

Robyn Price Holland: *Coming Home to Wheeling*

Carrie Nobel Kline: My name is.

Robyn Holland: My name is Robyn Holland.

CNK: I'm just trying to get a level. Can you try that again?

RH: My name is Robyn Holland.

CNK: Okay. And today is May --

RH: Twelfth.

CNK: Twelfth. And where are we?

RH: We're at the James Paige Learning Center.

CNK: Okay. Great. And what's the beginning of your association with Wheeling and your, your upbringing? Where did you say you were from?

RH: Well, I was born and raised in Martins Ferry, Ohio. Born in Martins Ferry, Ohio. Raised in Bridgeport, Ohio. I'm the youngest of seven children. And I lived in a neighborhood where primarily it was my entire family that, that made up the block that I lived in. So extended family -- I grew up with extended family. My father came from a very large family, and most of his family still resided in the area. So I had aunts and uncles that lived next door and older brothers that lived next door. And such is still the case. And so I grew up. And it's a very small town; it's a village actually. Less than 3,000 people. And I went to very small school, grade school from K through 12 same location adjacent to my home. So my, my trip to school was very short! Out my front door and into the school, school yard.

CNK: What was that school like?

(020) RH: It was a very close-knit school. Most of the families -- It was still the whole little village was like an extended family situation. So everybody that, you know, that were like my, my great -- My classmates had older brothers and sisters that the teachers all knew. The teachers all knew everybody's parents. So everybody kind of knew everybody. It was a real

protected, I think, sort of environment. And so my, my sisters were best friends with my girlfriends, and my mom was their best friend and things like that. All the families were real interrelated in some way or another. The whole entire community pretty much was that case. There, as far as -- Of course being a minority family, we probably percentage wise was in the community maybe less than three percent. So I went to a predominantly white school. And that's how I grew up. I grew up in a predominantly white environment. Competed and did everything that I needed to do there and, and did real well in school. And honor students and things like that, which was really a neat thing to do. I spoke with a lady that's here at Wheeling Country Day who's interested in

(036) getting some of the children here at the Learning Center involved out there. And we were talking about what do we think happens in a child's life that, that makes them feel as though they can achieve versus not being. And I've concluded for me that it's been placed in an environment outside of, you know, my, my ethnic background and seeing that I can survive there as well as within my own culture. And not having a fear of, of, you know, the unknown. So it was not an unknown to me. As far as my association with Wheeling, I came to Wheeling for -- Probably my first association with Wheeling was I took organ lessons in Wheeling. So I walked daily over the Suspension Bridge, weekly, once a week to Wheeling to take organ lessons. And it was right on the corner, and I went right back. And my father always was employed in Wheeling. He was a long-time employee of Blaw Knox which just closed down. And also at the hospital in, in all of his dealings and goings on basically took place in Wheeling. Ultimately I, as a child, I think 14, I became employed at Hornes Department Store in Wheeling. So I, I think I became a little bit more involved in Wheeling in that sense. And I knew what downtown Wheeling was. East Wheeling, I didn't know what East Wheeling was. And I really didn't have any friends here or anything like that. And it was kind of like just an unknown to me. And then I guess I went away to school. And I went to Ohio State and came back home for the summers and spent a lot more time in Wheeling and kind of went to -- A lot of my recreation here at Wheeling and developed a lot of friends from Wheeling, but still not really touching the East Wheeling side of it.

CNK: Can you back up? I just want to hear more about your childhood. So, tell me about these

trips you would take. How would you travel from, from your home to your organ lessons for example?

(060) RH: I would walk.

CNK: From ...

RH: Yeah, Bridgeport is just about a mile across the river, immediately across the river. And I would walk. I would go from my home, which sits right, right aside of Interstate 70, and walk down over the Island Bridge, is what it was called, that joined Bridgeport to Wheeling to the Island. And then I walked across the Island via the, to Wheeling via the Suspension Bridge. Sometimes the Fort Henry Bridge, but that was big for me! That was like really a challenge to walk across the 'big bridge.' So usually I just walked across the Suspension Bridge. And I usually had a girlfriend come with me to, to my lessons. So -- And so after that, I went away to school and came back home and ultimately transferred back here and went to Ohio State. I think I had kind of a, a cultural shock. I mean I went from this little school that I graduated with a class of, I think, 120 students. And I went to Ohio State where it was like 40,000 students. So I, I spent three years there in nursing and just was completely homesick. And came back home to mom and dad!

CNK: Well, what were things like at home, you know, before you left? What was your home life like with mom and dad? And what kind of a girl were you?

(078) RH: I, I was a very babied child. A very not, not spoiled materially at all because my family -- My father was a mill worker so -- But we also had seven children. I suppose if I was one child and he worked at Blaw Knox, I probably -- We would have done considerably well, but he had seven children.

CNK: What did he do there?

(082) RH: He was a, I believe, a machinist. And so he -- A good worker. I mean his work ethics was so, so strong and sound. And I had five brothers that preceded me and one sister. So I really grew up in an all boy, pretty much environment. Male environment. So I really was babied with my brothers. And I think that -- But in another sense, I had a strong sense of independence also. So I had lots of fun. I had lots of fun. I was always used to numbers, and we had big Christmases and big holidays and big gatherings. So it was always so much

fun when everybody got around. And I think each child must have had 20 friends. So we were kind of the house in the community when the moms couldn't find the other kids, they were at the Price's house. We were definitely that kind of family that was opened to everybody. We always had like at least one, two, three people overnight everyday of the week, you know. So it was kind of like the place to be. I seldom -- We seldom went out to other people's house because we always had everybody at our house. And then I was considerably younger than most of my brothers, and they kind of all went away. And sort of got -- I almost experienced that empty nest syndrome. And I kind of missed my brothers and the, the goings on in the house, you know, and whatnot. So they

(101) went away and had children and everything. And that's when I did go to school.

