

DR. JOHANNA JOHNSON

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Historical Society of Hammonton Oral History

Dr. Johanna Johnson

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Interviewer(s)	Janet Hasulak
Interviewee(s)	Dr. Johanna Johnson
Others Present	

It is February 14, 2023. I am Janet Hasulak, I am recording Dr. Johanna Johnson. We are in the Historical Society Museum.

Question: State your full name and your maiden name?

My name is Johanna, and it's spelled J—o—h—n—n—a. It's not pronounced Jo-hanna, but often, I do, and my middle name is Rae, R—e. My maiden name was Ruggeri, R—u—g—g—e—r—i, and my last name now is Johnson. I am soon to be 76 years old. I was born 4/3/1947. I was born here in Hammonton at the Swenson Home. The building is still there on Pleasant Street. I grew up here. I've always been here. I used to think when I was a younger woman and girl that the last thing I wanted to do was die in the community in which I was born, and now I can't wait until that happens. Well, I can wait, but this is where we are, my husband and I. Our roots are here, we're staying here.

Question: You mean you're content to stay here. You now feel content being in Hammonton.

Yes. Oh yes, I've been content here for a long time, but you know, when I was young, and I thought, oh, you know, I just have to get out of here. I can't be here in this town for the rest of my life, but here I am, and I'm very happy to have raised my kids here, and I'll die here.

Question: At any point in time, did you live elsewhere?

Not really, no. Traveled a lot. Visited a lot. Stayed with my sister for a while, my oldest sister, when she lived in Indiana, but aside from that very short period of time, I've always lived here.

Question: Can you describe your surroundings? Where did you live when you are a child?

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Oh, the first house I remember was 611 Passmore Avenue, in the first block, from First Road. The cemetery was three houses away. It was a little bungalow. There were three sisters in one bedroom. My brother was four years younger than me. He slept on a couch in my parents' bedroom. And so, this little bungalow got to be too tight, too fast, so we moved from there and lived 436 North 3rd Street in an apartment over a little grocery store called Passalaqua's.

The parking lot, Inferrera's Market, is where Passalaqua's used to be. It had a little apartment on the side where Mrs. Tramontana lived. The larger part was this little grocery store that had these wonderful Italian smells when you went into it. We lived in the apartment upstairs for a couple of years before my parents bought a home on the corner of Line and Madison, back on the other side of town, which is where I spent the rest of my growing up.

I guess I was around 12 when we moved to that house, and my dad and mom lived there until their deaths.

Question: Which schools did you go to? What were the names of the schools you were at?

I went to all Hammonton Public Schools. The little red building, across the way, was where I went to kindergarten and first grade, and then moved over to the bigger building, which was torn down, for my second grade through eighth grade. While I was in eighth grade, they condemned the building on the second floor, so they moved us all to the first floor. The seventh and eighth grade went full time. My brother, who was in fourth grade at the time, was on half-session from fourth grade through eighth grade.

Question: They were really cramped for space.

Well, yes, because the building was condemned, and it was a fire hazard on the second floor, and so they moved us. It was a very old building, and so I felt bad for him, because, he had to go to school in the afternoon, and he didn't get home until way after 4:00. I was going full time, and then in high school, I went full time.

Question: It wasn't the typical 9-to-3 school day?

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No, it wasn't. It was not a good situation for either teachers or students. It really wasn't. So yeah, that was an experience, because they kind of chopped things up, and rooms up, and they made little offices for teachers. It was weird. It was really weird.

Question: What resolved that problem?

The new school, but it wasn't until – that school wasn't – I was in the last class that graduated from that building over there, the big building, that high school building.

Question: What year was that?

In 1965. My husband graduated from the new school, the new high school in 1966. He was a year behind me in high school. So yeah, and then when I was teaching, I taught back in the little red building. I taught sixth grade there and went back then, when they moved me over to the high school, or what was then the high school was still the middle school, and so I was in one of the rooms there.

So I kind of spent a lot of time in this block, you know?

Question: As a child and as an adult.

Yes. I really did.

Question: What do you remember about your grade school years? Who were your best friends? Who were some of the teachers that you had that stood out in your memory?

I had one best friend. We are still friends. That was Patty Tassone. She and I started kindergarten together and went right through high school together.

Question: You go back a long way.

Yes, and I have a friend who came to this school. She was at St. Joe's, but she came to this school, public school, in seventh grade, and we are still very close friends. She, I consider my best friend, yes.

Question: That's very special.

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Yeah, yeah. I've been lucky. It's funny because the Class of 1965 was not well thought of. The teachers did not like us. Well, I'm not sure why, exactly.

Question: Do you know what prompted that reputation?

Not really. I guess we just didn't fit in to the mold or whatever. There were people who thought none of us would ever be successful. As a matter of fact, we had a gym teacher who actually told us, in our junior year, I guess it was, that none of us were of any value and we would not be very good mothers.

Question: Well, that's not very encouraging.

Well, I've got to tell you, not a friend, but an acquaintance, because she – you know, we were friendly, but we weren't friends, she literally slashed her tires for saying that. No one ever told on her. By the way, she's no longer living. Neither the teacher nor that student are living anymore.

Question: So, you can be honest about all of this without damaging anybody's reputation, yeah.

Without damaging, yes. You know, we just wrote her off then.

Question: I can see why.

How could she say that to us, you know? It's funny because there are many graduates from 1965 who run successful businesses and live in the community. They've been good parents and successful in their careers.

Question: She was obviously not a good judge of character.

No, she wasn't. They were just so glad to get rid of us. All the teachers in high school were glad to get rid of us. However, I still keep in contact with one of my teachers from high school. He's in his eighties and he lives in the Poconos. That's where he originally came from, Pennsylvania, and taught here. He was a history teacher.

I also had a crush on him; I have to admit it. I even took an extra year of history just so – but he was –

Question: That's why you're a history buff.

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Oh, he was such a good teacher too, because he felt that our class wasn't being taught enough about research, and that if any of us were going to college, that we needed to have a better background.

Question: That is an important skill.

Yes. He taught us how to do a term paper and gave us all of the directions, and we had to follow it, and do someone or something in history for that term paper. I've got to tell you, I really appreciated that, because when I did start college, I had no idea how to use a library, except for what he taught me. The funny thing is that, when he became a supervisor in the district, eventually, he became my supervisor. He used to bring books to me and say, "Give this a try."

They were English books. "Give this a try. Take some lessons from it. See what you think of the book and how you like it." I would, and I'd give him my opinion, and I'd give the book back. He would make decisions whether he would choose that book or other books, and so we had a long relationship.

Question: Would you consider him one of the most significant mentors in your life?

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Question: What was his name?

Curley, Tom Curley. Again, I was taking a history test, sitting, and you know, you remember these things, because that's the place you were when this happened, when Kennedy was assassinated. I was in his classroom, sitting in the first seat, the last row, next to the window. He went to the door, and another teacher came, and when Mr. Curley came in the room, his face was white.

He went over to the window, and he was standing near me. I said, "Oh, my God, what happened? It can't be that bad."

Question: You immediately knew something was horribly wrong?

Yeah, I said, "It can't be that bad, and when he collected all the tests, he said, "The President of the United States is lying mortally wounded in Texas."

Question: I'm getting chills.

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We all just gasped in the room. Then at the end of the class, they sent us to our last class, which for me, was a Spanish class, and then they dismissed us all from there. They didn't even put us through the day.

Question: That was a crazy time. I remember it well also.

It was really. Yeah. So yeah, he had a very big impact on me. I tell my husband that's the reason why I liked him so much because I learned so much from Mr. Curley. I always learned a lot from my husband. He had this wealth of knowledge, and I would just listen to him for hours. The truth is, I still listen to him, because he knows so many more things than I do because he reads a lot more than I do. I'm a reader, but he's a reader of everything.

Question: He apparently remembers a lot of details and wants to share it.

Everything, absolutely, and always did. That's what our dates were all about, you know? I listened to him.

Question: You're a good listener and he's a good teacher apparently.

Yes, he is.

Question: You are obviously married. How long have you been married?

It will be 50 years, June 16th.

Question: God bless you. That's a milestone. Congratulations.

It is a milestone, yeah. Yeah, yep, we're very, very fortunate to make it through 50 years.

Question: Yes. In any marriage, there are always a lot of ups and downs. Life can throw you a few curveballs here and there. If you can weather through that and still cling to each other, I consider that a big success, especially in this day and age where too many people are quick to throw in the towel, so to speak, and so I give you a lot of credit, both of you.

Yes, there are. Absolutely. It is a big success, yes, absolutely. Thank you.

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Question: Back to your schooling and your youth, how would you describe your teenage years? You've mentioned a little bit about it. You did talk about your high school times.

Yeah, it's funny. I would never want to go back. I was very involved with a lot of things in high school. I was a cheerleader for all four years. I joined clubs. I was part of the student council. I helped with dances. I was very athletic.

Question: You were very involved.

Yes, and there weren't a lot of athletic sports for girls.

Question: No, there were not.

I tried basketball, but I just was terrible at it, and so I just gave that up. Cheerleading was the one thing that I could do, and then I guess in my junior year, they had a gymnastics club started. I joined that.

I had a boyfriend in high school. He also joined it. He weight-lifted in a time when people didn't weight lift. He was a small person. He was very good in athletics, and so he did all kinds of gymnastics. I learned some too, and then we did a floor exercise together. It was fun.

