

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Lilian Fisher
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith

Smith: Several people told me you're Mrs. Ford's closest and oldest friend.

Fisher: 82 years.

Smith: 82 years. I think that qualifies on both counts. Where did you first meet?

Fisher: We met in dancing school. I think I've told this story before, but we met in Calla Travis' School of Dance a Thursday afternoon and started dancing classes.

Smith: Was that in Grand Rapids?

Fisher: In Grand Rapids on Fulton Street. The building's still there.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: And my mother sent me because I was a tomboy with three brothers and she wanted me to be graceful and lower my voice. So, I was sent to aesthetic dancing class and there I met my friend. She was very, very graceful.

Smith: Was she?

Fisher: Yes. She could kick much higher and she was in the right place to carry on.

Smith: She was Betty Bloomer.

Fisher: She was Betty Bloomer, yes. And she lived in town. We lived out in the country, so we used to come in town to do all kinds of things. It was three miles one way.

Smith: What was Grand Rapids like then?

Fisher: Well, there were streetcars and there was the main street, Monroe Avenue. There were some nice stores and a big hotel.

Smith: The Pantlind?

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Fisher: The Pantlind. The Pantlind family were part of our group; some of their children were our contemporaries. And, what else? Well, my grandmother and grandfather lived on Fulton Street and this is near where some of my friends lived. Out in the country, I really felt very lonely. I didn't have any sidewalks to skate on. I had animals to play with and dolls and a brook and a lot of country things that my parents thought were great for a family of six children. And we had a wonderful life out there. But as soon as we were teenagers and all, we spent more time in town. Although, we started early, as I say, eight years old in the dancing class.

Smith: What was she like as a child?

Fisher: What was she like?

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: She was pretty. She had a Dutch cut. That's what we had with bangs. Pretty, just pretty. I always thought, "Oh my, she's pretty and she's not too tall and she can kick." She could pirouette and do all these crazy things.

Smith: Did she have personality?

Fisher: Yes, you just sort of knew she was there in a quiet way. You were always aware that she was part of the group. She was more mature, I think, than some of the rest of us.

Smith: What about her family?

Fisher: Well, she had two older brothers, Bill and Bob. And they were quite a lot older. They were even older than my older brothers, so I didn't really know them well at all. I met them over the years, but never really knew them. They weren't in Grand Rapids for lots of time as I recall, but her mother was a lovely lady and I had met her father a couple of times. He was always away during the week because he traveled.

Smith: What did he do? Was he a salesman?

Fisher: I'm not just sure. I think I read about it. But he just wasn't there. He was a salesman or a factory representative or some such. I don't think he was in the

furniture business. Many people were. But we spent from that time together, and then as time went on there were birthday parties and things that our paths crossed. We were always aware of each other as friends. When we began to be closer was when I came in to go to Central High School.

Smith: Now what was the difference between Central High School and South High?

Fisher: Location.

Smith: Okay. Was that the only difference? Because traditionally, you know, they're portrayed as being was sort of the upper crust school and one was the more diverse or down scale in some ways.

Fisher: I would say that perhaps more of the young people who went to Central went away to boy's school or went east to college. That pretty much tells the tale. Their parents were in a position and that was important for them. South was very wholesome. It would've been much closer for me to go to South, but my brothers went to Central, my father had graduated from Central in the class with Arthur Vandenberg. That was his claim to fame. So, we drove in. My brothers could drive when they were fourteen in Grand Rapids. They wanted all the children to be able to drive tractors to help on the farms. , I came in seventh grade and that was junior high, Central. And we got to know each other and we were sort of in the same gang and the same group or in the same bunch. And had many of the same friends - we talk about them today. And then we went and started high school together and were in a sorority that they had then. There's a picture.

Smith: What was the name of it?

Fisher: It was called Gamma Delta Tau, but it was affectionately known as the Good Cheers. And Betty, just mentioned this when I was talking to her over the weekend. She said, "I love that picture of the Good Cheers." I think the original I have I sent to the museum. She's sitting down in the front row and I'm standing in the back row. She was very, very popular with the girls and the boys. We were always telling the girls to wait and see what boys were going to ask Betty for dates on Friday and Saturday to see who's going to be left over for the rest of us, if we got anybody. And then we went to boy-girl

dancing school, ballroom dancing school, together. Now, overnights and just a lot of good times. I think we would think about just about everything that these kids today can think about, but there was Prohibition and there was a Depression – that made a big impact on our lives.

Smith: How so?

Fisher: I mean, the furniture business collapsed and fathers didn't have jobs and fathers were committing suicide after the crash.

Smith: Really? Did you know any of them?

Fisher: Oh, yes, I can think of two. My father's friends. And those were serious times. None of us will ever forget those. And we went on, of course, to the war times, but even today this extravagance and the children who have everything, it bothers me a lot about where values are. But that's the way it was and it was a wonderful, wonderful place to grow up because there were great winter sports, sledding and skiing and when I was little, we had a pony with a little sleigh. In the summertime, we were near Lake Michigan and we went to Cape Cod as children. As we grew older and the time of the Depression started, we started going back to the Cape in the summer and stay at the house where my grandfather was born. But, before that, we went out on the beach where my father had gone when he was young. Betty told me that's where she first saw Jerry. She didn't meet him, but she saw him out on the beach. The name of this little colony on Lake Michigan near Holland, Michigan, you know. [Ottawa Beach]

Smith: Sure, sure. She apparently liked what she saw.

