

ROBERT ALLEN WILLIAMS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 26, 2023



HISTORICAL SOCIETY *of*
HAMMONTON

EST. 1960

**Historical Society of Hammonton Oral History
Robert Allen Williams**

Date of Interview	May 26, 2023
Interviewer(s)	Janet Hasulak
Interviewee(s)	Robert (Bob) Allen Williams
Others Present	

My name is Janet Hasulak. I'm sitting here at the Historical Society Museum. It is May 26, 2023. I am here with Bob Williams, and we are doing an interview with him for the Oral History Project of Hammonton Historical Society.

Question: Your full name is Robert Allen Williams, but you go by Bob?

I do, yes.

Question: We'll continue to call you Bob. How old are you, Bob?

I am 67.

Question: When were you born?

October 28th, 1955.

Question: Where were you born?

I was born in Hammonton.

Question: Right here?

Yes. In what's called the Esposito home, right across from the angle from the Wawa. I think now it's home for homeless people or maybe lower income. I'm not sure what it is, really.

Question: Is it back behind the West End Bar & Grill?

It's behind the old Firestone gas station, so it's on an angle from Wawa.

Question: I can picture it. Did you or your parents ever live in any other states or other cities?

My mother always lived in Hammonton. My father was from Egg Harbor City.

Question: Even he was from very close?

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Yes.

Question: Where did you live as a child?

Hammonton.

Question: Right here in the same house?

The same house, yes.

Question: How would you describe your surroundings as a child? What did the house look back in the day back then?

My parents were on the poorer side, but they always got us through, they always provided. Both my parents worked, but we had a happy childhood. We weren't rich, we didn't have everything, but I was always loved, it was a great thing.

Question: What did your parents do for a living?

My dad worked in the Eastern Brewery for, I believe, almost 33 years.

Question: What was his name?

Norris, N-o-r-r-i-s. And he worked in the Brewery, I believe, for 33 years. Then, I believe, he was laid off at some point. He was unemployed for a while and then went to work for Jamesway as a maintenance person. I know he had a couple of jobs in-between. I think he worked for Lou Pantalone when Lou Pantalone had a cleaning company way, way, way back. I think he worked for him also. Somewhere in-between, I couldn't tell you dates.

Question: What did your mother do for a living?

My mother worked for the Crown Pants Clothing Factory, which is now the Adrenaline Gym.

Question: That building.

Yes. That building was the Crown Pants, she would do piece work and she made pants or part of them, the dart of the pants.

Question: Doing darts, yes.

Yes. That's what I remember about that.

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Question: Describe your school years to me. Where did you go to school?

I went to school right here at the Hammonton Elementary on Vine St. Then, I went to the school on Liberty for 7th to 12th grade.

Question: You graduated from Hammonton Public High?

Yes, Hammonton High School.

Question: Do you have any favorite teachers that you remember from back in the grade school days?

That's funny you should say that because I saw a question on Facebook, "Do you remember your 5th grade teacher?" And I do, I think it was Mr. Rebeck and he was one of my favorites. Mrs. Triolo, way back in maybe 3rd grade, I remember her.

Question: It's amazing what a distinctive impression a teacher can make on you.

Yes, exactly. There was a lot of teachers that come to mind.

Question: What about friends? Do you have any buddies that you still keep in touch with from back in those days?

In those days, my best friend was Sal Velardi who passed away a few years ago. We did keep in touch the whole time. I'm trying to think what other ones. I'm friends with Anthony Rizzotte, We did many, many marathons together because I did get into running. But that was probably later on, I met him after High School. We ran marathons together; we ran together through Hammonton. Many people would remember that.

Question: How would you describe your teenage years? Let's talk about High School a little bit. What did you do in High School? Were you a joiner, did you get involved in athletics or Band?

I was not in athletics, I was not in Band, I was basically quiet. I did well in school, but I didn't do many activities. I just kind of did my own thing.

Question: Do you have friends that you remember from back in that age?

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Again, Sal Velardi was all through school.

Question: He was all through school with you, and you were close?

Yes. Very close, yes, we were very close.

Question: Where did the teenagers go for entertainment? What was the thing? What was the "in" place to go?