Question: That was a big deal in high school, just to get a floor exercise together.

Yeah, it was. Yeah, yeah, and so I was not an all-A student. I was mostly an A/B student, but I did get chosen for the National Honor Society, much to my surprise, and I mean a big surprise. I did not see that coming.

Question: Did you just think that you weren't capable, or why were you surprised?

Well, academically I didn't think I was, but I guess because of my involvement in so many activities in school that I was able to. The yearbook, I was part of the yearbook, and so just a lot of involvement.

Question: They must have been looking for students that were well-rounded and not necessarily straight A students.

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Right. The system was so much different than it is today. Today, it's far more objective. It was very subjective at that time. I mean, it was pretty much almost a popularity contest in a lot of ways because Nelson was not chosen for the National Honor Society, and he was like first or second in his class.

Question: I picture him as being very academic minded. He was first or second in his class, how could he not be – that's strange.

He was. He was, yes, and that's why I say it was very subjective, but I guess he pulled some stunts during those years. He rubbed some people the wrong way, because he could.

Question: There you go, a popularity contest, where grudges are held, and people—even if they're teachers—do some grudge holding.

Yes. Yes. So yeah, and in elementary school, it was just, I was a good student in elementary school and a good student in middle school, very active in anything the middle school had, too. I just liked doing things.

Question: What did your crowd do for entertainment? Was there any one particular thing that your group of friends liked as a teenager?

They used to have what they called "teen center" on Saturday nights. From our freshman to probably our junior year, they had dances on Saturday nights.

Question: Would they have these pretty regularly?

Every Saturday night, and so you had some place to go. My dad would drop me off and pick me up. It was very – you couldn't leave, but nobody really wanted to, because we all enjoyed dancing. That was mostly what we did.

Question: What type of music did you listen to?

Oh, it was all the 1960's rock-and-roll.

Question: The Beatles?

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Oh, my God, yes. It was everything. Whatever you could dance to, we were there dancing. We even had a little group of us girls, for our freshman/sophomore hop, we sang, "He's so Fine."

Question: I remember that tune. Some day we're going to put that song on, Johanna, and you and I are going to sing together, just for fun.

Yeah, it was, I remember, four of us.

Question: I can remember singing that with my girlfriends, as well, so I'm tickled to hear you say that.

Yeah, we were all dressed up, they put the music on, and the four of us sang it. I have a picture somewhere at home, of the four of us, singing, "He's so Fine."

Question: That's so cool; that's so fine.

It was fun.

Question: That's what girls did, back in the day. We'd do that, or we'd make up dances. We'd go to each other's bedrooms, and we'd make up little dances. It was kind of one step up from the stroll that you used to see done on *Bandstand*.

Oh, yes. Yeah, and my friend, Patty, who as I said, from seventh grade on –

Question: Is this little Patty? She's a little on the short side? I think I take yoga with her.

Patty Tassone. Her last name is Bernard, but she doesn't live in Hammonton. She lives in Egg Harbor. You probably wouldn't take yoga with her, no. She's a little reclusive, yeah. This is Patty Maimone, and she has dark hair that's kind of curly.

Question: Very outgoing. Very funny. She's a doll.

Oh, yes. Yes, that's my best friend. She lived over on Marlyn Avenue, and she had a finished basement, and so she had parties all the time. There were always guys there. We listened to music, ate pizza. We always had good times.

Question: That sounds like good, clean fun.

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It was. It really was good, clean fun. There was nothing untoward going on. There wasn't any sex. There was rock-and-roll, but it wasn't –

Question: Wild and crazy.

Yeah, there were no drugs, or who even thought about drugs? I mean, maybe there was cigarette smoking, but that was about it.

Question: You just read my mind, because we're approximately the same age, and I think back in the day, like we thought we were all big and bad if we just snuck a cigarette.

Yes, that's it.

Question: The person who stole the cigarette from their parents cigarettes, they were revered, because they were brave enough to do that, but that's just how things were back then. It was an innocent time.

It really was, but even as a young girl, like sixth grade, my parents would let me come into town because there were so many businesses in town. You could just go from one place to the other. A bunch of girls, we'd get together, and we'd go to where the Funky Cow is. That corner, that was called the Dairy Lunch, and it had booths. It had countertops. We would sit in booths and have a cheery coke and French fries.

Question: Americana.

Yes, it really was. Then we'd window shop into J.J. Newberry's or Miller's or Grant's because that was still on Main Street. We just kind of walked around, and then we'd all go home again, which would be a Saturday afternoon. That's what we did.

Question: It was safe for young girls to be out doing that, at that point in time.

Absolutely.

Question: Did most people shop in town?

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Absolutely. My mom went to the A&P, which is where the karate place is now, right next to Mary's. Yeah, that, and I guess out of that building was carved out Domino's Pizza.

Then, when the Acme opened up, over here, right over here, where the Human Services building is, that was an Acme, and so my mom used to go to the Acme. On Friday night, to come through Hammonton, it was a chore, because everybody got paid on Friday.

Question: That was when most people did their shopping, I would assume.

Yes, yes, and when you'd come through town, there was a traffic jam, because no matter where you were going, to the A&P or the Acme, there were just people out.

Question: I would love to see this town like that again.

It was. It was something.

Question: It looks like we rolled up the sidewalks at 4:00, and to just see some economical stores downtown, that would be amazing.

Well, it was, and down the side streets, down 2nd Street, and even down 3rd Street, there were a lot of businesses. It was a very vibrant community. Then on Saturday, or was it Saturday nights? It must have been Saturday nights. For a while there, after the Acme closed, and it must have closed early enough, and I don't think it was a Sunday, but they would put music out there, and made the parking lot a rollerskating night. There were all these kids.

Question: Oh, what fun. Was this outdoors?

Yeah, it was, right, the parking lot. That parking lot was so nice. It went from Bellevue Ave to where there were two houses, and so you couldn't go through to Vine Street the way you can now – there were two houses, right on Vine Street, right here. Where the parking lot was filled with the music. It was all run by adults.

That's the other thing about growing up here. One of those houses was what they called "the penny store," and high school kids would go over there to get hotdogs

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and Coke for lunch. All the rest of us, because the little red building and this building were here, we were able to walk down the street, cross over and go into the penny store. There were two women who ran it. They were sisters. We'd take our coins and tap on the glass top, and say "Peggy!". We'd call them both Peggy. We didn't know the difference.

"Peggy, Peggy ..." and they had all this candy, penny candy.

Question: I remember that.

We were permitted, and we used to buy those wax lips and the candy cigarettes.

Question: They'd last at least two or three days. You'd walk around wearing them, looking silly.

Yes, and the candy cigarettes. Oh, all kinds of crazy candy. That's how they survived. They lived upstairs. As a matter of fact, one of the women had a son, and he graduated high school with my husband, so yeah. I don't know, and I can't remember what happened to those ladies, but that house and the house right next door to them were torn down, and the parking lot was finished to the end.

Question: That's a shame. They turned it into a parking lot.

They did, yeah.

Question: Come to think of it, you were mentioning stores, up and down 3rd Street. As a newcomer to this town, I frequently see storefronts, or what looks like the old storefronts. You'll see a house that's obviously now a residence, but it looks like the front of that house was a storefront at one time. I don't know the full history behind these things.

I could tell you what they were because I lived there. I lived on North 3rd Street, over Passalacqua's, one of the storefronts. Just a block more, closer to town, on the other side of the street, was a place that was owned by the Tosta family, and they had a store, a little storefront. Even across the street from where I was, I think it is Ricca's, next to the Sons of Italy, there's a little building there, and that was Lucca's, at that time.

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Question: That's a name I see frequently, hanging around the Historical Society, here.

I believe they called him Piggy Lucca. He was a little short guy, a little short, round guy. There were these little markets from people's homes, everywhere in this town. There were ten of them. Because Nelson and I just happened to be talking about that this morning when we were in Mary's Cafe. He took me to breakfast at Mary's today, for Valentine's Day. Mary's used to be a little grocery store that was Monastra's.

That was Monastra's, and on my side of town, where I grew up, there was Mary's Market, and Mary's is now Bagliani's, yes.

Question: Over there. Now, was the town divided by the railroad tracks?

Pretty much, two different kinds of worlds. Yeah, and then on West End Avenue, right at the very end at Orchard Street, there was a little storefront. It didn't have a lot of stuff. It was called Pasterino's. I mean, they were everywhere, dotted everywhere.

Of course, there was a Olivo's and Baglivo's They were right in the town, a little larger grocery stores.

Question: I'm picturing small mom-and-pop grocery stores. They'd have can goods. They were like the precursor to Wawa, but not with the food-to-go, particularly, more like deli foods to go.

Absolutely. Yes. Right, they were, if you needed soap powder, you went there. If you needed –

Question: Last-minute items that you might need, that you're finding yourself short of.

Yes. Now, Mary's and the Olivo's and Baglivo's; they had meat markets too. As a matter of fact, my husband's father had a meat market as well.

Question: What was the name of that meat market, and where was that located?

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It was Chester's, yeah. It was on Bellevue Avenue, and I'm not sure exactly where, but I think it was down towards the railroad tracks, a little, or a few buildings in. It may even have been where there's a barbershop. That may have been it.

