

CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Janet L. Robinson

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Janet L. Robinson conducted by George Gavrilis on January 28, 2013. This interview is part of the Carnegie Corporation of New York 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.

3PM

Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: Janet L. Robinson

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: George Gavrilis

Date: January 28, 2013

Q: It's January 28. The year is 2013 and this is George Gavrilis. I'm here with Janet [L.] Robinson, Chair of the Carnegie Corporation board [of trustees], for the [Columbia University] Oral History Project of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Good afternoon, Janet. How are you?

Robinson: Good afternoon.

Q: Thank you so much for taking part in this project, particularly on this very wintry and soon to be slushy New York day.

You have a very interesting past. I think that many people will instantly recognize you because of your connection to not only the corporation but also the *New York Times*. But some of the people watching this or listening may not necessarily know that you actually began your career as a public school teacher. I was wondering if you could start with a little bit of a biographical sketch—where you were educated, why you chose the degree program that you chose and why you decided to become a public school teacher.

Robinson: Certainly. I grew up in southeastern Massachusetts and I graduated from Salve Regina University, which is a university in Newport, Rhode Island. At the time, the university focused very much on nursing education and teacher education, and still does to a certain extent.

Teaching was something that I was very interested in pursuing. During my years there, I majored in English and I minored in education. After I graduated from Salve Regina, I taught in Newport, Rhode Island for a year and then I taught in Somerset, Massachusetts for ten years. So all in all, I was a public school teacher for eleven years of my life and very much enjoyed my years as a teacher. I taught primarily elementary education, in many cases gifted and talented children.

After ten years, I decided to pursue a different career, one that was still tied to education but that was not necessarily in the education-academic format, primarily because of frustration levels that I was experiencing with public school education. At that time—I think it still exists today—education was not perceived to be, in my opinion, a meritocracy. Too little emphasis was being placed on student performance and student achievement. Too little emphasis was being placed on teacher training, performance and achievement as well. This caused teachers, who were very dedicated to education to think twice about staying in the field if it was not going to change radically. I asked the question of myself: was there a better way for me to educate?

I pursued a career in publishing because I felt that publishing and professional media corporations were doing a very good job of educating the citizenry. In my case, I selected—and was very happy to be selected by—the New York Times Company to begin my business career with them. I worked in their magazine divisions, their sports/leisure division. I moved over to their women's service division. And then eventually I went to the *New York Times*. I was the

director of advertising, then the president of the *New York Times* and then became CEO [Chief Executive Officer] of the New York Times Company.

Q: Okay, wonderful. I would like to talk to you more about your experience in journalism because a lot of that intersects with Carnegie programs. But before we get there, I wanted to talk about your first impressions about the Carnegie Corporation. And by this I mean before you came to the board of trustees, what did you know about the corporation? What kinds of engagement or knowledge did you have of its work?

Robinson: Well, certainly it's a very well-respected foundation. From my perspective, it was focused on important issues that were confronting society today—certainly higher education, immigration and international peace and security. It was well-known that this was a well-run corporation and that, indeed, Vartan Gregorian in particular had done wonderful work in focusing the efforts of the corporation.

[Interruption]

Q: Janet, can you tell us the story about how you met Vartan?

Robinson: I was the recipient of an honorary doctorate degree at my university, Salve Regina University. At the same commencement ceremony, Vartan was receiving an honorary degree as well and he was the commencement speaker. I had certainly known of Vartan and his wonderful reputation as an educator but I had not had the pleasure of meeting him. It was a special

opportunity to meet an impressive scholar and intellectual and a very wonderful man. I enjoyed meeting him at that commencement ceremony. Then right after that, I followed up with him to get to know him better and found that, indeed, everything that was said about Vartan was all true. He's an outstanding gentleman.

Q: What year was it when you met him?

Robinson: It was probably in the early part of this decade—of 2000, I should say. Around 2000, 2001.

Q: So it was a few years before you joined the board then?

Robinson: Yes.

Q: And how was it that you came to join the board?

