

## **INTRODUCTION TO INTERVIEW WITH STEPH FARBER**

Steph Farber is a businessman, an artist, and a craftsman of the old school. Civic minded and a timeless giver of his time and energies to the resurgence of the downtown Tacoma area, he and his family have been pillars of the local Jewish community as well as the downtown Tacoma area for several generations. Because the Farber family business, LeRoy Jewelers, has stayed in the same area for over fifty years, while countless other businesses have come and gone, I was curious to know why they stayed while others left.

Steph's workshop, where he designs and creates one-of-a-kind pieces of jewelry from the best gold and gems, is as cluttered as Rabbi's study. The tools of his craft are everywhere, but one can't help but feel that there is a creative kind of organization here. Lest he take himself too seriously, there is a rubber chicken hanging in one corner. Our interview was not to be held in the workshop, however, but in the foyer of the store itself. Our "desk" was a glass case containing unset and polished precious stones. Surrounded by crystal, china, and an atmosphere of understated elegance, we began to talk. This was no Zales or Fred Meyer jewelry store...this shop had old world class and grace. And as I have found out, so does the Farber family. The store mirrors its owners.

**TRANSCRIPT OF TAPED INTERVIEW NUMBER THREE  
WITH STEPH FARBER.  
MAY 14, 1992**

Nardah Fox: *Why don't you tell me a little about yourself and your relationship and your personal history of the downtown Tacoma area, and what you're involved in, what you have been involved in.*

Steph Farber: I am now president of the corporation of LeRoy jewelers. LeRoy Jewelers is a fifty year old business in downtown Tacoma started by my father that was managed by my father and mother, managed by my mother when my father died, and now I'm working with her here. Our store has moved from spot to spot in downtown but we are permanent downtown residents. The business was started by my father and his partner, who was also his brother in law--Jack Slotnik was his name, my father was Irving Farber. And they started the business when they returned from a partnership they'd started--they'd opened two jewelry stores in Coulee City, when the Coulee Dam was being built. And when construction of that fell off, they decided to move back to Tacoma and open up a store. Several years after they'd started this store, my uncle decided to pull out and opened his own business. So I'm involved with our business; I'm also involved with the theatre district: I'm president of the Board of Broadway Performing Arts which manages and brings events to the Rialto and Pantages Theatre and soon a new theatre that's being built to house the Tacoma Actors Guild. Besides that, and having basically grown up downtown, I don't have much relationship to downtown.

NE: *Not much! Past, present, and future, it sounds like, very entrenched in this area.*

SE: I'm afraid so.

NE: *Business wise, emotionally, you know, every way. Would you give me a brief description of what downtown was like before the mall, before downtown began to die.*

SE: I think we could go into something that's very interesting for your purposes. It wasn't that the Tacoma Mall was built so the downtown died. The Tacoma Mall was built with a number of businesses left. A lot of department stores moved out there. There was still a viable downtown for a number of years until the promoter from Portland got a bunch of Portland doctors to back him, put down deposits on a number of buildings, because he planned to build a world trade center in Tacoma. Once he got control of buildings, when businesses wanted to renew their leases, he wouldn't do that, he'd just kick the businesses out. And in the end once all the businesses were gone, it ended up that he was just a con man. He ended up at McNeil Island [State Penitentiary] and the buildings went in to kind of a limbo and that was really the thing that did the most harm to downtown retailers. Before he came in, before the mall, it was just like every town in America: busy, vibrant business center, financial institutions, four or more department stores. Every kind of business that was traditional for this kind of operation area.

NE: *What was this man's name? He was convicted.?*

SE: His name was Stanley Harris. and he ended up at McNeil Island. I think he probably--my story is--he started subdividing McNeil

Island into different plots and developed time-share condominiums there. We were one of the ones who were blocking his progress. We had a lease--he offered to move us out and give us space in this hotel in the middle, between 9th and Broadway, but it was all a fabrication.

NE: *When was all this happening?*

SE: That must have been 1968-72, somewhere in there.

NE: *So he operated here for four or five years?*

SE: He operated sometime during that period. He had a great time. He traveled all over the world. The doctors, or at least their corporation, had to go bankrupt. ...Coupled with the City Urban renewal deciding to build a pedestrian only plaza at a time when the rest of the country just decided that was a stupid idea, probably did not help things.

NE: *And that was about the same time?*

SE: That was, well, fifteen years--the Plaza was here fifteen years from 1988, so that would make it 1975--yeah, around that same time.

