

Interviewer: Tom Girard (TG)

Interviewee: Renee O'Neil

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Transcriber: Nicole Morin-Scribner (NMS)

TG: My name is Tom Girard. I am the interviewer and a volunteer with the Biddeford Cultural and Heritage Center. It is Wednesday, October 9th. Today I have the privilege of interviewing Renee O'Neil. We are conducting this interview at Renee's work office in Biddeford.

Hi Renee. I'd like to start by asking you when and where were you born?

RO: Hi Tom. Thank you so much for the opportunity to be a part of this interview. I was born in Burlington, Vermont in 1962.

TG: Do you remember what hospital it was up there?

RO: It was the largest. My dad was affiliated with the VA [Note: Veterans Administration]. There was a hospital there. I don't know which one it was. Something Memorial Hospital. [Note: DeGoesbriand Memorial Hospital] My brother, Chico, was also born there. Then my parents decided to move on from Vermont. They were traveling a lot at that time.

TG: Before we talk about how you ended up in Vermont or your parents did. What about your ancestry? What do you know about where your parents came from or their ancestors?

RO: I've done a little bit of digging to see where my grandparents and my great-grandparents were born. Some of it I'm still working on.

On my father's side, my dad's grand-father was named Dosithee Potvin. He was born in Canada. He married Marguerite Landry. She was born in Maine. Her family, I think, goes back to Canada. They both were in the Dixfield area and moved to Lewiston. They had my grandfather, Perley. Perley may have had a brother, (Alec) we think. We are unable to find specific documentation about him. They lived in the Lewiston area for a while. They didn't have much money and like a lot of people during that time, if they didn't have money, they would sometimes live on what we used to call a poor farm. The story in my family is that my grandfather and his brother basically ran away from an orphanage. But we don't really know if

they truly were in an orphanage or not. Somehow, they made it to Biddeford. That's where he met my grandmother.

My grandmother's name was Laurette Leonie Palardy. Her father was Moïse Palardy from Canada. Her mother was Clara Esther Cantara. She was born in Biddeford. We are making the assumption that the Cantaras also came from Canada.

What is interesting is our connection with Susan Deschambault, you interviewed her not long ago, Susan's grandmother was Henriette Deschambault. She was my grandmother's sister. So, Henriette was a Palardy who married Clement Deschambault. That's how we are connected to Sue. My dad enjoyed Sue's grandfather and father very much. The Palardys were a lot of fun. We had a lot of uncles and aunts that we'd get together with and that's one of the groups that we would socialize with. My dad had a brother, Albert Potvin, sisters Margaret Goodson and Bernie Valliere. They all were born and went to school in Biddeford.

On my mother's side, my mother was a Cote. Her name was Doris Claire Cote. She had no brothers or sisters. My mom's father's name was Onida Joseph (Leo) Cote. Everybody called him Leo. He was born in Canada. My grandmother was Laurence Anne Morel. She was also born in Canada. Her brother Adolphe had a son Micheal who was involved with banking and a daughter Rachel who is married to Dick Reny. Also, this ties in to my mom's cousins who are Claudette Levesque, Rita Parsons, and Claire Leclair whose dad was my grandmother's brother, Ovila Morel. Ovila, was also known as "Chester" and was one of the oldest employed workers at the mills.

TG: Mike Morel also taught at St. Louis High School for a couple of years.

RO: I didn't know that.

TG: Mike was teaching there when they closed, I'm quite sure.

RO: We miss him. He had a great sense of humor. My mom was about 10 years older than Mike. She used to babysit him sometimes and he used to bring her a comic book and say, "Doris, can you play this on the piano?" My mother used to make believe that the comic book was her musical score on the piano. He was quite the character. Later on, I got to be on a Board of Directors for St. Andre's with Michael and worked with him on other projects.

Going back to my mother's father, Leo. His parents were Joseph Cote and Clarinda Beauchesne. What was interesting about my great grandmother Clarinda, is my grandfather somehow you know there are stories about people of whom they used to say had Indian descent or Native American descent. I can't prove it. I've been looking at our DNA. I've been looking at some other things. I can't prove it but one of the things that my grandfather was asked to do is if

people in the community had an accident or they got a burn and were suffering from the pain of the burn, they would call on my grandfather and he would have these prayers. He used to say, "I'm talking to the devil right now." It must have been a different type of spiritual prayer. He didn't really like doing them but I heard he was very successful. So, the people that he attended to were provided relief from the pain. He never really wanted to pass that along. I'm not sure what that was but it was basically a story we would hear from him. My grandmother and my mother would talk about it. That was an interesting tidbit that I just thought of not long ago.

On my grandfather's side, they all came from Canada. They would go back and forth between Canada and Biddeford. Some of the Cotes went to Lowell Massachusetts and worked in the factories there. Finally, my grandfather said, "I'm not going back to Canada anymore. We are staying here." My grandfather and grandmother decided to move to Biddeford. They lived on Green Street with my Morel family. The Morels had a three-story apartment building on Green Street in back of Laverriere's Market. They lived there for a while. Then my grandmother's father, Evariste Morel, was a carpenter and built the house that is on Birch Street that my grandparents lived in. My grandfather and my great-grandfather together built that little house. Evariste Morel was a carpenter, but he was first a dairy farmer. In Canada, he had a dairy farm, and I found pamphlets that if you have a dairy farm and you made cheese or anything like that, you were in a book. You were registered with whatever province you were in in Canada. That was interesting.

My great-grandmother, Evariste's wife, was Clara Brouillard. I think her ancestry goes all of the way back to royalty. There was work that was done a long time ago by relatives to go back far enough to tie her in. I'm trying to find out if that is really true or not and what does royalty mean? That's interesting. She passed away when she was about 58. My great grandfather remarried a woman named Caroline DeVelder. I think she was Belgian. She is not a blood relative, but she was a cook on a steamship or hotel and very versed in fine cuisine. She passed along a lot of really good cooking skills to my grandmother. I think that came down to myself and my mom. Even one of my brothers enjoys cooking too. That definitely is how we were brought into all of that, from her.

The lineage comes primarily, most recently, the generations are in Maine from Canada but somewhere we discovered I'm about 20% Portuguese. When I did my DNA, we don't really know where that has come from yet. But the Potvin line goes all the way back to Normandy, France. That line is likely all French from what I can see. My mother's side did talk about having some English as well. There's a little bit of a mix there.

TG: When you were growing up, did your family make any pilgrimages to Canada? A lot of Franco-American descendants in Biddeford used to do that.

RO: Yes. We did not as kids. I did not go to Canada until the 8th grade field trip. But my grandparents would go often. We knew when they went and when they came back we'd get a bag of cheese curds that would come from the dairies that were out there. They would bring maple sugar back as well. We would cook that on the stove, melt it down and pour it on snow. We'd have maple candy. That was my grandmother on my mother's side primarily who would go to Canada. I don't think anybody else did those pilgrimages.

TG: Let's go back to Vermont for a minute. How did you come to be born in Vermont? How did your parents end up there?

RO: I know. That's interesting isn't it? A lot of people think, "You must have been born in Biddeford." That's all they know.

Both of my parents were born in Biddeford. My dad's work goes back to his military service. He served in the Korean War. He learned land surveying and engineering when he was in the war. He actually was surveying an area with an officer when he took his helmet off and my dad was hit in the head by a sniper bullet. That caused him to be taken off by helicopter similar to what you see in MASH {Note: M*A*S*H is an acronym for **Mobile Army Surgical Hospital**, an American [war comedy drama](#) television series that aired from September 17, 1972, to February 28, 1983} My dad would explain that he was fully conscious when this was going on, which is really remarkable. He survived the bullet wound. He did have some hemiparesis [Note: weakness on one entire side of the body] that he had to work through. That was kind of a big deal and he received a Purple Heart.

