BARBARA FEINMAN TODD INTERVIEW
THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD
Journalism Director, Georgetown University
January 10, 2017
Interviewed by: John Maggio
Total Running Time: 59 minutes and 31 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Newspaperman

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Barbara Feinman Todd

Professor Emerita, Georgetown University

Ben Bradlee's natural instincts and luck

00:00:13:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

I think—I've thought about this a lot. I think that he was lucky, that he was in a right place at a right time. But I think a million other people could've been there and they would've missed it. He had, you know, besides all the regular stuff, the talent and the good looks—and—the understanding about human nature. He also had this thing that is really hard to nail down. But what I think, for me, what it came down to was, he cared about things. But he didn't

care too much. And so he knew when to let things go. And he had—it was, like, just the right formula. So when something would happen, he had the guts. He knew when to push. He knew how to read people. But if something didn't work out or if someone pushed back, he didn't-- he didn't worry about it. He didn't—he didn't belabor it. He didn't—he didn't piss people off. I mean, yes. Of course, he pissed a lot of people off. But he didn't piss people off because he wanted to get something from them and they weren't giving it. So he—he was lucky. But he also—you know, it's a cliché. But he made his own luck.

Ben Bradlee's childhood

00:02:07:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

The thing that stands out to me was it seemed like he did have a life—a childhood of privilege. And so because he didn't want for a lot, money didn't make that big of an impression on him. And the thing that was the most defining—incident in his childhood—was polio. And it—it really—you know, I think—he had a choice when it happened, which was he would either feel sorry for himself. Or he would use it as a challenge. And he would use it as a lesson. And I—I don't know how much of that was his character and how much of that was just in his DNA. But it was the thing that he would always go back to when you talk to him about his childhood. It was, you know, the money and the Boston Brahmin, that was just all sort of the atmospherics and background. You know, if he'd grown up in a poor neighborhood that would've obviously had an impression on him. But I think, for him, the thing that was the defining thing was the polio and—and how he decided to deal

with that, which was it was-- it was just a little bump in the road. And-- and I think he learned from that that if you treat tragic things that happen as just a bump in the road and you move on that you can fake it till you make it. You can convince yourself. And then you convince everybody else around you that that's how they should treat it.

Ben Bradlee's confidence

00:03:53:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

He did have—you know, I'm hesitating at the word entitlement. It—it was—it just didn't—it wasn't on his—it wasn't on his radar to be anything else but confident. You know—you or I—a mere mortal going into, I don't know, a cocktail party or a Congressional hearing or something, we—we might have to tell ourselves—we might have to give ourselves a little pep talk. It just never occurred to him. It just—he just moved through life like that. It was just part of what he was like. I never saw him not have confidence about something. I rarely saw him doubt himself about anything. I mean, there were just a few things in his life, you know, the whole Janet Cooke affair, the whole Janet Cooke incident. That really destabilized him. But even that, he tried to turn that into—he tried to turn that into a character-building thing.

Ben Bradlee's insistence on truth and fairness

00:05:07:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

He became obsessed with the topic of lying. People can lie to you. That was the thing that he talked about. That—that was—you know, he didn't really

want to write this book. He didn't want to write the memoir. That was somebody else's idea. But there were a few things that he got really energized by a few topics, a few chapters. And when he—as painful as it was to write about the Janet Cooke thing—he was really into it because he's so fascinated by people being able to lie to you. Janet Cooke lied to everybody. She lied to the *Washington Post* readers. She lied to her editors. And—and she lied to Ben. And—I—I think it was—it—it was really hard for him to face that he had been—fooled by her and that – that she could—that she thought she could do that and—and that she got away with it, I mean, not ultimately.

Ben Bradlee and the Grant Study

00:06:20:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

He was—fascinated by—being studied. He loved being studied. And he—he just found it really interesting that it—that it charted his life and—and that he was sort of a guinea pig for it and that it—it defines success. It—it tried to—it tried to understand why some people are successful and why others aren't successful. And he loved being a part of it. And he—he talked about it a lot.

Ben Bradlee's ability to let go

00:07:04:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

What we did talk about in relationship to that was—I used to—I was—I've worked for a lot of famous people. And with each person that I worked with, I studied them to figure out what was it about them that made them so

successful? Why were they famous? Why were they—what was different about them than anybody else? And with each person, I identified something. And I was jealous of it, tried to emulate it if it was something I could do. What Ben had was the thing that I wanted more than anything else of anybody that I've ever worked for. And I've worked for Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and Ben Bradlee and Hilary Clinton. But with him, he could let go. He could—he didn't have an anxious bone in his body. And—if something—if something bad happened, if he made a mistake, if somebody didn't like him, if somebody disagreed with him, he-- he didn't worry it to death.

