

[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

ANNOUNCER: You're listening to the *Slice of MIT Podcast*, a production of the MIT Alumni Association.

JOE This is the *MIT Alumni Books Podcast*. I'm Joe McGonegal, Director of Alumni Education.

MCGONEGAL:

Jo Ivester, class of '77, is the author of *The Outskirts of Hope*, published this spring by She Writes Press. It's a memoir both written by mother and daughter adjusting to a move from suburban Boston to Mound Bayou, Mississippi in 1967. Here's an excerpt.

JO IVESTER: "My parents were foot soldiers in President Johnson's war on poverty. One of the president's first actions after announcing his new program in 1964 was to send his lieutenants in search of the poorest spot in the country. Expecting to find it in Appalachia, they were surprised to discover it instead in the cotton fields of Mississippi. By 1967, with a fresh new degree in public health, my pediatrician father decided to enlist.

During the height of the civil rights movement, my family moved to a small all-black town in the heart of the Mississippi Delta where my father opened a clinic and my mother, Aura Kruger, taught English at the local high school. I was the only white student at my junior high.

Both my mother and I kept journals of our time in Mound Bayou. Hers is the basis of the true story you are about to read. I burned mine decades ago because I was embarrassed by all that had happened and couldn't imagine ever wanting to share my story. Reading my mother's journals, I was surprised how vividly and completely those memories came back. More than that, I was pleased to discover that I could almost reconstruct what I'd written as a child."

MCGONEGAL: Thanks for joining me. Looks like you got to work on this book starting around 2008 or so, and what prompted it then?

IVESTER: Well, originally, it was my mother's project. When she was in her early 80s, she was receiving requests from extended family to write down all the family stories. She was the last of her generation. She was a wonderful storyteller, and so she did. She spent 20 minutes writing every morning. And after several years, she had stacks of spiral bound notebooks handwritten her entire life story going back to her parents in the 1800s, taking her through retirement.

The first thing I did was work with her as an editor, eventually as a co-writer, and we turned

that into a journal. And after we finished, she wanted me to circulate it, try to get it published in addition to sending it out to the family and her friends.

When I did that, I got feedback which was, this is a wonderful gift for family and friends. But the only really publishable part of that is this very unique story about your time in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. And if you'll take those 50 pages, and expand on them, turn them into something that reads more like a novel with character and scene development, then you might have something that can get published.

My mother by then was 85, and she said, I'm done. I've accomplished what I wanted to do. And I said, well, would you mind if I take over the project, and keep going on my own, and turn it into not just your story, but my story as well? She was very supportive and said, go for it. I spent many, many hours interviewing her trying to get more detail about all of the stories, and then I just started writing.

And I kept feeding back to her what I was working on to check for authenticity. I was channeling her voice, and the book evolved from there. It really started as her coming of age story-- starting to teach in her 40s in this unusual setting-- and then it became gradually my coming of age story as well as I brought in my voice more, and in some cases, told the same story from the perspective of a 10-year-old child and a 44-year-old mother.

MCGONEGAL: You both kept diaries back in the day when you were there, you say.

IVESTER: Well, actually, my mother didn't. She started her journal in her 80s, but her recollection was amazing. And she also had photo albums that she had kept from that time where it was a little bit like a diary, where she would write two or three sentences with the [INAUDIBLE] picture. I did keep a diary, but I burned it.

MCGONEGAL: Was it hard to be accurate about something nearly 50 years ago, now, in terms of your own telling of your own story?

IVESTER: It is as accurate as I could possibly make it. As I mentioned, my mother had a phenomenal memory. I do, too. I can close my eyes and picture details from my childhood going back to preschool where I can really picture individual moments like I'm watching a movie. So that's the kind of memory that she and I both have.

I went back to the town and interviewed as many of her students, and colleagues, and my

dad's colleagues and patients as I could, and my friends, and kept asking over and over again, is this accurate? Does this match your recollections? And the feedback I've gotten has been very positive that the recollections all seem pretty much on target.

MCGONEGAL: You enlisted your daughter in that process as well.

IVESTER: I did. My daughter was 25 at the time, and she was my note taker and photographer. And it was amazing to share the experience with her and get to have her see this town that she'd heard both my mother and me talking about the whole time she was growing up, because it really did affect who we were.

