

Nordic American Voices  
Nordic Museum

Interview of Solvi Barber  
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Interviewers: Brandon Benson; Marjorie Graf

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**Brandon Benson:** [0:01] This is an interview for the Nordic American Voices oral history project. Today is the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, 2017, and we'll be interviewing Solvi Barber. We are at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood. My name is Brandon Benson, and assisting me is Marjorie Graf. Welcome, Solvi.

**Solvi Barber:** [0:22] Thank you.

**Brandon:** [0:22] Could you start by telling us your full name, where you were born, and when you were born?

**Solvi:** [0:28] My name is Solvi Barber. I was born in 1963 in Bergen.

**Brandon:** [0:35] Great. Thank you very much. Growing up in Bergen, did you know your grandparents?

**Solvi:** [0:42] I met my grandfather. All the other grandparents were dead. He passed away when I was five or six years old.

**Brandon:** [0:54] What did your grandfather do for work?

**Solvi:** [0:58] He was a fisherman, and an owner of *fiske* [Norwegian word].

**Brandon:** [1:07] Did you ever spend time on the boat?

**Solvi:** [1:09] No, not his boat. But of course, my uncle's boats. But they were not commercial fishermen. They just fished for food. So, we lived in Bergen, but my family comes from Austevoll. Of course, that is the biggest fishing kommune in the country. Every weekend, we went there, and later we built a house there, in 1975. My mom and dad built a house. We had a cabin, or summer house, and we could go there every weekend. When I was little, we even went to school on Saturdays, so in the beginning, it was only Sundays. But later, it became having the weekend, leaving on Friday, and coming back on Sunday night.

**Brandon:** [2:06] Do you know anything about your other grandparents? The ones that you didn't meet?

**Solvi:** [2:11] Yes. I can start with my mother. She comes from Austevoll, which is outside Bergen. She was the second-oldest of seven kids. Her dad was Anders [unintelligible], who was the fisherman owning this *fiske* [Norwegian word]. My grandmother was Britt Anna. She originally came from Rogaland— Haugesund. I never met her. She passed away in 1958. She was very beautiful and hardworking. Obviously, at that time, you needed to do that. My mother was born in 1920. So, she was 43 when she had me. Therefore, I have grandparents that go back into the other century.

[3:28] The thing is, obviously hard work, and so on, are facts that she passed away fairly early. But it was also circumstances that happened. They lost their older brother, Ando, when the fishing boat, [Norwegian name], went down further north. Later, they said the reason for that might have been that they took the wrong path when the big storm came. There were a lot of young men that unfortunately drowned that day. My uncle (who of course, I never met), had actually made it to some rocks, but he couldn't make it, and he died. So, they brought the coffin home, and they had told the family that they shouldn't have a look, because, of course, they had repaired him, but the hands were still ruined from trying to survive.

[4:50] They did, and I think my grandmother couldn't... that was a sorrow that was hard to overcome. That was, of course, a part of that coastal life, and a heritage that goes back all the way for thousands of years, I would say. You have the female taking care of the farm, and also rowing, and fishing for food, and doing all of these things. And you are having to deal with maybe losing your husband or your children, because of how it is, because it's so brutal— the weather conditions.

[5:41] So, that was that. Then, the second-youngest boy, Lars, was a lawyer on ships. He had just gotten his education. And he got a job on a ship called *Black Eagle*. They went all over the world, and they went to New York. I guess there was something wrong, and I think he tried to fix it, but all of a sudden, he disappeared, and he has never been found. He was missing, and he was looked for by Interpol, but they never found him.

[6:25] Later, I found letters he sent to my mother, saying he had bought a car, and he had bought a refrigerator in America that actually came, and they stood for a long time, having never been used. I actually got one of them, and used it. It was good quality. It worked for a long, long time, even though it was bought in the mid-fifties. They never told the mother he was missing, so she wouldn't find that out, because they thought in itself would probably... She wouldn't survive it. It was so hard on the whole family, because he was the love of everybody.

[7:18] Of course, in Norway, when somebody disappears, and things go on, there are rumors, and there are all these things that just get totally out of hand. There were all sorts of rumors, but nobody actually found out what happened. They think it was something political with the ship, and that he had found out, since he was the lawyer. That was the theory, but we don't know. He might have fallen, or somebody killed him, or he got memory loss. We don't know.

[8:08] My mother was born in 1920, so she was 20 years old when the war came. She was still on the farm, and the farm was actually occupied by the Germans towards the end of the war. Of course, they were very strong resistance people. My mother's cousin was hidden. He was with Shetlands Larsen, and he was a big hero. He has the highest medals for his contribution in the war. He and one other person were personally responsible for making sure that Bryggen in Bergen didn't blow up. And he was hiding in my family's boathouse— *naust*. The Germans were looking for him. He

later got arrested, but he survived the war.

[9:27] Also, since she was a young woman, and all of a sudden they had all these German soldiers in their house, her father was strict to make sure that the girls were protected. There were three girls. They couldn't participate as much as they maybe wanted to, but they definitely played a role in helping out, hiding him, and making sure that they were on the right side. I think that was very much a part of my mother's life as it progressed. They had sort of taken those years from them, in a way.

**Marjorie:** [10:21] Were they deprived of food, also?

**Solvi:** [10:23] No, because they were quite... There were two things about my grandfather. He was the strongest man in Austevoll, and everybody says so. And they had money. They were not rich-rich, but they had money. They were not deprived of anything. Everything was perfect. They washed the table, and everybody sat, and there were the aunts and uncles, and all the kids, so it was a big family, the extended family. Obviously, they had all this hard work. Everything has to be clean. Everything has to be neat. Everything has to be presentable.

