

# An Oral History

MABEL FAIRBANKS

*– Figure Skating –*



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## MABEL FAIRBANKS

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*Today is January 7, 1999, and I am in Burbank, California. I am Sharon Donnan and I have the pleasure of interviewing Mabel Fairbanks, a figure skating legend in her own time.*

**Q: Mabel, I thought today we would start off with some of the very basic details in the beginning of your life, and if you could just tell me about your place of birth and your childhood, and we could spend a few minutes there.**

A: Well, I only know what I was told. I was there but I wasn't there (*Laughter*) because I do not remember any of those things like some kids are smart in the womb and they can remember, but I was never that smart. (*Laughter*) But I was born in the Florida Everglades, and Seminole Indian grandmother and English grandfather. My father was an African. I was in the Everglades until I was about maybe 3 years old, and naturally, I don't remember anything about it. So I only know that I was born there because an older sister told me that I was. I came out and I lived with my mother and father and all of my sisters and brothers, and then I'm like Topsy, I wasn't born; I just grew. (*Laughter*) Because when my older sister called and sent an application to Washington they said that they did not have any record of my birth, which meant my grandparents did not report my birth, because my grandmother really brought me into the world. So, then I just said, well, I guess I'm a very unique person. That's when I realized that I was very special, that I was most interesting, the most important individual in the world.

And then I decided during, well, I went to school really, during kindergarten and I went to beginner's school the same as all kids did, and then I went to high school, because my parents passed away of course.

**Q: How old were you when they passed away?**

A: I don't know. I went to live with my sister, [who] adopted me out with a schoolteacher and principal. ... [Then] I wrote my brothers in New York and asked them if they would send for me, that I could take care of myself. So they said, "OK and told the people to "send the kid to us." So I went to New York and lived with my brothers.

**Q: Could we back up just a little bit, Mabel? Could you tell me, do you remember how many brothers and sisters you had?**

A: There were 14 in all.

**Q: Fourteen in all?**

A: Right. That's what they tell me but I don't remember 14. In fact, there were so many kids around, because my mother took in everybody – every kid off the street – and gave them a place to

stay and something to eat. So I never knew who were my real sisters and brothers, but my older sister told me there were 14.

**Q: Fourteen?**

A: Um-huh.

**Q: Do you remember where you lived in the Everglades?**

A: No.

**Q: And you said when you were 3 and a half that you moved out of the Everglades.**

A: Yeah.

**Q: Did you move into another town in Florida?**

A: Yeah, someplace in Florida. I never thought of anything like that, I just know that I'm here...

**Q: Right.**

A: And this is it.

**Q: Right. With your parents, do you remember when they died or how or...**

A: Well, my father, I guess he got tired of taking care of such a large family, although there wasn't 14 of them when I came along because some of them had passed on. I guess he got tired of it and he took off. I don't know what state he went to, but he took off and left my mother with the children. And there didn't seem to be too many then, there were about just four sisters and two brothers that I remember during that time.

**Q: And they were older than you?**

A: No. I had a younger brother and a sister two years younger than I was. Then I decided that, gee, if I go to New York I can maybe become a secretary or something. So, I went to New York to live with my brothers. My brother had a fish market; this was on 8th Avenue in Harlem. I lived with him for a while and I had to pay for my board and my food. I had to help in the fish market, which was OK. I loved it. The parents, they would come in and bring their children and buy fish. They always picked the least expensive fish and maybe one fish. I said, now, how is she going to feed all of those kids – three kids – and herself with one fish. So I always gave her more than what she bought, and then her change ... I would always give more than she gave me. That went on for a couple of weeks and then my brother noticed that I was giving away the fish and the money. (*Laughter*) So he says, "I don't think you're going to be able to live here. You'd better go live at the Y." So, I said, "Well, that's OK because I can become a secretary, maybe." Then I stayed there and I got my room and board there. They said, "You can come in and still wrap fish but you can't bother the cash box." So, I said, "OK. I still gave people more fish. (*Laughter*) So finally, his wife says, "Look, we're going to the poor house if she keeps hanging around." (*Laughter*) "Put her out." So they did, and I stayed at the Y, the YW.

I started taking shorthand and typing, and then I was bored. I said, "I can't sit down that long, I've

got to move around." So, after a couple of months, I said that's not for me. So I finally got a job babysitting, and this woman she was just passing by one ... Oh, I got a room in an apartment with a girl I met on the street. I told her about my brother putting me out, so she said, "That's OK, come live with us." So, I went to live with her and my brother gave me \$5 and her mother wanted \$3 per month for the rent. So I said, "OK, so I have five so I'll have two left." I didn't think about eating or anything like that, I just know I have \$2 left over. Finally, the girl and I had a lovely relationship. And then when the month was up the mother said, "OK, you owe \$3 again." I said, "Well, I don't have \$3, I only have a dollar," because I had spent the rest of it for food. So she said, "Then you can't stay here." So I decided, well, I'll go sleep on the roof. I took some newspaper and went on the roof to sleep. Then the girl came one day and says, "You know, my mother has found us out. She knows you're sleeping on the roof." Because when she goes to work I would go in and take a shower or a bath or whatever, and eat. Then she said, "Tonight she's going to come up there because she has a big stick and she's going to beat your butt until you won't be able to sit or sleep." (*Laughter*) So, I said, "OK." So I left the roof and then I decided to sleep on the stoop. I slept on the stoop for three or four nights, and then people, you know, they had to walk across me in order to get into their apartment, so finally they said, you know, "You can't sleep on this stoop because we have to get in and out of our apartments so you have to go someplace else." Then I decided, well, I'll take my newspaper and move to Central Park. So, I moved over into Central Park. (*Laughter*) I was there for a few weeks. You know, nobody bothered you during that time. And a lot of people were sleeping in the park; it didn't mean a thing.

One day this lady was passing by with her baby in a carriage, and she said, "Why are you sleeping in the park?" I said, "Because this is the only home I have." She said, "Well, you can't sleep out here." She said, "You're going to die out here when it becomes winter." So I said, "Oh, but I'll get more newspapers to cover up with." She said, "That won't do any good because there'll be snow on the ground." (*Laughter*) So anyway, she said, "I'll tell you what, I live right across the street and you can come work with me and babysit." So I said, "OK, I'll come babysit." Then I was about ... I was about 8 and a half, 9 years old now, so I said, "OK." So I stayed with her and minded the baby, who was a very lovely baby.

And one day when it got very, very cold the pond froze over and the red ball goes up, and then all of these people were out there skating, and I said, "Look at the people going around and around." She said, "Yeah, they are ice skating." I said, "Oh, that's just beautiful, I'd like to do that." I said, "And maybe your daughter would like to ice skate." So, she said, "Only if she wants to because ice skating is really a very expensive sport. But if she wants it, she can have it because we can afford it." I said, "I would like to go and watch them closer up." She said, "Then just go across there and watch them," because we were watching from the window. And so I watched them and I said, "Gee, I'd like to do that." So then one day I was passing the pawn shop just around the block from where she lived, I go to the pawn shop and I said, "Hey, I see these skates in the window." I said, "May I buy them?" He said, "OK." So I got him down to giving him a dollar, and he said, "OK. They were black two-wheel skates, and that was the first skating I ever saw and I didn't know that you had white skates. So I bought them and I then put them on, but I then I couldn't get across the street.

Later the husband said, "You know, she should have her own apartment now, she has enough money to have her own room, so take her around and see if you can find a room for her." So she found a room with a friend of hers and he was a black fellow, they were friends to this family. So she said, "OK, then we'll see if they have a spare room they can rent you." So, I said, "OK." So they rented me a room for, I think it was around two dollars.

**Q: The family that you were working for, were they a white family?**

A: Yeah. Right. So then, I started living with them and I bought these skates and I told the lady. She said, "But you'll still be working for us because my husband said that you should come three or four times a week to work for me because I have other things to do. I have to go out and do shopping and this and that." I said, "OK." This woman's brother lived in this apartment building on the 20th floor. So he said, "Oh, you just call me Uncle Wally. All the kids in the neighborhood call me *Uncle Wally*." I said, "OK Uncle Wally." So then I got these skates and went across the street to Morningside Park because that was closer and it wasn't a big street to cross. I skated there for a few weeks and then, but I couldn't figure out why I was falling all the time. I would fall every time I get to the edge and I would fall. Then the fellow in the crowd said, "You know something, the reason you keep falling is because there is no more ice, it's only snow at the end." (*Laughter*) He said, "Why don't you go into Central Park where there is bigger ice. I said, "Oh, but I'm not good enough to skate over there because I saw them skate there and they can go around and around without falling." He said, "Go over there anyway." So I said, "I have to cross this big 8th Street or 8th Avenue," whichever it was called then. I couldn't get across there. So I held on to this one lady who had this big overcoat on. I held on to the tail of her coat and went across with my skates and all, went across there. I got on the pond and I then I discovered that I could skate around too, just like the other kids. I had so much fun and I said, "Now, that's for me, that's what I want to do." And so I went over there every day as long as there was ice.

Then I went to see a movie, and it was called "Sonja Henie, One In A Million." I said, "Well, gee, that's what I want to do. That girl has on white skates." And I said, "I need white skates." So, I said to the people I was living with, "I've got to have white skates, not black skates, the boys wear black skates, I want white skates." So they said, "When you have your 10th birthday maybe you'll get a pair. So surely enough, on my 10th birthday I got this pair of white skates.

Then I got some tickets from the New York Mirror, skating free. It was only at night. I clipped out all the clippings coupons and everybody in the neighborhood was clipping coupons for me and I would go to the rink to skate. This was in Brooklyn, Brooklyn Ice Palace, and I skated and skated. And then ... the Daily News had coupons, free skating at night starting at 8 o'clock. So I clipped out coupons out of the Daily News and everybody else started clipping coupons out for me.

**Q: So you were getting encouragement from the people that were around you? They wanted to see you ...**

A: Right, because that's what I wanted to do. They said if that's what you want to do, go ahead, but, you know, Negroes don't ice skate but go ahead if you want to do it. So, I said, "OK."

**Q: What about the family that you worked for, were they encouraging?**

A: Oh, yeah. They thought that it was neat that I wanted to skate. The husband sort of laughed under his breath, and I guess he told her she isn't going anywhere so let's let her have her fantasy. But it was a good fantasy. (*Laughter*)

**Q: I'll say. When you were in school, Mabel, did you have, were you an athlete? Did you consider yourself somebody who liked to play ball or did you have any interest in running or any other sport? It wasn't ...**

A: No. I was a 'fraidy cat of everything. (*Laughter*) Even if kids looked at me real hard. (*Laughter*). I

was saying to my sister. We were in the same grade really although I was two years older than she [was]. and I said, "She pushed me in class" or [She] "Told the teacher I was eating in class." She would go up to that person and say, "Did you bother my sister?" They'd say, "So what?" Bing! (*Laughter*)

**Q: Your protector.**

A: Right, right, right. Then we decided that we were going to church school. I went to church schools, which was good. We didn't have all of that in church school because everybody was Christlike. All the kids, wonderful kids.

**Q: That was when you were still in Florida?**

A: Right. That was fun. Three miles away from where I lived, but that was OK.

**Q: And at that time you were living with your grandmother?**

A: No.

**Q: Still with your parents?**

A: Well, my mother. That was before I went to, you know, was adopted out while my mother was still alive. See, I tell you, I just remember things as they come to me, not in order.

**Q: Right. That's fine. We'll piece it all together. Do you have a strong memory of your mother? Was she an important part of your childhood or a sad part or ...**

A: Well, this one sister, every time my mother came home, because she had to work now because the husband had left, every time my mother came home she said, "She hit me!" I would get a spanking. Every day that girl would say I did something. That was a sad part of my life. Everybody did something to me. They said I didn't belong. One brother bit me so hard, I still have the scar of it right there. (*Laughter*) And another brother cut me across the fingers. And another one, did what to me? Oh, my older sister hit me with a piece of wood, I still have the scar there. So, I said, "They don't like me do they?" They said, "No, we don't like you." (*Laughter*) Anyway, I was glad to get away from them. So when I went to New York I had more fun and more freedom, and I loved that.

**Q: And you weren't ever frightened of being alone?**

A: Uh-uh, I loved it, because then nobody bothered me.

Then when I saw Sonja and went to all these different rinks – I still had the black skates and it wasn't until my 10th birthday that I got the white skates – that's when I wanted to go into the ice rink now because all the coupons were gone. So, I wanted to go into an ice skating rink.

It was a Saturday morning, Uncle Wally took me to the Macy's basement in New York and I bought a pair of \$5.95 skates - five dollars and 95 cents – and I had them in my box and went to the Gay Blades, 52nd and Broadway, stood in line and then when I got to the window the lady wouldn't take my money. It was 50 cents to skate and she wouldn't take it. She said, "Go back. Go back little girl." Then everybody else would move up and every time I got to the front, "Go away little girl. Go away." Finally, everybody was in but me. So, I got back up to the window, I says, "Hey, Miss, I'm

next. Hey, Miss. Hey, Miss, I'm next." "Go away. Go away." Then the manager happened to come about that time. He looked out across the ticket window and says, "She has a new pair of skates. Let her in, she can't do any harm." So they let me it, but that was their mistake. *(Laughter)* From then on they had to let me in forever! *(Laughter)* The parents, "What's that nigger doing in here?" All the parents, "We don't want her skating with our children. In fact, we don't even want her on the same ice." So, they says, "Get out of here." So I said, "Well, I tell you what, I paid my 50 cents so you go see the manager." *(Laughter)* So, anyway, they said, "You're going to be sorry." I would get on the ice and I would just skate around and around and forward. That's all I could do was go forward. You know that spin where they hold the foot up in front?

**Q: Um-huh.**

A: I could hold my foot up in front and go forever around the rink, like that – and I'd hold it up to the side and go, hold it up in the back and go – and I could pull it all the way over my head like this and go. *(Laughter)* But that's all I could do, you know. I couldn't even do a two-foot spin. Anyway, one of the head instructors of the rink, Howard Nicholson, he said, "Come here little girl." So, I went over to him. He was teaching a girl to do back cross-overs. "Do this," he showed it to me. And I did it. He said to the girl, "Now, that's what I mean. Do what the little girl is doing." So she tried and she couldn't do them. She was just shaking like a leaf, even though he was holding her hands. So he said, "Do it again little girl." So I did it again, and then I started going so fast, I was going around 20 miles per hour around that rink. I was going so fast until I didn't know how to stop. He forgot to teach me how to stop! So I fell from this end and went all the way to the other end on my behind. *(Laughter)* So from then on, I've been doing back cross-overs. I was so good at it until Hicks, I think his name was, he had a column like "Stranger of the Scene" column. They had these different columns, little things, see.

**Q: Do you remember what paper?**

A: Uh-uh. I don't remember what paper. I remember I was at Brooklyn Ice Palace and they had me come over there. The newspaper had me come over there to Brooklyn Ice Palace, and had speed skaters come over. They said, "Now you skate backwards and the speed skaters are going to skate forward." And so I could skate faster than the speed skaters – *(Laughter)* – so then Hicks wrote it up. I don't remember his name – Nicks or Hicks wrote it up. I think I have a clipping of it still. And he wrote it up that I could skate faster backwards than I could forward. So, that was my thing, skating backwards. Anything going backwards I could do. I wasn't too good going forward, but backwards I had it all. *(Laughter)* So, that was the beginning of my skating! And things like you see them doing today – like they call it the "Biellmann Spin" – when I learned to spin, we were doing things like that. I remember one girl, her name was Penny, a red head girl, pretty little girl, 7 years old. She was so good. We had a theater call the Center Theater. They put her in the Center Theater because she was so good, and she did this spin, and I would do the spin at the rink. We all would do these spins. But you know, these things you hear them called the Biellmann Spin or the Button Jump, things like that, we did them all, but it's whoever did in competition first is whom they named it after. So, I said, "That's nothing new they are doing. I did all of this like the skating they are doing today." I said, "I was doing all of that," and they told me I wasn't skating. All this jive and everything I was doing on the ice, they said, "You're not skating, that's dancing." And then when I got ready to dance, they said "You're not dancing, you're skating." *(Laughter)* It was always some excuse. So, there's my skating. My beginning, anyway.

**Q: Did you stay with Howard Nicholson as an instructor? Did he keep you on?**

A: Well, I tell you, Howard Nicholson took me on and then when other instructors saw that the head instructor of the rink would work with men, other instructors worked with me. There was Joseph Carrol. He was a dance instructor. I took his class., I remember paying 50 cents a week to take his class.

**Q: Ice dancing?**

A: Yes, ice dancing. Then there was, and I used to dance with this fellow who was an instructor by the name of Green. I can't remember his first name. We would dance together when my edges were so deep until he could hardly dance with me. But [I] only danced with the instructor who also had deep edges. Then I discovered why. Because after I grew up and kept watching dancers, I said, "They're all skating on flats, no wonder." (*Laughter*) The man and the woman skate in flats; they're not skating edges. Then Maribel Vinson, she was skating with Sonja Henie, competing with her, and whenever she came to New York she would work with me. She said, "Now this is our secret. Don't tell anyone that I'm working with you giving you lessons, because you're not going anywhere. They're not going to allow you in competition. They're not going to allow you in ice shows because they don't have Negroes in these things." She said, "But I'll work with you because you're willing to learn." So I said, "OK." So she worked with me whenever she came she would work with me. So, I always appreciated all those instructors working with me. And then when these women saw that all the instructors are working with me, they said, "Well, maybe she isn't so bad after all." And then they would ask me to help their kids with things. So I would help the kids to do what I could do, because I could only do three jumps at that time.

**Q: What jumps were those?**

A: Waltz jump, Salchow and a flip jump. (*Laughter*) And I was working on a loop jump and almost knocked my brains out I fell so hard. I fell out and went, "Oh, this feels so good." (*Laughter*) So, anyway, I helped them all and began to have good times. But they didn't want me in any of the shows, because they wouldn't let me in competition. But you know something, the judges around the rink, they would judge my figures and pass me and I passed all of them, eventually. But you know, right in front of my face they tore the papers up. They wouldn't let me know whether I passed or failed. (*Laughter*) They said "Because you do not belong to our club." And they didn't tell me that you could be an individual member. I didn't know anything about that. I had to teach to learn about that. Anyway, I did pass all of those tests and enjoyed them.

Then I tried to get into the Center Theatre show. All those kids in the show, all the boys, I had helped with their skating and they were in. So I went there and tried to get in. And I could only do ballet, of course. They'd say, "Ballet dancers are a dime a dozen. We surely don't want a nigger doing it." (*Laughter*) So, they wouldn't take me. And they said and "We don't have mixture like this anyway. You have to be a dancer in nightclubs, and even then you wouldn't be in the line." I said, "I don't want to be in the line." I said, "I'm good. I want to be a star." (*Laughter*) So, they thought I was crazy anyway. So, we worked that one out and I knew that I can stop trying until Sonja Henie came to town one day, and I've gotten very good now. Sonja Henie came to town and she [had] an agent who was a friend of hers. He had signed me up and he said, "You know something? I can get you into Sonja Henie's show." So Sonja came to town and he told Sonja that he had this black girl, he didn't say black, he said this "Negro girl" because they were saying "Negro" around that time. That had moved from nigger to Negro. And I kept trying to tell them I was black. They said, "You should be ashamed of yourself calling yourself black." I said, "But I am black." Even when I went to get a passport and I put down black, when I got my passport it said "Negro" on it. I said, "I'm not a Negro; I'm black." I said, "My grandfather told me there were five races of people and I belong to the black

race." (*Laughter*) But that didn't mean a thing.

Finally, we just kept moving on and on like this throughout my skating until Sonja, when she came she says to the fellow, the agent, "Is Mabel Fairbanks as good as people say she is?" He said, "If she wasn't I would not have signed her up for your show." So she said, "Then if she's that good, She's too good for my show; she'll steal it. No, she cannot be in it."

Then I went to Shipstads & Johnson and tried to get into the "Ice Follies." They said, "We don't hire Negroes. You know what would happen if you go out on that ice? Everybody in the arena would walk out." I said, "I'll tell you what. I'll work for free the first night. And then if the people do not walk out and applaud me, you can give me a contract." They said, "No, we can't take that chance because if the audience does not walk out, then the cast would walk out. They won't skate with you." You know, they were telling the truth and I didn't realize that until I was in the "Ice Capades" in Mexico. I went out to just audition the number in Mexico because we had been in Mexico for a couple of months doing shows, and my roommate says, who used to skate with "Ice Capades", she said, "Come on Mabel, I'm going to have you audition for the show, because I can walk into the show whenever I want to now that we're closed." So she got in and then they auditioned me, at a smaller rink where I trained Mexican kids to skate. I went out on the ice and everybody lined up. This was after the show. They stayed over and lined up along the wall, and each one passed with their skate in their hand. "Just be careful, whatever you do out there. If you do any jump out there and you think you're coming off that ice. If you do any spin out there, when you get off that ice we'll all have our skates and we're going to kill you." (*Laughter*) So I said Shipstads and Johnson was really right, they weren't about to let me skate. Anyway, I didn't skate. I used to do just small shows.

**Q: Do you remember what year that was when you were in Mexico?**

A: It was in the '50s.

**Q: Early '50s.**

A: Um-huh. Yeah, like '51, '52, because I think I'd been to Cuba by now. We had a show [there] "Rhapsody On Ice," and that was a Warner Brothers show. Leroy Prince set that at a theater in Cuba. I think that was around '50 or '51. Then the show was supposed to tour all over, but the management wouldn't take it because they said that I couldn't skate in it. They said, "Why can't she skate in it?" They said, "It's OK for her to skate here in Cuba because it's scout country, but she isn't going to skate anyplace else." So, they said in that case then your contract is no good. And Balita [Jepson-Turner] skated then. It's a funny thing, because we used to practice at ice at [unintelligible] Palace. Do you remember Balita?

**Q: I remember the name vaguely.**

A: We used to practice together. She's English. We practiced together over at [unintelligible] Palace, and she was the star of the show. She was so happy that I was going to be with a show. She was the only one who had ever been happy that I was with a show. All the others, "No." Even my own shows, which I got up and had people produce for me, I had to have skaters. So, in having skaters it's OK until you get to the theater to get on the ice. "If Mabel gets on that ice, you're not going to have a show," they said to the owner, "So you better not let her go on." In my own shows I could not go on. (*Laughter*) That was funny. And when I look back at it, I say skating has moved up, but not that much.

**Q: Tell me a little bit about ... We've lost a few years here I think. Where were you during the war, during World War II? Were you still in New York?**

A: I was in New York.

**Q: You were in New York.**

A: What were we doing? We were singing, boom, boom, boom! *(Laughter)*

**Q: Were you doing shows during that time?**

A: No, I had my own little -- Maribel Vinson said to me, "Mabel, you're not going to get into any show. You have to do your own show." So, Uncle Wally had built a little six-by-six ice skating tank, which I keep in my bedroom, and I would practice until I got tired and then I would go to bed and sleep a couple of hours, then got up and practice some more until I learned to master that six-by-six. Then we got bookings into wherever clubs would do benefit shows, and I always got 40% of the gate.

**Q: What could you do on six feet by six feet?**

A: You'll be surprised the things you can do! *(Laughter)* You know like you can jump on the ice, jump from the floor on the ice, or you can jump on the ice to the floor and things like that. I remember I always had a roller skater working with me, because he had his roller skates on the floor, and he would do a lot of things. He would say, "Ms. Fairbanks is going to try this," and I would pretend I can't do it, you know. Then maybe the third time I would do it. And I got the biggest hand of all. *(Laughter)* It was fun! Lots of fun! *(Laughter)*

**Q: So you spent a lot of that time then, choreographing, and ...**

A: Oh, yes.

**Q: ... and staging?**

A: Right. That was fun.

**Q: And some of the small clubs in New York then would be where you would perform?**

A: Wherever a club had anything. Clubs are always having something to raise money. So, they must have entertainment. Uncle Wally always saw that I got a job with them ice skating. Just bring my six-by-six rink in there and put it on the floor, and in the channels just put in crushed dry ice and then on top of that crushed dry ice you water it down, and within an hour you had a sheet of ice.

**Q: Really?**

A: Yes. It was fun! I loved it and I kept it in my bedroom.

**Q: Were the sides ... the frame then was that made out of wood or metal or do you remember?**

A: Wood and the metal was for the containers to hold the ice because in these channels you had

to put the dry ice.

**Q: Then you'd put the ...**

A: Then on top you would just put water.

**Q: And it would freeze from the dry ice?**

A: Freeze. In an hour you had an ice skating rink. (*Laughter*) Even today it takes at least two and a half hours to make ice. But in an hour, you were ready to go.

**Q: And then you could transport that to wherever you were ...**

A: Anywhere you want to.

**Q: Six-by-six?**

A: Yes. And I loved that little tank. I remember we left it in New York, we left at an apartment I was living at 339, or something like that, Convent Avenue. I lived there a block of so from City College. Across the street was a nunnery, where the girls were. That was lovely. Then on that same street on Convent Avenue, a couple of blocks, there was a fellow who had a tennis court and so I said, "Gee, they have kids skating there." And there were some black kids skating there too. I said, "Maybe I'll go in there and skate." So I went in there and he said, "You want to rent skates?" I said, "No, I have skates." "You have your own skates?" I said, "Yeah." So he said, "OK, go out there and skate. I won't charge you, just go skate." Because they didn't believe I could skate, you know. (*Laughter*) So he had frozen the tennis court over and I went out there and I skated. When I was finished, he said, "OK, in the winter time you own the rink. In the ..." [tape ends]

**Q: OK, I think we were at the tennis court on Convent Avenue.**

A: Yeah. [Unintelligible] belonged to Althea Gibson in the summertime, where she practiced her tennis, and I in the winter. But still I always went to the big ice rinks, because that's where the fun was when I was working out with instructors.

**Q: Maybe we want to talk a little bit about, is this a good point at which to talk about how then from New York you started doing, you did a show in Cuba and also then to Mexico or ...**

A: No, this was in Los Angeles.

**Q: Oh, OK. So then what I think we need to do is back up a little bit and go from how you got from New York to Los Angeles.**

A: Because one of the studios called and, or sent a telegram or something, stating that they wanted to put me in the movies, and ...

**Q: How do you think they found out about you?**

A: Well, the newspaper, like the newsreel, they were always taking news reels on me and I was always on the screen in newsreels. So, naturally that plays all over. So one of the motion picture ...

