

Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

James Sandler

Jim Sandler: Commitment to the Environment in the Sandler Foundation

The Marion and Herbert Sandler Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Martin Meeker
in 2018

Since 1954 the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, formerly the Regional Oral History Office, has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and James Sandler dated January 9, 2019. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. Excerpts up to 1000 words from this interview may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to The Bancroft Library, Head of Public Services, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should follow instructions available online at <http://ucblib.link/OHC-rights>.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

James Sandler, "Jim Sandler: Commitment to the Environment in the Sandler Foundation," Marion and Herbert Sandler Oral History Project, conducted by Martin Meeker in 2018, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2019.



James Sandler

Photo courtesy of the Sandler Foundation

James Sandler is a Trustee of the Sandler Foundation where he leads funding related to the environment and other areas. The son of Herb and Marion Sandler, Jim Sandler studied biology at San Francisco State University. In this interview, Jim Sandler discusses the following topics: family background and upbringing in Lafayette, California; education and the development of an interest in the environment and conservation; and the work and philosophy of the Sandler Foundation.

Table of Contents — Jim Sandler

Marion and Herbert Sandler Oral History Project History by Martin Meeker	vi
List of Interviews of the Marion and Herbert Sandler Oral History Project	x
Interview 1: February 15, 2018	
Hour 1	1
<p>Born on June 7, 1966 in Berkeley, California — Lived in Lafayette, California — Discussing parent’s balanced lifestyle — Becoming aware of his parent’s economic status — Grandfather’s addiction to gambling and impact on his father — Father’s outrage at injustice — Living a protected childhood — Being exposed to the abstract inequalities — Visiting mother’s hometown in Maine every summer — Stories told by mother and father regarding their childhoods — Parent’s interest in human rights philanthropy — Jewish pride within the family — Attending Seven Hills School in Walnut Creek — Experiencing bullying at school — Struggle to do well in school — Travel in college, witnessing extreme poverty — Studying biology at San Francisco State University — Interest in biology and the environmental movement — Decision to focus efforts on marine areas — Joining the foundation — Working with big and small foundations — Wanting to work with organizations that were thinking big — Thoughts on Josh Reichart — Engaging with parents as colleagues on a professional level — “Understanding that your ultimate goal is to make good decisions and to do the right thing, and to help an organization grow” — Powerful lessons from his mother about asking the right questions — “You learned quickly that you had to be on your game”</p>	
Hour 2	18
<p>Developing a philanthropic portfolio focused on the environment — Discussing the difficulty of making grants — Emphasis on ensuring that money is handle by those who know how to manage organizations — Defining impact; impact at ProPublica — Involvement with the Sierra Club and recognition of its clear goals — More on impact — Partnering with organizations with the same values and thinking — Management of meetings and field work — Personal investments in the entrepreneurial side of green energy — How to make progress on the state and local level —Thinking about impact in terms of justice and enhancing peoples’ lives — Fairness and justice as core values of the foundation — Reflecting on his parent’s entrepreneurial success — Parents on self-doubt and failure — Passing on values of helping the less fortunate — Gratitude for the opportunity to deal with big issues with extraordinary individuals</p>	

Project History: the Marion and Herb Sandler Oral History Project

Herb Sandler and Marion Osher Sandler formed one of the most remarkable partnerships in the histories of American business and philanthropy—and, if their friends and associates would have a say in things, in the living memory of marriage writ large. This oral history project documents the lives of Herb and Marion Sandler through their shared pursuits in raising a family, serving as co-CEOs for the savings and loan Golden West Financial, and establishing a remarkably influential philanthropy in the Sandler Foundation. This project consists of eighteen unique oral history interviews, at the center of which is a 24-hour life history interview with Herb Sandler.

Marion Osher Sandler was born October 17, 1930, in Biddeford, Maine, to Samuel and Leah Osher. She was the youngest of five children; all of her siblings were brothers and all went on to distinguished careers in medicine and business. She attended Wellesley as an undergraduate where she was elected into Phi Beta Kappa. Her first postgraduate job was as an assistant buyer with Bloomingdale's in Manhattan, but she left in pursuit of more lofty goals. She took a job on Wall Street, in the process becoming only the second woman on Wall Street to hold a non-clerical position. She started with Dominick & Dominick in its executive training program and then moved to Oppenheimer and Company where she worked as a highly respected analyst. While building an impressive career on Wall Street, she earned her MBA at New York University.

Herb Sandler was born on November 16, 1931 in New York City. He was the second of two children and remained very close to his brother, Leonard, throughout his life. He grew up in subsidized housing in Manhattan's Lower East Side neighborhood of Two Bridges. Both his father and brother were attorneys (and both were judges too), so after graduating from City College, he went for his law degree at Columbia. He practiced law both in private practice and for the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor where he worked on organized crime cases. While still living with his parents at Knickerbocker Village, he engaged in community development work with the local settlement house network, Two Bridges Neighborhood Council. At Two Bridges he was exposed to the work of Episcopal Bishop Bill Wendt, who inspired his burgeoning commitment to social justice.

Given their long and successful careers in business, philanthropy, and marriage, Herb and Marion's story of how they met has taken on somewhat mythic proportions. Many people interviewed for this project tell the story. Even if the facts don't all align in these stories, one central feature is shared by all: Marion was a force of nature, self-confident, smart, and, in Herb's words, "sweet, without pretensions." Herb, however, always thought of himself as unremarkable, just one of the guys. So when he first met Marion, he wasn't prepared for this special woman to be actually interested in dating him. The courtship happened reasonably quickly despite some personal issues that needed to be addressed (which Herb discusses in his interview) and introducing one another to their respective families (but, as Herb notes, not to seek approval!).

Within a few years of marriage, Marion was bumping up against the glass ceiling on Wall Street, recognizing that she would not be making partner status any time soon. While working as an analyst, however, she learned that great opportunity for profit existed in the savings and loan sector, which was filled with bloat and inefficiency as well as lack of financial sophistication and incompetence among the executives. They decided to find an investment opportunity in California and, with the help of Marion's brothers (especially Barney), purchased a tiny two-branch thrift in Oakland, California: Golden West Savings and Loan.

Golden West—which later operated under the retail brand of World Savings—grew by leaps and bounds, in part through acquisition of many regional thrifts and in part through astute research leading to organic expansion into new geographic areas. The remarkable history of Golden West is revealed in great detail in many of the interviews in this project, but most particularly in the interviews with Herb Sandler, Steve Daetz, Russ Kettell, and Mike Roster, all of whom worked at the institution. The savings and loan was marked by key attributes during the forty-three years in which it was run by the Sandlers. Perhaps most important among these is the fact that over that period of time the company was profitable all but two years. This is even more remarkable when considering just how volatile banking was in that era, for there were liquidity crises, deregulation schemes, skyrocketing interest rates, financial recessions, housing recessions, and the savings and loan crisis of the 1980s, in which the entire sector was nearly obliterated through risky or foolish decisions made by Congress, regulators, and managements. Through all of this, however, Golden West delivered consistent returns to their investors. Indeed, the average annual growth in earnings per share over 40 years was 19 percent, a figure that made Golden West second only to Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway, and the second best record in American corporate history.

Golden West is also remembered for making loans to communities that had been subject to racially and economically restrictive redlining practices. Thus, the Sandlers played a role in opening up the dream of home ownership to more Americans. In the offices too, Herb and Marion made a point of opening positions to women, such as branch manager and loan officer, previously held only by men. And, by the mid-1990s, Golden West began appointing more women and people of color to its board of directors, which already was presided over by Marion Sandler, one of the longest-serving female CEOs of a major company in American history. The Sandlers sold Golden West to Wachovia in 2006. The interviews tell the story of the sale, but at least one major reason for the decision was the fact that the Sandlers were spending a greater percentage of their time in philanthropic work.

One of the first real forays by the Sandlers into philanthropic work came in the wake of the passing of Herb's brother Leonard in 1988. Herb recalls his brother with great respect and fondness and the historical record shows him to be a just and principled attorney and jurist. Leonard was dedicated to human rights, so after his passing, the Sandlers created a fellowship in his honor at Human Rights Watch. After this, the Sandlers giving grew rapidly in their areas of greatest interest: human rights, civil rights, and medical research. They stepped up to become major donors to Human Rights Watch and, after the arrival of Anthony Romero in 2001, to the American Civil Liberties Union.

