

## David Bernstein

A life dedicated to the service of those in need  
has made him a valued community leader

### Chapter 1 - 1:15

#### Introduction

---

**Announcer:** David Bernstein was the executive director of the Tulsa Mental Health Association where he was instrumental in the development of the first 24-hour telephone suicide prevention program in the Southwest. It evolved into today's 211 Helpline. While executive director of the Community Service Council of greater Tulsa, he worked on needed services for the growing Hispanic and Cuban populations, which required housing, language and educational support from the community. David has given professional leadership during an exciting time in history, both in Tulsa and worldwide. He has traveled to Israel numerous times to select emissaries to come to Tulsa with their families to learn the culture of Tulsa and teach about Israel to churches and community organizations. David and his wife Gerry are parents to five children, 16 grand children and 12 great grand children. Included in the many honors that have come David's way was the Oklahoma Human Rights Commission Award from the State of Oklahoma. This interview was conducted before a live audience on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011 at Temple Israel in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Listen now as Rabbi Charles Sherman welcomes the audience for another oral history recording on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com).

### Chapter 2 - 9:32

#### From The Beginning

---

**Rabbi Charles Sherman:** Ladies and gentlemen, I want to invite you to participate tonight in a very special addition of our summer adult education series. First of all, this is an experiment as Mr. Erling tells me. This is [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com) oral history website's attempt to capture the history of Oklahoma in first person voices of significant

contributors to the state of Oklahoma's growth and development. This is the very first time that this program is being done before a live audience. John, we are delighted to have you with us tonight.

**John Erling:** Thank you Rabbi Sherman. It is my pleasure to be here. I welcome everyone here tonight. I would like to thank Temple Israel for opening this up. The idea for this actually came from Rabbi Sherman. I would like to thank Mel Myers, my editor. There are a lot of things that need to be edited out. Most of what David will say tonight needs to be edited out—we know that. (Joking)

**Audience:** (Laughter)

**JE:** Our evening here is with David Bernstein, so let's make David feel welcome.

**Audience:** (Applause)

**JE:** If you want to laugh or boo or hiss or whatever, you can do that. That's what a live audience is all about, but remember Mel is the editor, so he can take it out too. As I am thanking everybody, first of all, thank you David for doing this. It is an experiment for you to be on stage in front of everybody, but you've got a great story to tell. So let's begin. My name is John Erling. Today's date is June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011. It's 7:35 in the evening and this is being taped before a live audience. David, would you please tell us your full name please.

**David Bernstein:** David Louis Bernstein.

**JE:** Were you named after someone specific?

**DB:** Yes, my grandfather—my father's father, who passed away in his 50s— I was named after him.

**JE:** Your date of birth?

**DB:** May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1932.

**JE:** Your present age?

**DB:** Seventy-nine.

**JE:** I will also say that I asked Rabbi Sherman to stay at the table here because there are going to be areas that he will know more about. Even if I know facts, there are feelings and so forth that he is going to bring to this. In a way this will be a dual-interview.

Tell us where you were born.

**DB:** I was born in Haledon, New Jersey, which is just outside of Patterson, New Jersey. It's a small community, like Catoosa is to Tulsa.

**JE:** Your mother's name and where she was born and where she grew up?

**DB:** My mother's maiden name was Rosen. She was born in Lodz, Poland and came to the U.S. in the early 1900s.

**JE:** What was your mother like? Describe her for us.

**DB:** I've heard you ask this question before. It's a beautiful question to start, because everyone's mother is beautiful. She was a very warm person. For a number of years

my folks ran an Italian grocery store during World War II. My mother was dark skinned and you know—Jews and Italians look alike anyway. To many of the people in our Italian neighborhood she was sometimes called Rosa and then she took her Hebrew name and turned it around from Ruth Lillian and Americanized it to Lillian Ruth. In case you don't ask me this, my grandkids are all named for people like my mom who have passed on, but they've been going back to the original names. So they've turned them back and made them their original order and gone back to their roots. We wanted to be Americanized at the beginning of this century to be accepted, so that's what we tried to do.

**JE:** She was a homemaker?

**DB:** She was a homemaker but she also worked at a little family grocery store close to our house.

**JE:** Your father's name and where he grew up?

**GN:** His name in Hebrew was Aaron, but his name was Arthur. He grew up in Manhattan. He was born in New York City and then met my mother as she came here as a young teenager. My dad's father was in the fruit and vegetable business. He used to get up at 4am and drive from Patterson, New Jersey to New York City to go to market on the waterfront. He was known for his beautiful fruits and vegetables. His store was called Art's market. My dad loved horses all of his life and raised horses. Even though we lived in the city, there was an old barn about 5 blocks away from us where my dad had raised Dalmatian dogs and trotting horses. He loved harness horses. So every minute of his spare time, that's what he did. He was also an amateur veterinarian. My dad loved horses because he loved taking care of them. Horses always ended up being lame on one foot. We raced these horses. The best racing horse we had was blind in one eye. His name was Radar Direct. It's very hard to have a horse that's blind in one eye. He was a wonderful horse. We didn't race at the beginning at big tracks. We raced at little places up in Rhode Island and along the Eastern Coast at places like country fairs where the winner won a bag or two of oats. The problem with that horse is that I used to have to walk him after a race. He would step on me all of the time because he was blind in that one eye and I could only lead him on that one side. I developed not a great love for horses at the end. It was my dad's pleasure with me on Sunday to go to the stables, curry the horses and sweep and shovel whatever is was on the floor. My mind was on playing a game of pool or a basketball game at the Y. I learned to do it, but I was not his favorite at doing that. Eventually I developed an allergy to horsehair and so then I didn't have to go take care of the horses. (Laughter)

**JE:** So then there was no more pressure on you.

**DB:** No more pressure. My dad's final revenge—when my dad passed away and I was already living here and he was in New York. He went to a wedding and probably drank a fifth

of Four Roses (Bourbon) or something and danced with all of the women and put his head down and passed away there. So we went back to the funeral. It was cold. We had a limo pick us up. I have to preface this by saying that my mother was not a lover of horses either. So when my dad came home after being with the horses all day, he had to change all of his clothes in our basement and then he could come up into the house. So at the funeral, the limo picked us up. Before I stepped into the limo I stepped in a little dog mess that was there outside. It was wintertime so they turned on the heater and it started to blow that smell. My dad loved that smell. He could sleep in a stable and it would be no problem for him. I thought to myself, this is your revenge David for not paying more attention to my dad and doing what I had to do.

**JE:** Do you have brothers and sisters?

**DB:** My brother was 13 when I was born and my sister was 11 when I was born. I was like an only child when I came along, probably by surprise.

### Chapter 3 - 4:50

December 7, 1941

---

**John Erling:** What did you do for entertainment in the 1930s? Did you listen to radio shows?

**David Bernstein:** Yes. Because I had an older brother and sister I liked the swing era and big bands and dances that we had at our house with a bunch of their friends. I learned how to Lindy Hop and Jitterbug and do all of that very early. We lived about 10 miles from New York City. If you sat on the top floor of my high school, you could see all of the buildings in New York. That's tough to go to school when you can see the buildings in New York City and that's where you want to go. I used to go to New York to the Roxy Theater and the Capitol Theater. Paramount was the ultimate. If you had the money you went to the Paramount. You would get to see a movie in those days and a big band. Gene Krupa was my favorite band. We would see Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and Jimmy Dorsey—all of the great bands. I was pretty young to get to do that, probably because my brother brought me along.

