

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**James Greenbaum**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**December 5, 2008**

Smith: First of all, what does it bring back to be in this room?

Greenbaum: A lot of wonderful memories. But interesting enough, most of the experiences that I had with President Ford were outside of the official surroundings, so to speak. We shared many dinners together.

You haven't asked me, but I'll volunteer it anyway, how we first happened to meet the Fords. My wife and I started going to Vail, Colorado many, many years ago. Specifically about 1968, and we stayed at a place called the Lodge at Vail. So after several years there we said, "Well, it would be a great place to buy a condo." So I bought the condo and as we were going up with the realtor, I said, "Who lives down the hall there?" And they said, well, so and so lives there and so and so lives there. I said, "Who lives at the end of the hall?" He said, "A congressman." I said, "What's his name?" They said, "Ford." I said, "Never heard of him. What state?" And they proceeded to tell me and so forth. Anyway, we never met him at that point.

It was a couple of years later when he became vice president, that we did meet him. We had a cocktail party for him and had a wonderful evening. One thing led to another and our relationship blossomed because they followed us wherever we went. I'm just being facetious, obviously. First we were in Colorado, then we moved from Vail over to Beaver Creek, where we bought a place and the Fords bought a place over in Beaver Creek. We moved here from Louisiana, here being Rancho Mirage, in 1976. Well, that was the same year that the Fords moved here. One thing led to another and our constant contact with one another kind of evolved into a real friendship. So much so that initially, when I met Betty, I was serving on the board of the Eisenhower Medical Center here in Rancho Mirage.

I finally left the Eisenhower Medical Center where I had chaired several events for the Betty Ford Center, and Betty asked me to go on her board,

where I still serve today, very proudly, and very proud of the work we do. But, going back in time, that was the beginning of the relationship.

Smith: In those early days, when you were just sort of getting to know them, did anything about them surprise you?

Greenbaum: Yes. The fact that, here I was, talking to the former president of the United States, and former first lady, and I didn't realize it. So much so, I'll give you one good for instance. One of the discussions we had - oh we'd already known them several years, and had broken bread with them several times, and my wife, who just tells it like it is (she is very special to me, and she's very special anyway) - but the four of us were having dinner one night and something came up about the Warren Commission. Well, my wife is from Louisiana, so she had very, very strong feelings about what took place and so forth, and she did not hold back at all with President Ford. And I'm kicking her under the table, and she's looking at me and I says, "Honey, he was head of the Warren Commission." And she keeps at it. Well, anyway, I ended up getting a letter and book from President Ford about the Warren Commission, where he stood by his findings of what the Commission finally resolved. But that was, I think, the most telling thing about him, and both of them.

You never realized you were in the presence of greatness because they were the personification, and Betty still is, of just being regular folks. We used to go out for dinner, the four of us and just have a casual dinner, and again, it was the same feeling. One of the nicest things about all the years that we shared experiences was, about once every couple of weeks or so, I would invite President Ford over to our country club here in Rancho Mirage for lunch with the guys. And he was one of the guys. Without exception, everybody who joined us during those lunches would come over to me later and say, "You know, I can't believe he's such a nice person. Not just a nice person, but a normal person." And, unfortunately, that position is not shared by some of our other previous presidents, but we won't go there.

Smith: Did he talk about his days in the White House?

Greenbaum: Yes. And I'm sure you have all the nitty-gritty – well, let me mention this. We discussed his coming into office as far as the pardon of Nixon and so forth. And he stood by it for many, many years, as he did until his death, that he did the right thing. But it really came home when President Clinton was going through all of his trials and tribulations those last couple of years when they tried to impeach him, etc., and he told us, he says, "You know, I'm going to say the same thing I said when I forgave Nixon. We need to forgive Clinton. Sure he was wrong in what he did, but we need to get on and remember what's good for the country." And to me that was very, very telling. It really was.

Smith: He took some heat for that.

