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GLORIA STEINEM INTERVIEW
GLORIA: IN HER OWN WORDS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

GLORIA STEINEM

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Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt and Sheila Nevins

GLORIA: The Person - *The Conflicted Daughter*

Growing Up

14:38:36;08

GLORIA STEINEM:

You know, I-- I was-- I've-- I've realized in later life that I was extremely lucky that nobody ever hit me. That I always knew I was loved by both my parents. That I was listened to. You know, that my parents always respected me as-- as an individual. All those things were very positive.

14:39:02;01

Some things were not positive. That is-- I was quite isolated as a child, living in books. So, I really believed things had a beginning, middle and an end. I took care of my mother, who was an invalid much of the time. So, I was a small person taking care of a big person from about eight forward I suppose. And we were by ourselves from about ten forward. And that was hard, you know, that was really hard.

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So, I-- I have-- a permanent childhood image of walking beside a big highway because our old house was falling into this big highway. It was in a slum. As the only person not in a car, and kind of invisible. And that's the-- the-- the

downside. It was extremely depressing and scary. Very scary. To be a child taking care of an adult is very, very scary. That's the hard part. And then, there was the good part. You know, which was that I always knew my parents loved me. They treated me as well or better as they treated themselves.

03:07:33;09

My-- my parents were the mixed marriage of their era, I think, although I didn't absorb that until much later. But because my father came from kind of upper middle class Jewish family and my mother came from a working class Protestant family, neither family thought this was a good idea at all. So, they got married secretly once and then publicly a second time. Which meant my father used to write things, "To my second wife," (CHUCKLE) when he meant to my mother.

03:08:08;27

By the time I came along, this was reconciled. I think it was dif-- very difficult at the time. But gradually both grandmothers and my mother all became theosophists. So, though I don't remember my paternal grandmother that well, I do remember-- going with my mother and her mother to theosophical lodge meetings as a child with my coloring book.

Gloria's mother

01:04:46;16

GLORIA STEINEM:

My-- my mother was-- I think was a-- great mother because her philosophy of childrearing was-- well, first of all, she was trying to counter her own childrearing. Her mother I think had been quite-- mean. And she did

perform the miracle of changing that pattern in one generation, which is a kind of miracle.

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But also, she was a theosophist. And since theosophists believe in reincarnation, her childrearing philosophy was that children are little strangers who come into your life. You have the duty and the joy of loving and caring for them. But they don't belong to you. And the idea is to find out who they already are, and help them to become that. You know, like a seed becoming a flower. And that is a great childrearing philosophy. It means you don't get pushed, you know, into imitating or conforming. You're listened to-- because you're perceived as a unique person. And I only wish that I had understood how great that was in time to say thank you to her. It's-- it took me more years to understand it.

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I-- I was a good daughter, a really good daughter in the sense of taking care of her-- even when it was very hard for me to do it, and supporting her, and taking her away on vacations. And, you know, we enjoyed each other's company. But I was not a good daughter in the sense of sharing interests. Because I was trying so hard or I was so fearful of becoming her. So, I look at her books now that I have, and I see-- how many interests we shared, and I regret that I denied her that companionship.

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If my mother were sitting here where you are, I would say thank you so much for your philosophy of childrearing that was so way, way, way ahead of its time, and is still ahead of its time, because it wasn't about possession or

making your child imitate you. (CLEARS THROAT) It was about recognizing the uniqueness of-- of a child. And helping them, you know, become they-- they already were. So, I would say from the bottom of my heart, thank you for that. And also-- I would say let's talk about some of the books and shared interests that we had and we never talked about. Or very little.

01:09:52;00

You know, I don't think she was-- mentally ill. And even after a couple of years in a mental hospital when I was in college, there was really no diagnosis except-- an anxiety neurosis, they said. And I said, "Would you say her spirit was broken." And the psychiatrist said, "Yes, you might say that." So, I think she just-- had a life that did not allow her to become who she-- who she was. And she-- (CLEARS THROAT) became depressed and retreated-- into another world much of the time.

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You know, she wasn't depressed while she was liberated and working. She was a pioneer in journalism before I was born. It was trying to-- be the wife of a very charming, wonderful utterly irresponsible man, be the perfect mother to my older sister-- and do it all at once. Also, my father wanted to go off and start a summer resort in a very isolated rural part of Michigan, which made it difficult for her to keep her big city newspaper job.

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And in the end, after a nervous breakdown, and being in a sanatorium for a year or two-- I'm not sure, she just solved the problem by giving up her life. You know, by giving up her job, giving up her friends, giving up everything she cared about, and moving to rural Michigan. And she ultimately became, by the time I was born, someone I remember as-- sitting in the car while my

father went in to buy and sell antiques-- which is the way he made a living in the wintertime in his gypsy way. In the heat and in the cold, no matter what, because she didn't want to be home alone. So, she was this figure sitting in the car while-- I went in with my father and we-- I tried to help him wrap and unwrap the antiques he was selling. You know, it's-- it's such a waste. But I-- I think that I identified with almost every woman in the world before I had the courage to really identify with my mother.

