

Oral History Interview with Charley Richardson, Becky Elisher, and Jane Lesh
Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow
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[Start: 00:00:00]

BE: I actually have a story. I'll tell you, but Charley can tell it. It was one my dad told me when he was driving in the car and she was eating cookie dough-

CR: She was eating brownies.

BE: So, you remember that story?

CR: I remember that.

BE: I thought it was wonderful.

CR: Well, I don't know. I think you could probably tell it better than I could.

BE: Well, you can fill in. My dad was driving, this was the middle child, at that age when you are very aware of people looking at you and such. Obviously my aunt couldn't care less and she was eating this brownie dough next to my dad in the car and they came up next to a stop sign. The people were looking at her-

CR: Some lady.

BE: Some lady was staring at her. So she just leaned out the window and said "Want some?" My dad said he just could have melted into the ground.

CR: He was so embarrassed.

JS: What did the lady do, just drive off?

BE: One of those (scoff) kind of things.

CR: This was downtown Mishawaka.

JS: Where you all grew up.

CR: Yes, that's right.

JS: Now, how many years apart were you and Liz?

CR: A lot. About 11.

JS: So you were the youngest?

CR: I was by far the youngest. My brother was 7 years older and Elizabeth was 11 years older.

JS: As the little brother, were there any pranks that you would pull on her? Or do things to aggravate her?

CR: I aggravated her all the time. Perpetually aggravated her. Yes. She was always disciplining me. I remember her washing my face with one of those brushes that has wire bristles on it. That I do remember, even now, which is many years later.

JS: Well, growing up in Mishawaka, what were some things that the family would do for fun? You lived on a farm, right?

CR: My sister was always at school. Because she was so much older, so she was in college when I was fairly young but she would come home for vacations and it was always fun to have her around. But I was really more of a child to her than anything else. Oh dear. Anyway-

BE: But through the letters that she wrote (I just finished reading the book, I had that opportunity in the airport) and she was very fond of Uncle Charley, but he was obviously the one who was doing most of the letter writing towards the end, even over and above your parents, staying in communication.

CR: Well, I was in communication but my mother was a very devoted writer and so is my sister. She wrote a lot of letters. That book, the James Madison book, all her letters and many more. She wrote very humorous letters. She had a wonderful sense of humor, an unbelievable sense of humor.

BE: Just another side that I'm remembering that he had a picture of the whole family sitting around the table and I didn't see this in the book, where everybody's making different noises at the table and the dog is underneath the table, and she pictures your dad as being drunk with little-

CR: He's carving a turkey.

BE: And my dad was looking in the mirror.

CR: I remember it was gloat.

BE: The word GLOAT was coming out from one of those things. I don't know how she pictured you, Uncle Charley, if you were just-

CR: I hate to think.

BE: Because you were the little boy who was causing trouble at the dinner table.

CR: I think I was looking for my teddy bear.

BE: Have you seen that picture, Jane?

JL: Yeah.

BE: It's at his house. But it wasn't in the book.

CR: No, it was my teddy bear.

BE: That's right. You were holding your teddy bear at the table.

CR: I remember that bear. It was Winnie or something.

[00:05:18]

JS: Did Liz do a lot of drawing and watercolors?

CR: Oh yeah, she was an artist from the time she was a child. Really, a lot of watercolors, oils, she took up oils later on when she was in Europe. She did some very nice oils which I still have. She was a very talented artist, talented writer. She wrote good short stories and poetry.

JS: And she kept a journal too, right?

CR: She kept a journal which, do I have that or does Lawrence have that?

JS: I think you have that.

CR: She wrote very well. Of course, going to Europe with the Red Cross, she did that because she wanted to. She wanted to do something for the war effort. And that was very important to her.

JS: What was your family's reaction when she told you that she was going overseas?

CR: I was all of about 10 or 11, but I think they were pleased. I think my family felt that it was nice that she wanted to do that. Of course, they never thought that she was in danger in any way, shape, or form. They thought it was a marvelous adventure for her. My mother was very anti-Nazi and was pleased that her daughter wanted to do something for the war effort.

