



Interview with Renee Swartz

Under the Auspices of the
Monmouth County Library Headquarters
125 Symmes Drive, Manalapan, N.J.
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Name of Interviewer: Alison Lenox
Premises of Interview: Ms. Swartz' home,
Rumson, NJ
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Chairwoman of Monmouth County Library Commission, Renee Swartz (right) with John Livingstone (center) and county Freeholder Theodore Narozanick, 1989

Ms. Lenox: Thank you so much for meeting with me.

Mrs. Swartz: It's a pleasure, Alison, and I am very interested in this project. I think looking at people's lives is one of the most interesting ways of looking back historically on how we arrive at where we are today. And that makes history so meaningful here in Monmouth County. I am very pleased to be asked to contribute to this process. I am delighted to have you come here. With your expertise, maybe we will have an interesting tale.

Ms. Lenox: Oh, absolutely! I don't think it is expertise that is needed, because I think you can talk for many hours about all your accomplishments. It is going to be fascinating!

Mrs. Swartz: Well, I don't know where you would like to begin. I think we need to begin with a direction.

Ms. Lenox: Let's begin at the beginning. Were you born in this area?

Mrs. Swartz: I was born in Newark. My father was a physician; his name was Sidney David Becker. He began a practice in Keyport, probably in the early 1930s. I was born in 1935, and it was during the Depression times. Of course I don't remember all of the trials and tribulations of that era, except that my father was a doctor; he was paid in kind. Most of the area between Keyport and Red

Bank was farmland. I guess it was called Middletown because it was just in the middle or between those two towns. But anyway, this was mostly a truck farming area. Most of the farms grew peaches, apples, corn, and tomatoes...the things that we associate with truck farming in New Jersey. When holidays came, and these people were really too poor to pay their bills with cash, they used to bring in bushels of potatoes and tomatoes. In the wintertime, there would be handmade dolls and baked goods, and that is the way they paid for their services. It was really not too long ago. It wasn't really horse and buggy physician-patient relations, but it was close to that. And it was a very different time in medicine than we have today. Families grew up, and many of my father's patients were from large Italian families. My father would know the mama right down to the new baby, and he would be involved in doctoring two or three generations of the same family. It was a very interesting time to compare with what we have in the County now.

I went to school at Keyport High School, and in those days I think only two or three out of a class of maybe fifty to seventy students ever went to college. There was no pressure to do that. In the spring and fall, most of the class was out farming and helping their families. I can remember my father being very involved in the life of these people, and we were, too. You just naturally were very close; he was a very dedicated physician. From this area, he went on to the Perth Amboy Hospital. Riverview, in those days, was very, very small.

Ms. Lenox: Where was Riverview?

Mrs. Swartz: Riverview was exactly where it is now, except it was a tiny building. I can't really give you statistics or facts of the size or the number of physicians it had. But being in Keyport, my father went to Perth Amboy, which was a very large hospital. So most of his connections were not in Monmouth County. Perth Amboy is where most of the large, center area was for him, as he was in the northern part of the County. He became very active in politics, within the medical profession, and he went on to be the President of the Middlesex County Medical Society. Then he was a founder of the New Jersey chapter of The Academy of General Practice, which was an organization of general practitioners. I think he was the first president of that organization in New Jersey.

During the summer, we would go to Asbury Park. We went to The Marine Grille, a restaurant that was at the very end of the boardwalk. Of course the Berkeley Carteret was there, also. In the summertime, after a very hot day, everyone went to the boardwalk in the evening, if they could, to "get the air!" All the women wore hats and gloves, and it was a very formal "airing." Today whatever you wear is fine, but in those days, there was an etiquette and a prescribed code, the women wearing their lovely dresses, hats, and gloves, and that was considered proper attire for an outing to the Asbury Park boardwalk. The Marine Grille was one of those lovely restaurants, which has long since gone, so life then was at a different pace than we have today.

The Parkway was just beginning in the early 1950s. We would take a drive down Highway 35, and because of the opening of the Parkway, people from cities close by would be coming to the shore. And that is the way the character of the County began to change. People who were in the cities found it much easier to come into the county with the Parkway, and large developments began to be built, one of the first called Fleetwood Park, on Highway 35. We used to go and look at the model homes. I can remember my father looking at the construction, from an older person's point of view, knocking on the walls, and saying, "They'll never sell." They just were not put up the way the old-fashioned houses were. (Laughter) This was how clairvoyant he was! Ten thousand houses later, he was proven to be wrong. And that's how the character of the whole County changed. First it was the Parkway, and then gradually the farmers sold off their land. People would come into my father's office, and he would have conversations with them. And these people just were not accustomed to having money like this, because they had just sold their farms. They got so much money from the sale of their land, and some of them had vests that they would put their money in. They would come in with all their money in their vest!

