

Nordic Heritage Museum
Nordic American Voices

Interview of Irma Goertzen

On February 27, 2012

At Seattle, Washington

Interviewed by Gordon Strand and Mari-Ann Kind Jackson

Gordon: [0:05] Today is February 27, 2012 and we are at the Nordic Heritage Museum and we will be interviewing Irma Goertzen for the Nordic American Voices Oral History Project. [0:18] , welcome. Thank you for participating.

Irma Goertzen: [0:22] Thank you.

Gordon: [0:23] Will you please state and spell your name and then tell us where you were born.

Irma: [0:28] My name is Irma Goertzen and its spelled with an I. Irma Edith Goertzen. You want my age? I was born November 8th, on my father's birthday in 1932. In Kenmare, North Dakota on my grandparents farm. My father's name is Gudmund Bernard Algae Rúndetrom and he is a native of Denmark. He came to the United States in 1924. He was 19 years old. He was born in 1905. [1:26] My mother Alice Marie Gissel was born in Kenmore north Dakota of Danish parents. She was born June 13, 1909. My father is the only member of his family that came to the United States to live. Except I do have one cousin Inger who came and I do not know what part of the country she settled in.

[2:07] My father came with a purpose of going to school. He felt that if he was going to be anything other than a "farmer" he was going to have to get an education. So he came to the United States via ship and landed in New York in 1924.

[2:28] He tells a story of how when he got into Ellis Island that it was very depressing. He felt it was like cattle. He also states that the ship he was on they were sleeping in the bottom, he said it was not a pleasant experience at all.

[2:46] But he tells it when he got into Ellis Island, he and one of his friends somehow decided they were not going to stand in this long line so they tried to get out. When they went out they apparently had to have a certain number on them somewhere and he didn't have his number, so he got picked up and sent back into the line and took his turn just like everyone else who came into America.

[3:14] He landed in New York and he tells about with his friend how they stood on the streets of New York and they said, "Now we can take off our tie because we are in America and we have freedom." [laughs] That was his idea of freedom.

[3:36] He did have an aunt and uncle, Alma and Jorgen Peterson who lived in Chicago and served as his sponsor. They had no children. So he did have a connection with them. He first went to Chicago but then he went to Dana College in Nebraska to do study there.

[4:03] My mother who was born in Kenmare, her parents, my grandfather, came to the United States from Denmark and my grandmother's parents came from Denmark. Their maiden name was Hagedorn. They lived in the Iowa area and she was one of I think nine children, quite an extended family.

[4:39] I do not know how my grandparents met but my grandfather did homestead in North Dakota, a farm. They were married there and lived there, in fact the whole family lived there [except my aunt and my mother], until they were all deceased.

[4:58] He was a farmer, had four sons and three daughters. One daughter died as a small child. My mother did go to school. She was quite an accomplished musician. She took instruction from the Catholic nuns in the city. I have a lot of her music that is very, very difficult to play. She was also a singer.

[5:32] My grandfather decided that he wanted her to go to this Dana College in Nebraska, because there they had a choir who was going to be traveling to Denmark. He knew she would be able to make the choir.

[5:50] She was sent to Dana College. There she met my father. My grandfather's idea was that she could go to Denmark with the choir and meet his mother. That's the only way he felt he was going to have any connection with his direct family.

[6:08] My mother following high school however had gone to a college in North Dakota, I can't remember which one. She was a teacher in a rural school for a year prior to going to Dana College. There of course, she met my father and they took the trip to Denmark together. My mother did meet my grandmother, Serena, and did spend time with her while she was in Denmark.

[6:42] She lived to be 94 or 96 years old. I do have letters from my mother's grandmother to my grandfather, that she sent him telling about the family and how everybody was and et cetera.

[7:10] My father then decided to go into the Ministry. He went to Augsburg College in Minneapolis. There he had to take a year of high school along with his first year of college. He didn't speak English well, so he didn't meet the requirements for college. So he took that.

[7:34] He did graduate from college, went directly into Seminary and graduated from Seminary. He received his degrees there in 1935 from Augsburg College.

[7:49] During his years in college he would go to the farm in North Dakota in the summer time and work. My mother lived in Minneapolis with my older sister who was born in Minneapolis. [I was born on the farm in North Dakota where] my mother spent a lot of time

with we two girls on the farm while my Dad was going to school. He used to write her lovely poetry, which I also have found and kept.

[8:23] His first church was in Zahl, North Dakota. It's a very small community North West of Williston. It's not far from the Montana border. He had four churches there, and was ordained there and was there until I was eight years old.

[8:47] At which time the main church had asked him to develop a mission church in Williston, North Dakota. In Williston we would go, I can remember as a small child going to Williston, and he would have meetings in the basement of the library. There may be only six people there but, he would have a service.

[9:16] That church now celebrated, I think a year ago, or two years ago, their 75th anniversary. They have now built a new church there. It's a very, very large, successful, Lutheran congregation.

[9:36] I was always a tomboy and I had a lot of friends in Williston, girls and boys. I spent a lot of my time outside playing baseball, and climbing trees and things of that nature, and ice-skating. I remember one year for Christmas I was given a pair of...they were used but, somebody had outgrown them...of used Sonja Henie ice skates. They had her signature on the bottom.

[10:15] I was the only one on the ice-rink and which was outside of course, or else down on the river, that had white ice skates. I was very proud of my white ice skates. I would come home after school, grab my ice skates which were hanging on a nail above the stairs that went down to the basement, and away I'd go. I spent a lot of time outdoors playing.