00:08:12:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

And he could just let it go. And it was such a beautiful thing. And I would ask him, you know, I would grill him about it just for myself. "How do you—how do you do that? What do you—what's your thought process?" And he was like, "It's just what I do. It's just who I am." And he would just roll his eyes at me. That was, I think—I mean, he had it all. He had—talent. And he was handsome. And he was charismatic. But he could let go of things. And that is—to me, it's practically superhuman. And—and there were—and so the Janet Cooke thing he couldn't let go of. And the other thing that he couldn't let go of was Quinn's suffering. That was—that was—that was the thing that—that was the thing he—that he always went back to. That—that was the thing I would see him get worried about that—you know, if I found him—looking really were—worried or reflective, it usually had to do with Quinn because he loved Quinn so much.

00:09:19:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

And it was the one thing that he couldn't fix. He couldn't fix—the—the—the medical misfortune that—that Quinn had with being born with—a defective heart—and then some of the other challenges that he had. That was when he was his most vulnerable. When I—you know—when I helped him, when I was his researcher on his memoirs, I sat with him for a series of interviews. I interviewed him. And that was—one of the few times that he got upset. And there were a few other times I could tell you about. But—but otherwise, he just—he—he seemed to sail through his life. And I think a big part of that was because he didn't hang on to things.

Learning from Ben Bradlee's ability to let go

00:10:12:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

When we were working on the chapter about—his service in the navy, he—he wanted me to go interview a navy buddy of his. The—and– The gentleman had been, actually, his superior. He had been the guy to give him orders. And—the man still lived in Washington. And what we had done—we had divided up—I interviewed some people. And he interviewed most people. And I would be there running the tape recorder, maybe trying to help steer the conversation if it got off on war stories. But there were a few people that he wanted me to interview by myself. And this gentleman was one of them. And the reason was he was worried that if we both went to the interview that it would just devolve into them telling actual war stories to each other. So he sent me to—and I set up the interview. He sent me to interview the guy. And I came back. And I transcribed the interview. And I gave it to him. And it was fine.

00:11:20:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

It—and then—then the man wrote Ben a letter. And it started out talking—just reminiscing about the glory days—of their time together. And—he said something like, "Did you ever consider that, you know, maybe it wasn't Watergate or the Pentagon, but your finest moment was," and then he gave some war story that didn't sink in my head because I'm not a war story kind of person. Sorry. And then the second paragraph was, "I have to be honest with you, Ben, I was really pissed off when you sent that little girl around to interview me." And then the letter went on. And I read the letter because I—I can't remember why I opened the letter first. Maybe I helped open his mail at that time. I can't remember why. But I read the letter. And I was really pissed off. I was 31 years old at the time. And it was 1991. And I did not appreciate being called a little girl. And so first of all, Ben was, you know, the original politically incorrect guy when it came to feminism.

00:12:38:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

He would—he would talk about—the sisters in the newsroom like if—if women were upset about something going on in the newsroom. So, but I didn't care 'cause I was really pissed off. And I—and so I—I read the letter aloud to him. And I said, you know, "This—this is, you know, really annoying." And he just shrugged his shoulders. And he rolled his eyes. And then he—he basically said, you know, "Get over it. Move on." And it was—it was a great moment because I thought this is—this is the exact kind of thing where he just lets things—he just lets things go. And he moves on. And he was modeling for me to do the same. Now, of course, it didn't bother him 'cause he

wasn't being called a little girl. But what he was saying to me, you know, I can still remember—him shrugging. And it wasn't unkind. But he was—he was saying to me without coming out and saying it, "You know, just move on. Get over it. Life's too short." And—you know, and he was right.

Ben Bradlee's indiscretions

00:13:55:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

Well, and therein lies the downside to that great quality because there are some things in life that we should worry about. Infidelity might be one of those. So yeah. I mean—he would get this look on this face when he would talk about things that he had done that he shouldn't have done. It was almost—you could see it was like weather passing through. A cloud would go over. But that was not a place that he wanted to dwell. He didn't feel as bad as I think probably people in his life thought he should feel. And I think when I would talk to him about something like that and I saw that cloud passing through, part of that was—I was a young woman at the time. And he knew I was judging him. And—for the most part, I don't think he cared that much what I thought. I mean, we had a great rapport. And he was a mentor. And he was very kind to me. But I was—when I started working for him, I was a 29-year-old woman. He didn't—I don't think he cared that much about me judging him, which is why, if you read the transcripts of our interviews, he was pretty honest because it-- I wasn't threatening.