[11:15] As I understand, my grandfather was very strict. My mother definitely thought he was way too strict, especially with her, because she was the first girl, and she also looked like Ingrid Bergman, in a way. She was very beautiful, and she was a very happy go-lucky kind of girl, and obviously popular. Later in life, when I meet older people... because I have done films in Austevoll. And they say, "Oh, are you the daughter? You don't look like her." And definitely not. Maybe a little bit more when you get older. You can see it in the pictures that she was extraordinary.

[12:05] Obviously, that also made a little bit of her destiny. Later, after the war, she went to Guernsey. She stayed there for five years. She worked at the hotel in Guernsey, called the Old Government Hotel, where all the movie stars came— *Gone With the Wind*, Vivien Leigh was there, and actually gave her clothes. My mother was the best storyteller I've ever met. She could make you laugh or cry in ten seconds, with everybody. She just had that thing. She was just amazing, I would say.

[12:51] Her mom was very nice. That's what she told me. When the dad sent them all up, no food, because he was very strict, then she would come after midnight when he was sleeping, with a tray with food. But you couldn't say anything. I feel I have a little bit of that. If I think that the kids were treated a little too strict, then I will maybe do something that nobody can know about. And I think I got that from my grandmother. Because my mother was not like that. She was strict, but she was very fair. And I don't have any siblings, so I can't say she treated me too strict. Everything had to be super perfect. Everything had to be clean. The house was just incredible.

[13:58] And because she had been in England, we had a lot of antiques. She loved beautiful things. She was the best bargainer ever. She would go into a store, and she would just say, "Oh, that table..." A beautiful table, a 100-year-old table, just absolutely beautiful. And she would find something wrong with it, and she would go, "Are you seriously selling this thing?" She would walk out, and she had bought the table for nothing. I was so embarrassed. How can you? Still, today, I am uncomfortable with that kind of thing. That's not good. That's not very Norwegian, in a way. But she was really, really good at it. I guess it was the Haugesund part of her. [Laughter]

[14:56] I can talk about her later, maybe, if you want to know about my dad's parents first. So, they come from between Lyngstad and Eide in Nordmøre, which is close to Stott and the ocean. Again, fishing family. Not as well off as my mother's family. Five kids. My dad was the youngest. I never met those grandparents. My grandfather's name was Olaf Lindseth, and my grandmother was Anna Lindseth. She also passed away before him. They had cows and fish. Same thing— they also had other family members living there. So, it was an extended family, coastal life, really hard work for women.

[16:15] I can say my dad was the nicest person I have ever met. And that is not only because he's my dad, because everybody says that. Just genuinely really nice, and didn't talk bad about anybody, except in politics. He was strongly opinionated about politics, but that's different. Personally, he was just a genuinely nice, generous man. But he was also very much a part of the culture where you don't show your emotions. That typical Norwegian sort of... You're not supposed to talk about it.

[17:01] His grandfather, my great-grandfather, also was a fisherman. My grandfather, my father's father, was in the same boat. And they [Norwegian word]. That means the boat went down. My grandfather tried to rescue his father, and he also held his hand, but he had to let go. And that also was very much a part of this guilt thing that I think goes through families, even if you have never met them. It just sort of sifts through different things. But obviously they're also from the coast.

[17:59] When I went and did my senior graduation film for my film school, I went on a fishing boat. It was [Norwegian word], which was a big trawler like they have in Seattle. We went to the North Sea. They were going for *sild*— herring, in the North Sea, really far out. When they started to fish, they were shouting, because everything has to happen at one moment. It's a lot of emotion, and sort of passion. I could just feel thousands of years of history going right through me. I knew exactly what that was. Of course, I had never been on a big fishing boat before, but I definitely knew everything about that, even though I had never been close to it, just through the culture and who you are.

[19:10] You have to live in the moment, and you have to understand that moment, just like in film. You have to understand that moment, because you throw that net, and if you miss it, you missed it. If you don't take precaution about the weather, it's going to go down. Somebody, for real, is dying. That, I think, is something we don't talk about with heritage that much, but I think it's very, very important, because it fills you, and you can't stop it.

[19:48] When you go to another country, or you go into other circumstances, all of a sudden you're not surrounded by people that think the same. You can even say going from Bergen to Oslo, all of a sudden, you meet a lot of inlanders— longtime farmers. I have made films about this. I have talked to people that have Ph.Ds in this. I know, obviously, now, it is more than just emotion. It is real.

[20:17] Obviously, if you come from where you are a farmer, and you have big lands, disaster can also happen there. But you have to long-term plan everything. You have to plant the seeds, prepare the earth. You have to do all that, and then you harvest. Obviously, everything is slower. You have to be more patient. It's not that you have to be in that moment, now it's happening. Not the shouting, and all that energy that happens. When you become like that, but you're not in the circumstances, it can be weird.

[21:07] We also have to remember, especially where my dad came from... My dad had very black hair, because earlier, 100, 200, 300 years before, and more, you had all these European ships. You had the Portuguese and the Spanish and everybody who came up the coast. Sometimes, especially where my dad came from, Stott, and further up in Hestvika, the ships went down. Of course, some of these young boys survived. And it wasn't like, "Okay, I'll catch SAS going back." They didn't go back. They stayed, and they met a girl. All of a sudden you had a Mediterranean temper and culture, and all this, into the culture.

[22:01] So, that is also a part of it. You have that foreign... The exchange of culture, and being close to Bergen, and all this international contact that you had, that was definitely a European city, or town. That, of course, also plays a part in the grandparents... they were all fishermen. They were all big and strong, and had to be all of that. But at the same time, you have to be on, and you have to carry that pain. You have to face it. So, I think that is very important if you talk about the coastal people. I do think that when you talk to all the fishermen here in Seattle that have come, I do think that is something that should be talked more about.

