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Dirkse, Ruth De Graaf Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Ruth De Graaf Dirkse

Conducted July 18, 1997
by Ann Paeth

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
AP: The first thing, could you state your name and where and when you were born?
RD: Ruth De Graaf Dirkse, born here in Holland, [date removed], 1928.

AP: Have you lived here all your life?
RD: Pretty much. There were a few years elsewhere after we were first married. We lived in Chicago one year while my husband was getting his masters degree. I taught middle school in Cicero that year. Then after he got his first teaching assignment in Ferrysburg, Spring Lake, Grand Haven area, we lived there for twelve years, and then came back to Holland after that. I grew up being a prof’s kid. My dad started teaching at Hope the year that I was born. He taught in the English department for forty-four years at Hope. That’s the longest teaching record, I think. I grew up on Hope College, and Hope College has been my bread and butter for a good share of my life.

AP: Could you describe your family, your father, your family’s history?
RD: My father grew up in Grand Rapids, as my mother did. Their parents were born in the Netherlands and immigrated to Michigan. My father and mother both finished college in Grand Rapids. My dad graduated from Calvin, then my mother finished high school there, and then went on to Kalamazoo to a teacher training college at that time, and got her teaching certificate. He went on to the University of Michigan to get his masters and then eventually a doctorate from the University of Michigan.
They bought the house in Central Park when they got married, and lived in it for fifty-some years. I grew up in that house and never left it until I got married.

AP: Was that unusual? A lot of people I talked to have lived in several different houses.

RD: I think it probably was. Of course, today’s families are much more transient. My father started out teaching at Holland Christian High, then, and was a coach and a math teacher and a principal there for three or four years, and then got the opportunity to come to Hope College. So that was not a move of the family, it was a move in career for him, but just from one side of the town to the other. So I lived in the same house in Central Park until I got married.

AP: Did you have any siblings?

RD: I had one brother and one sister, both younger than I.

AP: So what was Holland like growing up?

RD: Not nearly as diverse as it is today. A stronghold of Dutch families, many of whom had come from the Grand Rapids area, and some who had come directly from the Netherlands. I went to the Christian school. My parents felt that there I would have the opportunity for a Christian education. I had good experiences going to school there. Living out in Central Park, where I did, was really out of town in those days. Everybody thought that was way out of town, so that was quite unusual. I had my school friends all the time during the school year, and then living where I did, a whole group of families would come into their cottages in Central Park for the summer. So my summer friends were from Chicago, St. Louis, Grand Rapids, families that would move out for the summer. So I’d have another whole group of
friends during the summertime. That was fun. We worshipped at the little Central Park Chapel, that’s still there today. I had the best of both worlds, really. We would never have to go to camp in the summertime, because we had our own row boats and canoes and lived on the water as much as we could as kids. So it was a wonderful childhood growing up. But my friends who would come out to play with me during the school year, we’d always have to make transportation arrangements, because it was such a long trip outside of town. But today people don’t think anything of it. So I think there was a strong nucleus of families that supported the Christian school, but we still had good relations with the public school. I had a lot of friends, a lot of neighbor kids, that were in public school. We were all good friends. There wasn’t any real rivalry there between the two schools. The same thing would go for the churches. There was the Christian Reformed Church, which I belonged to at that time, and the Reformed Church, and I don’t know growing up how much the spirit of cooperation was between the two. Probably not as much as there is now. But Holland has certainly changed considerably as far as the diversity. And the large, industrial corporations have moved in and had good executives and good leaders. As far as the community is concerned, I don’t think that there are very many factories that have closed shop. It’s been a good place for people to work in industry. Of course, I’ve been involved in education all my life because my parents were both teachers. Being at Hope College was a whole lifestyle. I went to all the Hope College basketball games as a little kid, sat in the front row, and thought it was great if I knew the basketball players. Hope College has been a real lifestyle for me.
AP: What was Hope like compared to now, or how did it relate to the community?

RD: It's always had good relations with the community. I remember my dad being on the committee for the 90th Anniversary of the city, and the college planned a pageant out at Riverview Park, and some of us were in the pageant. I must have been nine or ten years old, and I remember having to run behind the person who was playing Van Raalte, and saying, "Yes, Dominie, yes, Dominie." There was a whole flock of us little kids walking around with him in the pageant. So I'd say the community relations have always been good. "Town and gown" has been strong in this community. I think other people would verify that.

AP: You mentioned the celebration for the city. What kinds of things has the city done in the past for those different landmarks? Have you been involved?

RD: That one I remember because I was very young and had a little part in that pageant. The next celebration, I was actually a camp counselor. That was between my freshman and sophomore year at college, and I was a camp counselor out of town. So I wasn't here for the big parade that they had in August, and I've forgotten what other activities they did, but the city concentrated on the summer months for their celebration. I was out at camp, so I didn't experience that. But my father was the chairperson on the essay committee. That's the year that they decided to send six essay winners to the Netherlands, three high school winners and three college winners. He was the chairman of that. I remember a stack of mail coming in in April and May to his office at the college here. I think they had a response from every state in the United States. So they were excited about that. It was nationwide.
AP: Do you know how many essays they got?