Fisher: Yeah, I won't tell you what she said.

Smith: Why?

Fisher: But she didn't meet him then, you know, and they were young. He was five years older.

Smith: Did that take place when you were still quite young?

Fisher: Oh, yes. About thirteen.

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Smith: Okay. From what you said, it sounds like she had a number of boyfriends.

Fisher: Yes, everybody loved her. To this day and I've said this before, of all the times I've spent with her over the years and all the places we've been, I've never heard one person say an unkind thing about Betty. I think I said that to Geoff Mason when he was questioning me about our friendship. But that's the way it was and it stayed that way.

Smith: When did the idea of becoming a professional dancer - how did that evolve?

Fisher: Well, then there was this period when I went away to school when I was sixteen. When I came back "I was a teenage college dropout," and I wasn't in Grand Rapids for some of those later teen years when she was graduating. I remember she was a Herpolsheimer's Personal Shopper.

Smith: What was that?

Fisher: Herpolschiemer's was a department store a lovely, lovely fine department store. Sort of a Grand Rapids substitute for Marshall Field's. And she had a job there. She was a model and she was also a personal shopper to help them select.

Smith: So, all this was someone who had taste from a very early age.

Fisher: Oh, yes, a very graceful womanly figure, well-turned out, everything like that. She went on with her dancing Calla Travis had this advanced program. One went through certain steps and you graduated just like you did in any school. I didn't. I wasn't eligible for that. I went away to school and I got to be the goalie on the soccer team. Anyway, during that period, she stayed there and she danced and she taught dance. My younger sister - eleven years younger - went to one of Betty's dancing classes.

Smith: The Martha Graham period.

Fisher: By then I was married and lived in Pittsburg.

Smith: Okay.

Fisher: I was married in 1939 and Betty married Bill Warren sometime after that.

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Smith: Now, who was Bill Warren?

Fisher: Well, he was a nice guy. Very handsome and very quiet. He sort of scared me. Older and handsome and well turned out. I never got to know him very well, but I certainly knew who he was and saw him around a lot. He was a couple of years older than she was and at that time, you see, when Betty and I got together, we were sticking pretty much with our own age. It makes a big difference when you're a teen. So, I never really knew him very well.

Smith: He was from Grand Rapids?

Fisher: He was from Grand Rapids. She's written about him in her books, so I won't get into that. But they were married for about five years and then she stayed on and soon met Jerry after the war.

Smith: That's right. And, I guess, was still in the process of getting the divorce when he first asked her out and so she was kind of reluctant to say yes.

Fisher: Yes, he is five years older and he was a football star. We used to go to our football games on Saturday afternoons, our group, the Good Cheers, and a whole bunch of others and sit there and cheer for Central. And the greatest rival was South. The last year, when Jerry was a senior in high school, we saw him play, but I don't remember who won.

Smith: Who did you cheer for?

Fisher: Oh, we cheered for Central. Then it was shortly after that she saw him as I remember it. She said she heard he was going to the University of Michigan.

Smith: Well, he was sort of a big man on campus.

Fisher: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He had a presence, you know. He had posture and commanded respect and he was very warm and friendly.

Smith: And yet, it's well known that he had a temper.

Fisher: When we'd get together, just he, Betty and I, up until the time he became very ill, we'd talk about Grand Rapids. We'd talk about all these things there was nobody else to talk to about. I remember sitting in Vail and Rancho Mirage

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and we'd laugh and carry on about the old days. My brother was two years younger than he was and they didn't know each other closely, but they got to know each other later when Jerry was at Yale in the law school when my brother was a Yale undergraduate. Then, my brother ["Marc" – Rev. Marcus B. Hall, Jr.] went into the ministry and had a church in Stowe, Vermont. He loved to ski. And he built an ecumenical mountain chapel halfway up Mt. Mansfield. He asked Jerry to be on the board with him.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: Yes.

Smith: That's great.

Fisher: Jerry's son Mike was in the clergy by then. He lived in (inaudible) and Pittsburgh for a couple of years. His oldest child was born in Pittsburg.

Smith: That's right. Religious faith was a significant part of the Ford family.

Fisher: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I mean, have you ever seen a brave man who didn't have some religious faith?

Smith: Did you know his parents?

Fisher: No, I didn't. He has a brother who lives in Naples.

Smith: Yes, I'm going to see him tomorrow.

Fisher: I haven't seen him for a long, long time. I saw him at a distance at the funeral, but I know when Betty was here visiting me when I lived down on Gin Lane, I had some people for dinner and he came with his wife. I haven't seen him since.

Smith: After the war, when they began seriously dating, were you still in touch with her during that period?