00:15:14:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

I wasn't intimidating. It was almost as though I wasn't there. And so—I didn't approve of that. But I—it was also my job to not show much judgment or any judgment at all because that's the quickest way to get somebody to clam up. But he—he felt uneasy. I don't know if he felt guilty talking to me about it. I mean, he wasn't proud of it. It's not something he would brag about. But I think that part of that being able to let things go and not worry about things and not being the type of person who wakes up at 3:00 in the morning worrying about things and having that tape running through your head, he didn't have any of that. And so, maybe the dark side of that is that—you can go to Paris and have some affairs when you've got a wife and a little baby.

Working on Ben Bradlee's book

00:16:11:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

We started by—he was just supposed to write the book. And I was supposed to be looking up stuff as we were going along. And I would be feeding him research to help jog his memory and that kind of thing. And it just wasn't happening because, as I said, he—he wasn't that into writing the book. I mean, it was 1989. I can't do the math. I don't know. Maybe somebody can help me out. He was around—I can't do the math, 65 something. He—he—I mean, he was the editor of—you know, of *The Washington Post* during the Pentagon papers and Watergate. He didn't need to prove anything. Jason Robards had already played him. He-- he was better looking than the Hollywood actor who played him. He didn't need-- he didn't need to write a bestseller book. He lived in a big mansion. He didn't need it. But other people around him thought it was a good idea. And he was—I think it was the line of

least resistance. And—so he said yes. And then when it was time to write a book, you know, he was much more—he—he liked to be out in the mix in the newsroom. Writing a book is very solitary. And so when it came down to actually writing it, he wasn't getting much done. And so we came up with the idea that I would interview him. We would tape record it. I would transcribe it. And then I would give him the transcripts. If there was something I thought was particularly interesting, I might write some notes. But so that's how that came to be.

00:17:40:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

So what happened was then with each chapter—and we had figured out what the chapters would be. So that's—the transcripts were supposed to follow the chapters. And so okay. It's time to write the Watergate chapter. Here's the Watergate interview. And so that would help him—because he had already said to me what—what was the most interesting stuff that would come up because you're talking to somebody. But I was really—I mean, I hate to minimize myself. But I was really like a blank slate. And that's—in that role, the best thing you can do is to be like a therapist, be like a rabbi—to sort of erase your own personality as much as you can and—to just get them to talk and to steer them if there's something interesting. Or I would read his face. And if I would see that weather cloud cross his face, I would gently push him to go there. But—you know, there was that feeling of—that it was a safe place. We didn't do it—we didn't do these interviews in his office, which was—part of the time he was still executive editor of *The Post*.

00:18:54:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

So it was a big, glass fishbowl in the newsroom, could look in. We actually did the interviews in my tiny, little, cramped office—which was strange to see him sort of fitting his—you know, broad-shouldered body into, you know—my tiny, little visitor's chair. And he was a little uncomfortable. And then he would, you know, stretch out. And he'd get comfortable. And it was just the two of us talking. And he would get lost in his memories. And, you know—the best thing I could do was to make him feel as though I wasn't there so that he would say—because he needed that material to be good.

Ben Bradlee and Sally Quinn

00:19:40:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

With the passage of time, you know, when I—when I knew him and when I was interviewing him, he had—respect for his two previous wives. He spoke about them-- nicely. He—he wanted only good things for them. He—he knew that he had made some mistakes. And it felt as though he was almost talking about another person in another lifetime. His—his real life in terms of—marriage, love really didn't start until Sally. I mean—I say that and—I mean no disrespect to—you know, his children whose—you know, their mothers.

00:20:42:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

But in terms of Ben Bradlee, you know, the—the great journalist, Ben Bradlee who filled up the room, Ben Bradlee who is this famous Washington editor, I mean, his life with Sally really—defined that. And—and their marriage was-- in my mind—it was a marriage of—they loved each other very much. And

they understood each other's human flaws. And they saw each other for who they were. And it felt, to me—now, I didn't know his other wives. But it felt to me like that was—that that was—a real marriage in the sense that it could survive because they knew who each other were. And they were real people for each other. They weren't playing roles.