[10:43] Then in the spring I was really a good baseball player. I could hit the ball further than most of the boys. I can remember at one time when I was in the sixth grade, a boy was so mad at me, because I could hit the ball. He threw the ball as hard as he could at me and it hit me in my arm. I think he thought I'd cry but I wouldn't cry, of course. I didn't cry.

[11:12] From Williston I lived there through the sixth grade. I was 12 when we moved from Williston. We had moved from Zahl once my father built the new church and the new parsonage. We moved from Zahl to Williston. I was in the third grade.

[11:39] I have many wonderful memories from Zahl as a small child because it was a small community. It had one little post office that looked like...

Gordon: [11:49] How do you spell it?

Irma: [11:50] Z-A-H-L. It looks kind of like the post office in the museum. Our parsonage was kind of on top of the hill next to the church. There aren't very many big hills in North Dakota, so it wasn't a big hill but in my mind it was a big hill. At the bottom was my mother's garden. [12:15] The gypsies used to come in their wagons through fields there. When the gypsies came to town they always would take the children off of the street. I can remember being pulled off of the street and taken into the lumberyard one time. Another

time being pulled into the post office because children were not to be on the streets when the gypsies came to town.

[12:41] They would sit sometimes parked down below the house in the wheat field, basically, my mother's garden was there and then it went to a wheat field. Of course, they would help themselves to the garden and they would sing and dance.

[12:59] In the spring time we would walk through the fields out there in North Dakota and pick crocuses. May 1st we would bring our package of crocus and drop it on our friends doorsteps and run.

[13:13] We went to Williston and I had very good experiences there but we only lived there four years. Then my father was called to a church in Enumclaw. There was a small church at the time and they needed to build a newer church and because of his construction experience, he was asked to go there and do that.

[13:42] I was 12 in the 6th grade at the time and I remember the first day of school. There was a large room but in the back of the room in each corner there was a desk and I was given a desk in the back corner.

[14:00] The main thing I can remember about that is I was so astonished because the kids were allowed to chew gum in class. They didn't have to raise their hand. They could get up and walk around the room, which from North Dakota that was totally different. We didn't have any of that freedom in our classrooms.

[14:24] We lived there in Enumclaw until I was 16. My father built the church there. It was very successful and the church grew. My mother during all of this time, she was usually the choir director and the organist of the church, and then she also gave piano lessons. Ministers didn't make a lot of money and when we moved to Enumclaw she had the seventh child, so we were a large family.

[15:01] Let's see, I have to think here. Yeah, there were seven of us, four and three, four girls and three boys. All of my siblings are living to this day except for one who was killed in an airplane accident many years ago.

[15:23] We did live in Enumclaw until I was 16 and those were also very good years. In those days, when you played basketball we could only run half of the court and then you had to pass the ball over to the other girls on the other half of the court. That was a very frustrating experience for me, because I was very competitive and a lot of the girls were not very competitive and I'd be frustrated.

[16:02] One day one of the coaches was watching me. He said to me, have you ever thought about playing tennis? Of course, I hadn't. I didn't know anything about tennis.

[16:16] He took me out of the gym and he took me into the other gym and he painted a line across the back of the gym, which would be at the height of a tennis net. He taught me how to play tennis, which became my sport.

[16:37] I had to of course, learn all the basics but, I was very, very fortunate to have a gentleman who saw some potential in me and he gave me something to do, that I really learned to enjoy.

[16:52] Of course, I was used to playing with boys so I wasn't threatened by the boys at all. He would stick me in to play with the boys and that gave me an advantage too, because I learned to hit the ball harder, and take harder balls and harder serves than a lot of the girls did.

[17:10] By the time I was a sophomore I had won the second place in the State Championship in girls' singles. I was very fortunate in that way.

[17:22] When I was a sophomore my father got a call to a church in Salem, Oregon, and went down again to build a new church. So we moved down there and there was a Christian school there. It was interdenominational.

[17:49] My father registered both...there were three girls at that time that would qualify age wise for this school so we were registered in that school.

[18:05] The President of the college was a Lutheran and my sisters and I, we were the only Lutherans in the whole school. It was a more holistic congregation of students. But, it was a Christian environment and a good school. I did graduate from high school in 1950 there.

[18:34] While I was there, there was this young man who was the star athlete in all the sports. He was shy. Didn't date many girls and all the girls of course, loved him. He sat kitty-corner from me in band, because I had also learned how to play the Clarinet and was playing in the band.

[19:03] He also was in choir. We had a very good choir that did some traveling in high school. His name was Don Goertzen. One day he had one of his friends ask me if he could take me home after the basketball game. I can remember standing outside the locker room waiting and there was nobody else around. I thought, I wonder if I am being fooled. Finally shy Don came up quietly and said, "I think I get to take you home, right?"

[19:40] That was the beginning of a romance that lasts to this day. We were married when we both completed school in 1954 and we've had many good years since then.

[19:57] Don went on to Seattle Pacific University on an athletic scholarship. He became a teacher and also he was, not active but, he was inactive military during the Korean War. He really wanted to get in to coaching. But, he didn't want to leave the Seattle area, because of his military commitments here that would have changed, had he left the city so he stayed in Seattle.

[20:29] He taught for several years in Seattle and then was promoted to become a principal. He was very successful as a principal. He was in many of the schools where there were challenging students and challenging times.

[20:51] During the Black Panther days for example, he was in the central area. He was the really last Caucasian or white principal to leave the central area of Seattle. The community really gave him an overwhelming...they were sad to see him go. He had a very successful career there.

