

Michael Baker, by Julie M. Luker

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Minnesota

CS: Cole Steinberg
MB: Michael Baker

CS: This is an interview conducted as part of a larger faculty and student research project initiated by Dr. Julie Luker of Concordia University, Saint Paul. Today is May 23rd, 2023, and I'm here with Mike Baker. My name is Cole Steinberg, and I'm an undergraduate student at Concordia University, Saint Paul. Today I will be talking to Mike about what life was like growing up in the Twin Cities. During this interview, I'm going to ask you to reflect on your childhood and life experiences as they relate to a variety of social topics from that time period. For the purposes of this interview, we have defined childhood as birth through 17 years of age. To begin, please state and spell your full name, including a maiden name applicable.

MB: Michael, F as in Frank, Baker. I was born April 19, 1947.

CS: Please identify your race and gender.

MB: A male, white, Caucasian, Irish descent.

CS: Finally, please share where you grew up, such as the name of the neighborhood or a nearby street intersection. Include any major moves you made during this time period.

MB: I spent my first 17 years at 2148 Iglehart in the Merriam Park district of Saint Paul. That is a street with a hill, between Cretin and Finn.

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

MB: The family had a mother and a father, and I had five siblings, two older brothers and three younger sisters. We were in a nice kind of a homogenous neighborhood back in those days. Saint Paul was much, much more homogenous than I think it is today. I think we are more racially diverse. We walked to school We walked to high school. So, everything was pretty nice. Kind of a beaver cleaver.

CS: Did you have any family pets? If so, please describe them.

MB: I think there was a dog that my older brother had, but I don't remember that dog. I think it was called Penny. I saw pictures. So, no, we didn't have pets.

CS: Which family members did you engage with the most growing up?

MB: Probably with my two older brothers and then the other family members were all younger than I.

CS: Thank you. Next, please describe the ways in which your family's economic status influenced your childhood.

MB: You know, I think we were pretty well-to-do. Two cars. Mother did not work. Father was part owner of a company that I became an employee and was president of the company for many, many years. Now my son's involved with it. So, a fourth-generation family business now. And we did okay.

CS: In what ways in what way has your family's financial circumstances shaped your spending habits today?

MB: I think I was reasonably frugal during much of my life so that I would have a nice sort of retirement income. And so, I think spending wisely was important to me. And now I've saved up enough that I can go on and pay for a second career. I'm taking up nursing school.

CS: Great. Now, I would like to know about your experiences with religion, such as Catholicism, Lutheranism, etc... Describe what you can recall about your family's religious practices when you were growing up.

MB: Well, the family was very involved with the Catholic Church. We went to a Catholic grade school. We went to a Catholic high school. And I actually went one year to a Catholic college. It was a little bit insular in that way. I recall growing up that the church was pretty conservative. I remember talking about some of the nice people on the block that went to public schools and there were in different religions, and I think we were all kind of told that they weren't going to be saved. But this seems kind of unfair. It seems like pretty nice people, and they seem to like their religion. But that was kind of the way it was going to be.

CS: As a child, how important or relevant did you find religion to be for you?

MB: You know, it was mandatory. Yeah, it was just kind of there. As a very young child, I didn't really rebel against it. I understood all of the parts of it. There were sacraments. There were readings. There were actually nuns in the in the grade school and there were priests in the high schools. Saint Thomas Academy was on the same campus as St Thomas Colleges now or University of Saint Thomas, I guess it's called. So, you know, it was just sort of there. I am well-schooled in the in the intricacies of the Catholic faith. But I've moved on. I'm doing different religion now; I'm Buddhist.

CS: What, if any, impact do you feel that religion has had in your life?

MB: Maybe it was a sort of a good foundation. I remember the Japanese word it, but it has to do with a life worth living. And maybe that was part of it. I think as I look back on it, there was a little bit too much of an emphasis on the next. Being saved and going up to heaven and not having to go to hell or purgatory. Those were kind of the choices if you live a good life you'll go to heaven. I think for a lot of people that's really important to hold on to and that there is an afterlife, and you strive for it, so you don't get left behind. I think it's sometimes it was sort of at the exclusion of living one's own life.