00:21:41:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

You know, I think he got married because he—the first time, he—thought that that's what you're supposed to do, that that's what somebody—in his station in life-- it was time to do that. And, you know, I suspect that he was probably emotionally a little bit immature. And that might have-- led to some of the mistakes that he made. So the—marriage that he's—that he had with Sally—was very real and loving and strong and honest, honest. I'm an outsider. But that's what it looked like to me.

Ben Bradlee's commitment to the truth

00:22:26:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

I have so much to say on that. So obviously, he was—he was most proud of the obvious things—Watergate, the Pentagon Papers. But he just—he loved sticking a thumb in somebody's eye who was trying to pull one over. And he—he just—that's—that's what lit him up. So there was—you know, there were those kinds of things. He had—he had an obsession with corrections, funny corrections. I don't know. Has anybody told you this? Okay. So he was obsessed with newspaper corrections. The funnier the newspaper correction, the longer, the most insane newspaper correction where, you know, the

correction is longer than the story, he collected those. He loved those. The—the book deal that he got to do the memoir, it was actually a two-book deal. It was—the other book that was the book that he wanted to write, *How To Read a Newspaper*.

00:23:30:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

And—so that book, which he never wrote, sadly—one of the things that—so he—wrote the autobiography. That gets published. And then he still had this other book to write. And I had moved on—to other books. And I was teaching at Georgetown. But I really missed Ben. I missed having Ben in my life. I could go over and visit. But I missed working for him. So I came up with this idea that he should come to Georgetown and teach a class called, "How To Read a Newspaper." And so he's like—great, papers, you know, all this stuff. And I said, "We'll teach it together. You'll be—you'll be the – talent. You'll be the star. "I'll take attendance. I'll be the facilitator." So we did it for a semester. We—we taught together. And he brought in Katharine Graham and Bob Woodward. I mean, it was incredible. I mean, there were—this—this was in 1998. And so, you know, the—it's, what, 18 years ago.

00:24:41:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

So—so those kids are now 40—40 years old. Oh my God. Shoot me. Those kids are 40 years old. And—they still remember. People still talk about having been a student in that class. And so he—he talked in that class. I mean, I just—I thought about the corrections thing 'cause they talked about the corrections one day. He talked about—he talked a lot about lying, the obsession about—that people can lie to you. You can do the best reporting

possible. But there is always the chance that a source can lie to you. That's why you have to have the two-source rule and, you know, even better three sources. But your reporters can lie to you the way Janet Cooke did. So you've gotta have more checks and balances. So we talked about all that kind of stuff. But really what he—what energized him more than anything was—was sticking it to people who were not telling the truth whether it was, you know, a corrupt government official or—you know, a businessperson, whatever it was. He just loved sticking it to people.

Ben Bradlee's friendship with JFK

00:25:57:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

The fact that Jackie Kennedy—got upset with him, that was one of those few things that he did have trouble letting go of. That really got to him. And that was one of those moments in the transcripts, you know, that—it's been 20 years since I looked at it. But I vividly remember—how upset he was that he—that was something he carried with him. So JFK, the thing about JFK was—you know, it was a different time. And this is something he would say. And it was—it was a different time. Reporters—and—government officials, the—it—things were cozier. And—you know, nowadays, if you had somebody—if you had a reporter who was cozy with Obama, it's gonna get written about. It's gonna be on the internet. It's gonna go all over the place. But back then, you know, in the early '60s, the—it wasn't like that. People didn't necessarily know that much. He could sort of control it. He was—close with them. He was close with Jack and Jackie. But he wasn't close enough to know that JFK was having an affair with his sister-in-law, with his wife at

the—his—at the time, his wife's sister was having an affair with JFK, with the President of the United States.

00:27:36:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

And he didn't—Ben didn't find that out until later on after she was murdered on the towpath in Washington. You probably know this story. She was an artist. And she-- was—apparently having an affair with JFK. And Ben didn't know. And what Ben would say later was that when he and his wife and—Jack and Jackie would have dinner together, it's not like infidelity would come up, you know, over drinks. And people would always ask me after Ben's book came out, did I really believe that? How could he not know? How could somebody that savvy not know? You know,—It's—I believed him. And—I do—I did believe him. And I do believe him. I think—I don't think he would've been comfortable with telling—with holding onto that as a lie all those years given how he felt about lying. But I also—it sounded very plausible to me. I don't think he had the kind of relationship with JFK where they were confiding their innermost thoughts to each other. I mean, remember, we're talking about the president of the United States. So he found out. They found out after—she was murdered on the towpath they think by just, you know, some guy that—who was just—she was a victim of, you know, random violent crime. But then it turned out that she had a diary. And he—he went to look for—he—Ben went to look for her diary and ran into his sister-in-law's ex-husband who worked for the C.I.A. who took the diary.