Robinson: Vartan contacted me and asked if I would be interested in joining the board of trustees. He had explained the mission of the corporation. I had done research myself in regard to why Andrew Carnegie had felt that the corporation was an important part of his legacy and how he founded it one hundred years ago. I was very intrigued with getting involved not only with the mission of the corporation but with the people who were on the board, with the talents that were represented on the board, and with how Vartan was leading the corporation.

Q: Do you have particular recollections of your first year on the board of trustees—what it was like, the atmosphere, what kinds of initiatives that you were asked to chime in on?

Robinson: I think one of the things that I admire greatly about the corporation and Vartan's leadership, is that there's a constancy of purpose. There is a commitment to adhering to the mission of what Andrew Carnegie set forth many years ago in regard to the appropriate diffusion of knowledge and understanding. I think the corporation staff, Vartan and the board of directors, take their roles very seriously.

During my first years on the board, it was very clear that there was a very strong focus on education reform, higher education, library support, on immigration and immigration reform. The importance of looking at what we could do to control nuclear proliferation and support any diplomacy efforts that would enhance international peace and security was also at the forefront.

Q: You've just mentioned an interesting number of—well, it's the portfolio of the Carnegie programs that were going on at the time or initiatives. I realize it's hard to pick one. But I was wondering which couple programs were particularly close to your heart.

Robinson: Well, having been a public school educator for a number of years, I have an affiliation with and an affection for education overall. I felt the corporation was doing fine work and looking at education reform in the absolute right way. One of the gifts that Vartan has brought to this organization is identifying issues of importance, identifying the root cause of the issue and then looking at a very effective, systematic way to bring solutions to the problem.

That may be over a number of years, it may be shorter term. But that identification of root cause is a very critical part of solving problems. I think he and his staff identified very early on that teacher training and teacher preparation was particularly a problem within education circles in the United States and that something had to be done about it. I think he also identified that schools were not necessarily structured the correct way and that, in light of that lack of proper structure, curriculum was not necessarily as unified as it should be. From that perspective, I think he also felt that doing things differently—organizing schools differently—was probably a cause that the corporation could and should support.

So when you step back and you look at what they've supported—New Visions [for Public Schools] and New Century [High] Schools [initiative]—what they've done in regard to teacher preparation at colleges and universities across the nation, what they have done in their support of core curriculum, the unification of core curriculum, it's really very much in concert with Vartan identifying what the root causes of the problems were and then finding solutions to those problems and making sure the corporation supported them.

I'd also point out that Vartan and the staff have done a very fine job of not only mobilizing the strength of Carnegie behind all of those efforts. He and his staff have been very masterful at convening a community around that effort and in doing so, expanding the kind of support and the visibility for the issues at hand.

Q: You had mentioned when we were talking earlier about Vartan's role or the Carnegie Corporation's role as a great unifier of philanthropic organizations. I'd love to touch on that. Before we get on that, though, one of the things that I find very compelling is that when you're on the board of Carnegie and Carnegie has all of these great teacher-driven, teacher-based, educational-based initiatives, particularly the one on teacher preparedness, you have this eleven years of experience under your belt. What was that like? Did you often find yourself harking back to your experience and using that to give suggestions? I'd be curious to have your thoughts on that.

Robinson: There was a lot of head-nodding when the problems were being outlined by speakers or by directors of the programs. And they are serious problems. They were serious problems ten years ago and they are serious problems today. But the efforts that Carnegie has supported have really made a difference in regard to bringing the problem to the forefront and making sure that solutions are being discussed and implemented. Progress has definitely been made. More progress needs to be made. I am encouraged about the future of public school education and the focus that, indeed, is now in place, not only with philanthropic efforts but with the national dialogue and conversation around the seriousness of the problem.

Q: What would you say, within the education sector, has been the Carnegie Corporation's real big mark?