Question: Did you go to college directly from high school?

Yes and no.

Question: Tell me about how your life went after high school.

Well, after high school. We didn't have the best education in Hammonton High School at that time. As I said, Mr. Curley was probably the best teacher there. We didn't really have a guidance counselor of any value.

Question: I just have to ask you this, just for my own personal information, but did Mr. Curley know that you were going into education?

Eventually, yes. Yeah. The guidance counselor at the time sort of pushed any of us who had any kind of academic standing to go to Peirce Junior College in Philadelphia, but he didn't encourage any of us. If you didn't have parents who told you or helped you to get a higher education –

Question: That's difficult if your parents didn't have a higher education because they don't know or wouldn't know how to go about doing that.

No, they were both high school graduates, my parents, but higher education was not something that was in their life, nor any of their family's lives, and so it wasn't anything they – although my oldest sister –

Question: I think that's my point, that the family wouldn't really know how to go about doing all that, or maybe wouldn't even have valued the higher education.

My sister did. They didn't value it, especially for women. My father did not value higher education for women. He didn't value – he didn't want me to do any gymnastics. He felt women should never do anything like that. He was very, very old-fashioned.

Question: What a different world.

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Yes, and my sister, my oldest sister, went to college for a semester. She went to Glassboro. She wanted to be a teacher. Financially, it was too big of a hardship, because my sister was 18 and my brother, my youngest brother, was just born.

Question: So, the birth order of your siblings, name those siblings for me.

Kay, Catherine. Her name was Catherine Gladys. She was named for both of our grandmothers. She was four years older than me. Wynnona, and Wynnona was three years older than me. There were only 18 months difference between the two of them. I was born three years later. I was post-war. They were during the war. I was the post-war baby of 1947. My brother Joe was born four years after me, and then my brother Tim was born when I was 14.

Question: If I have counted correctly, there were five of you.

Yeah, yeah. There's only three of us left. My two sisters died this year, this past year.

Question: I'm sorry to hear that.

My sister Wynnona died on June 15th and my sister Kay passed away on December 16th.

Question: I'm so sorry to hear that.

Yeah, it was, the first one, the death of my first sister, I took it hard because she and I were close. We were always together when we were kids, and she was failing. Her health was failing. My oldest sister, she died in her sleep, and I just didn't see it coming.

Question: That's depressing.

Yes.

Question: That's difficult on family, I think.

It is, because we're still mourning one sister, and now the other sister's gone, and she was very motherly to us, especially me. She looked after me a lot. We were very close.

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Question: That's a significant loss, especially if you've already lost your mother, and so you depend on sister like that.

It was, yes. Yes, and she kind of mothered me all through my growing up, because my mother was only, she was 17 when she got married, and she was 18 when she had my sister. There were no – my oldest sister was in the same generation, I would say, mind-wise, as my mother.

Question: Did you value your sister's advice a little more than even your mother's?

My mother never gave advice. She was critical, but she didn't give you advice. My sister Kay gave me advice, yes. Yeah, there was a big difference between them.

Question: I think advice coming from a sister is easier to handle anyway, even if your mother had given advice.

Yeah, and I mean, she was always wise beyond her years, and I think it's because my mother did depend upon her a great deal, as she was growing up. When my sister Kay was eight, my brother Joe was born, on her birthday, and so theirs was always a very close relationship. She always kind of looked after us. I mean, my mom was still young, and she had four kids.

Question: She was the oldest daughter, and that was typical, though, to rely on the oldest daughter a lot for household things, for watching the younger siblings, very, very typical in families. I think even in today's day and age, that would be typical, so maybe we rely on the oldest daughter in different ways, but that's still typical in a family structure, so to speak.

Yeah, yeah. Yes, and so I decided, I just was sort of pushed into going to Peirce. I didn't know what I wanted to do with myself, really. I always wanted to be a teacher, but I didn't think my grades were good enough. I took my SAT and my SAT scores were really bad, and so I didn't try to get into any other kind of college.

At Peirce, I kind of took a little entrance exam, but it was nothing spectacular. I was babysitting at the time for a woman who worked for Dr. Chiofalo and Dr. Mitrovic, here in town, and she seemed to like her job so much as a medical

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secretary, and so I said, "Hmm, I'll become a medical secretary and see what that's like." I figured, well, I'll get an associate degree.

Question: The attraction was that you met a woman who seemed very happy in what she did, and you thought if she could be happy at this, then you could be happy at it.

Yes. Yeah, I could be happy at it. I really enjoyed Peirce, in terms of two classes, medical terminology and accounting. I really loved those two classes. I hated typing. I hated shorthand, you know? We had a history class too, and that was okay, but those two. The medical terminology, I just loved it, because we were taught by a nurse who explained everything to us.

Question: She was a great teacher.

We also had physiology with her, and so she took medical terminology and the physiology, and she put them together for us. I learned so much from her.

Question: You weren't just liking the terminology, you were learning about anatomy and the human body, while learning about the words.

Yes. Yes, and the one lesson that she told us, and so this is pre-Roe v. Wade, but she said, "If you ever get pregnant, the last thing that you do is try to abort a child because you will die," and she said, "I've seen too many young women come into my ..." You know, when she was a nurse...with coat hangers and all kinds of things in their body.

Question: I was about to say, she must have had some personal experience.

We were all women, you know, young women. She said, "Whatever you do, do not ever think that you should do that." It just kind of stuck in my brain because she was so passionate about it. She was passionate about everything that she did. Mrs. Cross was her name. She was a magnificent teacher. She really was.

I became a medical secretary and graduated in June. By August, I had –

Question: Was that an associate degree at that point?

Yes. I hated being a medical secretary, intensely.

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Question: So much for that dream.

Yes. I'm not a good typist. I don't like shorthand. I can't stand listening to these doctors with earphones and having to transcribe everything that they're saying, and they'd say it so fast.

Question: It just wasn't for you.

Oh, no.

Question: You don't know these things until you try it.

No, and so in August I got a job teaching in the Catholic school.

Question: Oh, so that was your first teaching experience?

Yes. Yes.

Question: What Catholic School was that?

It was actually in Atlantic City. It was Our Lady Star of the Sea. I was there for just one year and then I got a teaching position at the Pomona Assumption School, which no longer exists. The building has been torn down. Do you know on Whitehorse Pike in Pomona, where they have the monument, Our Lady of The Highway?— there was a school there.

Question: Oh, yeah, actually, on the righthand side?

Yes.

Question: Where that new complex is.

Yeah, before it, it was beyond that, yes. The complex is on the corner, but this is –

Question: A little further down on the right, if you're heading east. I know exactly where it is.

Yes, a little further down. Yeah, there's the highway shrine that's right on the corner, and right behind it was the school. My uncle worked there. He was the janitor there. I got my job there. I taught there for two years, two or three years before – but I was then dating my husband, and I knew how educated he was and that he was going to go to law school. I was like, "Hmm, I need to get my

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bachelor's degree," and so I started. I was teaching during the day and went to Glassboro at night and during the summer.

Question: Your husband helped to inspire you.

Absolutely.

Question: It sounds to me as if he made you want to take things up a notch with your education.

Yes, it did, because he was just so much smarter than me. I needed to learn more. It took me three years, around, because they only accepted 25 credits of the 75 that I had from junior college, and so I pretty much started as a freshman. I just went three years around, just to get my bachelor's degree, and in the meantime, he had proposed to me. I was like, "I've got to get my degree," because he was still going to be in law school and I'd be the breadwinner, and I couldn't do that without my BA, and so once we got – I finished in 1972. Then in 1995 I earned my Master Degree in Elementary Education from Glassboro. I was 56 years old when I earned my Doctorate in Curriculum Development from Rutgers University in New Brunswick. It took me seven years to earn that degree. Nelson was supportive all those years, and encouraged me when I would feel down or overwhelmed.

Question: At that point in time, did you still have your eyes set on teaching with this degree? Did you know that was going to be your passion?

Oh, yes. Yeah, I really liked it, and I always wanted to be one, and I just didn't think that I was smart enough to get into college, but I'm a good practical learner, so I did. I did learn, and I loved teaching. I did, and I stayed with that, but I stopped while my children were being raised, or born, actually, before I quit teaching for a while, and then I went back.

Question: When did you and Nelson marry?

We married in 1973.

Question: You had three children. What are your children's names and ages, or birthdates?

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Three children. Well, Sarah is 47. She was born in October of 1975. My son, Ethan is 45. He was born September 2nd, 1977. Emily is 38, and she was born in January of 1985. There was a big gap, and not for lack of trying. We tried for a long time to have her, but my age had something to do with it because I was just short of 38 when she was born, and so we were very happy to have another child.

Question: She was your third, that was coming along there.

Yeah. Yeah, January 15th, Martin Luther King's birthday.

Question: Yes, absolutely, and she gets a holiday around her birthday. She's fortunate there.

Yes, she does.

Question: I'm looking over my questions here to see what else we can go over so we don't miss anything important.

I was married in the St. Martin De Porres Church, which is now the Cathedral. That was a funny story because my husband was always involved in politics when he was young. He had met a priest in Atlantic City, Father DePasquale, who was very active. Apparently, at some point, Father DePasquale married a couple when the husband was in prison. He married them while he was in prison, so his wife couldn't testify against him.