I think Sonja was working with 20th Century Fox ... I think it was MGM that called and asked me to come. Anyway, I said, I don't want to go, really, I'm having so much fun working on the six-by-six, so let's just do that." And you're always on radio or something like that where they interviewed you. So and I said, "That's fun." I wasn't making any money, other than on my six-by-six tank, but the other things, you know, it was fun doing them. Anyway, a woman called from Los Angeles and she was in New York or something like that, and she had heard of me. Somehow, she and Wally got together. I don't know how they got together. But the next thing I knew when we came to Los Angeles. We lived with her in the Alvarado Hotel. We stayed there only about two or three nights when she said the manager said that, you know, "I can't have anyone staying in my apartment," because they didn't have blacks in those apartments at that time, "So you have to move. But you can go live at the New Morris Hotel where all the entertainers live."

**Q: Would you remember what street that was on?**

A: New Morris?

**Q: Um-huh.**

A: It was on Fifth and Central Avenue.

**Q: Do you remember what year that was?**

A: No. Maybe '48 or something like that. I'm not too sure. I know all the movie people were living there, like Sammy Davis. I became friends with Sammy Davis because I couldn't see why he was still [performing] with his family his father and uncle and whatnot when he could go on his own and make it and still pay them. I said you'll be a bigger attraction. He said, "I couldn't leave them, after all, they're the ones who brought me up and that's why I am what I am today." I said, "But you won't be leaving them because they're still a part of the act, just that they're not performing with you. So, get out and do it on your own." He said, "I don't think that'll be cool." But anyway, finally he did. So one day he went to the, I can't remember the name of this club, but it said, "Through these doors pass the most beautiful women in the world."

**Q: That was Ted Carroll's "Moulin Rouge."**

A: Yes, yes! (*Laughter*) Right, right, right. You know that guy performed that night and nobody would let him off that stage. He performed until about maybe 3 o'clock in the morning before they would let him go. He was so good.

**Q: Wow. Oh, yeah, what a dynamo. Energy, unbelievable.**

A: And I told him, "You see, I told you how good you could be." He said, "Yeah, but it was tough telling your parents you're going do this and that."

**Q: You know what I'm thinking as we're sitting here, Mabel. How cognizance were you at this time while you were skating on the six-by-six tank in New York City, how aware were you of the competitive world of skating? There were ice skating teams going to the Olympics at that time.**

A: Yeah, well, when I skated at Madison Square Garden at the New York Figure Skating Club sessions, I noticed all of these skaters, like Tenley Albright and Yvonne Vaughn, and this and that,

and all these judges now who were skaters, you know, they were competing. And I remember one girl, her name was Phoebe Tucker, and she was taken from Howard Nicholson. Beautiful girl. Tall. And her dress, I think, cost \$5,000. That was a lot of money during that time to spend for one outfit. That was the most beautiful outfit I had ever seen. And we had to do double flips, you know, and I knew she couldn't do one, she almost had it but it wasn't any better than mine. So I said to Nicholson, I said, "You know something, don't let her do the flip, take it out, let her just put a single in there." He said, "She has to. She'll have two chances to do it. She'll do it once at this end and once at the other end." I said, "She'll never do it. I've never seen her land one." (*Laughter*) So he said, "She'll do it." So she goes out there and the first one she went up in it, pop, pop, right on the ice, in that beautiful dress. (*Laughter*) I said how could she do that in that gorgeous costume. So then, the program went on, and the next one she did, up, bop, right on the ice. He was so sick. I said, "I told you to take it out. All she had to do was do a single." The only thing they'd do is just take so much off for her not doing it. But no, she had to do it. But Fe-Fe, she never did become a judge or anything. I guess she just sort of gave up on it, but she was very wealthy. Very wealthy.

I used to like to skate at Madison Square Garden because you met such interesting people. There was one girl, I didn't know who she was, but her name was Doris Duke. She would ask me to help her with her skating, and I said, "OK." I would help her with her skating and get her to land her little jumps and things like that, and her spins. She said, "I notice you're always trying to do ballet." I loved ballet, of course. So, she gave me a letter of introduction to her ballet instructor. And when I went to the ballet instructor and gave her the letter, she says to me – there were mirrors all the way around the room, of course – and she said, "Just walk around the room." I walked. I could see from the other side she was doing this. (*Laughter*) I said, "She doesn't like me, she doesn't like the way I walk," to myself. Anyway, she said to me, "OK, I'll take you twice a week and you have to pay a dollar a week." I said, "OK." Then I practiced and practiced and practiced. You know, it was three years past before I realized that Doris Duke had paid for all these lessons and that was only a token that she wanted me to appreciate the work that I was doing, and that I would practice hard, and that I was doing it myself.

Then Doris gave me a beautiful black and white satin dress, because I didn't know how to dress, of course. They used to laugh at my costumes because I made them myself. I just copied whatever I saw. And I did it by hand too. So, she made this beautiful white and black satin costume, and I just wore it to ribbons. It was so beautiful.

After that, someone said to me one day, "Do you know who that is?" I said, "Oh, yeah, her name is Doris Duke." They said, "That's all you know about her?" I said, "Sure, her name is Doris Duke, like mine is Mabel Fairbanks." Then they told me who she was of course. (*Laughter*) I said, "Oh, really." I said, "Why would she spend all that money and time with me." They said, "Well, she must have seen something in you." (*Laughter*) So, anyway, she was a very giving person. Very.

Was there another question you wanted to ask me about New York?

**Q: Well, we were talking a little bit about what was happening in competitive skating at that time ...**

A: Oh yes, and that's when I realized that clubs do sponsor some kids, you know. We had one girl by the name of Dorothy Goos, who was very good. They had put her in professional school.

**Q: She was a woman of color?**

A: Color, what do you mean? They weren't even allowed on the rink. I don't know how I skipped in. *(Laughter)* I guess only because I just kept fighting for it.

So, she went to professional school and she was winning all of these championships. She was doing so well. She went far. She went as far as Nationals. I don't remember what happened after that. I don't think she went any farther than Nationals. Maybe she was on the Worlds team, but I don't remember.

There were just so many skaters. All the skaters, they were competitive skaters. That's when I learn about competing. I just thought you just went to the Olympics, I didn't know you had to come from the regions. I just thought if you were that good you just go to the Olympics, but no, they came through the regions. We had many of them. I used to love to go to the competitions. I was sort of like their little mascot, you know, because I was always around, and learning all I could about competitions. And I can see why I'm not in because the clubs wouldn't let me in. *(Laughter)*

**Q: But you made an attempt?**

A: Many attempts. Many. They just laughed in my face – no, no, no. It wasn't until I came out here that I said, "I'm going to train some black skaters and get them into clubs." So, they said, "You're not going to get them in any clubs." So then I knew people from back East who were the skating magazine people, like the editor and this and that. I would write for them. That's when I learned about individual membership. I would write about and ask them for individual membership. I would say, "You know I have several kids you would like to be individual members. Could you send me some membership sheets?" So they did. And when I gave them to the black kids, I said, "Now look, the question they ask you is, 'Why don't you join a club?'" I said, "Put on there because I'm in school and I do not have time to attend clubs." I said, "That's all you put on there; Don't answer any more." So, they all put the same thing on there, because they were going to school. And they accepted them of course.

When I got ready to test them, naturally all the clubs said, "We can't test them, we don't test Negroes." I said, "You gave me a rule book – I remember one of them gave me a rule book – that said here are the rules. If you think you can teach competitively, here's the rule book. So I said, "In this rule book, it says individual members, and they are individual members so you have to test them." Oh, boy, they were mad.

**Q: You found the loophole.**

A: Right. Then I remember one judge, one of her parents' daughter was going to be married. This judge, one of her friends' daughters was going to be married. So, she asked me – Roger Berry's mother, she was teaching – so she asked me if I would teach this little girl while she was over at the wedding, and she'd be gone for two weeks. I taught the little girl and then finally I said, "You can take your preliminary. I said to the mother, "Sign her up for the preliminary test." So the mother did, she signed her up for the preliminary test, and after she passed it, she was good. Then she stayed away for another two weeks. So the girl is now on her first test and doing very well. I said, "You'll be able to take this test pretty soon." And when Roger Berry's mother got back, she said, "I want my student." I said, "There she is; she's yours." I said, "I only taught her while you were away." She said, "Yeah, but the mother said she wants you to teach her." I said, "Well, that's between you and the mother, not me." *(Laughter)*

Then this judge, she was so mad that this woman wanted to take [instruction] from me instead of

her friend, so, I said, "Something is going to happen I know, but I'll just keep it under my breath." So then, when I had a kid go up for a test – a black kid go up for a test – she stood up in the bleachers and Polar Palace, "I will never pass one of Mabel's students. They'll all fail when I'm judging." And that's when you must have three judges, not two, three judges to pass you. If one failed you, you can forget it and wait another 29 or 28 days to take it. So, I said, "I've got to do something about her." And surely enough, every time one of my kids, when she judged, came up for a test, she failed them. The other judges would pass them. And she was the highest judge and they had to go by what she says. So, I said, "OK, I'll do something for this little whatever." (*Laughter*) So I wrote to USFSA and told them that this woman was biased and she's taking it out on kids because she doesn't like them or she doesn't like the [unintelligible]. I didn't tell them who I was or anything like that. I said, "This [woman] should not be judging." So naturally they wrote the club and asked them about her. Then other people were able to go forth and say that this is a good chance because she failed me and I'm a judge, she failed me. (*Laughter*) So they all said, "Yes, she's that way." So, she was taken out of judging.

A year later Atoy's mother came to me and said, "Mabel, Dorothy wants to judge Atoy." I said, "It might be pretty good. Maybe she had learned her lesson because nobody else would let her judge and she must have someone say you can judge." So I said, "Maybe let her judge." She said, "No, I don't want him to fail his test." I said, "Yes, let him take it. She wouldn't dare fail him. If she fails him, she knows she's out and I'm going to tell her so." I said, "Dorothy, I'm going to let you judge. I'll let you back in, but if you fail any one of my students anymore, you are out." (*Laughter*) She was a dancer, you know, and they were always failing her, because you're always skating on flats. (*Laughter*) So anyway, naturally she passed him so high he could have passed a gold test. (*Laughter*) From then on, she passed every one of my kids. (*Laughter*) She was so afraid of me. Then Atoy's mother said, "I guess you know what you're talking about."

**Q: That was already the late '60s then?**

A: Oh, yeah, that was in the '60s.

**Q: The late '60s?**

A: Yes, yes, because he won the '63 Juvenile Boys, and you're just going up the ladder from then on in. This was after the plane crash.

**Q: Right, that took the whole team?**

A: Um-huh. That's right. And one of my boys was on it. Do you remember? No, you didn't skate during that time. You don't remember Roger Campbell, I think was his name. He was a dancer. Do you know Yvonne Littlefield?

**Q: Um-huh.**

A: He was skating with Yvonne Littlefield, and Yvonne Littlefield's mother and his mother always clashed because he was gay and he brought his dolls to the rink. And she was saying, "Boy bringing dolls to the rink." She said, "So what's wrong with that?" She said, "That means he is a sissy." Then they fought. Then finally Littlefield said, "You know something, I'm not going to have my daughter skating with your son." So naturally when they went on the Worlds team to go the competition the plane went down, and that's the only way Yvonne was saved.

**Q: Really?**

A: The only way because she was registered to go. So, he took the girl from across the street, Sherbloom, and they went to Worlds, and they were killed in the plane crash. I guess God works in mysterious ways.

**Q: Yes, indeed. Let's go back to how you got from New York to ... That's how we started. The studios had contacted you because you had been on all the newsreels.**

A: So, as I said, this woman said, "OK, since I have an apartment in Los Angeles, why don't you guys come," I don't know how she and Wally got together – "why don't you come and stay with me?" After that, we had to move because the manager found out that we were staying there.

**Q: And that's when you moved to the New Morris Hotel?**

A: New Morris Hotel. So, that's it. After a while I got my own. Wally knew some friends, printers, since Wally was interested in printing and they were always doing his work, his printing. So he said, "They have a room there, Mabel, in their home. So why don't you move there?" So I did. I moved there. He was already staying there. And from there, that's how I got to Cuba. (*Laughter*)

[In the end], I didn't get the job for the movies because Wally and this lady they were fighting over how the money would be divided. And they called the studios and said, "You write out three checks: one for Mabel, one for me and one for Wally." (*Laughter*) They said, "We don't do business like that, we're hiring Mabel and she gets the check. Now, what she wants to do with it that's her business." But, "She might not give us any of it." They said, "Well, that's still your problem. Don't bring it to us." So anyway, they fought and fought about it must be three checks. So I said, "OK, I'll tell you what to cure the whole thing. I won't do the movie, so let's put it that way." They didn't care because they weren't going to have a three-way split. (*Laughter*) They rather not have me pay them than to have a say. They had to be the boss. So, that's why I didn't do the movie.

**Q: Was that the "Black Cinderella"?**

A: No, that was something else later on, but I didn't want to do that anyway. That was later.

**Q: Do you remember what this first movie was that you came out to do? That brought you to Los Angeles.**

A: No, they just wanted to sign me up for movies.

**Q: OK, it was just a general contract to make you ...**

A: Right, right.

**Q: But as an ice skater skating?**

A: Right, as an ice skater. I wasn't interested anyway.

**Q: How did the Cuba thing come up? How did that happen?**

A: Oh, let's see now, what happened that we were going to Cuba? You're going to a dark country.

You've got to have a dark skater. That's for sure. (*Laughter*) So, this was the Warner Brothers deal. We would go every day, so what happened, they looked for me and they looked for me and they looked for me. They knew of me, but they didn't know where I was. But everybody at the rink knew where I was, I was there at the rink. And they said, "Oh, she went back to New York. They wouldn't tell them where I was."

And one day, Leroy Prince came to the rink, and he said, "Are you Mabel Fairbanks?" I said, "Yeah." "We've been looking all over for you, they said that they didn't know where you were." I said, "Well, they always say that, so, I'm here." He said, "Well, we're going to do a show in Cuba and we need a black skater. Would you be interested in going?" I said, "Yeah." So I said, "But I want \$750 a week." And they said, "OK." But the cast was only getting around \$150 a week, so Bob Turk, who was doing the choreography on the ice – because Leroy Prince was putting it on the floor and he had to put it on the ice for us – he said, "Nobody's getting that kind of money. Why are you going to give her that kind of money?" (*Laughter*) So naturally, they reneged on it because of that. I said, "I don't think I'll be going." They said, "I tell you what, we'll pay you under the table and don't you let anybody know how much you are getting they don't want you to get that kind of money."

**Q: That was the time when Cuba was a very popular vacation spot and very extravagant, lots of clubs and ...**

A: Right. I met all kinds of wealthy fellows there. I met one fellow who wanted to marry me. He said, "Marry me, I have so much and it's all yours. You can go anyplace you want to in the world, but never to the USA. We hate Americans." I said, "I'm an American, you mean I can't go home?" (*Laughter*)

**Q: He was Cuban?**

A: Yes. "You mean I can't go home?" [He said,] "Never." So I said, well, I don't want to marry you. (*Laughter*) And he was a good looking fellow too.

**Q: Was that the first of many proposals?**

A: Yeah. And there was another one who used to have the singers serenading me under my window. Every morning they'd come with their banjo or whatever it was they played and serenade me. It was so lovely. I really enjoyed it. I would stick my head out of the window and really enjoy it. (*Laughter*) But that's as far as it got. I says, "I don't want to marry any Cuban because they all are going to say the same thing, don't go to the States. And then they were fighting over there, politically, about who is going to be the next leader, you know – Batista ... "Who is going to be next, Castro? We're going to put Batista out." They were fighting over that. I said, "Well, since they're up in their political thing, I'd better forget the whole thing, and I've got to go home." They wanted me to stay there to teach. They said, "We will keep the ice skating rink for you and you can teach the kids, you know, Cubans to ice skate, and we'll give you \$1,000 per week." I said, "That's good money," but I wouldn't stay because of the political turmoil there.

**Q: And that was forever the right decision. But just think of it, there would have been a whole genre of salsa skaters.**

A: (*Laughter*) I love it! (*Laughter*) Right. So, anyway I came back to Los Angeles and George Arnold said, "OK Mabel, I'm going to go [to Mexico]. Would you like to go?" I said, "Do you have

another skater to go?" He said, "You know there's no other skater, so come on and go." I said, "OK." Then I went to Mexico with George. We were there for six weeks or something like that. They had a theater called Bergère.

**Q: Like the "Follies Bergère"?**

A: That's what it was. We played there. Lovely. Then they decided to have a revolution. *(Laughter)* One day they came through the theater with their sacks or whatever they had ...

**Q: Machetes.**

A: ... and they said they cut off one kid's head. I didn't see it so I don't know. We had to run to get out, and we got out of the theater and were able to go to our hotel.

And another time when we were there at the theater, we had a flooding. You could see these bathtubs and things going down the street. *(Laughter)* I had so much fun in that place. So, I said now how are we going to get out of the theater because we have to come back here tonight for the show. This was in the morning. So finally our, the fellow who was our interpreter who we had, Mario, he came in and he says, "OK, guys, you want to go to your hotel?" We said, "Yeah." He said, "OK, I've rented a tub." So we all get into this bathtub and went row, row, row your boat down the street. *(Laughter)*

**Q: Some wild times.**

A: Yes. But we got to the hotel and the flooding was gone by night and we were able to do the show. So, it was quite nice. *(Laughter)*

**Q: Was it a full house?**

A: We always had a full house. And we had this girl, Tongolele. She played in Los Angeles sometimes, because I've gone to see her at the Million Dollar Theater downtown. She was the girl who had made a white streak all the way through her hair, and she was gorgeous.

**Q: Hawaiian dancer?**

A: No. She's the Mexican dancer. She was a Mexican. She had lived in Mexico most of her life and she was a dancer. She was an exotic dancer. She had on very little clothes, you know like you see these girls today in their little bikini and things like that. That's what she would have on and dancing. I remember, I think her theme song was *[illustrates song]* and she'd come out shaking her butt. *(Laughter)* She was good. She was really good. We taught her how to skate, to do it on skates.

**Q: Really?**

A: Yes. And she learned fast. She did that act on ice, very good. And she had a fabulous body ... She was good! Right. And we had to have so many Mexicans in the show too. Had to have at least two. So, we had two Mexican girls and two Mexican boys. So, that was good.

**Q: How big a group was the show?**

A: I guess we had about 12 in the show.

**Q: What did you do for music? Was it recorded music?**

A: I remember writing my own music. I mean, I would copy music from music sheets, the part I wanted. I would copy it on to whatever the music sheet I wanted. How did I get it played? It must have been live. I guess it was live. Because I remember once of wanted the beginning of "Rhapsody in Blue" and I remember writing the score for that by copying it from other sheets and then I added whatever I wanted to it. I just wanted the beginning because it gave me a strong entrance. I guess it must have been live music. They have so much live music over there.

**Q: So you enjoyed the time in Mexico?**

A: Loved it. And I remember once, what's his name ... Maurice Chevalier was on the stage once. Ice show and stage, he was. He was good. He was very good.

When we went to Guadalajara, I think it was, some other fellow. They had built for me a dome and out of this dome was fire, and I had to leap through this fire to come out to do my jungle dance. They had seen me dance. They said, "She needs some background for it." It was a gorgeous background. I loved it. Then there was one fellow who used to imitate me so much and I would cry. I said to my roommate, she was one of the stars of the show, I said, "He keeps imitating me." She said, "That's good. What do you mean, that's great." (*Laughter*) "He's giving you honor." I said, "Oh is he." (*Laughter*)

**Q: Imitation is the greatest form of flattery.**

A: And I didn't know that. I was always so stupid. I was a stupid kid. (*Laughter*) I didn't know anything. That's why I know I was picked for this job of doing what I'm doing. God had to guide me into it because I never would have done it myself. Because all of these black kids in New York whom Uncle Wally had in this little "School Days On Ice" show. Like the manager of the rink, he said have "School Days On Ice," have a show. You can have the rink at night after midnight. We had about 60 black kids in it and we would teach them how to swizzle on the ice. That's the only thing you could do, just swizzle. Not one of those kids would stick to it. Wally would say to the parents give them some ice skating lessons. They'd say, "For what? They can't get into a show. Mabel is good and she can't get in a show. What do you think they're going to do?" So, none of the kids would stick to it.

Only one girl stuck to it, but she wasn't exactly black. She was from Venezuela. She was a dancer and she was very good. She got into one of the shows. They wanted me to do a show in New York. I can't remember the name of the club. Evelyn Chandler was her name. She wanted me to do this show, but I had come out here. So I wrote her and told her that Venetta will do it and she would work for the price they wanted to give me. I said, "I can't work for \$150 a week." She said, "That's big money." I said, "I know." I said, "The kids are working for \$75 a week, but I don't work for that. I must have \$750 per week." So they said, "We'll use Venetta." So, she did use Venetta. Venetta's been doing well ever since.

**Q: She was the Venezuelan girl?**

A: Um-huh. She's a teacher. She teaches ice skating. I think maybe her mother married a black fellow, I don't know, because her name was Peterson. So, I said her mother must have married a

black fellow. But anyway, she did very well, and to this day, although she had two hip replacements, she's still doing well. She does Hawaiian dancing and teaching Hawaiian dancing. She does very well. She's up north. She came to see me one day up north and then she sent me a letter stating that she was teaching in Santa Rosa now. So I called her the other day and asked her for Jack Janson's phone number because Jack Janson said, "Mabel, I'm coming to Los Angeles and what's your phone number?" I said, "Why didn't you give me your phone number and I could have called you?" He was a hand skater. He skated on his hands. He has his own museum in his home. He has a couple of rooms that he has his own museum and has pictures of different skaters, and he's a friend of Sonja Henie. He has, "When I was king and Sonja a Queen." (*Laughter*) He was gay of course. He was always talking about he and Sonja and Leif, her brother. They are very good friends. And Leif didn't like Sonja anyway. (*Laughter*) They would talk about her, but not Jack. Jack loved Sonja. That was his heart.

**Q: Was he a show skater?**

A: Yes. He skated in the, I think it was the "Ice Capades" or "Ice Follies" or "Holiday On Ice." One of them. He skated on his hands. But he was always in some animal costume. (*Laughter*) But he was quite good, because he could skate on his feet, but he loved skating on his hands.

**Q: Was it those early years when you came to Los Angeles, when you first arrived, is that when you became friends or began coaching Jeni LeGon, is that when you met her?**

A: Yeah.

**Q: Because she was dancing in the '40s.**

A: Yeah. She was a dancer, she had a dance studio and I used to go to her dance studio just to watch her teach. She was so good and she was so cute, and she was in all these movies. And you see her in the movies and you see her in person, you know, it was quite exciting.

**Q: Did she take dance from you or did you take dance from her?**

A: Uh-uh. She had her own dance studio and I invited her to come to the ice skating rink. And that's where I just gave her lessons. And I didn't charge her, I just gave them. It was an honor, really. She was a very lovely person. I was so happy to see that she's very well married. Lovely husband. Good looking. (*Laughter*)

**Q: How are you doing, are you getting a little tired? I am.**

A: Ask some more questions. (*Laughter*)

**Q: Actually, it's 3:30 and I'm just thinking this may be kind of good place to stop.**

A: OK.

**January 8, 1999**

**Q: You know what I thought would be a good place to start today is to just kind of, we've really talked about almost the first half of your life by now, and I think two things that we should cover today would be the most important people, who were the most important people in your childhood, your early adulthood and then on into the time when you came to Los Angeles.**

A: I didn't have any important people. I was trying to get away from everybody. *(Laughter)*

**Q: That was family, though, right?**

A: I tried to get away from everybody, whether they were family or church member, whatever.

**Q: Because?**

A: Nobody seemed to have liked me.

**Q: Really? That's so hard to believe because the entire time that I knew you everybody loved you.**

A: That's when God took over and told me that I had to teach skating, I had to go into skating. So, that's when my personality changed. But other than that, I always felt I wasn't wanted. And a loner.

**Q: As a child?**

A: Um-huh. Right. So, that's it.

**Q: And then as you started skating, then who were the people, you mentioned yesterday someone who was working with, Maribel Vinson.**

A: Maribel Vinson, she was a competitor. She was skating with Sonja Henie. Whenever she would come to town, she would just work with me with my skating. But there were people like Howard Nicholson that was so great instructors, all of these are instructors. See, the instructors liked me. People didn't like me but the instructors did. *(Laughter)*

**Q: Because they saw that you had talent and that you were a dedicated student and you were ...**

A: I think it was because I was black. *(Laughter)*

**Q: Really?**

A: They were surprised to see a black person and how far can they go.

**Q: So it was a curiosity kind of ...**

A: Right. Absolutely. But they learned to love me.

**Q: And there was Uncle Wally.**

A: Oh, yeah. He was my manager and he went forth for everything. You always saw after my

name was always Wally Hunter. Or even before my name, Wally Hunter, because he used to promote different affairs. Before he met me he would promote singers and dancers and just anyone to make a buck, because I don't think he ever had a steady job. He was a PR person. And he was a wonderful guy.

**Q: And he moved out to California with you?**

A: He brought me out here.

**Q: And Phoebe Tucker you mentioned.**

A: She was just a competitor skater.

**Q: Was she a judge?**

A: No, she never did become a judge. She was just a skater. I was just mentioning some of the skaters who were competitors when I was skating.

**Q: Alright. When you came to Los Angeles, and in those first years here in Los Angeles, does anyone in particular stand out that was an important influence or ...**

A: Yeah, Hattie McDaniel.

**Q: Hattie McDaniel?**

A: She loved me.

**Q: And how did you meet Hattie?**

A: I went to one of her TV shows. She had that show, I can't remember the name of it but she ...

**Q: Was it "Beulah"?**

A: "Beulah."

**Q: OK. I watched it religiously.**

A: Yes. She was a wonderful person, I like her very much, and I would go to her house sometimes. But Louise Beaver didn't like me.

**Q: Louise Beaver was the agent?**

A: No. Louise Beaver was an actress. You remember she worked in the "Imitation of Life."

**Q: Oh, OK, in the first one, not the one with Lana Turner.**

A: No. She worked in that. She was a good actress. Very good. And I used to always watch her in the movies because I loved her. But she never did like me. Until, I think she saw me in a show or something and found out who I really was, then she started liking me. Like I would pass her on the street, like she's driving and I'm sitting in a car, because I wasn't driving at the time, I'm sitting in a

car and pass her, I remember her saying, "Oh, what a beautiful head of hair you have. So red and beautiful." And she meant it. See, before she was making fun of me. I knew that she meant that. I never did go to her house, but I used to go to McDaniel's house.

**Q: Where did she live?**

A: They seemed to live in the Country Club area.

**Q: Was that kind of near the Adams?**

A: Um-huh.