CNK: Well what about these, these holidays? What was your favorite holidays?

RH: Oh, no doubt, Christmas. Christmas was my favorite holiday. Lots of gifts under the tree and couldn't go to sleep the night before. And I believed in Santa for a great length of my life, my younger life! And finally one of my brothers told me there really wasn't a Santa Claus, and he got in trouble! But I think I was probably about 10 when I found that out. So I, I enjoyed Christmases for quite a while. And I still do in fact. But now our favorite largest holiday has turned into the Fourth of July, which is really strange. So everybody -- We pretty much have a family reunion. And everybody gathers back during the Fourth of July. And, and the two of you are, are absolutely invited to come attend our Fourth of July celebration because what happens is my brother puts on a tremendous fireworks display. And it's for like the whole city of -- And you see it in Wheeling. It's like Wheeling's fireworks display. It's a really big deal. We have just a big picnic out in our yard, and everybody's invited. And it's really a fun thing. So that's, that's our holiday. Christmas is kind of played down a little bit, but it's second. And everybody's basically here for that.

(118) I was my daddy's little girl no doubt. Daddy's little girl. He was my favorite person in the whole world from day one. And I -- He used to take me to church with him. I was raised Methodist and Baptist. My, my mother was Baptist. My father was Methodist. But the two are so similar there never was really any, any sort of a division because of religion within our family. We just grew up knowing the Lord. We were very Christian oriented

family. And I went to church. I started going to church early with my father and sang in the choir. And really got my roots early there with him.

CNK: Tell us about that church experience.

(127) RH: It was -- I was young. I was probably -- My first experience was probably like six. I think I initially started going with my mother when I was about five. All I remember is I just would go to church and want to fall asleep on her lap! You know, I got sleepy and was happy to be there, but ended up being asleep. And I, I remember that like five and six years old. But then I also remember I could come home and, and recite the hymns. And that was really neat for me because I guess even though you're there and you're not really cognizant of what's going on, you really are imbibing that all the while. And, and so when I was like seven and eight, I had wonderful memories of wonderful songs at my mom's church. And then I went to my dad's church. And that's when it became a little bit more real to me. And that's when I got baptized. I got sprinkled there. And actually sang in the choir and really felt like I was a part of the church and, and did really neat things in the church. And it became more real to me. And I think I did that until I was about 15. And I always was like the goody, real spoiled, like the baby. Really goody goody little girl and always grew up thinking that everybody always thought that I was so, so sweet! So it was -- That was me. That was what was expected of me to be sweet, which was, in essence, my nature. And then after that, I went away to college and did those college rebellious type things. But still, still knew that everybody expected me to be sweet. So I think I went through some sort of -- I don't know, it wasn't congruent, I guess. I, I -- Inconsistencies like in these minor, minor little things, you know. Going to bars and stuff like that versus being a goody little girl, you know. And --

CNK: So how does that relate to going to church? Was this an all black church that you went to?

(152) RH: Yeah. They, they both were.

CNK: ...

RH: Yeah. How does it relate to that? Probably I felt like a hypocrite! In essence --

CNK: So it was still important in your life?

(154) RH: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Always on the forefront, but, but also had a group of peers that

had fun doing other things besides going to church. I was like 'there's another world and maybe I need to see what that's about.' But I knew that, that -- I felt that -- I mean I just always had the God presence in my life, you know. And so I could never, ever go -- I could only go so far. And, and I would have to be like the designated driver. I was always the one that was the designated driver, the one that, you know, didn't do what the others did but was a part of that group, you know. And I can always remember my mom used to say, "That you are the company that you keep, so you must remember that, Robyn. And you need to pick your friends well because --," you know. That's the case. So she always used to tell me little things like that that always, always clicked. The little things. You're the company that you keep. Two thick don't stick. I can remember I used to have friends that would get real tight and, and she didn't always think that that was real healthy and that you need some space. And then she used to always tell me to count my costs when I made decisions to, to make sure that, you know, I know what sort of consequences are going to be a result of this. I always heard little things like that from my mom that still stick today. But even though she, I know, just thought that I never grasped them, that her words will forever reverberate, you know, so deeply. And I think being a parent now, that's one of the things that I realize is that even though I teach my little children things and I think that it's just like in and out, that really, I think, it penetrates. So those moments that I sometimes want to keep silent and just say, you know, 'what is this really going to matter,' I don't, you know. And I always know that it will make a difference. Even here with the Learning Center. I understand that you can't just kind of let children go and think they're not interested in that, they don't want to hear this. That you give it to them. You at least introduce it to them, and let, let -- Plant the seed and let it germinate as it will. But at least plant it. So, so then I'm, I'm back to school?

(170)

CNK: Well --

RH: Back to college yet?

CNK: You made me curious when you were talking about decisions. Can you talk a little bit about how decisions were made when you were growing up? Maybe at home or in church or wherever. How the community made decisions and how your family did.

(186) RH: I guess I can speak better about my family and how we made decisions. My, my father was the breadwinner. I mean we had the real traditional family; the mom never worked. My mom never worked, she had seven children. The only thing I can ever remember her doing is laundry and cooking, and never knew how to drive. Just was there for every one of our needs. And my father was out bringing home the money. And my mom would pay the bills, and she would basically -- If there's something I wanted to do, I would never go to my dad. I would always go to my mom. She was the decision maker. But, I guess pretty much for me, but I think with the boys, my dad had -- My dad was involved with the discipline of the boys, but he was never involved with the discipline of my sister and myself. And my mom, my mom -- I, I probably should have wished that my dad had the role for us because he was nice and soft! But my mom was in charge of the girls. He basically was in charge of the boys. And my sister has been very significant in my life, and, and she still is. We're very close. Growing up we weren't. There -- Four years apart, and I was the burden! I was the thorn in her flesh! 'Robyn has to come with me again.' It was one of those things where my mom always kind of monitored like what she was doing. Like 'why didn't you want Robyn to be with you.' And it was just one of those little teenage things. I was the little sister, the annoying little sister. Then as I went to

(206) college and whatnot, she ended up being, we ended up being best friends. And we're very much alike. I think all the morals and values and things that develop character have, have really been uniform throughout with all my siblings. So we're very much alike. We think a lot alike. So that breeds a, a strong sense of closeness that, that we all share with one another. Very close family. And, and that's really I guess how, how our household worked.