**JE:** On December 7th, 1941—do you have a memory of that day?

**DB:** I do. We were living on the second story. We were having breakfast and my brother was working at the grocery store. I remember he ran all the way home and yelled up our step, "The Japanese just bombed Pearl Harbor!" Most of us didn't have an idea of what that meant at that time. We used to hear a lot from my grandfather about what was happening in Europe.

**JE:** Do you remember the rationing?

**DB:** My father owned a grocery store and he could still get a Hershey bar, but mostly you didn't have Hershey bars unless it was a special party. My dad raised money for war bonds. He had a little horse and a little wagon. Whomever the politician was or the speaker or celebrities who would come to town, we would get on the back of that wagon and we would travel around Paterson and they would speak to people and raise money for war bonds. He used the horse and wagon to save gasoline. We delivered groceries with the horse and wagon too sometimes. We were all in the same situation. My father's older sibling lived in Nyack, New York. At that time it was a non-Jewish community. His family was the only Jewish family there. He had a gas station on Route 9. We'd go there all the time because my grandmother thought they were starving all week because there was no Jewish place to buy food in Nyack. They weren't starving of course, but we would go up on Sundays especially during the war when things were tight to take food up there. I remember we would go through Sleepy Hollow. At nights driving back through there, I remember my dad may have had a drink or two more than he should have. We would drive about 3 miles an hour all the through that area. (Chuckle) When all the boys were drafted in the Army, my uncle's two boys were in and my brother eventually was in, we would all gather to listen to the 6 o'clock news. They would hear the news and they were scared to death because their sons were overseas at that time. My sister was a nurse, so she was at some military bases also so they were worried about everybody.

**JE:** Do you remember hearing President Franklin Roosevelt on the radio?

**DB:** Yes I do. I was born under Herbert Hoover, one of the greatest presidents were ever had. (Laughter) it wasn't until Roosevelt became president that we had something to eat!

## Chapter 4 - 7:00

### Brother in War

---

**John Erling:** Let's talk about your education. Where did you go to school?

**David Bernstein:** In Paterson. Do you remember the movie *Lean on Me*? That was about my high school. When I went there though, it was a different environment and a different time. My principal wore a celluloid collar, so it was a little more reserved.

**JE:** In high school, were you an athlete or a member of clubs?

**DB:** Can I lie now? I wasn't an athlete, but I was 6'1". I am less than 6' tall now. The coach always wanted me to play center on the basketball team. I told him I couldn't play, but he

wanted me to come out anyway. So one time, I went out and he saw me play and that was the end of it. (Laughter.)

**JE:** When did you graduate from high school?

**DB:** 1950.

**JE:** That was the beginning of the Korean War.

**DB:** Let me go back if I could. In my pre-Bar Mitzvah year, it was 1945. My brother went into the service. He was already 26. He worked in a war plant. He had some physical things that kept him from the Army and he wanted to join the Army very badly. All of his friends were in the Army. We lived in a non-Jewish neighborhood. He was 6' tall too. People would see a big strapping guy and say, "Why wasn't that Jew in the Army?" So my brother went and had surgery on his hernia and tried to get in the Army and couldn't. He tried the Navy and he tried the Air Force. He was colorblind as can be, which I am also. He finally was able to get into the Army. He was in the Army for six months and then the Battle of the Bulge came. He was a replacement. They didn't know anything. In New Jersey at Fort Dix they gave them all sharp shooter medals, but he couldn't shoot a gun. We never had guns in our home. Anyway, my brother was killed in The Battle of the Bulge on January 15<sup>th</sup>. The Battle of the Bulge was in the middle of the winter when our guys were snowed in and iced in and couldn't leave—were surrounded by the German Army. I have letters from him actually the day before he died, where he was telling my mom not to worry about him and that he was okay and he was warm. Meanwhile, he would write my sister and tell her how his feet were frozen and how many guys had frozen feet, and lost their feet during that battle. Anyway, a telegram came to us. My grandmother lived with us and she received it. My mother and father were working at the corner store. She called my mom to come home and read this telegram that said that my brother was missing in action. That was usually the first telegram that you got. You can imagine what happens in a home when that happens to the oldest son. My dad had been waiting for him to come home from the Army to help build his grocery store into a stop-and-shop market with all of the new equipment for groceries. Anyway, it didn't happen. It took a couple of weeks of us just being worried to death. My grandmother spoke only Yiddish. The Yiddish I know today is from playing cards with her. She never let me play cards in any language except Yiddish. My grandmother was home and the telegram comes. She thought it said that they had found my brother Paul. My mother ran home and read the telegram and it said that he was killed in action. That was a breakup of my family. My mom took it hard and my dad took it extremely hard. He could never sit down to any holiday meal without crying over his son. Three months later was my Bar Mitzvah. No family would be in shape to have a Bar Mitzvah when something like that has happened. I had a quiet Bar Mitzvah. We had some relatives there I remember and we gave out

Hershey bars, I remember that. My brother wasn't buried in Belgium in the largest cemetery in Belgium, but was the first Jewish soldier to come back. My folks didn't want him buried in some foreign country and wanted a Jewish funeral for him. The Jewish war veterans in those days would hold a Jewish military funeral for those who came back. My brother is buried in our family plot in New Jersey. I tell that story because I imagine a lot of what I am today comes from that experience of what went on in my home during those next few years. That summer, a young Orthodox rabbi came to run our Hebrew School. He saw what shape I was in and he gave me a scholarship. I know it wasn't for my Hebrew. I went to an Orthodox camp for a short time in the Catskill Mountains in New York. I lived in this Italian neighborhood although I went to Hebrew School and I had lots of Jewish friends, I did not know Orthodox Jews to that degree. My grandfather was a modern Orthodox Jew. Those kids were great baseball players. It was an interesting short period of time for me but I learned a lot about a different form of Judaism there and it was a wonderful experience. There was a young man who was a rabbi and my counselor at school and he was a great athlete, so I kind of realized that people are people no matter what they are looking for--so it was a great experience.

## Chapter 5 - 7:46

### Education

---

**John Erling:** What year did you graduate from high school?

**David Bernstein:** I graduated in the middle of winter in January of 1950.

**JE:** Then you went on to college?

**DB:** Yes, but my prom at graduation from high school was unique and better than anyone at my school. We had a friend that knew the guy at the Copacabana and at The Latin Quarter--it was owned by the guy that put on the water shows at the World's Fair. He owned the Latin Quarter and this guide knew him. So as high school kids we got to march into the Latin Quarter and I was kind of a hero. We went to the 1938 World's Fair in Flushing, New York I believe is where it was. I remember the Beech Nut gum factory because my father was in the grocery business and we had tickets to go visit because of the grocery displays or whatever. (Chuckle) It was wonderful. There were airplanes. It was a time when airplanes were just beginning to be popular and I remember seeing airplane displays. They wouldn't let me into the girlie shows.

**JE:** Where did you go to college?

**DB:** I went to Fairleigh Dickinson University in Rutherford, New Jersey.

**JE:** I mentioned the Korean War, which was from 1950 to 1953.

**DB:** That's when I was in college. I made such high grades that I didn't get drafted—but that's not true. I did make good grades, but since my brother was killed in World War II, I was the sole surviving son. They couldn't draft anyone who was the last son left at home. It was good for my mother as well that I didn't go to the Korean War.