**Q: Adams Boulevard?**

A: Right.

**Q: Hattie McDaniel. I haven't thought about the "Beulah" show in ages.**

A: Yes, yes. I like that woman because she was so honest. You could tell. You could tell right away that she was that way.

**Q: Right.**

A: Not standoffish and think that you're a nobody. You were always somebody.

**Q: The other thing, Mabel, that would be very interesting for a lot of people, not just those of us who know about skating, but the general audience, is the history of the ice shows and how you became involved. If you could tell us something about the people and the companies early on – "Ice Capades," "Ice Follies," Shipstads & Johnson. Shipstad just recently died.**

A: Yeah. Eddie passed away.

**Q: If that feels comfortable for you, then ...**

A: None of them liked me of course, because I was black. (*Laughter*) None of the producers of the shows. They didn't even want to see me around, not until I started teaching and was producing skaters, and then I would present them to them to go into the show. That's when they started recognizing me. And then they decided to take in black skaters. But other than that, nobody seemed to have liked me. Maybe I didn't like myself, I don't know. They say you have to love yourself for other people to love you, so maybe I didn't love myself.

**Q: Maybe.**

A: Yeah. When I started teaching skating, and when I had to stand up for what was right, then I came out of my shell. I knew that I was very, very important. So, I said, who are they to say that I'm this and that. I'm as important or even more important than they are.

**Q: You said, though, that at some point in time God took over in your life and said that teaching was really what you should be doing?**

A: Yeah, that I should go into skating. Right. And you know and train. Since I could not get in then I had to train other black skaters to get in. But you see black skaters didn't have any money to get in so I had to spend all of my money on them to get them in – buy their costumes and rink admission – and buy their skates and things like that, to keep them in it, because the parents say we can't afford it. But this way, it was like everything was for free. And they were good, hard workers. Those black kids really became such good skaters. I felt nobody could out skate them, really. Thanks to one of the judges, Henrietta Nelson, who said my skaters had to be better than better. And I told her, I said, "Thank you Henrietta, because that's exactly what they will be, better than better." Then I asked her, "What does 'better than better' mean?" She said, "Better than the champion himself." I said, "Well, just don't tell anybody else that because my kids are going to be better than a champ, and that's how they're going to become champions." You know, they all laughed at me, even the judges around, because he had lots of judges in the Los Angeles Figure Skating Club. You know that's where Polar Palace was ...

**Q: Right, it was the home of the Los Angeles Figure Skating Club.**

A: That's right. And they all thought I was crazy. But you know, and I knew so many of them before they became judges. We used to skate together, you know, after a while. And they all came to like me when I would present skaters they had to judge and they found out they were better than the other kids. They all began to love me. They said she must have something. And then they would secretly bring me their kid and say I know they're making errors and I'd like to have flats and changes here in your figures, but I don't know how to straighten them out, but I know they're wrong, it's not the rule book. I said, "Can't the instructors straighten them out?" They said, "No, the instructor can't seem to straighten them out. Since your kids seem to have good figures, why don't you straighten my kid out?" And I would. I would take a look at them and find out what they were doing incorrectly. So, and I would straighten them out.

**Q: Yesterday when we left off we were talking about Mexico, and doing the shows in Mexico. Just to kind of keep the order a little bit, when you came back to Los Angeles from Mexico, what was the next step for you?**

A: Well, that's when "Frosty Frolics" came about.

**Q: OK. Alright. Which was the ice show on television, on Channel 5?**

A: Right. Stan Chambers was the M.C., and he always came out in his sleigh. That's when they were working around the corner, you know there was a theater, and they were practicing "Show Boat."

**Q: OK. In Pasadena?**

A: No, at Polar Palace, on Melrose, there was a theater. And I happened to have gone in there, you know, and Klaus Lansberg was there. So I said to him, "Why don't you put skating in there because I'm an ice skater? Could you put skating in there?" He said, "There's no skating in "Show Boat'." (*Laughter*) So I said, "Put it in anyway." He said, "No, that wouldn't be right." So he said, "But be patient, I'm thinking. Maybe I can give you a show. I can do a show for you." I said, "OK." So, that's when he came up with the idea of "Frosty Frolics."

**Q: And that was about the mid '50s then, wasn't it?**

A: Yes. So when I got back from Mexico, they had already started rehearsals on "Frosty Frolics." I just thought I was just automatically in because it was because of me that the show was going on. *(Laughter)* But all the kids fought to keep me out. They said she can't come in because the only thing she knows how to do is ballet. So I didn't tell them when I did shows – because I always had to do shows in dark countries – that I had to do some of everything, you know. And I just had to create my own stuff as they played the music. So, they said, "She's going to have to learn how to do the cakewalk; she's going to have to learn how to do boogie-woogie. She's going to have to learn how to do tap. She's going to have to learn how to do jungle dance, and this and that. I think it was about five dances they said I had to know how to do.

There was this fellow, Willie Covan, I taught for Warner Brothers. He taught the dancers. So I went over to his studio and I told him that I have to learn to do a tap number and a boogie and rhythm skating and I had to do the jungle, anything that a black person is supposed to do. So, he said, "OK." I said, "They gave me two weeks to learn how to do all of those dances." "Don't worry, you can do them." He said to just be in here at such and such a time in the morning, bring your lunch with you because you'll be here all day long every day. *(Laughter)* And surely enough I went there and Willie, he had a stick like a cane, he'd beat the rhythm out on the floor. No matter what rhythm, that man was so talented. He'd beat that rhythm out.

When he had to not be there, he would put one of his top dancers as overseer of me to see that I did the dances. I'm telling you, that man, he could be across the street, at the school across the street, and he could hear you. I noticed he would have his cane beating the rhythm out. I couldn't hear the rhythm but I knew he was beating it out, and if I made an error he would come in and say, "You missed a beat." *(Laughter)* I said, "How do you know, you're across the street?" *(Laughter)* Then he would straighten me out.

When I learned those dances in five days, they called and said, "The show has to go on and we have to take back the two weeks, you don't have two weeks to learn them, so I guess you are not in the show." So Willie Covan called Klaus Lansberg and said, "When do you want her in rehearsal?" He said, "Tonight." He said, "She'll be there." *(Laughter)* I went there and Willie brought his cane and they asked me to do – I think it was a rhythm number. I can't remember the music, but anyway, Willie started beating the rhythm out with his stick, and the band which they were rehearsing to, they all seemed to like what I was doing so they picked up with the band and the piano and everything. And I danced and I danced my skates off. Then I did another number. I did a jungle number. And I just went through whatever they wanted me to do. Then Claude says, "OK, she's in." So all the skaters were mad and they said, "How did you learn all those dances that fast? We said that you had to be here in five days and that wasn't time to learn one dance. How could you come up with five dances?" I said, "Because God is on my side and I'm on his side." I said, "That's how." So they said, "Well, I don't know about you being in the show the way Mr. Lansberg wants you to be in." This was the fellow who was doing the choreography for the show. And we were good friends. That's the strangest thing because he used to pick me up to take me to dance studios where we'd go to dance studios a lot. I was no good, but he was fabulous. So, he became a big shot of course, because he was doing the choreography. "I tell you what, you'd better go over to Western Costumes and pick up a costume, and a maid's costume, because that's what you'll be doing." I said, "OK." So I went over to the Western Costumes. That was in the Paramount, so I went over there. They brought this costume out. They said, "How about this costume?" Because they brought several out, I didn't like. And they said, "How about this one?" It was Betty Grable's costume where she was a French maid, and they brought that out. I said, "I want that." They tried it on me, they said, "Oh, it fits." I said, "Good." So, when we had the show I put that costume on. I'll

never forget that costume, it was so gorgeous. I think it was black with a white apron or something. I did a rhythm number that night.

I'm telling you, it wasn't myself out there doing that number. God took over and it was just fantastic. I'm telling you, I was just in seventh heaven doing it. And everybody in the audience stood up applauding. So I stole the show, of course, and then they were angry because I stole the show. *(Laughter)* "Get off that stage! You get off that stage!" *(Laughter)* "Get back here behind the curtain!" But the people wouldn't let me off, they were still applauding. And the more they applauded, the more I did. *(Laughter)* "We're going to cut most of this out!" I said, "You're not the one taping it. KTLA is filming it." *(Laughter)* I said, "They'll show what they want to show." They were mad. "Don't you ever do that again or you're not going to be in this show. I'll find some way to get you out." *(Laughter)* So, anyway, the show went on, and every number I did, I was just fantastic. Then the show had to move to Pasadena Winter Gardens because they kept going up more and more on the price of presenting that night. So, we moved to Pasadena Winter Gardens. I did all these numbers.

Then finally one day Bob Turk said to me, – he's the choreographer of course – "You know, Mabel, you've got to fall." I said, "What do you mean, fall?" He said, "If you don't fall and let the audience see you fall, I don't mean fall in a split the way you do or in a modern pose, I mean actually fall as if you were knocked out." I said, "But I don't fall like that." He said, "If you don't, I'm going to write you out of the show. I'm going to tell Mr. Lansberg we can't use you in this show anymore." So stupid me, I went on and did a fall. He wrote me out of the show anyway, *(Laughter)* but I wasn't clever enough to know this because I didn't want to be written out of the show. The show was because of me. Finally, he told Klaus Lansberg, "You know something, I can't think of something every week for Mabel to do. She can't skate the show every week. Maybe every other week or other three or four weeks. [Lansberg] said, "Create something for her to do. He said, "But I can't create anything for her to do. After all, she is black you know, and it's hard creating things for black people." [Lansberg] said, "Just use her in the show as you do for anybody else. Don't think of her as being black." "Oh, no, the cast wouldn't like that." So he said, "Well she's in the show anyway."

The show went on for a couple of more weeks and Klaus passed away. KTLA said, "Since we didn't want the show in the first place and Klaus Lansberg has passed away, we can cancel the show." You see they got their coming upping too. *(Laughter)* And that was a beautiful show.

**Q: I saw it. I went to the Pasadena Winter Gardens and watched it. And on television.**

A: I was just thinking the other day, while I was in bed, wouldn't it be nice if I could come up with some kind of plan of having another "Frosty Frolics," some show like that. A TV show which would show once a week. I said that it would be fantastic, but who would fund it. *(Laughter)* I said, "I'll think about it more, because you never know. Just might come up with something."

**Q: Apparently, figure skating and women's gymnastics are the most watched sports today.**

A: That's right. Absolutely. So maybe one day I'll get a brainstorm, because there are enough good skaters around. And we don't want competitive skaters, like they have now. That's all it is. Now it's just competitive professional skating. Competitive. And they only use the kids who have been on the Worlds team. If you can get kids who are just skaters the way we did for "Frosty Frolics," that would be more fun, and people would enjoy it more.

**Q: Be more of a showcase.**

A: It's more entertaining, and that's what it's all about, entertainment.

**Q: Um-huh. Um-huh.**

A: There are enough skaters all over the world who would like to be in it, and would come out here to be in it.

**Q: Sure.**

A: So, who knows. Maybe someone will fund it. That would be great.

**Q: We were just talking about "Frosty Frolics" and Bob Turk and their canceling the show when Klaus died. Then where did that leave you?**

A: Well, I worked with George Arnold's ice show. That's the small show we took on the road.

**Q: What was the name of it?**

A: "Rhythm On Ice." In Mexico it's called "Ritmo Sobre Hielo."

**Q: That's great. After "Frosty Frolics" was canceled you went back with "Rhythm On Ice"?**

A: Yeah. We just toured the USA.

**Q: And that was a successful?**

A: The show was always successful. Right.

**Q: Were you the only skater of color in that?**

A: Oh, yeah. We didn't have black skaters yet. We were still working at them but ...

**Q: But you hadn't started teaching yet?**

A: Oh, yeah. In between teaching I would do shows. I started teaching as soon as I came out here. People would ask me to help them, you know. I said then why shouldn't I charge also. You know, when I came out here they were only charging around \$2.00 or \$2.50 a lesson. They had an instructor, Eugene Mickler, he was charging \$5.00 a lesson. And I said, well, I feel I know as much as he does so I'll charge \$5.00. (*Laughter*) They said nobody is going to pay you \$5.00 when they can get it for \$2.50. So I said, well, I think I can because I'll teach them how to do it, when to do it, where to do it and this and that.

Then we went to, you know in Mexico, when we finished touring Mexico, I was sort of stranded there really. They had asked me to teach at this little ice rink. I think I told you about this little ice rink and that the engineer had made – I never could pronounce his name – he asked me to teach on this small rink. He was the engineer for Mexico. So I taught these skaters to do all the different tricks, which some of them I had never seen done before, and those kids were good. In fact, a couple of them skated in the "Ice Capades" until they took all of their tricks, and then they say, "We

don't need you anymore." (*Laughter*)

Anyway, we toured and we toured, and we played Palm Springs at the Chi-Chi Club. The Chi-Chi Club was fun. Anyway, the kids were only getting \$75.00 a week, and I told them that I had to get \$750.00, and you know George isn't going to pay anybody that. So I said, "Just tell me who you are working for and I'll get it." So that's how I did it. Just that they told me don't tell anyone that I'm getting that much money, because that was a lot of money during that time.

**Q: Still is.**

A: And especially for an ice skater. If they can get them for \$50.00, they'll get them for \$50.00. So George had a way of always pulling the girls dresses up, you know, over their heads. It could be in the streets, he doesn't care. To him it did not mean anything because he was gay, and that meant nothing to him. So I said, "George, don't ever do that to me." So he said, "Oh, no." But he did anyway.

When we played there they had all the different movie people who came in to work maybe one week or two weeks. We had Fifi D'Orsay, and she was funny. I think she was Canadian, but she was so funny. She always talked about her change in life. (*Laughter*) And then we had Rudy Vallee, and he was always trying to get next to me. His room was next to mine so he was always running in and out of my room, always trying to get next to me. And he was married, had a wife. ... And he was a nice handsome fellow, you know.

**Q: Yeah. Talented.**

A: Everybody came. They were all there because Palm Springs was something big during that time for the movie people. So you always had a room full of actors and actresses, from Bob Hope down. They had them all. From Bob Hope up, they had them all.

When we closed there we went on tour. We played different parts of Texas. I guess Texas was a different time. We went there at a different time, as I remember because I was in L.A. at the time and they called me to come. So that was a different time, we didn't tour Texas during that time. Then we, just all the different little places we were supposed to play until we got to Pittsburgh, where we were supposed to spend two or three days out there in the Carroll Club. We stopped at a gas station to get the car filled up, and there was a fellow there sweeping up the garage. It was at night but this fellow was the only one there. He pumped the gas also. All of us in one car, there was seven in the cast. Everybody in one car. So George decided that he was going to show the fellow while I was [unintelligible] with the show, that I was a play toy. So he takes my dress and pulls it up, and I hauled off and slapped his face so hard. I said, "Don't you ever do that again." I said, "You can play with the rest of the cast, but you don't do that to me." He was so embarrassed because of the kids in the car. If we had been alone it wouldn't have bothered him, but for the rest of the cast. They said, "You're not going to let her get away with that are you, George?" He was embarrassed, and he apologized to me in front of the cast so they can know that everything is OK. I said, "George, I will never apologize to you because you're not going to do that to me again."

So they decided that when we get to Pittsburgh they would strand me. So we got ready to go to rehearsal at the Carroll Club. George said, "Mabel, you're not skating. You're not going to skate the show." I said, "Why not?" "They decided they didn't want a black person in it." I said, "George, that's no reason." I said, "Give me a better reason than that. If I can play Texas, I can play anywhere." "Well, that's because you wouldn't apologize to me in front of the skaters. So the only

way I can prove to them that I'm the boss, I can say that you're not going to skate the show. You're not skating the show." So that's when the show was finished. They took off and left me there stranded, they thought. But you see, I was saving my money. Every time I got my check it went to New York at Chase & Manhattan Bank. And I had a checking account there also, so all I had to do was write a check for a ticket and go anyplace I wanted to go. So, they couldn't strand me. The rest of the cast they could strand because they only got \$75.00 a week, and he took that back from them. They were just so happy to be in the show.

Then I decided that since I'm here, maybe I could do a dance show at one of the nightclubs. I remember Ella Fitzgerald was working at some club and I went there. I told her I was with the show, but I wasn't skating the show. She said, "It's OK, come on. I'll talk to the owners and I'm sure he'll give you a dance spot." So I would dance in the club. I think about three nights I danced. I remember Wally calling me and saying you have to come back to Los Angeles because they want to do a story on you and Josephine Baker. I said I can leave any time. So the press called and said that Josephine Baker will be arriving at such and such a time at such and such airport, and whoever gets in first will go to that airport and wait for the plane to come in. Then they said that your plane is coming in first, so for that reason you must meet Josephine at such and such airport. So I had to go over there, wherever she was, and the press was all there. I had to go up the plank and stand with her so they can do their news story.

When I was going in, there were the Unger twins. I'd seen them so many times in New York on the stage. They said, "Who are you?" I said, "I'm Mabel Fairbanks." "Oh, you're the ice skater, huh?" I said, "Yeah." They said, "We have to do pictures of you and Josephine." I said, "OK." So they took all their pictures and this and that. That's strange because the Unger twins, we were going to use them once just for one show in Frosty Frolics. That's when I met my boyfriend, Neil. I didn't meet him there. He was a friend of the Unger twins. The Unger twins, they couldn't skate, you know, so I was teaching them to stroke. They were just going to stand and do that. They did a mirror act. One was left-handed, the other one was right. So I sat on the rail for a while and then one of them came over and sat with me, the skinny one, Bertil. He came and sat with me because I was teaching them to stroke. So he said, "OK, we'll rest for a while." Then after a while I felt my arm going up like this and he went kissing me all the way from the fingers all the way up. (*Laughter*) I said, "What are you doing that for?" "Oh, because I like you and you're going to be my girlfriend." I said, "Well, we'll think about that, but right now let's go skate. You learn how to stroke." (*Laughter*) So we did.

Then Bertil comes in with Neil. Oh, this handsome, good looking guy. He was a screen director and writer. Young, good looking, Oh, handsome. Six-footer And I said, "Now that's for me." I forgot about Bertil. (*Laughter*)

I said, "Well, I sure like him an awful lot, maybe we can get together." So we did, we got together. We were together for many years.

**Q: Really?**

A: Yeah. He always wanted to get married – "Come on, let's get married." I said, "I'm not marrying anybody, I'm married to my skating."

**Q: Um-huh. What was his last name?**

A: Neil Larsen.

**Q: Was he Swedish?**

A: Danish. Anyway, we just had fabulous times together, and every time he said, "Let's get married," I said, "Go find yourself another girl and get married." I said, "I'll be here," because everybody is always marrying and getting divorces. I said, "Go ahead and get married." Cornel Wilde had asked him if he would stand for him and said that he was a terrible husband to his wife, because she wanted a divorce and he wanted a divorce, but it was not mutual somehow. I guess because she wanted so much and this and that. So he went to court and said that he was a terrible husband. He hit her, he did this, he did that – lying like a bat! And he got the divorce.

**Q: But again, you had your life and you weren't dependent and you weren't ...**

A: Right. Absolutely. I made the right choices, really I did, so I wouldn't let anyone turn me around because God had chosen me to put black skating on the map. The only way you can do it is to teach some black kids to skate. But you know, Maribel Vinson told me that same thing. She said, "Mabel, there are never going to be black kids in competitions or even ice shows unless you do something about it. So you're the first one, so now you train them and get them into competition and get them into shows." And she said that same thing. So I said well, that's what I'm put here for, that's what I'll do. And I've always been so happy about it. No problem. It took everything I earned but I enjoyed doing it, I never thought about the money. Just like with Uncle Wally, he made me sign this contract for seven years, that we would split 50-50, I said, "Wally, you can have all the money I just want to skate. I don't care about the money just let me skate." But he didn't believe me, so he made me sign the contract. The last two years of that contract, because I had missed out on so many shows I wanted to do because he wouldn't let me do them because they didn't include him in it. I don't know why no one would believe me that I wouldn't give them the money, but I said well, the only way to do this is to not skate in any shows. So the last two years I would not skate shows until the contract was up. When it was up, I said, "OK. I said, "I'm not renewing my contract Wally." So he said, "I guess that's that then." I said, "Yeah, that's that. You didn't believe that I would just give you the money. That's strange because whenever I would tour you would send me all of these checks and say sign them and you wrote any amount you wanted in them." I said, "That's strange that you did that, but yet when I'm here you don't trust I would give you the money." So then I said, "Well, if that's the way you feel about it no sense in our being partners any more, or you being my manager." You know, when I wanted to go to Japan or to Europe or anyplace like that, he always put such a stumbling block there that I couldn't go because he was not included. But people are like that when it comes down to money.

**Q: Changes everything.**

A: Everything. It's very surprising.

**Q: Was that then the end of your relationship with Wally?**

A: Oh, no, no, no. He finally got married. A friend of his had this European girl from Czechoslovakia. Blonde girl. He introduced her to Wally and had her come out to the house. But Wally was living with me. He still lived with me, only he always had his own little apartment there.

**Q: Um-huh. I remember that. On Laurel Canyon, I remember that.**

A: As a little kid I saw so many marriages and they're so mean when they talk to each other. I said

when they're courting they're always honey and baby and sugar pie and all of this, and then when they get married they're yelling at one another and I couldn't understand that. So I said I cannot get married to anyone.

**Q: Well, Wally and his wife, they seemed to get along, huh?**

A: Oh, yeah.

**Q: It's almost 12:15 Mabel. I think we should end this session.**

**January 11, 1999**

**Q: Today is January 11, 1999, and we're going to resume our interview.**

We're in Los Angeles and Mabel you're teaching. You've got students at Polar Palace – at the rink at Van Ness and Melrose, and you're doing shows – "Rhythm On Ice" – in Mexico and Cuba, and this morning you mentioned to me that you went to Barbados as well.

A: Oh, yes!

**Q: That was on the same tour?**

A: No. That's when I toured with a different show. This wasn't "Rhythm On Ice," this was Jack Kelly's "Ice Follies", where we went to, I guess you call it the British West Indies.

**Q: Right, exactly.**

A: We sort of toured there. We played at ... I don't know the name of the big city where they made "Island In The Sun."

**Q: In Barbados?**

A: No, no, that was ...

**Q: Oh, the Bahamas? Was "Island In The Sun" in ...**

A: I can't remember. But anyway, we played the hall there and very successful of course, and then we went to Antigua and places like that. Barbados was our last stop, which was lovely. But the tour was a very, very successful tour and I loved it. Everyone in the show loved it. I had to take a partner with me, and the partner I usually skate with, he was busy as a hairdresser now so he didn't want to go. So I took Sidney with me, and Sidney and I were partners.

**Q: Sidney who?**

A: Herston.

**Q: Sidney Herston.**

A: He gets around an awful lot – terrific dancer. So we did the show. We really enjoyed it. Then we came on back to L.A.

**Q: Another question I just thought of. It's a little bit difficult to visualize an ice skating rink in a nightclub.**

A: Oh, no, because we had what we called an "ice skating tank."

**Q: A tank. And that would have been like a six-by-six, or ...**

A: Oh, no, no, no. Six-by-six is a little something I had in my room which I performed on as a single, and that was in New York. We have the portable ice skating rink which we call a tank, and we just take it around with us and put it down wherever we perform.

**Q: About how big would that have been?**

A: They're different sizes. The usual size is about 20 by 20, but there are some just 16 by 20 and there can be up to maybe 30 by 60 or 40 by 60, according to how many kids you have in the show. So we carried that around with us. In Mexico I think we had, no, in the USA because when they called me to come to Texas they had two ice rinks. That was "Rhythm On Ice" too, but they had two ice rinks. We would play in one place and the other one would go to be set up so we can immediately do the next show the next night. And we just got in the car, all seven in the cast, we just all got in the car and we would drive to the next spot.

**Q: And it would be set up and frozen?**

A: The tank was already gone in a truck.

**Q: And people would be sitting at cocktail tables and having drinks and ...**

A: No, that was in clubs where they did that, like Ciro's, when we played Ciro's here.

**Q: Oh, really?**

A: Yeah. They would have cocktails and dinner and things like that. And the Trocadero we played here in Los Angeles ...

**Q: Those are all the famous clubs in Los Angeles.**

A: Right. So it was lots of fun. And I liked P.O.P. – Pacific Ocean Park. We played there.

**Q: Really?**

A: Yeah.

**Q: I don't remember them having an ice skating rink, but it must have been one of these tanks.**

A: So many years ago. Yeah, we just take the tank around. George Arnold was very wonderful to

work for. I liked him.

**Q: Well, that was just a little bit of a puzzlement. It was just a little hard to visualize that, because I don't think that happens today.**

A: Yes, it still happens today.

**Q: Does it?**

A: Oh, sure. These shows you see on television, not the rink shows, but like "Fairgrounds" and places like that.

**Q: They'll have the tank and ...**

A: Right. Maybe 40-by-60 or whatnot. It's very nice.

Randy Gardner choreographed a show, I guess about 40-by-60 he did, I think, the "Nutcracker" on the stage. It was really, really nice. I was trying to think of the theater where he had it. My memory isn't that good any more (*Laughter*)

**Q: We're doing fine. So we were saying that we're back from tours and in between the tours you'd be ...**

A: I'd teach in between.

**Q: Teaching. And you mentioned just briefly about how people would ask you just to help them skate, and is that how it was at Polar Palace where you would be skating on the ice and then people would just be attracted to you and say teach me how to do that?**

A: Well, because when I was just skating everybody would just crowd around me, make a ring around me.

**Q: I remember that.**

A: Yeah. (*Laughter*) I guess I performed for them, and then they would say teach me how to do it. So then I started to teach them how to do it. And that was OK, that was called helping them until the parents decided they were going to pay me for lessons. The rink didn't like that of course: "Oh, you can't teach here. In fact, you're not even allowed to skate here. We're breaking the rule to let you skate. You cannot teach here." So I said, "OK, but if anyone else can teach, and I feel I have as much education in teaching or skating as anyone else, so why shouldn't I?" "But you're not allowed." I said, "Well the others do." They said, "Because they're not black." So I said if that's going to be the case, if they're going to discriminate against me and tell me that I cannot teach because I'm black, no matter how much knowledge I have of skating, then I must do something about it. Go to school and get an education again, because you didn't learn anything when you went to high school and got that diploma, you didn't learn anything, now go to college." So I decided to go to LACC and I decided to study law. I said if I study law and I know the law, then they can't do anything about it and I can stand up for myself. So I did, it took me about four years to finish a two-year course, but that was OK.