00:29:29:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

I mean, they were both there in—this—I think it was her studio. I think it was—her artist studio. And they—they—you know, it came out that she had been having an affair with JFK. And—and that was something that people just never believed. And I always—I always did believe him about that. I think that's one of those things where he just shrugged. And-- you know, he was—he was very—he cared very much about journalistic ethics. But it was a different time. And this was personal. And everybody's got their limits. And it—it was family. And he wouldn't have wanted to do that, you know, to his wife or, you know, to his—you know, to his wife's sister. And I just think—the whole thing, the whole story is so weird and murky that we probably don't—you know, we'll probably never know all of it. But—but I really do believe that he did not know that they were having an affair until he found out after her death.

Conversations with Kennedy

00:30:46:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

He wrote a book, *Conversations With Kennedy* (1975) after Kennedy died—was killed. And— he said to him, you know, "Your book is all about you, Ben." And that—that really hurt him. He was—he was very hurt by that. It—he brought it up several times. And then, you know, one of the times we talked about it, he real—you know, he said, you know, "I never told her. But, you know, I—I gave the money to—the money I made from that book, I made a donation to the Kennedy Institute at Harvard." And—yeah. He—that was something that he really couldn't let go of. That was the sense that I got from him, too. And—and that bothered him. He was used to being trusted by

people. We're all living, we're all playing out the whole Janet Malcolm thing. We're all just doing it to each other. The Janet Malcolm thing being, you know, any journalist, you know, who is—I can't remember the exact quote but—you know, that basically that journalists are conmen. And—anybody who's—has any kind of self-- any journalist that has any self-awareness knows that, you know, and that we're all in it-- that the thing that matters the most is the story.

00:32:12:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

And I—I think why that bothered Ben so much with Jackie is because what he wrote about Kennedy in that book was, you know, basically a love letter. It was—he loved John Kennedy. And he admired him. And he tried to write a book that was a tribute to him. And—and I think he thought it was a good book. And he was very hurt that she didn't like the book. And, you know, you see this—you see this a lot in Washington. We're all writing about each other. It's always about the story. And that's I think—I think in his heart, you know, he was—he was a journalist through and through. And there are—a couple of exceptions. Maybe this—what happened with his sister-in-law that was just too close. But otherwise, it was all about—the story came first.

Ben Bradlee's charisma

00:33:25:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

He was completely, 100% aware of what he was doing and playing and that he needed to perform. He needed to not because he had the need but because it's what people expected. So it felt sometimes—because I would—I had free

rein to walk in and out of his office with research materials or whatever. And—it felt sometimes when I was watching him that he was like a jukebox. And people were putting a quarter in. And he was playing the song they wanted him to play. And then if—you know, I would always often leave the room to give him privacy with whoever was coming to visit. I'm just talking about people strolling in from the newsroom. And they would leave the room completely—completely transformed. It was as though they had gotten an injection of heroin. You know, they were—they were high. They—they – he could do this thing where he could reflect back at you who you wanted to be. And you felt like you were that best image that you imagine for yourself. And in that moment, you—you felt high talking to him. Now, I didn't have that with him because I was behind the scenes. And I spent so much time with him and because my—I wasn't there to be—for him to amuse me. I wasn't there out of friendship.

00:35:01:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

I was there to help him write his book and to get the best book out of him, get him to write the best book that he could. And also, I was just so fascinated by the whole thing. I was performing my own little Grant Study by watching people, you know—how they—they would come in. And he would perform for them. But they were also performing for him. You know, he would have nicknames for people. And they would—they would come in. And they would do their shtick. They would have a new anecdote. Something happened while they were reporting that they couldn't put in the story. But they could tell him. Or they heard some gossip at a party they had been at the night before. And they would bring it to him and drop it at his feet, you know, as though

they were hunting dogs, you know, bringing the pheasant and leaving it for him. And then—and then he would be so grateful. He would reflect back to them how great they were. And they would leave. And they would come out of his office. And—you know, they just—they seemed as though they were on some kind of, you know, substance. It was great.