JS: When Liz was attending Milwaukee-Downer, did you go and help her move in?

CR: No. I was kind of a long ways away from this. In South Bend.

JS: Right. That was a long drive.

CR: In fact, I don't recall going up to Milwaukee-Downer until after Elizabeth died and I went up. She had so many friends up there, in the area. And I would go up and spend a few days with people like Chris Watson and Twine. So I got to know that area very well later on. Wonderful campus. Milwaukee-Downer, beautiful.

JS: Did Liz have an idea when she graduated from Milwaukee-Downer what she wanted to do, with her art?

CR: I think she was a very interested in advertising. There wasn't an awful lot of choices for young women at that time. They didn't have the plethora of choices we have today. And she went to work after she got out of college, she went to work for a department store, Gimbels. It's probably long gone, but it was a fairly large department store chain in the Milwaukee area. Then she worked in their advertising department and did drawings, that sort of thing. Then I think she went down to Chicago and

worked for Schuster's in their advertising department. And then, of course, the war came and she decided that she wanted to do that.

[Phone call – interview pauses]

[00:10:04]

JS: When Liz went overseas, the two of you exchanged letters pretty frequently?

CR: Well, she was a very good writer and mostly with my parents. She wrote letters to me, too, but I was 11 years younger so the tone of the letters to me would be different, because I was 11, 12 years old. But she wrote very interesting letters, of which we all have copies today, of her life in England and France. She was a good writer.

JS: What would she write about? What was going on, the kind of tasks that she had to do?

CR: Oh, absolutely.

JS: What were some of those?

CR: She was head of the Red Cross operation in the Le Havre area, in France. And she, they had all sorts of problems with French help and what have you, that sort of thing. All concerning the problems related to the war and they also were handling a lot of, Le Havre was an entry point into France from England, of all the allied forces. And the Red Cross had these Clubmobile units who were servicing that and serving donuts and coffee and what have you. She was very much involved with the GIs and with enlisted men and what have you. Trying to cheer them up. It was a very strenuous time.

JS: And then she obviously did a lot of watercolors and drawings while she was overseas.

CR: Absolutely. Yes. I think Lawrence has some. I have some.

JS: Yes.

CR: She was a good artist.

JS: Yeah, she was.

CR: That was her field that she really enjoyed, was art, and I think that was because that's what she majored in at Downer.

JS: How long, when she initially went overseas, how long was she intending to be there for?

CR: I don't know quite what the arrangement the Red Cross had. I think that when you signed up to go with the Red Cross, probably you had a certain period of time when you were, you just didn't get sent over to Europe just for a few months. It was probably for the duration. She had some good friends who also went into the Red Cross and were sent to various theaters of operation. It was a couple years' commitment, I think.

JS: I was going to ask, obviously with the Elizabeth Richardson scholarship and award that are given each year, that's a wonderful way of keeping her memory alive. Was that something that your family decided to do?

CR: No, I decided to do it. Well, the art award was a separate thing and that was started up by her friends, after she was killed, and that's still given I believe.

JS: Yes, it is.

CR: But that's a separate thing from when I decided much later to establish a scholarship in her name, and I think that's fairly recent.

[00:14:44]

JS: What are some of the ways that her friends have remembered her throughout the years?

CR: Well that's the amazing thing. I'm still in contact with those of her friends who are still living. Several who became very close friends of mine like Twine, who's Betty Blue, who's still alive, and Chris Hanson. Of course, when my mother was alive, she was in touch with them all for a long, long time. Ann Bumby's another one. All those people who are still with us. Amazing. And the memory continues on. It's wonderful.

JS: And they probably have great stories of her at Milwaukee-Downer and all the different things she did.

