

illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry

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An Interview With Marilu Norden and Phil Jones

Interviewed via telephone in Scottsdale, Arizona by Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada
October 28, 2014

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Marilu Norden and Phil Jones

Interviewed by Mella Harmon on October 28, 2014

Mella Harmon: This is Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada. The date is October 28, 2014, and I am interviewing Marilu Norden and her son, Phil Jones, and they are both in Scottsdale, Arizona. Marilu and Phil, I did receive permission forms from you, but I wanted to ask you again on tape, do you give permission to record this interview for the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries, to be made available to the public?

Marilu Norden: Absolutely.

Phil Jones: Yes, I do.

Very good. Thank you both. So let's get started. Which one of you would like to start and tell me your story of your time in Reno?

Norden: Well, I can start, because I'm the older of the persons that had the experience. Phil was only four years old when he came to the ranch with me. But I had no idea that any of this was going to happen, back in 1951, after I gave birth to my second child, a little girl. I was delighted, but I knew that there was a problem in the marriage before that, and so unfortunately, my husband decided to go see a lawyer on his own. I never met the lawyer in Connecticut. And he suggested that we get a divorce, and he was going to send me to a divorce ranch.

I'd never even heard of such a thing. I sure found out what they were all about, though. And of course, the history that you have there in Reno goes back a long way before I even got there, to the 1951 subject of divorce ranches.

That's why I wrote about it in my book, *Unbridled: A Tale of the Divorce Ranch*, because I thought it was very important to bring this out into the open, to people who never even knew that such a thing existed. I could go on and on.

Well, we'd like you to. What was your experience here? Tell us about what it was like coming out here, how you did it, who your lawyer here was, all the details.

Norden: Well, I don't remember my lawyer, because I never met the lawyer that my husband had. I don't remember his name. It was terrible, because I had to leave my little girl behind. I took Philip because they assured me at the ranch that it was fine to bring a child there. And there were several other children who came with their parents.

So anyway, it was a big shock. It was a terrible time in my life, and I didn't know what to do. I fought against it for a while, but I could see where my husband had made up his mind. He had actually met somebody else.

But anyway, I was sort of in a fog, so I found myself on a plane with my little four-year-old boy, and we were off to Reno, Nevada. The airport was very small back then, and the first thing I noticed when I stepped off the plane was the array of slot machines. [laughter] I'd never seen that before—surely not in Connecticut.

So I waited, and a very nice cowboy introduced himself, an older man. He turned out to be the man that was going to take us to the ranch, which he owned with his wife, Joan. It was Harry Drackert, and he was a fabulous guy. He really was. And she was a fabulous woman. I stayed friends with them for all the years after, until they both passed away.

It was a very interesting experience. I was 24 years old. I had my twenty-fifth birthday at the ranch.

Jones: Twenty-sixth, actually.

Norden: I was 25, I'm sorry. Thank you! [laughter]

Phil remembers.

Norden: But the ranch was way the heck out. And, of course, as you know, it was Pyramid Lake Ranch, so it was situated right on the shore of the lake, which was a very interesting, very primeval kind of an atmosphere, and yet very beautiful in its starkness. I really enjoyed being there, after a while.

That's about all I want to say right now. How did you feel when you first got there, Phil?

Jones: Well, you know, I had just turned four, and some people would say, “Well, how can you even remember any of this?” But it’s amazing how vivid my memories actually are, probably because I was uprooted, and didn’t know why, and suddenly I found myself in Nevada, out in the middle of nowhere, living with you in this tiny little cabin with, I think it had one single light bulb or something in the ceiling.

It was an interesting place. But it was a bit of a shock, and I think I was probably a little disoriented. And I knew there was a certain sadness going on, and yet on the other hand, it was kind of exciting, because we had our own cabin. The ranch actually wasn’t—people think “ranch” and they think a big dude ranch. No, this was just a very small guest ranch with cottages. They had a trading post on the highway there. I remember sitting in there on a pile of Navajo rugs, drinking sodas and seeing the people that came in. They had a small recreational hall where they had activities for the kids. And there were other kids there. You’ve seen the pictures of me with some of them....

Yes.

Jones:which was fine. It was a very safe place for kids. There was a swimming pool. I honestly don’t know who was watching us while we were swimming. [laughter] So we were there, because I do remember just running around the place, pretty much on my own, and there was no problem with that.

And I remember also that it was across the street from the lake, and there were some folks that lived in almost a shack across the street, and they had some kids, and I used to go and play with them as well. They were right there on the beach.

