



RUTH M. ROTHSTEIN
In First Person: An Oral History

American Hospital Association
Center for Hospital and Healthcare Administration History
and
Health Research & Educational Trust

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HOSPITAL ADMINISTRATION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

RUTH M. ROTHSTEIN

In First Person: An Oral History

**Interviewed by Emily Friedman
On August 20, 2008**

Edited by Kim M. Garber

Sponsored by
American Hospital Association
Center for Hospital and Healthcare Administration History
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Chicago, Illinois 60606

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CHRONOLOGY

- 1923 Born April 5, Brooklyn, NY
- 1950 Married December 22 to David Rothstein
Children: Martha (1952), Jonathan (1955)
- 1940-1952 United Electrical Workers
Organizer and Educator
- United Packinghouse Workers of America
Organizer
- 1952-1965 Jackson Park Hospital, Chicago, IL
- 1952-1960 Laboratory Technician
1962-1965 Personnel Director
- 1966-1991 Mount Sinai Hospital Medical Center of Chicago, IL
- 1966-1970 Administrative posts and Assistant to the General Director of
Operations
- 1970-1972 Administrator and Chief Operating Officer
- 1972-1977 Vice President and Executive Director
- 1977-1991 President and Chief Executive Officer
- 1981-1991 Charles H. and Rachel M. Schwab Rehabilitation Center
President and Chief Executive Officer
- 1991-1999 Cook County Hospital, Chicago, IL
Hospital Director
- 1991-2004 Cook County Bureau of Health Services, Chicago, IL
Chief

MEMBERSHIPS AND AFFILIATIONS

American Hospital Association
Member, Board of Trustees

American Jewish Congress Annual Deborah Award Dinner 1991
Co-Chair

ArcheWorks of Chicago
Founding Member
Member, Board of Directors

Chicago Children's Advocacy Center
Member, Advisory Board

Chicago Foundation for Women Advisory Board
Founding Member

Chicago Foundation for Women Luncheon
Co-Chair

Chicago Health Policy Research Council
Member

Chicago Housing Authority's Windows of Opportunity
Member, Board of Directors

The Chicago Network
Founding member

The Chicago Project for Violence Prevention
Member, Advisory Board

Duke University National Forum on Health Affairs Advisory Committee
Member

The Economic Club of Chicago
Member

Finch University of Health Sciences / The Chicago Medical School
Member, Board of Trustees

Illinois Hospital Association
Member, Board of Trustees

Illinois Hospital Association Conference on Teaching Hospitals Steering Committee
Member

MEMBERSHIPS AND AFFILIATIONS (continued)

Illinois Hospital Association Medicaid Task Force
Member

Illinois Medical District and Guest House Foundation
Member, Board of Directors

Institute for Diversity Management
Member, Board of Directors

Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago
Member, Board of Trustees

Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, Women of the Professions and Trades
Co-Chair

The Jewish Women's Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago
Member, Board of Trustees

Legislative Adequate Health Care Task Force
Member

Mount Sinai Hospital Medical Center (Chicago, IL)
Member, Board of Trustees

Mount Sinai Hospital Professional Women's Network of Doctors and Nurses
Founding Member

National Association of Public Hospitals
Member, Executive Committee

Premier Hospital Alliance, Inc.
Member, Board of Trustees

Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science
Chair of the Board of Trustees

Schwab Rehabilitation Center
Member, Board of Trustees

United Jewish Federation Business and Professional Women's Council
Member

Women in Charge Advisory Board
Founding Member

AWARDS AND HONORS

- 2005 Lifetime Achievement Award, Anti-Defamation League
- 2003 Doctorate of Public Service, hon. caus. from Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science (North Chicago, IL)
- 2003 Ruth M. Rothstein CORE Center named
- 2003 Women Who Dare Award, Coalition of Jewish Organizations
- 2003 Award for Leadership in Chicago Healthcare, Metropolitan Chicago Healthcare Council
- 2003 Award for Dedication to Community Health, H.B. Stowe Fine and Performing Arts Academy
- 2003 Featured in *Hospital News Chicago*, April issue
- 2002 Doctor of Humane Letters, hon. caus. from Rush University (Chicago, IL)
- 2002 Fellow, The Institute of Medicine of Chicago
- 2002 Named as one of “100 Most Powerful People in Healthcare”, *Modern Healthcare* magazine, August 26 issue
- 2002 A tribute to those who made the new John H. Stroger Hospital of Cook County possible, *Chicago Medicine*, Summer issue
- 2001 Trustee Medal, Rush University
- 2001 Distinguished Service Award, Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago
- 2001 Outstanding Cooperation Award, African American Contractors Association
- 2001 Award of Appreciation, Dr. William M. Scholl College of Podiatric Medicine
- 2000 Marshall A. Falk, M.D. Distinguished Professor Award, Finch University of Health Sciences/The Chicago Medical School
- 2000 Lifetime Service Award, Healthcare Consortium of Illinois
- 2000 Partnership Award in Business, Malcolm X College
- 2000 Certification of Appreciation for Outstanding Volunteer Achievement, Englewood District Health Council
- 1999 Humanitarian of the Year Award, Partner Home Care The Honorable & Mrs. William G. Stratton

AWARDS AND HONORS (continued)

- 1999 Impact Award, Chicago Minority Business Development Council, Inc. 1999
- 1999 Featured in *People* magazine, October 4 issue
- 1999 Lyman J. Gage Award, Civic Federation of Chicago
- 1999 Letter of Appreciation, White House Fellows, Office of the Chief of Staff
- 1999 Certification of Recognition for Public Health Leadership, Health and Medicine Policy Research Group
- 1996 Certificate of Appreciation, Institute for Diversity in Health Management
- 1996 Named as one of “100 Most Influential Women in Chicago” *Crain’s Chicago Business*
- 1996 Mentioned in article, Princess Diana’s Visit to Chicago, *People* magazine, June 17 issue
- 1995 Motorola Excellence in Public Service Award
- 1995 Health Care Industry Good Scout Award
- 1994 Henry P. Russe Citation for Exemplary Compassion in Health Care
- 1994 The W.E.A.V.E. Award, Chicago Abused Women Coalition
- 1993 Selected as Outstanding Woman, Honored by naming of boulder (Rock with name placed in downtown Loop), 1993
- 1992 Honored by Jewish Council on Urban Affairs
- 1990 The Deborah Award, American Jewish Congress
- 1989 Award of Honor, American Hospital Association
- 1989 Outstanding Achievement Award, Midwest Women’s Center
- 1989 Personal archive established at the Chicago Historical Society
- 1988 Outstanding Community Service Award, Organization for Rehabilitative Training
- 1988 Humanitarian of the Year Award, Mount Sinai Hospital Service club
- 1987 Ruth M. Rothstein Place, Street naming, Chicago City Council

AWARDS AND HONORS (continued)

- 1987 Distinguished Service Award, Illinois Council on Long Term Care
- 1987 Woman of the Year Award, Chicago Boys and Girls Club, Marshall Square Unit
- 1985 Crystal Globe Award, Chicago Hospital Council
- 1985 Doctorate of Law, hon. caus. from Kenyon College (Gambier, OH)
- 1985 *Ms. Magazine* Leadership Award, “Excellence” issue
- 1984 Wonder Woman Award, Wonder Woman Foundation
- 1982 Zapantis Memorial Foundation Award for Support of their Cardiac Surgical Program
- 1981 Thomas and Eleanor Wright Award, Commissioners of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations
- 1981 Chicago Hospital Council Award for Dedicated Service
- 1981 Sinai Scroll Award, Mount Sinai Hospital Medical Center Board of Trustees, presented at Ruth M. Rothstein Testimonial Dinner, honoring Mount Sinai Hospital’s Decade of Progress
- 1977 Myrtle Wreath Award, Hadassah Chicago Chapter
- 1977 Award for Achievement in the Field of Hospital Management, The Conference of Jewish Women’s Organizations of Metropolitan Chicago
- 1976 YWCA Outstanding Achievement Award in Professions
- 1976 Association of Torah Advancement Award
- 1976 Goldblatt’s Meritorious Service Award
- 1974 Outstanding Leadership in Community Health Planning Award, Westside Health Planning Organization



Mrs. Rothstein receives honorary degree from Rush University. Photo courtesy Ruth M. Rothstein.

EDITED TRANSCRIPT

EMILY FRIEDMAN: Today is Wednesday, the 20th of August, 2008. My name is Emily Friedman and I will be interviewing Mrs. Ruth Rothstein, who is the dean of American women health care administrators, the former head of Cook County Hospital and the Chicago Department of Health Services, former President and CEO of Mount Sinai Hospital Medical Center¹, Chair of the Board of Rosalind Franklin University in the northern part of Illinois, and other accomplishments. Thank you, Ruth, for being here.

RUTH M. ROTHSTEIN: Thank you for having me. I think it's very exciting.

FRIEDMAN: So let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born, and could you tell me something about your family?

ROTHSTEIN: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, and I was born in 1923, so that was indeed a very long time ago. The area that I was born into was really a ghetto. It was a Jewish ghetto. Everyone who lived there either came from some eastern European country or they were mostly first and second generations. I was born there.

My father came from Russia. He came from White Russia, from Minsk, and my mother was born in London. She came to the United States when she was three months old, so she literally considered herself having been born in Brooklyn or New York City.