Ms. Lenox: You're kidding! Well to them, it must have been a lot of money.

Mrs. Swartz: It was a fortune! Some of the farmers are still there, but of course it's a different era. But that was the way it was. Most of the people that I knew, my generation, farmed in the spring and fall. A lot of them did graduate from high school, but a lot of them did not.

Ms. Lenox: Are you saying that in that time period people weren't really pressured to go to college because they were farmers? And it was across the board, both boys and girls?

Mrs. Swartz: In my graduating class, maybe ten percent went to college, maybe less. The few people who I knew who went to college were not the majority of the class. Maybe there were sixty to eighty students, but there wasn't a push for college. There were no college courses in my school in my educational curriculum. There was one curriculum. There was typing, and there were a few vocational courses. You had business courses. Today there is such a pressure for everyone to go to college, that maybe we will end up in a society with jobs that will never be filled by people that would be perfectly happy to have them. These are jobs like a stationary engineer, or someone who does janitorial or plumbing work, or someone who works in a restaurant. These are vocations that are very much a part of our society, and they are becoming so hard to fill. And that's why I think the immigrant population is coming in so rapidly, because many Americans don't want to do all these jobs. And I suppose it is going to add to the vibrancy of our country by having the immigrant population renew the energy of the country. There should be more emphasis on vocational and artistic training. Not everyone has to be a physician or a lawyer. In those days, it was different. The pressure was the farm, and people were needed to work on the farms, and

that was the way life was. And there was a business track also, and this was very good, too, to start your own business, your restaurant, or your little store. There were people who went into stationery stores and did very well. There were office suppliers, restaurant equipment work, and lots of things that people could do. But from my personal point of view, I would say maybe one percent went away to college.

Ms. Lenox: And what were you, as a girl, expected to do?

Mrs. Swartz: I was in a different environment because my father was a physician and my mother was educated and had gone to college. And so there was no question for me. I, being the oldest child, was very encouraged and expected by my parents to do what I wanted to do. And college was certainly something that I wanted to do, and if it led to any other involvement, that was fine. There wasn't the pressure to be something or to do something, but to be an educated woman.

Ms. Lenox: So you could make the decision yourself about what you wanted to do.

Mrs. Swartz: In fact, I was married the summer of my junior year in college. My husband is a physician, and he was going to Jefferson Medical School in Philadelphia when we met. I was going to Barnard College, which is the women's college of Columbia University, and so there was a little decision there. I had to decide if I was going to continue at Barnard, which was in New York, or was I going to move with him to Philadelphia. I can remember my husband saying I really didn't have to finish school since there wasn't any pressure to do so. And I can remember my parents saying I should finish school, especially since they were paying for it. And to answer your question about what was expected of me, they definitely would have been disappointed if I hadn't finished, and I would have too. So I took the train to Philadelphia, stayed three days, went to Bryn Mawr College for six months, and then I took the train to New York in six months so I could graduate from Barnard College.

Ms. Lenox: Good for you.

Mrs. Swartz: I was really set on finishing my education. There was no way that I was going to give it up, which I am pleased about. I used to take the train on Monday, and I would have a wonderful time because I used to know all the porters. I would immediately go into the dining car and have breakfast, and it was like traveling. And I would stay in New York until Thursday when I would take the train back. I lived in the dorms and finished my credits. And it was fun.

Ms. Lenox: It happens now so much more frequently, but back then I am sure it didn't happen a lot.

Mrs. Swartz: It was very odd, like I was this anomaly. First of all, there was the pressure to finish. I had gotten married, and in those days, that was your objective. (Laughter) So then I did this, and they couldn't understand it. I was young, and I was a few years ahead of myself. I went in to see the President because I was peculiar. They couldn't understand why I wouldn't stay at Bryn Mawr, or why I was leaving to come back to Barnard

Ms. Lenox: So you talked to the President of Bryn Mawr?