They had a very nice main dining hall, and I do remember them singing “Happy Birthday” to my mom, when she was 26, one afternoon.

So all my recollections are as a four year-old. We rode horses. I remember sitting out and playing in the back of the kitchen at the dining hall, and this worker came out and he was holding a dead rat in his hand. It was disgusting, and he was throwing it in the trash can, and I’d never seen that myself. Little things like that really make an impression on a four year old!

Norden: Especially one from Connecticut!

Jones: In Connecticut, we lived out in the country for the last year before the divorce, so we weren't around a lot of people. And suddenly there were some interesting folks there, and I know Mom made some interesting friends.

One of my most vivid memories was walking, holding her hand as we were leaving the dining hall and going to the cabin, and we were looking up at the moon. And that's the first time I ever remember noticing there was a face in the moon. [laughter]

So there were some nice things about it. And the six weeks were interesting. I did fall and hurt the back of my head, and I remember the cowboy there who ran things, he put some—

Norden: His name was Red.

Jones: His name was Red, old Red. He used to take me horseback riding. I'd sit on the back and hold onto him on the saddle there, and that was probably one of the first times I ever rode a horse. So folks looked out for each other, and the adults there were very nice to the kids.

Norden: Yes, they were.

Jones: They were. So for me, it became a pleasant experience. It almost became home, even though I wasn't quite sure why I was there, and why you were going occasionally with a group of people—I remember you'd leave, and you'd go in the old Woodie station wagon and drive the hour or so into Reno to do whatever you had to do there.

Norden: I went quite a few times, actually. One in particular—there were a lot of interesting people there, and a couple that was there—I don't think they wanted people to know why they were there—but one of them was getting a divorce. I didn't know that. I just thought they were guests at the ranch, and I made friends with them. And turned out that Maggie and Andy George, which was the name they were going by, turned out to be Margaret and Andreas Papandreou, and he eventually became the Premier of Greece, and then his son became the Premier of Greece.

Jones: So you never know.

Norden: I was friends with them. After I moved to Denver, after the divorce, I got a lot of cards from them and continued a friendship for quite a while, actually. So that was kind of interesting. There were a lot of interesting people. I even met a fellow—I romanticize my relationship and it wasn't that great, but when I wrote the book I made kind of a thing out of it. It was kind of like what the character in the book needed to do just as much as I did—have some recognition that I was attractive and worthwhile as a person, and as a woman. That was important.

But there were some very, very interesting people. There was one gal in particular who took a big liking to Philip. She used to encourage him to sing “Ain't She Sweet?” Philip had a little lisp back then, so he was taught by his father. His father was a dancing teacher, a ballroom dancing teacher who had quite a thriving school of youngsters. And so he had taught Philip to sing this with all the mannerisms and a little dance and all the gestures and everything. But it was so cute, and Sage—the gal that I'm talking about—she was an older woman, but she was just very wise and sparky and fun. And she just wanted Philip to keep singing, “Ain't she sweet?”

Jones: Over and over and over again. [laughter]

Norden: It was great, really. It was an interesting experience for somebody that never had anything like that.

So when you would go to Reno, Phil would be left at the ranch? Who would watch out for him?

Jones: That's pretty much what I recall, because I don't remember going into Reno that much with Mom. But, you know, that's probably a little fuzzy. But I do know that Sage, at least, would watch me sometimes, and other folks would look out for me. And again, it was a fairly safe place. Kids were just kind of running all over. You didn't have to worry about getting abducted or molested or anything like that. [laughter] It was a nice little community.

Norden: I tried to make sure that he was going to be watched.

Of course.

Jones: She always made arrangements.

Norden: I felt terrible about leaving my little baby.

Oh, I bet you did.

Norden: That was really very traumatic for me.

That would be very hard.

Norden: And it was hard for her, I'm sure, too, in a way. Anyway, I went into Reno with Maggie and Andy one night, and went to the Riverside Hotel, and saw Frank Sinatra there, and my husband had had his pupils on Frank Sinatra's TV show, back in New York, about a year before. So I felt like I should go up and say something to Frank.

So I did, prodded by my friends Maggie and Andy. And he wanted to know how Phil was, and I said, "Well, I'm here getting a divorce." So he said, "I'm sorry. Well, that's how the cookie crumbles." [laughter] And then he went back to sit with Ava Gardner, who was there with him at the time. He was headlining at the show that they had there. There's a lot of interesting stuff that went on.

Speaking of the Riverside, several years later, I became a professional singer and I had a job for two weeks as one of the main singers there, in the stage show at the Hotel Riverside.

