

Kathleen Levitsky (Farnsworth House)

Interviewed by Vivian Jackson, Eric Johnson & Alex Menjivar (2006)

My name is Kathleen Marie Bowman Levitsky. My nickname is Kathy. My mother's name was Mary Joyce, and my father was Melville Bowman. I was born in West Falmouth, MA.— on Cape Cod— on February 3, 1929. That was the year that the Depression started. Then, when I was a year and a half old, my mother separated from my father. There were no jobs during the Depression. The banks closed, the plants closed, and there were no jobs, and the ones that suffered the most were the children. My father couldn't get a job, so he turned to drinking. My mother was afraid that he would hurt her, so she turned to her pastor for advice. He advised her to put the children in foster care. There were a lot of families that had to split up then because people couldn't take care of their children. That's why they started Father Flanagan's Boys Town in Nebraska, because they needed some place to put the children.

My mother had four boys and me, and my father wasn't able to take care of us. So the three oldest children were put in an orphanage called St. Vincent's Home in Fall River. I was put into a foster home in Arlington, and my little brother Francis was put in a foster home in Southbridge. I never met my father and the first time I met my brothers was in August 15, 1939. The state had Mumma take me back home, and my four brothers were there because they had gone back to her in 1937.

I had lived with Mrs. Donovan, my foster mother, for ten years. My mother was so happy to take me home — a little girl, because she had given me up when I was so young. My father wasn't allowed to see us at all when we were in foster care. He went off and got jobs in New Bedford and lived there. I was the only child the Donovans had, but it was never a warm place. They never hugged or kissed me. They just looked after me and trained me, and that was it. My mother use to come and visit me once or twice a year, and the other times she be visiting my brothers where they were. It was a very hard life for my mother, too.

When I lived in Arlington, I went to the Russell School from first to fifth grade. I had one little girl friend when I lived in Arlington. Her name was Helen. She was seven and I was about eight. She's come over with her bicycle, and we would play together in the back yard.

So I was happy to get back to my mother. My brother Francis came home about a month after me in 1939. It was so strange because there were four boys, and I had to get use to them. My brothers were Harold (the oldest), John, Henry, and Richard Bowman, but the foster family he lived with named him Francis Martin. The Martin's took care of him, and later when he was 21, they adopted him and gave him their family name: Martin. No we didn't have any pets. My mother was on welfare, and she was lucky to just feed and clothe us five kids.

After that I came home to my mother's house and I went to a school in Roslindale.

Later, we moved to Roxbury, and I graduated from Roxbury Memorial High School. I lived in the Orchard Park Projects on Eustis Street. After school I helped my mother out with the chores. Sometimes I would go roller skating, but I couldn't go too far. I had playmates down the street. We didn't have bikes at that time. We had to make our own toys out of oatmeal boxes and whatever we could find. Sometimes, we would play jacks or dominos. One time my brother Henry made me a 'box cart' with roller skates under it, and we rode it all over the street. We also we use to ice skate on Franklin Field. They would flood it in the winter.

My mother was very strict— too strict. I had a sheltered life. No dates, no nothing. I was the only girl with four brothers, so they were always trying to protect me. I didn't get in trouble for anything at home except for talking back. My mother would say, "what did you say?" So she'd give me one whack. We never got away with anything. And if we tried something once, we'd never do it again.

When I was in high school my friends were the girls from my own neighborhood. We walked everywhere, and it was a long walk from the high school to Orchard Park. Yes, I liked school. It was hard because we had to walk up a big hill to school. It was about a mile from my home. I lived in Roslindale and Dorchester and Roxbury when I was growing up.

I love the summer time. That's my favorite season. It was vacation time so when I was young I could play outside and roller skate. I would go shopping with my mother.

Music? I love ballroom dance music. I love all the "oldies." No I don't play a musical instrument, but we use to put a piece of tissue paper over a comb and play it like a harmonica.

I didn't play sports, but I like ice skating and roller skating.

Blue is my favorite color— royal blue.

I had the measles when I was eleven. I was in bed for two weeks, and the doctor came to the house. But that was all I ever had.

