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Interview with Reverend H. Kris Ronnow

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Transcription
Interview with Reverend H Kris Ronnow

1 Sarah Moore

2

3 Reverend H Kris Ronnow

4

5 **SM:** Okay. So my name is Sarah Moore. If you could please state your full name

6 **KR:** Kris Ronnow.

7 **SM:** Alright. The date of this interview is May 1st, 2015. It is taking place at the

8 Columbia College Library at 624 South Michigan. This interview is part of the Columbia

9 College Chicago Archives and Honors Oral History Project Chicago 68! That is part of

10 collaboration with the Counsel of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago. So what's
11 your year of birth?

12 **KR:** Year of birth?

13 **SM:** Year of birth.

14 **KR:** I was born on [REDACTED] in 1937.

15 **SM:** Place of birth?

16 **KR:** Saint Paul, Minnesota. Bethesda Hospital.

17 **SM:** Where were you raised?

18 **KR:** Saint Paul, Minnesota.

19 **SM:** Where was your father's place of birth?

20 **KR:** Chicago

21 **SM:** Your mother's place of birth?

22 **KR:** Saint Paul, Minnesota

23 **SM:** Great. Alright. So first question. Who did you live with growing up?

24 **KR:** My parents. Lived at home through four years of college. And when I went off to
25 graduate school I moved out and came to Chicago.

26 **SM:** What was your favorite toy to play with growing up?

27 **KR:** I had a red fire engine that I was able to push around. And then to keep things
28 neutral or nondiscriminatory I also had a baby buggy. I use to take the baby buggy up and
29 down the street and this is not something that a boy would necessarily do, but my
30 parents—At least my sisters tease me about it.

31 **SM:** Great. So when was the first time you defied your parents?

32 **KR:** (Deep breath) That's a little—defied them. I think when I was out playing with guys
33 on the street. I was about five or six years old. I got into a fight with my best friend. And
34 my mother was gassed that I had been violating what she had always said to be kind to
35 your neighbors and closer to your friends and I had disappointed her.

36 **SM:** So how was religion observed in your home?

37 **KR:** Life long Presbyterians and I was baptized at a Presbyterian church in Saint Paul.
38 My folks attended the Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church. Moved to Lexington Avenue
39 Presbyterian Church. Moved to Macalaster Presbyterian Church where they had their
40 membership until they died.

41 **SM:** What were you taught to survive a nuclear war?

42 **KR:** It was not a concept that was even on the plate because nuclear war was not
43 anything of common knowledge as we were growing up. The first turmoil that I was
44 aware of was during the Second World War and the bombing Hiroshima and that was just
45 sort of mind boggling because how can people destroy one another in that fashion. Then
46 the best memory I have of the Second World War was VE Day when we all piled into my

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47 dad's old car and drove around downtown Saint Paul with a parade put together of people
48 celebrating, honking horns and blowing bells and whistles. That was the positive side of
49 the war end that was not the negative of nuclear.

50 **SM:** So when did you feel yourself as different from your peers?

51 **KR:** During grade school I found myself not being willing to get in fights and I would
52 walk away from situations where— could potentially be for turmoil. I then during high
53 school never engaged in any contact sports. I played tennis, I swam, I played in a band, I
54 sang in the choir, so I think I was fairly well socialized in doing things. I avoided
55 football. Swimming is competitive, but it is not a contact sport. And I just had an
56 avoidance of contact sports.

57 **SM:** So how did your relationship to religion change during high school?

58 **KR:** Its change?

59 **SM:** Yeah how did—how did your relationship to religion change during high school?

60 **KR:** It didn't. I grew up—baptized as an infant, but then went to Sunday school during
61 grade school and high school. Active in the youth groups. And did projects with the high
62 school crowd and many of which were sponsored by the church and we were engaged in
63 activities so there was a gradual emerging and growing and strengthening of that.

64 **SM:** So what were your aspirations when you graduated high school?

65 **KR:** I had gone to college with the anticipation that I would want to be a director of a
66 hospital. I had—I worked as an orderly during college—well back up a little bit. During
67 high school, I was a counselor at a YMCA Summer camp and I really enjoyed working
68 with the kids and being a counselor. For two years I was a counselor, for a year I was the
69 field trip supervisor and the last year program supervisor and it was just a lovely way to
70 spend the Summer. I could work on my tan and do a fairly decent um outside activities. I
71 had to have a heavy job during the school year when I was in high school. Started out
72 with paper routes and then stock boy in a grocery store and that kept me in money and
73 that enabled me to save up enough money so I could buy my first car and that was a
74 major accomplishment even though I was a junior. And I wanted my own wheels. But
75 working at the YMCA camp pushed me in the direction of spiritual formation if you want
76 to use that term. We had chapel at the YMCA facility which was still Young Man's
77 Christian Association. Christian Association I think has sort of dwindled with the Y at
78 least from what I see of it now. At that point it was a fairly strong part of the program and
79 respect for nature, respect for the earth, respect for one another, respect for our
80 differences that sort of got wrapped up together. So anyway I got into college and
81 majored in economics thinking I was going to go into hospital administration. The
82 mistake I made was I started working at a hospital as an orderly. And it was good pay,
83 my sister was nurse one the floor and I think she helped facilitate my getting a job as an
84 orderly, but I realized during the time I was an orderly in the hospital that this was
85 certainly nothing I wanted to do full time. Hospitals were chaotic. They're
86 counterproductive from my perspective as a humble. Well I was never very humble.
87 Humble orderly. I decided I would like to do something else. Well by my junior year in
88 college it was coming over me that I really think I thought I might like to do church,
89 some kind of aspect of continuing church work. And I was convinced that there needed to
90 be some strong leadership given to inner city communities. Where structures were falling
91 apart, where schools were a mess, where kids were a mess, the family formation was a
92 mess and so I decided to go to the seminary and while I was in seminary I decided that in

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93 order to really do inner city work order would have to be between social work and
94 ministry. I should get a masters degree in Social Work at the same time so that's how I
95 got through seminary. And got my Masters in Social Work in the University of Illinois.
96 Fortunately, I married my first year in Graduate School. My wife got a very nice paying
97 job at Michael Lees(??) Hospital, so she maintained me a style to which we wanted to
98 become accustom until the first daughter was born two years later. She stopped working.
99 By then I was in some work that helped us maintain our lifestyle and it's been like that
100 for fifty-five years.