Robinson: Again, this goes to the constancy of purpose. It has been a constant reminder to the philanthropic world that education is an extremely important philanthropic effort to embrace. I

think it has done a masterful job of making sure that other foundations are well aware that, indeed, one foundation cannot be the only one to advance teacher preparation and teacher reform. They're not the only ones who can push core curriculum unification. They're not the only ones who can look at performance standards and stress the importance of student achievement. And I think when you look at those three efforts in particular, you see that Carnegie has led the way in many of those efforts. But they've also been able to bring other foundations and other institutions along with them to identify the seriousness of the problem and look at systemic solutions to the problems at hand.

Q: In describing all of these initiatives, you've used a really nice phrase a couple times just now—constancy of purpose. Can you talk a little bit more about that, about the common thread that goes from Andrew to Vartan today?

Robinson: I think that Vartan will probably go down in history as the finest president—primarily because Vartan has very unique qualities. I think we would all attest to the fact that this is a superb scholar, this is a man of great intellectual capacity, this is a man who is very well-respected and well-liked. And people love working with him. He is a convener of communities. But I think one wonderful attribute that perhaps does not get as much publicity as others when someone is describing Vartan, is his modesty.

He has approached this leadership role as the continuation of Andrew's mission—he has been true to the mission and he has been true to the man. I think in light of that, you are seeing that he has been very disciplined, very focused, very goal-oriented to make sure that Andrew's mission

is really being carried out during his tenure here at the corporation. If you point back to the progress that we've made during his leadership years, it's very clear that he has been true to that mission. At the end of the day, the Carnegie Corporation of New York is all about Andrew and all about Andrew's mission. One hundred years ago, he examined the importance of philanthropy and the efforts that he wanted to embrace. When you're looking at Vartan, you're looking at someone who truly understands that—that it's not about visibility or credit for the corporation. And it's not about visibility or credit for Vartan Gregorian or the board of trustees or the staff. It's really to make sure that the focus is on the mission of what Andrew set forth.

Q: This is a very compelling point, particularly because it touches on something that you had spoken about earlier, which is the need to unify philanthropic organizations behind a common purpose. So how do you or how does the board go about balancing that in a way that gets, perhaps, more accomplished through the power of a number of organizations but at the same time allows the Carnegie Corporation to get its due?

Robinson: I think that this is a foundation, a corporation, that has done wonderful work convening other foundations around specific efforts. That has been in the field of education, it's certainly been in the field of immigration, it's certainly been in the field of journalism and international peace and security. I think when you look at the expertise and the talents on the board, you would see that many of the trustees represent either relationships or connections or nonprofit support that support the efforts of what Carnegie has stood for.

And I think we have all encouraged Vartan—because I know it has been very important to him and his leadership—to convene the foundations around important causes and social needs. He has received the full support of the board to do that. I think the board has done everything it can to support him not only through relationships that we may have but also in the approval of grantmaking that would encourage others to participate as well.

Q: Is it easy to unify foundations behind a common initiative or purpose? One sometimes hears that it's a little bit like herding cats. Can you speak to that?

Robinson: I think it's very difficult. There are other foundations that have strong commitments to the very same commitment that we have, which are international peace and security, immigration and education. But everyone has their way of approaching a problem. That's not to say that the Carnegie Corporation way is the only way. But it's important that, indeed, when there are similarities, particularly in regard to the desire to improve and commit to a social need, those differences should go by the wayside. Those foundations should become united in focusing on the solution. In many cases, we've been able to do that. One of the reasons why we've been able to do that is primarily because of the personality that runs the corporation. Vartan is someone who is a wonderful lecturer, imparter of knowledge. But he is also a very gifted listener. I think he has used that listening expertise when he has been uniting the other foundations. He has listened to the positive aspects of their efforts and married them with the positive programs and mindset that exists here at Carnegie.

Q: What partnerships jump to your mind?

Robinson: The foundation has done a lot of work with the Gates Foundation. He has also worked with the [John D. and Catherine T.] MacArthur Foundation, the [Andrew W.] Mellon Foundation. There are a number of examples that I'm sure the program directors can point to that perhaps would not have happened if we had not had a gifted convener leading the efforts here at the corporation. But I think we should not dismiss the fact that that has been a wonderful contribution that Vartan has made to the corporation but also to philanthropy writ large.

