

Helen Johnson-Interviewed By Sue Flokos-6-27-84-Side B

F: Testing this machine. Today is Wednesday the 27th. Please play back.

SUE FLOKOS: Go ahead. Now, as I was saying, if you had a chance to go back, would you?

HELEN JOHNSON: Yes. It was a nice time of my life. I loved my family, loved having my husband. I liked the simple things. Even if we had to walk a lot and everything, I really enjoyed it.

SF: But I mean, if you were, I think I'm saying, if like, for instance --

HJ: We have everything now, I know; we have everything, but still, I liked that time of my life.

SF: But was it because of the atmosphere of Bridgeport, that, too?

HJ: That had a lot to do with it too, because you were safe.

SF: And there was prices and inflation, everything?

HJ: Oh, and the prices too, that had a great deal to do with it.

SF: Like you could go around and buy a hotdog or something for like a nickel?

HJ: Yeah, but don't forget, the reason that we have these high prices and inflation is because, if we didn't get the

[01:00] unions and they wouldn't drive up the working wage,
and that wouldn't -- what? (break in audio)

SF: Okay. So -- we're working here. So, you say overall, that
you think that you would love to go into the past, but do
you think that the future holds something different? Do
you think Bridgeport will be better in the future, or --

HJ: I definitely hope so, I really do, because there's so many
nice people living here. They deserve a better break than
they get. It would be nice to leave the house, and today,
I carried some money. You want to know where I carried it?
I put it in a brown envelope and walked on it. I just left
it off over at Bartram House. It's no way to have to walk
on the street, and I am afraid. I keep my fingers crossed
every time I leave the house, because I walk a great deal;
that's why I wear sneakers.

SF: [02:00] Yeah, it's [more?] comfortable. But, you hope that
the future holds something better (overlapping dialogue;
inaudible) --

HJ: Yeah, I'd like to see --

SF: -- Bridgeport?

HJ: I'd like to see something, truthfully. I'd like to see
something built in Black Rock that would ensure us comfort,
and also the children, like you, and something that we

could share. That doesn't look like it's going to happen. They seem to just forget Black Rock.

SF: Yeah. I read an article in the newspaper that said that kids want to get to know older people because they feel like there's a big gap between their lifespan, or the --

HJ: They really shouldn't be, because they have so much to gain from older people. I don't mean just like your interview or anything, but, we have so much to offer. We're not that much smarter, believe me, but the older people like companionship. [03:00] They like the young people to smile, like we did when we were young, because we were strictly brought up to be very nice to older people. I brought my children up the same way, too. The neighbors always commented on how well brought my children were up, because different children never stopped to say hello to them or smile to them, and it made me feel very happy and I think that's a very nice thing, because sometimes you have to turn to older people. It should be that way, I think. I'm very much for it.

SF: Because they were saying in the article that they said that now, kids want to get to know older people because they have a lot to offer.

HJ: Yes, and it's true.

SF: And if you want to learn about your community or something, that's the best person to ask.

HJ: Well, I always turned to my grandma and grandpa. I loved my grandma and grandpa, and anything they did, they never did anything wrong. They never [04:00] could do anything wrong in my eyes, because I really loved them, and I was close to them. I really enjoyed being with them, yes.

SF: That's nice to have (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

HJ: And it should be that way. I think young people have a lot to gain. And the togetherness, like I've said, in the old days, it really was nice. It compensated us for so many things we didn't have.

SF: So, overall, you would say that it's good to have that closeness with everybody.

HJ: Yes! I have enjoyed talking to you and I hope you have enjoyed talking to me, too.

SF: Of course.

HJ: Because I try to be nice to everybody. I --

SF: I try.

HJ: Yeah, I know. It's hard; it's hard because see, you never know how someone is going to take you, but I try to be nice to everybody. It's why I get along at the program here. They're all my friends. [05:00] We have about, between 50

and 60 people come, and I greet everybody the same way every day.

SF: And you work at the desk up front, or you just go there because it's closer?

HJ: I come here as a volunteer. I could have the job as a paying job, but I don't want it. I thought a younger person could have it, and then, if I want to travel somewhere, I would be tied down. I had it offered to me but I refused it. But I enjoy being a volunteer, and I come every day. I leave the house at quarter to 10:00 and I work till 12:30.

