

Jared Aswegan
Narrator

Julie Luker
Interviewer

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Transcriber

October 29, 2021
Minnesota

JL: Julie Luker

JA: Jared Aswegan

JL: This is an interview conducted as a part of a larger faculty and student project. Initiated by Dr. Julie Luker of Concordia University Saint Paul. Today is Friday October 29th, 2021 and I'm here with Jared Aswegan. My name is Julie Luker and I am an assistant professor of psychology at Concordia University Saint Paul. Today I'll be talking to Jared about what life was like growing up in the Twin Cities. During this interview, I am going to ask you to reflect on your childhood life experiences, as they relate to a variety of social topics from that time period. For the purposes of this interview we have defined childhood as birth through 17 years of age. So to begin please state and spell your full name.

JA: Jared Aswegan. J-A-R-E-D A-S-W-E-G-A-N.

JL: Please identify your race and gender.

JA: I would be a white male.

JL: State your date of birth.

JA: August 11th, 1954.

JL: Finally, please share where you grew up. Such as, the name of the neighborhood or street intersection.

JA: I grew up in Highland Park at the east end of Pinehurst Avenue, near the intersection of Snelling, right across from the reservoir where I spent many hours cavorting around the top like I was pretending I was Julie Andrews.

JL: Alright. I would like to learn more about your family life. Let's begin with the memories for immediate and extended family. Please share some memories you have about these relationships.

JA: Well, I would describe my childhood years with my family as somewhere between Leave It To Beaver and Nine Circle of Hell. This was the fifties and sixties when expectations were a little unusual. I'll be perfectly candid, I had parents that really didn't get along very well. So there was a lot of contention in the household. On top of which, my brothers who are all older than me. The oldest being nine years older than me, because of the age discretionary we were not very close. So having said that, I will also say my mother's family lived very nearby. My grandparents

and my aunt and uncle. So there was an extended relationship with them. Plus we would spend time with second and third cousins and it was really interesting as a child. I never understood who these people were. Like, how am I related to them? Who is aunt [May] and why is she an aunt? Why is she so old? Eventually through some theological research, I discovered who these people were and it was quite fascinating to know that I had met that many generations of my whole ancestry. It was very interesting.

JL: Definitely. Of those people, who did you feel closest to?

JA: Definitely my mother. She was a very spectacular human being. She died very young, she died when she was 58. In discussing things with family to get ready for the funeral, I learned things about her that I had never known. One was that she was very interested in writing which I knew, but also in journalism. She was offered a scholarship to an Ivy league school to study journalism in the 40s. Which was very unusual for a woman to be offered this opportunity and she turned it down and got married. So I always thought there was a real lost opportunity there, for her to grow and to have a totally different life. Of course I would not have been a part of that but I think for her sake it would have been nice for her to have that chance. She was also kind of a rock. I wouldn't say she was unemotional but she was pragmatic and deadly honest. She could nail you across the room with a look and at the same time was very supportive. I studied music a lot in elementary and senior high, she never missed a concert. She never missed a recital and she was always there. She actually got a job as a teaching assistant in the music department when I was in high school because I was so involved. So she was very special. I remember she would be very involved in church when we were kids, and she was a Sunday school teacher. She was given the chance to teach the senior high school students, which was always pragmatic because they were always wandering off and becoming nuances. She and a friend of hers developed this curriculum that was very creativity based, very discussion based. The kids were really engaged and really excited to go to Sunday school as a high school student in the 70s which was unheard of. The church was so confused by all this, so they fired her. They said we can't have this because it's not based on anything we understand so we have to replace you with someone else. My mother was very proud of the fact that she was the first bottom tier Sunday school teacher to be very openly fired by the church.

JL: Speaking of your mother, what role did she play in the family? If you can talk about that role she had.

JA: She was the parent. I don't think my father liked us very much. He had a full time job with the State Highway Department, and decided he was going to get a part time job in retail. So he would leave at 7:30 in the morning and he would come home at 10:30 at night, so he was never around. So mom was really the sole parental voice. There were some nasty exceptions to that but she was the one that gave us the guidance, gave us the advice, and questioned our choices. She also was really good in the summertime, now mind you this was back in the 50s and 60s. In the summertime when we were out of school our obligation was to leave the house at 9 in the morning and be home by dinner time. She would pack a lunch and say go, and we would get on our bikes and go wherever we wanted to go. It was literally miles away, we would bike across

Mississippi down Minnehaha Creek and ditch our bikes and walk the river. I mean we were crazy and I was maybe 8 or 9 at this point. The idea of someone doing that now is a little different and not going to happen. She was really the dominant force.

