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Ruth Clarke Transcript

ELISE BRENNER: This is Elise Brenner on Wednesday, December 17th, sitting at 21 Nonquit in Dorchester with the 2004 Women Who Dared nominee, Ruth C. Clarke. And she'll be the next voice you hear after my first question.

RUTH CLARKE: I'm not sure what you want me to say.

EB: Well, I'm going to ask you, don't worry about it.

RC: Okay. All right, you ask me the question.

EB: First, if you could just tell us briefly about your childhood, your growing up.

RC: Well, I don't think there was anything terribly remarkable about my childhood. I grew up in a family of four children, with a mother and father. Our family was somewhat dysfunctional and somewhat very functional. We had our problems, okay, but most families do. And I simply was – I suppose that children – I mean, and even adults – that when you think back on your childhood, you can always see it as being dysfunctional, in some way, shape or form, but you can always see it as being – it's very functional in other ways. But you tend to see limitations, okay? We were not a rich family; we were a poor family.

EB: Where did you grow up?

RC: I was born in Detroit. My family eventually moved to California, and I went to high school in California. Then I moved to Boston, and I've been here ever since.

EB: Siblings?

RC: I have one sister, who is older than me, and two brothers who are younger than me.

EB: And so you say your family's class status, we'd say it was – you were a poor family.

RC: We were. Well, my mother always considered us a middle-class family. Now, I don't know what that means. I mean, again, I don't know what it meant fifty years ago versus what it meant today. My mother always classified us as middle class. In terms of income, I would say that – I mean, if you want to add to that, in terms of income, we were lower–middle class.

EB: Were your parents at all activists? I mean, look at the path you chose, and I'm wondering about your parents.

RC: I think my mother was very much of an activist in any way, shape, or form. I mean, she was very active in the Unitarian Church, and I think she did most of her activism through the Unitarian Church. But, yes, she always felt that she needed to give back something. Absolutely. And yes, activism was also – I don't think the word "activism" is the right word. I think it's more sort of a feeling that people have responsibilities to other people. If that manifests itself in activism, so be it. But it's more than, well, gee, we should be activists because we should be activists. No, there's something behind why you should – there's something far more basic to it that drives people to become active.

EB: And you feel it's a sense of responsibility, and that comes from –

RC: Well, I think it's a sense of responsibility. I think it's a sense of responsibility, and I think it's a sense that you have to – we all live in this world together. We all have to make it somehow, together. And that we have to use our talents to somehow better or to make a difference in that which affects everybody.

EB: But you have to know – of course you do – that not everyone has that philosophy, that attitude, and I'm wondering why, if you can – and this is a really hard question, but what was in your mother, what is in you, that separates you from people that either don't have that attitude or might have that attitude, to feel, "Not me. I'm not going to do

anything."

RC: Well, I'm not sure. I suppose it's true that some people don't have that attitude at all, although I find it a little hard to believe because nobody – I mean, there's the John Donne – no man is an island, no man stands alone. We cannot exist – we are individuals, of course. We have an individual realm. But we do not progress through our lives as a total stand-alone individual. There are other people. There's the family. There is the [laughter] community. There's a collective sense, even if the collective sense is just family. There's a collective sense and collective good. When you go out and say, "Okay, let's extend it out from the" – that's just an extension. But I can't believe that anybody doesn't have any sense of collective good.

EB: Let's say people all have a sense. I still think it's the minority that takes a risk and acts upon that.

RC: Yeah. I think on that you're absolutely right.

EB: Where does that come from, then? For your mom, and for you? And for Magnolia?

RC: Well, it's just an absolute sense that it's part of your value structure, just an absolute sense that you have to speak out and do that which is right when the occasion comes up. Now, there's not one of us who can speak up and be active on every single cause that there is. There's just absolutely nothing, nothing. But there's a time when you have to – I mean, even in something as simple as voting – that's part of your responsibility, to vote for that which is collectively good and to take a position on policy issues. What right? What's wrong? You do this even in your home. You do this raising children – there are things that are right; there are things that are wrong, and how you interact with other people, and what you do for other people, is very much a sense of – it's part of morals, morals and ethics. That's part of how you're supposed to function as a human. I don't know. I think my mother was – I was raised as a fourth–generation Unitarian. And it was

always part – you were taught that you had to take stands, you had to speak out for what was right and what was wrong, and you had to involve yourself in some way, shape, or form in something.

EB: So the Unitarian church and your mother are two role models in a sense?

RC: Well, they are. Now, in terms of – I know you will eventually ask me about women. But, what I'm going to say – I'm going to preface this because what I'm going to say sounds very much like the Miss America pageant when everyone asks – no, I mean, they traditionally ask, "What woman influenced you most?" And everyone says, "My mother." But the truth of the matter is that that's actually true. That is actually true. There is no woman who has not learned more about – I mean, that is not primarily influenced by her mother because the mother is the first figure that a child looks to, or a girl looks to, to learn what being a woman is all about. So, I do not know – I mean, I presume that if a child is raised without a mother, there's probably another woman figure. In some cases, there isn't a woman figure, but there could be an aunt. It could be the woman who raises you. But it is from this figure that a girl learns how to be a woman. If the mother's dysfunctional, maybe you learn [laughter] a little bit wrong. Now, this does not mean that you're not influenced by a lot of other women too. But primarily, I think you have to be influenced by your mother. When I say this, I am not trying to tout my mother as being anything terribly exceptional. I loved her very much, and I think she was an exceptional woman. But I don't know that she was any more exceptional than any other mother.

EB: She might have been, with her degree of responsibility (overlapping conversation; inaudible) –

RC: Well, she might have been – this was just – and my father taught me this, too – this was just a part of what you did. There were things that were right; there were things that were wrong. Not one of us asks to be born. And there are times, I think, that we've all reflected on the fact that life isn't just – I mean, I suppose life is very valuable. There's no

question about that. But I think that we've all reflected at times, "Well, I didn't ask to be born, and why the hell am I here? Wouldn't it be a lot easier if it just had never happened?" But nevertheless, we're sort of stuck with it. And being stuck with it, given that it's going to go on for sixty, seventy, eighty years, you sort of develop a sense, well, maybe I ought to do something in this sixty, seventy, eighty, or fifty – or whatever space of years that I have called life – to affect someone or something in some way. Because otherwise, is there any purpose at all to life? There are joys in life. There's many profound, real, and wonderful joys in life. But they're not every other minute. Most of life is sort of drudgery and slogging through it and getting from one day to the other –

EB: If you're wondering, I am just – this is almost hysterical to me. These are almost the words out of my mouth to my sixteen year–old daughter two days ago.

RC: Oh, really?

EB: She was having a mini-crisis.

RC: Yeah, you sort of just slog through it.

EB: I said, "Most people live very small lives, in a way, with heroic moments interrupting it." You know what I'm saying.

RC: Heroic, joyous, and wonderful moments interrupting it. But the thing is, I don't suppose if every other moment was joyous, that you would even know what joy was all about. But, no, the majority of life is just sort of hard work – you didn't ask for it, you got it, and you've got to endure.

EB: Do you have children of your own, Ruth?

RC: No, I do not. No, I do not.

EB: Because boy, you would have been [laughter] – you're primed to share this message in a family context.

RC: No, I don't happen to have children. It was partly by choice, partly not by choice, and that's just the way it is. It's a funny thing about choices. For every choice you make, you deny yourself the alternative. So, having done this, you never know what it might have been like had I taken the other road, as Robert Frost says – what might it have been like? This leads to a lot of wondering, sometimes some agonizing, but you make choices. Sometimes you don't even make the right choices. But you do make choices, and choices put you in a certain direction. If you make the wrong choice, well, you sort of have to – you don't actually go back and change that choice; you just have to make the right choices in the – make better choices in the future. But every choice you make denies you the whole realm of choices that you could have made. And one never knows what it might have been like. So, I mean, it's a funny thing. You always wonder – one always wonders, "What might it have been?" I suppose a woman without children wonders, "What might it have been like had I had children?" A woman with children might wonder, "What might it have been like had I not had children?"

EB: Indeed, speaking of choices.

RC: It's choices, yes.

EB: You are a Jew by choice.

RC: Yes, I am.

EB: I would love to hear your story. Now there's a choice, and there's a path. From the Unitarian start, right?

