6-9-1997

Hannah, Carmen Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Carmen Hannah

(unedited)

Conducted June 9, 1997
by Ann Paeth

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
AP: Could you state your name, your birth date, if you will, where you were born, and when you moved to Holland?

CH: My name is Carmen Hannah. I was born in Hillsdale County in Hillsdale, Michigan. I grew up in Reading, Michigan. I moved to Holland in August of 1988.

AP: Why did you move to Holland?

CH: A job. Elementary principal at Van Raalte Elementary Holland Public Schools.

AP: Van Raalte is one of the oldest schools here, I think. Is that true? I don’t know how much you know about the history, but it seems a lot of people I’ve talked to have gone to Van Raalte School.

CH: Right, we have a lot of alumni that come by to visit. It’s almost a hundred. I don’t think it’s the oldest one. Lakeview Elementary might be.

AP: And probably some that have been torn down. What size of a school is that?

CH: In population? Currently 405 students.

AP: Could you describe the make-up of your student body?

CH: We have a diverse population in terms of ethnic background. 38% are Hispanic. 12% are Asian. About 2% are African American. Some Native American. The rest are caucasian.

AP: You’ve been at the same school since you’ve been here. Has that changed a lot over the years, the diversity of the school?
CH: Actually, the diversity’s stayed about the same since I’ve moved there.

AP: Because, the different ethnic populations coming to Holland has been something that has changed over the life of Holland, when you look at the long span. It’s really changed. We’ll just focus a little bit on your job at your school first off, and then we can get into other things. I wanted to ask you how you think others perceive your school and your students in Holland.

CH: It probably depends on what people you’re talking about. People that are familiar with our students, have been in our school, often comment on what good problem solvers they are, and thinkers, and how well they relate to each other. People who are not familiar with our school make some assumptions because of our high percentage of free and reduced lunch. Our MEAP scores used to be quite low, but they every year have gotten. Our math was second in the district this year. So, it probably depends on how familiar people are with our school. Some of the community people now recognize our school as being very neighborhood oriented.

AP: What makes it neighborhood oriented?

CH: We try to be very neighborhood centered. For example, we deliver newsletters to everyone in the neighborhood, and we invite the neighbors to our family events. Especially the neighborhood block party at the end of the year and the ice cream social at the beginning of the year.

AP: What’s the neighborhood block party, because I’ve heard about that. Somebody mentioned that to me.

CH: You have! Did you interview some folks in our neighborhood?
AP: No. Somebody in our office, when I said I was going to interview you, was talking about that was one of the things you did that they thought was really neat.

CH: It's pretty fun. It's a big block party that's a potluck, and we encourage everyone to bring an ethnic dish, and we serve barbecued chicken. So, for a dollar, they can have the chicken and drink, and then they bring the passing dish and their table setting, and so we get to taste a lot of different foods. This year, the fire truck came and the kids got to climb all over it. One of our Van Raalte alumni, he used to go to school at Van Raalte, he brought his band and we had live music. It was fun.

AP: As far as being neighborhood oriented, you not only involve the people in your neighborhood with kids, but everybody.

CH: One of my favorite stories is, this little lady that a lot of the kids call Mimi, her name is Mrs. Steketee, she came by and she came up to me. She says, "I just love coming to your parties, even though I don't have any kids here. But I just love your parties."

She comes to every one.

AP: That's so great. A lot of people, their kids grow up and leave the school, and that's just it. That's too bad.

CH: I know we have a lot of senior citizens in our neighborhood, and I think sometimes with changing population, there was some fear. So, we wanted to welcome them and show that kids are kids, no matter what color they are. The idea is that if they see children down the street, if they just wave and say, "Hi," that's a way of connecting with them, and that helps kids to feel comfortable. I grew up in a really small town, actually smaller than the neighborhood where I'm working. I kind of missed that
small town feeling, so the idea was to kind of create our neighborhood as a little small town part of Holland. It's a very established neighborhood. I'm always amazed at the number of people that say they went to Van Raalte School. When we worked on our playground, and decided to make it a neighborhood playground park, instead of just a school playground, so that meant adding benches and things other than just playground equipment, and one of the things we did to fund raise for it was we wrote letters to alumni, that were in their fifties. The contributions were just tremendous. A lot of them wrote stories and letters about their memories of being in school. It was real sweet. Then, channel 8 came and didn't a news coverage on it, and after that was on the news, we suddenly started getting letters in the mail with money. It was pretty incredible.

