

AVERY FISHER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Philip Avery Kirschner

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Philip Avery Kirschner conducted by Interviewer Gerry Albarelli. This interview is part of the Avery Fisher Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

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Session #1

Interviewee: Philip Avery Kirschner

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Gerry Albarelli

Date: May 20, 2019

Albarelli: Okay. So, if you would start by saying your name, where and when you were born, and just tell me a little bit about your early life—

Kirschner: [00:00:10] How early? My name is Philip Avery Kirschner. I was born in July 1980, so I'm thirty-eight now. I grew up born and raised in New York City. I've been here my entire life minus four years in school and a year in London. My mother is Nancy Fisher, who is Avery's daughter.

Albarelli: So, tell me some of your early memories as far back as you want to go.

Kirschner: Of Avery?

Albarelli: Of your own, because, as I said, this is kind of like a spoken autobiography, and we'll put your memories of Avery in that context. It tells posterity, for one thing, who's talking. It makes it more interestingly subjective, I think.

Kirschner: [00:01:11] Yes. I guess my earliest memories, and it's evident not like being a New York City kid. I joke now with my five-year-old son. A city kid is both a rare thing and something there should be millions of. But, generally speaking, after high school, having people

being like, oh wow, that's so unusual, you never meet anybody from New York City, I am on my mother and grandfather's side actually the fifth generation of our family that has been in New York City. So, most of my memories are of that.

I grew up in the East Side in three different places, mostly one on Ninetieth and Park, but have pretty visceral memories of playgrounds all over the East Side and what they were like, what it felt like to be on the streets here. And I know from my mother I used to be easily calmed being parked in front of construction sites as a kid, and the sights and sounds and noise of the city and looking out from our apartment over buildings. That's some of the earliest things that I can remember. Even just being in an apartment building, the elevator experience, the hall full of doors, which actually—it's funny—is a very strong part of my memory as a kid. But we moved from an apartment before I was five, where we were on a multi-door floor, to one where my parents are now that has basically just their door.

So, yes, apartment life, I'd say, apartment and cityscape life, and always a sense of family, I think, just because my family was all here. People who grow up in New York, for the most part, don't go very far. There was a little faction from my dad's side that is in New Jersey. But it made it very easy, generally speaking, to get groups together, or that there was enough of a cadence that I was pretty close to everybody. And also, a sense through my mom, and again, starting now as a parent, I have a child going into kindergarten next year where I went, which is also where she went.

Albarelli: Which was where?

Kirschner: [00:03:39] Ethical, Ethical Culture. She didn't go until sixth grade, but the same elementary and high school system where she went, whereas it turns out as did my wife, her sister, my sister. I've got a niece and nephew there still now. So, there's a sense of continuity and belonging here, was a pretty visceral thing for me as a kid.

Albarelli: What are some of your early—tell me about your mother and father.

Kirschner: [00:04:09] My mom, Nancy, is a woman who sort of shows love by giving of her time and energy and connections and food, is very much a giving and very social person. I got a strong sense of, I think, wanting to have an impact on the community and others, both friend circles but also nonprofits from her, when I was very young. Right before I was born, she helped found a nonprofit for family and social services called SCAN [Supportive Children's Advocacy Network]. She moved away from it more and more actively as I was growing up—she was a stay-at-home mom to me and my sister—but I still remember being very proud of her non-profit work. I remember going to SCAN's office and events and feeling that part of her calendar throughout the year were things related to this organization that I knew she had started.

My mom was also very involved then also at the Ninety-Second Street Y [Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association] where I went to nursery school because her mother was very involved at the Ninety-Second Street Y when she was in school there. She was very present in my life because she did not work full-time, but was always constantly volunteering for something. And that continues to this day. As you know, there was a huge period of her life

doing oral history interviews for holocaust survivors and then briefly for nine/eleven [September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks], volunteering at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, where she is now on the board. She's also involved with Lincoln Center, continues to be involved with the Y, has been very involved with all of my schools, is always filling her time either directly volunteering for someone or volunteering her time both socially and philanthropically through friends—museums, you name it. And I'm endlessly impressed by that.

My father, for all intents and purposes, is an attorney still at heart. He has moved on from practicing law but was a, in my mind as a child, hundred years attorney at several large firms. So, my memory of him growing up, he was not around as much during the week, leaving as early as I was up and coming back late. But I have very fond memories of going to his office, which was a very different experience—the oak and the stairs and the secretaries and everything that makes up a traditional law firm office, and was much more involved with my sister and I on the weekend, very involved with teaching me. He was an athlete growing up, wanted to make that part of my life in various leagues and teaching me how to play everything, taking me to my first games in the city.

And then, the only other interesting part of my childhood, from when I was two, probably, or thereabouts, they bought a house in Westchester where they, to this day, have a house. A different house, but I always had relatively regular access before and after teenager-hood, when I didn't care for it, to green space outside of the city. So, as much as I am a product of the concrete jungle, I appreciate the ability to get away. One of those houses was my grandparents' house in

Connecticut, not as frequent as the one that was my parents' and also closer, but that was something that was important to them to be able to step away, in spite of also being city kids.

Albarelli: Tell me a memory or an anecdote about your mother—early story, I guess—that would sort of convey what you just said about her, any of the general statements that you just made about her, just a story that would convey her character.

Kirschner: [00:08:44] She could probably to this day tell you the location, what I wore, who made the cake, what the cake looked like, and what activities took place at the first ten or more of my birthday parties, because she was personally involved. In my second birthday party, she dressed up, very famously in my family, as Big Bird, in the whole outfit, and was very friendly, and still to this day, with one or two women who were bakers or owned a bakery in this city. I mentioned giving through food, either taking pride in having things, baking them herself, having them baked very bespoke for me, for my sister, and even now with my sons, making a special journey to a certain restaurant that may be owned by a friend, where they get special treatment, special snacks and feel like they belong in that context of food—maybe a fairly stereotypical Jewish mother kind of thing.

But yes, the birthday parties, and has and keeps all of the photos from all of that. She's an incredible collector, both of her own and has gone through different stages of different variations of antiques and collectibles that she's kept. But that also has made her very good at holding onto things from our childhood. Drawings, books, toys, many of which are coming back around to my sons. That's a bit of a trend, the fact that I'm seeing now her saying, again, "Here's a book. Let

me read to you,” to my son, “this book, which I used to read to your father, and was given to me by such-and-such a person for such-and-such a birthday. Let me take a photo,” or asking me or my wife,” Take a picture of me reading this book to your son so that I can email it to my friend who gave it to me thirty years ago, who she still remembers gave me the book. That is the way her brain works and is sort of the best version of it, I think.

Albarelli: Other food memories? Talk to me more about food.

Kirschner: [00:11:14] Baking, she’s a baker. I love, probably naturally but maybe as a result, anything baked and breakfast foods—pancakes, waffles, cakes, cookies, breads, all of it, carbs generally. I found one of those pictures of my eighth, ninth, tenth birthday, somewhere in there, of a cake that—oh no, it must have been later. Fourteen, fifteen, maybe. It was a cake that had been decorated to look like a Web site, which is a very specific thing—I have a very technical background. I think it was partly a nod to that. But of all the words that were on it to indicate various interests of mine, one of them was literally just the word “carbs.” And I asked her about it later in life when seeing the photo in one of her archives. I said, why that? And she basically challenged me. Are you telling me that carbs haven’t always been one of your favorite things—breads, cookies, cakes and breakfast foods? And she’s right. Again, that continues to this day. Nothing makes her more happy than being able to make some kind of dessert or breakfast food for, now, my kids and my sister’s kids. That is the ultimate activity for her these days.

Albarelli: How about your sister? Tell me a little bit about your sister.



Kirschner: [00:12:47] So, I have two older half-siblings who are eleven and fourteen years older than me from my dad's first marriage, so less relevant, I think, to this story. But just psychologically, I didn't really grow up with them as much. We were very close, especially more as adults. But I am an older sibling. I am the oldest sibling, mentally. So, Diana, my sister, is three years, nine months or so younger than me. We are very close. We were very close growing up. I have nothing but fond memories of our collective childhood. I think I've always been very protective of her. And she reveled in having kind of a big brother to learn things from. I think it taught her a lot, made her very strong-willed in knowing how to get what she wants, because when you have an older brother it's a hard thing.

My grandmother's—Avery's wife—"favorite granddaughter" was always her favorite thing to say. Hi Nana, it's your favorite granddaughter. She was also the only granddaughter. That's part of the joke. But, I think it was a delight. My mom loved having a little girl. My grandmother loved having a granddaughter around. She was the only one, has always been extremely strong-willed and, I'd argue, maybe a little bit more difficult of a childhood, wanting more ahead of where her age was. I think it was probably frustrating to see a sibling getting more access to just freedom of roaming around the city, which is a tough thing in the city when you're a girl and tough in the city.

I remember telling her when I was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, somewhere in there, just saying I get a sense that you're really pushing the limits of the freedom that you should have. And I know that sucks. But I'm sorry, putting myself in a parent's shoe, I am a rather large, even then, very tall boy walking around the city. And, it can be less safe for girls running around. So, I

understand why they want to hold you back. But that made it very, hard, I think, to be the younger sibling and constantly wanting to move forward.

