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Prince, Edgar and Emilie (Prince) Wierda (Evergreen Commons) Oral History Interview: Citizens of Holland

Phil Tanis

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HOPE COLLEGE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Ed Prince and Emilie Wierda
Interview
August 1985

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FOREWARD

The Hope College Oral History Project was designed to record and transcribe for permanent collection the living heritage of Holland, Michigan. Since the project's birth in 1977, Hope student researchers have interviewed people involved in various parts of Holland's history, including that of Hope College. The persons interviewed represent a vital, but non-renewable resource, whose reflections will provide primary material for future historical research.

Upon completion of each interview session, the taped conversation was transcribed and edited by both the interviewer and interviewee. Some alterations concerning accuracy of detail and grammar may have come about during the editing process, but at all times the viewpoint of the interviewee has been maintained. Due to the fact that each of these interviews comes from a highly personal perspective, there may be some inaccuracies in detail. No claim is made that the information contained within these transcripts is absolutely accurate. The interval of time between the interviewee's experiences and the events mentioned can add to some inaccuracies. Tapes of all the interviews are stored in the Hope College Archives in Van Zoeren Library.

Without the advice of Dr. Elton Bruins, Dean of Humanities at Hope College and project coordinator, this project would not have succeeded to the extent it did. The success of this project must also be attributed to the efforts of the interviewees -- each has gone above and beyond the call of duty, putting in much time both in research and editing. I thank each and every one of them for their contribution to the history of Holland, in both this interview and what they have accomplished with their lives.

Phil Tanis, Summer 1985

INTRODUCTION

Ed Prince has played a prominent role in Holland for quite some years, founding the Prince Corporation and nurturing it to grow to the extent it has. It is now one of the biggest employers in the area. Mr. Prince has always been active in industry in Holland, but a few years ago, with the help of his daughter Emilie and the prodding of Mrs. Marjorie Hoeksema, he became involved in social concerns in the area--specifically those of the senior citizens.

Sensing a need for a senior citizens center, Mr. Prince hired Emilie to travel the nation and research other senior centers. After this was done and architectural drawings created, Mr. Prince initiated a successful drive to fund a senior center in Holland--by donating one million dollars and committing to underwrite the utilities on the building for three years.

Dubbed Evergreen Commons, the senior center is one of the largest in the country--and has to be one of the most successful also. Since its opening, thousands of area seniors have joined the "club" by paying a small fee for membership. The center sponsors many activities, including regular bingo games, craft rooms, exercise sessions, lunches, and a day care. It has succeeded beyond all expectations, and the community is greatly indebted to Mr. Prince.

Special thanks for this interview must go to Mr. Harvey Buter, another interviewee of this year. It was upon his suggestion that this valuable interview be initiated.

Name: Edgar Prince

Birthplace: Holland, Mi

Birthdate: May 5, 1931

Education:

Elementary School: Washington School

Junior High School: Washington

Senior High School: Holland High School

College: University of Michigan

Father's name: Peter (deceased)

Father's occupation: produce

Mother's name: Edith De Weert Prince (De Jonge)

Spouse's name: Elsa Zwiép Prince

Date of marriage: March 27, 1954

Children's names: Betsy De Vos, Eileen Ellens, Emilie Wierda, Erik Prince

Name: Emilie Wierda

Birthplace: Holland, Michigan

Birthdate: [date removed], 1961

Education:

Elementary School: Southside Christian, Maplewood Christian

Junior High School: Holland Christian Middle School

High School: Holland Christian High School

College: Calvin College

Professional Experience: Coordinator for Senior Center (2 yrs.)

Father's name: Edgar Prince

Mother's name: Elsa Zwiep Prince

Spouse's name: Craig Wierda

Date of marriage: June 10, 1983

Other committees and assignments: Community Swimming Pool Steering Committee

Affiliations: Providence Christian Reformed Church, Holland Chorale

Present activities: working at Prince Corporation, hobbies (choirs, softball, tennis, etc.)

Interviewer: This August 27, 1985. I'm talking with Ed Prince and Emilie Wierda about Evergreen Commons. And if you could just give the background, the origins of Evergreen Commons...

Mr. Prince: We've been asked often how we got started with the senior social center. I guess it goes back to 1977, 1975, I can't remember.