AP: Yeah, a lot of people went through that school. I'm sorry, how many years have you been in Holland? Since 1988? Have there been any big changes that you've noticed in the city or the school system or in general since that time?

CH: Mostly on my drive home, I've noticed changes. I used to see a lot of woods and now I see a lot of subdivisions. I'm amazed at the number. In fact, this one place is all wooded still, and I almost want to drive up and knock on the door and say, "Thank you for not selling your property," because that's really what attracted me to the area, because of the natural feeling, and still the close proximity of Chicago and a lot of the arts. This is a very art and culturally oriented area for being small. But that's my biggest change, is seeing the industrial and home growth. The mall was just barely here when I arrived. And it's nice to see the down town area revitalized.
That changed a lot since I've been here.

AP: Do you go downtown a lot, do you find you use it a lot?

CH: I don't know what a lot means. I go to the Arts Council a lot. There's certain areas that I visit, different stores.

AP: Are you involved in the Arts Council?

CH: As a volunteer.

AP: What do you do there?

CH: Not as much as I should. I usually help in the summer, with their celebrations. Sometimes I do addresses on envelopes.

AP: Why don't we talk about the artistic community here a little bit, because I really haven't talked with anybody that has brought that up, so it would be nice to talk about that. Basically, what kind of artistic community do you perceive, how involved are you in it?

CH: I'm not really all that involved. I'm more of an appreciator. For example, I love the films at the Knickerbocker. They have more arty films. I love all the dance concerts. I usually try to go to those.

AP: Oh, you do? I was a dance minor.

CH: Oh, with Maxine DeBruyn? They were very involved in our school. Striketime and Maxine had several students that came and did a dance workshop with our kids. Aerial Dance came and we had some boys who started a dance club. So, we involved some of the college students.

AP: They went to another school up north, and the principal was only going to let the
girls watch the concert. So they all went down to the office and they said, "No."
They had a guy in Striketime, and he said, "Wait a second."

CH: Oh my gosh. I can't believe that. I'm so shocked! (laughs)

AP: But the department at Hope, a lot of people are very dance education oriented.

CH: That's wonderful, and they did a great job with our kids. But, in terms of course work, there's a lot of course you can take. I took a couple of classes, even though I'm not very artistic, it was just fun to do. Then, there's a lot of art galleries. I think the Art Gallery Walk they started a couple of years ago, that's really nice. Of course, all the theatrical events at Hope, and with Grand Rapids being so close. And all the free events in the summertime. It's pretty amazing.

AP: It probably often goes unappreciated for people who haven't lived in other areas.

CH: Right, maybe it's kind of taken for granted here.

AP: I know that even coming from a city of roughly the same size, we just don't have the same events.

CH: Where are you from?

AP: Bay City.

CH: That's kind of an art area, isn't it. Saginaw?

AP: Saginaw, there's a little bit more. Midland. But I wouldn't say it's for everybody. Midland is a very upper-scale neighborhood, and to get your children involved in arts there... For instance, ballet, the better ballet schools, you pay a lot more money. So, there wasn't such an effort to get all kids involved at all levels, or free events.

CH: I'll tell you, something that the Arts Council does, they provide this performing arts
series every year. Then, if they have seats that were not taken, they'll call me up and say, we have so many seats, do you have some kids who want to go? Even though it's short notice, a day or two, we get a bus and take them. Because, at $2.50 a seat, that's really a nice discount. So our students get to see a lot of incredible performances that they wouldn't normally get to see. I think it's wonderful here, artistically.

AP: Do you think the quality of life, or the problems and concerns of kids today has changed from when you were a kid?

CH: Oh sure. I think there's a lot more pressures on kids today than there were when I was a child. I think probably the biggest difference is the need for dual income families. I'm amazed at the number of families in our school that work two and three jobs, and still qualify for free lunch. So, they're working non-stop, but not making enough to get ahead. When we moved here, we actually paid lower rent than some of the families that were in our neighborhood. It just seemed like some of the rent for large families was huge. That was when I first arrived here. I think the housing commission has really worked on upgrading homes and getting landlords to be more equitable. The fair housing commission has taken hold, because, really, some of the living conditions were not very good for the rent they were paying.

AP: I think there's a perception with other people, especially, the older they get, the further they get removed from being around children, that the quality of their childhood isn't as good as their's was. Or that nobody's taking care of them because their parents are working. What would be your perception of that? How do you
think we need to combat families with both parents working so that everybody gets
done what they need to get done, and that children get the attention they need? How
do you deal with all that, because I’m sure those are issues you encounter?