The Sandler's sponsorship of medical research demonstrates their unique, creative, entrepreneurial, and sometimes controversial approach to philanthropic work. With the American Asthma Foundation, which they founded, the goal was to disrupt existing research patterns and to interest scientists beyond the narrow confines of pulmonology to investigate the disease and to produce new basic research about it. Check out the interview with Bill Seaman for more on this initiative. The Program for Breakthrough Biomedical Research at the University of California, San Francisco likewise seeks out highly-qualified researchers who are willing to engage in high-risk research projects. The interview with program director Keith Yamamoto highlights the impacts and the future promise of the research supported by the Sandler's. The Sandler Fellows program at UCSF selects recent graduate school graduates of unusual promise and provides them with a great deal of independence to pursue their own research agenda, rather than serve as assistants in established labs. Joe DeRisi was one of the first Sandler Fellows and, in his interview, he describes the remarkable work he has accomplished while at UCSF as a fellow and, now, as faculty member who heads his own esteemed lab.

The list of projects, programs, and agencies either supported or started by the Sandler's runs too long to list here, but at least two are worth mentioning for these endeavors have produced impacts wide and far: the Center for American Progress and ProPublica. The Center for American Progress had its origins in Herb Sandler's recognition that there was a need for a liberal policy think tank that could compete in the marketplace of ideas with groups such as the conservative Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute. The Sandler's researched existing groups and met with many well-connected and highly capable individuals until they forged a partnership with John Podesta, who had served as chief of staff under President Bill Clinton. The Center for American Progress has since grown by leaps and bounds and is now recognized for being just what it set out to be.

The same is also true with ProPublica. The Sandler's had noticed the decline of traditional print journalism in the wake of the internet and lamented what this meant for the state of investigative journalism, which typically requires a meaningful investment of time and money. After spending much time doing due diligence—another Sandler hallmark—and meeting with key players, including Paul Steiger of the Wall Street Journal, they took the leap and established a not-for-profit investigative journalism outfit, which they named ProPublica. ProPublica not only has won several Pulitzer Prizes, it has played a critical role in supporting our democratic institutions by holding leaders accountable to the public. Moreover, the Sandler Foundation is now a minority sponsor of the work of ProPublica, meaning that others have recognized the value of this organization and stepped forward to ensure its continued success. Herb Sandler's interview as well as several other interviews describe many of the other initiatives created and/or supported by the foundation, including: the Center for Responsible Lending, Oceana, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Learning Policy Institute, and more.

A few interviewees shared the idea that when it comes to Herb and Marion Sandler there are actually three people involved: Marion Sandler, Herb Sandler, and “Herb and Marion.” The later creation is a kind of mind-meld between the two which was capable of expressing opinions, making decisions, and forging a united front in the ambitious projects that they accomplished. I think this makes great sense because I find it difficult to fathom that two individuals alone could do what they did. Because Marion Sandler passed away in 2012, I was not able to interview her, but I am confident in my belief that a very large part of her survives in Herb’s love of “Herb and Marion,” which he summons when it is time to make important decisions. And let us not forget that in the midst of all of this work they raised two accomplished children, each of whom make important contributions to the foundation and beyond. Moreover, the Sandlers have developed many meaningful friendships (see the interviews with Tom Laqueur and Ronnie Caplane), some of which have spanned the decades.

The eighteen interviews of the Herb and Marion Sandler oral history project, then, are several projects in one. It is a personal, life history of a remarkable woman and her mate and life partner; it is a substantive history of banking and of the fate of the savings and loan institution in the United States; and it is an examination of the current world of high-stakes philanthropy in our country at a time when the desire to do good has never been more needed and the importance of doing that job skillfully never more necessary.

Martin Meeker, Charles B. Faulhaber Director, Oral History Center, UC Berkeley

List of Interviews of the Marion and Herbert Sandler Oral History Project

Ronnie Caplane, “Ronnie Caplane: On Friendship with Marion and Herb.”

Steve Daetz, “Steve Daetz: Values and Leadership at Golden West Financial and the Sandler Foundation.”

Joseph DeRisi, “Joe DeRisi: From Sandler Fellow to UCSF Professor of Biochemistry.”

Stephen Hauser, “Stephen Hauser: Establishing the Sandler Neurosciences Center at UCSF.”

Russell Kettell, “Russ Kettell: A Career with Golden West Financial.”

Thomas Laqueur, “Tom Laqueur: On the Meaning of Friendship.”

Bernard Osher, “Barney Osher: On Marion Osher Sandler.”

John Podesta, “John Podesta: Building Infrastructure for Progressive Politics with the Center for American Progress.”

Anthony Romero, “Anthony Romero: Leadership of the American Civil Liberties Union in Times of Crisis.”

Michael Roster, “Michael Roster: Attorney and Golden West Financial General Counsel.”

Kenneth Roth, “Kenneth Roth: Human Rights Watch and Achieving Global Impact.”

Herbert Sandler, “Herbert Sandler: A Life with Marion Osher Sandler in Business and Philanthropy.”

James Sandler, “Jim Sandler: Commitment to the Environment in the Sandler Foundation.”

Susan Sandler, “Susan Sandler: The Sandler Family and Philanthropy.”

William Seaman, “Bill Seaman: The American Asthma Foundation.”

Paul Steiger, “Paul Steiger: Business Reporting and the Creation of ProPublica.”

Richard Tofel, “Richard Tofel: The Creation and Expansion of ProPublica.”

Keith Yamamoto, “Keith Yamamoto: The Sandler Foundation and the Program in Breakthrough Biomedical Research at UCSF.”

Interview 1: February 15, 2018

01-00:00:52

Meeker:

Today is the fifteenth of February, 2018. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Jim Sandler for the Sandler Family Oral History Project. This is interview session number one, and we are at the offices of the Sandler Foundation in San Francisco. Thank you for sitting down with me today and talking about, in particular, your mother and your father, Marion and Herb Sandler. We begin these interviews the same for everyone. Why don't you just say your name and a date and place of birth for record.

01-00:01:31

Sandler:

Jim Sandler. I was born June 7, 1966, in Berkeley, California.

01-00:01:48

Meeker:

This interview project, of course, is focused on Herb and Marion, and so we have a good biographical study, survey, established about them. Usually the next question I would ask is, tell me about the circumstances into which you were born, but that really is the nature of this oral history project, in which we're talking about the lives and the careers that they built together. I think really the first question I'd like to ask is maybe describe the first house that you remember, and what family life was like in and around that dwelling.

01-00:02:39

Sandler:

The first house was in Lafayette, California, on Hilltop Drive. It was a one-level, single-family house, with a big yard. We had a pool. It was a very warm, relaxed household. We acquired a pet along the way. Actually, it acquired us.

01-00:03:12

Meeker:

A pet? What kind of pet?

01-00:03:13

Sandler:

It was a cat. It was a neighbor's cat. The neighbors went on vacation, and the cat was lonely and came to us, and never wanted to go back. So that's how we got a cat. We couldn't have it in the house. My mom was asthmatic. We had three cats, eventually. It was just a very loving, warm—their whole thing was they would work—they were building their business, and they would work these long hours, but they would make sure they came home at a certain time, and would just dedicate their time to us. Very important to them to make sure that they had that balance. In some ways, as many kids, you don't really necessarily know what your parents do. They would just be at the office or they'd be at home. But they were very sure to make sure they spent that time with us. It was a wonderful, loving household.

01-00:04:14

Meeker:

Growing up, particularly in the 1970s and early 1980s, before you would go off to college, there were certainly a lot of women moving into the workforce at this point, engaged in professional work. To what extent was your mother's

role as a professional, going into work every day—was that unique amongst you and your friendship circle, or was that relatively common?

01-00:04:42

Sandler:

I guess so. It's more if I look back at it. I don't think it was anything in my consciousness at the time. They were partners in everything, and so they'd go to work together, come home together. Everything was sort of done together for them. They were sort of this unit. When I do think back on it, for sure that was, I guess, unusual, but I don't remember people mentioning it or talking about it, or it standing out as anything. It was the normal thing for me.

01-00:05:21

Meeker:

You weren't comparing yourself to your friendship circle?