Fisher: No, by then I went to Pittsburgh and then she went to Washington. And she had four children and I had four children and we really didn't stay in touch. But when she had breast cancer, I had had breast cancer four years before her

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and I had kept it a secret. And I thought, "I've got to get some words to my friend and tell her everything will be alright."

Smith: How did you do that?

Fisher: I knew she was at the naval hospital. Since then, well, I think she thought she had fifty thousand letters, but I had a friend who was a retired navy admiral, a good close friend, their son is my god child, so I asked him if I wrote a letter to Betty if he would deliver it by hand to her. So, she got it. His name was Lawson P. Ramage and had won a Congressional medal. But, anyway, then I heard from her, and one thing lead to another and it just drew us right close together as if we were magnetized.

Smith: Now, you heard from her, was that a thank you for your letter?

Fisher: Yes. And then after that, I became active in the Cancer Society as a Reach to Recovery volunteer. It's a support group for people who have had mastectomies. And we visited only at the doctor's request to help others who had it. We were trained to do this. I remember how much help I received when a volunteer came. The first question is, "How long ago did you have it?" She said, "Five years." I thought, "Yay, I have five years." So, I went into that. I felt that I'd recovered enough that maybe I could help somebody else.

Smith: Did she have questions for you?

Fisher: No, she didn't. She didn't. By then, we didn't really get back together until she was through with her chemo and things settled down for her. Because, after all, it takes awhile to just get over the shock.

Smith: Did she talk about that period?

Fisher: We talked about it, yes, because then she had asked me to go with her several times and several places year after year after year which were breast cancer related. The Susan Komen Foundation. We went to that annual lunch until they stopped having it, it got to be so big. And she sent me a couple of letters that she'd received and said, "Maybe you can help these people and try to get in touch with them."

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Smith: It's hard to imagine. I mean, one of the worst elements is feeling alone and not knowing what's next. Is it that informational vacuum that you find yourself in? Do you feel particularly bereft?

Fisher: Well, you see it was different then. Of course, we're talking about 42 years ago. Total shock and then I think we were blessed in a way not to have to wait and have to make all these decisions and make these choices of this or that or the other and my cancer was discovered by a mammogram. One of the first five in Pittsburgh by this new machine. The doctor said, "At your age, we have this new test." And there it was. So, that was on a Monday. By Tuesday, I'd been to a surgeon and he'd reconfirmed it. By Thursday they said, "If it's malignant, you're going to have a mastectomy and if it's not, you're going to go home tomorrow." So, I woke up and I knew. So, that was Monday to Thursday. I was numb.

Smith: Sure.

Fisher: And it was better that way. Like I said, when you have to discuss it with your family and your friends and you have to wait and have the tests – oh my goodness. It just (inaudible) there.

Smith: Imagine then about the First Lady of the United States going through this horror and waking up and the whole world wanting to know.

Fisher: She woke up and she told the world what happened to her. Now, I didn't have any compunction about talking about it because people asked her, "Well, can you tell us how it was?" When I woke up, I was surrounded in my bed by helpers and dear friends and a couple of nurses and everybody looked so downcast that I thought, "Wait, I'd better smile because they're waiting to see what I'm going to do." So, I smiled and they all smiled back at me. A good smile is your best weapon. So, when my friends wanted to talk about it, I would say, "Oh, I didn't like, but it's over. Let's talk about something else." And they couldn't tell which side it was on. I was told nobody's going to know unless you tell them.

Smith: She said, it was at the first event at the White House, she was coming downstairs, and they were wondering which side it was on.

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- Fisher: They look for it, they don't look in your eyes. They look right at you. Oh, dear, well this is something we never even would've talked about. But it's everywhere and it's facing the way life is.
- Smith: Again, you're absolutely right. People who weren't around then probably find it hard to imagine. How much of a difference did she make by going public?
- Fisher: Oh, a world of difference. I mean, she just brought it right out in the open. Well, I've had that, too! I'm just like Betty Ford, God love her!
- Smith: And then there's Happy Rockefeller.
- Fisher: Yes. Shortly after. And then also Nancy Reagan. One of the Susan G. Komen luncheons brought Nancy Reagan out in Dallas and there was Nancy Reagan and there was Lady Bird Johnson. But Nancy Brinker had a brilliant idea when she started this foundation in memory of her sister and she gave her Betty Ford award. Every year she asked Betty if she'd be there to present it. And that's when people just came like flies on sugar. It just got bigger and bigger and bigger.
- Smith: Did you visit the White House?
- Fisher: No, I didn't visit the White House and I have a great regret that I didn't. The time I was invited to go there was at the time of decorating the Christmas tree and my stepfather's funeral was that very same day. And as I look back on it now, I thought, "Golly, my mother would've probably understood." "Oh, mother, I have to be at the White House!" But I didn't. I didn't.
- Smith: Of course, we know now from what Mrs. Ford herself has written, you know, that long before that, she had some real problems, which I think frankly a lot of women had at that time. Here's someone who was going to have a career of her own and who was very happily married and very successful mother, but who was sort of losing herself in all of this.
- Fisher: Yes. I think the first time that I ever was really aware of it was when I went out with a friend from Grand Rapids to visit her in Vail and it was early on, it was right after they'd left the White House and they were renting the Bass House. They hadn't built their house yet. We knew that she was in a lot of

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pain and that her neck was bothering her. I had watched her broadcast from the Russian ballet and that's the first time I thought, "Oh, dear, what's the matter?" She must be terrified or something is the matter." But I didn't realize what it was.

