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Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Audrey Kadis– Class of 1970

(interviewed by Tatiana Mamaliga)

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Tatiana Mamaliga

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MAMALIGA: If you could please tell me about your childhood: where were you born, and what was it like leading up to MIT?

KADIS: I was born in Boston, but I grew up in Newton, which is only a few miles from here. I have two younger sisters, and I had a younger brother. I grew up in what I would describe as an upper middle class community -- it was pretty much a Jewish upper middle class. I think my father really wanted a son since my brother was ten years younger than I; he wasn't around for most of my childhood. I did very well in school, so my parents put all of the expectations that are very typical among a lot of Jewish parents onto me. If they couldn't have a son who was going to be a doctor, they had a daughter who could be a doctor. I had a very unremarkable childhood. My father was very successful in business, and he also was one of the pioneers at hiring people with physical disabilities. In the 1950s, he had a factory in Davis Square. He employed about three hundred people. 90% of them had disabilities ranging from people who had lost a limb in the World War II to people with cerebral palsy, dwarf syndrome -- you name it. He had a very strong social conscience. My mother had grown up wanting to be a labor

union organizer, and she had very liberal left politics. I was not only imbued with a sense of social responsibility but was also oriented towards achievement. Both of those things were probably the strongest influences on me.

MAMALIGA: Did they encourage you to come to MIT?

KADIS: Yes, absolutely. I went to an extraordinarily competitive high school, where a huge number of the kids, I think more than 90% of the kids, went to college. And a huge number of them went to the top Ivy Leagues schools. If you were in the AP classes, which I was, it was very equivalent in a lot of ways to the kind of competition you find at a school like MIT.

MAMALIGA: Were there a lot of girls in your high school?

KADIS: Oh yes. It was a public high school so it was probably 50% girls. In the AP classes there were obviously fewer girls in the math and science classes and more in history and English. When it came time to apply to college, I ended up applying to MIT almost by chance. One Sunday, there was an article in the magazine that comes with the Boston Globe that talked about how MIT was now admitting women in larger numbers, because it had just completed McCormick hall. Up until then, there were always women at MIT, but there had been four or six women. I saw that article, and I said,

"Wow!" My mother ended up calling MIT because it was late in the game, and she said, "Are you still seeing people for interviews?" They said, "Oh, yes, absolutely. We'd love to see your daughter." I came in for an interview, and they gave me an application and said, "Please just fill that out right now." You have to remember that was 1965, and the world was a very different place in terms of the role that women were expected to play. It was really before the feminist movement caught hold and, at the time, even though I went to MIT, I thought, "I'll go to MIT and then I'll become an elementary school teacher, so when I have children I can be at home in the summer." It was that sort of schizophrenic mentality; on the one hand coming here and on the other hand planning for a very traditional female occupation. I decided to come because I really liked math and science and didn't like foreign languages and MIT didn't have foreign language requirement. So that's why I ended up coming here. Like every other woman who came to MIT at that time, I spent my freshman year in McCormick and my sophomore year in the apartments in West Gate. There are now two towers in McCormick, but when I first was here, there was only one tower. My sophomore year, they built a second tower and the sophomore class, myself included, and lived in the apartments in West Gate.

MAMALIGA: They didn't allow you to stay in the dorms?

KADIS: They didn't have enough room. They had admitted a larger freshman class of women, and they didn't want to put the freshmen down in West Gate, so they took the sophomores down there. During that year, they completed the second tower of McCormick, and then they could accommodate a hundred women in a class.

MAMALIGA: Were you allowed to stay with the guys in the dorms?

KADIS: No, although in those days MIT probably had the most liberal visitation rules of any place. There were lots and lots of colleges and universities where women had curfews. Either you could not either have men in your room at all, or you could have men in your room, if you left the door open. There was a really big change across the entire country, not just at MIT, with the onset of the feminist movement, and in the sexual revolution between '66 and '69. Before I came to MIT, my mother took me out and bought me several really nice suits so that when I went to symphony or a similar event, I would have a really nice suit to wear. It was a dress suit with a skirt. I wore the suits during my freshman year but by the time I was a sophomore the protests around the Vietnam War were wide spread and undergraduates did not go to the symphony anymore. Everyone protested. This was a very unique period in history to be in college. The people who graduated from college between '69 and '72, were on campus during most Vietnam War protests. In 1970, the year I graduated every major university

in the United States closed in May, because the students and faculty went on strike to protest the war in Vietnam. MIT was closed; Harvard was closed; BU was closed – you name it. Every place shut down. Students wouldn't go to classes and the faculty wouldn't teach.