**JE:** When did you graduate from college?

**DB:** In 1953—I graduated in like 3 1/2 years or something. I would like to tell you one more story. The one experience that I've tried to write about and almost sent in to a couple of magazines was an experience I had when I was about to go to college. It was 1950. My best friend was a drummer in many bands in the East. He was a young guy too. Around Memorial Day, you would try out for a job in the mountains at the hotel. He had gone and gotten a job as a waiter for the summer. They would interview you and pick out the best guys. When he came back he was offered a job in a band for the summer as a drummer—so that's what he wanted to do. He said, "Are you working this summer?" I said, "not really." He said, "How would you like to be a waiter at the hotel for the summer?" I said, "Wonderful. I'll do it." He said, "You'll have to work under my name." There were no Social Security cards in those days that I remember. I just went down and told them my name—and my name was Chuck Wozniacki. I worked under Chuck Wozniacki's name with a bunch of guys from Rutgers. It was an interesting summer because the hotel was supposed to be a Kosher Jewish hotel. We found out it was owned by a mafia guy from New York. His Jewish girlfriend ran the hotel. The owner would come down on the weekends with his Mafia guys. I was the worst waiter and I ended up with the worst busboy in the hotel. It was the Bradley Hotel on Bradley Beach. I used to walk out with dishes and I could not hold those big trays with my left arm, only with my right arm. So whenever I left the kitchen the door would swing back and hit that tray. (Laughter) Many a day I remember coming out with a tray of juice glasses and that door would come back and hit me. There would go the juice glasses one by one by one. So I would hear around the room, (Mazel tov!!" Mazel tov!!" Mazel tov!!" (Laughter) So they gave me the worst table, right by the kitchen, so I wouldn't have to walk very far with my plates. When the boss came in for the weekend and brought some guys and girls with him, they sat at my two tables. The first thing the women would do in the morning is pick up the tablecloth and blot their lipstick on my tablecloth all the way across. I was told to never have any lipstick on my tablecloth, but what could I do? I was being called Chuck. Half of the time I couldn't remember that I was Chuck! (Laughter) Finally, I told them I was deaf in one ear and I would have to turn the other way to hear them to explain why sometimes I would not answer to the name Chuck. (Laughter) The boss had two attractive daughters that

sat at my table also. I had to be careful how I poured the water or whatever. With them, I would get shaky. I would hold the water out and I would pour that water and it would miss the glass and go over their dresses and I would think in the middle of the night they are going to come up and do me in, but they weren't that bad a bunch. So that was the experience I had and I would like to make a movie about it some day. (Laughter)

**Rabbi Sherman:** It also explains a little bit your affinity for undocumented workers.

**DB:** Yes! That's right! (Laughter) It also explains my fear of standing up and saying, "Yes, I'm David Bernstein." My Uncle Benny came down from Newark one weekend because he had heard I was working there. In the old days they had palm trees in all of the dining rooms. He was looking for me and he has the guy in front call for David Bernstein. When I heard the call for David Bernstein I was scared to death and I remember hiding behind the palm trees as Uncle Benny came through trying to find me.

**Rabbi Sherman:** What was your degree in?

**DB:** Masquerading! (Chuckle) My degree was in English Literature, Shakespeare and English Literature, which is worth two cents on the market when you get out of college.

**JE:** So Chuck, (Laughter) excuse me, David, after graduating from college with your degree what were you prepared to do?

**DB:** I enrolled in law school. I took the law exam and I was accepted at Rutgers and NYU. I was set to go to NYU, but it was a tough time because my mother died in 1952, the day after the presidential election. She had cancer for quite a while so it was a tough time in our family when she was ill. My sister was a nurse and took care of her. I just didn't have an appetite to go to school I guess-I don't know.

## Chapter 6 - 7:34

### Tulsa/Segregation

---

**David Bernstein:** We had an offer from a company that was opening a store in Tulsa called Rayco. It was a seat cover company. If we came down here (to Tulsa) for the summer, the next year I could go to California because they were going to open up stores there and you can always go back to law school. As I think about it, I probably would have made a terrible lawyer. I always see the other person's side and I don't think that's the best trait for a lawyer, but better (suited) for a social worker or a psychologist. So I didn't go to law school and I came to Tulsa that summer.

**John Erling:** What was your job going to be with Rayco?

**DB:** My job was to train the people in Tulsa who Rayco in New Jersey decided were ignorant. They thought a young kid out of college could train them. I came here to open up the store and to hire people to work in the shop. We made seat covers and we made convertible tops. We were trying to put OTASCO out of the seat cover business, which we finally did. Then they put me out of business.

**JE:** Where was Rayco located?

**DB:** Rayco was at 3815 East 11<sup>th</sup> Street between Harvard and Yale.

**JE:** You were the manager of the store?

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** Is there somewhere along in here that you met a young lady in Tulsa?

**DB:** Yes and that's what kept me from California. First off, I couldn't find any Jewish girls here and I had dated only Jewish girls in New Jersey. When I got here it was summertime and all of the Jewish girls were off to camp or wherever they go in the summertime. I couldn't find anybody to date. I knew Gerry's brother, my wife's older brother because we were friends. We went to the Jewish Federation then, which used to be at 51<sup>st</sup> and Harvard. I can remember going up there and there were no computers in those days and I asked for a list of all the single Jewish girls in Tulsa. They had heard that a guy had moved down here from Jersey and they didn't know much about me. They asked me, "What do you want it for?" I had to explain that I wanted it to start my youth organization. Anyway, they gave me a list of all the single girls in that age group. Stanley, Gerry's brother and I called them all up and had our first meeting. It was wonderful. We got to meet girls and the girls got to meet guys. We met a few times. I don't remember exactly what we did because at that time Stanley had taken me home to have dinner at their home. Their mother was a great cook. It was through Stanley that I met Gerry, this young girl in high school and I just fell in love. I had to dismiss the group (Laughter) I told them why.

**JE:** So that was your first group that you organized?

**DB:** Yes, that's right.

**JE:** But was it really for the group? Or was it really for you?

**DB:** Everything I've done, (pause) has been for me. (Laughter) There's nothing wrong with that.

**JE:** How long did you date Gerry before you were married?

**DB:** She says it was six months. The first date we had, but I brought another guy along just for safety (laughter) was to see the Globetrotters. They would come each year at that same time in February.

**JE:** Let's talk a little bit about Tulsa. You came from New York and New Jersey so you must have had some culture shock when you came to Tulsa?

**DB:** Oh yes, coming from New Jersey I had culture shock.

**JE:** You saw segregation at that time like you had never seen before?

**DB:** That's right. Everything was segregated when I came here in 1953 as I remember it. Movies were segregated and so were buses. My store was on East 11<sup>th</sup> Street, which was Route 66. Before I-44, Route 66 was the highway in Oklahoma and all of the cars came through there. They had restaurants and drive-ins. I hired a foreman who was black. I didn't know anything about segregation. Coming from New Jersey I assure you I didn't know anything about it. I had to select a new crew and then from them I had to select a new foreman. I don't know, I was there maybe two or three weeks and I picked a foreman who happened to be black. He was the best worker I had. He ended up being a minister in Tulsa. I took him to a drive-in restaurant and he said, "You are not going to get served." We waited and waited and he said it again, "You are not going to get served. They won't serve me." We never got served and finally I found out why-it was because I had a black friend in the car and they weren't going to serve me. This was on a Sunday night, because we worked seven days a week. By Monday morning, none of those white guys showed up to work. They all quit because they weren't going to work for a black supervisor. The store had a waiting room, a sales room and a shop. We would take the car into the shop and put the seat covers on and drive it out. I noticed that when a white kid would drive out and park the car, they (the customers) would walk out and see the seat covers and see that everything was fine and then they would come in and pay. If a black guy drove that car out of the shop, they would come down to see the seat covers and then open up the glove compartment and make sure everything was there. That was just a bias that was built-in in this part of the country. It was very, very hard to deal with as a young idealistic Easterner.

**JE:** The segregation that we are talking about and the prejudice, was it mostly toward blacks? Did you feel or see any of this toward Jews in Tulsa?