Question: Oh, that's what that was all about. I'm surprised that a priest consented to doing that.

That's what that was all about, yes, but he was very politically active. He was in Democrat politics. We were close friends with him, and we just loved him. He was a really nice man. When I wanted to get married, I went to Father Prisco, who was kind of notorious at that time, in the church, a very strict man.

I said, you know, "My husband is not Catholic. We have a friend who is a priest, and so he would like him to marry us. I'd like permission for him to do so."

Question: In the church that's now the Cathedral?

In St. Martins, yes, and he reluctantly gave me permission, but he said, "Don't let that priest do anything that he shouldn't be doing in the church." I was like,

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"What could he possibly do in this church that would be a bad thing?' I was like, "Okay," but as it turned out, Father DePasquale did come. He married us in the church. At the end of the ceremony, he introduced us and said, "You can all applaud their marriage."

Well, that was the first time that was done in that church.

Question: Oh, that was taboo.

Yes, and so everyone applauded, and I thought, "Oh, my God, he's going to be wild about this."

Question: The priest, the one you asked permission of, was he present?

Yes, oh yes. He stayed in the back. He was watching.

Question: He was watching, keeping an eye on the priest that you invited in, I get it, but he witnessed the whole thing. That's what I was wondering.

Yes, he wanted to see. He witnessed the whole thing. Well, after that, when he performed marriage ceremonies, he had them applaud, and so he learned something from this priest. He did.

Question: That's sweet because that's like welcoming the new couple into the community. It's just having the community share in the joy. I like that idea.

Yes. Yes. Yeah, it was really a nice thing to do.

Question: In that day in age, you were quiet in church. You didn't talk, you didn't show any joy, particularly.

No, no. No. Yes, it's very ritualistic, and you just stuck to the ritual. You didn't do anything.

Question: Yes, and you didn't ask questions about it either.

Right, no, nope, you sure didn't. Yes, that was our experience, and so we had a memorable day.

Question: What is your husband's full name?

Nelson Clarence Johnson.

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Question: You have how many children?

Three.

Question: What memories, or where did you and your husband live, initially? Did you still remain right in Hammonton, even during those years?

Oh, yes. Yes. Even though he was a year behind me in high school, we really didn't know each other. It went way beyond high school, when he was in college. It was actually his junior year in college that he and I got together.

Question: How did you two meet?

His brother married one of my friends, and we were in the wedding together, but we didn't even talk to each other the entire time. Then his brother and my friend tried to put us together another day, and so we went on date together, and it was a disaster.

Question: This was not love at first sight.

No, it was not, and then his dad died. I went to the funeral. After, later, and I guess that was in December, in January, he was going to St. John's University in New York, and he was home one weekend, and he called me up and asked me for a date. We went to a movie and we never looked back, and so it just had taken three times.

Question: You dated exclusively since then?

Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, no, that's not true. When we first started dating, he was dating at St. John's. He'd had dates, and I went out a couple of times, although I didn't really – it was just social. It was just a social thing because I really wasn't interested in anybody else. I really just liked him. I guess we dated maybe about a year and then we just kind of committed to each other and stayed together.

Question: How long before Nelson proposed?

It was between college and law school. He was in Denver for the Air National Guard because he could have been drafted, but rather than being drafted, he went into the Air National Guard. He took a year off between college and law

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school. When he was in Denver, he asked me to come out, President's Day weekend. I did. He asked me to marry him, and –

Question: The rest is history.

Yeah, we married in '73, and then he graduated from law school in '72. Oh, no. What am I saying? It was '74, because we went to – yeah, we were married when he graduated, because we married between his second and third year of law school. He said, "Well, what I'll do is I'll just go to live with ..." He was living in a woman's house, a little apartment, and he said, "I'll just go there for the week and just come home on the weekends."

I was like, "Okay, I'm not thrilled about that, but okay," and then he was like, "Hmm, I don't think so; I think I'll commute," and so he commuted that last year in law school. It was nice. Yeah, to be in love like that is nice.

Question: It is. Of course, that's a special time.

Yes, it is. Yeah, we lived on Grape Street when we were married, and it was funny, because during my years, after high school, I was working at Bellevue Drug. There was a woman who used to come in all the time, Mrs. Siple. She had this really good sense of humor. We got to talking a lot when she came in. The home that became empty—she lived on Grape Street too, but a couple of blocks up, or at least a block up—and so I knew that it was her house.

My husband was out campaigning for the school board because he was going to be on the school board, very young. I think he was 23 when he was on the school board. He went to that house. There were people living there who were renting the house. They said, "Well, we're going to be moving."

My husband told me that, and I was like, "That's Betty Siple's brother-in-law's house. Let me see if we can rent it." I called her, and I said, "You know me from Bellevue Drug. My boyfriend and I are getting married. We'd like to know if we can rent that house."

She said, "I didn't know they were moving."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I spilled the beans."

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So, she said, "Yeah, when they move out, you can move in," and so we did. We rented that house. We changed it significantly. I love to do those things and my dad was very mechanical. He literally helped me remove a wall.

Question: That's terrific, a good helper.

We painted everything, and we sanded the floors. My husband and I did all of this, or most of this work ourselves.

Question: That's a lot of elbow grease.

It was. It was. I lost a lot of weight, and not that I needed to because I was skinny then, but I developed a muscle so big in this right arm that the woman who made my wedding gown had to make the sleeve larger because my muscle was big, in the right arm. Yeah.

Question: Lifting weights helps or using a lot of elbow grease on the right side.

Yeah, I think I was about 112 pounds, but I had this really great arm, right arm, from doing all the painting that we did. Yeah, and so we lived there for two years, and then when we were expecting our first child, Sarah, the house across the street came up for sale, or rent. I didn't like the house at all. I hated the color of it. I thought it was a terrible house.

Question: Did you simply need more room at that point, though?

Yeah, well, we did, and you know, we wanted to buy. We were ready to get into a home of our own. Nelson said, "Let's look across the street. Let's just look at the house."

I'm like, "Okay," you know? I walked in the front door, and I was like, "Ah! Oh, my God, I love this house," so we lived there for 26 years.

Question: Oh, you did love that house.

Yes, we did. We renovated the house and made it very large. In 1983 we expanded the kitchen and did a lot of work in that house. We put down hard wood floors and everything, before we decided then to move out where we are on Waterfront Way, so yeah, we lived there for a long time.

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The funny thing is, when I'd get the school bus to go home, it would go down Orchard Street, and then go down Grape Street, and I always loved the houses on Grape Street. I thought that was such a neat neighborhood, very different.

Question: There is something special about those on Grape Street. I live on Valley, and so Grape Street is my cut-through if I don't feel like pulling out on Bellevue. Certain times of the day, it's a little challenging to get out on Bellevue from Valley, particularly, and so I'm familiar with that, that stretch. That's where I walk my dog, and I've probably walked past the house that you're talking about, at some point in time.

Oh, yeah, the Masciolis live there now, coming from Bellevue, from Central Avenue. The Masciolis are on the left-hand side. It's a little white bungalow with a screened-in porch on the front. That was where we originally, at 423, and then we went across the street. It's a light green house that has a stained glass along the window, and it has a front porch. We put that front porch on.

Question: What was the house number?

410.

Question: You were at 410 Grape Street.

Yeah, and that has a big, long yard, alongside it. The house is here, and there's a house right next to it, and we always shared a driveway. Right on the other side of the house, at 410, there's this really long lot. That was still part of the house, and it goes way, way back.

Question: Did you raise your family there then?

Yes, mostly. Emily was in high school when we moved over to Waterfront Way. We lived in two different houses on Waterfront Way. We built one(41), and then after Emily and older kids stopped coming home, because they all got married and everything, on the same street, we then built a bungalow that's one story (5), and it's very good for older people– it's got wider doorways for us, and everything.

Question: Perfect, so that you can age in place.

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Yes, for the rest of our lives.

Question: That's something that you have to consider when you get to be older. It's a smarter thing to do, I would say.

Yes, we do. Yeah, yeah.

Question: You've done a lot. Do you realize, or I mean, you must realize it. It's not like you haven't been out in the world, but it's very special that you and Nelson both are still in the community that you were born and raised in, and it's a rarity, considering how mobile our society is, that you're here. It sounds like, or you said in the beginning of our interview, that when you were younger, you couldn't wait to move on, and be out of Hammonton, but you now have that appreciation.

Right.

Question: It's interesting to hear you say that, as you grew older, you appreciated being in your hometown.

I think once I had kids, and I really did appreciate the school system, and the friendships that my kids made.

Question: You were able to maintain very special friendships from your childhood. That was special.

Yes. Yes. Yes, it's funny, because my graduating class, there were 82 in our graduating class, in mine. Nelson's class was bigger, but of that 82 –

Question: That's relatively small, extremely,

It is, and of those 82 that graduated, there are about 25 of us who still see each other.

Question: I find that amazing.

We go out to lunch together. At Christmastime, we got together and had lunch. Sometimes our spouses come, sometimes they don't. It's really a nice feeling that that many people still live here. There are even more. There's a lot of classmates that don't socialize, but still live here.

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Question: Well, that's what I find special about this community. We've talked about this community a lot, Heart & Soul, the community coming together, and I just find that it's special that so many people have thrived here and continue to thrive here, and they have valued the community like you and your husband do, remaining here. I think that's what makes Hammonton very, very special.