Smith: Was her it voice or her manner?

Fisher: It was her speech. Probably that's on record. Somewhere they have films of it and within a minute or two you can tell by her speech.

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: Then just being there with her, she had to take a lot of pills to be out of pain. By the same token, she was entertaining us, having her friends for lunch, we were going out for dinner, and we were just having a lovely time. Susan was there. I remember Susan, she was staying a month with her mother's friend. But she wasn't around much at the time.

Smith: Did they seem happy? I mean, the Fords obviously would've liked to have won the election, but did they seem happy to be back there?

Fisher: All the things I saw, she has written about in her book - about how Jerry said she was always late and these little things. I mean, she's come right out and thrown it right out there for everybody to read.

Smith: Right.

Fisher: Not for one instant ever did I see anything but the most loving relationship between those two.

Smith: They were in their new life outside of politics. Of course, she was kind of nudging him to leave politics anyway.

Fisher: It was mixed emotions, you know. She really wanted him to leave, but when she saw how hard it was for him, how close he'd come to winning, she didn't anticipate the hurt of it all.

Smith: Did it take awhile to get over that?

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Fisher: You know, time is a great healer and he found another life for himself, speaking, teaching, very much in demand to run on boards – busy, busy, busy. I remember a couple of times being out there with them and he was off to New York from California at four in the morning with agents.

Smith: Did you ever see anyone who liked to travel more or who had more energy? I mean, it was phenomenal really up until very late in life.

Fisher: He didn't slow down. He loved to swim. He took good care of himself, very good care of himself. He was in good shape.

Smith: What was it that they loved about Vail? I know that they loved to ski. Did she ski?

Fisher: She did, but not for very long. I think when they went out there from Washington with their children for Christmastime, I think I didn't see her standing up dressed for the part swearing how to put the skis on her feet. I don't have any recollection.

Smith: So, what was it about Vail that they enjoyed so much?

Fisher: Well, they chose that place, I think, while he was a congressman and they had some very dear friends from Grand Rapids who'd sort of discovered Vail. The skiing was bigger and better than it was in northern Michigan at that time. The Stiles, I think were the ones, Jack Stiles, if I remember. They were the ones that maybe started them going to Vail.

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: But it became a big part of their life with the Betty Ford Garden and everything else.

Smith: I'm told they were loved in Vail. The people in Vail really took them to their hearts.

Fisher: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And they thought a lot of the people and their interests. Betty had sponsored a summer ballet school.

Smith: Really?

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Fisher: Some little Russian girls came over. We went to see them one year I was out there in the summertime. They stayed out there and studied. It was reciprocal, maybe some American children went over to Russia. I remember them definitely flying to this recital for this ballet.

Smith: Describe their house in Beaver Creek [Vail].

Fisher: Well, it was spacious and it was contemporary. I was just right. It was sort of backed up against the mountain and there was the tram or the t-bar that ran behind their house. You went in on the ground level and there wasn't much of any living space. I think the agents had their command post there. So, they were there on the ground floor, but then there's an elevator up to the main floor. A lovely living room. Very comfortable. Very tasteful. Very low-key. It was nice. Very welcoming feeling.

Smith: Did she like to decorate?

Fisher: I think she knew what she liked. She had some good help.

Smith: How would you characterize her style?

Fisher: Tailored. She's casual. She and I liked the same kind of dress. I mean, she was kind of country, chintzy. That's the way it was.

Smith: There's a story about them when they were at the White House. There's a family dining room on the second floor and Mrs. Kennedy had found some 19th century French wallpaper that showed scenes from the American Revolution and Mrs. Ford had it removed because, she said, "It's really very difficult to sit there eating and watching all these people shooting each other and bleeding." So, she had it scaled down.

Fisher: Exactly. Unappetizing wallpaper for a dining room. I'm surprised Mrs. Kennedy didn't know better. Somebody sold her a bill of goods. She did a beautiful job at the White House, but she had a different feel than Betty Ford. Let's face it. Lovely lady, but different feel.

Smith: And were the kids there much in Vail?

Fisher: The kids were all sort of scattered around when I would be with them. Maybe one or two of them would be coming and going, but, by then, when Mike and Gail were married or about to be married and the boys were in California and Susan was at home. She lived at home.

Smith: Was there a sort of special relationship between Susan and her mother?

Fisher: Yes. Yes. It was so wonderful. It is a wonderful relationship. She just told me recently how thankful she was that she'd given this responsibility of running the Center to Susan when she did. Because, you know, we know all of a sudden I can't do what I used to do. This is a hard thing to accept as you grow older. Stay the age you are.