Yes, very different interests between the two of us. She stayed connected to sports a lot longer than I did professionally—skating, tennis, skiing, eventually went on to be a ski instructor before going to medical school, is now a pediatric intensive care physician, God bless her, something I could never stipulate doing, has left the city for just kind of thirty minutes north, which is very sad. We miss her here, but still very close and get to see them frequently.

Albarelli: How about extended family, including, of course, your grandfather? But start with others.

Kirschner: [00:16:05] My parents are each one of three, and with very little exception everybody's got two kids all up and around. So, there's lots of pairs of two, the odd one or the odd three but lots of twos. And all were here growing up. My dad's two siblings, a brother and a sister, had five kids between them, lived in New Jersey. We saw them frequently. My mom's brother has two here. And I guess the person that we saw the least of growing up was my mom's sister Barbara, who's older, left the country and has been living in France for as long as I can remember, also got married and had a kid very young, the oldest of Avery and Janet's five grandkids, my cousin Christopher, who is fifty or thereabouts now, so also wasn't really a kid from my memory. He was at all the family functions but also wasn't living in the city and hasn't been living around here. So other than Barbara and Christopher, everybody else was around. Cousins on my dad's side much closer to my age. On my mom's side, her brother Chip is

younger, and therefore his kids are younger. I think the oldest of the two is ten years younger than me.

But fond memories all around. I saw Chip's kids the most because they were in the city. They grew up four blocks from where we did. And having two boys, me being the older cousin, and the two of them fairly engineering-oriented, were very fond of me, I think, because I had a very similar technical path and was in high school and college learning and advancing my skills when they were just kind of coming up and still finding that they were very interested in tech, spent a lot of time.

That is a relevant piece of information. I have always been, and will likely continue to be, the technical support line for my entire extended friends and family network, my family in particular. Mother, father, not necessarily my grandparents directly so much as work I did do for them as a teenager for their bookkeeper. My aunts, uncles, everybody has at some point had me sitting down in their house as a teenager fixing, setting up, teaching something. Computers came very naturally to me, and I've always been that guy in my family.

Albarelli: What are some early memories of computers?

Kirschner: [00:19:16] First official exposure was in fourth grade. Learned to type, logo, old school, Apple computers. Somewhere in there, and I don't remember the genesis of it, I got introduced, or my parents must have gotten introduced, to someone who had probably helped a friend set up a computer or something in their house. When they got me a computer in our house

around the same time—fourth grade, fifth grade, sixth, maybe, somewhere in elementary school—so that would have been 1990, '91, right before the moment of the internet, largely, the public internet. But there were a lot of early-day dialup systems and things that I learned about from this guy—his name is Larry—who ran his own little computer technical support practice. And he got a computer set up in our house and got me onto the early days online stuff very fast. And I kind of took it from there.

Every birthday I just wanted some other piece of equipment that I had never played with before, some piece of software I'd never played with before, and always found that, had I—if I had more than a day or two of exposure to something and the ability to sit there and try it, I would likely never forget how to do it from that point forward. That led to a fairly lucrative side business in high school of charging people to have me go and help them, a lot of my friends, like parents, friends and family, which led to internships and desktop support and technology, eventually a computer science degree and the beginning of my career in information technology.

I recently, as part of the admissions process for my son to go back to Ethical where I went, saw the computer lab teacher who was there when I was in fourth grade in the hallway who recognized me, and tried as much as I could to impress upon her, I'm like, you started all this, I think, because it certainly wasn't my parents, although I think the technical and engineering prowess was in the family in the form of Avery. He was the only other person in the extended web that had any demonstrable expertise in some kind of engineering science. Computers weren't as prevalent at a personal level.

Albarelli: So now tell me some of your early memories of him, of Avery.

Kirschner: [00:22:05] Avery and Janet, I saw them frequently. They were very active parts. My mom, by the time I was five, was then living, went from 1185 Park Avenue to 1120 Park Avenue, so less than four blocks from where the apple fell, so to speak, with Avery and Janet still living in the apartment where she lived in that building. So we saw them all the time. They are now known in everybody's memory as Nana and Boopa because I could not say Grandma and Grandpa, and that's how it came out from me. I don't know what Christopher called them when he was growing up, but I christened them Nana and Boopa, so that stuck.

My memory, Avery was always incredibly soft-spoken. His demeanor was very soft-spoken. He was never as effusive as my mother is, and she gets that a bit from her mother, who was the warm, welcoming, hugging grandmother. He felt more formal but no less loving or interested in us and in teaching and showing. But it was much more quiet, passive, and funny. He wouldn't be goofy explicitly, whereas my grandmother would. It's funny. I just told my wife this the other day. My mom plays "last touch" or "gotcha last" with my older son, basically just "tag," but the idea of saying when you're not paying attention, I call "gotcha last". And my wife didn't actually realize that she got that because Avery used to do that to me.

And that was the game in his house whenever we were there for some extended period of time. Whatever was happening, if it was a family dinner or we were there for some, wherever we had come there was this other show going on between him and me of constantly who could, without the other knowing, tag within the requisite few-minute grace period of not tagging them back,

being like, you got me [sighs]—frustrating. I'll get you back. And that was just something he did with me. He didn't do that with my sister. It was like a special game for the two of us. But that was as far as he would go in terms of overtly being like a silly grandparent. My grandma would more like play, make silly noises, goof around as much as she was able. But Avery's was much more reserved. Everything else that I remember is quiet. He would show me things, unbelievable history in their house, books and records, things really old, especially in the mind of a child. I'm sure they were not as old as I remember them. But the history of items was something I was very aware of in that house and that he certainly tried to get me to appreciate.

Albarelli: Describe the house and some of the items.

Kirschner: [00:25:55] Their house at 1185, which was big, it must have been two units somewhere, something combined. You'd walk in. So, first thing, you came off the elevator. There were two doors, their neighbors' and theirs. Theirs had a white hallway, marble, paint, and a jet-black door with brass or similar kind of big door handle. And you'd ring the buzzer or knock, and most times it would be answered by someone who was working in their house, a housekeeper. They had a housekeeper named Rosa for most of my memory. Maybe there was someone else, but it was most common for her to answer the door.

When you came in, hardwood floor, kind of creaky. Drop everything we had, jackets or shoes or anything, right there. Big long hall, like a big entry foyer or hallway that would see, from the front door when you opened it, straight ahead into a living room. And the living room, couch and chairs and everything, but big piano, lots of books, big speakers. And that is where, far and

away, we spent most of our time with Janet and Avery as a family. That was like you kind of went in and you sat.

And at the end of the gallery, right before you went into the living room, you'd turn right, and there was a hallway that went down into where their bedroom was, the bedroom where my mother and brother must have been, kind of a loop-around back hallway through the bedrooms, and then a bathroom back there and an office that connected back around to the entry hall. And there were select things or activities that I remember from all those places. I'll come back to the living room.

My grandparents' bedroom wasn't off limits, but we were only in there for very controlled circumstances. My grandfather had a big comfortable chair where he used to sit. In there he always had a crossword dictionary next to the chair because he was big into crosswords, which is hard to understand at six, seven, eight, nine, ten. It was a little advanced, but I was very aware of the book, and a little notepad of paper that he would use to play tic-tac-toe with me but much more so with my sister. Their games of tic-tac-toe were sort of as fierce and happening all the time as his games of tag with me. And there was a TV in there, but there wasn't much else. It was basically that chair. If we went in there, one or both of us was getting on that chair, probably with him. And if we were in there without them, we would probably have been ushered out rather quickly.

Two separate beds, as long as I can remember, in that room. I'm sure they were together and then pulled apart when he was older, she was older. But by memory, maybe towards the end,

after he passed away but before Janet did, was that there were separate beds. The bedroom in the back that must have been my mom's or uncle's had little elements of boxes of really old stuff, closets with old stuff. There was a closet in that room where probably Janet—I don't remember who, but they would measure our height on a door and had done it for possibly my mom and uncle, at least, in the same place. But there are pencil marks all up and down the wall, and yes, old photos or just stuff. Anything that was in a closet there would have been a treasure to have found it.

And then, the office that was off of the gallery, same concept. Anything in there was old. But later in life, that was Avery's study. They had a typewriter, a very early version of an electronic typewriter, which was a piece of—call it computing-style equipment, basically like an early label maker. You could type across an entire line, delete, edit, do whatever you want, then hit Print and it would print it physically and advance the paper. And that was something that was a nod to Avery's technical interest and very, like, we have a thing in this house that not a lot of people have, was my interpretation.

But he had an office chair there and old-style accounting lamps and papers and things that felt very important. But, I remember that piece of equipment. I later would spend a lot of time in there helping with their bookkeeper as they were trying to advance their estate planning. Or she was trying to advance the technologies in the computer. Everything kind of lived in that room. So, the living room couch and chairs, very comfortable, not a place you would run around and play, per se—big grand piano, lots of memorabilia for them, photos and records, records, records, records, records of Avery's, all classical music. Books, old dictionaries and medical



dictionaries and histories of different things and music. And music, again, this whole built-in wall of just incredibly old books. And all of it just screamed having a sense of history.