MAMALIGA: So that was a historical time.

KADIS: Yes, I think it influenced people and gave them a slightly different view of the world, with a greater sense of social awareness and social consciousness. I look at people who are a few years older than me, and a lot of them seem like they're from a totally different generation.

MAMALIGA: Do you think it brought people together?

KADIS: Yes and no. Within the students who were protesting there was enormous camaraderie, but over all, it divided the country. If you think the country is polarized now, it was at least as polarized then. You may not have heard of this, but there was an incident at Kent State University where the National Guard opened fire and killed students on the college campus. The students were not armed. There's a very famous photograph of a young woman who had been shot with her friend standing over her, screaming. The young woman, who was shot, actually had been in my husband's high school. He knew who she was. So at times the violence was very personal. There were

huge marches, demonstrations and battles between protesters and the police. I think that profoundly defined my experience here. Before 1966 MIT was probably more like it is today except there are more women on campus now. At that time there was a draft in the United States then, and any healthy young men that didn't have a deferment could be picked and sent to fight in Vietnam. The male students were terrified, because so many people who went to Vietnam got killed. Plus, no one wanted to die for a way they thought was immoral. I think it took up so much of everyone's mental space, that a lot of the other things that people might have focused on here at MIT, went by the boards.

MAMALIGA: It sounds as if MIT took a break from academics.

KADIS: Well, I still had to go to classes, do problem sets and take exams, but I would say in a way, maybe you're right. It was not all super pretty. Quite frankly, I was very involved, until things got to a point where people were really getting seriously hurt at demonstrations. I was really afraid of getting clubbed. Students were very angry and sometimes, in retrospect, provoked the police who responded with tear-gas and clubs. It was not like what you see here today.

MAMALIGA: You were socially very active in the protests, but in your classes, did you have any social support from the women?

KADIS: The women were very close to one another, because there were so few of us. Even though, at least at one point, there was one incident that clearly was discriminatory, I really felt that MIT in many ways was a meritocracy, and if you could do the work, there was not a lot of prejudice against women.

MAMALIGA: So would the professors treat you the same as they treated men?

KADIS: Yes, that's how I felt. I ended up as a humanities major. The professors in the humanities department were fantastic. There was one summer, when I organized a one-on-one seminar with a full faculty member. In a million years that never would happen in another place. We read and discussed D.H. Lawrence all summer.

MAMALIGA: Even now, I don't think one would.

KADIS: I don't know what's going on now in the humanities department. People often ask me why I went to MIT since I was a humanities major. There is a rational explanation; on any kind of aptitude test that I had ever taken, I score exactly the same on analytics as verbal. So, that's why I was very happy being a humanities major here. The first few years I took a lot of math and science. I don't know what the requirements are like now, but

then they were requirements for all those things. Then I focused on humanities classes.

MAMALIGA: Was the humanities department big?

KADIS: No, it was super small. But it had really good people. I'm sure today the people in the humanities department are also good. What kind of major are you?

MAMALIGA: I'm course seven – biology, but I'm concentrating in History. I've taken some good history classes. I think the humanities are amazing here. The amount of work that a humanities course requires is as much as a science course, I would say. Expectations are pretty high. I think it's pretty good. So, after MIT did you start working?

KADIS: Yes. Actually I had gotten married while I was an undergraduate, which was a big mistake. After MIT, I had started working at what was then called Tech HiFi, on Vassar Street – where Vassar Street crosses Massachusetts Avenue. The company was started by a couple of MIT students and most of the people who worked there had advanced degrees from either MIT or Harvard. It was a group of really smart people who didn't quite have their act together. I was working there, as was my first husband. Two years later we moved to Atlanta to start a company there

with another couple. My husband ended up having an affair with my partner's wife, and I got thrown out of the marriage and the company and ended up here in Boston, on my own. In retrospect it's kind of funny. At the time it wasn't at all funny. It turned out that it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I was very lucky and met my current husband within 6 months. We've been happily married for thirty-seven years. At that time I was trying to figure out what to do, and I thought, I worked in business, and my father was in business; I might as well go to business school and get an MBA. So I applied to Harvard and MIT, got into both places and decided to go to Harvard, simply because it was different.

MAMALIGA: How was your experience at Harvard?

