

Sally Hilleboe Adelson
Narrator

Frances Akeley
Interviewer

Date?
Heritage Education Commission Oral History Project
Minnesota

FA: I'm Frances Akeley, and today I'm interviewing Sally Hilleboe Adelson. Sally, if I remember correctly, you were the first woman in the Fargo-Moorhead area to have your *own* personalized television show. Is that correct?

SHA: I guess that's true, Fran. There had been a lot of basic talk shows, and we refer to them that way because...hmmm...particularly I guess, in the 1960s and 1970s, every television station, I would say, had a daytime talk show. And usually they were hosted by a man and a woman. I wound up being the single host on a show on Channel Four beginning in about 1970.

FA: How did you happen to get into this? Do you want to go *way* back? [Laughs]

SHA: Way back. Yes, way back.

FA: Way back.

SHA: Hmmm, I was a volunteer. I was a volunteer in a lot of areas in the community. Beginning, I guess, with the Junior League, which you and I *well* know.

FA: Yes, indeed.

SHA: And it was a big beginning for volunteerism in this community. And thanks to *you* among other people. As a volunteer, I wound up being publicity chairman for a lot of organizations, and in that capacity was invited to be a guest on *those* talk shows on the local television stations. And the more I did it, the more comfortable I became with it, and therefore any organization that I was involved with automatically...you know, some people are the secretary, some people are always the treasurer because they do that well. And apparently I was able to do the publicity, and particularly to be on radio and television and be the person interviewed about a particular organization, so that was one thing. Then as a volunteer I worked at Public Television, which was then KFME [Channel 13] and hmmm...I was the first and second year's auction chairman. They had a televised auction.

FA: Oh, I remember.

SHA: I spent a lot of time at Channel Thirteen in those years when I was working on the auction. And on a couple of occasions they had scheduled interviews and the host had not shown up. It was a pretty loose organization in those days. And these people would come in expecting to be interviewed—and it happened on at least two occasions—and there wasn't anyone there to interview them. And because I was comfortable in front of the camera, they asked me if I would do these interviews. So I'd had a little bit of experience when one summer Jim Adelson called me and said, "I need a cohost for a talk show that I've been doing for I don't know how many years with four or five different women as cohosts. Would you be interested?" And I said, "Well, it sounds like fun!" So I went in and talked with him and thought probably I'd work for a year and then when it came time for the children to be out of school in the summer I'd stop working and go back to the lake. Well, it didn't turn out that way. I worked basically fifteen years. And Jim was the cohost of that show with me for several months and then he was no longer on the show and I was the sole host. So *that's* how I got into it.

FA: And so they were married.

SHA: In a word. [Chuckles]

FA: And so they were married!

SHA: *Many* years later we were indeed married.

FA: Then you became...then the part of your professional part of your career, aside from the volunteerism, how did you...? How did you get started in that, and what were you doing particularly?

SHA: Well, you mean the volunteerism?

FA: No, I mean the professional part, when you no longer...

SHA: Well, the professional part was that the reason Jim called me. And the reason that he even...he and John Boler (who was the owner and president of Channel Four at that time) even considered me is that I had appeared on Jim Adelson's talk show. And so they were looking for someone who knew people in the community who hopefully was going to be somewhat at ease in front of a camera and that's the reason they called me to ask me to do this job because I had been out there on occasion and had had some experience in being on television.

FA: What sort of programs did you do when...?

SHA: Basically...hmmm...they were community-oriented. Ah, you know, I feel it's really a sad time for social service organizations now because there aren't those kinds of talk shows. Those people need public exposure, they need publicity; the United Way Agencies, for an example, all the social service agencies, the theater, the arts groups. Those were the kinds of people that were on my show. The people who were the community theater people, when they had a production coming up, we'd go into the theater and film a little bit of their rehearsal or tape it later. And then

the director and maybe one of the cast members or someone would come and be on the show and publicize it and therefore encourage people to attend those performances.