Jones: About seven years later.

Norden: I think you have a picture of that, don't you?

Yes.

Norden: That was an interesting experience all by itself. [laughter]

I should imagine.

Norden: Spike Jones and his orchestra were the main attraction there onstage.

Oh, wow.

Norden: It was very interesting. But going back to the time before that, I had a lot of work to do personally to get back on track and I fortunately had some people in Denver who were friends of my husband, but they were very considerate and very helpful, and they helped me rent a little house, and so I stayed in Denver for about a year.

Is that after you left Reno, you mean?

Norden: After I left Reno.

Jones: Yes.

Norden: But you had to make sure—one of the requisites of the ranch—the requirements of the ranch—was that as a guest, you had to be accountable. Every night, they had to know where you were.

Right.

Norden: It was a bad thing not to be there, and they would bring it up at the divorce, too.

Jones: Right. Well, you had to establish residency for six weeks, and so they had to verify that you were indeed there for six weeks.

Right. Every day they wanted to know.

Norden and Jones: Every day.

Norden: So when I wrote this book, I fictionalized the character, but she had a moment there where she wasn't sure she was going to make it back to the ranch. [laughter]

Uh-oh. [laughter]

Norden: A little affair, you know. [laughter] Anyway, so it was fascinating, actually, and quite interesting, and it was sad at first. It was hard to get used to. But, as I say, the Drackerts were really wonderful people, and I became good friends with them and continued my friendship with them, so that when Harry and Joan came to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and I was living there with my second husband, Tom, we were invited to La Fonda Hotel to a little party that Joan put together, and so that was the last time I saw both of them, actually. He was like 85 then, I think. He died.

But I think at the University, they have quite a lot of memorabilia about the Drackerts.

Yes, there's an entire collection of their correspondence, and some of the guest ledgers from the period.

Norden: They were just wonderful people; they really were. I mean, they really took care of their guests and they had another ranch, the Donner Ranch. In fact, Tom and I went to visit them one time, and Harry gave us a big slab of salmon that he caught, frozen to take back.

I thought it was so fascinating, a part of my life to spend there. It's interesting to me that Philip remembers so many things about it.

I know. That's remarkable, actually.

Jones: I think one thing, though—people think, “Oh, divorce ranch,” and suddenly they think “resort,” because everybody likes to glamorize things. But this was anything but a resort. It was built in the thirties, I believe—late twenties or early thirties. And at that point it was twenty years old, and it was basically just cabins and a couple of large buildings. There was no air conditioning. It was pretty basic. But times were simpler then, you know. We had twelve-inch

TVs. [laughter] We'd listen to the radio, and there were no seat belts in cars, and all that stuff. So you basically just made your own fun and activities, and really related with people.

And the fascinating thing about it, too, was that there really was a strong Native American influence there, and cowboy influence as well. So while you had people coming from all over the world to establish residency and get a divorce, it still very much was out in the middle of nowhere and you had all this culture, this whole Nevada culture and history that was quite evident and very easy to fall into and enjoy.

One of the pictures of you, Phil, was with you and several other little boys. Was one of them a Native American boy?

Jones: I think the two kids on the other end were Native American.

Norden: No, only one of them.

Jones: Okay, who was the other kid, then?

Norden: The other kid was a boy from the East Coast with his dad.

Jones: Okay, I just remember the German boy who was the taller one there.

Norden: I made up stories for each one of those children in the book. So they all have families and they all have predicaments and everything. [laughter]

Jones: In the book. But notice we're all dressed as cowboys, too, with our cowboy hats and everything. So we were living the dream. [laughter]

Yes, you were! [laughter]

Jones: Hopalong Cassidy, you know.

Norden: It was a great experience for a kid.

I should say. Phil, when you were growing up, did you regale your friends with stories of your cowboy life?

Jones: No, what's so funny is when you tell people we went to a divorce ranch, you get this blank stare, like "Huh, what's that?"

And the more time passes, the fewer people actually know what it's all about, and they think, "Oh, I remember the movie *The Women*, from 1939."

But that was only a few minutes out of the entire movie, and again, it wasn't really representative of what those places were really like.

Norden: There was Marjorie Main, running the whole place.

That's right!

Jones: Crazy stuff, all on a Hollywood set, and people in designer Western clothes. This was real life. And people were there for a purpose, not necessarily a happy purpose, but a lot of interesting stories and lives and a convergence of people on their journey through life.