Q: I'd like to go back just a few years, not many, to one of the initiatives that Carnegie was working on soon after you joined the board. I think it was in 2006. It was also a time when the country was embroiled in some pretty big immigration debates. Could you speak to that?

Robinson: I think immigration and certainly the strengthening of democracy is very near and dear to the corporation, certainly with Andrew Carnegie being an immigrant himself. It was very important for us to fully understand, as board members and the administrative staff members as well, the importance of this particular initiative. It was embedded in his thinking one hundred years ago and certainly has been part of the corporation's thinking for the last one hundred years.

When immigration became such a problematic issue for the United States, it was very clear that philanthropic efforts should probably support more educational efforts to make sure people were made aware of the importance of the contributions of immigrants to the United States and the importance of the integration of immigrants into American society.

It was around that time, when I first joined the board. Vartan came up with a wonderful suggestion that was typical Vartan. It was a subtle approach to a very important problem that educated but did so in a way that made you stop and think. We worked together on an effort to put an advertisement in the *New York Times* newspaper around the 4th of July, the celebration of our country and independence. The advertisement was a Carnegie Corporation of New York salute to immigrants that had made outstanding contributions to the United States. And Vartan has done it every year since that first year. He's made sure that the inclusion of all of the immigrants that are on that page are well-documented. It's very clear that there are names that would immediately come to mind. But there are also new entries on that page each and every year and you may not be as well aware of what their contributions have been. This effort encouraged the reader to investigate what immigrants have done. It's amazing to see what an educational tool it has become. But also, I think, it has sent a wonderful message about not only what Carnegie Corporation stands for but perhaps what we should all stand for regarding the importance of immigration reform.

Q: Thank you for the story behind that initiative. Then there are the many initiatives in journalism [Carnegie-Knight Initiative on the Future of Journalism Education], for example. I certainly want to linger on those particularly because of your own background and professional experience. So I would like you to talk to those. Before we do that, though, this is one of the things that I've been trying to wrap my head around—when you joined the Board, it was the same year that, I believe, you became president and CEO of the New York Times [Company], am I correct? So how did you balance all of that?

Robinson: [Laughs] I think that when you have important responsibilities, you make sure that you allocate your time correctly and you focus on the important issues, whether it be in regard to my responsibilities and duties at the New York Times or my responsibilities and duties here the corporation as a member of the board of trustees. The one thing that I found very comforting was the fact that the mission of the Carnegie Corporation was very similar to the mission of the New York Times Company. The mission statement of the New York Times or the core purpose of the New York Times Company is to enhance society by creating, collecting and distributing high quality news and information. It's very similar to the mission statement of the Carnegie Corporation in regard to the diffusion of knowledge and understanding.

Q: How much time was required of you in those first couple years that you were on the board?

Robinson: I think there was a fair amount of time, primarily because I found it necessary to make sure that, if I was going to be a productive board member, I was familiar with not only what the corporation had done in the past and what it was doing presently but what it could do going forward. It took time for me to fully understand the breadth of what Carnegie had stood for all these many years. But I must say that it was a wonderful educational experience for me personally and it has been very fulfilling to be part of an organization that was so focused and disciplined.

Q: Regarding the journalism initiatives here at Carnegie, what kinds of thoughts or inputs did you have on them, particularly in your first couple years on the board?

Robinson: One of the things that should also be noted in regard to Vartan Gregorian's skill set is that he is masterful at looking around corners. He's masterful at anticipating what issues may arise and then, very importantly, moving very quickly to find correct solutions or contributions that Carnegie can make. He recognized very early in 2000, 2001, that the media industry was going through a revolution and that not only was the means of distribution part of that revolution but also, because of the growth of the internet, that the quality of journalism was being questioned. Did it exist at the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*? Did it exist on the internet?