CH: That attention piece is a biggie. It really is. It’s not so much just attention, but the
attending, truly attending to kids. That’s why I mentioned about we try to get our
senior citizens just to wave at the kids, because that’s a little piece of attention. We
have a church partner, the couples come and have breakfast with the kids in the
morning, not to do anything, but just it there and talk with them, because
correspondence is a biggie. The think that we’re discovering, as a major change, the
kindergartners who are coming in, some of them just lack language. Not English
language, I mean, they may speak only English, but it’s the breadth of language, and
it comes from a lack of interaction. So, conversation is what’s missing in children
today. Probably the other thing, I remember when I was a little kid, we raced around
on our bikes all the time. Just the traffic alone.

AP: It’s interesting, you mentioning conversation, when we’re approaching the age of the
internet. So infrequently do people sit and talk back and forth.

CH: The internet will probably help that. For example, we have a student in our school
who has Tourette’s Syndrome. It’s a unique syndrome, which, obviously, no other
children in our school have that. But on the internet, he can be connected with other
kids who have Tourette’s Syndrome, and they can truly talk, and share their thinking
and their problems and how they cope, and share their dreams and how they can
correct their challenges.
AP: I think, too, despite what critics have said, we’re getting back to the written word and how to formulate things on paper. On a screen, not always on paper.

CH: It’s actually more difficult to express your thoughts in writing than in talking.

AP: Just doing this, and putting down conversations on paper, which is the next step after we talk here, people are always amazed, when they look back, at how they talk. That it’s so fragmented, and they don’t use proper English, and they just are horrified. But that’s the way we really talk. For people to have communication in the written form, a lot of people are lacking that.

CH: I think in the written form is where we get our sense of expression clear, greater specificity of language. Where, like I’m doing write now—rambling, and go on and on and on.

AP: Do you have a lot of children who come into this community who are not native speaking of English?

CH: Yes. Not a lot, we have a percentage of students that we teach English as a second language. Something pretty cool, next year, our ESL teacher, which is English as a second language, she is also going to help some kids teach Spanish to our English speaking students. This year we had a bilingual kindergarten, for children who spoke only Spanish could learn English. And those who spoke only English could learn Spanish. The kindergartners picked up on so much language, that we just decided to offer it to the whole school. Our kids who are bilingual, who speak both languages, English and Spanish, will be teaching.

AP: Are they [children] just sponges and can learn it so much more quickly than us?
Absolutely. In fact, we’ve done a lot with the brain research now. If you want to learn a second language and be able to speak without an accent, you have to learn it before puberty. After that, you’ll always have an accent. It’s just interesting.

Teaching second and third languages is very wise. I guess when you’re born, you have the capability of speaking 20,000 different languages. But your brain says...

Because there are all these different phonemes and things, and our mouths just learn how to produce a certain few.

The ones that we hear.

And after a certain point, you cannot produce...

Create it. And that’s puberty.

I had history of the English language at one point, and so we talked about all these things. Then you get to trying to write down words in other languages, and you could notate it, but you couldn’t pronounce it at all. They would describe sounds and how they were made in your mouth, and you still couldn’t do it, even if you knew which parts were moving and how.

Another thing to talk about is, I was told that you were on the committee to go down for the All-American city. Could you describe that process? One of my standard questions is to ask people why they think Holland was named a top ten city, what they think Holland has that deserves it that honor. I would be interested in hearing what things Holland did have that made it qualify for that, and how that was done.
CH: Well, I guess the process was quite an honor for Van Raalte School. The committee interviewed a lot of different programs. I really didn’t know too much about it at the time, except for, obviously now, going through it, I know quite a bit. They came and asked about our school, and it was that neighborhood and community involvement piece. For example, community mental health works out of our school, we give them space, and we try to do a lot of connections with businesses and people. But one of the things that they were really interested in is our problem solving program, where we teach kids how to be mediators and coaches, to coach other kids who are having a dispute, how to talk through their problem, and resolve it. I guess that was one of the things that really, they thought, was unique. So, after interviewing all these different programs, they decided to choose three that started within the last five years, to present in the application. Van Raalte School was one of them. When the application was received and became one of the top 35, then we all went to Texas to present the application, so to speak. I guess that was where I realized what having this award meant. I really thought it was something about, this is a great place to live, and it’s a beautiful area, and the quality of life is quite good, but in truth, what it is, is about towns that recognize problems, and then find solutions. I’ll never forget when we were sitting there in the audience with all these people, and, truly, some incredible programs that different had presented, and the gentleman started it out by saying something like, "It goes to show that just having a beautiful setting does not make a city without problems." Ooh, that could be Holland. And then went on to explain a little more, "This is one city that chose to respond to some gang
violence." Ooh, that could be Holland. Then it went on and also talked about an elementary a school that had a problem solving program that used kids as coaches, and then I knew it had to be us. It was such a thrill. It was really a great honor to be a part of that. I was fortunate to be able to take one of our students, and watching him speak in front of all those people, it was phenomenal. It kind of reminded me of what I hope our school is all about, is helping kids find their voice, to speak out, and show their leadership. My dream is that the kids at Van Raalte will go forth to become really contributing citizens, to really make this world a better place. Because, a lot of them have had a lot of hardships, and to learn how to overcome those challenges will give them greater empathy to work with others. So, if we can help them find their voice, they’ll have the empathy and the voice and the leadership to make things happen.

