

John DeMeulenaere
interviewed by Mark Huang
transcribed by Mark Huang

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Mark Huang This is May 3rd. My name is Mark Huang. I'm talking with Doctor John DeMeulenaere at his house about early life in Grinnell County, Grinnell City?

John DeMeulenaere This is the city of Grinnell; we are in Poweshiek County.

MH Poweshiek County.

JD Uh huh.

MH I forgot. It's on my license and I didn't even remember that.

JD Yes.

MH So, tell me first, where were you born?

JD I was born in, uh, Brooklyn, Iowa, on a farm. And Brooklyn, if you are not aware of it, is only fifteen miles to the east of, uh, Grinnell.

MH Oh really?

JD Yes. So I didn't get very far away from home.

(MH chuckles)

MH I've never been there.

JD Yeah, it's just a little town of about 1500 people. And, uh, as I said, I was born on a farm about, oh, ten miles northwest of Brooklyn.

MH Uh huh?

JD And then, uh, when I was, uh, about eight years old we moved in on a farm which was right within the city limits of Brooklyn. And, uh, my dad was a dairy farmer, so I had, uh, the best of two lives, really, country and, uh, city.

MH And city.

JD If you'd call city a (unintelligible) fifteen-hundred populated town.

(MH chuckles)

MH Yeah, a lot smaller than I'm used to.

JD Yes, yes.

MH Did you like it there?

JD Oh, very much.

MH Very much?

JD Yes, I thought we had a very happy childhood there.

MH Uh huh?

JD And, uh, even though my childhood was during the time of the great depression, and, uh, I graduated from high school in 1933, which was right at the height of the depression, really...

MH Uh huh.

JD Uh, nobody had anything. But, uh, uh, having, uh, uh, been on the farm we had plenty to eat always. And, uh, so we really, we really didn't, uh, feel the pinch, you know, of extreme poverty which many people experienced at that time.

MH Uh huh.

JD Uh, my dad experienced the poverty, however, because, uh, uh, the, uh, ownership of the farm, his ownership of the farm was threatened because he had a mortgage on it, and, uh, he found it very difficult to pay on his mortgage.

MH Huh.

JD But then Roosevelt was the elected president of 1932, and then when he, uh, took office in 1933 one of the first things he did to help the farmer was declare the mortgage moratorium act.

MH Okay.

JD Uh, for farmers, and, uh, with that it helped my dad save his farm and we never lost it.

MH That's good. What was this act? I'm not familiar with it.

JD Well they call it, they, uh, the, uh, the Agricultural Moratorium Act, as I remember.

MH Uh huh? And what did it do?

JD Well, what it, what it did was to help to, uh, to, uh, postpone for the farmer the payment on the mortgage, and then put it off, you know, for a year, two years, whatever was determined at that time.

MH Okay.

JD So, uh, so Dad's mortgage, I know, was post-, payment on the mortgage was postponed sufficiently long for him to be able to pay it then later on.

MH Okay, cool. What did you do then when you graduated from high school?

JD From high school I went to college at the University of Iowa.

MH Okay. That's Iowa City, right?

JD That's Iowa City, yes, which was only, um, well, let's see, Iowa City is only fifty miles from Brooklyn.

MH Uh huh.

JD So, again, I didn't get too far away from here. And, uh, then, uh, I took three years of liberal arts and then, uh, I was accepted into medical school and I graduated from medical school and took my internship in, uh, in Detroit from '39 to '40.

MH Wow.

JD And, uh, then in 1940, October 15th of 1940, I was, uh, inducted into the Army. When I graduated from medical school in '39 I was automatically given a commission as a first lieutenant in the U.S. Medical Corps, uh, because I had taken ROTC training, uh, at the University, not of my own choice, but because it was mandatory.

MH Uh huh.

JD And so, uh, you don't remember this, but, uh, Roosevelt started his, uh, being aware, you know, of the, of the situation in Europe and the threat of war. Roosevelt was, um, far-sighted enough to initiate the emergency, um, uh, military build-up.