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You know, women step out for women because it needs doing. So, many women with very strong mothers do what I do. It-- it wasn't certainly the-- the only inspiration. **But I do think that a lot of us in my generation and still generations to come (CLEARS THROAT) are living out the un-lived lives of our mothers.** And I think-- I am doing that. And that's a proud and great thing to do, but I am so moved when I hear younger women, a few younger women say to me I hope I can have as interesting a life as my mother. Not the same life, as interesting. That's a big step forward.

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What-- what my mother would say to me now is probably a double message because I remember the double messages of the past. For instance, when I was engaged in my senior year in college, she said to me-- "It's probably a good thing you get married right away, because if you are unmarried and you have a taste of independence, you'll never get married." (LAUGHS) So, is that a double message or-- so, I think she would be-- she would say to me that she's proud of me. She would worry about me because she worried about conflict, she worried about whether or not I'd be able to support myself. She-- when I came home, she would say to me things like, "You know, your sister

just got a new winter coat and she didn't have to pay for it herself."

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My sister was married. You know, to a man who didn't make that much money, and she had six children. I mean, it wasn't rational (LAUGHS) in an economic sense. But my mother was fearful for me, that I-- that I wouldn't be able to-- to support myself, at the same time that she was glad to see me carrying forward what she hadn't been able to do.

Gloria's Father

01:20:56;19

GLORIA STEINEM:

My father was-- a gypsy. I mean, he-- he had two big things he was proud of. He never wore a hat, which in his generation, people did, and he never had a job. So, it's part of the reason I can freelance probably, 'cause he trained me for that. He always said, "If I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, it might be wonderful."

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(LAUGHS) And he took us in a house trailer every winter when I was a child, buying and selling antiques along the way, never with enough money to make it to Florida or California or wherever we were going. And-- and I was his playmate. Which was great. I mean, because he treated me as-- as an equal. Trying to think of an example.

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Well, his father story-- one of his favorite stories about me was that he took me at age four or five to a little country store near us, and I asked him for a

nickel. And he said, "What for." And I said, "You can give it to me, or not give it to me, but you can't ask me what it's for." And he said, "That's right." And he gave me the nickel.

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GLORIA STEINEM:

Now, this was a story about me, but to me, it's about him. That he was the kind of person who would say that's right. And recognize the will of-- of a four or five-year-old child.

Thoughts on not having children

02:07:00;27

GLORIA STEINEM:

You know, I used to think that I had to have children because I thought everyone did. And you were crazy if you didn't. In fact, I had a much older cousin who was the only person in my family who didn't have children. And she was crazy (CHUCKLE) and was treated as crazy. So, I-- like getting married, I kept saying, "Yes, I'm going to do that, but no right now." And it was really courtesy of the women's movement that made me realize, "Wait a minute, I'm-- I'm happy." And if having children is to be seen as a choice, then I'm serving a purpose in a way, you know, by showing that you can be happy with and without children. You don't have to have children.

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I suppose if I-- intellectually think about it, I can understand that some of it may be because I was a parent to my mother and therefore felt I had done that. I don't know. But the truth is, I've just never felt compelled in any way to have children. And I don't have regrets. In fact, I was sitting in a women's

center in New Delhi, I think, in a very poor area. And there were Muslim women and traditional Hindu women. Young girls were all sitting on the floor.

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And somebody asked me that question. And I thought, "If I tell the truth, I'll lose them, you know, because this is a different world. But what's the point in not telling the truth?" So, when she said, you know, "Aren't you sorry you didn't have children?" I said, "Not for a millisecond." And they all applauded. (CHUCKLE) Because I think we all want to know we have a choice. If-- if-- if we're going to honor having children, we have to say it wasn't compelled. In most species, if an adult of the species is put next to a helpless child of the same species, the instinct is to care for that helpless being because that allows the species to survive. But I don't really believe that has to be-- something that came out of you. You know, I just-- I just think it's part of-- that empathy is part of our evolutionary equipment if our species is going to survive.

Her Mother's Death

02:42:56;11

GLORIA STEINEM:

My mother had been-- living with my sister. My sister generously, you know, gave her a-- an apartment downstairs in her home. And my mother had been well enough to sometimes work as a saleswoman in a local little pottery store. She was -- still afraid to be alone. She still had agoraphobia. She didn't wanna be at home with her children, for instance. She was afraid to be responsible for them.

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But she-- she was-- she lived a pretty good life. You know, and she went to theosophy meetings again and she had friends and all of that. But then gradually she-- you know, her kind of addiction to tranquilizers-- I-- I realize in retrospect that those tranquilizers may have played a much bigger role in-- in her fantasies and her lack of reality sometimes because of withdrawal, because of, you know, for all kinds of reasons. But we didn't know that then. And gradually sh-- she became less able to operate in reality and take care of herself.