Mrs. Wierda: 1974.

Mr. Prince: Whenever -- we bought a pontoon boat, Else and I bought a pontoon boat and the reason we did is that we wanted to give rides to people on Lake Macatawa. We found that a lot of people who lived in Holland, Michigan had never ridden on Lake Macatawa and so the pontoon boat was used to give seniors rides on the lake. Emily at the time was fourteen and Ilene, our daughter Ilene, was sixteen. Ilene had had her driver's license for about six months at that time, and she used a twelve passenger chevrolet van to drive into town and pick up ten seniors who were pre-arranged at a location by Marge Hoeksema. She would drive them out to our college, and Elsa would be involved heavily because they had to have life jackets zipped on to them before they went out on the dock. And Emily and Ilene would take them on a tour of Lake Macatawa which would usually took about 45 minutes. The lemonade and cookies were held back until the last ten minutes because there were no bathroom facilities on board the pontoon boat. It started out as a two times a day, two days a week program and it ended up three times a day, three days a week, and in all that summer they went through about 500 seniors. So following that summer we decided that wasn't necessarily the thing we wanted to do every summer so the pontoon boat stayed in storage the next year.

Every year following that summer Marge Hoeksema would write me a letter or call me and tell me she had to have a half hour time and tell me about the needs of seniors. And invariably the conversation would go around to the effect that the seniors needed a facility. In 1983 (that right?) Marge came and we talked about the fact the now is the time to put together a shopping list if she was ever going to see a senior center come to a fruition. And so she got together with Ted -- what's the guy's name?

Mrs. Wierda: Ludwig.

Mr. Prince: Ludwig. Ted Ludwig. Tom Ludwig. Tom Ludwig. And see Tom was overseas for a while during the building of the senior center so that's why I lose his name every once in a while. But they came back with a shopping list that they said they needed 18,000 to 20,000 square foot building. The senior center as it's now evolved is about 46,000 square feet. So it got a little bit bigger. I think if you look at the accomplishments that were made in the early days of the organization following May of '83 they included getting the senior groups together and all aiming at the same direction. There was a little bit of fragmentation going on in the early stages which is to be understood. And when the representatives of that group were finally understood that our involvement in the senior center was just going to be to get a building up -- we really didn't want to run the programs -- I think that's when they finally got on board. Really that's the start up of Holland's senior center.

Interviewer: Do you have anything to add? What was your involvement -- you were criss crossing the country -- how were you brought on this project?

Mrs. Wierda: Well when Prince Corporation decided that they were going to be the initial contributor to the project I was brought on board to be the coordinator of the whole project and to look at other senior centers and see what a senior center was all about because it was very new to this area. It was a very new idea and concept for Holland. Most people didn't even know what a senior center was. So I visited many others because there are a lot of them around the country and took a lot of the good points from them and had a lot of discussion around here and people that know a little bit more about aging and with my dad and a lot of architects we came up with a plan that we felt would make a beautiful facility for Holland and for the number of seniors we have that could use it.

Interviewer: How many seniors are in Holland right now?

Mrs. Wierda: In excess of 8,000. That was a 1980 census so that's already outdated. It probably double by the year 2,000 easily.

Interviewer: Is that the Holland area or just the city limits?

Mrs. Wierda: That's five townships which is basically Holland. It doesn't include Zeeland.

Interviewer: I just had a question. Oh, how was the Christian Middle School site selected and come about?

Mr. Prince: When Marge came with her shopping list and I asked her where she

thought it should be and she didn't really have any strong feelings we knew that the Holland Christian School had been desirous of selling the old middle school because they were vacating it. And we -- at that time I made contact with one of the board members of Holland Christian School and told them we didn't want any names known as to who the buyer was because we were in the middle of the hassle with the city on the airport at that time. We didn't really want the two to get mixed up. So as it ended up we had an attorney buy the building for us from the Christian School and then didn't make it public until after the airport program had been settled up. But that's really how it ended up. We felt that it was an important site in the city because it was in the center of the city. From an access standpoint for seniors, there are many seniors living in the four to five block walking radius of the senior center as it's now in place. Plus the fact that we're sensitive to what the city looks like long term. The alternate plan for the middle school could have been a converted apartment project and we didn't think that would be necessarily the best asset in that part of the city. So we think we served more than one purpose by doing a senior center there. I think we -- the senior center ends up being an excellent building block for that perimeter of the city.