101 **SM:** Great. Who was the first person you voted for?

102 **KR:** Eisenhower.

103 **SM:** What pulled you towards getting your Bachelors Degree at Macalaster?

104 **KR:** I was the first person in my family that got a college education. My parents were
105 deeply committed to my continuing my education because my dad had been a brick layer
106 all his life. My mom was a secretary for a while until she was homebound taking care of
107 the kids. And then she got a job as a clerk in a hosp— in a grocery store and then a clerk
108 at a dry-goods store. And they thought—they wanted me to have a better chance in a
109 profession and so it really encouraged me and pushed me in the direction of going to
110 college. Living at home they could support me in terms of room and board. And I could
111 earn enough play money to on my own take care of my ancillary expenses. And at no
112 point did my parents expect me to pay room and board. At no point did they expect me
113 to—I did chores around the house as one would expect, but I was able to work enough to
114 pay for a car and pay for my running expenses and have them carry me for room and
115 board. When I went to McCormick—I came to Chicago in 1959 to go to McCormick
116 Seminary and I made frequent trips back to Saint Paul on weekends because not only did
117 I want to see my family—at least that was the overt expression—I wanted to see my
118 fiancé and spend time with her on weekends so she would come to Chicago sometimes
119 and I would go to Saint Paul and carry on our budding romance in that fashion.

120 **SM:** So, lets see. What was the atmosphere like on the college campuses where you
121 attended school?

122 **KR:** I was a live at home student, so I did not have a campus experience in terms of
123 living on campus. Macalaster College was a small liberal arts college in Saint Paul. It was
124 just across the street from the church we attended. There was a long-standing relationship
125 between the local congregation and Macalaster College. When—as a church related
126 college, it was a much closer relationship with local churches. And we constantly
127 engaged in interactions with faculty members, we would do stuff on campus, so there was
128 a natural draw for me to go to Mac. I explored going away to college, but when I checked
129 out what the price would be and the cost would be that was not feasible. I did not want to
130 go to the University of Minnesota because of the size. My high school class had 1100
131 students in it just our class, so 4400 student body. It was a big school. And there was
132 opportunities of getting lost in a big unit like that. So I wanted to go to Macalaster and it
133 was a very open affirming—Macalaster was the first college that flew the United Nations
134 flag. It was a peace oriented, inclusive, community. My high school was integrated or I
135 really should day my high school was desegregated. There were people—there were
136 blacks, there were whites. But we lived in distinctly different sections of towns and so
137 many of our social structures reflected where we lived. And so when I got to Macalaster
138 which was far more open and affirming of everybody—it had a strong international base

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139 and there were a lot of international students who at first to me were exotic. This was a
140 new perspective. They had a different world view and they were wanting to come to have
141 an American experience and by their presence there we were able to have an international
142 experience. And that was very informative for me.

143 **SM:** What were the rules you didn't like following?

144 **KR:** I thought it was unrealistic that my parents placed hours on me. Here I was in—in
145 grade school I could understand it, but as I got into high school it was already if I was
146 working to eleven o'clock and didn't get home 'til 11:30 it wasn't alright for me to hang
147 with somebody or with a group on the street. I needed to be home. I thought that was silly
148 because I'm not going to do anything wrong and I never did anything wrong that I can
149 remember or that I choose to remember. I'm sure there were times when my parents were
150 frustrated with me, but I was the youngest child. My sisters kept teasing me all through—
151 and have to this day—that I got away with everything because I was the boy of the family
152 and I was the youngest of the family. And they had worn down my parents so that they
153 became more tolerant of my having a lighter load of restrictions placed on me. I think—I
154 was left home alone for a trip that my parents took to California. And I remember there
155 was a new car sitting in the garage and my dad said do not touch the car, leave it in the
156 garage. And, of course, I was smarter than him so I took it out to wash it. And in washing
157 it I decided I need to air dry it, so I started driving around the neighborhood. It was a
158 souped up—to me—it was a souped up Oldsmobile '88 and I got up to a stop sign and
159 somebody came up next to me and gone and said do you want to drag race. And, of
160 course, it is hard to pass up that opportunity. Light changed and we started out and out of
161 the corner of my eye I saw a person making a left turn in front of me and I slammed on
162 the breaks and avoided the collision. I took that car back to the garage, put it in the
163 garage, didn't touch it again and it took me a number of years before I could tell my
164 parents about it because clearly I was in the wrong. But it was an ah-ha moment that—
165 don't put yourself in situations where you're going to compromise what you've been told
166 to do. And so that was a good experience in retrospect.

167 **SM:** So could you describe the moment when you knew you wanted to become a priest?

168 **KR:** Probably my junior year at Macalaster, during your junior year of college. I had
169 dated a girl all through high school and when I decided to go to seminary I was now in
170 college she said oh I'll be a good ministers wife. I thought, I don't think so. I don't see
171 her in that role and that by focusing on her role I was able to say, well what is my role?
172 And then in my junior year in college I became reacquainted with somebody I had been
173 in high school with. And she was really transformative for me as we developed a
174 relationship, as we developed a faith journey. And during high—junior and senior year of
175 high school I became very active in the Students Religious Group on campus. I was Chair
176 of the Religion and Life week on campus in my senior year. It was very clear at that point
177 that I was going to go into seminary and I had decided that I had really wanted to serve
178 an inner city church. That there were people who were hurting, do not come from money
179 by any means, but attraction to serving for _____(??) that I could support myself and
180 my family. It was a higher calling then say getting to an affluent church in Naperville
181 or—the _____(??) community of Naperville or Evanston. I wanted to go into the city
182 work.

183 **SM:** What was the congregation like in these inner city churches? What was the
184 congregation like in these inner city churches?