FRIEDMAN: Was her family also Russian?

ROTHSTEIN: No, her mother was Romanian. Her father came from Russia. They met in London, where they were married. As a matter of fact, on their way to the United States, they went through Canada and lived in Canada for a while and left Canada to go to New York only because it was so cold, and they couldn't stand the weather, although coming from Russia, I don't know why.

But anyhow, they came to New York, and my mother and father met in New York, in a factory. My mother worked in an office, in an I. Miller shoe factory, and my father was an operator on the machines. They met in that building. My mother used to help my father keep his books – because if you worked piece work, you had to turn in your books with how many pieces you made, and that's how you got paid. She helped him to do that, and they fell in love and got married.

FRIEDMAN: Do you have siblings?

ROTHSTEIN: I'm the eldest of four. I'm the only girl. I have three brothers. Two of them are still alive. One of them died many years ago. I always felt kind of that I was protecting them, physically protecting them. If they got into trouble, got into a fight, my father would say, "Go take care of that." So I always felt I was—I don't know if *they* feel that way, but I felt I was protecting them.

¹ Currently Mount Sinai Hospital (Chicago, IL)

FRIEDMAN: So you must have been an influence on them. Who was an influence on you early on?

ROTHSTEIN: My father was a very strong influence on me. He cared a whole lot. It was important to him that I see many things, that I just don't stay in this little ghetto. He was the first one to introduce me to opera, and it was really a very interesting way that he did it. It was *The Magic Flute*. It was at the Met in New York. He said, "We're going to the opera." I said, "We are? Why are we doing that?"

FRIEDMAN: How old were you?

ROTHSTEIN: Seventeen. He said, "Because I want you to learn about those things." I may have been a little younger than that, but somewhere in the teens, upper teens. When we got to the opera house, he said, "Okay, here's your ticket." I said, "Where's your ticket?" He said, "I don't have a ticket. We can't afford two tickets. We can only afford one ticket, so you're going in, and I'm going to wait outside, and when you come out, I'll be here." I had a standing room ticket to the Metropolitan Opera, *The Magic Flute*, by Mozart. It was fabulous. But I kept looking around all the time that I was standing, thinking, *I wonder what he's doing out there. How could he be out there?* When I came out, he indeed was there, and we went home on the subway, and that was my first experience, my first exposure into something as wonderfully cultural as that.

FRIEDMAN: He also then took you to museums and—

ROTHSTEIN: We went to many, many, many things, including demonstrations.

FRIEDMAN: Was he active in the labor movement?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes, he was active in the labor movement. He was one of the people helping or really responsible for the shoe workers union. He would take me on many demonstrations, and we'd walk up and down and in and out, and that was my exposure into the labor movement. He was just a very, very good guy, in many ways.

FRIEDMAN: How long did he live?

ROTHSTEIN: He lived till he was 77.

FRIEDMAN: What about your mom? Was she also active?

ROTHSTEIN: My mother was not at all active. In fact, it used to irritate her. She'd say, "Stop talking about this already." But she was a wonderful gal. She really was. She was kind of a loner. She kept the house, and she cooked and cleaned, and she did the kinds of things that she believed were her job.

FRIEDMAN: Did she keep on with her accounting after they got married?

ROTHSTEIN: She did nothing afterwards. She used to play the piano and even stopped doing that when she got married, because it wasn't the thing to do at that time, so she didn't do that.

FRIEDMAN: And how long did she live?

ROTHSTEIN: My mother lived till she was 94. It was terrific. It was really wonderful. I remember visiting with her, and she was in a nursing home, and I came in. At first she didn't recognize me, and then she kind of focused in on me, and I said, "Mom, how old are you?" She thought for a while. She said, "I think I'm 72." I said, "Not possible. I'm 72."

FRIEDMAN: So what was your educational experience?

ROTHSTEIN: Remember, I grew up in the Depression in the '30s. Many people who are my age or are historians know that that was a very serious period. We lived very frugally. I don't even remember ever having a winter coat until I was about 17, when I started to go to work. My education ended when I went to high school.

FRIEDMAN: But you did graduate.

ROTHSTEIN: Yes, I did graduate.

FRIEDMAN: Where did you go to school?

ROTHSTEIN: I went to Girls' Commercial High School in Brooklyn, on Nostrand Avenue, Nostrand and Eastern Parkway. It was an all-girls school, out of my neighborhood, because my father thought I would get a better education in an all-girls school. God only knows why. It meant leaving the community in order to do that. Schools in New York were neighborhood organized – you had to live within a very specific place to go to one school or another. So I lived in a neighborhood, but I went to a different school than I was supposed to.

FRIEDMAN: You went to work at 17.

ROTHSTEIN: I went to work at 17. I went to work for Western Union and Postal Telegraph Union. I worked in the office. Actually what I did was fairly clerical. I posted the dues that came in from the membership. I belonged to a union myself. I belonged to a white-collar workers union. All of the people in our office belonged to a union. We negotiated with our bosses, like they did with Western Union and Western Telegraph. It was really very exciting to see how *they* treated us and how we had to fight to get raises and do all of the things that any worker has to do. So it was really a very interesting experience.

FRIEDMAN: So the clerical workers for the union were in a different union than the union that employed them.

ROTHSTEIN: Exactly correct.

FRIEDMAN: And my guess would be most of the clerical workers were women, if not all of them?

ROTHSTEIN: All of the clerical workers were women. I worked there until I was 19, and I got married, and I left for Cleveland, Ohio.

FRIEDMAN: Working for the union, had you wanted to be an organizer? Was that inspired by your dad, or was it just being in that milieu?

ROTHSTEIN: I wasn't an organizer at that point. I was a clerical worker. I hadn't thought about it, what I was going to be, one way or another. I just did what one did at that moment, and that was the job I had. I didn't think much about what the future was going to be and what I would do until a little while later.

FRIEDMAN: How did you meet David Rothstein? By the way, I didn't ask what your maiden name was.

ROTHSTEIN: My maiden name is Merson.

FRIEDMAN: How did you meet David?

ROTHSTEIN: I met David in Chicago, but I lived in Cleveland for many years.

FRIEDMAN: You were married before you met David?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes.

FRIEDMAN: Tell me about your first marriage.

ROTHSTEIN: Nobody knew that. I don't even know why I said it. I never said it. That's interesting, because I never say that, ever. I lived in Cleveland for about six years, and I went to work for the United Electrical Workers Union. I got to Cleveland. I was looking for a job. The only thing I knew was unions, and I looked in the phone book and found the United Electrical Workers Union AFL/CIO. I went there to find a job in their office. That's really what I was looking for. When I got there, it had struck me that there were no men in the office, and then, again, it struck me they were all at war. It was during World War II. So when I started to speak with people in the office, I said I was looking for a job as an organizer. They said, "We could use an organizer because all the guys are gone." So they hired me as an organizer.

FRIEDMAN: Were you the first woman they had hired for that?

ROTHSTEIN: I was the first woman they had hired. Again, it was serendipitous because I came there for one thing and decided, after looking around, that that's really what I should be doing.

FRIEDMAN: Had it not been World War II, if there had been a lot of men organizers around, do you think you would have gotten the job?

ROTHSTEIN: Probably not.

FRIEDMAN: How long were you married in your first marriage?

ROTHSTEIN: Just about four years.

FRIEDMAN: Was he also a union guy?

ROTHSTEIN: No, no, no. Went to school. He was an engineer.

FRIEDMAN: The marriage ended. You did not have any children from that?

ROTHSTEIN: I didn't have any children.

FRIEDMAN: How did you meet David?

ROTHSTEIN: I met Dave in Chicago.

FRIEDMAN: How did you get from Cleveland to Chicago?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes, I was going to tell you how I got from Cleveland. I went home. I went back to New York.

FRIEDMAN: After your marriage had ended.

ROTHSTEIN: No, I lived in Cleveland for a number of years after that, but I just decided it was time to go to New York, go home. But it was interesting, when I came home, my father, who was really a very wise man, said, "I think this is the wrong place for you. You really should not live in New York, because if you live in New York," he said, "We're going to bother you. We're going to want to know where you are, we're going to want to know where you're going, we're going to want to know who you're going with." He said, "What do you need that for? You lived alone, on your own."

FRIEDMAN: At this time, you were in your twenties already.

ROTHSTEIN: I was in my twenties. He said, "Don't do it. Don't come back." So I thought, "Well, okay, you don't love me." He said, "No, no, no, we do love you. That's why we're saying it." I went to the United Electrical Workers Union office, their headquarters, and I said, "I need a job. I'm looking for a job as a union organizer." We were still in wartime—it was the end of the war, really. They said they had a job in Chicago—would I like to go to Chicago? I said, "Sure, I'd be delighted." What was the job? The job was with the United Electrical Workers Union, and they were doing some organizing, and they needed some people out there to help.

I drove out to Chicago, got the address of a friend of a friend of a friend, and was lucky to be able to stay with them for a couple of days until I could locate myself a little more permanently. The way I did that was—when I was in Cleveland, there was an organizer there that had come in from Chicago to do some work, and he said, "If you're ever in Chicago, look us up." I said, "Okay," never thinking I'd ever be there.