AP: That’s wonderful.

CH: It’s true. It’s what I believe. I see it happening a lot. We have a lot of success stories in our school. Unfortunately, I think, sometimes when we have substitute teachers in our school, I wish that the children would give automatic respect, but they don’t. Sometimes the few that don’t, that’s what’s remembered and then that gives an impression of our whole school.

AP: What about their regular teachers in terms of respect?

CH: As far as I can tell, yes. They care very much for their teachers. I guess, kind of significant, on the last day of school we have different traditions that are usually started by kids. For example, two years ago, I asked my students, the fifth graders,
well, what do you want to do to celebrate your ending of your elementary years and transitioning to the middle school years. They wanted to have a goodbye breakfast where they could have breakfast with all their old teachers, and then call them by their first name. (laughs) So now that’s become a Van Raalte tradition, and it’s really kind of sweet. A few years ago, spontaneously, some of the fifth graders came forth at the awards assembly, and gave a message to the school. So now, every year, I ask the fifth graders, as a group, you know, if you want to give a message to the school, just let me know and we’ll give a spot for you. This year’s message, we had six students that wanted to talk, and the words they said were so wise and so dear. It had everyone in the audience crying. When the end of the year came, it was kind of one of those ripple effects that everyone was crying, the boys and the girls. It was a sad goodbye this year.

AP: What role, do you think the church and religion plays in Holland, and what role has it played in your life?

CH: In my personal life or my school life?

AP: Both, or whatever you would like to talk about.

CH: Well, I’ll start with the school life. Right now, of course, Bethel Reformed Church, our neighbor church, we were partners until they closed their church down and left. But now Christ Memorial is our partner, and they have something called Kids Hope program, have you heard anyone speak to that? The Kids Hope program is where they have volunteers that come to our school, one hour a week, with one student, and they stay with that student every year. So, when we first started, we had 25
volunteers and they were matched with 25 kids. Then the next year, we added 25 more, and then 25 more. So next year, we have these tutors who will be working with the students as fourth graders now. And we’ll have about 110 volunteers coming every week for an hour to work with kids. So, to me, that’s a real impact. Those families get to see our students in a different light. Sometimes, when people who have quite a bit of money will see a child who’s not dressed very well, they’ll automatically think they’re not loved or not cared for. But now they can see that there’s a lot of love and attention given to them, but it just looks different.

AP: I’ve always been impressed by the number of volunteer hours that are spent in Holland every week.

CH: Incredible volunteership.

AP: I think that’s one of the things that makes Holland unique.

CH: And I think volunteering without an expectation of reward or recognition, just volunteering because it’s a nice thing to do, it’s a good thing to do, it’s the right thing to do.

AP: What about as far as the role of the church in the community?

CH: It seems to have a big part. I know having been in different communities, the church is a stronger force or entity. It’s very evident. I remember walking in our little school neighborhood. I counted seventeen churches in our small, geographic neighborhood. I haven’t seen, and I think that might be changing, the churches working together as a group, yet. That might be changing. I don’t know, have you heard that?
AP: I would say that there's probably still territories and lines drawn between different denominations as far as people not knowing a lot about different denominations and what difference there are.

CH: That's my sense.

AP: I know that on campus there's a lot of confusion about Catholicism. Protestantism, which usually get put as Christianity, and Catholicism isn't in that. You're saying, wait a second, Catholicism is Christian, and people just don't understand the terminology.