Greenbaum: Oh, absolutely. I think it probably cost him the election. He said that he felt that it did cost him the election, and he said when it happened, he said, "This will probably cost me the election, if I do this. But I've got to do what's right for the country." And he lived his whole life like that. Just a very stand up type guy.

Smith: Tell me about when you first met Mrs. Ford. Now was this before the Betty Ford Center had opened?

Greenbaum: Well, yes, actually it was.

Smith: Let me ask, it may be a delicate question but she's written about it. Were you aware of her problem at that point?

Greenbaum: Yes. I'm going to tread lightly on those – yes, I was. I knew Betty had a problem because I had been with her, and I realized that something was wrong, I wasn't quite sure what, and then I found out later exactly what the situation was.

Smith: Tell me about the genesis of the Betty Ford Center, because, clearly it was much more than her just putting her name on this place. I mean – let me back up because I've been told that she saved Leonard Firestone's life.

Greenbaum: Exactly. Well, I know you talked to some of my friends that are very involved with the Center, and also familiar with her past, and I'm sure they filled you

in on all the blanks on that. Yes, she felt the need, as she said, between Leonard and Betty, they realized there was a need to help other people. By taking their feelings and going the next step, they hired John Schwarzlose, who has been with the Center since its inception. He's still president and CEO of the Center, and between the two of them, they built it into what it is today. I would give equal credit to both of them, or I'd say, all three of them. Leonard, Betty and John Schwarzlose.

Smith: Tell me about Leonard Firestone, because in some ways he's maybe the unsung hero in this story. Most people don't know the name or certainly wouldn't necessarily associate him with...

Greenbaum: Well, in the early years, I really was never that close to Leonard. I was with him on social occasions, but I never had occasion to really go one on one with him too often. I just heard a lot of wonderful things about him. He was a very caring individual.

Smith: For her, this was like – I use the analogy of Kathryn Graham, almost – in middle life suddenly being thrust into a situation where you're responsible for a very large operation.

Greenbaum: She was and is a gutsy person, okay? I've watched her. She has all the humility that anybody could possibly have. She's very modest in her own way. At times I think she really forgets the power that she really has. And I say power, the power of her presence. I've been around her and I watch her with our patients at the Center, and these people hold her in awe. Last year we had our twenty-fifth anniversary here for the Betty Ford Center, and Robin Williams came and entertained, and I must tell you, Robin Williams referred to Betty as Teresa.

Smith: Mother Teresa?

Greenbaum: Mother Teresa – thank you. I knew something was wrong there. And she got a big kick out of it. But it was true. We had, I think, 1,700 people there that night. And everybody, without exception, just being in the presence of Betty Ford was being in the presence of greatness. It was electrifying.

- Smith: Had Robin Williams been a patient?
- Greenbaum: No, not at the Center, but if he were I couldn't tell you. But he is in recovery, and he was remarkable because he did something that I don't think he's ever done before. He had relapsed and he was in the second round of recovery, and he exposed himself. And that's tough to do. By exposing himself, I mean, he let it all hang out, as only he can do, and it was just a fascinating, wonderful, special evening. It really was.
- Smith: What is it – do you have theory, or does she have a theory – putting aside the emphasis on celebrity, what it is about creative, driven, sort of type A, whatever cliché you want to use - or is it something about them that seems to make them particularly vulnerable?
- Greenbaum: You probably would be a better judge of that than I would. I really can't put my finger on any one thing in particular. And I've been around other people of great reputation and what have you, and what makes them different from other people – I wish there was one common thing, but there isn't. Everybody has their own little thing.
- Smith: I mean, presumably there are physical components involved, and there are psychological components involved. That's grossly oversimplified. Maybe there is obviously no one element that explains addiction.
- Greenbaum: I can't really tell you what sets one person apart from another, other than the fact that something shines, something radiates, and both Betty and President Ford have this, or had it.
- Smith: Do you think for a while the public thought that most of the patients at Betty Ford's were celebrities?
- Greenbaum: Oh, very definitely. We still have that problem. That's the good news and the bad news. The bad news is a lot of people think, well, I can't afford to go there because it's strictly for celebrities. And it's really not. Less than one percent of our patients represent that particular type clientele. The vast majority of them are just from everyday walks of life. The good news is, because of that exclusivity, it gives us a little shine that other institutions

would like to have. They say, well, gee, I'd like to be a place where they have all these famous people.