**Q: Yes, working full time, absolutely.**

A: Right. So then I went to this law school, I'm trying to remember the name of that and I can't think of it, but after two weeks they told me that I really didn't have enough academic subjects, that I had to go back to LACC for about six months. So I talked to the people there and told them that I have to pick up some more academic subjects. I said, "What would be the easiest thing for me to take?" She said well since you studied law, why don't you take up police science. So I did, I took up police science and that was really easy. All we had to do is write papers on the right things to do and have someone come in to talk, no matter whether they were a doctor or what. So I did and always made lots of A's, nothing but A's. Never made a bad grade. There were only fellows in the class and they were all policemen. (*Laughter*) I was the only female there. They saw I was making all these A's and they says maybe she can help us. So they would come to my house and I would help all of them so they could get better grades. The lieutenant who was teaching the class, he said, "You see the reason you guys are here is just to get an extra \$20.00 on your paycheck." (*Laughter*) "She's here to learn."

So then when it was time to graduate he wanted to give me a C. And I said, "Why should I get a C when I'm getting an A all the time? Why are you going to put a C on my card?" Everybody in the class said, "No you can't do that to her. She's the only A student you have in the class and she has helped us, so no, we will not stand for that and we're going to report you if you do." So they all stood up for me, and on that they gave me the A. Boy, I was going down the drain with him on my card. (*Laughter*) He didn't mind everyday giving me an A, but not on my card. So anyway, I got that and then I was going back to Loyola.

Then in the meantime they were building a law school on the other side of the campus at LACC. I said why should I go to Loyola when this is closer, and I didn't drive. So I enrolled into Van Noman Law School which opened up there not far from LACC and I was studying law there. We had a lot of talks and civil law on things like that. I did very well in that. Then I was supposed to take the baby bar in two years.

I went to take the baby bar but my uncle, Uncle Wally, he said, "Since I'm so sick could you give up school and stay with me and help me?" I said, "Of course." So I gave up my law school and just worked with him, put him in the hospital and do things like that for him. Even though he was married, but his wife was now in Czechoslovakia or in Canada. I would write her and I said please come home your husband is very sick. Well, she wouldn't do anything unless her psychic told her to do it, and her psychic was in New York. She said, "I have to call my psychic first and ask them if I should come to Los Angeles." She called me back and she says, or she wrote me, "My psychic said I can't come right now, I have to wait a while." "My psychic said I can't come until after he passes away." So you know she stayed away until when I wrote and told her or called her or whatever and told her that he had passed. "I'll be right there." (*Laughter*) So surely enough she was there to get the money from the insurance.

**Q: Let's see now, where were we? How did we get there? Law school, because you gave it up to take care of Wally.**

A: Yeah, I gave it up. Took care of Wally. Right. So I didn't go back, but it served me well because then when they would say, "OK you can't teach here," I said, "You know, I just saw my attorney today. And you know what he told me? That if you make any rules, especially for me, which did not apply to any of the other instructors that you're going to be sued so hard that you won't be able to get from under it. Not just you, the manger, the owner, the whole rink goes. In fact, she'll wind up owning the rink." (*Laughter*)

So naturally the owner takes me over to the Nickadale to have lunch one day. He said, "Oh, you're our little problem girl, so you won't be having any problems. You can skate at the rink and you can teach." Because I was teaching movie stars and their children. That was OK, because they're not going anywhere they just want to have fun like when I started. I started out just for fun and for the enjoyment of it.

Then I didn't have any problems of course until I started teaching competitively –kids that go to competitions. "You can't do that." They put a sign up: "Professional Staff." Right as you're coming into the rink you saw this "Professional Staff" but my name was on it of course. Then I didn't say anything, I just let it stay there. Then I would call and pretend to be someone else. I would change my voice in different ways, "I have a child and I would like her to take lessons." "Oh we have lots of good pros here." "Oh, someone referred me to Mabel Fairbanks." "Oh, no, she doesn't even skate here, we don't know her, and surely she doesn't teach here." So then I would have someone else call, and they would say, "Oh, no, she doesn't teach here. Sometimes she comes here to skate, but she doesn't teach here." That was Grace at the box office. Then I confronted Grace and I said, "Grace, why do you tell people I do not teach here?" "Because I was told to say that. So as far as we're concerned you do not teach here. We will always tell people you do not teach here." I said, "I'm sorry, but I do, and if you tell people that anymore I'll have to sue you too.?" (*Laughter*) So poor Grace... Right, so she talked to him and told him that she couldn't do that anymore.

**Q: That was when, in about the '60s, mid 60s?**

A: Sixties, or, yeah. Right, the early part of the 60s.

**Q: Which is of course when all the civil rights legislation was just coming in to being and Martin Luther King, I think he marched in '63.**

A: Um-huh. That's when Atoy won the juvenile ...

**Q: In '63 he won the juveniles?**

A: Um-huh. Right. We had Southwest and he was so good. I think he was 11 then when he won. I was sitting with some of the judges because I knew some of them before they became judges, we used to skate together. Then I remember sitting with Patty Stanton, and she said, "Oh, Atoy is winning the figures." I said, "How can you tell?" She said, "Well, he's the only one pushing off correctly on the back inside edge, and he has good edges." (*Laughter*) ... **[Interrupt]**

**Q: We were talking about Atoy and in 1963 and with civil rights legislation just beginning and that was the year that Atoy was juvenile champ.**

A: Won the juvenile championship.

**Q: You know that would be maybe a good jumping off place to talk about coaching because we could answer a lot of those questions. How did Atoy find you?**

A: I was teaching this little girl and the mother was a friend of Atoy's mother. She said to this friend, "Your daughter skates?" So she said, "Yeah, she takes from a lovely black girl, Mabel Fairbanks." She said, "Well, I would like for my son to skate. He's seven." So she said, "OK, I'll have, this woman ..." She had little social parties at her home teaching people how to serve food

and what to serve and how to set tables and things like that. So she said, "I'll invite her to one of the parties." And Thelma, Atoy's mother, was going there. So I did. I went over there and I met Atoy's mother and she asked me if I would teach him. I said, "Yeah." I said, "Everyone charges \$2.50, but I charge for \$3.00 for beginners and then I go up to \$5.00." So she says, "OK, so I'll bring him over at such and such a time." And she did. And Atoy just loved it, he ate it up. He learned real fast. And all this time we were just working figures and freestyle. I had really worked him to selling just figures because he couldn't go into competition at that time, so I just worked on him, you know, like the instructors helped me. They just helped me all the way through the gold test although I couldn't even take test. So I said, "OK Atoy, we still will take the preliminary one when they get around to letting us do it." Finally, I just told them that Atoy is going to take the preliminary test. Nobody wanted to judge him of course. We had most of the judges right there at the, because that's the L.A. Figure Skating Club that's there, and we had most of the judges there. You need three judges to pass at that time, not just two. Finally, they decided that they'll give him the test and he passed with flying colors of course. Then he went into his competition. He was so far above everybody else. Let's see, who was in the competition with him: Ken Shelly and some boy by the name of Fields. I think it was only three of them in there. I remember, that's the first time I met John Nicks, who had come here from Canada. It was after the plane crash, because that's how John got here. The fellow whom they asked to take the coaches because he was killed in the plane crash asked him if he would take over the club in Pasadena, but he said, "No, that's too much for me to handle, but I have a friend in Canada by the name of John Nicks. So why don't you send for him?" He said, "I'll tell him about it and let him handle it." So he did and John Nicks was teaching these kids and naturally won the figures. I remember at the board, when I went up to the board to see who won the freestyle, and I knew Atoy had won it of course, from watching the others. So I heard John saying to the other, "Don't worry about who came in first. You know Atoy came in first. Just worry about who came in second." I think Kenneth came in second."

The first time I met John, and I liked him, he said, 'Oh, you're Mabel Fairbanks whom I've been hearing so much about?' I said, "That's me." Then he was teaching in Paramount because that's where the club was, and I'm here with in Hollywood Polar Palace. So we didn't see each other anymore, you know, but we knew ... [tape ends]

**Q: OK, we were talking about Atoy.**

A: And from then on whenever any of my kids went against John Nicks' kids, my kids always won over John's. (*Laughter*) So naturally I love him. (*Laughter*)

**Q: Was Atoy your first student that actually went through the testing and entered competition?**

A: Yeah, right. But then I had others after that.

**Q: But Atoy was the first one?**

A: Right. And then I had other black kids who was there and did very well.

**Q: Well I remember Zenobia. She's older than Atoy, she's older than me.**

A: You do remember, right.

**Q: Did she go through the test? Did she go to competition?**

A: Oh yeah, she was on her third. I remember taking the third test, but my kids all had good loops because Maribel Vinson taught me to do good loops so I always had a knack of teaching good loops. In fact, some of the judges would ask me to help their kids with the loops and things like that, although they were taking from somebody else. The loops were the last ones we always did in the testing; now it's about the third one we do.

I remember when we finished and there was Roger Berry, one of the judge's kids took this test, third test also, and his loops were a mess. He took the test first, he really shouldn't have passed. But Zenobia's loops were so fabulous. And you know what they did? They took Zenobia's loops and gave them to Roger and said, "Zenobia didn't do good loops." I said, "What do you mean she didn't do loops, she's the only one who has loops out there, those other things are not loops." (*Laughter*) They said, "Well we said they belong to Roger Berry, so we'll fail her and give them to Roger Berry." And they did. They were always nasty like that.

And another thing, they didn't like teaching, although they didn't teach black kids, but they wouldn't even teach a white kid who did not dress primp and proper. I remember I had so many students and I just couldn't put them all in so I said to one of the instructors, "Could you take the little girl over there?" I guess she was about 10 years old. He said, "Where?" I said, "Way under the clock, she's skating." So the he took one look at her after she got close up, he said, "No." Little white kid. "I don't teach dirty kids like that." I said, "But she isn't black." (*Laughter*) But no, no, no, she had to be prim and proper.

**Q: Yeah. That was the invidious attitude that skating really generated.**

A: Um-huh. That's right.

**Q: I remember the kids that were skating in the figure skating club. They were tall and lean. They looked like they were in elegant country club kind of ...**

A: They didn't even want Jewish kids in the competitions. I remember in New York there were two Jewish girls, sisters, and one of them was really good. But they didn't want her into competitions. And the mother said, well, since she has excelled over her sister, I'll put all the money into her and let her take the lessons. And she did and that girl was good. I can't remember her name but she was good. So maybe she went with an ice show. But they were very particular about whom they put into competitions. So they said where are you coming from we don't let Jewish kids in. (*Laughter*) So that was that.

But anyway, out here was very good and all of my kids were doing very well. I remember one little, now out here they had begun taking Jewish kids because I insisted on the father becoming a judge ...

**Q: Was that Denise Beckerman?**

A: Right! So Denise goes up for competition. There were three in there. So she had won the figures. They didn't realize she's taking from me now of course. She won the figures and then on the freestyle. You know how the kids come up to the rail to you to find out what should they do next or why they didn't do this or that, and this was techs with Mabel. And she had won first place straight across the board, and then they said she came in third. She came in last, there were only three in there. She came in last. So I said to them, "She couldn't have come in last when she was

in first place and you have her straight across the board." "But we decided that she came in last."

So I went into that judges' room, which is not allowed. I went into the judges room, I said, "Guess what? God tried to tell you people to be fair and unbiased." I said, "You had a plane crash to teach you, and there wasn't one black kid on that plane and I doubt whether there was a Jewish kid on there. So since you didn't learn anything from that, he'll get each one of you sitting here, individually." And they said, "Don't pay no attention to her." Surely enough, this one judge, she goes along the freeway and she had a big accident which crippled her. Another one, while she was out, her house burned down and the only thing that was saved was the clothes on her back. The other one, the daughter had a baby out of wedlock – competitor skater, had a baby. (*Laughter*) And so I said, "You see, God works in mysterious ways and he don't want you hurting his kids." I said, "See, because I belong to him and he does not want you to hurt me and be cruel to me, discriminate against me. Any of his. He's a very jealous God." So they said, "Maybe it's something to her, maybe she's telling the truth about all of these things." (*Laughter*) You know they started changing from there on in. That's right.

**Q: But Denise's father actually became a judge?**

A: Yes! Yes, he was a judge.

**Q: And of course he wasn't allowed to judge when she was competing.**

A: Oh, he can't judge his kid. You can never judge your own kid. But all you say to the other judges, put my kid in first and I'll put your kid in first. (*Laughter*) It's always been crooked. I'm telling you, judging has always been bias. It takes a little [unintelligible]. She has won the competition many times, but they would not give it to her. Even to this day. So she decided that we [were] going to turn pro.

**Q: Did she?**

A: Yes, she turned pro. I told her she should have stayed at least one more year. She said, "I'm just so tired of it - of the unfairness." And yet in the European, here she is five-time European champion, but it doesn't mean a thing to them when they want to discriminate against you, they just discriminate against you.

It's better for minorities now, but it's not that great. But little by little it's getting there. Right?

**Q: Um-huh. Did Atoy go on past juveniles?**

A: Oh, sure. He went to Nationals. He was a national champion. Novice champion. Then I had other black kids who were junior Champion, national and who won all of the competition going up.

**Q: Atoy didn't skate, what, the Olympic team now?**

A: No. His mother made a mistake, like all the black kids, they all made mistakes. Once they got up to National the parents felt they needed a white instructor next to them. They said, "Oh, well we've got to get a white instructor." I said, "For what? You can still get one now that they wouldn't mind teaching them now because they're champions. All of them are champions." So I said, "But it's OK to have one, that's good, because later on they can say I took from this pro and that pro and this pro, if that pro has a good name. But if the pro doesn't have a good name you can forget it."

*(Laughter)*

Then I had this pair skater, this one was before Tai and Randy. It was Richard Ewell and Michelle McCaddie. They were good. And they always tried to hold them back because they said that the girl was passing for black and she wasn't. Her father was black but she was very fair and light hair so they said she was just passing. So I had to have her father come to the rink so they could see him. I said, "This is Michelle's father." "That's her father?" *(Laughter)* I said, "Yes, that's her father." Then they started treating her differently then. They saw that she wasn't skating with ...

The thing about it, each one stayed exactly where they were, they never let them up any higher. And I said to some of the judges, I said, "These kids are doing very well in competition in Nationals, why can't they move on?" They said, "They want to be treated like whites so we're treating them like whites. That's what we do to our kids." *(Laughter)* And they were right, because that's what they did to their own kids. They gave it to whomever they wanted to give it to.

They said, "Mabel, we know he's going to win this championship, the juniors, but we can't give it to him because this is the first time he is in Nationals. And all these kids have been in juniors for two or three years and we can't put him over them." See, but they tell me because they're afraid of me, because I just say, "OK if you're not going to do it, I'll have the Panthers, I'll have the NAACP, I'll have CORE." *(Laughter)* So I said, you people are doomed. So they always were honest with me. So they said, "There were 11 in that group, and he has to come in last because all these kids have already been here." So I said, "I'll have to tell him because he's 18 now and he'll wonder why when he knew he did the best." So I talked with him and told him how it was going to go down. So he said, "Well, if they would just bring me in 10th I wouldn't mind it." So I went back to the judges and said, "OK, we'll play the game, but bring him in 10th instead of 11th, because he said he'll feel bad going back to the club and stating that he came in last." He was so good of course, so they brought him in 9th. And they said, "Next year don't give him the gold test now. Let him stay back and come back and pick up the Junior Championship." They said that he'd already won it, but we can give it to him, so let him come back next year and we'll give it to him. I said, "OK," so I told Richard this.

Richard decided when we got ready to go to the National, Richard said, "Mabel you pay for everything. You're always paying for everything, my transportation, all my uniforms, my skates, my everything. Why don't I just go with Mr. Nicks and his students since he has about three students going?" I said, "No, I'd better go along with you." So then his mother spoke and said, "We want a white man to handle my son. We want him standing next to him at the rail." I said, "It wouldn't work. OK, if you want to go pick the championship up, go ahead with John." So he did, he went with John to pick the championship up, but that was promised him so he picked up the championship.

So when he got back his parents said, "I want a white man teaching my son." I said, "He had already won that championship, the one he just picked up. He isn't going to win anymore." They couldn't believe this. So the club said let him take the test, we want him with the big boys. That was before he went to pick up the Junior Championship. We had to have outside judges, which was good because I'm over at Culver now. So I said to the referee, we were pretty good friends, I said, he can't pass that test, the gold test. He cannot pass it because he has to go pick up that Junior Championship. He was doing so well, that's when we did the loops last. So he came to the rail and said, "He's passed all of it so what are we going to do?" I said, "He hasn't done loops yet, fail him on the loops." So he said, "OK." So at the end they called me on the ice and said, "Mabel, he didn't push off correctly on the loops." *(Laughter)* Had to find something of course. I said, "You're right, so fail him." *(Laughter)*

The mother knew I had told them to fail him, you see, so she was yelling, "Mabel don't let him fail, please don't let him fail! Let him pass it, please, let him pass it!" But they listened to me and they did fail him. So naturally, which put him on the [path to the] Olympic team, because if he had passed it he would not have been. Even as a junior he's already on the [path to the] Olympic team now, just waiting for the next competition. They said, "Now he has three years. He'll take the gold then go to Worlds for two year and then to the Olympics and back to Worlds, so he'll do very well." And I told the parents this, they said, "We already have it made, what do we need you for?" (*Laughter*) I said, "You're going to regret it because he isn't going any further now." But they didn't believe me. So he went and switched over to John Nicks and John Nicks said to me, "Mabel, I never liked the little fellow, I don't want to teach him really." (*Laughter*) I said to the parents, I said, "John can't teach him anything. He has all his double work and he's working on triples and doing very well with his triples. What can John do for him?" They said, "We don't care

So anyway, they wouldn't even pass this test, the gold test now. He tried seven times to get the test passed and they refused to pass it. So Atoy's mother said to me, "Mabel, he's going up for that test the seventh time and he isn't going to pass it." Because she had an in with the judges also now. I said, "He'll pass it." She said, "No he won't, they've already told me." And I said, "Richard, you're not going to pass the gold test and you're running up to Wagon Wheel and up this place and up that place trying to pass it. They're not going to pass it." So he says, "Oh yes they will." I said, "No they won't." I said, "Unless you come back to me, stating that you're taking lessons with me, and that I got you all of your tests up to now and got you where you are, because what can you learn in a year with anybody. It takes years when you're up that high." So anyway, he came back. And I said, "Are you going to give me credit for it and you're going to tell the Professional Guild that I'm teaching you?" "Yes!" So I got the test for him and let them know that I was teaching him, so naturally he passed it.

Then the Guild called him, or wrote to him or whatever, because I had put his name down as my gold medalist, and they asked him what test did he pass under me. He said, "I take with Mr. John Nicks." (*Laughter*) And they told me, "He said he takes with John Nicks although we know better but that's what he says, so we have to go by that. So we can't give you your Masters." So he kept me from getting a Masters because of that. He never won anything from then on in.

**Q: And the Masters for you was a coaching ...**

A: Yeah, you see for Professional Guild we have you take these little tests saying that you are an associated teacher, you're a group teacher and dance instructor and this and that. The master is one who went through all the testing. Because they never would give them to me anyway because they wouldn't even let me join the Guild for many years. It wasn't until Peggy Fleming won the Olympics and we had a meeting at her house and her mother said, "Mabel, we're going to have a seminar for the Guild. Why don't you come?" I said, "OK because no one has ever let me come to one of the meetings. The first meeting I went to they put me out of it. So finally I went there to her house, and I think Peggy was in Colorado after she came back. But the people who were up there in the Guild, they were there, and they said, "Mabel would you like to join the Guild?" I said, "Yes, of course." They said, "You'll just get a masters anyway because you've done so much in skating, so you'll just get a master degree. So I said "OK." When I went to apply for it, naturally they wouldn't give it to me. They wouldn't even let me take one of the tests. So I said, "OK, that's alright.

And all the black kids stopped – Lesley – they all did. I got this grant for Lesley for one year. I think it was \$8,000 or something like that. The woman I got it from, her husband was a doctor, and I said to her, "Your husband is a doctor, he must treat black people." I said, "Some of them have

clubs, so could you speak to some of them and ask them if their club will sponsor a skater?" So they said, "OK. So surely enough it came through. She said, "How much do you need?" I said, "\$10,000." "They said they can't go any higher than \$8,000 for the year." I said, "OK, that's good enough because I'm paying for everything anyway."

One day – Lesley was staying with me at this time – we walked through Culver Ice Rink door and he held the door open for me and let me in and then he says, "You think because you're an adult that you can have the last word and you're the only one who is right." I said, "What's wrong?" I was surprised. "Well, I don't have to take this, I'm going." So I guess this woman was waiting for him out there and he saw her when we drove up and he knew he had to go with her over to Van Nuys where Frank Carroll was teaching. So they went over there. I guess that's what happened. I never saw these kids anymore. They wouldn't even come over to Culver to practice. They stayed at the other rinks. But not a one of them went any further. Not one. Just exactly where I left them that's where they stayed. They didn't have anyone to speak for them, that's why. And they just couldn't believe it. As I said to Richard a couple of months ago, I said, "Richard, you could have been a millionaire now, same as the other kids. They're all making millions. You could have been there too, but you couldn't believe what I was telling you that my association with the judges and this and that, and competition." He said, "Mabel, you know, we never did believe anything you told us about competitions and judges. We never believed that you would have that much insight or they would let you. So this is why we did it. We thought we had to have a white person." I says, "Too bad. Now you just will have to just work by the sweat of your brow from now on in because you missed out. It's gone."

**Q: What's he doing now?**

A: He's teaching. He teaches out in Anaheim. Doing very well, too.

And he was a kid who had to, his mother said, because you know Lesley is a kid like this, people are just people to Lesley and it didn't matter whether they were white or black, you know. So he was always with some white girls, you know, they were doing things, and white boys, because there wasn't any black boys around skating for him to hang around with anyway. And Richard's mother saw this and she says, "I want a white girl for my son. Mabel you find him a white girl." I said, "These are just skaters, they're not boyfriend and girlfriends." I said, "All he have to do is just be around the kids and have a lovely time, that's all. That's all Lesley is doing just having a lovely time, and they're just friends." She didn't believe that. And I said to her, "Lesley is gay anyway, he doesn't want any of those girls." (*Laughter*) They were just like a boy to him. (*Laughter*) But things, the parents just can't see, and it's sad that they just can't see it.

**Q: They probably didn't have any experience, didn't know how the game was played.**

A: That's right. And it's a game, please believe it.

**Q: What were your intentions and what were your goals when you first started skating?**

A: Just skating for fun.

**Q: Just gliding over the ice I think you said. When did you first start realize that this might be something that you would spend the rest of your life doing?**

A: When I first went into an ice skating rink and saw these skaters preparing for competitions and

saw that the pros were really pushing for the different levels of competition.

**Q: And then as you begin to realize that you weren't going to be a part of that competitive scene, how did the show skating evolve? Whose idea was that? Were there ice shows happening at the time?**

A: There were loads of ice shows: "Ice Follies," "Ice Capades," "Holiday On Ice."

**Q: In those early years?**

A: Oh, yes, just loads of them. But I didn't think about getting into an ice show at that time, I just wanted to get good, as good as any of the kids on the ice rink. So I just worked hard to be as good as they were.

**Q: The other question that I wanted to ask you, in looking back over your career, both as an amateur skater and then a professional skaters and all of the setbacks that you encountered while not being allowed to be on the ice, not being allowed to compete, was there any time when you ever thought I'm going to quit?**

A: Oh, never.

**Q: Why not?**

A: This was my goal, to be the best I possibly could be. And to be the best I had to be as good as the kids who were on that ice skating, and they were competitive skaters who were working for areas of championships. I wanted to be that good.

**Q: Even though you knew you weren't going to compete?**

A: Well, I didn't think that I would be able to compete at that time, I just wanted to be as good as they were, or even better. So that's it.

**Q: So that was the driving force?**

A: Right.

**Q: And then as a coach, there was never a time then when you were frustrated with having your students refused and being refused ...**

A: No, I knew that because I couldn't do it, God seemed to have appeared in me and said look, if there're going to be any minority skaters in there, you've got to train them. So that when I decided that I was going to push for it and get every black kid, every minority regardless of their race or creed, I was able to get them in there. And I didn't care if they were dirty or what coming to the ice. That's what they could afford so you accept them for what they could afford. So it was a calling from God.

**Q: When did you realize that? Do you remember?**

A: Well, really, I started teaching in Los Angeles, but in New York I used to just help the skaters from the different shows that were there, like the Center Theater Ice Show. [Unintelligible] and

whatnot was there, but we would just do it for fun. We didn't think of making money off it because we had all these high-powered instructors, so I just helped and did the best I could with them. But when I came out here and I started teaching show skaters and for the fun, recreation skaters. That was fun because I mostly taught movie stars and their children. That was OK, and I did very well with them and they loved my teaching. And I told them that I wasn't supposed to be teaching so don't let the management see that they were giving me money. They said, "Why shouldn't we? You're the best out there, so if you're the best, we're taking from the best, and they're only trying to hold you back because of your color, but you are the best." I didn't think of it that way, you know, I just said, "Well, gee, maybe they just want to take from me." I was charging more than the other pros so I didn't see why they wanted to take from me anyway. And I would tell them, I said, "You know the other pros charge so much less, maybe you would like to take from one of them." "We want the best and you are the best. We've watched you. We have come in here year in and year out and you are the best, so just remember that." So I decided that if they think I'm that good, then maybe I can teach competitively.

So that's when I went to the head instructor and I said, "Could you give me some lessons in teaching?" They didn't teach black people at that time, but he knew that I was a pro and I was doing shows. They felt that I was somebody different. So I said, "I'll pay whatever you charge." So he said, "Well, I charge \$5.00 a lesson, and because you are a professional I have to charge you \$7.00." I said, "That's OK." And then he said, "You know, I'm not very good at teaching kids to get up off the ice when they fall or when they hurt themselves and I can't stand to see a kid hurt themselves. So I'll tell you what, we can work out a deal, that I can give you some ice time and you could help skate with my students, just don't tell them that you're giving them a lesson, just say, 'Let's skate together.' Whatever they are doing incorrectly you correct it. I've noticed that you can correct these kids." I said, "OK." So how we worked out the ice time he gave me, and the ice time was really, there was a girl by the name of Theresa Von Hagen, her mother, I think I mentioned this before, her mother rented the rink a couple of times a week or more for her to have the whole rink to herself.