Jeez, I don't know. That's a tough question, I'm trying to think, where did we go? God, I don't know.

Question: What activities would you do with Sal?

We would just hang out, that's all.

Question: Hang out at each other's houses?

No, just out.

Question: Were there dances?

There were dances, but I don't think I ever really went to any of those either.

Question: Did you date at that age?

I started dating later. I didn't date in those early years.

Question: Are you married, or have you been married?

I've never married.

Question: No children.

Now you can skip a lot of lines.

Question: No problem. Tell me more about your mom's history. You said she was from Hammonton.

Yes.

Question: She was a true Hammontonian, too.

Yes.

Question: What was your mothers name and maiden name?

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My mother's maiden name was Merlino. The homestead was out there on 14th Street, so I know they lived out there the whole time. That house eventually went to one of the sister's. When my mother got married, they bought a house out on South 1st Road, which is the house I live in now.

Question: And that's where they remained their whole married life?

Yes.

Question: Where did your mother grow up?

In Hammonton.

Question: This is where she lived her whole life as well?

Yes.

Question: How would you describe your mother? What did she look like?

My mother was a heavier person, but she was a doer. She got everything done. My dad worked full-time. My mother did basically everything in the house, took care of us, took us to school. I was very close to my mother. If I had to say, who was I closer to, it was my mother. My father and I – I loved them both, but my father and I didn't see things eye-to-eye on some things. But my mother and I were always so close. We could just agree on everything.

Question: It sounds like she was a true 50s mom, she took care of the home.

Yes.

Question: I bet, she worked outside the home, too.

She did, yes. She worked part-time, and then she could work full-time, but she was always there to get us off the bus or whatever, something like that. We were very close to my mom. I had two brothers, and we were very close to her.

Question: Did your mom tell you any stories about your ancestors? Did you know your grandfather or grandmother?

I knew very little of my grandparents. I knew of my father's side of the family. My grandfather actually lived with us for a short time. It's very vague what I

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remember about him, he did live in our house. I was too young; I don't remember much about him. I know he loved to garden; he would be out in the back yard.

Question: This was your father's father?

My father's father, yes.

Question: Was he in poor health at that time?

He was okay. He actually died from encephalitis from a mosquito, and it was actually in the paper.

Question: Not necessarily from old age?

No, he just died of that. Yes, and that's what I remember. We had a couple of big apple trees in our back yard, and he would always sit under those apple trees. I remember that in one of those old kind of lawn chairs.

Question: He liked being outdoors.

He did.

Question: That was his happy place.

I don't remember my father's mother at all. I know she actually lived with us, too. She died, probably when I was very young.

Question: So that would limit your memories.

I can remember her being sick, but I don't remember the death or anything like that.

Question: How was your mother's health? Did she stay well through the years?

She passed in her early 80s, but she had heart issues most of her older age. She did have a valve replacement. She did not pass from that, she passed from something else. She was okay, but like I said, she was a heavier person. In later years, she didn't get around as well as she would have liked to have.

Question: When did she pass?

2004. My dad passed away two years before that in 2002 and he was around 79. My mother passed at age 82.

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Question: No, that's pretty good to have those dates. Was she buried in a local cemetery?

Yes. They were both buried in Holy Sepulcher on 1st Road.

Question: What was your father's full name?

Norris S. Williams.

Question: Yes, you had said that earlier. Did he have a nickname?

Not that I know of.

Question: Do you know where he was born?

Egg Harbor City.

Question: He grew up there?

Yes, he grew up there.

Question: How would you describe his looks?

He was handsome. Yes, he was very handsome – as you age, you know. He was a good worker, he provided. He also liked gardening like his father. The brief time that I remember, they were out there together, but then my dad always gardened way after that. He passed from a stroke, but he was actually doing the thing he loved, gardening.

Question: That's the way to go, I'm telling you. Did your father have any brothers or sisters?

My father had two brothers. Uncle Harry died very young. I remember him, he was like an idol of mine. He always wore a tie and then I wanted to wear a tie and a white shirt. He always wore a tie and a white shirt.

Question: He looked distinguished.