I looked them up, because I had very little money and I needed someplace to stay more permanently. I knocked at their door and as my friend Irene, who was his wife, used

to say, "I stood at the door; I opened it, and I looked up, and there was this very tall person standing there, and she said, 'Your husband said that if I'm in Chicago I should come and visit with you.'" Irene said, "He did? That's very nice. That's very nice." She said, "Come on in." So I go in, and she's holding a little baby, and I said, "This is a newborn baby." Irene said, "Just a month." She said, "Let me ask you a question. Do you know how to bathe a baby?" I said, "Of course." She said, "Wonderful. If you bathe this baby, you could stay for dinner."

So I took the baby and went to the sink and did the kinds of things one does, and when I'm all through and I wrapped her in a towel and handed her to her mother, she said to me, "How did you learn to do that?" I said, "I didn't." I had never done it before. She said, "I would have killed you if you had dropped her." I said, "No, I would not have." Anyhow, they asked me to stay for dinner, and they asked me to stay, because they knew I didn't have any place to go. I lived with them. While I was living with them, she said, "Listen, I decided that the only way to get rid of you is to marry you off, so I'm going to find somebody." They introduced me to David.

David was a lawyer from the union, United Electrical Workers Union, and other unions. I was introduced to him actually the first week I was here.

FRIEDMAN: He was a good bit older than you.

ROTHSTEIN: David was 15 years older than I was.

FRIEDMAN: So you were 28 when you met him?

ROTHSTEIN: About 28.

FRIEDMAN: You were together until he died.

ROTHSTEIN: Yes.

FRIEDMAN: How long were you married?

ROTHSTEIN: About 33 years.

FRIEDMAN: We'll get back to the later part, but you're now in Chicago, you're organizing for UE.

ROTHSTEIN: No, I never organized for UE in Chicago because when I got to meet the people I was to work with, I asked them why did they have a job opening, and they said they had this woman that they wanted to get rid of. I said, "I don't do that. I don't get rid of other women. If you had wanted to get rid of somebody, you should have done that well before I came here, and the answer is I won't take the job," and I didn't. I went to work for another union. I worked on the switchboard because they didn't have an organizing job, and didn't hire women, anyhow, for organizing; they were much more heavy industry. I never worked for UE in Chicago.

Then I worked for United Packinghouse Workers Union. I went into the Swift & Company plant to force them to honor a clause, an EEO clause in the contract, which was the first in the country, as a matter of fact, an equal opportunity clause for women. They needed someone to go into the plant to prove that Swift & Company was not honoring the contract and they were not hiring—not only not hiring women—but they weren't hiring black women specifically. In order to prove that, I had to prove that they would hire me and would not hire black women.

FRIEDMAN: So you essentially went in under cover.

ROTHSTEIN: I went into the plant under a cloud of dust, actually, because I had never worked in a plant and said I did, and they hired me. We were all in a hiring hall. We were there for a couple of days, and every day the guy would come out on the platform and he'd say, "There are no jobs here." We'd all leave. The black women would leave; I would leave. Then there was a little cluster of women who didn't speak English, and someone was interpreting for them. We would all leave, and after about the third day, it occurred to me that that was kind of foolish of me. I was not quite understanding this process, and I decided to make eye contact with the guy who was saying, "There are no jobs today." In making eye contact, he kind of indicated with his eyes that I should stay after he says that. Everyone left, except me and the people who didn't speak English. We stayed. All the black women left. And that day, they hired about ten of us, and I went to work on the bacon line, which was very interesting, very fascinating.

FRIEDMAN: I hope you didn't keep kosher.

ROTHSTEIN: No, I didn't keep kosher, thank God! But I was the only one not working piece work. Everybody on the line worked piece work, and I was the packager. They worked very hard and very fast. All this stuff is coming down the line. It was like a Charlie Chaplin movie. After a while, I can't pack fast enough. So I figured, *The hell with it. I'm not getting paid to do that.* So I let the stuff fall and finally, when I had a break, I called Dave. I said "I can't stand this." He said, "So leave. You made your point. Leave." So I did. We made a point. There was a magazine that was put out by the union on this very issue. I think I still have it.

FRIEDMAN: You left work at one point.

ROTHSTEIN: I was working for the Packinghouse Workers Union. At one point Dave and I got married, and I decided that it was too hard to be in the union. We wanted to have a family, and traveling was something I didn't want to do at that point. So I quit. I stayed home, and I had two children, Martha and Jonathan. I was home when my friend Irene, the person I had lived with when I first came to Chicago, called to say she needed help. She was a lab technician originally, before she was a union organizer. She wanted me to help her answer the phone. She said everybody quit and she needed help, and I said, "Sure." I said, "I have a housekeeper that comes in and watches the kids. When she comes in, I'll come down and help you."

FRIEDMAN: How old were the kids? Where was Irene working?

ROTHSTEIN: Martha was in kindergarten or first grade, and Jonathan was not yet in school. Irene worked at the union health center—which was the Janitor Workers Union health center—and I came down to help her answer the phone. It was Dave’s contention, and correctly so—he said, “She’s going to suck you in. You’re going to work for her full time before this is over.” I said, “No, don’t be silly. I’m not going to go to work full time.” Sure enough, I did. She did suck me in. She said, “I will teach you how to do lab work.” I thought this was great because—other than union organizing—I didn’t have any skills that one gets when you go to college. I didn’t have that. You become an accountant, you become a lawyer, you become a doctor, you become whatever, a nurse, which I wanted to be at one time. This gave me an opportunity to get a skill. She taught me, and sure enough, I was hired at Jackson Park Hospital², as a chemistry technician.

FRIEDMAN: Do you remember when this was?

ROTHSTEIN: In the ‘50s.

FRIEDMAN: Did you enjoy it?

ROTHSTEIN: I liked it to the point that it had become boring. It is repetitive. I had said to the man who was the chief administrator, after he became ill—and he used to sign all our paychecks by hand, in the ‘50s. Imagine that? We didn’t get paid because he was sick. I convinced him that he needed to have a human resources department and that he needed to go to a bank and get a check writer. That took a while. He wasn’t quite sure he wanted to do all this, but I did convince him to set up a human resources department, and I became the head of it. I convinced him that, because of my union experiences, this would be just terrific for him. So I opened a human resources department at Jackson Park Hospital, and I ran it for a number of years. Then we decided to move from the South Side, and we moved to Evanston.

FRIEDMAN: Did you have a positive interest in administration or was it more just trying to get this guy to get the place together?

ROTHSTEIN: That’s an interesting question. I think it was the beginning of my interest in trying to break into work in the health care field other than just being a robot, although being a lab technician is certainly a very important position and very important in health care generally. However, I wasn’t skilled enough to be able to make it a profession for me. Now there are all kinds of machinery and mechanisms and all kinds of things that one does that we didn’t do and weren’t able to do and didn’t know anything about. So I think it’s certainly different today than what it was at that particular time.

FRIEDMAN: So now you have become an administrator running human resources. What are the memories from that shift from being a line tech to running a department?

ROTHSTEIN: I think the difference was that as the director of human resources, I had an opportunity to be a part of the administration of the hospital. It gave me an opportunity to help make change where possible. It was difficult. But it wasn’t something

² Currently Jackson Park Hospital and Medical Center (Chicago, IL)

that was repetitive, and it was something that I could become a part of, making a difference, and I think I did at that particular time and that particular hospital.

FRIEDMAN: So you pretty much caught the bug then.

ROTHSTEIN: I had the bug, no question.

FRIEDMAN: Then you moved to Evanston. It was a long commute, so did you leave Jackson Park at that point?

ROTHSTEIN: I left Jackson Park, but I'm trying to think at what point. When I worked at the union health center, the medical director of the union health center left at some point and went to Mount Sinai Hospital. When I left Jackson Park and we lived in Evanston, Dr. Abrams called me from Mount Sinai and said he would like to talk to me about a job.

FRIEDMAN: What was his position at Sinai?

ROTHSTEIN: He was the medical director of the ambulatory care service, and Mount Sinai at that point, as Rush³ did, had an OEO contract with the government, and they were to set up clinics in the community, two clinics: one, Rush was; and one, Mount Sinai.

FRIEDMAN: That's Office of Economic Opportunity, which was a 1960s program.

ROTHSTEIN: Dr. Abrams called me and said he needed someone to help them set up this clinic, and he thought I should come in and get this job. He thought it would be terrific, since I had been a union organizer, had worked with union health and had administrative skills. He was really quite excited about this. I wasn't sure I really wanted to do it. I didn't even know where Mount Sinai was, and in order to get there I think I must have traveled the whole city. When I came out, I had a parking ticket, so that really irritated me. I knew I was never going to work at Mount Sinai.

FRIEDMAN: Was your parking ticket on 15th?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes. On 15th Street.

FRIEDMAN: Just for the record, 15th is now named Ruth M. Rothstein Street.

ROTHSTEIN: I went to Mount Sinai, met with Herb, but I had to meet with the person who was the chief executive officer of the hospital.

FRIEDMAN: Who at that time was?

ROTHSTEIN: Nate Hellman. And Nate Hellman asked me about my education, and I said, "I only have a high school diploma." "Oh," he said, "not possible. Not doable.

