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Oral History Interview with Barbara Selvin

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STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

RACIAL UNREST 2020: EXPERIENCES FROM THE STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY
COMMUNITY DIGITAL PROJECT

Oral History Interview with
Barbara Selvin

Stony Brook University Libraries Digital Projects

Stony Brook University

2022

PREFACE

The following oral history interview transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Barbara Selvin conducted by Mona Ramonetti on April 22, 2022. This is a transcription of the spoken word.

This interview is part of the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project, created by the Anti-Racism Task Force of Stony Brook University Libraries.

Transcriptionist: Software and humans working in the Stony Brook University
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Narrator: Barbara Selvin
Interviewer: Mona Ramonetti
Session Number: One session
Locations: Stony Brook, NY
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Pages: 13

[00:00:00] Mona Ramonetti: Good. (Barbara) Okay. Alrighty. Here we are. Good morning. It is April 22nd, 2022. This is Mona Ramonetti interviewing Barbara Selvin for the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences From the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project. Barbara, thank you for spending some time with us today to talk about your experiences.

Can you tell us how you're affiliated with Stony Brook University?

[00:00:28] Barbara Selvin: I'm an Associate Professor of Journalism in the School of Communication and Journalism.

[00:00:33] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

When do you first remember hearing about the murder of George Floyd?

[00:00:40] Barbara Selvin: Right around when it happened.

As a journalist, I'm pretty much always following the news. So I don't remember specifically the moment, but, um, I was aware of it, very early on.

[00:00:51] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

What was your initial reaction to hearing about and/or viewing George Floyd's death on television, internet, social media?

[00:01:03] Barbara Selvin: My first response: I was horrified by it and, uh, deeply shaken, um, and angry. And concerned.

[00:01:19] Mona Ramonetti: Why were you concerned?

[00:01:22] Barbara Selvin: Well, I was concerned [about] another death of a Black man at the hands of police, who wasn't doing anything, you know, wasn't threatening the life of the police officer. I was concerned about what it meant for the

community in Minneapolis, for, Black communities, all around the country, for our country as a whole.

For my students and how they were going to feel about this, and, how, how threatened and unsafe. And not that this would be the first time that something in the news made them feel that way, but it was just so egregious, and the fact that it was all captured on video was so powerful.

There was no possible excuse that somebody could gin up because the evidence was there. It was just deeply disturbing and frightening. And you know, I'm a white woman, so I don't have to worry about my own two sons, being in that situation. But. My students. And now the story that I'm going to tell you has a lot to do with that.

So, yeah.

[00:02:33] Mona Ramonetti: Did you seek out communication with anyone from Stony Brook University during this time?

[00:02:41] Barbara Selvin: Yes. I'm not sure exactly how to respond to that. Not in the sense that I personally needed to, uh, you know, get any kind of psychological support, but when I tell you the story, you'll see why I'm hesitating.

[00:02:56] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. All right.

Um, why don't you go ahead and tell me the story.

[00:03:03] Barbara Selvin: So of course this happened in the beginning of June, right.

2020, June 3rd, at around—

[00:03:09] Mona Ramonetti: You know, the end, the end of May.

[00:03:11] Barbara Selvin: —end of May, okay. End of May, right. Happened at the end of May. And we had been teaching remotely for two months at this point. And, shortly after we went to remote learning, um, I'm, in addition to being an associate professor in the School of Communication and Journalism, then the School of Journalism actually I'm also the Director of Internships and Careers.

And so I keep in touch with a lot of our alumni. I keep in touch with as many as I can. I bombard them with information, but, uh, I, I decided that, it would be, a good way to kind of engender a sense of community during this very difficult time to have

some Zoom, Zoom was new to us of course at the time, but I thought having alumni talk to the students about their careers would be kind of a nice way to bring people together and, help everybody who was, you know, it wasn't just the students.

Of course, everybody who was working was suddenly working from home if they were still working. So I started having, I guess, about every other week, I organized Zoom panels with our alumni. I had one, with a woman who has been freelancing since she graduated in 2012. Talking about freelance life.