It does because there is – now, most of my friends that I socialize with today, those that we spend most of our time with, they weren't originally from Hammonton. One of the spouses is, but the other spouse isn't, or both of them are not from Hammonton, and yet, I still have all my – it's like I have this group of friends, that group of friends and that group of friends, because the interests are all different.

Yeah, it's a really nice place to be. I'm really happy. Like I said, raising my kids here was great. I think they learned a lot. None of them live here. None of them appreciate the community as much as I do, or as much as my husband does. I don't quite know why because they all got a good education here. They all still have friends here.

Question: Do you think it's because they're younger? At what point in time did you come around to valuing the hometown atmosphere that we have?

Well, I guess it was about the time I was, or well, by the time I married, for sure, and especially after we had kids, but they're in their forties, and you know, Emily is in her thirties.

Question: Well, they are sort of old enough to where, if they were going to value it, they would have by now, I would say.

Yeah, well, my son is a special agent with the FBI, and so he was working in Delaware. He lived in Maryland for a while because he was in the Baltimore office and Washington, and then he moved to the Delaware office, but he's now living in Mantua Township. That was very close for him to be able to travel, but he now works in Northfield, and it's very easy for him to get there because he just comes right down the expressway with no difficulty.

Sarah always loved the shore and she's a NJ Superior Court Judge for Atlantic and County visinage. She lives in Margate, and her husband lived in Mays Landing, and

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that's where he grew up, but they both love the shore, and so they wanted to be in Margate.

Question: They wanted to be in Margate. Well, that stands to reason, and that's still very local, actually.

Yes, it is. Then Emily, she lives in Woolwich Township, which is on the other side of Swedesboro, closer to the Commodore Barry Bridge, because she was working as a buyer for QVC, and she was supposed to go to West Chester, because that's where their headquarters is, in West Chester, and so that was easier for her to commute.

She now has two children, two young children. They lived in Philadelphia, and they didn't want to raise their kids there, but they needed to be closer to the bridge for her to get to work, because my son-in-law works at home. She's a buyer, and so they're all within an hour, yes.

Question: They are still pretty close to the home roots, I have to say.

Yes, they are. Yes, they are; it's nice having them close by.

Question: Now, to talk a little bit more about your teenage years, were there any major news events in your life? You mentioned President Kennedy being assassinated, but are there any other things that you can remember?

Well, yeah, what was it? Our centennial for Hammonton.

Question: For Hammonton?

Yes. That was fun.

Question: How did you participate in that?

My girlfriends and I got all dressed up, and we came to the big celebration in town. We have pictures in our garb, you know? Yeah, that was fun. That was a fun year. I can remember all the men growing beards and having the beard contest. Yeah, so I guess I was 16, somewhere around there, 15 or 16 when that happened, and so that was fun, yeah. Yeah.

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You know, just watching this community change in the way that it has, there was always some sort of parade. We always had a Halloween parade or a Christmas parade or something, and now we've got both.

Question: How would you say it's changed?

Oh, I think for the better, I really do. It had a lull. What happened, I think, was it was such a vibrant community, and then all the factories, people at lunchtime, would – you know, you'd hear the whistle, and they'd empty out. People would come into town. All the drugstores, and Newberry's, they all had –

Question: The luncheonettes would be full, I'd imagine.

Yeah, they had all these counters. The drugstores had lunch counters, and J.J. Newberry's had a lunch counter, and so a lot of them came into town to have their lunch, and then they'd go back to work. But then the factories started closing because they went to foreign countries, and fortunately for this community, people who worked in the factories, if they didn't retire – because you know, gambling started, and they just went from one type of job to another.

Question: Interesting, I never thought about that.

I think that economically saved this community, although there was a big slump because, first of all, there are not as many people coming to down, downtown, and so the stores all started to close, and the malls opened. The Cherry Hill Mall opened, and people were –

Question: That detracted from the downtown businesses as well.

Absolutely, and so between the two, the factories leaving and the casinos opening and the malls becoming the big draw to go buy things, the community really went into a big slump in the 1970s. My sister-in-law and I had a business. We opened a linen store, which is part of Mariachi's right now, and we had a little store.

Question: What was the name of that store?

It was called the Linen Garden, and we were only in business for a couple of years, 1973, 1974 and 1975, something like that, right in there, and people wouldn't come to the store. We really had it decorated nicely. It was a nice, little store.

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Question: Why do you think that was? I mean, you did mention a few things that detracted from business, but did things get a little seedy downtown, or?

Yes, that was part of it. Yes, Monastra's was right next door, and a lot of Hispanic men literally hung out right in front. Well, women aren't going to go into the store when you've got all these men.

Question: No, that's intimidating, yeah. That would be intimidating to anyone.

It was intimidating, and so, you know, I'd try to shoo them away and say, "You can't be in front of the store, you can't be ..."

Question: No loitering.

Yeah, and so that was a problem, but it was more than that. I mean, we had one customer, and she was a very wealthy woman in this community. She came in, and she said, "I couldn't get to the mall, so I thought I'd come here," but it was like, "No, why didn't you come here first, and then if we don't have what you want, go to the mall," you know?

Question: Seriously, you were the local store, and I really love the campaigns for buying local. I do.

Yes. Yes, me too. I shop locally, all the time. Yes.

Question: I think that's the way to go. If you want your downtown area to thrive, help out, spend a little bit of your moolah here; it's important.

I agree. I agree, so we ended that business then in the downtown, and I'd heard people say, around that time, you know, the ones that were younger than me, that they didn't feel safe. Their parents didn't want them to come downtown. I said to Nelson, "I never felt that. Did you ever feel unsafe, ever, in town?" He never did. Because his parents had a hardware store around Main Street, and his brother was still running it at that time.

Question: What was the name of that hardware store?

Chester's Hardware.

Question: Oh, you said that before.

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Yes, it's where Lynkris is now. His father went from having a market, a food market, to hardware, because he had a lung problem, and going in and out of the meat locker all the time was damaging to his lungs, and so he went into business across the street, and that's where my husband was raised, in the hardware store, right behind it. They had a house right behind it.

Yeah, so neither of us ever felt like we weren't safe in the community. We never felt that, and so I was surprised when people said that, from Heart & Soul, but then Main Street came a long, and we could see little things getting a little better, and a little better. The person who ran it, I think his last name was Woods, he wasn't a real people person, I don't think. He wasn't a Cassie, and Cassie came along, and she just exploded it all.

Question: That's amazing.

But you know, it took like 25 years for it to get to this point, you know, and that's a long time. That's a full generation.

Question: Yes, it is, actually.

But growing up there, there were businesses everywhere, the little clothing shops. You didn't have to go anywhere but your own community to buy shoes, to buy clothing. Everything that we needed was here.

Question: How convenient, and how convenient that it was affordable.

It was, yes.

Question: I mean, for older people, and I mean, now that I'm getting to be part of the older generation, I have more of an appreciation for such a thing. You wouldn't have to drive very far, and/or if you were a young mother with young children, you didn't have to go very far either. That said, I would love to see our downtown – I mean, our downtown is lovely, don't get me wrong, but I would love to see it renovated to the point where I could actually do all my shopping there, and not just for myself, for everybody.

Me too, and I guess it's because that's the way I grew up. There were men's stores. There were women's stores. There were several women's stores where

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you could go. The buildings are still there. The shops are still there, but they're not women's clothing anymore.

Question: It would be nice if some specialty stores came back. It would be so, so nice.

Yeah, it really would, yeah. Yeah.

Question: I see a need for that.

Me too.

Question: Let's talk a little bit about your immediate family, your parents. What was your mother's name?

My mother's name was Cora, Cora Mallette. My mother was born in Upstate New York, and that's where my parents met. My dad was stationed up there in what then was called Pine Camp. It's now Fort Drum. They met there and fell in love, married, and while he was there, she got pregnant. He was overseas. I guess he was in France when my sister Kay was born, and then when he came back –

Question: This was during the war, WWII?

Yeah, and when he came back, my mom got pregnant again, and then my sister –

Question: Yeah, kind of typical.

My father was actually in the desert, here in the United States, being trained to go to Africa, for that campaign, when my sister Wynnona was born, on Memorial Day, and fortunately the war came to an end. He didn't go anywhere after that, and then he wanted to come home, because this is where his family was.

My mom was okay with that. The little town – she grew up in a little town called Carthage, just 18 miles from Watertown, and Fort Drum is right there, right near Watertown.

Question: How many brothers and sisters did she have?

She was one of seven. She had one – her sister was the oldest, and then she was sort of in the middle, and she had two younger brothers, yeah, and two older brothers.

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Question: A large family, and not necessarily for that time, but considering nowadays.

Yeah, and my dad was born here. He was born, I believe, in a house off of Fairview Ave; I believe on the grounds that are now the ECEC. My grandfather had a farm off Pine Road, but my dad was born, right there, off of Fairview Avenue.

Question: In the house?

In the house, yes, and he was one of seven also. There were just two boys, and he was next to the youngest. The older siblings were all girls.

Question: What did he do for a living?

My dad was a mechanic. He worked at Ranere's, which was a very big place here in Hammonton. The building doesn't exist anymore.

Question: What was Ranere's?

Ranere's was an auto dealer and an auto shop. It's funny, if you think about it, right now.

Question: Did P.T. Ranere own that?