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185 **KR:** Most of them were at least tangibly or somewhat desegregated—integrated—and bi-
186 racial. We had congregations that were predominately black or predominately white and
187 historically it's been very difficult to mix the two worship styles. That the Presbyterians
188 had a number of churches in the inner city where they were struggling with low income,
189 low education experience, low resource families, were really struggling to put it together
190 and keep it together. And it appealed to me that I am a person who has had some really
191 fine experiences and opportunities. And what can I do to help improve that life for folk.
192 And when I got to seminary I took courses that were focusing on urban affairs and
193 decided that this is really where I want to work. And so after seminary I was sent to look
194 for an inner city church. And where I could practice both the values and the methodology
195 that I gained both in the seminary and in social work school. The president of the
196 seminary at that point said that I could always pastor a church, why don't I take this job
197 and do community organizing in the city? And that was intriguing to me because I had
198 worked during the seminary in some community organizations on the South side and the
199 North West side and found the kind of power that comes together by people working
200 together and being organized and then I got familiarized with Saul Alinski and the
201 Industrial Areas Foundation. That was a strong po—potent organizing effort and Saul had
202 a way of antagonizing all the powers that be and that was intriguing to me. We can push
203 buttons to get the city to be more responsive. That's exciting. As a bi-line on that one of
204 my seminary professors suggested to me that I go be the Social Welfare Consultant for
205 the state of South Korea. And I thought that's sort of interesting, but as my wife and I
206 talked about it, thought that what would it be like to be in Korea. We had never traveled
207 internationally. Um and I found out that the salary for my working full time would be less
208 than what a round trip air fair is from Chicago to Korea. I thought, what if something
209 happens with my parents or her parent and we need to come home and wouldn't have the
210 money to do that? So we sort of turned that down. Plus I thought—I felt greatly
211 inadequate about it—how can I be the social welfare consultant to the state of South
212 Korea when one I can't talk—I can't speak Korean and I don't think I have that broad of
213 skills, but doctor _____(??) was the professor who was trying to convince me to go to
214 Korea. He said your Masters Degree in Theology and Social Work more than
215 compensates for your lack of work experience and uh you would do well. I turned him
216 down and took the job as—with the Confederation of Churches here in Chicago.
217 **SM:** So what caused you to get your Masters Degree in Social Work?
218 **KR:** How can I have the skills to know how to organize people and serve people (paper
219 ruffled) in both basic human services motif as well as community organizing motif. At
220 that point there was not a track in Social Work school for community organizing. You
221 had to case group work or case work. I went into group work as a _____(??) at my first
222 year at Brit—at fellowship house in Bridgeport the community where Mayor Daly lived
223 and family still lives. It was a good experience working with kids and, I thought, but I
224 think I'd live something else. So by the second year I got a field placement in the North
225 West Community Organization working out of Emerson House, a traditional settlement
226 house, but I was able to do neighborhood organizing that's where I encountered Saul
227 Alinski and the methodology of helping people, identify their needs, organize and
228 strategize as how to meet them and then carry out action programs really made a lot of
229 sense to me. So I was able to use my Masters Program as an effort to facilitate that kind
230 of organizing.

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231 **SM:** And what was it like to be the Executive Director of The Interreligious Counsel on
232 Urban Affairs?

233 **KR:** It was awesome. I started out working for the Protestants with the Church
234 Federation. But then we form—the Interreligious Counsel of Urban Affairs had been a
235 group that had been put together by Rabbi Robert Marx, Dave Ramage and _____(??).
236 Dave Ramage being the Protestant and _____(??) the Archdiocese because we
237 realized in working in the city neighborhoods individual churches acting alone are not
238 going to be very effective. Combination of churches working together um can have more
239 power and more ability to redress wrongs. When I was asked to be the first director of the
240 Interreligious Council I thought, this is awesome. Um one I respected deeply the men that
241 I was working with and it was all men at that point. And but it made so much sense that
242 to deal with the powers that be that were deeply entrenched and deeply dysfunctional in
243 many ways. Functional for a lot of stuff because the water kept flowing, the garbage kept
244 getting filled up, but the educational system was really in bad shape. Power corrupts and
245 absolute power corrupts absolutely and we saw lots of examples of that. And to be the
246 vehicle that helped put in shape the interreligious council so that we could be a force to
247 do community organizing, raise money from the various denominations and to do
248 collaborative work is far more effective then standing alone.

249 **SM:** So when did you know people were following what you were saying and that it was
250 making an impact?

251 **KR:** When you sit and talk with people and they articulate what are the frustrations that
252 you are dealing with and you map out an action program for what needs to be done to
253 resolve that. Um and you successfully carry out that action people get a whole new sense
254 of empowerment. And that citizenship means something. Very simple example often
255 overworked is that city neighborhoods sometimes—well there is a wide range of city
256 services in the fifty wards of the city. In some wards where the affluent had powerful
257 voices, garbage pick up and schools and everything, but really pretty good shape. Then
258 you got into other inner city neighborhoods where the political representation was weaker
259 and you could not get action to get the alderman and his cohorts to do what they're
260 suppose to do. And so we ended up doing some block clean ups. Lets get out there and
261 clean it up and we'll deposit all of this garbage that we collected in front of the
262 Alderman's office and see how he likes that. And see how long it takes for a garbage
263 truck to get there to pick that up. And they'd see that the garbage truck would get there to
264 pick up the junk and the next time you called the Alderman, and you asked for your
265 streets to be clean, far more apt to have it happen. And so it was a citizen action that was
266 nonviolent um that got results. Educational system was a lot harder to deal with because
267 there were so many layers of entrenchment in the school systems and the
268 unaccountability of the principles and the teachers to the community. Organizing some
269 demonstrations around churches, around schools, demonstrating, walking a picket line
270 around the schools. Um at one point they brought in Willis Wagons which were portable
271 classrooms and plunked them down and that was suppose to solve the problems. There
272 were not—It was anti-education I mean they were not solid forms of carrying on
273 education. And so we shut those down by presence. And this would be sitting down,
274 laying down, whatever could stop the educational—the quote educational opportunity
275 that was going on until it became more real and more substantial. I think one of my
276 favorite ones that was never carried out, but was threatened. Was that we would tie up all

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277 the bathrooms at O'Hare Airport and have somebody—and have a group of people stand
278 in front of the urinals, go inside the toilets and just shut them and lock them because if
279 you notice patterns of behavior when people are getting off planes. A large group of
280 people always migrate immediately to the bathrooms. If they are shut down because they
281 are occupied and they are occupied for hours upon hours you get the attention of the
282 airport operators, hence you get the attention of the mayor and hence you get some
283 redress of the grievance that was being used. So it was fun.