[23:02] I think, yes, the success, of course, and the adventure, and all that. But if you didn't come from that— if you didn't come from those circumstances, you couldn't have done it. That, you have to have in you. If you are very patient, very low-key, you can't actually do it, I think. Yes, you can do it— I'm not saying that you can't learn, or can't be taught, but I don't think you can do it to the extent that some of these guys have done it. I do think that you have that in you. Otherwise, it's at least a lot harder to do it. These interview that you're doing with those guys— I think it's very important to think about that.

**Brandon:** [23:56] Thanks. You've covered your mother's parents and your father's parents. So, what about your mother?

**Solvi:** [24:04] She is a film in itself. I wanted to interview her. I never did, on film. That is my big, big regret. I put it off, and she didn't like to be on camera later. One reason is, of course, she used to look like she used to look, and she didn't like getting old. So, she felt shy about it. But she looked great. There was nothing wrong with that. Later, when I made a film about Edvard Munch, she actually had a part. She liked it, when she went to the movie theater and saw it. She liked it.

[24:47] She was a very interesting person. As I said, the best storyteller I ever met. She worked as a night nurse in the mental institution in Bergen, Sandviken Sykehus, for 37 years. She actually worked past 70, because she was loved by all the patients and the staff. She had natural respect for other people, and she had a kindness. She was stern, too. She was no wussy, you know. She came across as strong, but she had a big heart, and she was kind, and very respectful. She had this connection that you could understand.

[25:54] There is this saying... they use it now in this new TV series in Norway for the youth. You never know what burden... Or, everybody is carrying a burden you don't know anything about. Be kind, always. It's almost like that was her thing. Therefore, also the patients and other people would always open up to her, and talk to her, because they knew that she would never spill anything. She would only be honest in her replies. And she was funny. It was just so fun, growing up, I would say, even though I didn't have siblings. It was that humor, and she was a good cook. My dad was cooking most of the time, though. She was just an incredible human being, so it was a privilege to be

around her, growing up with her.

[27:15] My dad got really sick with asthma. His story is that he was super smart. He was so smart that the schoolteacher came to the house and said, “You have five kids, and this is the youngest, but if you send any of them off to the university, this will be the one.” But they couldn’t afford it. So, he didn’t [go to the university]. He started to work. This area is known for stonemason work, and all the gravestones, and sculptures, and all this that goes with it. He was then working in a quarry. He was 19 when the war started.

[28:01] Before the war started, he got into an accident. A big boulder fell on his foot. He was also a soccer player. He was very talented. He was in Molde Sjukehus, with the cast, and the foot up. Then the Germans bombed the hospital. Everybody evacuated except him. So, he was left in the hospital when the explosions went over. He had to stay. I think that also was a big part of him. He hid it well, but I do think that shook him for life, in a way.

[28:57] Then, of course he got out. His brothers were also in that industry, and his sister married the biggest factory owner. I shouldn’t say factory, because in those days, they didn’t have machines to do it. They were all doing it by hand inside factories. So, you had a lot of dust. And of course, he started young. When I was ten, he was definitely diagnosed with severe asthma, and he couldn’t work anymore. So, you didn’t know when you came home if an ambulance would be outside. It was severe. It wasn’t just a little thing. It was very severe.

[29:51] But he lived until he was 72, which was incredible. That’s because he had a very strong heart. So did my mom. That’s why he could still survive. He was so supportive. He was super smart. If you had a quiz on TV, or something like that, 20 questions, or whatever, he would always know all the answers. Music, he would know the answers. So, of course, it was almost like a privilege.

[30:27] I never even considered not being good at school— with him, who was not even able to go. Obviously, today, it’s hard to have new kids living in America. I have a girl, and she is like that. But the boy is like, “Well, it’s okay.” And they never said that I should do better. They were always happy with whatever I did. Of course, I did well, I must say. I wasn’t like him, because it didn’t come all natural. I had to actually work. I had to study. If I didn’t study, I didn’t know it.

[31:17] My son is like my dad. For a long time, he didn’t need to work. He had to just work a little bit, and he’d do well. Today, they don’t even want to put in that, right? And then you go crazy, more crazy than my parents. So, that’s interesting. It’s almost like... I wish I was more chill, like they were. It’s hard. I feel that it’s disrespectful to them, subconsciously, that they don’t take it as serious as they should. Because [my dad] didn’t get that chance.

[31:54] He had huge hands, but he could repair jewelry with the tiniest little things. He could just do it with his hands. Of course, he was a stonemason, and he was the last stonemason in Norway who still went out to the... Even when he was sick, he would do it personally. If you are out on the coast, and you have these... That’s my childhood, because I went with him. We would go in small boats all the way out to the islands, and there would be a cemetery that would go almost into the ocean, and a little chapel. There would be this stone that needed to be... You can imagine the weather. It couldn’t be too windy, and it couldn’t be raining. But sometimes it would start to rain.

[32:54] So, I would cover him as he was doing it. He was an artist. It was beautiful. But it was also very meticulous. It's math. You have to know where to put it, and all this. And then you put a new name on it. At that time, they wouldn't take the old grave monuments. They wouldn't take them into there, so that's why. The critical thing was when you put the gold in, because then it couldn't be blowing. I would hold it. It was real gold that he had to put into the thing.