Yes. Where Bellevue Drug is here, and there's a parking lot, and that parking lot was Ranere's. That was the showroom, and then the bank was next to it, and then behind Ranere's, where it's still a parking lot, all back there, that was the –

Question: That's all located behind Bellevue Drugs.

Right, that was where the auto shop was, and my father was a mechanic there. He actually became, I guess, like a foreman there.

Question: Did he work for P.T. Ranere? Was P.T. Ranere the big boss?

He worked for P.T. He worked for P.T. Ranere. It was not enough. His salary was not enough to raise a family of four.

Question: Did your mother then work? Did she complete school?

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Oh, yeah, my mom was really smart. She skipped a grade. She went to a Catholic school for all her life, but Dad would never let her work. He was so Italian. He was so Italian.

Question: Oh, interesting. He wanted his dinner on the table at a certain time every night.

And you know, and it was an affront for him to have his wife work. So, at one point, I was –

Question: It would look like he wasn't providing.

Yes. I was in kindergarten, I think it was, when she used to take in ironing, and he hated it, because this was like such an insult to him, for her to be doing this, but she liked it. She always liked ironing, and so it wasn't something for her, and it kept her occupied, you know, because by the time, my brother Joe was four years younger, and so I guess he was like three, or something like that. He wasn't occupying all of her time, and the rest of us were in school, so she did that.

Question: Why not do something constructive?

Well, he made her stop that, so she couldn't do that anymore.

Question: What about hobbies? Did your mother do any charitable work? Did she get involved with the church?

My mother didn't drive at that time.

Question: Oh, I see, so she was at home.

Yes she was home.

Question: Did she have hobbies at home, besides cleaning the house?

She crocheted and she embroidered. As she got older, she did a lot of needlework and a lot of cross stitching. She taught me how to sew. She taught all of us how to sew. My mother always sewed most of our clothes, and so she made our clothes, but she was definitely –

Question: She was a talented lady.

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She was. My mom, if she had had an opportunity to get an education and/or my father letting her be more exploratory and try different things, but he didn't. She just kind of accepted that.

Question: She would have excelled, but she was a product of her time. She stayed home. She did what she knew made her husband happy, keep her family together, and family content.

Yes. Yes, she was. Yes. Yes, and that's really why they had my youngest brother. She was just 37 years old, and we were all in school, and she was like, "What do I do with myself?" And so, they decided to have another child.

Question: That's considered older to be having a child, back in the day.

Yes. Yes. Like I said, she was 38 and my sister was 18, so it was like, you know, really? That's, you know, starting all over, and I mean, she had a built-in babysitter because I was 14.

Question: Yes, she did, and you were the backup.

And then I was, you know – yeah, I was. I was, yeah. So yeah, it's a shame because she never reached her potential, but she did a lot of things, though. She baked. She was an excellent baker.

Question: What did she look like? How would you describe her appearance?

She was five-foot, four. Very thin when she married my dad. She got a little heavier. She had, not real - she was not, she was more dark than she was – you know, she wasn't fair like my sister, she wasn't. She was darker, and had light brown hair that she always hated, because it was thin. She always hated her hair. But she was an avid reader, and my dad was too. They both read a lot, and so we all learned to love reading, in my family.

Question: Do you know any stories about your mother's ancestors?

Yes. My mother's family came from France, originally, and immigrated to Canada, and then moved down into New York. That was my grandfather's family. I don't know a lot about my grandmother's family, although they apparently all lived in that area in New York, in Upstate New York, around the Carthage area. So yeah,

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and that my great-grandfather was one of 13, and my grandfather was one of 13 children.

My grandfather spent most of his life in an orphanage because his mother died and his father abandoned them, and so there were several who had reached adulthood already, and my grandfather was one of the younger ones, and so he was in an –

Question: This was the large brood you were just speaking about?

Yes, and so his sister, when he was a teenager, his sister, Cora, for whom my mother is named –

Question: That's a beautiful name.

Yeah, Cora Mae, she took him out of the orphanage, and he lived with her for a while, before he met my grandmother, who was 15 when he met her, and he was 17. I mean, he wasn't older –

Question: They were babies.

They were babies. As a matter of fact, my sister tells me—and I didn't know this story—she told me this, that my grandmother was such a girl when they married that she still played with paper dolls. My grandfather would come home from work and she'd still be playing with her paper dolls.

My grandmother was a diabetic, a juvenile diabetic, and she died when she was 59.

Question: That's so young, especially by today's standards.

My grandfather had a stroke the year before, and he lived for a very long time. I think he was just 60 when he had his stroke, and he lived to be 83.

Question: What about your parents? How was their health in their later years?

Well, my father died at 69. He had cancer. He had stomach cancer. They thought when they removed part of his stomach that he was fine, but he didn't have any

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chemotherapy or anything, and he developed cancer again, and he died of liver failure, liver cancer, by the age of 69. So yeah.

Question: Obviously, things had metastasized. We didn't have the drugs that we have nowadays, back then.

Yeah, and you know, he lived two years after he had stomach cancer, and he died very quickly, which was a blessing, because we did not watch my father diminish in any way. He still looked like himself, when he died, when so many cancer patients, they just become another being.

Question: That's true, and that's traumatic for the family to have to witness.

Yes, yes.

Question: What about your mother in her later years? How did she fare?

My mother had heart disease and high blood pressure. She had so many ailments and back issues. We were always – like, she was in and out of the hospital all of the time, you know? Even when my dad was alive, she was still having all these issues, but she died, literally, sitting in her living room. You could see exactly what she did, because she did have this routine. She got up in the morning. She made her coffee. She sat down, had her coffee, read the newspaper. Both of those were on the table in the kitchen.

Question: She was predictable that way.

Yes, she went into the living room and sat down, said her rosary, which she did, because her rosary were right there.

Question: God bless her.

She always put her head back and took a little nap at that time because she was failing, and –

Question: How old was she at this point, would you say?

She was 83. She put her head back, went to sleep and didn't wake up.

Question: That's the way to do it.

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Yeah, and that's, my brother Tim was a police officer at the time, and he stopped in every day to see her. He was her pet, anyway, and they were very close.

Question: Was this the baby of the family?

Yes, he really was her pet. And so, she lived quite a few years without my father, and this was really tough on her, because she depended on him for just about everything.

Question: They married at a very young age; you were saying?

Yeah, they were very young. She was 18, I guess, or 17, and he was just 4 years older than her. Yeah, he was like 21 when they got married.

Question: They went the distance, they managed to –

Oh, yeah, they did. They did go the distance. There was never a time when I didn't think that they loved each other. I mean, they were just attached.

Question: I think that's a very special thing for a daughter to say about their parents.

Oh, yeah. Yeah, I mean, my husband's parents, it's the same way, and I think we had really good role models.

Question: You and Nelson did, absolutely.

And so far, knock on wood, our children are the same way. They're just, I think they know that we modeled a good marriage. It's not that they saw it was hunky-dory all of the time, because they didn't, because that's not our personalities to each other.

Question: But you know, I think children – this is just my personal opinion about that, but I think children need to see arguments occur and to see how things get resolved, and how to negotiate that.

And how you put it back together, yes, how you put it together when it – because it did get broken, but it got healed, and it took time to heal it, but you put in the time to do it.

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Question: You have to put in the time and put in the work, and you have to sit back and remember that things don't get fixed all the time in one hour's time, so things take time. It's not like a TV program that will resolve.

Yes. Right. No, no it isn't. It takes a long time, but fortunately, they've seen that also with their aunts and uncles. Only one member of our family, on both sides, got a divorce and then remarried, but stayed married to that second person for a lifetime.

Question: That's marvelous. They had good examples. A good foundation on each side.

Yeah, very good examples, yeah. Yeah.

Question: We were talking about your mother's health. She lived a few years after your father passed away?

Yeah. Yeah, quite a few after my father. He died in 1987 and she died in 2006.

Question: What cemeteries are they buried in?

They're in the Catholic cemetery out on First Road, Holy Sepulchre, I guess it is, it's called, yeah. My father's family are all buried out at Oak Grove, and that's where Nelson and I will be too. We've already made our arrangements to be there, that cemetery.

Question: Actually, and this is a little sidebar, but I actually saw the monument you had put there.

Oh, did you?

Question: Only because Joe –

Joe Berenato?

Question: Yes, I always say his name wrong, but he showed me a picture of that when I said you were coming over here later. It's beautiful, by the way.

Well, thank you. We wanted, we're both a little – control freaks. We both admit that, you know, and we're not going to say anything more than that, except that we felt why put our kids through having to do all that? We know what we want.

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We know where we want to be, so we'll just do it ahead of time, and that takes pressure off of them.

Question: I think that's a marvelous gift that you're giving your children to do that, to make all those decisions ahead of time.

Yeah, so we just felt that it would be easier for them, you know, then for them to try and put it all together when – I mean, one of us will outlive the other, and we've accepted that.

Question: But this takes the burden off the surviving spouse as well.

Yes, it does that too. It makes it easier. I know, with my sister, one sister was cremated, and her ashes are with her husband, in her house, and when he dies, those ashes will go with him, but my other sister is buried, and my brother-in-law hates going over to the cemetery because the stone not there yet. So, this is hard on him, you know?

Question: Oh, I can understand that.

So, I'm glad we did what we did because we know where we're going to be.