Smith: It's interesting, I assume you were part of the discussion, when folks in other cities have approached Mrs. Ford about, in effect, franchising.

Greenbaum: Oh, yeah. Actually, I can go a step further. There are bars all over the world that are the Betty Ford bar, or what have you, and we have to spend a lot of money protecting our name. But Betty, and rightfully so, is very protective of what we do. And bigger isn't necessarily better. We know that. As a result of this feeling, we've maintained a relatively small number of beds on campus. We have a hundred beds on campus, and we have around fifty-eight off-campus, here in this community, though. We've been very, very protective of the name, but what we're trying to do now, we've started something called the Betty Ford Institute, and what we're doing there is trying to take the things that we know and teach these things to other people.

We have a children's program that is second to none, and by children's program – these are children of parents who are going through or have gone through treatment, and we want to make sure those children don't feel responsible for what their parents have done. We'll hopefully be able to teach other people. We have a program called SIMS, Summer Institute for Medical Students, whereby we take X number of medical students and teach them about alcoholism. Because, unfortunately, and I don't want to digress, but basically, too large a percentage of the population don't recognize the fact that being addicted is a disease.

Smith: She probably, as much if not more than anyone, has managed to remove much of the stigma.

Greenbaum: Oh, absolutely. I have a number of personal friends of mine that are almost, I won't say that they are proud to admit they are alcoholics, but they've come out of the closet now. Much to the benefit of everybody else, because, as a result they've encouraged other people to participate in recovery.

Smith: Do you think she fully realizes what her impact has been?

- Greenbaum: Yes and no. Sometimes I know she does, and other times I don't think she realizes the magnitude of it. We are second to none – I say 'we' – the Betty Ford Center is second to none anywhere in the world. It's just an awesome thing. It really is. I don't know if you've been – have you been on the campus?
- Smith: I have been there in the past.
- Greenbaum: And so I think you realize what I'm talking about. It's like being on a college campus. But the education is a hell of a lot more important than anything you get out of college.
- Smith: I remember being told stories when I visited that it was not unusual - whatever time of day or sometimes night - there might be a patient coming in, a woman of a certain age, didn't want to be there, very resistant, who had parallels with what Mrs. Ford's story had been. And they'd call her at home and she'd go down there and sit on a bed and hold the woman's hand and walk her through her own story.
- Greenbaum: That's right. And I've got to digress just briefly because, to me, one of the most telling things that I remember about the Fords and their humility and how wonderful they really are, was a number of years ago an individual showed up at their home about six o'clock in the evening, rang the bell, or went through Secret Service, and they said, so and so was out here, and you'd probably know the name if I'd mention it, but I'd rather not. And he said, "I'm here for dinner." It was the wrong night, even the wrong week. Well, Betty and President Ford, to their credit said, "Come on in, have a drink," and this individual had no idea that he'd shown up on the wrong night. Now, I don't think my wife, as wonderful as she is, I don't think she could carry it off like that. But it gives you a pretty good indicator of the kind of people they are.
- Smith: As a businesswoman, she had to be – I'm told she was pretty hands-on.
- Greenbaum: Absolutely. To her credit. And what was good about it, or is good about it, is the fact that Betty has always had the capacity to get involved and to express herself, but she had the wherewithal to know when to back off, and to listen to

other people around her. That's a real art, because too many of us, and I know I'm guilty at times, I'm very big on my ideas, and I'm a little slow sometimes, to listen to other people's ideas.

Smith: Did you sense, over the years, a growing confidence on her part? She was doing a lot of things that she had never done before.

Greenbaum: Yes. It was almost trial and error at times. But she didn't make many errors, to her credit. She really didn't.

Smith: And she obviously was a significant fundraiser.