01-00:05:28

Sandler:

Not really. No. Very sort of, as a child, self-involved, I guess. I don't think that happened until, in fifth grade, we moved to a different house, and it was a house that they designed. They were very involved with designing. Obviously they didn't design it, per se, but they worked with an architect, who was a friend of theirs, Bill Turnbull, who's a well-known architect. It was sort of their dream house, their dream project. It was a beautiful piece of art in and of itself. I think that's when I started to notice that there were differences between myself and how I was growing up, and others. I would mostly see it in reflection of them. They'd come say, "Wow, look at your house," and "Oh my gosh, wow, you must be rich," and then those types of things started to kind of creep into the relationships. That's when I think I started noticing, and became maybe a little uncomfortable when someone new would come. With some of my old friends, it was momentary, and then we all just started to play and have fun. But new people coming over or whatever, I had to kind of deal with that. That was uncomfortable.

01-00:06:50

Meeker:

To what extent did your parents talk about their histories, their family histories?

01-00:07:02

Sandler:

My father would talk about how his father, at one point, had become a gambler, and was addicted to gambling, and how that impacted him growing up and his family, and his perspective on the world.

01-00:07:21

Meeker:

What lessons was he drawing for you from that?

01-00:07:28

Sandler:

It wasn't necessarily about gambling, per se, except I think he was disturbed by gambling, but it wasn't something that we would get lectures on or anything. It was more about, I think, lying, in order to cover up this—obviously, when you're addicted to something, you feel shame, and you're trying to keep it a secret. So I think his father did a lot of lying about money

lost, what he was doing with his time. So he was very focused on telling the truth and being honest. Money—it had become something that had made him very nervous. It was always hanging over their heads. His father had done some things that had put them in some jeopardy as far as borrowing money in situations that were involved with his business, where he was taking money that clients had given him to hold on for them, and using it to kind of pay a certain debt. There was a lot of added stress. But again, I don't feel like I grew up with this certain dogma about things, except being honest and trustworthy. It wasn't about, "Don't gamble, don't do this, don't borrow money." There wasn't anything like that, really. Actually, in retrospect, I'm surprised that there wasn't more of that. But I think he was very conscious about the messages that he wanted to give to us, and trying to be as best as he could not to put the things that he saw as disturbing him onto us. So I think he was very conscious about that.

01-00:09:16

Meeker:

It's interesting what you're saying. It sounds like there are not directives or rules that you're to live by, but rather an acknowledgement that, if you don't live basically an honest life, these things will come back to hurt you and the people around you.

01-00:09:33

Sandler:

That was one side of the things. The other things that he talked about were—they were involved in some local politics around their neighborhood, and he would talk about that. He always sort of exuded this sense of outrage at injustice. He couldn't control that. He would see something, and he would get very upset if he saw people with power using their power over others who didn't have power in dishonest ways and manipulative ways. That was something he couldn't hide. I don't think he wanted to, but maybe he didn't know that he was expressing it as much as it just kind of came out. I think were those values that were associated with growing up. His father was a judge, and would work hard on these issues. His brother, as well, was a judge, and those values were important to him, and they were important to my dad, and probably to his mother. I don't really know too much about that. But those were some of the things, I think, that impacted him, growing up in the neighborhood and seeing a lot of poverty, and people in different, bad situations and whatnot.

01-00:10:53

Meeker:

For a kid growing up in suburban California, did his descriptions of downtown, Lower East Side New York seem pretty exotic to you?

01-00:11:03

Sandler:

I don't really remember that. Every teenager says, "Oh, dad, you don't get it," and he'd have to say, "Come on, kid. I grew up in a situation that you don't know at all, and here you think you know so much more than I." He wouldn't be that explicit about it, but I think he would say, "I've seen things, I've done things, and I know about this kind of stuff." I was very sheltered. They were

very protective. I don't know if that, maybe at the time, was also coming into fashion, just wanting to give your kids—they didn't necessarily give us things, but just trying to give your child this ideal kind of lifestyle. Being outside and in your backyard and playing, and the world is this wonderful, sweet place, and don't worry about anything. Very sort of protected childhood that I had. He didn't really go into much detail about hardships and things like that, except the whole aspect that there should be this justice, and there should be equality and things like that. It was definitely something that seeped in, but not necessarily through harsh descriptions of horrible ways that people live in this world.

01-00:12:27

Meeker:

That's interesting, being a young man growing up in the suburbs in California, and as you said, isolated by design, in some ways. How were you exposed to these kinds of inequalities in life that really made your father passionate? Were they real or abstract?

01-00:12:55

Sandler:

I think they were abstract, yeah. We didn't go drive down to downtown Oakland. Even though, just recently, he was telling me about when they were there in the seventies, in Oakland, at their office. We had someone in here at the foundation who he was talking to, who he knew back in the seventies, who was running a program to help poor people. They were recollecting about what it was like during that time. So he was definitely living it in Oakland as well, as far as running a business in an area that had a lot of issues, and doing his best to be a model company, trying to be involved in the community and doing what he could to help ameliorate the situation around him. But again, it didn't seep into my life. Maybe he experienced and he saw it, and maybe there were conversations that I don't necessarily recall paying attention to, but those values were very strong coming from him. I feel them, too. I have a sense of outrage when I see something. I can't point to anything in particular that made me that way, except I know that he and my mom had that sense of justice.

01-00:14:18

Meeker:

Did your mom talk about her background, or did you learn much about where she came from?

01-00:14:25

Sandler:

We used to go to Maine every summer. We used to go and see the town. We would drive around the neighborhoods and whatnot, and we would see her mother and her brothers, and hear stories, mostly family stories. A little bit about how her father made a living, and how they had this hardware store, and they each took turns working in that. A little bit like that. Not a whole lot, but there were some interesting stories. Also, being a Jewish family in a place in Maine where there are not many Jews, and they had four boys and the father. Five Jewish men in a town was big for that small Jewish community. So there's a little bit of stories. I'm sure I could think of some.

01-00:15:22

Meeker:

What was it that you learned about the family during those visits? Again, did it seem sort of exotic and remote from your own experience? Was it something that you were interested in and found compelling?

01-00:15:37

Sandler:

Oh, yeah. They're both very good storytellers. You've obviously heard my dad tell stories. He can tell quite a few. My mom as well, mostly when we were there. Little stories about her brothers and the relationships with each other, with their mother. There were stories later on about some of her brothers marrying women that weren't Jewish, or wanting to, and how difficult that was for their mother, and that being kind of destructive to relationships because of that, and my mom being very upset about that, because she loved her mother and loved her brothers, and saw that rift, as someone at that time thinking how ridiculous it is that this was happening to a family. Those kind of stories stuck with me. My mom being the youngest, and sort of the princess. The four brothers, they might pick on her, but no one outside the family was allowed to pick on her. Very protective of her. And Barney working at the hardware store, and I think learning a lot of his business acumen through that. I'm trying to remember all the stories. It's hard to remember. It was very pleasant. I don't know if it was exotic, but it was very warm and reassuring and pleasant, and having these family stories and learning more about who your parents are from that.

My dad had a lot of stories about his relationships growing up, too, when he was young and whatnot. My mom's felt a little bit more—how do I say it? Hers were warmer stories. My dad's [stories] were warm, but also, I think he had some troubles. His mom was very neurotic, and how his brother dealt with it, and how he dealt with it, and how they dealt with his father gambling and lying. His stories weren't quite as warm and comforting, whereas my mom's [stories] were a little bit more so, because the family relationships, I think, were not quite as neurotic and damaging in some ways.

01-00:17:54

Meeker:

As you're learning about family history, family lore, members of the extended family, how important is the Jewish identity component of these stories?

01-00:18:09

Sandler:

When I think back, when they told them, was there an emphasis on that?

01-00:18:12

Meeker:

Yeah.

01-00:18:18

Sandler:

I don't think so. Not necessarily in their own stories, but in life in general, they would say, most people that—I remember there was one time when they were talking about these people who were very philanthropic or whatnot, and it was like, Jews in general, they felt, were more philanthropic, or maybe more obsessed with certain issues of justice or something like that. They had certain

biases, I guess, that they would kind of interject into things. But as far as their childhood, I can't really remember that being a big part of their stories.

01-01:09:08

Meeker:

It sounds like it was more about a culture and values rather than any religious component.