**DB:** Yes. Everyone knows about Southern Hills Country Club, so it's not a secret. The whole area of Southern Hills, the neighborhood was to keep Jews out. Jews and dogs were not really wanted in that area. Southern Hills Country Club didn't allow Jews to be members, simple as that. So the Jewish people here before I came built their own country club. That's where Meadowbrook Country Club came from. They earned money. They became businessmen. They wanted to live the life they saw their compatriots living, so they had to build their own place. That was terrible to see.

---

**Chapter 7 - 3:36****Anti-Semitism**

---

**David Bernstein:** When Gerry and I were married in 1954 we were allowed four days off. We decided to drive to Colorado Springs. It was August 15 in the middle of summer and it was like 110° or 115°. I had called and said that I was with Rayco and I needed a room for a couple of nights at the Broadmoor Hotel, which is still in existence today. When we got out there, I was with my very young bride. I told the man at the front desk that I had made a reservation under Rayco and gave him my name, David Bernstein. He looks down and says, "I'm sorry we don't have any rooms and we don't have your name down." I said, "That's impossible." They said, "We can't put you up." I didn't know why. I guess in the back of our heads we all knew. If you read *Gentleman's Agreement*, you'll know the story of what it was in those days. So we found a place to stay in a little motel and it was fine. It didn't interrupt our honeymoon. But it was a situation that I will never forget. But this year, on Passover I had Passover Services at that hotel. (Laughter) So things have changed and things have gotten better. But Jews can pass many times because we are Caucasian and we pass. Blacks still can't pass many places even though it says we are open to everybody. That experience I had in Tulsa in those early years knowing Gerry, Gerry didn't put up with any prejudice and it made me open my eyes and we got more involved in the movement of integrating Tulsa. Martin Luther King was our hero. I still believe that Martin Luther King is the reason young Jewish kids today can go out in the streets and wear their kippahs on their heads. We used to only wear our kippahs, even if we were religious, inside the home or in the synagogue. If we went out on the streets in Brooklyn we would take them off because we were going to get beaten up. But Martin Luther King said something about black is beautiful and you can go out and do whatever you want to do. You are as good as the next guy if not better. I think Jews learned a lesson from that too. That and the state of Israel, the two of those together gave us a better feeling about ourselves...who we were and what we were.

**John Erling:** When you called that hotel, they knew your name?

**DB:** They didn't know it I guess, but they knew my name when I got there and they saw me.

**JE:** Did you ever try to hide your Jewishness? Or consider changing your name to just Berns? Did you do any of that ever?

**DB:** No. I personally didn't. If someone needed to do it to get a job, I understand their doing it, but I didn't have to do it, and I was proud of who I was. I grew up in a religious atmosphere culturally with all Jews and I was proud of being a Jew. The oil companies here were not hiring Jews. Texaco and those large companies would not even interview Jews.

**JE:** Were they turned away?

**DB:** Yes, they were turned away. I didn't apply for one of those jobs, but I applied for the job as Director of the Community Service Council, which was a United Way agency. The United Way did a search to make sure being Jewish I wouldn't interfere with anything that they were trying to do, which was raise money from these high-level executives. They were wondering if I would put them off. So they called a meeting and I met with half a dozen of the top executives in Tulsa. I purposely wore my hair long and everything else, but I still got the job.

## Chapter 8 - 5:25

### Career Change

---

**John Erling:** Let's jump to the fact that you went back to TU then.

**David Bernstein:** I will admit it right here today, okay? I was not the best businessman there ever was in Tulsa, Oklahoma. (Chuckle) I enjoyed business and I enjoyed working with employees and helping them. I enjoyed meeting and helping customers every day. But I kept terrible books. In the wintertime, Rayco used to send letters to you as a franchise. The letter said that in the winter you should cut your crew in half because you don't do as good in the winter as you do in the summer. I couldn't lay guys off for the winter. I had gotten to know them already and I knew their babies and all. So little by little, I wasn't doing the kind of business I should have been doing on 11<sup>th</sup> Street. Finally, they wanted us to enlarge our place and go into the muffler business. Anyway, I went out of business and opened up a store downtown called Central Seat Cover with my good friend Fred Strauss, sitting there (motioning). Because of me, Fred is a great success today (laughter) because I enticed him to leave his job with Oklahoma Tire and Supply and come work with me. Of course, my deal never worked out, but from there he was able to go to Fabricut and become a leading executive at Fabricut, all because I hired him. (Laughter)

**JE:** So then you see your life as a businessman obviously was coming to an end?

**DB:** Yes, I went into a few other businesses. One of them I couldn't give it up. I took an old school bus and I stripped it down and put a sewing machine in it and put up some racks and we hung material. I went out in that bus to the suburbs. I went to Bristow, Bartlesville, Catoosa and wherever these towns were. I would pull up into a dealers car lot and explained that I was selling the covers and I would make him for them right here on your lot. The only thing I need to do is plug in a very long extension cord. (Laughter)

There was no fancy way of doing it in those days. So I did that for a while. My wife was a better businessman than I. She had a store in Broken Arrow selling bedspreads. I loved business but it did not love me.

**JE:** So then what prompted you to go to Tulsa University?

**DB:** I decided that I'm not made for this and I should go back to school. I did a whole survey on myself. I found out what I enjoyed the best was working with people and helping people. I believe I even wanted to know a little bit about myself. Most people who go into psychology in school, do it in part to learn about themselves. Some of them never find out—they become psychiatrists. (Laughter) But I did go to find out about myself also. It was a good field for me. I went into psychology. We had four kids and I had to support my kids as well, so I did a bunch of things. I taught fourth-grade Hebrew School. My (Hebrew) education stopped at about 3rd grade. I worked out of a book and I would look up the English translation at home and write it between the lines and I would teach the class. If they got too far ahead of what I had translated at home, I was out of business. I think I was a good teacher, because when you get children who come at 4 o'clock in the afternoon to Hebrew school, after being in school all day long—to sit in this chair for 2 hours 3 days a week or whatever—it's not comfortable for a lot of kids. We didn't know about HDD in those days, there just good kids and bad kids. One of the kids I had was Dr. Finer. Because I was also going to school and learning about psychology, I thought I knew everything. I had figured out Dr. Finer. She had some learning disabilities and she probably would not make it because she didn't listen to me. (Chuckle) I had her pegged as not making it. I've told her this story many times. James Cash was one of my students also. He wouldn't take any books home with him. Instead of teaching him, I had them take books home with him and tell him to bring them back. Anyway, before I had surgery on my shoulder he came in to see me. He said, "Mr. Bernstein, are you ready to go?" I said, "Yes, but I want you to know one thing. Please forgive me if I ever said anything wrong to you in Hebrew school." (Laughter) He said, "You know Mr. Bernstein, I will put you at ease, I don't remember being in your class." (Laughter) It was kind of a defeat for me. We went ahead and did the surgery and everything was fine. A lot of the kids in this town I had figured out wrong. They were nice kids. They all turned out to be businessmen and lawyers and doctors and wonderful men.