JL: Did you have any family pets? If so, could you talk about them?

JA: Hundreds, literally hundreds. My cousin and I have a joke. They were five siblings and he said every time he came to our house it always felt like animals and I said every time I went to your house it always felt like diapers. We always had a dog, we always had tiny mammal pets like hamsters and guinea pigs, things like that. They live like 10 minutes and then they die with many funerals in the backyard. We had fish tanks, we had salamanders, we had cats, we had anything that was considered a small mammal was fair game.

JL: Today do you have animals?

JA: Yes. Up until recently I had a thoroughbred who was delightful but kept trying to kill me so I rehomed her. Just getting older you don't want to fly through the air anymore like Superman so now I have 2 cats.

JL: Next, please describe in ways in which your family's economic status influenced your childhood.

JA: We were not anything close to abatement, I would say maybe lower middle class financially. Basically we were working with my father's income. My mother started working when I was in junior high. That was only because she wanted to earn her own pocket money, so she was really pushing that sense of independence. Just to do what she wanted to do without getting permission all the time, the lovely role of women in the 50s and 60s. So I never felt wanting for anything. I always had proper shoes, proper clothes, if there was an important event cooking up I had the ceremonial suit that would be used to support that. Activities were something my parents were always able to support like my music. So that included piano lessons, violin lessons, voice lessons and all the things that go along with that. I grew up in a very small house. It was a typical post WWII bedroom bungalow with a single bathroom and a single room upstairs. I thought it was comfortable and I had nothing to compare it to. I knew that house extremely well, because I was actually born at home. That day my mother went to the hospital and nothing happened so they told her to go home and nothing would happen. Later that night she woke up and kind of knew what was going on so I was born in the bathtub.

JL: Was it a healthy delivery? Were you ok?

JA: It was very quick apparently and she did it herself. She sent my father across the street to get my grandmother, and the time it took him to leave to get grandma I was delivered. She wasn't afraid to solve a problem.

JL: In what way did your family's financial circumstances shape your spending habits today?

JA: Well to be perfectly honest I have probably been really bad with my spending because I didn't really have to deal with spending. This is something that you're supposed to learn at home but you don't. So I have spending habits that are probably nightmarish for investors that just have no concept of what I am thinking. I think it's because we never learned and it wasn't a topic

that was going to be taught in school because it's something that you should learn at home. I can balance a checkbook, that's not a problem. When you see zero it's really easy to see it in matches.

JL: Great. Now I would like to know about your experience with religion, which you did mention briefly. Describe what you can recall about your family's religious practices when you were growing up.

JA: Ok. It starts with my great grandfather who was a Baptist circus rider in South Dakota. He rode from church to church in all weather, preaching all over the eastern part of the state. My mother's family were staunch Baptists, I mean they really were. My grandfather's family did not care so much, he didn't really care one way or the other so my grandmother was the driving force behind that. Somewhere along the line my mother had decided that because she had been raised Baptists, she was no longer interested in being a Baptist. My uncle on the other hand decided to marry a catholic. So here we are with Catholic and Catholic, then we have my grandmother pulling her hair out because her Baptist heritage has just been shoved away. So for me growing up, the church I went to was right down the block when you walked down the alley and you were there. My mother worked there as a secretary and I spent a lot of time over there and was really involved in the music program. It was a really pivotal part of my life and was a wonderful place to grow up. A huge number of wonderful peers that we went through all of this stuff together. In fact my godfather was the priest at the church when I was baptized, who became the bishop of San Diego. So there were connections. When my mother was relieved of her duties as the volunteer Sunday school teacher, we switched to a different church. Interestingly enough, the man at that church used to be my dentist as a child so we knew him. That was a wonderful church. Absolutely extraordinary, we had choir retreats where we would spend overnights together and we would literally go hours going over the hymnal. Choosing hymns and putting them into harmony and singing together. It was kind of like the Episcopal version of the Trapp Family. We had a wonderful time. Some of those friendships I still maintain.

JL: What impacts of religion do you feel has affected your life as an adult, if any?