[33:32] And of course, that is a kind of bond that develops when you are needed, in a way, but you're still a kid. So, there is a lot of experience. We got to eat cake and coffee. Of course, he was so nice, he would hardly take any money, and my mother would go... You know. He was very modest that way. But obviously, my mother made him take money. [Laughter] But he would have done it without, just because he could see the situation. Most of the time they were not super rich, but sometimes.

[34:25] His best friend, who became the best friend of the family, also worked in the same thing. But he didn't get the lung problems, and when I was little, I went to see them. Of course, today, there is no one left, because he was the last one that went out. And today, everything is done by machines. Of course, you have the craft, those who make monuments, sculptures, and stuff. But you don't have that occupation anymore. That's gone. I have all his tools. Everything. His work bench. Everything is still there.

**Marjorie:** [35:13] Do you know how your parents met?

**Solvi:** [35:15] Yes. My dad had an aunt who worked at the mental hospital. That was his mother's sister, Inge. She had a flat between the hospital and where I grew up. So, she decided that my mother probably was a good candidate for this nephew who was living with her and working. He had started to work. But he didn't have a girlfriend at that time.

[35:52] Obviously, she thought my mother... seeing her in the hospital, in that environment, I can just imagine that she thought she would be a good catch. So, she decided to invite my mom to tea and cake. She had vaguely heard that there was a nephew. I don't think that was mentioned much. I think my mother was very surprised that there was this nephew guy showing up. So, he drove her home, and that was it.

**Brandon:** [36:37] That's great. I had a question about your mother working night shift. What hours were those? Was she around during the day, and your father around at night?

**Solvi:** [36:47] Yeah. Seven to seven. But it was out at Sandviken, and we lived in Minde. If she took the bus, it would be 45 minutes from when she left the house until she would be there. If he would drive her, it would be maybe 35 minutes. He drove her quite a bit. But it was seven to seven. No sleep. Hardcore. When they started... I don't know how much you know about mental institutions in Norway, in Bergen, but this was a big one. When she started, they were all in wards. There were no single rooms, or anything like that. There were several beds, and they would all be belted. They didn't have the drugs, so they would all be strapped down. They were very, very sick. So, she told about that.

[37:52] My dad's aunt— before she worked at the mental institution, she worked at the leper hospital in Bergen. I have pictures of them out on the sea, on a boat with the leper patients and her

having a day out. Then, she came to the hospital. She also had incredible stories. And that's how I grew up. I grew up under the kitchen table, listening to all these stories from the night shift that she would maybe share with girlfriends or my dad. She sort of vented a little bit about what had happened. Of course, they were just incredible stories. She would always be on the side of the patient, but she would come home bruised severely. She almost got killed by a knife. A lot of serious things happened as well. But she was just really, really good at it.

[39:14] Of course, the painful stories were often about other nurses that didn't have that respect. They were kind of cruel. Somebody had gotten new clothes, and then the nurse would say, "Take it off, it's not really yours." Something like that, that breaks their heart. That's all they have, and they were so happy. In situations like that, my mother would definitely risk her job in telling that was completely not necessary, to put it mildly. She didn't shout, but she definitely chewed them out like there was no tomorrow. When she said something like that, there was no doubt.

[40:07] I got a job before I was 18 at the mental hospital. And all my aunts were nurses in different capacities, or in healthcare, and all my cousins. On my father's side, they were all teachers, and on my mother's side, they were all in healthcare. So, I sort of assumed that I would be, too— probably a physical therapist, or a doctor, or something. Then I took that job. First of all, I got the job because I was her daughter. And there were expectations that I would be her daughter. Of course, being 17, and all of a sudden you're in this mental institution, it's totally different than having heard about it, actually being there, and feeling that this was actually not safe.

[41:12] But it was funny, too. I was washing the floor. This guy was over two meters tall. Really big. There was a door into where they keep the brooms and buckets and everything for washing. So, the door was open. I was just washing outside it, and he passed me, and he just did like this, and I flew into the thing, and fell in. it was just so comical. The whole scene was just super funny. But of course, it was scary when you are young like that, and you see a lot of things.

[41:58] I just realized that I didn't have to do it, but I did do it for years, there, and I traveled a lot. At a different hospital, I had a horrible experience. Then I knew that when I walked home that was the last day. I cannot do it. I'm so happy I don't have to do it. I can do something completely different. I don't have to be in healthcare. Oh, my God. I don't need to have these hours. As I grew older, first it was seven, and then it was eight, and then it was nine. Those two hours are actually a lot, because you can't sleep. That was another thing. I also tried night shift. I was young, and it was brutal. It was really brutal. I don't know how she did it. But she slept. She always had breakfast.

[42:59] When I woke up... that's one of the things. The radio is the smell of bacon and eggs. Just this warm feeling— her voice, or she was laughing, or something like that. And you want in life, I think, to recreate it, but you can't, because you have to create something new, something other than that. You cannot do it. Of course, we didn't live in a big house. It was all sort of cozy. Of course, everything was perfect. But that is sort of... I want to go back. I wish you could wake up one more time like that.

**Brandon:** [43:47] So, you had to find something else to do, because you made your decision. Where did you go from there?

**Solvi:** [43:54] Yeah. So, this is important. Bergen is Bergen, so there are a lot of cool people in

Bergen. My best friend was the minister's daughter. That was a privilege, because we could just say that she was allowed to do something. Then, of course, since the minister was giving permission, then it would be okay. We would go to her and say, "My parents said yes." Then we would do things.

[44:35] When we were in high school, we decided that we were going to... We were very young. I can't say exactly how old we were, but we were young. We were definitely not 18, to put it that way. Probably 16. We were saying we were going on a bike trip. We didn't have any gear, or anything like that. We were going to stay in a tent. We had a tent, and all that. And they let us go. They actually let us go. I don't know how well you know Bergen, but we biked to Os, and then we were exhausted.

