Interview of Mrs. Judy Wimmer. Interviewed by Francesca Davis and Stefan Borst-Censullo of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Mrs. Judy Wimmer, who is currently a photographer, gave a unique perspective of Memphis during the 1950s. After moving to the affluent neighborhood of Whitehaven, which was predominantly Jewish, she had difficulties adjusting because of her catholic faith. During the push for civil rights, she was involved in many progressive organizations such as the Panel of American Women with Modeane Thompson, Rearing Children of Goodwill, and Concerned Women of Memphis and Shelby County.

This interview was conducted in 2007 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

Francesca: Well welcome on behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom Project here at Rhodes College. We would again like to thank you for coming in and interviewing with us.

Judy Wimmer: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Francesca: So, could you for us your name and your current occupation --

Judy Wimmer: I'm Judy Wimmer and I'm currently a photographer.

Francesca: Okay. And could you talk a little bit about where you were born and raised?

Judy Wimmer: I was born here in Memphis in 1942. I lived at the time, during the war, World War II in the Cooper Young neighborhood. But then when I started going to school I lived in Whitehaven and that's really, where I grew up.

Francesca: Okay. And what was it like growing up in that part of town? Could you describe the community?

Judy Wimmer: Well, I grew up in a Catholic community. It was very rural, I mean I walked to school and it was like half a mile or something to get to school. And it was like the '50s, so I graduated there in '56 and it was, I went to school in a four-room schoolhouse. So, there were eight grades, and two grades in each room till I finished the eighth grade.

[01:11]

Francesca: And what school did you go to?

Judy Wimmer: St. Paul's Catholic School.

Francesca: Okay. And I'm assuming that religion played a really big part in your life --

Judy Wimmer: It did, very big role.

Francesca: Okay. Could you talk a little bit about your parents, who they were and what they did for a living?

Judy Wimmer: Well, both my mother and my father were I guess fourth generation Irish Americans and both came from Catholic families. When I moved out to St. Paul's it was mostly an Italian parish, so we were kind of, you know I felt a little funny but then because all of my friends' grandparents spoke Italian. So, that was a little different there, but it was great.

Francesca: Okay.

Judy Wimmer: *[02:06]* But very small and kind of insulated –

Francesca: Um-hmm. What about any brothers or sisters?

Judy Wimmer: I have a sister and a brother, both younger than I am.

Francesca: Okay, so you're the oldest of three.

Judy Wimmer: Yes.

Francesca: Okay. Could you talk a little bit more about the community, the other types of people who lived there and how people got along or that sort of thing. You said when you moved out to Whitehaven it was different for you.

Judy Wimmer: Yeah. Yeah, it was, we were Catholic, and we were minorities. But, because there was a huge school, Whitehaven High School and Whitehaven Grammar School out there and it was very large. But there was no mixing with schools, but my mother thank goodness, and this was unusual because the other kids didn't get to do these kinds of things, but my mother got me into Girl Scouts and Brownies. And I went to the Methodist Church to do that, so I had, and there were no other Catholic girls in the Girl Scouts then.

And, I did different things like that which kind of opened the world up a little bit for me anyway.

[03:11]

Francesca: Were you ever or did you ever feel alienated as a result of moving to a neighborhood where you were in the minority?

Judy Wimmer: No. I really didn't. I was too busy.

Francesca: Busy with Brownies and Girl Scouts --

Judy Wimmer: Brownies and Girl Scouts and I took dancing lessons from the time I was three years old, so I was always on the run.

Francesca: Okay. What type of relationship did you have with your parents? Were they people, that you looked up to, really strong role models in your life, in your family?

Judy Wimmer: They were good people, both hard-working people. Mother was a housewife. She didn't work outside the home which was typical of the time. Dad was very hardworking and just very middle class. You know it was, he was a veteran. He had been in the War for four years and he came back and finally after a while of living in duplexes here and there we had enough money to build a house. And so we, you know with the GI loan and all that, so.

[04:18]

Francesca: Okay. Were you aware of the greater Memphis community and what was happening in the city growing up at all? That could be positive or negative --

Judy Wimmer: I really wasn't aware of civic life, as we know it now. But, I wasn't aware of, I mean I knew who was the mayor and that kind of thing, but I wasn't informed about the inner-workings of city life at the time.