CH: I would say when Christian Reformed brought over the Bode people, so to speak, from Cambodia, those that switched to Christian Reformed, seemed to have been accepted. Those that wanted to keep their Buddhist religion had nowhere to go. What we saw in the school setting, because the monks were actually the disciplinarians of the families, when their children didn't obey, they took them to the monks, the monks made them obey, and then they brought them back home all willing to be good sons and daughters. So, coming to America where the closest temple was Chicago, it was hard for families to cope. Where as now, I think, there is a temple in Grand Rapids, and a few more monks nearby. Back when I first arrived here, it was difficult for families to know what to do.

AP: Do you think they're having a hard time blending their own traditions into traditions around Holland?

CH: It would be my guess. Yeah, I would think so. I remember when I first arrived, I had never seen something called "coining." When your child is ill or has a fever,
you take a copper coin, heat it up, and rub it real hard so that it looks like the child is
bruised or burned. I reported it to protective services, not knowing at the time that
that was a natural healing tradition. At the time, neither did the protective services.
But, now, we’re very aware that it is not a form of abuse, it’s a traditional method of
healing.

AP: What role do you think the Dutch heritage plays all of this? It’s kind of a blanket
question. Let me focus a little bit more. Obviously, the Dutch heritage is major
here. As far as getting all of your kids involved... I guess, maybe the most
interesting comment I’ve heard is that, as far as Tulip Time goes, there were all
different kinds of people involved, lots of different people participating, beyond
people of Dutch heritage. But as far as other celebrations of other ethnicities, there
are very few Dutch people involved. I don’t know if there’s any perception, or if you
have anything to say about that.

CH: Well, I guess I hadn’t thought about that too much. One of the things that I can share
is the Tulip Time Parade—I’ll share a story. We had a family who was very involved
in our school, did everything, but their children never participated in the Tulip Time
Parade. Finally I asked, why not, you do everything else, you don’t like to march in
parades, or what? This family was African-American. They said, it’s their personal
boycott. They would not have their children wear a Dutch costume, because the
Dutch, actually, were one of the beginners of slavery. So, it would be against their
belief to have their children wear a Dutch costume. And I said, hmm, then we’ve got
to figure out a way to allow them to wear a costume that’s not Dutch, so they can be
a part of this parade. So, our theme was "People of the Sea." We knew the Dutch were great explorers, so we had "People of the Sea," and then the separate pieces were, transportation of the sea, the sea shore, and then explorers of the sea. As explorers, we let anyone in our school wear their own ethnic costume, because the Dutch were great explorers. So that little portion of the parade has anyone who wants to wear any costume besides Dutch participate in the parade. It's kind of a colorful portion of the parade. Still, most of the kids choose to wear a Dutch costume, and that's great, but those who want to wear something different, can. But as far as the Dutch participating in the other, I think that will change as they become greater appreciators of culture. For example, we had an Asian dinner night at our school this year, and we combined it with our talent show. So, the kids put on a Cambodian fashion show, intermixed with our talent show. I remember several families saying that, like we fly to Florida, our kids will be flying to Cambodia to go shopping when they're our age. What a tribute it is to our school to have these tastes and exposures to different cultures. I think that's what it is, just feeling comfortable. As people get more exposure, they'll get more comfort, and recognize it's all for everyone.

AP: It seems that the role of education, or people's perception of the role of education, as far as the educators's perception, has really changed. I'm just thinking of my grade school, which was a bit old-fashioned, because it was a small parochial grade school, the job of the teacher would be to teach math, science, and religion. But as far as teaching some of the other things you talked about like conversation, problem solving,
mediation, that's seems to be a relatively new thought process going on in education.

CH: Sometimes as adults, we have difficulty confronting, so if we can teach children how to confront, I think that will be easier. It's unfortunate most of us learned it when we're too old. Growing up, it would save a lot of heartache.

AP: Have you had much contact with Hope College? What would you say the role of that is? Do you have student teachers coming from there?

CH: We don't have as many student teachers, because we have a hard time turning our kids over to a student teacher. But, we rely on the volunteers a lot. For example, one semester, we had 94 volunteers from Hope College. So, we rely on their help.

AP: Have you seen any change in the students since you've been here, as far as coming into the community to volunteer?

CH: No. They usually are required by a course, (laughs) to be honest. I don't really see too many volunteering out of the goodness of their heart.

AP: Are there any other organizations or activities that you are involved in, on top of everything else?