When he received his honorable discharge he ended up working for Lane Construction. Lane Construction at that time was working on all the interstates that were going in throughout a good part of the United States. My mom and dad when they got married were moving around a lot. They moved to wherever Lane Construction was working. They had a trailer. If they had to move to Columbus Ohio, they moved to Columbus Ohio and stayed there until the work was done. Then they went to Billerica, Mass. They did Columbus Ohio. Then they moved to Vermont.

TG: Did the family go with your dad on all of these?

RO: I wasn't born yet when they did most of their traveling. When they ended up in Vermont, I was born there. My brother, Chico, was born there. Then they moved to Keeseville and Slate Hill, New York. These were just small towns that interstates were going through. By the time we moved to Slate Hill, I just started kindergarten. I was 5. That was at the point where halfway through the year, my parents decided to move back to Biddeford. My dad was offered a job with the Street Department for the City of Biddeford. So, they decided to move to Biddeford.

They bought the house we lived in where I grew up, on Elm Street. They had a GI Loan. They were able to purchase a home. That's when we started living in Biddeford.

TG: Do you know how your parents met?

RO: Yeah. My mom, although she went to the local schools, had rheumatic fever when she was younger. She had it two years in a row so she lost a lot of time in school. My grandparents, fortunately at the time both of them worked. My grandfather worked at the Saco Lowell. He was a machinist. My grandmother was a loomer in the mill. Both worked and could afford to send her to private school. They sent her to St. Joseph's Academy which I think was in Berwick, Maine. It was in the southern area of Maine. It was a convent where you stayed there. You lived there and went to school there. The order of nuns were very kind and nice. My mom enjoyed it. She spent a lot of her time there. She wasn't as well known to my dad. Later on when she would come back in the summer she was very interested. She dated a lot. She was very pretty and she had a lot of male suitors. She went on one date with Art Descoteaux. I think it was Pete Danton that I think she went out with before too. Somehow, she connected and saw my dad. At that time, my dad was working for Sammy Cohen at the York Bottling Company. My dad used to drive his truck by Birch Street where my grandparents lived. My grandparents' front lawn was probably maybe 4 feet by 4 feet and my mom wanted to catch my dad's eye. So, she would mow the lawn with a little push mower. (laughter). My dad caught her eye and they connected that way. They got to know each other. That's pretty much how they met.

TG: Did your mother do high school at St. Joseph's?

RO: Yes. At St. Joseph Academy. She wasn't around during the school year, but in the summer she would be home and on vacation. She was kind of someone new and interesting. Actually, when my parents were growing up, they lived near each other. My dad lived on Cutts Street and they both lived around Green Street for a while. They knew of each other but didn't really connect until later.

TG: Your dad, did he go through parochial school?

RO: Yes. My dad went through St. Joseph's and St. Louis High School.

TG: You talked about your dad's military service. What about civic activities? Were your parents involved in civic activities?

RO: My mom was the person who grounded everything so that my dad could go out and do those civic responsibilities. My dad was a people person. He loved people. He loved being out there. He was very connected politically. He was involved in a whole bunch of organizations.

The typical Knights of Columbus, the Elks, the Voltigeur Club, the Richelieu Club. They used to call him in to emcee because he knew a bunch of French jokes that he would tell. He was someone who really loved to connect with people. He was a City Counselor for I don't know, it had to have been over 15 years. He was also a Boxing Commissioner for the State of Maine. He was very active in anything that was political on the local level as a Democrat. It was funny because John & Dave Kerry told me one time, "If you got Dick Potvin's vote, you were going to be all set if you were a Democrat. If he agreed that you were going to be the candidate for the Democratic Party, you were going to be all set."

TG: Your dad was not only a joiner, when he joined, he was active.

RO: He was active

TG: That's where that gene comes from, in you as we'll see a little later when we talk about your civic activities.

RO: Yeah. And I think one thing my dad was really good about was crossing party lines. I would say from both of my parents.

Later in their lives my mom and dad bought a store, Potvin's Market at Halfway in Old Orchard Beach. Growing up in that store really allowed me to watch my parents and how they treated other people. They really welcomed people regardless of what they looked like, what they sounded like, where they were from. Everyone was welcomed and part of the family. My dad had friends that were Republicans. My dad was French Catholic but had friends who were Greek. He had friends who were Jewish. It didn't matter to him. He saw people as people. My mom was the same way, very accepting and understanding of differences. That was a wonderful attribute to be able to pass along.

TG: Back then, in the 40's-50's-60's, probably even before, Biddeford was primarily Democratic. Your father ever talk about that, what it was like in an almost a one-party city?

RO: Yeah, he did. I think there were times when there would be Republicans running and what they had back then was a slate. You would have a slate. It was Democrats running against Democrats vs Democrats running against Republicans. Depending on whose slate you were on, was going to may or may not make you successful at what you do. We were fortunate to have him also have such deep ties that we had Mondale come to our home. My dad hosted a gathering at their home to welcome Mondale and bring awareness to his campaign. Also, Jimmy Carter. My dad was instrumental in arranging for Jimmy Carter. I remember meeting him at the St. Joseph's Parish Hall. My dad was invited to go to the White House for a breakfast with Jimmy Carter and others to thank him for his efforts in helping with the campaign. We have a

picture of him. It's great. We have pictures of Mondale and people coming to our house to meet him. It was kind of a big deal. [NOTE: Walter Frederick "Fritz" Mondale (January 5, 1928 – April 19, 2021) was an American lawyer and politician who served as the 42nd vice president of the United States from 1977 to 1981 under President Jimmy Carter. He was the Democratic Party's nominee in the 1984 presidential election, but lost to incumbent Ronald Reagan]

TG: How about siblings? Can you talk about your siblings for a few minutes?

RO: Do I have to Tom? (laughter)

TG: I know you have some.

RO: I have the best brothers. I have two awesome brothers. My brother, Chico, everyone says, "Is that his real name? Where did that come from?" His given name is Richard Paul Potvin II. My dad's nickname, they used to call him Dick Potvin. They decided to give my brother the nickname of Ricky. My brother hated that name. My dad was a boxer. My dad was a Golden Glove before he was drafted into the military. Obviously, after his injury, he wasn't able to do boxing any longer. There was a boxer called Chico Vihar. So, they used to call my brother Little Chico. That name has stayed. People call him Mr. Chico. He does developing. Even when he was little, when my dad was working for Lane Construction, my brother always wanted to build. He always had that drive to make things, build things. He had all of the construction Tonka toys. Later on he would build in the back of our house on Elm Street, there was a little patch of woods where he and his friends would build tree houses and cabins. My brother always had that drive and desire to build things.

My brother, Jay, is five years younger than I am. Jay is a really remarkable person. He was born prematurely. When he was born, the doctor said that he probably wasn't going to make it but if anyone could do anything, it was this priest who was known to be able to say prayers. The doctor was Jewish. The doctor said, "I don't know how this works but that's all I can offer you at this time." The story is my dad tried to reach the priest at the rectory but he was in bed and didn't want to get up. So, my dad went over and pulled him out of bed. Again, we don't know for sure exactly what happened but the deal was my dad did get the priest to the hospital. There were prayers said and then my brother started to make improvement in the next couple of days. That was kind of a big deal. Now, my brother is taller than my other brother and I. We are like, "Well heaven forbid if you had come in on time you'd be like Jethro Bodine." [NOTE: Jethro Bodine was a character in *The Beverly Hillbillies*, is an American television sitcom that was broadcast from 1962 to 1971] Jay is great. He is funny. He has a great sense of

humor. He used to memorize Rodney Dangerfield albums. My parents used to pull him out of bed at night to come down and tell Rodney Dangerfield jokes to all their friends when they were having cocktails. Jay works now for Sodexo. He is a chef with them. He's been with that company, he's probably one of their longest standing employees. He has kept the tradition of boxing alive in our family. He runs a nonprofit boxing club for young people. It's about using the art of boxing to enhance people. It's not so much about fighting. It's more about the art of boxing and the discipline. He's helped a lot of young people who really didn't have a direction and needed a father figure. He's done really, really well with that. He does that totally as a volunteer.

