

ELDRIDGE STREET SYNAGOGUE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Amy Stein-Milford

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Amy Stein-Milford conducted by Hanna Griff-Sleven on September 18, 2023. This interview is part of the Eldridge Street Synagogue Restoration Archive Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center

Session: 1

Interviewee: Amy Stein-Milford

Location:

Interviewer: Hanna Griff-Sleven

Date: September 18, 2023

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

Q: [00:01:50] It's September 18th, 2023. My name is Hanna Griff-Sleven , and I'm with Amy Stein-Milford, a former [00:02:00] staff member at the Museum at Eldridge Street.

Milford: Once the Eldridge Street Project.

Q: Yeah, when it was the Eldridge Street Project. What was your first experience with Eldridge Street?

Milford: So, my first experience—well, I lived on the Lower East Side, so I knew of the building. And I was inside for the first time for a reading with Peter Hamill that Roberta Brandes Gratz had organized, and I think this was, or I know this was back in the late 1990s, and I just remember going into the space. And it was so spectacularly dilapidated, both beautiful and a wreck, and I just really was immediately taken by the space by both the beauty of the space, and the fact that there was programming going on [00:03:00] inside of the space that Pete Hamill was talking about a book that was connected to the synagogue and had actually had a connection to the synagogue when he was younger, and so it was just a magical place. And at the time, I had heard about a position there, and so I really wanted to get to know the space.

There was also, I will add, at the time there was an exhibit of dresses up in the balcony by Carol Hamoy and these were garments, tea-stained garments that were like ghosts hanging in the balcony. And it was so rich to have art and history, and then just this important New York City building.

Q: So, you said that you knew that there was a position there. What were you doing? What was your job at the present?

Milford: Oh, at the time, I was [00:04:00] working at the Jewish Museum, and then I heard of a position there, and it was within the development, and the PR, and I just knew I loved the mission of the place, I loved where it was located, and so I applied for that.

Q: Okay. So, who hired you? Who was the director at the time?

Milford: At the time, the director was Amy Waterman, and I have a very vivid memory of meeting with her in her little office on the lower level in the space that would have housed the secondary chapel or the beis medrash, and she was so warm, she is so warm and gracious. And I just really liked how she talked about the building and what was happening there, and she really—not in that interview, but in my time working with her, really inculcated in me the sense of [00:05:00] creating mission-focused programming that really had connection to the building, that we didn't just program things within the building, but that we did things were connected in some way to its history, to its architecture, and its aesthetics and also to the Jewish heritage and

spirituality of this space. So, that could be translated very broadly, and that was something that I got to do in my time there. But that's definitely my memory of Amy, that she was very, very focused on really thinking about the mission of what the building could be, and how it could be used as a cultural and an educational center.

Q: What did you know of the Lower East Side? I mean, I know you lived there, but what did you know historically of the area at the time?

Milford: [00:06:00] The neighborhood is so rich, and memory-filled for me. I grew up in New York City and I would take the M15 bus from my house on the Upper East Side to the Lower East Side. We'd do it about every three months or so. It was that kind of what you might call a nostalgia trip, but it was very deeply meaningful for my family, and especially for my father who grew up in a Yiddish speaking home, and his parents emigrated to New York from Eastern Europe, the countries that were the founders of Eldridge Street. And so we would go, and it was just so magical, we would go to all of the Jewish shops, we would go garment shopping, but we'd also go to Stritsky's [phonetic] [00:07:00] and we went to Hollander Pickles, not Guss' Pickles, and to many other stores that were there, and got all this Kosher food. And then we would always have dinner at Schmulka Bernstein's on Essex Street, and that was for me so amazing 'cause there was no kosher Chinese food in New York. That was really the one place to go to.

So, I had all of these childhood memories, and then in college in my early twenties, I would go to the Lower East Side seeking culture, and it was dangerous, and it was exciting. And then as I got

older and when I was applying for the job in my late twenties, early thirties, I just thought it was so interesting 'cause it had these layers of memory, layers of history, it had Jewish history, it had new immigrants who'd come to the Lower East Side where [00:08:00] I eventually lived, was a part of Chinatown and it had these personal and family memories too, going back to my grandparents.

Q: Do you know where they lived in the Lower East Side?

Milford: Well, the rumor was always that my grandfather, my zeyde lived on Attorney Street, but I don't think that's true, I think that was lore because my father became an attorney, so it was like he grew up on the Lower East Side. My father didn't, he grew up in Williamsburg, but he was an attorney, and then my father became an attorney, but I don't think they actually lived on Attorney Street.

Q: Okay. So, Eldridge Street definitely fulfilled something in your heart.