Mrs. Swartz: Yes, and her name was Helen Taft Manning. She was the sister of President Taft. She was pompous and a very official looking woman, and there I was, just a young lady. She told me they couldn't understand it, and they would accept me to graduate and to do a Master's program, which was quite a big deal. And I thought about it, but when I graduated, I wouldn't get my degree. I would get a certificate instead, because there was a two-year residency requirement. So I would have had to be on the campus for two years. In all my wisdom, I decided I had to have my degree if I graduated. So I told her I couldn't do that, which was scandalous. So I went on this adventure back and forth, but I did get my degree from Barnard, and it was exactly what I wanted. In retrospect, I should have done it the other way because I would have ended up with a Master's Degree. Then I continued on at Columbia for a Master's, but it was too hard commuting. Then I became pregnant, and it just became too hard to do. I had seven years to finish the program, and seven years goes very fast when you have a child. Then my husband graduated from school and did his residency in New York at Cornell, and then we moved back to Monmouth County. He opened his office in Middletown, because he is from this area, too, and that's where he wanted to practice. He grew up in Monmouth Beach and Shrewsbury, and his parents had a business in Middletown. He loved the shore area, and he just couldn't think of any other place where he wanted to live. So we came back to this area, and then it became even harder for me to go to New York. I used to go on the bus, because his practice was on Cherry Tree Farm Road in Middletown, just off Route 35, a bus route . That's where he opened his office. We bought a house there, and he had a home/office practice. The bus used to stop at six o'clock in the morning in front of the house, and I would get on and go to New York City to Teacher's College. I was taking a Master's in Educational Administration, and I would spend the day in New York doing this. Well, you can't do that for very long, so the seven years passed, and I had sixteen credits. Then I had another child, and it just became impossible. Actually, sometimes when you have it all laid out for you in an easy way, you don't understand it!

Ms. Lenox: You don't see it, you don't look ahead.

Mrs. Swartz: Yes, that is so true.

Ms. Lenox: I would like to talk about Asbury Park a little bit more. What it was like then and how you think it has changed and why? If I'm not mistaken, it was "the" place to go, is that right?

Mrs. Swartz: I was born in 1935, so you are talking about 1945 to 1950. I was out of the area through the 1950s. I think Asbury Park was never in the category of Atlantic City, because Atlantic City in those days was very elegant with all those lovely hotels. It was a premier resort. Asbury Park was not of that caliber, but it was one of the fine places on the shore. It was a destination for the summer. The whole shore area, and you can pick out a few of these most popular places, was really a destination for people in the cities. Asbury Park was one of the lovely areas, and the boardwalk was beautiful. I remember going to The Berkeley Carteret with my husband on New Year's Eve. We went there for a party, and it was so elegant. They had a wonderful trio that played for dancing. It was lovely, and the boardwalk had the peanut man and all the rides. It was something that children looked forward to. I can remember when my daughter had her tenth birthday, I took six or seven of her best friends there, and we had a party. We all took picnic lunches, and the kids went on all the rides. She is forty years old now, so we are talking thirty years ago. But it changed because I guess demographics changed. People had money and they stopped coming to the Jersey shore. They started traveling for their vacation. Instead of going to the shore and renting a house, they traveled somewhere else. And now it has come back. In one hundred years, it's almost like it was then, but on a different level. There is a different sophistication, population, involvement, and interest, but it has come back to such a degree. Not Asbury, but the Jersey shore in different ways. The beaches were beautiful, and then we had tremendous erosion and storms. People had a great deal of expendable income, so it wasn't fashionable just to go to Asbury Park for the summer. You started going to Bermuda, or the Islands, or you took a trip across the country, or to Disney World. There were all these different places, which people are still doing, but now they have come to appreciate the fact that this Jersey Shore is so lovely. And the beaches have been restored. Now I can't tell you what happened to Asbury, because everybody else knows what happened. And Long Branch was the same. Places like Spring Lake and Sea Girt, they did not go through that upheaval because I don't think they were so public. They were mostly private. I think a lot depended on tourists, and on the tourists driving the whole economy. When people had money, they went traveling, or gambling, or on bus trips, or down to Nashville. It just became so easy to travel with flying, and people became curious about doing other things. To do exactly what your family did before was maybe not the thing to do. You did other things. So I don't really know what happened, other than demographic changes, population changes, economic reasons, maybe the erosion of the shore, maybe the pollution of the ocean. Years ago, who thought about it? The ocean was the ocean. But we let it get to the point where it was not even bearable. And it has taken all these years to bring the ocean back, to bring the sand back, and to bring back the idea of the Jersey shore as it used to be. And I think that is what has changed.

Ms. Lenox: The Parkway was not around when you first got here, obviously. Do you remember exactly when it started happening?

Mrs. Swartz: Well, I was growing up, so I would think that it began in the 1940s. I would think that after the War.

Ms. Lenox: I think when major highways come into a community, it changes the community so much.

Mrs. Swartz: Monmouth County was a distance from the city, from North Jersey. I remember when we would leave in the evening to take a drive when my father was finished working or on a Saturday, we would drive to Asbury. It might have taken forty minutes or maybe an hour, because you went on all the small roads. But then as the different roads came through, it was quicker. Imagine coming from the city. But with the Parkway, it was a direct connection. And so it made a big difference. I don't know when the Turnpike was built, but it was the same thing. I think it was probably after the War. It, too, began to change the face of the county with increased population, building, construction, services, and even the expertise. People came here and could start businesses. We did lose our farms, but we had people coming in with skills that enriched the life of the County. Then we had more families, and then we needed more schools. And that's how I got involved with the library, because there was no facility to accommodate the population explosion and the kind of degree of education that I had wanted for my children.