284 **SM:** Why did you become an activist?

285 **KR:** (Pause) I don't think I had a choice in my faith journey um we are all equal in the
286 eyes of god. We all deserve recognition, affirmation and opportunity. And to see people
287 that were mistreated, maltreated, and had roadblocks all along the line. Um it just wasn't
288 fair. It was an equity question. It was a religious question. Whatever it was that my
289 parents did for us as we were growing up. They very definitely inculcated in us an anti-
290 bias, inclusive kind of perspective. Neither of my parents were particularly articulate.
291 They would stumble through articulating out their faith journey, but it just became wrong
292 to see people living in despicable conditions and others of us living in a fairly affluent
293 and comfortable environment. So there's a sit—There is a situation at my high school
294 and when—high school seniors we were electing a homecoming king and queen and we
295 elected Janet _____ (??) was here name, still in touch with her. Was a very attractive,
296 typical Minnesotan Norwegian or Scandinavian background, very white. And
297 Bob _____ (??), who was the star of the football team, who was very black. And they
298 were our friends and thought that its clear they should become the homecoming king and
299 queen. Janet faced a deluge of international pressure and hate mail and demonstrations at
300 her house because she had the audacity to stand next to a black man and be a king and
301 queen. And that just didn't make sense. There's no logic to that. Nothing's happening
302 between them other then friendship and yet those who are paranoid about that and who
303 are biased and prejudiced built up all sort of a perspective that this was bad. It took—the
304 rest of us said no that's wrong. I mean—attacking them there—it's our choice, we're
305 exercising our right as students to elect who we want and that was a ah-hah moment. And
306 then you keep having ah-hah moments when you see the behavior of the police toward
307 black males, which is historic and we have seen enough of that this week. To remind us
308 of how in many instances the police are not operating as a professional manner. I've
309 never been stopped by the police, I've never been frisked by the police and I have friends
310 who have been. And it's a demeaning, debilitating, negative and its wrong and we should
311 do what we can within our powers to change that.

312 **SM:** So what was your first experience as an activist?

313 **KR:** That's hard to say because I think that we became involved—at the YMCA camp
314 we had a very inclusive clientele: Hispanic, black and white. And uh working with them
315 people would ask me, why are you spending your time at the camp? You're not earning
316 that much money, but I would say yes, but I'm doing good while doing well. I mean I
317 was earning enough money to carry me and it was interesting to see how kids from
318 different backgrounds were able to come together. And from there it grew to—in my
319 professional life. I think the march Washington in '63 was probably the pinnacle turning
320 point for me that um we were able to organize busloads of and planeloads of and carpools
321 to go to Washington. And it was such a good affirmative action yet so many people were

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322 worried about are you gonna be safe, what's gonna happen. Well it was a very peaceful
323 demonstration as a majority of demonstrations are. And so we um
324 **SM:** [Camera powers down] Keep going.
325 **KR:** We were happy. I was glad I had that experience. I'm sorry that I did not go to
326 Selma. There was a group of people in Chicago who went to Selma and walked across
327 the Pettus Bridge. I'm sorry I did not do that because that would have been another strong
328 bench point.
329 **SM:** Mmkay. So what impact did marching alongside Martin Luther King Jr. have on
330 you?
331 **KR:** He's a small guy. My first reaction is that uh he was small in stature, but big in
332 influence. And he was able to articulate and to name issues and name problems in a
333 biblically based strong affirmation of the rights of all. And that was—lingered with me
334 and prodded me on a long time and then when he got killed, thought this is more injustice
335 piled upon injustice. I need to do whatever I can to counter that.
336 **SM:** How did you feel after Martin Luther King Jr.—after he left the community—after
337 he left—after he left the community marches for open housing? How did you feel?
338 **KR:** He gave a legitimacy to the right to march. And that because we got positive
339 responses from—we got actions from the neighborhoods we marched in and got public
340 attention drawn to it. And the conditions of the housings and discriminatory policies were
341 open at that point. A lot of people had denied that they exist. People who denied that they
342 were steering going on, racial steering. People who denied there was differential
343 treatment by banks and insurance companies in terms of whether or not they'd write
344 policies or whether or not they'd write mortgages. We were able to build on the base of
345 the march to do further investigation and study and demonstrate without any doubt that
346 these discriminatory practices were going on and that they needed to change. Chicago
347 still is in many ways is still a very um very segregated community. It's—the money
348 haven't flown of late have minimized that and those who have—people of color who
349 have been able to obtain a financial stability have found the possibility to move into
350 neighborhoods that previously have not been possible for them. But it's the mass of
351 people for whom they were warehouse in the Robert Taylor Home's stretching down
352 South State Street along the Dan Ryan Expressway. There were bad design and they
353 proved to be a bad living environment and a bad investment because they all ended up
354 being torn down. Can we do something more prudent and positive and productive in terms
355 of investing our money in housing and fair housing—fair housing—is one step in that
356 direction.
357 **SM:** So when was there a time you wanted to stop being an activist?
358 **KR:** Most mornings. (Pause) Because of the frustration of pushing the rock and pushing
359 the agenda that did not win friends and it was difficult to consistently reinforce allies. By
360 that I mean your constantly having to justify what you are doing as terms of being the
361 right direction with many people who were had lives of segregation and lives of
362 separation, lives of people not having one on one relationships with people who were
363 different from themselves. Could not comprehend why you want to do this. You're
364 pushing a rock up a hill. I said yes, but the hill needs to be conquered. And so we need to
365 push that rock. And members of my extended family often felt I was putting myself in
366 dangers way and certainly when I was on the streets during the Democratic Convention in
367 '68 there's clearly—there was that potential for that personal injury or personal gains. I

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368 served a church on the West side of Chicago. I was—it was a changing neighborhood in
369 which there was a lot of tension and a lot of pressure going on and I would go to work
370 everyday and be—feel very comfortable because I knew the neighbors, I new the kids in
371 the in the neighborhood and so I felt that there was a built in protection that they would
372 take care of me as long as I'm taking care of them and there was a reciprocity.

373 **SM:** So what were your thoughts on the Tet Offensive?

374 **KR:** Which?

375 **SM:** The Tet Offensive in Vietnam.