Milford: It rang every bell for me. I mean, I grew up in an orthodox Jewish home, it is an orthodox—or it was historically an orthodox Jewish synagogue. Its makeup, the architecture of the synagogue, its design is just like the synagogue I grew up going to. [00:09:00] I knew where everything would be when I walked into the building, I knew where the bema would be, I knew where the ark was, I knew where the women's bathroom would be, that there'd be one upstairs. It just was set up identically, but on a very different scale, and much more intimate 'cause it was built at a much earlier time, and you could just feel the kind of handmade quality of it, and the

hand painting. I might not have been articulating that right when I came in. So yeah, it just spoke to me in so many ways.

Q: So, getting back, you went to this book reading, and you said that the building was a wreck. So where did the actual reading take place, was it upstairs, downstairs?

Milford: The reading took place in the main sanctuary, and where the men would sit. So, yeah, in the main sanctuary, and then I was able to walk around and go to the women's gallery, and that's where I saw [00:10:00] the exhibit by Carol Hamoy. But yes, even though the building was under construction, there were programmings going on there, and again, that was a program set up by, I guess Amy Waterman must have facilitated it, but Roberta Brandes Gratz was the one who knew Pete Hamill and who orchestrated it.

Q: So, was it shortly after that that you applied for and got the job?

Milford: I was applying for the job, and I was doing my homework, and so I then met with Amy and just really wanted that job. And, yeah.

Q: That's great. How did visitors experience the place back in the day? So, there were programs, but were there tours going on, do you remember?

Milford: There were tours, I remember very vividly. There were tours Tuesdays and Thursdays at ten-thirty and two-thirty, [00:11:00] and Sundays either eleven to four or ten to four, I believe it

was eleven to four. And we who were on the staff—there were docents, not as many as there were when I was working—as the docent pool expanded, but when I started, there were some docents, and they would usually come on Sundays. Some would come on the week, I remember Joy Shanker who I just bumped into a few months ago immaculately dressed, and she would come and she'd give tours during the week. But it was often the staff who was giving the tours during the week, and then on Sundays, a staff member would come in, but it was generally docent led.

However, my first Sunday, I was told how to come in, how to open up, and no one else was there. I was the only person, I was manning the cash box, [00:12:00] I was opening the doors, I was giving tours, but also trying to keep an eye on everything. It was a very different space in those days.

Q: Yes. And I remember, and correct me if I'm wrong, it wasn't on the hours when there was a critical mass of people, you would give a tour, right, or how did that work?

Milford: On Sundays, on Sundays. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we were there, and we were working, so it really was ten-thirty and two-thirty, and it was advertised in guidebooks, so people would know. You would get a buzzer, you know, on Wednesday at five you're ready to go. I total softy, and, you know, the person would be like, "I've come from so far. I'm from Connecticut." [laughs] Or, "I've come from so far. I'm coming from Germany." Or, you know, sometimes it really was far, and generally I would say, "Of course, you can come in, and take a peek." But there were those official [00:13:00] times. And then you're right, on Sunday, it was more kind of

as people amassed, it wasn't so strictly—I think it was supposed to be on the hour, but it wasn't really so strictly so.

Q: So you mentioned that there were docents. Do you know how they were trained, was there a manual?

Milford: There was a manual. I read the manual front to back. Amy Waterman and the American History Workshop had created it, so before Amy—and I know that you spoke with her, she had worked for Richard Rabinowitz's American History Workshop, and they I believe had created the script, and it had both a kind of narrative that you would follow as you were giving the tour, and points that you would hit upon. There was also explanation of words [00:14:00] like Hebrew words or what a bema is, so, it was comprehensive. It did go through iterations, especially as we were restoring the building, and when Annie Polland came on and she brought a lot of good historical context, and so it evolved. But when I was there, that's the script we were working with.

Q: Okay. So tell me something about your job, you said you were hired to do developments, but I feel like you—

Milford: Yeah, so I started in the development, doing development and PR, but very quickly was interested in the programs and became the program director, and then ultimately became the deputy director, and was there for eighteen-plus years. I say eighteen 'cause it's significant in Judaism High, but I think it was closer to twenty. So over twenty years, [00:14:00] you gather a

lot of jobs, and I oversaw programs before you came on Hanma and then you took over that. But I created any number of programs, I helped raise money, I helped get out the word, and build community. And then as deputy director, I also oversaw exhibits, and the commissioning of the window that Kiki Smith and Deborah Gans created, and any number of projects that were meant to raise the profile of the organization, which started as the Eldridge Street Project. And then when we completed the restoration and reopened to the public was renamed the Museum at Eldridge Street.

Q: Okay. So I just wanna backtrack though a little bit before we get into all the other things you do. When you were here, I know that there was something that [00:16:00] actually how I found the place was I went to one of the Garden Cafeteria literary programs. Tell me about that and the name and how it resonates with the Lower East Side?