01-01:19:16

Sandler:

Yeah. Definitely. They kept kosher for a little while after they got married, and then I think they gave that up. I remember when I was getting bar mitzvah-ed, I was thinking, "Why am I doing this?" We'd go to temple, and I would get answers that were not very satisfying. Later on, finding out that my dad was not very religious, and has a lot of issues with religion in general and how it's used in negative ways, and I think my mom feeling a certain obligation to her mom and her parents that I should be bar mitzvah-ed, but maybe not having a great reason other than that. Nothing about you really need to identify with your Judaism and things. They were very philanthropic for quite a while in the Jewish community, as well as money to Israel, and then they got very upset about how Israel—human rights issues with Palestine, so they started trying to direct more towards the Jewish community here. Near the end of my mom's life, it took less and less of a value for them, and it was more about human rights in general. They would pay attention to news about Israel, but it wasn't all-encompassing or anything like that. Once you become part of a new culture and a new country, you start—I don't know why I do these things; I just do them. As kids keep asking questions and pestering, then it gets hard to come up with good answers.

01-00:21:00

Meeker:

What holidays did your family celebrate?

01-00:21:04

Sandler:

Passover, for sure. Hanukkah. We would go to temple on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which I found—I didn't understand, really, what was going on. We'd stand up, sit down, get up. We'd be reading. No idea what I was saying. Some of the songs were fun. I did go to Jewish camps, actually. I went to Camp Tawonga and Camp Swig. Those were great fun. There was a lot of singing and camaraderie. It was neat to kind of belong to something that not too many people belonged to. It felt like you were a part of something. That was kind of fun. But then, going to school, my sister and I and one other kid being the only Jewish kids—and there was a little bit of negative, occasionally, but I don't really remember much. Maybe one kid might say a snide remark, and I wouldn't really understand what it was about. People were curious, but then didn't really care so much.

01-00:22:10

Meeker:

Did your parents ever sit you down and say, "Hey, listen, you might experience some anti-Semitism, or people not being nice to you?"

01-00:22:20

Sandler:

No. No. It never really was something that personally affected me. Maybe here and there a little bit, but I don't really recall it. It wasn't a big thing in my life. They would talk about it maybe in more general terms, but not necessarily specific to me. Obviously World War II and the Holocaust, and an awareness of that. But it was never really a lot of direct conversations or anything like that. It might be some reference here or there, or you see something in a movie. There was definitely Jewish pride. I think any culture has a certain pride. You can be around any group of people who love their culture. There was definitely a lot of pride, and maybe why we're—are—not necessarily better, but why we're great, or good, or whatever. The things that make us special. Yeah, I guess the more I think about it, there was a little bit of that going on, if it was something in a movie, or—I guess there was a lot of, oh, and by the way, he was Jewish, and oh, by the way, this and that. There were a lot of Jewish jokes and things like that. So yeah, I guess I got, now that I think about it, a lot of it.

01-00:23:47

Meeker:

Tell me about your education. Tell me about the schools that you went to.

01-00:23:52

Sandler:

I went to a Montessori preschool, that I don't recall that much about. I went to a school called Seven Hills, private school in Walnut Creek.

01-00:24:04

Meeker:

And that went through—

01-00:24:06

Sandler:

Sixth grade. I had difficulties in school. I remember, at Seven Hills, there was a bully. It impacted me. I didn't want to go to school a fair amount of times.

01-00:24:28

Meeker:

This was a small school, if I remember correctly.

01-00:24:30

Sandler:

It was a small school, yeah. I see my kids at their school, and wow, what a wonderful school they have. They really focus on socialization and whatnot. I'm sure the school I went to was progressive at the time, but I look back at it, I don't think it was really that special. The fact that they really didn't know how to deal with the situation with the bully. This kid had brothers, and I think they were all bullies. I try to wonder if that impacted my interest in school, or maybe I should have gone to school a year later. But whatever. I was not that interested in school. I remember, growing up, getting a lot of tests—have any learning disabilities or whatnot. They would always say I did very well, and I think they were confused by why I wasn't doing well in school, or that involved in school. Seventh grade, I didn't follow my sister. My sister, I think, went to Head-Royce. I went to a private school called St. Paul's Episcopal Church, kind of near where their office was. Then the next year, I went to Head-Royce, and I went there for three years, but then my

grades weren't good enough, so I ended up going to Miramonte High School in Orinda for my junior, senior year.

01-00:25:48

Meeker: Was that a public school?

01-00:25:49

Sandler: That was a public school, yeah, in the area where I grew up.

01-00:25:52

Meeker: What animated you, say, when you were in high school? Did you have any particular passions?

01-00:26:00

Sandler: At Head-Royce, I was very involved with the theater group. I wasn't doing it on stage. Actually, I did a couple things on stage, but very minor. But I liked being involved with that group of people. It was a really neat group, and I did a lot of the technical stuff, the lighting and the sound and stuff. So it was really disappointing when I couldn't go to that school anymore, because I felt it was a really fun community of—maybe a little bit of outsiders. It was a fun group. So when I went to the other high school, I was kind of lost a bit. I did end up finding a group of techie kids and getting involved with them. But it wasn't the same. I wish that I had been able to stay at the other school and stay with that group.

01-00:26:50

Meeker: You left Head-Royce because of academic issues?

01-00:26:52

Sandler: Yeah, my grades weren't up to snuff. I wasn't paying attention to that.

01-00:26:58

Meeker: So you, I guess, graduated high school about '84, is that right?

01-00:27:01

Sandler: Yeah.

01-00:27:06

Meeker: How did your parents talk to you about education? You were having some academic issues. They both were high achievers in that realm.

01-00:27:18

Sandler: They were very conscious not to put pressure in ways that they would—it's interesting. There was a certain amount of walking on eggshells, I felt, going on in our household about certain things. How to make sure we're very cautious of people's feelings and whatnot. They didn't really try to compare or do things like that. I think they were just seeing me struggling and trying to figure out ways that they could help. It wasn't a lot of, you need to do this, or you need to go to this college, or you need to get this achievement or anything like that. The most would be my dad really wanting me to read, and

emphasizing how reading would open up this world and whatnot. I was not a big reader at the time, and struggled with a lot of things like that.

01-00:28:26

Meeker:

At what point were you becoming aware of how accomplished your parents were? And what did that mean to you?

01-00:28:36

Sandler:

How accomplished they were? I remember going into their office, and they had these two offices that were connected. They definitely seemed like they were the boss, and they had great views from their offices. Again, I don't know if I had anything to compare it to. It wasn't like a big office with people all over the place saying, yes, sir, no, ma'am, or whatever. It was them and a few other executives on this top floor, and of course they would interact with other people. I didn't get to see them in meetings. They had this whole other life that was going on, and then they would come home and be my parents. For a long time, I don't think I saw that. I think there was a point when they had told us—I can't remember what grade I was in—when they said that there might be something in a magazine, *Forbes*, talking about wealthy people, and they wanted to prepare me that that might be something that might get back to me at some point. It was just the way it was. They were very powerful people in general, their personalities and how they were with friends and whatnot. For me to see them as powerful outside and be shocked by that wouldn't make sense. They were just kind of very strong, decisive people all the time. I guess I didn't necessarily think, oh, they're these important people, because it always seemed like that. They were very confident and self-assured with everything they said and thought about the world, and this is the way this should be, and we're going to make changes. It's just that's how they were.

01-00:30:26

Meeker:

You had mentioned your parents'—I guess social consciousness, maybe, is a way to describe it. Did that ever translate into specific dinner table conversations around what was happening in the political sphere? Did they seem engaged with presidential elections as they were happening? Was that something that motivated them?

01-00:30:47

Sandler:

I don't recall. Probably, but I don't recall.

01-00:30:51

Meeker:

Was there ever a point that you became interested in that part of social life?

01-00:30:56

Sandler:

I don't think until I was in college. Not until, like, 1991 or something like that. I'm trying to remember. One of the Gulf Wars or something like that. Hanging around with a bunch of people and talking about it. I think that's really when it came to me about that.

01-00:31:32

Meeker:

So you graduated high school in '84. Did you go straight into college?

01-00:31:36

Sandler:

I did. I bounced around different colleges as well. I still struggled. I took some time off, and then I did something called semester at sea, which was traveling abroad. Then I transferred to Boulder. When I was in Boulder is really when I think I got that consciousness.

01-00:31:57

Meeker:

What about that semester at sea? I feel like I've heard reference to it in your context about it being also somewhat meaningful.

01-00:32:07

Sandler:

Yeah, that probably did start a lot of it. You're on a boat with a bunch of other students, and it's a semester. It's a hundred days, and basically you go completely around the world, and stop in ten different countries. The first country is Japan, which was pretty mind-blowing at the time, 1986. But India, I think, was the biggest eye-opener, being in Bombay, or Mumbai now, and seeing just the extreme poverty of people that were there, sleeping on the streets. Hard to walk down certain sidewalks without having to avoid stepping on people. When you talk about exposure to how different people lived, that was really the first time I think I—it wasn't abstract, and it was really right there. That had a huge impact on me. That was a transformative time in my life, for sure.