**Q: No kidding. That was at Polar?**

A: Yes, Polar Palace, yes. And he said, "You never use the whole rink for figures so we'll use this half and you use that half and you can work on your figures. And then I will come over after I finish with her and give you a figure lesson." So the first time he gave me a lesson he said, "Well, but you didn't make any errors so how can I straighten it out?" I said, "Well, that's what I'm going to teach my students, not to make errors." He said, "That's what you think. They make errors all over the place and they don't even care. They say let the pro straighten it out. So you will have a hell of a time saying you're not going to teach them to do errors. Sure you're not going to teach them to do errors but they make them on their own, so you have to watch out for that." And he was absolutely right. Those kids, they were so negligent. They didn't even care what they did on the ice. *(Laughter)*

**Q: These were the show skaters?**

A: Competitive skaters. See I'm teaching them to be competitive. So they didn't care what their figures looked like, they just wanted to go around the circle, you know. And then their turns were sloppy. They had hooks and flats, changes all over the figure. So then I said, well, he was right. They're going to make the errors even though you're teaching them differently.

**Q: Who was that? Do you remember who that was?**

A: Yeah, Eugene Mickler, he was the head instructor at the rink. He was an older man. I guess he was in his 50s. We became very good friends. He told me that his father sent him to England to study and he went skating one day and he like it. So he was just waltzing all over the ice then these beautiful young ladies would come up to him and say, "Give me a lesson." He said, "But I don't teach." "Give me a lesson anyway and I will pay you." He said, "I was just teaching all of these ladies to dance and they were paying me handsomely. That's how I became an instructor."  
*(Laughter)*

**Q: So you never really felt setbacks or ...**

A: Oh, no. The more they tried to set me back or say, "You can't do this, you can't do that." That was medicine for me. It pushed me forward.

**Q: Pushed you into an inspiring law career, we talked about yesterday.**

A: Yes.

**Q: So you would know exactly where the law was and what you could do to combat the discrimination, which by that time was becoming illegal.**

A: Right.

**Q: I guess the reason we want to talk about these things is to see if there were any real pivotal moments in your life where something might have happened because you decided you just didn't want to do it anymore or it was too frustrating, but it doesn't sound like there really were those moments where you would have a change of heart and have to overcome it. It was just a strident march from the beginning ...**

A: Every [obstacle] boosted me up. Made that me so much stronger. Made me more determined that I knew I can do it.

**Q: Where do you think you learned that?**

A: I don't know. I guess it was just something God must have put into me. I didn't have because I was always very shy, which I still am – shy. But I was so shy that I would never say anything to anybody, unless they spoke to me first and I'd just answer them as shortly as I possibly could without going into conversation. So as I said it must be a gift from God. I just loved doing shows and I loved teaching. That was the most beautiful thing to teach someone else to do it. As Eugene Mickler said when I asked him to give me lessons in teaching, "You know, I always wanted to meet someone that I could impart my knowledge to." He said, "So finally I met someone." He said, "You're good but you'll be even greater." I said, "OK, just give it to me and I can take it." Certainly did.

**Q: I remember one time, Mabel, I think I had finally worked up to maybe possibly being able to start practicing an Axel. And you remember that I was terrified of heights and speed, and it was all I could do to do a waltz jump to get myself up off the ground. And I finally just looked at you and I said, "I can't." And you looked back at me and you said, "Never say I can't." And I'm telling you those words, it had such a drawing affect on me. No one had ever said that to me before. No one had ever said ...**

A: Just always feel that you can do anything you want to do. If you work for it long enough and hard enough, and think positive, you can do it. So everybody can do whatever they want to do really.

**Q: And that's clearly what guided you all of these years.**

A: Yeah. You've just got to want to do it. Right. And I couldn't figure out why there were no black skaters. Then when I found that because they were wanted, first place, they would not let them into the rink. But skating was so expensive until they couldn't even afford it. So this is why there were no black skaters.

**Q: And then we get down to your interest in performing and starting the shows, starting your own show and becoming a performance skater. What were your goals around performance? Deciding to go into show skating and doing the nightclub acts. Was it the performing that you enjoyed? Entertaining people?**

A: Well, on the stage I became a ham. I loved to perform for people. I loved to hear the applause. So the more they applauded me the more I did. And when I went with the George Arnold show, people would not let me off the stage. But George Arnold didn't care, you know. He said, "Hurrah, let her take up the time, that's good." (*Laughter*) But with others, like Frosty Frolics or anything like that, "Get off that stage!" Well, looking back I can understand why they said get off that stage because you're on television and it's timed. So if you take up all that time because they want you, then a show would not go on. But I had to grow up to understand that. I just thought they didn't want me there; well, they didn't want me on there, but they didn't want me to accept the first applause. (*Laughter*)

**Q: But timing was the critical factor?**

A: Yeah, I figured the timing was. (*Laughter*)

**Q: But so it's really a love of performing. Of hearing the applause and knowing that you're pleasing the audience. I remember also at Polar Palace, the last 10, 15 minutes of the session they'd put on, might have been the "Happy Organ" or something and then Mabel would come out and do flying camels and everybody would stand around and count. (*Laughter*) How many flying camels could she do. That was a ritual. That was a ritual, I know every Saturday afternoon about 10 to 5. I knew where I was.**

A: Those were the fun of days. And I still try to tell skaters to enjoy what they're doing. Don't just think of it that I'm going to make money off it now that they are accepted everybody in the shows regardless of their race or whatnot. I said just don't think of it as just the meal ticket, think of what you are giving to your audience. I always try to tell them that, but they always go by a paycheck by paycheck. But that's why, too, that's why I went into teaching because I had to have a job, and I didn't know how to do anything else. So I said, "OK, I will learn to teach and accept the money people are offering me and this way I can earn a living."

**Q: You talked about earlier your personality changing from before you were teaching to when you began coaching and instructing. And you talked a little bit about it today when you said it was really a message from God that you really were selected to teach and that this would then become your source of income and would also, as we know, pave the way**

**for skaters of color into a sport where there never had been. But I wanted you to talk a little bit about that personality shift, because ... [tape ends]**

**[Continuing] We were just talking about that personality change and what happened that, how did it actually manifest for you.**

A: Well, I figure now that I'm teaching I could be more demanding in what expect of a skater. See it wasn't just fun, you do it and I do it, and this and that, it was getting them to do what you know they are supposed to do in order to succeed.

**Q: And discipline. I think that was one of the big messages for me was ...**

A: Right.

**Q: It is a discipline.**

A: You must have that. You must want to do it really. Perseverance. And no matter what stumbling block there is in it, you just jump over it and keep going.

**Q: Right. Never say, "I can't."**

A: There is never such a word.

**Q: (Laughter) I can see that look on your face right now. (Laughter)**

A: I can, and I will! I always try to put that into them.

Right now I just sort of help the instructors in their teaching of their students. Like they'll have me come down and say, "Look at her Mabel," or "Look at him. What is he doing incorrectly?" I said, "Well he doesn't know what to do so he can't try it." I said, "He first has to be taught what, when, where and how. When he learns that then he'll know what to work on, what comes first and what comes second." I said, "They're all trying to do number two before they do number one." I said, "First you have your A, B, Cs. Number A I'm going to do this, B I'm going to do that and C I'm going to do this. You don't jump from A to C. And that's what I try to tell them when they come out of skating. I have several students who are doing shows on their own, choreographing and putting shows together. And they would say, "What's wrong with it?" I said, "Uh-uh, it's what's wrong with you." I said, "You are skipping from A to D." I said, "And that's not right. You've got to go from A, B, C, D, the whole works and stop skipping around." So the kid is lost because they don't know what to expect. You said to do this and now you want me to do that. I said, "That's not right." I said, "Take it one step at a time and they will get a good understanding of what they are supposed to do." So they are getting a little better at it but whenever they get into a jam they'll call me. (Laughter)

**Q: And then you'll go down to the rink and watch?**

A: Yeah. Or I'll tell them over the phone what's wrong ...

**Q: Because they're going from one step to another?**

A: Right.

**Q: Give me an example in terms of skating language.**

A: OK. If you start out to do let's say a jump. They know how to start off on it, that's A. They know I'm going to, maybe I'm backward or I'm going forward or whatever, and I take my edge. Now, what else happen? They just know they're supposed to jump, but what's supposed to happen before the jump? You have to set yourself up. Get your arms in place, your head in place. And that's another thing they don't think about, the head. They just think they have to just jump up and pull in. It's not that. You've got to know when and where and how to pull in. See, what they try to teach them to do is just to go around and do the jump. Like Sonja Henie, she just spun around in her jumps instead of going up. You've got to first teach them to go up, and when I go up then I can pull in to go around. And now I've got to know when do I check out, because you can keep in here, like when I was learning I just stayed in here all the time, I just kept going around and around and around until I got down and just went flop. (*Laughter*) Because I didn't check out. So they must know when to check out, and that comes through practice. Rhythm, rhythm, rhythm. So you have to teach them all of this.

**Q: Well, I think that kind of covers all of those questions that were guiding kinds of questions and I hope tying some of our ends together. But now we're where when we left off yesterday we were taking Atoy Wilson through the Novice Championship. We talked about him being the first black skater that you actually got into competitive skating. And then after Atoy came Lesley?**

A: Richard Ewell and Lesley at the same time.

**Q: And that was all at Polar and then on over the Culver?**

A: No, this was Culver. I taught Lesley at Polar for only a very, very short time before it burned down and then we moved over to ... And he was out of skating for almost a year because he couldn't afford it. And that was when I decided that really the money I made should go into training black skaters because they couldn't afford it. Now why should he have taken time out? But he did because they could not afford it.

So then Richard Ewell and then Lesley, about the same time they were pushing for championships, although they didn't belong to a club because they wouldn't let them join a club. But as I told you before, I had all of these individuals so they had to let them compete.

**Q: The individual membership. Yeah, we talked about that.**

A: Right. And then I started teaching Richard Ewell and Shelley McCaddie also to do pair work. And they were doing very well in their pairs.

**Q: Had you done pair skating?**

A: Yes. I did what we called "adagio," that's different from pair skating.

**Q: How is it different?**

A: Because you can do anything you want in adagio. You can throw a person over their shoulders and carry them, and swing them around, and lock their feet here and their head is down there and

swing them ...

**Q: Wild stuff.**

A: Very wild.

**Q: But it sounds great.**

A: Right. And you can stand on his shoulders, things like that. But now they're putting a lot of that into dancing.

**Q: Um-huh, ice dancing.**

A: So if you watch dancing you'll see a lot of adagio moves in that.

I did pair skating with a Canadian kid who came over here, Harold Harley. We did a pair number for the Shrine Auditorium when we skated there.

**Q: Which show was that?**

A: That was for the NAACP – "Festival On Ice."

**Q: Do you remember what year that was?**

A: No, but I think it was maybe in the early '60s. There [were] about 7,000 people there, even though Sonja had called the agencies who sold tickets and told them not to sell tickets to my affair because her affair was on the same day, although mine was only for one day and hers was continuous. So they called Uncle Wally and told him that they can't sell any tickets to the Shrine Auditorium, but we got 7,000.

**Q: Seven thousand people.**

A: Leave it to Wally. That was his field anyway. *(Laughter)*

**Q: Who skated in that show?**

A: I had all of my kids who were not competitive skaters. I gave them letters, had letters sent in that no one was paid for the show and this is only a recreation thing. I guess I had about 15 or 20 kids skating the show.

**Q: Were Zenobia and Atoy and ...**

A: No, I never would let Atoy go in. His mother [said,] "If he is doing competitive skating I don't want his name marred at all, so don't put him in anything you give." So I always had to leave Atoy out.

**Q: So that takes us now, Polar Palace the rink burned down in about, what, '67?**

A: I think before that. I have the date of it. In fact, somewhat strange for someone whom I had never met. Anyway, one of the tenants in this apartment, she said, "Mabel, I have a friend who said

you knew her mother. She ran the coffee shop at Polar Palace and she told me to give you this article." And it has a date on there when Polar burned down.

**Q: OK, maybe we can try and look for that. Because that certainly was a turning point for you. I remember your gold skates were in there, your locker, we were all use to coming there. I mean, it was home.**

A: That's right. I said to the manager of the rink, the owner. I said to him, "Isn't the rink insured?" I said, "Because you know I had thousands of dollars of equipment in the locker." He said, "No, you were not insured for it." So that was that. I never did believe him because the rink would be insured for everything. But that's OK. That's the way it was supposed to have happened, so it didn't bother me. I said I can always get more skates. (*Laughter*)

**Q: Did you ever get another pair of gold skates?**

A: Oh, I've got to show you my gold skates.

**Q: (*Laughter*) You'll have to. Absolutely.**

A: Yes. I've had a couple of pairs since then. (*Laughter*) And I've had them all colors – ruby, all different colors. I gave Atoy the maroon ones when I came back from up north. SP-Teri. I had moved from Harlick who was making my boots to SP-Teri.

**Q: Is that an American company?**

A: Yeah. Both of them are. See there used to be a company called Harlick, and when Harlick passed away this fellow and SP-Teri they worked for him. So this fellow bought out Harlick and kept the same pattern, the boot was the same. And then SP-Teri they had to create their own style, so they did, and they made with more of a pointed toe because kids just didn't seem to point their toes. So the made more of a pointed toe. So when I went up north I decided to change from Harlick to SP-Teri. And I sent all of my students to SP-Teri instead of Harlick. But those who had a Harlick, it's hard to say I'm going to change to this one or that one. But SP-Teri boot last forever, you know, seem to me. You just didn't break them down. I had one pair I never did break in. (*Laughter*) Oh, so disgusting. A white pair, I'll never forget it. I never could break those boots in.

**Q: How much would a pair of boots cost from SP-Teri?**

A: Now? I guess maybe around \$800.

**Q: Really!**

A: According to what you have done to them. People skating now they know what they want in a skate and they know what paddings and whatnot, and sole and this and that ...

**Q: So it's come a long way from Harlick boots? Riedell boots in the '50s and '60s?**

A: Right. So you can pay as much as \$1,000 for a boot, plus the blade.

**Q: And how much does the blade cost?**

A: Well the blades cost anywhere from, I guess from \$95 all the way up to around \$300 and something. So the blades cost less than the boot now because the blades are standard. But the boot is changing because of what you want in a boot.

**Q: Right. And they're able to do that. They're able to customize.**

A: Right. I remember I took Bing Crosby's grandkid there to, little Kelly Crosby, I think it was Dennis' daughter, but I took her there to get a pair of skates. I think I took her to Harlick though, and those boots cost her almost \$1,000. She was only six years old.

**Q: Oh my God. (Laughter) That's amazing.**

A: (Laughter) So it's what you put in the boot that's what cost you. Like they might have a standard price and say that price is \$125, but then what are you going to put in it. How do you want it? So that's it.

When Polar burned down, you know they had just put up the Pickwick Ice Skater Rink. Just put that up. And the fellow who used to take care of the skates [near the Polar Palace], he became the manager of Pickwick. And he never liked me in the first place.

**Q: He was the one who ran the rental skates and everything inside the rink?**

A: Rental skates and sharpened blades. So, he became the manager of that rink. Now, not liking me and he knew that black people were not allow to this and that, so all of the instructors went over there to Pickwick. I think our Eugene Mickler, he still would remain the head pro. So I called him one day and asked him about a job teaching over there. He said, "We're all filled up now and there's only one place left and I think Jerry Rehfield will get that Rehfield." So I said, "Well that's out."

So then I called the Olympic Arena in Harbor City. The manager said, "Why don't you come out and let's talk." So I did, I went over there and I talked with him. He said, "I'll tell you what. I you want to take the rink over and manage everything and take over the club, I will split 40/60, give you 40 percent and I will take 60, and that will be like owning your own rink." I said, "That's great just that I don't drive." (Laughter) How was I going to get all the way out there. (Laughter) So he said, "The job is here if you want it." So I said, "I'll think about it." So then I called him back. I said, "You know something, the person you need to run this rink is Jerry Rehfield because he can't get a job anyplace else, so could you give him the job?" He said, "OK." And I gave him Jerry Rehfield's number and this and that. And Jerry and I, we didn't get along together anyway. We were always threatening each other for some reason. (Laughter) And he married Louella Parsons.

**Q: You mean the columnist?**

A: Louella, the niece of Louella Parsons, the columnist. He married her niece. She had this long very dark brown hair streaming down her back, and she used to always say nasty things to me. I said, "You know something Louella?" She says, "What?" I said, "I'm going to take your hair and I'm going to mop this whole ice rink up with it." (Laughter) She got so frightened she never said another word to me. (Laughter)

**Q: Was she a skater? Did she skate?**

A: She's a teacher.

**Q: Yeah. I remember her.**

A: She had married Jerry Rehfield and he was a teacher. And that's funny because Jerry and I were very good friends in New York. In fact, I helped him to get into the show at the Center Theater there, but that didn't mean a thing when he got out here.

**Q: Did that open up the space at Pickwick for you then?**

A: No. They didn't want me there, just had an excuse ... . They had just built a nice skating rink over in Culver City, maybe I'll call the manager there, one of the owners, because I used to go up to Lake Arrowhead and he had a rink up in Lake Arrowhead. I always went to Lake Arrowhead.

**Q: Blue Jay, right?**

A: Yeah. And I would take students there to skate. I was learning to drive and I hadn't still learned very well, so I would have one of the students who could drive, drive. So I said, "Hey [unintelligible], you know Polar Palace burned down." He said, "Yeah." He said, "Where are you teaching?" I said, "That's why I'm calling you, maybe you can give me a job in Culver City." He said, "No problem. Tell the manager over there, who is Jerry Paige, to put you on the staff." I said, "OK." So I called Jerry and he said, "We don't have any openings." I said, [unintelligible] put me on the staff." He said, "Gaff said that?" I said, "He'll call you." Anyway, I went over there and I said, "Did Gaff call you?" He said, "Yeah, he called me. He told me to put you on the staff." Then when I looked up at the board where all the instructors were [the words] Mabel Fairbanks, an associated teacher. So all the pros said to me, "What does associated mean?" Since I didn't know myself, I said, "It means I own part of the rink." (*Laughter*) They said, "You do?" I said, "Yeah." (*Laughter*) I'm in partnership with Gaff. (*Laughter*) And they knew that Gaff was one of the owners. There were three owners and they knew that Gaff was the head owner. So they all huddled around me and so nice to me.

Then we became such good friends until they were always borrowing money from me because I'm the only one charging a decent price for lessons. So I said, I'm no threat to you, "I'll tell you what. In that case I'll go up on my price. I'll charge \$8.00 a lesson instead of \$4.00. I'll double it and then no one will take from me they all take from you." So naturally people still would come to me for the lessons. So then finally they said, "We've got to do something about her." So I said, "I'll just go up on my price again. I'll go up to \$12.00." So I did and people still flocked to me. (*Laughter*) Then I got people like Jimmy Durante wife and his daughter and people like that. Betty Hutton and her daughter. So I got big people, you know. So they would say, "I know what, we'll get her fired from the rink." So they did. They had a meeting and said, "You're going to be fired. The manager said you're going to be fired." I said, "Oh?" He said, "Yeah. You can work here this week and after this then you will have to go." I said, "That's OK." And then I said, "You know something." I went in one Tuesday, I'll never forget. That Tuesday and I was supposed to work until Saturday and then I couldn't work anymore. They said, "What are you doing all dressed up for?" I said, "Well, I just came from a meeting of CORE, NAACP, the Black Panthers and they all said, "They're so happy that you're firing me because that means that everybody is fired and there won't be any more skating here. And the rink will be closed on Saturday." Everybody started shaking. And I said it where another owner could hear me. He was downstairs at the time. And he listened, Bill Green. He said to someone, "Go get Jerry Paige and bring him down here." We were in the coffee shop. So Jerry Paige came down. "Did you tell Mabel she was fired?" He said, "Yeah and that's what all the pros wanted." He said, "I tell you what. You are fired." (*Laughter*) "I'll give you three months to

put yourself in order and find a job, but you are going. And don't you ever say anything to her again." *(Laughter)*

So, that's how things turned out. It was always a stumbling block there, but I just stepped across it or I jumped across it. And that's how my jumps got so big jumping across these hurdles. *(Laughter)*

I tell you, my jumping, even my waltz jump, I'll take off on this end and I would end up over on that end and the manager said to me, "Nobody does jumps that big so you can't do jumps that big anymore. In fact you can't even jump at this rink anymore." *(Laughter)* So I didn't care.

**Q: But then you stayed at Culver after that?**

A: Oh, yes.

**Q: And then your students from Polar, did they follow you over there?**

A: Um-huh, yeah, they did. Only the dancer I had didn't follow me. Strangest thing about this dancer. Tall, handsome kid around 15 when I took him on, and he was going to Black-Foxe ...

**Q: Military Academy right there.**

A: Yes. Very polite. So I said to him, I said, I think his name was Michael. I said, "You know something, you should go in for dancing and take dance lessons from Mr. Mickler," because I was teaching him dancing because he had done freestyle at that time. But I decided that I wasn't going to teach dancing competitively because they kept changing the rules or changing the steps or whatever each year. So I said, "I don't have time to keep up with that so I'll just stick with figures and freestyle. [Go talk] to Mr. Mickler. He said, "OK." And Eugene was so elated over him. He said, "Mabel, that's the most polite skater or person or youngster I have ever met." He said, "He always says 'yes sir,' or 'no sir,' or 'Mr. Mickler, so and so and so.' Very polite." I said, "Because he went to military school." *(Laughter)*

**Q: Military Academy, right. They beat it into him. *(Laughter)***

A: *(Laughter)* That's right. So he became a good dancer. And then he used to go out with this girl and they would come to the rink and skate sometimes over at Culver, just for freestyle. And then he called me one night at home and said, "Mabel, could you talk to my mother?" So I did. She said, "Well he's going out with this girl and he wants to stay out until 10 o'clock at night and that's not a good time for a young person to be out." I said, "You know something, he's 18 now." I said, "So he has to have some freedom." I said, "And you'll find out that he will remain that wonderful person if he has a little freedom instead of trying to steal time and giving some excuse why this and that happen." So she said, "Well, maybe you're right. You've been right about everything else." But that was so strange how he started taking lessons with me. She was one of these very polite women who sat up in the bleachers. Very uppity. One day I was sitting with her, she said, "Do you know why I have my son taking lessons with you." I said, "No, why?" "Well, he's going to be a doctor and he'll be having black people also, so I want him to know how to talk with black people as well as whites. So that why I said he needs a round education." *(Laughter)* So I said, "Oh, that's good." I said, "He'll be well-rounded by the time he becomes a doctor, going to college and this and that." *(Laughter)*

Anyway, he finally married that girl. They became dancers together. He married her. And they only

went in an aerial competition, they didn't bother about going into big competitions. So they finally did get married. Now whether he became a doctor or not I never did know. *(Laughter)* These kids have a mind of their own when they grow up, I don't care what the parents have prepared for them. *(Laughter)* It's not the olden days when they had a shotgun on you – you did this, and you're going to marry her and this and that or you're not going to. *(Laughter)* But he worked out OK I'm sure. He had to with that education. He had to work out alright.

**Q: Yeah. That was expensive too. Black-Foxe was a lot of money.**

A: Oh, yes.

**Q: He probably lived there in Hancock Park.**

A: Yep. Very good.

**Q: Who were some of your other memorable students from Culver?**

A: Let's see. Did you remember Billy Chapel?

**Q: Um-huh.**

A: Yeah.

**Q: Very well.**

A: He was on the Worlds team. I think; was it '67?

**Q: Um-huh.**

A: It was after the plane crash. The plane crash was '61 I think. So he was on the, I think, '67 team. He did very well and he went to Las Vegas. They were Mexicans too.

**Q: I didn't know that.**

A: Yeah. And I remember once he was on one test. I can't remember which test it was. He stopped. He was passing OK. He stopped and he said, "I know you're not going to pass me because I'm taking lessons with Mabel. You're not going to pass me. I'm not taking the test," and walked off. *(Laughter)* So I said to his father, "OK, that's not healthy, so let him take lessons from someone else." I said, "And a good one for him to take lessons from really, he isn't that good enough pro but he is learning, let him take lessons with Jerry Rehfield."

Jerry Rehfield, he wasn't afraid to speak up to anybody. *(Laughter)* We wouldn't even have a club if I couldn't get these students from the head pro. So he would do that. In fact, he did one day. He says, "Kids are not going to skate in the club show." I said, "Why?" "Until I get all of them from the other pros." *(Laughter)* And he was that way, and he got his way. But you see he was a tall, handsome guy. See I knew some of these judges before they became judges and they would come to me and say introduce me to Jerry. I said, "OK," and I would introduce them. And as long as they could have their fun with him it was fine. And they just gave him the test, you know. Every month they were giving him a test. He couldn't do the figures, but take the test anyway. And he would take the test until he got to the sixth test, and then after he needed a high test judge, and we

didn't have a high test judge at that time, so they couldn't give it to him. They said, "Jerry we have to order a high test judge and this and that." (*Laughter*)

**Q: (*Laughter*) He was a deal maker.**

A: Right. He was good. (*Laughter*) In a way I liked Jerry really, although he said that I was his greatest enemy because I knew him from nowhere. And he thought I would hold that over him, which I didn't because people are just people to me and this is it. You do what you have to do to get by. (*Laughter*) But he was a character. (*Laughter*)

In fact, I liked all the pros. They didn't like me, but I liked all the pros. But I'll tell you something. All of those pros at Polar Palace learned to respect me, because my kids were good and they could do when their kids couldn't.

**Q: Are you getting tired Mabel?**

A: No. I just say we keep getting off because all of the stories are so juicy. (*Laughter*) I hope they're not going to print any of that. (*Laughter*)

**Q: (*Laughter*) Well that's why we're going to do an extra take. We're going to save all the juice for the extra take. (*Laughter*)**

A (*Laughter*) Right. Good.

**Q: (*Laughter*) I was hoping we'd get like through the coaching of Tai Babilonia and Randy, because I know that ...**

A: Well, you know I had them when she was six and he was eight.

**Q: Was that at Culver?**

A: Culver.

**Q: Oh, I didn't know she skated at Culver, I thought she skated at Pickwick.**

A: Oh, no, it was later.

So, anyway, I had [her] and Randy in one of my classes. I had about three different classes. Stages, you know., beginners, intermediate and more advanced. You know they were doing so well, so Tai's mother had already pulled her out of the class and said you take private lessons. So Tai was taking private lessons with me. Then after a while, Randy's mother came in one day and she says, "Why do you always have to take class lessons? You should be taking private lessons." So he said, "I'll only take private lessons if I can take with Mabel." She said, "I don't care who you take from as long as you take private lessons." So then Randy started taking private lessons.