I did one on alumni who had gone into health communication. I did one on alumni who had become lawyers. It was a series of, of, of things like this, where I'd have 3, 4, 5 alumni as a panel talking about some particular aspect of journalism or communications that they all shared as their work.

And then students, current students and other alumni could join and listen and learn about that aspect of the working world. So, when, when George Floyd was killed, I thought we have to do something. You know, let's, let's use this forum that we've created. And I had done three or four by then.

Let's use this forum to, to address this event. And so I decided to have the panel focus on covering racism and protest. And for all of these, I had been reaching out to individual alumni who I had kept in touch with, and I knew what they were doing, but for that one, I also just reached out broadly to all our alumni and asked who would like to be on the panel.

And two alumni responded; one had covered Ferguson, a Black woman named Stephanie Brumsey, who at the time, was working for Reuters; she's now at MSNBC. She had covered—Ferguson, I think for Reuters, and, another alum named Adam Peck who had been working for ThinkProgress, which is, a, kind of, progressive think tank in Washington that had a journalistic, operation; I think it's defunct, that particular operation, but he had been covering these issues as part of his work as an editor for ThinkProgress. And he is a man of Latino background. And one of our faculty members, Terry Sheridan, who was white, had covered the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle.

Which I [believe] were about 20 years ago, give or take it was a while ago. And he had covered some other, other protests; a longtime journalist, you know, an older guy. Um, he'd covered a number of protests, so, that was our panel. And I put the word out and about 45 students and alumni joined on zoom, it was the most well-attended of these panels that we had.

There was clearly a hunger to come together and talk about covering these issues, how to cover racism, how to cover protest, how to stay safe. And so each of the panelists talked for a while about his or her experience. And then we opened it up to

questions and one student, a sophomore at the time named Sarah Beckford, she's just about to graduate, a Black woman, asked a question. I remember her exact words. She said, "What is the school of journalism going to do to help students who are covering trauma in their own communities?"

Right?

[00:07:46] Mona Ramonetti: Um-hm.

[00:07:47] Barbara Selvin: And. I don't even remember what the responses were at the time. I know I didn't have a response. I, wasn't really my place to respond in that setting, but it stuck with me. And I knew that we had to have a response, and we had to think about it. I spent some time trying to look at what was being done elsewhere and was immediately overwhelmed by so much that was being written at the time by journalists of color about, unpaid, emotional labor by, by trying to, you know, educate other white reporters coming to them and, you know, asking them to look at their stories and, and, and, a whole range of things. And I realized this was much more complicated, you know, it was, it was super complicated and as a white person, it wasn't for me to deal with this alone. To come up with a response for how our school was going to respond, I needed to know more about the questions that our students of color had. And I wanted, I thought it was important for the students to come up with, based on their experiences, their life experiences to come up with some answers about how the school could help them.

So in the end, I had the idea that, this was over the summer, so I had the idea that when we came back in the fall, we could have a workshop that would address that question. What is the school of journalism going to do to help students who are covering trauma in their own communities? So I put the word out to our students that I didn't really have a format for what this workshop was going to be, but let's talk about this question and let's, let's look at what the needs of students in the program are, what their experiences are, how the faculty— generally, at the time we were a majority white, majority middle-class, majority middle-aged faculty; that's less true, now.

Our, our recent hires have been people of color, and we've also expanded to include this communication faculty as we've become a school of communication and journalism, which was more diverse than the journalism faculty. For a long time, I was the only person on the journalism faculty who was not a white man. Um, but I am white. In the fall, about a dozen students signed up to do this workshop. We decided to offer it as a one-credit workshop; we met once a week on Zoom, as we were still remote in fall 2020. Um, and so every Tuesday evening for an hour, we would talk and I let the students guide what we were going to accomplish. One of the things they wanted to talk about was their experience of microaggressions in the classroom, both from faculty and from other students that faculty didn't pick up on.

And it was interesting to me, it [the discussion] wasn't just around race and ethnicity. There were also concerns about the kinds of stories that faculty would approve. If a student proposed something from, say her own experience in her own community, sometimes faculty didn't recognize that it was a story and would reject the story proposal.

