



**Storytellers @RPL**

**Interviewee: Arnie Labaton**

**Interviewer: Sarah Kiefer**

**Recorded on March 25, 2019**

**SARAH:** My name is Sarah Kiefer. Today is Monday, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and I'm speaking with Arnie Labaton. We are recording this interview in the Bolger Heritage Center of the Ridgewood Public Library. Thank you so much for joining us today Arnie, I'm excited to learn a little bit more about how you came to Ridgewood. So, to start, I guess you could tell us how you came to live in Ridgewood and when.

**ARNIE:** I came to live in Ridgewood in the spring of 1974. I was... I was starting a new job as head of WNYC radio and television. I was moving from Bethesda, Maryland where I was the head of operations for PBS from the time it started until the time I left. And I had a three-year-old child and another child on the way and my wife wanted to move to the suburbs rather than Manhattan. A friend of mine recommended Ridgewood to me, he lived here, and we looked around. We looked in Westchester County and we liked Ridgewood. I checked out the schools and I wanted to make sure the school that my kids would go to was integrated and so we...I ended up buying a house here.

**SARAH:** Ok. And can you share some of your fondest memories of living in Ridgewood maybe with the kids growing up?

**ARNIE:** Well, it was a great place for my kids to grow up. What happened after I moved here was within a few years my wife was very unhappy and left and so I was a single parent and it was a very easy place to raise my kids. My kids were then three and six years old and there was a great nursery school here, the Temple Nursery School, and my friends, the friends that I had made, help me out a lot. That is to say women would take my kids to my younger daughter to and from nursery school. My older daughter by then was going to Orchard School so she could get there on her own.

I found that as a single parent I was treated much better than the women who were single parents. That people were, thought it was a wonderful thing for a man to be a single parent and they offered to help me in many ways. So that was that was one of the advantages of being in a town like Ridgewood. I spend most of my time working that is, no I shouldn't say that, I mean I came home every day. But I didn't participate a lot in the community life because of my job and because of my parental responsibilities.

So I...Ridgewood has a lot of a lot of amenities. I like to play tennis so I used to play tennis at Bellaire and my kids who went to Orchard I would take them with me and they would play in the playground while I play tennis and then I pick them up. Except for the one occasion where my daughter decided to go to her friend's house, my older daughter with my younger daughter, that made me a little bit crazy because I did not know where they were. But other than that, Ridgewood was a very welcoming town; an easy town to raise my children.

**SARAH:** That's good to hear. Are they still in the area or did they branch out?

**ARNIE:** No, No, they're much older now. My older daughter is president of a PR company that specialize in beauty. It was ranked, I think, the number one beauty PR Company in New York by the New York Observer last year. And my younger daughter, she went to Mount Holyoke after high school and my younger daughter went to Barnard after high school and when she graduated worked half time for Gloria Steinem and half time running a small startup foundation for young feminists and after five years she felt she was getting too old to be a young feminist so she went to NYU Law School. And from there she's had a number of very interesting jobs since then. And she is now the mother of two young very...very engaging children.

**SARAH:** That's...That's a good way to put it, engaging. So that's good that you are all seems to still be in the area. Did you commute into New York City by the train? Or how did you?

**ARNIE:** I commuted...When I was working in NYC, I commuted by train because it was downtown in the municipal building and I would take the train in the Path to World Trade Center and walk over. And when I left NYC after four years to go to WNET, I...I for a month or two I continued to commute by train but then I started taking the bus and later on I started driving in because my hours were sort of irregular.

**SARAH:** Right, as Ridgewood being where it is, it's a lot of people live in town and then commute to the city so it's always interesting to see what people choose to do based on where they are located in New York. So...

**ARNIE:** Yes, NET was then on 57th Street and ...57th Street and Ninth Avenue so it was much more convenient to take the bus and especially to drive in.

**SARAH:** Yeah.

**ARNIE:** And because I was an executive, I was provided parking and things like that.

**SARAH:** And can you talk a little bit about what you did in your work and your employment history. How you've been involved in these different jobs.

