

Bob Harrington Interview, November 2016

J: June

B: Bob

1:36

J: Hello.

B: Hello, is this Ruth Hussey?

J: This is June Hussey, this must be Bob.

B: That's me. That's me. I had one question before we go into anything. Do I have to pay for the postcards?

J: What's that?

B: Do I have to pay for the postcards you send out?

J: Oh of course not, no, no, no. Your only investment is your time on the phone with me today.

B: I was only teasing, ok. Ok, what do we do? You lead me into it.

J: I will. I'm going to take a few minutes to start off and explain to you what this is all about. And then I'll turn it more over to you. We do these interviews, Bob, with residents at Watermark Communities around the country in order to learn a little bit about them and what their life has been like and where they've lived and what exciting things they have done. And then we like to get into how they came about thinking of moving to a retirement community, what process they went through in doing so, how they chose the place they did and what they think about life there now. And then, what we do with this information is, we share it with people who may be just in the beginning of planning their future or maybe should be planning their future or maybe have never even considered a retirement community. So we find that sharing our own residents' personal stories is very helpful to opening people's eyes and minds to the possibilities of a better life in a retirement community. So that's basically what we're after. And then I also wanted to let you know that we are recording the conversation so that we can produce an accurate transcript. If you should happen to say something that is too personal or you don't want to share with the public during the call just say right then and there, "Oh, please don't print this part." And we won't, ok?

B: Ok.

J: Very good.

B: I have to say that Jessica went over this very well, just the way you went over it, so I did have a pretty good idea of in general what was going on.

J: Perfect, well, good. Then we should be ready to get started and what I'd like to do now is invite you to introduce yourself and share a little bit about your life with us. And you can start with where you were born and where you grew up and how you met your wife and your family. Anything that you would like us to know about you. And then after that I'll ask you some specific questions about your decision to make your move, ok?

B: Ok, fine. Thank you.

J: So go right ahead when you're ready.

B: My name is Bob Harrington. I reside at 50 Benton Place, East Longmeadow, Massachusetts, 50126. I was born in Brooklyn, New York. My family moved when I was a baby to Long Island. I

grew up my main life in Long Beach, New York. I was in the insurance business and I met my wife through my best friend who I went to high school with. She went to my high school graduation and we got married 18 years later. You can see I don't jump into things too quickly. But anyway everything was going great. I lived in Long Beach, New York right on the ocean. I had a two-bedroom condo. I would walk out the side door of the condo and I was about less than two minutes from the ocean. But finally about 18 years ago I decided to, not I decided, my wife and myself decided to move up to Longmeadow, Massachusetts to be closer to my two grandchildren. So we bought a two-bedroom condo. Some people might know it. It was the Converse Street School and very beautiful two-bedroom apartment except it was a very cold apartment but it didn't bother us. We were snowbirds. We had a two-bedroom apartment in Del Ray Beach right on the golf course. I worked at the golf course as a ranger. My wife and myself, we played golf at least three times a week. And it was a great life. We ran the two of us back and forth, back and forth. Unfortunately, my wife came down with dementia and very quickly was in a wheelchair. At that point I was unable to really take care of her, the toileting, the dressing and a lot of things, that was very hard for me to handle, so we decided to look and see if we could find a place with a memory care unit. And my daughter, from Longmeadow of course, and I we went all over this general area of Massachusetts and we looked at many, many places. To be truthful, some were very nice, but we finally settled on East Village Place. We thought that was the best place for my wife and we still believe that it is the best place for my wife. And that's how we wound up with East Village Place. I personally did not come, just my wife. And she's in the memory care unit of East Village Place. And I lived in my nice two-bedroom apartment in Longmeadow.

J: So you are still in your apartment in Longmeadow then, is that correct?

B: That's correct. At that point I was still in the apartment.

J: Oh, I see but now you're living also at East Village Place, right?