---

**Chapter 9 - 5:44**  
**Tulsa Public Schools**

---

**John Erling:** Before we move on, you mentioned you have four children. Tell me their names.

**David Bernstein:** Lori is my oldest daughter. She's an MSW social worker in Florida and a songwriter. All of my kids played instruments with no lessons. They loved instruments. Pam, my second child, taught music in the JCC preschool and day school system in Chicago and does to this day. My third child is my son Jeff, my only son. He went to Washington University, as did my oldest daughter. They both have degrees from Washington University. Lori has an MSW from there and he works in management in the Chicago area. He used to run nursing homes. That was a tough business to be in. My youngest daughter is Beth. She was with us the longest until she finally graduated high school and left. She is a math major from Northwestern. They all married. My first daughter Pam married a guy from the Chicago area. And then little by little, Jeff came back from Israel and said he wanted to live by his sister. He went to seminary in Israel for a while—until one Sunday morning they found him with some girls. He wasn't supposed to be running around with girls in this seminary. He was in the wrong seminary so he came home early. Most of my kids are Orthodox and traditional and raise their kids very traditional. Their kids (his grandchildren) go to seminaries now and our great-grandkids—we will wait and see what happens to them. We will have 10 great-grandkids by the fall.

**JE:** So with that degree, where did you go to work?

**DB:** The first job I had was with Tulsa Public Schools as a school psychologist for three years.

**JE:** While you were working in the psychology department for TPS, you needed an extra job?

**DB:** Well, that job with Tulsa Public Schools was only during school hours, so after 4pm I had to get another job. I worked in the Hebrew school from 4 to 6pm and then I worked for a private psychologist in the evening doing group counseling with kids.

**JE:** Was there a dry cleaning business?

**DB:** Yes. I knew a little bit about dry-cleaning from living back East. Gerry said, "Why don't you do that?" I bought an old panel truck for not much money and I went around and picked up dry-cleaning while I was going to school. The people I knew were all originally people from B'nai Emunah, so I would go around to them. Charlie Goodall was a great customer of mine because he wore a fresh suit and shirt every day. Eventually, it kind of made me a big shot in the way that I knew who had ring around the collar. (Laughter) You have to be old enough to remember that commercial to know that story. But anyway, I picked up a route. I used to get lost every time I went to West Tulsa, but I developed a nice clientele. I knew how to press pants so I worked out a deal with a dry cleaner here. I would take the dry cleaning to him and he would dry clean it and then I would go press

the pants. Then we would split the profits 50-50 and that's how I made a living out of that. Then we decided let's go uptown and we wanted to open up a drop store for Gerry to run. A drop store is a dry cleaner without any machinery because it's done off-site. Anyway, we opened one up right by the Tulsa Club on Harvard. We rented the store and that day they started fixing Harvard. They were tearing the two-lane road up and working on it for two years. Here we were trying to make a living. At that time we were living with my mother-in-law. I missed the whole period where we went back East to try and make it there. Then we came back and my house was rented, so we lived with my mother-in-law in a beautiful new house on South Irvington. We moved in with four kids and a dry-cleaning truck and a couple of racks I put up in her garage. She was a sweet, sweet woman and my father-in-law put up with it too. Then Gerry decided she was going to do cuffs. I went to the library and I got a book about it. It was a beginner's book about how to do cuffs and fix a suit. We survived that until I finally got out of school and finally got a job.

**JE:** So you were with TPS for three years?

**DB:** Yes.

## Chapter 10 - 8:06

### Suicide Prevention

---

**John Erling:** Then you became the executive director of Tulsa Mental Health Association?

**David Bernstein:** Yes.

**JE:** Tell us about some of your work there.

**DB:** I got the job with the Tulsa Mental Health Association as the executive director not knowing what a mental health association was. But, I had a little gray in my hair and they thought I knew more than I did and they couldn't find anybody they liked. The original executive director ran off with the secretary. So on a Monday morning they didn't have a secretary or an executive director. I loved it there, but I really didn't know what it was. I had become enamored with some work that was being done in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center was located in West Pico, which was a Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles. West Pico was where all of the best Jewish delis and stores were in that day. They had a suicide prevention center that was run by Edwin S. Shneidman. He was a thanatologist actually, who became the father of suicidology, and a partner who was also a psychologist, Dr. Farberow. So these two Jewish guys put suicide

prevention on the map. Until that time, people didn't know what to do with someone who is suicidal. They opened up a center that was a walk-in clinic, but also you could call them on the telephone. People didn't believe especially in the field of counseling, that you could counsel somebody on the telephone, let alone talk him out of committing suicide because you can't watch them if you are talking to them on the phone and you couldn't see their physical actions. They found out that you could do it. Someday I believe it will be done on a computer. Young people don't even want to call and talk to someone at a center. They will type it to you through Facebook or email. So I went to California and learned a little bit under Dr. Shneidman and then came back and added a program to the Mental Health Association called Suicide Prevention Center. We were the first one in the Southwest actually to have this. I had a little storeroom in Hillcrest Hospital on the psychiatric floor. In those days you had to rent a TV set for your room. There were no TV sets in patients' rooms. They let me share this storeroom with these TVs. They let me put a little desk and run suicide prevention. It was good for us because we were hidden in the hospital and we worked 24 hours a day. Beth Macklin who was the religion writer for the *Tulsa World* in those days, was one of my first volunteers. She would put the paper to bed and then she would come up and volunteer. We had a training session for the volunteers. Dr. Shneidman advised that suicide prevention is done better by volunteers than by professionals—because volunteers have their heart in it more. It takes a lot of patience and a lot of good timing and understanding from your heart to deal with somebody that says, “I want to kill myself. I don't care what you say. I don't want to live. Don't tell me I do want to live—and don't try to stop me.” But the thing is they do call and so we knew that they did want some intervention. Dr. Shneidman got into this because his office was right across the street from the LA coroner's office. He and his partner went down there and got a hold of all of the letters that were ever written by suicidal people through the years. There were boxes and boxes of these suicidal letters. He read them and learned a lot from the letters. He learned about the dichotomy of someone's life and the ambivalence of someone wanting to live and wanting to die. In the front page of his first book, I remember he had one of the first letters he saw. It was a very simple letter and it said, “Dear Mary, I hate you. Love, John.” That taught him a big lesson. He could work with people that were transitional. You might be suicidal this minute, but if you could spend some time with his significant other for a short period of time sometimes it can change your life. Today, Dr. Shneidman is the father of suicidology, but they don't follow that kind of work anymore. Medicine came in, so through the medical world you can treat depression with medicine, pills and so forth. Just like long-term therapy, it went out of fashion to a degree. A few years after Suicide Prevention happened, there was a hit television show called Hotline with Vince

Edwards. It was the number 1 show that year. It was about a place that ran a hotline. This came about because the drugs that we so despise today, in those days were many times in the black community, and the white community...this side of E. Admiral Blvd. couldn't care less. When we had a bust of white kids on Brookside from Edison High School who were doing drugs—it opened up everybody's eyes. Therefore, there became this demand to have a 24-hour drug telephone line. It was a place for kids to call with all kinds of problems. I saw the TV show and then I called California. Sure enough the first teenage hotline was in LA. So I went out to LA again and worked a little bit within there. Then I came back and opened up a second 24-hour program called Teenage Hotline. It was run by a different group of volunteers working on telephone lines. Many times I would take the calls. A woman that used to call me regularly—she was a chronic caller on the suicide prevention line—she would always punish me at the end of the call. We'd talked for a half hour and I would say, "I have to go there are three calls waiting for me." She would say, "Okay. Don't worry about it. You'll never hear from me again." Letting me know that I did her in. She used to call me quite a bit. She had worn out every relative she had and every friend she had because she would continually tell this sad story, a very dark story—a depressed story of her life. One day I picked up a phone call on the teenage line and it's that same woman. I knew her voice so well. She said, "Can I talk to you about a problem?" I said, "Sure." She said, "My grandson I think is using drugs." A light came on to me that you didn't have to have a specialized line to deal with people. People wanted somebody to talk to. Someone who is objective and someone they don't see or know, so they won't run into them again. People never come back after a bad situation to tell you thanks for helping them. So I decided to combine both programs. About that time I was asked to become the director of Community Service Council.