JA: Fond memories mostly. I must admit that the church and I have had a bit of a falling out. I think it's such a problematic thing in this day and age. Especially when I see young people reaching out. I see young people reaching out to be more inclusive, more relaxed about people's lives and who they are. The restrictions of the church kind of get in the way of that, and I think that's pushing a lot of young people out of the way. I know that there was a lot about that, and it happened to me because I worked as a developer at the Minnesota Aids Project. I saw so much condemnation of people with this illness from the church body so it pushed me out the door as well. Either practice what you preach or don't preach it which is where I am with it today.

JL: Now I would like to learn more about the neighborhood in which you grew up. If you moved then you can reflect on any neighborhood that you choose just let us know if you're changing things up. Describe what comes to mind when you think about that neighborhood.

JA: It was absolutely magical. It was a neighborhood that was filled with kids. There must have been 15 or 20 of us that played together daily. We were in each other's pockets, basements, and

back in each other's houses. When it was 11:30 we would have to go back home for lunch. We would just call and say we would be eating at a friend's house. It was really like an extended Lord of The Flies without the bad part. It had almost a tribal quality to it. We all had a place in the hierarchy and we knew where that was. You could cross it, you could combat it and ultimately it was just a very warm loving group of kids that just grew up together. It was really wonderful.

JL: Can you talk about the safety you felt or the lack of safety you felt? How did that feel for you?

JA: In terms of?

JL: Just making sure you were safe versus maybe being a victim of a crime in that neighborhood.

JA: Well that actually wasn't even thought of. One of the elementary kids I went to school with, her mother was actually murdered in their home. It was set up by her father who had hired to kill her to get her insurance money. So that happened about 3.5 blocks away from my house. During that time our parents were a little cautious but rules didn't really change. You were given a lecture that if someone comes up to talk to you and you don't know them, you walk away. Don't engage and just go away. We were also encouraged to look out for each other, but the rules never really changed. After dinner you were allowed to go out and run around and do whatever you wanted too until it got dark. Street lights came on, you came home. We didn't have a GPS on us so we could be anywhere we wanted to be. Hoping we wouldn't get caught.

JL: How diverse was that neighborhood?

JA: It was very white, at that point it was very white. It was a mixture of a lot of people of Christian faith and Jewish people. It was really fascinating. I grew up with a number of Jewish friends. I attended more Bar Mitzvah than can count. It didn't seem like anything but a slight cultural issue. My Jewish friends' parents were so great. They were always trying to introduce me to other food stuff or just trying to get me to eat more. They were just wonderful. So I grew up with a great appreciation of the differences of the cultures and it opened my mind to these other concepts. Things like desegregation and things like that especially in the 60s. I already had the point of reference that this person is the same and not another.

JL: Earlier you mentioned your house, if you wouldn't mind if we could talk about that for just a moment. If you can recall, what was your favorite part about the house?

JA: I think one of the favorite things about the house wasn't really about the house, it was about my mother. She would get bored very easily with furniture arrangement. So you come home and suddenly all the furniture was moved into the center of the room and she was trying to visualize how she was going to change this around. Things were always changing, clothes closet to record storage. One bedroom all of a sudden became a dining room, my mother moved her bedroom down to the basement. She built a whole suite for herself downstairs, that was kind of unique as well. It was little, the upstairs was one big room that the four of us always shared and my mother was really clever with moving things around. So, she was always finding ways of figuring out

the upstairs that gave us all equal amounts of space which gave us some sense of privacy. Sort of like living in a dorm but a little more private than that.

JL: Was the upstairs more like an attic, then? You just changed it into a bedroom?

JA: It was actually finished because it was all pine and slanted ceilings. So when you get older and taller. We are kind of a tall group. I am six feet and I had siblings that were taller than me and one was 6 feet 7 inches. As you got taller the room got smaller because you couldn't get past a point without banging your head on the ceiling. I did not know this concept of having my own bedroom, so as far as I was concerned I had my own bedroom. It just did not have walls and a door.

JL: In your mothers case when she moved to the basement, I know in Saint Paul a lot of the basements are damp cellars. Was it like that for her?

JA: Oh not at all. The house was built in 1947 and the basement was always a concrete bunker. Cinder block walls with concrete poured floors. It was always very dry, we didn't have any damp issues. It was as basements go, top of the line.

JL: Now I am going to ask you all about leisure time. You started to talk about that earlier. Describe in some ways you, your family, and neighbors engaged in leisure time when you were growing up.