[45:23] She had spent one year at a high school in Iowa, so she knew English. This was the year she came back. We might have actually been 17, or just about to be 17. Then, we decided to be Americans. We started to hitchhike. A trailer was going to Stavanger, so we decided to go to Stavanger. We just pulled it off so beautifully. It was so funny. So, that was where my long career as practical joker started, really. We had done a little bit before, but this, we kept it a week. There were no cell phones, so we could control everything. They didn't know where we were.

[46:21] We were in tents, talking to boys who thought they were meeting two American girls. They would speak Norwegian—"Who do you like the most?" They would sit outside our tent. My best friend Liv is so funny. I would put a sock in my mouth so they wouldn't hear how much I was laughing when she would go on about life in America, and how many cars they had, and what color they were. Of course, she had been there, but of course she didn't live like that. A mansion. There was no end to our beautiful life in America. That was very entertaining.

[47:05] It ended with... we rode in taxis in Stavanger for free, for one week, as American girls. We were just famous. We told the SAS person someone had died, and they took us for free, with our bikes, to fly from Stavanger from Bergen with SAS. The only other biking we did was to bike from the airport. We didn't tell anyone for years. This is everybody's favorite story. There is a lot more. It's very entertaining. That was the start of our career where did traveling, and practical jokes, and the whole story thing. Of course, I had my mom, too.

[48:00] I was set on studying physical therapy and psychobiology in Iowa, where my girlfriend had already been. I went to Decorah, Iowa, to Luther College, because I had done both... I had actually graduated in both social sciences and science, and I had done some more, so I could actually take the senior courses in psychobiology. So, I did. I was very set on studying that. I went over to Sleep and Dream. He was a top ten professor. Moorcroft—he was one of the top ten in the States. He was really interesting.

[49:11] It was absolutely wonderful. I had the best year of my life, I think, being at Luther College. It was very secure with all the Nordic students, but at the same time, it was America, and a lot of people from Malta, and different parts of the world. I had just thrown in an application for going to [Norwegian word], which is the Third World Studies in Stavanger. It is very, very hard to get into. I just sent an application. And there was a boy. The boy was super cute. So, I thought maybe I'd just stay, because he still had a year left, or a little bit more than a year.

[50:15] But then all of a sudden, I got a letter that I had been accepted, and I was supposed to be

there in three days. So, I made the decision. Hard decision to leave the cute boy and pursue a life in telling other stories. Of course, I didn't quite know it, yet. But I'd had some experiences at Luther where I was asked to do two things—a presentation of Amnesty International. It was Moorcroft who was actually involved in that.

[50:50] So, I did slides and a live performance, dance. The cute boy was playing. And people were lining up to get involved with Amnesty International. It was something I did, even if I didn't know what I was doing, that made an emotional connection with people, maybe. And I really enjoyed doing it, and there was something there.

[51:30] Also, I had a friend called Namona. She was from Namibia. We started a Namibian group at the college. At that time, South Africa still was occupying Namibia. And when we were there, her sister was shot. She was killed. So, that became very close. Going off to the Third World Studies was also part of that. My thesis paper was on Namibia and the path to freedom. Later, I made a film called *The Long Way Home*, where I follow five women and their way, two of them, from America, back.

[53:39] But way before that, I did the Third World Studies. I had just come from America. We went to Sri Lanka. Then I did extra, so I could do the Ph.D. Then Liv and I met up again, and for almost two years, we just traveled all over the world, filming women and coming back with a documentary. At that time, there was no Internet. So, I did journalism by letter. I had to do it quick.

[Unintelligible], it was called, where you do a correspondence course in journalism. So, it was like a crash course. [Laughter] Okay, now I know how to interview, what to ask. So, we went out on this incredible journey. Six months in India. Over a month in Nepal. We had no connections. We were 21. We were gone for almost two years.

[53:56] We went back, and we showed the material. We got the money from [unintelligible], which is the help organization. And we got money to also distribute it. People really liked it. We went to schools, and organizations, and showed it, and talked about it. It was the first film, really, that showed people from the Third World... This sounds really crazy now... where people were smiling. They were not just very thin, and crying, and so on. Of course, those things were still there, but just to show a different story.

[54:41] So, it made a lot of press, and good things, actually. We used that film to make it into the film school. We did that. Before it was even over, I was asked to do a film about the Norwegian Peace Corps in Africa, and we did that. Then we started a film company that was based on content, and that was unheard of. You don't make a company based on content. You make it based on that you have the equipment. At that time, you couldn't go out and buy a little camera and start a company. That was a million kroner-plus, just to start, if you were serious about being a production company.

[55:42] So, we started at the other end. Obviously, that paid off, because we were just a little bit early in the curve. I come from Bergen, and I have a big mouth, and I was saying that I didn't like these films in the museums. I think you could do so much better. "Okay. What would you do?" And all of a sudden, we were commissioned to do the films for the Olympics in Lillehammer. [Unintelligible], who is now out at Bygdøy, he was then the director of the museum.

[56:34] So, we took the challenges. We made the films. Of course, that was the first time we worked with the museums. But that led to doing partly independent films. I did Edvard Munch *Dance of Life*. That is an independent film from the Film Institute Support, and also Nordic, and also NRK. That was sold all over the world, and traveled also with the film festivals. Of course, I have done a lot of shorts. I have done 28. I think I was counting documentaries. And I have worked with so many museums, and exhibitions. What we did was, we started to do exhibitions from a storytelling point, different than being the architect that's thinking about all this. It was all about the story.