Ms. Lenox: So let's go back to where you met your husband, and how you got started.

Mrs. Swartz: We were introduced because his family knew my family. It was very traditional. He had already finished his first year in medical school. As my father was a physician, we were introduced. He was going into his sophomore year in medical school, and I was going into my sophomore year in college. We dated that year, and then that summer we were married. He was then going into his junior year in medical school, and I was going into my senior year in college. And so we were married. He grew up in the county. Well, he grew up in the county, and his story is very interesting. He is third generation Monmouth County. His grandfather and his grandfather's brother came together to Ellis Island from White Russia, which is Lithuania. When they came through Ellis Island, they had to give their names and data, etc. The two brothers somehow were taken by different people, so one brother's name is Schwarz. It's spelled like the car dealer in Red Bank, and that is a branch of the family, but they spelled it with the "sch." When my husband's grandfather came through, they spelled it Swartz. So even though it's the same family, there are two different spellings. The brother who was in Red Bank was Lou Schwarz. He started with a little horse and buggy, and he had notions and things. He would go around and sell them, and that is the way he started. Incidentally, the two brothers came

through at the same time as the grandfather of Michael Eisner, who is now the CEO of Walt Disney. He had a little horse and buggy too, but he was selling millinery and notions. That's how he started; the whole Galleria in Red Bank was once the Eisner factory. In World War I, Eisner made a fortune making uniforms for the soldiers. So the one brother had this little horse and buggy, and he went around selling household things, notions, or knickknacks. And then from that came a little antique store in Red Bank. And then, about the time that Eisner went on to his factory, my husband's grandfather went to Highlands. Highlands in those days was a kind of fishing town and shore resort. All the ferries came there from New York at the turn of that century, because it was in the late 1800s. We have tried to pin it down, but it was probably 1860, 1870, or 1880. The ferries were coming to bring people from New York. So he went to Highlands and started a little store that sold souvenirs for the tourists, notions, and he also had a soda fountain. It was like a little variety store. One of the people who came over the summer was a young lady, and they eventually were married. Then they lived in Highlands. My husband's name is Harry, and his grandfather's name was also Harry. Gradually Harry Swartz bought a lot of the property in Highlands, so he became the big landowner in Highlands. He had stores on three corners: one was an A&P, one was a diner, and one was his store. The tourists would come in the summer for fishing and clamming equipment, etc. My husband's father was born in the area, and he eventually was involved with real estate and had a furniture store in Middletown. My husband was brought up in Middletown, and he lived on Tindall Road, but where he lived is no longer there. He went to Leonardo School, and there was no Middletown High School at that time. It was just Leonardo Grammar School, which is now an intermediate school. He said that he was the first one who ever went on to become a doctor from that little school. He was born in 1931. So my husband is third generation, and our children are fourth generation Monmouth County residents. We have a son who is a physician practicing with my husband, and he has a son. So our grandchildren who live here are fifth generation Monmouth County residents. We are very proud of that.

Ms. Lenox: Absolutely, that's fantastic.

Mrs. Swartz: We have been involved in the history of Monmouth County for a very long time.

Ms. Lenox: You got married and settled in a house, which is also an office.

Mrs. Swartz: After my husband did his internship in the city, he decided he was going to practice in Middletown. The house/office was on Cherry Tree Farm Road; the office was downstairs, and we lived upstairs. We lived there about seven years. He was trained to be an internist, but he decided he liked every part of medicine: he wanted to deliver babies and be involved as a family doctor, so he did an extra year of training. He was beginning his very busy practice of delivering babies and being involved in the community, and he became the

doctor for the towns around Middletown. He has been in practice for forty-two years, which is a long time. The years really add up, and we have been very sedentary. We have lived here in Rumson and have not moved in ten years.

Ms. Lenox: What made you come back to this area?

Mrs. Swartz: My husband wanted to be in Middletown. He loved to sail and fish, and we had friends here. The school system in Rumson was very good. I particularly liked the community, and we had looked in a lot in different areas. We actually looked on Navesink River Road, which is in Middletown. But the houses were very, very large old houses. We decided that Rumson seemed to offer the kind of life that we liked. And we have been very happy here; it has worked out beautifully. My children really thrived, and the school system was wonderful. Our daughter went through the whole school system, and our oldest boy went through the system until ninth grade. Then he went to Choate, which is a boarding school in Connecticut. Our youngest boy went to Rumson Country Day, and then he went off to Choate. But our daughter took advantage of the whole school system, and she was very happy and is still connected to friends in the area and comes back to visit. One son is a physician and stayed in Monmouth County, and the other two do not live in the area. But they do come back and maintain connections.

Ms. Lenox: Has Rumson changed much within the timeframe that you have been here?