That experience made me the person I am today, and I would tell her that, tell my daughter that. And it wasn't until she had a chance to see the town, and meet the people, and hear people telling stories about me as a 10-year-old that she realized how true that really was.

MCGONEGAL: Let's talk about some of the obstacles in bringing it to press. There's some editing hoops to jump through in weaving these stories together as it got closer to press.

IVESTER: Absolutely. I was fortunate enough to find a fantastic editor who had quite a few years of experience teaching, writing, working with writing groups, and agreed to take me on as a client after I made two statements. The first was a recognition that even though I had a complete draft, that I realized I was at the beginning of the process, not the end. And if I was going to write something that was honest and authentic, I had to go back to Mississippi.

At first, I didn't want to. I had left under abrupt violent situation and was hesitant to return to that. I didn't know how I would be received. And she stressed the importance of it. Finally, my decision was to my parents, my mother especially was very brave going there in the 1960s. I could be brave and go back in my early 50s and do what I needed to explore.

MCGONEGAL: You channeled some of the bravery of your mother as you went back to uncover some of the memories again.

IVESTER: I did. It was wonderful going back, and I was very well received very fondly. I mentioned that I had left in a rough manner. I had been attacked. And I'd made arrangements to interview one of my assailants, and that's something that most people never get a chance to do. And it gave me a sense of closure for a very unusual experience, and that's actually detailed in the last chapter of the book. That was quite an unusual experience.

MCGONEGAL: It's a cinematic scene of sitting in this truck again. Is it a pickup truck?

IVESTER: It was a van. Yeah, a van.

MCGONEGAL: With your assailant, who was himself a child at the time of the attack, or 18.

IVESTER: He was about 18.

MCGONEGAL: 18.

IVESTER: Yeah, he was 18 and I was 11.

MCGONEGAL: I wonder what your impression was in going back to this town. Your parents had both gone there under rather idealistic circumstances inspired by the Jack Geiger Clinic in Boston to be the founding-- your father, the founding doctor of this clinic in Mound Bayou. Your mother shared that idealism, I imagine, of the great society.

IVESTER: Yes, and the war on poverty.

MCGONEGAL: Yeah. You tell the story through your mother's eyes. It left me with this impression of who had the greater impact in that town, your mother or your father?

IVESTER: I think in the long run, it was my mother. My father certainly had a huge impact on his patients. They loved him. The clinic is still up and running, still providing medical services for people for miles around. It's one of the biggest employers in the area, and certainly the biggest employer in the town. So he had a very, very big impact.

My mother's impact was multi-generational. The students that she nurtured, many of them ended up going to college who might not otherwise have done so. Three of her students, she arranged scholarships for them. And [? Brambus ?] was very generous about that.

I had the opportunity when I was in Boston for a reading about a month ago to have one of those students that had come to Boston speak up. It changed his life and his children's lives, and so it had an impact for generations, and that's very, very exciting. But I think that's the power of teaching.

MCGONEGAL: I'd love to have you read an excerpt, probably the most choked up I got. Your mother tells a story of acquiring some books, from Malcolm X. But there's also Langston Hughes and others. And this culminates in a pretty tense PTA meeting one night. The story of neighbor-- I think it

was Jackie-- joining her at the PTA meeting, it's an anecdote describing in very minute detail the change she was affecting in that community. This is when Jackie decides to join her in the cause.

IVESTER:

Sure. "Before I could protest that this was an unfair description of the books, he held up his hand to stop me. 'I know there's a difference between this literature and the revolutionary writings of some of the more extreme figures. But others don't, and they're scared.' We shook hands again at his front door and he said, 'I promise, I will be there.'

We walked home. Jackie said, 'I've lived in the same town as Dr. Burton for years, and this was the first time I've ever talked with him. I thought he'd be different, more distant, but he seemed very supportive.' 'And so have you, Jackie,' I said. 'I can't tell you how much it means to me that you were there tonight.' 'I didn't really say much.' 'Doesn't matter,' I answered. 'I wish we'd gotten to know each other sooner.' 'Me too,' she said.

'How about if I drive us to the PTA meeting?' 'Oh, you don't need to do that. I can drive myself.' 'I know I don't need to. I want to. I want everyone to know that I think you should use those books.' I stopped walking and turned to her. 'Jackie, you could lose your job. It's one thing if I get fired. We'll get by on Leon's salary, but you're just starting out. If you get fired here, you'll never be able to teach again.' 'You don't think I know that? I've been quiet for too long. It's time for me to take a stance.'"