MH Uh huh.

JD Which he started September 1st of 1940.

MH Uh huh.

JD This was over a year and three months before Pearl Harbor.

MH Okay, so he was ready for it, well kind of.

JD Well, at least it gave him, gave us some, um, gave us a little room to, to prepare for what was coming.

MH Uh huh. So then, uh, when you were inducted into the army you started right off being a, a medic then?

JD Yes. I was a medic when I was, uh, when I was, uh, taken into the army. I was a doctor. I'd finished my internship so I was a full fledged physician at that time.

MH Uh huh. And, uh, do you have any stories from then, or, uh, where did you serve?

JD In the army, okay, I was in, I'd taken my, uh, I had, I had taken my internship in Detroit.

MH Uh huh.

JD And, uh, as part of this, uh, Roosevelt's emergency military build-up, the National

Guard, the 32nd Red Arrow division of Wisconsin and Michigan was, uh, called to active duty, so, uh, I was in the reserves, so I, too, was activated, and I was assigned to, uh, that 32nd Red Arrow Division, infantry division.

MH Hm.

JD I was assigned to them and, uh, we were set to camp down in, uh, uh, Camp Livingston, Louisiana.

MH Uh huh.

JD And, uh, we were in training down there at the time, uh, of Pearl Harbor, and, uh, then one month later we were sent overseas to Australia.

MH Oh wow.

JD And, uh, to prepare, you know, to stop the Japs over there because at that time Australia was, uh, being threatened by invasion by the Japanese.

MH Uh huh.

JD So we went to Australia, then, from about January of 1942 until about July, uh, the Japanese were then threatening Port Moresby up in New Guinea, so they flew us, they flew our division into Port Moresby.

MH Uh huh.

JD And then we started fighting the Japanese back over the old Stanley range to the, uh, to the northern side of Papau, New Guinea. And then we had a showdown with them at Buna.

MH Hm.

JD And then, uh, after Buna, well, then we kept leap-frogging up the coast of, uh, of, uh, New Guinea, uh, Finch Haven, the Drinimore River, Hollandia, and, uh, and then in November of, uh, 19-, uh, 44, uh, we were in on the, uh, landing at Laitae and started the return to the Philippines.

MH Okay.

JD We served under Mac Arthur.

MH Hm.

JD You remember, maybe you remember Mac Arthur saying, "I shall return." Well he returned to the Philippines landing at Laitae.

MH Hm. Okay. I'll admit that my history...

JD Yeah.

MH is pretty shaky.

JD Yeah, yeah.

MH My knowledge of it is pretty bad.

JD So then it was from, uh, from Laitae in, uh, around the 1st of December in, um, 1941 that, uh, my chance at coming home at points. I'd been over there three years, almost three years by that time. So I came home.

MH Hm.

JD And, uh, and arrived back in the states in January of '45.

MH Okay. And, uh, show how bad my history is, was the war over then?

JD No, the war was not over.

MH Okay,

JD No, I left, I left my outfit, they were still fighting, they continued fighting, moving up to, uh, uh, Manila, freeing Manila.

MH Uh huh.

JD And, uh, capturing all of the Philippines and then were in line to, uh, make the, uh, the invasion of, uh, Japan, had that, uh, materialized.

MH Uh huh.

JD When I came back, when I came back to the states, then, on January of '45, uh, I, uh, I was assigned to an induction center at, uh, Fort, uh, Leavenworth, Kansas. And, uh, I, uh, I was there, of I was there until about September. I guess it was when the Japanese surrendered. Well, I was there, yeah, I guess it was September of 45.

MH Uh huh.

JD And, uh, and then, uh, they thought I had something wrong with me and I was hospitalized in the Mayo General Hospital in Gaylesburg, Illinois for a couple of months and then I was discharged from the, uh, the army in about, uh, January of '46.

MH Okay. What did they think was wrong with you?

JD Well they thought I had insidious paralysis agitand, so, have you ever heard of paralysis agitand? Or, Parkinsonism, have you heard of Parkinsonism?