Michael Nobel Kline: What about the church as a social organization? Did the, did the church take care of its flock so to speak or was it, was it more --

(217) RH: I, I think that my grandmother experienced that in her generation, and when it came to my mom's and my generation, no. The church in my grandmother's time was her everything. So I mean she was at church probably every night of the week. And her decisions, everything was based around the church and whatnot. And that's where my mom's sense of Christianity of course developed. She, she grew up in a very strict Christian family, very.

And my mom was born and raised in Colorado, and she lost both of her parents. She lost her mother, I think, nearly at birth. She may have been a year old or so, and she lost her mother. And then she lost her father probably when she was about 14. So she had two brothers, two older brothers, an older sister and a younger sister. There were five of them, and they lived in Colorado. And they didn't have parents. It was like 'what do we do?' So I had an aunt who lived here in Bellaire who took them in. So they moved to Bellaire when my mom was like, I think, 13. And so when she moved with my grandmother, then that's when her life really was different because she was very, very spiritual and strict. ...

CNK: How did that change then over time do you suppose? The church, did it get less involved in people's life somehow?

(237) RH: I'm not so sure that the church got less involved in peoples' lives, but I think that people got less involved in church perhaps. And I would say that's, that's what happened with us maybe. I think my mom felt that she grew up in such a strict environment that she probably really was anxious to kind of get away and get her freedom. And I understand that's how it was because -- And I -- It probably would have been different if she grew up from day one in that environment, but she came from a situation where I don't think her father really valued the church much in Colorado. So when she came here, it was really new for her. And, and so I think she kind of wanted to break away a little bit from it. But yet she was there from 13 till 18, and actually she was there from 13 until she got married at 22. So 13 until 22. And so it really became a major part of her life, you know. But she kind of picked and chosed, chose what, what portion she wanted to keep. It ultimately didn't end up being as, you know, as, as my grandmother's. I didn't mean to say that she was less of a Christian than my grandmother. She just took religion in a different way. And, you know, I've always thought there's a difference between religion and

(256) Christianity. And religion, you can be religious about anything. And I think my grandmother was just very religious. My mom said she can remember when one time they were in church and my grandmother -- The minister said, you know, of course everybody sins right? Nobody's sinless. And the minister asked who here didn't sin this week. And she said that her mother was the only one that raised her hand! And, and that's just how

my -- She -- I mean I called her Grandma, and she lived to be like 96. And she was just so strong. She did all of her gardening until, you know, a year before she passed away. Just a strong, healthy lady. And very, very dedicated to her church. Her church was her life. Which, which was beautiful, it really was a beautiful thing. And she was a happy, peaceful woman. And my father and his parents -- I, I didn't know -- I didn't have

(269) the beautiful experience of knowing either sets of my grandparents because, of course, my mom's grandparents died early. And my father's parents, my father's dad owned a cleaners in Bridgeport, and that's what he did. And, and my grandmother who also -- You know, being in Bridgeport I always hear stories about her, so I guess she was a real stately Christian woman and loved everybody. And she was more of the gentle, loving Christian versus my mother's grandmother who was very, kind of pious in her Christianity. And so with my, with my dad's mother, I guess she was just a beautiful testimony to everybody. Sweet, strong lady. And she died a year and a day before I was born, so I never got to meet her. And everybody says, 'oh, she would have just loved you,' you know, 'and you would have loved her.' And I, I kind of walk straight. And my dad did, and his mother did. So everybody always says that we all three possessed that straight stature type thing. And I kind of miss that. And his father died early, earlier than his mother. And he one day woke up and was blind. Out of nowhere.

CNK: Your father?

(287) RH: My father's father. He -- I guess maybe when he was about 50, he woke up. I guess my grandmother -- He always woke up at a certain time early in the morning. And this one day he didn't wake up for, at that time. And it was longer than normal, and my grandmother had asked where -- His name was Marcellous Jackson Price, and my grandmother asked, went to see why he wasn't awake. And it was because he thought it was still dark out. When he opened his eyes, there was no light. I can't imagine, you know. And so he was blind from that time on. So that's what happened there. And they grew up right where my family lives now. My dad was caddy corner from where -- My mother's home sits now is where my dad was born and raised right there. And later on they moved across the street, and that really became their family home. It's a large standing home right

now, and his sister lives there now. So the family home is still two doors away from my mother's home. And of course, my dad passed away four years ago. My dad was very well known in Wheeling, very well known in Wheeling. He -- The one thing that a lot of people know him most for is because he walked on stilts in parades. And

(308) everybody, everybody remembers Mr. Price on these like, I think they were 12 foot stilts. And, and he's, he was six foot four, six foot five himself. He was a really big man. So everybody knows him for his height and for his stilts. And he used to actually represent Ohio Valley Medical Center at one point in the parades. So he did that, and he loved doing that. And I remember my dad doing that, and he was my hero because we lived on a hill, a real big hill. And he used to walk up like hills, not -- I mean they were like unplanned, you know, areas where it was rocky and woody and whatnot, really steep hills with his -- And then he used to walk up steps. And I can remember he used to always mount his stilts from -- We had a really high porch, and he used to like lie them down up against the porch and mount, and then shove himself up to the stilts. And, and it was always so tense, you know. My mother never watched. She was like -- And especially as he got older! She used to kind of talk him out of doing it. She was like 'you know, you're really getting older,' you know. So finally, he, he did give them up. And my brother kind of took on that, and he had eight foot stilts. And he walked those stilts really well, and he did really good. And then my dad made me like, I think, two foot stilts! And I -- Just didn't work for me! I mean I just couldn't pick it up at all. I didn't -- I never picked it up. So I wasn't able to carry on the