CR: Yeah, well, she had a wonderful, the greatest quality, she was a great artist and all that, but the greatest quality she had was sense of humor. Tremendous sense of humor. Some of the letters that she wrote were just very funny. And she could always find something amusing out of fairly dire circumstances. Such as the one in France, they had this wonderful, they thought it was a grave, where people were leaving flowers and everything and so on. Turned out it was a latrine.

BE: I missed the story, sorry.

CR: No, no. They were putting all of these flowers out because they thought it was some kind of a grave.

BE: Oh, I read that in the book!

CR: Course it turned out it was a latrine. Not a grave at all!

BE: And she didn't have the heart to tell them.

CR: That's right, who had shed tears, you know.

JS: When did James Madison first contact you about doing the book on Liz?

JL: Three or four years ago.

CR: Yeah, some time ago, and I don't know how he came across Elizabeth. Of course, he was a Professor of History at Indiana University. I know what it was – for some reason he was over at Omaha Beach and he came across my sister's grave. Which is, I've been there, it's a beautiful location, overlooking the beach. It's quite a spectacular sight and he wondered who in the world this woman was from Indiana who was buried in this gigantic cemetery. It's huge. So he contacted me and then from there I sent him copies of letters, because I still have all her letters. And got him interested and he wrote this book.

JL: And he came out to see you.

CR: He came out to see me. He was terrific. She was a remarkable woman of her time. Women at that time had not really established their place as dynamic people and she was one of the leaders, although she didn't think of herself as such.

BE: I think of her as a maverick. I really do, and I admire her sense of humor and her willingness to say "No, I'm not going to do that."

CR: She was certainly independent.

BE: And I was going to ask you, Uncle Charley, if you don't mind, I was curious as to why your parents decided, how it came to be that she remain buried in Europe. Because don't they give you the choice?

CR: They did, they did have the choice.

BE: So, do you recall the discussion or anything?

CR: Vaguely. I don't think there was ever a real question because my mother felt that that's what her life at that point was dedicated to, doing that, she really truly want to be of use in the war effort, and mother felt that since that was what her life was so geared to that she should be buried there.

BE: I think that that's a huge sacrifice on your mother's part.

CR: Yes, I think it was. Well, I remember they debated it. Because the government offered to have her brought home and buried in Indiana, but why would she want to be buried in Indiana? She had no real connection with Indiana after going to college. Her life was over there.

[phone rings]

BE: I'm sure your father had an opinion, too. It just seemed that your mother was-

CR: Mother was really the one, I think. I mean, I think they talked about it. I wasn't really involved with the decision making, obviously, 12 years old. But I think they felt that was the place for her to be. She really, that was her life. She was very, very involved with the war effort and really wanted to see us succeed.

BE: And from what I got the impressions of reading your letters, she was planning on staying. I mean, she wasn't one of these ones saying, "I want to come home."

CR: Absolutely not.

BE: She had every intention of seeing it through.

CR: Yeah. In fact, she was flying from the Le Havre to Paris for reassignment to Germany. She was going to Paris for this meeting where they were going to assign her, because the war had passed through France, at that point it was in Germany.

BE: They were cleaning up the mess.

CR: That's right. And so she was going there to confer with whoever the head of the Red Cross in Europe was for another assignment, not in Le Havre but in Germany itself. And she wanted to do that. She wasn't thinking of coming home at this point.

[00:22:26]

JS: Did her friends who served with her in the Red Cross, did they come and visit your family after the war?

CR: Oh absolutely, quite a few of them. They're all very wonderful people, some of them I remain friends with, right up until now, if they're still alive. They're all, you know, my sister would be 90. Hard to believe.

JS: That must have been good because they came and told you about her life overseas and what she was involved in.

CR: Absolutely. She has so many friends and also, but also, there were nice guys who came, made the effort to come and see my parents, which is a big effort because when you get back you don't want to do that. You want to move on to something else.

JS: I remember reading about Frank.

CR: Frank Policastro, very nice guy.

BE: Did he come visit your parents?

CR: I met him.

BE: Oh really?