We did bits of the symphony, we did...went into the art galleries and shot show being hung. And then in Jim O'Rourke's case, he would come and be on the show with me. And maybe there was a visiting artist and we'd interview him, sometimes see them at work. It was basically geared to the community and what was happening in the community. Then of course we were also fortunate to have all the traveling dignitaries who came through, the people who were speaking or performing at the colleges or the politicians. It was a whole variety of things.

FA: Well, this was a community service on the part of the television station then.

SHA: Hmm...basically that's the way it was...yes. As a matter of fact, television stations were required to do a certain amount of public service time and I had to log it out for the station. Hmm...so...yes, that was our reason for being. And...

FA: And was there a reason that they had a certain number...? Did they have a certain number of hours that they were to devote?

SHA: Mmmm-hmmm. The FCC required that local stations devote a certain amount of time to the community. And you know I can't even remember how much, but...

FA: Is this no longer the...?

SHA: ...but I fulfilled that requirement. Hmm...I think that it has changed to a large degree. They are able to fulfill some of it by doing some news stories that are geared to again the United Way Agencies, that sort of thing. But I can't believe that they're...and I am...I'm sorry, I'm really not sure about whether they are still required to do that or not.

FA: Along with that sort of...did you have other daytime shows or other talk shows?

SHA: Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, one of the things that I had done on the talk show—on the basic talk show—was things that were geared toward women in the home. Hmm...sewing, cooking, crafts, those kinds of things. And we found that there were some women who were working outside the home and were not able to see those kinds of things. So the management of the station asked me if I would be interested in doing a five minute segment in the noon news, which therefore would be available to some women who were working outside the home but during their lunch hour were watching television.

So I did a five minute segment in the noon news which...hmmm...I tried to make different than the other show. But I was told to do it about things that women were interested in. And my retort naturally was, "Women are interested in everything!" So I did a series on women and finance and women and politics, involved women. I interviewed women who were active in politics either as elected officials or appointed. And hmmm...women in auto mechanics, and women in unusual professions such as women welders, and women electrical workers, and post office mail

carriers, and those kinds of things, which was...it was fun to find those women who were doing...oh, you know, they weren't what you'd think of as the traditional women's roles.

FA: It took a lot of homework to get to find that.

SHA: A *lot* of homework. And that was fun. That was the fun part of it!

FA: And not only homework but a lot of imagination, I would think.

SHA: Well, yes. And I...very often when I was...if I were searching for topics, which I really wasn't, because I had a lot of input from the audience who would write to me and say they would *love* to know about something. And so then all I had to do was find someone who was an expert in that field. I used the colleges and the university a lot. I had some people who became very good friends and good resource people. And I'd be looking for someone in a particular field and I had to be careful because hmmm...we had to worry about whether or not someone was doing advertising. In other words, experts in lots of fields are working in those fields, and so if I could get someone who was an expert, but not working on it *in* that field rather, it was better. So working through people who were in the universities, in the colleges and universities, was often better.

FA: Then that brings us into the medical program that you had, which was very unique, and I'm interested in how you got started on that.

SHA: It was really an outgrowth, I'd say, of some of the guests that I had on, again, the basic talk show. Women's magazines in particular were having a lot of articles about medicine. And obviously, medicine was changing, the public was more interested in becoming better informed about a lot medical problems. And I had had doctors as guests on the talk show. And I decided from the response that I got that it was worth doing a whole show on medicine. And so I went to the management of the station and requested that I would like to do this. And I also requested that I be given a time slot—not necessarily prime time, because you don't take that away from the networks—but there was the six-thirty to seven o'clock time slot which was supposed to be available for this sort of thing.

And after a lot of talking they decided that I could have one six-thirty to seven o'clock time slot a month to do a medical show. And the format was that I had two physicians and we...I would decide on a topic. Very soon after I began I found a friend who was a physician who said he would help me with it, because I wasn't always sure which physician would be the best one to speak to a particular topic. So we would meet frequently and kind of block out what topics I felt were important from my reading, from my conversations, and what he felt were important from the standpoint of the medical profession. And then together we would decide which doctors we would ask to come and be the experts.