NE: *Sounds like a lot of factors came together.*

SE: Well, yeah, there were a lot of things that contributed. Before, though, there was a, oh, goodness, for somebody growing up down here taking the bus downtown, the number of businesses--well, in our own business, the jewelry business, at one time there were a

dozen jewelry stores within a three block radius. And everybody did ok during the period. Now there's one, maybe two really functioning jewelry stores, in all downtown. Before then the city could have easily supported a dozen stores. ...Many of the jewelry stores were connected to the community, the Jewish community, [as well as] many of the other stores downtown. Our store was in the middle of 11th and Broadway, and next door was Bernie Brotman and his menswear.

NF: *That was the place to buy clothes when I was in junior high. I grew up in Tacoma. If a guy dressed from Bernies, that was it..I mean, forget it, if a guy dressed in clothes from JC Penney's. Bernie's was the only place.*

SE: Bernies was there, up the street was Lyon's--

NF: *The only place for girls.*

SE: --Karl's shoes I think was owned by the Deutsches, Karl Bravermann had a men's clothing store, who else? It seemed-- Kahns', Kahns' had a jewelry store down the street from us. Phil Friedman had s boys' clothing store called Nick's. I'm sure I'm missing a whole lot of them. ...That was just on Broadway. Brodsky's menswear and uniforms, Art's Loans, there was for years and years and years...a daily minion of men who would gather down on Pacific Avenue before business started.

NF: *Really?*

SE: Sure, sure. Sy Rose owned A. Rosenson's jewelers, followed his father's footsteps down on Pacific. He's a good source of stories.

NE: *When did the stores first open--the '20s? roughly, before that? Remember, Fox [Jewelers] used to be over there.*

SE: Fox's actually started out right across the street from the Winthrop Hotel down on Tacoma street, and then they moved here, moved to Broadway. In the place there was Andrew's, Miss Valerie Andrews, another member of the [Jewish] community.

NE: *That was the nice ladies' chop. I remember that. Lou Johnson's was another one.*

SE: Lerner's, Klopfenstein's

NE: *Mierows, Freidlander's,*

SE: Weisfield's, Burnett's, and Burnett's had a relationship to the [Jewish] community as well, at one time. Frasier's, gift store. Gunderson's.

NE: *What were some of the names of the stores between the 20s and the 60s, and which of these were owned by members of the local Jewish community and what were their names?*

SE: I think you could talk to my mother. She'd give you more complete list. But thinking back, it seemed that half the store owners were people I saw at services at one time or another.

NE: *This was before the merger of the Temple, prior to 1960?*

SE: Yes. In the '40s and '50s. Helen Davis [Ladies' Clothing Store] --that was another one.

NE: *Yes, I remember, in junior high, that's where the ladies shopped, the adults. Who owned Lyons?*

SE: Babe and Herman Lehrer--it was started by Babe Lehrer's father. That started out across from Sears, closer to 13th and Broadway and moved up the block, on the other side of the street, closer to Bernie's.

NE: *What happened, and I think you've kind of answered that. Did the stores relocate? Did the people move away?*

SE: Some closed up, some moved to the mall, some moved elsewhere. Andrew's moved out to Lakewood Center, and I think they closed there about three years ago. Phil Grenley had a clothing store, and I know he did not want to move from downtown. But he also opened a second store at Southcenter, when the leases were not extended by Mr. Harris, he had to close the Tacoma store and move to Southcenter for a while. Helen Davis was out at the Mall for a while. Lyons built a big chain started at the Tacoma Mall and had stores at fourteen different spots and shopping centers. Bernies opened in Seattle and a thousand other places. He closed up. Deutsches moved out of town; Phil Friedman moved out of town. He had a clothing store in Burien or something. Bennett's closed, I don't know what happened to them. They just disappeared. But we stayed.

NE: *Why?*

SE: *Why? Because inertia, and because [of] the kind of business we do--two things: one is a card store, a hallmark card shop--you have to have a lot of sales every day in order to keep your doors open. When you're a jewelry store, sometimes one good sale a day--or even a week--can keep you open during times when there isn't so much*