RD: I did look it up and included it in the article I wrote. Several hundred. They had a screening committee at the local level. Then they had another screening committee at the local level that picked the top ones. Then they sent them on to ambassadors and Senator Vandenberg, I believe, in Washington D. C., key people in the Dutch government and the United States government. They were the final judges. Then three college students and three high school students went with my father to the Netherlands for six weeks. It was a wonderful experience for them. They met the mayors of every little town that they visited, were given the keys to the city, they had tea with the queen and her husband on the royal yacht. It was really a big thrill. The war was just over, so the Dutch people were so grateful for the help that America had given them. They were just given the red carpet treatment everywhere. It was a marvelous experience. I would read my dad’s letters that he would send home. Then, of course, after he got home, he filled in a lot of details. What a great experience.

AP: Did anybody from the area win?

RD: Two of the Hope students, who happened to be ministers’ sons, that was really interesting, got second prize. The second prize winners were supposed to come to Holland, then, for the festival. But because they lived here and knew Holland so well, they were given trips, I believe, to New York City. So that was second place prize for them. The other winners were from around the United States. Kansas, New Jersey... The girl from New Jersey who won actually came to Hope College as
a student. She was a high school winner. One was from California, I think, and one from Pennsylvania. So they were from all over. It was really a worth while thing to do. The topic they worked with was the influence of Dutch immigrants in America an American culture. That was pretty exciting. Other than that, I don’t have any memories of specific celebrations.

AP: Do you remember them bringing the windmill over?

RD: Yes. We were living in Grand Haven yet. That was the last year we were in Grand Haven. We knew that it came on a ship into Muskegon Harbor. Then some huge flatbeds went up to Muskegon Harbor, if I remember correctly, to take it off the ship and bring it down to its location. Then it had to be reassembled. I think the prince came over then for the dedication. I was not at the dedication. We were living in Grand Haven and our children were little, so I didn’t get here for that. Of course, the queen has been here a couple of times. She came here once to thank everybody in Holland, Michigan for what they had done for the war effort. Then she was here again in the summer when we were head residents in Voorhees. The princess is coming in September or October, isn’t she? They’re trying to coordinate it with Zeeland.

AP: You went to Hope? What was it like attending Hope at that time? Were a lot of people from Holland attending Hope?

RD: Yes. But many, many more from outside of Michigan. Those students had heard about Hope from the Reformed Church. We had a lot of students from the west coast. We had a lot of students from New York and New Jersey.
AP: Because there's a seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey?

RD: Right. So there were many more students from states outside of Michigan, and many more international students. The year that we started as freshman, twenty students from the Netherlands came and were in our class. Several of them graduated from Hope. Some of them came just for the one year of exchange, but some of them stayed for four years, and some of them went on to graduate school here at Michigan State and the University of Michigan. There were more students from various countries in Africa, if I remember correctly. It just seemed like the campus had more of an international flavor. Then, of course, we started in the fall of '46 with all of the returning GI's who had the GI Bill and didn't send in any applications ahead of time. They just plain stood in line the first morning of registration. It was just wild. There were so many students. The faculty had no idea how to handle that. I remember, I worked for my dad at the registration table. After all of the Monday-Wednesday-Friday classes were filled, they opened the same classes on Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday. We went to class on Saturday. They opened up night sections. I remember my dad leaving the registration table so many times during the day to make phone calls: "Can you teach in the English department? Can you possibly help us out for courses?" Hope College didn't know what hit them that year. It was just phenomenal. It was probably down to 400 and something the last year of the war. Then in '46, when we started, in the fall, there were, I think 1,370 or something like that. Which was triple. Where do you go to get instructors? Where do you put them to live? The college bought the old Froebel School, and used all the classrooms
and put twelve bunks in every classroom, twelve girls in every classroom. It was just
wild. The fellows were four to a room in single rooms in the Seminary dormitory
until they could bring T-Barracks over here, these government barracks that were
used on bases. They brought those and filled up the whole athletic field complex.

My husband (he wasn’t my husband at the time) ended up in those barracks where the
walls were like cardboard. They just bought so many and put them on campus. They
put girls in the Froebel School and bought some more old houses and filled up those.

They were just frantic for space. For that reason, then, all of us who lived in town
were asked to live at home. So we did. I stayed at home my whole four years. My
folks said, "You certainly may move on campus your junior or senior year, if you’d
like to, and have the full college experience." Well, my junior year, I was seated
alphabetically next to my now husband in a very dull class. So we started scribbling
notes to each other on our notebooks. Things developed from there. By the time I
had the invitation to move into the dorm because they had the space, I thought, "I
don’t want to come in every weeknight at 10:00 and always have to sign out."

AP: So you would have more freedom at home than you would at your dorm? That’s kind
of opposite of how it is today.