(331) legacy! And in addition to that, he had a catering business. And that's probably what most of the people from Wheeling know him from. And he used to set up catering bar services for most of the people in Wheeling, you know. Weddings, he did almost everybody in Wheeling's wedding. He, he worked a lot at Oglebay Park, and he was known as Price. They always called him Price, Mr. Price or Price. And he used to always call everybody Easy Money. And then he would tell -- And he was real easy going and real loving. Just a teddy bear. And he'd say, 'Price is right!' Or someone else would say, "Price is right, Easy Money." They'd always repeat, you know. As he was coming they knew. And his name, his nickname to a lot of people in Ohio -- He grew up in St. Clairsville, Ohio. All of his

classmates knew him as Mulely. Because they used to say that he used to pick up railroad ties, and he was so strong and so big. So they would -- I guess, as strong as a mule. That's his name. His nickname was Mulely. And so for the longest time, I mean he was just the only caterer, the number one caterer, bartender in Wheeling. And he worked at the Fort Henry for a long time.

CNK: What was that?

RH: The Fort Henry Club down there. He worked there for a long time.

CNK: What kind of a club was that?

(352) RH: It's a -- What sort of a club is it? I'm really not sure, it's like a luncheon -- They have luncheons and whatnot. It's, it's like an elite club down on, I think, 14th and Chapline somewhere in there. Yeah.

CNK: Is that an African-American club?

RH: No, it's not.

CNK: But it was acceptable to --

RH: Yes.

CNK: Cater?

RH: Yes. Yes.

CNK: How did --

(558) RH: Yes. And that's it.

CNK: ...

RH: And truly there were no, there were no, you know, I guess it was -- It's not, it was not open to black membership. And that's -- How did that work? That's just how it worked.

CNK: It was okay to bring the food in the back? Is that --

RH: Well, no. I mean he, he -- Well, he was so well liked, you know. Price was our --

CNK: So you were talking about the Fort Henry Club and --

RH: Yeah.

CNK: Your father catering.

(363) RH: It was okay, you know. He was -- I wouldn't say a token, but, you know, he really was accepted in -- And it was okay for Mr. Price to, to be the bartender there. And, and so in

addition to that, he actually moved on from there and did -- He did actually most of Oglebay's functions for whatever they did. He had probably maybe 15 employees. And every wedding, most of the weddings. And most often he was requested, and, on a yearly basis I mean. He's done like Wheeling Dollar Bank's Christmas parties for 10 years. And, and it got to be a point where they started to like recognize him as this man that's been with us for 10 years. And I -- I mean whenever I'm in the community, it's kind of sad because I never really had the interface with the community to this degree prior to his having passed away. So it's, you know, everybody refers to me 'isn't your dad, wasn't your dad, isn't your dad.' It was really difficult for me to come back. I wasn't sure if I should keep my Price name because everybody knew me as Price or if I should go Holland. So I'm Holland, and most people are really getting to know me as Price Holland, which, which is kind of neat. But I'm -- So he did that a lot. And, and probably for about four years I started to work with him doing that. And so we were back together as our team!

CNK: What would you both do?

(386) RH: We would set up parties and do their catering. And I would bar tend up at Oglebay for him. Only for private parties, weddings, weddings -- And, and a lot of the corporations come and have their annual meetings at Oglebay, and they'll have the social hours. So we'd take care of social hours. It was basically wedding receptions and social hours for organizations.

CNK: Would you cook together?

(392) RH: No, we would have the bars. He would provide all the liquor and all of the bartenders. And we would just make sure all that was in order.

CNK: What was that experience like for you working --

RH: It's wonderful.

CNK: With him?

(396) RH: Absolutely wonderful. Probably the best job I ever had. The money was excellent, and it was so great for me to come home from college. I'd sometimes come home for weekends just to make spending money for the next couple of weeks. And I would do that with him, and it was great. It was great. I couldn't have had a better job. Plus I met so many people that has just been wonderful with me and what I do right now. A lot of PR with this position,

and it's kind of easy because it's already been established a long time ago. So --

MNK: So you were -- It sounds as though you were known -- That you were an African-American family who sort of were able to move somehow in all these different circles despite your color. Were you aware of your color or was it ever a problem for you or --

CNK: Did you feel like a minority as you mentioned before?

(411) RH: Yeah. You know, that's interesting that you should ask that because it, you know, it's probably not -- It probably wasn't good for me because I really did, I never saw color. Because my dad was just so well liked, you know, that anything that I -- If I ever needed a job, you know, he would talk to this person. I would get a job. And, and so I never really suffered from -- Perhaps I did, perhaps I have, I'm sure that I have suffered from discrimination, but it's, I, I'm not aware of it. And I've always -- Anything that I've ever wanted to accomplish, I've, I feel as though I could do it. And, and my sister and I often talk about that. And we both believe that, that there's not -- Perhaps there have been those instances. I don't know. But, but most of the things that I've ever gone for -- So I guess I really -- As far as discrimination, I, you know, I may have come across perhaps individuals who may have, may have been prejudiced or whatnot, that, that maybe I didn't click with or something. But -- I mean you meet people like that all the time. So -- But as far as jobs and things like that, I've always had the jobs that I've wanted. And --

MNK: But your experience was not typical of, of other African-American people, was it? Or was it?