So we talked a lot about how to approach those problems. And, and we started creating a document where we were documenting the things that students had experienced in class, a wide range of things; one broadcast professor who told students, he didn't want them interviewing people in wheelchairs because it was hard to set up the camera correctly to get a good picture.

That didn't go down too well.

(Mona laughs)

[00:11:57] Barbara Selvin: Um, so it was a wide range of concerns and we documented maybe 15; a case where, uh, there was a Zoom class, um, and somebody, a student was doing a presentation and in the chat, some other students said something insensitive about, some police assault, brutality incident. And the professor didn't acknowledge the conversation in the chat; now, she was focused on the presentation that was going on in the main Zoom. So, but it was still something that the student was upset about. Um, there were students who, who were concerned that all the examples that professors gave of journalists were always "he." So we started writing these things down and I didn't know what we were going to do with this. The professors weren't named, although pretty much everybody knew who was who and in the school, we're not that big a school.

Then the students started coming up with proposals for what the professor might've done instead, or how the student might have handled the situation, differently, or how the professor might've handled the situation differently. When I finally showed it [the document] to the Dean, she was just blown away by it; she thought it was such a good teaching tool for faculty and so good as a way to develop scenarios for trainings. And, in fact, we have a couple of faculty, communication faculty who are working on a class on incorporating DEI into instruction. And they're planning to use this material in that class.

Um, we did a bunch of other things. The students organized a panel discussion of faculty from around the university, talking about what they think the media could be doing better. So we had Nancy Hiemstra from the women gender and sexuality studies department talking about immigration, which was her area of research, talking about how immigration is characterized with words like surge and invasion and things like that, and disease terminology. We had Zebulon Miletsky from Africana Studies and we had, oh gosh, Joseph, I'm blanking on his last name, from Hispanic Languages and Literature—

[00:14:25] Mona Ramonetti: Pierce.

[00:14:26] Barbara Selvin: —Pierce! Joseph Pierce, yes, okay. Um, and then we had our own Pablo Calvi who is a Latino man on our faculty. That was so successful and well attended that the students organized a follow-up because the faculty had so much to say that there wasn't much time left at the end for questions and discussion.

So we had a follow up event where we also brought in some representatives of student groups, students of color to talk about some of their concerns. Then we had a second event that was more of a discussion. After the killings in the spa shootings in Atlanta, the students in the workshop put together a document, a statement, not only condemning the, the shootings, but providing resources for, student for—for students and anyone who is gonna be covering the Asian-American Pacific Islander community. Um, so th-this workshop, all the students who were in it the first semester, the fall of 2020, wanted to continue. And the founding members of it have all stayed in it until they graduated; some graduated in spring of 2021.

We're now in our fourth semester. We've added some new students this year, but recently I surveyed them. I gave them a questionnaire and I asked them, what—the mission, what—how they—to summarize the mission of the workshop in a sentence or two, how their involvement in the workshop, which we call by the way, "Building a Better School of Communication and Journalism workshop," the BBSOCJ workshop. Um, what has it meant to them personally, what discussions, accomplishments, or events have had the most impact on you or the most meaning for you, meaning for you personally, which do you think have had the most impact on the school? What would you like to see the workshop accomplish in the next year?

What, if anything, would you change about how it operates, increasing its visibility? Should it continue indefinitely or is there a natural stopping point? And everyone said it should continue, all the respondents.

[00:16:36] Mona Ramonetti: So Barbara—

[00:16:37] Barbara Selvin: Yeah.

[00:16:37] Mona Ramonetti: —the students that were part of the, or are a part of the workshop, are these predominantly students of color or—

[00:16:45] Barbara Selvin: Yes. Yes.

[00:16:48] Mona Ramonetti: Um, is there, and are students, are white students or Asian, uh, are white students, uh, interested, or are they invited to be part of this?

[00:17:02] Barbara Selvin: Yes they are. Although I've, uh. I had, I had a white student who joined because he needed the credit; his motivation wasn't really aligned with what the workshop was trying to do and he hadn't really done the work. You know, he wasn't really prepared to engage in these issues, but we've had other white students who were very much engaged.