Mrs. Swartz: I think Rumson has always had the same character. When we bought this piece of property, it was part of a very large estate. It had been bought by someone before us. It had been the Shiff Estate. Shiff was of the caliber of a Carnegie. Shiff was one of the prominent financiers of the century, and his estate encompassed I don't know how many acres. We have about four acres here, and when we bought this, it was part of thirty-two acres. The properties of all of the old estates have been pretty much divided, and the zoning here in different areas is different, so that some parcels are smaller than others. But I think that is what has really changed. At the turn of the century there were these huge estates of multimillionaires, financiers, and that environment went all through Monmouth Beach. There were the large homes in Monmouth Beach, too. In fact my husband's family had a summer house in Monmouth Beach. But when they lived there, there were houses on the other side of the seawall. The beach was so wide, and the seawall was there, and then you had Ocean Avenue. There were homes on the other side of the seawall, before all the erosion. So that was the character of the area: it was really like a play area for very well-to-do people. And then you had Asbury Park with all the rides, and the entertainment, which was for everyone. But that's the way it was, depending on your area.

Ms. Lenox: I love this area.

Mrs. Swartz: So we loved it, and we decided it was where we wanted to be. We thought the school system was excellent, and it worked out that way. And it became a very lovely life for us, and my husband is still in Middletown and still practices exactly where he opened his office.

Ms. Lenox: That's unique.

Mrs. Swartz: And our son is with him, and they do this together. But as we approach this century, it is much different. Everything has changed. The way Rumson has changed has been the dividing of the large estates, but the character of the town has been maintained. I think it is governed well, and people are very conscious of maintaining a certain standard of service and education. There has been a great stability here. But it does change, and you look around and see the old houses being demolished. Depending on the economics, there are huge houses being erected or renovated.

Ms. Lenox: But it is nice to know what the character is aesthetically.

Mrs. Swartz: I think the character of the town has been carefully maintained. I think there has been a blending. There have been new people moving in and new energy. Our children are long since gone like the children of other parents our age, and so many people sold their homes and moved away or retired. And then younger people have come in with children, and now they are expanding the school. There is great resistance to that, as there is in every community, because of the taxes. And for many years, there were a lot of older people that predominated and didn't want an increase in the school system because they didn't need it. They didn't want to pay for it, but they were still part of the community. But this has changed now. These older people have sold their homes because of economics, health or age, and it's a new generation living here. And I think it's very interesting. New life comes in, but as you look around, Rumson is still maintained well and beautifully, but it is different. Nothing stays the same.

Ms. Lenox: I want to start talking about how you have established your profession and how you define yourself. What did you do after you graduated from Barnard?

Mrs. Swartz: I think it was different then. I think back then education was not really a driving force. It was very nice, but you had to be very committed. And maybe that is scandalous to say, but I do think that it was on the cusp of women pushing forward. Of course Barnard has always been a women's college. It always encouraged women to succeed, excel, and try to reach their potential. If you weren't really interested in that, you wouldn't be drawn to that kind of a college. There were many other ways you could go to college and get your degree, and still have a different perspective. But I was oriented toward achievement, really, and pushing yourself into a career. I think even today, more

women who graduate from Barnard go on to get their Ph.D and become professional women than women from any other school. That even includes schools like Stanford, Cornell, UCLA. The women's colleges were maybe always that way. But Barnard was really attuned to excellence. Not that I was definitely that way, because I don't even know why I was drawn to that school. I did like Bryn Mawr, and I think I was the only person ever from Keyport High School who ever aspired to any kind of a college at that time.

When I was married and began to have children, my husband was very busy, and I did have childcare. I was able to do a lot of what I wanted. I had to be there for my children, and I was very interested in that, but I also had a lot of free time because my husband was very busy. He was in a profession, and not even in a specialty in that profession, but he was involved in an all-consuming passion. He really loves what he does, and he wasn't a nine-to-five person. So there were many evenings we didn't have a traditional dinner hour, and we didn't have the traditional time that father came home like most families did, and they would all sit around the dinner table and discuss their day. Or maybe that's not even the norm, maybe that's a Norman Rockwell image that nobody really has. So I had a lot of time to figure out, which I really didn't do consciously, what interesting things I wanted to do. In those days, volunteerism and community interests were...well I can't say more important than today, because now women have careers, pressures, families, and so much to do. And I don't know how they accomplish it all; it's a miracle that they are even able to do half what they do. I think women have been sold a bill of goods that they are supposed to be able to do everything, and they try to do too much. But in those days, I had the luxury of being able to do community and volunteer work. I could have gone back and gotten my degree at that time, even though I had little children, but it was a little too hard for me. And I didn't want to go to school locally because in my mind I had to go back to where I started. And that might have been an interesting thing to do, too. I was involved in the Barnard Club. They formed a Barnard Club in I guess the early 1960s, and I was invited to come. I did, and I found it fascinating. There were women from every decade, and there was a woman from Red Bank whose name was Irma Von Glan. She was a maiden lady, and she taught Latin, and she had taught my husband in school. I sat next to her, and I was probably in my early twenties, and this lady was "ancient" as far as I was concerned. They had just shot the Mercury Space Launch, or one of the first space launches, and Armstrong was coming down. Wasn't that the Mercury?