CH: I can't really think of any.

AP: Why don't you describe your first impressions of Holland.

CH: When I first arrived? Well, I had applied at places along Lake Michigan, and I'd never been to Holland. When I was called in for an interview, I was looking all over for Lake Michigan. (laughs) When you come into Holland, it's not easy to find Lake Michigan. So, I drove through what appeared to be an industrial area. I didn't have very good first impression. The downtown was a little desolate looking. I came on a
Sunday, and back then everything was closed. It looked pretty abandoned. So, my impression was, I wasn’t sure I wanted to live here. But then, of course, when I actually came to the interview, and met some people, and then got a little tour, and saw how to get to Lake Michigan, and saw the beauty... I will say they’ve done a lot to pretty up the entrances of Holland, and have done a lot more for the parks. So Holland today is far different than it was eight years ago, I think.

AP: It sounds like it has changed a lot in a very short amount of time. Are there any people that were very instrumental in your segue into this area? Or, are there any important people who have affected your life since you’ve come to Holland?

CH: Well, truthfully, I went to the interview only as an interview practice. I really had no intention of coming to live here. Because my first impression, like I said, wasn’t really that strong. I thought, well, I’ll get a little practice in and move on. But during the interview, David Nifer, who at that time was the assistant superintendent, is now the assistant superintendent, I.S.D. When I interviewed with him, I wanted in the worst way to have the job, because I saw him as a leader in education and somebody I could learn from, and his warmth, genuineness, and his true passion for learning, was something I thought I’d want to work for, and I’ve never been disappointed. He is my mentor, continues to be. He’s just the greatest educator, by far. I’m continually amazed, I guess that’s one of the things I enjoy most about Holland, is the sincere desire to reach out to others. I’m amazed at even very wealthy people who are very caring, and share the wisdom of their knowledge. Max DePree comes to mind. He’s such an incredible man. And Gordon VanWylen has
been very kind to our school, and to me, personally. All these big important people.
Very kind.

AP: What has Max DePree done?

CH: I read his book, and then I had the opportunity to meet him at an event where I gave a little, small presentation, and I remember going up to him, and I said, "You’re Max DePree!" I saw his name tag. I had no idea what he looked like, because I’d only read his book. And I said, "I just need to shake your hand. I just loved your books, you’re like a hero and inspiration." He was so kind. He’s just the dearest man.
Now, he’ll come and read to our kids at school, and share his pearls of wisdom, and relate to fifth graders just like he was a kid himself. You’d never guess he was such a wealthy man and so knowledgeable.

AP: I don’t know whether this is a good question or not, but do you think there is a generation gap in Holland? Or any other kinds of gaps?

CH: That is an interesting one. Now that I’ve become the older generation, this is good to ask that of me. I don’t know. I see some of the most active senior citizens that I’ve ever met in Holland. They seem to be more involved and have more events and things to do, and a willingness to participate. I guess I don’t have an opinion there, because I feel like I’m one of the kids a lot of times, but I know that I’m older. I think I don’t have a good perspective on that. Do most of the people say, yes, there is?

AP: Just that yes, there probably is, because it’s probably inevitable.

CH: I was going to say, I thought there was when I was a kid.
AP: It's funny because I think as a younger adult, you notice it more. Just being
twentysomething, you look at the kids in junior high or high school and you think,
what are they doing? So, it's kind of funny that the more compact that time is, the
bigger you perceive, whether that's realistic or not. Well, that's just a little side
note. That's not important.

What are the negatives to living in Holland?

CH: Well, people seem to make a judgment faster on people than in other places I've
lived. Probably, if they knew me in my college years, they would not hire me as a
principal now, just because of my background and growing up, and the parents I had,
I don't think that would be well received. Having come to Holland, I was only the
second female ever hired as an administrator. The first outside female. The other
one was a teacher within the district, and then advanced. So that was kind of a
novelty back then, where as now, gender is not an issue. But, I think Holland's
changed a lot in the last ten years, in their receptivity to differences. Although I've
been an administrator in three different towns, this was the first town that I ever was
asked my religious preference, before they decided to put their children in the school.
So, I think religion has a very big factor in people's lives. Probably my greatest
concern, or negative, about Holland, is something I call "the white glove treatment."
Sometimes, there's some very well meaning "Christian" people who want to help, but
they want to help with white gloves. They want to help by not getting too close.
They don't want to touch for fear that some of it might get on them, if you know
what I mean. I think that's changing, but I certainly noticed it more before. People
wanted to help without having to get too close. They wanted to help those poor little children. But really didn’t want anything to do with them.