And so I started asking students who want to join, regardless of color or ethnicity, to write a statement about why they wanted to join. So we could be a little bit more selective because it's with permission; it's actually an independent study. That's how we're doing it, bureaucratically. So, we've had a number of white students.

Um, well, a small number, (laughs) I think maybe three. Um, in the four semesters, there was one, one student who was in it for one semester and two students—one student who was in it for two semesters and then graduated, and then another student who's been in now for three semesters, who identifies as queer. (Mona: um-hm) The other two were white men who were basically cisgender, you know, straight white guys, but one of them was very committed to the work.

[00:18:14] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. And the other, uh, so, uh, and I, I guess I'm getting back to the panel that you had referenced with Zebulon and, and Joseph, and the other faculty members; so these faculty members were, all members, are people of color, yes?

[00:18:34] Barbara Selvin: Yes.

[00:18:36] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Um, and again, if you can remind me what, you, what was the rationale for, for just having, not just, not just, but just having that composition—

[00:18:49] Barbara Selvin: Actually no they weren't; Nancy Hiemstra is white.

[00:18:52] Mona Ramonetti: Okay that's right. Uh, gender.

[00:18:54] Barbara Selvin: Yeah. She, and she was talking about immigration, not even really a gender issue, but, but how—

[00:19:00] Mona Ramonetti: So were there other, and I guess what I'm getting at is, um, and I think what you've done is, is, is, is remarkable, and it's, it's, it's great to hear, um, that it was so well received and will continue hopefully, um, for for a long time. Um, when we started this project and I put a call out to, it was just for the students—

[00:19:28] Barbara Selvin: Um-hm.

[00:19:29] Mona Ramonetti: —and only students who responded were African-American students. And I had approached a few white students, um. And I had asked them, you know, "would you be interested?"

And their response was in a negative and they had their reasons, understandably so.

Um. So when it came to selecting folks for faculty and staff, admin voices, I didn't do that. I specifically, it was very strategic. Because I wanted the voices of, as many diverse voices as possible. (Barbara: um-hm) And, uh, my reason was more often than not with this type of work, we get the voice of, the underrepresented.

And, and it's great to get that voice. Don't get me wrong. But we need more white par-participation in (Barbara: um-hm) these things. And we need the, the white male, we need the white female, we need the Asian, we need the, you know, everybody at the table. Um, and I think it's a great step to have, to get the students to start talking because they essentially are the ones that will be benefiting from what we're trying to do here.

Um, so my, my wish is to, simply as possible, to have more voices, more white voices at the table. It is a hard, thing to do.

How do we do that?

[00:21:29] Barbara Selvin: Well, the students who've participated in the workshop from the beginning, the, the first group of students were all under-represented minority, whatever, um non-white. But they were very diverse; Asian, um, Middle-Eastern, uh, Black, um, Latino. Uh, the current group I think is probably, majority Asian, if anything? Um, I would have to check that though. But one of the questions I asked in this questionnaire, and I would love, if you have time, to read you some of their responses, but one of the questions I asked them to your point about increasing the diversity of voices and bringing white people in, I asked them to suggest students that we could reach out to, to, um, participate in the workshop going forward because most, I think eight of the current, I guess there're about maybe six of the current members are seniors and they're graduating. So, um, they suggested a number of students, and, there's a real mix. Uh, plenty of white students are in the mix.

[00:22:47] Mona Ramonetti: So it has, you know, I, I think you're onto something here. Um, I think when it is, well, I'll, I'll give an example here with this particular group, uh, cohort that I'm interviewing, I did get a few white males, who said, "No, I don't want to participate." And, and then I did my spiel (laughs) and I said, look, we need your, we need the voice.

And one of them said, "Yes, I know I'll reconsider," and he was amazing. (Barbara: hmmm) And what an amazing voice to have, as part of this project. But again, it was, there was a strategy to it. I think when you, and the students might be onto something here, where it is an individual, um, solicitation.

[00:23:46] Barbara Selvin: Um-hm. I agree. I think that having that personal "someone suggested that you would be really good for this," it's a strategy I use when we have our internship fairs, quite frankly; I ask the faculty, "Who are your best students?" And then I send out an email that says, "One of the faculty, one or more of your instructors has said that you're a really top student who would benefit from this internship fair; you should really come," because they all feel like they're not ready. So.