TG: Where is his club?

RO: Right in Biddeford. It's in the back of where Cowbell is.

He works with young men and women. If someone is a promising boxer, he'll take them to Portland to work with Bobby Russo of the Portland Boxing Club. He's pretty remarkable. He works a full day and then he goes to the gym at night and works with these kids.

TG: Sounds very interesting.

You talked about having lots of family: grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. Do you have memories of family gatherings? Were a lot of relatives, the older relatives in particular, French speaking?

RO: Yes. Pretty much everybody growing up, there was a lot of French being spoken. There was also a lot of Franglais: a little French, a little English. My grandfather on my mom's side spoke English pretty well. My grandmother's was pretty broken but got better as we came along. It moved her to speak English more frequently. There was a lot of French and we as kids knew some basic things but weren't encouraged to speak it. It was more because you wanted to know what the grownups were saying (laughter). That was the drive for learning it. I look back and I'm really glad that I was exposed to that. Working at my parents' store, we had a lot of tourists who would come so we had to at least be able to speak or try to understand what they were asking for. That helped us develop some conversational French. My brothers and I aren't even close to being fluent in French. My parents were and obviously their parents were too.

TG: Where and when did you meet Jim O'Neil?

RO: Wow (laughter). Your sister had a role in that. Helene and I have been friends since high school. We had a mutual friend, Chris Robinson, whom Jim was friends with.

A lot of times Chris would come out with the girls which was Helene Girard, Nancy Drapeau, Joyce Morrisette, Sandra Bissell and Karen Foss. We were a group that hung out together a lot. Chris was the guy that would show up and hang out with us too. We would say, "Chris, you've got a lot of guy friends. Why don't you have them..." He would say, "No, no. They don't want to have anything to do with you." Then the guys were asking Chris. "Hey, Chris you have all of these girls. Why can't you have them come to our..." "Oh no. They aren't going to want to have anything to do with you." Somehow, Jim ended up going to a party with Chris. Helene, our friends and I were there. Jim and I started talking with each other. We had not really connected in high school that much before. We had separate groups that we were in. I remember seeing him once in the cafeteria and saying, "He's kind of a nice looking guy." He also talked to me when we were doing Homecoming decorations. Back then, the juniors did Homecoming decorations for the seniors. I was helping out. I love to do artwork. I was doing some project and Jim came over and started talking to me. I didn't really think too much of it. At the party, we really started to talk. He made me laugh. I thought, "I need someone to entertain me and he's cute so why not?" We've been together since junior year in high school.

TG: You've stayed together all of that time?

RO: How it really solidified is Helene passing me a note in American Studies class that said, "Do you like Jim O'Neil? Circle yes or no." I circled yes. That was the contract that sealed it.

TG: The admission.

RO: The admission.

TG: Neat story. How many children do you and Jim have?

RO: We have two. I have a daughter now. She identifies as Lauren. Lauren was born male. Lauren's name at birth was Janson. That transition has been very recent so it's kind of, we are all getting used to it. Lauren is lovely and has a very kind heart. She is very smart and works as a medical assistant. She is doing quite well with that.

My youngest is Sean. He also worked at the hospital for 3 years in Patient Access in the Emergency Department. Now he is looking for a different career. Again, very smart. Extremely hilarious. He is really funny. We think we are funny and then he tops us. He is also kind. So, two very wonderful children.

TG: What was it like growing up in Biddeford? What are some of your favorite memories? What did you do for excitement?

RO: I look back and a lot of people from our age group, Tom, we really were fortunate. It was a time when you could just go out. You had to be careful about some things but overall, in Biddeford, you could wander around almost anywhere you wanted. You could bike. My parents, working in the summer, we would work with them sometimes. We got to know Old Orchard Beach, so we almost had two homes and two sets of friends, which was neat.

Growing up in Biddeford people knew who you were. If they knew who your parents were, that helped a lot. You had something in common like an extended family. Even people you weren't related to, you felt like you were related to them. The ability to just be able to get on your bicycle or walk to where you could go and do something was a wonderful privilege to have. I know a lot of young people don't have that today. We would do things sometimes as neighborhoods. The nice part of Biddeford was that it was a small town. The bad part about Biddeford is it was a small town. Sometimes for whatever reason, you had people who would want to be your friend, and you are welcomed whenever. Another time you show up and someone says, "I don't like you because of this." Then, it all blows over in about 5 minutes and everyone is friends.

It was one of those things where neighborhoods became a little territorial too. It's not like a gang. The people on Green Street and the people on Mason Street were like different sections. It was a time when you could really be free as a kid to make a lot of choices that were your own choices. Some of them could be good some of them might not be but you weren't micromanaged in those choices.

If something didn't go well, your parents were going to be there to find out about it because someone's mother or father was going to tell them. People kind of helped each other in that way. My parents were pretty lenient. I did not have a curfew. They could be lenient because they knew all of my friends. They had curfews so there was no need to impose one on me because they all had to be home. I didn't feel like I had strict parents but they held me accountable. I felt like I was held accountable. I wasn't just allowed to do whatever I wanted to but I had friends who had a lot more restrictions than I did.

TG: When you were in pre-high school, did you have boundaries that you had to stay within without telling your parents? Or, could you go as far as the Mayfield or downtown without telling them?

RO: Yeah. I wasn't supposed to go to Indian Cliff, but guess who went one day and stepped in a puddle and it was obvious that I had some explaining to do once I got home.

TG: Did you spend much time at the Mayfield in the summer?

RO: I spent a lot of time at the Mayfield. Dairy Joy was probably everyday. My mom said between my brothers and I, we probably kept that place open.

TG: Was Dairy Joy where it is now or was it at Five Points?

RO: Where it is now.

TG: What about downtown Biddeford? When you were in pre high school, where did you like to go? Where did your parents like to take you?

RO: When I was younger, they would take us downtown for some shopping. At Butlers, we would get our shoes there. We had to wear a uniform at St. Joseph's. Sometimes they were mail ordered or we could get part of the uniforms at Butlers. Nichols, we would go to. My brothers would go to Langevins. That was more our parents taking us there. Murphy's Music Store was the only place I remember going to. Children's Shop, my mom would shop for me there. At that time, even in high school, I was pretty petite so I could fit into some clothing. That was probably the nicer clothing shop that was still open at that time. A lot of times in high school, that's when the mall came [Note: Maine Mall in South Portland which opened in 1971]. That's where we ended up going a lot. Downtown was near the end of its cycle by the time I got to junior high and high school.

TG: Did your family go out to eat much at local restaurants?

RO: We used to go to the Wonderbar a lot. We knew the Droggitis family. The Wonderbar was a place we would go. A lot of our eating out was mostly in Old Orchard Beach because my parents worked there, and we'd go to Charlie's Drive In and some of the other places down there. My parents liked to go to nice places to eat. We would go to places in Portland sometimes as well. I remember going to the movies at the Fine Arts which is not such a fine arts place but that was the classy movie theater at one time. [NOTE: link to information about this theater which was located on Congress Street in Portland and closed in 1997: <https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/49922>]

TG: What about classic establishments like Alex Pizza and Reilly's Bakery?