RD: It is very opposite. But for me it was fine because I could keep my own hours. I
had enough friends in the dorm that, lots of times on weekends, the other girls would
say, "Stay in our room over the weekend." So I did a lot of that. But I never
actually was a resident on campus until I became head resident in Voorhees Hall,
after it was renovated. That was funny. The enrollment actually tripled our freshman
year, and the college was frantic to get it all squared away. Of course, all of these GI's were not interested in anything other than an education. Social activities didn’t mean anything. A lot of them were married, and they just wanted to get their college degree and get on with their lives, because they’d been in the service. They were very industrious about their academic program, and the competition in classes was keen. I remember there was one advanced math class that one other girl was in and I was in, with about 35 fellows that were much older and smarter than we were. We just trembled when our prof called on us to go the blackboard and work the problems. But we worked hard at it, and the prof was very kind, very understanding. But it was really competitive. We worked hard. Of course, those fellows worked hard, too. They had this government bill to pay for their education, and they were very eager to get on with their lives, so that was their major interest in college. Where as the rest of us regular freshmen just out of high school had interest in doing some social things, too. So Nykerk was big for us, and the Pull was big for us.

AP: Were you in Nykerk?

RD: Oh yes, four years. Play one year, song one year, and then coach junior year and senior year.

AP: What did you coach?

RD: The whole thing, really. I guess you’d call it class rep.

AP: I don’t know how similar it is, but they have a lot of different positions. They have a chair that kind of oversees everything, getting the judges and their gifts and announcing and all that. Is that what you did?
RD: Well, it's grown so much bigger. I actually had that position, but it wasn't as big then.

AP: How has it changed? Have you seen it recently?

RD: We go almost every year. Except lately it's hard to get a seat. I went all the time when I worked at the Academic Support Center, because I knew a lot of my advisees were in it. But once I retired from that job, I though, it isn't really fair to parents who have come a long distance for me to take a seat. So, I'd say the last three or four years, I haven't gone. Otherwise I went all the time. It has grown so much. For instance, when we were freshman, you could just have a select group of kids do the song. Then they dressed in costumes. I remember, we did the Indian Love Call one year, and we had a make believe bonfire on stage and we were all in Indian costumes. So it was more dramatic and more selective as far as the people that were in it.

AP: What kind of plays would they do?

RD: Usually a comedy. They've done a lot of adaptations of the fairy tales now. We never did any of that. We just did twenty minute comedies.

AP: They say it's an even year tradition now to do a fairy tale. Did you have any little traditions that you did every year?

RD: We didn't have morale guys. We did have morale girls for the pull, but there were no morale guys. We still had the three categories, the oration, the drama, and the music.

AP: Because, odd year had a tradition that you have to mention the name of your year's
song and the oration in the play somehow. I wonder when that started.

RD: I think that’s very recent.

AP: They also have a rubber chicken they always have to work in somehow, but that’s new.

RD: So, yes, Hope College was a wonderful experience for me.

AP: Did you ever have your father in a class? What was that like?

RD: Yes I did. I was an English major, and he was chair of the English department.

Being chair, he felt he always wanted to teach one freshman course, one sophomore, one junior, and one senior, to stay in touch with the whole range of students. I think it was my junior year when I had him for the first course, a literature course. Then my senior year, because I was going to do my student teaching in English, he taught all of the people who were going to go into English teaching. So I had him for that class, and then I also took two courses on Milton, one on Paradise Lost, and one on Paradise Regained, and he happened to be the only person that taught those two classes. So I did have him for a couple of different classes. It was a wonderful experience. I was very proud of him as a teacher, and a lot of my friends reinforced that idea. They also enjoyed him, so that, of course, gave me a lot of pleasure. I worked awfully hard for him, because I didn’t want to let him down. I wanted to make sure that I carried my weight in the class. We kind of had a little understanding. I would sit next to the window, and he always wanted class discussion. If I knew what he was asking for, I would raise my hand. Others would, too, and he wouldn’t always choose me, but at least he knew that I was on target. If
I wasn’t at all sure what he was after, I’d kind of look out the window, and then I knew I was safe. (laughs) So we had this little deal worked out, but I guess I contributed enough in the class that he knew I wasn’t playing games with him, but I did work really hard for him. Everybody told me he was a very, very fair grader, very fair marker, and always available to students in his office if they had problems. So I guess I felt comfortable being in his classes. We both enjoyed it.

AP: You’ve had a couple of positions at Hope through the years. What have you done at that college?