Francesca: Okay. What was school like for you?

Judy Wimmer: Well, I was a dreamer. I was not a great student in grade school. But, I enjoyed it. And I became a much better student in high school and I could be an eternal student right now. I just went back to school, since I didn't finish college when I was supposed to at that age, I went back and I still take classes every once in a while.

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Francesca: What high school did you go to?

Judy Wimmer: Immaculate Conception High School in Memphis.

Francesca: Okay --

Judy Wimmer: We had a bus that took us from Whitehaven. There was a whole group of Catholic kids coming from Whitehaven into Catholic High School and Christian Brothers High School and Immaculate Conception.

Francesca: Could you talk a little bit more about the role models you had growing up?

Judy Wimmer: Oh, well my parents were role models of course, but I had some aunts, my mother's sisters, whom I adored. And they took me on trips and they worked, they were all working girls. And I was almost a surrogate sister. It was just lovely. And in fact, one of them just recently died, that was a real role model that I just thought she was glamourous and you know. She introduced me to classical music and jazz and those kinds of things, when I was like 12 –

[06:14]

Francesca: Do you have any say significant memories or experiences growing up in Memphis that you can recall?

Judy Wimmer: Well, you know one of the things, as far as race relations is concerned, believe if or not we were, we never had a lot of money but we had a really nice house and a big backyard and all that. And we had a maid. You know, when I think about it now, I go what in the world were they thinking. But everybody, a lot of people had maids because they paid them very, very low wages and but we did. And she came in once or twice a week and cleaned the house.

[7:10]

And one time I'll never forget that one Thanksgiving my dad had a turkey and a basket of food or whatever and he took it to a poor family, that I guess it was our maid. I'm not sure. But, I remember being really impressed with that because it was a very poor situation and it was bothersome.

Francesca: Do you think that kind of influenced your perception of African-Americans, especially being in Memphis where things were so segregated?

Judy Wimmer: You know, I didn't have, I really didn't have much of a feel for that. There were two things I think that stand out in my mind now that you say that. When I was about in the seventh or eighth grade, one of my closest friends and I went shopping downtown with her mother and it was at a store many Memphians will know, Gerber's Department Store. It was a beautiful store.

[08:26]

And we were standing at a counter and an African-American woman came up to the counter and my friend's mother, there was some conversation. I'm not sure what was going on. And I said something about well this lady was here first or something. And she said that that's not a lady, that's a woman. And I thought, wow what did I say? You know, it was obviously meant in a derogatory manner. And it stuck in my mind. And another time we were driving along and we always drove Fords. And we were driving along and my parents, and there was an African-American man driving along beside us. And I said oh, wow he has a Cadillac.

And my mother said yeah, but you just, you should follow him and see where he ends up, what his house looks like. And I though well gosh if he has a Cadillac it'd probably look nice, you know I didn't get that. But anyway, but it stuck --

00:09:42 Begin Clip 3

Stefan: Did your status as a Catholic affect your idea of what it meant to be a minority in Memphis?

Judy Wimmer: Yes. I was not fully aware of it because I had a really nice, pretty nice childhood. Until 1960, I was in high school at the time, when John Kennedy was running for President. And I was absolutely blown away because there was, well it's Bellevue Baptist, when they were in midtown.

[10:18]

His name was Reverend Lee I think, his name was. And he would talk about if a Catholic is voted president of the United States the Pope will run the country. And I thought boy, that's the strangest thing I've ever heard. And I couldn't understand how an educated

man, I mean he was a highly revered minister in town. And he would say those things. I just, oh, it was really ugly that year. I remember it vividly.

Stefan: Where did you go to college?

Judy Wimmer: University of Memphis. I went right out of high school for a year and a half. But at the time, I was also dancing professionally at Front Street Theater here in town.

Stefan: And what was your college experience like?

[11:14]

Judy Wimmer: It was good. It was very good, I just, I really enjoyed it. But I was only there for a year and a half. And then I was keeping, you know I continued to work as a dancer and had my own dance school.