Yes. He passed away very young.

Question: Did he put it in your head that you wanted to be a white-collar worker, dressed like Uncle Harry?

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Maybe. Then the other Uncle was Uncle Al. He passed away before my father did, but he lived a lot longer. They lived out in Atlantic City. He was kind of in the maintenance area, too, like what my dad did for a while.

Question: Did you have any cousins that you were close with from these uncles?

From that side of the family, no. On my mother's side, yes, my cousin Angela, who I'm still close to, but now she lives in Florida. She was the one that I was closest to.

Question: From your mom's side, Angela.

Yes. That was my mother's sister's daughter, obviously. Aunt Jeanette was my closest Aunt.

Question: Your mother's sister.

Yes. She passed away after my mother, but I always looked at her as my second mom.

Question: Her name was Jeanette what?

DeMaio.

Question: DeMaio.

Yes.

Question: Do you remember any stories your father told about school? Did he finish school?

My dad, I believe he did not finish school. I couldn't tell you what age or what year he went up to. I don't believe my mom finished school either.

Question: Did he tell any stories about his childhood? Do you remember any stories from the uncles or from your dad?

No, not really. I know my Uncle Al and my dad – my dad always wanted to visit Atlantic City; we went there almost every weekend. They had a house near the water but not on the water. I know they had family barbeques; I remember going to them. I don't remember much other than that.

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Question: Was your father in the Military?

He was not.

Question: Do you remember any stories about your father's ancestors, his side of the family, his grandparents? Did he share any of that with you?

I don't remember any of that at all. That I do not remember.

Question: Your father remained healthy until he had the stroke?

Yes. He was pretty healthy. They had ailments as they got older, He still got around. He drove to the end and still did his gardening.

Question: Is he buried over in Holy Sepulcher, as well?

Yes.

Question: Did your parents ever tell you about how they met and fell in love?

Yes, they did. My dad was coming from Egg Harbor City and going to Philadelphia. I believe were coming to Hammonton or Philadelphia, I believe either one. My mother was going to Philadelphia, and they met at the train station right here in Hammonton, which is still there. It's a very nice story actually. My dad would see my mom occasionally at the train station. He told a friend, and I don't know who that friend was or someone, he says, "I'm going to marry that woman."

Question: He was smitten from the get go.

Later on, that's how they met, and they did marry, obviously. As a matter of fact, their 50th Anniversary photo, which I have, which is beautiful, they took there for their 50th Anniversary.

Question: At the train station?

Yes.

Question: That's very special.

Yes, sitting in one of those benches— because they had remodeled the train station, kind of what it looks like now. They have a photo from that, I should have brought that.

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Question: If you have any photos, you'd like to share I can make copies of them easily, and we'll include them.

Yes.

Question: If you have a headshot of yourself or any photo that you like of yourself, we can put that on the front.

Okay.

Question: I can get them from you later. Tell me more about your mom. What her likes and dislikes and her hobbies?

She loved sewing and she, obviously, worked in that field. She like providing for the family. We were her whole life.

Question: That was her world.

Yes. Hobbies? I always remember her sewing at home, too.

Question: Did she make your clothes and curtains for the house?

Yes, curtains for the house, obviously, yes. Like I said, they were poor, and they made a lot of things. My mother always sacrificed things for us, even my dad. Hobbies, for my dad was gardening, but my mom, I don't know. Was there really a hobby? I think it was sewing.

Question: Just household things, and her sewing was her greatest forte.

Yes.

Question: Did she like to cook?

Oh, I should say that, she loved to cook.

Question: What were her special meals? What are your memories of what she made for you guys?

I remember the meatballs. I think everybody has that memory, if they were Italian, but I remember that. She always made them in the oven. I like them in the oven even before the sauce or the gravy, whatever you call it, I think it's sauce. Maybe I'm wrong, but I do sauce.

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Question: I go with sauce.

Yes. One of the things she loved was cooking. I don't know how I even forgot that. Definitely, one of her favorite things to do.

Question: What about your dad? Did he have hobbies besides the gardening like cars, or chess, or anything like that?

No. No. Nothing like that, no. Just the gardening was probably his favorite thing.