RO: Interestingly, Reilly's would be a place we would go when you hear the stories of kids getting bags of pastry pieces for like a nickel. We also used to go behind St.

Joseph's Convent. They used to prepare hosts. [NOTE: communion hosts] They would punch them out and all of the pieces that were left over from the circular hosts were also put into a little bag and we would get those. That was part of our little downtown trip.

Alex Pizza was more if we went to my Aunt Jean's house. My aunt Jean was my grandmother's sister. They were one of the first people to have a built-in swimming pool in Biddeford. They lived on Ray Street. Jean and Ray were the original owners of Ray's Market. We used to go swimming there and once in a while, we would stay for dinner. My aunt would order Alex Pizza for us.

George's Italians. I remember having my first George's Italian at my grandparents' house on Birch Street. I said, "I don't know what this is but I know I like it." (laughter) It was such a different sandwich. We think today we have all kinds of sandwiches on sub rolls but I'd never had a sandwich on a sub roll before. That was a neat thing.

There weren't a lot of choices for soda at my parent's house. It was at my grandparents' house it was ginger ale and mostly because they could have it with their 7 & 7 or with their Canadian Club and ginger. I never had any of that kind of stuff until later at my parents' store. Then it was Oh my goodness there's 50,000 varieties of soda, chips and desserts.

TG: Did you go to the movies much when you were growing up?

RO: Yeah. We went to Central. I never went to City Theater to see a movie. I did go to the Mutual. The Central was fun because it was such a big place. They used to have matinees with a clown who would come in during intermission. That was a lot of fun. That was something we would do as well. [Note: Central Theater was located on the corner of Alfred and Bacon Street, where the Biddeford Police Station is currently located.]

TG: What about winter activities? Did you go sledding, ice skating, any of those things?

RO: I was a dancer. Everyone would think I'd be a great ice skater. Oh boy, I was terrible as an ice skater. My ankles were not strong enough. But I loved to go ice skating at St. Louis Ice Skating Rink because that was the big hangout. I swear they had three 45s [NOTE: 45 rpm records]: Color My World, Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog and American Pie, that they played over and over and over again.

TG: I'm not sure that it mattered if you could skate back then. Both Westbrook and St. Louis had a nice warm clubhouse that you could stay in.

RO: Yeah. I'd kind of go out around once just to say that you did it. I never went to Westbrook Skating Rink, which is interesting because I live near there now. It was too far out to go. But St. Louis was great. It was really a lot of fun. We also did sledding. My dad had a snowmobile. We were fortunate enough to have a backyard that was actually pretty good size. We had set it up as a baseball field in the summer. In the winter, we would ride my dad's snowmobile in the backyard. Sometimes we would go to Ossipee Lake. Then the lake used to freeze considerably and you could ride a snowmobile on it.

TG: Did you ever sled down Bradbury Street Extension Hill? You lived right around the corner.

RO: Oh yeah, we did. That was one of the things we should not have done. It wasn't necessarily a smart move. But, yup, we did. You probably have done it. We had someone at the bottom of the hill.

TG: We never did it but we saw a lot of kids do it. We were told explicitly not to do it. We always went over to Shaw's [NOTE: Shaw's Hill].

RO: Yeah. A lot of people did that. Then Rotary Park didn't happen until later but I remember going there a couple of times.

TG: That was the mid 70s?

RO: Yeah.

TG: What about Catholic grammar school? You had nuns all through grammar school?

RO: When I went to school in New York, I had started kindergarten there. I only did a half year. That was a full day kindergarten. It was actually pretty advanced. Then, we moved to Biddeford and I finished kindergarten at Emery School. Then started at St. Joseph's School. At St. Joseph's, it was still in the original location where Parish Place Apartments are now. I was in that school until probably 3rd grade. Then they made the switch. When St. Louis High School closed, it became St. Joseph's which is now St. James.

TG: What was it like to be a young teenager growing up in Biddeford?

RO: When I was in the 8th grade, I had a really great class of people. The nice part about going to school with the same group of people, there are pros and cons. As I said before regarding a small town, when you're in you're in and when you are out you are out. If you don't quite fit in sometimes it's hard to find your people. But for the most

part, that group of people that I went to school with in the 8th grade, we were really tight. A lot of them were really smart and others were very clever. Some went on to do trades. We were very fortunate. In 8th grade we didn't have nuns. They were lay teachers. We were given an opportunity to be more worldly with our conversations than we would have with the nuns. Some of them were very nice. Some of them were very frustrated individuals. Some of them were very strict and not very supportive. The lay teachers really allowed us to have some good solid conversations and prepared us to go on to high school. I think this helped my teen years, not to be so sheltered. By the time I got to high school, I was really looking forward to it. I was looking for more of my people. I found those people. It took a little while but I would say again that our class as a whole, I graduated in 1980, The class of 1980 I think we had 320 people in our class.

TG: I was going to say, going from a small Catholic grammar school to a large high school, your age was the tail end of the Baby Boom. Those were big classes coming out of Biddeford High School, by Maine standards. Most of those classes were 300+ students. What was that transition like?

RO: It wasn't too bad because by the time you are in the 7th and 8th grade you are running out of resources, like boyfriends (laughter). Everyone's kind of in the same boat so we would cross over. Back then, we had St. Andre's, St. Mary's and St. Joseph's as the 3 Catholic schools. Then Biddeford Junior High. There were occasions, like at Rollaway Bowling for example, that was a place where we would meet up. I had a boyfriend that went to St. Andre's.

TG: This is before Jim O'Neil?

RO: Oh yeah. There were dates before Jim (laughter) and Jim had dates before me. You got to know some of the people. Also, cheerleading and doing other sports, you had some opportunity to get to know some of the other people. It wasn't like you were just coming in to a group of total strangers. Like anything else, once you start going into classes, you have some of the classmates you've always been with but then you have new people. It was good. I really enjoyed my time in high school. I'm still friends with that group that I mentioned. We call ourselves the Circle of Five. We still get together. It feels like time has really not passed when we are together. We've grown but our personalities are still there. It's great that we have been able to hold on to those friendships. My friend, Nancy Drapeau, we've actually been friends since 1st grade. We kept that up. She's my pesky little sister (laughter)

TG: What activities and or sports did you participate in in high school?

RO: I went to dance school. I love dancing. When I was really little, I connected with anything that was about dancing, a ballerina or any kind of dance. I went to Gladys Reuben's School of Dance. What was great about Gladys is that she took us to Massachusetts and some other places so that we could see that even though we were good here, there were kids out there who were way ahead of us. It exposed us to other types of dance. I focused a lot on dancing and gymnastics. When I was in high school, I also was a cheerleader.

I really liked the gymnastics part of it. It was much more physical. I had a lot of energy and I also loved the fact that gymnastics was one of the only sports where you were combined with the guys. We would set up the gym and we would have both the boys' team and the girls' team practice together. It was really good because you learn how to be friends. Sometimes we dated each other too. But, there was something about you would see people working hard. We would root for each other. It was a different dynamic than just doing a sport that was all women. Track is kind of like that too where it is mixed. It definitely made it fun to go to practice because you got to joke around, have fun and socialize but you also had to do the work that was asked of you. We had to set up all of the equipment for gymnastics practice and tear it all down in the same evening. It was a lot of work, then go home and do your homework. I learned a lot about discipline and making sure that you can also have fun but you have responsibilities that you need to do.