He again went right to the heart of the problem, which of course is based in education, and made sure that he spoke to the journalism schools. He united many of the journalism schools around an effort to make sure that journalists were being trained for the 21st century. That meant training them in skill sets that they did need fifteen years ago but they would need now and, more importantly, need in the years ahead.

The News21 effort did make sure that the journalism schools attacked that problem head on. We looked at it at the time as a critically important effort to educate the citizenry, to understand what quality journalism would be or is today and what it can be and should be going forward, and to make sure that we were doing everything to support journalism.

When great institutions are threatened because of a media revolution, it is wonderful to see that philanthropy can play a role in supporting them. I think that he [Gregorian], again, looked around the corner, made sure that he understood that supporting journalism schools and journalism

training was a wonderful way to bolster this effort, and was one of the first to get behind that important effort.

Q: In terms of the journalism sector and professionalism, what do you think remains to be done?

Robinson: I think a lot remains to be done. I think that it's very important for our citizenry in the United States, and worldwide as well, to understand the difference between quality journalism and something that is not quality journalism. I think we would have to all agree, unfortunately, that there is much that is perceived to be quality journalism that is not. It's important that those institutions that are committed to making sure that quality news and information is part of their offering, whether it be in broadcast, in print, on the internet and a variety of means of distributions—meet certain standards. That relates to sourcing, that relates to international coverage, that relates to making sure that they are financially supported. Too often, many citizens of the world are not necessarily as discerning as they should be regarding the kind of information they accept as fact. And that is the role, certainly, of the major corporations within the media industry, but it's also the job of an educated citizen to be selective.

It's also critical to make sure that there is a clear understanding that quality journalism cannot be free. This is something that citizens around the world should be willing to pay for and should be willing to treasure. I think that in many cases now people are beginning to realize that fact.

Information, certainly, can be paid for and respected when it's of a quality nature.

Q: It's a very compelling point. As you've been talking about it and intersecting it with the work at Carnegie, I have a question about that. Once, as a newspaper or as a journalist, you go free in the sense that you have the material out there for the public, how difficult is it to make it something that you have to pay for?

Robinson: I think it's very difficult. It goes directly back to making sure that you continue to invest in your product. If you have established in the minds of the consumer that you have a quality news source—and that can be at the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* or at *Bloomberg [L.P.]* or at the *Financial Times* or CBS [Broadcasting, Inc.] or any of the organizations that you can mention—you continue to invest and you broaden your coverage. You make sure international coverage, financial coverage, national coverage and local coverage is part of your offering. You are creating something that should be treasured and is treasured, in the minds and the hearts of the educated consumer. I think that now people have begun to realize that those institutions that continue to invest in their product are the ones that deserve investment on the part of the reader and the viewer. That is beginning to change the dynamics in regard to the financial stability of a lot of these media institutions. But I think that this revolution was caused, yes, by wonderful new means of news distribution, this proliferation of news and information that was not necessarily of the quality that it should be. It was the job of many, certainly the corporations noted, to point out the differences in what is considered to be quality and what is not.

Q: Would you say, when it comes to the issue of quality and paying for quality, that we're entering a world where they'll be a bifurcation, where you pay for quality and the cheaper stuff is

free or the less quality stuff is free? Or when we have newspapers like the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* entering paid-for models digitally, does that mean that other news outlets will follow suit as well?

Robinson: I think that there will always be free offerings. And I think that there will be many paid offerings. Many of the companies are migrating more towards some form of payment and that is necessary in order to support a very vast news organization that has to collect and create quality news and information. So I do think that you're going to continue to have both. But the more people understand the differences in the quality of what they are consuming, they will begin to realize the importance of paying for content that is of the highest quality.

Q: Janet, I imagine that when, at the *New York Times*, you were shifting to paid-for digital access, this is also when you were here on the board of Carnegie. Many of your colleagues must have been absolutely fascinated, as readers of the *New York Times*, to see the process and the transition. Do you remember any of those discussions?