376 **KR:** Oh. (deep breath) Pick your battles and pick your battles that are your business,
377 which are your prerogative in which you can successfully carry out. There was no reason
378 for us to be in Vietnam. We only made matters worse. You can still see that evidence of
379 that in terms of an aggressive military action is not the answer. I am more of a pacifist. I
380 am an activist. I think that we should be able to sit and reason together and to figure
381 things out and our place in the world. We are the dominate power in the world, but we are
382 not the father of the whole thing. We don't have to be in charge of everything and it was
383 just one that made no sense, the same as Iraq. It was not any place that we had any
384 business going. And nor did we—were we particularly successful in making it work.

385 **SM:** So what did you think of Lyndon B Johnson declining the nomination?

386 **KR:** I think he read the tealeaves. And felt that he would not be electable. And so it was
387 easier to go back to Texas and enjoy the rest of his life on his ranch. One time I was
388 flying over Texas and in the middle of no where was this huge airplane runway. I thought
389 what's that doing down there? I asked the stewardess what it was. Oh, it was Lyndon
390 Johnson's private air strip that was built with public money, so that he could commute
391 easily from Washington to Texas. But Lyndon Johnson in some of his actions proved to
392 be very event—significant impact—particularly in the '64 Civil Rights Act. That he did
393 some good stuff even though he was sometimes not—he was mis-motivated.

394 **SM:** So how did you feel after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated?

395 **KR:** One more down and how many more are we going to have before this stupidity and
396 violence is stopped. And it continues to this day. I mean we still are killing people on the
397 streets, shooting them in the back, diminishing people's to good services and life. And
398 it's wrong. And so many of our heroes have gotten knocked down.

399 **SM:** How did you feel after Robert Kennedy was assassinated?

400 **KR:** I think the hardest one for me. The one that woke me up was when JFK—his
401 brother— was killed. I was not surprised by Robert Kennedy's being killed because again
402 he was pushing that rock. And I acknowledge that I probably put myself in harms way on
403 more than one occasion. I've been anti-gun all my life and I've never owned a gun. I
404 don't see the need for the gun. I think that the way in which fear of others or fear of the
405 other has so filled people's minds and hearts that it can erupt any place. And so I cease
406 being surprised. I grieved and I'm sad, but um Robert Kennedy's death, JFK's death,
407 totally unnecessary, but those who are marching to the beat of other drummers obviously
408 have a different view in mind. And their world view is different then mine.

409 **SM:** So what was your opinion of Mayor Daly?

410 **KR:** I have a lasting image of him at the Democratic National Convention, beat red
411 which he often was whenever he got excited, saying that there was nothing happening in
412 the city. And ignoring the demonstrations right outside the hotel um or he was denying
413 that that was happening. And I thought he's out of touch with reality. Now his reality was

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414 his own power structure that he controlled the way people breathed and ate and slept and
415 were housed. He was a dictator and the dictator was falling apart. And the face—scene of
416 him at the convention beat red when people were starting to castigate the city. For
417 everything that was going on in the streets was a moment of slight satisfaction.

418 **SM:** So what did you think of the men chasing the Democratic nomination at the
419 convention?

420 **KR:** Chasing it? You mean those who—

421 **SM:** Well that were running.

422 **KR:** Good luck. You know I—because I think that (clears throat) the more people that
423 are in the game I think enhances the game of putting together city life, um putting
424 together a coherent challenge to the powers that be and the need to constantly keep that
425 wheel going. So the more the merrier. The more that come in. I think if I could
426 contemporize that I think Bernie Sanders just announcing his run for the Democratic slot
427 for president is a great thing. I just don't know how many people will vote for a 78 year
428 old man or 73 whatever. He is in his 70s. But it counterbalances to Hilary um and it
429 counterbalances the women in Massachusetts um who—blocking her name right now—
430 but um I think that the more the merrier. I think that one of the problems in Chicago has
431 been over the years you've gotten political _____ (??), boundaries of wards have been
432 designed to protect incumbents and you have a degeneration of creative government.

433 **SM:** So tell me the story of your experience of the Democratic Convention in late August
434 1968.

435 **KR:** I'd been in Lincoln Park and I had smelled the tear gas and thought here is groups of
436 people just in peaceful protest not bothering anybody except maybe killing of some of the
437 grass that grew on the ground in Lincoln Park. And we knew that we had to do something
438 about being on the street to try to combat the violence that was being perpetrated by the
439 police who were operating totally outside the bounds. Michigan Avenue was a wash with
440 demonstrators as well as police. And the police devised the tactic that they would do
441 sweeps of the street. Pushing everybody off the street, going up to the river by the
442 Tribune Tower and then turn around and go the opposite direction and take them down to
443 Roosevelt Road. And it was counterproductive because all they were doing was
444 provoking the demonstrators. People who were demonstrating for a peaceful resolution of
445 issues that were facing the Democratic Convention. They were not doing anything violent
446 at that point. And yet the police by their sweeps put up and down were provoking people.
447 And when you provoke people so far you going to get a negative reaction. I was in front
448 of the office building about a block from the Art Institute and there was a young woman
449 who had been part of the demonstrators. And she was cowering and she was shaking and
450 she was obviously having a traumatic anxiety attack because being caught up in all of this
451 and not knowing what to do and so I—she was hovering at the corner of the entrance
452 way. I—we were on the street with our clerical collars, so that we were clearly
453 identifiable to the police of who we were and why we were there because we had told the
454 police that we are there to ensure safety and avoid violence on the streets. I knelt down to
455 ask the girl how she was doing and she was barely able to get a sentence out. And as I
456 was talking to her a policemen came up to us and with his stanch raised he was about
457 ready to club me and the girl. And for some reason I had the ability to you don't want to
458 do that and I sure don't want you to do that. Why don't you just move on? I was able to
459 say that in a calm voice, nonthreatening. Let's resolve this peacefully. And a sigh of relief

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460 came over his face and he dropped his nightstick and went on his way. And I then helped
461 the girl get to a safe place where she could then get back into a safe environment. And it
462 taught me about the futility of the violence about how they rationed it up and this cop
463 wanted to club—clobber us both over the heads when we were doing nothing. We were
464 just hovering in the doors door opening. And I thought this is being repeated time after
465 time after time after time. And using tear gas, using excessive force was not solving
466 anything.

467 **SM:** So what other encounters did you have with women at the convention?