**ARNIE:** Well I...After college, I went into the army and I got out not knowing what I wanted to do. And I soon got a job as a reader for a literary agency which after a year of

reading a lot of bad manuscripts and plays took a job at CBS starting out in the mailroom and within three years I was Deputy head of production for WCBSTV and then I worked for CBS news mostly on special events, big projects like space shots, and elections, and things like that. And I left CBS news in 1968 after working on coverage of the primaries the last of which was the California primary where Robert Kennedy was killed and some specials we did after that. I went to an organization called the Public Broadcast Laboratory, which was a precursor of PBS and that the funding for that ended after that year. I went back to CBS to work on Apollo 11 where another man and I were responsible for setting up and operating 43 remotes that we...that we had. We were on the air for a lot of time, 43 hours continuously.

And as soon as that ended, there was a special where the astronauts returned to the US for a big dinner in California and then I was a producer of the WCBSTV election coverage. When that ended, I was asked the FCC had decided to grant under the public broadcasting act which one of the provisions of which is common carriers should provide free or reduced service to public broadcasting. So AT&T which was really the only national network capability was providing 2 hours a night four nights a week to carry national programs and NET which was a separate organization for what is now WNET which previously had been distributing programs on videotaped educational stations was running this for a few months and the head of programming at NET was someone I had worked with when I was at CBS and he asked me if I would run the network while it was deciding...while it was being decided what would happen. NET wanted to be, what became PBS, the operator of the network but the stations decided that a new organization should be created, PBS, to operate the network and I was recruited to be the head of operations of PBS.

A job like others I reluctantly took but...but the general manager of PBS who I had also worked with at CBS felt he did not know anybody else who could do that who could set up the network and to deal with AT&T and set up all the operating rules for all the program providers and so I did all that. And we create a network... I spent a year... over a year negotiating with AT&T to build the network and...and designed it so that it would have maximum flexibility and finally in May I think a year and half later or year later the FCC ordered AT&T to go ahead and build the network for us on a permanent basis so we became the fourth network in America. CBS, NBC, and ABC were the only three other full-time networks so PBS became the fourth network.

And I did that for four years when I was again recruited to become the head of WNYC again. The mayor's son had been a producer who reported to me when I was at WCBSTV and he recruited me to come and run WNYC. So I did that. I thought it would... at first I was reluctant but then I realize I knew a lot about producing in New York and I knew a lot of people from my previous experience and I thought I'd you know we could do some interesting work but within a year the New York City fiscal crisis erupted and it was huge pressure on the city to sell the stations, the licenses for commercial licenses, and so they were very valuable and many including the first deputy mayor who was brought in to help clear up the messes that the city was in and I think even the New York Times editorial board said the city should focus all its efforts on

essential services, police, fire, sanitation, education, and sell the stations and so I...I met with the mayor and tried to convince him not to sell the stations and he agreed to let me go ahead and try and figure a way to reduce the burden of this budget on the from the city's finances.

So I spent most of my time I went to Albany to try and set up a public benefit corporation. I met with good government groups to put pressure on the city to maintain this so all the things I really thought I would enjoy doing I didn't do but we did manage to convince the city to support the stations and I set in motion before I left a...a process by which a separate not-for-profit corporation would be set up that could receive and distribute funds. One of the problems with the stations being a city agency was they was subject to all the civil service rules which were very restrictive in trying to hire talent. But by the time I left, I had raised enough money so that I think we had a million dollars in the bank essentially and we were on the way toward creating the corporation that would later be able to take in money and even ultimately it became the owner of the licenses and cities transfered the licenses except under the Giuliani administration. They sold the television station for whatever...for the revenue it provided. But the TV station... the radio station NYC AM and FM still of course continued to exist as the major public radio stations in the country and it's a much better operation now than it is when I was there. They're much more flexible they have a lot more money they hired a lot of good people. I think they are terrific stations.

But while I was at NYC again I was approached by WNET for a job there. Vice President came to meet with me and asked if I would be interested in coming over to run their operation and I said no and he said well if I ever change my mind and was ready to leave I should meet with them. So after four years, Ed Koch was elected Mayor ironically his brother-in-law was a producer at CBS with whom I had worked and he came and asked me if I would stay on because he wanted to recommend. He said he had been asked to...to recommend somebody to run the stations and he wanted to recommend me to continue to run the stations but it had been...it had been a hard time. My marriage had broken up a year earlier and I decide I don't want to stay on.