Then one day, about a year or so later, they were giving the club show. See now I have already gotten kids into clubs. Each pro had so many minutes. So many numbers. You can do three numbers or four numbers or whatever. So then I had used up all my time, and I didn't have any more room, but for one. I said, "Well I can't put Tai in there and I can't put Randy in there because that mean that it was two. So I'll make one out of them." I said, "You guys are going to skate

together." They said, "OK." So I taught them a routine to skate together and they skated so well. Got a standing ovation!

And I said to them after the show, I said, "You know you guys are really good, So let's do it competitively. We're going to take test." That's when Tai said, "I don't want to hold that boy's hands." He said, "And I don't want to hold her hands either." (*Laughter*) I said, "Well, you know something, you are going to hold hands, and you're going to go to the '76 Olympics and you're going to do very well." The mother said, "You're not even skating together yet and she's already telling you what you're going to win. (*Laughter*) So she said, "I'm still not going to hold his hand," and he said, "I'm not going to hold her hands either." I said, "Yes you are." I said, "Just go on the ice and start stroking together because you are going to skate together and that's it." So they finally did, and from then on in we started taking tests, and all the judges loved them. The said what a beautiful pair. And they started winning competitions, which was good.

And then finally, after teaching them for ... But they always did take the single lessons, which was good because you should be a good single skater. One day the L.A. club approached me and said, and the parents, not together, separately, said, "Look Tai and Randy are going places. They're going to be winning all of these championships so why don't you work with one of the other pros like John Nicks or Frank Carroll." I said, "I'd rather work with Frank Carroll, but he is so far out in Van Nuys. I don't care to go out there. And since they belong to L.A. club anyway, so why not skate closer in." So they said, "We don't care who you put on with you, but you're going to have to have help." I said, "OK, because I've been trying to get team teaching in Los Angeles. See we had it back east." And I said, "OK, since John Nicks is closer in maybe we'll take him." So they said, "OK." He was teaching over at Santa Monica Ice Rink then. So they went over there to study with him and still skated over here in Culver.

So I said, "OK, now I will be coming over to Santa Monica because "Ice Capades" had been trying to get me to work with them for quite a while." John Nicks kept saying, "Why don't you come work over here?", because they wanted all of my students over there of course. And I knew why he wanted me there. So I said, "I have to clear things up here, give me a couple of weeks but I'll send the kids over so they can become accustomed to the rink over there." So I did. I sent the kids over and then when I went over there and I started to teach my students, John said, "That's my student." I said, "Huh?" "Those are my students." I said, "What do you mean they're your students? They're all signed up with me." So I went to the different parents and I said, "What do you mean you signed up with him." "Well he told us that you two will be working together, but I had to sign up with him in order for me to work with you. So that's how we signed up." So I said to John, he said, "Well, they signed it didn't they, so they're my students." (*Laughter*) So that's how it happened.

**Q: And that was really the beginning then of team teaching?**

A: Right.

**Q: And what was his focus?**

A: Well, he just knew that I had good students and he could – if I would teach them how to do it - he as coach can get the credit. (*Laughter*) And that was his focus on being ...

**Q: Not much of a team. Did John Nicks then continue to coach them as well?**

A: Yes! Of course! These are winners.

**Q: He wasn't letting go, huh?**

A: That's right. He wouldn't let go of any of them. Finally, whenever he had a kid who couldn't get something ... It was a funny thing, if someone was teaching a student and they couldn't get them to do something, they say you'd better see Mr. Nicks. So John would look at their figures and he couldn't straighten it out and he'll call me over and say, "This kid has to leave the school because they can't understand how to do what they're supposed to do." So he said, "Maybe last hope you'll get them." So I would. So the little girl was turning three and I said, "It's no problem. It's just that she has a dropped hip and her butt is sticking out. (*Laughter*) All she needs to do is pull her butt in and raise that free hip up." I said, "She'll be OK." So he said, "Let's see her do it." So anyway I put the kid in position and she did it clean. He said, "How did you do that?" I said, "I just told her what to do, that's all." So he said, "Let's see her do it again." So she did it again. "Huh, so I guess she does have it." And that's what happened with everyone.

Like Tai would hook her brackets. He said to me, "How do I get her not to hook those brackets?" So I would tell him.

**Q: Can you explain what brackets are?**

A: You know what a three looks like, well the bracket is up instead of down; it's up. So that's a bracket. Then she finally would get it, you know.

Then finally he said to me, "We're going to open up a rink in Pasadena." He wanted to get me away from the kids of course so he'll have them all to himself and I wouldn't have to give them lessons. So he said, "So you have to go over there Mabel for three months and bring that rink in." So I did for three months. I did the PR work on it and went to all of the factories, all of the industries, the peoples' homes, churches, schools giving them pep talks about the rink opening. And the night that the rink opened we were packed. And I had 300 students all signed up.

Naturally it's impossible to teach that many so I gave them to some of the other pros. They said, "Why does everybody that comes here want to take lessons with you?" I said, "Because I'm the only one they know. They'll get to know you and they'll be asking for you. But in the meantime here are lessons." So I gave lessons to all the pros over there and we were doing very well.

Then John couldn't teach the kids to do some things, like Tai and Randy. He couldn't teach them to do certain things. Randy's mother, she was a teacher, you know. She was a very brilliant woman. She knows what's going on. So she took him out to Harbor City to take lessons with Barbara Roles, who was an Olympic skater also. And John got wind of that and he said, "No, no, you don't go out there. She doesn't teach them anything," because he want the glory of it. So then what happened, they would come over to Pasadena where I was teaching. And Randy's mother said, "We had them over at Harbor City and John cut that out and he can't teach them to do triple jumps or anything like that. So Mabel I'm bringing them to you. You work with them. Don't tell Tai's mother that I'm paying for Tai's lessons because she believes whatever John tells her." So anyway, I didn't, I just accepted the money and I taught them, you know, until they had done very well and then they didn't have to come over anymore. And certain other things they would come over for that they couldn't get and I would work with them. Although I think John knew under his breath that they were doing this, but as long as he got the credit he didn't care, you know. I sort of felt that and he knew I wouldn't say anything. So anyway whenever they went out to competition, John says, "You don't have to go Mabel. I'm going. I'll take them to all the competitions." I said, "Why, so you

can get the credit?" He said, "Yeah, that's why I'm the coach." I said, "That's all you are. You are a coach. You are right, you are a coach but you're not a teacher." He said, "No, you're a teacher, you can really teach." He said, "I'm not a teacher but if they have it I can keep them up there." I said, "But the parents do not realize that. They think you are teaching them. They do not realize that they're being taught by other people." He said, "You know something, they don't even care as long as I would give them five or ten minutes." (*Laughter*) And he was right. I'm telling you he was right because since he was taking the kids to the competition, he was the big shot and the parents wanted the kids to go with him. So that's how he became so big. (*Laughter*) But I liked John, he was a nice guy and we had lots of fun together.

**Q: So then did you follow Tai and Randy though as they went up to Nationals?**

A: You mean did I go?

**Q: Um-huh.**

A: No, not unless I had some other student in there. I didn't go and John wouldn't have wanted it that way because he wanted all the glory. When they did competitions here Tai would say to me, "Mr. Nicks said that if we don't do well in this competition that we're not going to go to Nationals." I said, "Don't pay any attention to what John says. Please believe this, this is a good way of psyching you out because he's saying this just in case you do not do well and he will say, 'See I told you so.' Don't pay any attention to that. You can do it. You go out and you just do what you know you are supposed to do and it will happen."

Whenever they were at Nationals or something I'd be there. John and I would stand together for their practice at warm-up and this and that. But if I didn't have any other student there, I wouldn't be there because he knew that all the judges knew that they were my students. John sort of felt that because of me they would get a lot of things. So anyway, we never did lose contact or anything like that, we were always together. And Tai and Randy would come over no matter where I was and I would take a look at them. They'll make it.

**Q: And they did.**

A: That's right. And the mother said to me, "How did you know way back then that they would be on the '80 Olympic team and the team before that and win World and things like that? How did you know?" I said, "Well, I can just tell by their heads. They have brains up there." So she said, "I still don't understand how you always call the shot years before it happens." I said, "I know what I've taught, and this is it."

If you instill goodness in the skaters and let them know that they can do it, think positive, that I am the best, I am the greatest and nobody can out do me in this event. I said, "If you go out there thinking that you're going to do it ... because then they have pride in themselves that they are the greatest." So I never had any problem with any students. As long as they thought they were the greatest they did it. Never did let down. Maybe I was too tough on them, but it made champions out of them. (*Laughter*)

**Q: [Let's] talk a little bit about the physical, emotional and psychological levels of students.**

How did you identify someone who had the ability? You just told us the story of Randy and Tai and how you did that with them, but did you have different ways of dealing with different levels of ability

and recognizing certain talents and then how would you work with to develop a well-rounded skater, someone who could skate figures as well as do a good freestyle presentation?

A: Well, I never felt that you could [treat] any two students alike. They all have, even though they made the same error, but you can't straighten it out the same way you straightened it out on another student. You have to look at them and find out what they are doing incorrectly and why they are doing it, and this way you can tell how gifted they are. Because to me the last thing you needed was talent. What you need is perseverance – wanted it badly enough you sleep it, you eat it, you drink it and you're hungry for it. And if you felt that way, you're going to work for it. So I always felt that they can do it as long as they did those things.

**Q: And if they showed you that they had that, they were hungry for it, then you would invest your time.**

A: That's right. So it hasn't been any big deal really with me. I just take one look at them and ask them if they want it – "Oh yes, I want it." One kid said to me, "I want it, but I don't want to work for it." (*Laughter*) "I think it just should be there." That's one student I had that was so funny.

**Q: So what did you do with him?**

A: He was studying competitively. This was Polar Palace days

I was teaching him to do a flip jump, and he said, "That's strange, you're the greatest instructor. Now all you have to do is to tell me how to do it and it should just happen by itself." I said, "But you still have to work for it, you've got to practice these things." "Oh no, no, no, it's supposed to happen by itself." I said, "It's no such animal. Maybe you should find another instructor." (*Laughter*) Anyway he did work for it and got it.

Then I used to teach another fellow. He used to wear a size 15 shoe. Tall, 6'2". He read skating books and he'll come to me with his skating books and say, "OK, today I must do so and so." I said, "No, you haven't gotten that far yet. You have to take it in different stages." He said, "Why? I already read up to here so I should be up here." (*Laughter*) I said, "Reading and doing are two different things. A lot of practice goes into skating." Same as in gymnastics. A lot of practice goes into it. "I said, "You're not going to just do it." I said, "You think that person out there running just hit those so many miles?" I said "They practice running." "No, I read the book and they told me after I learn that I learn this, this, this. Now I read up to there." (*Laughter*) "So this is what I should be doing." (*Laughter*) I said, "I wish you would find another instructor who would teach you by this book and let you know that as fast as you can read that's as fast as you can learn." (*Laughter*) So there are some people who figure that it should already be there for them, they should have to learn it. Just read it and it's there. I tell them to find them another pro when they tell me that. So I guess we cleared that up about how ...

**Q: Yeah, pretty much. Let's focus a little bit on the physical training. I know you used to suggest that people would do off-the-ice work as well, either with dancing or ...**

A: Well, I had a dance studio upstairs at Culver and I took my kids up there every Saturday and Sunday. We had dance classes, we had ballet, we had gymnastics, we had modern dancing and we worked on the jumps and spins on the floor. After we worked on that for a couple of hours, then we'd go downstairs on the ice and I said, "OK, today we're going to have the Axel." And they learned to land it very well on the floor. I said, "OK let's take it from there. We can do it from a

forward outside edge or we can do it from the back outside edge and step forward into the edge. Any way that you feel is going to be more comfortable for you, you can do it." I said, "We'll work on it both ways and see which way you like but most people, 99 9/10 of the people, always take a back outside edge for speed and then push into a forward outside edge, so we'll work on it both ways." You know they would take off, but they knew how to pull up. I said, "First you jump up. Remember that any jump you do you go up, up, up, up to the sky and then you pull in and then you check out. I said, "If you can count to three when you jump up. On the third beat you can come down and check out." So they did, and an Axel was easy for them to learn.

I know when I was learning an Axel, I couldn't do an Axel. No one taught me to do an Axel so, but I could do a double Salchow. Double Salchow was easy for me because it was from a back inside edge, so it was easy. So then I said, "Now why can't I do an Axel? I've seen it done so many times." So I would take off and I would watch the kids and I would do it, but I didn't know how to check out. So I'd be up there forever and ever, going around and around and around. Maybe I did a triple or a quad, I don't know, but when I came down I always came down in a sit spin. I can do a sit spin, but I couldn't land it. (*Laughter*) So I said, "OK, I've got to land it."

Then one day, this was still in New York, one day a skater said to me, "The skaters they were running around the ice saying 'Mabel can't do an Axel. Mabel can't do an Axel.'" See, I was fooling them that I could do one by doing the double Salchow and pulling out of that. But they'd notice my takeoff – "She's doing a double Salchow watch her take off." So they only saw me go up and come down because all jumps look alike once you get in the air. So when they went around saying that I was so embarrassed I didn't know what to do. And I remember crying, "I can do an Axel too, I can, I can, I can do an Axel." So I took off and I jumped up there and I went around and around and came down and fell flat on my butt. But I got up because then I had the feel for it, how to check out. And then I said, I'd pushed up into and I said, "One, two, check." (*Laughter*) So that's how I learned an Axel.

**Q: And then that's how you taught it.**

A: Right. And we worked on these jumps, every jump, we worked on the floor. I don't care whether it was a triple or a quad or what, we worked. And I had my kids doing something no one has to this day been successful doing. That was a double Walley.

**Q: I don't know what that is.**

A: Well, you just go back on an inside edge and just jump up like a loop jump, only from an inside edge instead of an outside. It's OK, it's a simple jump just doing a single, but to do a double is very difficult. I had a couple of kids do it. Atoy did it. He missed it in Nationals, when he was in juniors he missed it. But there was one girl, Zenobia, she had these strong legs ...

**Q: Oh yeah, she did, I remember.**

A: Yes. She could land it. Those were the only two that ever were able to land a double. Right. So they should put that in. The kids should really learn that jump. You see loop is an outside edge so it's easier than taking off for a double Walley on an inside without any help whatsoever. So what we do, we do a double Walley by tapping. We tap the foot and jump straight up from an inside edge. So then they can do that. You can triple a Walley that way by tapping.

**Q: Is that the full name of the jump?**

A: It was name after the skater. Most of the jumps are named after skaters. So this fellow name was Walley. We tap and just jump straight up and pull in, do a double, or we can do a triple. But they couldn't do it without tapping. *(Laughter)* That was like the double toe loop. I said, well, the double toe loop came about because people couldn't do a double loop, like myself, I almost knocked my brains out trying to do a double loop. So we'd tap it and we're able to do it. The double toe loop, well, that's the easiest double jump you can do.

**Q: You mean a tap like you would do on a flip?**

A: Yeah. Tap and jump up. Right. That tapping push you up into the air.

So, anyway, we worked hard on the floor and then we just put it on the ice when we came to the ice. And all the different spins we wanted to do, like they call the Biellmann Spin now, but we did all those spins. When I was learning I learned to do that spin where you pull it over your head, not just stopping it here in the middle of your head, we'd pull it all the way up to our nose, you know, really. But whoever does something in a competition, they name it after that person.

**Q: So you did a lot of floor work with kids. What about weight training or anything like that?**

A: Yeah, like Randy's brother lifted weights so I would say to him, I said, "Look, I want you to teach Randy to lift weights because he has to lift Tai and that will make his arms stronger." So he did. So that's why Randy was so strong. And they wonder why Tai is the same size as he and he could lift her, you know. *(Laughter)* Because he did weightlifting. Right. And as small as he is he's still strong. Right.

**Q: And then what about their emotional training or how did you, I suppose, increase incentive and provide impetus and ...**

A: Well I just told them to always think positive, anything could happen if you think you can do it. I said, "Never let anyone put you down. Never let anyone intimidate you. You are the greatest, just remember that. You don't need any hang-ups, and if you have one, let it help you." This is what I tell them and they seemed to follow that. Right.

**Q: And then the psychological?**

A: Well, I always feel that you can do whatever is up here. It tells the body what to do. So if you're thinking wholesome, if you're thinking that you can do something, it's going to happen, please believe me, if you work at it, though.

**Q: Did you ever have students, Mabel, that had problems off the ice that they brought onto the ice or that ...**

A: It's their parents who brought it to me. You stop having my kids tearing up my furniture! They're jumping over my furniture! Jumping over all the chairs, the mirrors, and now they're jumping over the bed! *(Laughter)*

**Q: *(Laughter)* And it's your fault.**

A: My fault. *(Laughter)* Yeah, it was the parents not the kids. *(Laughter)* The kids didn't have any problems off the ice ...

**Q: How did you deal with the parents?**

A: I just told them, I said, "You want them to be the greatest don't you? I said, "Well that's how you learn to be the greatest. You can buy more furniture, but there's only one time that they can be great is when they are young, so let them do what they have to do. That's right. So let them destroy it, and when they start making those millions they can buy you more." *(Laughter)* So the parents bought it.

**Q: Well, I think we want to talk a little bit more about coaching and about what you did from Culver.**

A: Oh, yeah. Well, what happened, how I happened to have gone up north to teach, the instructor who learned down here, he was a good pair skater here. He was up North teaching. He had bought himself a condo up there and he was teaching up there, and in the summertime he would bring his students to me to teach. He wasn't my student, this particular coach, he was just someone I knew because I had Tai and Randy at the same time he was doing pair work. So naturally we got to know each other pretty well. That was Jim Hulick. Jim would bring his students down and we would go to a rink, didn't matter which rink. We would go to a rink and we would work on them, and then we would go to, I said, well, I'm working really out of Culver so let's go to Culver. And we'd go to Culver. Some of the kids stayed with me in my home and we would have nice parties and things like that, but I always say that they got to bed on time.

Then during the wintertime or during competition time he would say to me, "Mabel, could you come up because I have to take Kristi Yamaguchi and Rudy Galindo to the competitions and we'll be gone for maybe a week or so, or maybe two weeks. So could you come up and take over my students?" I said, "OK." So I'd go up and work with his students until he came back and then I came back down here. Then I found out that it was lots fun in doubling because they didn't seem to have good pros and I liked that. Because the pros all hated me of course and they would tell their parents that Mabel is charging \$65 for a lesson. You can get three or four lessons or five lessons from me for that price. And I said, "That's good, keep telling the parents that because I'm overflowed anyway." And naturally the parents would stick with me because they loved my teaching and they were Jim's students and they didn't mind paying the price. When he would come back, then sometimes he would ask me how to do certain things with Rudy and Kristi Yamaguchi, and I would tell him. See he taught Kristi pair skating, but she had another coach for her singles, but she always worked at our rink in doubling. She didn't work at the rink where her teacher taught. So anyway, the only thing I would do is sort of give them good advice mentally and I liked serving as their mentor and tell them what to do or how to do it.

Then one, I guess it was summer, or winter, I don't remember which, then I would bring them down here and ask Tai and Randy to work with them and teach them to do certain things that Tai and Randy did exceptionally well. They did and it worked out very well. And I wouldn't have Randy and Tai charge them. I said don't charge them just do it. So they did.

Then his other students, like one of the little girls he was trying to teach to do a double flip. He said, "Mabel I've been working on this double flip for a couple of years with her and she can't do it." I said, "Yes she can." He said, "How?" I said, "Turn your back or go down to the other end of the rink." And then I told her what to do. And he said, "How did you get her to do that?" I said, "You

know what you pros do not teach is the head. That that head is very important." I said, "Because a kid is looking back here when they make a turn. They're not going to jump that way. They're going to jump to the left. Some kids jump to the right of course, but then it's opposite." So he said, "What did you tell her to do?" I said, "I told her to just turn her head and look where she was going before the jump." So he said, "I've been telling them all the time never to move that head." (*Laughter*) I said, "But she has to see where she's going." I said, "One third of the jump is already made if you see where you're going." (*Laughter*)

**Q: That's right. Sounds so simple.**

A: Right. And I remember when I was teaching one kid here at the L.A. Figure Skating Club, because I belong to that club. I was teaching him to do triples. I said, "You're jumping nice and straight, but let's take a straighter edge and I want you to look over your left shoulder before the jump and see where it will take you. And he did it of course. I said, "You see the head is very, very important. On the landing you can bring the head back to center and to the right if you want to, but first you must look where you're going. And I said, "And I bet you that almost a full turn will be made by looking over your head by the time you get up there." And so surely enough, he found it found it very easy. Everybody in the rink, all the instructors were shocked when he learned an Axel, because he was taking from Eugene Mickler. That was his pro. And his father came over and asked me if I would teach him. I said, "No because he is Eugene Mickler's student and that wouldn't be nice." He said but I talked to Mr. Mickler and he said it was OK. I said, "Maybe he said it was OK, but he doesn't feel right about it." So I said, "And you settle that with him before I can teach him." So he did, he said he settled it with him. But Eugene never felt good about it, you know, because when he did an Axel, I taught him to do an Axel, I said, "Look you don't always have to do a back outside edge going around in a curve and pushing forward into it. There's another way to do it. Let's take a back cross-over and then step into it because you're in a straight line now and I bet you you'll have the highest Axel there is." And he did and he landed. He said, "Wow!" And this was doing club time and all the pros said, and judges said, "Wow! Where did that come from? I bet he can't do it again." I said, "He'll do it every time." And so he did and that became his trademark, that double Axel. How simple it was to do it from a straight edge. So I said that the problem with the pros [is] they're teaching kids to jump on a curve too much. I said, "If they would jump from a straighter line, you'll find out and still have an edge. You'll find that it's much easier." So the pros started taking on to that and jump from a straighter line. And they found out their kids were jumping better too. Right.

Because I noticed Sonja. I said Sonja has rolled herself into a little curve and she jumps into that same curve. I said and that's not right, there must be a better way to jump than the way she is jumping. But she always did do that; she was so cute on ice. And she was the best runner there was. She could run on her toes. I still haven't seen anyone who could run the way she ran on her toes and be so cute. (*Laughter*)

**Q: She was small in stature, wasn't she?**

A: Yeah, 5'2".

**Q: How tall were you Mabel?**

A: I was 5'2", but I always told everyone I was 5'3" because I didn't want to be as short as she. (*Laughter*) But she had a beautiful Lutz jump. She had a beautiful sit spin. Those two things she did, everything was just off air. I mean, any beginner could do as well but that Lutz and her sit spin

and she had a cross-foot spin that a lot of people still can't do today. And she so much speed on that. So those three things she was fantastic at. Very good. And who could look as cute and be dressed as well. She had it. *(Laughter)* Please believe it. *(Laughter)* And I loved her, I really did. Even though she didn't like me, but I loved her.

**Q: Well she really gave ... Put skating on the map.**

A: That's right.

**Q: Made it a spectator sport.**

A: By doing motion pictures. That's right.

**Q: Right. Exactly.**

A: I think she worked with 20th Century Fox. That's right. And I was there to see every one of her movies after that. I always thought she was the cutest. I said I don't care what she does, just let her run on her toes. *(Laughter)*

**Q: Right. In a pretty costume.**

What other skaters do you think impacted you? Probably no one as much as Sonja Henie because she of course was skating when you were young, but what other skaters were ...

A: Balita. She was a much better skater than Sonja. She was a tall girl about 5'4", nice and thin. She was really there. She'd jump from a straighter line also.

**Q: She skated with a show?**

A: I don't know, but I know that we worked together in Cuba. We did an ice show together. And she's the only skater who ever said, "Well we used to practice at the rink together." She was the only skater who ever said, "Wow, you and I are going to do a show together. Wow, that's going to be fun." She was the only skater who ever said that. Everyone else always says, "Huh, like we don't want her in the show." And even in my own shows when I had to have skaters, I'd get them and soon as I was ready to step on the ice they'd said to the fellow who was having the show, "If she steps out on this ice, you can close this show because we are not going on." But she was the only one.

Sonja said I was too good for her show. But at least Sonja was honest. She didn't let anybody, not just me, but nobody skate in her show who had a short dress on. Wear a dress leg length, even to the ankle is OK, so she didn't want anybody skating in her show that's going to show off their legs. She was a smart woman. Very smart.

**Q: Bobby Specht was in the newspaper today. He passed away unfortunately.**

A: Oh really, when?

**Q: A couple of days ago. It was in the obituaries.**

A: Oh, no, we were just talking about him Saturday.

**Q: Really. I was going to ask you if you knew him.**

A: Oh, yes, wonderful person.

**Q: He was with the "Ice Capades"?**

A: Yeah, he and Donna Atwood paired together.

**Q: Right, that's what the article said.**

A: Was he living in Palm Desert?

**Q: Yes. He must have been a smoker, he died of emphysema.**

A: Right. But they all ...To them when they got into the shows because they were good competitor skaters, but when they got into shows they just felt that they can drink and smoke and do all the things a man would do. So this was their downfall. Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

**Q: But he was someone that you knew and skated with?**

A: Yes. I didn't skate with him. I just know him. The only time we skated together on the same rink was in Van Nuys. He was a wonderful person. Wow. That hurt. It does hurt when someone so lovely and has done so much for skating. Wow. So he and Donna were very good pair skaters.

**Q: Um-huh. And what happened with her?**

A: She still lives in Palm Desert.

**Q: She continued skate for years?**

A: We taught together in Santa Monica. We taught there for two or three years together, until they sold the rink. And then, you know she lived. ... like Santa Monica. She lived there. She had a lovely apartment there and her kids were wonderful kids. Very wonderful. They loved her dearly.

**Q: You're talking about her own children or her ...**

A: Her own children with Harris.

**Q: Oh, Harris of ...**

A: They were married and she had twins and another kid. I think she had three kids. They were very, very wonderful children. When John Harris passed away I told her, I said, "Look, I'm sure that you still own a part of "Ice Capades." All these studios they're putting up and this and that. So make sure you get your worth and have a good attorney." She said, "Oh, I'm doing OK there." She said, "I don't worry about it." So then after a while the boys said – I call them the boys, you know the gay fellows who all went to live up in Palm Desert – they said Donna, "Why don't you come live here?" And she did. She was a good teacher too. A very good teacher. She and I worked at the same rink with John Nicks. She was a great inspiration to some of the kids because they knew her from the "Ice Capades."

**Q: But she skated competitively. I think that the article said that they would have gone to the 1944 Olympics but for the War.**

A: I told you, they were good competitors. That's why I don't understand how they can be competitors and not drink and smoke and then [when they] become grown men, "Now I can do all these things." It's crazy.

**Q: Yeah, not right thinking.**

A: No, it's not right thinking at all.