468 **KR:** Had some encounters in which the delegates were meeting and they wanted to know
469 what was happening on the street and we were able to interpret and meet with them an
470 explain why were here, what were doing, both the demonstrators as well as the clergy.
471 We saw this weekend in the instances in Baltimore where the clergy were able to say to
472 the people hold back. They were able to talk to delegates and say this is another view of
473 what's going on in the street. There were women clergy who were with us and were
474 identified as clergy so they were standing with us and were apart of the protest and part
475 of the reaction to the protest. So as equals in that process we probably were concerned
476 that they not be in harms way. That men can handle the harm better than they could with
477 _____(??) perspectives were slow to die and they haven't all died. I still hold the door
478 open for people from time to time. But it was able to get with those who were on the floor
479 and could then make statements that countered the ranting and raving of Mayor Daly and
480 uh do it with facts they had just experienced and seen.

481 **SM:** So when did you feel united with the other protestors?

482 **KR:** I don't think I ever felt un-united because I wouldn't of been on the street four
483 nights in a row if I didn't feel if I didn't believe in their their right to protest. I mean
484 that's part of the Democratic process. That we believe that the right to dissent is a God
485 given right. It is part of—part of our constitution, it's part of our voters_____(??). And
486 so I took exception to some of the behavior of some of the demonstrators who were you
487 know tossing things at the cops which was provoking in face to face confrontation. With
488 both sides yelling at each other and being able to say, this is counterproductive, this is not
489 accomplishing anything. Why don't you cool down? And why don't you stand aside and
490 let peace have a chance and have some perspective on it.

491 **SM:** So what difference were you making by being at the convention?

492 **KR:** We reduced the number of personal injuries. We avoided death of both the police
493 and demonstrators. We got a different dialogue going, a different dynamic going, that it
494 isn't what the Chief of Police has said or the mayor has said. We were able to get airtime
495 and interpret to the larger community both sides of the issue. And how nothing is being
496 accomplished by the simple demonstrations that are only enhancing and increasing the
497 violence and the disagreement and the destruction of community. It's costly to carry on
498 demonstrations like that. It is costly in terms of police power. (Clears throat) And trying
499 to get airtime for both the police officer perspective in terms of what he or she was going
500 through as well as the demonstrator what they were going through. And to get some
501 understanding of the common ground that exists.

502 **SM:** So when did you experience the police showing restraint with you and other
503 protestors?

504 **KR:** Go back to my earlier example when the guy lowered his Billy club that was a
505 success. When we could stand in front of the building and people could carry on their

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506 chanting and the police would just keep moving, they wouldn't stop, they wouldn't
507 pause. When you talk to a police officer and I've done some police training in my
508 experience in my life. Police personnel are human beings also. And they are—I want to
509 respect their dignity as a human being and but I want them to operate in the bounds of
510 law. As they expect others to operate within the bounds of law. They to should be within
511 the bounds of law.

512 **SM:** So when did you see the police step outside there means to deal with you and other
513 protestors?

514 **KR:** When they appr—had the push against the crowds. Pushing against them for no
515 obvious reason other than to just demonstrate their power to do that. When the tear gas
516 was thrown—they did not have rubber bullets at that point that I can remember. But when
517 the police as fraternity operating coherence with one another and being able to say—to be
518 able to bring a different perspective to the table. And say to them this is not productive,
519 this is not helpful and this should not be tolerated.

520 **SM:** So how was it participating on the PCUSA Boards of National Admissions in New
521 York?

522 **KR:** I had the fortunate job of having a portfolio with money. And I could fly in as a
523 consultant to churches around the country that if they acted in concert and we raised a
524 certain amount of money. We could match from a national standpoint. There was a
525 sensitizing and developmental process. We did a workshop with a group of women in
526 terms of nursing home investigations. Helping them understand what a good nursing
527 home looks like because they were doing inspections in Indiana and all they got was bad
528 smelling nursing homes. I said a good nursing home doesn't smell. And we were able to
529 train them up at the program up at the Presbyterian home in Evanston to know what to
530 look for and how to look for it. We ran a mock prison environment for chaplains to help
531 them understand what it's like to operate within the walls of a secure institution, prison or
532 a large jail. And how tensions grow between the inmates and the guards and how you
533 keep a perspective on that. And how you come to respect all sides and avoid violence in
534 doing that. So there are a number of examples like that. And then the community
535 organizing was taking shape in cities around the country. We were able to use the
536 organizing skills we refined in Chicago and learn in Chicago to get training in community
537 organizing in the other cities and fund that.

538 **SM:** So what was life like in America after the troops returned home?

539 **KR:** (Deep Breath) After the troops returned home. Have they ever returned home?

540 **SM:** After the Vietnam war.

541 **KR:** My son-in-law was a medic in the Vietnam War and um its taken him years to be
542 able to talk. And we've had some very good conversations. And I've respected what he
543 went through and respected his perspective on it because he went through hell. And I
544 don't think we've done enough ventilating of what people went through in the
545 environment of war, in particularly Vietnam, because it was a terrible war. It was an
546 insidious confrontation. People were stretched to their limits and when stretched to their
547 limits they sometimes don't live up to their own expectations of themself. And people
548 have horror stories. I think you need to tell those horror stories. I think from a therapeutic
549 standpoint you need to get those stories out. And we've not done enough of that. We're
550 not doing enough of that today because we've got soldiers returning from battle. One,
551 coming from a battle that wasn't necessary and, two, not able to get the support that they

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552 need medically or psychologically or humanly as a person. And hopefully more of us
553 are—more of the general population is aware of that. But when we ask people to go to
554 war we ask them to pay a terrible price.

555 **SM:** So what were you able to accomplish as the Organizing Community Relations
556 Director for Oak Park?

557 **KR:** I was called back to Oak Park—we had lived in Oak Park in the 60s and I came
558 back in '72. Oak Park was trying to become an intentional integrated community and not
559 suffer the black—block by block black desegregation that happened all over the West
560 side of Chicago. By organizing block clubs, by organizing neighborhood groups, people
561 were informed about what was going on. So mythology and air and misinformation was
562 kept to a minimum. People had a sense that they could control what was happening on
563 their block. But I think what happened the most was when we did some testing of
564 realtors. And said that they are going to be held to the code of conduct, the code of ethics
565 to be operative in a nondiscriminatory fashion and people have access to housing they
566 can afford. And by putting, getting, the license for all those seventeen realtors because of
567 illegal practice on their part put the others on notice that this will not be tolerated.