Milford: Yeah, so that was the series that I started, the Garden Cafeteria Literary Series. I was always interested in literature and literary events, and I knew that on the Lower East Side on East Broadway there was a place called the Garden Cafeteria, and it was right next to the Forward Newspaper Building, which was on East Broadway as well. The Forward Newspaper was the most popular read non-English newspaper in the country during its heyday. It was founded in 1897 and by 1910, 1920 had a circulation of a quarter of a million per day.

And so people wrote for the paper and other newspapers would gather [00:17:00] at the Garden Cafeteria, which was this dairy restaurant. And then this is later in the history. I should emphasize the Garden Cafeteria wasn't open in the '20s and '30s, it opened more in the sort of

second phase of life in the '50s. And people like Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Yiddish writer, a Nobel Laureate would eat there, writers from the Forward Newspaper would eat there. And they very famously in one of Isaac Bashevis Singer's story which is absolutely based on the Garden Cafeteria would sit with their glass of tea and argue, and debate the politics of the day.

And so I wanted to create a series that would recreate that spirit of intellectual discourse and debate. And so that's what it was named for, and it had some [00:18:00] great writers during its heyday, Phillip Lopate, Luc Sante, Ilan Stavans, many others. And, you know, with that mantra that Amy Waterman really sort of set that all of the programming, all of the literary events we did were connected to the building in some way if they were about Lower East Side history, if they were about immigration, but that there was some connection to the rich stories that were manifest in the building.

Q: Excellent. That must have been fun. So, how many people were on staff when you were there?

Milford: When I first started, there were four. It was me, it was Amy Waterman, Lisa Hodkoski was the administrator there, and the education person was Beth Rosenthal. Those positions changed, the education and the administrator changed over time, there were many wonderful people who worked there. [00:19:00] It just attracted good people. Amy hired wonderful people. I'm friendly with many of them to this day. And it grew over time. But for those first years, there were just four of us on staff. By the time I left, I would say there were nine or ten people on staff, so it doubled.

Q: Yeah. So, the programming was very small, there was the Literary Society, and tours.

Milford: There was the Literary Series, there were all kinds of programs, I mean there were tours, there were walking tours. This was not a program I started, but it's how I first met you Hanna, who is conducting the interview. My colleague at the time, Jillian Gould started something called The Egg Cream Festival, Egg Cream Festival, and it was a celebration of Jewish heritage on the Lower East Side. And I remember going to meet with the program officer at the New York State [00:20:00] Council on the Arts, the folk-art program officer there to talk about the program and try to raise funds for it. And that program officer said, "Huh, you're doing a Jewish heritage festival, and yet you're in a building that's in the middle of Chinatown." And I said, "Oh, that's [laughs] a good point Hanna." 'Cause that program officer was Hanna Griff-Sleven, and so Jillian and I and the staff expanded the festival to be the Egg Rolls and Egg Creams Festival. And then when I took a long leave to have my second daughter, and you came on as program director, you inherited the festival and really expanded it and enriched it in so many ways.

Q: Yeah, that was fun. So, that was another way to bring people in and stuff like that. Tell me about the exhibitions. There were some great ones even before [00:21:00] I started working there I know.

Milford: Yeah. So, in the early history, and I would say these were really spearheaded, I worked on a couple. But it was really someone named Rebecca Faulkner who would think about the

ways to kind of activate the building. And I should say actually before Becca there was a really amazing exhibit by Christian Boltanski that utilized—it was through the Public Art Fund 'cause a board member, Susan Freedman was president of the Public Art Fund, and so Christian Boltanski did these sounds in installations in different sites throughout the city.

This is before I started working there, but it was a really incredible installation where you'd go in and you'd sit in the pews, and you'd hear immigrants telling their stories and it was very evocative of the people who were [00:22:00] there. So, there were exhibits early, early in the history, preceding me, preceding Rebecca, preceding the restoration of the building. Rebecca Faulkner who was studying a PhD in performance studies brought in, again those kinds of exhibits that activated the space that were related to its history and heritage that might have been located in unexpected places in the building, in the balcony, in the water closet, the former water closet within the pews, really lovely evocative—

Q: The one I remembered where I think that you were in it a little bit was the Hana Iverson one in the broken-down staircase. Could you talk about that?