KADIS: I didn't like Harvard at all. I really didn't like it. At Harvard there were nine hundred students in the class, and only one hundred women. There was a lot more discrimination, sexism, there than there was here, even though it was '77-'79. A lot of people looked at the women and thought, "You're using up the space of a guy who should be here." At one point, I was out of the house, somebody called and started talking with my husband about a job possibility, and my husband said, "Oh no, you've got the wrong person. I'm Jack. It's my wife, Audrey, who goes to the business school." They said, "Well, we wouldn't be interested in talking to her, because we've never hired women." When I complained about it at the business

school, they said it was "perceived" discrimination. It would be very hard to perceive it as anything other than discrimination. I also felt the focus was on teaching students how to act, rather than teaching you things that were substantive. A lot of it was about learning to "walk the walk" and "talk the talk." That wasn't who I was, and it's not who I am. I never really fit in that world.

MAMALIGA: Were the attitudes coming from the professors or from the students?

KADIS: From the professors and the students, both. Not all of them, but certainly a number of them.

MAMALIGA: Were you already married by then?

KADIS: Yes. I got married right before I started business school, and then when I finished business school, my husband decided he wanted to go to business school. He had been in a family business that he didn't want to be in anymore. We moved to Palo Alto so he could go to Stanford. We ended up living in the Bay area for five years in total – two years down on the peninsula while he went to school and three years up in the city.

But again, it was a very different world than today. My son and his partner, Madeline, have a four-month-old daughter. Madeline was able to take six months paid leave when the baby came, because she works for a non-profit

with a very progressive maternity policy. She stopped working right before the baby came, and she will go back to work in January, which is fantastic. When my kids were born, a very good maternity policy was that you got two months off at no pay, but you could keep your benefits if you paid for them during leave.

MAMALIGA: So you lost your benefits?

KADIS: Unless you paid for them yourself. In my son's partner's case, all the benefits are paid for and she's getting full salary. But back then it was two months, unpaid.

MAMALIGA: They were really discouraging women to work.

KADIS: Yes. And see, I still wear the MIT ring.

MAMALIGA: Is this an MIT ring? It's changed a bit.

KADIS: Yes. I started wearing it when I started working for Fidelity in 1982. At the time there were very few women working in financial service and technology. I would go into meetings, and I would put my hand out on the table, and everyone around the table would see my ring, and people would

know what it meant. It was a signal that said, "I may be a woman, but I'm not stupid."

MAMALIGA: Where did you work in California?

KADIS: In California, I spent part of my time working as a consultant around technology. I also worked for IBM, selling large computer systems back in the days of mainframes, which is ancient history.

MAMALIGA: Was that your first company job?

KADIS: Yes.

MAMALIGA: Why did you move from California to here?

KADIS: My husband and I always felt that the culture there was just a little bit different. People would say, "Everyone's so friendly in California." We felt that people are very friendly at a very superficial level. They're very friendly to play tennis, or go running with. But with people on East Coast it was different; if you had a friend, you really had a friend. You would do things with your friends other than go running or play tennis, like talking to them. So that's pretty much why we moved back. My children were about

nineteen months apart, and we moved back here when my daughter, my second child, was three weeks old.

MAMALIGA: Did your children follow the business path?

KADIS: No, not really. Remember, I told you I had a mother who wanted to be a labor union organizer, and a father who committed a huge amount of his time to helping people with disabilities. So I was always involved with social action activities, and when my kids were six, I started involving them. I would take them to work in soup kitchens and help with coat drives. My son was concerned about the environment, so we used to go together and volunteer at Green Peace. I did a lot of things with them that involved progressive social values. Then, unfortunately, my brother had AIDS. We found out about it when my daughter was about six and my son was about eight. He lived almost a decade after that. He survived for a very long time, given when he was infected, because the anti-retrovirals weren't around yet. I spent three years working at the AIDS Action Committee, mostly as a volunteer. My daughter was very close to my brother and she got very involved there as well. When they would have their kick-off breakfast for all the corporate sponsors, my daughter would be a speaker, because all of these business people would look at her in her pink dress with her braids, and they'd think, "You know she looks just like my kid. If she could be affected by this, I can understand how maybe my family could

be." Both of my kids ended up being very involved, in social action kinds of efforts when they were growing up. If you tell your kids, "You have a responsibility to help people, who have less than you," it's not the same thing as when you actually do things to help people and you drag them along. It's putting your money where your mouth is.