**Q: Well then I was going to ask you Mabel about some of the most fulfilling moments you've had both as a performer and as a coach.**

A: Well, as a performer, I just loved it. And it was all fulfilling. I told you about the fact that when we were touring with the George Arnold show and we played Texas all over. I told you about Texas. Now that was fulfilling. I remember living with this family in some part of Texas because we played many places in Texas. I was living with the white family and in walking distance was the dime store. We had lots of those during that time. So I would go to the, I went to one of the stores and I was looking at different things, you know, and I just thought people were watching me because here this is a black person and here she is in this store. I didn't know they were watching me to see if I was going to take something. *(Laughter)* That's why they watch black people. They figure they're going to take something, I learned.*(Laughter)* And I didn't know that. But anyway, I was in this store and I bought a couple of things I needed for the show. And then I sat down at the counter and I said, "May I have a glass of water please?" So she says, "I can't serve you." *(Whispering)*. I said, "I only want a glass of water." "You shouldn't be sitting here," the waitress said *(Whispering)*, "Why don't you leave. I'm going to lose my job." I said, "Why should you lose your job?" She said, "If I give you a glass of water." And I'm thinking that, you know, all this prejudice going on, people being people. Then I left you know and I went back to where I lived and I told the lady where I lived, I said, "The strangest thing happened." I said, "I sat down at the counter at the dime store and ask for a glass of water and the girl said she couldn't give me a glass of water." She said, "Go back there and ask for the manager and make sure you sit in that same seat so that same girl can serve you and just say to him, I'm Mabel Fairbanks and I'm here to entertain you on ice." She said, "And just watch the difference." So surely enough I did that. Boy, everyone was running: "May I have your autograph?" Serving me food which I didn't even want. *(Laughter)* Lemonade. And I only wanted a glass of water. *(Laughter)* Everything they were serving me. And they say, "You must come back." *(Laughter)* Everybody in the store was getting autographs. *(Laughter)*

So I said, "Why you didn't give me a glass of water before?" "Because you was a nobody. Now we know that you are somebody." *(Laughter)* "You're more important than we are." *(Laughter)* That was funny. That was one of my fulfilling ... *(Laughter)* I loved it. I couldn't see how people could be so different, you're the same person, but you didn't have a talent, they didn't have. That's it. *(Laughter)* That was funny.

**Q: And as a coach can you think of one of the most fulfilling or rewarding times you had?**

A: The most fulfilling and rewarding time I've ever had as a coach is seeing my kids come in number one. Doing the best they can. Even if they didn't give it to them they still skated number one and in their hearts they knew they skated number one. In my heart I knew they skated number

one so it didn't matter where the judges placed them. I just wanted them to be the greatest. And that has always been sort of fulfilling for me as a coach.

**Q: What do you think has been your greatest contribution in your lifetime.**

A: Giving back to the public and to my students what I was given. A God-given thing that was given me. Mine wasn't given to me by man. It was given to me by God, but man would say that he's the cause of it so I'll say giving it back to him. This has always been fulfilling there, and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed everything I did in ice skating and I would still do it the same way. There's no sense in changing. I'd still go up to the window and say, "Hey, Miss, I'm next. Miss, I'm next." I don't care if it happens all over again. I'll enjoy every moment. I enjoyed the fact that I stood there even after the session was half way over before they let me in, I enjoyed the fact that I knew that I was going to get in there. So everything that's happened to me in skating has been great.

The only thing I didn't like was the fact that I was told to fall in "Frosty Frolics" at the end of my program: "Make sure you don't fall in a split the way you usually end a program or in a modern pose. Make sure you fall and let the people know that you fell." That's the only part I disliked. Other than that everything was great. Even when they said that I can't do any more for you. I can't write anymore scripts for you to be in this show. I can't do this or that, it didn't bother me too much. I'm the cause of the show being there but I knew that it didn't matter because that had happened to me before. They walked off a show. So I've been very successful I think.

**Q: What about being inducted into the Ice Skating Hall of Fame?**

A: Oh, that was beautiful. You know the person who said, "Mabel why aren't you in the Figure Skaters Hall of Fame,?" was a student of mine. And you remind me so much of her. In fact, every once in a while she comes down from up north to see me. She has a couple of kids and they were here for the New Year's parade, the Rose Parade. Dr. Graham he is heading it, and then you can write some of the judges here and some of the skaters I've taught and see what happened. So she said, "I'm going to do it because you should be in the Figure Skaters Hall of Fame." I said, "OK, if you say so." So she got on it and all the judges sent letters to Dr. Graham and all my students: Randy, Billy Chapel, Kristi Yamaguchi and Atoy, Lesley and Michelle McCaddie, all of them. I mean so many of them. They got so many letters until, oh ... Then you know it has to go before a vote, and it goes before the vote by some of the pros on the panel, you know. Frank Carroll is on the panel. So Frank said to me one day I was at a competition, this was before it happened, he says, "You took lessons with Maribel Vinson, my pro." (*Laughter*) I said, "She gave them to me. I didn't take them she gave them to me then I accepted them." (*Laughter*) He said, "Those were lovely letters. We got so many of them." So which meant he knew I was in.

**Q: Um-huh, he was telling you?**

A: Yeah. Right.

**Q: Oh, good, good.**

A: And then Scott Hamilton says, "Why don't you just give it to her. Just give it to her." (*Laughter*) He was so cute. So anyway, they have always been such supporters of mine. And Debi Thomas said that what I have instilled in them mentally was so wonderful. So that was nice.

**Q: And he's referring to that positive, "Always say I can, never say I can't?"**

A: Right. I remember when Debi first came out here to be in a Southwest, I think it was Coast competition, anyway, she was in this competition and she was skating against people like Rosalyn Summers and this and that. One of them, I won't say which one, one of them spiked her. A deep gash. So she couldn't skate. Because she was the best of course. And they pulled her off the ice and the judges say well you don't have to go on. So I went over to her and I said, "You are going to skate." I said, "Forget this, we'll just put a bandage on it, and you are going to skate. You go out there and you skate." So she said, "OK, I'll skate." Because she was thinking that she shouldn't be skating out there, after all she was bloody and this and that. I said, "Forget it. Go out and skate and we'll just clean it up the best we can." And I know the pro who told this kid to do it. You know what I mean? So I said to her, because I was watching. And she said I hope I'm able to do my triple Lutz or something, triple flip or one jump. One triple jump. I said, "See, you're already thinking negative." I said, "Forget it." I said, "That's why you were hurt because they knew you could do these jumps." I said, "Forget it, just go out and skate." So she went on and she did it. She did a very good job but they gave this girl first and gave her second. But that was OK. And her pro said to me, "You know she has done so well in every competition, all these area competitions, but how do I get her in the National Championships? They won't let her in." I said, "Yes they will. Just let her join the L.A. Figure Skating Club and they will see that she will get in because I will tell them." So anyway, she did, she joined the club and I just talked with the judges and they knew that she was good, you know. And these judges here had learned not to be prejudice anymore. By my being around, they're not prejudice anymore. They didn't care. If you were the best, you're going to win it. We only had one prejudiced judge and she's still prejudiced to this day, but not just with blacks, with anybody that she doesn't know and know the family.

I remember this one judge says, we were having a competition in Lake Arrowhead and we said we were going to try to have the kids do the figures without the judges seeing, just come out and judge the figures, which I think was the best thing to do. And I heard her say, "I'm not going to judge any figure that I can't see what kid is doing it so I won't know whom to give it to." (*Laughter*)

**Q: That's incriminating herself wasn't it.**

A: Right. Absolutely. But she came out and judged it anyway and she was made when she gave it to the kid whom she didn't want to have it. And that kid happened to have been my student. (*Laughter*) So from then on the judges here have learned not to be prejudiced. They call it as they see it now. And, this is it. So now I'm as big as night and day so they just take one look at Mabel and say, "She has it, he has it, and this is it." (*Laughter*) If they did.

Like one judge said to me when she became a judge, we were very good friends, we used to go out an awful lot together to lunch and things like that ... She said, "Mabel," and we always skated together ... Pat Stockton. She said, "Mabel, now that I'm a judge I can't give anything to your students." I said, "I don't want you to give them anything. I want you to be honest." She said, "Well, that's me, you know how honest I am, I'm very fair. If the kid does it I'll give it to them, but if they don't do it, I'm not giving it to them." I said, "That's the way I want it." I said, "The kid will never know what to work for if they're just handing them things." I said, "That's what's wrong with competitive skaters today. They know the judges that are going to give it to them. So our best skaters do not get up there to go to Worlds and the Olympics." I said, "No, do your [scoring] the way you do now." And she used to write a piece in the paper, I think I told you about this ... World Skating Magazine, a paper she was writing: "Unmasking the Judges." She was telling about all the dirt, you know, and how they were not capable of doing what they are doing. So she got out of judging finally. And then how they would ask her to write their papers for them because they didn't know how to write the

papers. Anyway, she still writes for the paper. She's a wonderful person. I told you she got married on ice.

**Q: Oh, yes, I remember you telling me, yeah.**

A: And I was invited.

**Q: Were all the guests on ice too?**

A: Um-huh.

**Q: Oh, how great.**

A: Yep, it was very nice. I really did enjoy it. That was in Pasadena Winter Gardens, because that's where she was. She belong to the Blade and Edge Club in Pasadena, although she skated over in Polar Palace with the ... I think she also belonged to the L.A. Figure Skating Club. Because you can belong to as many clubs as you wish, but you just pick one as your home club. Yeah, she belonged to the Blade and Edge, but she skated in Polar Palace. And she loved it. And I'm sure you've seen her on ice, you just wouldn't know her. Well, to this day you wouldn't know because she's all grown up and very elegant looking. She was from a very, very wealthy family, so she never had to work a day in her life. I remember one year we were at this, I don't know I think it was in Las Vegas or someplace, we had our convention. Professional convention. She had a check. She showed me, she said, "Look, the first money I ever earned in my life." (*Laughter*) Because she served as a consultant, and that was it.

**Q: And she got paid.**

A: And they had to pay her for it. Right. She didn't teach skating, but we was a consultant. So that was neat. She enjoyed that check. I don't know if she ever cashed that check. "My first working check." (*Laughter*) That was lovely.

And there was another girl, she and Pat Booth De Forest – her grandfather was the one when who invented the radio tube. They would skate together. We used to have girls pair skating also, so they were pair skaters and they were always winning championships. And so we three, we were really very, very good friends. And Booth was a judge also. So that was fun. I love that good old Polar Palace, with all of their ups and downs for me, and discrimination. I still love Polar Palace. I was so happy as to what came out of it only because I stuck to it and said, "It has to be done. When you say no, that's a big yes for me. You just boosted me up there." (*Laughter*)

**Q: In your lifetime, Mabel, what do you see as the major strides in terms of, I guess, just from your point of view, do you think that there have been major strides in opening skating up to skaters of color? Do you think the legislation in the '60s really made a difference? In 1999, looking back over the year, how would you measure the success of ...**

A: I'd say every year that I have been there, they have tried to improve quarter of an inch. Tried. Even if they didn't succeed they tried, because there was always someone else who would pull them down and say, "You're not judging the way we want you to judge." Little by little they have opened the door for minorities – black skaters, all types of minorities, Mexicans, everybody. It is happening little by little. We have come a very long way, but we still have twice as far to go. But it's a beautiful beginning. And any skater who has the ability can go into those competitions and feel

they're not going to be cheated 100 percent. But 90 percent they might be cheated, but not 100 percent. *(Laughter)* So at least they're recognized, and this is beautiful.

And the judges, they get to know the kids who skate at the clubs. They know because you see they are now members of all the clubs all over now, see, because we just open up to them. And they know the kids and they know how hard they work. And every rink has judges. Every rink. Because judges became judges because they have kids skating and they want those kids to be the top, so they become judges. Although they can't judge their own kid, they say you judge my kid and then I judge your kid and we'll see that they stay in the top. So they know the kids and they know how well the kids can do and they work towards that.

**Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?**

A: *(Laughter)* No think we have said just about everything. Just that it's for the kids to have faith in themselves that they can do it. Thinking positive, knowing that they are the greatest in that division and nobody can out do them. I think that's all they need to know as long as they work for it.

**Q: But they need teachers like you to tell them that.**

A: Yeah, true. I tried to.

**Q: You did.**

A: I tried. And the kids I have taught who have become instructors, I'm sure they're teaching their kids the same thing. Because they said to me, "Mabel if we only knew the way you used to talk to us and tell use these things and we listen to you, we just thought you didn't know anything. How could you know these judges? How could you know what they are thinking? How could you know how well the kids are going to do? How do you know where the kid is going to come in and this and that? We just didn't believe that." I said, "Because God told me in the outset, so that's how I knew." I said, "I kept telling you to believe in me as I believe in God." They said, "But we were so young that we couldn't. We just thought that it has to be otherwise. They said we're sorry we didn't." I said, "But you could be millionaires now if you had listened. *(Laughter)* You wouldn't be out there struggling, teaching the way I taught." *(Laughter)* But everything is for a reason. You need to get kids and teach them how to think positive and to know that they are the greatest in that division or they wouldn't be there. So if you can get that over to them, I said, "Then when they teach they will get that over to their students. So you just keep teaching that." I said, "I'm sorry you didn't become millionaires, because if you had maybe you would have remembered me." *(Laughter)*

**Q: Well, that might happen yet. *(Laughter)***

A: Yeah, you never know.

**January 12, 1999**

**Q: So, this is January 12th. We're going to go back on and review Mabel's induction. Mabel, we do want to hear the whole story of the induction into the Hall of Fame.**

A: Finally, Dr. Graham wrote me a letter saying, "Congratulations, you have been chosen as one of the inductees to the United States Figure Skating Hall of Fame. And the induction will take place at Nationals." – I think it was in Tennessee, 1997, at Nationals – "We hope to see you there."

I called him and told him that I will be there and thank you so very much. I'm very excited. So he said, "I'm glad you're excited about it. (*Laughter*) So, yes, so we will see you there to be inducted in."

I called Tai and told her that I was accepted and I'll be going to, I guess it was Tennessee. She said, "Oh that's good Mabel, I will take you." Because I was wondering who was going to take me of course, but I was going. If I had to crawl there I was going. (*Laughter*) Tai, she bought three outfits for me. She said, "Mabel I'm bringing over three outfits and you pick out whatever you want. If you want all of them, you keep all of them." So I did. I said I want all of them. (*Laughter*)

We went, and Atoy went, Becky, the girl who reminds me of you, she was an adult student of mine. She was the one who instigated the whole thing. So the three of us, Tai, myself and Becky, we stayed in one big room at the hotel, where everybody was staying of course. Then after the girls skated – Tara had won the championship – we're supposed to have ... they're going to spread out the red carpet for us to walk down to wherever they were handing them out. So we did and Tai she helped me on the ice, to step across on the ice and she stood with me, which was beautiful.

Then they gave us a thing and told us what was going to happen. We're going to get a bowl and flowers and first off somebody was going to say something about us, and our background and what we've taught and different things, who you really are. And they did all of that. And then they said, "I'm presenting Mabel Fairbanks." Tai helped me upon the ice and walked down the red carpet. Then they handed me the bowl and the flowers. Then everybody stood up when they called my name of course, and was waving. And I'm the only one they did that for because they had a lot of important people at that time who became inducted into the Hall of Fame. And Barbara Roles, she was inducted at that time. So we had a lovely time.

Then after it was over with we stood around on the carpet and talked to everybody, and everybody congratulating everybody. It was beautiful. And then when we got off they handed us a couple hundred dollars. I said, "For what?" They said, "This is for dinner." I said, "Oh my gosh, wonderful." (*Laughter*) So then we stayed until the whole competition was over because we still had the boys to skate. And Tara, bless her little heart, she was just handing out autographs in the hotel. Beautiful young lady. They had a special place set up for her. And Becky said, "Tara," that was funny because her daughter was a big fan of Tara.

**Q: Tara Lipinski we're talking about?**

A: Yes. So Becky's daughter was a big fan of hers already. So she told her about her daughter. She said, "Oh yes. I have a present for her." Isn't that something? And she sent her a present. Then Becky said, "I would like for you to autograph all of these programs for my friends." She must have had about a dozen or more. And Tara sat there and she, in her little seat where they had sat her, and had skaters come up and autograph every one of those programs. Then Becky gave her \$10. Her mother said, "What's that Tara?" She said, "Oh, nothing." She said, "We don't do that you know. You're happy to sign them and get skaters to sign it." She said, "Oh yes, of course. I'm sorry." And she gave her the \$10 back. And then when Tara was all finished autographing for everybody, she just went, her mother was sitting over there away from it all, and she just went over and sat on her mother's lap, and there she stayed the whole time, and just smiled at people. Very

lovely girl. And I was sitting about as far as we are.

Then you know they had to give exhibition and all of this afterwards. But it was just beautiful to see that she was such a lovely girl. And she loved her mother, and I like that. When you love your mother I love it. (*Laughter*)

Then I notice later when she turned pro, I said, "That's beautiful, she should turn pro. There's nothing else she can win. She has a Worlds and she has the Olympics. Anything else, why rake over the coals when you had it from the beginning. So forget it."

And that's what I told Tai and Randy. I said, "Randy you cannot skate the Olympics." I said, "When in world do you think you're going to Worlds?" "Mr. Nicks said we have to go." I said, "I don't care what Mr. Nicks said. You are not going to Worlds. Put Tai down and I'll go in there and I'll tell him." He said, "We have a meeting coming up." I said, "Well you better tell him. If you don't tell him, you let me know you didn't tell him so I can tell him that you are not going to Worlds." I said, "If you didn't skate the Olympics, they're not about to give you another Worlds. Please forget it."

And I tried to tell little, the other little girl who had won Worlds as singles. I tried to tell her not to go. She said, "Oh I have to go. My pro said I have to." She was taking from Frank Carroll. "Oh I have to go because my pro told me I have to go and my mother told me I have to go, so I have to go." I said, "Girl, you're going to lose your championship. They're not going to give you another Worlds." I said, "You can forget it." She said, "Well I have to go." I said, "See you don't have Tai and Randy there to fall back on. These are skaters from the USA. You don't have anyone, so forget it. She said, "I wish I could but I can't." And she went. Naturally she didn't come in [first] of course. So she turned pro and she was skating in Las Vegas and those papers – I guess they were right about her that she couldn't win the Worlds because she is a mess now. I thought that was so cruel. If she had only listened to what I had to say. See, they won't listen to me. They look at me and say, "Who is she? She is nobody. She just gives advice."

**Q: Just someone who has watched the game and knows how it's played.**

A: Right. They just can't see it. They don't see how I knew how it should be played. But that's the way it's run. I guess these are the things that had to happen, so it doesn't bother me that they are not listening. They hear me, but they're not listening. So it doesn't bother me. Bless their little hearts. I hope them all well.

**Q: That's how they learn.**

A: I hope they all get that million dollars. (*Laughter*) I promised them millions if they would stick to it 'til the end. But no.

**Q: So where did you go for dinner with the \$200?**

A: I didn't, I brought that \$200 home and stuck it in the bank. (*Laughter*) I said that's \$200 I'll always remember that's there. (*Laughter*)

**Q: And the Figure Skating Hall of Fame is in Colorado Springs?**

A: Yeah.

**Q: And what is there of yours that is in there?**

A: Oh, they have a picture of me in there. You know you flip through these things and they have a picture of all of the, each one on their own billboard, and different skaters all over the USA who have made it or that important they feel have contributed something to American skaters. So I'm on one of them and they tell who I am and this and that. And then they have a library with all of your photos and things about you, memorabilia and whatnot.

**Q: I just asked Mabel about navigating through the racial discrimination as she was coming up as a performance skater and then leading her students into competition. And she was saying that she felt that she was led by God.**

A: Right, because I always say that take my hands and lead me, and he always did.

**Q: How did you learn to do that? How did you learn to ask God for guidance?**

A: Well, I was brought up in the church of course. We were always reading the Bible and we had to memorize a verse from the beginning to the very end of the Bible and had to get up and recite them, you know. And my sister and I, like I would take Genesis and she would take Exodus and we would go on like that. And we would have the verses from each book in the Bible. So I was brought up in a Christian home.

**Q: And did you continue that practice all through you young adulthood and now into you later years.**

A: That's right. Absolutely.

**Q: So that's really been a force that's been with you since very early on.**

A: Absolutely. Sure. So, I never had a problem on my own because I always knew I could navigate through the problems, but it was just when I got ready to speak for others because no one would stand up for themselves. So I had to speak for them. The funny thing about it, I just open my mouth and God spoke, and there it was.

**Q: You never had to think about it.**

A: I never thought about it. Just open my mouth and the words came out. And it was always the right words, because it really turned things around. It was great.

**Q: Well that's what everybody says, and clearly there are champions of color that wouldn't be there or wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for you. So it worked.**

A: Right. It worked. Absolutely.

**Q: I'd like to hear a little bit more. I think an interesting part of your story is the part of how you navigated through that is how you managed to see who these judges were and how the game was played and what you needed to do to further your student down the competitive road.**

A: You know I always felt, when I first started teaching competitively, I always felt that, Russia said,

"OK, I'll take the dance and I'll take the pairs. Now we'll divide the single ladies and the single men amongst the U.S. OK, the U.S. can have single men and single ladies or then we could have, if France or whatever can be thrown in but we have dance and the pairs and this is what we will come out as gold medalists." So they always won the dancing and the pairs.

**Q: How did you hear that? Was that something someone told you that they were going to do that or you just observed that as ...**

A: I just observed it. I could see that. How could they win each year, each Olympic year, or even Worlds year, how could they win all the time when we had good pair skaters, we had good dancers? Well most of them were good anyway. Most of them were skating on flats, but we did have some good ones. (*Laughter*) But they never would get that far to compete against them. Even if they did compete against them they weren't going to win it anyway. Pairs or nothing was going to win it against them.

**Q: So then what did you decide then? We should focus on the single skaters?**

A: Well we did focus on the singles but we also said that we're going to still work the pairs and 19 years passed before Tai and Randy were able to win the pairs. Nineteen whole years. That's right. Wouldn't let them through. I think they had to tear that wall down before they let them through. The lost a lot of power there.

**Q: So you think world politics also play into the Olympics as well?**

A: Of course, absolutely. That's right.

**Q: And now of course we're in Salt Lake, we're seeing where all the money is playing into decision making.**

A: Absolutely. It's usually when we have competitions. It's whatever club can afford it. Can you afford everything which needs to be had for a competition? And different clubs always put in their bid and say we can afford it, we'll have the competition here and they go through it and find out which one they want to take. And that's it. Because it's expensive having a competition. Very expensive.

**Q: For the club it's expensive as well as the individuals that are competing?**

A: Very, especially for the club. And the USFSA, the whole mechanism. USFSA is bringing it here and they've got to know that that wealth is there from the club.

**Q: So the club then has to pay the judges?**

A: The judges are not supposed to be paid. The only thing they get are expenses. Everything is amateurs. Amateurs were not paid at that time; now they are of course. But Russia has always paid. The Russian kids, if they did well and got that medal, they got their car and a home. So that's why the Russian kids worked their buns off.

And then too, Russia had a way of training the kids from the ground up. They seemed to put them in a school and say, "OK that one will do and this one will do for this, this one will do for that, this will make a good dancer, this will make a good pair, and this will make a good single and whatnot."

So they were trained. Their government paid for everything there. The poor kids here they had to pay for everything. If their parents could not afford, it they would not make it. In fact, I remember one boy who was so good here, and the judges didn't bring him in. Someone questioned them why. They said even if he had won the medal here, he could not afford it. The first place he can't even afford the training so we'll be wasting our time trying to send him to the Worlds or the Olympics. So there it was. But now the clubs they help the kids out an awful lot. In fact, like I give so much each year to help the kids. It's not much but whatever I can. I used to give \$100 and then when I couldn't afford the \$100 I would give them \$50. But with my little money and others giving, and as I told them, I said, "You should have all the pros give something towards the kids because that goes into the club funds and they will disburse it among the kids who they felt need it." So this is what they do now, but they still do not get enough from the instructors. I don't know why, and the instructors are making money off the kids, but do not seem to want to put anything back into the kids. And this is bad. Maybe one year they will. I keep praying that they will.

**Q: The consciousness will grow.**

A: Right. Absolutely. And then we have kids coming up who are teaching now who knows that the club has helped them. So now they will say that the club helped me so much so I should be able to give to the club to help others. I think that's good.

**Q: Oh yeah. And what about your own experience with taking Atoy or Lesley or Tai and Randy through the competition? Did you encounter any kind of these, with the judges, difficulties or ...**

A: Sure.

**Q: Can you tell us about some of that?**

A: In the first place those boys could not afford to enter competition. They couldn't even afford to skate, other than Atoy, he could afford it. But I said, "Well, these boys are so talented. I will put my own money into it." I would pay for their entrance into the rink. I was giving them the lessons so I didn't charge them. But for their skates and costumes and everything, I paid for and this way they could skate, not taking anything out of the family because the family couldn't afford to put that money out. And whenever I got them ready for a test or anything like that, they would rarely fail one of them on a test because they knew the kids were good in their figures. Very, very rarely. But when it came down to competitions they brought one boy in, I remember he was in intermediate, I think, and he was the only one who had a triple out there, a triple Salchow. There were six in there. They brought him in sixth. So the boy was so upset he didn't know what to do. He knew he had skated first place. He was just so upset. I said, "Look, it's so much better to come in last than for them to even put you in third because you won the championship. And then everybody will know that it's bias. By them putting you in there somewhere, people will not know that it's bias. But now they'll wonder how could he come in last when he really won it." I said, "So let them chew on that." It was very hard for him to understand that but I finally got him to understand it. His mother was crying, he was crying, they were just going on. "I came in last." I said that was the best place for you to come in. I said now we have something ...

**Q: Now it's obvious.**

A: Right. And I said to one judge, in fact she would never bring one of my kids in anyway, but I said to her, "Where did we miss?" She said, "Oh, they didn't have enough spins." I said, "What do

you mean, he had six spins in his program? Where were you, didn't you see them?" (*Laughter*) She said, "Well I say he didn't have enough and that's it."