foot traffic. We're not as dependent on drop-in foot traffic. Also, my father and mother, and my mother after my father's death, developed a fine enough reputation about this store that as difficult as it was for people to get there, people would still come. And so the phrase that was used was that you had to have your own doctor, your own lawyer, your own jeweler that you trust, and you go wherever they are. And people would come down to see us. I've been blessed to inherit that kind of clientele. Also, and this speaks more directly to recent years--well, the last twenty years, while I've been making jewelry here--the kind of things that we do and the kind of customer service that we try to promote and practice really can't take place at a shopping center where you have to have a lot of turnover, [and] keep selling stuff because your overhead is enormous. You have to be open hours when you don't have customers because the shopping center has to stay open, expenses are horrendous--we didn't have that pressure here. Further, ...in a shopping center, all the merchandise starts looking the same, because you go to one store and then you'd have to compare prices. If you see something new at one store, you'll ask for it at the second store. If they don't have it at the second store, they're going to get it, because they're here and people are asking for it. Pretty soon, all the merchandise looks the same. I would personally go crazy if I had to make stuff the same as everybody else, and do it over and over again. And so we've made our mark by making things that are different, things that are unique, ... if you wear something that we make, it's unlikely that you will see someone else wearing the same thing.



NE: *So you design your own jewelry, and have for years?*

SE: I've been doing it for twenty years. Also the quality that we handle--the fine diamonds, the weight of the gold--is not the kind of merchandise that is seen as often. You can't do it at a shopping center with the pressure of "thirty-percent off, forty-percent off, seventy-percent off this week," because when you sell at those prices, there's got to be something the matter with it. And we don't sell third-rate merchandise. You'd have to--the temptation and actually the practice would become imposed on you in a shopping center. You have to compete by price. And if you compete by price, you've got to sell shoddier goods. We've never done it, never will.

NE: *Good. So you do have faithful; clientele, and people who want quality things, and you make them.*

SE: Yes. That's what we depend on. There'd be no reason for people to come here for more than twenty, twenty-five, thirty years, if there wasn't something like that available to them.

NE: *Well it's more like art than mass production.*

SE: That's true. That's true. We have to preserve that clientele that my father and mother developed by treating people well and honestly. We have to preserve that by not lowering standards.

NE: *Sounds like a winning formula.*

SE: I hope so. The Jewish community having an impact on the growth of downtown Tacoma [was] much greater than the actual

percentage of Jews in the city would have indicated...sure, why not. ...[In] my parents'...generation, there were a lot of Jewish entrepreneurs, and at least my impression was that there was an overabundance of Jewish entrepreneurs and businessmen. It was probably hard to buy a men's suit without going to a Friedman or a Brotman or a Belmonte, who was working with a Friedman. It was probably hard to buy women's clothiers without going to a Lehrer or a Posner or, who else? You get the idea. For a while anyway... Of course, the children and the grandchildren of those entrepreneurs did much better than I have, and they became the professionals, the doctors and the lawyers and the accountants, [and] are not running the businesses that their parents started.

NE: *It almost seems like a shame, though, that the businesses are gone--except for yours. I mean, there's family businesses that have tradition and quality, and a name, you know, and it's kind of a shame, I think, that more of it isn't continued.*

SE: I would not argue with you--not a bit.

NE: *I never go to the Mall--it bores me.*

SE: I don't know if I can help you with this next question. As far as stories of the families--there are probably better sources for that. Although the one story I can think of--two, two: one relating to Bernie Brotman. Bernie Brotman is one of the sweetest men alive, and I know one story that's talked about a lot. Somebody with a less-than-sterling reputation needed a pair of pants, and Bernie said, "you owe me money." The man said, "Bernie, I swear I'll pay

you." And Bernie said, "but you owe me money. You've owed me money for a long time." And he said, "I need a pair of pants. I'm going to a funeral--it's my mother's funeral. Bernie, I need the pair of pants." And Bernie said, "But when are you going to pay me? When will you pay me for these pants?" The guy says, "I swear on my mother's grave, which I'm going to go visit only if I have a pair of pants, I swear--" the guy got down on his knees-- "Bernie, please..." Bernie said, "take the pants." Bernie never saw the guy, never saw the pants again, but that was Bernie.

The other person in that same vein--and this was kind of people you see less and less--I know that when my father died, people would drop by at unexpected moments to see my mother in the store and give her ten dollars or twenty dollars that [my father] had loaned them...--he never kept records, never said anything. If my mother knew all the money he'd loaned out, she would've killed him. But there was honesty and a trustworthiness that has struck a chord with me, that I've admired. Those stories ring true. I know that each of those businesses. each of the families, had stories of hard times, making bills, making payrolls, bad seasons, recessions, depressions. ...While they were all frugal and good business people--I think there was always a humaneness--they always carried with them a memory of hard times they themselves had. And they had pity on those people that needed their help... There are probably a thousand stories like that.