Robinson: Yes. Many of my colleagues on the board were very interested in the process. They were very interested in what kind of research and investigation took place in regard to how we were going to approach it. I think many of them were very interested in how we were going to support the effort from a technological perspective. I received support from the board members and from Vartan and many of the administrative staff members. I felt very strongly that it was important for us to do that, to not only sustain but to grow the financial stability of the

organization to make sure that our news report remained at the quality level that we had enjoyed for so many years.

So I think that there was a clear understanding on the part of many people here within the Carnegie Corporation not only of the importance of making sure that we were financially sound and going to be stable for many years to come, but also, they understood the importance of identifying quality journalism and pointing out to the consumer the differences between what would be considered quality and what would perhaps not be as well-sourced or well-documented.

Q: Tell me, if we're looking in the future, let's say, at ten or twenty years down the road, what kinds of initiatives do you imagine that we're going to need to have in the field of journalism, philanthropic-based ones?

Robinson: I think there will be a call for more philanthropic support from many institutions. There will be perhaps unique ways for them to do that. I do think that there is a better marriage between the world of philanthropy and the world of journalism in regard to how we can work together to make sure that quality news and information is disseminated to increase understanding and tolerance and adhere to the commitments to an educated citizenry. I think that many people within the corporations that we all know in the media world and many foundations would like to find ways to work together to make sure that the support is there. I'm very encouraged by the commitment that the foundations have to this effort but also the commitments

that the media institutions really do have to this effort that brings issues to the forefront and does so in a way that can be respected within journalistic circles.

Q: Thank you for that. I'd like to shift gears a little bit right now and talk about a bit of a difficult issue that the board went through starting a few years ago when we entered the [2008] financial crisis. The Carnegie Corporation went from having one of the most robust and wonderful trust funds and investment holdings to dealing with the financial crisis and the fallout. Can you tell us about the debates the board had—the concerns, the fears, the atmosphere and how you got through it?

Robinson: Well, I don't think that there was any foundation or any corporation, any business, any governmental concern that did not go through difficult times during that period. Everyone was doing a lot of soul searching. Are we being run as efficiently as we can be? Have we made the right decisions in regard to investments? How should we look at the next two years in regard to performance—not only in regard to operational performance but also in regard to our investment performance? And certainly Carnegie went through that soul searching as well. Vartan and the staff have done an excellent job of running the corporation in a very cost efficient manner. They've always paid attention to efficiency.

They've also done a wonderful job of looking at and carefully monitoring, the investments that have been made. There has been a disciplined monitoring process regarding investment capabilities and performance of the institution that has been taken very, very seriously. All during my tenure at the corporation, I have found this investment staff to be one of the finest. I

am on investment committees for other nonprofits and I have found that the discipline, the focus and the research that is done by this corporation in regard to its investment holdings and future investment holdings has been quite extraordinary. That rigor and that discipline certainly made the financial crisis easier for this foundation to go through. But it certainly prepared us to make sure that we were well-organized in regard to our portfolio going forward, to make sure that we were doing the right things to protect the endowment and to grow the endowment as the years go on.

Q: The other issue that I wanted to talk to you about—you already spoke about it a little bit—and that's the collaboration with other philanthropic organizations. What would you say have been some of the more interesting, in your opinion, or more successful collaborations that you've seen close up?

Robinson: I think that there are a number of them. We've been involved in the Four Freedoms Fund. We've been involved in America's Voice Education Fund. There have been others that, whether it be MacArthur, as I noted earlier, or Gates, the Mellon Foundation, many that have joined forces with efforts that we have been involved in.

I think, again, this goes to what I said earlier about Vartan's gift of making sure that the presidents of those foundations understand the benefits of uniting the funding of each of those foundations behind a specific cause—whether it be immigration, whether it be higher education, whether it be journalism—he's just masterful. And the staff is masterful at stressing the

importance of uniting the funding rather than sole contributions. So there are many that you can point to that Vartan has been the leader of convening those organizations.

Q: You're currently chair of the Carnegie Corporation board. One of the things I wanted to ask you about is it's a relatively recent position you've assumed, I believe in December of 2012. Is that correct?