[00:24:10] Mona Ramonetti: Right, so this is fantastic. So, um, yes, if you can, I would love to, we, we, we don't have a lot of time left, but I would love to, to hear more about what you've done and, um, and, you know, get the word out as much as possible. I don't, uh, well, we could, we could talk about it later in a sec. Let me just, I have a couple more questions—

[00:24:32] Barbara Selvin: Okay.

[00:24:32] Mona Ramonetti: —and then. Uh, du-du-du-du—

[00:24:34] Barbara Selvin: Oh, I did want to mention too, that one of the things we did, you know, we've done a number of public facing things; one of the things that students complain about a lot is that they, the faculty want them to cover hard news and not culture (Mona: um-hm) and fashion and art and things like that, which I get suppose is true to a point, but, um—and they certainly feel that way—so we brought in, they brought in, one of the students in the workshop had interviewed a professor named Elena Romero at FIT, who covers fashion and culture, and she's super dynamic and she's had an incredible career in journalism and done everything. And so she came and we had a public session during our workshop hours and we had a bunch of outside students come and listen to her and we recorded it and we put it on our YouTube channel.

And we're doing that again with somebody else in a couple weeks. In our last session, we'll have another open thing like that. Internally we've also had a bookclub, for the last two—last semester we read, *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson. And this semester we're reading *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

So, during the wor—during the book club discussions, I turn off my video and my sound and just let the students talk, which is much more effective than having me hang out there, so (Mona laughs) that's been a real privilege for me to hear what

their, you know, hear, hear them talk about it, but to your question, what was your question? (laughs)

[00:25:59] Mona Ramonetti: Oh, oh. (laughs) Okay.

Many who have witnessed the murder described it as a pivotal moment in American history. Do you agree or disagree with that sentiment?

[00:26:09] Barbara Selvin: Well, I think time will tell. Um, I think it's certainly in the, in the, time since it happened, it's been pivotal.

How—

[00:26:20] Mona Ramonetti: Can you elaborate a bit in terms of—

[00:26:22] Barbara Selvin: —Well, I think there was a, you know, there's much talk about this racial reckoning; Some, you know, Confederate statues came down; um, in, in journalism, newsrooms have been publishing account, have been accounting for their failures. Uh, I was just reading about a prize that went to a project that came out, called 'Printing Hate,' it's out of the University of Maryland journalism school, but a number of other journalism schools were involved and it reported on newspapers' promotion of lynchings and, and just a variety of different things that newspapers had done that are pretty shameful, (Mona: um-hm) not pretty, extremely.

Um, so I think that there are, you know, there, there have been some, some changes. Uh, but it's, you know, it's a long journey and this is just one step.

[00:27:14] Mona Ramonetti: Absolutely. Um, I have two more questions, but I'm not gonna get to them. I'm actually gonna ask you something you said. You said in the recent, for your recent hires, you've been able to get, within your department, School of Journalism, um, a more diverse candidate (Barbara: um-hm) selected.

How did you go about doing that?

[00:27:40] Barbara Selvin: Well, I think it was, one of the things that, um, we, we have a diversity committee, the Faculty Diversity Committee, which I chaired for a number of years; I'm still on it, but I'm no longer the chair. But one of the things that we did at the beginning was say that every search committee should have a member of the diversity committee on, on the search committee to, to elevate the concern about diversity and representation and that every search language should mention, have demonstrating, um, involvement, engagement with issues of DEI [Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion]. And our Dean is very much, uh. This is a top level

concern for her too, to diversify, not only our faculty, but our staff; we just lost a key person on our staff who took a job elsewhere in the university.

Um, and I know that she's, she would very much like to have—our, our, our faculty has become more diverse; our staff is still all white. Um, so there's a, a real interest in bringing on—and this would be somebody who would interact with both students and alumni. A staff person of color. Um, yeah.

[00:29:00] Mona Ramonetti: So you think by having that representative has, has been very impactful? Um, aside from the, I mean, based, based on what you've just said, what about outreach—have you looked at, at a different source? Um, have you reached out to a different source of candidates?