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And her heart was irre-- heart rhythms were irregular. She had around the clock nurses. It be-- you know, it became impossible, really, for her not to be in a nursing home. So, for a while she was in a nursing home, a wonderful nursing home where the nurses were great to her. And she made friends. You know, she-- my mother made friends wherever she went because she was dependent. And so she knew how to get people to take care of her.

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When-- when she came here in this apartment to stay with me, if I went out in the neighborhoods afterwards-- everybody knew my mother, (CHUCKLE) you know, because she had made friends with the shoe repair guy, with the delicatessen person, with (CHUCKLE)-- and she retained that-- that ability. So she-- she did well in-- in the nursing home. But, gradually, her heart problems and her-- sometimes retreat from reality just became more and more and more pronounced.

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So, my sister called me and it was clear that my mother was, you know, in her

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last few days, I guess. And my sister was there most of the time. But she didn't happen to be there in these last hours, you know. So, I was sitting with my mother and-- she kept saying that she wanted to go home. And so I-- (CHUCKLE) as I remember so well kind of lied to her one last time and said, "I'll take you home." And then she just gradually stopped breathing. And my sister and I-- I mean, my sister came. I called her and she came right away.

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And we sat with her for more than an hour, I think, because my mother had once read a story in which a woman was thought to be dead and was not. And it haunted her. So she had made us promise that we would sit with her body for-- you know, an hour or more, which we did. And the-- the-- and there was wonderful funeral. My mother had-- had joined-- a kind of hippie Episcopalian (CHUCKLE) church in-- in Washington that had breakfast programs and let poor people sleep in the pew and, you know, was definitely my mother's kind of church.

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She'd also given them the remainder of our property in-- in Michigan because she hoped that they would have a camp for poor children, preferably black children, because she felt the neighborhood was prejudiced. They'd been prejudiced against my father because he was Jewish. So she wanted desperately to have (CHUCKLE) a camp there. But actually, the church sold it, you know, because it was hundreds of miles (CHUCKLE) away. You know, it made more sense for them to-- to sell it. But it was her great gesture there.

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You know, I don't th-- of course-- when someone dies, you know I-- and especially your mother, I mean, the-- the guilt I felt more had to do with--

companionship, you know-- had I in-- in discussion, you know. It wasn't so much presence because I had been taking her away for vacation every year. And we saw each other. And we felt very connected, I think. But it-- so I think I felt guilty later, not at that moment, but later, after I realized how many be-- interests we really could have shared.

02:48:44;11

She-- well, and the weird thing was that-- that sh-- not too long after she died, I don't remember, a few months, I sat down and wrote-- Ruth's Song (COUGH)-- 'scuse me, (COUGH) which-- I'm not a fast writer. I mean, if there were an Olympics for slow writers I would be a member (CHUCKLE) of the team. But that kind of wrote itself. It was as if it had been writing itself somewhere before.

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You know, so it was somehow inscribed. And I was taking it down. Then after I wrote it and I was published, I couldn't read it for years. It was just too sad, even though I wrote it. It was as if some part of me, you know, in an emergency, part of you comes along and rescues yourself. (CHUCKLE) So, s-- a part of me had come along and allowed me to write it. But to really feel it-- to understand-- what it meant took much longer.

Her Father's Death

GLORIA STEINEM:

03:01:06;16

My father was, of course, long divorced from my mother. And we had not been living together since I was about ten or so. (THROAT CLEARING) But he came back east once a year from his, you know, gypsy travels-- in the Sun

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Belt. So I was in touch with him. And we saw each other. But he had been in a car accident in Orange County in California. He hadn't-- he must've told the-- doctor in this kind of battle station hospital behi-- beside the highway to call me. (CLEARS THROAT)

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And I was out of the country somewhere. So I didn't get the message for-- for quite a while. And when I did, (CLEARS THROAT) my sister and I and I allowed my sister who then had little children and couldn't have gone herself to say, "Well, why don't you wait to go until he has to leave the hospital? And then you'll be able to transfer him, you know, to his apartment and so on?"

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I shouldn't have done that, you know? I should've gone right away. But I think that-- a deep part of me feared that if I went, I would never come back, that I would end up caring for him, you know, as I had for my mother when I was little. So, (CLEARS THROAT) I didn't go. And then we got a call from the doctor saying he's taken a turn for the worse-- so I should come. And-- he-- died while I was en route.

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My sister called me and reached me, paging me in-- in Chicago, I think. So, he-- he died alone. You know? And I regret that so much, that he was the-- I mean, I know, in a sense, that he'd chosen, you know, to-- to live alone. But-- I really regret that. So, I suppose it plays a role in my trying to be present (CLEARS THROAT) not only for my mother but, for instance-- my dear friend Wilma Mankiller-- whose-- who-- who with her husband, Charlie, had done our marriage ceremony-- a dear friend.

03:03:39;17

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She has-- was very ill. And I stayed there for a couple of weeks before she died. And I'm so grateful that I did. And I went to see Blair (PH), my college fiancé, before he died. (CHUCKLE) You know, I think-- I think I'm still trying to make up for not having been with my father or to learn from it.