Smith: So few people who create something that really is an expression of themselves have the satisfaction of knowing that it can be entrusted to somebody.

Fisher: Yes, I feel that way about my children. How are they going to know if they don't have the experience of doing things the way I hoped they would do? It's interesting to watch, but, you know, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. They came with certain characteristics that they just came with.

Smith: Did they [the Fords] enjoy grandparenting?

Fisher: Yes. Yes. They did. They did. And they had all those little girls first. Five little girls when finally the two little boys – remember at that funeral? Who would ever forget them. I was sitting right smack besides them. The littlest one was sitting on his mother's lap and he let go of her and then he'd go to sleep. And then his brother got up and read. Yes. It was beautiful. When we came from the library, we came all the way out Fulton and Lake Drive. We went right past Calla Travis Studio of Dance. She taught my father ballroom dancing. She had dyed hair, brown hair. The first person that I ever knew who had dyed hair. My mother said, "Yes, she dyes her hair."

Smith: That's not very Dutch.

Fisher: No. Travis is English, isn't it?

Smith: I think so. When did you know about Mrs. Ford's intervention and all that flowed out of that?

Fisher: I will tell you, it was very dramatic because I had asked her – I was active, as I say, on the Cancer Society and they ran their big fundraiser for the Society in Pittsburgh with a ball. A Cancer Ball at the William Penn Hotel. My cronies asked me if I would be on the committee and if I would help. I said, "Oh, I'd be glad to." And I said, "Maybe Betty Ford would like to come." And they said, "What did you say?!" Well, I mean, she's had cancer and she goes everywhere and this is a beautiful place and it would be wonderful to have her. She could only say 'no'." So, I asked her and she said yes, she'd love to come. Well, as soon as we worked that out, the publicity started for the party (tickets were being sold). A week before the party, she sent me a telegram and she said, "I am very sorry to say" – practically the day I read about it in the paper was when the telegram came saying could she come back next year? And she didn't come and they got me to stand up at this crowd of a thousand people or whatever to read the telegram. And the next year, she came back. I have some pictures of us from the next year when she came back for the next cancer ball. It was wonderful.

Smith: And, obviously, her life had turned around during the interim. This was a year after the intervention?

Fisher: Yes, and she had been to Long Beach and she had a face lift and she was a new Betty!

Smith: Did she talk about the face lift?

Fisher: Well, she sent me some pictures right away, yeah. I have a great big picture of her that I don't have hanging. I had my file drawer. You know, I lost two of our children – but the oldest and the youngest are thirteen years apart and they're girls. So, they didn't know each other really when they were growing up because Peggy went away to school and college. Two years they were home together. But they're very, very close now. I lost my train of thought.

Smith: Well, you mentioned the facelift and the photo of Mrs. Ford.

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Fisher: Oh, I said to my girls within the past year or so, "I'm getting all these things – these letters and all of these things to do with the Fords. I saved them and I just wonder how to handle it or what to do with them." And Peggy, the oldest one said, "Just have them all in one place." So, I have this metal file drawer and they're all in one place. They're not in any order.

Smith: That's great.

Fisher: But, from time to time, when somebody wants something like a picture of the Good Cheers. What's-her-name, Green, who just called, she had said when I met her out in November at the birthday celebration in California, she said she'd like to have some pictures of me with Betty. And she typed a note where some of these places were in Grand Rapids and nobody seemed to know where this one or that one had been. So, I said, "Well, send me a map, send me a list and I'll mark on the map."

Smith: That's great.

Fisher: So that's what I did. And I said, "You be sure and send these pictures back because they're very precious." And she did.

Smith: Did she talk to you or did you ever talk about that part of her life which is obviously a whole new beginning in many ways - but it had to have been pretty dark before the dawn.

Fisher: Oh, yes, she talked about it and she said, so indebted to the Firestone's. I mean, when I was with her and I was out there at the Center with her, she was so happy and so proud of it all. She wanted me to see what she was doing and how she was doing it. And John Schwarzlose, I've known him from day one, I think.

Smith: She was very hand's on, wasn't she?

Fisher: Oh, absolutely, she was very much hands on. Very much. She went every week over there. She signed autographs. Every Big Book for every person when they left. I mean, she was right in it all with her whole heart and soul. She came later to Pittsburgh – she came several times to Pittsburgh. She came on the anniversary of a youth program for drugs. She raised a lot of money by

speaking and coming to these events. Of course it was all given to the Center, every penny.

Smith: There used to be a sort of a gag; supposedly they had a deal. The president could raise money east of the Mississippi and she raised money west of the Mississippi.

Fisher: That would figure.

Smith: Clearly she always had a sense of humor.

Fisher: Yes, she did. She's lots of fun. Still is. We were together out there the anniversary of the Center - the people with us were watching, listening, because we were comparing our canes. Her cane is much prettier than my cane. And, these people, I don't know, the nurses or whoever, were laughing at us.

Smith: She can laugh about growing older?

Fisher: Oh, yes, because we have so many of the same things happen to each other at the same time. It's a support group.