³ Currently Rush University Medical Center (Chicago, IL)

Need to have a master's degree." He said, "It's a tough neighborhood, the west side. I think its better that a man do this job."

ROTHSTEIN: I said, "No, fine, fine. It's okay. I'm leaving." I got up—and he said, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. Don't leave." I said, "You just told me I couldn't have the job." He said, "Yeah, but I have another job." I said, "Oh? What is that?" He said, "I need a secretary." I said, "That's terrific. You better find somebody who can type." So I left. I walked out. Herb called me. He said, "What happened?" I told him. But Herb said, "Listen, do me a favor. Do something for me. Come work here. They need you here." I said, "Doing what? I'm certainly not going to be a secretary." He said, "No, no, what do you care? Anything. Do anything, as long as you're here." He said, "Ruth, trust me, they need you."



Mount Sinai Hospital (Chicago, IL)

After a lot of thought, I decided to go there. I figured, this would give me an opportunity to do something other than human resources and would give me an opportunity to learn more about hospitals. I knew about the laboratory. I knew about human resources. Didn't know anything about finances, and I didn't know anything about the admitting process, so I thought this would be a terrific way for me to learn, which is what I did. I went, and I worked in the admitting office. I was the chief of the admitting office. I did that for a couple of years. When Nate Hellman retired, they hired a person who used to work for the American Hospital Association, as a matter of fact.

FRIEDMAN: Who was that?

ROTHSTEIN: Fred Elliot, who worked for Crosby⁴. When he came, I went to see him. Someone suggested to me that I go talk to him and tell him what I did and what I knew and tell him he needs an aide de camp. I said, "That's terrific. What is an aide de camp?" Never heard of that. He said, "You'll be an assistant. Go." So I went in, and I talked to him. I said, "You need an aide de camp." Thank God *he* knew what it was, because I didn't. He said, "Maybe, I think I might." I said, "You will! I know you will." He said, "You wanna be it?" I said, "Of course." He said, "Okay, you can be it." So I became his aide de camp. He moved me into his office right next door. I used to go to board meetings with him. He was a wonderful guy. He really was a terrific guy, very bright, and I learned a lot from him as a human being, but he had about as much desire to be the chief administrator of a hospital as I had to do belly dancing on State and Madison⁵.

⁴ Edwin L. Crosby, MD, was Executive President of the American Hospital Association from 1954 to 1972.

⁵ The intersection of State Street and Madison Street is the center of downtown Chicago.

FRIEDMAN: How did he end up with the job?

ROTHSTEIN: I really don't know how he ended up with the job. He was well recommended by I don't know who. Came from the American Hospital Association. That's pretty exciting, I guess. He ended up with the job, and it was a bad match. It was a board of young Jewish men, all living in the suburbs, and Fred—who was a Buddhist—so this match was not made in heaven. He did a lot of traveling, and they didn't understand this at all. I would go to their meetings, and I'd take minutes.

Fred had a way of speaking that they didn't have a clue what he was saying, so when he would say something, they'd say to me, "What did he say?" I'd say, "What he said was the following." When he was out of town and I went to the executive committee meeting, they told me that they were having trouble. I said, "Don't talk to *me*. I don't want to hear anything about Fred Elliot. I simply do not, because if you do, I'll have to go and tell him, and I will tell him, so you better not. I don't think you want to do that with me in the room." They agreed that I was professionally appropriate, that that was absolutely right.

Anyhow, Fred left, and they set up a search committee, and I was on the search committee. I went through a number of interviews, all men. I heard what they were willing to pay, like \$50,000, and I was probably making 16. But people would come in and they would want country club memberships, and I kept saying, "You can't afford it." They finally hired someone. They hired a doctor. When they hired him, I said to the search committee, "Now that you've hired your chief executive officer or whatever you want to call him, I'm leaving, because I decided that I don't want to be someone's alter ego again. I've already done that."

They said, "What do you mean you're leaving?" I said, "I'm leaving. Going. Goodbye." They said, "We better go tell him." He was at a summer camp for the summer. He was a pediatrician. I said, "Yes, I guess you best tell him." When they went to tell him, he said, "Oh, I'm not going to come." He said, "I was coming because Ruth was there, and if she's leaving, I'm not coming." He said, "I'm quitting. I'm not coming."

They came back to tell me. I said, "Okay." So they said, "Do you want the job?" I said, "Well, of course." I became the administrator—they wouldn't give me the title of president or chief executive officer because the bylaws didn't enable them to do that, they thought. I said, "You know, you can change bylaws." That was a little bit of a struggle, but nonetheless, I did take the job.

Then we talked about salary. I said, "I only make \$16,000. You offered this guy 50. He was making 50!" So I think we settled for 20 or 22 or something. After I thought about it—it was an ego thing. It really truly was an ego thing. My position was I was going to eat, I was going to get clothes, I wasn't going to suffer, and I would have to prove myself differently than a man did. I had to work twice as hard as any guy would have worked there, because I had to prove myself, even though these were good people—and they were wonderful people. Imagine in 1972 a group of young Jewish men naming a woman as their chief administrator.

FRIEDMAN: A woman with a high school education.

ROTHSTEIN: One with a high school education. That was really pretty tough.

FRIEDMAN: No woman had ever run a Jewish teaching hospital in the country.

ROTHSTEIN: No woman had ever run a Jewish teaching hospital.

FRIEDMAN: Very few lay women had run anything.

ROTHSTEIN: Very few, in any hospital other than the Catholic order—only nuns.

FRIEDMAN: All through this period, people kept coming and saying they need you. People kept coming and saying, “Apply for this job. Do it anyway.” What do you think all these folks saw in you?

ROTHSTEIN: Some would say they thought I was tough. I think I had organizational skills. I probably was tough. I probably am. People say it all the time, so I guess I believe it by now, although for a very long time I always said, “Why do you say that? Why do you say that?” Someone once said, “Because it’s true!”

FRIEDMAN: I think there’s a difference between strength and toughness, and I would prefer the word “strong.”

ROTHSTEIN: I think I’m strong. I was certainly then. Mount Sinai was in very bad shape financially. Mount Sinai was barely making it, and there were really some serious questions about whether Mount Sinai should stay on the west side of Chicago.

FRIEDMAN: I want to get to both of those, but just for the chronology, when did David become ill?

ROTHSTEIN: David became ill in 1979.

FRIEDMAN: He had Parkinson’s.

ROTHSTEIN: He had Parkinson’s. It was diagnosed in ’79. He died in 1984.

FRIEDMAN: I do want to talk with you about the care giving, but you had a vision for Mount Sinai that you achieved probably more successfully than anyone with a community vision for a hospital has achieved in the United States. Would you talk about that a bit? Here you are, you inherit this place. It’s on the west side. It doesn’t have any money. Most of its original constituency now lives in the suburbs.

ROTHSTEIN: Most of its physicians had left. Many of their major admitters had left.

FRIEDMAN: You had a public housing project across the street.

ROTHSTEIN: We had public housing across the street.

FRIEDMAN: Describe North Lawndale just a little bit.

ROTHSTEIN: Lawndale has two pieces: One is North Lawndale, and one is South Lawndale. Mount Sinai's vision was never south; it was always north because the Jewish community lived in North Lawndale.

FRIEDMAN: In the '20s—not now.

ROTHSTEIN: Up until the Second World War, North Lawndale still had a fairly good-sized Jewish population. They started to move after the war. When the guys started to come back from the Army, they got G.I. Bill and went to school. Many of them got jobs, and they started to leave North Lawndale and started to move north to Albany Park. That was almost the next stop. Some in the suburbs, I guess. North Lawndale was then inhabited by an African-American community. Many of these folks had come in from the South, to Detroit, and worked in the automobile industry. When the war ended and they lost jobs, they moved to Chicago for jobs in the packinghouse and so on. So that was the movement.

The south part of Lawndale was inhabited by Slavic, Bohemian, Poles, and for some reason, maybe because it was never inhabited by the Jewish community, they never looked towards that part of the area. When I came there, the census had started to dwindle. Because the board didn't understand the new community that surrounded them, they kind of built a moat around the ER, and the community did not look at Mount Sinai kindly at that point. They felt that it was not their hospital, and they were not going to be accepted.

I realized that in order to win back any glory for Mount Sinai, of which it had much, it would require that we change attitudes and that we start to reach out to this community that lived there and make them welcome at our hospital. This was something that the board had to decide they wanted to do. The question that was posed to them was: If you want to stay here, then you have to reach out to this community, and we have to change the way we deal with people in our ER. If you don't want to stay here, which is another option, then you leave, close it, and move.

Mount Sinai was attached at that point to the Chicago Medical School⁶, and because it was a teaching institution, they felt very strongly about continuing their relationship with the Chicago Medical School. Needless to say, a number of years later the Chicago Medical School left them sitting on the west side of Chicago and moved to someplace in North Chicago.

But the decision that this board made—to their forever credit—was that they wanted to stay. They said, "Tell us what it takes to make these changes." It meant going out into the community. I had to hire an administrative staff. On Sundays, we—even some of the board members—would go to churches. All of my staff joined a community organization. Everybody was responsible for getting a community board and joining it. We became an integral part of the North Lawndale community. Our emergency room became much more friendly to people who lived there.

⁶ Chicago Medical School is currently part of Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science.