B: Well, eventually. I used to come over. I used to drive and I still have my car here at East Village Place. I used to drive over every day and spent a good part of the day with my wife here and then at night I'd go back home and I'd go back to my apartment. In fact even I was a volunteer. My wife and I used to say the rosary every day together. That was a part of our life. And one day I came over and I looked at the, they have, up in the lobby, they have a little thing showing the planning for the whole week and I looked in it and Monday through Friday it said the rosary in the library, which was right there. So I said, "Gee, that's good, I'll go say the rosary today." So 1 o'clock, I went into the library and nobody showed up so I said the rosary by myself. And the next day, the same thing and the third day, the same thing and I finally said to the lady, it turns out it was Joanne, eventually I found out who she was, I said to Joanne, "What about this rosary?" "Oh, well, they don't say it anymore because the lady who was leading them passed away." I said, "Well, I'll do it then." So every day at 1 o'clock, I made sure I was there and they would bring quite a few people down from the memory care unit. There's two levels of memory care here. The one where my wife is more severe, Alzheimer's and dementia. On the second floor they have a much milder case of memory problems. But they would bring quite a few down. And I marveled that they all looked so neat and clean. And the aides bringing the men were so affectionate to them and attentive to them. I was very impressed with that. But I still liked my two-bedroom apartment in Longmeadow so that's how I became acquainted with East Village Place. So do you want me to continue talking or what you want to do?

J: Yeah, well, give me an idea of when you physically made your move to East Village Place.

B: My daughter was after me to move in almost immediately after my wife got sick and I said, "No way. I love my apartment over here." When I say over here I'm talking about my apartment in Longmeadow. I said, "I love my apartment here." I had a garage for my car so I could keep my car in the garage. I can come and go in and out whenever I want. I said, "No way. I'm very content." But slowly, they kept after me along with Jessica who is in charge of the admittance here and so forth and also Marianne, the nurse. They would see me with my wife and give me the sales pitch. They showed me an apartment. It's the apartment that I eventually took here. It's a nice apartment but when I first saw it I said, "This is a very nice but very small." I'm comparing it with a big two-bedroom, upstairs downstairs apartment, you know? So but eventually I found that the meals were a problem for me. My daughter was after me to move in with her but I didn't want to do that. She has a lovely three-bedroom house and she has two children, my two granddaughters, and they each had their own bedroom. They would have to get together and I didn't think that was quite fair so I said, "No way, I'm staying here." So she would bring sandwiches over, not really sandwiches, she would bring dinner over from time to time. One of my neighbors was very nice and he'd bring dinner over but eventually my neighbor went on a long vacation and I ended up eating Marie Callender's and I'll tell you they are very tasty. I would recommend them but after a while Marie Callender's gets a little bit too much. So finally Jessica who is in charge of the rooming here said to me, "You know Bob, that apartment that you looked at someone is looking at it and I think they are going to make an offer." I said, "So what?" Well, that's what happened. The gentleman looked at it and he said he would move in. Jessica said, "I have one other gentleman," meaning me, "who is very interested and he said that he might move in." She came to me and she said, "You know, if you don't take it I have to give it to the other gentlemen." I said, "Well, give me three days to think it over, you know." Well, my daughter was after me after me and, to make a long story short, I felt it was time to divorce Marie Callender's. Mainly, you know I had looked at the menu that they put up at the main desk when you come in. I had looked at it and it's really great. You get two choices of a hot meal, lunch and dinner. That includes soup, salad, the main course and a dessert. And there is even a third main course that if you don't like those two you can go to this other one that they put in the micro-oven for you. It's a dinner that had been cooked and frozen but sometimes some of them, in fact I have gone to that third one once in a while and it's delicious. So after I looked at the menus and all that, as I say, I finally felt that and on top of that my apartment although was very nice was very cold. It was a former school. It had 15-foot ceilings. It had the original school windows. I still had the stick to open them with, if you remember from when you were a girl. It was very hard apartment to keep warm. It didn't bother us, as I say we were snowbirds and the only time it did bother us at Christmas, the first couple of years we came up, we spent three weeks up there with Christmas with the family and then it was two weeks and finally towards the end we were coming up for a few days. It was too cold in that apartment. My daughter Colleen kept reminding me of where I was going to be in the cold weather from now on because I would never have gone back down to Florida without my wife. So at that point I said to myself reluctantly, and I do mean reluctantly, I decided I would move in here to East Village Place.

J: And so you were reluctant and then you made the move and how did you feel about the move after you had made it?