01-00:33:09

Meeker:

You've become really quite interested and engaged with environmental issues in your philanthropic work here at the foundation. Were you an outdoors guy? Did you go camping? Were you part of the Boy Scouts or anything like that growing up?

01-00:33:27

Sandler:

I was part of the Boy Scouts, briefly. I would go camping with some friends. That, again, started in Boulder, probably after the semester at sea thing. Spent a lot of time outdoors. I know we're now talking more about me, so I don't know if that's really your intention right now. There was a certain amount of that there, and then really what happened, I took a trip with my parents and my uncle, Bill Osher, to Baja. It was on a boat, and on the boat, every night, we'd have a geologist or a marine biologist or a botanist who would explain all the things we had been seeing or we were going to see. I was just taken by that, and I came back from that trip and was just like, I'm going to study biology. I went back to school for another time and focused on biology. Once you become aware of all this, then you also understand how fragile it is, and how—again, it sort of does fit into the theme of powerful exploiting the vulnerable, and it just being exploited and destroyed, with no care for it by certain people. Difficult for other people to do anything. Anyway, I can go on about that, but—

01-00:35:02

Meeker: What years were you at Boulder?

01-00:35:11

Sandler: After semester at sea, I went there. I was there '87, '88, and then I actually left school, came to San Francisco, lived, and did some work here. Then I ended up going back there, I think in '89, '90, and then moving back here with my now wife, and living in San Francisco for a while. That was when I was in Boulder. Then I was kind of doing various work and whatnot outside of that, and then I became enamored with biology and decided I was going to go back again and study biology.

01-00:35:43

Meeker: And you went back to Boulder to study—

01-00:35:45

Sandler: No, I did that here, in San Francisco.

01-00:35:48

Meeker: At USF [University of San Francisco]?

01-00:35:49

Sandler: San Francisco State.

01-00:35:51

Meeker: This period, late eighties and early nineties, when you're starting to gain an interest in biology and the natural world. This is a period, really, when there is—I think Earth Day starts again, right? That's maybe 1990, I think, or maybe it was '89. There's an emerging, new environmental movement and consciousness that really seems to be growing at that time. I was in college at the time, and I remember it was pretty impactful. Was that something that was on your horizon that you were engaged with?

01-00:36:27

Sandler: No, not really. I think it was my own personal consciousness-raising. Then I asked my parents—I knew that we had been giving some money away to human rights and doing some philanthropy, and I said, "We should do something in environment." They said, "Well, that's not something that we're focused on, but if you want to do it, then go do it." That's when I started getting involved with that. My dad said, "The environment is a big area. Maybe you should try to focus." Then I started focusing in marine areas. That's when that kind of started for me here at the foundation, was just this—and the realization of all of these things. It's pretty intense. When your consciousness is raised about something, and you see it everywhere, it's a little overwhelming after a while to understand what is actually happening with climate change and other things.

01-00:37:30

Meeker: When did that happen for you? And what facilitated that, too?

01-00:37:41

Sandler:

I don't really remember where it started. As far as what?

01-00:37:49

Meeker:

You said there's a moment of epiphany in which you start to put the pieces together and—

01-01:37:58

Sandler:

I think there's a first part, which was just that it's really fun to do stuff. Let's save coral reefs and stuff like that, without necessarily understanding completely what all the threads were. I think, actually, environmentalism has changed a bit in some ways, because a lot of it was, let's save the tigers, let's save the elephants, and in some ways I look back and that's kind of quaint now, because now it's really like, oh my God, are we going to make it through this bottleneck, and is there going to be anything—are humans going to survive? Obviously, nature will survive in some way, but it's really all on the table at the moment.

01-00:38:39

Meeker:

In terms of climate change?

01-00:38:40

Sandler:

Yeah, in terms of climate change. That hits me more and more every day. I would say that consciousness probably started maybe five years ago or something, or maybe more, but really when you start seeing it happening—because it was always the scientists saying, oh, thirty, fifty years from now, it's going to be horrible. Then you find out, well, no, it's actually right now. People are suffering right now, and nature is suffering right now. You see strange weather patterns happening more and more frequently.

01-00:39:15

Meeker:

When you were at state studying biology, was that the major that you were—

01-00:39:21

Sandler:

I was a biology major, but I got really interested in genetics, so I started working in lab, and working with a professor in a lab, and really enjoying that. It was very intellectually fulfilling, but at a certain point I decided I didn't want to be inside, in a lab. I was looking at researchers' papers, starting in the seventies, and still working on the same genes in the eighties and the nineties, and I was just like, oh my God, this person has been working on the same genes for thirty, forty years. I don't know if I want to do that. That's when I decided I would move into the foundation.

01-00:40:02

Meeker:

I'm curious about moving into the foundation. What does that entail? Philanthropic work is its whole professional sector. There are different schools of thought about the best way for philanthropies to have an impact, for instance. What was your way into the foundation?

01-00:40:33

Sandler:

My parents were still at the company, and my sister was working on areas of education, but running her own nonprofit. Like I said, I wanted to do something. My parents said go do it. So I started off with some very small grants, and just trying to find my way myself. Finding the areas that I was passionate about, and then trying to find the organizations. Actually, what was very helpful to me was finding the other foundations and philanthropists in the area, through a process of just going to meetings and conferences and phone calls and whatnot, finding those people that saw things the way that I saw them, or who were very—incredibly smart people have been doing this for decades. Connecting with them, and finding out how they would approach things. Do you know about this organization or that organization? They'd be more than willing to return my phone calls, because it was another person giving money to an area they were passionate about. So it was really kind of discovering it on my own, and doing it for a number of years—six, seven, eight years—before my parents eventually sold their company and we created this. I had been doing it for a while, in the environment, on my own.

01-00:42:00

Meeker:

Who are some of these folks in the field of the environment that you were engaging with?

01-00:42:07

Sandler:

I was working with the [David and Lucile] Packard Foundation, with Pew [Charitable Trusts], which had a different form at the time. They were a charitable foundation at the time—or they were giving their money away. Now they run their own programs. There's the Marisla Foundation. Hewlett Foundation. It was great. There's the Henry Foundation. You could work with small foundations, big foundations. Every year, they would get together all the people who would be funding in the ocean area. They call it the marine area. There would be an annual meeting and get-together. You had all different size foundations showing up and talking about their issues. Some of them, they're very pet issues. It might be, oh, we're a Florida foundation, so we only work in Florida. But I really wanted to work with the folks that were thinking big and open to taking on the projects that were going to have the most impact, that weren't sort of, well, I only do Florida, and I really like this, and so this is what we're going to do. That's what I ended up doing. I ended up gravitating towards those. That's why they end up being the bigger foundations, because they could see the bigger picture, they could fund that way, and give me the perspective that I needed to—what are the big issues, and let's focus on those. Not approach it where I like this, and I like that, so that's what I'm going to do.

01-00:43:36

Meeker:

Were there any particular individuals in these foundations that you saw as thought leaders that were—

01-00:43:41

Sandler:

Josh Reichart at Pew was very smart, very strategic, and aggressive. He would do what he thought was the best, and so he would step on toes, obviously. He was probably enemy number one to the people who were coming up against him, whether it was in industry or whatnot. He was just very smart and effective, and very interested in helping folks like me learn about it. We did a lot of partnerships with them, Oceana being one. They started Oceana, and he ran it for a while. Just a really smart, strategic guy. Being around my parents, who are smart, strategic people who knew how to get things done, I gravitated toward that type of people.

01-00:44:52

Meeker:

I'm curious about this work that you're doing. How is your interaction with your parents around this? What do they think of your burgeoning interest, from your perspective?