TG: Did you play a musical instrument?

RO: I played guitar. The nuns actually would teach you if you wanted to learn how to play guitar. I played guitar in church. Later on, when I met Jim, he was a drummer and started to play guitar. He said, "Can I play your guitar?" I said, "Sure." He was way ahead of me. I'm not even going to try. That led to later on my being involved in theater and doing musical theater.

TG: Did you participate in school plays?

RO: Not in high school. Not until I went to college.

TG: You are an accomplished artist at least by my standards. Where did you pick that up?

RO: From my mom.

TG: In school?

RO: I took basic art classes. The focus was always, that is the only unfortunate thing, college prep - this is what you focus on. I would take an art class as an elective. I really enjoyed the art class and did well but it wasn't encouraged. They had a theater program at the high school but I never again, being in sports and doing everything else, I didn't look at that as an option. When I was younger, Nancy Drapeau and I used to do little skits together. We would do them as part of opportunities to do them in front of the class. We got that kind of exposure to performing and doing dance recitals. Even though that opportunity didn't really happen in high school, even the art piece, more awareness came up when I went to college.

TG: What about social events in high school, like dances? Were they a part of your life?

RO: Oh yeah. You've got to go to a dance and walk around. Football games, walk around the field. You are watching a little bit of the game but you are also meeting up with friends. There were parties that we went to in high school that were in different places. We would try to find things you can do when you aren't of drinking age. You've got to get really creative about those. We had our places that we would go to have parties or the big thing was parents that had basements that were finished. In the 70s, there was a big trend to deck out your basement and make it a place where you would have to play cards or games. Some parents were nice enough to let us have a party down there. I think they just hoped nothing bad was going on down there (laughter).

TG: You talked about summers at Potvin's Market. Did you have any other summer jobs?

RO: I worked for Park and Recs teaching gymnastics. That was fun. Back then when you were in a sport, you only had that finite time when that sport was in season where you could practice. The Junior Olympics came about so they had lots of summer programs for gymnastics, track and field. Biddeford had a great program that was in place. They needed someone to teach the little kids and I loved doing that. That was one of the things that I did in the summer. Pretty much it was that or working at my parents' store.

TG: You graduated in 1980. Then you went on to college. How did you make that choice, leaving Maine to go away to school?

RO: I wanted at the time to be a medical technologist. Colby-Sawyer had one of the best colleges. I was also interested in going to an all women's college because at that time one of the things I was frustrated with was wanting a quality education and the

money. I knew my parents would be spending the money for me to go to college so I wanted that education to be focused around me as a woman. What I found was not that Biddeford High School was discriminatory but I did feel that there were times when male sports took over as compared to the other sports that I was involved with. So wherever I was putting my money in, I wanted that to go there. I also really liked smaller classes. I found that this worked best for me. That's what Colby-Sawyer was able to offer. They also had a dance program. That was a good choice. At the time, that was a lot of money for my parents. That was a driver for me too, if I went there, I was going to be able to focus on my work. I mean have fun too but I knew at that time that's where I wanted to go. Meanwhile, most of my friends wanted to go to Boston schools or DC. Some went to U Maine.

TG: When you went away did you feel that growing up in Biddeford and your family experiences had prepared you well for that?

RO: I think for the most part, yes. I think having a good group of friends was really important. Back then, you had to literally write letters or call somebody on the telephone to communicate with your friends. Knowing that I had that support group, even though we were away, was helpful. What I wasn't prepared for was how wealthy some people were and how much they got away with, not being serious about being at school. That was an eye opener for me. I had not experienced that before. In Biddeford we kind of all came from even though some had a little bit more money than others, the people that we were around didn't have the kind of money that I saw when I was in college and the expectations of that. If I got a card with \$5 in it from my mom, I thought that I had hit the jackpot. Meanwhile, I had people I went to school with that were upset with their parents because they didn't deposit the \$2000 that they were used to having every month. That, for me, was something that was like, wow...a whole different life.

TG: Let's talk about post college and post marriage experiences. If nothing else, both you and your husband Jim would be described as entrepreneurs. Certainly you, I'm not as familiar with Jim, in terms of civic responsibilities. I couldn't go through the whole list. We'd be the rest of the month (laughter). You owned a small business. You used to do some catering. Your husband has a business that he still runs. Plus, he is an accomplished professional musician. He still practices music. You were very involved in the City Theater and the restoration project. Anybody that has listened to the interview on City Theater saw a lot of you and what was going on there. You were the Biddeford Clerk of the Works. I didn't know that. You worked at St. Andre's. You worked at Southern Maine Healthcare for quite a while and actually made a career

transition in healthcare the past couple of years. I don't know where to begin but I will ask you, "How did you and Jim decide to operate any small business on your own? How did you get to that? You two were very young and that's a brave decision."

RO: It was but if you have nothing to lose, you have nothing to lose, right? How that came about is when I graduated college, my first professional job was with the WIC Program, which is the Womens, Infants and Children's Program. I really enjoyed doing that work. Jim, at that time, had started to work for my parents. He really liked the business aspect of the store. I went away from it a little bit thinking that maybe I understood being self-employed the pros and cons of that. I also wanted to utilize some of what I had acquired in college, feeling that I needed to have a professional type of career. It became very clear to both Jim and I that we really liked doing our own thing. We liked calling our own shots. There was an opportunity. My parents weren't really ready to sell their business yet. It got kind of close; we thought maybe we'd have an opportunity to buy a store. The former Roy's Garage was somewhat renovated. Dick Gagne and the Corriveau's who are in-laws bought it. It was becoming clear that it wasn't what they wanted to do anymore and the area was growing.

TG: Just to be clear, Roy's was the intersection of Main and South Street for anybody who might not be familiar with it.

RO: Right. Roy's Garage was where I think there was gasoline being sold and perhaps

TG: It was a Shell service station.

RO: Yes, exactly. Then they converted it into a convenience store. That's when Rotary Park developed right there. Parkview Court was there and they were starting to build Cathedral Oaks and Village Lane. The construction was going on and they were getting really busy, much busier than I think they ever anticipated. This was a perfect opportunity. Jim, somehow, saw the ad for it going up for sale. We ended up buying it. We didn't have very much money, but Jim's dad co-signed the loan. I was just 23 or 24 and Jim was 24 when we bought it. But we had tons of experience. We had relationships with all of the vendors. It was also at a time right before a lot of change in banking went through where your name and your family connections did make a difference. They valued the experience that you had. Even though we were very young, we probably had more experience than most people starting a new business. That's how we started it. It didn't take long before we outgrew the space. We needed to make an addition. We ended up making an addition for ourselves upstairs to live there and work there. That actually worked out really, really well. We did that for 19 years. We sold it in 2005.

TG: A positive experience overall?

RO: We got to know so many people in the community. Anyone in Public Works, the Fire Department, the school system, the people that lived in the neighborhood that worked. We were also very mindful of the quality of what we offered. It was really important. My science background made me realize how important cleanliness is, before that even became a thing. I was very careful about cross contamination. Also, the quality of what we offered at a very reasonable price. We wanted people to keep coming in everyday. I think that formula worked well. Even when I got jobs later in life, at the hospital people say, "Oh, I remember you. You are Jim and Renee." Not just Renee, you're Jim and Renee. (laughter)

TG: Did Jim start his current business while you were doing that?

RO: Yes. How he developed his software, which is JPOS Software, was based on the need that we had for our store. We knew that computerized or what they call point of sale systems were just starting to come out. That would make our business so much easier, especially with invoicing and everything else that was becoming much more complicated. We looked for programs but they were way too expensive at the time. Jim had a friend who worked for IBM. He lived with us for a little while. He gave Jim an old IBM laptop which was a new laptop at the time. Jim basically learned how to do coding. He taught himself how to program and developed our own POS (Point of sale) system that he now sells to customers. It was kind of a nice segway into what he does today.