Milford: Oh my gosh. You are bringing me back Hanna. I totally forgot about that. So, the building when I was there, there were two stairwells that led up to the [00:23:00] women's gallery and downstairs. The one that was south facing was intact, the north facing stairwell had collapsed and was just an empty chasm in the building. And this artist Hana Iverson created an installation that was projected into it as Torah scrolls being stitched together. So, it's this imagery of stitching together and within this place that is not stitched together, that is this hole. It was

really very beautiful. And it was also about women's roles within the building 'cause it went up to the women's gallery. And she did record me and my child Hester when Hester was a baby, and I can't remember exactly why. I think she wanted the sounds of what would have been in the main gallery, [00:24:00] in the women's gallery, and maybe I also—I can't remember. But it was a very beautiful exhibit, a video, sound, and very appropriate for the space.

Q: But I wanna get this on record because it was such a pain in the neck to put together. I mean that's how dedicated I remembered we were to the arts. It didn't matter, if the artist wanted to do it, we're like, "Yeah." But can you talk about—

Milford: Oh my god. I don't know if you know this, I did something so stupid and dangerous to get that video on. So, the way it was projected into this hole, like imagine just it's a three-story hole in a building and the video screen, you had to turn it on from below. And usually, you could access it in one way. I can't remember. [00:25:00] I came in on a Sunday, and the access to the way we usually turned it on was off, so I literally climbed down—is that what you were getting at? I literally climbed down the gaping hole in the building from the main floor to the bottom just to kind of press play on this video recorder. And then, I don't know how I got myself back up. [laughs] But I was young, I was—yeah.

Q: [laughs] It continued to be a problem—

Milford: Yes.

Q: —when I was there, but I just wanted that on the record. 'Cause it was fun in that it was so nontraditional, we were doing very avant-garde things there.

Milford: Yes, yes. And our jobs, I remember you and I would joke that we not only was program director, deputy [00:26:00] director, but I was the intern, and you were the—

Q: The custodian.

Milford: —janitor, right? On one of your first weeks, we opened the door and—were you there with the pigeon that—and in came not only—no, no, it was the—yeah. Not only came a person who lived on the streets, but also a pigeon, and I had to deal with both the pigeon and the person.

Q: Yeah, the street came into the schul a lot, it seemed to. So, speaking of exhibitions, the biggest exhibition that we had while we were there was the Kiki Smith, Deborah Gans window. Can you tell me how that happened, and what was there beforehand?

Milford: So that's after the restoration. So maybe I'll—I first should—I can talk about that.

Q: Yeah, I think it fits right here.

Milford: Okay. So, following the building's restoration, [00:27:00] and there were other exhibits that I worked on that were more historically based, there was one—so the building was restored, it was such an incredible and thoughtful restoration led by so many people, again Roberta

Brandes Gratz, the founder and a preservationist herself, Amy Waterman, who had sort of led with the cultural mission, Bonnie Dimun brought on to help finish the restoration, and then just a team of architects and historians like Richard, and the American History Workshop, and also teams of artisans. It was just so exciting to be in the building and watch the stained-glass artisans or the lighting [00:28:00] experts.

And I will come to the window, one of the things that I did as the building was being restored was I got to interview all of the different artisans, Dawn Ladd, the lighting designer, and Tom Garcia from the Gil Studio who sadly has passed, who was the stained-glass designer, and also Ray Clagnan who he worked with, and Jeff from the painting company, the EverGreene Design, and Jill Gotthelf and Walter Sedovic who were the architects for a video about the restoration, which is still viewable. And just there was such thought that went into the restoration, into preserving the building, returning it to its grandeur, so that when you came in, you could feel that sense of [00:29:00] uplift, that the original founders would have felt, which was in such contrast to the places where people were living, and working. And also, leaving places within the building that were unrestored, so in the main sanctuary in the women's gallery, leaving a complete panel of lath and plaster unrestored, leaving other traces.

Now, the biggest example of a change in the building was the east window, which we know had originally been a stained-glass rose window. We had no physical documentation of what it looked like, and there is an early drawing of the sanctuary from Century Magazine from 1887 that shows the synagogue, that shows the interior that even [00:30:00] shows the eastern wall, but it stops right below the window. So, there was no visual documentation of what the building

looked like. Although people did have memories of it, there were still some people who in their oral histories remembered it as looking like the one behind it. Whether it was a replica, likely not, but it was probably something like that. And that window was damaged, and replaced with glass blocks in 1938.

So the question was what to do with it. And of course I'm sure this was covered in your earlier interviews, you could leave it with the glass blocks, and that was something that many people favored, and let that be a testament to a period of decline in the building's history. There was some thought of returning it to a window that looked like what [00:31:00] was in front, and then there was the idea to have a new commission to celebrate a new moment in the building's history. And so that was definitely something I was very excited about, and that was the choice that the board of directors made and I was tasked with overseeing the project for the staff. And so we had, I think it was a dozen different proposals for the window, and they were from very well-known artists whose names you would recognize to emerging artists to artists who worked specifically in stained-glass. And there was a really rigorous and thoughtful process, and we shared the different proposals with the board of directors and [00:32:00] it was decided by the board to go with the design by Kiki Smith. And she worked in partnership with Deborah Gans, the architect.

