



City of Alexandria  
Office of Historic Alexandria  
*Alexandria Legacies*  
**Oral History Program**



**Project Name:** *Alexandria Legacies Oral History Program*

**Title:** *Interview with Marilyn Harris*

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**Location of Interview:** *Interview was conducted online via Zoom.*

**Interviewer:** *MaryAnn Beatty*

**Transcriber:** *Meia Cacho*

**Abstract:** *Marilyn Harris is a life-long Virginian who moved to Alexandria after working for the US Government in Germany. She has formed several lifelong friendships in Alexandria through TWIG. She talks about how proud she is of the many contributions that TWIG has made to Alexandria Hospital and the community, especially the Thrift Shop. While she is now a resident of South Carolina, she still maintains her special connections within TWIG.*

*Also present during the interview were Janet Hawkins and Susan Joseph.*

**This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and may not reflect the audio-recording exactly.**

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<b>Introductions 00:00</b>	
MaryAnne Beatty:	Hi there! My name is MaryAnne Beatty, and I am a member of TWIG's Historic Preservation Ad Hoc Committee. Today is January 27. And I'm pleased to be able to interview Marilyn Harris, who was a long-time TWIG member. Marilyn, you can tell us all about it. I'm also here with Janet Hawkins and Susan Joseph. Susan, tell me again where you are. Where are you currently?
Susan Joseph:	I'm currently in Madison, Virginia.
MB:	Okay.
SJ:	And I'm usually out there but I had to get here.
MB:	Nice, nice. Anyway, I'm pleased to be able to talk to Marilyn. Marilyn, I'd like to start. I was just reading over the questions. And you're a native Virginian?
Marilyn Harris:	Yes.
MB:	Okay. And you're currently living, is it in "De-taw" [Dataw] Island? Is that how you say it?
Marilyn Harris:	It's pronounced Daw-taw Island.
MB:	Okay.
Marilyn Harris:	Yeah.
<b>Moving to Alexandria and Joining TWIG 01:09</b>	
MB:	All-righty. As a kid, I used to go to Jekyll Island with my grandmother. I don't know how far that is, but anyway, thank you very much. Marilyn, if you could just give us a little background about how you came to Alexandria and a little bit about your family background, and we'll go from there.
Marilyn Harris:	Well, like many Alexandria residents, I came via the US government after having spent ten years in Germany working for the Department of the Army, I moved first to Woodbridge. I'll have to tell you a funny anecdote about that. When I moved back—I grew up outside of Richmond, and so when I moved back to Alexandria, it was my first experience in Northern Virginia. I absolutely could not understand why anybody would live in a townhouse in Alexandria when they could live in a big, larger house in Woodbridge with more acreage. Well, it didn't take me a very long time to figure that out because I was commuting from Woodbridge to the Pentagon.

	<p>Every month that I did that was a whole lot less fun. So eventually, having figured that out much later than many, I moved from Woodbridge to Alexandria and happily moved into a rowhouse. This community was relatively new. I think it was probably built around 1996 or something like that. It was called, it is called Overlook. And I was so fortunate to move into a community where there were TWIGs already living. One was Ika Joiner, the other one was Barbara Vogt. It was a very friendly neighborhood, lots of parties and lots of five o'clock Happy Hour get-togethers that happened every Friday. In fact, there was a little flag traded off each time so neighbors knew where to go for Happy Hour.</p> <p>That's how we got to know neighbors. Ika and Barbara Vogt and I think Gwen Cloutier may have been a member or she joined about the same time I did. Eventually, we were invited to a coffee, one of those membership coffees. I was so lucky that Starlet [Zarek] was the president. She's so warm and engaging, and friendly. And it's really, really hard to say no to her. I thoroughly enjoyed that coffee and decided to join TWIG. I think that was about 2004, maybe. Yeah, I think it was 2004. And so that was the beginning of my experience with TWIG.</p>
MB:	Who was your sponsor? Who sponsored you?
Marilyn Harris:	Barbara and Ika, I think. Both were my sponsors.
<b>TWIG Committees and Groups 04:27</b>	
MB:	Okay. And then what did you jump into? What committees and groups did you get involved in?
Marilyn Harris:	<p>Well, you know, I was still working full time, so I usually did my TWIG time on Saturdays. I did the normal stocking [merchandise] period. Everybody had to do the whole stocking thing. You get to know the Thrift Shop. Most of what I did was with the Thrift Shop. And then later, I think it was Janet Hawkins who talked me into being Parliamentarian even though I was working full time. I'm not sure who that was, but I want to say it was Janet. And then I worked with my dear friend, Susan, on the Homes Tour. The only way I would have said yes was as co-chair to Susan because, really, she did most of the work getting all the homes, and she sort of let me tag along.</p>
Susan Joseph:	I don't remember that. Actually, I must be getting so old, my memory is failing on that, but you do block out difficult times like that, getting those houses.