Mrs. Wierda: Not only that but it is a focal point and so people see it and know about it because it's right in the middle of the city. Many senior centers aren't even acknowledged in other communities because they're off on the outskirts and people don't even know what they are or that they exist. Well everyone knows that the senior center exists in Holland.

Mr. Prince: Yeah. As alternate we -- because included with the senior center

site we had to pick up some houses on Twenty-first Street. We needed two houses there for sure, and if we were not able to buy those houses then we were going to scratch our plans as far as doing it down there and one of the alternate sites was on Ottawa Avenue where there was some sixteen acres available, where you could buy sixteen acres for less than what you end up with a package down there. You don't have a building to start with but then you don't have any of the problems with a building to start with. But Emily's right. From a focal point, this is an ideal location. And we think the architects did a super job of designing a building to fit on that location.

Interviewer: Who were the architects?

Mr. Prince: The outside of the building was designed by Design Plus in Grand Rapids. O.K. then you have Vern Omen. That's the fellow who was sitting right there.

Interviewer: What did Prince Corporation contribute money-wise --

Mr. Prince: A million dollars.

Interviewer: A million dollars. And then you're underwriting the -- what was it?

Mrs. Wierda: The utilities.

Mr. Prince: We underwrite the utilities for the first three years.

Interviewer: How is the other money raised? Where did that come from?

Mr. Prince: Still coming. Still to come.

Mrs. Wierda: Lots of sources. Community Development Grant monies gave us a \$50,000 grant. Many individual donations, many corporate pledges --

Mr. Prince: You may back up. That Community Grant money was really used to buy one of the houses on Twenty-first Street because we didn't want those money -- that money intermixed with the rest of the money.

Interviewer: There's a few rules and regulations that go along --

Mr. Prince: Well it was done -- it was the cleanest way to do it and it's a better way.

Mrs. Wierda: And Kresge Foundation has said they will give us a grant of \$100,000 if we raise the rest of the money by November. So that's what our goal is, is to raise the rest of that million dollars by November.

Interviewer: So how much was the entire project cost?

Mrs. Wierda: Just in excess of two million.

Mr. Prince: Two million.

Interviewer: You had said that all the programs were run by the various

organizations so what this was -- you built the building but the organizations have now moved in?

Mr. Prince: Yeah. Essentially what we have to operate the senior center is four people on a paid staff in essence. You've got an executive director, a program director, a daycare director, and a person in the kitchen. That really runs the building. They really run the building. And people can use the building for their individual programs. But I would imagine that if you look at the structure five years from now it won't be individual organizations anymore. They're all going to be part of a senior center.

Mrs. Wierda: And that's really what they are already. The organizations have come in and have continued the activities that they used to perform in all different locations around the city, but they are all a part of Evergreen Commons and the membership of Evergreen Commons, and any senior can become a member of Evergreen Commons. And so therefore the group that met at Fourteenth Street or the group that met in the Civic Center all now come to the senior center.

Mr. Prince: For one thing it's an air conditioned, clean facility. (laughter)

Interviewer: What organizations are there? I know there's Senior Citizens Advocacy Council. What other ones have been brought in? Were just groups like these?

Mrs. Wierda: They were just basically groups -- well, one was called the Senior Citizens Council and they were a group of seniors that met at the Civic

Center one day a week. They're no longer called that. They still perform a bingo activity one afternoon a week, and all those people are very instrumental in helping setting up those same programs in the senior center. They're the active ones because they were active before it started. Now they're active twice as much because they have a facility to do it in. The Senior Citizens Advocacy Council is now all under the senior center. They're performing their same programs and services but they are all a part of the senior center. And basically all of them have melted into one. The Fourteenth Street group still has meetings that same group of people organizes to put on, but they're put on in the senior center. So it's really become a collection for all the different smaller groups plus many more that were never a part of those small groups.

Interviewer: How many seniors are members?

Mrs. Wierda: I haven't asked this week yet, but two weeks ago it was over 3,500.

Interviewer: And it keeps climbing. What were the projections for that?