NE: *Those are good stories. I like those stories. I wonder if it's the times, or the people today, or what--you don't seem to hear the same kind of trust and repayment of trust, mutual trust.*

SE: If that's so, we've lost a lot.

NE: *I know. I hope not....*

SE: ...Stories of the Farber family...

NE: *Where did the Farber family come from?*

SE: Long ago and far away, in the hills of White Russia, in the town of --a little, picturesque *shetl* [village] of Grodno--arose a family, the Farbers. Actually they must have come from Germany in one of the earlier exiles. They, through marriage, were related to Elan family, and Isaac Elan, came to America first, and he was a *shohut*, a Kosher butcher. He heard that there was need of a Kosher butcher in Seattle. Came to Seattle; they sent him to Tacoma. And--

NE: *Not much work here for a Kosher butcher!*

SE: Well, at the time there was a little bit of business. He came, and a couple years thereafter, sent for his family and his in-laws. And among those in-laws was my grandmother Goldie Elan. Goldie Elan married Solomon Farber. ...They came, then soon the rest of the family came. The Farbers made a stop in Red Bank, New Jersey, where one of their daughters, Lena, was born. Moved here, to Seattle first, where my father was born in 1909. The family then settled in Tacoma, where another daughter, Ethel, and another son, Kenneth, were born. Among the Farbers, I think there may have been six or seven brothers and sisters. And creating, what was for me a very

large extended family, consisting of Farbers and Elans and Epsteins, through marriage to Steinbergs in Seattle, Antscheses in Seattle, Refeloviches through marriage, and it was a very very large extended family that would gather sporadically around the holidays. My grandfather Solomon, who was a *molamet*, a travelling preacher, a travelling teacher, found that there wasn't a lot of a work for a *molamet* in America, and he and his wife opened a pawn shop. And the pawn shop was the seeds of what stands before you today.

NE: *What was the name of it?*

SE: It was called Pioneer--not Pioneer--I'll think of it in a minute. Pioneer was my father's business. OK Loans--that was it. The OK. They were down on Commerce street, near 15th, I think.

NE: *There was so many around Commerce.*

SE: Commerce and Pacific. They opened that up--my grandfather, who I did not know, seems to have had the same kind of reputation my father had--a gentleman, a gentle man, an easy touch. My grandmother was tough--the one with the stronger purpose, the stronger business sense. This is by reputation. But they moved here right after 1909--probably 1910. Living first on Fawcett--about 23rd and Fawcett--then moving to a house on Ainsworth, around Division Street. My Uncle Kenneth, who was in Central School at the time, tells the story of how when they made the move and made it to the new house, and everyone was so pleased and so happy and so excited that he had found his way. I always wondered if they were trying to lose him or what kind of dope they thought he was, that he

wouldn't find his way to his new house, and if they were so worried, why didn't they go get him...? But when they moved out, the Epsteins moved in--first Uncle Epstein, then Auntie Epstein, Ida Farber, and their family, and when they died their unfortunate son Henry lived there until he died. And then I think the house was carted off, and somebody else made a killing on the spot. So that's where we came from. At the time the Grand Coulee [Dam] was being built, my father and his partner, his brother-in-law to be I think, Jack Slotnick, wanted to open up a store. To hear Jack tell it, they bought some old, discarded grocery store shelves, a case from a grocery store, and a couple chairs and a table, and they loaded it on the back of a very old Ford, and they rumbled out to Coulee City, which was becoming a very big boom town, and they opened up a jewelry store. And apparently there were days when the partner who made the sale could have lunch, and there were some days when neither of them had lunch, and there were other days when crews got so large--especially near the end of the project--that they had two stores, one on either end of Coulee City, that supplied the needs of the construction workers there. [My father] moved back to Tacoma--actually he wanted to open a store in Seattle, but the Wholesale house, the house that provided all the merchandise for start-up jewelers--said they had enough stores in Seattle and they'd only give him goods if he opened up one in Tacoma.

NE: *So they had a little control on the [jewelry] market?*

SE: They had everybody controlled on the market. And so, they were left with the choice of "my way or the highway." So they

opened up in Tacoma, in the lobby of the Security Building, I think it was called, which is now Woolworth's, at the corner of 11th and Broadway. They were there a couple years. There was [only] room for five letters on the marquis, and they made an anagram name or [used] a Ouija Board or something and came up with the name LeRoy jewelers. It was scientific marketing in those days also.

NE: Also [*LeRoy means*] "*the king*" in French--not spelled the same, but close enough.