Ms. Lenox: Where he just went up in space? Right.

Mrs. Swartz: The ship that they were going to pick him up on was called the Corsage. I was sitting next to this lady, and I don't know how old she was. And she said to me, "Dearie, I remember the first Corsage. This battleship wasn't the first one. And that was the Spanish American War." And when she said that to me, I thought I would never hear this type of thing any place else.

Ms. Lenox: How did you decide to become a volunteer and become part of the community?

Mrs. Swartz: Well, it wasn't that I decided, it was just the avenue that was open. I wasn't going to have a career per se, because I really didn't have any idea of what I would do. I had young children, and our son was probably four or five years old, and the second child was probably born by that time. Or maybe we had all three children by that time. In those days, your pressure wasn't career. When you were home, you were a stay-at-home mom, as they call it today. Even though I did have help that could relieve me, pretty much that was what you did unless you had great pressure and training to become a career-oriented person. And I didn't. So being at home and very interested in my children and their educational progress and growth, the avenue to doing something outside of the home was in the volunteer capacity. Without much thinking about it, I got into that track. So I did go to this Barnard Club, and I did meet very interesting women.

Ms. Lenox: Was this located in New York?

Mrs. Swartz: No, it is in Monmouth County. Some of the older ladies who had been here for years decided it would be nice to have a local Barnard Club, because there are college clubs all over the country and all over the world. So the meetings were very lovely and socially done well with grace and charm in someone's lovely home. I was young and very impressed with these very interesting women who were educated, well-read, and people I normally didn't come across. I was a young mother, and to me these were very interesting women. At that time The AAUW (American Association of University Women) was doing a study of the educational facilities in the County and conducting a survey. This was in the early 1960s and the population was beginning to change. The Parkway was already having an impact, already the County face was changing, the fabric of life was changing. There were these hundreds of homes around, and young populations in all the areas where there hadn't been this population before. The population was growing by tremendous amounts, beyond anyone's expectations. Monmouth County was being discovered for the seashore and all its other different attributes. So the AAUW decided they were going to see what was available educationally. It was during the Johnson era, and Johnson as President had all this initiative for Head Start and monies to come in for Title 2 to improve education and schools. This was because of this change after the War and the way the country had come out of the War. And it was a new time. Thinking that this money would be available, you had to plan what you would do with it. AAUW thought about this ahead of time. They wrote letters to different organizations, and I don't know how many were approached. But there were an awful lot of university women, different college clubs, church groups, and you name it. And the Barnard Club got one of these letters. They said they would like to have a volunteer, and wondered if anyone was interested in serving on this committee to proceed with whatever study they were doing about educational resources in the County. And so I volunteered. Well, nobody else was going to

volunteer, and there wasn't any competition, so I was it. I went and joined this committee, and I found it fascinating. I got involved with these women who were professionally oriented, or they seemed to know what they were doing, but they were volunteers also. I got involved in this, and the results of the study showed that education definitely needed to be encouraged, it needed money and support. But the backbone, which was the libraries, was very inferior. They would need a great deal of effort, industry, resources, attention, and whatever you want to call it. The Monmouth County Library was in existence, but in 1961 it was really just a little house in Freehold that had a collection, and it had mostly bookmobile stops. The bookmobile went around the County, and the librarians changed the collection in schools twice a year. The County Library was a resource for the schools and the bookmobiles also came into some member communities to change their collections. The County Library was begun in 1922. It was to bring library services to the rural areas and also to serve communities that wanted to support it. There were lots of communities that wanted to support the County system, but there were some that didn't. You wouldn't call them cities, but maybe you would call them urban centers. They felt they had their own libraries and didn't need this rural delivery service. Places like Middletown, Red Bank, Long Branch, Asbury Park, and Neptune felt they didn't need to be part of this system. So you had areas that were kind of exempt from the system and didn't pay taxes or anything for the libraries, and then you had towns that felt they could enjoy having the extra benefit of belonging to a larger library system. Those towns were called the members, and included Rumson, Fair Haven, Little Silver, Hazlet, and a number of other towns. And the rest were bookmobile stops. There were no branch libraries like Hazlet, Holmdel, Colts Neck, or Marlboro. Places like that were only bookmobile stops. The AAUW study proved that this was a problem. We had a resource, we had a network, we had a structure, but we had nothing else. With that conclusion, the study ended. It was then decided by some of us that maybe we should form a Friends of the Monmouth County Library System, and we should try to seek monies and resources to bolster this system. After all, Monmouth County was going to have all these children coming in, and if students had to do a project, they had to go either to Rutgers or Princeton. There was no resource library in this county. So it was very interesting. We began this organization, and we went out and spoke everywhere. We spoke to church groups, the Elks, at the train stations, and everywhere to enlist the support from the Board of Freeholders to build a new library and get monies from Title 2. Libraries traditionally get the least amount, or the last of the monies after everything else. But our campaign was very successful. Joe Irwin was the Chairman of the Board of Freeholders then, and I remember going to see him. We didn't want the library built in Freehold, where the collection was housed, because the study showed that the population would have the most growth in the area around Shrewsbury first. Furthermore, the Borough of Freehold was not a member of the system either; it was one of these exempt areas. The study showed that the center of population was going to be in the eastern part of the county. Now it is in the western part, but demographics indicated that by the 1980s, it was going to be in the Shrewsbury area. So we wanted a library built