From the front door, it was a 180-degree turn to put you right into a dining room that had a black-and-white checkered floor, beautiful table, beautiful buffets, everything wood, very beautiful. But that's where we would sit and eat as a family. And the coolest part about that space as a child was that my grandmother, who sat in the chair closest to the kitchen, had a bell that went back into the kitchen on a foot pedal right under her feet. And, for the grandkids it was like who could push the bell, or who gets to push the bell, or can sneak pushing the bell without anyone paying attention so that Rosa would then show up saying who called. And we'd all giggle and figure out who it was that hit the buzzer.

But then that went back into a kitchen, butler's kitchen, maid's room. It was sort of the back of house where we would go to play or get snacks or dessert or something later. But for the most part it was very traditionally back of house for a Park Avenue apartment. All this was in 1185, which is one of those buildings, one of the incredibly few—I don't even know if I can think of another one—building on Park Avenue proper that has a drive-in circle, a roadway. It's a really grand building. We looked right into the courtyard from the second floor.

But with all of that about their apartment and all of what I now know is incredible memorabilia and letters signed by all sorts of famous people related to Avery's impact on Lincoln Center, it was not dripping with it. And, that also, I realize now as an adult, and having been involved more with the latest state of affairs at Lincoln Center, was not something that was in my face as a kid. I

sort of took, and who knows when I learned or finally put the dots together that his name was on a building here, and a fairly prominent one.

But it wasn't something that he showed off. It was not like, let's go to my hall. Look at all these pictures in the house of that building which is named after me. It was just not something that he made a big deal of. And I now know it's because he didn't ask for it to be named for him in the first place. But that influenced me a lot because I have grown up also basically not talking about it unless it came up or I was forced into the situation where somebody figured it out, not out of embarrassment or anything else, but just like he was incredibly modest about it, and I was raised to similarly be. But that was their house, at least in the city.

Albarelli: Tell me a little bit more about Rosa.

Kirschner: [00:35:34] I don't remember her very much. I remember her being very tall and skinny/slender. But again, I was little, so for all I know she could have been five feet tall. Had been working for my grandparents for years, had a select number of things that I knew she would make all the time. She and my grandmother made—the big one was brownies. Every time we went to their house, we would be sent home with a tin foil—whatever baking pan she had, it ended up being cut into a very predictable five-by-ten grid or something of small little brownie squares. Same tin every time, same cutting pattern every time, that would then be dumped out into a piece of foil, folded over into a rectangle, and frozen. So we would then be handed this cold rectangle when we left, possibly one each for my sister and I, maybe.

But I remember her involvement in that and, I'm sure, not being crazy about my sister and I trying to run around the house because from the edge of the kitchen, through the kitchen, through the dining room, through the gallery to the living room was a very long single straight shot. And, I am almost certain now that there were races involved or something that we would take advantage of in that apartment that she probably wasn't thrilled out. But I don't remember her interpersonally that well.

Albarelli: I'm glad you remembered the brownies.

Kirschner: [00:37:07] The brownies. I forgot about the brownies.

Albarelli: Tell me some other early memories of your grandmother, any anecdotes.

Kirschner: [00:37:17] She was much sweeter. Again, not that Avery wasn't, but I remember a lot of her, and I always see my mother much more effusive in giving of her time. She also had been a very full-time volunteer heavily involved with schools and museums and other causes, loved to host, was always warm and high voice and more explicitly played games with my sister and I, everything from tag or let's imagine something. She used to roll her tongue for us, which is a very funny thing I remember as a kid, just because she could turn her tongue left or right and do it in a way that was very silly.

Would read to us. I have very fond memories of their house up in Washington where she had a greenhouse and did a lot of gardening and wanted us to understand that and be outside, take us to

playgrounds, probably with my mom, or any memory of being dropped off at Nana and Boopa's house for any extended period of time or to stay over, which I don't think happened a lot. But my memory of that time is with her. She would have been much more active, especially with my parents not around, in making sure that Diana and I were being kept occupied, producing something from the closet that was old—a game, a book, whatever it was, much more of the woman taking the parenting responsibility in that kind of traditional sense.

She was so interested in what we were doing and what we were learning, had a lot of trouble with her memory later in life. And that now kind of clouds some of my memory from late teenager or college age until she passed away nine years ago, yes, was that her memory went. And that clouds a lot of my own memories of the specific interesting things that we would do. But yes, she would welcome me into the kitchen and, could we bake? Could we do something? Could we draw? Could we go outside? Could we plant? Could we go to the museum? Could we—whatever it was.

Albarelli: Describe her physically.

Kirschner: [00:40:06] Like my mom, reasonably tall for a woman, five-eight, nine, always very slender, always very well put together, not in an expensive kind of way, but clearly, I think, took pride in being out and about, and especially in the Upper East Side was like a lady around the Upper East Side or the institutions and the Y and causes where she was very involved. Had a sort of weird side knack. She had a side interest, actually, in investing, now that I remember, which

was sort of out of character for her, especially relative to my grandfather who wasn't, at least from my memory.

But yes, threw herself into causes, always wore a lot of great hats and jewelry and always very put together. I have no memory of her walking around in a pajama shirt or just an apron or something like I think my kids see now of my mother who will hang around in clothes until she gets ready. My grandmother, definitely not. Janet would have been dressed when we came in, or if she wasn't when we came in would disappear immediately into the bedroom to go get dressed and ready before coming out to see us.

But same short white hair that my mother has, that I have, and wanting to know everything about everything that was happening in our lives. Always the questions from her—what are you doing? Dating anybody? For me, later in life.

Albarelli: What about your observations of the way they interacted, Avery and Janet? What do you remember?

Kirschner: [00:42:25] Other than at dinner, other than sitting, I don't have a lot of memories that are distinctly like I did this with them together. They're sort of compartmentalized a little bit. Again, that doesn't mean that it didn't happen. And in an all-family conversation, there was a—like dinner or all together in the living room, not a very traditional, social or power dynamic. It was much more likely for Avery to ask Janet to do something, who in turn might then ask Rosa or whoever their housekeeper was, depending on what it was, for us. Plus, I think Janet was more

naturally inclined to be like, I'll get up and do something. But I have a memory of that being a very traditional—which I'm sure is very common—dynamic between the two of them.

Avery would engage more about things—pianos, books, history, equipment, not like let's be goofy and play. But I don't have a lot of memory of explicitly doing things with them together. And they're no less loving. I have no reason to think that they deliberately avoided each other or didn't. But it was sort of a sequence of experiences with each of them back and forth as opposed to together.

Albarelli: Maybe you can describe that table, conversations around the table.

Kirschner: [00:44:25] Yes. I remember them being chaos, and maybe I'm projecting my current reality of trying to sit around the table with my parents while having toddlers around, where it's all kind of chaotic in its own way. I was there and had more of a memory as a teenager with just Janet when the conversation would have been more mature in theory. She would have asked more sophisticated questions. But unfortunately, I was countered by the fact that her memory was getting much worse. So, I was later in life much less rushing to share complicated details of things that were going on because she didn't show—I knew she wouldn't remember it. So it was all very simplified a little bit.

But, younger, it was about the family. Their interest was very surface-level. Where are you going? What are you learning? Who are you seeing? What's going on around us? In the city, neither side of my family really ever had a deep—I get a sense that my mother and her siblings

did not have the kind of relationship with their parents that involved deep probing on how are you feeling right now. It was much more what are you doing, not how are you feeling. And, so those conversations probably were more related to that, like what is happening in the ecosystem very objectively, not subjectively—how are you feeling? How did that make you feel? What do you think about that? Similar to my own upbringing with my parents, I think, as a result, because neither of their families did that with them.

Albarelli: And, music, memories of music, early memories?

Kirschner: [00:46:31] Memories of classical music in particular being deeply important to Avery and Janet, obviously. Some amount of performances that happened with them, around them, or because of them, my mom used to take me to Little Orchestra Society and things in Lincoln Center when I was younger. They obviously had it playing nonstop in their house. My mom had it playing all the time, [W]QXR here in the city. It was sort of background music to life with them.

I don't remember the order of when I actually started to learn names of composers and things, at least surface-level that anyone might learn. But I started playing trumpet in fifth grade, fourth, fifth, somewhere in there. Whenever we started a musical instrument was within three years before Avery passed away, or thereabouts. But they start you learning classical music, and I think that probably connected a lot of dots for me. But I was always aware of the instruments and Avery's involvement with classical music and the hall at that point. I didn't truly understand the nuances around the artist program and things that were more sophisticated parts of his original

arrangement. I was just like, right, name's on a building, likes going to the philharmonic. I, as a result, get taken to some version of classical music on a fairly regular basis. Even if it was three times a year, that was way more than anyone else I knew.

And so, I certainly had an appreciation for it. I wouldn't say I was reaching for classical music to listen to as a teenager, as a choice, but a deep respect for the complexity of it, for the dedication that people who played it had as an art form. And, yes, it just pervasively was around but always classical specifically and very little—my mom is very much into the arts more broadly—made sure that theater, both spoken word, musicals, opera, dance, modern dance, ballet, all that was a part of my childhood, seeing it and going to the arts, whereas Avery was very specifically like I'm interested in classical music, would not have rushed to go to the ballet or the opera or anything else. That was my mom's layered interest over time, I think, after that.