Question: Did they ever get involved in Civic groups, any local politics, or anything like this?

No politics at all.

Question: They were busy working and just caring for the family?

Absolutely, yes.

Question: Which parent do you think you resemble the most?

My mom, yes.

Question: Do you remember them telling any funny stories or jokes or times they lost their temper? Any stories about them that you recall? The story about how they met was very romantic.

Yes, I love that story, too. I don't remember anything about them losing their temper. I know they did, everybody does.

Question: Nothing that stands out?

No, not at all. Not really.

Question: What do you think is the greatest tragedy they have had to deal with? What kind of adversity did they have? It sounds like they just made ends meet, they kept food on the table, they were hard-working.

That was in the early years, when they got older, they were able to provide more and do more. The greatest tragedy – probably the loss of their brothers or sisters, I would think.

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Question: When their siblings started to get older, and they had to deal with that.

Yes.

Question: Your mother had two children, just yourself and your brother?

No, three. Myself, and my younger brother, Norris, Jr., and my older brother Donald.

Question: You're the middle child?

I'm the middle child.

Question: What are their birth dates?

Norris was born February 17, 1962; Donald was born January 10, 1952, I'm thinking.

Question: Who was the oldest?

Donald.

Question: Donald's the oldest, you're the middle child, and then Norris is the youngest.

Yes.

Question: Did any of them have special skills or any special talents as children? Anything that you remember back then as children?

My brothers?

Question: Right.

Both of them were very good in auto mechanics and stuff like that. I was never – my hands were always cleaner.

Question: You wanted to be a white-collar worker.

I always tried. I think I did that pretty much. I'm looking over there and seeing the book by J. G. Wilson. My younger brother married his daughter, Sue Wilson. I just saw that over there.

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Question: Did you have many nieces and nephews?

I have one nephew.

Question: You didn't really know your grandparents that much from your dad's side?

No.

Question: Any stories that you remember about your mother's mother?

No, because I didn't know my grandmother or grandfather from that side, they died very young, probably before I was born.

Question: How many siblings did your mother have?

There was many sisters. I would say there was at least seven siblings. I think there was at least two brothers. My mother's mother was married twice, so there was a brother or a sister from a different marriage. I believe there was at least seven or eight.

Question: Do you recall their names?

Some of them. There was my Aunt Jeanette, Aunt Mary, Aunt Nancy. Do you need last names?

Question: If you can remember them.

Aunt Jeanette DeMaio, Aunt Mary Interlante. The brothers, there was Uncle Joe Molino – . There was Tony Rizzotte was one of the brothers.

Question: A total of seven siblings?

Yes. I now remember some of the other siblings Nancy DeMaio, Grace Intelisano, Francis Crea.

Question: Do you know what your grandmother died of and is she buried locally?

I don't know where she's buried at. Oh, Greenmount. Yes, my grandmother's and my grandfather is buried in Greenmount Cemetery on my mother's side.

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Question: Did you know anything more about your grandfather?

On my mother's side?

Question: On your mother's side.

No. It's just that he was in the service, but I don't remember much about that. I know when I go to the grave at the cemetery, there's one of those flag monument that they stick in the ground that he was in the Military.

Question: He had that background.

Yeah. I don't know what he did.

Question: Did he have many brothers or sisters?

My mother's father?

Question: Right.

I don't remember. I don't know.

Question: Just curious.

Yes, it's hard for me to remember that stuff.

Question: What about on your father's side, I'm forgetting. Did you know those grandparents at all?

On my parents side?

Question: Yes.

Just my grandfather that lived with us for a while. His wife lived with us too, but like I said, she passed away when I was very young. I have a vague memory of her in our house.

Question: Was she your grandmother or was that a second marriage?

No, I think she was my grandmother. Yes, I think she was my grandmother.

Question: You were pretty young at that time?

Very young, yes.

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Question: Your memory would be a little hazy of that.

Yes, I don't remember much about it.

Question: What do you remember about Hammonton, when you were a teenager, when you were younger? Where did you go? Do you remember what businesses were here?