there first. I remember Joe calling me in. He told me that there was a position on the Board of the Monmouth County Library. This is a Freeholder appointment for five years. As I had been so active with the Friends that he invited me to consider this appointment. There was an editorial in the Register that said I should get that position. I had no campaign, no political base or anything like that, but I was very active, and I was responsible for having the decision made by the Board of Chosen Freeholders to build two libraries. I was President of the Friends, and I was their driving force to become a public force and to go out and seek funds to support and bolster this library system. I had young children, and I was very interested in education, and very driven to make sure that my children would have the best that life could offer. If they were going to go through a public system, I wanted to see if we could get it enhanced. I then went to see the Director of the Board of Freeholders, and he told me they were going to make the decision about two libraries. Then someone resigned from the Monmouth County Library Commission, which is the advisory body for the Monmouth County Library. It had five members, although currently it has seven members. When the position came available, there was a great swell of public support and an even an editorial in the paper that said I should get this position because I had done so much to advance the interest of the library. And I did. I was appointed to this unexpired term in 1968.



Monmouth County Library Commission, 2001. Seated from left: Secretary Frank Gibson, Chairwoman Renee Swartz, Treasurer Frank Walsh. Standing from left: director Kenneth Sheinbaum, library commissioners Barbara Silkworth and Grace Abromov, and assistant library director Margaret Field.

Ms. Lenox: Were there any other women on the Library Commission?

Mrs. Swartz: No. In 1968, it was a whole different thing for women to serve in this way.

Ms. Lenox: So the first woman on the board was you.

Mrs. Swartz: Right, and for many years I was the only one. Then it became not fashionable for there to be only one only woman, and another woman was appointed. But it has been a mostly male-oriented board, as most boards are. I have been on the board since 1968 and I have been chairman since 1976. Since that time, we have built the twelve branches. Many bookmobile stops became branches. So we have had a tremendous surge of building.

Ms. Lenox: Which were the first two?

Mrs. Swartz: The first library to be built was the Eastern Branch on Route 35 in Shrewsbury. This is the largest of all of our branches. That is almost like the jewel in our crown. It's one of the finest reference libraries in the state. There is nothing to compare to it. The other libraries, the members, are like town municipal libraries. We have Headquarters and eleven branches, which used to be bookmobile stops. In all we have seventeen member libraries and forty member municipalities in the entire system. The thirteen exempts that didn't want to be part of the system are still that way. When you are a resident of a member community, you pay a County tax which enables you to use all the libraries in Monmouth County Library System for free. If you live in any of the exempt towns, you have to pay fifty dollars to get a library card to borrow from the library. If you just use the facilities in the system, it's all free. So it went from the study of AAUW, to getting involved, to forming the Friends, to getting on the Board of the Monmouth County Library, and then from there we formed the first branch system in the state. Our system was so excellent, and we were so innovative, and we did so many things. The branch system became the model. Then we had free concerts, and they became a model. We also have materials in Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and other languages.



**Renee Swartz,
president of the
Association of New
Jersey Library
Commissioners at
Eastern Branch, 1973**

Ms. Lenox: And you have established that? You sat around and thought you needed to do this now, and then something else after that?