RC: It's from a Unitarian start. I married a man, a Jewish man, and I eventually converted. Converting for me was not the experience that converting, let's say, from

Catholicism might be for another woman or converting from fundamental Christianity for another woman. So I suppose everybody's – when one makes this sort of choice, I suppose everybody's experience is entirely individual. For me, it was not too much more than a reaffirmation of everything that I had always been taught. I mean, at least in terms of the more basic mitzvot. There are, of course, a whole litany of traditions and a whole variety of mitzvot that one learns and one either accepts or – I don't want to say accepts – one either makes a part of their life or doesn't make a part –

EB: Right, like kashrut, or –

RC: – or doesn't make a part of their life. But, no, I would say that in many senses, fundamentally, it was more a reaffirmation of what I had always believed because I was never – I was raised on the Bible, the Old Testament. I was never taught that – I mean, Unitarianism is basically a Christian religion, there's no question about that. It has Christian roots. But being the type of denomination it is, it depends on which congregation you are, or how conservative you are, or how – very much like Judaism – or what the orientation is. Some of the churches are more social and activist; others are more philosophical and more based on a religious – when I was growing up, I had a variety of these. I mean, some of them were the more social and some the more fundamental, basic type. But nevertheless, I was never taught that there was anything other than one God, and I was never taught that there was anything that anybody – I mean, that Jesus was a Jew who had a very good message. It was as simple as that. That's what I was taught.

EB: When you convert, though, you do, in a sense, throw your lot in with a people.

RC: Yes, you do.

EB: And that's a big change for any Christian. What was that part like? A people, a community, a heritage, a history that you now joined?

RC: Well, not quite sure how to answer that.

EB: Or did you feel [overlapping conversation; inaudible]?

RC: Heritage is something – no, heritage is something that – when I grew up, I was always taught that my heritage was extremely important. I was taught about my grandparents, my great–grandparents, everything. I mean, it was heritage, where you came from, your genealogy. These things were important because they gave you a sense of who you are. The fact that I can go back to the revolution – I'm not a member of the DAR because I haven't actually – I've never done the rather intensive job of documenting, but I have everything ready to go. I can also go back to the Mayflower – I mean, there's no big things. I'm just stating it. But this is important, to know who you are. Well, I think this is – a Jewish heritage is very much the same thing. It's important to know; it defines who you are. So the importance of heritage and the Jewish sense of the importance of heritage is very fundamental, so I relate to that. Now, I didn't have children. If I had had children, there's no question that my (feeling?) of heritage was such that I could not have raised a child, not a child, with my husband, who wasn't Jewish because this is part of the child's entitlement. Now, when you join a group – because Judaism is a religion, but it's also a heritage, you cannot absolutely get the heritage. You just somehow – that part you don't – maybe, if you have children, you can somehow pass the heritage on a little bit, but you don't quite get the heritage for yourself. And so, no. I guess, in many senses, I think the Jewish heritage is a rich, respectable heritage, filled with heroics and things that are inspirational. But it's not my personal heritage. It's a heritage by choice now, but not my personal heritage.

EB: But have you been affiliated with a synagogue, that kind of community?

RC: Not formally with a synagogue, and I'll tell you why. It's very simple. The cost of membership is prohibitive, to be very frank with you. Right at the moment, I mean, my finances are such that they just don't allow for it. Now I also [overlapping conversation;

inaudible], I certainly know – I mean, at one point in time – this was years ago – I was involved with the Brookline Egalitarian Minyan and was a member of that. I'm involved with a group – we call ourselves a family, very dear friends – as a matter of fact, it was the woman who nominated me that – Pam and (Paul?), who are both from the Midwest, made their home in New England and they found themselves without their own families. They set about creating a family, a Jewish family, for their child Aaron. And I am a part of that family. But it's a created family, and most of us in there – there are many of us in there who don't have any immediate family, but we've created our own family with grandparents, runs all the [inaudible] children, and we created our own family, and our own Jewish family. And so we spend a lot of time together at the holidays, a lot of time together outside of the holidays, and this is sort of our family. I go to holiday services – when I go, past couple of years, I have not been as judicious about it as – quite frankly, it's a little embarrassing to me to sometimes not be able to afford holiday tickets. And I also know – I'm well aware that I could go to the synagogue and say, "Gee, I really can't afford this." I don't choose to do that. I don't choose to do that. I also don't choose to sneak in because people have told me, "Oh, well, nobody's going to take your ticket at the door." Well, this is something I just won't do. But no, most of the time, I do go for the holidays. I do go to the services, or at least a portion of them; I'm always there. I don't go to synagogue regularly. When I go, I typically – and most of the time, I go to Kehilath Israel when I go by myself. Sometimes, I go to Temple Israel with friends. In my heart of hearts, in my beliefs, I would say that I have to affiliate with Reform Judaism more than Conservative Judaism. However, in terms of services, I happen to find there's more spiritual satisfaction in the Conservative service. I have some differences in terms of how Jewish do you have to be if you're Conservative or how Jewish do you have to be if you're Orthodox. But I think that in terms of spiritual fulfillment and the actual services that are held, that I find – I mean, they're a tad long [laughter], but I find them more spiritually satisfying. Now, my only complaint with the length of the services, which I must say – now that was – oh, that was new. You want something that –that was a

change. Oh, that was a big change. I don't mind the length. I don't. The hardest thing for me is the prohibition that you can do no work on Shabbat. And so, since you can do no work on Shabbat, clearly, you can't do any work while you are sitting in temple. Now the truth of the matter is if I could sit in temple and embroider, I would be able to sit very nicely through the service because it keeps my hands occupied and gives me something to avoid falling asleep, and it would let me – but sewing, even embroidery – now, I don't consider it work. I consider it very, very satisfying. It would be frowned upon, so I don't feel that I can do this. I have yet to find anything that I can do to occupy – because I do this even – I go through periods sometimes of doing a lot of sewing, a lot of embroidery. I haven't happened to do any in four or five years now, but one of the times that I really like to embroider is when I have to sit in conferences and long meetings. I like to embroider. I don't knit. Other women knit. But this is the sort of thing that's perfect to do. It allows you to focus enough that you can keep – otherwise, you sort of fall to sleep, and you just get so – it gets endless. No, I would say that was a big shock. Now, going back to – one of the big challenges in conversion, of course, that I noticed in the group of people who converted at the same time I did, was just a variety of how we each wish to lead our Jewish lives after conversion. Now, there was a young woman who was in the group, and I know that she was looking forward to leading – I don't know – an Orthodox life, but being very, very observant of all the very traditional mitzvot, temple every Shabbat, all the holidays, keeping absolutely kosher. I felt that that would have been the easy way to go. That would have been the easy way to go. But I had grown up in the Unitarian tradition where I was taught that religion is not a – I remember somebody saying to my mother once, and she was furious, saying – because she was very, very involved with the Unitarian church – and somebody saying "Well, your religion must be a big comfort to you." And she was furious. And she said, "Religion is not a comfort; religion is a challenge." Well, I've tried to adopt – I still see religion as being a challenge, and I think part of the challenge is what you accept and what you don't accept and what priority you put on the mitzvot – which are the most important and which are the least

important. And I don't know that. I don't want to say that there's any right or wrong in this decision, but I think we all have to make it.

EB: When you explored Judaism, what did you feel were the priorities in Jewish values, for yourself?

RC: Priorities in Jewish values for myself were the social mitzvot that had to do with other people. Not the mitzvot that had to do with my private rituals, but the mitzvot that had to do with how I treat other people and how I relate to other people, and what I do in life that affects other people. There's no question about this. There's absolutely no question about this at all. This part I very definitely do not want put down. I'll tell you this, but I definitely don't want –

EB: That's what I'm going to write right here.

RC: Okay. All right. Yes. What I'm going to say about kashrut. Okay?

EB: Yes.

RC: I'm no authority. I'm not an authority on kashrut. But my observations of kashrut is – it's very simple. It's that each woman and each family defines how kosher is kosher. I don't know that there's just an absolute, this is and this is not, because – not from what I've observed. Now, what did I – I've sort of lost my train of thought.