JA: It was all very casual. We didn't plan barbecues or events where we all got together as a neighborhood. If we were out playing the aunts may come out and would just sit on the porch chatting and having a moment. Sharing stories or whatever they would be doing while the kids were playing together. It was all very casual and impromptu, It wasn't formalized at all.

JL: Did your family ever take vacations anywhere?

JA: Yeah, we took a vacation every summer to my grandfather's farm in Mexico, Missouri. We would load up the car and drive all night with the hope that we would just fall asleep in the backseat. Then we would stay for a 10 day visit on the farm. Interestingly enough my aunt, my father's sister and my mother did not get along at all. So as kids we would arrive at the land of bounty and contention and end up with this underlying tone of snarkiness between my aunt and my mother. I remember one event in particular my aunt said, "It would be really nice if you would come to church with us on Sunday." They were Baptists. My mother said, "No, because we belong to an evangelical church". My aunt replied, "Well, people would really like to see you". My mother said that they could meet them at coffee hour. While all my friends were doing things like taking a family drive to the Grand Canyon, or the north shore or the Boundary Waters, we were going to the farm every summer.

JL: What were you into? What kinds of television, bands, music genres etc.

JA: I was really into music and theater, very much into that. My first instrument was a violin and was playing in the music program at church for a very ambitious organizer on Saturday morning. We would all sit down and learn how to cite read and we would learn the ins and outs of the hymnal then he assigned me to be a string chord team. This was probably when I was 8 or 9 and I thought I couldn't do this but all of a sudden I was playing a string chord. I didn't think we were really that good but that didn't really matter. Then I discovered that I could actually sing, I was a

voice Soprano. I really got into classical religion music. So I used to do Bach music. I remember a woman who was involved in Saint [Aldwyn's] in Washington, came to my mother and mentioned that she had been speaking to the people at Saint [Aldwyn's]. She really thinks that Jared needs to go and talked to the potential of a scholarship and asked my mother about her thoughts. My mother said, "I'll ask him." She did and I pulled the same trick that she did about staying away from Ivy league schools and so I declined. I couldn't get behind the idea of going to Washington by myself and thinking that is just not for me. In her own style she decided not to press the issue and just let me make my own decision about it. The music stuff continued on, I was involved in both orchestra and choir in junior and senior high. I was very involved with the choral program in high school. We had a magical group of 8 people and had a small ensemble of about 20 people and then had another group of about 60, so I was involved in different levels. Plus I was in the theater program in which I had directed a few things and acted in a few things which was kind of my focus back then.

JL: Do you hold any regrets about not pursuing the scholarship?

JA: I try not to. There was a time in my life when I visioned what my life could have been if I had done that scholarship. Obviously it would have been very different. I went from music nerd to costumes which is not really a direct line at all. I could have ended up as a conductor, who knows?

JL: When you said Washington, did you mean state or DC?

JA: DC. It was the school attached to the national cathedral and it has a really expensive music program.

JL: Well, thank you. Next, let's discuss your experience with schooling. Please discuss what it was like going to school for you as a child.

JA: Interesting. I went to Highland park elementary school, middle school, and high school. They were two blocks from each other and I always knew where to go. I was with the same group of students from kindergarten through sixth grade. The schools merged together for junior high so the groups got bigger. In senior high it did it again so it kept adding to the student body. It was great, I had wonderful teachers. I had a couple of teachers that were so incredibly inspirational and so helpful as guiding lights. I still think about them and rattle those names off and just wonder how lucky I was, this was all the way through. I had one teacher that I loathed because I hated algebra and loathed the class. Me taking the class was the worst idea ever and because they thought I needed to live up to my potential, they put me in accelerated algebra. This was a really bad idea and this poor woman was trying to get me to understand. I finally threw in the towel and said that we both did not like each other and let's just call it a day.

JL: Highland Park? What were your rivals?

JA: Central definitely, Monroe, Mechanic Heights.

JL: What were school lunches like back then? How did that work?