Some of the time when they were growing up I had demanding work at companies like Fidelity Investments and an artificial intelligence company. I didn't work all the time while my children were growing up. I mentioned that I was interviewed on the topic of work-family balance by Harvard magazine. There are people, who are really good at balancing things day to day. You work this much and then, you have this much time for your kids. I could never figure out how to do that, so I would take a job, and I'd work really hard for a few years. Then I'd burn out, and I'd do volunteer work for a few years. Since I didn't have real responsibility as a volunteer I'd get bored and would go back to the real work world.

MAMALIGA: What was your most recent job?

KADIS: I resigned from Oxfam America, a month ago. I don't know if you're familiar with Oxfam. There are Oxfams in about fourteen different countries, and they all work on programs to help really poor people. In some cases it's straight humanitarian work. Oxfam America has a lot of people in South Sudan now, and they work in refugee camps. In other

places the work is around helping people develop sustainable livelihoods or social justice issues, because the political environment and the economic one are tied so closely together. I was there for five and a half years. I went there because I wanted to work for a non-profit doing humanitarian work. By that point, I had done all kinds of things, working in non-profits including direct client services, running events and raising money, you name, I did it. I realized I would be happiest is if I had a job at a non-profit, where I believed in the mission of the organization and there was intellectual content to the work. I knew I didn't want to go work in a refugee camp. That's just not who I am. I went there to manage large technology projects. My first project took about a year and a half. Then they didn't have anything for me to do for almost a year, and I did little stupid things. In 2009 I had another big project, which took about a year, and then I did little stupid things for a while. When I left, I was managing another big project. I was trying to push the organization to take a more strategic view around their systems and use more contemporary methodologies for implementing systems. A colleague with more political clout didn't want to move forward and she had the support of the COO. With the encouragement of my husband I finally said, "You know, life is too short. I'm 64. I'm out of here." So I left then because I really like making things happen, moving things forward and I realized this was not going to happen at Oxfam. I'm not at the forefront of anything, but it's easy to see how organizations could really use them. Trying to use old

technologies to me just doesn't make any sense. Oxfam wanted to implement a system would be a marginal improvement over the system I implemented 5 years ago, when they could implement something that would be a game changer.

MAMALIGA: You've been involved a lot in the field of technology. You've done a lot of different things and have had successful projects. What would you say was one of the most challenging things throughout your career?

KADIS: The most personally challenging thing for me is that in many of the sectors on the business world where I worked being smart didn't necessarily get you very far. In certain places, it probably does, but I was in a lot of situations, where having better people skills than I have, being more political, being able to strategize about how you are going to get this person to like you, counted more than any of your ideas. The guy I was working for at Oxfam would say to me, "I'm not going to tell anyone what to do. I'm going to sort of drop hints and hope that other people hear them and think it was their idea and if that happens, they'll be really excited about the idea." That's not me. If I have an idea, I'm not going to drop hints and hope somebody comes up with it. I'm just going to say, "Here is the idea, you can like it or not like it." I'm just too straightforward. The most challenging thing for me professionally has been keeping up with technological change. I have primarily worked at the intersection of

computer technology and business (work). I'm not very interested in technology itself, but how it can be used. My favorite work experiences have been introducing new technology in organizations and I seeing it improve how people can do their jobs. In 1982, when PCs were first being introduced I was the project manager for the implementation of the first decision support system for portfolio managers at Fidelity. In today's parlance it would be a client-server application and it would be considered primitive. After that, I joined an artificial intelligence company because I was intrigued by the possibility the technology offered to radically improve people's work life. This focus continued through most of my work over the past 30 years. Over my career, I've primarily been a project manager for technology-focused projects. The role sits between business and technology and plays to my desire to organize things. My husband has frequently commented that I like to make order out of chaos, which is what a project manager does. It also can be a very frustrating job because you have responsibility without any authority.

MAMALIGA: What would be your advice for the women at MIT?

KADIS: Find a career where being smart really matters. If you decide to go into business, find a sector where being smart matters – for example, being a strategy consultant for a company like Bain & Company or McKinsey.