Albarelli: Any anecdotes that you can tell me about Avery?

Kirschner: [00:49:40] Any specific stories? There's little moments of wanting to—and I don't know if he saw it in me when I was that young, just the engineering interest. If I so much as flinched at a piece of equipment, he would go out of his way to explain it to me. And, it's funny. I have a very distinct memory of a small, white, plastic or glass, kind of a half—it looked like a—how to describe it? It's like a really long maybe carrot cut in half the long way. So, it had a flat surface on top and a rounded surface on the bottom. And it would sit there. And if you tapped it, it would spin one direction for a couple of seconds and then stop and spin even faster back the other way, a little physics trick of the way that it was shaped, the vibrations, whatever it



was. But, I remember him giving that to me, showing it to me, thinking this thing is black magic, and then spending a lot of time trying to understand it and having him sort of show me or try to explain to me when I was younger the properties of it.

And I'm sure there are other examples of that, of kind of like wanting to show me a little peek into something that is magical, in a way. The typewriter, little moments of deep interactivity with me to show me something. I don't remember a lot of them, but I remember it happening frequently. His tools I still have, and my mom does, too, like little Fisher-branded screwdrivers or electrical toolkit stuff that has just been persistent with me forever. The radios themselves, the Fisher radios, several of us have one of the original ones that still operates. So, I took great pride in the high school, college, and then later in my own first apartment, having very old audio equipment from him. Those moments, those moments and playing tag are the strongest memories I have.

And I definitely had a real sense of—not that he was sick for a long time, but I don't know. I remember there being a feeling. My bar mitzvah, where he died within a year, it was very lucky that they both made it then. Janet was fine, but Avery was getting older, frailer. And I don't remember the exact order of got sick, fell, broke his hip. It's within the year then. So that's kind of the culminating moment, obviously. What else? Yes, that's the big ones.

Albarelli: Tell me your memories of the house in Connecticut.

Kirschner: [00:53:23] Washington, Connecticut felt like hours away from the city but really is not at all. But yes, much more country than even my parents' house in Westchester. A long, swoopy driveway through flowered fields, nothing you would not really walk from the road to. I have no memory of really the town of Washington, Connecticut as a child. My parents having a house then in Pound Ridge, New York, I remember going to town, like let's go to a restaurant, go to the store, the supermarket, the whatever. I have no memory of that from Washington, and it would have been the same age.

So, either someone else was doing that, like going to get stuff, and I'm sure there wasn't as much in the town there. But it was like we got to the house, we stayed at the house, played in and around the house, and then left. So, big sweeping driveway, came around a big turn, and then you would see this beautiful white ranch house, all one level, kind of up on a hill, big piece of property.

Pull in the driveway, in the front door, and then because it was this ranch house: *sequence* that went all the way to the back, coming into the kitchen. Off the kitchen was a greenhouse that my grandmother was very fond of and actively—coming into the kitchen and seeing her coming out of the greenhouse, dusting off her hands and taking off the gloves, that was a very stereotypical, almost the, like, come in the house, Grandma comes out of greenhouse, goes to oven, produces cookies, the maybe very 1950s-style stereotype. But I have a memory of that in my head.

So, I enter into the kitchen. Kitchen rolled into a dining room. Dining room rolled into a big entry hallway where the actual front door of the house was. But we never, ever, ever went in that

door. Kind of a sitting room, big living room, same thing, piano, lots of sitting chairs and couches where most of the family would sit. Big, carpeted entry hallway, which is very different than in the city. The wood felt like a thing you couldn't run on. But there, not only is it not an apartment so there's nobody underneath you, but a big expanse all through the hallways of everything carpeted meant you could run around a whole lot more as a kid.

Then, all the bedrooms in the back, like little small, single beds where my sister and I and my parents would sleep. And then at the end of the hallway was their bedroom. Much less time spent—same thing—in the bedrooms. There wasn't toys or anything back there, maybe in a closet that we would drag out. The big thing in that house also, in addition to the space outside, big lawn. I remember playing Wiffle ball or something there probably just as much with my dad as with either Janet or Avery.

We used to go sledding in their yard when we were little, in what I imagine is like a five-foot hill. They had a garden I was very much aware of, where Janet kept a lot of flowers. But the basement of the house had a ping pong table, and the ping pong table got a lot of use, at least from Janet. I think Avery played with us, too. But I grew up then later with my parents having a ping pong table in their basement with this ultra-sensitive competition in the family, constantly rolling games of ping pong, all four of us and the six of them. The basement also was totally unfinished, so large concrete space with all kinds of caverns of largely Fisher Electronics gear around, gear, tools and open stereo cases and stuff, a lot of stuff. But there was nothing else down there that we would have ever gone for except for that ping pong table.

Again, largely sitting in the living room as a family with the kids were running around playing. And there were blocks and more older toys that lived up there that probably my mom had. There was an attic, too, where much of that must have been kept. But I remember coming down and always playing on the floor there.

Albarelli: How about holidays? Do you have any evocative memories of holidays? Did they do holidays and that kind of thing?

Kirschner: [00:58:02] I don't remember any consistent holiday with them. It wasn't like we always do Thanksgiving.

Albarelli: Or any particular?

Kirschner: [00:58:26] No, not distinctly any memory. They're all kind of blurry. And again, because my dad's family and some things were also here, it made for very easy splits, or in my head thinking, yes, one year we're going here, we're going there. And they all kind of blur together a little bit when they were around, especially with my—I have strong memories of those kinds of gatherings on my father's side because my father's sister has two kids who were much closer to my age, whereas Christopher, ten, twelve years older than me, Barbara's son. And Chip's two boys, kind of ten or plus years younger than me in that period of my life from, call it six to fourteen, when both Janet and Avery were still around. It was just me and my sister for the most part in those kinds of events. So, it felt like—I'm sure it bleeds together in my head of a lot, like grown-up dinners that maybe were just a little bit more formal.

Albarelli: What are some of your memories of your mother, the way your mother interacted with Avery?

Kirschner: [00:59:44] Very loving but not like—come in, she—my memories of her referring to him as Daddy. She'd come in and say, "Hi, Daddy," give him a kiss, hug, get us settled, whereas I walk into my parents' house now, I will say, "Hi, Meema," which is my mother's grandmother name. But my memory of my mom coming in was more like, hi Mom, hi, Daddy, to them. And again, it's more like the objective catch-up. How are things? How are the kids? What are you doing? Where are you going? Not, how are you feeling? So, surface-level, loving and very much focused on us when I was there. But I don't have a good enough sense of the sophisticated nature of their relationship.

Albarelli: You've mentioned a couple of times the dots. You didn't put the dots together for a while. Maybe you could talk about when you did and maybe some of the stories that your mother told you about.

Kirschner: In particular, like Avery vis-à-vis Lincoln Center?

Albarelli: Yes.

Kirschner: [01:01:36] Yes. I didn't have a real understanding of it as a kid. I knew his name was on the building. I knew he'd given money to get his name on the building. I knew that there were

periodically people who showed up in his ecosystem or who I had met as a child, like Yo-Yo Ma, who was—he had played in their house, or our house for a surprise party for one of them. Yes, one or two of those examples where I was like, oh, that's like a real person. I know enough to know that that is a significant figure in classical music, and you're on a first-name basis with him, and he sends you letters, you send him letters, kind of thing.

So, that I think I was aware of before he passed away. Then, I remember upon reflection, when he died, having dinner at their house after he died with the rest of the family or whoever was around, and being asked to say something, like we should all say something around the table. And, my thinking in the moment, kind of immediately aligning not with his, not philanthropy or musical interest, but rather history as an engineer. And I don't know if I had just sort of come to realize that in and around when he died or maybe as a result of his death, and reading more of his history and what was in obituaries and kind of having it click in my head and saying at the family dinner, at thirteen and a half—yes, because he died February '94—that he was both an entrepreneur and an engineer. The entrepreneurial side went to my uncle Chip, and the engineering side came to me.

Of the people in that room, especially, I was the only one that had any inclination on anything that could—they wouldn't even take apart a piece of equipment. And I never went into electrical engineering or anything like he did, but it's like no one else here has that, and I have that. So, that's like my special thing that I've taken from him. So then, I think I became much more aware of his role as an engineer and a founder at that point, and a little bit more aware of the history of

his grant to Lincoln Center probably in line more with being a teenager and being a little bit more sensitive about what that meant to my identity.

And, my mom does not really—actually, her identification, she grew up with the naming of the hall and everything that came after, right in her most formative years. And I think it was deeply impactful to her and very much part of her own identity, mine more in a, like, I had a grandfather who clearly was wealthy enough to make a very generous donation to this institution but not defining myself by it and also not flaunting it, but wanting to understand it enough so that if someone did figure it out—because, again, he had a different—I wasn't running around sharing my middle name, and we have different last names.