B: Well, to be truthful, I wasn't unhappy but I wasn't too happy. I really liked that apartment because when I moved in it was the summertime. You know so I didn't have that real cold. If it was December I might have had a different feeling but I wasn't unhappy when I moved in here. I looked around and a couple of guys said, "Hiya, hiya." And I'm not one to leave the apartment. I'll go into that in a little while but anyway when I finally came in, they sent me with a very nice couple. For meals you are assigned to a particular table and you stay there as long as you're happy, although I have only seen, since I'm here, one person asked to be moved and she just wasn't happy. This particular young lady is totally blind and likes to do things herself. And one of the ladies at the table insisted on helping her for every little thing. And this young lady decided she didn't want to be sitting with that bossy lady. It wasn't anywhere they were arguing or anything like that. It was just a situation where the lady just wanted to be helpful at all times. Honest to goodness I say she's a marvel. She walks around East Village Place with a cane and she goes to, her room is upstairs. Like if she's coming down, she leaves her apartment, walks by herself, gets over to the elevator, goes down, walks from the elevator to the dining room, walks over to where she eats. One of the servers will at least pull her chair out for her. Honest-to-goodness she would put you to shame if you felt sorry for yourself. Lovely lady, she even goes on, we have here, for exercise we have two exercise bikes, you know you work them with your hands and your feet and you can go from speeds one to ten. And she gets on there for 15 to 20 minutes at about a seven speed which is very hard. And she sits there and pumps away. But anyway to come back, where was I? I'm losing my chain of command here. But, I sat with this couple when I first stayed there, they're a very lovely couple but the man never spoke. He had dementia but they lived in the assisted living part because his wife would help him. But then she came down with a little bit of it and they were moved over to the second floor in the memory wing. And just at that time there was a table open with three fellows, the fourth one at the table had left so they put me there. And I met these three fellas and we've become quite friendly and we get along fine. But that first beginning, as I say, I was not unhappy but I just didn't feel too happy, you know. I had given up my nice apartment and at that time I was putting my place in Florida up for sale also, so besides coming here there was other things going through my mind at that particular time.

J: Right, there's always an adjustment period. And I think most people can relate to that feeling. How long did it take you to finally feel better about where you were?

B: Oh, after two or three weeks, finally I figured, "hey this is my life from now on, get with it." I'm thinking mentally and fortunately my daughter and her husband are both teachers. Well, my daughter in Longmeadow, my son-in-law in Wilbraham. And so they take the summers off, they don't work. They spend time with their grandchildren, they go on a two- or three-week vacation but my daughter and the grandchildren and my son-in-law used to come over quite a lot in the beginning, in fact they still come over quite a lot but it was good that they were in and out. It sort of took my mind off my problems if you want to use that expression. Really, it didn't take me too long particularly when I looked at the food menu and you can get you know really everything. It's just great. I would say they have three tremendous cooks here. And I would also say one of the best meals I've ever had in my life was last Christmas dinner. We had some sort of a steak, flank steak. I don't know what it was but boy that was a meal. And the desserts, it was really a tremendous meal. My family from Longmeadow sat with my wife and myself in the main dining room and it was just a lovely Christmas dinner.

J: Nice, now I understand that you are a big football fan of the New York Giants?

B: Yes, if you want to find out, call me someday on my telephone and I have a big blob on, "Go Giants, go Big Blue, I love you." It goes on and on. It's been on there since I got married and I got my own telephone.

J: Oh wow.

B: It's been the same thing. I have quite a few trophies. My most famous trophy is from my 50th wedding anniversary a few years ago, almost 6 years ago. I had Tom Coughlin was the coach of the football Giants at the time and I met his daughter up here. She brought a signed football by Tom Coughlin for my wife and myself.

J: Wow.

B: And on it he wrote, "Happy 50th Anniversary Bob and Ann - Tom Coughlin." It's a really, and I met her in church. I'll tell you how I met her, which I think you'll get a kick out of. After the pastor, and we have two nuns, they're all big giant football fans, so the nuns knew of my recording and they had the pastor call one day and he couldn't get over it. So one Sunday myself and Ann are in Mass, fourth row right on the aisle, and he comes off the altar at the end of the Mass and he says, "Mr. Harrington, will you come up to the microphone and say "Go Giants?" My wife is hitting me, "No, no, no." He said, "Will you come up?" I said, "Sure." So he goes back up on the altar, gives the last blessing and then he said, "Now, wait a minute, nobody go. Mr. Harrington has something very important to say." So I go up on the altar and he takes me over to the microphone and I lean over so that I wasn't talking into the microphone and I said, "Father I'm just going to say 'Go Giants,' right?" "Oh no, you've got to give them the whole spiel." I said, "Ok." So I did it. "Hello, this is Bob and Ann Harrington, the New York Giants' biggest fans." And then I go on and on and on. The two nuns are clapping away. A lot of people in attendance are looking at us as if we are crazy. We probably were to an extent but when I got done he said, "Now, ladies and gentlemen, the reason I had Mr. Harrington do that is that we have Tom Coughlin's assistant in attendance tonight. Her name is Chris Cohen. Chris, will you stand up?" So she stood up and waved. I didn't know her from Adam. She didn't know me from Adam but after it she came right down to meet me and we became very close friends. Her family is a marvelous family. So that's how I wound up with it.