568 **SM:** So what was it like working as the Vice President of Public Affairs at Harris Bank?

569 **KR:** I had worked in the church, I had worked in government and I wanted to work in the
570 private sector. It is interesting that people are the same in all three sectors. And I was
571 amazed at myself for landing the job at Harris Bank because I thought, are they gonna
572 hire a do gooder, a social worker, a clergymen to do a job at a bank. But I realized at the
573 bank they had some of the same problems of interpersonal relationships. They had some
574 of the same problems of speaking the truth and finding the truth and acting on it. And I
575 was able as a Community Relations Vice President for the bank, facilitating
576 neighborhood tours so that they became more familiar with the neighborhoods. Investing
577 our money in neighborhood groups who were doing organizing a little bit outside the Art
578 Institute and North Western University motif by managing the contributions dollars that
579 brings in money to it. I think one of the strong experiences I had was as clergymen I had
580 people coming to my office and start talking about I have a friend that is— and it would
581 be one thing or another. It was drinking too much, it was gambling too much, it was
582 abusive. It would often turn out that the person who was talking about their friend, was
583 talking about themselves. And I would turn around and say well what do you think you
584 want to do about this. And we were able to set up an employee assistance program, which
585 the person could get psychological, social work, support, counseling support to deal with
586 the issue that they were dealing with. It was the first EAP, Employee Assistance
587 Program, that got started in major downtown corporation. And it's now spread so that
588 EAP is an expected part of Human Resources, helping people cope with their problems.
589 And it's cheaper from an employment standpoint helping people resolve their problem
590 rather than have a debilitated—negatively effect how they work.

591 **SM:** So what impact were you able to make in Colombia with CSLA Congregations in
592 Solidarity?

593 **KR:** When I went as part of a peace delegation to Colombia. We were having a lot of
594 guerilla activity going on in Colombia. And you had super powers (paper flips) who were
595 raping the land. They were taking away farmland owned by indigenous farmers and
596 turning it into um palm tree orchards because the price of palm oil was productive. They
597 could come in—and the government was allowing them to come in and destroy the land

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598 by taking it over and uprooting local farmers. Their basic rights even under the
599 Constitution of Colombia was being violated by those actions. We were able to visit with
600 public officials, the um representatives of government of Colombia and say we are
601 watching what we believe are illegal actions and we want you to change your behavior.
602 And we can—it was like chapter and verse of this farmer, this farmer, this farmer who
603 had either been disappeared, being taken, stolen by, kidnapped by the guerillas or land
604 taken away and not been able to get a hearing in the government. We were able to
605 facilitate people getting hearing. We were able to get people who had applied for Visas to
606 come to the United States and that the Visas were being denied or not considered or it
607 was taking a nauseating amount of time to get their hu—basic rights honored. And we
608 had the kind of give and take people we were supporting who were fighting, struggling,
609 to hold on to their lives. And by intervening and visiting the white people from America
610 had a clout that we didn't realize. It was clear that when we visited with the person about
611 hi—he was the Commisioner on Refugee Action from the United Nations. And I must
612 say that he was the most honest person that we met with. And reflected the frustration
613 that the United Nations was having in trying to control the government or influence the
614 government in Colombia to do what they had committed to do.

615 **SM:** So how did the events of 1968 change you?

616 **KR:** I think it's helped me reaffirm the depravity of man. And the lengths that people
617 will go to have superiority over the other. Then the other being someone who is different
618 from me, who is different race, different ethnicity, different economic class and it is
619 caused me to constantly applying the lens of how am I—how am I influenced by that in
620 my own behavior, how do I void behavior that is nondiscriminatory and non-respectful
621 and destructive of the values and the rights of others? And it just permeates my being, so
622 that um always looking for what's the justice side of an issue. It has raised my paranoia
623 that I am constantly sometimes thinking the worst of people because I have seen
624 depravity. I've see how people are corruptible and are corrupting others. And how do I
625 void myself from getting into that context? And how do I ensure that others are helped to
626 see the errors and the sins of their way rather than seeing the goodness, truth and beauty
627 in people?

628 **SM:** So what are you most proud of as an activist?

629 **KR:** During the King era I was on a T.V. program and I was talking about the actions
630 that I have taken. And I made the comment that I have to constantly confront the racism
631 in myself, in my own life. And constantly confront the propensity that it is to be the
632 superior person. It was a taped program that the following Sunday was going to be aired
633 and I'm sitting, watching it with my three girls. And they said well how come you are
634 saying that you're a racist. And so I repeated my same _____(??) about how I've been
635 privileged, I have had opportunities that others have not had and I have taken advantage
636 of that. And they have all gone on to become very solid, humane people enjoying the
637 other, enjoying an integrated community and celebrated that. So being able to raise three
638 kids who carry on the vision has probably been one of the deepest satisfactions I have
639 had. And to be able to be sitting here today talking with you, the fact (clears throat) that
640 were still keeping on, and having the power—I've got a circle of friends, circle of
641 acquaintances that have shared experiences. And we can constantly come together and
642 reinforce and analyze how we're doing and what we're doing and hold one another
643 accountable. And be comfortable in saying that really is not the right thing to be doing

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644 and still be friends. And then friendship goes on and builds on both the positives as well
645 as the negatives.

646 **SM:** So what was the most regrettable consequence of the 1986 Democratic Convention?

647 **KR:** (Deep breath) I think it marked the Democratic party with some negative
648 perspective on the parts of others who have not trusted them or who have said I don't
649 want to go there. I think there is a propensity in our society to want to be at the top of the
650 hill, to be the affluent, to be successful. And let others serve our needs rather than us
651 serving their needs. And I think it soured a lot of people on the Democratic power. And I
652 think it also soured people who don't believe in contact. Who don't believe in
653 confrontation. And yet conflict and confrontation can be a positive. And we can be
654 survive it and be better because we've gone through that conflict. But people don't
655 (clears throat) have a strong taste in their being. To many people are too willing to get by
656 and not address grievances and things that are wrong. And I think that's part of what I
657 have seen as basic to my ministry is helping people see that you can face conflict and
658 controversy in love and get a result.