MH Yeah, I've heard of it, but I don't remember what it is.

JD Yes, well it's a neurological disease where a person has uncontrollable shakiness, and so forth.

MH Uh huh.

JD And I guess my shakiness was more an aftermath from the war than anything else, what they call battle fatigue, or whatever.

MH Uh huh.

JD But, uh, so then, uh, then after that I went back to Detroit, the same hospital I took my internship, and, uh, took another year of training and, uh, and then, uh, I took myself a bride, uh, from Detroit, and then in July of '47 came here and, uh, started to practice medicine.

MH Huh. That's cool. Did you like Detroit?

JD Very much.

MH Very much?

JD Very much. As a matter of fact I had chances to, to stay there and practice, which I almost did, but, uh, ultimately decided to come back to Iowa.

MH Uh huh.

JD So, uh, much to the dismay of my wife.

(both chuckle)

JD It was hard for here, being a city girl to adjust to, uh, to a small town.

MH I can imagine.

JD But, uh, we've been here ever since.

MH Wow, wow. I've never been to Detroit. I've driven through Michigan...

JD Yeah.

MH But I've never actually been to the city.

JD Well, uh, Detroit is, uh, is, uh, it's been destroyed.

(MH chuckle)

JD Really. They've torn it apart. It's sad, sad, sad. We go back to Detroit now, almost once a year. My, uh, wife's folks are still back there, and, uh, I feel as though I can't get out of there fast enough, it's that bad.

MH Oh really?

JD Yeah.

MH That's too bad.

JD Yeah, it is too bad because Detroit was a nice city. But, uh, the racial riots have just destroyed the place.

MH Uh huh. Yeah. Southern California, um, generally is a lot like that too, there is a lot of places like that.

JD Yes. Now did you grow up in the Los Angeles area or San Francisco?

MH No. Um, I grew up in...

JD Neither.

MH Neither, yeah. I grew up in Wisconsin. I lived in Sacramento...

JD Oh, you said that, yes.

MH Um, for two years when I was a baby.

JD Uh huh.

MH And then, and I have maybe a dozen memories at most from then.

JD Yeah.

MH And then I moved back there just four years ago.

JD Uh huh.

MH So I'm pretty, I'm not really a Californian. I'm from there, but I'm not really...

JD Yeah, yeah.

MH It's not in me. I don't like it.

JD Uh huh?

MH I'd rather live somewhere up like around here when I end up living on my own.

JD Yeah.

MH It's nice right here. When did you decide you wanted to be a doctor?

JD Well, I've been asked that question now, different times. I don't know exactly, um, and, um, I tell people, "I don't know," whether it's, uh, jokingly or whether it's, uh, the truth. My dad was a dairy farmer, and dairy farming is a, uh, a very demanding job.

MH Yeah.

JD Uh, it, uh, demanded us getting up at four o'clock every morning, uh, milking the cows, bottling the milk, and delivering it, because we supplied the, the milk for the town of Brooklyn.

MH Uh huh?

JD And, you, as I said, you do this seven days a week, there's not much vacation on a, on a dairy farm. And I think, uh, I think I realized that this was very monotonous, and, uh, and maybe I didn't always enjoy it, so I thought about better things for myself.

MH Uh huh.

JD And livin' in town, we, we happened to live, uh, right across the street from a family doctor, uh, whom I, uh, liked and admired, uh very much. And so I think that it was in that way that I became interested in medicine. Uh, I really can't say when I, uh, when I, uh, made up my mind that this is what I want, uh huh. But once I got to school, and, uh, uh, I certainly was, uh, determined that that, that that was what I was going to do, and, uh, and I wasn't going to let anything, uh, deter me from achieving that goal.

MH Cool. Are there any other occupations that you thought about doing possibly?

JD Not really.

MH Not really?

JD Not really, no.

MH That's good.

JD No. Well, yeah, I'll, uh, have to back up a little bit, to, uh, in my senior year. I think it was because of the economic situation, my father didn't have any money.