Mrs. Swartz: It kind of evolves. You have a director who is responsible for running the library and the personnel/staff and most of the programming. But every once in awhile, we get an idea, and we say we would like to try this or that. And through the years, this is how it has happened. Sometimes the director brings us an idea and we decide to go with it. Other times we are sitting around and someone has read about something that was done somewhere else, and we decide we would like to try it here. And then we will do a pilot project. For years we had History Week and Jazz Week, which we still have. We now are very interested in poetry, and we are interested in art. So it goes through different stages, and we continually try to make it more vibrant. But it also happens that we have staff people that we hope have ideas and are creative. We have the director and the senior administration, and we have things going on around the country. And we know we are the best library in the State of New Jersey. We hear this all the time. All this has propelled me on to national committees, and I was asked if I wanted to serve on the State Board which is a five-year appointment by the Governor. I think it was in the early 1980s that I was appointed to my first term. Now I have served through four governors, and I have been on the board since the 1980. I have been Chairman of the State Board since 1986. And I have tremendous interest on a state level, because that board

is over all the libraries in the state. I have gotten involved with the School Media Association, the New Jersey Library Association. If I have an idea, I bring it up, and it somehow gets going. I go to different committees and I bring in ideas. You know, if you speak up and sound halfway intelligent, they ask you to do a job. And if you do that job well and bring some spirit and enthusiasm to it, the next thing you know you are in charge. I have also been involved at Rutgers.

Ms. Lenox: That is where I went to school.

Mrs. Swartz: I like being involved there. I have been Chairman of the Board of Rutgers Library School probably for twenty years. All through the interim, I maintain my interest at Barnard. I was asked to be on different committees there, and I became President of the Barnard Club in Monmouth County. Then I was asked to come to the school because we ran very interesting functions and began to have different events with other college clubs. Then I became involved at Barnard College and for years served on different committees, and then I became the President of the Alumni Association at Barnard College. It is worldwide with maybe 30,000 alumnae. I traveled and had very interesting times all through the country.

Ms. Lenox: And all the while doing all the stuff at the library.

Mrs. Swartz: Right, at the same time. It was kind of like different stages and phases. Then they had a Library White House Conference in 1979. There never had been one on libraries before. The library profession wanted to discuss libraries, their impact, and their partnership with education. We give money to education, but not much to libraries. So how does that work out? So I became involved. I was elected to chair the delegation from New Jersey to Washington. There were sixteen people that went in 1979. It was by formula how many state senators and congressmen you had, so each state had the same representation at this national conference as you did in the government. They went through every group...ethnic, religious, social, and even the gray panthers. It was a formula where you had to have someone nominated. Out of all these nominations, there was a Governor's Conference, and it came down to sixteen people in the state. Those people represented the state, and they had been filtered through many different screenings to make sure you had all the people represented like the handicapped, the disadvantaged, the inner city, the well-to-do, etc. So I chaired that delegation in 1979, and then there was another White House Conference in 1991. And I was the only person in the country who came back to the 1991 White House Conference. I was a chairman of the delegation, and it was entirely different people with an entirely different perspective. So I have been in it a long time. And I have loved it. And it has all come together, though there was no conscious design. It was just an interest of mine, and I was vocal and visible. I got invited to different places to participate, and because I did, I have been involved in many interesting things with faculty such as designing curriculum at Rutgers, etc. I represent the lay public. I am not a librarian, I am not

a professionally library-trained person, but I bring in the perspective of you and me as citizens. And from that point of view, I think of what would be the best thing to happen given our funding. I really epitomize the volunteer sector.

Ms. Lenox: And this is all volunteer, is that correct?

Mrs. Swartz: Absolutely! I have never been paid for anything. When I do attend a conference, I am reimbursed by the county or state, as any employee would be who was sent to a conference. But other than that, I do not get any compensation. I go the State Board meetings and I get travel expenses. I get nine dollars when I travel to a State Board meeting in Trenton. (Laughter) And that's not going to feed you very much. I have had much criticism all my life because all my work has been done on a volunteer basis. This criticism occurs especially as women have come into the mainstream and have had important positions. Obviously my work is all administration and planning and a process of visioning where you would like to see things happen and develop. But people are always saying I could have gotten paid so much money or been this or that, etc. Other women would say I was just wasting my time and should be working out there and setting an example for others. I would feel bad when I got home, and I would think about all these women retiring and getting their teeth, their glasses, and their healthcare all paid for. And it would have been nice to have thought about that, but those things never entered my mind.

Ms. Lenox: It is interesting that someone said you should have set a great example, but you did set an incredible example for volunteerism! And it shows what you can accomplish by just being somebody who is interested. It's amazing!

Mrs. Swartz: It comes around now, when you look at society. You see how little time and energy there is, and what is left for people to do like what I have done. In my traveling around the country and the state, it has been recognized that I kind of have a vision for what is the correct thing to do. And I am very pleased about that.

Ms. Lenox: And you have received accolades. You just got one last week when you went to Chicago.

Mrs. Swartz: And through the years I have been rewarded. I got the Columbia Medal for being an outstanding alumna. I am the only person in the state who received the Trustee of the Year award twice from the New Jersey Library Association. I received it in 1999, and I had received it in 1980.

Ms. Lenox: Yours has been and continues to be an extremely productive life, and I'd like to thank you again for sharing it with us.