So, my closest friends all knew. When I was little, that was never a problem. But if anyone knew, figured it out or had it pointed out to them when I was older, I remember as a teenager in particular having a bit of a defense, not that it was negative, but I had more facts at my disposal about, like, oh, do you guys still own Fisher Radio, which was then still selling products in the early nineties or thereabouts, or enough people and their parents may have had something at home that said Fisher Radio. I was like, no, he sold the company at some point to someone who in turn—oh, I remember also Sanyo owned it at the time, and there were questions that I would get, enough that I remember it, about having sold a company to a Japanese company. I was like, no, actually he didn't do that. He sold it to someone who then went on.

So, I knew enough about Fisher Radio at that point because I think that coincided for me with my growing kind of affection for equipment, generally. And it was all computers. It was not like

stereo, per se. I did not grow up as an audio-visual gearhead. I came to appreciate it much more through technology and was very involved in school with a lot of technical theater and some digital media early days, stuff that was happening at Fieldston, which maybe was related. But anyway, I was more interested in the history of the company and the equipment and what it was and wasn't than I was in the direct Lincoln Center side of it.

I became more aware of the real Lincoln Center side of it in the early 2000s, late nineties, early 2000s, when it was the first time that there was this blip, momentary threat, from Lincoln Center to rename the hall. And, my mother, obviously horrified by that proposition, and my father stepping in as the legal-minded one in the family, at some point while I was college. I think being a little bit blindsided by that flare-up, and there were some articles written, letters traded. It all happened. Then my parents educated me really fast about what was happening and the nature of the agreement and why they were fighting it.

And, again, of the five grandkids in that moment, I'm sure Christopher was getting some level of communication. But that would have been through his mother, who was a little bit removed, living out of the country, and not having had a great relationship, I think, in her early adulthood with her parents. Chip's kids being too young, and my sister not being as interested in the details. My father squarely looked at me and was just like, "You're the one who's going to need to understand this." And that was the first time that started, call it 2000, plus or minus a year or two, when I got a very clear signal that, of this next generation who may carry this name and have any kind of responsibility as a result of that, you're it. You're the oldest of the core four and therefore the most grown up. You will graduate college first. It later became like you're the only



one living here and out of school, with a wife, with kids. I'm the oldest but also the most open to, "okay, let's sit down and talk about a fifty-page legal document." I had no interest in being a lawyer, but my dad was like, you're it. I'm going to start explaining this to you in more business terms because someone has to know that's not me at some point.

So yes, it was more like Fisher Radio is around Avery's death and through high school, which kind of established who he was, why he had money to begin with, and then starting to understand the mechanics of the agreement with Lincoln Center starting in the early 2000s and then culminating a couple of years ago now with the few-year run-up to the actual renaming of the hall. And that forced me—treating the entire renaming process, compressing a couple of years down into a moment, again, it was this, like, whatever happens in this process, somebody from the next generation is going to have to carry this torch forward. So, it will be me. That made me not only read everything I could get my hands on, but also go back and read every New York Times article I could find about the original naming.

And that's where my mom or someone would always say, "Oh, he never really wanted the hall named after him." It wasn't until I saw his own interview quotes about that that I really understood. I learned in my twenties did I really start getting invited to the Avery Fisher Artist Program career grant concerts and start to understand that money was being given away every year to up-and-coming young artists, which I kind of knew. And I knew that the money all sort of happened, was coming from the same initial gift.

But it wasn't until I read some of the articles in the original contract that I understood the mechanics of why he did that and understood how deeply important it was to him that this was not a competition, the difference, which was very much consistent with his attitude about the naming of the hall. It's like I'm not hosting a big competition and drawing all sorts of attention to myself and this program. I'm just going to give an award to someone—it's a recipient; it's not winner—without them knowing. And language in the original articles, interviews and contract related to his belief that there should be widespread access to the arts and classical music for people, no matter if they could afford it or not.

Students, anyone, all that language is in that original contract that I only really understood later when trying to form my own opinion about it in the face of people who grew up with him and were around when it happened. So, fast-forward now, and I am officially the representative for the Fisher family with Lincoln Center proper and on the executive board for the artist program with my mother and her brother, Nancy and Chip. And, at some point—knock on wood—fifty years from now, it will just be me. And then I will have to engage other members of my level family if they're even interested.

But yes, so I guess starting at age twenty-ish, that's when I got the first signal of like, you're the one who will have to remember all of this from the documents, not necessarily from having been there when it happened. So, I play that role now.

Albarelli: What time is it now?

Kirschner: Four thirty.

Albarelli: This is really great, and I think this is enough for one session because you've just opened an important door, and maybe we could finish it up next week.

Kirschner: The Lincoln Center door?

Albarelli: I don't want you to rush through it.

Kirschner: Sure. I've got thirty more minutes if you want, or we can do another time.

Albarelli: Another hour session?

Kirschner: Yes. If you think that'd be better, I could do that.

Albarelli: Yes. This is what I mean by slow down, don't rush through it. So, the first time it came up, you said your mother was horrified, obviously, at the prospect of the name change.

Kirschner: Yes.

Albarelli: Maybe you could slow down and tell me about that—what your memories are, what you said, what your father explained to you, more specifically.

Kirschner: [01:14:50] Yes. The explanation that I got about why all this was happening anchored around the contractual sticking point about things being done in perpetuity and what that meant and, oh, look at all these other cases that just so happened to have all popped up around the early 2000s, and I think in an age now of increasing expenses for nonprofit organizations to run themselves, there has been a change of what does it mean to give these monster gifts? And can you get them forever? And what happens when you pass certain periods of time?

Not that the law has changed, but I think the dispute, the initial dispute between our family and Lincoln Center and a few other examples that just so happened to coincide around the country have brought this all to the beginning. But that was the education. It was like, this is the contract. This is what it says. It should be pretty cut and dry, but here it is anyway. And, of course, it took many years and different changes in leadership and perspectives and master plans from Lincoln Center and whatever. It took a while.

Funny little anecdote that my mother may also have shared. There's a moment when we were growing up when my sister finally became aware of the fact that there was a building with our grandfather's name on it who said, somewhat famously to my mom, and I was there, and I don't remember if either of my grandparents were. But she asked point-blank if Avery had been named after the hall or if the hall had been named after him. She didn't really understand that.

My mom, growing up as Avery Fisher's daughter, I think, was—obviously it's an intense part of her identity. It happened while she was—what, '74, so she was twenty, nineteen, eighteen, right before college—very influential time in a child's life. It both happened at an influential time in

her life, was very interested in the arts and everything herself, probably much more influenced by that directly, and then grew up as Avery's daughter. Actually, my sense of Avery's wealth is the gift to Lincoln Center. But she grew up the daughter of a founder of a very large electronics company. So, I'm sure there are elements of that life and being very fortunate that I have no concept of what that must be like.

But, being Avery Fisher's daughter, and the association with the hall and all the benefits that that yielded to her, even if it was just called special treatment around Lincoln Center and being able to enjoy the arts the way that she wanted to and then gave that to me and my sister, being able to draft off of that a little bit, using simple as going to the Big Apple Circus at Lincoln Center but being able to park in his family parking space where all the garage attendants—I think it's actually under what is now Geffen Hall or close. It's one of those underground parking lots that's not very big that not everybody can get into.

I have all sorts of memories of, yes, we go to Lincoln Center. We take the car because we can park in *the* spot. And maybe I used it on my own less than a handful of times in my life, like when I was old enough to drive. But yes, all that was just a deep part of her identity. And any threat to having the name come off the hall was met by a deep sense of mourning from her immediately, like this can't happen. I'm projecting a little bit, like not who will I be, but I will lose something in my life, whereas for me, I didn't have the same—I never from that moment even had the same sense of loss of the name.

But as I got older and closer to the process and reading more of the original things and thinking, like, okay, I wasn't there to have this conversation with Averyq. I didn't see it all go down. So, I can only trust what I can see in writing and in interviews with him. And, if everything he focused on was on saving classical music, saving the hall, making sure that there's equitable access and focusing this long-term endowment for the musicians themselves, the performers, my approach was always like it would be going against—there is no way that if he were alive right now, that he would not step aside and let someone else donate money to the hall if it meant continuing for another fifty years or more of being able to give access and enjoyment for classical music in New York City, period. I'm convinced. There's no way he would not do this.

Someone else, prove me wrong. I'm just going off of the facts. This is not an emotional thing for me. But for my mom it was very emotional. And I saw what has ended up happening through the agreement, and it's still not, because there's been a lot of changes with Lincoln Center, the shifting of the energy from the name on the building to the artist program itself, the grant-making engine that runs and gives money to new artists, and making that be the dominant part of the narrative instead of the building being the dominant part of the narrative. That's like the inflection point that we have just started in the grand scheme of things that I am very much championing.

The building does not make the man. And he wasn't even looking for it. So, it's silly to hold onto it. And I will feel more proud to my children saying this is where I've spent my energy than in trying to defend against the name. I'd rather Lincoln Center continue. That made sense to me. But yes, the whole thing was a very emotional process for her and a real deep sense of loss. And

I didn't get that from Chip or Barbara in the same way, not nearly. Of course, it was hard, but not even close to the level of my mom's feelings about mourning the change or potential change.

Albarelli: So, who were the main players in that first act of this drama? You mentioned a couple of times change of leadership.