Smith: My sense was it was very difficult for her to accept his illness or aging. I know friends of theirs the last several years urged them not to go to Vail and she said, "You know, at this point in life, we've had the quantity of life. Now we want the quality of life." Obviously they loved Vail, and they were showing that they could still go to Vail.

Fisher: Well, the last year, I remembers he said, "We're going and I know the altitude is not the place for us, but if we can't stay, we'll come home. But, we're going."

Smith: And I know, towards the end, again there were friends who were sort of suggesting, "You need some nursing help."

Fisher: Let me tell you this as an old person to a young person: we just have to be ready to make these decisions. We have to be ready and it's a matter of control, no matter what you say or do. We're not stubborn, we just want to feel comfortable about it.

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Smith: I sense that she really wanted almost up until the end she wanted to be the one nursing him.

Fisher: Yes, she said that.

Smith: To you?

Fisher: Yes, she wanted to live to be 90 years old. She would admit to that. So, she did. But she's a gutsy lady. She always did what she said she was going to do. That doesn't come as a surprise to me.

Smith: I think he felt a little bit of guilt for all those years when he was out traveling and so on. And in the later years, he was able to spend more time with the children...

Fisher: And he was so affectionate with her. He always called her Mother. He always called her Mother.

Smith: I heard a story that at one point they were sitting around, a small group at dinner, and he was reminiscing and at one point he was dating, was it Mary Pew of the Steelcase family?

Fisher: Oh, yes, Mary Itema.

Smith: And was going on and on about how he'd dated her and she listened to him and then she said, "Well now, Jerry, just think, if you'd married Mary Pew, you could've been the president of Steelcase instead of president of the United States." Touché.

Fisher: That's the way she was. She had a great wit, a great sense of humor and, believe me, you have to have that to go through some of the things.

Smith: He appreciated it, obviously.

Fisher: Yes. She wouldn't let him get too stale. Oh, my goodness, yes.

Smith: There's the story of the time when the Pantlind was renovated. Of course, it was built the year the president was born and they were going on about how it had just been. And she turned to him and said, "Maybe you could use a little

renovation, too.” And he laughed. I mean, he genuinely laughed. He didn’t have a pretentious bone in his body.

Fisher: She softened him. She didn’t let him take himself too seriously.

Smith: That’s interesting you say that. How she softened him, you say.

Fisher: Yes.

Smith: It sounds like maybe every politician should have a wife like Betty Ford.

Fisher: Yes. I’m just finishing reading a book called *Alice* about Alice Roosevelt Longworth. Have you read that book?

Smith: I have it, but I haven’t read it yet.

Fisher: Oh, my goodness, it is something else.

Smith: She was a character.

Fisher: She was something.

Smith: And had a difficult life.

Fisher: And the people she “hung out” with [associated], I mean, think of Washington today and think about Washington then. But, anyway, she knew where she was going and so did Betty, bless her heart, and she had a really strong faith, a fighting faith.

Smith: Let me ask you, is faith a significant part of her life?

Fisher: Of course, how could it not be?

Smith: She expects to be reunited with him?

Fisher: Well, we haven’t talked about that, but I expect to be reunited with my beloved of 48 years. I hope to.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?

Fisher: Jerry?

Lilian Fisher

Smith: Yes.

Fisher: Yes, it was the year before he died. I went out there with my friend Elsie Hillman from Pittsburgh. Elsie was a very active person in politics.

Smith: Right. I know the name.

Fisher: You know the name?

Smith: I know the name.

Fisher: A close, close friend of mine. What did we go out for? Well, we had been out to the twentieth anniversary together, but then we went this later time. In fact, she was going to California to see her doctor and I was going out to see the Fords and I said, "Let's go and not postpone it." She had said, "I'd like to go with you the next time you go." So we went. We stayed there at the Marriott and we had lunch with them and Betty's very dear friend Lee Annenberg.

Smith: Yes.

Fisher: He was so sick now. But we had the nicest kind of a time. But then he was unsteady. He had a nurse with him and I remember their saying, "Now, when you stand up, just wait a minute." But clear, oh yeah. Sat at the front of the table and carried on conversation all during lunch. But that was the year before. Elsie said, "I have a ball cap that's been signed by four presidents and I'd like to get the fifth president's signature on it. Do you think I could send it to Jerry?" This was after that. I said, "Try it." And so he signed it and she got it back.

Smith: I assume you talked to Mrs. Ford after that. I mean, did you keep in touch during that last year?

Fisher: Oh, we talk about every two weeks.

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: We talk often, yes.

Smith: I mean, during that last year?

Lilian Fisher

Fisher: Yes, and she called me that Tuesday morning and she said, “Jerry doesn’t know me anymore. He’s very, very sick.” And before the day was over, he was gone. So that’s how I heard about it. And the children have been just very dear and considerate and Susan and Vaden - what a nice guy – and all of her children, so nice and dear. They’re like my own children.

Smith: Has it been hard for her?

Fisher: Very hard for her. I know she’s grieving deeply, God love her. I understand that part of it, too. I’ve been there.