TG: What about your experience at the City Theater?

RO: That was a wonderful experience. My dad helped make that connection. When I came out of college, I was dancing at Ram Island Center and Casco Bay Movers in Portland. There wasn't an outlet for dance, locally, the way I was dancing. The classes I was taking were getting to be frustrating. I don't know what I'm going to be able to do with my dance skills. My dad said, "How about City Theater? They've got a show called West Side Story." I said, "That sounds great." I auditioned, I got in and started with the theater.

I actually started sooner than that. I had done an internship with Maine Opera for two summers at City Theater. But it wasn't associated. At that time, in the summer they would rent it to the Opera Company. It was called Maine Opera. I worked as an Assistant Business Manager. Then, I choreographed Carmen for them. That was a very interesting relationship that I had with the Theater.

When I was working on the Opera side, there was a gentleman named Bourassa. He collected old black and white film. He lived in Biddeford Pool. He wanted to create a theater in his basement. City Theater had all of these odds and ends for seats. I needed money for books, so I volunteered to make 18 seats. My dad found a place that would powder coat them. It was an automobile guy that hung up the seats and spray painted. I spent my summer re-upholstering them and picking the gum off of them. We had Hardy Banfield install them in the basement of Mr. Bourassa's basement. So he had City Theater seats in his basement. I got invited to a big hoity-toity party with the President of Shell Oil and other bigwigs there. It was great. He paid for my books and then some.

That theater was like a springboard for me. Later, I performed at City Theater, became the Business Manager of City Theater and worked on the restoration. That's how I got tied into the Clerk of the Works. At the time, they didn't have anyone doing facility work. They needed someone to come in and help with some repairs. I just segwayed into that.

TG: I would encourage anyone listening to this, if you haven't seen the City Theater interview and tour, there is a lot more in-depth information about the history with Renee leading that tour. It is very interesting.

How do you see that building? City Theater, City Hall. What is the importance of that building to downtown Biddeford?

RO: I think it's an anchor. The City Hall, right now, I am so pleased that they received grant money to repair the clock tower. It's not restoring it back to exactly what it looked like but it's definitely going to be quite stunning and beautiful. The best part is the integrity of it will hopefully last for many, many years to come. It really is the centerpiece of the downtown. When the downtown was struggling, City Theater was one of the few places that managed to still bring people to the downtown area. It was a way for people to piggyback off to use as one of the first art centers for the community. Now, look at what's happening downtown. It was great because you've got the government and the art piece coming together in one building. It also still has a lot of the historic flavor that it had in its original state. In addition, people care enough to preserve the stained glass that's there. They care enough to preserve the colors and woodwork as much as we can still use it. The public can come in. It doesn't belong to a private person. It belongs to the community. I think that's really special and important.

TG: You are of an age so that you can remember the thriving downtown Biddeford. You mention the beginning of the end of what we knew growing up with the Maine Mall

opening up and the strip malls. Then, you saw this down period of Biddeford and now you are witnessing the upswing of that. What are your impressions of all of that and the history and how do you feel about it? Where are we going with downtown Biddeford? Do you know?

RO: I think it's great. I do remember being a creative thinker when people think of the mills, go back in time and say, "Oh the good old days." It's hard for them even with the successes that are happening downtown, some people are still caught up in what it was like when they were growing up. But, if they were to go back now, it wouldn't be the same. There's something about being in that time, in that place, only knowing what you know. There was a time when Biddeford had spillover from the Tannery that smelled like burning boots. Then we had Maine Energy and it smelled like rotting cheese. Those are the things that sometimes we romanticize a little bit. We don't remember how difficult it was.

I think those memories are important. In Biddeford we have places that have always been special. Even when it wasn't the place to go for shopping anymore and the Mall took that away, there were still people that had something interesting happening downtown. The Natural Foods Store for example. Reilly's Bakery. Alex Pizza. George's Italians. There are still some cornerstone places that remained.

There are some people who would try. They could see that there could be a renaissance to bring it up. They would try. It would kind of catch, but that flame would go out because we had an issue with the economy. The best thing that ever happened is we never went through urban renewal. Being quiet for a while actually helped us preserve some of the integrity. Having the Mall out there also helped preserve the integrity of our downtown because many of the buildings could have been raised in order to build box stores.

I think Biddeford's planning on that, Bob Dodge, was a big influencer on that, as the City Economic Developer. He knew that we needed industrial parks, we needed different places to have these things and that our downtown would be a special place. I remember saying, "It won't work until people live down here." People said, "Where are they going to live?" I said, "They are going to live in the mills." People thought I was nuts. I said, "No. You could develop that. If people live down here, they'll shop down here." Now, people are living in our mills. I think this is great.

I think there will also be some challenges. Sometimes there are worries about gentrification. The arts bring in all of this interest in a place that nobody wanted to look at. The arts come in. They fix it up. They make it fun. People want to come and then

you push them out is what you usually see. My hope is that won't happen. That we'll always have a mindfulness of that but it's hard to say. A lot of these are not public spaces. They are privately owned. We need them to continue to invest. I hope that in the places that are public, they stay protected.

TG: What, if any, influence do you think UNE (University of New England) will have on downtown Biddeford?

RO: I think it's already had an influence. Further back, there was a time when they would tell the kids, "Don't go downtown Biddeford." Kids would come anyway because they just will. They've had a big influence. The challenge will be to see what happens. The Med School is now transferring to Portland and the Business School is going to be in Biddeford.. There will still be students available at UNE. I'm not aware of how much they have actually contributed to the downtown monetarily. But I think having the students and the bus line that will go back and forth was a really smart move. I think it's good for the college to have a vibrant downtown where the parents can come to and the kids can go to. It's a great campus but there's an extension of that campus and that is our community.

TG: I have to ask you about this job, the Clerk of the Works. What does a Clerk of the Works do?

RO: (laughter) I didn't know what a Clerk of the Works was until the Councilors, I think it was Pete Lamontagne, provided that title. At my work at City Theater with the restoration, I was basically the general contractor for all of that work. The City Hall, as I described in detail with the City Hall tour, had water damage that had occurred when the water tank let go. It literally rained through the City Hall into the City Clerk's Office. At the time, they didn't have a facilities person. They had Paul Gagne that would help out, but they didn't have anyone overseeing anything. So, I basically inserted myself as a volunteer to help guide them through that process. It then became clear that they needed to hire me because of the responsibilities involved. They had to give me a title and they called me the Clerk of the Works. I was helping them arrange for the contractors to come in. Jerry Lapierre and some other people like Jim Godbout were very helpful. There were other projects that were city based. I believe they hired Phil Radding. I don't know who is doing it now, but they do have a person that oversees the facility.

That was the fun name that I got at that time. (laughter)

TG: Renee, how did you end up going from the civic responsibility position to healthcare and going to work at St. Andres?

RO: My parents both deteriorated at the same time in different ways. My dad had progressive dementia. Then my mom had a lot of medical challenges. She was a dialysis patient. We were in and out of hospital settings and in and out of different skilled nursing facilities. When I went to college, although I didn't become a medical technologist, I kept up with my medical background. I graduated with a medical studies degree and a bachelor's degree in fine arts. I had jobs in the medical field intermittently. I worked with WIC doing that kind of work and also worked for Planned Parenthood in kind of a medical assistant role.