I remember a lot of businesses. I remember going a lot, coming into town with my dad or my mom. My mom would shop at the local 5 & 10s, and there was many of them. One was on one side of the street, and one was on the other side. There were so many stores that I remember when I was younger. There was Miller's Department Store, where we went to see Santa Claus at Christmas time. I remember that, he was actually downstairs.

Question: This is where people would go to shop, to the downtown area? There was enough stores there.

Yes. There was nothing out on the Pike, and if there was, it was very little. Until like the first store that came was like Jamesway. I think we had an ACME out there, but ACME was also where the social building is right here.

Question: Downtown?

Yes. That was the ACME. There was an A&P there in the middle of town.

Question: They would have been the larger supermarket.

Yes. They were small, but they were big then. There was the hardware stores, Rice's Hardware, I remember that. There was Chester's, which is now I think is something else.

Question: What kind of a store was Chester's?

A hardware store. There was a couple of 5&10s, there was Dan's Stationery Store where the Toy Market is. Those are the things that I remember going to. There was Olivo's Grocery Store. I think Olivo's the back door is still there actually, next to Annata Wine Bar, that was an auto parts store, so I remember that.

Question: The downtown looked so different.

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Yes, very different.

Question: What changes have you seen over the years?

A lot.

Question: The atmosphere downtown?

Hammonton was always a very nice town to live in. I think as the people changed, different generations came, and it got a little different in how things were done. But I think the town has still maintained, it's place where you would want to live. That's how I felt about it. I remember, what was it, the Bicentennial, I don't know if it was the Bicentennial, I know my parents dressed up. My mom wore a long dress like how they used to live before that.

Question: Like back in the olden days?

Yes, that was a big time, I remember that.

Question: A big festival?

Yes. Of course, remember the Mt. Carmel festival all those years.

Question: Yes. I've heard it was really grand, it's really huge now. It was really the place to go.

It's much bigger. They took us there, that was a memory. I remember that every year. My dad always went there to meet friends that he had known over the years.

Question: So, everybody would get together once a year at the carnival. It was something to do, a place to rendezvous. That's pretty cool.

Yes.

Question: I've interviewed people who say, "I remember we always would get to dress up for the Mt. Carmel Festival. We'd get a new outfit; we'd get an ice cream cone."

I don't remember getting dressed up, but I remember going there maybe getting ice cream or something like that, funnel cakes.

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Question: Yes, all the good food.

I can remember that, yes.

Question: That makes it memorable.

Yes.

Question: Definitely makes it memorable. As a teenager, what was your first car? What were you into as a teenager? Did you get into cars?

Yes. I actually got my license later. Like everybody wants to get it at 17, or it was 17 then. I didn't want it right away. I felt like, hmm, don't really need that. I think I got my license a year later. My first car, my younger brother helped me repair it, it was an older car. I want to say it was a Pontiac Lemans. It was older at that time. I do remember that.

Question: Do you remember what year it was?

No, I don't. I can't remember that.

Question: It was just a cool Pontiac Lemans.

Yes. It's hard to remember the names of things like that. It was a Lemans, I believe.

Question: After high school, did you go to college? Did you get right out to the workforce?

I started going part-time to Atlantic Community College for computers, I believe. For computer programming, but I didn't think that was what I wanted to do. So then, I went right into the workforce. My first job was at Presswell Records , which is not there anymore. It was my very first job out of school. My summer jobs were Atlantic Blueberry, like how long is the blueberry season, six weeks.

Question: What did you do for them?

Worked in the packing house. Then, from there it was really not a whole lot. From there I went to Presswell Records and then Morano Paper Supply which was in Hammonton, you might remember that.

Question: I've heard of it.

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Yes. I was there for a long time. I went there to drive a truck and then my boss there, Rocky Morano at the time, great people, they saw potential in sales for me and that's how I got into my present job. I just went out and doing sales.

Question: You sold for Morano's store?

Yes, for like 35 years.

Question: Did you have a territory?

It could be anywhere in South Jersey. I went where there was openings at that time. That's what I did and that's what I do, to this day still doing that.

Question: You're not retired yet?

Not retired yet, no. Thinking about it, but not quite yet.

Question: As long as you're enjoying what you're doing.