EB: That kashrut is –

RC: Well, because it is –

EB: – it's not just an absolute. It's ambiguous in practice –

RC: It's not an absolute in practice. It's really not an absolute in terms of families and in terms of how you practice it. So, it's a decision you have to make. I keep kosher as well

as – I don't make a great deal of – I mean, other people would say that I don't keep kosher at all. It's very difficult for me, in terms of even just the way I think about cooking. If you grow up in a – my husband used to say the very thought of a roast beef sandwich and a glass of milk turned his stomach. Well, that's because – there's a reason. There's a reason. He would never think – he would never have thought of eating a roast beef sandwich and drinking a glass of milk. You know? Well, that's because his mother had never given him a glass of milk with a roast beef sandwich. Never been done. But you understand, for a woman who is used to cooking in a kitchen where you mix milk with meat products, it is very, very difficult even to think about this. Now, I remember – I mean, this was at the time of conversion, and I think I tried to – I just about gave up on this at this point in time. A number of us had gone out after one of our sessions to one of the restaurants at Coolidge Corner – it happened to be – I can't think of the name of it, but it happened to be the old – it wasn't Jack and Marion's, but it was the location of where what is now – but Jack and Marion's was there for years. I think there've been ten or fifteen different restaurants there since that time. So, I have no idea what restaurant it was. I sat there looking at the menu, saying to myself, "Well, what can I have that is acceptable?" because I'm in the company of those who wanted to be a little more observant than I. So I finally decided, "Well, at least I think I can have onion soup."

EB: Whoops. [laughter]

RC: Well, no, there's nothing wrong with onion soup, but of course, you know, I had to have it gratin. Because this is how I like –

EB: Right, right. [inaudible] beef base.

RC: Well, of course, it has beef base. But you understand, I'm thinking to myself – this is just one of the challenges that I haven't chosen to – I've just chosen to try to be, at least with certain meals and certain holiday meals, to be as symbolically kosher as I can be. But in terms of – I was taught, in terms of dishes, and I get a kick out of this – in most Jewish families, from what my observation is on kashrut, is that you have – there's a set of fleishig dishes and a set of milchig dishes. And then, of course, you have your Passover dishes. Now, you understand, I grew up in a family where there was a set of everyday dishes and then a set of good dishes. So, to me, the thought of keeping kosher and keeping fleishig and milchig means that I have to have everyday dishes, and then I have to have the everyday separate. And then for my good dishes, I also have to have two sets of those.

EB: And two sets for Passover.

RC: And two sets for Passover!

EB: Where do you store it?

RC: That's six sets of dishes. Now, I barely have enough dishes for everyday dishes! I mean, this is just –

EB: It's mind-boggling, huh?

RC: Mind-boggling! Absolutely mind-boggling. I said, "You know, this is just something that isn't going to happen."

EB: Paper plates solves this.

RC: Well, paper plates partly solve it, but the thought of six sets of dishes, keeping them never – two refrigerators. I'm sort of just –

EB: I definitely get the idea here that practice and values for you are very different – the values, Jewish values, that you've incorporated into your feelings of involvement. That's where it's at for you.

RC: I would say that that's where it – I mean, I would say that [overlapping conversation; inaudible] –

EB: You say the Jewish values that you've incorporated are the ones about the social mitzvot.

RC: The social mitzvot – how I treat other people, what I do with my life, do I make a difference. These are the values that I have chosen to try to practice as best I can. Now, one doesn't – I mean, one is partially successful – I don't know that one's always 100% successful.

EB: [inaudible] what one is working towards.

RC: But one works towards this. But I don't know – it seems to me that – I'm sorry, it's just like – you understand it. I was out one Sunday morning doing something on the street, cleaning up, or raking, or something like that, and one of the men in the neighborhood came out of his house with his Bible in hand and congratulated me on the fine job I was doing for the street and the community. And I said, "Well, gee, we could use your help." He said, "Well, oh no, I've got to go to church." I made a very snide comment, or snide in my mind – I tried to make it as nicely as possible, and I cannot quote the words, but, "Well, that's all very nice, but I'm doing God's work right here." Okay? Well, somehow, to me, there's a lot of doing God's work. Doing God's work does not – going to temple regularly does not fulfill, to me, doing God's work. Okay, it just doesn't. It just doesn't do it. And those who just – if all you choose to do is –

EB: One second, we're going to have to stop. [Long pause; background conversation.] Thanks.

RC: I don't want to suggest that your life is small because you go to temple every Shabbat and that you have Shabbat dinner every Friday night. I don't want to suggest your life is small at all in that. But if that's all you do, I don't think that you have – I think it's very important if you have children, if you have family, that yes, absolutely, you observe Shabbat. And you observe – it's not quite so important when you're by yourself. But, no, I just think if that's all you do, your life is a little small. But this was one of the challenges, as I said, when you convert – what do you accept? And I said, "Well gee, you can go back in, and you can do all of these ritualistic things and think you're being good, but have you really met what is fundamental in the Jewish faith?" And for me, what's fundamental in it is the way you conduct your life, what you do for other people, and what kind of a difference you make.

EB: Well, I'd love to talk about that now. Because this is the big topic – to just tell, into the tape, tell us about your experiences with Nonquit Street.

RC: I've lived here on Nonquit Street since 1970. Would you like another cup of coffee?

EB: Oh no, I'm fine.

RC: I didn't move to Dorchester because I thought that there was anything particularly great about Dorchester. It was simply a matter of economics. As a matter of fact, I didn't think there was anything much desirable about Dorchester. And to this day, again, you probably better not quote this, but to this day, I'd rather be back on Beacon Hill. Or in the Back Bay. I won't be, not at this point – I have responsibilities here because I've sort of made a commitment here. But, no, if I had my druthers, I would not. This is not the neighborhood of choice. And I don't know what the neighborhood of choice would be because, to be honest with you, I don't know that anybody knows. When you go to buy a house, you [inaudible] to select a place to live; it's based primarily on economics. I don't know where you live. I understand that Newton is a lovely community; Newton is also very, very expensive. There are lots of lovely communities that are very, very expensive,

and you can either afford them, or you cannot afford them. It's as simple as that, and there's no moral judgment here in any way, shape, or form. You simply can afford [them], or you can't afford them.

EB: So you landed here.

RC: I landed here.

EB: You landed here thirty years ago.

RC: I landed here thirty-three years ago, as a matter of fact, for a variety of reasons. I landed here, and I was living in an apartment down the street in what's now the Nonquit Street Garden. And several years later, the neighborhood, when I got here, was a good mix of whites, Blacks, and Hispanics. But it was a changing neighborhood, and most of the white families within the next five years – five, six, eight years – moved out, or the older white families who had lived on Nonquit Street eventually left. It was a very definitely changing neighborhood. When I bought this house, which was – I lived up the street, and having the thought, well, you know – about four years later, this house went on the market, and I learned about it in a very strange way. I had a German shepherd who got loose one morning. And he was not a mean dog, but he did have to be watched rather carefully because he had a habit of – if I took him into an open space that there were a hundred people, he wouldn't bother a soul. However, if I took him into an open space where there was nobody around, he got the idea that that was his space – that was his. And that anybody who then came into the space was an intruder who had to be taken care of. So the adult son of the family who was living here happened to come out just as the dog had decided that all of Nonquit Street belonged to him. And Fritzli bit the young man right in the butt. So, I got him back in the yard, and of course, I had to do the responsible thing – I went up, and I apologized profusely. I explained to the family that the dog indeed had rabies shots. I advised that if the man had not had his tetanus shot recently that he'd probably better go get a tetanus shot, and I offered to pay for his

trousers. What else does one do? And in the process, his father, who was an elderly gentleman, said, “Would you like to buy a house?” Yes. And I’d never thought about it. But they were moving out, and I got the house in 1974 for $5,500.

EB: This.

RC: This.

EB: The whole thing.