MH Uh huh.

JD That I made application to attend the, uh, the naval academy.

MH Huh.

JD And, uh, I did get an appointment, and, uh, but, uh, failed to pass the physical examination. So I didn't get in there.

MH Huh. That's too bad.

JD And then when we went over, when we went overseas, went over to Australia during the war, went over by boat, uh, I, uh, I didn't stand, uh, seafaring too well.

(MH laughs)

JD I was uncomfortable most of the time and, uh, felt better if I was in the horizontal position. So it was probably a good thing I never got into, into Annapolis.

MH Yeah, probably.

(both chuckle)

MH I've never been on a boat that large.

JD Yeah.

MH I've always been in, like, canoe.

JD Oh is that right?

MH Yeah.

JD So, so that was about the only other thing that I, uh, considered, I guess, was Annapolis.

MH Huh, wow. That's pretty directed.

JD Yeah, yeah.

MH Yeah. Um, do you have any brothers or sisters?

JD I have, um, I have, uh, one brother and one sister, uh, living, uh, and I have two sisters who are dead.

MH Are they, are they older than you?

JD Uh, both are younger.

MH Both are younger.

JD Both are younger than I. I had a, one of my sisters who is dead was, uh, older. I was the second in a family of five.

MH Hm. And what are they doing now?

JD Well, my brother's retired. He was a, a roofing contractor and lives down in Phoenix.

MH Uh, uh.

JD Uh, and my, uh, younger sister, uh, lives in Cedar Rapids, and, uh, she's, uh, married to a CPA.

MH Hm. Cool, cool. Do you get along well with them?

JD Oh fine.

MH Good.

JD Yes, yes.

MH I, uh, I get along really well with my sister. She's a few years older than me.

JD You have just the one?

MH Just one, right. But I have a lot of friends who don't get along very well with their siblings.

JD Oh, I know. I know.

MH It's really sad to hear about.

JD That happens altogether too often.

MH Yeah. It's not pleasant.

JD Yeah, we're, we're fortunate, we, we get along fine.

MH Hm. That's cool. That's neat. Um, so you stayed in Grinnell all this time?

JD Uh huh.

MH Do you ever regret not going somewhere else?

JD Not really. I think we've been, uh, I think we've been quite happy. I think we had, uh, seven children, and I think they, uh, have all been very happy growing up here in, uh, Grinnell.

MH Uh huh.

JD And, uh, I think Grinnell is really, uh, rather unique, uh, small Iowa community. Uh, the college makes the, makes the difference.

MH Yeah, I'm sure it does.

JD With the cultural advantage of it, and the cultural tone that it, uh, gives the community. Yeah, if it were not for the college, Grinnell would be just another, uh, small Iowa town.

MH Really?

JD It's well located. As you know, it's on the main, uh, uh, east-west highway, and, uh, it's only, uh, fifty miles to the state capitol to the west and only sixty-five miles to the university to the east. It was for that reason that I, that I picked Grinnell.

MH Really? Did you, had you been here before?

JD Oh yeah. Growing up in Brooklyn, of course, I've been up here many times. But I, but I hadn't given any, all that, all that time, uh, I hadn't given any thought to locate in Grinnell. As a matter of fact when I came back from Detroit in '47, looking for a place to locate in, I, I looked in several other towns.

MH Really?

JD And then I, uh, I asked myself, "Well where, where do you really want to, uh, uh, have access to, and, uh, and live?" So, uh, I knew that I wanted to have access to the university, the university hospital, Medical School there, and, and Des Moines, and this was ideal. Almost midway between.

MH That's cool.

JD So that's how I picked, uh...

MH Grinnell.

JD Grinnell.

MH You said you have seven children?

JD Uh huh.

MH Um, what is the spread between boys and girls?

JD Well, we have five girls and two boys. And, uh, the difference in the ages? Well, let's see. Diane, oldest, has a birthday tomorrow.

MH Oh wow.