AP: They were more acting out of pity rather than, I don’t want to say love, or compassion?

CH: I think they thought they were being compassionate. I think there’s still a lot of ignorance in diversity issues. Seems to be some very clear right and wrong dividedness. There’s only severely right ways and severely wrong ways and nothing in between. You probably have that in every community, though, people make opinions and judgments. It just seems to be a little more driven here. (laughs)

AP: Right. I was going to say, it seems in some places it’s easier to escape the thwart of that than it is others. Do you have family or friends that come to visit Holland or live nearby, and what is their perception of Holland?

CH: Well, most of our friends and family that come to visit see the beauty. Of course, where we live, you know, it’s beautiful. This is the first time we’ve ever bought a house. We’ve always rented and moved a lot. So this is a long time living here. So mostly the beauty and opportunity to do things, unique shopping, unique experiences. My brother and his wife come a lot for the fun. We do a lot of outdoor things.

AP: Do you think you’re settled here?

CH: Well, it feels that way, since we’ve only lived for three years in every other place.

AP: Do you feel like a Hollander, or do you feel like, still, you have to say that you’re from someplace else, originally?

CH: Oh, I never say I’m from someplace else, originally. I’m always very proud to say
that I'm from Holland. Especially when I go to different workshops or conferences and things, people say, "Oh, you’re from Holland." So, I’m very proud to say that I’m from there.

AP: Do you think Hollanders see you as a Hollander?

CH: No. I think I look Dutch, and a lot of people think that. A lot of people call me by my last name, as my first name, I think because it’s Biblical. I’ve never had that anywhere but here. I don’t think people think I’m a Hollander. There is something that has changed in Holland for the better. When I first arrived here there were a lot of bumper stickers that said "If you’re not Dutch, you’re not much." I don’t see that anymore. That’s kind of nice. Although I never was personally offended by it, I found it kind of tacky.

AP: It seems, I’ve kind of recognized a trend that people who have moved to Holland and even lived here for years and years and years, still feel, in Holland, like they’re not from Holland, or feel that the Hollanders still don’t identify them as Hollanders. They’re all still like, oh, you’re from Chicago, or you’re from Iowa, or wherever they’re from. I was wondering if you felt that holds true to you.

CH: I guess that’s never been important to me, so I haven’t noticed it. I am a believer of history, and I love people who have historical stories and ties, so I would admire anyone who has those ties to Holland. But as for feeling badly that I’m not recognized as that, that wouldn’t be significant at all.

AP: It’s probably not. Are there any other events or organizations or issues that I haven’t touched on that are important to you, that we should discuss?
CH: Well, I think the things that they're doing with the water way, trying to create a green area, pathway through, I think that's wonderful. Because of the growth, I think it's really great that they're trying to create still a very natural, artistic area. I remember when they came through and evaluated downtown, they thought it was getting a little too similar and they advised to have a greater variety of building structure. I think that was smart, too. I love all the bike paths. That gives me the feeling of Europe, being able to hop on your bike and go places.

AP: Especially the Netherlands, too.

CH: And Germany, too, is the same way. An area that has changed from when I first arrived here, it seems like there were more people that wanted just to build a wall around their little city, and just keep Holland pure, and keep away everyone who was not pure. I don't hear that so much anymore. When that gang and violence first started, I think that's when that idea of, we're just going to build a wall to protect, now I see that changing. Instead of building a wall, building a bridge, so that people can have common threads and common grounds. We all smile in the same language, that kind of thing. I think that's taking charge.

AP: Do you think people are becoming less resistant to the growth of the city? I think that was something people were resistant to as well.

CH: I think there's still a fear of the growth. I don't think there's as much of a fear of the people, as there is of getting too big and losing the small town flavor. Because, actually, for the size of this area, it still does feel very small town. It's nice. I maybe shouldn't put this on tape, but we still don't lock our doors.
AP: You know, the people that have lived here for 70 years, when I ask them how they
city has changed, they say, "Well, for starters, we never used to lock our doors."
It's funny, because I think for a lot of people coming into Holland, like you say, I
never lock my car doors as much as I would in other places. It's all relative to what
you've known before. To me, it's one of the safest places I've ever lived. The
people that have lived here all their lives, they think it's just so unsafe now. It's very
interesting.

CH: ---- Comparative.