[21:18] Following high school, I had an idea that I wanted to be a doctor and my dad was very supportive of that. One of the things my father always said to me was, "You can do anything you want to do as long as you work hard and keep trying."

[21:40] My mother also had a very famous saying that has been passed down to our children, is, there is no such word as can't. I can remember saying something like, well I can't do this. My mother would say there is no such word as can't. You haven't tried yet, you just keep trying.

[21:58] So we were never allowed to say can't and then we were always told that we could do anything we wanted to.

[22:05] In my high school days when I graduated there were not women being admitted to medical schools.

Part II

Irma: [0:01] Then I was in love with this guy who had already gone off to his first year college. I decided I would go to the Lutheran Bible Institute in Seattle, probably because Don was in school in Seattle. So I went to LBI and I only was there for a semester and then made a decision to go into nurses training. [0:27] I went to the Emanuel Hospital in Portland and went through nurses training there. It again was a Lutheran sponsored hospital, which isn't the reason I went there. It was a very nice, very good school, had a very good reputation and it had a large nursing school.

[0:49] We worked very, very hard. It was different in those days. We had at least 44 hours of work and class every week. No we had 48 hours to start out with.

[1:10] I remember when I was a senior, I was in office, the officer of Student Body President or something. I decided I was never going to, not have to work so hard. I got our hours changed finally to 44 hours from 48 hours. But, we put in long hours as students.

[1:33] When I was ready to graduate, I got called in to the Head of the Schools office one day. We were never allowed to sit in her office. We stood when we were in her office. She asked me to sit down and which I thought was interesting.

[2:00] I remember sitting there scared to death. She took out these papers and gave them to me, and said, "I would like you to look at this and consider this. I've already made all the arrangements."

[2:16] In those days there were very few nurses in the country who had Master's degrees and she was one of them. This was an application to Columbia School of Nursing in New York and she wanted me to go there.

[2:33] Apparently she saw something in me that I didn't see in myself and I had no ideas or thoughts about going on to school. But, she talked to me about this, gave me the papers, and I thanked her and left the office.

[2:50] Of course, Don had been out of school a year now teaching and I was going to go on to work, and we were planning on getting married. His mother had, more than once, told me that we were never to consider getting married, until we were both through school.

[3:10] Don's parents, neither of them had a high school education. They were farmers from North Dakota. They were determined that all of their children would have a college degree. Don has one brother and one sister, Janice and a brother Jerome.

[3:37] We'd never thought about getting married until we were through school and we both had worked almost a year, each of us. Don had worked over a year before we did get married. In those days women didn't have careers. I went to work as a nurse.

[3:57] We also didn't have contraception in those days [laughs] and I presumably got pregnant in our first year of marriage. We had our first daughter, Peggy which was a total delight in our lives. My father in the meantime had received a call to the Ballard Lutheran church. In 1955 he came up here and went to that church.

[4:27] There were two Lutheran churches here in Seattle. One was definitely downtown Seattle and then there was the Ballard Lutheran Church. Both of those churches were quite small, and had little problems with struggling and surviving. They'd had some communications about joining and building a new church and making a two-one church.

My father took that on, which was a very difficult experience for him, I know. They did join, merge the two congregations and they did build a church called Crown Lutheran Church on 15th in Seattle.

[5:13] Don and I at the time had been living in Seattle and my parents moved up here. It was fortunate, because I had my mother, I can drop Peggy off a little bit and she got to spend time with her grandmother and my mother got time to spend with her first grandchild and I went to work.

[5:49] I worked off and on part-time basically in the emergency room. I first worked at Children's Hospital when I came to Seattle and then when I was pregnant I decided not to stay at Children's because there was an opportunity over at Ballard. They were opening the new Ballard Hospital in December 1954, I believe it was. I had a place in the operating room so I went over there as an operating room nurse.

[6:13] I helped move from the old Ballard Hospital into the new Ballard Hospital and I worked there full time to begin with and then I worked part-time in different areas of the

hospital - different shifts depending upon what my opportunities were. Then in 1958 our second child Kathryn was born. In 1960 I was working again in the operating room. I worked there when they approached me and asked me if I would be interested in becoming the head nurse. I had been working part time and an opportunity came.

[7:00] Don and I talked about it and he said to me, "Well maybe you should take it because they know you there. Maybe you'll never get another opportunity like that." I thought he had a lot of confidence in me [laughter] . I have to say my husband has always been very very supportive of my career and work here. We've never had an issue with that.

[7:26] So I did take the job as the nursing supervisor and I was a supervisor from 1960 to 1964, the head nurse, I should say... In the operating rooms. Now during all this time and many times I would remember Mrs. McFadden who had called me into her office, sat me down, and told me I should get further education.

[7:55] I went to the University of Washington and I was working. I found out they had a program called the R.N.B.S. program. I only had a Registered Nurse degree. You had to go to school to get your bachelor's. I signed up for the R.N.B.S. program. I found out when I got there it was going to be the last year it was offered. I would get the most credit for my R.N. degree that year if I signed up and went then. That meant that I had to go to school almost full time.

[8:33] I decided I would do that, but then the hospital asked if I would work part-time as the Assistant Director of Nursing or the relief supervisor. This gave me an opportunity as teachers didn't make much money. Here we had three children and we were trying to build a nest egg, so I did go to school full time, took the job and I worked part time at the hospital and I raised, while working, three children.

[9:18] When we first got married we lived in an apartment over in the Laurelhurst area. We had an opportunity come to us to manage some apartments on Florentia Street. There were eight units over there. We managed those apartments until 1961 when we purchased our home.