[57:45] So, that was basically how that was all involved. There have been so many projects. There has been [unintelligible] with Bjorn Bjornsson. There has been the ski museum, and Knut Hamsun. There has been the Nobel Peace. Of course, there have been independent films done about how the landscape reflects the culture, and how we think, and how has that changed. That was a huge project. It took years, and I was very happy with the result. All those people are now gone, but the stories are still there, and now, of course, the changes are even more. But we caught it in that in-between, where the old and the new were still there, together, but the old was about to die.

**Brandon:** [58:53] So, timing is everything.

**Solvi:** [58:54] Timing is everything. That was very good timing. I have made a lot of impact. I have heard that people have been very inspired by it. TV took it. Some colleagues that I had at the time have gone on to make many, many films in that genre, or that theme, in NRK, and have had a lot of success. Then we did films about the old fishermen, and the old ways, up in Lofoten, and Hamarøy area. There is so much, it's hard. Iron Age, Stone Age, Vikings. All the big ones in literature and painting. I have been privileged to tell those stories.

[59:56] I'm here because I met a man who was American, in one of my short films that was actually for Culture Bergen 2000. They didn't only invite artists who were painters or dancers. They actually invited filmmakers to make short films that would go one month in the cinema before the features. They took 12 directors from Bergen, and then they asked us to work with a list of writers from Bergen. I can tell you, I was thinking I was not going to do this. This is so boring. I was reading... there were a lot of people I didn't want to do a film about. Just that it didn't inspire me to do anything.

[1:00:53] But then I read Frode Grytten, and I called him. I think it was eleven at night. I said, "Okay. You're on the list. Do you want to work? Has anybody called you?" "No." And of course, later he won the Nordic literary prize. He is, of course, very much deserving to win all the prizes he has, and doing all the things he has done. He came from Odda.

[1:01:17] The good thing is, the film about the old and new... One of the interview guys there, he lived in a house. He was deceased. But we had access to the room, and one of his friends was playing the old man in Bergen. My film was called *Eighty Degrees East of Birdland*, which was from Frode Grytten, from Odda, which is where I made the first documentary, and also where we shot this short film that got nominated for an Amanda. It was definitely very successful. I think at that time, it was probably the most-sold short.

[1:02:06] It was so universal, a very simple little film about an American jazz band that met this driver that says he's from Britain, and he says he knows Norwegian. Of course, he doesn't, and he's

completely lost, and then they find this old man, and he doesn't know English. The interpreter, or the driver, misunderstands, but he gets them in, because he is going to the older persons' home, a retirement home. So, he is waiting outside, and then they come in. Through music, they find some connection. So, that was very simple. My husband was one of the musicians in the film, so I accosted him. That's how it happened.

**Brandon:** [1:03:06] Do you work out of Norway now?

**Solvi:** [1:03:08] Yes, I actually do. I'm actually almost there as much as here. That's where I work. I do a little bit here. Mostly, though, it's hard. I do consulting on films. I am actually consulting on a film now. They asked me to direct it. I haven't decided yet. Maybe I'll do it. It's hard to work, especially in Seattle, to break in, even if you have a lot of experience. There is so much talent here, it's ridiculous. Here, it would definitely be the right place at the right time. It's nothing about being better, or worse, or you can't do it, but there is just so much great talent, young people coming up, hungry, and all that.

[1:04:09] Yeah, it's humbling, but at the same time, I do think you learn some important lessons. You know what you know. It's good enough that you can do things. You still can do it. It doesn't matter where you learned it. You still know it. You have to be confident that you'll do your thing, and it will be the best that you can do. And if people like it, then it's good. But not to think I'm going to be the best, ever.

**Brandon:** [1:04:50] Visiting Norway, has it changed a lot from when you grew up?

**Solvi:** [1:04:54] Yes, of course. But I go there so much. It has changed a lot. Also because I was so close to the old, I have skipped a generation. My mother could have been my grandmother, and I could have been the grandmother to my children. Therefore, it is almost like I am so close to the old time, and the old values, and all that. Those, of course, are changing. It's much faster. It's getting more like America. But at the same time, there are some fundamental differences. I don't know if you've had people talk about that, but I think they're very important differences.

[1:05:54] When I first came here, I actually had a sabbatical. So, the first year, I was here. I worked with the Norse foundation— Nordmanns Forbundet. I met a lot of people, and I loved their stories. I made a little exhibition called "Somebody's Grandma," that was here. Because I do love it, and I do think it's important to take it seriously. A lot of Norwegians... oh, ha ha, they have gnomes and *julenisse* in the window in June, and they're eating lutefisk like they don't know any better. All these things that you easily can make fun of in America. Stereotypes of America.

[1:06:52] But I think it's very important to understand that the Norwegian-American culture is a culture of its own. It is not Norwegian, and it's not American. It's Norwegian-American, and it has its own values. It has taken some of this, and some of this, and it has merged. In the preservation of the culture, it's hard, because you have America right there— strong, and very influential. And you have the old Norway. In that culture, some people paint a romantic picture of old Norway, and what they think Norway is, and that's not true.

[1:07:40] You have to understand, like I said, the values of hard work; the values of cleanliness, the values of respect of other people. The kindness. Especially on the coast, the "here and now," and

the “yes.” At least that part of Norway, it’s a thousands of years kind of thing. So, that doesn’t go away that easily. The lutefisk— that’s just expressions of conditions, how to preserve fish at a certain point. Lefse, that is... All these things are very important. But the nostalgia of your grandmother making it— the sounds, and all the memories that come by seeing it— I can only go to the Viking place, and have the sandwiches to get that feeling of home, in a way. But that must not be mistaken for Norway, also as it was when I grew up.