JD Uh, she'll be forty-four. Uh, Kate's, uh, and she lives in Albuquerque. And Kate, the second one, is in Omaha. Uh, she's a physical education teacher in, uh, parochial school there. Her husband teaches, uh, high school chemistry. Uh, and she is, uh, Kate is, uh, 42, gonna be 42. Uh, uh, next is, uh, Anne-Marie. She lives in Chicago. She's in, uh, restaurant management.

MH Uh huh?

JD And, uh, she, she's gonna be forty this year.

MH Wow.

JD Next is Carol, who lives in Des Moines. She works in Younkers, and, uh, Carol was born in '55, so she's gonna be 38 in July. Next is John Kelly. He is, let's see, John is, uh, gonna be 35 next month. He's here at home. John, unfortunately, has a behavioral disorder, and is, uh, quite dysfunctional.

MH Uh huh.

JD So he's home here with us. Uh, David, uh, uh, is, uh, David is, uh, let's see, he was born in 62, so how old does that make him? He's gonna be 31. He is 31. And he's out in Aspen, Colorado, trying to become a ski bum, of sorts.

(MH chuckle)

JD That's what I accuse him of, anyway. He graduated from business school down at the University, but he hasn't, uh, gotten into business at all yet. Um, and then the youngest one is Joni. Joni's married, lives in Chicago, and she works for Dow Jones.

MH Hm, wow. Sounds like they're all spread out a lot.

JD Yes, right, right. Yes, it keeps us busy, going and visiting them. As a matter of fact this weekend we, uh, were down in Omaha.

MH Oh really?

JD One of our grandsons down there made his first communion, so we had to go down for it.

MH That's cool. That's great. Where did they all attend? Did any of them attend this college here? Or did they all go out?

JD No, they went to different, different schools. Diane went to St. Theresa's up in Minnesota, up in Wynona. And, uh, then, uh, Kate and, and Diane went to, uh, Drake. Uh, Annie went to Simpson. Uh, David and, uh, Joni went to, to the university. Carl went to Mercy in Cedar Rapids. So they went to several different schools. None of them went to Grinnell.

MH None of them went to Grinnell.

JD None went to Grinnell.

MH Would you have like it if any of them had?

JD Well, I certainly had nothing against it at all. But none of them, of course, it seemed like all of them wanted to get away from home, however.

MH Yeah.

JD To go to school.

MH I know that feeling.

JD Yes, yes.

MH Wow. Do you have any current, uh, affiliation with the school or anything like that? Or do you just live near it? I mean, do you...

JD You mean the university?

MH The university, yeah.

JD No, no. Other than being, uh, uh, I'm an active, well not a very active alumnus either, really.

MH Uh huh.

JD But that, that's all. I have no other association with it.

MH Hm, okay.

JD We go down there to the theatre, uh, Hansher Theatre, uh, I belong to the Hansher, uh, circle, which is a, uh, a supportive organization for the theatre. And, uh, we were down there, we were down there just recently. I don't know if you were aware of it, Isaac Stern was down there.

MH Hm.

JD And Yo Yo Ma.

MH Really? Wow.

JD Have you ever heard him?

MH Yeah, I've, um, I've been doing...

JD Just tremendous. He is tremendous.

MH Yeah, wow. That's cool.

JD Yeah.

MH I didn't know they were there.

JD Yes. So we go down there, we go down there frequently to the theatre.

MH Cool. Do you like Iowa City?

JD Yeah, interesting town. All young people like Iowa City, I expect you've talked to.

MH Yeah.

JD Some young people who have had something to do with Iowa City. But all, all young people, especially young married couples seem like, uh enjoy Iowa City immensely.

MH Yeah, I like it a lot.

JD Yes. There seems to be a certain camaraderie about, you know, that they, uh, they all, all like.

MH Uh huh. I go down there periodically, uh, maybe once a month, or so.

JD Oh do you?

MH I just hang out.

JD Yeah. Where do you hang out?

MH Um, downtown.

JD I see.