Robinson: I believe—last year, yes, mid-year.

Q: Mid-year, okay. So I'm a few months off. So what's it been like? And what are your hopes for the future as chair?

Robinson: Well, all of my years at the foundation on the board have been very inspiring, enjoyable, educational and very fulfilling. I've really enjoyed the time that I've spent here. I can't say enough wonderful things about the personal experience for me. I think just being associated with the people here, it has enlightened my thinking in regard to some of the issues at hand.

I think that I said earlier that there has been this constancy of purpose. That has impressed me during my tenure here. There is very little fluctuation in regard to being true to the mission. That is not to say that there are not new issues of the day and that there isn't a keen understanding on the part of Vartan and the staff in regard to specific issues that confront America and beyond that need to be addressed that very moment. But they support those efforts in such a way that it really

dovetails with the mission of what Andrew [Carnegie] had set out. Let me give you an example. Vartan has done a wonderful job—did so very early on and has done for many years—in making sure the corporation is supportive of educating people in regard to Muslim and Islamic societies. That was a very important part of the corporation’s outreach at a time when this had become a major problem in the United States. He was one of the first, if not the first, to embrace this. He has done so to inform our citizenry regarding the need to understand and be tolerant of others.

I think that when you look at that effort and you couple that with Andrew’s commitment to impart knowledge and understanding, it’s totally in concert with the mission. It answered an issue that was at the time, and still is, a very troublesome issue that needed to be addressed. It wasn’t going to be addressed by every foundation. It needed to be addressed by people who were willing to express a point of view and to put grant dollars behind support of that issue.

Q: Do you remember some of the discussions as that initiative took shape?

Robinson: I think there was overwhelming agreement on the part of the board that this was a wonderful thing for the corporation to do. The seriousness of the issue was confronting the United States right after 9/11 [September 11, 2001]. This issue had become so important in the United States. This was a very important part of educating the citizens of the United States when there was a very strong lack of understanding as to what these societies have meant in the past, what they mean to the people involved, and more importantly what they can mean to the United States going forward. I think we made an impression, not only on other foundations, but I think we made a contribution to educating many Americans.

Q: You said that there was an overwhelming support behind the Islam Initiative. Were there initiatives in the foundation here that were harder to push ahead? That created a little bit more debate?

Robinson: I think there's always very good debate. I would not say that there are issues that are presented to the board that are not embraced by the board. There is enough discussion and enough dialogue at meetings, between meetings, that there is a full understanding of what the corporation has really worked on, is preparing to work on, or is preparing to support. I think the strong communication that exists within the corporation—with Vartan and the board, the staff and the board—really ensures that the debate is a very healthy debate. There is agreement in regard to supporting the news initiatives, in supporting the Muslim and Islamic initiative, the support of New Century Schools, the support of any immigration effort. That's a very important leadership tool—to make sure that you understand that constant communication is a wonderful way for you to bring your board in and get the best out of them.

Q: This is a really interesting point that you make about what happens at the board meetings and what happens in between them or in the margins of them. How does one maintain constant communication with board members, who are incredibly busy people, without overwhelming them too much? Is there some sort of an understanding as to how much or how little interaction is required outside of the board meetings?

Robinson: Well, I think they do a wonderful job with their publications of not only educating the board but well beyond the board regarding the efforts of the corporation. But I think Vartan and the staff does a very good job in monthly emails and phone calls and discussions with particular board members or all of the board members, to make sure that if there is a question or a new initiative that we're aware of it. We know exactly the efforts that he is behind, where he has spoken, speeches that he has made. There is a wonderful line of communication. I do think that has ensured this wonderful dialogue that exists between the board and the staff and with Vartan specifically.

Q: One of the things that you had wanted to talk about—I know this from our previous conversation—is the broader future of philanthropy. You wanted to express your general thoughts. So I thought this would be a good opportunity to turn to that.