And so that was an incredibly meaningful and exciting project, it was such a beautiful project. Kiki Smith and Deborah Gans were so responsive and thoughtful in their design. I remember when I met Kiki, she said, "I'm not going to do a Kiki Smith," not meaning that it wouldn't feel of hers, but that she didn't wanna overtake the building, that she wanted to create something was

respectful of the building's history and aesthetics, and she really did. And there's so much I could say about it, but I'll leave it at that. It was a very innovative process, the creation of the window. It used innovative stained-glass techniques, it's a monumental window in terms of its scale and its weight. The process of getting it in, [00:33:00] I remember when the blocks were being brought in and lifted by hoist from outside, it was super exciting. So, that really was your—it doesn't get bigger than taking a historic building, it's a pretty radical thing to do and put something new in, but it was really done in the most intentional way, approved by landmarks, it really was done crossing all the Ts, dotting all the Is.

And then one of the things that I oversaw as deputy director was a new architectural tour that really delved into the choices that were made. And I worked with graduate students at Pratt and at Columbia and at UPenn, and designed a tour that really helped people understand why we made the choice. Whether you agreed with it or not, you should know that it was a [00:34:00] very thought-out decision.

Q: Absolutely. Thank you. I wanted to get that one on record. I also actually wanna back track a little bit and talk to you a little bit about the congregation. What was it like when you started the relationship and how did you see that sort of not grow, but change over time?

Milford: The number one question I, and I'm sure you were asked on a tour after, "Where is the bathroom?" is, "Is there a congregation still worshipping in the building?" And that meant the world to people. And it's funny 'cause often they were people who'd come up and sort of be like, "I can't believe they separate the men and the women." And yet they wanted to know that there

was still prayer going on in the building. And when I first started there, there was, and it wasn't happening [00:35:00] in the main sanctuary, there were services that were held on the lower level, and I would on occasion go. I went for Rosh Hashanah, for Yom Kippur services, I went with you for Yom Kippur services, I went with Amy Waterman, sometimes Bill Josephson was there.

So, there were services there every Friday night, every Saturday, and for all of the Jewish holidays. And I would say that in all of my tours, people really appreciated that. But it was a small group, they struggled to make the minyan, the quorum of ten men. And over time that just continued, and it just got harder and harder, and I would say the real heart and soul behind the minyan was Judge Paul P.E. Bookson who lived on the Lower East Side, [00:36:00] and he really is a force of nature. I remember his coming in with his—always had a cigar in his mouth and the top hat. He was the one who really made sure there were people there, he and his Tova Bookson would make sure there was a little collation, not a little collation, they had quite a nice collation of food. He passed, and it really did—the congregation struggled then, and diminished over time.

Q: Did you have any besides, I know we went to services there, did you have any interaction with them otherwise?

Milford: With the congregation?

Q: Yeah.

Milford: Early on much more so I would say. And early on it was nice, we were very respectful one of the other, and they would build a sukkah [00:37:00] around this time of the year, Sukkot, which was the smallest sukkah you could imagine 'cause there was very little space for one. So, there was some interaction, I felt I really knew Tova Bookson.

Q: Yeah. Thank you. Okay. So, let's talk a little bit more about your actual job or the fundraising, that was a huge part. And before you get into the details of that, when you were giving tours, and you would say, "And some day when it's fully restored, it'll be this," did you actually believe it would get restored?

Milford: That's so funny, Hanna. Yes, I did. [laughs] I did believe it. I didn't know when it would happen, but I thought it would happen. But it was hard to envision, it had been like that for so long, and it just felt like budget creep like first it was—before I was there, it was three million, and then it was [00:38:00] whatever million, and then it just kept being more and more. So yes, there was a sense of that. And we'd do the doors, and we'd raise money for this, yeah, the HVAC systems.

But yes, so fundraising was definitely a part of my job, of everyone's job. Early on, I really did a lot of it, I wrote grants for both foundations and government. We all asked people for money, at the end of all of our tours we did. I've always worked at places I love, I have no problem asking people for money if I think it's a worthy and good project. There was and is a board of directors, you would have annual galas. There was a very effective direct mail, Amy Waterman would write the letter and people would feel like they knew her, and they were [00:39:00] very

personal. Yeah, there were some key funders early on, there was a window that was funded by Brooke Astor, a picture of Brooke Astor in the building with Roberta, I think from the '70s or '80s, '80s, and all kinds of funding.

Q: Yeah. Besides the Brooke Astor donation, were there any other memorable donations that you can remember?