Ben Bradlee's affability

00:36:14:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

I think—because I saw—I would see him—you know, it's like seeing the actors behind the stage. I would come in there. And he'd be working on a crossword puzzle. You know, that's—everybody knows that's how he relaxed. And I would come in. And, you know, sometimes he'd repeat a story to me that he'd just heard or whatever. Or he'd roll his eyes about somebody if somebody had come in that he wasn't, like, a huge fan of. But—but-- but he-- he tried to like everybody. It—it's easier to like people than to not like people. And he wasn't—he—he didn't have contempt for people except for those people we were talking about who, you know, corrupt people, you know, people in the news—who were full of shit.

Ben Bradlee chose his words carefully

00:37:06:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

He loved to tell assholes that they were assholes. And, you know, he would—he would—write things and letters to—you know, if people would write in angry letters, I mean, God, do I wish Twitter existed when—I mean,

he wouldn't have been on it. But it would've been so great if he had—I mean, Twitter was made for him 'cause he had such great zingers. I still, to this day, I swear like a sailor from being around him. And-- you know, it doesn't work as well for me. But it was just—he—It was such an art form. He—he just—he could always find the exact combination of swear words. He just would nail it. And it sounded beautiful coming out of his mouth. And so everybody around him, most people around him sort of, you know, we were cheap imitations of it. But I really do, to this day—it's bad 'cause I'm a professor. We're not supposed to swear. Yeah. I—he just—he had no fear about calling people anything if they deserved it. He—he—I never heard him call somebody something that they didn't deserve. It was really—it was usually, you know, some colossal jerk.

00:38:30:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

There was a guy who was the head of a government agency, a smallish government agency, a couple hundred people, maybe, he was in charge of. And this guy cheated at golf at—a local country club in some tournament. And he got caught doing it. He got reprimanded. He got fined. There was some kind of, you know, punitive action taken. But somebody at the country club or somebody in that universe called it in as a tip to the investigative unit. And a reporter on Bob Woodward's staff named Ben Wiser who's now at *The New York Times* started reporting out the story. And the golf cheater—got wind of the story as the reporting was going on. I—I believe Ben's—Ben Wiser's plan was to—you know, he was doing the typical investigative thing where you—where you interview people surrounding the story and you get closer and closer to the target.

00:39:43:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

And then the last person you interview is that person so that you've got a lot of leverage. And—but the guy gets wind of it and, you know, lawyers up and asks for a meeting with Ben and—and Ben—with both Bens and—editors and all this and convinced them-- convinced this group that they shouldn't run the story, that the—golf cheating didn't have anything to—do with his business, with—the government—kind of government business that he does and that he was—I think he was getting therapy for it, whatever. And so they deliberated. And they decided to not run the story. And what Ben told him was, "We're not gonna run the story. But if you ever run for office," 'cause this was—he was an appointee. He was not elected. "If you ever run for office, we're gonna hold to this story. And we reserve the right to, you know, do something with it later on. But we're not gonna do anything with it now." And then he ran into the guy at a party. I don't know how—maybe a year or two, three years later.

00:41:05:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

And the guy was drunk and, you know, went up to Ben and said something nasty to him. And Ben was just like—he's such an asshole and told the guy what he thought. And then he put the story, at least an abbreviated version of it, in his—in this book. And that's the kind of—that's the kind of guy who could provoke—that's the kind of anecdote that can – that could provoke—a string of curse words coming out of Ben's mouth. But he was somebody who loved language. You know, he studied Latin at Saint Marks. He—he just loved

language. He had such an ear for it. And so he knew how to use curse words. There's an art to that, too.

Ben Bradlee and Nixon

00:41:56:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

I think he thought Nixon was an asshole. You know, I mean, the—yeah. I think he thought Nixon was an asshole. And I think that he thought Nixon thought Nixon was smarter than *The Washington Post* was. And Nixon was wrong. He loved the Watergate story because it was such a hard story to get and because they didn't know what they had. But they knew they had something and because everybody else was afraid because—everybody else either didn't get it, the—I mean, didn't get it meaning they didn't understand it. Or they didn't have—they didn't have the guts. And "guts" is not the word that Ben would've used. So I think—he just—he loved it. And—and he also—he was, in his own way, very patriotic. And I think that it—it was an insult to his patriotism that—that Nixon and—and all the president's men would do what they had done—especially after having been friends with Jack Kennedy and having been up close with that White House. Now, obviously, JFK wasn't perfect either. We just talked about his infidelities. But—I think, you know, very few people would argue that he was a patriot. And so I think Nixon—I think he thought Nixon was a coward, too.