MCGONEGAL:

Jackie just choosing guilt by association.

IVESTER:

[INAUDIBLE] Jackie's personal strength as well.

MCGONEGAL:

Right. The word "MIT" does not appear in this book, and you don't get to your college years. But can I ask you how MIT et al vocation is alive and well in your writing?

IVESTER:

I am very proud of having attended MIT, and it's absolutely in there. I started learning to write while at MIT. If I go back to-- I'd kept a journal before then. But when I go back and look at short stories that I had written at 18, 19 years old, that was during my MIT years, so it's very much a part of who I am.

And then you add in my time with the Shakespeare ensemble. I have a development of a love of literature and of theater that came right out of MIT. And this was something that was above and beyond my classes, and is with me today, and is a big part of the book.

There's a whole section where I got to sit in on one of my mother's classes and watch her teach a scene from *Merchant of Venice*. The schools were way behind what they had been in Newton Center where I had lived until I was 10, so my parents took up teaching us at home. My mother was teaching Shakespeare, and we'd read plays out loud. My father taught me math.

Because we were working one on one, I didn't even think about it, but I was advancing beyond my age group. So at 11 years old, I was doing algebra. And by the time we'd moved back into mainstream education and left Mound Bayou, I was actually quite a bit ahead. By the time I was 14, I was in a calculus class. And that all goes back to the tutoring which happened because we were in Mississippi. And that's what landed me, I think, at MIT.

MCGONEGAL: It was the lack of formal education that prompted your talents in math. That's interesting.

IVESTER: Yeah.

MCGONEGAL: We all know that the work of civil rights is not done in this country. What other stories need to be told? Do you think yours? Or what other writing is ahead for you that will touch on that?

IVESTER: Well, I think you're right that there's still a huge amount to be done. And of course, it's on everybody's mind right now with the people that were murdered in a church in South Carolina, and all the police violence that we've seen over the last year, with it seems like one story every month coming out. With the police violence, I don't believe that's new. I believe that the internet is making us all much more aware.

I see this actually as very positive that everybody seems to now be talking about it. That is what needs to happen. It's very easy for people who are living a comfortable life to assume that everything is fine now. That's just not the case. What's happened is it's coming into people's daily lives, the awareness of the news. That's going to make change happen more quickly.

Now, we have come a long way. There's no question that in the 60s, you still had government supported segregation in many places throughout the South, and we have definitely come way, way beyond that. So now, it's a matter of reaching every individual.

The more that people are willing to tell personal stories like I've done, the better it will be. I've given this a lot of thought. It's very easy to see people who are different from us as other. And if we don't interact with people of a different race, for example, as a child, then later in life, it's

hard to develop a sense of comfort. In many situations, that discomfort bubbles over into fear and then violence.

For me, the matter's personal. Because of my time in Mound Bayou as the only white child at the junior high, I was able to get comfortable with people who were other than me. When people share personal stories like that, it helps to increase that comfort.

The next book I'm working on is a different take on this other, which is that another group that has a lot of difficulty in our world is the transgender population. Well, we happen to have an asexual transgender son who started life as Emily, and is now Jeremy.

And now in the same way that my mother and I worked together on a book, my son and I are working together on a book that's going to tell his story of figuring out who he was, and starting in his late teens, early 20s with asexuality, and then realizing he was transgender, recognizing that, having surgery, and now living as a man.

MCGONEGAL: Well, I look forward to reading number two.

IVESTER: Thank you.

MCGONEGAL: What else are you reading right now?

IVESTER: I just finished a marvelous book by one of the other authors with She Writes Press called *Even in Darkness*. And it's written as a novel, but it's based on journals, so I had a lot of appreciation for the process. And this is someone who had a great aunt that was a survivor in Germany during World War II, a Jewish family. And so it was marvelous reading that.

Another one I recently finished reading, *The Invention of Wings* book about a white girl who was given a slave as a gift her 11th birthday. This is in the antebellum South. And the friendship develops, and the white girl goes on to become an abolitionist, and it's based on some true stories.

MCGONEGAL: Jo Ivester, class of '77 is the author of *The Outskirts of Hope*, published this spring by She Writes Press. Jo, thanks for joining me.

IVESTER: Thank you.