And I was gonna get married. And I knew who I was gonna marry. So, I didn't think I needed, in fact, my parents didn't think I needed to go to college.

Stefan: When did you first become aware of the _____ Civil Rights Movement?

Judy Wimmer: Things were getting, how do I say, more evident. You know people, there was stirrings going on in the city in 1967. I think they were calling it the "hot summers," the "long, hot summers" because people were getting dissatisfied with the situation. And the Christmas of 1967, some friends of ours from Chicago came to town and visited. And they said you know, because they were involved in a lot of that in Chicago. And the guy was my best friend, my husband's best friend in high school.

[12:33]

And they said there's this conference, this workshop that's gonna happen in Memphis in February called the "Rearing Children of Goodwill Workshop" given by the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the Evergreen Presbyterian Church. And we were living in Whitehaven at the time, but I said well I think I just might do that. And you can take your kids every Wednesday for five weeks and I think our kids were like four and three, something like that. And so I said I think I'll sign up for that. And I did.

And that's when it all was shown to me. And I just was kind of astounded.

Stefan: What was your experience like that within the organization?

Judy Wimmer: Within the organization of the NCCJ?

Stefan: Um-hmm --

Judy Wimmer: It was excellent. They had organized, the Rearing Children of Goodwill Workshop was all about learning about prejudice.

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And, it was kind of basic, why people are prejudiced, the psychological reasons that kind of thing. And how _____ the things you do influence your children and everything. And it was very well organized. There were 75 women there. And each week, like the first week, we had Dr. Schwartz and, oh I forget who else, Paul Schwartz who was wonderful. And Robert Bidgelick come and talk about the psychology of prejudice. But the thing that made it so extraordinary was that the sanitation strike started in February. And because of that one week, they were smart enough, oh and the other thing, it was that Joan Bifus and Kate Portman who ended up being good friends of mine later, were in charge of it.

[14:34]

And they were smart enough to get Maxine Smith the day after she, she was taken out of jail that morning for marching. And they brought her to the workshop and we all got to ask her questions. And I remember my 25-year old arm going up and naively saying Mrs. Smith, you're an American. Why do you have to march? You have the vote. Why can't you vote and change things? And she was very gentle and very kind. I mean I can't imagine her frustration at the time, but she overcame that and explained to me. She said well we've tried to do this for over a hundred years and it hasn't worked. And this is where we are now and this is our only recourse. And so I understood.

[15:32] Begin Clip 4

Stefan: Why specifically did you have this view that marching was counterproductive at the time --

Judy Wimmer: I didn't see what it could accomplish besides just disorder. And I just didn't understand it. It was out of my realm of comprehension.

Stefan: Where were you living at the time in Memphis?

Judy Wimmer: I was living in Whitehaven, still. My husband and I had married and had two children and I was still running the dancing school. And he was working at the printing company. So, you know we lived a pretty insulated life.

Stefan: And among your community, what were the attitudes towards the burgeoning movement in the city at the time?

[16:24]

Judy Wimmer: Oh, it was very negative among my community. And but the other thing that the workshop did is the next week after Maxine Smith spoke they had, I think his name was Frank Holloman, who was the chief of police at the time. And they had him come in and talk. And it was like watching a battle because it was all in the newspapers and the television and radio. And it so was like having a battle that you're watching on all, this different media. And once a week you'd go in and they'd have one of the major combatants come and tell you what's going on. And so you got, oh my goodness, you got really direct information from the source. And it was dramatic and impressed me a great deal from both sides. I was, it was extraordinary.

[17:34]

And we also had our children there so at lunchtime the women would get in different rooms and we would all sit around with our children together and they would be running around eating sandwiches or whatever and we were talking. And that's when I met Modeane Thompson, who has since been all these years a very dear friend. She had five children and she's just a little bit older than I am. But she was telling me one day, she said Judy I've got this budget here in front of me that I got from this sanitation worker's family. And she showed me that this man worked 40 hours a week, but he didn't make enough living to get them out of poverty. He was, they would still have to get welfare for the children. I mean they were destitute. But he was working 40 hours a week and wasn't getting a living wage.