Greenbaum: Absolutely. Listen, we miss her right now. She's still around, thank God, and I hope she'll be around for a long time, but she's not as active as she used to be. And as a result, we've had to go out and do it on our own. We still have the benefit of having her name, which is a very big asset for us.

Smith: Did you raise an endowment, or are you working on an endowment?

Greenbaum: No, we have an endowment, like every other institution. It's not as big as it was, thanks to our economy right now, but we're going to get it back.

Smith: The joke used to be, between the Fords, that the President had, for fundraising, east of the Mississippi, and Mrs. Ford had west of the Mississippi.

Greenbaum: I remember that.

Smith: I think they occasionally poached.

Greenbaum: Every now and then.

Smith: Tell me about your friendship with the president.

Greenbaum: I've been blessed knowing a lot of people throughout my life who made a difference to me. And I would have to put President Ford at the top of the list, and not because he was a former president of the United States, but because of his human qualities. We would go out and play golf, and I remember one time we had a caddy, a nice young man, and we got through and I said, "Let me take care of the tip." I pulled out, I forget what, maybe forty or fifty dollars,

and he said, “No, you’ve got to give him more than that.” I said, “President Ford, this is very appropriate.” He says, “No, these young men, they work hard...and if we’re in a position to help them, we need to do it.” And so I ended up giving him a hundred dollars. But, really, that was the type of thing that he would do and he taught me things like that. I figure if he can be humble given his background and history, I sure as heck can practice a little of that myself.

Smith: Now the other side, he was very accessible to people.

Greenbaum: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: But I know one of the two things that annoyed him, sometimes, were autograph seekers.

Greenbaum: Yeah, but he was good. He handled it well. Because these people would come up in the middle of dinner, unfortunately too often, and ask for his signature, or wanted to say hello. Or they would come over to Betty, and say, “I’ve been through the Center,” and this that and the other. And they were very gracious about it. I never heard them make any derogatory comment about that at all. I knew it would drive me crazy. It really would. Although I would say the vast majority of times, people were very respectful of him – at least here in the desert.

Smith: They were very visible around here, weren’t they?

Greenbaum: Oh, extremely.

Smith: Very involved with a number of causes and activities.

Greenbaum: Oh, yeah. I’m smiling right now because I’m thinking of something. A number of years ago, President Ford was going through a lot of illness and so forth. He had just been released at one particular day from Eisenhower Medical Center, and he was picked up by the Secret Service, and they started bringing him home and he said, “No, we’re not going home right away.” They looked at him and said, “Why?” He said, because he loved hamburgers, and particularly from In and Out Burger. He says, “We’re going to go to In and Out Burger.” So, lo and behold, they drove him about five miles from here

and took him to In and Out Burger. He got out of the car, and he proceeded to stand in line at In and Out Burger. Now it was very crowded. Obviously, everybody let him through. But the idea that he wanted to go to In and Our Burger, and he was going to stand in line to get his hamburger, it was very telling.

Smith: Especially coming from the hospital.

Greenbaum: Oh, yeah. I mean, he had a little, a few eccentricities. One of them, he loved to buy lottery tickets. I think it was either once a week, or once every two weeks, he'd always go out and buy a couple of lottery tickets. As far as I know, he never hit it big, but he bought his tickets. He loved it.

Smith: That's wonderful.

Greenbaum: And he loved his golf. And he loved his football, he loved his University of Michigan.

Smith: And I'm told that to sit with him and watch a game was unlike most such exercises. I mean, he was very focused on the game.

Greenbaum: Absolutely.

Smith: He had a sense of humor.

Greenbaum: Yes. He had to. Anybody that didn't have a sense of humor in that position, they are in trouble. He loved a good joke, he loved to play golf, he loved to laugh about his golf game. And he was just a good sport.

Smith: As you know, from childhood on, and with considerable success, but he had a lifelong effort to control his temper.

Greenbaum: You see, I never saw – I did see his temper a couple of times. And I'm not going to go into that. But he's human.