[1:08:56] When I grew up... I might say something wrong now. But I have had some experiences having my kids in Christian schools here, and I have been shocked. When I grew up... And remember, I am not young. I went to school in the seventies. And we were taught in school... It was a state school, in religion, by religious people. And my best friend’s father was a minister. And he was quite conservative. But we were never taught that the Bible was literal. Like the creation story— it didn’t actually happen in seven days. It is a metaphor. It is to understand that there is something more than us, that we are a part of. And this was explained to us when we were kids.

[1:09:54] When I came here, my kid is coming home completely in tears, because he thinks that his dad is going to go to hell because he said something good about Buddhists. I would go, “Oh, what’s this?” Then I had a conversation with the teacher, and I said, “He now takes everything literally. He thinks that the world was created in seven days.” And the teacher told me, “And so do I.” I said, “Oh.” And he said, “And I do think there were dinosaurs on Noah’s Ark.” And I was like, “Really? Okay.” “Yeah. And the world is 10,000 years old.”

[1:10:56] Of course, the kid is no longer in that school. That is obvious. We didn’t know. We couldn’t even comprehend that. That is being a Norwegian in America. And this is Seattle— fairly more liberal than the south. And being married to an African American, of course we have mixed children. So, that in itself... But the kids can pass as white. Maybe not anymore, but especially when they were younger and very cute.

[1:11:45] I am really aware of that, because I thought that America was the melting pot, where there wouldn’t be problems, and that in Norway there would be. But actually, Norway is totally different, because there are so many values that are about... It’s hard to explain. Of course, Norway is a much whiter society. There are more white people there. But there is a lot of tolerance in the mainstream, and nuance.

[1:12:38] The political situation— ten different political parties. The religious is in the middle. It took me forever to understand that. How can you be religious, and on the right? It doesn’t make sense. In Norway, the religious are the ones that want the rules. The family. The best party for family values. Are you kidding me? But it’s all about rules. No drinking. No driving on the... It’s a lot of rules. It’s all about rules, really, and new laws to make sure that the kids are safe, that it’s safe. How can you be without rules? That is completely... It doesn’t make sense.

**Marjorie:** [1:13:27] So, there is still a strong Lutheran influence... Maybe not religious, but Lutheran values in Norway?

**Solvi:** [1:13:34] I would say so. But of course, there is no state church anymore. So, that has changed. I would say that the Lutheran values are still there, but it has been replaced. Like gay rights. The female pastors, early. Gay marriage, early. Now, gay priests have been approved. I think even a

bishop, if I'm not wrong. I'm not sure about that. I'm just saying, it is on the forefront of some of these things. I don't think some of the Norwegian-American nostalgia quite has grasped that that's Norway, and very much the values that are there.

[1:14:38] One of the things, also, is because we all pay the taxes, which I think, now that I've been here, and have seen at least how things work here— I don't think they're that high, necessarily. It's a little myth around it. Of course, you do get the free healthcare. You do get the free schools, and the free universities. There are some huge benefits to this system. Because it is like that... It is called [Norwegian word]— we're all equal. You can't pay your way. Of course, it's changing, but that was the value when I grew up, and to some extent, still. You're not going to be ahead just because you have more money. That doesn't count. We're all going to have the same education. Of course, if you have money, you can buy these things, also, in Norway now. I'm not saying that. But it's that fundamental thing.

[1:15:47] But here, I couldn't grasp the thing about charity. They are not given the safety net that we have in Norway. We have a very good safety net. You don't have that safety net, but you get charity. But you see, that is against a very fundamental Norwegian value, that we are equal. It shouldn't be like somebody should, in that situation, be dependent on you giving to them. There's nothing wrong with giving to people that need help, but we shouldn't have a system that put them there in the first place. What we are going to try to do is get them equal, so they don't have to feel that they depend on you. That un-enables them, in many ways. Of course, it gives power to the person who can decide whether to give, or not to give.

[1:16:54] Of course, I understand it's much bigger than that. I've been here long enough to understand that there is a lot of nuance to this thing. But the fundamental values are very important. It's very important to understand. I have met some groups where they were all Norwegian that were born in Norway, and some where there are hardly any. There is a big, big difference, because you have those values in you, that we are equal, that you don't respect somebody just because they have money.

**Marjorie:** [1:17:48] When you made your Third World films, and they were shown in Norway, did that have any influence on immigration policy?

**Solvi:** [1:17:57] No, I wouldn't say so, because it wasn't directed to that, at that point. What was very strong was that Norway was one of the biggest supporters of Namibia. There was a Namibia [Norwegian word] that was very strong, out of Elverum. There were visitors from high political... in [unintelligible], which was the freedom association, before the freedom. Of course, after, there is a lot to be said about Namibia, and the political system. But it wasn't directed for that. I have always, in my films, gone for the personal stories, as well as to understand the people, and to see them in context. I think that's very important.

[1:18:59] Of course, the Norwegian immigration policy has a totally different start than America. In Norway, in the seventies, we needed a workforce, so we invited people from Pakistan to come and work. They were invited. That's how it all started. Then you had the Vietnam situation, and the boat crisis in the seventies. But that's how it started. Of course, it has changed. Personally, I don't think we have been so successful with all our policies, and maybe some people would say they have been so naïve, and they have been so nice, because the political right is to involve everybody, and not

everything has been correct.

[1:20:04] But there's no doubt that if you look at the culture, it has been so much richer by inviting people in than if it had just been done by itself. Of course, being in Bergen, that was already happening for thousands of years, as people from different cultures, with different food, and everything... But I do think having the success Norway has had... It's not only the oil. Nobody would want to live in a place like that they were still eating the lutefisk, and the lefse, and all that. It's because we probably have one of the best Chinese restaurants outside China, you know?