Being involved with my parents' care, drove me back to healthcare. Both of them ended up at St. Andre's for long term care. I was also on the Board of St. Andre's at the time. There was a position open for their Admissions and Marketing. My work with marketing at City Theater as well as my background, although I'm not a nurse, I can read medical documents and I have a very good understanding of medical terminology. It was a good fit. I became their Admissions Director. I really enjoyed my time at St. Andres. It is a very special place.

For people that may not realize, St. Andres used to be a home for unwed mothers. People would bring their daughters or relatives who were pregnant and the sisters would look after them. They would go to school there. They would have their babies and the babies would be given up for adoption. There are several people in the community, actually I have two friends I grew up with who were adopted from St. Andres. The sisters that did that work were very protective of the information. There is a lot of history. That would be a really great segment to talk to somebody about, St. Andre's and how they managed it. What the nuns did was amazing. What they did and how they did it. Then it became a skilled nursing facility later on. Covenant Health System is now running it. [NOTE: See Voices of Biddeford interviews with Sister Madeleine D'Anjou and Sister Viola Lausier for firsthand accounts of the work they did at St. Andre's Home and its evolution through the years. Dr. Michael Guignard's interview also covers research he did with women who spent time there].

TG: When did the home for unwed mothers close? Do you know?

RO: I'm going to say in the 70s. There wasn't a need. The stigma wasn't there anymore. I think it was probably around that time.

TG: We talked offline about this, you aren't really sure which order of nuns was operating the facility.

RO: I know they usually put the call out. There were two priests, the Decary brothers, that were very influential. They also started St. Francis College and set up St. Andres. They were the go between the diocese and Canada as well as Maine. They also looked for need. Where was the need and how were they going to meet the need. The need at the time especially with the textile mill and others in the area, there were lots of challenges with young women and families not wanting to, again, they were shunned. The families were shunned. The young women were shunned. This was a nice way to be able to provide privacy. Then, the babies were born and adopted.

TG: It was a good thing.

RO: It was a very good thing. I don't pretend to know what it was like during that time and how they were treated. I never heard of treatment being poor. If anything, I heard it was very supportive. I do know that they changed the names of the young women that were there. In some cases, when it was first founded they even had a little farm in the back. The young women that were there also helped out and received schooling as well.

TG: An interesting part of Biddeford's history.

RO: It is. It's actually pretty special if you think about it.

TG: After St. Andres, you came to work for Southern Maine Healthcare.

RO: I actually did a little stint in Falmouth. Falmouth Foreside. I worked for First Atlantic which is another company that is a for profit that does skilled nursing. St. Andres is not for profit. I got to work in the world of assisted living as well as long term care. I worked there for a couple of years.

From there I came to Southern Maine Healthcare, working in patient experience. They needed help, especially in the Emergency Department. I came in to work with the families and the staff to try to get people to understand why they were waiting so long. Is there anything we can do to help explain? Even though we can't do anything about waiting times, sometimes just knowing what it felt like to be a family member or see people that needed help allowed me to be a good go-between with the staff, families and the patients.

TG: And local organizations, there are too many to mention. (laughter). But one I'd like to talk about among others is the Heart of Biddeford. You were one of the founding

persons and you are also on the Board there. Can you talk a little bit about Heart of Biddeford? And what it means to you?

RO: Oh yes. It was one of those nice spinoffs from City Theater. We had City Theater as what we would call the Heart of the Arts. It's what was there at the time. Then, recognizing David Flood who was also very involved. There were downtown development groups, a lot of groups very involved in the downtown. They were all doing great work. There was a Main Street Maine Program. If we were able to meet the criteria for it, it would provide a template and also what we would need to help grow that initiative. That's part of the Maine Preservation Group. It's well organized and had excellent results at that time. If you became part of the Main Street Maine Program, it was going to really benefit your downtown.

We hired our first director, Rachel Harkness. She was this young woman coming in and she was wonderful. She was the right person to bring in. City Theater actually covered part of the non-profit piece until they could get their 501(c)(3) [NOTE: tax exempt status under Internal Revenue Service code]. When you are getting donations or anything like that you need to be able to filter it through an existing 501(c)(3). Until they can get it, then you bring it back. That's how we got tied in very closely, working with a great group of people. The group continues to evolve and change. Now I'm just an advisory member. I'm at a point where someone will ask, "What happened back then? What did we do? What do you have for advisement?" To be honest, they are doing such a great job. Delilah Poupore is the current Executive Director. She is amazing. She's been a consistent presence and they are just growing and the foundation for the downtown. They have done great. I was really glad to be a part of that.

There have been other spinoffs from that as well such as Engine. Tammy Ackerman is another wonderful person. She came into our community and started a real awareness of art and design. I was lucky to be on that front end.

There were people before that had those visions. The Karvonides and Cynthia Howard who was an architect who was very involved in the downtown. Heart of Biddeford, for whatever reason, really took and has remained.

TG: Any of the other organizations that you were a part of that you want to talk about or at the risk of leaving some out.

RO: Yeah, I know. Right now, I've been on the board of the Wardwell. There are two presidents. I'm one of the presidents of Wardwell. I'm very proud to be a part of that

organization. They are amazing and do really great work taking care of people who have been in our communities.

TG: A lot of Biddeford people.

RO: Yeah. They do great work. I'm really proud to be a member of that organization.

On the Policy Committee for the City of Biddeford, I think I've been on that for 14-15 years. I have lost count. I'm happy to serve the community on that committee. Again, a good group of people that I work with. They really care. We don't have a lot of power. We are advisory. But, we are able to put things together and have the opportunity to hear from the public without a full out public hearing to get an idea of what we are bringing to the Council.

TG: Usually, we like to have people tell their memories of certain events. You may be too young to remember many of them (laughter) but your parents would have back then. It's just interesting to see if they might have shared it with their children.

Did your father ever share anything in detail about his experiences in the military besides the major event of his being wounded?

RO: One of the things, meeting people from different parts of the country was an interesting thing for him. Growing up in Biddeford, he talked about how there was only one family of color at the time. Going into the military, meeting people from different races and ethnicities and having to work alongside them wasn't something he was afraid of. He actually would talk about what that felt like. He also boxed, before he had his injury, in the military. He was able to bring some of that over. He kept some memorabilia from his stint in Korea. He had a little spade shovel, his uniform and the medals. We still have his Purple Heart. Those were the kinds of things that he tried to paint. For most men that were in the military and the women who also served, I can't imagine how impactful that time was. You have no control. You are being told to be here in a totally different world. Now you are going to a totally different country. You were asked to do things that you grew up being told you are not supposed to do. But this is your service. I don't think we had any inkling, when those stories were being told, of how significant and even with my father's injury, we had no idea how significant that event really was until much later when other people reported back what my dad was like. What he did and how much he persevered. That's very impactful.

TG: What about the mills closing? In the 50s is when it really hit hard but there have been others since then.

RO: I remember being little and certain times downtown, there would be a police officer directing traffic because there was so much traffic. I remember walking with my grandfather to Doyon's Pharmacy to get an ice cream and seeing the people at different shifts coming in and out.

TG: For those who don't recognize Doyon's, it was on the corner of Main and Hill.