Of course, the problem was always financial, because many of the people who lived there had no insurance or if they had any insurance at all, it was Medicaid. The community was made up mostly of single women with kids. There wasn't even any real Medicare in that community and there still isn't. It was tough. It was a financial problem. But that board—to again their everlasting credit—they stayed, fought it out, and they're there today. They have made a major contribution to the health care of this country, certainly of the city and state.

FRIEDMAN: You did three things in particular for which you are renowned. The first thing is that not many people from the community were employed at the hospital. You really changed employment practices so that local people knew that they had a shot at jobs.

ROTHSTEIN: Exactly.

FRIEDMAN: The second is your work with the public housing project across the way.

ROTHSTEIN: Yes, with the women in the projects.

FRIEDMAN: The third is the clinic system that you developed. If you'd talk about those.

ROTHSTEIN: The clinic system was not as big as it had become when I went over to County. We merged Schwab Rehab Institute⁷ into the Mount Sinai family, so we ran both Mount Sinai as well as Schwab Rehab. We had two clinics on site at Mount Sinai. We had an OEO clinic in the North Lawndale community, which later became obsolete. I have to tell you it took no less than ten years to make this happen. It took no less than ten years for the State of Illinois to understand that Mount Sinai was an integral part of the fabric of the State of Illinois, and without Mount Sinai, the west side would suffer. To their credit as well, with a lot of arguing back and forth and a lot of fighting with the State of Illinois, Mount Sinai indeed held its own. With the City of Chicago, when they set up a system of trauma, they excluded Mount Sinai. I wouldn't let that happen.

FRIEDMAN: Most hospitals don't keep Level I trauma.

ROTHSTEIN: Exactly, and we wanted it. Why did we want it? We wanted it because I felt it gave Mount Sinai a chance to be recognized in the community and we needed to do that. As I said, it took us ten years. We had to put all the building pieces together: the community, the clinic system, the trauma center, the opening of the ER. It was like a puzzle. You put it together. I think what we were known for all over the country was that we went into the community—that we brought the community into our institution and we went into their institutions. None of the hospitals anywhere, and certainly none of the Jewish hospitals, had done this before.

FRIEDMAN: How did you handle changing hiring practices with the local folks?

⁷ Currently Schwab Rehabilitation Hospital (Chicago, IL)

ROTHSTEIN: We made it pretty well known that all jobs are posted and that everyone can come and look at the postings. When we went to the churches, we talked about job openings. We told them how they could come into the institution and find the jobs that were available to them. Even some of the aldermen and the people who think about patronage and how terrible it is—as Old Man Daley⁸ used to say, “Who do you hire, your enemies?” I was perfectly willing to hire someone that a congressman or an alderman recommended, with only one codicil—they have to be qualified to do the job, and they have to do the job. If they can’t, then they’re fired; don’t call me.

FRIEDMAN: Didn’t you engage in on-site training for some professions? You didn’t have a nursing school.

ROTHSTEIN: We had a nursing school. We closed the nursing school. The last graduation was probably in 1975. But, yes, we had a nursing school. We had training. We had laboratory training. We had technician training. We maintained that for a very long time. Closed the nursing school because it was hard to recruit young women, and it was becoming much too expensive for us to keep running it. But we had a number of job training courses on site for people in the community.

FRIEDMAN: Now, tell me about your work with the women in the project across the way, because that became a national model.

ROTHSTEIN: There was a big housing development, which is now gone. One of the things that got me started with it was that it was not clean. There was a lot of waste around, and the grass had not been taken care of. We had to figure out how to engage women in the housing project, because there were mostly women who lived there, and to enable them to take charge of their own destiny and decide what they wanted to be and what they wanted to do. We started to offer the women in the housing project job training so that when jobs became available at Mount Sinai, they would have first dibs on the jobs. This would enable them to do a better job as parents for these kids. We talked about making sure that the kids went to school. We also talked about cleaning up around the housing project. We kept meeting with the city to make sure that the city gave them the kinds of services that they deserved and should have had. We became their organizers. But our position was, with the housing project: You have to do what’s in your best interest, and you have to figure out what *is* in your best interest. Not in my best interest, but in yours. We had a really good relationship with them.

FRIEDMAN: As you look back at 25 years at Sinai, what are you proudest of and what do you think was the greatest lesson you learned?

ROTHSTEIN: The fact that Sinai is still on the west side of Chicago—that Sinai is a recognized institution of excellence makes me very proud. I think that the only reason Sinai survived, and I truly believe this with all my heart, was because we went into the community. Had we not, I don’t think Sinai would be there today. But today they are there. They are a major care giver for both North and South Lawndale, a major care giver in OB. They deliver many, many babies, which is really very exciting. They’re a very proud

⁸ Richard J. Daley was mayor of Chicago from 1955 to 1976.

institution that's going to maybe even build a new hospital, which would be so wonderful for the west side of Chicago.

FRIEDMAN: The Lawndale neighborhoods have started to repopulate.

ROTHSTEIN: Yes, we did some stuff in housing. We built some housing with the Neighborhood Housing Service. We built the first new housing that they had in about 38 years, right behind the hospital, some little townhouses, and that was a very exciting experience as well.

FRIEDMAN: David was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 1979. How were you able to balance care giving with running a major teaching hospital?

ROTHSTEIN: People would say to me, "How terrible it is for you that David is sick." I said, "No, it isn't terrible for *me*. It's terrible for him," because he was so vibrant and such a good lawyer and such a caring guy, so it was really terrible for him. I was able to work because I was able to get outside care giving for Dave. We had full-time help around the clock. But even with the full-time help around the clock, people can't work seven days a week, 24 hours a day, so I would pitch in when I would come home at night, and I would be the caregiver at night. Again, with help. Women are the caregivers in more instances than not. Fortunately I was able to afford help. There are women who can't afford help, and yet they have to work, they have little kids, and it's a very difficult situation in this country because caregiving is still on the backs of most women.

FRIEDMAN: At no time did you think about leaving Sinai?

ROTHSTEIN: No, I didn't think about leaving Sinai. I had already put in many, many, many years, 25 years. If I were to leave Sinai, it would be to retire.

FRIEDMAN: David died in 1985.

ROTHSTEIN: Eighty-four.

FRIEDMAN: Eighty-four. And how old was he?

ROTHSTEIN: Seventy-five. I was 60.

FRIEDMAN: You were able to continue at Sinai, continuing this killing schedule. That's very impressive.

ROTHSTEIN: As I say, women work twice as hard as men.

FRIEDMAN: When did you decide to leave Sinai?

ROTHSTEIN: I really hadn't decided to leave Sinai. If I was going to leave Sinai after 25 years, I really was going to retire. I was 68, and I had really felt, *Maybe this is the time for me to retire* when I got a call from Richard Phelan, who was then the newly-elected president of the County Board, asking me to meet with him. I wasn't sure I was going to do that. The reason I even went to meet with him is because one of our board members asked

me to. It was Susan Manilow, and Susan asked me to go meet with him, that he wanted to talk to me.

FRIEDMAN: When you left Sinai, both the C-suite leadership and the board looked a lot different than when you'd gotten there.

ROTHSTEIN: Absolutely, much different.

FRIEDMAN: There were women on the board.

ROTHSTEIN: There were some women on the board, yes. The diversity took a very long time. It wasn't an easy thing to do. But I think after I left, the momentum kept going, and I think it even changed even more after I left.

FRIEDMAN: So what was the greatest lesson from your time at Sinai?

ROTHSTEIN: That you can't run an institution in a vacuum. At every institution, and I don't care if it's on the Gold Coast⁹ or on the west side of Chicago, you have a responsibility to a community.

[End of first part of the interview.]

FRIEDMAN: I'd like to start with a rather special honor. Although the city has named a lot of streets since then, this was one of the very early times. Can you tell me how that came about? Who came up with the idea?

ROTHSTEIN: The board.

FRIEDMAN: Now, did they know you were leaving at the time?

ROTHSTEIN: No, I wasn't leaving at the time.

FRIEDMAN: When did that happen, then?

ROTHSTEIN: I think it happened when we rebuilt the kitchen and we put in a new cafeteria and a new board room, and we built a kind of a porch off the cafeteria for special functions. It was very



The City of Chicago named West 15th Place after Ruth M. Rothstein. Mount Sinai Hospital is in the background.

⁹ The Gold Coast is an affluent lakefront neighborhood in downtown Chicago.

beautiful, and there were lots of windows, and it looked out into the park. Someone on the board had the idea that they ought to name that street, which was 15th Place, after me. On 15th Place was this new porch, but it also had the old nurses' building, where the nursing school was. There was some new housing at the end of the street. It was a board issue. I was kind of surprised when they did it.

FRIEDMAN: So where you got a parking ticket the better part of forty years earlier—

ROTHSTEIN: It was probably on 15th Place.

FRIEDMAN: —they ended up naming for you.

ROTHSTEIN: Because I paid the ticket.

FRIEDMAN: Okay, so where we were before the break was—Dick Phelan called and said—and you're still running Sinai at the time, and you're thinking, *Maybe I'll retire, and maybe I won't.*

ROTHSTEIN: Yes.

FRIEDMAN: Then Dick Phelan, the president of the Cook County board, calls you.

ROTHSTEIN: Yes.

FRIEDMAN: This would have been about 1990.