[9:52] Don knew absolutely nothing about maintaining anything in a house because his father would do everything. I had watched my father change the washers in sinks, so I could tell him how to that. The gentleman that owned the apartments ... I can't remember his name right now ... also owned the mall at Holman Road at the time. A Salvation army gentleman. I can't think of his name. He loved Don.

[10:25] I remember one time Don was trying to fix a leaking shower and he broke the pipe off in the wall. This gentleman was so kind; he sent somebody out from one of his crews to fix it and said, "Don, thank you for trying". We worked there and we didn't have to pay rent. We worked hard and sometimes I would come home, when I was still an Emergency Room nurse at night, and I would be on my hands and knees at two in the morning scrubbing floors to get ready for another rental. We only had two children during those days.

[11:08] Then we had the opportunity to buy a house in Magnolia on Perkins Lane. Don had a friend who he had known through from college. His family lived down there. They knew Don. One day they called us and said there was a house for sale down there, and they thought we might like to look that up.

[11:32] So we went down looked at this house which was just a rectangular block, really. It was nice but, there wasn't anything fancy. It was on the beach. We had also looked at some new homes that were being developed on Richmond beach. There were track homes, they were small and everyone looked just alike. They were new and everything else, kind of tempting too.

[11:58] We ended up buying the house on Perkins Lane which we've been very thankful for, for many years.

[12:05] I did work as an Assistant Director, and then again I finished my Bachelor's degree. As soon as I finished my Bachelor's, I went right on to get my Master's degree in administration. I was fortunate with both my Bachelor's and my Master's, that I applied for scholarships and I was able to have scholarships to cover my tuitions. So that worked out well.

[12:33] I did work off and on during all those periods. I received our fourth daughter. We didn't know where boys came from. We've got four wonderful girls but, our fourth daughter was born when I finished my Master's degree.

[12:50] Following that I was offered a teaching job at the university which I did take. I taught as a faculty member for a year but, that was not my calling. It was not something I really enjoyed. I enjoyed the students but, I found myself frustrated, sitting in faculty meetings where they didn't make decisions fast enough for me.

[13:17] One time during my Master's program I had an instructor and she said to me, "Irma one of your problems is..." I said to her I'm not very patient. She said, "No, that's not the problem. One of your problems is that you are a problem solver. You are always thinking way up here ahead of everybody else, on how to do it and get it done. Then that's where your patience comes in. You don't sit and wait, and let people solve some of their own problems."

[14:00] She gave me a bit of advice that has been a great bit of advice that I have shared with my Vice Presidents who worked under me and other people along my career. And that was to write on my paper when I'm in a meeting, SU, which means Shut Up.

[14:19] I learned how, and my Vice Presidents used to laugh at me when they'd see me at meetings with a group of physicians and they'd see me going over my SU. They could tell I was really weird. [laughs] But, it taught me how to be a listener instead of a doer.

[14:38] So I did get my degree and I did get a call to be then an applicant for a job as the Director of Nursing at the Ballard Hospital. They had a new administrator there and I did go

there. I was the Director of Nursing. In my years and all I don't have those exactly right but, I was there from probably '69 to mid '70's.

[15:08] The interesting thing as I look at my life and many times as I've spoken nationally, to young people especially, is that if an opportunity comes along take it, because you never know where it's going to lead.

[15:27] When I was a Director of Nursing, when I interviewed for the job, I said to the administrator, am I allowed to write the budget for the nursing division. In those days no Directors of Nursing did that. All the budgets were written by the finance person.

[15:49] I also remember saying can I make these different kinds of decisions, because if I can't I'm not interested. I want to be able to and I'll be responsible. I don't want somebody telling me what I have to do all the time.

[16:05] Then one day I get a call from the State. There is a new hospital commissioned. I have been appointed by the Governor to the hospital commission and would I accept that.

[16:23] Well the hospital commission was set up to look at the budgets of all the hospitals in the state, and to go over them and approve them et cetera, et cetera. Well I said, of course, I'll do that. I didn't know anything about finance really. I'd taken some finance classes in school.

[16:46] One of the other things I had done is when I would sit in the meetings at the hospital, I didn't always know the terms that people were using so I'd write them down. When I went back to my office, I had books on finance, I'd pick them up and I would read the books and that's I self-taught myself a lot of finance.

[17:05] But, because I was writing my budget at the hospital, the law required that they have a practitioner that understood finance. Because I was a practitioner nurse, they thought I understood finance. I was asked to be on the state commission which was a very good learning experience.

[17:28] It was an example of I was given an opportunity, I took it and it was a very great learning experience for me.

[17:39] I was there at that hospital and was recruited to the Providence hospital to take the Directors job there. Somewhere in there also, I was appointed by Governor Dixie Lee Ray, to chair the board of health. I served my term there serving the state board of health.

[18:16] That was during the time when we first started having discussion about smoking in restaurants. I remember a meeting... Our meetings were only may be a morning long. We had 300 people signed up to talk about taking smoking out of restaurants. I had to chair that meeting and get all those people in at that time.

[18:44] It was an interesting experience and we did end up as a board making the decision that restaurants had to have smoking areas. People might remember that. That was the first step in getting smoking out of a restaurant.

[19:02] The other thing that we did at that time, we looked at the housing for the micro-workers in Eastern Washington and made major changes in the laws for the migrants.

[19:14] A third decision that I get reminded of every time I go to a ladies room in a hotel or restaurant or anything in Seattle, was we also put through the time, when it was required that they put a toilet seat covers for women in bathrooms. [laughs] Really, the importance of things.