You won't get the job at those companies unless you're really smart. But that's what I would focus on. The other piece of advice is that in whatever family unit you are in, if you have kids, you have to at some point, work out some kind of an arrangement that you and your partner are comfortable with sharing responsibility and sharing childcare. I've worked with women whose husbands stay home – women much younger than I, and they're fine with that arrangement. It doesn't matter what it is, as long as you and your partner agree and you really can emotionally buy into it. When I was coming out of business school, there was an expectation that highly educated women could do everything. You could be really successful in a professional career; you could be a fantastic mother; you could have a great house; you could be active in social things; you could show up for volunteer bake sales and run the girl scout troop. If you didn't manage to do all, the assumption would be that it was your own personal failing. So it set the expectations really high. I think a lot of women – at least I did, fell into that trap of thinking, "Hey, I went to MIT and HBS; I should be able to do it all. I'll just get the right house care and child care." But there are just twenty-four hours in a day. You can't make any more of them; so you have to figure out what you want to do with them. I look at people who win Nobel Prizes, and there are very few women who win Nobel Prizes. I think the main reason is that traditionally, and to some extent, until today, the role of being a father is very different than the role of being a mother. To win a Nobel Prize, aside from being very smart, you have to have a single-

minded focus, a huge dedication, and time commitment. You have to be in your lab on Saturdays and Sundays. Those are the people who win the Prizes. Expecting to have two kids and go on field trips with your kids at elementary school, and at the same time, win a Nobel Prize probably isn't going to work. Either you make peace with an arrangement that works for you want or you end up like me, feeling torn a lot.

MAMALIGA: But still having a successful career!

KADIS: Yes, but it depends who you compare yourself to. I go to my HBS reunions. I went to one a few weeks ago. I found out that one of my classmates was the chairman of General Motors. There is a big difference between what I do and being a chairman at General Motors.

MAMALIGA: I guess everyone has her own idea of what is right for her.

KADIS: Right. I just want to check the time. Oh, it's fine. If I leave here around 3:30 p.m., I can meet my husband at the movies, and that will be fine. If I leave here at 3:30 p.m., I can be at any movie theater I want to, in half an hour.

MAMALIGA: Are you going to go see *Skyfall*?

KADIS: No, we're going to go see *Argo* because I think it's leaving the theaters soon.

MAMALIGA: I haven't seen it.

KADIS: It's about getting prisoners out of Iran.

MAMALIGA: Do you have anything else to add?

KADIS: Part of it is I think the world has changed some. What advice would I give somebody who is forty years younger than I? It's a different world you're in.

MAMALIGA: But I think people older than my generation have a better view of the world.

KADIS: There are things that matter to me. I really believe people who are fortunate like I have been have a responsibility to help people who are less fortunate. People coming out of college today, certainly people coming out of MIT, are going to be privileged by virtue of their education; you're not going to work at Walmart for $10/hour and live in your car. I would hope that as college graduates move into careers they keep their responsibility of helping those who have not been so fortunate in mind. I think in terms of

things that have been satisfying for me, some of the things that I've done in the social sphere have been so much more satisfying than when I got to be vice-president at Fidelity. If somebody said, "What was best that has ever happened to you at work?" I would say it was when I was working as a volunteer. I was working at this little start up organization to raise money for families in Israel during the Second Intifada, which was 2002-2003, when every weekend, there was a suicide bombing and lots of people were killed. Israel is a very small country so when you start having dozens of people killed every week; it is like having the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, every couple of months. It's big. In this organization, we would connect a temple or day school with a specific family in Israel, and the organization would raise some money to help those families where someone was dead or severely disabled. They would also provide some emotional support. They would write to their families. If they went to Israel, they would visit them. It was really nice. One day, I got a call from a facility in Cleveland circle, in Brookline, which is an independent living facility of the elderly. The woman who called me said, "We want to adopt a family." I said: "You have to raise $5,000." Most people in those facilities are on social security. She said, "I understand that we have to raise $5,000. Our residents really want to do this, and they will solicit their doctors, and they will solicit their families, and we will raise the $5,000." So they had a walkathon. All of these elderly people, some of whom were on walkers, made a two block walk, back and forth, with their children and

their grandchildren. In this country the elderly are often perceived as recipients of care, and in this case they were taking care of their family. It was incredible how empowered they were by this walk.

MAMALIGA: It means a lot.

KADIS: It means a lot to be able to do something for somebody else. The residents of the facility would call their families from Israel every week and put them on speakerphone. That was really fantastic. No matter what you do professionally I would encourage you to something to help other people. It's a real responsibility and there is a personal benefit - it makes you feel good about who you are. And then, as I said before, find something to do for work, where being smart matters.

MAMALIGA: Thank you so much for the interview.

KADIS: You're welcome.