Kirschner: [01:22:41] I now don't remember the order of operations, who the president at Lincoln Center was at the time. I could look it up. But yes, that was two or three different sets of leadership ago. That was before. First was maybe change the name, and then later it was like we knock down the whole hall. And then that idea came away because the city wouldn't let them do it. And that led into eventually a huge capital plan to say we'll do that, but we have to do lots of things. And so, the energy was transferred to other parts of the campus for a while before coming back to the hall.

I think it was under whichever leadership. They kind of sniffed at the hall first, led to a flare-up and a series of articles traded in the paper. And I'm completely guessing when I say this. I think Lincoln Center was like, look, if there's other things we can do that don't involve this kind of fight, let's do the other things we have to do anyway. And then we'll come back to this problem. And it wasn't until Jed Bernstein came along, who was at the helm for Lincoln Center for two and a bit years, three—not very long—who, in his very much showmanship style, conjured up a whole different series of ideas that was the first time not just saying we have to change the name—that was the difference.

2000, it was like “we’re going to take down that. We’re going to knock it down. We’re going to give it a new name. Forget the family.” Jed came in with, “we still have to change the name. Maybe we knock down the hall. Maybe we gut it. Whatever it is, that has to happen. But here’s a whole new series of ideas that will retain Avery’s name in the campus in a variety of different potential ways.” That was different. And he brought the family to the table at least to hear him out in a way that the previous regime had just been like, surprise, we’re changing the name. That was my interpretation of it. It was not easy, but the process of bringing the family to the table to not just say no but look for ways around it, that I ended up quarterbacking that conversation, is what eventually led to the agreement.

Albarelli: So, if you’re not opposed to another hour another day—

Kirschner: Sure.

Albarelli: I think we should do that.

Kirschner: Yes. It can’t be about the details of the agreement because I can’t talk about it. So, if you’re thinking that will fill an hour, we can’t do that.

Albarelli: No, but there will be other—your involvement with the grant.

Kirschner: Yes, absolutely, yes, exactly.



Albarelli: And maybe today, just finish, if you have another few minutes, with the death, Avery's death, because you haven't really talked about it.

Kirschner: [01:25:48] It's sort of fuzzy for me. As I said, I have a memory in my bar mitzvah, which was May '93, that, like, we got there—not for Janet; for Avery. But he was kind of sick, frail, broke his hip, had a surgery, had a complication. Something else happened. It was all sort of a blur. And I was not ever—then he spent much more time up in Washington. I was not there. I remember my mom coming home after he had passed away and saying that this is what had happened. And again, I was aware, sick, but I was not involved versus I was thirty when Janet passed away. I was in the city. She was in the hospital, at home. I was here. It was all happening around me. I went to see her multiple times while she was still at home and then while she was in the hospital and then after she passed away in the hospital. I just was too young.

And I think, I'm guessing because I was thirteen, so that means Diana was nine, she was definitely too young to really be in it. And I'm sure my parents were going with the lowest common denominator, like if you can't really involve Diana, you can't involve me because if you involve me I was going to tell Diana. Whatever I encountered, that would have probably been too uncomfortable for her to understand, whether or not I could, really. My assumption is they just were better not to put us too close to the deathbed, per se.

So, it's all kind of a blur of the order of what happened. I just remember him spending a lot more time up in Washington. I have one memory of maybe seeing him in their bedroom when he was not unable to get around but was spending a significant amount of time...it was hard for him to

get out of bed, I think because he was maybe post-op on his hip. I remember seeing him there and talking to him and realizing like you can't really be moving around, but then to a large part being kept away. It's like he needs to rest, that kind of an attitude. But again, it was fuzzy at best.

Albarelli: Okay. Thank you.

Kirschner: [01:28:20] I don't think any of them would remember—probably too young.

[END OF SESSION]

ATC

Session #2

Interviewee: Philip Avery Kirschner

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Gerry Albarelli

Date: May 28, 2019

Albarelli: Are you tired? I'm tired.

Kirschner: My brain is coming back into gear.

Albarelli: So, was there anything that occurred to you that you wish you had said the last time or hadn't said?

Kirschner: No. I think any factual inaccuracies may have already been corrected by my mother.

Albarelli: It was nice seeing your mother the other day.

Kirschner: I'm sure it is.

Albarelli: I just mentioned that—she said how much she admires you. And I said, well, I get the sense that it's mutual.

Kirschner: Very.

Albarelli: And she gave me a pumpkin muffin.

Kirschner: That also does not surprise me.

Albarelli: I was prepared.

Kirschner: I did mention food.

Albarelli: Yes, right.

Kirschner: So I'm glad.

Albarelli: I felt as if I was stepping into a world you had created.

Kirschner: [00:01:07] Into the story, yes. So, I think you wanted to spend more time a little bit on the Lincoln Center component. Remind me where you want to start, and we'll go from there.

Albarelli: Well, actually, your mother talked a little bit about the interaction with people at Lincoln Center, and maybe you could just talk some more about that, some of the personalities involved.

Kirschner: [00:01:39] I don't know what she would have shared about the personalities and the impact on her personally. I have been less affected, I think, by the personalities, per se, and maybe more sensitive to, even if I was, what I would or wouldn't share about it, than she might.

In truth, in the grand scheme of all the history, I've come in at the eleventh hour, generally speaking, very active in the negotiations of what to do, but more with an eye on when this all gets settled, meaning I was not the dominant voice in the room about—I was not the majority voice in the room about the decision about what to do. But once the dust settled and there was a decision, I am now effectively the only voice, both as the representative of the next generation and also to prevent Lincoln Center from having to negotiate further with a group. So I think it's much more simple for them to be dealing with one.

And, in terms of personality, the one thing that was, I guess, unfortunate, is that after the initial flare-up in the 2000 timeframe, plus or minus a year, whenever that was, when Lincoln Center had endeavored to—sort of came public about their thoughts about changing the name of the hall in order to raise money absent any prior conversation about same with our family, sort of just them leaping from a legal position they thought they had, which obviously we disagreed with. Then all went quiet for a number of years until Lincoln Center had a new leader at the helm who took the hall problem head on a little bit more and, for the first time, engaged the family directly to say I have to solve this problem, but I know I cannot solve this problem without your collaboration. So, let's have a different conversation than was had a decade or so before when I was not in the room, didn't really know the personalities beyond superficial introductions and meetings and didn't know them personally.

But, what is unfortunate at the end of it is that the leader at the time came to the table with some ideas. His original ideas are not necessarily what got executed. But Lincoln Center did go public with the announcement to change the name of the hall but also shift a lot of energy into a concept

around what they called the hall of fame programs, which was going to have both a physical manifestation in a renovated hall, smaller physical manifestations around the Lincoln Center campus, and then a significant digital representation with programming and things happening all under the moniker of the Lincoln Center hall of fame, of which Avery's name was transferred to the classical music section thereof. And that was all in the announcements.

But that entire idea was conceived of by the head of Lincoln Center at the time, who is no longer at Lincoln Center, and obviously who is supported by the board and everybody else, otherwise it wouldn't have gone anywhere. But yes, to your question of personalities, the biggest challenge for me has just been that there are now different personalities. So there went from that head, he left. A new head, she left. And then an acting head, literally only as of three weeks ago.

I was going to say, the thing that we didn't really get to is what I can share of what the new mechanics are going to be, the elements that are public, and what I learned, the reason they are, which is what I learned of Avery's original intent for the program. But what was your question?

Albarelli: No, this is kind of where I was going.

Kirschner: [00:07:00] I don't remember what I said exactly last time, but when my family was trying to figure out what to do now, and obviously in the room of voting members, of which primarily my mom and her siblings, who had deep personal memories of Avery from growing up—mine ended at thirteen, and obviously I never knew anything really about the Lincoln Center deal. As I think I said last time, as I was getting older, I found myself wanting to learn a

little bit more about the history of Fisher Radio, not necessarily the Lincoln Center component. I just hadn't quite gotten there in my level of maturity before all the change forced the issue.

But what most of the world saw was the naming of the hall. I think what most of the world either didn't see or forgot, especially in the kind of press flare-ups that happened around both attempts to do it, were a few things. One, he never really wanted it, and I think was a very humble guy who wanted to help Lincoln Center and sustainably save what was then Philharmonic Hall, but had not expected that kind of recognition, and that a lot more of the language in his original agreement actually was related to the establishment of what is still now the Avery Fisher Artist Program, where there's two other elements of it that I think say a lot about Avery.

One, that it has, since the beginning, it's one of the more reputable, and certainly more lucrative for the recipients, classical music grants in the U.S. You have to be a U.S. permanent resident or citizen to receive it. So, it's not a global program. But it's not a competition. And everyone who receives the grant—and I say “receives” deliberately because it is not—every time I say “win,” I usually get corrected very fast. They're not winners. There is no competition. They do not know that they're even in the running. And the confidentiality of someone even having been recommended is taken very seriously. And for years at the beginning I think it was Avery who was making the phone calls.