[18:34]

So, and they always had to balance food against rent, and I'm thinking oh my God. I mean it was horrible. And things fell in place in my life that I thought, oh, it's like getting a different, a

larger view of things. And saying this is what's going on. And that workshop was so meaningful that out of the 75 women, a great many of them stayed involved for many, many years. I mean they're still going on.

Francesca: Who are what encouraged you to remain involved? Because it seems to me that it could have been real easy for you to go back to your life, but what kept you wanting to learn more about the struggles of racial politics here in the city?

[19:25]

Judy Wimmer: I just knew it wasn't right, I just knew. This is not right. This is America. You're not supposed to be treated like that, and it was, there was, I had never seen Memphis quite like that before. It was shown to me from a totally different perspective by people who had credibility with me. And I thought these people are bright and smart and they, so I was convinced. I knew things had to change. I did bring a friend along with me the first two times and she came. But she never came back. And it would have been easy for me to not come back, but I was too involved already. And I could also see the benefits of my children. I saw that this offended all children. This was not healthy for any of the kids and I didn't want my kids to grow up like that.

[20:33] Begin Clip 5

Francesca: What were the feelings of some of your other friends and people around you? Were they getting involved as well or did they agree with your involvement?

Judy Wimmer: No. You know some were sympathetic and some weren't. My husband had, thank goodness, had a very interesting experience at the same time, when Dr. King came here for the first time they had the big march. And by the way, my husband also printed this, the "I Am a Man" signs and delivered them. He was in the printing business and he delivered them to the striking workers. So, he was getting, looking, but he was not sure either what was going on. And but then he had a friend who was managing the Chisca Hotel, which is right at the corner of Main and Beale.

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And that's where the marchers came up from the church and moved up to the corner of Main and Beale and then turned onto Main. Well, his friend called him and said you want to watch a march. And Fred said sure. He said well I'm gonna be up here on

the roof. Why don't you come up and join me? He said I've never seen or watched a march before. Let's do this. So, they went up on the top of the Chisca Hotel and watched it. And he said it looked like Easter Sunday. There were people all dressed up, they had their children in buggies or strollers or little kids walking. And it was very organized and everything. And as they got I guess closer to Main Street, they were on Beale the majority of the marchers had already gone onto Beale, some young teenagers starting breaking windows toward the back of the march.

[22:30]

And then the police started moving in and he said he has never, that's the first, my husband smelled tear gas from up on the roof. And he just saw people, policemen beating young people. And he said it was surreal because in this one area there was chaos, bedlam, and people getting injured. And then you know two blocks away there would be people walking away, waiting for cars to go by and lights to change and then moving on. But, it was, it changed his life too. So, I mean it was good because that happened because we were on the same page.

Stefan: And what happened with Dr. King in Memphis change your perception?

Judy Wimmer: Oh, he was such a powerful man. I had met people at that workshop who ended up going to hear Dr. King and I could kick myself every time I think about that I could have gone and didn't.

[23:37]

But I was scared, frankly. Even in, I mean we were living in Whitehaven which was, you know a White suburb at the time and we were scared. We would go in the backyard and hear a noise and we'd run in the house. It was, you just didn't know what was going on. But, what was the question? I'm sorry. I got sidetracked --

Stefan: The assassination, how did that really affect you?

Judy Wimmer: Oh my God. It was just devastating. We were supposed to go to dinner at somebody's house, a business associate's house that night or the night after, maybe. And we were crying. And it was just devastating watching the television and all that happened after that.

[24:33]

But the next night or that night I guess, we went to dinner and this man that was having the dinner party said well, I was at the airport coming home from a trip and they said did you know Dr. King was killed? And he said no, but I'm glad. And he went on like that and I just said I can't take this. I'm just, so we left, just didn't even stay. It was devastating. After what I had seen, this workshop, this wonderful, wonderful workshop with these terrific people and then to see that was just devastating. And a week or so later, Modeane Thompson, the person that I had become friends with, sent out a letter to every woman that had been at that workshop and said don't let us lose what we've developed.

And let's get together again, and we did within a week or so. We got together again for a big luncheon to talk about what we could do. And I mean I've just been involved ever since. So, you know it was just a life changing experience.