(433) RH: I think probably the only thing that makes -- I think there are probably one of two situations that African-Americans are involved with. Either you're very segregated or you're integrated. I think I just lived a very integrated life.

CNK: And your, your childhood friends were white and black or --

(438) RH: Yeah. White and black, but I had more white just because of the population. Yeah. And so I never -- I have never been in a segregated environment other than -- I just can't think other than! No. Other than church. Other than church. So I guess I, I had a balance. I think I had a nice balance, and I think probably balance is what is important. I know it's what I want to provide my children with is that balance. Because we've, we've just got -- I think ignorance, and not so much the negative sense of ignorance, is what really fosters

prejudice. And not knowing. And the fear of the unknown. Not knowing the other race. Not knowing anything about the other culture. And you get all of these preconceived misconceptions of, you know, what -- Our mind can do wonderful, creative things. Unfortunately, sometimes negative, you know. So if you really don't know, then, then you can make anything of it. And because I was exposed to it, you know, it was never a mystery to me anymore.

CNK: What was the balance for you then?

(459) RH: I think of, of having both, both black and white associations.

CNK: Was there a value in having some places where there were only African-Americans at this church. Was that important to your development?

(464) RH: I think -- Well, certainly church was important to me. I don't think it was so important then, at least I don't realize it. I didn't realize at that point the value of it. I certainly think at this point it's, it's very important. Because I, I can remember when I graduated from college and I went to stay in Detroit with my cousins. And it was just so segregated, you know. And, and I was just like 'wow.' But in the midst of the segregation I saw blacks having what normally I saw whites having. You know, the beautiful mansions, the, the neighborhoods that had all 2,000, 200,000 plus homes in it. And they were all black neighborhoods. And so to me that was neat, and I was like 'wow, this is great.' Because you really don't see a lot of that in, in the smaller areas. So I think I grew fond of metropolitan areas because I liked seeing blacks be successful and, and have things that notoriously were just for, you know, whites. So, so to me, yeah, that's neat. That's -- It's, it's -- To see the, the segregated areas in that sense, I think, is good. It's positive for me.

CNK: Well, we, we slowed you down. You were just, you were just getting out of the house and getting to college.

RH: Back to college!

CNK: Yeah.

(490) RH: Well, I -- So my college days I spent three years in nursing, and I was miserable. And it's one of those things where I think I grew up, and my mom just always admired nurses. And she always says, "Nurses are just so special," you know. So I wanted to be one of those

special people! And I ultimately went into nursing and from day one didn't like it. Day one. But -- And probably because I -- School came very easy to me at Bridgeport, and, and there -- I wasn't challenged by the curriculum at all. And I got grades just by being there and going home. Never spent much time studying, which really wasn't a good thing. And never did much reading, which was awful. But just never had to. And when I got to college, the nursing school was a real rigorous thing, curriculum. And we had to go two days before everybody else started their class. And I was like, 'wait a minute!' I'm here like two days early to have fun with everybody else, and I'm the only one that's got to go to class all day. And then we got these huge, thick notebooks of material that we had to complete and read. I was like, 'read?' And so I was just overwhelmed with, with the load that I got in nursing school. And so I struggled through it. And I had to develop study habits that I never had before. And even if somebody did have good study habits prior to coming there, being in the nursing program was -- They would have had to really buckle down too. So for me it was just like doubly hard. But I did it, and I struggled through. And finally my third year I was just like -- I went back home and my dad at this point was a supervisor at the hospital. He got, kept getting laid off at, at Blaw Knox. They finally just wanted something that was more stable, so he ended up going and being supervisor of patient escort at Ohio Valley Hospital.

CNK: What was this layoff? Why were there so many layoffs?

(526) RH: I don't know, but throughout the whole entire history, I think he spent maybe 26 years at Blaw Knox. He -- It was a series of layoffs that, you know -- He basically had steady work, but during those periods of layoff, I guess, you know, it just got really difficult for the family, And, and he just wasn't willing to go through the peaks and ... of income, I guess, or problems like that. So, so finally he went with the hospital, and he spent his last 14 years, I think, at Ohio Valley. And so I needed a job for the summer! I told my dad I needed a job, so I got a job at the hospital, and I worked as a, excuse me, nurse's aide. And I, I really decided at that point that it's really not what was for me because -- I don't know, I just didn't think it was for me. So I went back and was most unhappy and called home. And my parents, being the supportive parents that they are, said, "Well, if you're not happy, then honey, come home." And that's all I needed to hear! I was like 'I'll be there this weekend!'

So I came back home and, and I stayed there. And I enrolled in Ohio University, a branch that was right near my home. And I ended up in business. And so I got a degree in science, general degree in science because I had so many science credits from nursing. And then I got a degree in business administration. I was so happy to get

(553) back home. It was a real relief to me. And then from that point, I graduated, and I got a job with Merk, Sharp and Demm. And I worked as a pharmaceutical sales representative, which was probably one of the best jobs I could have landed right out of college. So again, you know, I didn't feel discriminated against or anything. I couldn't have asked for a better job. And I worked there. And my job, my territory ended up being in Ithaca, New York. So that's how I got to New York. And I had a territory there for two years. And I got married right as I got to New York to a minister! I married a minister. And I -- After two years of marriage, I had my first child, a little girl Danielle Nicole. And I stayed at home to be a mom and probably because it's what I knew moms to be because of my mom I'm

(570) sure. And then after that, we moved to Corning, New York, which was really great because the demographics there. It was such that there were a lot of professionals. A lot of black minority professionals there that were engineers and that were vice presidents of Corning Glass and who lived well and successful and accomplished. Had the nice little family unit together. And it was really neat to see. It was progressive, you know. I came from Wheeling, which was kind of, you know, depressed at the time. And so it was really a brightness in my life to go and see that. And my husband pastored a very nice, large predominantly black church. And it was, it was the largest church there, and it was really neat. And we had a real successful ministry there, very successful. It doubled. It financially quadrupled and all that stuff. It was real successful. And then I had my next child and --

CNK: Name?