Mrs. Wierda: Well we had said that if we had between 1,500 and 2,000 the first year it would be a success. And that's really what we had planned on because based on other senior centers in other communities that would have been a very, very good response. But, as you can see, we've had twice that good a response. So we're pleased.

Interviewer: What kind of things can the seniors do there? What different

activities?

Mrs. Wierda: Anything. If they want it they can organize it or get a group to organize it. The facility is there for them to do it in, and the staff are more than ready to help and do things that seniors want to do. Right now there's programs and activities such as bingo, and bowling leagues, and a computer club, two different choirs, there's probably fifteen or sixteen different classes that can become involved in, a sewing club; they can --

Mr. Prince: Art.

Mrs. Wierda: Yeah, art classes, art clubs, a workshop they can go and do their projects in, they can take part in blood pressure clinics, and health check-up clinics, exercise classes. They can --

Mr. Prince: Shuffle board.

Mrs. Wierda: Play shuffle board. Pool, there's pool tables there. There's a library where they can come and read and take books out. There's a giftshop that they can come and give things to or buy things from. Come for lunch every day, they can each lunch from Monday through Friday there; a real good -- it's more like a dinner than a lunch, it's a well-rounded, balanced meal. Plus have a number of services offered to them: legal aid, hearing clinics. You know, the list goes on.

Interviewer: What do you see as the future? Do you see it as growing even more? And what are the long range plans for that area?

Mr. Prince: If the senior center has enough people active, eventually the senior center should own all those houses on Twenty-first Street. I would guess they would all be parking lots. We have a long term dream that perhaps one of those houses we could remodle and make into a day care area for -- it has been proven that one of the things that seniors lack when they don't have any grandchildren in the area is little children to hug and take care of. And so you would use seniors to help out mothers and take care of little children when they are doing something else. I guess the age in which we live will probably determine whether that ever happens because the liabilty insurance for day care centers this year is up four times from last year because of the problems of molesting and all the -- you now, it's dumb when you think about it. I struggle with how you'd ever handle that situation. One of the things I thought you could put a full time video monitor in there that played tape all the time so the whole experience, the whole day is taped so you could always go back to the archives and check the tapes as to what goes on. But it's frightening when you think about that problem. But ideally it would be a neat thing to be able to do some day because it would do one more step in the fulfillment of the peoples' lives. I think the neat thing about the senior social center, Phil, really comes back to when people get older their friends start to die around them, and what's evident, their friendship -- their circle of friendship gets smaller and they start to pull into themselves because they generally meet people in a church setting or in a coffee shop or because of some other friends. The advantage of a large facility of this type -- that's a multi-function facilty -- is that people can meet other people that they learn to thouroughly enjoy that they would not have had the opportunity to meet before. I think that that's one of the biggest social needs that

hopefully people will be able to overcome with that.

Interviewer: O.K. Another question just popped into my mind. Are you planning on getting grant monies or other monies to run the operation or where will that be coming from?

Mrs. Wierda: There's a number of sources. Yeah, probably ten, twelve different sources, and if you'd like me -- Region 14 which is a council on aging will be supplying a good chunk of the operating funds for the next probably couple years. Churches, individuals, patrons, gift shop proceeds, membership dues, all those kinds of things add up to an operating budget that is fairly minimal for an operation of that size, because the seniors provide so much of the volunteer help for it. But long term we hope to raise money to form an endowment fund so that it will run itself long term.

Interviewer: O.K. Is there anything else you'd like to add for the record on this accomplishment?

Mr. Prince: No, really, I think our family has had an enjoyable time doing it. It's a lot of responsibility and a lot of involvement but anything that's worthwhile takes a lot of work and it's been very worthwhile. We're excited to see people using it and being excited about it and about wanting to be a part of it. That's really the excitement.

Mrs. Wierda: Yep.

Interviewer: O.K. Thanks.

Interviewer: This August 27, 1985 I'm talking with Ed Prince and Emilie Wierda about Evergreen Commons. And if you could just give the background, the origins of Evergreen Commons....