RC: Yes. And I decided that, well gee, I sort of did the math and said, “Well, if I live in this house for five years, I can give it away, and go elsewhere, if that’s what happens.” It just didn’t happen that way. It just didn’t happen that way. So, somehow, I’m just here. I would say that this house – it took me a lot of years before I started doing renovations and trying to make it – and it got into very bad shape for a while, but until I finally started doing some renovations and rehabbing – this house has sort of sustained me for a long time. One of the things that I never wanted to do was commit. When I was married, my husband and I both worked. Sometimes he was out of work. Sometimes I was out of work. So what we tried, or at least I tried to do very hard, was to make sure that we could live on one income. And never go beyond – we could spend or fritter away another income, but we could live on one income, and we never made financial commitments that went beyond one income. Now, of course, I have to – since my husband’s death, I definitely have been a one-income family, but suddenly with that choice, you understand, I have to – I want to keep my cost of living down so that if I’m out of work, I am not going to lose my residence. Well, this house is now paid off – it didn’t take too many years to pay it off. I didn’t have the entire purchase price in 1974, but it was paid off, and I owned it totally within five years. But this has been – because sometimes I have been out of work, from time to time. So, in essence, when my husband died, it sort of – there wasn’t a choice. The thought of moving away became a much more problematic thing.

EB: Sure, but you know you can live here. You got your deal. You're here. You can ignore the neighborhood –

RC: Well, that's untrue.

EB: But you can't [inaudible] this is where I'm –

RC: Oh, okay. All right, I've gotten sort of astray on this. I always had, since the time I moved here, some thoughts – well, not since the time I moved here. Since the time I moved here, I always knew these houses were pretty little houses. There's no question these are cute little houses. But by approximately 1978, which was about eight years after I moved here, all of the houses where we now have the Nonquit Street Green, all those structures up there had been burned, probably some by arson. Who knows? But they were gone. The house that I had originally lived at, down at what's now the garden at the end of the street, burned. I have no idea. But we suddenly had all these vacant lots around here. And so it was always – I had thought sort of toyed with the idea that there was this space and that one could do something rather nice with it, but I was busy working, and I didn't feel that I really wanted to take the bull by the horns, as they say, or do anything. And so we went from about nineteen, almost twenty years – we all sort of, not organized, here in the community – we all sort of sat around saying, "Well, someday somebody's going to do something." And we just didn't define it. In late 1991, one of my neighbors, Magnolia Gordon, who lives down at number twenty–nine, was very concerned about the ragweed we had growing in the vacant lots causing a major health problem, especially for her son, who had asthma, and other children in the neighborhood had asthma. She had done a little bit of looking into it and had been told that there were ways to make community gardens and to take charge of properties and do something with them, particularly for open space and gardens. She solicited the neighborhood, including me, with some of her ideas. It sort of rang a bell with me because the thought of making gardens – as a matter of fact, I had at one point in time had a garden

[inaudible] – when I lived on that property, I had this idea – it was all mine with my dog and my garden. So the thought of making it into a garden was something I had thought about – or a little park space. So, what her ideas were sort of rang a bell with me. But she was only concerned at that point in time with the space down at the far end of the street. And so I said to her, “Yeah. I share your ideas, and if there’s anything I can do, let me know.” She had solicited everybody in the community, and we decided to have a little meeting at which I showed up. So, there Magnolia and I sat. She went over some of the things she had learned.

EB: Are you trying to say that there were only two of you at the meeting?

RC: There were two of us.

EB: I just wanted to check that.

RC: There were two of us. There were two of us. And we realized, and we discussed this part of the thing, in order to do something like this, to take over land, or sort of [inaudible] – one of the things that the city always wants or foundations always want is some sort of evidence of community support. And so we pondered over whether two of us constituted community support, and I said, “Well, I think this is a way – we have to interpret this creatively.” I said, “We don’t have any opposition.”

EB: Absolutely.

RC: Nobody on the street has opposed this. And so, well, that doesn’t – support comes in different sizes and in different shapes and in different ways. And one of the ways of supporting something is to not oppose it. And it’s sort of tacit support. It may not translate into –

EB: How did you move forward from there? I mean, where do you go? You're two women.

RC: Well, we're two. Well, we decided the two of us could start that garden.

EB: Oh, so you just started working?

RC: Yes. Two of us. We got a small grant.

EB: How did you get that?

RC: Well, we got – first of all, we started out – we had a fiscal agent, but we got a small grant for five thousand dollars from the Green Space Alliance, Boston Green Space Alliance, and that allowed us to get started. We got the property license for our care, and it allowed us to start doing something in the garden. We did a cleanup, and we started planting, and it was as simple as that. And Magnolia and I worked there, and sometimes her husband came out. Sometimes her kids came out. Sometimes there were a few others. A few other kids in the neighborhood would come out and do a few things. But basically, we just decided to do that. And that was it. And we installed ourselves, the Nonquit Street Gardening Committee. We did put in a few vegetable beds, which are no longer vegetable beds, but that's another story, so that a few people that wanted to plant vegetables – we had a number of people on the street who planted vegetables, and that's basically how we started, and we called ourselves the gardening club. We got another small grant for about $2,500, and we got our water system in, and that's basically what we did. Now, at this time, we also were faced with all of this land up at the top of the street. We decided – because I said to Magnolia, "That land up there is the biggest challenge," because down where we had the garden, there were at least some amenities down there. It was a filthy mess, but there were some trees there, and there was actually some grass. Now, the trees are mostly – well, I'll call them weed trees, in the sense that they were not planted trees; they planted themselves. This doesn't necessarily mean –

there were some trees that we took out because they were – we took out several ailanthuses. We said, “No, we didn’t want any more of those,” and we got those out because those are a very, very invasive tree. We have a number of maples down there. They’re not the big-leaf maples. I don’t know the exact species. They had planted themselves; those have stayed. And a lot of the trees down there are self–planted trees. And we’ve just let them stay, so we at least had some amenities down there. The big challenge was the lot up at the front of the street. We sort of decided – we didn’t know quite what we were going to do, but we sort of decided, “Well, let’s make a stab at that one, too.” So we started making a stab at that one, but that one was a major challenge because that was just a flat site without a bit of vegetation on it. I mean, there wasn’t –

EB: It was concrete?

RC: No, it wasn’t concrete. It was dirt.

EB: All the rubble from the burnt-out buildings –

RC: All the rubble from the burnt–out buildings had been shoveled back into the earth; that's what it was. There was maybe half an inch of topsoil on top of it and just filled with – and it grew ragweed. It didn’t grow anything much more than ragweed. So that was the big challenge.

EB: And then people dumped their old furniture.

RC: Oh yeah. We had a lot of dumping. We had a lot of dumping there. But, the next thing that happened, we were basically just the garden, and we did get the lot up the street licensed to us. We at least got the city to put a little small fence around it. It wasn’t worth much. It rotted away in about three years, but we got it sort of enclosed, and we started taking care of it and at least keeping it clean and tidy. And we took it under license agreement and said, “This is going to be a big challenge.” We had one outlet we thought we could at least get some funding from. But as we were doing this, a resident –

we were still, at that point of time, with another greening organization. They were acting as our fiscal agent. Now, this other greening organization – and I don't want to disparage it too much – we had some problems with it eventually. I think the biggest philosophical problem I had with this other organization – although I did sit on its board and there were many fine things about it, I think the biggest philosophical thing that I had with that other organization was that they, of course, as one of the parts of their mission statement, was to empower people. Well, this is a very common mission statement in this community, and what I have observed, not just with this group but with a number of groups, is that everybody wants to empower – the verb, empower. But they don't want to deal with an empowered group. Well, this is a little bit of a conflict. If in your process of empowering, you make people dependent upon you, that's not empowering. That is definitely not empowering. Now, you have to – it's like raising children. You raise children, and at some point, you have to say, "You're off on your own." And you've got to accept that. You can have your tears, and I mean all of the things about letting your child go, but at some point of time, you have to let go. And so that was part of the breakup that we had with this other fiscal agent. But meanwhile, along this time, we had started work – we were going after a fairly large grant from the city; it was some federal money. It was only $125,000, but that was big money for us. It was a grassroots program, and we had applied once and had been turned down – well, not turned down. They never formally turned anybody down, but they hadn't granted it. So, we were going after it again. We felt that we had organized again and had a real chance of doing it. But you understand that the fundraising, the proposals, got written by me. They didn't get written by the other group, so I mean, it's a question – [inaudible] empowering thing. We finally got that money. But in the process, I've tried – and let's step back a little bit. In the process of doing this, one of the things, as our fiscal agent was trying to help us organize the community, they felt it would be a very good idea to have sort of a community meeting with the police because there are always a lot of concerns about crime. So they called a community meeting, and quite a number of people came, including a number of people

from here on Nonquit Street. It was held off the street. It was not far off the street, but it was held off the street. But the police didn't show up.