CR: Nice guy, very nice guy. I don't know what happened to him.

BE: The book says that he passed away.

CR: I think he did. I think that's right. Elizabeth, besides being a very good artist, which I think she was, she had a marvelous sense of humor. Could really laugh at herself, and I think that's a marvelous trait. Not too many of us have that ability, but she could really see the humor in the day to day life. But she

was very serious about the Allied war effort and wanted to see us prevail and there was a real question back then whether we were going to prevail. The Nazi war machine was pretty strong.

BE: And I think one of the ironies of the situation was the fact that your brother, my father, was a Marine. And if somebody was going to be expected to not come back from the war, I'm thinking it would be somebody who's, you know. So I'm sure it was a huge shock to your parents.

CR: Tremendous shock.

BE: In fact, your mom didn't live too much longer, did she?

CR: No, it killed her. When I think about their grief, because I remember waking as a kid, waking and hearing her crying after she had gone to bed.

BE: She passed away before I was born.

CR: She died when she was about 64.

BE: Weak heart, was it?

CR: Heart attack, weak heart. I think Elizabeth's death certainly shortened her life considerably.

JS: Did your parents ever go over to France?

CR: My father did. After my mother died, my father married my mother's cousin. She had never married before. She was 65 when she married for the first time. And I think they were married because she reminded my father of his wife, because they had a lot of similar characteristics. They went over the cemetery and to Europe and I'm glad they did. I'm just delighted they did.

JS: Then I'm sure that some of Liz's friends from Milwaukee-Downer went over, as well?

CR: Absolutely, especially my dear friend, I think you met Twine?

BE: Years ago. She came and visited you, I'm thinking 20 years ago.

CR: And she's still alive, she's up in a nursing home in Duluth. I talk to her occasionally. It's very hard to talk to her, she's very hard of hearing, so it's a little difficult, but she also had a wonderful sense of humor. All those women were just amazing women. Amazing women.

[00:27:00]

JS: I'm trying to think if there is anything else I can ask.

BE: How about you, Jane, anything else come to mind?

JL: Oh, well, Charley is the one to ask.

BE: But I'm sure things stick out in your mind, stories that you've heard Uncle Charley tell. Aspects of their home life.

JS: Any specific pranks?

BE: Yeah, I would be interested in that.

CR: Well, she was always doing things that were a little off, off-key, but it's so hard to remember after so many years. Her friends and she shared, all shared a marvelous sense of humor, and they were all remarkable women. I think Milwaukee-Downer created that sort of woman, nurtured that sort of woman, because they were ahead of themselves in life.

JL: She developed a cartoon personality, Beulah, who was the Milwaukee-Downer girl and into Beulah, she put all the fun bits from one friend or another into the saddle shoes and bobby socks.

CR: And George. I think George was the male friend of Beulah's. The cartoons were marvelous.

JS: They are really great.

CR: It's now been a long time, 60 years.

JS: 63. But it's so cool that people know of her and they still talk about her and they have all these wonderful memories. I think that's really great.

CR: They do. She was a remarkable woman for her time.

JL: And I think Professor Madison has really made her come alive on the page.

CR: Yes, he did a beautiful job with this book.

JS: Have you seen the article that he wrote on her?

JL: We've seen a couple of the magazines that he sent you, Charley.

JS: The Wisconsin Magazine of History.

CR: Yes, I did see that. Very good.

BE: That's also in the National Archives.

JS: Yes, the Prologue Magazine.

BE: I was amazed because I happened to Google her name the day that magazine came out. So it came to the top "National Archives" and that was pretty cool. I got a copy of it with Richard Nixon on the front of the cover.

CR: Is that right? You've got to be kidding. I didn't see that.

BE: You didn't see that one? I have it. I thought I ordered you one. Come to think of it, I ordered two and they only sent me one. I will go back and order you one.

CR: I'd love to see it.

BE: Because they weren't the same articles as he wrote. This one was entitled "Wearing Lipstick to War."

CR: I didn't see that at all.