RO: That was his place to get his Bromo-Seltzer (laughter) and a coffee. I do remember people in high school would occasionally get jobs at the mill. They were considered really good paying jobs as compared to what you could earn for your age. I do remember as a young adult being invited to go to a group for Biddeford Textile that would meet. I think Paul, I can't remember his name, who would bring people from the community to talk about the community. When you were done, they were so sweet. They would give you a Vellux blanket to take home. I remember when it was closing, I knew it was significant to the people who lived in our community. A lot of people thought, "Oh good. The mills are gone now." For others, it was their livelihood. It was good to know that I had the background to understand what people sacrificed in those buildings. I can't even imagine what it was like to work there. People did and they took great pride in what they did. I remember going to the mill outlet store that was to the left of Nichols in that brick building. They used to have sheet goods and some small imperfections. Even then, the quality of what came out of there was significant. Understanding in a short period of time what happened with the industrial revolution and seeing how Biddeford benefitted from that. Also, when you have that one thing and it goes, that's why you need multiple things. That's why we are probably going to be in a better place moving forward. We don't have all of our so-called eggs in one basket.

TG: That's a good point. Did your parents talk at all about the forest fire of 1947 that hit close to Biddeford? And the fires in 1963 like the Hooper Street/Grafton Lumber fire? And the top of St. Mary's School had a fire?

RO: Yeah. My parents weren't living here during that time period in 1963. They were living in Columbus Ohio. I think they were there in 1960-61 and then Vermont. Of course, my grandparents were still local. People love to talk about fires. Those were big events. They were sad that they were happening but at the same time, they were pretty spectacular events for people. I remember my dad talking about the fire of '47. It came almost up to where we lived. For whatever reason, it finally stopped and how significant it was and how much was lost.

TG: It certainly was a major event.

You've walked us through a good part of the history of Biddeford that you are familiar with, what do you think the current perception of Biddeford is now?

RO: I think there's two sides of opinion. Some people really like the growth that is happening and are appreciative of the efforts to make Biddeford a destination. There are other people who are being critical of the things that unfortunately have always been a part of communities with people who are unhoused, people who are coming here as our new set of citizens, new Mainers. I think what we forget is when people are talking about "We have all these people coming in. We can't take care of our own." Biddeford was built on immigrants. When the Irish came, they certainly weren't happy about French people coming because they were worried about their jobs. It's about fear. It's about the worry that someone's going to take over. We are at a point, especially in the service industry, we don't have enough people. For a lot of people, the goal was to be able to go to college and get better paying jobs. With that, a lot of young people now aren't doing service industry type jobs and we need people to come and help us with those jobs. We need nurses, teachers, police officers and we just don't have enough people. Having people come from other communities is not a bad thing, for people to want to come live here. The challenge is do we have enough resources to help support them so that they can do the work that they want to do. Some people I think live in a bit of fear, what does that mean to me? It's changing. Literally, the color of Biddeford is changing. The age group of Biddeford is changing. I think we are still the youngest community in the state. Our average age, the last time I looked at the numbers, I think was 38 years old as the average.

TG: The youngest population in the oldest state. Interesting.

RO: It is interesting. That dynamic could change. I really think there is some thoughtfulness. There are so many things that are much better. Even though we think about the old that we loved, there are some things that are much better and some things we long for that were maybe better before in our community. But you can't go backwards. You have to go forward.

I think that one of the next big things are the children in this community and how we are supporting them. With schools, the technology has changed. How we use schools today is so different. We think of a lot of our schools as being new, but they are not new. When we go back, they've actually been there for a while. That's the next big thing that people are going to worry about. The expense that it takes. That's the other thing. We are a community where people want lots of things but that comes at a cost. It's getting more expensive to live here.

TG: You walked us through the contrast of downtown Biddeford. How important is it, in your opinion, to have a vibrant downtown? Or is that even necessary anymore?

RO: Some people don't think it's necessary. Personally, I think it's important to have out of pride. You have this beautiful architecture. You keep the memories alive. Even though the mills are not going, we have a museum to honor that. We have a City Hall to honor the people who felt like this was an important place to go to. If we don't have that, I don't know what you would do with it. It would fall into disrepair. The more energy you have, and if it's positive, it brings more positive to that. There will be things that will come and go. There will be things that will stay. Things are going to evolve. It happens everywhere. You can't stand still in time. My hope is that things stay accessible, and it doesn't get to a point where we start losing that special...Biddeford has a little grit to it as people say. I think that's what makes it so appealing.

TG: How has your life turned out so far compared to how you envisioned it when you were younger?

RO: That's a great question. I'm someone who likes change. I don't fear change. I don't think I ever really had a picture of what my future was truly going to be. I set my goals more to adapting to what is going on in the moment. What are the best opportunities in that moment? I don't really have a bucket list. I think that's why my husband and I get along so well. We are so grateful for what we have. I will say that my parents were like that too. There was always being grateful for what we have and not always looking for that next shiny thing. Also, expanding ourselves. Not being afraid to try something. Even though I'm one of those people who doesn't have a degree in something, I know how to do that. Getting the knowledge. What do I have to know to be able to do that?

I'm really happy about where I am today. With all of the ups, downs, twists and turns that came around, I learned so much. I think that's part of what it is. I just absorb what is around me. I like to fix things. I like to make them better. I also like to help people see their value. That's the other thing. Someone may say, "I don't think they know what they are talking about." I'm like, "Well. Let me listen a little bit more. I think they might have something to say. Do they even know how important they are?" That's what I think, everybody has a purpose. Everybody has value. That's the other thing I believe I learned from my parents. Even if someone is different and sees things in a different way, sometimes you can figure out how to communicate with them. You don't have to agree with them, but you can honor what they are saying and maybe learn from them.

TG: What is something you would want to make sure people take away from hearing your story?

RO: I would say there is something to being involved in your community. If you are going to have an opinion about something that is ok. There's a lot of energy that you put into an opinion. You might as well put that energy into action. You may not get the results that you think you want but you might get results that need to happen. At least, you can call attention to it.

Also, you meet a lot of people along the way that you may connect with for other things. You may end up making a connection somewhere that takes you on another path. The piece that I really would like to take away is don't have the fear of getting to know people who are different from you or situations that are different from yours. Get to know what those are because you can benefit greatly from them. That I think is where I feel really good about the parts of my life, that I've been able to do that. Also, treasuring friendships in people, not writing people off. Giving people a chance to be who they are and accepting them for who they are. Not try to pigeonhole people either. Let them grow and meet them where they are at. Those are things that not only will help others, but they really help fulfill you. Giving of yourself to projects and different things will help come back and be very fulfilling.

TG: It's worked for you.

RO: It has. I had good role models for that. I wasn't even thinking about it being a job. It just was what you do.

TG: Is there anything else you would like to share that we didn't discuss?

RO: I would like to share that the work that you and Nicole are doing with capturing these stories is so important and meaningful. It's hard to do these interviews. I think I would love to re-say everything I said at the beginning. I'm realizing some of it is tangential and it's all over the place. But it's real. It's what it is for now. There are so many things that I could say when I leave here that I wish I had said. But it doesn't matter. You are capturing the essence of someone's stories. I think that is really valuable. I want you to know that the public appreciates it. It's something that people will go away, they die, and their stories if they are not continually told, those will die too. The stories I told were from my dad, mom and grandparents. I don't know if my children will have that same experience. It's different.

TG: At some point, they can listen to your story. I've said to other people even not so much as your children, as your grandchildren and grandnieces and nephews. They will

learn a lot about their family history by listening to some of these. They are not intended to be a formal interview. We try to keep it informal. And Nicole, besides doing the interview, she's the one that does all of the transcription and gets these all set up on the website. She is really the main workhorse on this project. We are very fortunate to have her leading this. I feel fortunate to work with her and be doing this.

RO: Thank you for considering my story. I've enjoyed listening to the other stories and reading the transcripts as well. So, thank you for your work.

TG: On behalf of the Biddeford Cultural and Heritage Center, we thank you for sharing your story with us today, Renee.

RO: It's been my pleasure. Thank you, Tom.

TG: You are welcome.