RD: Well, we came back to Holland in 1964; my husband was given the offer to teach, then, in the education department. So we left Grand Haven and moved to Holland. He taught in the education department, and I picked up some extra hours in library science, which the college offered at that time. You could get your degree in library science here. So I picked up those extra hours and worked in the West Ottawa school system as an elementary librarian for sixteen years. The last two years of that job, the head residency of Voorhees was open, and we looked at that. We wondered, we didn’t know, if that was a wise decision. But we moved into Voorhees and had a great time. I think there was enough difference in age that the kids didn’t feel like mother and dad were breathing down their neck, but it was still somebody, more like grandpa and grandma. (laughs) Somebody old enough they could talk to easily. We had an open door policy so the kids were in and out of our apartment all the time. All hours of the night. We had a wonderful time. Voorhees is an ideal size, a hundred students. Co-ed. We got to know them all individually. Then because of
that being such a good experience, administration kind of twisted my husband’s arm to be dean of students. So then we moved into Hillegonds Cottage, which was just destroyed for the Haworth Center. Of course, we didn’t have responsibilities with any particular dorms, so what we did is we had all the kids who lived around us in the cottages come in for snacks at night, so we got to know them, and that was great. So he was responsible to the entire student body as dean. But as far as student groups, we tried to have the kids in the cottages come over for study breaks. Then when I retired from West Ottawa, the Academic Support Center needed somebody to work with Mrs. Heisler there, so the registrar asked if I ‘d be willing to be a Focus advisor, and take about fifteen Focus students as my advisees. The Focus students are the ones who come to Hope on a probationary semester their freshman year. Either their GPA wasn’t outstanding, or their test scores were waving a flag. A lot of them they feel that they’d like to give them a chance, at least, so they come on a probationary semester, and the college usually takes about thirty. I think we had forty one year. They meet with their advisor every week, and their advisor tries to help them stay on target. They carry a twelve hour load first semester, and if they can prove that they can do the twelve hours and get decent grades, then the probation is wiped out and they’re accepted as full students. I thoroughly enjoyed that, I got to know those kids really well.

**AP:** Were most kids successful?

**RD:** Yes. Most of them were. There were a few that either were rebelling completely and didn’t want to go to college in the first place, but their folks, having been Hope
grads, insisted that they try it. There were a few like that who would do nothing to try and make a good impression. Maybe two or three a year like that. Most of the others worked really hard to prove that they could do it. In fact, the interesting thing was that then the second semester I would have Soar kids for my advisees. Those are the kids who came with flying colors and just bombed out the first semester. They would go into this same type of program where they would take a little bit of a reduced load and report to their advisor every week, at least until midterm.

AP: So they would have been admitted normally, but they just didn’t make the transition well, so they had to go on probation?

RD: That’s right. It happens often. It was more of a struggle for those kids to pull up grades that were really, really bad. The GPA goes down much more easily than it takes to get it up. So I’d have a group of those kids. That, often, was tougher. They often lacked the motivation to really dig in. There were some of those, too, who said, "I know what the problem was, I know what I did the first semester, I’ve got to turn things around." Then, by reporting to somebody, having to be accountable weekly, they could do it. So many of them would be successful, too. But we had more, a greater percentage in that group, that did not stay at Hope, than in the Focus group. So I did that for six years, and loved that, too. Then my husband said, "It’s time we both retire," so we did. But we’re still around campus, constantly.

AP: I think I remember you mentioning something about when you retired, didn’t you take off for a while?
RD: We did. We left Holland. We went to a mission school in Kentucky, in the poorest county in the eastern part of Kentucky, and worked there for he school year, and really enjoyed that. But we felt we'd make a clean break and then come back and settle back into whatever we enjoyed about Hope College. He's back observing student teachers again, been doing that for several years. I go over to the middle school and tutor there two days a week.

AP: Lamont was chair of the education department?

RD: Right, so he's enjoying his contacts there. Of course, we take in everything that happens on the campus, so it's almost like it used to be. So when I say that Hope College has been a life style for us and been my bread and butter for most of my life, it's really true. There were only fourteen years there, from the time I graduated till he accepted the position here that we weren't dependent on Hope College.

AP: Has the school changed a lot?

RD: Oh yes. A great deal. Living in a dorm didn't even look that enticing to me my senior year because the girls were so well supervised. You could be out until ten o'clock on a school night, a little bit longer on the weekend. The curriculum keeps changing, keeps evolving. There's always faculty input in that, trying to keep up with what's going on in society, as well as technology and that type of thing. The dormitory rules have completely loosened up. I know when we became head residents in Voorhees, and that became a co-ed dorm, even then, at that stage, there were parents who were just having a fit. They didn't think that was a good idea at all.
AP: Was that the only co-ed dorm at that time?

RD: No. Phelps and Kollen were.

AP: Did you have a certain type of student? I know each dorm now kind of has a certain type of student.

RD: Yes, I would say so. It was limited to juniors and seniors because it had just been remodeled. They wanted it to be an upperclassman dorm. I think a lot of kids who were really serious about their academic program chose to live there. It was kind of the elite dorm at that point.

AP: Voorhees right now is the only dorm that doesn’t have quiet hour rules because it doesn’t need them. And it’s close to Peale, so a lot of science students with a lot of lab hours tend to live there.