CS: Now I'd like to learn more about the neighborhood in which you grew up. If you moved during childhood, you may wish to reflect on more than one neighborhood. This is fine to do, but please indicate as you do it. Please describe what comes to mind when thinking about the neighborhood in which you grew up.

MB: I only lived in the one house. It was a nice neighborhood. There was a park about two blocks away that had swings and recreation. There was a country club that was only a block away, and we could go there for sledding in the wintertime. There were plenty of places to bike to and to walk to. Lots of kids in the neighborhood, a lot of big families. Life back then was much freer for children. You did really didn't have to check in. You could just take off. And when the streetlights came on, you'd come home.

CS: As far as transportation options, how did you typically get around town?

MB: We were driven a lot of places. I took swimming lessons at a place in downtown Saint Paul called the Athletic Club. I occasionally go down there for shopping, and that was using Metro Transit buses, which were pretty close by.

CS: Now, describe the best part about growing up in your neighborhood. What comes to mind?

MB: I think there were a lot of kids around to play with. It was easier to get over to the park. It was a nice neighborhood to bicycle in. I always thought that bicycles are kind of a freedom machine. A baby learns to roll over and the baby learns to stand up and then the baby learns to crawl and then the baby learns to walk. The next really big thing is when the baby grows into a child and can ride the bike and there's this great freedom. The next big freedom probably is when you get your car keys.

CS: Next, I would like to learn about the values shared by your family and your neighbors. Values are principles or standards that help guide behavior. What memories come to mind that demonstrate what these values were for your family and your neighbors?

MB: I think honesty, truth, justice, fairness were all strong values. There was never any shortcutting. Something was right or it was wrong. And so, I don't think we had a lot of situational issues where you would kind of hide the truth in order to get a desired outcome. I think that was a good foundation. When I run into people kind of cutting corners on that, whether it's taxes or truth or anything like that. I have a pretty good standard. It's either true or it's not true. You know, there's no alternate facts, as we heard from the one of the press secretaries for the Trump administration. They are facts. I've got a law degree, and that also stuck with me. You got facts or you don't get facts.

CS: Now I'm going to ask you all about leisure time. Describe some of the ways in which you, your family and your neighbors engaged in leisure time when you were growing up.

MB: Well, we're fortunate to have a lake home only about an hour from the Twin Cities. Down by Burnsville, Eagan, Buck Hill. So, we would spend the summers at the lake. My father would commute, and we would be at the lake. That was even more freedom. We had rowboats. We could go fishing; we could go out and play in the cow pasture. We could ride our bicycles on the gravel road. So that was a lot of the leisure. And that was kind of our summer leisure time instead of going off to some camp someplace. It was really quite enjoyable. And then when we got cars and motorcycles and scooters and things like that, then there was even more leisure. So yeah, during the school year there would be swimming lessons. There weren't as many sporting opportunities as there are today for children in elementary school and high school. It was really with a certain group of kids who were good enough to get on the on the basketball team or the baseball team. But it wasn't everybody who could be a play soccer, lacrosse or swim team or soccer or something like

that. If you weren't a good athlete, you would go to games and watch. It was worse if you were a woman who had no sports.

CS: What types of toys did you play with growing up?

MB: Well, very young it was blocks and coloring and paints and then I always had bicycles, you know, and I still have bicycles. I learned how to become a bike mechanic. So, bicycles were pretty important. Cars and motorcycles, I had quite a few different motorcycles and scooters. I got my first motorcycle... It was a little moped when I was age 15 because in those days, once you hit 15, you could get a driver's license for a motor scooter. And then, you know, you were hot shit. You got another freedom machine. Freedom machine beyond the bicycle. It would take you further and faster. Kind of a gateway to the car. When everybody else is waiting for the calendar to flip to 16, I was off and running. I even got a job that summer because I could commute to it.