Milford: I mean, there were many including—I mean I remember we worked with a lobbyist with Geto & de Milly, Michelle de Milly and that was the first time we got significant funding from the government and that made a lot possible, so like six figure donations from government institutions, which we hadn't been getting. So that was very significant. There were board members who were incredibly generous. Eva Brune [00:40:00] who was brought on in the early 2000s was a dynamo and really galvanized the board, and I think was a big part of getting it done, and making sure there was funding for it.

There were a lot of people who were generous, big and small. But there was never any angel donor, there was never someone who was like, "I'm gonna give you a million dollars." We did get six figures on rare occasion, but there was never that like angel donor.

Q: Yeah. That's true. I do remember though when they started doing the galas, we couldn't even imagine putting one on and then all of a sudden we were—just had to like hold your breath and do 'em. And you had a big role in those galas I feel like.

Milford: Well the very first day I started working, before I even was [00:41:00] in the building, I went to a fundraising event at Michael Weinstein who was and is the board chairman had an event at Ark Restaurant, so I went to an event there, that was a fundraiser, and I met board members.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

[INTERUPTION]

Q: All right. So, tell me about that fundraiser at one of these restaurants.

Milford: Oh, so that was just my first time there and I got to meet some of the board members, Michael Weinstein. I remember Bill Josephson who I knew beforehand, but he was there, Roberta, I think you were there, and it was just very nice. But yeah, there were a lot of different kinds of fundraisers. I planned and helped [00:42:00] with some. But then I think we hired someone to really run the gala, and then when Eva came on, she really took it over. And yeah, it was—I remember the big one-million-dollar fundraiser because David Moore, one of our board members was the honoree, and he really, really worked hard to bring in money. And I think one of the other honorees was a friend of his, and they said they were very competitive in how they raised money. So, yeah, the galas would raise at that point between 400 thousand to that was sort of the high point of what we would raise.

Q: Great.

Q: Who was that?

Milford: Who was David Moore working with?

Q: Honoree?

Milford: You know, I can't remember, but he was connected with Aish [00:43:00] and I can't remember his name.

Q: I can't either, I remember that one, but—

Milford: Yeah.

Q: Okay. What about other museums in the neighborhood? Was there a collegiate feeling with the Tenement Museum and MOCA? Tell me about that.

Milford: Well, I mean the Tenement Museum, and this I'm sure you've heard from others including Annie Polland, and Roberta Gratz, I mean the genesis of the Tenement Museum was Ruth Abram's working with Roberta. So, I'll leave that to them who know so much more about that. But I would say there was a real sense of collegiality with the neighborhood organizations, and that was very important to Amy Waterman. She was a member of AAM, American Association of Museums, the CAJM, Council of American Jewish Museums, [00:44:00] we

worked with the Tenement Museum and it's very gratifying to see Annie Polland who was the Vice President of Education at Eldridge, now as the President of the Tenement Museum. We worked with MOCA, the Museum of Chinese and Americas. We worked with other Jewish museums like the Jewish Museum when Joan Rosenbaum was there, the museum of Jewish Heritage, Center for Jewish History once that opened. So, there was definitely collegiality in partnerships, you could create programs with some of those organizations, so yes.

Q: Okay. Let's see. So, we talked about the restoration. So, when you talked about coming in and the place was an elegant wreck, that's how I like to refer to it, and then do you remember [00:45:00] the day we were let in after all the painting had occurred and what it was like to see it was restored? Can you walk us through that feeling and what you saw?

Milford: It was so odd because, and maybe you feel this way, 'cause we were there every day working in the building while it was being restored, so it wasn't like I saw it a wreck and then I saw it restored. But it didn't hit home even—I couldn't really believe that's what the paint looked like until it all came together. So, even though I was very day-to-day, it didn't really strike home to me what it looked like until the very end, and it really was kind of like, "Wow, we did it. We did it."

And I remember, [00:46:00] and you know this story, that the night before the grand opening which that I planned, so the reopening was on December 3rd, I remember it was right around Hanukkah time, this theme of rededication that's associated with Hanukkah and the rededication of Eldridge Street. But the night before, I went with my daughters Hester and Flora to the

building to show it to them, and I was showing them the stained-glass, and the painting, and then we went from each floor and we went to the top floor where there was the unrestored panel of lath and plaster. And I just remember Hestor who was eight, Flora was five, Hestor went, “[gasps], Mommy, you’ve forgotten something.” ’Cause she thought I’d made a mistake, that her mom had made a mistake, and there was this booboo and that [00:47:00] I had forgotten to restore a panel of the wall, and that people would come the next day and I’d get in trouble. I could just see her eight-year-old face like—and it was such an incredible moment because I was like, “That’s just the response we want.”