J: That's a great story. Wow, how exciting. So let's see, what else, I understand you were in the Navy for a while?

B: Yes, I was. I joined at 17 in 1942. I enlisted in the Navy. I served aboard the USS Vincennes CA-44 in the South Pacific and got wounded in the battle of Leyte Gulf. And so I'm still here at 91 years old now so I can't complain. And I loved the Navy while I was in there. I had no intention of staying in. One, I couldn't. I got a medical discharge eventually but I wouldn't have stayed in any way. I loved my time there and I love the sea. So that's my war experience. I had a brother that flew B-24's. He was a second lieutenant, flew B-24's into Germany and all around different areas there in the beginning of the war. In fact his last mission he had to volunteer for it was his 36th and it was D-Day and then he came home. And they wouldn't send any of them back after serving 36. It was too much of a strain I guess, I don't know.

J: Wow, thank you for your service. I hope you have a great Veterans Day coming up next week. Do you celebrate that there at East Village Place I take it?

B: Yes, yes and they generally introduce all of the veterans and so forth. And if any of the veterans want to talk and say anything but most of them don't, myself included. The only time I

used to speak, we had a lady that served in the Pacific as a Navy nurse and I used always say she was the only really true volunteer. She didn't have to go but all of us, even like I volunteered but if I didn't volunteer, I would've been drafted into the Army. So in effect I wasn't a true volunteer like she was and I used to always make a comment about her. Lovely lady she has since passed away God bless her.

J: Well, before we close is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you would like to say or that you would like to advise people about in their own decision-making process? I mean, you've been through a lot with your wife and her memory issues. Is there any advice you would like to share for people who are going through that?

B: Yeah, I would say, you know, it's not easy. I'm talking of my own experience, just me personally. My wife there was no, you know we had to put her somewhere where she got the proper care but for me, you know, I had to think about it. I say that anybody, you know it's not an easy decision. You have a lovely home, you have a nice car and garage although you can bring your car here. But what they should do is really give it thought and look at different places, you know, just don't listen to me and say, "Oh, he's great, I'll go there." But I can guarantee, you are not going to be happy when you come here for a short time. We had one lady cried hysterically and I mean really crying for about two weeks. She eventually settled in. She went to the painting class. She was a very good painter. She finished second this year in the contest. You just have to settle in and just give it a little time. What you can do here is, if you are not sure, come here for a month or two. Make up your mind. If you don't like it then go. My friend across the hall from me came like that. He came for a month or maybe it was two months I'm not quite sure. But before his full-time was up he signed up permanently. So that can be done. And you know maybe that's the way some people might want to get the feeling. But I guarantee you, once you are in here you are not going to leave. I've never seen, and I'm here going on three years, I've never seen anybody leave here because they didn't like it. And you will love the food. The food is of the utmost and even this is an example when I first came here with the food. I like Honey Nut Cheerios, which they didn't have. And I talked to the chef, not the chef, he's in charge of the overall kitchen I asked him about it and eventually he bought the Honey Nut Cheerios. And now I'm here a couple years, I eat shredded wheat now but you know, you have to give it thought. You know, it's not just, "Oh, I don't like those places." Come and visit here, visit next-door, go around the corner there's all these places. I'm not saying we're the best but I would never leave here. To me this is the best and we looked long and hard, my daughter and myself. So any of you people out there that are really looking or thinking, you can even come and visit me. I'd be glad to sit and talk with you in my apartment or in the library or you could even come and have lunch with me someday. Ok?

J: Well, that's a very nice offer and some excellent advice I think. So on that note, Bob, I want to thank you very much for sharing your story with us today. It's been a pleasure speaking with you and I wish you well. Enjoy the rest of the day there in East Longmeadow.

B: Well, it's now night. It's now 6:22.

J: Oh my gosh, well, it's still light out where I am so I got confused.

B: Well, that's true. And what time is it there then?

J: What time is it here?

B: Yeah.

J: It's only 3:25.

B: Yeah, ok. Well, ok, it was a pleasure talking with you and you have a nice day.

J: Thank you, Bob, take care now. Bye.

B: Bye.