01-00:45:06

Sandler:

What I liked about it was it was my area that they didn't know much about, and so they couldn't really—they could ask me sort of bigger questions, like, how are you thinking about this? But they wouldn't necessarily be able to say, oh, you shouldn't be with that organization, because of this reason or that reason. They couldn't know whether I was with the right one or not. Sometimes I would share some of the strategic papers. This is our strategy of what we're doing. They might make comments on that. It left me with a certain amount of freedom, and this is my area. Which I really needed. Because they do have very high standards, which, in some ways, is something I don't think I could really meet their standards. I don't know if I would necessarily ever been hired at their company, because—my dad was definitely not into nepotism in any regard, and never pressured me to join their company. They had very high standards. So it was good that I had my own area. I was their child. They loved me, and they wanted me to do things, and they wanted me to be involved. I think they loved the fact that I was doing something that was in line with their values of doing good in the world. It was something that they were kind of involved with, but not directly. We could still talk about it and whatnot. It was kind of the perfect thing. I had my own area, and they would kind of leave me alone.

01-00:46:50

Meeker:

Did this ever evolve into a mentoring role, in the sense of them certainly still being parents, but perhaps mentoring you in your interest in philanthropic work?

01-00:47:05

Sandler:

A soft mentoring. I became effective at drawing my boundaries about how involved I would let them be. Obviously, they could have, at any time, said, well, if you're not going to let us be involved, and we don't know what you're doing with the money, so we're cutting you off. But they didn't do that. I think they had to take a leap of faith a little bit with me, and I think they could

check in a little bit and understand what was going on. They would ask me questions and give me ideas. When I mentioned that I was working with Josh Reichart, and they met him, I think they saw the same thing that I saw. I think that made them feel good, that the people who I was interacting with, and the organizations I was interacting with, were very reputable and strategic and strong. I think more trust was built in my being able to do things. So there was not any direct mentorship. It's kind of funny, because it's hard to do that. I would watch them do that with other people, and watch these people let them get deeply involved. I could never let them do that. It would drive me crazy, but that's because they're my parents, whereas these other people would be, "Oh, thank goodness. You've given us such insight, and oh, that criticism you said was so right on." People would be so appreciative and so thankful.

That's, actually, what I have to say is probably the best thing about working with them and the foundation, is that they had this whole life at work, which I never saw. I didn't sit in meetings. I didn't know the people they were working with every day and building this amazing company with. Even though I knew they did this stuff, I never saw it, and I couldn't even really imagine what it was like. Later on, when we worked in the foundation, I could actually see them in action, and see how people reacted to them, and see how they thought. I had many positive things about working with them, but that was one, was getting some insight into who they were as professionals, which I didn't get to see for my entire life until later, until my mid-thirties, or actually probably more like forty or so. It's a real treat to be able to see them, and see how people react to them, and then get this other appreciation of your parent not just as a parent, but as a person.

01-00:49:41

Meeker:

In the process of seeing this happen, and engage with them as a colleague on a professional level, were you beginning to learn some skills or ways of being that you started to adopt for yourself, or model for yourself maybe? Actually, let me stop. You said yes. What were you saying yes to?

01-00:50:11

Sandler:

I was going to follow up with your question. I think, when they were running a business, they were very sort of no-nonsense. Let's make the right decisions for the right reasons, not because that person is nice, or because I like that person. I can like that person, and I can say no to that person, and I might have to fire that person. I didn't grow up around business or anything like that. I was into science, I was into outdoors. I just didn't experience that. So it was very uncomfortable at the beginning, watching my folks in meetings, asking people very difficult questions that might make that person uncomfortable. If they gave some answer that was not really an answer, they would say, "You're not really answering." Or if this person was clearly trying to BS them, they would say it. Or they would say something that would be obvious that they understood that that was going on. A meeting would end. It was very uncomfortable for a lot of those meetings at first. The difference between

when I would first sit in those meetings to years later, when I would say, oh, here we go, this is going to be interesting to watch, and to see how they would handle it. They were never mean about it. They were just very direct about it.

Those were sort of the lessons learned. It's still difficult, I think, to do that. How do you do that balance where you're respecting the person, but you're also being clear that this is not—what you're saying, I don't think, is really the right thing, or you haven't thought this through, you're not being strategic or whatnot. But understanding that your ultimate goal is to make good decisions and to do the right thing, and to help an organization grow. If that organization is run by someone who's not going to help it grow, then good luck to you, and goodbye. Certain lessons about that, about how to make grown-up, professional decisions. People's feelings are people's feelings, but not let that rule you. Because I think it can. You can say, that person is so nice, and gosh, that person is great. We should do this, because they're passionate about this and they love it. You can get really involved in that aspect of things. Anyway, when you're asking about some of the lessons learned, those are definitely some of the lessons learned.

My mom would also, in those meetings—she had a certain way of asking questions and talking with people. She would ask these open-ended questions, and often there might be an uncomfortable silence, because the person wouldn't know what she was looking at. There would be a tendency to want to prompt that person, or help that person, and you'd get a look from her if you did something like that, or if you gave them what she would call a multiple-choice question. You'd say, "Are you doing this strategy because of this or because of that?" She said, "Why are you giving them the answer? Just say, 'Can you tell me more about that?' or 'Why are you doing this?'" You'd be in the meeting and you'd say something, and she'd say, "Multiple choice." You're like, oh, boy. We would all sort of learn there's certain ways to ask the questions, and let that person answer without telegraphing what you wanted to hear. Anyway, there was a lot of lessons that she taught.

01-00:54:01

Meeker:

Was there much prep that was going into these meetings in advance? Were you sitting down? Was there much discussion of the meta-dynamics that were going into this?

01-00:54:12

Sandler:

I think, for them, they worked together for forty-something years. People talk about mind meld or whatnot. I think they would try to sometimes do that before, for our benefit, or we would debrief afterwards. But I think they had a certain way of doing things, and they both knew it. My dad would be very chatty and very talkative, and my mom would sit back and knit, and often people would think she's not paying attention, or not really sure what she's doing. Meanwhile, she'd write a word here, a word there, and when my dad had kind of done his thing to bring people out, then she would go through and

say, "So when you said this, can you tell me more about that? What did you mean by this?" They would, all the sudden, see that she was playing a game of chess, and maybe they had put themselves in some sort of bind, and she was about to checkmate them. That would be part of it, too. They saw that and could appreciate it, and would sort of say, "Wow, you're right. That's a good point. I'll have to get back to you on that." If they tried to BS their way out of it, it was a tell about who they were. If they were very upfront and honest, or could answer her questions in a satisfactory way, that was also good. That was when they would realize that she wasn't just sitting there not paying attention, that she was actually hearing everything they said, and was now going to follow up and lead them along this path of logic that they had set up for themselves. That was fascinating to watch. I don't think that was something that I could do. That was very particular to her, and I don't know if I could necessarily replicate that.

01-00:56:13

Meeker:

These meetings, these interviews, are infamous, certainly in every single interview that I've done. It doesn't matter who the person is. They could be the top of the field, the most accomplished individual in X, and they were still subjected to a very strenuous, sometimes very long series of interviews.

01-00:56:37

Sandler:

I think she would see people making assumptions, and then she would test them on whether those assumptions were well-thought-out, or if they were just repeating something or whatnot. But you're right. It doesn't really matter who you were. You learned quickly that you had to be on your game.

01-00:56:56

Meeker:

Have you found a way to adapt any of these methods to your own circumstances?

01-00:57:04

Sandler:

She was very conscious about it. She passed away almost six years ago. Because she's not around, I'm not as conscious about them. There are certain things that have stuck with me. I think they were second nature to her, and for the rest of us, we had to kind of be thinking about them. I don't know if I really think about them quite so much. Certain ones have stuck with me, about the open-ended questions, and not prompting, and not giving multiple-choice questions. She had a very high tolerance for silences, uncomfortable silences. [laughter] That was always interesting. She wouldn't mind sitting there for a while. If that person clearly couldn't get themselves out of it, she would let them sit there until maybe they would admit that they were kind of in a situation that they couldn't really talk their way out of. I don't know if I'm answering your question.

01-00:58:15

Meeker:

On the business side of things, about developing this portfolio within environmental work, I guess, ultimately, under the umbrella of the foundation.

Was there sort of a budget that they provided you with that they said, hey, what impact can you make with—

01-00:58:38

Sandler:

No, I don't think so. I think it was one of those things where my first grants were ten to twenty thousand dollars. Now, we're making two-million-dollar grants in the environment. I think it was just sort of training wheels, and then get a little bit more and more adventurous as things moved on. Oftentimes, the first grants you're making, you're not going to stick with those. You'll think, oh, yeah, those were interesting grants, but my thinking has changed. Understanding that maybe the first few years, you're going to make a bunch of grants that maybe aren't going to be where you're going to end up later on. I didn't really have a budget, but it was these smaller grants, smaller grants, smaller grants, that got bigger. There was a point where we need to make more grants. Let's pick up the pace. There's a little bit more pressure to do that, except, at the same time, we have very high standards. Maybe that's why it's difficult sometimes, when we want to feel like we should be giving more money away right now, and we try, but at the same time, we don't always achieve that. It's easy to give away money, but not give away money well. So I don't necessarily have anything where I have to cut back.