So I went to meet with the president of NET who created a job for me. And I was...I was called Director of Special Projects that was all. So I took that job and I...within a few months I was the Deputy Head of Program Production at NET. A job I really enjoyed and we produced a lot of programs and between then... and later on I became head of production between in that period, that thirteen year period we created series like Nature and American Masters and we got more support for Great Performances and we produced a number of miniseries, big miniseries oh very expensive, The Brain, The Mind, Civilization and the Jews etc. And the that was very rewarding except that WNET was running into financial problems at a time when we had two very big miniseries on the way big in the sense that they were very expensive. One was The Brain and the other was Heritage: Civilization and the Jews were all by Abba Eban and in both cases the executive producers who started them were under enormous pressure and the show... they were having... the series were not working out and in one case the executive producer resigned because he was having a nervous breakdown he thought.

And so the head of The Brain...the head of Science program named George Page suggested he and I take over as executive producers. And I said no, I was not willing to do that. I was their superior. Then a few weeks later, the executive producer of Heritage Civilization and the Jews said he was leaving, it was too much pressure. He already spent about seven million dollars one program was completed. The first two programs had been shot twice and neither of them worked and...and so within hours after I reported that the President, I was then Deputy Head of Program, the President, the Executive Vice President, and the Vice President of the program separately came into my office and told me I had to take over the series which I refused to do. I said I wouldn't do it but I would go and find somebody to take it over and I would meet with the staff in the interim. Well I met with the staff and I felt it was... they were so demoralized and it was in such chaos and I realized that I would not be able to find somebody soon enough to step in so I made a deal with a head of programming that I would take it over but I wouldn't give up my other job and so I had... I would work there most of the time but I had offices in two different buildings. And so I took it over and I promoted the man who was overseeing the scripts to become the series producer and we started reviewing all the existing episodes that were being edited and being shot.

And within a few months, I remember...it was Thanksgiving eve, the office of that unit was in the building at 10 Columbus Circle overlooking Central Park West and it was everybody in the office had gone except me and I was looking out the window despairing how we would be able to salvage this series. But, that passed and we... the... the series producer and I decided that we couldn't make the first two programs work. That we would consolidate them into one program. They covered an enormous period of time and all the available footage was of deserts and we had nothing to cover the narration. We had...and so that was a big decision, we had to go to the underwriters and tell them that even though they'd given us all this money we were reducing the size of the series and having made that decision and hired...I hired a...a writer I had worked with at CBS a very good very smart writer to write that program and I promoted the producer who was working on something else to work with him on deciding what we need to shoot to make it work.

And slowly...And slowly the series took shape, I met with the staff and told them I was confident we could do this series and that we would be on the air in a little over a year because we'd committed to PBS. That the series would air in the fall of '84 was gonna be one of the big things they were promoting and...and we continued to work and went on the air in the fall of '84. That summer before that, a producer and I went over to Israel, Producer...Associate Producer and I went over Israel and shot something like 25% of the first program, 30% of the second program and 15% of the third program to...to...to fill in all the holes that had been edited but it was... we saw what we didn't have and so we went there and within a two week period we shot all that material and redid the avat evat stand ups for all three programs. And we went on the air, in October of 1984 to a wonderful reviews. The series won the Peabody award, The Christopher award, it won every major award that was given to television programs. And it was later declared one of most important miniseries in American television.

**SARAH:** Wow.

**ARNIE:** Provided to every library, probably including this library at the time.

**SARAH:** That's amazing.

**ARNIE:** Yeah, so that made me feel much better. So I was in...I stayed at NET and became head of programming until there was a severe budget problem in 1991 and half of the Vice Presidents were let go including me. But few days later, I got a call from PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting asking if I be willing to oversee the presidential election coverage for public broadcasting. So I did that through the fall of 1992 and then I was an independent producer for a while. I produced a series of special programs on news media called Media Matters that ended up running from 1995 to 2003. And some other programs I produced for an organization that was starting up the ovarian cancer research fund. I produced two documentaries for them that ended up... they were really for survivors but they ended up being shown on television nationally as it turned out. And then in 1999, I got a call from PBS the head of programming at WNET asking if I would be willing to become the executive producer of a series that was ending its second season called Religion & Ethics Newsweekly, a half hour weekly documentary series and I agreed to do that for one year and in 2017 when the series ended I was still doing that. So that's my working life.