ROTHSTEIN: The end of 1990.

FRIEDMAN: You weren't sure you wanted to talk to him.

ROTHSTEIN: I wasn't sure, but one of our board members, as I said, Susan Manilow, was a personal friend of Dick's, and she said, "Please go speak with him." He talked about all of the problems that he knew were going on at Cook County Hospital and that he felt that some major changes needed to take place. The person who had been running it was really not doing very much. He wanted to know if I would take that job, to run Cook County Hospital, and I said, "My instinct is to say no, because I think it's too hard."

FRIEDMAN: Could you just provide us a little bit of the history? Because this was shortly after Hyatt had had the management contract.

ROTHSTEIN: There were many problems with Cook County. Three or four different forces were in Cook County Hospital. They had a consulting firm, and that failed. They hired an individual from that consulting firm, and he failed. Wonderful guy, a wonderful friend and a wonderful guy, who failed not because he was incompetent—he failed because of the way the place is structured.

FRIEDMAN: It was an impossible situation.

ROTHSTEIN: It was an impossible job, the way the place is structured, and the relationship of the institution to an elected board, which makes it different than an appointed board. An appointed board—you work with them in a different manner. An elected board—they're elected by the people of the county, and they're quite different. It failed. Then they hired Dr. Haughton¹⁰. Dr. Haughton and the board had some very serious difficulties, and they set up a health and hospital commission, of which Dr. Haughton was the executive. But they didn't set it up in a way that enabled them to really function, because the budget was controlled by another body. So they got into grave difficulties over this issue. And when President Phelan asked me to run Cook County Hospital, it was under a cloud and a backdrop of so many failures and so many problems that I thought, *wow, this would really send me into a tizzy*.

FRIEDMAN: Would you describe the state of the physical plant at that time?

ROTHSTEIN:
The physical plant, the old Cook County Hospital, was so bad, that if you brought someone through it, they would immediately run away screaming. The OB department was so awful, women gave birth on what they called a "labor line." This was 1991. A labor line was a very, very large room with beds lined up, cots lined up, side by side through the whole room, and every woman labored together in this one room.

FRIEDMAN:
With the residents coming along and catching the babies as they came out.



The façade of the old Cook County Hospital (Chicago, IL)

ROTHSTEIN: Mostly residents delivering the babies.

FRIEDMAN: Not knowing the mother's name, not knowing anything.

¹⁰ James G. Haughton, MD

ROTHSTEIN: So that was a labor line, and that was what was at County Hospital. They had had many problems, many, many problems in the '70s and in the '80s, and running it was going to be pretty tough.

FRIEDMAN: Why did you take the job?

ROTHSTEIN: I keep saying that to myself. I had told President Phelan that I didn't want to run a hospital, that I had already done that twice and that what I really would



Statue of Louis Pasteur near Cook County Hospital

like to do, if it were possible, I would like to really develop a public policy approach to the institution. What I would like for him to do, if he could, would be to put all of the health care in the County of Cook under one label, and that would be a bureau of health for the County of Cook. That, I would consider. That would mean that he would have the county hospital, Oak Forest Hospital¹¹, the six or seven clinics, the Department of Public Health for the county, all under one head. We did not have Provident¹² yet. It was in the process of being delivered or bought out. He agreed; and, he agreed that any future health care would come under the rubric of the Cook County Bureau of Health. Under those conditions, I felt it was worth taking a shot at putting together a health system and start to develop a new way of delivering care.

FRIEDMAN: Did anybody tell you that, for a 68-year-old widow to take on running health services in Cook County as a retirement job was essentially insane?

ROTHSTEIN: I don't think anybody said that. There were some friends who thought I was slightly off my rocker, but I really felt it was worth doing. I really believed that. I really believed that there were good things that could come from delivering health care differently than they had in the past; and, of course, I wanted to prove that it could be done.

FRIEDMAN: What was the reaction at Sinai?

ROTHSTEIN: The board at Sinai was very upset at the time because, you remember, I only went for six months. I left Sinai for six months. I took a leave of absence, and I said to them, "I'm sure I'm going to hate it, and at the end of six months I'll probably be back." There were many days when, in the middle of the night, I would have run away, packed up my bags and run away, because it was not an easy job to do.

But I have to tell you, I had a lot of good help. I had good people surrounding me that I was able to hire. Not a whole lot. I was able to hire some wonderful people. I was able to deal with the president. He was very forthcoming and very helpful, and he had a

¹¹ Currently Oak Forest Hospital of Cook County (Oak Forest, IL)

¹² Currently Provident Hospital of Cook County (Chicago, IL)

similar public health view as I did. I was able to work with the board. It took a while. It took a little while for us to get to know each other, but once we did—we were able to work together and to figure out how to make a difference.

FRIEDMAN: When did Commissioner Stroger come to you and start talking about building a new hospital? Probably your second day on the job.

ROTHSTEIN: Second day on the job. But interestingly enough, others talked to me about *not* building a new hospital. The Civic Federation—

FRIEDMAN: In which you were very active.

ROTHSTEIN: Not at that point. Clark Berth from the bank, Lester Crown from the—was he from the Civic Federation—came to me and said, “If you want to build a new hospital, we’re opposed to it because there are enough beds in this city, and we don’t need a new hospital. From the business point of view, it doesn’t make sense.” My position at that point was, even though I didn’t necessarily agree, I said, “It has some merit. We have to look at it. My suggestion would be that we set up an advisory committee of the business community, the provider community and members from the Lawndale community. We set up a group and we start to study whether it makes sense to keep this hospital, as dysfunctional as it is, or does it make sense to build a new hospital? Will it be more business friendly?”

They thought that was a great idea, and we had an advisory committee made up of all these people, and we did spend a year to study it, and we were fortunate to get services free from accounting firms who took a look at what was going on. We had the provider community very much involved. We had the Chicago Hospital Council; we had the Illinois Hospital Association involved in looking at—is this something for us to do?

FRIEDMAN: Did the Chicago Hospital Council take any position?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes, they voted unanimously to approve it after we made a presentation and my position was very clear: if you don’t approve it, if you don’t agree, then x number of hundreds of thousands of people who go to County Hospital and county facilities will be at your door.

FRIEDMAN: Nothing like playing hardball, Ruth.

ROTHSTEIN: You know, “Hey, make up your mind.” And I left. I left, and before I got into my car, somebody came running down the stairs and said, “They voted unanimously to approve.” I said, “I’m very touched.” Very touched. But I have to tell you, when I went to County, I had the chief executive officers of the three major institutions—Rush, Northwestern and University of Chicago—call me and say, “What can we do to help you? What do you need?”

FRIEDMAN: Wasn’t Children’s helpful to you as well?

ROTHSTEIN: No, just those three. It was Ralph at the University of Chicago. It was Gary Mecklenburg, and it was Leo Hennicoff. I said to Gary Mecklenburg, “Why are you guys offering me help? What is with you? What is this? I’m impressed.” They said,

“We don’t want you to leave. We want you to stay there and fix it.” That was really very, very, very excellent of them to do that. I really was most appreciative.

FRIEDMAN: Tell me a bit about getting the new plant built, but also about some of the other innovations you were able to institute during your time. I also am interested in John Stroger’s role in all of this.

ROTHSTEIN: John Stroger¹³ was the chairman of the finance committee when Dick Phelan was president of the County Board, and the succession has been from the finance committee to the president, although it didn’t happen with Dick Phelan, who was an outsider. It was John’s turn, and it was fair for John to run for president of the County Board. He had been there for some 28 years. His dream and his legacy was to build a new Cook County Hospital. He was very supportive. John Stroger was a really remarkable guy in many ways. He came from Arkansas and went to school here. His mother was very insistent that he leave Arkansas.



Groundbreaking for the new Cook County Hospital. John H. Stroger, Jr., is at far left. Ruth Rothstein is at right. Photo courtesy Ruth M. Rothstein.

FRIEDMAN: His family were sharecroppers, weren’t they?

ROTHSTEIN: They were sharecroppers, exactly. John came here to go to school. I don’t know quite whether he came here directly to go to law school or whether he came here and went into undergraduate. But anyway, he did go to law school here.

He was a ward committeeman. He was a very integral part of the Democratic Party. It always blows my mind when I think about it. I think to myself, *Here is this guy, who is African-American, who was probably one of the few blacks in the machine apparatus. How he must have felt! How strong he must have been to want to make it, to have been one of the few blacks to have risen to Mayor Daley’s office.* He was very loyal to the Daleys. He was very loyal to the mayor and said so all the time. He was just a very loyal guy. His dream, his real dream, was to build a new hospital for people who needed it more than anybody else. He also was very active in the Public Hospital Association,¹⁴ on their health care committee. He was an integral part of the health care scene for all of his adult life.

I worked for him, and I respected him, and I believe he respected me. He categorized people very easily. If you were an accountant, don’t talk to him about law, “because you’re an accountant.” If you’re a nurse, don’t talk to him about accountants, “because you’re a nurse.” So I said to him, “John, you categorize people all the time. That’s

¹³ John H. Stroger, Jr. (1929-2008) was the first African American to be elected President of the Cook County Board of Commissioners.