<p>Marilyn Harris:</p>	<p>Well, you knew exactly who to call and you are quite talented in talking people into doing what we needed them to do or what you needed them to do. I can tell you my experience in knowing Susan really changed the trajectory of my professional life. And I'll always be grateful to her for that. That one weekend we spent together in the Thrift Shop that ended with our working together on Capitol Hill.</p>
<p><b>Special Connections and Friendships 06:11</b></p>	
<p>MB:</p>	<p>Well, my next question was going to be about special friendships and special connections. So can you talk a little bit more about the two of your special—your friendship and connections.</p>
<p>Marilyn Harris:</p>	<p>Well, I have to talk about Janet first because I'm not sure how it came about that she adopted me, but she did. And we've been dear friends ever since, she and Dave. I have spent countless, countless holidays and weekends, and evenings in her home both in Alexandria and in the Outer Banks. She's been extraordinarily generous with her friendship to me and to my whole family. And she's sort of been there for me through difficult times. I went through a health crisis when I refused to let anybody come to see me in the hospital. And I looked up one day and there's Dave. I don't even know how they let him in, but he was determined to make sure I was okay, and I was grateful. And another, as I was recovering, I remember Janet brought Gidget—or Spike?</p>
<p>Janet Hawkins:</p>	<p>No, it was Gidget. It was Gidget.</p>
<p>Marilyn Harris:</p>	<p>Gidget. Oh, Gidget was a baby, she brought her over, and it was a very sweet thing to do and certainly lifted my spirits. Janet and I became very close friends. And we remain close friends today. She knows my children; they know her. And they have her—especially my son, they've got her phone number in their phones. And when they're in Washington, they don't hesitate to look them up. That's a special friendship. As I mentioned, Susan Joseph, who is probably the most humble and amazing person I've ever known. Susan and I became friends on a very, I don't know, non-descript weekend working in the Thrift Shop. Susan and I both work full time so we pulled our Thrift Shop duties on the weekends. I happened to be complaining a bit about my job to Susan. I was beginning to think about retirement with having worked in only one agency, and I happened to mention that to Susan. And she said, "Well, you should give me your resume and come and work with me," without really telling me where she worked. I said,</p>

	<p>“Okay. Where do you work?” She said, “Well, I work in the legislative branch or I work on the Hill. And I have worked more than twenty-five years in the Executive Branch.” And I said, “Okay.” I gave her my resume as soon as I could, and she promised to get back to me. The next thing I know, I’m getting a call from the Office of the Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. After a whirlwind week or two, I joined Susan as a congressional investigator. We worked together for a number of years. And as I said, that changed the trajectory of my entire career. And I’ll never forget her friendship. I’ll never forget her mentoring and her support. It has meant a lot.</p>
SJ:	Thank you.
MB:	Susan, would you like to add anything to that?
SJ:	No, I just remember working with Marilyn, and it happened exactly as she said. She came up on the staff, up on the Hill. I can’t remember, Marilyn, do you think about three or four years that you were there?
Marilyn Harris:	Yeah, it was actually five years.
SJ:	Oh, my goodness. That tells you.
Marilyn Harris:	Yeah.
SJ:	Five years and then you continued working after that. You got another job. So you retired and—.
Marilyn Harris:	Yeah. I allowed myself to be recruited back to the Executive Branch for another five years.
MB:	And what agency were you in?
Marilyn Harris:	At that point, I went to the Department of Veterans Affairs. I joined a general I knew who had just been named secretary.
MB:	Nice. And what years were you at the Pentagon?
Marilyn Harris:	I was at the Pentagon from 1996 to 2010.
MB:	Okay. I was there in 1979. And I still remember my office number, 3CA3A. I cannot—[laughs]
Marilyn Harris:	Wow! That’s fantastic.
MB:	I just remembered. That was weird how you remember things. Well, you had a very illustrious federal career. And then how did you get down to South Carolina? Did you just retire?
Marilyn Harris:	I just put my house on the market one day thinking that it would