And then we had a phone-in situation. We didn't allow the phone calls to come directly to the physicians because they were very nervous about it at that time. So we had...actually, they were wives of physicians, members of the Medical Auxiliary would come as volunteers, answer the phones, write down the questions and bring them in to me so that then I could ask the questions

that the public wanted answers to. And it was interesting that when I...in the beginning, when I would call a physician and ask him if he'd appear on the television show, they were *very* nervous about it, very reluctant. I had to be very persuasive to talk them into saying yes. And as it evolved, they were calling us and wanting to be on the show!

FA: Hmm...what it sounds is all that would be a little delicate at times.

SHA: Hmm...

FA: Two different physicians.

SHA: Yes, it was. And we tried very hard to have a fairly equal representation from the various medical facilities in Fargo and Moorhead. And you know it's a fine medical community and we have a lot of very qualified people. Some of them, however, are better in front of a camera than others and express themselves better. But yes, it did get to be a little bit tricky.

FA: So what you were doing was as an advocate, attempting to train the patient to be an informed patient at the time that he would...

SHA: Definitely. Yes.

FA: ...talk with the trained expert would be his doctor.

SHA: Mmmm-hmmm. And you know it's interesting how now every network has a television expert and every local news channel has a medical expert, and they are doing that on television. And when I started doing it, it really wasn't...I hadn't known of anyone who did that kind of a show. Now it's happening all over the country, to the point that physicians now have workshops that they attend to teach them how to appear on television.

FA: You were indeed a pioneer in the medical advocacy field. And it sounds as if that were your very favorite, right?

SHA: Oh, it was. I did another segment in the news for a while that I found very interesting, which was sort of a consumer advocacy kind of thing. And I don't know if people are really aware of the fact, but Fargo-Moorhead does not have a Better Business Bureau. And that always disturbed me. And I was a member of the board of directors of the Chamber of Commerce. So I persuaded the Chamber of Commerce to have a person who would act in the capacity of a Better Business Bureau. And when people had problems they could call her, and so she became sort of my consumer person. And so we did some consumer problems...oh, I think it was once a week, on the regular news show, and that was fun. That was interesting.

FA: Are you doing anything now?

SHA: No!

FA: That's a pity!

SHA: [Chuckles]

FA: What do you miss...?

SHA: [Chuckling] Well, I shouldn't say I'm not doing *anything*. I'm doing lots of things.

FA: Not really...

SHA: But I'm not doing anything in radio and television.

FA: ...on the television. What do you miss most about not being on the front line?

SHA: Oh, without question, it's...the thing that I miss is that I don't know what's going on in the community, in the whole world. I really *had* to keep up with things. I had to do a lot of reading, a lot of research. And it was terrific. And I got to know and to interview people who were experts in their fields and it was a *wonderful* education.

FA: How would you advise someone who...a young lady who would like to get into this same sort of field? What would you suggest for her procedure?

SHA: I think educationally speaking, a broad education is really important. You need to know a little bit about a lot of things, about the arts, about business, about politics, about the humanities, about...as much as you can about everything. So I think if a young woman or a young man is interested in going into radio or television journalism, a broad education is something that...I think too often they're inclined to feel that they just go into...broadcasting. And there's so much more to it than that. Even as a news reporter, for instance, you're going to be talking with people in *all* fields of endeavor, and you need to know a little bit about what they're talking about.

FA: Beside that sort of formal education, then the actual...experience of having television exposure...

SHA: Well, of course, that's ideal. And a lot of stations still have intern programs.

FA: Oh.

SHA: And I believe in that sincerely. College students who are able to work part time in a television or radio situation and get some experience and work with people who are more expert in the field.

FA: Thank you very much, Sally! That...you've very much left your mark on Fargo-Moorhead television!

SHA: Thank you.

FA: And we appreciate your giving us your time. And [unclear].

SHA: Enjoyed it. Enjoyed it.

FA: Thank you very much.

SHA: Thank you, Fran.

[End of interview]