25:49:00 BEGIN CLIP 6

Francesca: And the luncheon that you had, you said you discussed various things that you could do. What was the outcome of that meeting?

Judy Wimmer: Well, first of all Jocylen Wurzberg, I think she's already started planning this, but she was gonna have another Rearing of Children of Goodwill Workshop out in east Memphis. And I was planing to have a Rearing Children of Goodwill Workshop in Whitehaven, which we did. And so we knew that we were committed. And my husband backed me up and, you know we were just gonna do something, whatever it took.

Francesca: *[26:35]* What other activities were you involved in during the time?

Judy Wimmer: Well, at the time I was also pregnant with our third child, and then Bobby Kennedy was killed and I mean it just, it was just a violent, violent year. But I had that, well in July of that year Jocie Wurzberg called and she said that we're having a meeting, actually, Jocie didn't called, it was the man, I don't know his name, was the head of the National Conference of Christians and Jews here in Memphis. And he said we're going to have a meeting to try to start a group called the "Panel of American Women." And we're gonna have some people, a lady come from Little Rock, who has a Panel there and also, Esther Brown from Kansas City,

who had started the Panel of American Women several years earlier.

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And to help us talk about it, I said I'll be there. Well, it was gonna be in the Falls Building downtown. This was in July, like mid-July, something like that. And it was gonna be in the Falls Building downtown. And we all arrived and there was a lady named Maddie Crossly, very dignified woman, who was a teacher, African-American. And as she came in to the meeting, she said well did you all find the ladies room on this floor? And we said yes. And she said that when she came in, she went up on the, it was like the 11th floor or 8th floor whatever, and had asked the receptionist. She said I'm supposed to be in a meeting on this floor, but I need to go to the ladies room first, where is it? And she said the basement. So, she knew there was another ladies room besides the basement, but she went.

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And she came in and told us and of course, there was, it's right you know, just that kind of stuff. So, we all agreed that indeed we would start a Panel. And Esther Brown was one of the people that had started the first desegregation case in schools in Kansas City, in the country. So, she was quite a lady. So, there were like six or eight of us there that day and started it.

Francesca: And so what were your experiences like with the Panel of American Women?

Judy Wimmer: Just unbelievable, just wonderful. We spent many, many nights together with African-Americans, Jewish people, White Protestants, that's we always had to have a Catholic, a Black, a White Protestant, and a Jew on every Panel.

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And then at the time, I can't believe this and you won't believe this either, but at the time, we asked everybody, we had asked them to put a skirt around the table so our legs wouldn't show and we had to wear white gloves. This was 1968, you know. It was a while back. But anyway, we spent many nights that first year, sometimes we'd have a get to know the White Protestant. And they would tell us about their lives and their religion and how they lived. And then we'd have Catholic night and they would ask all the things like, different things that people, myths that people believed about Catholics, which I won't go into because they'll just promulgate them, or something but anyway.

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And then we would talk about Jews and all the myths and things about them. And then the Blacks, and it was an astounding revelation, just you would hear things that people believed about other people and think how in incredible. How did we ever believe that stuff? When actually, everybody as relationships and good things and bad things and we're all human. There are differences, but I learned to appreciate them for the most part. And I was thrilled that my children would be able to be affected by that.

[31:34] BEGIN CLIP 7

Francesca: Did you feel that the that other people who would be hearing the Panel of American Women would get it? Did you think that it was gonna be effective to the people you spoke in front of?

Judy Wimmer: Oh, I thought it was gonna be much more effective than it was. But it was effective I think. I think for the first time that somebody would ever hear the Panel, I think they would be touched. You know, it would have to give you some compassion. I mean, it hopefully would develop compassion in you because you would see that people just aren't that different on a human level.

Francesca: What sort of places would you go?

Judy Wimmer: Oh gosh, anyplace that would have us. You know we put out brochures and things like that, and we went to churches, synagogues, schools. We had a whole series of things that we did with the city schools

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And with PTAs, we had a series that we did, I've got a brochure that we did with the library system. We spoke at every library. We spoke at Rotary, some of those other civic groups, Kawanis and different ones. And we were on television and in the newspaper. I mean they were, we spoke over a thousand panels, over several years.