(591) RH: Jonathan David Holland. And that's strictly biblical. There's, there's a story. It's in Samuel. You're probably familiar with it about Jonathan and David, King David and Saul was King Saul. And Saul had a son Jonathan who really loved David, and they were best friends. But Saul really hated David because David was an up and coming king. And the

people loved them, and they went to war. Saul and David went to war and David was a war hero. And when they came back, the community and the women shouted, 'Saul killed thousands, and David killed tens of thousands.' Well, Saul got very intimidated, but at the same time, David was a wonderful harpist. And so Saul had mental disorders, and Saul decided -- Whenever David would harp for Saul, he, it calmed his soul. And, and he, he maintained a balance, and he was okay. And that's what kind of took away the stress for David to do that. So he kind of loved David for that, and he thought he was talented and whatnot. But he did grow jealous of him, so he sought to kill him with a javelin. He sought several times to kill him. Saul's son Jonathan really saw the, the wrong in it, and he protected David. And, and knew when David ought not to be around when his father was seeking his life, and protected David. And they became very best friends. Like probably the greatest friendship ever in the history of the bible. And it ended -- The story ended that, that David loved Saul more than any love there could be. And it was just a really beautiful story that touched my heart. And I was like Jonathan David,

(629) it's so beautiful. And so I named my son -- And I always said if I ever have a little boy, I'm going to name him Jonathan David. And I did. I'm so happy that I got to do that.

CNK: What were those early years of mothering like for you?

(634) RH: They were wonderful because it, it was innate for me. It was very natural. It's what I always wanted to do. I, quite frankly, could have foregone college! Because I really wanted to be a homemaker, and be a mom. Probably just like my mom. But at the same time, I didn't like the dependence that my mom had by not having an education or anything behind her to stand on. She was very dependent on, on a lot of things. And I wanted an independence, and I knew that an education would provide me with the independence that I needed.

CNK: What kind of independence are you referring to?

(645) RH: I think just a, oh gosh, just an overall -- Certainly not a financial, but, but to a degree financial independence. Independence to make choices, you know. Choices to not have to stay at home if I didn't want to. Choices to not live in Bridgeport if I didn't have to, you know. Just freedom of choices I think it provided me.

CNK: Is that related to being, your mom being dependent on a man, on her husband?

(658) RH: Yeah. Couldn't go to the grocery store until dad got home with the car. She never knew how to drive or anything like that, you know. So -- And I think that's the one thing my mom has always told me that she really admires my -- She says, "You'll just get up and go." I'll make road trips just like nothing. I can remember my dad got ill during his last few years of life. And he got seriously ill, very, very ill. And occupational pneumoconiosis, black lung from, from, actually what it was from the factory is what he ultimately died of. But I can --

CNK: From a steel factory?

(671) RH: Yeah. Yeah. And it wasn't steel. It wasn't -- Blaw Knox I don't think is steel. It was foundry. Iron?

MNK: It was a foundry so it was --

RH: Yeah. Iron. I, I'm really -- I guess, I don't know.

CNK: You were a ...

RH: I just know he worked there, yeah! And I know what he died of. But -- So --

CNK: You were talking about the -- You came home and how you make road trips easily.

(682) RH: During the last few years of his life, he was really ill. And I used -- He used to love these cakes. So I, I didn't work, so I had the freedom to kind of hop on the road and do what I want. So I had just had Danielle then, and she was about two. And she was just a road warrior. I mean she was so good. I could stick her in the car, and took us like seven hours to get here, and she would just be a gem the whole entire way. And we would just drive. So one, one day, I just felt really like I needed to see him. And I hopped -- I baked a cake and drove it home to him, and went home the next day!

CNK: What kind of cake?

(695) RH: That was a, a 7-Up cake, like a pound cake. A really good cake, and it was his favorite one. So I baked it, and drove it home to him. And my mom was like, 'boy, Robyn will just get on the road and go.' But --

CNK: What a surprise that must have been for him.

RH: Yeah, yeah, it really was.

CNK: They didn't expect you?

(701) RH: No, no, no. And I guess the most important thing that, that I've done in life is that I know that my dad knew how much I loved him. There was no doubt. I mean he -- It's not like he passed away, and I was like 'oh, he didn't know.' He knew. So that, that was really good. And I think that's important to be able to have good relationships every day because you never know when, when they're not anymore. So then I -- My husband passed away so became widowed and, and decided that there was, it would probably be better for me to move back home with the support of my family.

CNK: Was that a sudden thing for you to go through again then?

(718) RH: Yeah, it really was. So -- And I had gone through -- I had, I had -- Actually it had been a really bad year. I had gone through an illness myself, then my husband passed away. So it was like -- My dad had passed away, then I had an illness, then my husband passed away all within like Aprils apart. April '91, April '90, April '91, April '92. And so Aprils are just like 'oh' to me! But actually I'm, I'm not like that. It doesn't bother me when April rolls around or anything. I just think 'this will be a better April than last April' or whatnot.

CNK: Well, was there a community there set up to support you in these hard times at all?

(736) RH: Yeah. Absolutely. I had the most support from my church that I could ever have. I mean just the most wonderful group of people, and they're still there. They are still there. And I go and I make frequent, at least once a year I try to get back to Corning, New York, and visit our church and --

(side 2) RH: Just knowing people who are there who really -- I, I developed a lot of solid, lifetime friends at the church that was named Friendship Baptist Church. 'Where friends are eternal' is what our little slogan was, and it's so true. It's -- It really rings true for me.

CNK: What was your involvement in that church as the wife of the pastor?

(005) RH: I, I served on the deaconess board. And I was Sunday school teacher, the new member orientation church training director. I did quite a few different things.