EB: Well, it's just one challenge after another.

RC: Well, there were several people on this street who were very upset that the police had not shown up. This other group was sort of giving me all sorts of rationale and excuses for why the police had not been at that meeting. At any rate, one of the residents from Nonquit Street came to me and said, "Ruth, do you think there's any way you can get the police to meet with us?" And I said, "Yup, I do." And he said, "Well, please do it." I said, "You want me to do it?" I said, "Oh yeah, I think I can get the police to meet with us." And I had not done it – until somebody asked, I wasn't going to do it any more than – I didn't feel when Magnolia started, I was willing to go with her towards this vision. I didn't want to go it all by myself. I wanted it to somehow emanate, at least out of other people, some other sense, in this community. Well, now I have somebody who's asking me to deal with something other than gardening, and there's this crime. And this is getting at least the police to come out and meet with us. Well, I wrote a letter to Paul Evans, who was the Commissioner of Police – he's not now. He's just recently taken another job. But I wrote a letter to Paul Evans, and I said, "Gee, we're down here on Nonquit Street. This is what's happening on a daily basis. This is what we're facing." And I said, "Well, where the hell are the police?" And I said, "What does it take to get a police officer out here to meet with this community?" I said, "Do we have to have a murder before we get a police officer out to meet with residents who are extremely concerned?" Well, I had a call back within less than a week and arrangements to have a meeting with police representation.

EB: And they showed up?

RC: Of course. Of course. Now, I had said to one of the women at this other fiscal group – she said, "How do you think that –?" Again I said, "I can do it." I said, "I know

how to do it together." She said, "I don't believe you. We're having all these problems." And I said, "You watch me." I said, "Within a month, we will have a meeting with the police." Well, it's very simple. There comes a time when you don't go to the bottom; you go to the top. If you want to get something done, you don't go to the bottom person who may or may not do this; you go to his boss. Simple as that. So I went to the Commissioner. And yes, we did. So, at that point in time, we sort of became the Nonquit Street Neighborhood Association and land trust and garden. Well, we sort of became the Nonquit Street Neighborhood Association. Then through our fiscal agent, we got a planning grant for the development of the Nonquit Street Green. Now, these grants are given to neighborhood groups. But if the neighborhood group is not a 501(c)3, you have to go through a fiscal agent. We had named this other group as our fiscal agent. But we were the primary group who did this. Well, once we got the grant, this other group, our fiscal agent, suddenly took the attitude, "Well, we've been mandated to build this park." And I said, "Well, that's really not quite the case. You are the fiscal agent. Of course, we want you involved and stuff like this because we've named you as this fiscal agent, but this is not ...". Well, the executive director sort of decided that she wanted to redefine this project. And the redefinition excluded our group in many, many ways, but it excluded us from everything but taking responsibility for the maintenance and care. I said, "Well, gee, I'm sorry." If you're going to make a commitment to caring for something and raising funds for something, you probably want a little bit of say-so in what you're committing to. You can't let somebody – I can't say, "Okay, I'm going to raise funds for you. I'm going to take care of whatever it is you build." Okay? I can't take care of whatever it is you build because I have to know what the hell it is you're going to build before I can make that commitment. Ergo facto, we have to have some dialogue here. Well, I still was not ready to make a break until several people within my community just took great exception to the way the executive director of our fiscal agent was approaching this project, and they just – and again, I wasn't the one who implemented the disaffiliation. But I was not the one who emanated it.

EB: In other words, it was consensus for this [overlapping conversation; inaudible]

RC: It was consensus, yes. I get to make these things happen, that –

EB: Why is that?

RC: I don't know. I don't know. I mean, maybe because I think I know how to do it.

EB: You know the system. You know the systems from –?

RC: Well, I've been learning the system. So we disaffiliated, and that left us with another big challenge, disaffiliation.

EB: And you're finally the ones [inaudible].

RC: Yes, that's right.

EB: And then you [reaffiliate?]?

RC: Well, no. So it's the question, do you take another –? Nobody wanted to take another fiscal agent because everybody was just so appalled with the approach of this particular agency, and I warned people. I said, "By disaffiliating, you no longer have a fiscal agent. You've got to have a fiscal agent, and so we either become our own 501(c)3 or we go with another." And the decision was we wanted to become our own 501(c)3. And that's sort of how it happened. And so, in a sense, we gained our autonomy –

[END OF PART 1]

EB: Oh, good. I'm actually going to ask you a formal question here to get things into the web exhibits format. And it is, what role does your work – and this means your activism work – what role does your work play in how you define yourself? It's a very tough question. People have trouble with it, but I know you can do it. What role does your

work play in how you define yourself?

RC: Well, I think we all – people have a bad tendency of defining themselves by their work. And generally, that's sort of the job that you have. Interestingly, my role here with the community has been – I've never been paid for any of this work that I've done. I mean, this is all voluntary.

EB: When I use work, I mean –

RC: No, no. I would like to be able to get to the point where because there is a tremendous amount of foundation work that has to be done, the point of getting at least a half–time salary out of it. But so far, that hasn't come to fruition yet. Most of the time that I was doing this, I did have another job – right at the moment, I don't – I'm just pretty much involved with this and with another project – open space project – that I am being paid for with the Carter School, which is a public school here in Boston. I would say, although I have had a number of jobs in my life, and I've defined myself – I was a teacher at one point in time, and I called myself a teacher. I was a systems administrator at one time, a computer systems administrator at one time, and I called myself a systems administrator. Now I'm pretty much just doing open-space projects and trying to sustain myself through this work with some degree of difficulty. If I had to define myself, I'd say managing open-space projects, managing open-space developments.

EB: Let me change the wording here. How you see yourself is my intent.

RC: How do I see myself?

EB: Yeah, instead of define – where do you –?

RC: How do I see myself? Well, I see –

EB: How do you see yourself as a result of doing this kind of work? Your sense of self.

RC: I see this in some ways as – I used to say, people would say – I've had jobs, as I've said, that were very, very satisfying. And people would say to me, "Well, you seem to be so happy in your work." I said, "Well, I don't really know that I'm happy in my work, and you're not necessarily right in saying that I'm 'happy' with such–and–such a job." And I said, "The reason I don't know is because I don't have any choice. I have to work to earn a living." Ergo facto, I do not know that I can ever tell you that I am happy with a job or with a certain degree of work. And I've never known. I think I can look back and say, "Yes, this was satisfying." In a sense, this has been – I've had a modicum of choice in this.

EB: Right. You could have said no to Magnolia from day one.

RC: I could have said no. This, I've had a modicum of choice with. And so, since this has been, because it's been a modicum of choice, and there has been some ability, or greater ability than when you are working for someone else, in defining my own role. It has been, in a sense, perhaps the most satisfying thing I have ever done in my life.

EB: Wow.

RC: We have tried, and I want to divert a little bit here – I gave you sort of a history of how we came about. But one of the things we've tried to do – it's an inter – we call ourselves – I will show you the letterhead or give you a letterhead at some point of time. One of the ways we define ourselves is "Fighting Crime with Flowers."

EB: Oh. I think we had that little logo, whatever – mantra –

RC: Yeah, that's sort of our logo. "Fighting Crime with Flowers." Well, when we started meeting with the police, we became a crime watch group. Well, there are certain things – you need to watch out for your neighbors. You look out, and you try to keep some degree – but how does one fight crime? Well, I don't have the faintest idea. I've only got some ideas on what affects crime rates and things like that, but I don't know how you

fight crime. I'm not a police officer. So I don't know how you actually fight crime. I do know that there are things that affect crime. And one thing that affects crime is the appearance of a neighborhood. So that sort of was the choice that we made, that we would try to fight crime with the cleanliness and the beauty in what we develop. And in doing this, we would try to appeal to the spiritual sense. This is a neighborhood that, in many ways, is devoid of anything that is spiritually satisfying. Well, if you go into a neighborhood and all you see is trash around, and you never see a tree, or the tree you see is in pretty rough condition, what is there that's spiritually satisfying in your neighborhood? I mean, I go out to Newton, which I cannot afford. And I love Newton. God, I love – it's a beautiful neighborhood.

EB: I can't afford it either when I lived there.

RC: Well, it's a beautiful community. It's a beautiful community.