JA: For elementary school you went home and you traveled in something called a line. My line went from the school to Macalester Avenue to Hillcrest. It stopped there because most kids lived on the fork road. We would go across Pinewood and then walk back after lunch and repeat in the

opposite direction. That was through sixth grade, seventh grade we ate in the cafeteria. So because schools were joined you had two cafeterias. You had junior high on one side and senior high on the other. Both were served by the same kitchen. Lunch was a half hour to 40 minutes. Maybe it was 20, I don't remember. We never knew who we would sit by each day. We often wondered what the social ramifications would be of who we sat next to. You would never know if you were going to sit by the nerds because they are your friends or if you would sit by the cool kids. All of those dynamics were in play by then and it continued in high school. By the time we were seniors, we would ditch lunch and get someone's car and drive to Taco Bell and have lunch then come back. We were just not going to go back to the cafeteria.

JL: For our final topic, I am going to ask you to reflect on global and local issues such as war, poverty, discrimination, social unrest etc. In your opinion, what were some of the biggest issues affecting the people in your neighborhood when you were growing up?

JA: Ok once again we're talking about the early 50s and early 60s. One of my first memories was in regards to the Cold War, when we would have nuclear drills. This meant you would get down on your knees on the floor, crouch down with your elbows under your knee, put your hands over your head and sit under your desk. It was like putting you in a fryer because when a nuclear bomb goes off that was not going to do any good. We all did it anyway and there was a bomb shelter in the church near my house. The nuclear drills went from under your desk to having to walk to the gym like Harry Potter in the last movie. When you got to the gym you would have to kneel your head against the wall, your butt facing in the middle of the room and everyone was in a ring around the gym. It must have looked like a very interesting picture but I don't understand the purpose of the exercise, so that was the nuclear issue. Then I think assassination was a big part of all of that. I have such clear memories of the Kennedy assassination. Mostly because it was the first time I had seen adults cry. This was such a tragedy for them, all of these icons in my life were in tears. It was the first time I had seen my mother cry, and all I could see was her standing in the kitchen doorway with tears streaming down her face with no other reaction. The tragedy of it was amplified by the fact that my adult icons showed me vulnerability for the first time. As a result, that had a huge impact on me overall. I remember we went through segregation, so Highland Park being really white they decided to change that. I mean we were really white. I guess they brought in a group of 12 African American kids in classes. There were about 3 kids in a class together. I have to say that we all tried very hard to welcome them and to give them a sense of belonging and that we are glad they are here. Flash forward to the assai nation to MLK JR. These kids that I had grown up with now had come in 5th grade and now it was 8th grade. I remember walking up the stairs, and a whole bunch of my black friends were standing across the doorway of where you came out. They had a huge glare and had a huge sense of you white people did this. I remember thinking that I can't blame them because this is such a horrible thing that happened, I just went up to them and hugged them and told them how sorry I was. It was an understanding of why I know you're so rightfully angry. Let's try to have a moment where we can fix each other.

JL: How was that received?

JA: Initially it was a little tense, but I can understand it. I would have been pissed off too. Things eventually turned around and it was ok. The other big player of course was war in Vietnam. I grew up during the lottery and you would wait knowing that they would draw your name out of a bowl. If you were above a certain number then you were safe, if you were below a certain number then you were going. I remember my brother, when his number came up he was 11 years old so he was definitely going to go. So he enlisted in the Navy instead and actually pursued a career in the Navy and retired a couple of years ago. My number was 340 and so it was a moment where I could breathe a sigh of relief and say that it is behind me. However it imputed a lot of anxiety from the time the lottery started until your number was drawn. It really led to a lot of guys to participate in anti-war protests. I remember in high school when I was a sophomore we had a school walk out. I would say probably 45 percent of the student body just walked out and the school was just like suspending them all. We knew that there were too many of us for the school to suspend because they would lose funding like crazy because of how many people were out. So we played nifty little capitalist children as well, that was big. It was different, I remember going and watching the news every night and seeing images of war and death. It was really painful things that were broadcasted every night and it was really eroding. I would try and find ways of working out of it and trying to find a moment of enjoying yourself. I think those were the big elements. I don't think there was much locally that I remember except one good one. One of the kids I went to grade school with, tried to blow up the women's bathroom up during the terrorist movement. He planted a bomb in a women's bathroom and they discovered it before it went off. They traced it back to him and he went to prison.

JL: What year was that?

JA: That was after I had graduated from high school around the mid 70s.

JL: Alright, well this is the end of our interview. I just wanted you to know that your responses are absolutely invaluable and we really appreciate that you took the time to do this. Thank you.

JA: Thank you Julie it was a pleasure.