Question: Yes, you know where you're going to be, the stone is there, and the stone has been chosen, and it's what you like, what you prefer, so I think that's marvelous to have all that lined up.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Question: Back to your parents, tell me what you can about their ancestry, if you haven't already discussed it. Is there anything more you'd like to add?

My father's family was from Sicily. Both my grandmother and my grandfather came from the same village, Saponara, which is about 10 kilometers from Messina.

Question: Are you third-generation Italian? And American.

Yes, but I'm a mix, you know? Yeah, I'm not full Italian, although growing up here, you can't help but be –

Question: Why is there always a distinction between Italy and Sicily for Italians?

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Oh, because as my uncle used to say, "I'm Italian, but by birth I'm Sicilian." They're two different places. The languages are different, but you don't – yeah, the spelling.

Question: So, there are more distinctions.

Yes, the spelling of the words are different. My daughter, my oldest daughter had a dual major at Brown, and Italian was one of them, because she really liked the language. She learned it in high school, and she really liked the language. When she was in Italy, studying there, she took a train down to Sicily, which is a story onto itself, because you have to get on a barge that takes each piece of the train across the strait to –

Question: Oh, it would be interesting just to see that.

Yes. They do it overnight, so you don't even know it's going on, but she said it was difficult because the language is different. She goes, "You know, all the Italian I know is like the Roman Italian."

Question: Because she was prepared to be on the mainland, but not necessarily in Sicily, so then that made her even more – that had to be an adjustment.

Yes, Sicilian is – yeah, I consider it – I call it fractured Italian because it's really different, and even the way people shorten things here, there were certain words that they use here that are just not – if you saw the spelling, you'd – like it's just –

Question: Can you grasp what's going on? Is it similar enough?

Yes, because I grew up with it, but I never knew that capicola, that meat.

Question: Oh, yes, that's a ham. I recognize that term.

Yes, I always heard it pronounced, Gabagool, so.

Question: I've heard that term too. I thought it was too separate things. Oh, so I'm getting an education here.

That's an example. The name is –

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Question: Capicola and Gabagool are the same thing. I thought it was too different lunchmeats. Who could have known?

When I saw it spelled, I was like, "Oh, my God," and that was as adult. I said, "Capicola, that's Gabagool."

Question: There's always something new to learn.

So that's why I call it fractured Italian because it really, it's kind of –

Question: It is, it's similar, but not, like Pig Latin.

You know, and so my dad – that was my dad's first language, because –

Question: Did he speak that around the house?

That's what my grandparents –

Question: They spoke Italian, or Sicilian, excuse me, Sicilian.

Sicilian, but no, when he grew up, because he was first-generation, he was born here, but my grandparents never spoke English. They understood some of it, but they never spoke it.

Question: So, he was raised in an extremely Sicilian household.

He learned English from the neighbors, from being with kids, because he didn't –

Question: Right, I would assume.

Yeah, he didn't. He didn't. English wasn't spoken in his home, never was. I can remember being at my grandparents' house, and they lived right on the corner of 4th and French. There's a little bungalow there. That's where my dad pretty much grew up, in that house, and there was – my grandfather was 82 when he died. I was only eight years old.

My grandmother died when she was 82, but I was 23, so –

Question: You had an opportunity to know her, more personally?

Yeah, but there was a big age difference. My grandfather came here first, and he worked on the railroad when he came here.

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Question: What were their names, Johanna?

Antonio Ruggeri, and my grandmother's name was Catherine – Catarina, and so my sister was named after her, Catherine Gladys. My grandmother's name was Gladys.

So yeah, so he was here for quite a while, and then she had a brother here, and her first husband, in Saponara, left her. She had a child with him, and he left her. He moved to Messina. He went into Messina. Her husband just kind of disappeared, and she was left with a child in a village with no husband.

Question: Was she able to divorce him, considering that he just disappeared into the night?

I don't think she ever divorced him. I don't think that was even an option, because then she came here, and she lived with her brother, Casper Bertino. Bertino was her last name, and he – this is the story that my aunts told me, that she came here, she was with her brother. Her brother said, "You can't stay here all the time. You have to leave, but this man needs a wife, so you go with him, and you become his wife." So, she did, so – and there was an age difference between them.

Like I said, he was – I was eight when he died.

Question: About 15 years? I mean, you can do the math and –

Yes, because I was eight, when he died at eighty-two, and I was twenty-three when she died at eighty-two, and so you know, there was a big difference in their ages. So he pretty much raised her child, as well as then having six more children. Two of them died. They were twins, and they died at birth, and then there was one that died when he was four or five, of some disease, but I don't know what he died of.

Question: They didn't have antibiotics back then.

No, and he was, the one who died, his name was Salvatore Joseph, and when my father was born, she named him Salvatore Joseph.

Question: Oh, for Heaven's sake.

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But he became ill, and she thought he was going to die.

Question: Your father?

Yes, so she had my father rebaptized, Joseph Salvatore, and then he lived, so she was very superstitious, my grandmother. She was also a healer.

Question: In what way?

She made poultices, and she was a masseuse. People would come to her home. A Don from Philadelphia used to come to her with a bad back, and she would take olive oil and bless it. She'd make the sign of the cross over it. She'd bless it, and then she would take him into the bedroom and massage his back. And everybody in the house had to be quiet.

My sister Kay remembered this more than I did because she was four years old. I remember it, slightly. I remember being told I had to sit still and be quiet.

Question: This was your grandmother that you're speaking of?

Yes, my grandmother, yes. And she had fingers like steel. I did a stupid thing one day in the school building that is no longer here. They had, it was a porch with – you know, you came out of the building, and it was like a porch, and you had steps on two sides.

Well, somebody dared me to jump off the porch. I did, and I sprained my ankle. So my mom had to come and get me. She had to get the neighbor to bring her— because she didn't drive at the time—to take me home. And they put ice on it.

Well, my father went over and got my grandmother. She came over, and she massaged that ankle, and it hurt so bad, but I was fine. I mean, she just kept working all the – you know, how fluid –

Question: In the muscles, yeah, and sometimes you have to – it hurts, or it feels worse before it feels better, when you do a therapy like that.

Yes, she just had these really strong hands, and she knew how to do these things.

Question: See, nowadays, we would have called that alternative medicine.

Absolutely, it was alternative.

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Question: She was a woman before her time.

Yes, and unfortunately, she didn't pass it on to her daughters or my father, and you know, or my –

Question: That's a lot of valuable knowledge, actually, a lot of practical knowledge.

Yeah, it was. It was a lot of practical knowledge that just – you know, she didn't pass it on. She was a character, though. She was. She didn't, they didn't care for my mother because she wasn't Italian, you know? That wasn't a good thing.

Question: Did that cause a division in the family for a long time, or was it just something they felt casually?

No, my mom knew it, you know, the way they treated her, but my grandmother did teach her how to make Italian gravy, you know, and so somebody had to teach her.

Question: Yes, so your father could eat. She was protecting her son when she did that.

Yes. Yes, but she knew. She knew that they didn't care for her, because you know, they'd call her the "American," you know?

Question: Oh, my.

But you know, I think they all kind of mellowed with her. And so, my two aunts, my father's two sisters, they married two brothers, and so –

Question: Your father's two sisters married two brothers and had the same last name then.

Yes, and so they had the same last name, and you know, that was arranged. My grandparents, especially my grandmother, she really was –

Question: Another arranged marriage. See, women, nowadays, the younger generation that is now of marriage age, they would really find that so odd, and so odd that your mother agreed to stay home in the kitchen. I think that's one of the reasons I want to record histories like this. I just feel that the girls need to

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know how far we've come, women in particular. And men, because they've gained by the Women's Movement as well. They've been able to do nurturing with their children much more than or generation, than even our generation, our husbands did.

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yes. Yes, absolutely.

Question: I think there's a lot to be said for that.

Yeah, I think so too. I do, and you know, it was – that was, those two marriages were arranged, and my uncles, their last name was Giacoppo and the two brothers worked at the racetrack. They were groundskeepers at the racetrack. They were both in the Army. They both went into the Army. One of them had a medical discharge. He had a psychotic episode.

Question: What racetrack are we speaking of?

The Atlantic City Racetrack. He was stationed in Washington when that happened. My aunt went out there and then brought him home. He would be considered OCD today. His brother married my Aunt Rose. He was this little, tiny guy, and really a character in his own right, but they both had – they were the garbage collectors for Hammonton.

They had a pig farm out on 8th Street, and they collected the garbage. At that time, you put garbage in a can, and you put it out on the street, like you do the trash.

Question: An old metal can?

Yes, like you do, you know, you put out your trash, although people didn't put out their trash, they burned it, when I was a kid.

Question: That was still allowed at that time.

Yes, when I was a little kid, yeah. And then they collected the garbage, and then they would take it out to 8th Street. They had this huge boiler, because in order to feed the pigs, they couldn't feed them raw garbage. They had to feed them – it had to be sterilized.

Question: They actually cooked it first? Interesting.

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Yeah, they cooked it. Yes, and they had that pig farm for a very long time. And then after they stopped having garbage collections, you know, they just stopped. That was it. They sold their property – or they hung on to the property for quite a long time, but eventually ended up - well, my Uncle Gus ended up in a – he went back into psychotic episodes, and he had to be – he was in the Veteran's Home in Vineland.