BE: You've seen it?

JS: Yes.

CR: Not too many women at the age of 26 have accomplished as much as she did.

BE: What was her birthday?

CR: 1918, June 8th?

BE: I think you're right, because I remember when I was reading the end of the book, the author made note that there was no mention of how she was going to be celebrating her birthday the next day.

CR: June 8th. I used to know that by heart.

BE: What's weird is D-day was June 6th and my parents married on June 7th and her birthday was June 8th.

[00:31:59]

CR: Of course, I've been to Normandy twice, and it's a wonderful experience to go to that place, the location is just spectacular.

JS: And she's one of twenty Americans featured in the visitor's center. I think James has said.

CR: Well, considering her age and everything she really did an awful lot in a short life.

BE: They don't give the actual day of her birth, that's interesting.

JS: I know it says it in the very beginning of the book, I think the first chapter. I just reread this this past week.

BE: I had read it a little more than halfway through and it was weird because of course I know the ending. And so I couldn't ever get myself to finish the book. So this trip I said to myself, "Oh come on, Becky, you've got to read the book." And I think he did an excellent job.

JS: He really did.

CR: We were very fortunate for Professor Madison become interested in it because her memory will live on, much longer than mine will, I'm sure.

BE: I don't know, Uncle Charley, you're mentioned in the book.

CR: Like it says: "If you have a club foot, buck teeth, crossed eyes and a cleft palate, you can still be Miss Popularity." The main thing is that you're female. And speak English! I love it. Miss Popularity, here it is: June 8th, 1918.

BE: So isn't that amazing, June 6th, 7th, and 8th are key dates. Interestingly enough, I married on June 7th as well, same day as my parents. Did you know that?

CR: I think I did, if I stopped and thought about it, yeah. Everything we're talking about was some time ago. Julia was just a baby.

[00:34:34]

BE: This is fabulous that you are able keep this kind of stuff alive.

JS: Yes, and James was so kind as to put the url for the collection in his book, so that collection is not going anywhere, it will stay there forever.

CR: That's the other thing that probably we should think about. I have other things and what should I do, of Elizabeth's. I sort of held back because I'd like to have them, but I should probably leave those to Lawrence, is that the idea?

JS: That would be great. And we could just add them to her collection.

CR: When I get back to San Anselmo, I'll go through things and the things that I feel I can part with now, I will just send them to you and you can keep those in the archives?

JS: Yes, they will stay here.

CR: Don't you think so?

BE: Absolutely. What good does it do for me if you're going to pass it down? I mean, I could put it in my living room and show it to my friends that visit, but it's so much better to be able to put it a situation like this.

CR: Well, how about her art? Watercolors?

JS: Yes, that would be great.

BE: Those that I don't want. I have one in my home, one that dad had, and it looks to me like it must have been of Mishawaka.

CR: It was the farm in Indiana.

BE: But the ones she did in Europe-

CR: I think a lot of those should go to Lawrence.

JS: The ones that you don't want.

BE: Yeah. They only have room for so many of them, Charley.

CR: I just want to find out what to do.

BE: A lot of that has to do with what you decide.

JS: But as you go through materials, if there are ones that you want to donate to the archives-

BE: In my opinion, you have the original letters and that should be given to them. There's a difference between letters and a painting. A painting that I would have in my home would be enjoyable for me to see, but letters are only valuable as archive material.

CR: I still have all the original letters on the Red Cross stationery.

BE: That's fabulous. For a university to have that kind of thing would be a coup.

JS: Yes, that would be wonderful.

CR: Okay, I'm glad to do that. I just didn't know what to do.

JS: That would be wonderful. Can you think of anything else to tell?

CR: I can't, there are so many stories of Elizabeth. I had to really sort them out and think about them. She was a remarkable woman.

BE: Well, Professor Madison got a lot of them.

JS: Yes, he did. Okay, I'll go ahead and turn this off then.

CR: Yes, by all means.

[End: 00:38:00]