Smith: It must be frustrating. I mean, it must add to your frustration if you think there are people out there who wonder, “Well, six months have gone by or a year has gone by, why haven’t you bounced back?” Unless you’ve gone through that, you can’t explain it.

Fisher: I think now she has her physical situation to cope with. Whereas when I lost my husband, I was only 68 years old and I was very healthy and active and I didn’t bounce back, but there again it was like coming out in the recovery room after the cancer. I thought, “I’ve got to smile at people. They’re waiting to see what I’m going to do before they know what to do.” And I felt I have to make the effort to get out there and do things and I’m a single parent. So, it’s a different situation because there’s many years difference makes a great deal of difference.

Smith: Obviously there are lots of people who would love to see her out in public.

Fisher: Oh, yes. At that twenty-fifth anniversary that Friday night, they were so glad to see her. And she was shaking hands with everybody and finally the nurse came up and said, “Here, let me spray your hands. You’ve been shaking hands with everyone.” Her immune system, I think. Yes, I wish I could be closer to her because I think maybe we could get out and around.

Smith: Let’s be frank. At her age, there’s probably a finite number of her contemporaries who are still around who are able to get out.

Fisher: That’s right. Her friend Lee Annenberg, she’s at Mayo’s and Delores Hope is about 96 and her other friends – some of them are mutual friends – she has a

very close friend in Denver who was a classmate of mine at school. And, I don't know. I guess it's true. If she had some girlfriends. That's one of the things about being here. Somebody once told me the most important thing you could do for yourself is to make younger friends.

Smith: It's funny you say that because my sense was and I think one reason why we became so close – the times I was out there, I noticed they liked to surround themselves with younger people. They were very comfortable around younger people and I think in some ways maybe it did exactly what you said.

Fisher: it's a defense mechanism. But here in Naples, my goodness, there's all ages. They're from all over. They come down, they go back, they come down, they go back. It's a very dynamic place to be.

Smith: Has she ever visited you here?

Fisher: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. She's never been to the apartment, but she visited me in my house. She came one time to speak over in Ft. Lauderdale at a secondary school and it so happened that the daughter of my next door neighbor, this little girl I saw grow up and got her graduate degree in marine biology and she married the admissions director of the school over there. Anyway, they wanted Betty to come and speak about her use and the drug problem, so of course Betty came. And I said, "Go ahead and write her. She would love to come." So, I went over to hear her and she came back with me. Actually, I came back. She had to come with the agents. And she spent the whole day here. And that's when we saw Dick Ford. And she and Jerry came to the Cape and visited.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: Yeah. That was funny because the agents called several days ahead and said, "You know, we're going to come over and we're going to put in a phone line and when the Fords arrive, we'll have to hitch this up so everything will be there." I said, "Fine." They looked the place over. So, the day that they were to arrive, I heard my neighbors next door, they were having the trees pruned. Anyhow, the agents arrive and they plug in their phone. It was dead! So, the agent said, "I will call and get and a repair service man." And I could hear

him say, “Oh no, you won’t wait five days. I’m very sorry.” The tree people cut the phone wire!

Fisher – additional comment added after interview: The Fords stayed with me while Jerry placed in a golf tournament with Tip O’Neil, his dear friend.

Smith: Did you ever sense what their relationship was with the agents? Because they really did become part of the family almost.

Fisher: But, you know, you weren’t conscious of their being there.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: No, no, no, no. I mean, when they were at my house – two times at my house – my house down here, they stayed in the garage. And we had beverages and snacks and things, but that’s where their command post was. That was the best we could do. And they came in the house once and looked around to see where she was going to be sleeping. Then, at the Cape, they came inside, but at the Cape, the house is on three levels and built on the side of a hill. And the beach level was sort of an independent little unit of it’s own with a little galley and bedrooms and a sitting room and we used it out of season, but the shutters were on the top part. So the agents were down there and we were up above and we never knew that they were there. I mean, unless it was time to go someplace, we’d step out the front door and there’d be the car to go. It’s not hard to adjust to. It’s not my usual treatment. But these are the things that really - our friendship has been such a blessing to me and it’s given me experiences and taken me places that I never otherwise could’ve been. You just can’t believe it.

Smith: Do you think she’s doing better now? I mean, is she – I hate to use the word ‘adjusted’ – but do you think she’s adjusting?

Fisher: Well, I hope so. She’s going to get her hair done and I think it’s when she’s ready. When she feels like it, she’d going to do it. Aren’t we all that way? I mean, have you ever told somebody to do something and sat there and watched them do it? They don’t do it.

Smith: I'll tell you a story someone told me who was out there recently visiting with her. There's an olive tree out in front of the house and she had white lights in it for Christmas and they're still there. She turns them on every night so he knows that she's okay.

Fisher: That's good.

Smith: That says a lot, doesn't it?

Fisher: Well, now, tell me about your plans. Why did you come to see me?

Smith: Okay, well, we're putting together for the Ford Library/Museum an oral history collection.

Fisher: History.