Question: How did that manifest itself? What happened?

He was my godfather. He was such a neat guy. He was a real character. I just loved him.

Question: So regardless of his psychiatric problems, you got along well?

Yeah, he was a really nice man. He was very quiet, and he didn't socialize a lot, just a very quiet man. Again, my Aunt Angie was the boss in the family, sort of, and –

Question: She was the oldest?

No, she wasn't the oldest. My Aunt Rose was older than her, and Aunt Mary was even older than her.

Question: So, she just had a bossy personality.

She just did, yeah. So she was kind of the boss, and he was kind of laid back. Two different kinds of brothers. One was very quiet and had issues, but was very quiet, didn't know he had any issues. He was just – but he was clean. Oh, my God, he was OCD about cleanliness.

So even though they were garbage collectors, both of them were immaculate people.

Question: Did he marry?

Well, he married my aunt. Yeah, and so they were just very, really – you know, Uncle Gus would not –

Question: I'm just thinking, that would be a lot to live with. I can't imagine, unless she was the same way.

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Oh, yeah, well – in a lot of ways, yeah. Her home was very immaculate, and as my grandmother's home was. My Aunt Rose and my Uncle John had a little house over on Pleasant Street, a really little house, and they had it for years, but they didn't live there after they were married.

My Aunt Rose sort of devoted all her life to my grandparents, and so she lived – she literally lived with them. There was a little two-bedroom bungalow.

Question: With your uncle or without?

Yeah, my uncle too. Yeah, he accepted that. You know, he was there, and it wasn't until much later that they even sold their house. They kept it a really long time. So instead of her going back and forth between – and which wasn't far, she just moved in, and my Uncle John was all right with that. So when Uncle Gus, after – when he was older, he would not – he would get underneath a blanket and just stay on the couch and he wouldn't be – he wouldn't talk to anybody.

Question: A depressive?

Yeah, he was depressed and psychotic, and you know, he just was not – you couldn't communicate with him.

Question: That's sad. He has to have suffered.

Yes, it was, and so he was in the Veteran's Home for quite a long time because then my Aunt Angie died of heart disease –

Question: So, she pre-deceased him.

Yes, she did, and then my Uncle John – my Aunt Rose died when she was 90, and he was 90 also. They were the same age, and less than a year later, he died. And my Uncle Gus was still alive in the – and he was in sort of a catatonic state. He didn't speak, and then all of a sudden, one day, in the nursing home, he started to talk.

Question: Amazing.

But it was all in Sicilian.

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Question: So, he went back to his original – well, in old age, frequently people will do that, that have dementia. They slip back into the dialogue of their youth.

Yeah. I went to visit him. I didn't visit him when he was in this psychotic state, when he was noncommunicative. When he – I had put my Uncle John in the veteran's home as well, because – it's a long story that I really don't care to tell, but he was not being taken care of after my Aunt Rose died, and so I needed to put him where he'd be safe and clean. And he was – when, he fell there and broke his hip, and after he broke his hip, he had surgery, and it wasn't long after that that he died.

So, I visited my Uncle Gus while I was visiting him, and Uncle Gus got chubby, and he was in a wheelchair. And he's talking to me very, you know, animatedly, in Sicilian, and I'm like, "Uncle Gus, I have no idea what you're saying to me," because my Uncle John used to tell me jokes in Italian too.

Question: In Sicilian?

And I would be like, I'd laugh, because he'd laugh the whole time, as he was telling me the jokes, but I had no idea what he was saying.

Question: Were you laughing just because he was tickled?

Yes, because he was so tickled with it. You know, it was like, "Uncle John, I have no idea," but it's funny. So yeah, they were characters. So my aunts, you know, they were very close to my grandparents. My Aunt Angie built a house right next door to my grandmother. And so it was like a household run by women.

Question: That's very nice. You had a very nice, close extended family, it sounds like. And you feel it was run by the women?

Yeah. Oh, yeah, I felt they were – you know, yes, they did, because my grandmother was such a strong character, and my grandfather, went – you know, he –

Question: And this is the grandmother on your father's side, the Italian grandmother?

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Yes, and my two aunts sort of just took over too. And yeah, they were very strong women on that side, yeah.

Question: I'd say, and I see where you get your strength from, Johanna.

Yeah, I guess.

Question: Well, I think we've talked about each branch of your family. Now, is there anything you would like to add to the story here?

No, except that it's – you know, this is a good community, and it's – I would love my kids to come back here, but I don't see that they will. I doubt if they will. They're happy where they are, and I'm happy they're happy, so –

Question: That's the important thing.

Yeah.

Question: I don't think we touched on your grandchildren. Do you have grandchildren?

I have actually seven. Two of them are step-grandchildren. They're adults. One just turned 29 yesterday, and her brother is 27. And then I have – my son has – these are my son's stepchildren. He has one daughter, Ava, and she is nine – or ten, rather.

Question: I love that name. Very pretty name.

Yeah, Ava Elan Johnson is her name, and she's a delightful child. She was adopted. My daughter-in-law was unable to hold pregnancies, after – because she was older, and so – but Ava is the apple of his eye. He absolutely adores her.

Question: That's so sweet.

I tell him, "Be careful, my dear. You're so close to her. She's going to leave you," you know?

Question: Yes, at some point in time.

You know, those teenage years are going to get touch.

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Question: I think when you have young children you don't realize that, at 14 and 15, you're not going to be the important role model, or the important person in their life. Their peers are going to become important, and for some parents, that's not so easy to take.

Yes. Yes. No, and she idolizes him too. I mean, they're really like two peas in a pod. They really are very close.

Question: He's a wonderful girl dad.

He is. He is, and it's so funny because I just never saw this coming with him because he was such a tease when he was just a kid. And then Emily has two little girls, and Emily's daughters are three and almost sixteen months.

Question: They're tiny yet. What is Emily's married name?

Jokinen. It's a Finnish name. And she is like – my three-year-old granddaughter is named for me. Her name is Johanna.

Question: Precious.

They call her Jo-hanna. They pronounce the H. Her middle name is Rose. That's her other grandmother's name.

Question: Very sweet.

And we have the same initials, J.R.J., and so does her dad, J.R.J., and she's delightful, and her sister is going to be 16 months old the first of the month, and she's Layla, Layla Violet.

Question: That's pretty also.

Yeah, and she looks just like her mom, nice chubby cheeks and big dimples.

Question: Aww, that must bring back a lot of memories for you.

Yes, it does. Yes, it does. As a matter of fact, I kept so many of Emily's clothes that I gave them to her, and now her girls are wearing them.

Question: Oh, that's so marvelous that you utilized them, and so Emily must be your youngest.

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She's my youngest. And Sarah has two. Her son is Asher Wyatt Bell. Asher is going to be 13. He's 12 right now. And his sister is three years younger, and so she's nine. That is Sloane, Sloane Kiernan Bell, and they're delightful. And they all have really different personalities, you know, every single one of them.

Question: Isn't that amazing to see? They're peas from the same pod, yet they can be so different. And then appearances as well, as your sisters and you were very different.

Yes. Yes. Yeah, we really – if you put us together in the same room, you would know we're sisters, but if you see us, you don't automatically think, "Oh, well, you must be So-and-So's sister," which is just the opposite in my husband's family. When you see a Johnson, you see another Johnson, they all look alike.

Question: It's funny how that happens in families.

You can identify a Johnson anywhere. I mean, you know, it's really – because he has – his sister is still here. She's 81.

Question: So, his sister settled in this area as well? I forgot to ask you that, or are there many of Nelson's family here?

Well, she lived in New York. Yeah. Well, his oldest brother, Richard, he had the hardware store, and he died about two years ago, and then Becky lived in New York City for – well, the suburbs, Queens, for many years. She's a registered nurse, and when she moved here, she still did nursing. She did home healthcare, mostly, and she's amazing, an amazing nurse. She's a good person that can tell you what's wrong with you, just by talking to you.

Question: Another healer in the family.

Yes, she is. She is a healer. She's really something. And then his brother Ed still lives here in town too, so – because there were four in his family, and he was the youngest. So yeah, Nelson's the youngest, yeah.

Question: Well, I really appreciate you taking time out of your busy day to sit and help the Hammonton Historical Society with their projects.

Well, my pleasure.

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Question: I feel like we're preserving a little bit of history here.

I really appreciate being asked, because I never thought anybody would want to know anything about what I do, you know?

Question: It's part of what we want to know, and I think it's – like I said earlier, even just from a women's issues' standpoint, it's important to tell your story so that young people understand, and then just so people know you personally. Both you and your husband are a bit of the personalities in the area, so I think that's a big value as well.

Yeah, you know, my husband always says there are two things that you have no control over, to whom you are born and where, and it's the truth. I've been very fortunate. I was born here. I married someone who wants to be here, and I'm very fortunate because he never stopped encouraging me. He always says that we complement each other because he wouldn't be the writer that he is if I hadn't been encouraging him, and I wouldn't have gotten the education or doctorate that I've gotten, if he weren't encouraging me.

Question: And you did complement each other.

Yes, so it's been a pleasure, you know? So, thank you. Thank you for asking me these questions.

Question: It's nice to meet somebody who is happy with Hammonton as well.

Oh, yeah.

Question: It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

Thank you, my pleasure.

[End of Interview]