Norden: I went to the Trading Post every night, practically. Not every night, but quite a few nights. It was a great gathering place, to make friends and listen to the music and play the jukebox and dance. I enjoyed that. That was great. Dinners and meals were in a big dining room, and that was fun, too. And then you'd see new people come in, and then other people that had been there for a while leave, and there actually was a lady who left because her husband was deceased. And so she didn't have to be there anymore.

Jones: That was convenient. [laughter]

Norden: It was fascinating, as I keep saying. But it was. It's part of our history and a lot of famous people went there. And I'm sure that Bill McGee has spoken to you about people that were at his ranch.

Oh, yes.

Norden: And I think a few years after I had been at Pyramid Lake, that was where Arthur Miller got his divorce...

Yes.

Jones: That's right.

Norden: ...so that he could marry Marilyn.

That's right, yes.

Norden: And then that was the idea of *The Misfits* and the whole thing.

That's right. It really spawned a much bigger story.

Jones: Absolutely. And I'm surprised that when they think about divorce ranches, most people remember *The Women*, but *The Misfits* very much was all about Reno and Nevada and that whole culture. It starts out with a divorce and Marilyn trying to find herself. I'm surprised more people don't remember that as well.

It's interesting about history.

Jones: People have selective memories. [laughter]

They really do. And sort of the idea behind this project is that this was really a big deal for Reno, to be the Divorce Capital of the World for a number of years. And so much of popular culture surrounded it. It was really a big deal.

Jones and Norden: Right.

And it's kind of slipping away from the collective memory as time passes.

Jones: All the more reason to do this now, rather than in another twenty years. [laughter]

Exactly.

Norden: Because it really is an important part of United States history.

Jones: Yes, in terms of divorce laws and the differences in the various states. If you had stayed in Connecticut, I think it would have taken at least a year.

Norden: It would have, yes.

Jones: And my father did not want to wait a year. [laughter]

Norden: He got married, and they lived happily for—

Jones: They had a wonderful family, and they were very happy, and ultimately we were, too. So it all worked out for the best.

Norden: So, Phil, you stayed with your mom?

Jones: Yes, my sister and I stayed with my mom, and eventually moved to Southern California, and that's where we were raised, my sister and I. And then my mom had three more children with her second husband. So we stayed pretty much in the West. I've lived all over—the

Midwest, Texas, and now back in Arizona. But basically, I consider myself a Westerner.

[laughter] And the Nevada experience was just part of forming me.

That's right, it was just your intro! [laughter]

Jones: Absolutely, it was my intro! [laughter]

Norden: Yes, Phil had an important job here in Phoenix for about fifteen years.

Jones: In my last job, I was the Director of Arts and Culture in Phoenix. I was also Director of Arts and Culture for the City of Dallas for five years. So moved around a lot.

Norden: He plays the piano beautifully. And I'm still painting. I'm a professional painter, artist. Still going strong.

And you're still beautiful, too, I'll tell you.

Norden: Oh, thank you. It's more important to be beautiful inside, I think.

And you are that as well.

Norden: Well, thanks. I'd like to meet you someday.

We've just had such great luck with talking to people who had these experiences like yours, and it's interesting, Phil, other people who were children who came here, and have varying degrees of memory about it.

So far you were the youngest and have the most fully developed memory of coming here.

Norden: How interesting!

Jones: That's funny.

You must be a prodigy or something.

Jones: [laughter] I just paid attention to things.

Norden: I'm glad he did.

Jones: Well, you know, in a way it was a traumatic experience, in a way—and not in an awful way, but it really got my attention, so I was aware of what was going on, because I felt like I'd been lifted out of one place and plopped down in another.

“What on earth has happened to me? What has happened to my world?”

Jones: Right, right. And then had a similar adjustment when we moved to Denver, and the same thing in California. We finally got settled in California.

If you're going to have that kind of experience, it was really a wonderful place to be. It really was.

I want to give you the chance—is there something else you would like to say about your experience, or what you think the importance of Reno's divorce trade was?

Norden: I don't want to be pushy [laughter] but I think that to read about it in my book would be very valuable for a lot of people...

Oh, absolutely!

Norden: ...because they would feel like they were part of it, they understood it a little better.

It's on Amazon.com, anytime anybody wants to go and look for it.

Jones: Well, thank you so much for this opportunity. It's a pleasure talking to you.

Thank you. It's a pleasure for me as well.

Norden: Oh, good. Well, we wish you the best of luck in this whole venture. I think it sounds really interesting, and I think a lot of people will benefit from learning about it, and I just think it's a beautiful thing for the City of Reno and its history.

Jones: Absolutely. Well, thank you.

Thank you.

Norden: Thank you, dear.