EB: You can't afford your own house in Newton now.

RC: Yeah, well, it's a beautiful, beautiful community. And there are other beautiful communities. But Newton is one because it's close, and I go there fairly often, that I always have some – I always enjoy driving down Commonwealth Avenue. It's beautiful.

EB: It really is uplifting [inaudible].

RC: It's uplifting. Now, I can't afford to live there, but I can afford to drive through there, so it doesn't bother me. The affordability doesn't bother me. The fact that it's there, that I can go, that there's something uplifting about it, means that there's somewhere that there's inspiration. But I don't see why you can't have this in other communities too. And I'm very conscious of nature and beauty as being spiritually uplifting. And I think that through – I mean, in a sense, I see nature as God's finest work. I mean, it's sort of his cathedral.

EB: That's beautiful.

RC: Well, you could say that mankind is God's finest work, but that's a different thing. But it's sort of his – this is the magnificence of this world. And I feel that without this, there's just very little to satisfy for us. And one of the things that I disliked when I moved to Dorchester because we're a little bit out of the way was if I want to walk to something – it's not the best neighborhood to walk in, and I'm not sort of talking about just because of crime – it not being the best neighborhood to walk in. But there's a whole lot of areas that you walk through that there's nothing spiritually satisfying! And I love walking around. We all do. Walking around, I like looking at beautiful homes. I like looking at things, architecturally fine things. These, I enjoy. It means something to me; it does something for me. And I don't think there's – I think that we can have these things in the community, at least in some small way. So we have tried to focus on that which appeals to the spiritual because no other group has ever tried to focus on it. Basically, every other organization – as far as I can see in this community – has basically said, "You can't have that until we get the crime rate down."

EB: There you go.

RC: Well, and I'm saying, "Maybe you will never get the crime rate down if you don't have this. And we can have this, in spite of the crime rate."

EB: Are there statistics that it has affected the crime rate?

RC: Oh, I can't give you statistics – I mean, we're very small. I don't think we're having too much trouble with crime on Nonquit Street. We had a greater problem with it a few years back than we have now, but no, I can't give you any statistics on it. I think there are a large degree of statistics showing that when communities are revitalized when there is an object of care, you do see the crime rate go down. But taking Nonquit Street – and actually, those types of statistics, no, I don't have. But I do think that when you talk

about belief structures, I was taught – and I believe this – that there is a spark of divinity in all of us. There is a little bit of God in all of us. And I confess that, quite frankly, there are a few people that I would have to say, well, they need their spark fanned a little bit.

EB: Right, right.

RC: Or that you almost can't find it, but I actually do believe that there is something within all of us that aspires for the best, that can be touched and can be moved. We have tried, as best we could, in what we are doing, and particularly with our approach to aesthetics and beauty, to reach this and to appeal to the better side of people than the grubby, greedy side of people. And even to the point – I will admit, there are some who say – there were some who said, "Why do you need art?" And I had to say, "Well, maybe because I can get funding for that." I want to tell you that getting funding for art is not at all easy. But there are groups who will fund our art, and they won't fund other things. Well, to some people, this is exactly how I sold it because it's something that we can get the funding for, and if we include art in our project, it will make it more appealing to some people. Now, this isn't the only reason I included it. It's because we happen to believe – there are those of us who happen to believe that art is intrinsic to quality of life. But if it has to be sold that way, that's the way it has to be sold.

EB: So, the philosophy is beautiful, and it's very helpful – all throughout this, I get a sense of many obstacles that you have overcome, challenges – just one after another after another, and I'm wondering what the greatest challenges have been for you in accomplishing what you've accomplished here.

RC: There are challenges to everything – there are challenges in anything you do in life; there are challenges, too. Nothing comes easy.

EB: I mean specific –

RC: Well, I'm going to try to – I'm going to try to, but I'm not sure I can give you –

EB: But, I mean, first, the lack of police help at the beginning.

RC: That's right.

EB: And you sort of talked about that.

RC: Well, the lack of community support at the beginning. I mean, not everybody comes out. You have to do something to build this. You have to develop this. You have to do this. I'll tell you quite frankly – when we started out if I had known, or I think even if Magnolia had known, when we sort of started out with our modest little endeavor, that we would still be twelve, fifteen, years later, working as hard as we're working, we might have said, "Gee, do we want to do this?" But you don't know this. You never know what the future is going to be, so you start out with a small thing. And if you have success with that, you build up a little better, and a little bit more, and a little bit more. You also become very, very stubborn. Because if you invest yourself in something – it's the same thing with money – you now have an investment. It becomes harder and harder to give it up. One of the biggest challenges has been – well, the way to solve it is persistence. You don't get funding, you don't get community, you don't get help from the city just by saying, "We'd like this." You have to make sure you do it yourself. I'm not talking about – we've had a lot of assistance from the city; we've got all sorts of things. But you don't just go out and say, "We'd like such–and–such done," and just think that somebody else out there is going to take it upon themselves to do it. I mean, they may take it upon themselves to do a portion of it, like the actual physical job of doing it. But the whole thing of administering it and getting it done – if you don't take that on yourself, it's never going to happen. If you leave it to somebody else, it's just never going to happen. And so a lot of this has been just persistence. Somebody says, "Oh yeah, we'll look into that. We'll get that done for you." Well, six months later, it's not done. Eight months later, it's not done, So you've got to – oh, God, on the phone constantly. It's follow-through.

EB: It's brutal, isn't it?

RC: It's brutal. I don't know if that answers your question.

EB: It totally does.

RC: Okay. That's the challenge is the follow-through – making it happen. That's the challenge, is the follow-through, making it happen.

EB: Making it finally happen. A lot of promises, right? A lot of happiness. A lot of celebrations.

RC: Lots and lots of little idle promises. And you've got to hold people's feet to the ground with these promises to make something happen. And it's not just holding somebody's feet to the ground – it's very easy to say if I say, "Well, I'll do something for you …". Now, if I don't get around to it right away, then if I haven't heard from you when I think about it a few months later, or six months later, or seven months later, and I haven't heard from you, I sort of say to myself, "Well, I wonder how important it actually was, to begin with." Now, if I've been hearing from you, and you have been nudging me all along, well you've certainly given me the impression that this is pretty important to you.

EB: You're the only person that I've interviewed that has talked about being stubborn and persistent. Can't we call it tenacious?

RC: Well, tenacious.

EB: No, because she said, "No, I'm just stubborn." I said, "Tenacious."

RC: Well, tenacious is –

EB: And persistence sounds good too –

RC: Well, persistent, tenacious, pain in the ass –

EB: This seems to be a case for all of you Women Who Dared, that this is – you could have just laid it down and said, “I don’t have the strength.” [inaudible]

RC: But if we’d laid it down, you understand, I wouldn’t be getting this award; it would be the person who made it happen who did because somebody has to take this role. Things don’t just happen by themselves.

EB: And I have an obvious question. You’re a different religion and often a different skin color than a lot of people in your community.

RC: Okay?

EB: How has this affected you, your work, the response you’ve gotten? Have you affected other people, the response you’ve gotten, anything, or can you say, “They don’t even know I’m Jewish?” White, of course, they know.”

RC: Not everybody knows I’m Jewish.

EB: No one particularly knows you’re Jewish?

RC: Well, people who come into my house might know I'm Jewish; there are a few Jewish symbols around. Maybe they know –

EB: They probably assume you’re not, though – they just assume it because they're Christians, you're Christian.

RC: I would think that’s probably – I mean, I think one assumes. I think it’s always been my sort of – you sort of extend yourself. Of course, if I like you, you like me, then you know, then of course. It’s just one of these things. I don’t know that religion is something – if somebody asks, I tell them what religion I am. But I don’t see that it’s anybody’s business. I don’t think it’s anything to necessarily advertise. I mean, it’s not something that I keep hidden. But I don’t see that –well, yes, I define myself very much [as] being

Jewish, in a personal sense. But I don't go out – I've seen people who go out – I remember, there's a person who just recently ran for directorship in one of the other organizations, and he defined himself as a Christian. Well, I'm sorry, I just don't do it. In my life out in the community, no, I don't define myself this way.

EB: But [inaudible]?

RC: Well, the truth of the matter is that I'm not [inaudible]. I carry some [laughter] – but no.