AP: It sounds like people are widening their bases to compare with.

CH: I think so, but fear is a scary thing for people. When you see a large group of
somebody who looks unfamiliar, that can be frightening. Not to me, but to people
who aren't familiar. But, you know, I think it's just a riot: one time during the
summer I went to Meijer during the week, like about nine o'clock in the morning,
and that's when all these seniors kind of congregate around the coffee machine,
having their conversation and chatting. It was like a whole new slice of life of
Holland. Or you go to Meijer on a Friday night, and you can get a Spanish lesson.
You go at different times of the day, and you get a whole different group of people.
I think it's great, there's all kinds of different foods there now that you can try and
experiment with. I just love to go there and I'll see someone picking out a different
fruit, and I'll say, tell me about that and how do you know how to pick it out. Then
they go into these real elaborate stories about the fruit and what it tastes like. It's a
great place to live if people are interested in learning about other ways.
AP: We were just eating Couscous tonight, which I thought was pretty common. Someone in our house was like, "What’s that?" Couscous. And he said, "Well what does that translate to?" Couscous. It’s a grain, try it. "Where did you get that?" At Meijer. It comes in boxes like Rice-a-Roni. It was kind of funny. Or I’m always surprised when people can tell me the Dutch name for something, or I’ll know about German pastries. We all forget that we all have our own different backgrounds.

CH: Here’s a funny story for you. One of my second graders came up to me, it was after spring break when I had gone to Mexico, and my skin was very suntanned. He came up to me and he said, "Hannah, you’re Mexican, aren’t you?" And I said no. "But look," and he put his skin next to mine, "Look, we’re the same color." I said, "Yeah, we’re the same color, but my family’s not from Mexico. He said, "Well, what are you then?" I said German. He said, "Do you speak Spanish?" I said no. "Well, what do you speak?" German. "What’s German." Well, German is the language of people from Germany. He said, "Teach me some German." I said, I only know one thing, so I taught him "Ich liebe dich." Do you know what that means?

AP: I love you.

CH: So to this day, he’s in fourth grade now, and every time I see him, he says, "Ich liebe dich." It’s just kind of a nice little story.

AP: That must be fun to see that awareness happen about, oh there’s another nationality beyond even all the ones we’re exposed to in Holland. They’re so innocent, so eager to know about that.
CH: I’ll tell you two more stories. When I first came here, remember I said being female as an administrator was quite a thing.

AP: That’s what it was.

CH: Kids came up to me and said, I heard we’re having a girl principal, and they were all pretty excited about that. I’m thinking, maybe this wasn’t such a good thing. Of course, now I’ve been here so long, it’s kind of a natural thing, but my first year there, a first grader said to me, I was observing the teacher for evaluation, so I was sitting there in the math class, and all of a sudden she looked up at me and this little first grader said, "Mrs. Hannah, you should be princip Mall, not principal, because you’re not a boy." So, that was the novelty of it. Now, last year, the kindergartners have only had me as a female principle, and in their classroom, they have kind of a housekeeping area that they turn into different things, and they had turned it into an office. They were playing, and two boys said they were going to be a principal, and the girls told them, you can’t be a principal because only girls are principals. So they went up to the teacher and said, "Mrs. Gebben, can boys be principals?" She said, "I don’t know, you better go ask Mrs. Hannah." So here are the two boy, hand in hand, knocking, "Mrs. Hannah, can boys be principals?" And I looked at them and I said, "Only if you’re really, really good." (laughs) But that just kind of goes to show the change of perspective. For them, their image of a principal is female. That’s why it’s important, I think, that we provide a variety of role models in a variety of settings and a variety of ethnic backgrounds and genders.

AP: So, even in the past eight years, would you say the role of women has changed
around here?

CH: No. (laughs)

AP: But as far as the administration?

CH: Yes. In education it has.

AP: Someone I talked to said, years and years and years ago, it was common practice that once the teacher was married, she had to quit. Teachers had to be single women. That was very interesting how far that has changed.

CH: Of course, a long, long time ago, it used to be all female administrators. Then they started paying them more. Then they all became male, and now it’s switched back a little bit. As far as the role of women in Holland and in the church, I would say there’s a ways to go.

AP: Are there any other things that we should talk about? We’ve talked about so much.

CH: I think we’ve covered a lot.

AP: Okay, then I think we’ll just wrap it up. Thank you so much. I really, really enjoyed our talk.

CH: You’re very welcome. You’re easy to talk to.