Stefan: Was this seen as part of the feminist movement, as well as the Civil Rights Movement at the time?

Judy Wimmer: It didn't start out that way, but it started being that way after a while. When we realized that we didn't have to wear gloves and you know and have white sheets around your table so your legs wouldn't show.

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And as time and lifestyles changed, several of us went back to school and several of us became lawyers and different things like that. And so it definitely changed our lives. It went from interracial, interfaith, ecumenical things to a more feminist, personally I mean just personal change. It didn't change the Panel. The Pane was still the Panel. But it changed our lives personally.

Stefan: And how were your children dealing with the change that was going on at the time?

Judy Wimmer: Good question. Because when we lived in Whitehaven, we put our oldest child in Catholic school out there. And she was in first, finished first grade in Catholic school out there.

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And by that time it was like 1971 and we had been trying to move into Midtown for three years, looking for a house that we could afford and then we had three children, the youngest was two. And we found a house in this neighborhood over across the street from the football field. And we were scared we couldn't afford it at the time, but we moved anyway. It was six blocks from Modeane, which made me feel very comfortable. But, it caused a stir in my family. My mother said I don't care if it's made out of diamonds I'm not coming to that house. And so for six months she didn't come to my house.

Francesca: Why is that?

Judy Wimmer: Because it was in an integrated neighborhood and I was gonna put our children in public schools. So, but Kate started the first grade, I mean the second grade at Snowden and Kaitin and her brother Damon went through Snowden and Central, and loved every minute of it.

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They had a grand time. And they went on to excellent colleges and you know it was a great experience. We have another son, Peter who has some learning disabilities and he didn't get to go to, he had to go to special school all of his life, so. But he was all involved in the Evergreen Recreation Center, which was all integrated and everything. So it was just a great experience.

00:36:22 BEGIN CLIP 8

Stefan: So the move to Midtown seemed to have been a pretty big deal. Did you sever the ties with people you had previously been neighbors with in Whitehaven?

[36:34]

Judy Wimmer: Well, some of those people were friends, but and you know we'd already started having friends from all over the city, so it didn't seem to matter quite that much. There were people who just didn't believe the way we did and so we just kind of, there was distancing.

Francesca: Well, in thinking about your experiences with the Panel of American Women and other activities you were involved in back then, have you seen change with not only in yourself and your own philosophies about life, but also about the people you were around or just the city, in general?

Judy Wimmer: Oh yeah. Yes. There has been a great deal of improvement in a lot of ways. But, we're not all there yet. It's got a long way to go.

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There's still I think, it's almost like an adolescence that you're going through these pulls from the past and I love to see all of these young African-American professionals, and they're doing so well. But then I see also kids that are in schools that are still not speaking well, and getting that, a negative attitude about life. And it breaks my heart. But, a lot of progress has been made. But, we're not, a lot of progress still needs to be made.

Francesca: Yeah. How do you think or what are your feelings about bridging the gap between generations, like yourself who were very active and very involved to the youth of today –

[38:52]

Judy Wimmer: Either, you know I really don't know because either they take it for granted or they just don't look at it. It's not as prevalent. It's not as foremost in their minds as it was in ours because we were involved. We tried to help move it along. But in some ways we're going backwards, so I don't, it's you know racism and prejudice is alive and well still.

Stefan: Do you think Memphis is still segregated?

Judy Wimmer: Oh, yeah. It's a lot more integrated than it used to be, a lot more integrated. But it keeps going through these changes and the public schools are not entirely integrated anymore. I mean Snowden's still is, but a much less percentage that it was when my kids went there.

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And it's human beings are still separating themselves.

Francesca: Well, on behalf of the Crossroads of Freedom Project, again we wanted to thank you. It's been a great honor and pleasure to be able to hear and for you to share your story with us. So, it's been a great honor.

Judy Wimmer: Well, thank you very much. I just want to tell you that the things that I've been involved with have given our family a much happier, richer life than I think we would have had otherwise. So, I'm very grateful. It's been a gift to me. Thank you.

Francesca: Thank you.

Stefan: Thanks --

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