CS: What television shows did you watch growing up?

MB: Usually only one choice at a time. There'd be a children's show or a family show. You wouldn't have whatever it is today uncountable choices. So, it was when I was very young that was the Howdy Doody Show. And then as we grew up, there was Gunsmoke and Paladin. There were a lot of cowboy shows. I was volunteering at a nursing home last semester. There was a poor fellow who was quadriplegic, almost quadriplegic, and he couldn't get enough of Gunsmoke. [Laughter] So, I was in his room. I watched Gunsmoke. A lot of moral situations in Gunsmoke. And I think some of the early programs really tried to have an undercurrent of moral principles in some of those shows. People were getting shot up. They were getting shot up for a reason. [Laughter] I guess it was Gunsmoke. And then, you know, teenage years, American Bandstand and some of the other shows came on. I can't remember what all the other shows were. I think there were Three Stooges. There were some cartoons for the younger ones. So, Ozzie and Harriet, Leave It to Beaver was one of those. Those were always sort of a message. Where there were funny shows. Ward Cleaver and June Cleaver. June was a stay-at-home mom and wore a suit and went off someplace and made a lot of money and came back. Beaver was always getting into trouble and his brother saying, get him out of trouble. At the end of the episode, the father would always say, well, Beaver, what did you learn from this? So not like The Sopranos or some of the others, crime didn't pay.

CS: Next, let's discuss your experience with schooling. Please describe what it was like going to school as a child.

MB: Well, we'd walk about, and it probably wasn't even a half a mile to school in any kind of weather. And usually, we'd walk home for lunch. There was that much time. We even did that in high school. My lunch would be prepared, or our sandwiches would be set out. School was, you know, a normal school day. Not much to say. It was elementary school and then high school. High school was a Catholic, all boys school. I always kind of thought, you know, it might have been better to have girls there.

CS: Which teacher stands out to most in your memory and why?

MB: There was a very kind nun in second grade. Catherine Ellis, I think, was her name. I just thought that she was kind and wise. I don't remember the kindergarten teachers or most of the other nuns in in grade school. There were a few good teachers in high school. There was an English teacher who really made sure that we had a great fondness for literature, and we all learned how to write. He was somebody that students could converse with. He was an actor and was in local plays. I don't think we ever saw him in them, but he was smart, intelligent, engaging. He never talked down to students. He always wanted them to kind of come up to his level. I think Julie's a lot like that too. As I've gone back to school with so many online classes, I made it a point to interact with every teacher. Got a few more that I got to take care of this semester, but I think it's important-now

we're getting into today, but it's important for the teachers to interact with the students. I think there's a distance that today that serves both the teachers and the students poorly. I found a few teachers when I said, you know, I really want to come and meet with you or have a Zoom meeting. Why? What do you want to do? What's the purpose? Hey, I'm your student. I want to meet with you. I have to have a big purpose. You want an agenda? But Julie was very open to that. I had a very poorly written paper that she said, yeah, come to the meeting and bring your paper. She got out her red pen and went over it with me, including APA, and handed it back to me. Rewrite it and resubmit it, and I won't give you a late. I like that. I became a much better writer using APA at least.

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

MB: Well, I think we were probably a bit prejudiced. I think they kind of came down from my father and maybe from his father. When his father came from Ireland, he was an Irish immigrant, and he was low man on the totem pole. He used to tell my father stories about when he was a young boy growing up in America, because he came over at a very, very young age. When he went out looking for work, there were signs that said Irish need not apply. It's the kind of the great immigrant story. Once a particular race makes it and then they become a little more... They're no longer discriminated against. And now they, you know, discriminate against the others. And that's kind of too bad. But that's kind of been the history there. So, it's something I think we all have to work on. And particularly with the black folks who didn't emigrate, you know, they were brought over. So, it's not as if they, you know, had a choice in the matter and it's been more difficult for them. But I think we were a little prejudiced. Part of it was we didn't have any interactions. Nobody knew any black people. We knew some Jewish people. We knew Protestant people. We knew maybe a few, maybe a few Oriental people. But it was pretty insular in the neighborhood and in the city itself.