**JE:** The concepts you learned in California and brought to Tulsa, which would have been new, did everybody in the medical world accept you? Were you readily accepted?

**DB:** No.

**JE:** Why wouldn't they accept you?

**DB:** Because the people on the phone weren't professionals, they were volunteers. They were volunteers who had some training from dealing with people's lives. But there were a lot of physicians and this is tough to say in this town because I have a lot of physician friends, but a lot of physicians don't want to deal with someone who is suicidal. It's too dangerous because they are afraid that something will happen and perhaps they might be sued and everything else. So people in hospitals stay away from people who they know are suicidal or who have attempted suicide. There was a study done about the care of suicidal people in the hospital. A person that is in the hospital because they cut themselves or did something to themselves, shot themselves in the leg or whatever,

those people did not feel that they were treated the same as patients that they were in the same room with. They felt that there was some stigma that because they tried to kill themselves, why should I as a nurse or the medical person on the staff put all that effort into saving them, after all, they wanted to take their own life. But really, they didn't want to. They wanted to live.

**JE:** They wanted attention.

**DB:** Yes.

## Chapter 11 - 6:07

### Community Service Foundation

---

**David Bernstein:** I put together a play about a young boy who had a gun and was going to kill himself. I went to a lot of little towns with that play.

**John Erling:** When you took calls back then, did the callers tell you that they had a gun with them? Or would you ever hear a gun go off? Did you have any of those experiences?

**DB:** Sure. You are bound to have that if you are answering calls on that line. We used to take calls at home when we didn't have volunteers working in the office. Once at home, Gerry brought me a drink with ice. I was talking to this person a long time. They said, "Is that ice rattling?" I said, "Yes, it is." The caller said, "You are sitting there having a cold drink while I am spilling out my guts and telling you all could keep things that I would never tell anybody?" So I never did that again. One night I fell asleep. (Laughter) I was sitting on the edge of the bed. I was talking with one of these suicide cases and I fell asleep. That person had a right to kill themselves. There they had finally found somebody who would listen to them. A suicide prevention worker doesn't want to reject anybody because there's no place else to go. Anyway, it ended up okay. I had a girl shoot herself while I was talking to her on the line. She told me she didn't have a gun anymore, but she really did. You have lots of clues. Women talk about suicide a lot. Men attempt it without talking about it. There are certain clues, but all of that goes out of the window because everyone is an individual and you don't know what's going through their heads. She happened to be a go-go dancer and she was having problems with her boyfriend. Anyway, she shot herself-but she shot herself in the stomach. Then I didn't hear anything for quite a few days. She finally called me from the hospital. She said, "Did you know I did the worst thing I could have ever done? I can't work anymore because I wear a bra and pants. I have this wound right here that I put on myself on my stomach and I can never be a go-go girl anymore." So maybe she turned out to be something different.

**JE:** You mentioned the Community Service Council- tell us what that is.

**DB:** It's a planning agency that plans for mental health and social programs for northeastern Oklahoma. It looks to see where the needs are and tries to conduct studies on it and get money for agencies and develop programs. It also runs the helplines. The whole program is now called 211. You can just dial three numbers. I put that program together. But actually, I say I, and I apologize for that, because I didn't do it by myself. Sometimes I wasn't even the leader. That I was involved in it and I felt very involved in it and with the good people in Tulsa that worked with me, I was able to do a lot of these things.

**JE:** You remained the executive director of the Community Service Council for number of years?

**DB:** Yes, I was there 15 years.

**JE:** Right, so some of the things that were accomplished while you were there-the Women's Resource Center?

**DB:** Yes, the YWCA Women's Resource Center started with the YWCA. The YWCA used to get in trouble in those years. People in Tulsa, especially men who ran businesses, conservatives didn't like the idea is the YWCA being so involved in feminist programs. They wanted them to be quiet little ladies and take care of themselves and that's all. The YWCA ladies would go to a conference and get ideas for a lot of things that they wanted to. They would come back with these proclamations and they would get themselves in trouble with the United Way in getting money for their programs because they were too radical. The leadership of the YWCA when I first started there didn't believe that women who are in trouble could be saved very well. They considered them women who had just turned the wrong way, but young boys and men could always be saved. The Boy Scouts could save anybody. Any program that was developed for boys you could get money for, but it was hard to get money for domestic violence. We fought and fought and fought to get money for that program. Until we had some women come on the Board of Directors of the United Way, the YWCA had a hard time. I knew that the United Way took back money at the end of the year. If they gave you \$100,000 and you only spent \$85,000, then you had to return \$15,000. Then they would call me up and we would meet with them. I encourage them to start a program with the remaining money as opposed to just giving it back. We had to do it before December 15. After December 15, they would get suspicious that I was doing something because the money wasn't coming back. But if you did it before December 15, then you could get away with it. So we started some programs. The Multicultural Service Center was another program that we went to the Y with. We said people are coming in and immigration now is here. I worked a lot and immigration in those days as a volunteer. For years I was on the Federation board before I went to work for them. When I left the Community Service Council, the United Way

said to me, “Your hobby has been the Jewish Federation all of these years why don’t you work there? We hope you’ll make your hobby the United Way when you go to work for the Federation.” (Chuckle) It doesn’t always work that way.

---

## Chapter 12 – 8:10

### Jewish Foundation

---

**Rabbi Sherman:** I think there are a lot of people including Jews who don’t know what the Jewish Federation is all about. Somebody take a minute and tell us about what the Jewish Federation is that you became the Executive Director of.

**David Bernstein:** The Jewish Federation is actually a model for the United Way. There were Jewish Federations before there were any United Way organizations. In every community where immigrants came in, there was a place for them to come and a Hebrew-free loan where through a federation usually they would come and be able to borrow some money to be able to start a business. Federations are a combination to me of the Community Service Council and the United Way. The United Way raises money for agencies. The Jewish Federation raises money both for local Jewish organizations and national organizations. It raises money for Jewish Defense organizations, organizations for the poor and the blind. Also it raises money for overseas for the state of Israel especially, because in 1948 it was a brand new state and needed our help and no one was there to help. But through the federations we were able to raise money and do a variety of things to get people involved and knowing what this new country was all about. We were sending money to Europe. All of a sudden those people we were able to work with them. Some of them got to Israel. We tried our best to get all of the people out of the Holocaust and out of the range of being captured by the Nazis—to go either here or to Israel. It didn’t happen, but at least we now have a country. There have been some interesting books lately of something that could happen in the United States. Some president could come along and decide that Jews are not his favorite people and maybe the Nazis were right in what they did. We know today that we have a place to go. We have a place to escape to because we have a country. In those days people tried to come to America or South America. Most of them were turned away and didn’t have a place to go. So we are very supportive of Israel. We raise money. The United Way learned how to raise money that way. We also help people from giving money to every little agency that came to their door. There’s a tradition in Judaism of men that traveled from Jewish

institutions who would come into your neighborhood or come into your city all over the country, they would go door-to-door and to the synagogues to raise money for orphan asylums in many places. Thank God we don't have those orphaned asylums today. Jewish Family and Children's Service that we work with and helps us a lot was one of those Jewish orphanages by the way. So people started Jewish Federation. People could give one gift and the Federation would distribute it to those agencies that proved worthy. United Way did the same thing.

**Rabbi Sherman:** I'd like you to even make it even more personal in terms of our community. I think that there's, as you well know, a stereotype that all Jews are middle class or above—that all Jews are successful. You know because you're on the front line and I would like for you to share a little bit what it means to have a social service fund, which you for years have been the one that administers. Give us a little slice of what that looks like in Tulsa's community.