	<p>take three to six months to sell, and it sold in forty-eight hours. And I was like, “Holy cow!” So I got in my car and headed South. I happened to know a couple who I had met—I met her when we were both at the Federal Executive Institute in Charlottesville, at UVA [The University of Virginia] in Charlottesville. She owned a home here, and I’d visited her a couple of times. And it seemed like my car found its way. After a couple of visits, it seemed like the place to go. Janet and Dave weren’t so sure I was making the right decision but—[laughs] and they’re still not so sure.</p>
<p>JH:</p>	<p>We miss you. We miss you. Do you want to share a story about who sold your house for you? Was there a TWIG connection there, too?</p>
<p><b>Selling Her House 12:45</b></p>	
<p>Marilyn Harris:</p>	<p>That’s exactly right. Thank you for reminding me. Susan Fitzgerald. That is so true. Thank you for reminding me. Here’s a crazy story about that. I called Susan Fitzgerald in March and said, “I think I want to sell my house, but I’m not 100% sure. And I’m toying around with the idea of putting it on the market in October. Would you come over and take a look?” Susan had just sold a house in my neighborhood, a TWIG’s. She sold Barbara Vogt’s house, another TWIG in my neighborhood earlier that year. And so, she came over and took a look. Susan is also a professional stager, which was helpful. She wanted to explain to me that I either had to put it on the market in June or I had to put it on the market in September. But she would not be available in September because she was retiring and moving herself.</p> <p>And so we agreed that I would put it, you know, we’d do whatever she recommended. So Susan sold my house in two days, and I didn’t know whether to hug her or not. I didn’t know what to do about it. [laughs] Anyway, she sold it. I mean, she got everything I asked for. As it turns out, we were both moving to South Carolina. We moved the exact same weekend. The same moving truck picked up some of both our household goods, dropped it off with her in Charleston, and drove another hour south and brought my household goods. So we live within an hour of each other. Is that a coincidence or what? Thank you for the reminder. That is another TWIG connection.</p>
<p><b>Contributions of TWIG to the Hospital 14:30</b></p>	
<p>MB:</p>	<p>So back to TWIG and your membership and involvement in TWIG, what do you think are some of the most important contributions that the TWIG has made to the hospital?</p>

Marilyn Harris:

You know, in my time with TWIG, probably the things that I was most proud of being a part of certainly included the TWIG Pavilion at the hospital. [It is a telemetry unit which helps meet the hospital's need for monitored short-term medical care. Twig completed this pledge in June 2010.]



That was huge. I think the neonatal department was already done when I got there, but the TWIG Pavilion. And we had—we women had the audacity to pledge a million dollars to the hospital. I mean, who do we think we were? And not only did we pledge it, we did it. I'm really, really proud of that. I'm proud of the way the TWIG organization recognizes nurses and the value that they add. And the way that we always contributed to continuing education for nurses.

I was always very proud to be a part of that. When we brought those nursing applicants in and awarded those scholarships. It was always just truly heartfelt on our part and on theirs as well. I'm really proud of our presence in Alexandria. One of the things that I appreciated so much about working in the Thrift Shop was the faces of the people that we saw almost all the time. These were the people who needed what we were selling. I remember that one of the first things Starlet said when I was going through my orientation was "Leave the diamonds and the bling at home," because we are serving a segment of the community that doesn't need to see that.

So it was impressed upon me the value of recognizing the humanity of the community that we were supporting. And so while some might see TWIG as an elite women's organization, I know better because I remember still some of the faces of the people who would come in. And they were just grateful that we were so nice to them, you know. We would help them shop. We would



	<p>help them try on clothes. We would genuinely admire what they were doing. And then there were the people who came with the vouchers from Christ Church. We always—at least the TWIGs that I worked with were always just so kind and generous with everyone. And I’m proud to have been a part of an organization that supported every segment of our community. Those who needed to donate and those who needed the donations.</p>
<p><b>Keeping in Touch 17:27</b></p>	
<p>MB:</p>	<p>That’s nice. That’s very nice. Do you continue to support, well, I guess being in South Carolina, do you keep in touch with anyone, or do you keep in touch with what’s—I think you do—keep in touch with what’s going on with TWIG?</p>
<p>Marilyn Harris:</p>	<p>You know, I didn’t want to leave without talking somebody into joining TWIG to fill what I considered the gap. So I introduced Lydia Pugh, who was a neighbor, who then introduced another neighbor. Anyway, she brought two more people into TWIG who also live in our community. And they’re both active. I think Lydia was even the head of the Thrift Shop.</p>
<p>JH:</p>	<p>Yes, for two years.</p>
<p>Marilyn Harris:</p>	<p>Yeah.</p>
<p>JH:</p>	<p>She’s made a huge number of contributions to the organization. She really has.</p>
<p>Marilyn Harris:</p>	<p>She’s a hard worker. And so I did for Lydia what Barbara Vogt and Ika Joiner did for me and for TWIG. I stay in touch with her. She’s very low-key. I notice when I get the TWIG newsletters with photographs, she’s always hiding in the back of the photo. She’s very tall so it’s hard for her to hide, but she doesn’t want her picture taken. I keep up with the newsletters. I keep up through Janet and through Lydia, for sure.</p>
<p><b>TWIG, Moving Forward 19:04</b></p>	
<p>MB:</p>	<p>And with times changing and, I don’t know, with the vaccine and even the new hospital being planned, what do you think the TWIG goals moving forward should be? Anything different or?</p>
<p>Marilyn Harris:</p>	<p>You know, I see TWIG as philanthropic. And I think we should continue that type of philanthropy. I think we should continue, I say “we” and I’m eight hours away or twelve hours away, or something, but I really do think that the TWIG organization should continue to be a presence in Alexandria. I think that TWIG brings a unique perspective, a unique value, and a unique presence. So I</p>