¹⁴ Currently the National Association of Public Hospitals and Health Systems

terrible. What am I?” He said, “You”—and he looked at me—he said, “You’re a union organizer.” I said, “John, I haven’t been that for 40 years!”

FRIEDMAN: But you and he were able to pull something off that people had been trying to do for 50 years.

ROTHSTEIN: Yes. I think the beginning of it came with Phelan. Phelan also wanted to leave his mark in health care, and building a new Cook County Hospital was very important to him as well. Up to the day he left, we had gone to the Facilities Planning Board with our plan to build a new hospital. He left, John became president of the County Board, and we picked up from there, and we worked our way through it. It took quite a while. It didn’t just happen. It took about three years.

FRIEDMAN: How was it funded?

ROTHSTEIN: It was funded by bonds—and successfully. We got unanimous approval to build that hospital from the Facilities Planning Board.

FRIEDMAN: Would you tell the story of the last rounds that you did before you moved into the new hospital?



The John H. Stroger, Jr. Hospital of Cook County (Chicago, IL)

ROTHSTEIN: One of the doctors talked about, “Before we open the new hospital and close the old hospital, we should do a last Grand Round.” That would require that we bring back all of the doctors who had worked at Cook County Hospital at one time and who had trained there, and worked there—and have a ceremony. We were going to have a big panel discussion before we opened the new hospital. I went up to the fifth floor of the new hospital, which was still closed, and I was standing and looking out the window.

What I saw were hundreds and hundreds of doctors who had worked there, trained there, still worked there some of them, in white coats, and their stethoscopes around their neck, marching from—it’s very touching!

FRIEDMAN: They took them all through the old hospital.

ROTHSTEIN: They came from the old hospital to the new hospital, to go through it and then to have a ceremony. We had a panel discussion. Studs Terkel, as a matter of fact, was the chair of that panel.

FRIEDMAN: A lot of the physicians were in tears.

ROTHSTEIN: They came from out of town. They came from all over. Yes, it was really touching.

FRIEDMAN: It means a lot. It's our hospital.

ROTHSTEIN: When I got there, I figured there were a couple of things that had to be done. One was to open a new hospital. Also, during Phelan's time, we reopened Provident Hospital, because the community really wanted it to open. I'm not sure it was absolutely necessary to do it, but enough pressure was put on for us to do it.

We needed to build a new hospital, develop an ambulatory care system, and look at our teaching relationships. Those were the three things that I felt that I could look at and probably even accomplish. Together with my staff of good people, bright people, and the medical staff of all the facilities, we set up a system of committees to deal with these three issues. The committees came from all of the institutions. We left nobody out. They would come up with reports: Do we need and can we build a new Cook County Hospital? Our advisory committee was part of that. How far should we develop an ambulatory care system? What kind of an academic relationship do we need? Because when I came to County, every medical school was cherry-picking at the institution, and I felt—and my staff felt—that this was wrong.

FRIEDMAN: Would you explain that comment?

ROTHSTEIN: All of the medical schools, five or six of them came, and they each had a piece of the institution. Northwestern had surgery, somebody else had OB, somebody else had pediatrics. But there was no unified training program. Everybody picked what they wanted, what was in their best interest but not necessarily what was in County's best interest. So we developed an RFP, which we sent out to every medical school, a request for proposal to be a single medical school for County. That brought about a lot of buzz. That got everybody's attention. We sent it out to everybody: the U of I, everybody. The only response we got was from Rush. That's why today Rush is the academic arm for the Bureau of Health, which I think is quite wonderful. It was good for them, and it was good for County. It was a very good marriage. That doesn't mean that there aren't some medical students from one or another place. There are. But by and large, the major relationship is with Rush for academia. Also, we built the CORE center, together with Rush. We had a partnership with Rush.

FRIEDMAN: Would you talk about the CORE Center?

ROTHSTEIN: It was a dream to take out of the hospital, which was in terrible shape at that time, take out of the hospital the HIV and AIDS patients and to try to treat them primarily on an outpatient basis. There was no room in the old Fantus Clinic, which is still there. There was no room to treat people with dignity. The suggestion by some of the

physicians was: Could we build another facility for infectious disease, to take care of infectious disease on an outpatient basis, because people will be better taken care of?

That was a challenge, to say the least. They wanted about a 60,000 square foot building. I was pretty frightened about where this money was going to come from, particularly since we wanted to build a new building. It was really a tough thing. I said, "I'll agree to it two ways, two things: One, it can't be 60,000 square feet. Forty thousand square feet, I'll agree to." I don't know why. It sounded like a nice number. Well, 40,000 square feet and how much? Thirty million. Okay, 40,000 square feet, \$30 million. I would agree to it if we could figure out how to get the money not from the County. Firstly, we worked with Rush. They wanted to participate, so we developed a partnership with Rush. We were very fortunate to have Christie Hefner as our champion.

FRIEDMAN: President of the Playboy Foundation.

ROTHSTEIN: She, together with me and Leo Hennicoff and others, started a fund-raising campaign. We raised \$30 million. Much of it came from the federal government, state government. None of it came from the county government or the city. None of it came from Rush. It came from foundations, corporations and the feds and the state. Christie was just fabulous. She was just wonderful. The CORE Center has been open now for ten years.



Ruth M. Rothstein CORE Center (Chicago, IL)

FRIEDMAN: What does CORE stand for?

ROTHSTEIN: Nothing. We had no other name. We didn't know what else to call it. Somebody said, "You have to have a name," and we couldn't figure out a name. Somebody said, "How about CORE?" "Why CORE?" "Well, it's a core." We don't know why.

FRIEDMAN: What's it called now?

ROTHSTEIN: Ruth M. Rothstein CORE Center.

ROTHSTEIN: It's been ten years now, and in ten years we've not raised any money. We set up a foundation with the excess funds that we did raise, and now it's time for us to take another look, a hard look after ten years, to start to raise some funds again.

The CORE Center has done a phenomenal job. Firstly, they're a model for other parts of the country, which have come and looked at it and tried to develop something like it. We've trained people from Africa, Mexico, and other countries, Malaysia, who come, learn and bring back the information to their countries. They run many clinics in both the Hispanic community as well as the African-American community. It's just a very remarkable center. The work that's done there—the research, the grants that they've gotten to do research—is absolutely remarkable, and that staff is just superb. They do just very, very exciting and great things. They work with the jail, and they work with the people who are inmates so that they don't spread AIDS into the community when they're let go, so we're able to do that. It's a wonderful place.

FRIEDMAN: I should add, for the record, that Cermak Memorial Hospital¹⁵, which is the hospital for inmates of the Cook County Jail, is also part of the Bureau.

ROTHSTEIN: We also built that.

FRIEDMAN: Yes. Built a new one of them, too. I visited there. When did you decide to leave county service?

ROTHSTEIN: I really wanted to leave when I was 80. I decided that that was enough. When I told President Stroger that I wanted to leave, he said, "You can't do that." I said, "Yes, when you get to be 80, you can do anything. And therefore I can do it." He said, "You have to wait till I find somebody." I said, "Okay, I will do that, but it better not take too long." So I actually left when I was 81. I left in July of 2004.

FRIEDMAN: What are you doing now?

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, my goodness, I'm having such fun. When people ask me, "What do you do when you retire?" and how frightened they become, I say, "No, no, no, don't worry about what you're going to do. The first thing you do is take care of yourself. The second thing you do is decide: "What were the things I wanted to do that I never was able to do?" I wanted to learn to speak Spanish, and so I went out, and I got a tutor—I can't speak, mind you, but I sound like I can. I go travel in South America and Central America, Mexico, and I make believe I can speak, and so it's kind of fun.

The other thing is I wanted to play the piano. Never played the piano in my life, and I wanted to do it. I wanted to play pop. I wanted to play stuff I knew, stuff I could sing to, other people could sing to. I bought a keyboard, and I take piano lessons. Every week I take a piano lesson, every Monday.

I am also the chairman of the board at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science. I chair that board because they got into some difficulty and asked if I would chair that board and bring it back to some stature. We have done that. We have a new board. We keep recruiting new, wonderful people, and they, too, train some really very, very good docs and other allied health professionals.

FRIEDMAN: What have you learned from your trusteeship duties in terms of the difference between being a trustee leader and being an executive leader?

¹⁵ Currently Cermak Health Services of Cook County (Chicago, IL)

ROTHSTEIN: When I worked with the board, I was always very concerned that they not interfere in the day-to-day operations of the institution, and I made it very clear that that's not something one tolerates easily. A board is to give advice. A board is to do oversight. A board is to be cognizant of their fiduciary responsibility. But they don't run it. The executive runs it.

I have to be very careful, as a chairman of a board or even as a member of a board—because I've seen too many of my colleagues go on boards and then try to run them when they would not tolerate it if somebody did this to them. So I try very hard, and I think because I'm cognizant of it, I am very careful about what role I play.

FRIEDMAN: Two of the boards on which you have served are the Illinois Hospital Association and the American Hospital Association.

ROTHSTEIN: Yes.

FRIEDMAN: Your close friend and fellow Rosalind Franklin trustee, Gail Warden, ran the AHA at one time.

ROTHSTEIN: At one time. He ran the AHA, and at one time he was its chair.

FRIEDMAN: He was at Rush for a long time as well.

ROTHSTEIN: At one time he was at Rush, and we are friends.