RD: And, of course, there wasn’t College East, yet, so there was no choice of apartments at that time. Two years later College East was built, so that sort of pulled off a different type of student. At that time, Voorhees was kind of the neat place to be. If you wanted to go to the library at night, you were close by. But, of course, there were many, many more restrictions when we were students on campus between ’46 and ’50. As far as activities, sororities and fraternities were much bigger when we were on campus. It was the only way to have some social life of any kind. So all the sororities and fraternities had meeting rooms in the basements of dorms around campus, and always met the same time on Friday nights. We had what we would call a literary meeting. Much more focused on literary activities. We had a humor paper and a serious paper at every meeting, and some kind of a musical number and some
kind of a little skit. A lot of people had dates on Friday night after the sorority and frat meetings. But there weren't a lot of other outside organizations to belong to for social life, so sororities and fraternities were a much greater percentage of the student body. I was a Delphi. We had five sororities, and, I think, five fraternities, all large. It was pretty much the thing to do. The Greek percentage of the student body was much greater. Today, there is really a small percentage. There are so many things that students can choose to do and remain independent and not be involved in Greek life at all. We didn't have that many opportunities. We had one formal party a year with chaperons; college faculty had to be in attendance at our parties. Of course, there was no drinking involved at all.

AP: Why don't we spend some time talking about how things have changed in the city. We kind of talked about how the size of the city has changed. How has the different ethnic groups coming in, how has that affected the population?

RD: I remember when the first Hispanic people moved in, a lot of them came as migrants in the summer time. Our churches, even when we lived in Grand Haven, would run great programs in the camps for them for their kids in the evening. We'd go out and really try to make those people feel comfortable in this area, knowing that they had to return to Texas and Mexico and so forth. Pretty soon, these people began to see that this was just the best place, "We get treated so well here," so they began to stay a few months in the fall, until for sure all the pickles were in or blueberries. Then gradually they began to stay year round. That has really all happened in my married lifetime, that they have actually become stable community members now. For me,
it’s been a good experience. Being exposed to another culture is great. I think I can understand what difficulties some of them have, especially now when I tutor at schools and know that there are some kids I’m working with who take messages home to parents who can’t understand any English. I think, how tough it is for you to finish this assignment on your own, that’s really got to be difficult. I can sympathize with the problems that they’re dealing with. But many of them have strong, strong family commitments, and really solid families. For me it’s been a good experience, and they have a lot to offer this community.

AP: How do you, being in education, think we need to address those problems of learning English as a second language? What’s the best way to deal with that?

RD: That’s a good question. There are, of course, the people who say, expose them totally to the English, if they want to live here, they have to pick up our language and catch on. There are others who want to give them every kind of service in their own language. I’m not sure that that’s always doing them a favor. Certainly you have to get them through a transition period, but to continue to offer them all kinds of services makes them still more dependant on the services you’re giving them. Not having to go through that personally myself, I don’t know how... At what point do you say, OK, we’ve done what we can to help you get started, now you’re on your own, I don’t know exactly where that point is. Everybody’s different. Some of the Asian students that I work with come from such pressure to be successful academically. They really, almost resent your bending over to help them too much, because they’re going to get it on their own, they’re just going to get it. They do!
They really do. I’ve had some Cambodian students who are just marvelous students, and haven’t depended on us to help them make the transition. So I think it’s hard to come up with a definite answer, and the school systems have… (tape ends)

…several Spanish speaking aids in the building, very available to students who need that. They work intensively with some new students coming in. The other students… In fact, I saw a mother come once with a couple students, and I wasn’t quite sure if she was understanding exactly what was being told her in the principal’s office, so then the Spanish speaking aid came in and helped her understand. So I think that they feel the help is there if they need it. Now the new principal at West Middle is a Spanish speaking person, and I think the parents feel more comfortable with that.

AP: It’d probably be hard for the parents to get involved otherwise.

RD: Now the families that have been here, now that they are second generation, they are much more comfortable, of course, and able to really function in the community and take positions of leadership.

AP: You were mentioning what the community would do for the migrant workers coming in years ago. Do you think the communities doing that now? Comparing how everybody made this effort to make migrant workers welcome, are we doing that for other groups coming in?

RD: We aren’t doing that as much, I don’t think. I can’t say for sure. I know we still run the day care center for all the babies. I don’t think there are programs going on in the camps in the evenings. I think a lot of them who are strictly migrants now are
men from the families who work here for the summers, send their paychecks home, and then go back. I don't know if there are as many whole families that come just for the summer months. A lot of them have already relatives here and have heard good things about living here, or bunk in with their relatives for the months that they are here, and then return. It isn't quite the same type of migrant workers. The migrant camps, I don't believe, are quite as extensive as when they first started coming up here. Then they had little housing for all these families.

AP: Do we farm as much here?

RD: Well, we do have a lot of blueberries. But I think the ones who have come here in the summer, have come and settled in. And their kids will go out and pick. And a lot of the Dutch kids go out and pick. I think the pickle farms have, over the years, attracted just men. I don't think the wives and the children actually work in the pickles. The tree farms, too, are all pretty much men. I think that has all kind of changed.

AP: How has the role of women changed in the community?

RD: I guess right along with the rest of the nation. Of course, we have many more women in leadership positions. The superintendent of the Holland school system is now a woman. I think that's a first, if I remember correctly. Sure, there are many more women in positions. The administrator of Holland Hospital is a woman. There are strong women leaders in this community, and I'm sure that when Van Raalte came, that would have been unheard of. The women were needed at home. Now, in this wonderful age of technology, you just push the button on the washer and the
dryer, you can do it at ten o’clock at night if you want to.