**DB:** Before I came to work for the Jewish Federation I was on the board as social welfare chairman. This was in the old days. They gave me a checkbook. Because my office was downtown at the Community Service Council, I was near the bus station. In those days people with problems would come to Tulsa on a bus. Today they come by car or by airplane or whatever, but in those days they came by bus. Someone would call and they wouldn't have any money. We called them transients in those days. Today they are known as the homeless. I would have the checkbook so I could write out a check for \$10 to them and get them a place to stay for the night. We put many people up at the YMCA in downtown Tulsa. Although, many Jewish people in those days were a little afraid of going into a Christian organization even though they were helping them have a place to stay they were suspicious that there would be some proselytizing going on and there usually was. So for their night stay or food or whatever they would have to pay for it by praying the way they didn't want to pray. (Chuckle) So we would find them places to stay where they felt comfortable. We also had people in the community that were hidden from us. We don't live in high-rise buildings in Tulsa where we know everybody. On my first date in the Bronx, everybody in that building knew the girl I was dating, the time I brought her home, how long it was before I went downstairs to drop her off at her room and come back and they would let you know about it. (Laughter) Here, we don't know everybody. We don't live in the ghetto. I'll make a demarcation point. When American Airlines brought people to Tulsa, a middle-class came to Tulsa that was Jewish that wasn't here as much for the oil business. Why would a Jew come to Tulsa in those days? There were a lot of Jewish people here. There weren't necessarily jobs for them if they didn't speak English. Many people I put to work in Henry Zarrow's pipe yard because there was no place else they could work. But they were people that were hidden, so

that's what I worked on for a long time. I worked on finding those people and giving them some assistance, getting them on their feet and having them feel comfortable to come in somewhere. Today we contract with Family and Children's Services. Anybody in our community is able to have a number of sessions of counseling available to them through the Federation working with the Temple and synagogues. So there is nobody that we shouldn't be able to help. Once the middle-class came in more, then we begin to see other problems. People know it today with the recession—you can be in good shape with a very good job and something happens and you might not have a job and you've moved your family out to Oklahoma for it. So, that's the kind of work we do also. Or somebody's in the hospital and needs help—we have variety of situations. We work with people quietly through the Federation and through the synagogues. Those people that I see in synagogue on holidays that I've helped through that system, would just wave like that (motioning), because those were problems that they don't want to have again. Or, in the days of drugs I'd get a call saying, "I found a packet in my son's closet what should I do?" They were asking me because I had worked with the helpline and all of that. I didn't know what to do anymore than they did. But I would meet with the parents and work with them. For Educational Development Corporation here in town I wrote an audio system—it was before video systems—called *The Choice is Yours*. It was everything I knew about drugs. That would take two pages in those days, which was nothing, but I did a lot of reading and I did a lot of visiting with the institutions that were working on it. It was new anyway. Then we went out and met with young people and college people and interviewed them. So this audiotape was interspersed with kids talking about actual experiences with drugs. We came down on marijuana like you would never believe. You know, that was the hardest drug out there at the time. We have learned a lot since then but it was information that was available in those days. It was the first one written. The Navy bought it and used it for their recruits. They would use these tapes and then talk about it afterward in groups.

**Rabbi Sherman:** One of the things that I so admire about David Bernstein is he is one who doesn't talk the talk but who walks the walk—who exemplifies in his own life.

## Chapter 13 - 12:25

### Fort Chaffee

---

**John Erling:** In 1985 you were executive director of the Jewish Federation.

**David Bernstein:** Yes.

**JE:** How large was the Jewish community then and how big is it today?

**DB:** It's a little more than it is today. We've shrunk by nearly 1,000 people, but I don't want to advertise how big we are or how small we are and I will tell you why. One time a reporter came to me and asked me how many Jewish people there were in Tulsa. I gave him the number and it ended up in the paper as 25,000. (Laughter) I was so mad that morning that I was going to call the *Tulsa Tribune* as it was called in those days and tell them that was wrong. Then I thought what am I going to tell them that for? There were anti-Semitic people out there. I thought let them think there are 25,000 Jews in this town and we can rise up against them if we need to. But, in reality it was about a tenth of that size or something like that. We are in a situation now also where we are trying to recruit Jewish people to come to these smaller towns. We are still a smaller Jewish town. Most Jewish people move to metropolitan areas and we would like to get some of them to come back to our area.

**JE:** Throughout the state of Oklahoma too, the number could be fairly significant?

**DB:** Just double it. Whatever the number is—double it.

**JE:** Right.

**DB:** There's only Oklahoma City, and very few Jews anymore live outside of that area. There were six Jewish families in Joplin when the tornado came, fortunately they all survived and are fine.

**JE:** I did bring up Fort Chaffee, which is in the Northwest part of Arkansas near the town of Fort Smith. Give us some background into why you made that visit.

**DB:** Well, when I was with the Community Service Council, we worked with and immigrant groups. The Cubans came in at that time and the Vietnamese came in 1975. People came here and didn't know the language. They needed something in their language so they could understand what was going on. So at the Community Service Council I hired two people—one that could write Spanish and one that could write Vietnamese. We put out newsletters. We made copies of what happens when there is a tornado to explain that a siren goes on. We advised them on how to deal with the police in Oklahoma. We had to explain that it's not their country where police are taking money under the table, except for a few that were taken care of. (Laughter) They are gone now—they're gone. We explained that you could trust the police and you could call the police. If your child has a problem, you don't have to hide from the police. When the second round of the Vietnamese came—those are people that we called the boat people. When the first Vietnamese group came out, Gerry and I were volunteers for. They were people that knew English. A lot of them had learned it for the army in Vietnam or Saigon. They pretty much could make it on their way. But we worked with a number of those people who are very good friends today. A lot of young boys came in to the states because they sneaked

out because of the army. They were lost because there were no women to tell them what to do to tell you the truth. (Laughter) We men need women to tell us what to do. Gerry became a momma for quite a few of those young boys. Every year at Christmastime, Gerry gets Christmas cards from those boys with pictures of their wives and their kids and notes telling her they will always remember her when they came over from Vietnam and telling her Merry Christmas. That's the good stuff that happens in our family-not from me, but from Gerry. Most of the good stuff happens from Gerry. Then the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS) called up the Jewish Federation and said, "Look, the federal government is asking us for help with the Vietnamese. They are coming out in droves. They are not being picked up. They are floating out on ships. We helped HIAS by giving them grants when they brought in Jews in the early part of the century. We would like HIAS to take some responsibility now for bringing in some Vietnamese. HIAS was our national organization that helped us bring Jews to this country. We got involved with bringing in Soviet Jews, which was a big movement. When the walls came down, the first plane that flew to the Soviet Union was purchased by a Jewish man from Tulsa for seven figures. He would never let me give his name. He bought that first plane to bring put those first Jews. We raised a lot of money-much more money than most communities. I had trouble at the Federation to tell you the truth bringing Soviet Jews to the United States because there were some people on the Federation Board who felt that all of the Soviet Jews should go to Israel. Well, not all of the Soviets wanted to go to Israel, and not all of our parents and grandparents wanted to go to Israel. That's the point I had to make against some powerful people who felt that the Soviet Jews should go to Israel. So we brought quite a few to Tulsa. Eventually, most of them left because they wanted to be with their families and they wanted to be with people that spoke the same language and from the same culture. If I were a Soviet Jew, I would rather be on Coney Island or Brighton Beach than I would be on 23<sup>rd</sup> and Peoria in Tulsa. Anyway, it was a good experience for our community and a lot of volunteers helped us with that. So having a track record now of years of successful resettlement, the U.S. government asked HIAS to apply those experience to resettling the Vietnamese. When I went to Fort Chaffee and spoke to those people there and others, they told me there were Catholics and Buddhists coming from Vietnam. Most of the Christian Vietnamese were taken in by churches and helped. You had to have support for them to teach them English and get some education and job training. All of that business was done by their agencies. But Buddhists were only welcome if they could be converted to Christianity. I'm sorry, but that was the situation then. It happened the minute Soviet Jews got off the airplane in New York. There were societies there that made them believe they were Jewish and convinced them to come to a temple and get a meal. The Soviet Jews didn't