Mr. Prince: We are often asked how we became involved with the senior center. I guess it all began in 1976 when we bought a pontoon boat so that we could give rides to elderly people on Lake Macatawa. We found that many people who had lived in Holland for years had never been for a ride on Lake Macatawa. So two of our daughters gave seniors boat rides on the lake. Emilie was fourteen at the time, and Eileen, another of our daughters, was sixteen. Eileen would drive a van into town and pick up ten seniors at the 14th St. Church. The riders would sign up through Marj Hoeksema who organized the dates and times people would receive their ride.

The seniors would ride out to our cottage and tour Lake Macatawa aboard the pontoon boat for about 1 hour and 45 minutes. It began as a 2-day a week, twice a day project. But there was such an interest amongst the seniors that the girls had to increase the number of tours to three times a day, 3 days a week. In all, some 500 seniors went for pontoon boat rides that summer.

Every year after that summer, Marj Hoeksema would call me to let me know she needed a half hour of my time to update me on the needs of seniors. Invariably, the conversation would turn to discussing the fact that seniors needed a facility.

In 1983, Marj came for her yearly visit and I asked her to put together her shopping list of what would make the ideal senior center. And so she got together with Tom Ludwig, a professor from Hope College. They came back to me with a proposed center of about 18,000 to 20,000 square feet in size. The senior center, as it's now evolved, is about 46,000 square feet.

The early days of organizing in '83 included getting existing senior groups together on what this senior center was going to be all about. There was some fragmentation and friction between these groups. When representatives of these groups met together to discuss what this center was all about, they understood there would be plenty of room for all their activities and interests. Emilie did an excellent job of mending fences between the various groups.

Interviewer: Do you have anything to add? What was your involvement -- you were crisscrossing the country -- how were you brought on this project?

Mrs. Wierda: Well, when Prince Corporation pledged to be the initial contributor to the project, I was brought on board to be the coordinator for the project. I began by looking at other senior centers to see what they were all about. A senior center was a new idea and concept to Holland. Most people didn't know what a "senior center" was. So I visited many centers and took the best ideas from each of them. With these ideas and also pointers picked up from discussing our goals with experts in the field of aging, we put together a plan we felt would make a beautiful facility for Holland and the many seniors we have in our community that can use it.

Interviewer: How many seniors are in Holland right now?

Mrs. Wierda: In excess of 8,000. That was a 1980 census so that's already outdated. It'll probably double by the year 2,000.

Interviewer: Is that the Holland area or just the city limits?

Mrs. Wierda: That includes four townships which basically make up Holland. It does not include Zeeland.

Interviewer: I just had a question. Oh, how was the Christian Middle School site selected and come about?

Mr. Prince: When Marj came with her "shopping list", I asked her where she thought the center should be, but she didn't really have any strong feelings. We knew that the Holland Christian Schools were desirous of selling the old middle school because they were vacating it. We bought the Christian school building because we felt it was an important site to maintain as it is in the center of the city. It's also a great site from an access standpoint for seniors. There are many living within a four to five block walking radius of the senior center. Also, we are sensitive to what the city looks like long term. An alternate plan for the middle school site could have been an apartment project. We didn't think that would be the best asset for that part of the city. So we think we served more than one purpose by building the senior center there.

Mrs. Wierda: Also, it is a focal point in the community so people see it and recognize it as a vital facility. Many senior centers are not even acknowledged in other communities because they're off on the outskirts of town and people don't know what they are or that they even exist. Everyone knows that the senior center exists in Holland!

Interviewer: Who were the architects?

Mr. Prince: The outside of the building and basic first floor plan was designed by Design Plus in Grand Rapids. The detailing and inside was done by Emilie Wierda, Elsa Prince and Ray Jansma.

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Interviewer: What did Prince Corporation contribute money-wise.

Mr. Prince: A million dollars.

Interviewer: A million dollars. And then you're underwriting the -- what was it?

Mrs. Wierda: The utilities.

Mr. Prince: We will underwrite the utilities for the first three years.

Interviewer: How is the other money raised? Where did that come from?

Mr. Prince: It is still coming....

We have and are receiving funds from many sources; many individual donations, corporate pledges, \$50,000 from Comm. Dev. Block Grant Monies, and the Kresge Foundation has said they will give us a grant of \$100,000 if we raise the rest of the money by November, 1985. So that's what our goal is, to raise the rest of that million dollars by November.

Interviewer: So how much was the entire project cost?

Mrs. Wierda: In excess of two million.