AP: I’ve heard criticisms from others that because of women working, the role of the family unit is suffering, yet a lot of women need to work now, because of our economy. Do you have any thoughts on that, or any ideas as to how to alleviate that?

RD: My thoughts are such that children should have their mother home with them until they’re at least ready for school, but that doesn’t happen everywhere. I was a firm believer of that, and so I stayed home until my youngest was in fifth grade. I thought, "Well, she could come home and pour herself a glass of milk and have a cookie if she was home before I got home from school." So she could handle that. Then I was ready to go back into the field of teaching. I wouldn’t have changed it ever, I wouldn’t have wanted it any different. Today I see so many young couples building huge homes that absolutely need two salaries to make the payments. I think, will you ever regret it that you’re going to give up those years of being with your children when they’re pre-schoolers? All that enjoyment of watching them grow. When they go to school, of course you hand them over to another set of adults. You’re still totally responsible as parents, but if you need to stimulate yourself by having some kind of a career, that’s acceptable, too. If you have been home with the children in their crucial years. I think I see these young couples doing this all over this whole area, well, all over the country, but it’s very noticeable in our community. Are you foolish for strapping yourselves to needing to have two salaries?

AP: Do you think we’re getting more materialistic?

RD: Definitely.
AP: How has that changed? Why has that changed? Because it has.

RD: I don’t know. It has, it definitely has. I was talking with one of my friends about it the other day, and I said, is it because these people who are now college age and thinking about marriage and thinking about establishing a home, is it because they haven’t really lived through a war, they haven’t lived through a depression? They haven’t lived through anytime when they had to sacrifice.

AP: I definitely get a sense of that from talking to a lot of people that that’s probably a big key.

RD: I think so. That’s all I can blame it to. Granted there are so many advancements in work around the house that a woman can have more free time as far as household routine, not necessarily more free time from little children, who I think, should have her time.

AP: Maybe the idea of the home office will get established.

RD: That could change. That just bothered me so much in the teacher’s lounge in the schools where I was librarian. I had four schools, and the teachers, if they became pregnant, they said, "Just stay out of Ruth’s way for a while, because you know what she’s going to tell you." I would listen to these teachers talk, these young gals, and they would grumble so about the kids they had in their class whose parents were never home, and who had been in day care all the time until they came to school, and I think, "You’re perpetuating it yourselves."

AP: So you can really see a difference in the kids? One of the principles i talked to said that a lot of kids lack language coming in now. They’re not talking with people. It’s
not to do with bilingual, it's just no language.

RD: They haven't had enough stories read to them to increase their vocabulary. There, again, there are some day care centers that do a very good job of exposing the children to all types of experiences, and some of them maybe have a little bit of a head start when they come to kindergarten. There are other situations where the child is just in the care of somebody with maybe several other babies in the same home, and not getting what a parent who really is involved with the child would give that child. So every situation is different. I guess I as a parent was just selfish enough to want to have those experiences myself with my own children. We could, we weren't' used to a double salary. We lived within our means, and enjoyed it. We have wonderful memories of the kids when they were little. I have one daughter now who says, "Mother, I've invested so much in my education." She's a lawyer, and she works part-time and brings her little boy to day care.

AP: What does her husband do?

RD: He's a teacher.

AP: Because her husband could stay home, too.

RD: He could, that's right. He teaches and coaches, and she can take her work home if her son is ill or something, that's alright with her office. Otherwise, she works part-time, goes into the office. Maybe it will come to the point where home office will work for her. She could be on a consultant basis and be at home. Maybe Jason will be in school by that time. She says, "Mother, I know exactly where you're coming from. I know exactly what you mean. But I feel since I've put this much money into
this education, if I drop out of it, it would be very hard for me to get back in." So I listen to her arguments and nod my head and think, well, maybe it would be very difficult for her to pick up the law practice after being out of it. A teacher, I think, has a better opportunity to be home in the summertime with their youngsters, and then take a few years off, if you need to, and then, hopefully, there would be something open in the field of education that you could get back into.

AP: My mom was a secretary, so that was very easy to go in and out of as you need to. Now she's at a point where she can really be at a place where she can enjoy her career. She's been an executive secretary at a bank. But she used to do secretary work at a church part-time. It's hard, though.

RD: It is. Women have to make a lot of choices.

AP: They were just talking in our office about the woman working full-time and doing housework. I mentioned that when my mom worked full-time and got a promotion, they had someone come in once a week to do cleaning. They just gave it up because they had a building campaign at our church, and they're going to clean the house themselves and donate that money that they would have otherwise spent. Our secretary said she thought any woman who works forty hours a week should have a housekeeper, but we don't. The other girl said that was what she least looked forward to when she would be working full-time, cleaning the house. I thought, my mom and dad clean the house together.

RD: We do, too.

AP: I kind of made me sad that she hasn't even met her husband yet, and she's just
assuming she has to do it all by herself, and I wonder why women assume that.

Every Saturday, my mom sat down with a list, and there were three of us kids and my mom and my dad, and there were five things, and everybody each did something.