I do enjoy what I do. Yes, I do enjoy what I'm doing.

Question: And you still live in the same house you were raised in. How did that come about that you ended up staying there?

Over the years, my parents needed help and they had ailments. My mom had heart problems and my dad had his issues, too. I stayed and took care of them. My brothers had married, and they really couldn't afford with what they were doing, to have a house to take care of. I was able to take care of them, help with the bills. Over the years, we remodeled that house, you had to. I put money into it. Finally, I said, "I'm putting money into this house, I probably should end up getting it." I talked to my brothers, I talked to my mother and father, and they decided it was the right thing to do. I stayed there and took care of the house and that's how I got the house. They would not be able to afford to stay there, on Social Security.

Question: You allowed them to stay in the home as they got older in life.

Yes.

Question: That was advantageous to everybody in the family.

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I never really started going out and meet friends for a drink or two or whatever, or out to dinner, until after my mom passed away, which was 2004. I stayed home.

Question: You were very busy with work and your family, looking after them.

Yes, taking care of them.

Question: Keeping the house running along.

Yes. That's where that all came from. So, that's that. I'd do the same thing again. My parents were always so good to me, and they needed help at that time, so I was there.

Question: That's marvelous that you could give back to them. And you gave them a marvelous gift to be able to stay in their own home.

Thank you, yes. Absolutely, I always said they would never go into a nursing home, and they did not.

Question: You saw to it, that's wonderful. That is a wonderful gift.

Yes.

Question: I'm trying to think if there's anything that we didn't discuss. Were there any News stories that were impacted on you as a young adult or anything like that, that stands out in our mind?

I remember President Kennedy being shot. I was at home with my mom and my Aunt Mary Interlanti was coming by with my Uncle Paul, who was her husband. They stopped and said, "Did you hear the News?" It was devastating.

Question: I think the whole country just stopped in its tracks.

Yes. I remember that, that was one thing I do remember. I do remember that.

Question: I remember that, as well.

Yes.

Question: Walter Cronkite making the announcements. He was the man of great authority and the newscaster that we all looked up to.

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Absolutely.

Question: It was very tragic.

It was very tragic. I do remember that clearly. I wasn't young, young, but we had other things going on, but I remember that, and it stayed with me.

Question: You probably were about 8 or 9 years old, when it happened in the early 60s.

Yes.

Question: Any other stories that you'd like to share? Anything that you can think of?

I'm not thinking of anything right now.

Question: Do you remember when Reagan came and visited the town?

I do remember that.

Question: You mentioned the Bicentennial and I thought that you would probably remember Reagan coming to Hammonton.

Yes, that was exciting.

Question: I think just to see the hoopla and the security, what it took to logistically get him here, it must have been amazing.

Yes, absolutely, I do remember that.

Question: That really put Hammonton on the map, politically.

Yes, politically. Yes, it did. That was exciting. I remember it was so crowded. I remember trying to come in, but it wasn't like you could get too close.

Question: People everywhere, you would have to walk in.

Yes, absolutely. I'm trying to remember other things and I don't.

Question: If there's anything else that's significant, you can always add an addendum to this. Add a little bit, if you think of any stories from your brothers or anything else you would like to add about relatives.

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I'm kind of a boring person.

Question: Not really.

Yeah.

Question: I really thank you for coming in and giving your time.

Thank you for asking me. I would never, ever thought that would be asked of me.

Question: I do appreciate it.

I appreciate it, too.

Question: I know you're involved at church.

I am very, very involved in church, yes. In the last six years, I would say even more. That's the kind of thing I want to do when I retire, do more for the church. I try to do as much as I can, I usher and I'm part of the Chant Choir, but not as much as I'd like to be because of my time with my job. Yes, I love doing that, it means a lot. My faith is very important.

Question: Wonderful.

Yes, very important.

Question: It's been nice for my husband and I to be new people and have somebody that's been friendly when we enter the church. We knew no one when we started going, so that's nice. That's appreciated.

We've tried to get more people to come to church, but we're doing our best.

Question: You're working on it, I can tell. Thanks again, Bob.

Thank you.

[End of Interview]