Robinson: It's wonderful to see many new foundations being developed and created by wealthy individuals throughout the United States. Many of them I admire greatly in regard to their focus on issues that I hold dear and this corporation holds dear—education, immigration, certainly international peace and security. But again, I think that when people are forming foundations and working for foundations, it's important to understand what kind of example Carnegie has set. And it goes back to that phrase, constancy of purpose. They defined their mission one hundred years ago. Andrew defined our mission for us. And it has been adhered to for one hundred years. That is not to say that we haven't been responsive to the needs of the day. We've always been responsive to the needs of the day as it has focused on the main tenants of what has been defined as important to this foundation.

I would hope that foundations, as they're created and as their work continues, see the Carnegie example and that they learn from it. A foundation should not necessarily have a wavering commitment. They should have an unwavering commitment to the tenants that, indeed, they believed in when the foundation was created. I think from that perspective there is a lot to be learned. Certainly there are other foundations that you can point to that are very true to their mission and to their purpose, but I think Carnegie has set an outstanding example for other foundations to follow in regard to that commitment.

Q: Is there anything else that you would particularly like to remark or comment on? This is a part of the session that's completely open for you.

Robinson: [Laughs] Okay. I don't think so. Let me just look at my notes for a minute and see.

[Interruption]

Q: I did have one final question that I wanted to ask. It's just a bit biographical.

[Interruption]

Q: Janet, it's been really wonderful talking to you for this project. And you've added quite an interesting perspective to the oral history project. One of the things that I'd like to end on—well,

we're going to come full circle because we started talking about where you grew up and your early career path. I'd like to come back to that. I believe you were an English teacher.

Robinson: I was an elementary school teacher. And I primarily focused on teaching gifted and talented children. So it was in that early education timeframe, kindergarten through second grade.

Q: Well, one of the things that I would like to end here with is to just have you talk about some of your memories as a schoolteacher—the highs, the lows and a little bit of everything in between. It's a very open-ended question, but one that I would like to have on the historical record because it has obviously colored a lot of the ways that you think about education here at Carnegie and elsewhere.

Robinson: My career in teaching definitely colored my view towards education. It's one of the reasons, as I noted, that, when I changed careers, I wanted to educate in a different way. And being involved with the New York Times Company was a wonderful way for me to do that. I very much respected, needless to say, the wonderful news report that it presented each and every day, but I also respected the mission of the company. And if education was dear to me and I wanted to remain in education in some way, going into publishing and changing careers from teaching to publishing was, in my estimation, not a huge departure, almost a transition. To this day, I look upon it that way.

As I noted earlier, I think I do bring a unique perspective to some of the discussions, whether they be here at Carnegie or beyond, in regard to education, having been a teacher for as long as I was. I loved teaching. I feel that it was a profession that should be respected and treasured. I think that it is one, if not one of the most, important professions in the United States. And I do look upon it as a profession, whereas some look upon it as a job and don't have the kind of respect for it that they should. I think when you step back and you look at the experience that I had and, to be quite honest, the frustration that I experienced, I have been able to think broadly about grant giving here at the corporation.

When I knew that Michele Cahill and Vartan and Deana [Arsenian] were going to be very focused on higher education and education reform and were going to put serious funding behind teacher training. I was encouraged to become not only part of Carnegie, but to make sure that I was vocal on those subjects beyond Carnegie and beyond the New York Times.

There are wonderful memories that I have looking back on my teaching days—wonderful students that I had in class, wonderful opportunities to see them advance. Many of them are very successful.

When you are in an environment that is not based on merit and it is based on years of service, you become very jaded. I think that you should not stay in a position and be jaded, you move to another slice of education or you transition to another way to educate. In doing so, not only did I work for a great corporation [the New York Times Company], I also had the opportunity to get

involved with a great foundation like Carnegie that really did address and continues to address those issues that frustrated me thirty years ago.

[Interruption]

Q: I apologize for giving you a very unceremonious end to the interview. But I'm going to end it now—is that okay?

Robinson: Great.

Q: Janet, thank you very much. This concludes our interview for the Carnegie Corporation oral history project.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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