CNK: Was there a lot of music in the church?

RH: Yeah. There was lots of music. We had a wonderful choir, beautiful choir.

CNK: Were you a part of that?

RH: No. I've never been musically inclined in any way.

CNK: Nor your husband?

(011) RH: To a degree. To a degree. His mother's a pianist, and she sings. She's got a beautiful voice. And he, he never really pursued it, but he probably could have. But I did, like I say, I had organ lessons for at least eight years, and just never had my heart into it! My music teacher used to say, "Do your parents realize they're wasting their money! You never practice when you come!" So -- That was -- So that was -- And so two years ago in April, I moved back to Wheeling. And --

CNK: Why?

RH: Upon the death of my husband.

CNK: Yeah.

(018) RH: And, and I just felt like, you know, it was good to be back with family and have the support of my family. And so I, I did that. And I didn't work for about a year. Was it a year? Yeah, about a year and a few months I stayed at home with my children. And my little girl attended a Christian preschool here. And my little boy, I had a lot of time with him. And I've always thought it's important to -- I always said that at least the first three years I would like to be at home with my children. And I got to do it five years for my little girl, and my little boy three years. We just hit three years really, and I became employed full time. And that was -- I started out with Wheeling Works last July, I think it was. And worked there until, part time, on a very part-time basis. Maybe like 10 hours a week, which was so -- It was perfect for me because I didn't have, you know, a spouse to do all those things for us. So I really kind of needed something to get out and do, and that was perfect for me. So I did that.

CNK: What did you do?

(029) RH: I was the director of quality control there.

CNK: I don't know what Wheeling Works does exactly.

RH: Wheeling Works is a nonprofit organization that was established to help set up individuals into entrepreneurships who wouldn't normally have the capital to do so themselves. It was -

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CNK: ...

RH: Really a neat organization.

CNK: Yeah. How did you get involved in that?

(034) RH: I knew the gentleman who was the CEO, and he was really looking for someone to, to do the job. And I met him actually here at the Learning Center during one of their functions. And he had asked if I would be interested in something like that. And I interviewed for the position. I had some nice recommendations and got it. So -- And I worked there until my coming here, which was in February.

CNK: What brought you here?

(039) RH: I knew the position was available. And I really had wanted to do something full time at this point. Prior to this being in Wheeling, I didn't want to really work because I wanted to stay at home with my children. But they're -- The time was coming that I really needed to do something. And so I, I came here.

CNK: What's the position?

(043) RH: The director, executive director. And it just seemed like -- I teach Sunday school here, and I'm, I'm the assistant Sunday school superintendent at Macedonia Baptist Church. And church again is still very vital portion of my life. And I worked with so many of the children from East Wheeling that basically were in my Sunday school, and I just love children. And these children in particular because I, I would see them come in and kind of look, look at me like a stranger. And I knew all I really had to do is wrap my arms around them real tight once or twice, and I was no longer the stranger but Miss Holland, you know. And it was so easy to just like develop a relationship with them, a warm, loving relationship. And it's what I love doing, and it was like what they loved having done. And so I knew that I would be working with the very same children here. And I just somehow just wanted to help make a difference in somebody's life. And I think that it really starts at, in the youth stage. And if you can really get youth at that point, there's really a great chance that you can kind of help lead them in the right direction. And I, I

(059) try to live my life as, as a model, as a good model, a good role model. And I just hope -- And it's got me places, you know. And I've had success with it, and I'm happy. And I think

that's what people try to achieve in life, and it's not gaining. It's an internal happiness, it's not gained through material gain or anything like that. But there's just like an inner peace that I have that I think is wonderful. That everybody probably seeks to have. And if I can help somebody gain that, that just being the best that you can be for yourself. It doesn't matter, you know, who's better than you or who you're better than. There's, there's always someone on either end of that, you know. But as long as you're right there doing the best that you can do, then you can do whatever you want to do. And so that's what I really hope that I can help these children gain.

CNK: Are there goals or hopes that you have for the community here or East Wheeling?

(069) RH: Oh, yes. Certainly. I, I see the high rate of unemployment. I see, I see people who are just wanting a better life, and not necessarily having the opportunity. And I want that. I want to see people have an opportunity to have a better way of life because there are --

CNK: What does that mean?

(074) RH: Well, part of the thing that we're doing with the Learning Center that I think is really neat is we're working on community development. And working on providing affordable housing for individuals who wouldn't normally be able to have home ownership. And we're providing that. And we're just in the infancy of it, but it's like -- It's going to be a big step. Our first project's going to be big. It's going to provide like 16 single unit family homes. And we've got another location site where we're going to provide three rental spaces for, for people of, of moderate to low income.

CNK: Who would all this work?

RH: How would it work?

CNK: Yeah.

(082) RH: On -- They would have to qualify. And they would have to meet standards, federal standards, HUD regulations and whatnot. It's basically -- The bulk of it's federal funds, and so they certainly have their criteria. But, but most of the people would qualify. So -- And I think that -- I know for myself, you know, when I rented it was different than when I owned a home. I mean when you own a home, it gives you a sense of pride. It's yours, and you want to make it nice. And, and it's just something. You got a piece, a chunk of

something out there that's yours. And I think that would be so nice for the people of the community to also be able to have that.

MNK: How would you describe East Wheeling to somebody who had never seen it before?

(091) RH: I would say it's, it's a community that, that obviously at one point was nice, warm, friendly, close. The houses are close, neighborly type community. That over the years because of industry being displaced and no longer a part of it, it's grown very depressed. And the remnant hopeful, and they want that yesterday back today.

MNK: So, so at one point East Wheeling was more prosperous because the city as a whole was more prosperous?

RH: Absolutely.

MNK: And now it's not because the city as a whole is not?