SE: Close enough. So my father became the businessman. He was an English major at the UW. His sister Lena was quite a woman, married Burt Treiger from Seattle, who was a rabbi. He served as rabbi in Tacoma. His mother-in-law, Goldie Farber, got him his job in Tacoma. Apparently the reputation Burt Treiger got was as a fine man, a lovely man, but often when he got jobs--or when he was allowed to keep jobs--it was because of that wonderful [unintelligible]. If they could hire the [unintelligible] and lose the rabbi, they would be very happy. He had a pulpit here, and moved elsewhere--I think he moved to New Jersey--after a job my grandmother (my mother's mother) got him in New Jersey. And he died early, relatively young. They had no children--one child was born dead. And once she became a widow my aunt Lena Farber Treiger, became the Women's director of the Jewish Theological Seminary and spent, at a time when a woman's place was by the stove, she was travelling the country meeting with women's organizations all over the country.

NE: *Her picture was in one of those books you lent me.*

SE: Yes. She--on her retirement, she had amassed more flight miles ... I know that once she flew into Tacoma and instead of leaving early had to wait for a News Tribune reporter to finish because she had an enormous amount of miles--fifty thousand or something--of travelling. They'd never heard of that in an old propeller plane. I don't think she had to put a scarf and goggles on, but she was an early traveler and an early feminist, I suspect. She fell in love again late in life, and married a man named Sam Shimmel, who made his mark by introducing refrigeration to the Middle East. He sold refrigerators to King Farouk, gold-plated refrigerators. And they retired to Israel--to Jerusalem--where she died and then he died, many years ago. Far from being the extended family I grew up with, now it is a family [that] has become rather fractured--fragmented--with fewer children and fewer large family events. That's something our children will have to rediscover on their own, when it's time for them to have families.

NE: *How many children do you have?*

SE: I have a daughter.

NE: *So do I--just one.*

SE: Daughters are wonderful. I don't know if it's worth having sons, but a daughter is a wonderful thing to have.

NE: *I've never had a son so I don't know. My daughter's graduating Saturday from UPS, and I'm graduating next year from the UW, God willing! ... Merchants in Tacoma ...*



SE: I wonder how many merchants there are left in Tacoma? -- Merchandise merchants--I'm sure there are a number of them; I can't think of any besides myself right now.

NE: *The Duffle Bag.*

SE: Yes, the Duffle Bag.

NE: *Model Lumber is no more, now.*

SE: Greg Kleiner works two doors down from me now, at Safe Streets, pushing social programs rather than two-by-fours. But we don't have so many merchants, that I can think of. Less merchants--at least of my generation. People got smarter. As far as the future of downtown Tacoma as a center for business and culture, I am working on that. There've been a number of redevelopment attempts in downtown Tacoma, not the least of which was the Broadway Plaza, which made it impossible for people to get to the businesses who wanted to stay. There was an attempt some years ago to import Seattle into Tacoma when Cornerstone built a Pike place market clone--the few shop fronts on Court C--[an] imported business district, [including] a hotel, a financial center and redeveloping some older buildings. That didn't work because Tacoma's a different place. I think you have to live here a long time to get a feel for Tacoma--and I hope we maintain that feel. Right now my efforts are being directed toward developing a downtown center around the Theatre district. If we can get an art school that operates during the day, we will be getting not only thousands of people down here at night time for the shows but hundreds of people coming downtown each week--thousands maybe--for classes in art schools. If there is a viable art school, then there will be reason to have coffee shops, art

supply stores, music stores, galleries--if there's these kind of places, people will come downtown and they're going to need someplace to buy band aids, toothbrushes and toilet paper. If you have that, the schools, you'll also have places for artists to do their work. Artists don't need grade-A facilities. They're happy with Grade C and D facilities. We've got plenty of those. And so artists can work, people can come and see their works--the more people there are, the more it is attractive for other businesses to move in. And I think that's the way we're going to build a business district. That's what I'm working on.

NE: *That's wonderful. What a different perspective--it's very innovative, I think. The big picture is very plain. It's the domino--I don't know if it's the domino--you know, one step leads to another and another.*

SE: The irony is that if this works, those people who actually make it work--the artists--will live in the lofts and do the work, they will attract enough people and businesses around them that they will become displaced, because their real estate will become so valuable that they won't be able to afford to stay here. But that's the way it is with artists--you have to live on the edge.

NE: *It has something to do with social Darwinism--evolution--like you say, the people who start it up sometimes are the ones who can't afford to stay. We'll see what happens. That sounds really promising. It sounds like Tacoma has a future.*

**\*\*END OF INTERVIEW NUMBER THREE\*\***