**SARAH:** And are you still working or are you at least partially retired?

**ARNIE:** I'm...I'm with two partners trying to develop a long form documentary on the challenges facing the news media today. That has a strong endorsement from PBS. So I expect any day now that will get a starter grant from the Ford Foundation and will begin doing some real work on it. My two partners are the man who was a series producer on... on Heritage: Civilization and the Jews and the host and executive editor of the series Media Matters that I did who later became the head of Harvard's Shorenstein Center a job he held from early 2000 to 2015 when he left it.

**SARAH:** And has the work environment, it sounds like it's changed and evolved a lot over the years, is it still something you really enjoy and...and

**ARNIE:** No, I enjoy making programs yeah. It's challenging but after all this time I think I know how to do it.

**SARAH:** That is...that is important. And you spoke a little about that you really enjoyed that miniseries and got all these awards. Would you say that's one of your greatest accomplishments in your career or is or anything else you want to mention?

**ARNIE:** The miniseries is one of my serious accomplishments. Religion & Ethics is another. We won something like 150 to 200 awards while I was there. I also have another Peabody for I was...I was in that period after NET and before Religion & Ethics

I was the executive producer of two theatrical documentaries, one called Arguing the World that won a Peabody and the other called A Life Apart about Hasidism in America and that was a finalist for the EMMY best documentary award. So I have a lot of awards.

**SARAH:** Sounds like it. And I guess we can go back a little bit because you mentioned right before you got into the career that you were in the military. Can you talk a little bit about your formative years how you went from the school...the schooling system to the military and then to?

**ARNIE:** I went to high school in Brooklyn; from there I went to the City College in New York. I didn't know what I wanted to major in so I...my brother was at the business school what's now the Baruch School, I went there. After the first semester I decided I really don't want to be a business major so and I was told I had the aptitude for other majors so I went up to Uptown City College as an engineering major. After one semester, I decided I didn't want to be an engineering major either because there was a lack of the kinds of courses that really interest me, literature and history and things like that. So I became a math major, was another thing I felt I could do well. But after one semester, I decided I didn't want to be a math major and I became a philosophy major which I... I... I thought was really probably the best decision I made. It was really challenging, intellectually challenging, philosophy faculty was the smartest faculty I felt at City College and the method of teaching was a Socratic method so that you had to justify what you believed all the time in class and it was really rewarding.

While I was at City College I was the editor in chief of two magazines one a literary magazine and another one called The Journal of Social Studies and it was always I think my extracurricular activities that opened the doors for my jobs. Then when I was working for the literary agent I...I ended up as a contestant on a network television quiz show and again I say partly because of my background. I tied and lost and the person who beat me was a the biggest winner on that show it was called Tic-Tac-Dough. It was on five days a week on NBC I think. He worked at Look Magazine.

So one day, when I decided I didn't want to be...I wanted a new job I had an interview at Doubleday Publishing which was a few blocks away from CBS and Look Magazine and I had a lunch date with him. So my interview ended early and I... Look Magazine was right across the street from CBS Inc. on Madison Avenue. So I went into the lobby of CBS and I asked if there were any quiz shows offices in the building. I figured if I could get another quiz show it was an easy way to make money. And he said no, there were no quiz shows and so I asked where the personnel office was and I walked up, he said the fifth floor, and I went there and I filled out an application and I got called in for an interview and I was in the middle of the interview when I realized I was going to be late for my lunch date so I apologetically said "Yeah, I'm really sorry I have a lunch date could I come back and finish the interview after lunch." and the person interviewing me said "No that's all right if you want a job you could start on Monday." And that's how I started up in television.