[19:40] When I was the Director of nursing at Providence which was a larger organization, I had to start using different skills, learn how to delegate more et cetera. I was there it was late or mid '70's probably, late '70's, early '80's.

[20:06] My secretary got a call from the corporate office and they said they wanted me to be downtown at the corporate office at two o'clock. My secretary said I have a meeting and they said, "Well cancel it. We need her here at two o'clock." They had never gone around. They always used proper channels when they would go to anybody. I didn't know what in the world I had to go downtown for.

[20:41] Well I showed up down there and when I got off the elevator, the head of personnel was there to meet me. He took me into the President's office and said that they were firing my boss at four o'clock and they wanted me to be the acting administrator. I was in total shock, because I had never ever thought I would become a hospital administrator.

[21:14] I thought anybody that did that was crazy. Not only that I thought that my boss got along well with the corporate office and I was in total shock.

[21:22] There were I think six or seven of us that were vice-presidents. The others were all male. I knew that two of them especially, wanted to be hospital administrators. So I suggested they offer the job to them, because they'd give them the opportunity to see how they did and et cetera.

[21:45] If I didn't do it they would bring somebody up from Olympia and...

Transcription by CastingWords

Part III

Irma: [0:00] I said, "Well, can I think about this over a night at least?" Which they said "OK," and I wandered out of that office not knowing what to do. Number one, I got along with my boss great. I was just really shaken about him being fired. Of course, I was given another opportunity. I did take that job. At the same time, I was also being recruited by the University of Washington to be an Associate Administrator over there for the Nursing Division. I told them I had that opportunity. [0:47] Well, to make a long story short, I did take the job as the Acting Administrator and it was an opportunity for me to see a broader picture and to see what the broader responsibilities were and so forth of administration. The board at Providence made a recommendation that they keep me there as the

administrator, but the sisters had other ideas, and I had other ideas. I left and there was a different recruiting story, which isn't important to my history.

[1:33] But anyway, I went on to the University and took the job there as the Associate Administrator for Nursing. While I was there, I had also over the years been very active in the National Nursing Association. And had been elected to the...The Colleague of Nurse Nationals, group of nursing people or whatever it was, I can't remember the name of it right now. `

[2:09] I was pretty active, and I was known nationally in the nursing world, in the nursing circles. That was one of the things, I think, that attracted the universities. I was functioning there as the Associate and it was an opportunity for me to learn about universities and how universities function, if anyone can figure that out. And also to learn about research and how research is.

[2:52] At the time, NIH had appointed me to a committee at NIH on women's health grants, where I would get massive stacks of grants that were to be reviewed. We reviewed them and made recommendations for who got approval for grants and etc.

I used to sit in bed and do that and Don thought I was out of my mind, that I would sit there and read all of that stuff. [laughs] He'd go to sleep and I'd be with my stack. But it was another good opportunity to be able to add my knowledge base. I was there until 1984, when my boss was promoted to the corporate office. The university had two hospitals: [3:18] Harborview and the University Hospital. He was promoted to the corporate office to be the CEO for the two organizations.

[4:10] That opened up the position at the University of Washington for a new administrator, and I decided to apply. My competition basically ended up to be, there were three or four men, and me. I did get the job. It turned out that I ended up to be the first woman in our country to lead a major university hospital.

[4:46] It really was a world of men. This was also during the feminist period. That's another whole story in itself. But I did get the job. I remember going in to my office the first morning and sitting there, and there wasn't one thing on my desk except a calendar and phone, that was all. I said to myself "Now what do I do?" [laughs]

[5:24] Then, I said "Well the guys that had competed with me for the job were all younger than me," and I thought "those kids think they know how to do this." "If they think they know how to do this, I ought to be able to do it; I've been around longer and I've been part of this." And so, I did end up getting a little confidence and was able to take on that experience and have a lot of success in that experience.

[5:53] I had been there five years and everything was going well except the relationship between my boss and Harborview was not going well. Then telling stories out of school probably...That relationship was not going well. I was told by some members of the Harborview Board that he had asked that they be removed from having that reporting relationship, which they did take from him at the time. He called me in and decided he was

going to come back to the hospital and take the administrator's job and he wanted me to go back to be the Nursing Administrator.

[6:47] Well, I had made a switch mentally and everything else from being a Nursing Administrator to being a Hospital Administrator, and I said "No, I've taken on this experience; I know my career is in the Hospital Administration Field." "I'm not willing to do that." The Vice President at the University called us both in and he told my boss, "You handle external relations and let her do the internal relations."

[7:13] Except my boss was still the guy sitting ahead. He told us to come back at a certain date to have...I don't remember. We had an assignment, and it was going to be laid out and spelled out. My boss would never schedule that meeting again with the Vice President. He just told me that if I wasn't going to do that I had to leave.

[7:41] Basically, all Hell broke loose at the University, and they called a quick news conference. I was getting calls from the press, and they called a quick news conference and said that these changes were being made because the State finance support to the hospital had been deleted, which was all a big lie. I mean I knew what the finances were. They had told the administrator down at Harborview, who knew all was going on also, that he had to go to that news conference. They ordered him there and he said, "I'm not coming, because I don't agree with that." They ordered him there, and he went, but it was not a pleasant experience.

[8:30] But then, the University had a problem sitting there because they didn't fire me, but they didn't know what to do with me. They didn't dare fire me, I guess. But they didn't know what to do with me. Then, they offered me jobs. They had worked with other universities. They wanted me to take over finances for Western University. They had a position. I wasn't a finance administrator. They offered me things, and they put me downtown in an office.