Smith: Well, no, but that's exactly what I mean. I don't mean it critically, but, would you see it on the golf course?

Greenbaum: No, not too much on the golf course, no. He was smart enough to realize that you don't get mad on the golf course, it doesn't do any good.

- Smith: What were some of the things that they were involved in? Tell me about the season here...when a lot of charitable events are scheduled almost back to back. And they must have been visible.
- Greenbaum: They supported everything and anything that they were asked to do, just about. It was really wonderful. Bob Hope did the same thing. They were invited to all the events and wherever they could, they went. Not because they really wanted to go out and be part of the scene, per se, but they felt an obligation and they lived up to it. They were a vital, vital part of this community, as they were in Colorado where they lived. And to this day, people still talk about them. I have friends of mine that come up to me, oh, fairly regularly, or, I say friends, people that I know, but I don't know them intimately, and they come up and they say, "I remember when you brought President Ford and Mrs. Ford over here and how wonderful they were and how warm they were and how meaningful it was to us." I hear that all the time.
- Smith: Maybe that explains in part those 57,000 people who overnight went through St. Margaret's to pay their respects.
- Greenbaum: Absolutely.
- Smith: That's a lot of folks.
- Greenbaum: It sure is. And I was privileged to go to Washington, D.C. for the services there, and obviously, it was a different kind of service, but it was very meaningful.
- Smith: We've heard from a couple of folks, I think you were with him the day over at the country club, maybe it was his last golf game, I'm not sure. It was a hot day and he was having some problems.
- Greenbaum: Yeah, I don't think that was the last time he played golf. I played with him that last year when he was playing golf. And it was difficult for him. There was a time he would never let me do what I did. But this time he hit the ball in a trap a number of times – sand traps or bunkers – and I would take the ball out and gently put it over here. And he never said one thing or another, he just

went ahead and hit the ball. But prior to that he never would let me do something like that. He just had a good time. People had a good time being with him. He was a fun person.

Smith: What is it about golf – what is it about that game that is almost obsessive?

Greenbaum: You're not a golfer.

Smith: I'm not a golfer.

Greenbaum: To me it's not obsessive. To me – I have three very important criteria for golf and I think President Ford probably felt the same way. One, is to be out there with people you enjoy being with, and that's what it's all about to me.

Smith: It's social.

Greenbaum: Yeah. There are a handful of people in this world that make a living playing golf, I'm not one of them, and obviously President Ford was not. Number two is the fact of being out there in good weather, and number three is the golf. The golf being the most incidental of all of them.

Smith: One person suggested it's a game where basically – it sort of cleans out your head. You have to focus on the ball.

Greenbaum: I'm not that serious about the game. I haven't gotten to that point and my game reflects it.

Smith: Tell me about his relationship with Bob Hope.

Greenbaum: They had a great deal of love and respect for one another. They really did. Bob would come up to Vail, well, let me back up. President Ford started the Gerald R. Ford Invitational Golf Tournament in Vail many years ago. And because of his relationship with Bob, Bob Hope would come up and entertain, etc., and the relationship just kind of grew from there. It was something to behold. You could tell that they really loved each other, and enjoyed each other's company. I know you've had a couple of people here who were as very, very close to Bob Hope as they were to President Ford, so I'm sure they've probably given you a lot more detail than I ever could.