659 **SM:** So what was the most positive consequence of the 1968 Democratic Convention?

660 **KR:** Mayor Daly was ousted as the tyrannical person that he was. And that other
661 corruptible powers were enforced that needed to be changed and those—and they did get
662 changed.

663 **SM:** So what parallels do you see between 1968 and now?

664 **KR:** We haven't learned much. I—Watching the news this week. Seeing the
665 confrontations in Boston—in Baltimore and (clears throat) go back to Rodney King, go
666 back to any number of instances where we continue to have unprofessional behavior by a
667 small portion of the police whose power it is to enforce the law, to maintain the law, and
668 the need to constantly challenge that. I think the vast majority of police officers, as well
669 as the vast majority of people, are positive, productive thinkers and yet they get hidden
670 behind the minority who act illegally and dishonestly. And the need to keep dealing with
671 that, the frustration of—I can find it hard to imagine, and I've tried, to understand the
672 frustration of a black male young man is dealing with. With the constant harassment
673 stopping. As I said earlier, I've never been stopped by the police, I've never been
674 searched by the police. Is that because I'm white or that I've been the paragon of virtue?
675 Well there have been times when I probably should've been stopped and I should've been
676 frisked, but that didn't happen because I was white. And that's not right. And we keep
677 seeing it, we keep repeating it, the streets are still boiling, the kids are still bad paid, are
678 still suffering brain disorders because of that. And it's wrong. And we can do better
679 because we have the resources to do better. But there are too many—a significant
680 minority—that says I want mine and I want mine now and the rest be damned.

681 **SM:** So what changes do people need to make to find peace with one another?

682 **KR:** They have to open themselves up to a relationship with people different than
683 themselves (clears throat) and in doing that not allow the fear mongers to rule the day. I
684 think we get intimidated, we ratchet up the society, and make the other into something
685 that's bad, negative. When the other can be restorative and transforming. And we don't
686 experience that unless we open ourselves up to that.

687 **SM:** So where in the past would you have liked to make change?

688 **KR:** Again.

689 **SM:** Where in the past would you have liked to create change?

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690 **KR:** (Pause) I think that (clears throat) in my work in Oak Park at the Community
691 Organizing that I did. I would have liked to see more people participate in that and I think
692 that when you are organizing the community once you get it organized you have to start
693 all over again. Because when the have nots become the haves they seem to perpetuate and
694 protect what they have. So we have to constantly keep organizing. Saul Alinski did some
695 of his basic organizing in the backyards where the stockyard workers who faced
696 despicable conditions in the pens in the stockyards. And he organized them and then it
697 became the organized became the affluent and then they had forgot those that they had
698 left behind. I think the labor movement is guilty of doing that very same thing in which
699 they have people organize and then they get to be leadership position and then they seek
700 to protect what they have and forget the troops. I think the need to constantly have that in
701 motion. That's unsettling to a lot of people because they think they want peace and
702 tranquility and there is no future. There's a place for tranquility and I get it when I'm
703 sailing. And I'm grateful for that peace of mind, but it is only if it equips me, if it charges
704 me up to deal with the down _____(??)—the disenfranchised.

705 **SM:** So what's it like connecting with people on a spiritual level?

706 **KR:** Awesome.

707 (Sarah Laughs)

708 **KR:** I think that we don't nurture our spiritual side enough. I've been working up a
709 meditation to use next week in our counsel meeting. And I'm using the analogy of the
710 sun rising. I'm compulsive about watching the sunrise because the sun rising is a new
711 day, is a new beginning, is new possibilities, is a new future and we need to constantly
712 reach for that because there is a whole lot of junk that we deal with everyday. And we all
713 deal with a constant tide of disenchantment or destructive behavior one to one, in our
714 personal relationships, in our corporate relationships. And we need to constantly see to
715 improve that. And if we get in touch with our spirit and it's the spirit that flows through
716 all of us. To be positive, to be affirming and to witness a new day. I'm the eternal
717 optimist. The cup is half empty. The cup is not half empty. The cup is half full.

718 **SM:** So what are some life lessons that you have taken away from your experiences?

719 **KR:** A delight indifference. That there is richness in finding out what somebody else's
720 journey has been and what somebody else's journey is. It helps me put mine in
721 perspective. And I am not the king of the hill. I don't control the top of the mountain. We
722 all function better. When we function as community we can in fact enhance one another
723 and have a deeper sense of satisfaction, a deeper sense of love, a deepening sense of
724 respect. And we can live together peacefully. But we got to work at it.

725 **SM:** So finally can you please state why you wanted to do this interview.

726 **KR:** Because you asked. When I was recruited to come—One of the things I have not
727 done a good job of is journaling. And I've got lots of stories, lots of experiences that
728 aren't written down any place. And when I do sit down and write it is cathartic and it's
729 helpful. And it helps me reflect on both my arrogance and impotence in terms of dealing
730 with stuff and I would only do more writing I could get that out and so this interview
731 process and thinking about '68 convention I had visited only episodically in the past. This
732 project has helped me coalesce, redefine and define some of what I did and why it was
733 important to me.

734 **SM:** Any final words? Any final stories you would like to share?

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735 **KR:** I'm grateful that school is doing this. I'm grateful that you called. I'm grateful to get
736 acquainted with you and to know that there is a new generation coming along who are
737 interested in some of the transpiring values that enable a community to take place. And so
738 that gives me hope. When I was on the board of Macalaster College for six years. I was
739 reacquainted with the new student body that was coming up. They seem crazy. They
740 seem different. They seem irrelevant or irreverent. They seem—Coming down the El this
741 morning there are five people texting and I don't text. As you know I seldom take
742 answers from my cell phone. And it's a new world, but I need to see that new world and
743 the potential of that and see it positively. And so my grandson is trying to teach me how
744 to text and he is very patient in helping me learn. And I need to do that because that's the
745 future. And I want to be apart of the future as well as celebrate the past.

746 **SM:** Got it. Well all that's left is for me to thank you. Thank you so much for agreeing to
747 do this interview.

748 **KR:** Happy to do it I'm glad we got together. I'll wait to see a tape of it.

749 **SM:** (Laughs) Alright.