Smith: Yeah, and we're talking to friends of both the Fords and people who were in the administration and some of the few people who are still around from Grand Rapids and basically these will all be typed up and transcribed and you'll have a chance to look at the transcription. Eventually, they'll be housed at the library and will be available to scholars and researchers and people who are doing research. You know, this day and age, people don't write letters, they don't keep diaries, Lord knows, and people in the White House don't keep a lot of the documents that they used to in part because of special prosecutors and all that. So, oral history is absolutely invaluable at filling a lot of the gaps.

Fisher: This is the side about these libraries that's new to me and it's so true. So true.

Smith: I mean, the irony and the paradox is that there's more paper than ever before, but people don't put their thoughts on paper in the way that they were accustomed to, so oral history is a way, imperfect, like any science, but oral history is a way of getting particularly the warmer, you know, the kinds of things that don't get put on paper - the personal stories, the observations, the insights. So, you know, it's just invaluable.

Fisher: It's history.

Smith: It is history.

Lilian Fisher

Fisher: And it's important for those who follow us.

Smith: Absolutely.

Fisher: Yeah, I was thinking about that when I was reading about Alice. I mean, my goodness. What a gal.

Smith: What a life. Mrs. Ford is often described as a free spirit. Do you think that's true or does it not go far enough in describing her?

Fisher: Well, it's true but it's overused.

Smith: How so?

Fisher: Something fresher. A lot of people, I mean, movie stars are called free spirits.

Smith: What adjective would be more appropriate?

Fisher: That's a good question.

Smith: She doesn't wear any obvious label.

Fisher: She was a perfect First Lady.

Smith: Did she enjoy her time in the White House?

Fisher: Oh, I'm sure she did.

Smith: Imagine, though, being sort of tossed into that.

Fisher: And with such suddenness and the children, they say their lives were just thrown in turmoil overnight. But, you know, when we were young, we would go down to this tea room on Monroe Street and have our tea leaves read. This is in her book about how she had the tea leaves read and was told she was going to dine with kings and queens. You just never know. Well, I certainly didn't know when she was my friend that our lives were going to become so entwined and for what reasons – whoever would've told us when we were little girls that we were both going to have life-threatening disease and you're going to have this friendship no matter where you are.

Smith: I can't thank you enough. This is fun. I mean, it's very fun.

Lilian Fisher

Fisher: I hope it's been helpful.

Smith: Oh, it has been.

Fisher: You know, I feel that perhaps I'm going to be repeating myself because I have been asked a couple of times.

Smith: I'm not surprised you were asked.

Fisher: I'm very complimented that you would trust what I have to say.

Smith: You clearly have a very special place in her story and in her life and you'll probably talk to her before I do.

Fisher: She has a prettier cane than mine.

Smith: Describe her cane. What makes it prettier than yours?

Fisher: It has a silver handle. Mine just came from the medical supply store.

Smith: She always sees joy in art, doesn't she?

Fisher: Well, she had a style, yes. She liked clothes. She liked decorating. She liked art. She was creative, I would say. I don't know that she ever put a brush in some paint, but lots of creativity.

Smith: Before I forget and I think she's written about this, too, as we know now, alcoholism is a disease and it's often genetic. Was her dad an alcoholic?

Fisher: Well, I've seen it printed. I think she's said that. She didn't realize it at the time, but I think she said that, yeah. Her mother was a very dignified lady.

Smith: Regal?

Fisher: Oh, yes. I mean, regal, that's the word I wanted. Regal. I mean, you stood up when she walked into the room.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: Yes, a lovely lady. I can just see their house. I used to go there and spend the night Friday nights.

Lilian Fisher

Smith: What was the house like?

Fisher: It's still there.

Smith: On what street?

Fisher: Fountain Street. 717 Fountain Street. If I remember, it had a little front porch. Very Dutchy. You know Grand Rapids. It's further up Fountain from Central High. Is Central High still there? It's not on the map.

Smith: I don't think so.

Fisher: But Fountain Street School where she went to grade school is still there. I was amazed at that. It's on the map that Kay Uptemaim sent me. She got a road map. But it was very detailed. It had Kent Country Club and it had all the places. Grace Church. I hadn't realized when I went out to that funeral until my younger sister told me that there was a new Grace Church. I wasn't going down to Lafayette Street.

Smith: I know they were married in Grace Church, but was it the old Grace Church they were married at?

Fisher: Yes. We were married at St. Mark's Church.

Smith: An amazing story, it was the new church, remember President Ford's mother, when she died in church one Sunday morning.

Fisher: In Grand Rapids.

Smith: Yes, and they went back to her house and characteristically they found her appointment books were filled for the next month. Now you know where the president gets his energy and his work ethic. I mean, I think he seemed to always want to be busy.

Fisher: He had a lot of energy. He was an athlete and if you take that energy off the football field, it has to go some place. Yes.

Smith: He loved campaigning.

Lilian Fisher

Fisher: Yes, was very good at it. What would he be thinking about today? Well, I thought that book that was written *After I Die* was revealing. He wouldn't be so surprised today because he thought that that was the path we're on.

Smith: Yeah. This is perfect. Thank you.

Fisher: You're very welcome.

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