[9:09] That was when I learned a lot about computers because I needed a computer down there. In those days it was Macs coming out, and the guys at the hospital said, "We'll bring you a computer" So, they ordered the biggest, best and newest computer that there was available. I said "Just deliver it in a box."

[9:31] They delivered it in a box and I took it out, and I put it together myself. When I put it together I called them and said, "Would you come out and turn this thing on?" Because I was afraid it would explode or something. That's how I learned my basics of about how to put mother boards in computers and et cetera.

[9:55] But I did work there, and at the time I got a call from the State Hospital Association. They had gotten a request from a physician in Pennsylvania. They had put out a call to different parts of the hospital to ask if they knew anybody that understood hospitals and universities, because they needed somebody to do some consulting with them in Pittsburgh.

[10:20] The CEO here at the Hospital Association, Leo Greenawalt, recommended they call me, and I went back there. I could do that as an employee of the university. You can do so much time as consulting.

[10:36] I was still being paid by the University for doing absolutely nothing, best job. I went back [to Pittsburgh] and interviewed to help them with the contract negotiations, and they had told me that I could not be an applicant for the job and that was fine, because I said to Don , "Who wants to move to Pittsburgh, nobody?"

[11:02] I went back there and I did get the position. My role there was to negotiate, help them to negotiate their contract. It was a private hospital with a private board but it had all of the OB/GYN teaching facility for the university. They didn't have any other OB/GYN or women's health.

[11:23] I went back there and I interviewed. I would go back there for two or three days every now and then to do some consulting and to get the contract signed, and et cetera.

[11:40] While I was there, Don would join me and we would do some sightseeing, figure out what the area was like, and we really enjoyed it. To make a long story short, they did end up asking me if I would consider staying there, which I did.

[11:59] It was a small hospital that basically did OB when I was there. I was there 15 years and we developed the largest women's health hospital in the country. I created a research institute for women's health. When I started they had about \$600,000-700,000 in NIH grants and when I left we had over \$10 million. A big operation.

[12:29] I was running both of those organizations, which was easier for me because I had had that from the ground up. When I left they hired two CEOs to replace me and I retired from that position.

[12:43] In that position also, we were asked by our government in fact, to develop a western style birthing house in Moscow, Russia. It was just after Perestroika in the early 1990s. We went over to this hospital to develop a birthing center. At the time, we were only going to remodel the first floor of this birth house.

[13:09] That was the second largest hospital's complex in Moscow. We were just going to do that but the OB/GYN chief asked me if we could remodel the whole birth house because they didn't want to have two levels of care in the birth house.

[13:27] At the time, the healthcare was atrocious. The stories and the pictures that I could show you were horrible but the people were lovely. The medical people wanted the best for their people, so we had that in common with them.

[13:50] Also, they kept wanting a lot of the equipment because we had a lot of the equipment that they had read about, that they had not access to. But we had to do things like start with basic hand washing to decrease infections.

[14:11] It was a good opportunity and one of the major reasons I think we were very successful is I was in a large hospital and that's all we did was women's health, that went from just being OB/GYN to doing everything now.

[14:31] We had staff that we could send over and we had a lot of qualified staff that could be very helpful.

I probably was in Moscow 25 to 30 times. I went there a lot. One of the things that I learned when I first went over there was, I got a call once that I had to come. They had a major crisis and I had to come. I went over there on Friday night, I got on my 5: [14:38] 00 plane to go over there. I would go through Germany and then up to Moscow. I would get there usually around 3:00 in the afternoon.

[15:18] They had a meeting and I said, "What's the problem?" The downtown office had asked them to close the hospital and were they ready to close the hospital so they could start gutting it.

[15:39] They didn't know whether they should do that and they wanted me to tell them what to do. I said, "No, I can't do that. This is your hospital." One of the things that I learned quickly is that they were not used to making decisions, all of their orders came from the central office.

[16:02] They took me to another part of Moscow in a car, to show me a hospital that had been closed that was still sitting there empty with the windows out and everything because nothing ever happened. I made a commitment to them that we will finish this.

[16:17] Now, the last time I went back there, I went into the labor and delivery room and they have private rooms and there were two staff in there working with ultrasounds on a patient. There was a husband in one room where, helping his wife and it was all very foreign. And then, we were also then asked to extend our programs to the Ukraine and to different parts of Estonia and different parts we did education and we had 24 different educational sites in Russia.

[16:51] The Russian government, the Department of Health took our curriculum and it became the curriculum for the medical schools there for OB, and so, also in the Ukraine it was the same thing in the Ukraine. While I was in Pittsburgh, we developed a lot of close friends; it was a group of people from different professional-wise, which was always fun for me.

[17:27] We did, have done a lot of traveling all over the world. Don and I have had the opportunity to be on all of the seven continents, and so forth we have done a lot of traveling with our friends throughout the world. I retired in 2004. I kept telling my board I was going to retire, and they'd say "Can you just get this done," or "Can we just do that?"

[18:00] Finally, I gave the board. It was during that time, when the hospitals were merging in different areas and we became a formal part of the University of Pittsburgh Medical System. We were a part of a larger system. The research institute is independent, all the

faculty is member of the University of Pittsburgh Medical School, but the Research Institute...We kept independent so that we can control it. There is another reason, is that if the NIH money, the overhead that the University would get was not as much as we got from NIH.

[19:06] It was financially beneficial for us to keep the Research Institute separate, so we kept that. One day the CEO [of the UP Medical Center] called me out and he said, "How the hell did you do that?"