And to all the concerts I have seen for the announcement of every annual career grant, the question from the host is always to the recipient, like where were you when you found out? And all of them, when you read your bios, are in a constant state of performances and recording and

really just like on the acceleration of their career and any number of other contests and things that they have won when you read their bios. But to say I competed in this and I won this, and then I received an Avery Fisher career grant, it's just very different. The responses are always incredibly genuine and truly surprise and honored, I think, especially to the extent they know the names of people who have received it before.

But, so that element, like the fact that it was meant to recognize young artists and not to have them be competing for it. And then, the thing that I discovered when trying to figure out what my voice should be and what my opinion should be in the whole matter, just combing through articles and interviews and anything I could get from Avery's earlier years, was something that was actually—well, two things.

So, one was—and this is now going to happen and was announced with the original changes to the hall. In addition to the career grant, Lincoln Center is supposed to be doing a little bit more than they have been to showcase the comings and goings of past career grant and prize recipients through the campus, which is happening all the time. For the caliber of arts institution that Lincoln Center is, and New York being New York, in any given year, past career grant recipients and prize recipients are floating in and out of the campus all the time. But we're working now to draw a little bit more attention to that and highlight at least one or two concerts a year, specifically as a career grant-related concert to bring more attention to the grant program, because while it sort of lives at Lincoln Center, it is technically an independent entity. So, the concert series was something that will come back now with greater rigor than was there when the focus was just really on the hall.



And the second thing that I was most struck by in the agreement was Avery's intent for Lincoln Center to do something about increasing access to the arts by people who couldn't necessarily afford it, sort of specifically called out students. And I think that access concept actually was a lot of what fueled his energy around Fisher Radio. It was all like, I am very fortunate to be able to go to see the symphony, but not everybody is. And we should all have the ability to know what that sounds like in our own home. It wasn't just like I want to make a great stereo system. A lot of what he said was like, I feel like everyone should be able to have this experience in their house.

And I learned about that as a teenager, again, as it pertained to Fisher Radio, but did not know until 2010, '11, '12, somewhere in there, that it actually had—that same language had snuck its way into the agreement originally with Lincoln Center, with massively open-ended ways of solving for it. But this question of, like, something should be done in order to make access to the arts easier for everyone, but in particular students. So, while I can't say what is going to happen yet specifically, as the circumstances around Lincoln Center with leadership and their approach to the capital campaigns and the hall are evolving from when the deal was done to take Avery's name off the hall, that's giving me a chance to lean harder on some of these elements of what I think Avery wanted originally. I will feel very good about his original wishes being respected and his name living on related to that and not necessarily like the big concrete block. That is the salient thing we didn't get to last time.

Albarelli: Right. So, can you talk about specific conversations that you've had around these last issues?

Kirschner: Like, with specific conversations with Lincoln Center?

Albarelli: Yes.

Kirschner: [00:15:32] No, I can't because nothing has changed since the original agreement even though Lincoln Center's own strategy around those elements has publicly changed. So, all of the, hey, we're going to do X, Y or Z, it is no longer relevant. And I don't expect that anything will be publicized in the same way, not with the same fanfare.

What I can say is, everyone I have spoken to about that particular element and just saying, hey look, I'm the new guy, effectively, and I have a vested interest in Lincoln Center. Yes, for my family, but also I am exactly the target demographic that Lincoln Center and most arts institutions struggle with. I live in the city—*near* Lincoln Center, mind you—with the means to attend the arts in that most generic sense, but limited time also because I have a young family. So, given limited free days to do anything, either with or without kids, with a universe of options from I'm just going to go to a restaurant with my wife to we're going to take our kids to a friend's house, everything in between, choosing the arts, and Lincoln Center in particular, is challenging.

And I think attracting the next generation that is not likely to be seasoned subscribers all over town like our parents or their parents might have been who appreciated the arts, because that was the primary means for consuming it, is tough. And, actually, even professionally now as I've kind of landed in real estate, generally speaking, I also feel for the other challenge that Lincoln Center has in particular just about this massive physical place that it represents. And, what must they do to make sure that the campus is somewhere that people want to be, because right now it's very much a collection of independently-functioning entities who are not necessarily incentivized to do things together.

And I'm sure that has been a decades-long challenge for the leadership at Lincoln Center. The philharmonic, the opera, the ballet are full-functioning, massive institutions with their own priorities and own budgets and own boards, and by and large do what they want. But to solve this next generation of the arts problem, they have to act as one much more. So, I'm very personally interested and invested in helping do that. And as I've told the story to the success of leaders in Lincoln Center to say, look, we have to work something out, but I am interested in the way forward, and I am more intellectually interested about Avery's thoughts on access and recognition and less about the physical establishment. And that has been very well-received so far, again, while just churning through temporary leaders trying to get to a moment of calm where we can formalize some of it and move forward.

Yes, all very positive. There was never any problem. It's just an unfortunate turn. And I am pragmatic enough to know that they have to solve a half a billion-dollar problem. And if they can't solve the half a billion-dollar problem, everything else is a wash. So, I've been patiently

waiting for the macro decision to be made to then kind of fine-tune the details of what we'll do. But I'm excited. His name will continue to live on in the programming without having to live on in a physical institution the same way, although when the hall does get renovated, there will, as there is now, remain some physical recognition of Avery's life contribution to the artist program in the lobby somewhere. None of this has been sorted out yet. He will live on in the concert hall with hopefully more attention on the programs.

Albarelli: So, talk about, if you would, your increasing involvement with the—or have you had interaction with recipients? I guess you have.

Kirschner: [00:21:07] Yes. Actually, it's interesting. I would not say that my personal interaction with recipients of the career grants—and I'm focusing on the career grants because there's the career grants and the prize. The prize is a whole other thing. That is not given away every year. It's a significant sum of money. The people who are recipients of the prize are major influential artists. And there is no problem with the prize program.

And there's no problem with the career grant program, but it's where I've taken most of my interest now in thinking, especially again, Avery's obsession with access and trying to identify and support new and upcoming artists. And, trying as I can, sitting on the executive committee now for the last couple of years with my mom and her brother, they will, knock on wood, continue to serve on that committee for many years. But at some point, it will shift to me and presumably another member of the family or, one day, one of my kids.

Most of those meetings have historically been around focusing on who's been suggested and who do we think should be selected. And it's a massive net of people who have the ability to make recommendations and sometimes a very large group of candidates in any given year. And, I like classical music, but I do not know these artists and have not felt in a position to say, oh, do you pick Bob over Mary or Mary over Bob? Who's better? I sit there smiling and nodding and asking questions when I can. But I am not the expert when it comes to the performers.

But, what I hope to, I guess, in a way, going back to being one of the people in the family who is the most like Avery in his analytical nature, something I can do is help to take the entire process and kind of bring it forward in terms of its sophistication around Avery, sort of trying to bring the artist program's back-of-house administration into the new age and make it a little bit more data-oriented than it is today. This has literally started in the last two months. I'm saying, look, Bob or Mary, that is not a thing I am good at.

But, I can see operational inefficiencies in how things have been done over decades, mostly paper-based, which has led to really interesting situations in some of these meetings, just as simple as everybody is looking at a potential candidate who happens to play the guitar. And someone in the room will say, oh, that's interesting. I don't think anyone has ever won who's played the guitar. And someone else in the room, notably like Mary Lou Falcone, who you have spoken to already, who is the walking encyclopedia of everything related to the artist program, having run it for decades and knowing Avery so well, will say, no, no, actually, once before so-and-so won who was a guitar player back in 1982. It's all in her head.

And, I started to say to the group, listen, it's amazing that Mary Lou knows all this. And, again, knock on wood, we have Mary Lou for a hundred more years. But, comparing ourselves to any other nonprofit organization or arts organization, it's kind of criminal that we might be in this room making decisions about the potential fates of these career grant winners where a question like that, that is so simple, like has anyone ever won who played the guitar, of course we, the collective we, we know the answer. The list is public of everyone who's ever won. And you could go to the list, and you could look at it, and you can say, oh yes, so-and-so won who played the guitar in such-and-such a year.

It's sad in this day and age when it is so easy to manage this kind of information at your fingertips, that we don't just have the information at our fingertips. And, having basic information at your fingertips, like are there trends related to certain instruments that have been favored over time, even more complex issues around diversity in all of its forms, where it is not a stated objective of the artist program to slant in any particular direction. But, times are different now around gender and racial equality. *I*, as the youngest member on the committee, kind of hold it to be unacceptable that we're not more aware of it.

So, the answer to all of these questions comes from information. I can contribute my time to making the information around the choices we have made in the past or are about to make, a little bit easier to see. And that might ultimately unlock some either problems that we want to solve or opportunities that we want to go after that are in line with Avery's original wishes.

For example, like I said, there are a hundred and some-odd people around the country from every possible program and conservatory and orchestra who can recommend new young artists for consideration. And they all receive the same requests for recommendations every year. But, a lot of them never recommend anybody. And I'm sure this is true of almost any comparable program, but I look at that as an opportunity to say, hey, Avery thought a lot about access to the arts and being inclusive and recognizing talent where it may not have been recognized before.

And without saying what our future mandate or mandates might be around that, I said we should be using the data behind our choices and who is or isn't recommending candidates to find out if here's people out there that we're missing or should be doing better going to find, because a lot of the candidates end up going through very established programs and have clearly been fortunate enough to have had the training to get them in front of the right people to get them into the right programs to get them successful enough to even be considered, right?