CS: What sticks out to you as some of the most serious health threats to people in your community, such as specific disease or illness?

MB: I think certainly today, diabetes, obesity, cancer are all high. Accidents are very high auto accidents. We still have a fairly high rate of alcoholism. Cigarette smoking is way, way down, which is very positive. But I think lifestyle, you know. I have a very active lifestyle. I pretty much always have. When you travel, particularly internationally, Americans stick out, they waddle. We have a big obesity problem. And there are sort of islands. If you go to the Denver airport and walk through the Denver airport, you know, you see people carrying skis and bikes and they're much more active than if you go to New Orleans. You know, they're waddling. I don't want to, you know, denigrate people on that. But I just think we have too many poor choices for food and for lifestyle and for eating. I think probably obesity is the biggest thing leading to diabetes. We are kind of a funny place today in that we are recognizing the problems, but we're also kind of throwing the pendulum the other way and saying, free to be you and free to be me. People like Lizzo, you'd say, wow, you know, you could lose about 150 pounds. Instead, they're celebrating bigness. And you walk through the Target store and there's a whole area big on the past used to mean tall doesn't mean tall anymore. So, I think those are the preventable diseases are that's the biggest issue that I see today in lifestyle.

CS: Is there anything else you want to elaborate on from this section as far as local and global issues from that time period?

MB: Local and global issues. I'm taking a lot of courses dealing with the with health care and healthy environments and so on. I have a good friend who's from Finland. And she says in Finland, they usually are rated as having the highest happiness index. All the Scandinavian countries are like that. And she said, here's the reason is some of the things that worry people and cause them to be

unhappy, are taken care of. And they are schooling. All the schools are good. You don't have to move to a neighborhood that you can't afford in order to get a good school. You live in a poor neighborhood. You got a good school. You live in a rich neighborhood. You got a good school. The teachers are the same. You're not dependent upon property taxes. The school boards floating a bond or something like that. It's taken care of. The other big one is health care. You don't have to shop around and take a job that has health insurance. You got health insurance. You got it. And she said, if you take those two things off the table, the people don't have to worry about them. Can I afford to go to a doctor? Am I going to get into a good hospital? Are my kids going to get a really good education? Can I afford the school taxes? Those are taken care of. They're off the table. A little easier to be nice, to be happy. The third thing that she threw in is that there's less disparity in income in the Scandinavian countries than there is in the U.S. Part of it is because the people with high corporate net worth are discouraged from being ostentatious with their wealth. So, if you are president of Nokia, you're going to drive an ordinary car because you don't want to stand out. You might live in an ordinary house. You might have four other vacation houses someplace. And you might, you know, always sit in first class. But as you're walking down the street, you're walking down the street. It's considered very poor form to put up a mega-mansion to be driving, you know, a very, very large car. And so, it's a little bit of an equalizer. And maybe that means that people don't feel like they have to work so hard to amass so much wealth and have additional houses and show off their wealth and have big gates. I live very near in North Oaks. And there's a lot of look at me houses up there. A lot of them. And people don't stay in rooms that they don't use. But it's look at me. So that's kind of my basis. I would, even though I was in business for many, many years, I think we'd have a better country if we had more socioeconomic equality and maybe if we had a little different government where it wasn't divisive with having only two parties. Maybe if we had multiple parties so the parties would have to form coalitions, they'd have to get along in order to govern, as we see in England, and Canada, and so many other countries. So, it's a big wish. But we haven't had a third party in a long, very, very long time. Jesse Ventura, that wasn't a party. That was just Jesse. Soon as he decided not to run, they said, oh, well, you know, we have this nice party. Could you help us? He said, Hell no, you're on your own. So, it wasn't really a party. It was Jesse.

CS: This is the end of our interview. Your responses are invaluable, and we really appreciate that you took the time to do this today. Thank you so much for participating.