[00:29:20] Barbara Selvin: Well, we, we always advertise in all the jobs with all the, the, what we call the affinity groups in journalism, National Association of Black Journalists, of Hispanic journalists, Native American journalists association, NLGJA [The Association of LGBTQ Journalists] with gay and lesbian LGBTQ.

Um, so we've always done that. Um, but I think the—

[00:29:42] Mona Ramonetti: So you think this thing's been most impactful having that, that representative?

[00:29:46] Barbara Selvin: Um, I think it's, it's also the framing of the language and, uh, I think it's, it's just, uh, um, a welcoming it. I think we try to make it clear that it's a welcoming environment for people of color.

So our pool has been pretty diverse for each of our recent searches, and so we've been able to find people. To—

[00:30:11] Mona Ramonetti: So—

[00:30:11] Barbara Selvin: Yeah.

[00:30:12] Mona Ramonetti: —Only recently the pool has been very diverse. Or has the pool been very diverse prior to it, but this change within the composition of the committee has made a difference in—

[00:30:25] Barbara Selvin: I think it's made a difference, but we've also had a change of leadership in the school and I think that's made a difference too.

[00:30:31] Mona Ramonetti: Okay, I see. I see.

Um. Okay, one more question, of the two. What would you like people to know about this time in your life and what you experienced?

[00:30:50] Barbara Selvin: Well, what I've experienced is being, what's been most gratifying to me is to be able to express my allyship, to use a word that's gained some currency, in an effective way that wasn't just something that I felt, but something that I was doing. And that's been really meaningful, and feeling the trust of the students, in that questionnaire, and I asked who they thought might be a good candidate to replace me when I stepped down from leading this, and one student said, I don't know. I, I really trust Professor Selvin and I'm not sure, you know, who else I would trust. (laughs) Well, that's very nice.

(both laugh) That's good to hear.

[00:31:34] Mona Ramonetti: That's good to hear. That's good to hear. Okay, so, uh, is there anything else you'd like to share before I stop the recording?

[00:31:43] Barbara Selvin: Yeah. I just wanted to read you some of the comments from the students on this questionnaire.

Um. So.

I asked them to summarize the mission in a sentence or two, "BBSOCJ worked to close equity gaps through programs and tools provided to the school. It's also to provide marginalized students in the school with a platform to discuss issues. The workshop exists as a safe space for students of color and facilitates events to discuss diversity and how the school can best support its students of color and also report on diversity."

So those, those are just a couple. And then I asked them what their involvement has meant to them personally. "It feels like a safe space to talk about issues in the media and specific incidents that have happened in the classroom."

Um, "I brag a lot about being a part of the BBSOCJ because I think we do a lot of meaningful work and host great discussions. For me, I genuinely just enjoy talking with my peers about the issues they face and have a place to talk about my own issues and goals." Then another one, "I'm incredibly proud of the work we've done, and hearing the stories of my peers, it makes me feel much more comfortable during the end of my tenure here at Stony Brook, knowing that even the negative experience I went through are now able to make a better experience for others." Then they talked about the things that meant the most to them, the panel with the professors from across campus, "just being able to have a presence in the school backed by a faculty member so people take us seriously has been very empowering." And I think that's, that, personally, that's what I think is key. It's not

just that, that, that the students are having these conversations, which they've been having among themselves, but that a faculty member is transmitting what they're saying to the rest of the faculty and to the leadership of the school.

[00:33:32] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:33:34] Barbara Selvin: "Having my stories and voice heard, as well as the stories of other students, made me feel like there was more visibility for marginalized groups at this school." Oh, another thing we did was we put together a diversity toolbox for reporters. (Mona: um-hm) Um, and several of them listed that as what they thought was one of the most impactful accomplishments.

[00:33:55] Mona Ramonetti: So these are all very great steps in, in the right direction. Um. And, uh, so have you—actually we're, we're really over time.

[00:34:05] Barbara Selvin: Okay.

[00:34:05] Mona Ramonetti: Let me stop. I'll stop here for now.

[00:34:07] Barbara Selvin: Okay.

[Recording stops]