01-01:00:14

Meeker:

That's a really interesting idea, and I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that. What kind of thought and work goes into giving money away well, particularly in this context of the Sandler Foundation?

01-01:00:30

Sandler:

Have you interviewed Steve Daetz as well?

01-01:00:32

Meeker:

Yeah, we've done one session. We focused kind of on the business, because—yeah.

01-01:00:38

Sandler:

He'll be able to answer those kind of things probably a little bit more coherently than I can. But really, it is an emphasis on making sure that the organizations we're giving money to are run by smart, strategic people who are passionate about what they do, know how to manage, don't let their egos get in the way, and are really focused on having impact. Sometimes it's hard to find that type of organization that is also big enough to have an impact. There's a lot of smaller organizations, but then you have to measure, are they having impact? We spent a lot of time understanding the person, understanding the executive team they've put together. There's very high standards. We also don't do a lot of things where—let's say we're interested in human rights—let's give five human rights organizations money. We usually—what is the strongest one that is in this field, that is getting things done, and help them grow to be as impactful as possible. I feel a little bit better about that. Generally, like I said, it's hard to find. It would probably be

hard to find five really good organizations in one field. We try not to do that. We try not to get into a field and saturate it with a whole bunch of different organizations. It's more, what is the big one that's doing the best in that area.

01-00:02:40

Meeker:

I'm curious, in the area of environmental work, has your understanding evolved over time about how you would evaluate impact? What a highly impactful organization would be.

01-01:02:58

Sandler:

Has that changed, evolved?

01-01:02:59

Meeker:

Yeah. How has your understanding of that grown?

01-01:03:08

Sandler:

I think, when I first got involved, I didn't necessarily have that. "Oh, wow, that group sounds like they're doing a lot of great stuff," and "wow, that person seems really smart." Not necessarily understanding what impact could be. Then going to a lot of meetings, with a lot of different organizations coming through the foundation. You might meet with one group and say, wow, that's pretty neat. They really do some really neat stuff, and boy, that really sounds like they've got some good stuff going. Then another person comes in, and you're blown away, and you say, oh my God, what was I thinking with that other group? This person is so strategic and so smart, and they are so focused, and they really know the change that they want to make, and they're making it. There's that feeling that you get when you meet that person and that organization. Some of it is that gut-level thing, where you really see it and really get it. Each organization has impact in a different way. Impact isn't, we've got all these articles in the newspaper, and we've got a million members. Those are maybe somewhat an indication of something, but that's really not impact. Having to remember and think about what impact is.

01-01:04:48

Meeker:

For instance, Dick Tofel spent a lot of time thinking about impact in terms of ProPublica. It's not just the metrics of how many page hits or something like that. They're interested in holding powerful members of society to account for their deeds and misdeeds. I wonder, in the environmental field, the conversations you've had about what you're looking for in terms of impact. It is huge. The planet is on the brink.

01-01:05:30

Sandler:

Like the Sierra Club. We got involved with them. It was right when [Dick] Cheney had met behind closed doors with a whole bunch of energy companies, and there's this big plan to build about 150 coal plants around the country. Sierra Club's goal was, "We are going to not let this happen. We're going to stop that." Very clear goals. They had a strong strategy, and explained very clearly how they were going to do this, how they were going to measure it, and went systematically, stopping one after another, with various tactics and

strategies for each one. That's one way. You could look at Oceana, understanding what were the destructive fishing practices, understanding who their target audience was. It might be a congressperson or a senator. This is our goal, to change this policy; who's going to be the person who's going to be important to change or to create new policy? How do we get to that person? Figuring out various ways to put pressure on that. Again, it was a campaign, it was defined, and it could be measured. I think with organizations like Earth Justice, or Center for Biological Diversity, litigation. We are going to sue on this, stop this. Again, you can measure that. This is why we're choosing this lawsuit; not just because we want to win this one thing, but because that's going to have implications on these other issues, and if we could win this, that will have a huge impact beyond just this case.

You could find a small group that does that, which is great if you've got some smart, strategic people, but wouldn't it be great if—here's a group that's medium-sized, that has really smart people, that's having impact. Why don't we bring them from a medium size to a much bigger size. Help them with challenge grants. Help bring in other funders who understand this. Eventually, you start partnering with other funders, and learning what they're doing and how they're thinking, and having the same values. That's when I worked with Pew and Marisla and Packard. I would always go to Packard, like, what are you doing—when we were interested in Baja, California—what are you doing in Baja, California? Expose me to these people and how you're thinking about them. We did a lot of partnering with various groups. I think it's being able to understand what you want to do, and having some way to measure it, and a strong, strategic plan to get there.

01-01:08:29
Meeker:

What is the best way you've learned for this communication, for information sharing, to happen, to make sure that you are plugged in with the individuals and organizations that are going to be doing the most impactful work? How do you actually manage your time, your engagement?

01-01:08:50
Sandler:

There's some foundations which have hundreds of grants. We don't do that. We try to do fewer, bigger grants. That's one way to manage your time and the number of relationships that you have. Then having very personal relationships. A lot of phone calls, conversations, and face-to-face meetings and whatnot. Having a manageable number of them, and then engaging.

01-01:09:17
Meeker:

Do you get to go out into the field much and see these kinds of projects when appropriate?

01-01:09:27
Sandler:

It's interesting. Not as much as I used to, and I'm trying to start doing it more again, to kind of remember why I'm doing it. It's got a positive and a negative to that when it comes to the environment, because then you're reminded of

how much you have to lose. You go there and you see something gorgeous, and then you understand that that could be destroyed shortly. There's people who can't wait for you to turn your back so they can jump on a particular environment, knowing that climate change is happening. It gives me that feeling of wanting to fight more, but at the same time, I have a hard time sleeping sometimes. How do I remove myself from this when I need to, while staying focused and driven? It's difficult.

01-01:10:19

Meeker:

Have you, in terms of the environment and dealing with something like climate change—correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems like a lot of the activity is around trying to prevent bad things from continuing to happen. But it seems like there's also another side, where we're still going to be an industrial world that requires energy, and people need to be fed. So there's a positive side. Maybe the Elon Musk side of electrifying and renewable energy. Is the foundation interested in maybe the entrepreneurial side of green energy or—

01-01:11:08

Sandler:

I've done some personal investing in that area, but I have to say, also, we worked with the Sierra Club when they originally were going, let's stop these 150 coal plants. We've accomplished most of that. Just a few of these things got built. Now let's take down the really dirtiest ones that exist. That was part of their thing. Now it's like, how do we push the public utility commissions to choose solar or wind over dirty energy? So they're in that phase. We also fund a group called Vote Solar, which also works at the public utility commissions to promote clean energy, to make laws and regulations and the rules that will let those things grow and flourish. Which is really nice, because you're right, there is so much a feeling of you're just running around trying to put out fires. There's people running around with matches, throwing them all over the place, and you're putting them out. At a certain point, you have to start figuring out, how do you fireproof certain areas so that fire doesn't start up again there? That can be the very depressing side of things, is understanding that that's going on constantly, and maybe you're losing the fight in some areas. It really does need to be that side of, how do we create positive?

I know that it's difficult right now, in this particular time, when everything is under attack again. Under [Barack] Obama, it felt like we were moving forward, and now it's trying to hold the line, and that's very difficult. There will be, again, a point when we'll be moving forward, I think. I try to now think, how do we do things internationally, or how do we do things on a state level, or a local level, where you can make progress? I would say the climate fight has moved a little bit more towards—you're still fighting certain countries that want to do a lot of coal, or bad, dirty energy, but there's a lot of countries where you're now helping them create vision, and a visionary way of thinking about things. That can be really exciting, too. You need that. That feeds the soul more than putting out fires.