Ben Bradlee and Watergate

00:43:40:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

In the early '90s when I was interviewing him for his book, we were talking about Watergate. And you know, Watergate even in—1991, at the time of this transcript, so that was—it was almost 20 years later, 17, 18 years, whatever. And it had—it had been—this ground had been covered and recovered. And, you know, what else was there to say? And in interviewing him we weren't coming up with fresh material. And that concerned me. And I knew it—it wasn't that Ben didn't have something interesting to say about Watergate. I mean, obviously, he did. But he'd said it on a million stages at a million different universities and other forums. I knew how obsessed he had become with the whole notion of that people can lie to you. And I knew that Watergate—Watergate—the coverage of Watergate would not have happened if Ben hadn't taken a chance, if Ben hadn't trusted Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.

00:44:58:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

It would've been a house of cards. It would've fallen apart. They were two young, inexperienced reporters, the-- they needed him to—they needed—just practically, they needed him to give them permission to keep doing what they were doing. But they also—they needed him to believe in what they were doing 'cause it was really scary. And so, the fact that he believed in them had to be a little bit of a leap of faith. It occurred to me that must be a leap of faith because if you flash forward to the Janet Cooke incident, that also was a leap of faith for her editors. It's always a leap of faith. You—you can't—you can't follow your reporters around. You can't always know that every single thing happened exactly the way they said that it happened. So, I wanted to get through that veneer of what I had heard them

tell a million other people on stage, on TV, everywhere. And it was just the two of us in my little office.

00:46:13:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

And he controlled the material. It was here—his material. I asked him the questions. The tape recorder records it. I transcribe it. I print it out. I give it to him. I give him the tapes. He owns it. So he knew—he knew it was safe. He knew it was his material. And he could do with it what he wanted to do with it. And so, I asked him if he ever worried about whether any of it was untrue, if any of it was exaggerated, embellished, whatever. And he expressed some doubt, not in any of the facts, not in—any of the reporting but just maybe some of the atmospherics of it, some of the—what he would call about other things not this but too good to check. If—if you heard a rumor and it was something you were gonna—chase, a story you were gonna chase but it sounded too good to be true, he would call it a too good to be—too good to check story which meant you got to go check it. But I wish—I wish we didn't have to 'cause it's gonna fall apart. So that day when I interviewed him for his book and I asked him about it—I was blown away by his response. I was blown away that he would say it to me.

00:47:45:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

And I had to remind myself that he wasn't really saying it to me. He was just saying it out loud. You know, we all have stuff that we don't wanna say to anybody. Well, at least I do. And I was about as close as you could come to that because I wasn't important. I—I wasn't his wife. I wasn't some famous journalist. I—didn't have anything invested in the story itself. And so, I think

it was just a thought—a random thought, that I asked the question. And he—and he—he felt like—he felt comfortable enough to answer it. And then I transcribed the tape. And I was upset because this is 1991. And I had—I had worked for Bob Woodward in the '80s. I had been Bob's research assistance. And Bob was, in fact, the reason I got the job with Ben Bradlee because after I helped Bob on his book, then he suggested to Carl Bernstein I help him on his book. And then Bob suggested to Ben Bradlee I help him on his book. So Bob Woodward was a mentor to me. And I felt grateful to him for the job. And I cared about Bob. And so I felt really funny about that exchange.

00:49:20:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

I wasn't happy about it. I didn't—I didn't feel comfortable. So I transcribed it. And I threw the tape in the box with all the other tapes. And I gave Ben the transcript. And he wrote the chapter. And he did not include that in it. And I did my best to forget that I ever had that conversation with him. What he expressed to me, the doubts that he had was—was there really a flower pot? It was the atmospherics of it. It was the—it was the Hollywood embellishments. It was—sort of the stuff that's too good to check. Was it—was he meeting with Deep Throat in a garage? You know, it was that kind of stuff that—but it wasn't—it wasn't did Nixon do this? Did Haldeman do that? It—you know, it was nothing like that. It was—it—he wasn't challenging any of the facts of the case. It was just, you know, have you ever been at a party and you've had a beer or two and, you know, your wife tells you to tell that great story? And, you know, maybe he'll throw in an extra, you know, little, great, you know, oh, and then—you know, and then the guy—then the cashier said to—you know, just throwing in something.