FRIEDMAN: Given that you've had a lot of hospital association experience what sort of hope would you have for the AHA in the future, for hospital associations generally?

ROTHSTEIN: Like any association, there are difficulties. The difficulties are that there are differences among institutions in terms of need, in terms of desire and in terms of what they want for themselves. It is difficult for a disproportionate share hospital and a non-disproportionate share hospital to have the same interests. It shouldn't be. We should have the same interests, but it's not always workable. I believe that for me personally, as a member of any association, my desire would be to assure that everyone has health care in this country. That is not true—54 million people do not have health insurance in this country. I personally believe in a single payer system. I believe, and have always believed and said this even when I was in the admitting office, that health care is a right and it's not a privilege.

FRIEDMAN: What are a couple of lessons in terms of getting along with physicians? I understand it's different when they're salaried employees, but most executives do not have that opportunity to have them be on salary.

ROTHSTEIN: Having salaried employees has its advantages, and it has its disadvantages, because even if you're with salaried employees, you have to respect the professional. You have to respect their dignity. You have to respect their work. So in many ways, it's the same. I like to believe that I was able to win over both the physician cadre at Sinai and at County because they became inclusive. I included them in everything that I did.

FRIEDMAN: You made a particular point of including them in terms of the planning for the new County Hospital.

ROTHSTEIN: Absolutely, the new County Hospital, the clinic system, the academic process—they were always a part of the solution. I believe that without it, you can't make it. They're the only ones who can admit patients.

FRIEDMAN: You also have helped many women in many different situations. You've mentored them; you've seen that they were part of your leadership team. I remember when we had our first conference at the United Hospital Fund in New York on health care for women, and you were the keynote speaker, and you had everybody in tears and got a standing ovation. You've inspired a great many women to feel that they have a bright future in health care. How does the future of women as leaders in health care look to you right now?

ROTHSTEIN: I think it looks pretty good in health care. I'll never forget when one chief executive officer from one of the hospitals said to me, "Because of you," he said, "I started to look at hiring women executives in my institution." So, I think that it's different. Do we still have to fight? The answer is yes. Do you still have to make sure you're going to get there? The answer is yes. But the thing is that those of us who have gotten there—make sure you take another woman with you. Look behind you, and take another woman with you. I think it makes a difference.

FRIEDMAN: We could talk about Gail Warden, who went way out of his way to mentor women. There's a group of pretty highly-placed women in health care who call themselves Gail's Girls.

ROTHSTEIN: That's right. The person who replaced Gail is a woman. Which is to his credit.

FRIEDMAN: The idea of mentoring, however—a lot of women say, "I don't have the time." But on the other hand, a lot of women executives complain that they didn't have anybody, growing up. Certainly did not have women mentors. You can have a Gail Warden, but he's still a "he." How important is it that women who have succeeded make the time to mentor somebody else?

ROTHSTEIN: It's critical. If women don't do it, they're being grossly irresponsible to themselves as well as their families, because they must have daughters, and they will want those daughters to be mentored as well. It's an imperative that you mentor and that you really follow through and you don't let it fall by the wayside.

FRIEDMAN: What do you think are the three most salient characteristics of a good leader?

ROTHSTEIN: Strength, ability to make a decision, and ability to take a risk.

FRIEDMAN: If you could go back and do something different, what would you change? One thing you'd do different.

ROTHSTEIN: Probably go and get a degree. I probably would have been a lawyer or a nurse. I probably would have gone to school. If I had something to do over again, that may have been what I would have done.

FRIEDMAN: Do you think you would have ended up in the same place if you had done that?

ROTHSTEIN: No. As my husband would have said, “You’d be a director of nursing.”

FRIEDMAN: What is your biggest professional regret? Or was that it?

ROTHSTEIN: That I couldn’t be a doctor, couldn’t be a nurse.

FRIEDMAN: What would you name as your greatest professional accomplishment?

ROTHSTEIN: The new Cook County Hospital and the CORE Center.

FRIEDMAN: What are you planning on doing from here on in?

ROTHSTEIN: The same thing I’m doing: traveling, playing the piano, learning to speak Spanish.

FRIEDMAN: Will you teach at all? Be a bit of a presenter?

ROTHSTEIN: No. Teaching is a particular skill. Lecturing is different than teaching. I tried a class with Ralph Muller, and it was very hard work, and I didn’t want to do that kind of hard work.

FRIEDMAN: But you might lecture.

ROTHSTEIN: I don’t mind doing that. If somebody will call me, yes, and if I’m free to do it, I will do it.

FRIEDMAN: Are you going to write your memoirs?

ROTHSTEIN: Probably not.

FRIEDMAN: Then I guess this will be the record.

ROTHSTEIN: Exactly.

INDEX

- Abrams, Herb, Dr., 9, 10
- Accomplishments, 29
- Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, 24, 26
- American Hospital Association, 11, 27
 - issues, 27
- Awards
 - Street naming, 17
- Blacks, 7
- Brooklyn (New York City), 1
- Ceremonies
 - closing old hospital, 23
 - opening new hospital, 23
- Cermak Health Services of Cook County (Chicago, Illinois), 26
- Chicago (Illinois)
 - North Lawndale, 13
- Chicago Hospital Council, 21
- Chicago Medical School (Chicago), 13
- Civic Federation (Chicago, Illinois), 21
- Clinics
 - outpatient, 14
- Community service, 13
- Cook County Board of Commissioners (Chicago, Illinois), 18
- Cook County Hospital (Chicago, Illinois), 18, 19
- Cook County Jail (Chicago, Illinois), 26
- Crosby, Edwin L., 10
- Crown, Lester, 21
- Daley, Richard J., 15, 22
- Depression (United States), 3
- Discrimination, 7
- Discrimination in hospitals, 14
- Diversity, 17
- Elliot, Fred, 10
- Emergency medical services, 14
- Equal Employment Opportunity, 7
- Fantus Clinic (Chicago, Illinois), 24
- Girls' Commercial High School (Brooklyn, New York), 3
- Governing board
 - CEO-board relations, 27
 - chair, 26
 - elected versus appointed, 19
 - role, 27
 - trustees, female, 17
- Government agencies
 - consolidation, 20
- Grand rounds
 - Symbolic, 23
- Haughton, James G., MD, 19
- Health care
 - right versus privilege, 27
- Health facility closure, 23
- Health services
 - big cities, 20
 - district concept, 20
- Hefner, Christie, 25
- Hellman, Nate, 9, 10
- Hennicoff, Leo, 21, 25
- Hiring practices, 14
- Honors and awards. *See* Awards
- Hospital administration
 - physicians relationships, 27
- Hospitals
 - county, 18
 - Jewish, 13, 14
 - opening new hospital, 23
 - physical plant issues, 19
 - public, 18
 - replacement, 21
 - safety net, 18
 - urban, 12
- Housing, 16
- Housing, public, 15
- Human resources department, 8, 14
- Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board (Springfield, Illinois), 23
- Illinois Hospital Association, 21, 27
- Jackson Park Hospital and Medical Center (Chicago, Illinois), 8
- John H. Stroger, Jr. Hospital of Cook County (Chicago, Illinois), 23
- labor line. *See* Obstetrics and gynecology department, hospital
- Labor unions, 2
 - union organizing, 4, 5, 7, 9, 23
- Laboratories, 8
- Leadership, 12
 - characteristics, 28
- Lessons learned, 15, 17
- Manilow, Susan, 17, 18
- Mecklenburg, Gary, 21

Medical schools
 affiliation, 24
 Medical staff
 hospital relations, 27
 Mentoring, 28
 Models, organizational, 15, 20
 Mount Sinai Hospital (Chicago, Illinois),
 1, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15
 National Association of Public Hospitals
 and Health Systems, 22
 Neighborhood Housing Service (Chicago,
 Illinois), 16
 Northwestern University
 Medical School, 24
 Oak Forest Hospital of Cook County
 (Chicago, Illinois), 20
 Obstetrics and gynecology department,
 hospital
 labor line, 19
 Opening new hospital. *See* Hospitals
 Outpatient care, 14
 Outreach programs, 13
 Packinghouse Workers Union, 7
 Phelan, Richard, 16, 18, 22, 23
 Playboy Foundation (Chicago, Illinois), 25
 Postal Telegraph, 3
 Provident Hospital of Cook County
 (Chicago, Illinois), 24
 Public housing. *See* Housing, public

 Regrets, 29
 Reimbursement
 single payer system, 27
 replacement hospitals. *See* Hospitals
 Retirement, 26
 Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine
 and Science (North Chicago, Illinois),
 26
 Rothstein, David, 4, 6, 7, 12, 16
 Rush Medical College (Chicago, Illinois),
 24
 Ruth M. Rothstein CORE Center
 (Chicago, Illinois), 24, 25
 Schools, nursing, 15
 Single payer system. *See* Reimbursement
 Street naming. *See* Awards
 Stroger, John H., Jr., 21, 22, 26
 Swift & Company, 7
 Terkel, Studs, 24
 Trauma centers, 14
 U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, 9
 clinics, 14
 United Electrical Workers Union, 4, 5
 United Hospital Fund (New York), 28
 United Packinghouse Workers Union, 7
 Warden, Gail L., 27, 28
 Western Union, 3
 Women
 in health professions, 28