[19:20] And, I said, "What'd I do now?" He said, "I thought we got the Research Institute." I said, "You were at the same negotiation table as I was. No you didn't". The main reason was the finances, for the Research Institute. That was a very good experience.

[19:38] Now I'm retired. Don and I have been able to watch our children grow and have their successful careers, they're all successful, in different ways. All the girls have been career oriented and they all have families. They all have husbands, stable marriages. We have 10 grandchildren. I've been to an awful lot of soccer games. Life is very good.

Gordon: [20:16] Talk about the museum and how you became involved here.

Irma: [20:21] When I retired, I made a commitment to myself, nobody else, that I was not going to take any responsibilities for a year. I, over my years, I have served on numerous boards, national boards, local boards, community, symphony, all these different kinds of boards. [20:46] I've seen more people retire and they get so busy that they don't have time to do anything that they have not been able to do or wanted to do because they are so busy running around. I made a commitment to myself that I wasn't going to take on any responsibility for a year. It was amazing how many calls you get when you retire, because then people think you are available and have free time. I got calls from the state wanting me to go on the state Quality Assurance committee. I hate to say this but that almost gagged me.

[21:22] I'd been doing that forever, I don't want to do anything like that. I got a call from Marianne one day, asking me if I'd look at the board, and I said I'm not taking any responsibilities for a year. I made that commitment to myself and we had a nice chat. I got a call from one of the hospitals that didn't have a Hospital Administrator, and would I be interested in just doing an interim there, just all kinds of things. There was a college that needed an interim President. I didn't need any of them.

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Part IV

Irma: [0:01] It was so nice, I'd made that commitment to myself and I could tell people that and I actually stuck to it. That's my advice to people that are retiring. Your opportunity now is to focus on what you want to do and so I took that opportunity. [0:17] Then a year later, I figured if anybody wanted me they'll call me a second time and Marianne did. [laughs] My

year was up and she called me, it was almost to the day, she called me and asked me if I'd get involved.

[0:37] I was raised a very strong Scandinavian heritage. We as children, I remember in Williston, we never had our Christmas tree up until Christmas Eve afternoon. Dad brought it in. It went in the middle of the living room. We all decorated it. Our mother made dinner. And then we danced around the tree and sang songs and we had this ritual in our family.

[1:05] As we grew, all of us, my brothers and sisters, all went home Christmas eve. You could imagine with seven children and all of the grandchildren. Even my parents were living in Everett. They had a small home. My father was an administrator. After Crown, he was the administrator of the Home. Because they needed again to build and the church asked him to go and do that.

[1:35] He went out for a period of time. We were all on Christmas, everybody went home. We all piled in that house all the kids. To this day, our children, my parents' grandchildren, that was their big memory. It was going to grandma's house for Christmas Eve.

[1:55] We had a ritual there, that after dinner my father read The Christmas story or he would have one of the kids read The Christmas story, and we sang songs. It was always the same. On Christmas Eve, when we were younger, the last present we opened on Christmas Eve was from Tante Irma in Denmark.

[2:22] We've always had very close ties with her family in Denmark and Tante Irma, whom I'm named after. I'm named after two of my aunts, Tante Edith and Tante Irma. We would always wait to open Tante Irma's gift that was the very last gift in a special time.

[2:47] We were raised, my grandparents on the farm. They had a parlor that you never went in except on Sundays when guests would come. But my grandfather had the ritual also and candles on the tree and there was a pot of water sitting close by. He would go in there and he would light all the candles, and then we'd all sing a Danish song when we went in to the parlor for Christmas Eve.

Gordon: [3:21] What was the community like? Was it largely Scandinavian themselves?

Irma: [3:25] In Kenmare?

Gordon: [3:27] Yeah.

Irma: [3:31] I don't know what percentage would have been. There would have been a lot of Danish people there but, I really don't know what the percentages would be. My grandmother's family, the Hagedorns, they were also Danish. I had Danish all the way through. [3:57] I didn't take Danish until I went to the university. My Father and my mother both spoke Danish. They would speak Danish to each other but, my father didn't want us to learn Danish. One of my favorite pictures of my father would be...when he sat near his chair he read a lot. He had a big chair that had big arms on it.

[4:22] He had a dictionary that was huge and when he didn't know a word, he looked it up. He was told, I can remember this, as a young man, he was told by the President of the Lutheran church that... There was a Lutheran free church at that time. That he'd never be successful, because he didn't speak English well enough and he ended up to be a very successful...

Gordon: [4:50] I know who that is.

Irma: [laughs] We always had Danish stories told to us. My mother would tuck us into bed at night and she always would give us a kiss and say, "Så godt." I never thought of any God. When I went to the university, when I was taking Danish, I thought, oh my gosh, that's what she was saying, sleep well. [laughs] [4:53] Every night it was " Så godt." [5:30] Several of my family members from Denmark have visited my parents here and my father would take them on trips and so forth.

Gordon: [5:38] So, you met Dr. Hermer, didn't you?

Irma: [5:40] Oh yes. Yeah, I knew Dr. Hermer. In fact, Don and I were just in Denmark a couple summers ago and I visited with one of my cousins and family and I do communicate with some of them on the email. We are planning on taking another trip back there, because one of my cousins, Henning, is getting older. He is a very accomplished sailor and recognized in that world, very highly in Denmark.

Interviewer 2: [6:13] Would you go back to the Nordic Heritage Museum with Marianne maybe?