No, I never learned how to drive. The most exciting thing for me was take the train. My mother and I would take the train down to the Cape to visit my aunts for the weekend, then we'd take the train back. I loved the train, but now I like to fly.

Yes, I had lots of chores to do at home. I had to help my mother out with the dishes, sweep and wash the floors, and do the errands. One of my brothers had to go down cellar and bring up the oil for the oil stove. My other brothers had jobs at gas stations. Everyone had to do something to help.

One time during World War II, we took a little wagon and went around from house to

house to ask for magazines. Then we would sell them to the "Rag man." Later, we would go around and deliver circulars. They would pick us up in a station wagon, and we would go around to all the houses in a certain place in Dorchester and deliver the circulars. They were like advertisements. Then, when we were all done, they would give us 50 cents and we'd go in to the movies. When the Second World War came, two of my brothers joined the Navy from 1942-45, then another one joined the Army in 1952. He was in Korea.

When I was your age, we'd walk to the square to go to the movies. We went to the Rivley Theater in Roxbury. That was a long walk too. We had double features on Saturdays, so we'd go with our friends. When I was twelve I pretended I was eleven so I could get in for cheap, but I was tall, so that didn't last for long.

When I was a teenager, I use to keep a scrapbook. I would cut out pictures from magazines — anything that interested me. I liked photos of picnics, swimming, sledding in the snow. So it was scrapbook of things I liked to do, or wished I could do.

In those days people didn't have cars, so you had to walk everywhere. That's why people were thin! Then when I was about thirty, I noticed that people were getting heavier because they were driving more. There were more cars. When we were younger, people were very thin because we had chores to do and we walked everywhere. Also, we didn't have television until I was 25! We did have one radio for the whole family, and we'd listen to all the different programs. There wasn't much music, but the radio played stories. When there was music on it was big band music or classical music.

I had to take care of my mother when she got older, so there were a lot of things I didn't get to do. But I did go to the library and read or we'd bring home books to read. I use to love mysteries, so the library was important. When I got out of high school, I worked for seven years for an insurance company on State Street. Then I got a job filing and typing on Milk Street downtown. It was another insurance company — that was the Commercial Union. They were on Milk St. for years, then they moved into a new building at One Beacon St. I retired from there when I was fifty six after 33 years. So between the two insurance companies, I worked for forty years before I retired.

The farthest I've ever gone was to Ireland. I went back to the place where my mother was born in Galway. We stayed there for three weeks during the month of August. I loved it, it was so pretty there. It was cold and damp, though. I needed my sweaters!

Then, when Arthur and I got married, we went on a cruise to Bermuda for a week. I loved the boat. Every night at twelve o'clock they'd have a huge table full of food. We'd fill up our plates and try all the goodies. It was fun. If I had unlimited money right now, I'd love to take Arthur to Ireland because he's never been there. I'd take him to the places that I went with my mother when we went to Galway. I'd love to go to Disney World and, maybe, to Las Vegas. That would be fun.

I guess my greatest accomplishment has been taking care of other people. I like doing that. Arthur and I have worked with Maura Hennigan and Liz Malia, helping them with their campaigns and talking to other elders. We were on a TV show recently on Channel 9. She interviews people about their lives, and we were interviewed about taking care of other people. Both Arthur and I took care of our mother's.

No, we don't have a car now. We walk everywhere, or we take the bus. We go to Dunkin Donuts almost every day to meet our friends and sit and talk. That's fun!

The hardest thing I ever had to deal with was when my mother passed away. Oh, it was terrible. I was left alone for three years. It was very hard, but people told me to get out and meet people. They thought it would help me, and three years after my mother died, I met Arthur on a senior day trip. I didn't know him at the time until he was sitting across the table from me. He looked at me and said he thought I was kind of young to be with the elders. After that, we met every Sunday in the hall here at Farnsworth House for ballroom dancing. We got married when I was 58 and Arthur was 64!

What makes me happy? When I'm with Arthur and we go places together. We're happy to be together."