00:50:42:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

You know, it was like that. So I didn't—it's not that I thought that was important or that it was a big deal. I thought that it was interesting that he would express any kind of doubt. And I think that that doubt was more generic, that it wasn't even—it wasn't saying something necessarily about Woodward and Bernstein. But it was saying something about what he had learned, the capacity that people had. You know, that Janet Cooke, you know, a trusted reporter, I mean, not—not at the same level, obviously, as Woodward and Bernstein, but that somebody on your staff could lie to you and let you publish a story on the front page of *The Washington Post* that would go on to win a Pulitzer. And then it would bring such shame to everything—that they had built up. So I think it was more—the reason it was interesting to me was because I was able to see how deep that that—that that insecurity that people can lie to you is.

The impact of Watergate on *The Washington Post*

00:52:05:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

You know, one of the things that you've gotta realize is—and I'm sure you do realize this. But something that you should remember is that Watergate was the defining event of these three men's lives, their professional lives at least. And—it is—it's treated as—it's the greatest story in the history of journalism. And there is—a romance about it. And it hearkens back to an era that any of us have worked in newsrooms and it's pristine. It's this—it's this beautiful moment in history where the good guys won. And—even, you know,

here's what it's like. It's like—it's like my brother when he bought that corvette, that perfect, beautiful corvette. And he'd park it at the far end of the parking lot at the grocery store so no one would scratch it. And then you come out. And there's still a ding in it. And it's not that big a deal. It's just this tiny ding. That's what it's like.

Ben Bradlee's relationship with Kay Graham

00:53:33:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

She was one of his absolute favorite people. He adored her. He respected her. He had so much gratitude to her. I mean, she's one of the few people that I can think of in his life whom he looked up to and who—whom he appreciated, that—that he felt a sense of gratitude to because—because she always had his back. She always believed in him. She always trusted him. I think they had so much trust for each other. And it was—it was quite amazing to watch them. He brought her to the "How To Read a Newspaper" class here at Georgetown. And—you know, it—it was a love fest. I mean, he just—he was so happy to bring her and to share her—to share his friendship with her with those 15 or 20 students that we had. And he just spoke about her with such affection and reverence. And, you know, it felt a little awkward. They were both writing their memoirs at the same time. And—you know, they joked– There was the joke that—she was gonna call her book *A Better Life* 'cause his book was *A Good Life*.

00:55:10:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:

And I used to joke afterwards that she should call it a better book because – she won the Pulitzer. But yeah. They—they loved each other. They needed each other. They had— here's what it reminds me of, I—I have a couple of students who are combat veterans-- one who fought in Iraq and one who fought in Afghanistan. And they met each other here at Georgetown. And they became best friends because none of the other students could understand what they had gone through. And they have this incredible bond. And I saw that with Mrs. Graham and Ben. They had this thing that they had gone through in a certain way that nobody else had.

00:56:04:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:
Yes, he's got that with Woodward and Bernstein. And, of course, he's got a whole other—He had a whole other thing with Sally. And he's got the relationships with his children. But what he had with Mrs. Graham was a unique, personal relationship that is—inextricably tied with this huge moment in journalism's history. And—and it was—they both knew how important and how delicate that relationship was and how important it was for their posterity. And so, they were very careful with each other—I don't mean careful—I mean, they were careful about each other's feelings.

Quinn Bradlee

00:56:58:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:
Here's the thing, Ben—Ben didn't have to be Ben Bradlee when he was with Quinn. Ben could just be Ben. And—they had such an amazing bond. They had—I don't think I—I don't think I have the capacity to even describe it

because I don't—I don't understand it 'cause I haven't had that kind of a relationship but—you know, obviously, between a father and a son. And I think—I think that Ben had such enormous respect and pride—I'm gonna cry. I'm sorry. So terrible. I think Ben had such—you know, Quinn is such a fighter. Quinn was such a fighter from the moment he was born. He had—I think that Ben saw in Quinn the best—God, I am really just, like, losing it.

00:58:15:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:
He saw in Quinn the trait about himself that he valued the most, which is that you never give up and that you're a fighter and that you set your mind to do something or to get something and you get it. And he did that. He did it with Watergate. He did it with the Pentagon Papers. He did it with various women. He—he did it—I mean, he did it as a young reporter. I mean, that is—that—that was it. So he—he had such a bond with Quinn. But at the same time, Quinn didn't expect anything from Ben except for Ben to be his dad and—and to be there with him.

00:59:03:00

BARBARA FEINMAN TODD:
When I think about what their relationship was like, it was—they were best friends. And—and Quinn—Ben didn't—and forgive me, but Ben did not give a flying fuck about most—what most people thought of him. He cared about what Quinn thought of him. He cared about whether or not Quinn thought he was a good father.

END TC: 00:59:31:00