SF: Mm-hmm, and then right now, you would be home then.

HJ: Right now? Pretty soon. I play cards in the afternoon or I go over in Saint Ann's and I play bingo on Monday afternoon, and I go to bingo at night over there. Then Tuesday nights, like last night, I went to bingo over to Holy Trinity.

SF: So you're very involved in the community then.

HJ: Yeah, I [06:00] like it that way, yes.

SF: So you've gone to the bingo club and you've gone over here; what else do you do?

HJ: I'm a line dancer. I used to be with Mary Feathers; we used to go out and entertain. I sort of backed up on that when I started being a volunteer here. We went out; we

wore costumes. I was, been in the Barnum Festival in costume with her, and we did shows. We went to rest homes and everything, did benefits, never got paid for anything. It was just something we liked doing.

SF: Yeah, so you were like in the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

HJ: I just can't sit still, and, I want to do things all the time.

SF: That's good, if you keeps it up like that. See, but other people can't be like that. Some people just sit in their house.

HJ: Oh, I can't see that.

SF: I can't do it; I can't; I wouldn't. Said, "Nobody's going to put me in no rocking chair." (laughter)

HJ: No, no, it's too many older people wasted their lives that way, [07:00] and there's so much to look forward to. I just thank God for every day that I live, and I enjoy it.

SF: That's good.

HJ: That's my outlook. And if I can help anybody or do something for anyone, I'm there.

SF: That's good. And somebody, you can always look up to somebody that --

HJ: I think it's so self-satisfying, for me, to do for others.
I think it's, to me, it's a way of helping God, one way or another.

SF: That's nice though, (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

HJ: Yeah, that's my outlook on life. I can't change it.

SF: Oh, I know. I love the way you put it.

HJ: Yeah, I really can't change it, because that's me. I like to be everybody's friend.

SF: That's nice; that's really --

HJ: Because, and everyone, even eccentric people, there's always so much good in everyone. And then, too, people are hard to get around. Eventually, they come around, they're nice, [08:00] you know.

SF: And you might get the, like one person always says, "You can't judge a book by its cover."

HJ: No, you reach out. You reach out over halfway and then people -- people need friends a lot more than you think they do. They need to turn to people, and like when my husband died, I really never realized. And he wasn't well, and when I started to go out, and of course, he couldn't go anywhere, and he'd say, "Well, make friends. Have friends, so when I'm gone," and it was the truest thing, I'm telling you. When all those people come and throw their arms

around you, it's such a good feeling, and then you're not lost. You're really not lost at all.

SF: So you like that kind of all together (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

HJ: And then I figured that I'm alone and I can do something in return, and show my love for other people. Because I think God wants us to do [09:00] things like that, and if we have a good feeling about doing it, that's it.

SF: It's good incentive, very, very good.

HJ: Yeah. So I wouldn't do it if I didn't enjoy it, believe me. No, it's enough for it. You get up, like a lot of people, ladies that I know, they stay around in their old housecoats all day and watch TV. This way, I'm up. I'm get my bed made and get my breakfast, the dishes, and get dressed, because every day you have to dress up to go out, especially if you have to be neat to come to a place like this, too, and it does give me an incentive to be the right person.

SF: That's good. It really is. I hope I am like that when I grow old. (laughs)

HJ: Well, I find this, an awful lot of satisfaction in it. Yeah, like down at the center there, when the girls came out, they wanted me to take over the site, because we were [10:00] having a little problem, and I said, "No," I said,

"but I'll be the best volunteer they've got." So that's what I do.

SF: That's good, that you're so energetic about everything, and you want to get out and always try to help people. That's the best kind of job that anybody would want.

HJ: I really like it.

SF: It sounds like it, it really does. I know I like doing the same thing. I always want to reach out and help somebody.

HJ: Even you are never too young to reach out. You start when you're young, and of course, I was busy -- I brought my family up and all -- but my daughters are like me, too. My three children are like me. They reach out; they reach out, yeah.

SF: Sounds like you're very good. I thank you for your time.

HJ: I thank you. It was nice interviewing. [11:00] It was really a pleasure.

SF: Oh, it's been my pleasure. Very good to talk to you.

HJ: Okay.

END OF AUDIO FILE