understand their religion because they were not allowed to practice their religion for over a generation. They didn't really know themselves what being Jewish was. The only thing that was good in those days about being Jewish is they let you out of the Soviet Union. Therefore, we took Buddhists. We had no Jewish Vietnamese that we could find, so we brought Buddhists in. (Chuckle) Jews are not prone to proselytize. We've been for thousands of years, murdered for not wanting to pray to another person. So, we don't do it to the next person. Buddhists felt comfortable living with the Jews I guess. Agnostics and Jews were the best thing for them to find. (Chuckle) Through that experience we brought in a number of families. The families did pretty well here. They owned a Vietnamese restaurant here for a long time. Gerry helped out at that restaurant and ended up working as a waitress for eight years in that Vietnamese restaurant. She could give you an order of anything on that menu and serve it with chopsticks. Also then, the boat people needed to come in and the Jewish community brought some of them in. We had volunteers to help with that. Through that, we had a young man who came to live with us for a short time. He is the father of our two grandkids who are sitting right here, and the husband of this young lady in the middle. This is our family. We've talked about our natural kids and their children, but here are other members of our family, Mrs. Tran. You might know her from her nail business. She is a top businesswoman in this community. This is Tina Tran, her dad lived with us for 14 or 15 years before Gerry figured out how to get him married. This is Jimmy Tran. They both go to Union School. Friday nights they are at our house for Kiddush. They both graduated from the Heritage Academy, but they are Buddhist. Their parents are Buddhist. Their grandparents in Vietnam are Buddhist. Gerry wouldn't have it any other way and she runs the roost in my house. I am embarrassing the heck out of them, but they are wonderful kids and but we love them. Friday nights they have dinner with us every week. Jimmy can do the Kiddush as well as anybody can do. They have Passover with us when we are in town. They are our grandkids and we are proud of them. I assure you, they have brought more to us than we have brought to them.

**JE:** So you and your wife took in their father and raised him?

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** Why did you choose him and how did you decide he needed to come into your home?

**DB:** He was here with his brother and his brother was not very good to him. He was sort of the slave of his brother. He never had the opportunity to do anything on his own. His brother had been in the army many years and they didn't know each other that well, but they were brought here together. We took both of them. Excuse me for saying this, but he had no education. As most Vietnamese did, they knew their own language, so it wasn't as hard for them to learn English. But he didn't know his own language. He could speak

it but he couldn't write it. He was illiterate in his own language—therefore it was difficult for him to get along. Gerry took a liking to him and that was it. He wasn't the only kid we ever brought into our house. My oldest daughter tells me to this day, "How could you bring these people in? In the morning we would wake up for school and there would be someone sleeping on the living room floor. We didn't know who they were." We didn't know very well who they were either. I would ask Gerry to bring them home for the night. I was counseling with them. I used to work with Traveler's Aid if someone came into the bus station and didn't know how to speak English. We had a French couple come and stay with us from Canada for quite a while. We had a barber from New York stay. The only way we could get him out of our house was that Gerry turned the living room into a barbershop and all of our friends, including Fred Strauss, would come and get a haircut until he could earn enough money to move on. (Laughter) We had different people through the years at our house. One neighbor loaned me a trailer and we put it in our driveway and a couple lived there for quite a long time. But this is something that Gerry and I have gained from. Most of us had grandparents and great-grandparents who came to this country without a dime, like their father came, without a dime. We don't know that story and especially my kids didn't know that story. So it was a good experience to have them. Gerry named these kids that came and lived with us. She taught them English at home. Finally when they could speak English well enough they could go to work. The first job I got for him was at the kitchen in McDonald's working the night shift. I forgot which McDonald's I took him to. (Laughter) I drove around to different ones looking for him. In those days they didn't have many Vietnamese working at McDonald's I assure you. He just kept sweeping the floors until I got there. Anyway, it's been a broadening experience for us and for our children especially who grew up like every other American kid and didn't really know what it was to come here without anything.

## Chapter 14 - 4:08

### Repair the World

---

**John Erling:** This heart that you and Gerry have to take people into your home, I would say most of us don't have that—we're not there. Where does this drive that has been with you all of these years, to be this kind of human helper come from?

**David Bernstein:** Part of it comes from the fact that we're Jewish and that's what we are told to do, to repair that world—that's our job on this Earth. Secondly, we know what happened

to the Jewish people and we don't want to see that happen to the Hispanic people or to the Vietnamese people, or any minority group in this country. The Hispanic people that I have been working with in the last few years, they think that Jews were born rich also. They don't think that we suffered or that we also came to this country without anything. That's been an experience to learn also from us. We have a wonderful silent film that was done about a young European family that came who couldn't speak English, just like the Hispanics, just like the Vietnamese. They lived in a tenement in NYC and couldn't pay their bills. Their daughter came home and said, "I don't want to wear these clothes from Europe. I want to be an American girl. I need all of this stuff." Her father couldn't get a job. Her mother started working as a cook. It was the same story. The same story could be told in any language. It comes from that and it comes from my grandfather personally who was a wonderful guy. The guy who came to collect money from the organizations had to have a place to sleep. So Friday night he would go to the synagogue and whoever wanted to take them home, would take them home for the night. My grandfather always did that too. He always was helping somebody. We saw that happen as well. Then we saw our parents treat people of a different color or a different race a different way than other people did in our opinion. Not being derogatory to anybody, but it wouldn't have happened unless everybody took it on. But that was something I think that was inbred in most of us.

**JE:** I'm sure that spirit is full in this room.

**Rabbi Sherman:** I hope so. I think also, without trying to guilt the lily, that to have that...to have an example and role model, David doesn't like to see himself as that, but he surely is—what we've talked about and heard tonight, is that out of those Jewish roots comes the commitment to the larger community. Tulsa is a much better place because of David Bernstein's contributions both to the Jewish community and to the general community. He manages to exemplify for all of us really, the best of our tradition. That's why I am very, very pleased John that you selected him for Voices of Oklahoma. I think that you couldn't have had a better person.

**JE:** The whole community obviously is fortunate. Do you know whom I am going to thank? Rayco. (Laughter) It was Rayco who brought you to Tulsa.

**DB:** That's true.

**JE:** But, I feel like I am speaking on behalf of the community, beyond the Jewish community they don't know that somebody like you and others like you work behind the scenes. They don't know your name and they may not know you but they would say, "Thank you!" for what you have done for this community. (Applause)

---

**Chapter 15 - 0:33****Conclusion**

---

**Announcer:** You have just heard David Bernstein tell his story of growing up in New Jersey and moving to Tulsa, Oklahoma where eventually his mission was to repair the world. This interview was conducted before a live audience at Temple Israel in Tulsa. We thank Rabbi Charles Sherman for extending an invitation to Voices of Oklahoma and participating in our interview. VoicesofOklahoma.com is a nonprofit agency funded by founding sponsors and foundations in Oklahoma who believe in preserving our legacy one voice at a time-  
VoicesofOklahoma.com