And I often say this about the building, or I did, for me my favorite Jewish holiday is Passover, it’s the festival of questions. There are four questions, the rabbis ask questions. And Eldridge Street in its restoration was meant to look glorious and beautiful, but it was also meant to provoke questions. And so that wall should provoke a sense of question, “What happened here? Why has this been like this?” The window by Kiki Smith, if you look closely, “What’s here, why is this different?” Like you might not know the answer if you don’t have a docent led guide, but [00:48:00] you can sense that things happened there. The floorboards that are unrestored, you can sense that there is history there, there are stories there, there are questions.

Q: Yes. But do you remember opening the doors, it had snowed the day before, and people welcomed in? Can you talk about the flood of humanity that came in that door?

Milford: Oh, you may have different memories. I was coordinating that whole day. I do remember the snow. I actually remember Amy Waterman’s father, my father was there. I

remember all the people who had worked on the building from the restoration, artisans to the board of directors to people in the community, to museum colleagues, all the people we've been talking about, [00:49:00] to the congregation, and we created the ceremony to give kavod, or to give honor to each of those different people. That was very important. There were government officials, and yeah, I remember the space being filled and I remember going up onto the balcony and just seeing all the bodies in the space and that was very moving.

Q: To me, I just remember it seemed to shine. Yeah, it really, really was nice. And then after that what was it like working there for you after—so we had the big grand opening, and we originally had offices just across the street and then real estate changed and we had to move away. How was your relationship with the building after the restoration and as we were [00:50:00] coming into what I call the more professional state of the museum?

Milford: Yeah, very different. It was so poignant to be there in the first phase before the restoration, there was a real power and poignancy. In the first years following the restoration, it was exciting. I remember the first tour I gave was the best tour, it was really a mixed group. We had gotten tons of publicity, so all these people are coming through the building for tours. And I had a Yiddish speaker, I had, I don't know, foreign tourists on the tour, children on the tour. There were like a lot of us, and we just kind of came together, literally it was like a congregating congregation of people.

And I remember at one point, being in the main sanctuary, and I was about to say, "And [00:51:00] you can see how—"I was ready to give the old tour of the pre restored space. And I

said to the group, I was like, “I cannot believe I’m showing you this restored space.” It was very moving, and it was a very powerful experience after the restoration. So, there were some very exciting things working on the window, working on the new permanent exhibit on the lower level, working on numbers of programs with you, we had some really exciting ones where we created scenes from earlier times. It wasn’t quite as exciting. But I have something here. But yeah, it was more about sort of setting up [00:52:00] an operational museum, putting in protocols, hiring a visitor services director, all of that.

Q: So, when we had offices in SoHo, how often did you come to the museum?

Milford: I tried to go a lot. I also lived on the Lower East Side at first, so I was near the building. But I think that was challenging to be so far from the building. I mean, I think the museum is a site, it’s not a museum of ideas, it’s very connected to where it is, and so that was somewhat of a alienation from the building, and I really I think I did, you did tried to be there a lot. But sometimes you have your desk work to do and your desk is in SoHo and the building is on the Lower East Side, [00:53:00] which doesn’t seem far, it’s a subway stop away, but it is a lot to get from one to the other.

Q: Also, in addition to post restoration, it was also the neighborhood was changing. And Amy, you and I used to do the Nosh & Stroll every year, like a pre-Passover and everything. But remember when all of a sudden stuff just wasn’t there?

Milford: Yeah.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about that time?

Milford: Yes, yes. So, the Nosh & Stroll, that was a tour that existed before I got there. There was something called the pre-Passover Nosh & Stroll that had been done before I got there. And it was beloved, they'd sell out. I think once it was listed by Florence Fabricant and, I don't know, there are many, many people allegedly before I was there. We always sold out and it was super fun, and we would go to historic landmarks in the neighborhood and point them out, places [00:54:00] like the Forward Newspaper Building, and Jarmulowsky's Bank. But we'd also go to the food places in the neighborhoods, and ones that were related to Passover. So, at first that meant Streit's Matzo, Schapiro's Wine, those were all still there when we started in the late 1990s. But one by one it was like a game of Jenga, like, "No, Schapiro's Wine, they're not gonna be there anymore, they're gonna be in Essex Street Market and you can go, but their site isn't there." And then Streit's Matzo, they closed, they moved their operations to New Jersey. Until we would give the tour and it was like, you know, holding a candle at the site of—everything was, "This is the former site of Streit's Matzo. This is the former site of Schapiro's Wine." Which is the way the neighborhood is, and it was an exciting. [00:55:00] Part of what we did was also point out the new landmarks, the Dumpling House, Vanessa's Dumpling House or whatever it is that will no doubt one day be a landmark.

Q: Yeah. So, it was interesting to be working at really one of the few places that was still there, and that had successfully restored.