- Smith: If you were trying to explain him to people who never knew him, or back up – the public, stereotype, cliché, nice guy, but questions raised about his IQ and sophistication. I don't know how you'd want to describe that – there is a certain amount of snobbery involved. We were sitting here last night with Lorraine, the cook, who had an extraordinary story of her own to tell. I asked if she was surprised by the reaction to his death that was so overwhelming, and she said, "No, I just thought finally he got his due. And I thought, for years, I've known all of this about President Ford, particularly his character and his integrity, and better late than never."
- Greenbaum: Well, you know better than I how fickle the public is, okay? And I think this is probably the best example of it when you see the fact that after his passing, that people all of a sudden, it was like the windows had opened, or the sky started lighting up. "Oh, he was really a great person. He wasn't guilty of this, he didn't do that." And it's disappointing. I guess that's human nature, unfortunately. Because it really did – he got all the credit he deserved afterwards.
- Smith: Time was good to him, in that he lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking on the pardon, for example. The Profiles in Courage Award at the Kennedy Library was a real turning point. I happened to be with him that day and I think it was one of the great days of his life. But if someone who never knew him said, "Tell me about Gerald Ford," particularly something that might surprise people, how would you answer that? What's important for people, particularly younger people to know about him?
- Greenbaum: That's a great question, but it's a difficult one to sum up. That you don't have to be born from a wealthy family. You don't have to have a lot of things that people think you have to have to become great – whether you're president or head of a corporation, or what have you. We see it every day, and he was at the right place, at the right time, thank God, because what he did, I don't think anybody could have done a better job than what he did. As far as some people questioning his intelligence, he was bright, he was extremely bright. He was as bright as anybody I've ever met. He had a grace about him, a graciousness

that most people don't have. I would challenge the vast majority of people I've ever met in my life that they could have the success that he achieved and be as humble as he was. And that's what a lot of it's about. That's what makes him special. The greatness but the humility that went with it. I envy him for that, I really do.

Smith: Did he ever talk about the war?

Greenbaum: Oh, he talked about his experiences on the aircraft carrier, when it was going through a terrible storm and he nearly got washed overboard. He loved to tell that story. He took great, great pride and joy in telling about it. Other than that, he really didn't get into it too much. There are a couple of things, though, that he was just trying to reminisce that he shared with me. A couple of stories I prefer not to tell. I don't know, there was nothing in particular that I can think of at this point, as far as the war is concerned.

Smith: It is interesting, because when we were planning the funeral, with their input, there were two revealing things. The one thing that he was adamant about was, he didn't want a caisson through the streets of Washington. And I heard the story from a good source. Someone who obviously didn't know him at the military district in Washington tried to, for lack of a better word, shame the president into accepting this. And he used words to the effect of, "Well now, Mr. President, you wouldn't want people to think that you were a second rate president?" Well, needless to say, that argument didn't carry much water. He was lucky he got out of that room with his head.

Greenbaum: It was difficult to intimidate him. I saw several instances where people would try to put him in a corner and he wasn't about to go there. He had very strong feelings about where he had been, what he had done, and he wasn't about to change his mind on them. I said, the Warren Commission being one of them. To the day that he passed away he said, "I stand by what I indicated at the hearings."

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the public reaction at the time of his death?

Greenbaum: No, not really. I would have been surprised otherwise.

Smith: Because, I know from within the media bubble, I can tell you – there are a lot of folks in the media who were surprised.

Greenbaum: Well, they should have been because they were part of the guilty parties, which is not unusual in this day and age.

Smith: You miss him?

Greenbaum: Yes. Very much. I think of him very, very often, and I savor the times that I'm with Betty now, because we talk about him as though he is still here, and I feel that he is.

Smith: It's rough for her, isn't it?

Greenbaum: Yes. They really had a real, real love for one another – a real caring. I feel that way about my own wife, but I know most people don't have that deep feeling for one another. And Betty and President Ford respected one another and that goes a long way.

Smith: We've heard from a number of people who have said that as long as he could travel, he loved to travel. But the day didn't begin and it didn't end without a call from him to her.

Greenbaum: That's right. And of course, you know all about his love for swimming. He had a pool built at their home in Colorado and it would be snowing outside, but he'd get in that pool religiously. He did it here, and that's when I knew he was in trouble because the last – I forget how many months – he didn't go swimming – and that was important to him.

Smith: He was a very self-disciplined guy, wasn't he?

Greenbaum: Yeah, it was something we could all learn from.

Smith: Any other stories?

Greenbaum: No, not really.

Smith: Well, I can't thank you enough.

Greenbaum: I thank you for the opportunity.

Smith: This is great and the In and Out story is priceless.

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