(102) RH: Yeah. I, I truly believe -- I mean my, my brothers were coal miners, you know. And, and coal miners did well. The coal industry, steel industry -- This is a good middle class American town. Really, people doing well and industry. A lot of my brothers had like 18 years. Chemical plants and things like that that just go. And I mean if, if you don't have education -- I mean education wasn't necessary back then if, if you wanted to live a nice, decent life. But that's what I try to educate the children here today concerning that. That if you want that sort of life, that education necessarily wasn't necessary for at that point. You've got to have education, and, and it's the key. I think it's the key to our youth having a better tomorrow. So working with them, we stress education. Working for the ones who aren't, who don't have the education. The parents of these children. We stress that there are opportunities. Education still is there. It's never too late for that. And that in the meantime, that, that there are opportunities. There, there are other options, alternatives. And that you can be happy and, and have things be, you know, in ways that, that you normally wouldn't be able to have by people who are willing to -- Like the James Paige Learning Center who are willing to go out and get the government funds and provide opportunities for these people who can afford housing.

CNK: What kind of, what kind of educational model then do you promote here at the James Paige Learning Center?

- (124) RH: I, I'm -- It's vague to me what --
- CNK: Well, when you say that you want the kids to value education. What kind of an education do you want them to have? And toward what end?
- (126) RH: Well, I think that -- First of all, number one and foremost is finish school. And not only finish school, but do well in school. Strive for academic excellence. And that's what we really try to do. In fact, we're working with the Good Zoo. And they're going to get the curriculum, the science curriculum, and they're going to develop, implement a program here at the Learning Center that is based on the public school system. And they said how, how would we want to see it done. Do we want to do experiments when they're learning about the lessons. How do we want to go about doing it. And I thought that if we could kind of precede them in what they're doing. And then our kids kind of will have an edge when they go in. Because I know when I was in school that if I did my readings and my work prior to, to the lectures, I knew exactly what was going on. I knew what kind of questions, what sort of questions to ask. But if I didn't do it and I went in, I mean it wasn't until after the lecture that I had all my questions, which was sometimes too late unless I went and had a personal conference with, with the professor. So I know in everything in life, preparation is really the key to success. So we decided that we would prepare them prior
- (142) to them going in. So, so they're going to know, they're going to know a little bit more. And they're going to be on the edge. I think it's important educationally, academically to be on the edge and not just go and kind of take a set back position.
- CNK: How do you get kids to feel excited about learning?
- (146) RH: I think that when you let them, when you let them know that, that learning is more than just opening a book and reading and going and taking a test and trying to get good grades. That it encompasses so much more that, that the growth that you can get from it. Where it can get you in life. I mean, again, having choices. I think choices are so important because if you don't have choices, you're penned up, you're pent. You're -- You just -- Not much movement. And, and I think it just allows for a lot of choices. And to take it to a broader depth, for a broader view.
- CNK: Are there things that you try to teach the kids here about their role in the community?

(156) RH: I do. We -- First of all, we're trying to implement a program where the kids will go out and, and help clean up the streets. And they're doing that now. I think next week, they're going to do it prior to the big race that we're going to have. And just, just taking pride in their community, and, and getting to know the bigger children that we have come in. I always try to get them to kind of take the younger ones under their arms, you know, and, and work with them as brothers and sisters, which implicates that, that unity with the neighborliness. And when they see them on the street, it's kind of like 'that's my big brother, that's the one that helps me.' That sort of community thing.

CNK: Do you have hopes that these children will remain in Wheeling, make a certain contribution?

(167) RH: I do. I do because I see the, the results of it. I see the James Paiges, the results of that who have always had education as a priority in his life, and, and really did well all through school. And went and had the choices, the freedom to make decisions. Ended up going to law school, and was able, through those sort of things, to put things back into the community. And that's another area of the importance of education. Is that it not only allows you to think of self and what you do, but it gives you choices to reach back and help others in a bigger way, I think. And so I think that that was one of the really important things too. Is, is that you can reach back and, and do something for the community. Yeah, even if you're not here, even if you're not present. Just in, you know, other things.

MNK: Let's take a break for a second. Given the current economic situation in Wheeling where there, where there is not enough opportunity, not enough jobs, how -- Does, does what you're doing, it creates choices for people, but it sounds as though the choice will always be to leave Wheeling. In most of the young African-American people I've encountered don't see themselves as staying here. They think they're going, they're going to be off somewhere else. So, so how, how do you actually -- When you're dealing with a crippled economy and the resulting cripple, cripple communities, what do you do about that educationally?

(190) RH: Well, I think that you could steer -- I think a lot of times, you know, even with education, people think as long as I get a degree, I can do something. But we have a lot of children here who, who want to grow up, and they've got bigger ideas, which, which do really provide

you with greater choices. And as you said, you can have choices, but if you don't have options, then choices don't really matter. But we have people who want to be veterinarians, and there's, there's a place for that here. Professionals. And that you can be doctors, and you can be lawyers. And you can have your own practices, and you can do well in Wheeling just like you can do well anywhere else. And you didn't have to, to go somewhere else. But -
- So there's room in that, in that educational sense. That you can be a professional. You didn't have to just go to school and be this. I think to have children aspire to, to not just get educated, but to do maybe something that gives them a sense of independence along with their education. And I think that's really neat too.

CNK: So the goal is to have kids feel that they can be professionals, is that what it is?

(204) RH: Yeah. Absolutely. Because I think notoriously professional was like for somebody else. You know, to be a doctor, you have to be a genius. You just have to be dedicated, you know. And it starts right here. Good study habits. Discipline. Discipline's really important. And, and direction. And I think that if you provide the children with, with that end and, and the means along the way. Social, social development and whatnot, that it's, it can be done. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to be a doctor right!

CNK: Are they waiting for you downstairs?

(214) RH: Yes.