Milford: Right. I mean that's part of why it's so essential that it is one of the only remaining markers of the Jewish Lower East Side that exists today that you can go into, that you can tour, that you can learn about the history and see it and touch it, very few left.

Q: Yeah. Do you have a favorite memory? We've talked about a lot, but is there any particular program or event that happened there or some celebrity sighting or anything that came in there that—

Milford: There were some celebrities, but [00:56:00] I would say for me, it was the community of people I worked with, things like at the end of a hard day, having a glass of Slivovitz with you. Certainly the reopening ceremony was very, very meaningful and moving.

Q: Okay. Any connections with the neighbors on Eldridge Street?

Milford: With the neighbors on Eldridge Street. Well, when I started very early on talking about, "This is the former site—" there was a place called Ziontalis, and so that was still open, and that was very exciting to have that right down a few doors down. And we had a connection with them. And Roberta Brandes Gratz, but there was some—one of the things I didn't talk about was the collection, [00:57:00] the exhibit we have at Eldridge Street, the permanent exhibit is comprised of Jewish artifacts, Yiddish signs, very amazing Jewish signs from old synagogues and sites of the Lower East Side and Brooklyn, Judaica Silver, Books. Now this did not all come from Eldridge Street, these things were gathered by a group called The Synagogue Rescue Project, which also predates me, predates the Eldridge Street Project, goes back to the 1970s.

And I believe Ziontalis had some—Steve Yaroslavit, that's his name, had some connection with those kinds of early artifacts. So that's sort of a Jewish neighbor, and there [00:58:00] were neighbors like that.

But there were other neighbors on the blocks, Chinese speaking neighbors. And I wanna emphasize that when we say it's Chinatown, it's very different than say Mott Street Chinatown that has been in existence for well over a hundred years. The community that was developing around Eldridge Street was more recent Chinese immigration, post 1965 when the immigration laws changed. From what I was told and understood, it was many people from the Fukienese Province, which is not the Cantonese descent of sort of Mott Street Chinatown.

And so these were really [00:59:00] first generation immigrants, and many of them did not speak English and so there was definitely connection, but it was through their children, so their children would come to Eldridge Street for our school programs, and many of those school programs were about Jewish culture, history, holidays, but some of them were about immigration, and here you have kids who are themselves immigrants or children of immigrants, so it was really very rich and powerful. So, there was that relationship.

And then there were times, and you and I have had to do this sometimes like for the Egg Rolls Festival to get the permit, we needed every business on the block to sign off. So, we'd go door to door asking for people to sign, and that was—we'd bring a translator. And some people knew us, and at a certain point they're like, "Oh, the festival." But it was challenging in the best of ways [01:00:00] because there was a real language and cultural barrier. And these were people who

were really busy, they had their working lives, and we were doing something educational and cultural very different.

Q: Thank you. So, you were there you said eighteen to twenty years with a little bit of gap and stuff. When did you realize that you had to go?

Milford: That's a good question. I mean part of me always wondered, "Why am I here?" Much as I loved it, much as it spoke to so many bones in my body or person, part of me had never thought I'd work at a Jewish heritage organization, and I'd come from the Jewish Museum. But I'd always been interested in culture and writing, and I did not want to be at [01:01:00] a Jewish institution. In fact, I fled that in my younger life, I mean in college I took German, and studied Christian saints. I wanted nothing to do with Jewish anything. I'd grown up orthodox. So, part of me was always, "What am I doing here?" [laughs]

But I think that it was hard to recreate the excitement of the opening in 2007 and then the window was exciting again. The exhibit and the orientation center was somewhat exciting in 2014, but I wasn't gonna have the kind of excitement and opportunity and growth. And I think there was sort of push and pull factors that led me to leave. I both [01:02:00] wanted to write a book, I wanted to be somewhere different, and I felt Eldridge Street wasn't gonna kind of be the place I wanted it to be. I had a very particular vision, and sense of what the place could be that had to do with community and art and culture, and I just felt like that in my role as deputy, that wasn't gonna be possible, so it felt like there were both reasons happening. And it was I think

ultimately a very good choice, and I'm happy to see that the building is standing intact and beautiful, and it's been good changes for me.

Q: [01:03:00] But ironically, you're at another Jewish institution.

Milford: Not exactly. I mean its heritage is, but the work is not specifically, yeah.

Q: Yeah. Is there anything else you wanna speak to about your time there?

Milford: I think that covers it.

Q: What year did she leave?

Q: Oh, what year did you leave?

Milford: Oh, I left 2017.

Q: Left in 2017.

Milford: Yeah.

Q: Wow. Okay.

Milford: Thank you, Hanna.

Q: All right. Thank you. That was great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]