Irma: [6:20] Marianne invited me to come and I came on the board. I had been here before but, I didn't know much about it. I've always had a personal policy that when I come on board I don't say anything. I keep my mouth shut and learn as much as I can about the organization before I start talking or asking questions. [6:46] I came and observed for several months to try to figure out how the place was functioned. Then Marianne decided she was going to leave. They had already purchased the property and I was not involved in any of that. She'd asked if I would help with fundraising and I said yes, because I'd obviously done lot of that in my career.

[7:24] When we started talking about building and I suggested that we should have a Facilities Committee to help supervise the project...One of the other experiences I had as a hospital administrator, I built two hospitals and I built a research institute.

[7:42] I had had lots of experience working with architects and construction people, and financing buildings and things like that. So, I felt that the best way to do that is really to have somebody that is overseeing that from the board's point of view.

[7:57] That didn't go too easily but, finally, they did put in a Facilities Committee that all the board members didn't feel that was necessary but, it has turned out to really be a very, very beneficial to the organization.

[8:12] Then of course, Marianne left and I was involved with the recruitment of Eric. I was really basically just on the Fundraising Committee. Then they asked me to be on the Facilities Committee, which I helped with there.

[8:46] I've tried to say, where can I be helpful with the experience that I've had in my life and the things I've learned as an administrator. How can I help the organization is my goal. I tried to say, what can I do? That's my main goal, is to say what current skill do I have that I can help here. Not that it all needs to be fixed or anything like that.

[9:15] When Eric talks, he's also been an administrator before. He and I understand same languages. We sometimes bounce ideas off each other, and so forth. My goal has always just been to say, where can I be helpful and be supportive and help. That's the focus I've had.

[9:37] I'm obviously a strong financial person now, a little better than when I use to look up the words and books. I've had the good fortune in my life to have a lot of experiences. If I could use those to help something else, that's my purpose and goal.

[10:04] I was the Vice President, wasn't I, and then they asked me if I would chair the board. That's been a wonderful experience, too, to represent the organization. That time is coming to a close I think this year, because we have limits on that, which is always nice. I think they do that so lots of people don't need to see the same face all the time.

Gordon: [10:25] Really?

Irma: [10:26] Yeah, we have term limits on the board. This would I think be my last year. When I first came to the museum before Christmas or basically on Heritage, that's what I heard anyway. I don't know if that's true or not, that was more perception. [10:56] I was thinking about what is happening. Like at that time [inaudible] was so big into the telephone and cell phone thing. When you think about what's happening in the Scandinavian countries and the whole development of the green environment, et cetera and et cetera that it's being picked up and windmills in Denmark are of the waters and so forth.

[11:17] I was thinking to myself one day. I was sitting and listening in a board meeting and I thought, how do you incorporate that into today's museum, because that is going to be the history? That's when I started asking questions that were not always too popular maybe.

[11:40] The other thing is how do we get the young people involved, because they are the future, and our board has been composed of a lot of retired. It's not that they don't have value but, if you can get the younger people so they are committed, because they are going to be the future of the place.

[12:08] One of the things I've learned is that a lot of the younger people, they don't have time. But, as a young professional I knew how important it was, that when I got a new board on, that I was a member of a new Board on my vitae. When they started looking at me for a higher job, that they could see that I had experience on Boards and that I provided

something into the community, et cetera, community involvement. It was very helpful for me.

[12:43] Younger people, if they can see that, too... That's important if put they have interest in professional growth, career growth. Try to give them opportunities.

[12:54] We've have the good fortune of getting some good young people. There are a lot of them, but these kids, they are kids. They are very busy. They have young families, they've got to get them to soccer, they're working hard at their own business, et cetera. That's why we restructured our Board a little so that we could try to get them in, and get them over with, and get them out. We could also be attractive to the younger people.

[13:25] I feel very positive about the organization, the growth of the organization. The fact that during these very difficult times, we haven't gotten stagnant. We've grown. That to me is just amazing.

[13:46] The other thing is that we've managed our budget every year so it's positive. I think restructuring our building program right now to phase the project was something that I could offer because I've done that with a hospital.

[14:06] One year, we had a \$225 million hospital project going, but we had to phase it because reimbursement to the health care system went down the tubes. I started saying, "Couldn't we do some phasing, and get this thing going?" Because that in itself, I think, will excite people and it will be easier for us.

[14:31] The other thing I've learned about the Nordic community is they are a little doubting. They want to wait. Is this really going to happen? The other thing is that they live in Norway, and for example, you want a new museum, you just ask the government to build it. Philanthropy is not a big part of their life, so that's a different challenge than I've had to work with.

[15:09] I give them a bad time now and then. I feel very confident. There's no doubt in my mind that we'll do this. It's going to happen.

[15:20] The volunteers in this museum are outstanding. I used to count the hours. I don't know if we do this here. I've always got to ask Eric about that. If you put the volunteer hours on a piece of paper and then divide it by 20,80 work year, you see how many FTE's. I could tell I haven't had to hire X number of FTE's because people are contributing that. That's worth this much money, because this is a huge amount money when you put the average salary of a hospital employee onto that. It always ended up.

[16:03] Yeah, it's amazing.

Gordon: [16:07] Well that's great I think we have something more?

Mari-Ann: [16:12] I just want to thank you for your involvement in the museum. It has been so wonderful having you on the Board and as our leader of the Board.

Irma: [16:22] Well, thank you.

Mari-Ann: [16:24] You just emanate confidence and the qualities that we absolutely need and love.

Irma: [16:34] That's because I played with the boys when I was little.

Mari-Ann: [16:36] Yeah, exactly. [laughter]

Mari-Ann: [16:40] Thank you for sharing your story with us.

Gordon: [16:41] Yes, thank you.

Irma: [16:43] You're welcome.

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