MH Pretty much. That and, uh,

JD What, one of the bars, or, uh...

(JD chuckle)

MH Just on the streets, record stores.

JD Oh, I see.

MH Bagel places.

JD I see, I see.

MH It's really nice. I like it down there.

JD Uh huh? Yeah, it's, uh, it's a nice, uh, uh, nice atmosphere down there for young people.

MH I've done some theatre work down there, too.

JD Oh, have you?

MH Yeah. That was, that was really fun, too.

JD Uh huh.

MH And, the Iowa Playwright's Festival last year.

JD Oh yes.

MH Uh, I participated in that. And that was very educational.

JD Yes.

MH But it was really good, too.

JD Uh huh.

MH Cool. What do you do nowadays? Do you...

JD Not much of anything. People ask me that. "Well what do you do?" And I tell them, "Well nothing. I'm retired, you know."

(MH chuckle)

JD "I'm not supposed to do anything." This is the, uh, retirement is an interesting stage, I guess, in a person's life. Uh, people, I think people are made to feel that you've got to be doing something and I don't have a hobby. I'm not a golfer. And, um, I just do a variety of things. Uh, I start out my day by having coffee each morning with a small group of friends, and, uh...

MH Oh cool.

JD Uh, gets the cobwebs out of my eyes. And, uh, gives me a purpose for getting up, it seems like, and so forth. I find it enjoyable. And then I, from there, my wife and I wanna make up our minds, you know, to go to Iowa City or Des Moines, we can take off, uh, as we feel like it. And, uh, that's about it. And then, I play bridge, I belong to a stag bridge group. And my wife and I belong to, uh, a couples club and that sort of thing.

MH Wow, that's interesting.

JD And I take care of this big yard.

MH I was admiring your yard.

JD Yes.

MH It's a nice yard.

JD Yes, yes.

MH That's one of the things I love about the midwest is you find nice, beautiful yards like that.

JD Yes. I guess that's what attracted me to this house. I liked the yard. We did have a white fence around it. Um, and I took that down. I'm gonna replace it with a, it was a wooden fence...

MH Uh huh.

JD Which was put up when the house was built in '48. And it was going to, I, I started, as a matter of fact I started out this spring scraping, and I was gonna paint it again. And, uh, painting is not one of my favorite pastimes, and I thought to myself, "I'm not going to spend the rest of my few years I have left doing this." So I, as I started to investigate, uh, uh, plastic fence. So I, uh, got some bids on it, and so forth. I thought it was going to be, uh, financially, uh, uh, impossible to do it, but it was cheaper than I thought. So, uh, we took the fence down, so now we're gonna, whenever the fence comes, why we'll be putting another one back up again.

MH Cool. Same color, white?

JD Same color, white, yes. Uh huh.

MH Did you move into this house right away?

JD No. When we came to town in '47 we lived over in the east part of town until, '47 until '51. I bought this house in '51, and then we moved in here in September of '51 and lived here ever since.

MH Wow. That's 42 years almost.

JD Uh huh. Right, right.

MH Wow. Twice my lifetime.

(both chuckle)

MH I can't imagine doing anything that long.

JD Yeah, help you appreciate the time element there.

MH Yeah. Well this is a very, a very nice house.

JD Uh huh.

MH It's very impressive. Cool. Tell me about your wife.

JD Well, my, uh, my wife is a, uh, was a nurse. I met her at the hospital, uh, in, uh, Detroit. I kid her a lot about this because when I went back after the war one of my duties as the house. I was a house physician.

MH Uh huh.

JD Was to, uh, uh, teach one of the nursing classes. And she was a student nurse.

(MH chuckle)

JD So, uh, I noticed her sitting, she always sat in the front row, and so I, and she always was the one to ask the most questions.

(both chuckle)

JD So that's how we met.

MH Wow. That's cool.

JD And, uh, this was a catholic hospital. And, uh, one of the nu... one of the nuns out there, who was sister Marry Assumptu, uh was the head of surgery...

(end tape)