RD: Oh sure, a family project.

AP: That was every Saturday. We just knew we had to do that.

RD: Right. It was assumed that you all contributed to the family’s benefit. You better set her straight.

AP: So you can definitely see how this generation’s priorities have changed a lot.

RD: Definitely. As you say, I think it’s much too materialistic. I think if anything would happen. If through downsizing the parents lose their jobs and can’t find something else quickly, they would be devastated, I think. I don’t know how they would cope.

AP: We’re very fearful. We can’t imagine that.

RD: We say America has been so greatly blessed, and we have been. But sometimes strength of character comes through being tested a little bit, and having to sacrifice something.

AP: Has the church or the role of the church changed?

RD: I don’t know. I’m much more involved in outreach things now, urban ministry. We work at the Bridge, which is a third world store, and that’s all volunteer work. We work at the seminary serving meals to the homeless people. That’s only started within the last eight to ten years in Holland. I think the church has a concern for all people, not just their own members.

AP: So they’re getting more involved in those social activities.
RD: I think that’s typical of most of the churches in the Holland area. I think they’ve all had that feeling that here are people who need help. There are people who are hurting. Emotional situations, too, counseling. For instance, our church has a counseling office that’s open to anyone, not just a church member. Other people may come in for help, too. We have a food pantry in our own church, as well as contributing to Community Action’s food pantry. So I think churches on the whole are becoming more aware of needs throughout the community and trying to respond to them. I don’t remember that so much growing up. But maybe we didn’t have as many needs. It was a much tighter knit community when I was a child, and so when we talked about service to others, it was missionaries who were going to China and India.

AP: So the idea of outreach...

RD: It was never local.

AP: Because you didn’t have to reach out to find somebody because everybody was connected and knew who needed help. That makes sense. So recent years we’ve focused on, hey, we need to do stuff here, too. I think you mentioned earlier something about the city government. I was wondering if there were any outstanding people in the government or in the community that you thought made a big impact on Holland or your life.

RD: The local government, of course, changes every couple years. I guess I didn’t sense as much that as I did the college administration, the college presidents, made great impacts on my life. Because my father was employed at the college, I was much
more sensitive to what was going on on-campus.

AP: Do you remember any in particular?

RD: Dr. Wichers, who hired my father. I was very young then. He was very well respected in the community. He was a relative of the Wichers who the Holland Trust Historical Association is associated with. Dr. Lubbers was president while we were in college. He was a strong character within the community as well. I don't know if that these people necessarily held positions of leadership within their churches, but they were all faithful church members, and kept alive this strong relationship between the town and gown. Gordon Van Wylen, of course, there's just nobody like him as far as even in retirement what he contributes to this community is just amazing. He has the gifts, he has the ability, and he loves being responsible for a vision that we all should share. Mayor McGeehan, who's the mayor now, was my children's political science and history teacher in high school. He was an outstanding teacher. He just made things exciting for them so they would all be very loyal to him as having really impacted their lives in the classroom. I remember Rena Boven, an outstanding nurse in this community, a single lady who was a very good friend of my mother's, and was very instrumental in getting the first hospital built. I worked for her one summer in the hospital. She found all kinds of jobs for me to do in the hospital, and I just worshipped the ground that she walked over. This whole community did. She was a wonderful person with a real vision for health care. I can't think of any other names right off hand.

AP: What kind of impact has your family had on the area? I see the name De Graaf
around. I don’t know how to ask that.

RD: I like to think that they were very well respected in the community. Of course, I am terribly biased. I was very proud of my parents and never really went through a stage that was rebellious or embarrassed or ashamed of them and wanting to kick over the traces. A lot of kids go through that, I guess. I don’t have any of those feelings. I never felt that. My parents were both very strong leaders in our church, 14th Street Christian Reformed Church. At that time there were a lot of good, solid people who didn’t have the opportunity to have a college education, so my parents both assumed leadership roles in the church and were very well thought of. Many, many friends. My father also went on to other leadership positions in the Christian Reformed denomination on a national level, and was able to make contributions there. I think because of him being at the college, he had respect in the community, but then he also did a lot of service in the community, so I think he was well respected by everybody.

AP: I know quite a few of my friends have lived in De Graaf Cottage. Is that named for your father?

RD: Yes it is. I think the college now has gotten to the point where they give all the cottages a name, don’t they? They keep moving the names around, so I can never keep track. De Graaf Cottage, one time, was back of us in Hillegonds. Now where is De Graaf?

AP: Now it’s in back of College East. They moved that so it’s on 15th just past Columbia. Sometimes they move the house and it keeps the name. Sometimes they
just move the name. Sometimes they move the house and they change the name.