Interviewer: You had said that all the programs were run by the various organizations so what this was -- you built the building but the organizations have now moved in?

Mr. Prince: The senior center is operated with four people on a paid staff. An executive director, a program director, a daycare director, and a person in the kitchen. They really run the building. And people can use the building for their individual programs. But I would imagine that if you look at the structure five years from now, it won't be individual organizations anymore. They're all going to be part of a senior center.

Mrs. Wierda: And that's really what they are already. The organizations have come in and have continued the activities that they used to perform in all different locations around the city, but they are all a part of Evergreen Commons and the membership of Evergreen Commons, and any senior can become a member of Evergreen Commons. And so therefore, the group that met at Fourteenth Street or the group that met in the Civic Center all now come to the senior center.

Mr. Prince: For one thing, it's an air conditioned, clean facility.
(laughter)

Interviewer: What organizations are there? I know there's Senior Citizens Advocacy Council. What other ones have been brought in? Were just groups like these?

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Interviewer: How many seniors are members?

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Interviewer: And it keep climbing. What were the projections for that?

Mrs. Wierda: Well we had said that if we had between 1,500 and 2,000 the first year it would be a success. And that's really what we had planned on because based on other senior centers in other communities, that would have been a very, very good response. But, as you can see, we've had twice that good a response. So we're pleased.

Interviewer: What kind of things can the seniors do there? What different activities?

Mrs. Wierda: Basically anything. If the seniors want it, they can organize it. The facility is there for them to do whatever they would like, and the staff is more than ready to help them do things seniors would like to do. There are programs like bingo, two choirs, bowling leagues, a computer club, and fifteen or sixteen different classes going on right now that seniors can become involved in. There's a sewing club, art classes, health/blood pressure clinics, exercise classes, a beautiful wood workshop, indoor shuffle board courts, pool tables, a library where they can come read or take out books. There's a gift shop which sells things made by seniors where anyone from the community can come and browse. Lunch is served from Monday through Friday, so seniors can purchase a well-rounded nutritionally balanced meal. There are also a number of services offered such as legal aid, financial seminars, hearing clinics, the list goes on and on....

Interviewer: What do you see as the future? Do you see it as growing even more? And what are the long-range plans for that area?

Mr. Prince: If the senior center has enough people actively participating in its programs, the long-term plan would be to purchase all the houses along Twenty-First Street and turn some of that area into parking, as space for parking is something we are short of. We have a long-term dream that perhaps one of those houses could be remodeled and made into a children's day care center. One of the things seniors have said keeps them "young" and "vital" are small children around that need their love and attention. If seniors do not have grandchildren in the area, they miss out on this dimension. In a child's care center, we could use seniors to care for the children. They could be wonderful caretakers and both children and seniors would benefit. I think the neat thing about the senior center, Phil, is the social opportunity it provides. When people get older, their friends begin to die around them, so their circle of friends gets smaller and smaller. The advantage of a multi-purpose senior center is that people have a great opportunity to meet other people and increase that circle of friendship again. The opportunities to meet others doesn't come along very frequently otherwise. I think this is one of the biggest social needs seniors will be able to overcome with the help of Evergreen Commons.

Interviewer: O.K. Another question just popped into my mind. Are you planning on getting grant monies or other monies to run the operation or where will that be coming from?

Mrs. Wierda: There's a number of sources for operating funds, probably ten to twelve of them. Region 14 Council on Aging (Federal Funds) will be supplying a good "chunk" of the operating funds for the next couple of years. Churches, individuals, patrons, gift shop proceeds, membership dues, private contributions, and revenue from the day care and luncheon programs all contribute to providing funds for an operating budget that is fairly small for an operation of this size. Seniors provide so much of the hourly labor needed to keep a center running that the operating budget remains fairly small. Long term we hope to raise money to form an endowment fund so we will not have to depend on any government funding or annual fundraising year to year and Evergreen Commons can run itself.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to add for the record on this accomplishment?

Mr. Prince: No, really, I think our family has had an enjoyable time doing it. It's been a lot of involvement and responsibility, but anything that's worthwhile takes a lot of effort and it's been very worthwhile. We're excited to see people excited about it and using it. That's really the whole story.

Mrs. Wierda: Yes.

Interviewer: O.K. Thanks.

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