	think TWIG should keep on doing what it's been doing for all these years.
MB:	Okay.
Marilyn Harris:	And don't ever stop doing the Homes Tour. [laughs]
JH:	You know, we didn't have one this past year. I think the verdict is still out about this year because of COVID.
Marilyn Harris:	Well, I hope we don't give up the idea of it.
JH:	I don't think so. I was hoping now that you would talk a little bit about the Homes Tour. I don't know if Susan's back on again.
SJ:	Yeah, I'm here.
Marilyn Harris:	Susan did all the work. [laughs]
JH:	I do remember that Marilyn had an escort the day of the tour.
Marilyn Harris:	See, I don't remember that.
SJ:	Who was it?
JH:	It was Clayton.
Marilyn Harris:	Oh, that's right! He surprised me. He did. How can I forget? MaryAnne, Clayton is my son.
MB:	Oh, nice. Oh, very nice.
SJ:	You know, I heard that they're going to have a garden tour for our tour this year, you know, gardens versus inside homes. So maybe it will continue this year.
JH:	I know that they're exploring the idea. The last I heard was that Mary Schoen, who will be our next president, I don't think you've met her before, Marilyn—remember my neighbor, Katie Lewin, her husband John, Mary was John's work-wife, but anyway, she would be the next president. And they still don't have Homes Tour chairs, so if you want to come back to TWIG, we're looking for chairs.
Marilyn Harris:	Yeah, only if Susan would do it.
JH:	I know the Garden Club of Virginia is doing their Old Town tour this year, but it's going to be all outside, so I think they're kind of looking to see whether that's something that TWIG can do. You know, gardens in September, Susan, you know this because you live in Old Town or not necessarily the big star in September. It's more a spring thing, but we'll see. We're hoping we can do it.

SJ:	Yeah, that'd be good if it will continue.
Marilyn Harris:	I now remember the second person who came into TWIG as a result of Lydia, who came as a result of my twisting her arm. It's Monique Bagby.
JH:	That's right. And she's our Assistant Treasurer. She's done that for two years this year and helped out with the Homes Tour. She's on the board right now. She's delightful. She lived on Winter View, too.
Marilyn Harris:	Yes.
<b>What Makes the Alexandria Hospital Special 22:41</b>	
MB:	Well, I only had one more question, and you've sort of answered it already, but what is it about the Alexandria Hospital that makes it so special to the community when you lived there? Your thoughts?
Marilyn Harris:	Well, I like the convenience of it. I like the size of it when I lived there. Obviously, it's grown. My daughter told me about the new campus where the ExxonMobil facility used to be. I haven't been up there since then. That's pretty cool. I now live in a community that has a hospital like Alexandria Hospital was when I started with TWIG. Every time I go over there, I remember how warm and friendly a small hospital could be. And so it's very nice to walk into the hospital, you try not to have to go too often, but if you do have to go, it's nice to see familiar faces. And so it was the community feel of the hospital in 2004, during that period of time when I was there, that I like so much. I liked to be a part of it.
MB:	Yeah, yeah. Well, thank you. Well, those are all my questions. It's nice meeting you over Zoom. Janet talks so much about you. And, Susan, sorry I can't see you, but it's nice meeting you.
SJ:	Yeah, and it's nice reliving history. Thank you, Marilyn. As you age, you just kind of forget about a lot of things, and you kind of walk down memory lane. And it was very nice. Thank you.
Marilyn Harris:	No, thank you. Well, I look forward to seeing my TWIG friends when I'm back.