Another time I remember I had a girl skating. This was a few years later. I had a little black girl skate, and she really won the competition. And I said to one of the judges, I said, "How could she come in so low when she was the best one out there, she really did all the requirements of that division and more? He said, "I don't know, I didn't see her. In fact, I didn't even judge her." I said, "Where were you?" I said, "Look on the board, your name is on there." (*Laughter*) He didn't even see the girl skate, so which meant when the girl came on she just dropped her head and read or did whatever she wanted to do, but she was not going to judge that girl. (*Laughter*) So it's pretty sad. But they have learned. Now they know that they can't be that biased anymore because everyone sees it. They hide. See that's why I was so happy when we took figures out. See they can say that the kids didn't do the figures. I mean any kid, because whomever they wanted to bring in and we did figures. They just put that kid down as didn't do good figures. Flats and changes and hooks and this and that. And the kid would come in so low, so when they did the freestyle you can forget it. And kids didn't pay too much attention to figures as helping them, or freestyle as helping them because wherever they wanted to bring them in that's how they were going to bring them in. They say, "It's combined," but they never judged it that way. They just brought in whomever they wish. And that's why the kids would say, "I'll excel in figures." And another one will say, "I will excel in freestyle." And it got so that the kids who were good in figures did not do good freestyles. Kids who did very good freestyles didn't do very good figures. So when they dropped those figures I was so happy. I kept saying, "Drop the figures. If the kids are going to do figures, let them do it separately. Let the kid say, 'I'm entering into competition in figures.' The other one, 'I'm just entering the competition in freestyle.'" I said, "And that's the way it should be."

**Q: And that's how it is now?**

A: That's how it is now.

**Q: So you can compete in one area or the other area or both if you choose.**

A: That's right. And that's up to Nationals.

**Q: OK. But the Olympics you have to do both don't you?**

A: No.

**Q: No?**

A: What we did when we took the figures out we put in a short program – two-and-a-half-minute freestyle, but they had requirements, so many jumps and so many spins.

**Q: And no figures?**

A: And no figures. And then you did your long program afterwards.

**Q: So no figures at all anymore?**

A: No. We don't need them ...

**Q: Does anybody teach them?**

A: Sure, the kids must still take figures.

**Q: To pass the test to ...**

A: If they want to be a gold medalist in figures, because they have to teach figures to their students when they become instructors. So they must take testing in them. So, that's good.

And then it was so funny that, about three years ago, this was while I was still up north, maybe four years ago. They brought out foot work. Required foot work in testing. So when you did your program, because you had to test your figures and your freestyle, if you failed the freestyle, although you passed the figures, you had to take the figures all over again in order to take the freestyle again, which was bad. They give you so much of time, say maybe 28 days or whatnot and you should be able to pass your freestyle, but the figures also. But the kids who now will fail the figures because they're so disgusted so they don't get a chance to freestyle anyway. It's a big mess really. That was the worst thing that ever happened to ...

**Q: Separating them.**

A: To separate them. Right.

**Q: One thing I've been wanting to talk to you about is what was your feeling about Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan and that whole mess?**

A: Well, I don't think it should have happened, but that's the best thing that ever happened to figure skating. *(Laughter)*

**Q: Why do you say that?**

A: Because it puts skating on the map. You know, they never knew what to do with skating. They didn't know whether it was a sport or entertainment. Now it really is entertainment. *(Laughter)* But Tonya, poor thing, I don't know if she knew anything about it or not. Maybe she did, but that crooked husband of hers, I guess being the first marriage and this and that, and being young, the kids are in love you know. After all, they worked so hard trying to get where they are going on skates. They do not get a chance to date or go out and have fun like the other kids so she would let him lead her into these things. And whether she knew about it or not, she denied [it and said that] she didn't know anything about it. Then when it came to shoves, just admit that you knew something about it even though you weren't connected with it. She was a better skater than Nancy Kerrigan.

**Q: Really?**

A: Yeah. Much stronger. So this was one way of putting her out of the competitions. She was a poor kid on the other side of the track, which I felt so sorry for her. I said, "If I had a show, I would put her in it, you know. *(Laughter)* I would, because I didn't think it was fair." And Nancy was not hurt really. If she had hit Nancy on the knee and that knee was hurt, I know because I have knee problems, Nancy could not have gone out there and skated. So she wasn't really hurt, but that gave her a big lead and pushed her name up there and she became a big shot in skating. *(Laughter)*

**Q: Yeah, silver medalist.**

A: Yeah. Naturally Walt Disney had her on parade and Mickey and this and that. And she says, "This is so stupid," which was very bad. You don't say things like that.

**Q: She's got attitude problems?**

A: And she still has attitude problems. Please believe it. Whenever she would come to the rink where I would teach up north she had an attitude problem.

**Q: But I think she was definitely, and this is my humble opinion, I think she was definitely out skated by Oksana Baiul.**

A: Of course, she could never touch her. Absolutely not. And they would mark poor little Surya Bonaly, always marked her down. Well, she was black and this and that, and she did things which the others couldn't do and they would put it on the fact, at first they said well because she slows down when she gets ready to jump, she doesn't have that same speed going into her jumps. They had that excuse. Then later Bonaly says, "I'll show them. I'll do my back flip, which is not required." You don't do that in the competitions. *(Laughter)* For show stuff, yes, but Bonaly knew it. She said, "They're not going to bring me in anyway so I'll just [skate] for my own people in France. I will do this for them." So she always skated for her country. And I loved her for it anyway. Brave girl. And she had more jumps and that's what they were judging you on anyway. She had more jumps than any of the other kids.

**Q: Did Tonya Harding go pro then or has she just kind of disappeared?**

A: She tried. No show would seem to hire her. She tried to go back into competition and they wouldn't let her. I still don't think that they dealt with her fairly, not really. I feel for her and I still feel for her, but that's the way they do it. If they want you out, they're going to get you out somehow. But I'd rather she had been in there instead of Nancy Kerrigan, because she was a nicer person.

**Q: And Tara Lipinski you met when you were inducted. You said she was a ...**

A: Oh, yes, she was a lovely child. Beautiful child. I love her because she loves her mother. I just like the way she conducts herself, even off the ice. She was a perfect little angel. What she does in the home I don't know and it has nothing to do with her skating and her winning these championships.

After she won that championship, I told you how they set up a booth for her to sign autographs. And she sat there for hours in the hotel signing autographs. And I was sitting in one spot because I couldn't move too much because I was quite sick at that time, and I watched that child. Not one murmur that "I'm hungry" or "I have to go to the bathroom" or anything. She sat there and she did those autographs until everybody had all their autographs.

Very cool. And as you know her father stayed back in Texas on his job, although he's very, very supportive of her, but just that he has to work in order to support it. You know what I mean. *(Laughter)* And she missed him very much. I liked the idea of her turning pro when she did. She had already won everything she was going to win. She won Worlds, turned around and won the Olympics. And they said that she should have stayed in another four years. I said, "For what?"

They're not going to give it to her anymore. They'll find a way of taking it from her. Now before, skaters could stay in there and win maybe two or three Olympics, like Sonja Henie. What was Sonja? Ten times Worlds champion and three times Olympic champion. So you could stay in there and win it, but then they cut that out and let you win it once and that's it. So I said, "They're not going to give it to her anymore."

**Q: But she's so young. She was only 14 years old.**

A: Right. Well that's OK, they don't care how old you are. What the U.S. really wanted to have someone to be the youngest in a competition to beat Sonja Henie's record. And she did, she beat Sonja Henie's record.

**Q: How old was Sonja Henie when she won her first one?**

A: I think she was, when she won the Olympics, I don't really remember whether she was 15 or what. But I know Tara beat her about a year. (*Laughter*) Tara was 13, so Tara beat her about a year so that was good. And I love that. So the U.S. have done very well with our skaters and knowing where to push them and how to push them. It's just that it's very difficult for the kids to get up to that level.

**Q: Mabel, what do you think was the most difficult part of your life?**

A: Let's see, because I never thought of any of it as being difficult, I always thought of everything as being a challenge and something for me to reach for.

**Q: Well what was the biggest challenge then?**

A: Getting minorities into clubs. First getting them into the ice rink and after I got them there I said, "I've got to work to get them into clubs. And after that I have to work to get them into competition." And those three things were difficult, I'll tell you, but I just stood there and fought for it, and that was it. But once they let them in they had to let them forever. But I instilled in the kids that you got to be good honey. And one judge I remember told me when I started teaching, "Mabel, you think you're going to be a competitor instructor? No way, because your kids will have to be better than better." I said, "Henrietta, what is better than better?" She said, "Better than the champ himself." And that's when I told her thank you and don't tell anybody else because my kids will be better than the champion or how else can they win the championship if they're not better than the champ. I said, "So they will be the champ." So she said, "If you say so, I know you'll work for it." And she and I became very good friends because, see, everything they have put before me, like saying you know you can't teach, you know you can't do this – all the different judges – and you know your kids are not going to win anything even if they get into competitions. Every little thing they tried to put into my path, I used it as a stepping stone. I said, "OK that'll push me up on step higher until I was able to fight for it."

But nothing beats an education, I'm not kidding you. And that was something I didn't have when I was a kid.

**Q: But you certainly made up for that going to LACC and Police Science and Loyola Law School.**

A: Yeah, well I had to become an adult to do all of that. I had to first learn on my own that I needed

an education and only going to get it if I would go to school and deal with people who do have an education. So that's what I had to grow up to be an adult to know that. I didn't learn anything down there so how am I going to learn anything up here, unless I did go to school. So that was good. And going to all-black schools at that time you didn't learn too well, because some ...

**Q: The quality was really low.**

A: Yeah. They didn't care whether the instructor could teach it or not. You know what I mean? They don't want you to learn. (*Laughter*) Keep them stupid. (*Laughter*) So when you go to a mixed school and you had white instructors and the black instructors knew darn well they had to have an education in order to teach in mixed schools. So that made it good. So that's why I got the education I did get.

**Q: Who are some of your heroes? Who are some of the people that you think have made great contributions in the area that you're most concerned with? Who do you look up to? Who would you, not necessarily people that you knew but just anybody, world figure, historical figure?**

A: Well, I always looked to people who are not just thinking of themselves. People who say I'm a part of the human race and I think this will be good for the human race. We had Martin Luther King, he was fighting for the human race, not just for blacks, he was fighting for minorities.

**Q: He was fighting for justice, that's ...**

A: Right. And I appreciate things like that. And any of others who said I will go forth and forget myself and fight for the human race. And these people have made such a big difference in where we are today. Please believe it, and I love it.

**Q: And besides Martin Luther King, who else stands out for you?**

A: Oh, many of them stand out but just that he stands out mostly in mind because when the others before him, they did the best they could and didn't have all of the support of the minorities. They didn't have that support, like the Black Panthers and this and that. They didn't have support.

**Q: Enough popular support.**

A: Right. So there are so many of them before Martin Luther King, they just didn't have the support, they just did the best they could with what they had. But I still admire all of them. And they've formed organizations like CORE, NAACP, and so many different little organizations that try to push minorities. Justice for minorities. And some of them just didn't have the support. The NAACP is the only one who is still standing today, who is fighting for justice. And when you think of the NAACP, you think it's just for blacks. It is not. It's for the minorities.

**Q: They have a wonderful conflict resolution center, the NAACP. During the Rebuild L.A. years I was working on the racial harmony committee and the NAACP was represented there. And that was a program I was very interested in getting involved with, and that goes citywide for this chapter here.**

What would your advice be to young skaters of color starting out now?

A: Black skaters, first place you've got to want it, unless you're there for recreation. If you want to be a competitive skater, that's a different story. So if you want to be a competitive skater, want it so badly that you'll have to give up certain things like with your friends who are not in skating. You have to put them aside and deal with them otherwise, because these are the people who will hamper your skating and say to you, "Why are you going to that cold ice rink, look we could be in the movies or we could go this place ... ? And they don't realize, they still can do some of those things if they want to skate badly enough.

I know that when we had the skating school in Santa Monica, we had kids from all over the world and we just said to them ... John Nicks he was the coach there. So we just put the law down to them. We said, "OK, you skate six days a week and you have one day off. You can take Saturday off or you can take Sunday off, whichever day, it doesn't matter. And if you don't want to take the same Saturday or Sunday off each week, it's still OK. It's whatever you want to do on that particular day." And we put them up in an apartment in Malibu. It was a house we rented in Malibu. They all had their rooms and sometimes three or four had to stay in one room because there were a lot of kids from Europe, all over Europe, Asia and whatever. Everywhere there were kids. So whatever day they had off a pro had to supervise them.

So I supervised them when we had a big van that we would drive them, pick them up at the rink and from the rink we'll go to Malibu. It's right on the ocean of course. You walk out of a big door and step into the water. So one Saturday or Sunday, I can't remember which one it was, I had to supervise them, so we had a blast. *(Laughter)* I brought down ribs and yams and everything that we could cook outside under the building. *(Laughter)* We made our fire and I brought an electric barbecue. We put those ribs on that barbecue pit and seasoned them up and I'm telling you we had a blast. We ate and ate until we were silly. Then after we ate we went to, I said, "You can't get into the water now because you've eaten so let's do something else." They said, "OK let's go to Magic Mountain." I said, "Great." So we went to Magic Mountain and we had a blast there.

So the next morning when I got up I just took them to the ice rink and actually that was the end of my supervising them, which meant now someone else had to supervise them the next time. They said, "We don't want anybody but Mabel. *(Laughter)* She's fun. We have so much fun with her, we do things we don't just sit at the apartment or just sit on the beach, we go places, we do things." So I was designated to do it for them. And then sometimes I would take them to my home because I had a big swimming pool and big house, so I would take them there and we would still have a blast. We would eat outside on the patio, around the pool and things like that. And then I would have them help me cook the food, and they loved that because you know they did things like that at home. And we would still have a blast. I said, "Anything you want to do?" "Is it possible to take in a movie?" I said, "Of course, let's go to a movie." *(Laughter)* So we'll go to a movie and we'd really have a wonderful time. So I enjoyed that.

I only wish we had another nice one like that. They have lots of skating schools in other states, but we don't seem to have one here, not like that anyway. I think out in Lake Arrowhead, Frank Carroll, he has a skating school and the kids come from all over. And that's nice. But locally we don't seem to have one. But I loved the one in Santa Monica, it was really wonderful.

**Q: And of course that rink is gone now?**

A: Oh, yes.

**Q: It has been for a long time?**

A: Oh, yes. They have a mall in there now.

**Q: I think it's Fred Segal's now, isn't it?**

A: Yes. So that's nice.

**Q: What did you look for specifically in a student? I know that you told me that you always knew somebody who was going to excel if they were hungry enough, and you could see that, you could tell if they had it.**

A: Funny thing, I always went by their heads. What their head looked like. (*Laughter*)

**Q: What their head looked like? The shape of their head or where it was?**

A: If it was right, you know. Like their eyes and just the head. And I can tell that they had brains up there and that they really wanted it. I said, "Well if they want it badly enough, let's put them through the test to see." And those are kids who would even try to sneak into the rink because they wanted it badly enough. I said, "We don't have to sneak, I just have to know that you want to work for it.

Then they put their little skates on and push off and then I said three strokes is enough. I know you can do it.

**Q: Really. Just the strength of their ankles or if they took and edge or ...**

A: Um-huh, the way they stroke. They didn't go out klutzy. They pushed from one edge to the other. I said, "That's good enough, I know you want it and I know you'll excel." Because as I said before, you can have the least amount of talent and excel because you're hungry enough for it. If you're hungry enough, you're going to sleep it, you're going to eat it, you're going to drink it, you're going to do everything in your power to get to that ice rink. I said, "One thing about it, the ice rink is not going to come to you. If you want it badly enough you have to go to the ice rink." And they say, "Well that's true." I said, "Roller skating comes to you. You can put a pair of roller skates and skate in the house, go down on the street and skate. Roller skating comes to you, but ice skating will not come to you. You go to that ice rink." So they soon got that in their heads that they had to work for it because they're not on there 24 hours a day like you're on what you're going to skate on when you roller skate. Twenty-four hours a day you have the platform you're going to skate on within the house, on the street or wherever. It's there for you. I said, "But you're at the ice rink maybe from three to five hours a day and that's very little, really, compared to roller skating. So you're going to have to work your buns off and really get in there and say, 'I want it and I'm going to do it, nothing is going to keep me from doing.' And this way you will excel."

**Q: If you could do something differently, is there anything you would, in looking back, you would do another way, another approach?**

A: There was no other approaches than the ones I took. I took sensible approaches. I took educated approaches. No, I didn't do anything for spite or I'm going to get even. No. I did it because this was the right path to take. So I wouldn't change any of that, I would still fight the way I fought and it would still be much better of course, because now that I'm way up in age I can see so much more. I can't get around as well but I still can see so much more. Like when I go to the ice rink to work with some of the pros to help them with their students, I'm just sitting there. And the

things you see that need to be changed in a skater that their pro is so close on that skater they can't see it. Sometimes I ask a pro, I say, "Come over here and stand with me." I said, "Now have your student do something. It doesn't matter what, anything." They say, "I don't see anything wrong just that they can't do it." (*Laughter*) I say, "There's a reason they can't do it." They say, "What's the reason." I say, "They know. I say, "Ask them why they can't," and they would tell. And I say, "Now work on what that kid knows the error is." And by the kid telling the pro, the pro could see it, you know. I say now have her to go back out there and do what you ask her to do. He say, "Oh yes, I see. (*Laughter*) Right."

**Q: That sort of is an indication that, to me anyway, the way I would interpret that, is that you basically have a very bottomline respect for your students, because many teachers don't ask that question, not just coaches in skating, but as I've seen in the field that I'm in amateur education. Most teachers come in and almost disregard the student. It's as if they're just a vessel and you're pouring something into them and they should yes ma'am you and then you're the head honcho here. And when I think education really happens, when learning really happens is when a teacher has respect for their student. And what you've just said I think indicates that, that you ask a student, "Why can't you do it?" And that validates then their ability, their feeling, their everything, who they are.**

A: Right. Well when I take on a student, the first thing I say to them, I say, "Well I want respect from you as your pro and I will give you respect." I remember once I apologized to a kid for something. He said, "Why do you apologize to me? My parents, they would slap me silly." I said, "No, I was wrong and I don't want you to carry this through your life as this is what should have happened." I said, "No, I was wrong and I do apologize." So I always gave my kids respect and they respect me in return.

**Q: I know a lot of famous people have come through your life and you've had contact with a whole world in Hollywood and Los Angeles, and I think that's very definitely an interesting part of your life. Is there anybody in particular that comes to mind? I know you've taught so many people's children skating and ...**

A: There's just so many people that I've taught. Like Ricardo Montalban, Tony Franciosa and different movie stars like Hedy LaMarr's children, Betty Hutton and her daughter. I've taught so many of them. So very many. They're hard to remember. I have most of them down on paper.

**Q: Yeah. And it's also in the newspaper article which I have that as well. What about personal relationships with people like Eartha Kitt and ...**

A: Eartha Kitt and I, we were very close and we still are, it's just that now I guess she's on tour or something.

**Q: Yeah, she is, and doing very well.**

A: Exceptionally well. We've always been very good friends. When her daughter didn't want to go on tour with her I would stay over at her home or the kid would stay at my home so that she could skate. So that was nice. And Eartha was doing very well on skates. She said, "Look Mabel this skating is so expensive,. Why am I spending money learning to skate when I'm not going to use it? Teach Kitt how to do it." So Kitt came up real fast too. Within a year Kitt had passed her preliminary, her first test, her second test and her third test. Four tests. She was a very clever little girl. Very smart. She put her in the best schools, of course. I remember she wanted to send her to

New York to a French school or something and she was calling all over for the best schools to send her to. So, very well educated. But little Kitt was cute. She said to me one day, "Guess what, we went to Africa," South Africa or wherever, "And in this park black people are not allowed, but I could go because they couldn't tell what I was." (*Laughter*) You know with her light hair and, well anyway, her father was white and she took after him. Beautiful girl. She said, "Here I am having such a wonderful time in the park and my mother cannot come to the park." She said, "But I didn't think it was right so I gathered up some black kids and I took them to the park and when they said something to them I stood up for them and said they can come to this park as well as I can." She said, "You know, they let them in the park, wasn't any problem."

See, someone has to stand up for you. If you can't stand up for yourself, get someone to stand up for you. You know that bothered me when Martin Luther King passed away, and he was assassinated. People were saying, "What am I going to do? Don't have anyone to lead me." I said, "Why don't you try leading yourself, speak up for yourself?" Always expecting someone else to do it, that's what's wrong with our government. The President must speak for us. I say, "That man is supposed to run the country. How can he speak for everybody? I say, "He isn't God you know."

So if you learn to speak up for yourself things will happen, but they're not going to happen unless ... All of my friends really have been white when I was coming up in skating because black people didn't want to skate or couldn't afford it. One day [I asked] one [white] girl, "Why do you hate black people so?" She said, "My mother said that we have to hate them and try to hold them back because if they ever got up on top they would kill all of us for we have done to them." (*Laughter*) I said, "That's what your parent said?" "Yes." See, that will go along with her all her life and with her children. It's what these parents teach these children. That goes on and on. They have taught that to the kids from the cradle. Whatever you teach that kid by the time it's 7 years old it's up there in that brain, written on the brain. So you just can't say that it's not going to happen or it is going to happen, unless you learn to speak up for yourself. Be your number one man.

You know another time over at Polar Palace there was a young girl. She lost her money, she didn't have 50 cents to go home. So she asked everybody around there if they would give her bus fare to go home. So she asked me, we were in the dressing room. She said, "Gee, I need 50 cents to go home and nobody would give me 50 cents to go home." So I said, "Here." So I gave her the 50 cents. You know that girl said, "How dare you have to give me 50 cents when my own people won't give me 50 cents and you're a nigger. And you giving me 50 cents." I said, "You can give it back to me." "But I need to go home, but to think that my own people will not help me. And you, whom we're always kicking in the butt, you help me." I said, "Maybe you'll learn something from it." I said, "You don't go around kicking people in the butt, you don't know whom you're going to meet coming down."

**Q: Isn't that the truth?**

A: So be kind to people. Let them know that they are people too. That's all you have to do. Just forget race and just say this is the human race here. Forget about whether they're black, yellow, green, purple or whatever. They are human beings and if you can remember that they are just as good as you are or as bad as you are, and this is it. So I hope she got something from that. (*Laughter*)

**Q: Oh, I'm sure she did, as she was riding home on the bus. (*Laughter*)**

But you know Mabel, with all that you've encountered, in terms of the discrimination and being

barred from competition, it's amazing to me that you avoided having a chip on your shoulder or tremendous bitterness or anger throughout your life. Because as I see you now and as I saw you when I was 11 years old, I never detected any anger or bitterness or a chip on your shoulder, and it just seems as though, I don't know how you would have avoided it given all that you've had to overcome and all the stories like you've just told that came from everybody. They came from higher ups, they came from kids at the rink, they came from the managers. I think that having the chip on the shoulder and the bitterness and the anger all serve as impediments but it just seems like it would be just a natural reaction, it would just be almost unavoidable.

A: Uh-uh. I just said life is too short to be angry with anyone. I say we're on the earth such a short length of time. We don't live like they did in the biblical days, 900 years old and this and that. I say, "I would like to. I would like to live to the end of the earth to see the different changes. Since we don't live that long, I don't have time to be angry with anyone." I can't carry a chip on my shoulder, that's another burden. I don't need any of that. So I just say, "Be happy and help other people to overcome the burden they have and this way maybe they won't think the way they are thinking, that because this person isn't white I don't want to have to do anything with [him] or that Japanese or that Korean or this and that." Be yourself and just think of them as the human race and we the people. That's all we have to do. Don't carry chips. I just can't. I won't be bothered.

**Q: Do you think part of that came from your early Christian upbringing?**

A: Yes. And it's little songs that they used to teach us in church school because I went to church school. Then I would say, like, the little birds fly you know up in the sky and God takes care of them, you know. And all these different little things.

**Q: Little songs that they would teach you and things you remember that carried that message?**

A: Right. All the different little things. That's why every kid should go to Sunday school. They learn so much in Sunday school or Sabbath school, whichever one they go to, because to me I learned that church is not in the building, it is in your heart. So you carry the church around with you forever as long as you're breathing, as long as that heart is pumping, you're in church. So don't worry about the fact that where is God? Why isn't he doing this for me? Why isn't he doing that for me? I say, "But you know what the Good Book said, help yourself first and then I will help you." You have a talent and what did the Good Book say? That person who hid that talent, they don't want people to see it. He couldn't help them. It was a person who said, "I don't have too much but I will spread it out and I will lift myself up from where I am." That's the one God helps. So you have to look at it that way.

I don't know, sometimes they just can't, they're so clouded. They can't see through the cloud. Like sometimes I even wonder. I see the cloud over there and I don't see the mountain, I say, "You know I can't see through that cloud and see those mountains out of my window." And I look and I look. Sometimes I even get my spy glasses to see if I can see the little mountain. Well, people's minds are the same way, so clouded, they cannot see. And this is it. They can't think, they can't use their brains. I say that the brain is a wonderful thing. Use it.

**Q: What are your goals now Mabel. What are you planning for the next part of your life?**

A: What I would like to have is a skating studio, maybe 75-by-50, and I would like to take minorities of all races and train them and have some of the instructors whom I know are working for the

minority and not just for themselves come in because I have lots of students who would come in and train. I would train these kids from the ground up, from stroking, that's the first thing they must learn is good stroking, from stroking all the way up. And then show their parents that these kids can do it and the only reason they couldn't do it is because you couldn't afford it. Now that we have all these facilities for them, all they have to do is to bring themselves. We give them skates. We give them anything they need to skate in and they don't have to pay for anything. So I would like to train these kids and then show the parents maybe every six months we'll have a show to show the parents what these kids have learned and keep moving them up from there. And we'll have little competitions amongst ourselves as to how much you have improved. And after they see that, then if they want to enter big competitions, why not, because they have the best training in the world. They will have. Not mediocre training, the best training in the world they will have. And if they want to enter these big competitions, they'll be well prepared to enter them.

And I would like also to teach blind kids, the deaf kids. And you can do it because I had a class when I was teaching for "Ice Capades," I had a class in Pasadena of blind kids. Taught those kids to skate.

**Q: What a fabulous experience. What a tremendous sensation.**

A: And you can do that. That kid became somebody, you know. Not that I'm just groping through the dark. So they had someone to lead them because I was led by God and I would lead them and then they could see. As I told them, "I'm not just doing this on my own. I'm doing it through God. He is leading me. So they said, "That's good. Then I know I can do it." Then they had faith in themselves. They became somebody. And I love that. I love teaching the minorities. Yeah. Don't put them down and after you get them down put your foot on them and say, "You dare not get up." No, pick them up and say let's see how high you can go. As high as the sky just go, just keep your thoughts there and you'll go.

So that's what I would like is a skating studio that I can train these kids and get them to become self-worthy. Not on the streets, not in gangs, but in that studio. They can stay in there as long as they want to as long as they are working at their skating. Right. So those are my dreams.

**Q: Wonderful dreams.**

A: That's what I would like. And I feel that it is going to happen for some reason.

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