RD: The last couple of years I haven't been able to keep up. And there's an award for a graduating senior in the English department named for him, and a lectureship for the entire college community, but the English department sponsors it, and that's in his name. Then my brother and I wanted to make sure the Icarus sculpture in the Pine Grove is kind of exactly on the spot where his office was in the old Van Raalte Hall before it burned down. It was on the second floor right in that corner of the campus. So that's kind of nostalgic for us to see that's where the college decided to place it. I think in his whole lifetime as a faculty member, he thoroughly loved students, and his students all respected him. I still have people of that generation come over and talk to me about it. In fact, last week I got a letter in the mail from some lady who had just joined the fifty year circle. She said, I'm going through all the material for that big day of joining the fifty year circle, and I found some photos in my photo album of your dad, and I thought you'd like them, so she sent them to me. That generation all remembers him. I would say that they certainly made an impact with their lives on the community here. My mother also did serve on some community institutions. She was chairperson of the Visiting Nurses Association, although not a nurse herself, she just held that office. A lot of her leadership was given to the church, and, of course, she was living in the days when mothers didn't work at all outside the home.

AP: But they did probably do a lot more in church groups. I don't know if you've noticed that change at all, the amount of women's groups in churches.

RD: Oh sure, there isn't the Ladies' Mission Society that meets in the afternoon, and there
isn’t the Ladies’ Bible Study that meets in the mornings.

AP: I know what my mother was in when I was young was really geared toward homemaking type things, crafts, putting a bizarre on, cooking. Now that organization has moved on, and it’s the same group of women. They haven’t had new women come in, because we don’t know that anymore. I still can’t really sew a button on that well. It’s OK, but it’s just not as good, you know?

RD: That’s really a thing of the past. I think that’s true all over. I’m sure it’s happening across the country.

AP: I know the Women’s Issues Organization here has an annual bake sale, which they call "Taste the Irony." Different groups always have bake sales in the DeWitt Center, and it’s still the best way to raise money.

RD: Oh sure, because everybody loves to eat.

AP: Are there any other things that we should talk about that we haven’t talked about? Have there been any issues in Holland or controversies?

RD: I can’t recall any. I suppose that the whole idea of getting Windmill Island started and how heavily Tulip Time should reflect only the Dutch culture, or should it reflect the diverse culture. Now the big issue of where are we going to go with the sports arena, and are we going to build homes on Windmill Island? Going way back, I guess I can’t recall any big issues.

AP: Has Tulip Time evolved? Has that changed?

RD: When we were little, it was a ten day festival or maybe a week. The opening parade was always on the first Saturday, the closing parade was on the last Saturday. I think
they did actually try a ten days for a while. They’ve almost gone to that now. They say they start having tours come in really before the official first parade. Of course, the Holland Furnace Company was the big industrial place in Holland when I was growing up. They capitalized on Tulip Time. They would bring in the movie stars that would sit on the balcony of the Warm Friend. You didn’t begin to have the tour buses coming in. It was much more local. It has grown tremendously.

AP: Earlier we were talking about priorities changing with this generation, and how its priorities are a lot different. I wanted to ask you maybe as a final question, have your priorities changed?

RD: Well, I suppose with the children growing up, getting married, and establishing their own families, I have more time to give to other people. My family was my top priority all the time, and still is, but because they don’t have to have me physically present, I am able to do a lot more in the community, helping people, more volunteer type things. I guess there was a while there where I enjoyed the career part of it, too. I was very happy being the school librarian. Very happy working at the college. But now because retirement has set in, then I’m finding all these other ways to be with people, and try to be of help of some kind. But I still have a great deal of loyalty to the family, go to a lot of the grandchildren’s activities, because they live close by. So I see a lot of soccer games and piano recitals and tennis matches and all those good things. But they aren’t necessarily top priority in my life. I like doing service type things in the community. So, yes, I think your priorities do change as you go through certain changes in your life. I’m not a golfer. I’m not a bridge
player. So what I see many people doing in retirement kind of turns me off a little bit. I think, I still have health...

AP: You still have a lot to give.

RD: Yes, I feel that I do and therefore I should. So playing golf or joining a bridge club doesn't tempt me at all. But I enjoy going to concerts and plays and that type of thing. Everybody's different. There are lots of retired folks who just talk about the six months in Florida or Arizona, and then back here and playing golf year round. It doesn't even tempt me. I have no desire whatsoever. I still am pretty much a people person, and would like to be of service if I can. I would imagine that everybody faces those same kinds of decisions. They may all come up with different response. People who choose what they choose in the way of sports for retirement have made that choice, and that's fine for them. But I think everybody, as you will experience in your life time, too, that you'll face different periods of time when you have to make a choice. And it has to be one that you live with and you're happy with. I'm very happy with what I've done so far in my life, and what I still can do. It's just a joy to get up in the morning and to know what I'm going to do that day, and who I'm going to be with. I look forward to that. I imagine there are a lot of people who will tell you the same thing about retirement. That's really been the main thing, the main purpose for getting up each day and being grateful to God for having good health. We're at the point in life, too, where lots of our friends are dealing with major, major health problems. So you're reminded that if you have the blessing of good health, you should be very thankful.
AP: Are there any last things you’d like to add.

RD: No. I don’t know how much of what I’ve talked about has been appropriate for the Sesquicentennial. I think we’ve covered a lot of topics.

AP: Thank you very much.

RD: Oh, you’re welcome.