And, I'm sure there's a lot of people being left out who are either not able to make the top-tier programs and are excelling in other ways or in other places that just don't have the same likelihood of being spotted. So again, I don't know what will happen, but I now feel for the first time that I have something I can contribute directly by saying we should be doing better. Avery would have wanted us to be doing better, especially considering how easy it is now to figure out where we could be doing better. And I can do *that*.

And that's been very motivating for me because, kind of leading up to it, I wasn't sure what my role on the committee was going to be, and I didn't want to spend the next sixty years being a

passive, just smile and nod in the room. That's not my style. So, fast-forward a few years. I'm hoping with being able to make sure that these particular elements of Avery's story being shared more prominently in the physical instantiation of what becomes of his legacy in the new hall, greater visibility for the artist program itself, greater impact of the artist program with my encouragement and the other executive leaders jumping on all extremely positively, and some newer programs of recognition like getting Avery's name, again, related to that access component, which again there's some ideas we're kicking around, but nothing is finalized yet.

That is all very connected to me and gives me something I feel like I can be proud of that is not reflected in the actions of anyone before me, necessarily, and my mom and her siblings, whose focus has dominantly been on the hall and the artist program as it stood without having a reason to dig in and find more of this. But I needed a voice a little bit and have now found one. And I'm excited that that will be something I can be proud of and communicate to my kids and the other younger members of the family, for them to have their own story, as none of us were really around for the big, for the hall decision in history, which is what was most visible to the world.

Albarelli: Any interaction with recipients that you can share?

Kirschner: [00:31:55] I have met some. I meet them usually at the annual program. I would really have to think about times I might have inadvertently run into them at other functions. But truthfully, no, I would not say I've had substantial impact. But I think if the program starts to become a little bit more impact-oriented, and that that impact—again, we're like the last mile of the race. So, there are, I'm sure, many notable issues and causes and things within the arts and



classical music in particular, altruistic missions of different organizations or symphonies or schools or you name it, that are trying to increase access or identify talent or make education more accessible to people who couldn't have done it, all that along the way.

We are recognizing people who have gotten to a certain point in their career. We don't own the entire continuum up until that point. But there's lots of things that maybe we will do in the future in terms of aligning with other organizations that we find share a common mission, that don't violate any of the principles of the artist program itself. But, once there is a little bit more of that purpose and impact beyond just recognition, certainly for me, if it becomes an official mandate, that will give me a narrative to share in those annual programs that's more my oriented narrative as opposed to now where I play the grandson.

That's not wrong, and it's not meant to demean me in any way shape or form. But, my mother and her brother are still around and on the committee, and say the kind words every year on behalf of their father. And if one or both is absent, I'll say something and announce the winners or whatever. But it's a very superficial role for me. But there are many other players on whose shoulders I stand, so I'm not asking for a more active role in that process now. In a few years, knock on wood, when everybody is still around, but if there is a little bit of a pivot and a redefinition of the mission where I have stronger attribution for why we're doing that, I can both insist on a stronger voice and will probably look to, even if it's just in that moment, engage the winners in a way that is a little bit more than just like congratulations.

I've had conversations with them at the party after the awards. But after that I am not personally tracking them, and we're not personally trying to engage them into the mission. As I say that, yes, anyone who has won, anyone who wins the prize is automatically added into the list of recommenders for the career grant, for sort of the younger award. Again, maybe down the line you open any number of options for how to engage the career grant winners themselves into decisions or nominations of who else is out there that's amazing, all because it's just, there's no barrier to having more people having eyes out for you now because it is easier than ever with data to just sort of keep tabs on folks.

Even if it's just like, hey, so-and-so won a thing, and they're really young, and are they ready for this now? No. Might they be in a couple of years? Sure. The barrier to having someone just go, keep an eye on that guy, in a few years if he keeps doing what he's doing, maybe he's great. And look at that group over there. They're amazing. Again, too young, not quite there, but keep an eye on them. I just saw them. They're amazing. Then it's different. I think there would be a reason to engage them. Right now, I don't have a reason yet that's not superficial or I'd be making up.

Albarelli: Well, this has been not such a long second session, but I'm really glad we did it because these are important issues that you're raising.

Kirschner: Anything else, burning questions that haven't come up?

Albarelli: No. I guess I just wanted to ask you to talk about, just for a minute, about your own evolving relationship to classical music, because I asked you when we were not recording about what kind of music you listen to.

Kirschner: [00:37:59] I do not listen to classical music. As a choice right now, I don't. I cannot think of a time where I've deliberately gone and turned on classical music. It's sort of impossible to do it in our house with the kids around because they will change. But, I'm aware that I want to make them more aware of it as they're old enough to not turn off or change a channel when requested. And my retention for information about classical music and performers is slowly increasing with my involvement with the artist program. I can see myself wanting—yes, I will go deeper as I get a little bit more mature about the process. But I don't now. And I sometimes feel embarrassed about that. But, time is precious. I'm also not obsessive about music, period. I'm not someone who has music playing constantly.

Albarelli: But just talk, in terms of your own story, you know what your taste in music has been, because we were talking about that when we weren't recording.

Kirschner: [00:39:42] It's all over the map. I sort of routinely will say, generally speaking, I will listen to anything but country. And, I like a lot of music in the background. I grew up in the city here, so I've been very influenced by the explosion and popularity of things like hip-hop and electronic music. I grew up—my dad was very into rock and roll, and I had some appreciation for that. But also, my parents, for the most part, were not people who had music playing all the

time. And so, I was not—I have some peers who are obsessive about certain, what I think of as classic rock bands because their parents played that music all the time.

My mom has had QXR on in the background for my entire life, so I think of it as background music. I don't think of it necessarily as something like knowing specific artists or pieces outside of my awareness through my mom of particular super-famous pieces or operas. I recognize a lot of tunes from that. I also played the trumpet when I was in middle school and high school where you learned largely classical pieces. So, I'm maybe more aware than most and more appreciative of it. But that does not mean I seek it out. Otherwise, I will listen to virtually everything.

It's funny. My musical taste may have been influenced a little bit. My hearing is not very good. I've had problems with my hearing since I was little, which means in order for me to understand the words of a song, I *really* have to be paying attention. Hearing things passively, it's not something I will pick up. And therefore, classical music is kind of nice because I'm not paying attention. And listening to music that I don't know, if I'm just sort of like doing work, I will use Spotify or some other service to just play whatever they feel like I should be listening to and have no vested interest.

I'm not trying hard to understand it, which I think lets me be perfectly happy listening to music that I don't know persistently, as opposed to the same songs over and over again these days. But yes, not since being a teenager would I say I had favorite artists or favorite things I'm only listening to right now. I have a lot of friends who are that way, and I'm definitely not. Hearing it in the background, again, it's sort of supportive of being more into classical music over time.

Albarelli: But who were some of your favorites when you were a teenager?

Kirschner: [00:42:52] Classical? Anything? I, this morning, doing work at a coffee shop, was listening to nineties hip-hop mix on Spotify, which is all the music I grew up with as a teenager, the entire canon of nineties hip-hop. Yesterday it was a lot of—we do a lot of classic rock because it's very kid-friendly. My dad in his house is big into Springsteen and Johnny Cash. Jonah, my older son, has somehow oddly gotten into Queen through listening to “We Will Rock You.” But any day he's not playing Baby Shark is a good day in our house these days.

All of that, classic rock—Beatles, Queen, Paul Simon, Bruce Springsteen—are very kid-friendly. Everything now feels a bit more produced and possibly explicit in some ways. So it's easier to revert to the classics a little bit. But yes, later in high school and college, I used to DJ on the side a bit, which I think reinforced my interest in hip-hop and club music. My wife hates both, would never listen to either. But I retain, I can't shake what I liked at one time. But I think you can hear it. I could sit here and enumerate artists, but it is just not important to me.

Albarelli: But it's an interesting aspect. I'm sort of glad to end on this note, unless there's anything else.

Kirschner: [00:44:50] No. I'm aware that, or rather my perception is that almost nobody that I know listens to classical music, and that if I just came forward saying, yes, I listen to classical all the time, that that might be seen as a bit of a, like, that's strange, especially without having to

explain myself as to why I might feel encouraged to listen to more classical music based on my family connection which, as I think I said, is something I don't look to share deliberately.

But if I have a reason to, and again, stronger personal voice around the objectives for the artist program and say my interest is actually now fueled by, yes, a family connection, but it's more my belief that things could be better/different. And let me tell you stories about particular artists and things that are happening and say, look, we all learn an instrument when we're younger, and you don't jump right into hip-hop when you're playing the flute. They still teach you classical music for a reason.

And, everybody has a little bit of some association or affiliation and reaction to symphony music, I think, than we let on. And I would love to be able to tell that story a little bit more deliberately, but I won't do it unless I have a reason, which I don't yet, but I will.

Albarelli: Okay, great. Thank you.

Kirschner: No, thank you.

Albarelli: This has been the second session interview with Phil Kirschner. Today is May 28, 2019.

[END OF INTERVIEW]