EB: [inaudible] D–A–R, I'm sure.

RC: Well, yeah, probably. Well, that's an interesting thing. I mean, I've never known how you define race. It's interesting, [overlapping dialogue; inaudible] – do you define it by – basically, race is defined in the practical sense and in the social sense, in terms of how people respond or react to other people. It's defined.

EB: It's social.

RC: Yes. This is the social. It's defined by your appearance. If you appear – do you appear Black, or do you not appear Black? It doesn't matter. If you appear white – it's strictly my appearance. And it's how the other person sees you, not how –

EB: Therefore, it's very important to know if that has affected the community, you, the response, anything. Is it Ruth Clarke, the white woman, or is it Ruth Clarke, the Nonquit resident?

RC: I don't know. I don't know. I don't know, absolutely. I think that – racism is something that permutes all races. Yes, I think there are probably people who do define

me as Ruth Clarke, the white woman. This is something that I haven't chosen to ask other people. My assumption is, yes, that other people, in terms of my race, define me as being white. Do they define me as white in being a polarity? Maybe yes. I don't know. This is something I haven't chosen. I mean, I'm very conscious of the fact that not everybody thinks that I'm the end-all and be-all. Not everybody thinks that I'm the end-all and be-all; there are plenty of people to point out every single flaw that I have –

EB: But does that mean that they're opposing what you're doing?

RC: I don't know whether it's opposing what I'm doing or not. I have no idea. I mean, in communities, there's a lot of petty politics out there; I hate to tell you that.

EB: No, no. If that's what you're referring to, I understand.

RC: It's petty. It's a lot of petty politics. Yes, I have the sense that some people are not as fond of me as other people. And how do they define me? I don't know because I am not – I get a little feedback once in a while, but I'm not going to go out and ask you.

EB: What about just the Nonquit residents themselves, then? How have they responded to your work?

RC: Well, I think they've responded – how they responded to the work? I think they responded very positively – the work, the accomplishments.

EB: The accomplishments. The accomplishments.

RC: Yes. I think that most Nonquit Street residents can see the work we have accomplished. It's not my work; it's our work. I don't know that everybody automatically shares the same vision when you go into something or automatically sees – and I don't even know that anyone does. You know, the "If we do this, this will happen," it's sort of like predicting the future. How broad you can go out in this, one doesn't know. I think

that everybody certainly recognizes that the value of their houses have gone up.

EB: They're benefiting economically?

RC: They're benefiting economically, they're benefiting spiritually, they're benefiting socially because we all know each other now, and we actually talk to each other. We're a fractious group. I mean, as most groups are, we can never – we always have to have an argument about something.

EB: That's okay.

RC: But, no, I think that by and large, oh yes, that people do recognize that we have made some major, major – we have moved this street from – when we look back – and we also now have a span of better than ten years. This is important to have. Because you can't measure accomplishments in, well, was it better six months ago? You've got to be able to look back and say, "What was it like ten years ago?" You've got to have this span.

EB: So, how rewarding is that?

RC: Well, I think it's very rewarding. I think it's rewarding to all of us. I think that it doesn't have to be recognized. It's just rewarding in the sense that you know you can look out and say, "Yes. Things are better." It's not in the sense of being recognized for it. And I think that we have all taken – and I certainly have – but I think we all have taken, in terms of getting the Nonquit Street Green built –and then, of course, in getting the sculpture, which are two of our biggest, biggest, projects, an enormous sense of pride and accomplishment, that this has been done. And I take personal pride in it, and I think we all do with it – this is just what we have. We've got something now to point to, to

show. And since our projects have been, in many ways, capital projects – I don't know quite a good lot. I haven't worked so much with social projects, and social projects I'm not quite sure how you measure it. Capital projects, it's a little easier because they're capital, and you either have them or you don't have them. But they're sort of a little easier to point to in that sense and say, "This is a physical, tangible accomplishment."

EB: Oh my gosh, absolutely. The impact your work has had, I mean, you have improved the quality of people's lives.

RC: I think we have, and I think people recognize that the quality of their lives have very, very much improved, very much improved.

EB: How has your life changed, as a result of your involvement, personally?

RC: [laughter] Well, it has changed – well, economically, it has changed because I'm certainly a poorer woman, I guarantee you that. I mean, has it changed –

EB: If you had kept your job and not been laid off or whatever, that would not necessarily be the case, would it?

RC: If I had stayed in my last job, no, I still would have done – I mean, I was stubborn enough to complete these projects. It would have taken longer. It would have – maybe we would not have accomplished as much as we have now. I mean, the more time you have to devote, of course, that affects certain things. I don't know.

EB: But the reality is that you have had a decline in your –

RC: Oh yeah. I've had a decline in my personal income, oh yes.

EB: Would you say that's a result of the work and involvement you've had because you've expended personal resources, you're saying?

RC: I've expended personal resources, and I have given up personal resources. Do I mind doing this? As one of my girlfriends pointed out to me when I get home, one of the girls I grew up with pointed out to me one day, she said, "Ruthie, you and I both know how to live poor." She says, "That's the great thing about you and I. We know how to live poor." I'd never thought about it that way, but it actually is true. Now, because I have kept my expenses within a very, very reasonable framework, I have a certain modicum of choice or range of the money that – I can sustain myself on this. I can sustain myself somewhat better on a little more. But you understand that I don't have some of the requirements that other people have because – and when I say this, I don't want to, I had a friend of mine who once said to me, "Well, Ruth, you don't need to earn as much as I do because I have more expenses than you." And I said, blah, blah, blah. I said, "I also could choose to be house-poor if I choose to." I said, "That's a little unfair. I made a choice not to be house-poor."

EB: That's right, you did.

RC: But because I can keep – and I don't have a family, I can give more of myself. It can be in the sense that I'm earning less now, but I can give more of myself than I could at one time.

EB: [inaudible] in your situation, maybe, because you don't have children, that doesn't make you – it's not required by our society, "Those who don't have children must give of themselves to their community" – hardly.

RC: No, I don't think – no, no, I'm not saying that because we don't have children, we must give ourselves more to the community. I don't want to translate it in that way. I mean that, obviously, there are times in your life that you can give more –

EB: You can, but the fact is that you chose to do it.

RC: You can, right, but do you?

EB: Right, which is why you're nominated.

RC: It's because it's important to me because I get a certain amount of personal satisfaction from it. Not satisfaction. I mean, no, I do get – when we dedicated the Green and opened the Green, I had sort of an epiphany, as I said to Pam Paternoster. It was sort of an epiphany that, "Gee, when I'm gone, and I go when I join the matriarchs, wherever that may be, that I can say, "Yes, I have done something to make a difference." And it doesn't matter that you recognize it, or the Jewish Women's Archive recognizes it – it doesn't matter if anybody recognizes it, it matters that I recognize it and that I can say, "Yes. You haven't done much with your life. You're flawed. You're not perfect. You're all of this, but yes, I have done" – I mean, there's at least one major thing that I can point to to justify the fact that I have lived on this earth, that I indeed made – now it's not just a matter of choice, it's also a matter of opportunity. You've got to grasp opportunities as they appear, and you can't always grab opportunities. I mean, it's sort of a mixture of things.

EB: I agree with that. A circumstance is an opportunity you have to be somewhat around in order to –

RC: That's right. And you can't define – I can't go out and say, "Well, gee, I want to be an activist in such-and-such." It doesn't work that way. It works in how the opportunities present themselves to what you can do and how much can you give up yourselves. If you're home raising eight kids, the chances are not very good that you can spend a great deal of time – my poor mother made all of our clothes. I mean, it was a classic. It was where we had the ironing day, we had the sewing day, we had the mending day – the very old-fashioned sense. But, no, she made all of our clothes, she baked, she did all the cooking, she did all of these things. I know my mother felt liberated when my youngest brother finally left home. As a matter of fact, she announced to him – she told me this – she announced to him when he graduated high school – she handed him an alarm clock,

and she said, “You can get yourself up from now on because I am not going to get up. I will never again get up to get up a child. I’m not doing this again.” Now, since I was an older child, I didn’t realize this. But, no, she liberated herself that way. And, of course, she developed new interests, more community activism – but it’s all part of what you can do at certain stages in your life.

EB: Let me ask you a question that I’ve asked all of these honorees, which is: what advice do you have for people interested in being activists?