**SARAH:** It's funny how life goes from one to the next.

**ARNIE:** It is. But the things that was hard...why did you hire me instead of ... if you went if you started out... CBS they start everybody in the mailroom, the mailroom was filled with guys from Ivy League schools, and so when I was hired for the first job I applied for after a while I said "why'd you hire me rather than the other guys". They said "we didn't have anybody before who had worked for a literary agent and who had been on a quiz show." So...

**SARAH:** It's serendipity sometimes and all that. Ok, so I guess looking ahead is there anything any lifetime goals you're you're working towards and it sounds like you havet a lot on your plate. So...

**ARNIE:** Well first, I'm eighty five years old. I was probably the oldest executive producer in broadcasting when my job ended and if I do this project I will probably be the oldest executive producer on a project for public broad... I don't talk about that because you know in many forms many prejudices no longer socially acceptable but there are some that are and one of them is ages. People are reluctant to hire older people. You can understand a lot of that. I mean if you're a 40-year-old executive you don't want to hire somebody who's 50 or 55. It makes you uncomfortable to have all the people working for you but it pervades almost all...all working life in America. So the one thing one doesn't do if one wants to get support is to reveal one's age. I think people are not allowed to ask you so it makes it a little bit easier but if you look at my credentials you can begin to wonder how old I must be.

**SARAH:** So you think you'll continue with it in this project and further or just this project?

**ARNIE:** This project?

**SARAH:** Uh-huh.

**ARNIE:** I hope to get the funding for it and I think it's very important. I think the questions of the challenges the media faced today both financially and editorially are a significant issue in American, in American life today and I think we could do a very good documentary we have a lot of knowledge about that. Alex Jones actually wrote, who's the anchor who's a former head of Shorenstein wrote a book a few years ago about the challenges the news industry faces. So we can do an important documentary if we can get it funded.

**SARAH:** Well, I hope it all works out. Sounds like a very interesting documentary, so it's very important the challenges being faced with that so...

**ARNIE:** Oh, it is

**SARAH:** It's a key part in this.

**ARNIE:** It's not only...The traditional media it's all a competition from things like FaceBook and other social media sites and create and the ability to create and distribute fake news and find audiences for reliable news.

**SARAH:** Which is a big part of our job here

**ARNIE:** What?

**SARAH:** It's a big part of our job here too cause we have a lot of people asking about reliable sources so.

**ARNIE:** Uh huh. And what do you say?

**SARAH:** We give tips on how to recognize if it's not a reliable source, where to look to get that information, and obviously a big big one is don't always judge the first story being the truth of the matter always look around and research further so.

**ARNIE:** Well there's a lot of good research being done. I don't know if you personally use it but Pure Research issues a newsletter you could sign up for that does a lot of research into people views, what they believe, where they go for their news, on how trustworthy they feel different sites are, and the other one is the Nieman Organization. Neiman also puts out a daily and a weekly newsletter that both of these one can subscribe to for free and they have a lot of interesting reports on their own and a lot of links to other interesting sources.

**SARAH:** That is good to know. Thank you.

**ARNIE:** You're welcome.

**SARAH:** If, is there anything else you like to...to share with your...your story.

**ARNIE:** No, I've talked a lot about myself but actually what I'm most proud of are my two daughters.

**SARAH:** They'll be happy to hear that. Yeah.

**ARNIE:** Yes, they are. Well, they...they both do very good work, they're both smart and they work hard and they're both good citizens.

**SARAH:** That's good to hear. And they grew up in a nice town that they can... get that education.

**ARNIE:** They grew up in a nice town when my daughter got married. There were two people who officiated one was a judge that her husband clerked for in the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. And the other was Gloria Steinem who went out and

researched and wrote this wonderful speech for the occasion.

**SARAH:** That's nice.

**ARNIE:** Yeah, that is nice.

**SARAH:** So you keep the ties here. Okay, well I want to thank you so much for coming in and...and sharing your story and talking with me today and if you ever feel like coming back and telling a little bit more about how this documentary goes out we can certainly do that.

**ARNIE:** Ok. Thank you Sarah.

**SARAH:** Thank you.