[1:20:49] There are a lot of incredible, interesting things happening because of that meeting. After all, it's a very peaceful country, although we had that 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, Breivik, and all that. It's not that those things are not there, and for real. But I do think generally speaking, it is a peaceful country. It isn't violent. It has contained, I guess, the violence in a good way, if you compare it to other places. It's not that anywhere is perfect.

[1:21:42] But you look at it a little different when you are away this much. Before, you could look at it and be critical of a lot of things, but you look at it, and say, "Okay, but after all..." In the end, we all have to live together, and we have to find ways to live together, and we have to try to make every person's life as valuable and as happy as possible—happy being a lot more than just grinning, and being superficial. But to deeply have the appreciation of life that you deserve—for you, your family, and your kids.

**Marjorie:** [1:22:27] What traditions are you passing along to your children?

**Solvi:** [1:22:31] When they were little, the stories—the oral stories, Asbjørnsen and Moe. They know them all. The songs. The food. I'm trying with the kindness, and not talking behind anybody's back, but I don't think that's necessarily a Norwegian value. But I'm definitely passing it on from my parents. And I did hear my son tell a grown woman, when she said something fairly outrageous about somebody, "Are you actually talking behind her back?" And I was very proud of him. He said, "That's not very nice, and I don't really want to hear it," or, "I don't appreciate it." And he is a teenager in America. And I thought, "Good for him, and good for me," that that could happen, and he had that reaction.

[1:23:48] And I try to teach them to cook waffles, and easy things, still. *Fårikål*, of course. My daughter loves lamb. So, I passed that down. We have *pinnekjøtt*, of course, at Christmas. We do the traditional things, and we always go to Syttende Mai. But they understand, because they go so often, and they have a close connection with their cousins, and Norway. But when they walk in... I could film them in the airport, and they have the American walk. And when they come back, they don't.

[1:24:41] Another thing, here we drive everywhere. Especially when they were little, they didn't have many friends in the neighborhood. We have to drive them to their friends. We have to drive them to their sports. We have to drive them to school. The first thing that happens in Norway is, they grab some bikes, and they go. I could feel myself being totally American about it... "Where are they? Are they safe? Are they out in the road?" I mean, that thing that you don't have to worry about. Of course, traffic, you have to worry about. But all the other things you have to worry about here, you don't have to worry about there. And that takes a few weeks before that totally goes away in me. But when I knew they were Americans... You know the solstice festival? Somebody had invited me. I

didn't even know what it was. And they had some friends with them.

**Marjorie:** [1:25:59] You mean in Fremont?

**Solvi:** [1:26:01] Yeah. Obviously, it's a lot of nude people with body paint, and costumes. So, how do I know that my kids are American and not Norwegian? It's when they stand in front and say, "Oh, my God! They're naked!" And they're all freaked out. And I go, "Oh, my Gosh. They are so not Norwegian." And then we went to a beach this summer, a very nice beach in Oslo. And there was a baby, two years old, without... "Oh, my God, he's naked!" "Yeah. I know. It's Norway."

[1:26:46] So, that's the thing that you cannot override, even if you tell them, even if they've seen it. The culture here is so strong on that thing, the values, and everything, and that is hard to... You just have to say, "Yeah, that's different. Here, we do it like that. It's different." But also, on the other side, my daughter is very much talking and confident, and all that. In Oslo, we went on the subway, and of course, nobody is talking. "Why is nobody talking to each other?" Then I found myself saying, "Okay, this is Norway. They don't talk." [Laughter]

[1:27:38] So, it goes both ways. That is really nice here. We live close to Seward Park. Everyone says hi. We know everybody. It's very friendly. Even if people say that people in the Northwest are the most closed in America, it's still way, way different than Norway. It goes both ways. Some are good, and some you wish... It's a little embarrassing, I have to say. I was glad there were no other Norwegians there. "Oh, my God, they're naked!"

**Brandon:** [1:27:15] I'm curious, are you still in touch with your friend Liv?

**Solvi:** [1:27:18] Yes. She is still my best friend. She lives She lives in Nesodden. She works with Innovation Norway now. She had worked at Redd Barna, which is a help organization, and [Norwegian word], a film institute. So, she has done many interesting things. And she was in Zimbabwe for five years. My mother was 80, and I took her to Zimbabwe to meet them. Of course, my mother had never been to Africa. And we went to the falls, and on a safari, and all that. She was the life of the party. Oh, my gosh. She just loved it.

[1:29:13] She couldn't believe... That was exactly the kind of service that she used to know. That was very interesting. Obviously, she is used to the service in Norway, and she went to Portugal a lot. So, it's not like she's not used to it. But she used to work in Guernsey at the Old Government Hotel, which is British. So, she knew how things were supposed to be done. Then she comes to Zimbabwe, in Africa, and the service is just incredible. I actually asked people, "What do you do with the people? How come the service is just so good?" They said they have to go for three weeks of the year, training, to refresh. Because it was absolutely perfect. Of course, the rooms, everything. Everything was so wonderful. We had a great time.

**Brandon:** [1:30:14] That's great.

**Marjorie:** [1:30:16] Nice memories.

**Solvi:** [1:30:16] Yeah.

**Brandon:** [1:30:17] Do you have anything else?

**Marjorie:** [1:30:19] No. Do you have anything else you might want to add?

**Solvi:** [1:30:23] No, I think if you're happy, I'm happy. No problem.

**Brandon:** [1:30:26] Great. Thanks for participating in our project.

**Solvi:** [1:30:28] You're welcome.

END OF RECORDING.

Transcription by Alison DeRiemer.