RC: Well, I don’t know that you can – I don’t know that you can actually make that decision.

EB: No, you go get your coffee. This will wait. This will wait.

RC: I don’t know that’s how that happens. You can make a decision if there’s an opportunity that presents itself to become active or to do something – you can make that decision. Am I going to act upon this opportunity? Now, there are hundreds and hundreds of opportunities that present themselves on a daily basis, opportunities to become active. But you have to grab one of the opportunities. You have to sort of say, “This is something that I can do, and I want to grab that opportunity.” I don’t know when you grab it, but you don’t just decide, “Well, I’m going to suddenly become active in such-and-such.” It’s sort of an opportunistic time that you grab.

EB: It doesn’t happen in the abstract.

RC: I don’t think it’s a decision – “I’m going to become active.” It is an inclination – if you have the inclination, yes, I wish to help humanity, I wish to do something for my fellow man, you then find an opportunity that goes along with your interest, and with your abilities, and sort of grab it.

EB: Okay, so a teenage girl on the next street over, let's say, says, "My street should be doing something like this. I don't know what to do, though. I don't know where to begin. What do we do?"

RC: Well, very easy. That one's easy. No, no, that's easy – what do you do? You talk to people. But you don't define it simply by talking to people. You go out, and if you see something that needs to be done, you simply do it.

EB: Just start.

RC: You start.

EB: Like you guys, you and Magnolia [overlapping conversation; inaudible].

RC: Exactly. You see something that needs to be done, do it. You don't need anybody's permission. You don't need to have other people affirm this; if it needs to be done, you do it. You don't need to have – if there's trash on the street, if there's litter on the street, pick it up. You don't need anybody's permission to do it. I don't need to give you permission to do that. If it's something that needs to be done, you simply do it. Now, how much you can do – I mean, then, this in a sense becomes a collective thing, and how much you can do sort of depends on what it is you're trying to do, and who will help you, and that's sort of – you've got to pursue this out a little bit. But you don't need anybody's permission to start doing something, and if something needs to be done, fine. The windows need to be washed? Go wash the damn windows. You shouldn't be telling your teenager, "Clean your room." If it needs to be done, you do it. And you can make things happen. Making things happen – I mean, the essence of philanthropy is, if you care enough, if people care enough, it can happen. You can make things happen; you simply have to care enough to make them happen. And how do you make them happen? I don't know exactly how you make them happen because along the way in making things happen, you're going to meet all sorts of challenges, and I can't define

what those challenges are going to be. But with each one of the challenges, you have to be flexible enough to confront it. And somehow get through that challenge. But nobody can define to you what the challenges are going to be.

EB: Except guarantee that they will be there.

RC: Or, except guarantee that they will be there. Oh, yeah, they will definitely be there.

EB: A littlest topic on womanhood. Let's try to make it – I'll give you lots of ideas, and you can just speak. Has the women's movement had an impact on your activism? Has being female affected your path toward activism?

RC: Well, you understand, I'm female. So, I see the world from a woman's perspective. I do not know what a male perspective is, so I don't know. I don't know that any one of us can answer. I think that a woman's perspective is different than a man's perspective. I do not feel – I don't know that anybody who's raised children or has ever seen small boys and girls should have any illusion that boys and girls are entirely different little creatures. And this has nothing to do with socialization. I mean, believe me. From the very earliest time, there are differences between little boy –

EB: Do you mean as a teacher in classrooms, is that it?

RC: Well, speaking as a teacher, but also speaking as a – I do have nephews and nieces, and I have lots of friends with small children. Little boys and little girls are very, very, very different. Now, I don't want to downplay that there are social aspects, but little boys and little girls are very, very different. But I see the – I mean, unfortunately, I can only see out of a woman's set of eyes because that's what I –

EB: So, as you see what being a woman is and means, how has that affected your choices in becoming involved in this community?

RC: Well, one of the roles of women that I think is incorporated into everything I've done – they say that a woman is also a nurturer. We like to feed people. We like to take care of people. And I don't know how that is true or not, but I think that it's sort of an extension of the nurturing role that women identify with. The women's movement. I've only been on the – I support the women's movement. I define myself as a feminist. But I've only been on the peripheral side of the women's movement. I haven't been terribly active in it in any sort of structured way. I feel that I incorporate it, but no, I haven't been active in it in a formal sense. As I have progressed through life – I did say earlier that I feel that we all have to attribute to our mothers the woman who has most influenced our lives. But I have, in the span of my lifetime, known a lot of women and a lot of men. Now, men have made a big difference in my life. Don't get me wrong. They really have. But I don't know that men make differences to women in the way we define ourselves as women – at least, that hasn't been the experience for me. I think we define ourselves as women based on the women around us – our mothers, our aunts, and women that we interact with through the years. Now, as we progress through life, and especially, I think, when we watch women who were once – who was forty when you're eighty, and you know her and what she's doing, and plays a great deal of influence. I think as you get to the point when you're losing a lot of these people, it especially strikes you how much other women have impacted your life. And also, I think, in terms of when you get to certain stages of your life or when you get to certain experiences, you very often flashback. I remember one woman who I would say had a great influence on my life, saying to me – and this was many years ago, and her youngest son was then a teenager, and he was into marijuana, and they were having all sorts of problems with him – and she said, "If we can just keep him alive until he's twenty–one, he'll be okay." Well, when I was nineteen, I didn't quite understand that. But from the perspective of now having watched children, and from my perspective now of having watched certain children go from infancy through teenage lives into adulthood, I have very often looked at a few teenagers whose parents are having problems with them and who are challenges to all of

us and said, “You just keep them alive until they’re twenty–one.” There’s a span, and teenagers are very difficult because they think they know everything, but they still need a lot of protection, so you got to get them through that stage. But it’s funny; I see myself – that’s just an example of coming to certain experiences in life and reacting exactly like somebody in the past reacted, and sort of appreciating – gee, I have modeled my life – there are things that other women have said to me – that even at times that you don’t even quite understand, or even at times that you reject, that really, you don’t even realize how much they influence until you are confronted with a similar situation, or that you get to a certain point of life. Now, I happen to – I haven’t yet issued this. One of these days, I will – I happen to owe a letter of apology to Lady Bird Johnson. I owe this woman a letter of apology because when she was First Lady, and she made the beautification of America her prime project, I was a young thing, [and] I questioned the social relevance of that.

EB: Ugh.

RC: I felt that as First Lady, she could certainly be doing something that was far more relevant than concerning herself with nature and beautification and ecology. I mean, she certainly – I mean, goodness. There was the Civil Rights Movement. My goodness, gracious, weren’t there things that were a lot more important and relevant? Well, it’s sort of funny.

EB: Totally ironic. So glad you brought this up.

RC: I owe her – I mean, she doesn’t know me, but I do, and one of these days, maybe I’ll get around and write it. I do owe the woman a letter of apology. From my perspective now, I do have a better understanding of the importance of what it was she was trying to do that I could not understand when I was a younger and more agitating type of person. And I think we all go – I mean, if we can listen to our hearts, and our memories, I don’t know how any of us cannot recognize – I’ve heard women say – I got such a kick out of

Maria Shriver Schwarzenegger saying – apparently, and she's confessed this publicly, so I can quote her on this – apparently when she was a teenager she was at times a little embarrassed by her mother, which is something most of us can relate to, that our mothers and our fathers – God, they can embarrass us when we're teenagers. Oh my God. And there were times that I think – she confesses that she felt a little embarrassed by her mother, who was generally a little disheveled, and she relates the story of arriving one day to a function of her son, a school function, and she was dressed in combat boots and grubbies. She looked at herself when she went into the room, [and] she said, "Oh my God, I've become my mother." I think you've got to be – and I think she realized at the same time it's not that she was sort of proud that in spite of the fact that, at the time, she was horribly embarrassed by her mother. This, all of a sudden, is not important anymore. She felt a great sense of pride, not a great sense of "Oh my God, I've become my mother," that this is something that shouldn't have been done, but a sense, "Oh, yes. She has taught me something, and I have come to embrace things that she valued when she was my age that I did not understand at a younger age." So that's what I have to say about –

EB: That was really helpful —

RC: – about women.

EB: Now I have to take pictures.

RC: Okay.

EB: So let's turn this off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]