01-01:13:34

Meeker:

There's a place for hope. This practice area of the environment within the foundation is just one amongst many areas that the foundation is working in. How do you and your fellow, I guess, trustees, or board members, determine priorities and decide what is within the realm of fundable priorities, and what might fall outside of that, even if it's a worthwhile goal? Is that something that's ongoing, or is that something that was kind of established—

01-01:14:15

Sandler:

We do have a lot of established organizations, but we still are trying to do new things. Again, they have to have impact. Impact is defined as affecting many, many people's lives, millions. Country-sized kinds of accomplishments. It really has to do, still, with justice, with raising people's quality of life in a tangible way. I love the arts and I enjoy the arts, and I'm so thankful that they exist, and that does impact millions of people's lives, and it can be very positive, but that wouldn't necessarily fit with us, because it's really about almost basic needs, basic rights. Some issues are very complicated. Complicated for various reasons. Immigration is complicated, because it gets very political, but that doesn't mean that we back off of that for that reason. But there's also a lot of other funders in the area. Our funding, would that make a difference? Is there too much in-fighting? I don't know. There's a lot of questions to ask whether we go into an area besides impact—well, no, it's mostly impact. Also, something someone here is passionate about. There's a lot of different factors that go into choosing an area. I think maybe the first level is, is there someone here who's going to champion it and want to spend the time doing it? If it's an important area, but I'm not that passionate about it, then it's not going to happen, because you're just not going to put as much effort and time into it. There's that level. Many different kind of ways of thinking. We spell out, but we don't really need to. We spell it out because that's just how we're thinking about it in general.

01-01:16:41

Meeker:

In terms of spelling it out, then, what are the core values that the foundation is interested in propagating?

01-01:16:49

Sandler:

I think I've said a bunch of them already. Fairness and justice, and helping people preventing exploitation of people and the environment. Bringing fairness to this world, where there's a lot of motivation to go around the rules and to break rules. The consequences of that is hurting a lot of people and a lot of things. I think if we see an area, we're like, oh my gosh, here's an area that is really hurting a lot of people, we didn't see that before, we take a really big look at that. I think it's really about how do you impact the most number of people in a positive way.

01-01:17:48

Meeker:

I'm curious about conversations you might have had with your mother and your father after the sale of the company, when they moved—it's a second life now, and it's entrepreneurial as well.

01-01:18:06

Sandler:

Very. Very entrepreneurial.

01-01:18:06

Meeker:

Starting the Center for America Progress, and ProPublica. Did they ever communicate to you, like, wow, this is weird, I can't imagine we're doing this? Like a surprise about this is where life has taken them.

01-01:18:26

Sandler:

I imagine that I think they both have felt incredibly blessed that they have been able to do things that they love and that are engaging, intellectually and emotionally, and that they get to do it together, and that they are impacting the world and people's lives. I think they have been surprised, in some ways, their whole lives about everything they've done. I don't know if they ever expressed that surprise, but more just sort of a great gratitude, I think, that they actually get to do this, and how much fun it is, and what a privilege it is. To me, it was surprising how incredibly entrepreneurial. Obviously, growing their company from nothing to something huge had to be very entrepreneurial. I think it's unusual for people to start something at a small level and still have the capability to run it when it's huge and complex. And then to go back again and start all over is incredible. My dad, right now, is still talking to people who are coming from Silicon Valley who are seeking his advice, and I imagine they see him as a young entrepreneur at heart still. I think there is something about that that is part of who someone is, no matter their age or whatnot. I think you either have it or you don't, and they have it, and incredibly talented with it. Incredible what they have done and continue to do.

01-01:20:18

Meeker:

Can you think of any examples of them ever expressing self-doubt or trepidation about, "Gosh, do we want to take this on?"

01-01:20:28

Sandler:

I think admitting to some failures with things that they've done. Self-doubt. I don't know if there's ever self-doubt. Yeah, I guess so. There was questioning about whether something was going to work or not. Like, are we crazy to be doing this? Does this make sense? Is this going to happen? This could all fall apart here, here. But that's part of starting something and taking risks, is going in there, looking at all those potential pitfalls, seeing if you've got a plan to minimize the number of risks, and still knowing those risks are there and going for it anyway. I think that they would always go in with their eyes open as much as possible, and think about all of those problems, and then understand that they were taking a risk. If it was a sure thing, then probably somebody had already done it, I guess. A lot of things they've done have been risky.

01-01:21:49

Meeker:

At what point did it become apparent to you that your mother suffered from some chronic health problems?

01-01:22:00

Sandler:

It was, again, probably part of their desire to protect us and be overprotective, so it wasn't until a lot later, probably after—when I went off to college, and then was gone for a long time living in Colorado, and then coming back in my mid-to-late-twenties, that was probably when I would hear a little bit more about this or that. My mom definitely suffered from things before that, but I don't feel like I remember those moments, or was like, oh, you're going to go spend time with this person while—I didn't really know it until later in life. Then, as she aged, these things became more frequent, the issues that she had. She'd end up in the emergency room, or just having to have certain procedures, or having asthmatic issues.

01-01:23:03

Meeker:

Was she a type who would become reflective or philosophical about her situation, in terms of health and longevity?

01-01:23:11

Sandler:

I don't think so. I think she was much more action-oriented type of person. I don't think it was until much later that I saw her get down for longer periods of time. But inevitably, she would—"What am I going to do about this? How are we going to change this?" You could get really wrapped up in thinking about these things, or you just get up and make change and take care of it, and do the best you can, and find the solution. She was always very action-oriented.

01-01:23:49

Meeker:

Did she get to the point of reflecting on her accomplishments or on the meaning of her life?

01-01:23:59

Sandler:

I don't remember having conversations about that so much. Maybe in a context with my dad bringing it up, or someone else bringing it up, but more in direct questions to her. Or my sister and I asking a direct question.

01-01:24:18

Meeker:

What would you have asked?

01-01:24:21

Sandler:

What was it like in this time, being a woman in a world where it was very difficult to move forward? We'd hear different stories about her experiences and whatnot. It wasn't as philosophical. It was very sort of, this is what happened. This is what it was like. This was going on. My dad is the person who philosophizes about things and tries to understand the place of everything. I think, again, my mom was very action-oriented. Maybe on her deathbed, she had a few things to say, but I don't remember having deep, philosophical discussions about meaning of life and things like that with her as much.

01-01:25:24

Meeker:

You have two young kids. If you thought about, in the event that they have kids, what your grandkids should know about your parents. Because your grandkids probably won't know—

01-01:25:42

Sandler:

I think that I would like them to know that they were very accomplished people, and about their values. Because you can have very accomplished people who then go off and build castles and monuments, and have yachts and things like that, and try to be in the media as much as possible. I think the values that they had, and that they tried to pass onto us, and they tried to pass onto everybody they come into contact with, I think those are the things that I would like them to know about.

01-01:26:25

Meeker:

I know that we've talked about the values in context. Could you put those values in a nutshell? Is that even possible?

01-01:26:32

Sandler:

I feel like I'm repeating myself over and over again. I think it's fairness and justice and helping the less fortunate. And not necessarily thinking you're any better than anybody else. I go out to lunch with my dad, and he's always opening the door for people. "Oh, no, you go first," and thanking people repeatedly. He's so warm, and treats people that he encounters with more respect than I see most people in the world doing that. He just really is very conscious of people's self-respect, and goes out of his way to make sure that they feel that coming from him, that he's acknowledging that. Not for any other reason but that's just who he is. That's something that I do reflexively as well. I attribute that directly from him. Then I try to think about that. I think about do my kids see that when we're out in the world, and how I am interacting with other people, and making sure that they do the same thing. Just as a normal human value, I think.

01-01:28:02

Meeker:

Any final thoughts that you'd like to add? Anything that we haven't covered or talked about that you think really should be discussed?

01-01:28:14

Sandler:

I don't think so. Like I said, I think the biggest gift that I think I got was being able to come back and work in the foundation and watch them do what they do, be a fly on the wall around other extraordinary people. I've encountered other people who are just as extraordinary as they are, that I might not normally have the privilege to, but for them, and see how other people reacted to them, and appreciate them. Again, it's hard as a son, or as a child, to kind of be able to step back and see them anything other than a parent. So to be able to see them through other people's eyes—other people who are incredibly accomplished themselves, still seeing them as mentors, or as being able to help them deal with big issues. People in every field, whether you're a professor at Berkeley or someone who's—John Podesta, the chief of staff of

the president—still valuing what they have to say and offer, and making them think and change the way they think about something. It's been fascinating, and a really great privilege.

01-01:29:39

Meeker: Great. Well, thank you very much.

01-01:29:41

Sandler: Yeah, thank you.

[End of Interview]