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## Oral History Interview on Bloomfield, CT, part one

Adelle Wright

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## **Wright, Adelle**

Oral history interview by Meredith Murphy and Aleesha Young for the Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Project, April 11, 2005. Available from the Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford Connecticut ([http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cssp\\_ohistory/](http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cssp_ohistory/)).

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Abstract: Adelle Wright reflects on housing and demographic changes in the Bloomfield area before and after the second World War. She was born in Bloomfield, then resided in Newington for nine years, then returned to live in Bloomfield around 1960. As a white woman, she became active against housing discrimination as a member and chairperson of the Bloomfield Human Rights Commission during the 1970s, on issues such as racial steering, blockbusting, testing realtors, the ordinance against real estate signs, and cooperation with the National Neighbors organization. She mentions how her children attended Bloomfield public schools during a period of racial transition and never had an issue. This oral history interview was conducted in front of the Cities, Suburbs, and Schools seminar from Trinity College. Submitted as part of the OnTheLine web-book by Jack Dougherty and colleagues (<http://ontheline.trincoll.edu>).

Speaker key:

AY: Aleesha Young

MM: Meredith Murphy

AW: Adelle Wright

[all comments by transcriber in brackets]

AW: It occurred to me that it might be helpful if I gave a little bit of a history in the opening, just to give you a setting because Bloomfield changed tremendously between the time before the second World War and after the second World War. And I think it's germane to your study, so I'd just to spend a little bit of time doing that. I promise not to take too much time. I don't know that much about it. [Reads from her notes.]

I must say that I grew up in Bloomfield. I was born in this town and grew up here and went to public school here. Graduated from high school in 1946, so you can do some computations from that. And in my high school graduating class there were 42 students, to of which were black. Bloomfield had always had some representation of black in the community, partly because [they?] were on the North end of Hartford... but other reasons too, I'm sure. Anyway, there were two black students in my class. And the town was 5,000 people before World War II, an agricultural community, basically, of 5,000 people. After the second World War, two things of grave importance to all of the United States happened. Although I'm not a Democrat, I have to give credit to the Democrats for these accomplishments [laughs]. One was the GI Bill for college and the other was the GI Bill for housing mortgages. Those two facts

probably had a major impact on the town of Bloomfield. After the war, you had young families being established in a great hurry and children being born, people making up for all of that lost time with the war. And so there was a need for affordable housing. And Bloomfield, having recently been an agricultural community, had a lot of beautiful land that could be used for housing. And so in the years between probably 1948 to 1955, two major subdivisions were built in Bloomfield. One of them on the East Side, off of Blue Hills Avenue, and, you won't believe this, but those houses, new, sold for \$11,990. And to buy one of those houses you could get a GI mortgage if you'd been in the military service, at 4 and three-quarters percent interest. That was a great impetus to growth. At the same time that that community was being developed, another one was being built just off Bloomfield Center, in which the houses were a little larger and the prices a little higher. My recollection is in the \$18,000 range. Those houses of course are now selling for \$200,000 [laughs]. But that was the setting. There was a lot of growth and a lot of change in Bloomfield. The GI Bill for education and for home mortgages had a lot to do with it.

Bloomfield, on the east side, borders on the North end of Hartford. Look to the map and you can see that. There is regular bus service up and down Blue Hills Avenue, frequent bus service. I'm sure that people in the Blue Hills area always associated themselves more with shopping in Hartford than with shopping in Bloomfield. So, it was recognized by people inside and out of Bloomfield that it was very convenient to get from Hartford to Bloomfield in that section of the area. Before the war, a lot of the population of the North end of Hartford was Jewish. And it was built; those communities were built around synagogues. As you know, some of the believers walk to synagogue for services. And so there were several synagogues on the North end of Hartford. To just show you that prejudice cuts every which way, a Christian relative of mine was sent to private boarding school because Weaver [High School in Hartford] was so Jewish. She, her sisters, had gone to Weaver when it was less Jewish. But by the time that she came along, that was the feeling. But after World War II, synagogues started being built outside of Hartford. And in the next fifteen or twenty years, three new synagogues were built in Bloomfield. So, when the Jewish population moved out of Hartford, they went to West Hartford or Bloomfield. Bloomfield was a bit more affordable, so probably a larger percentage came to Bloomfield. And when they left the North end of Hartford, black came in behind them. Somewhere I've read that "ghettoes follow ghettoes," that if you once ghettoize an area, and if it starts to fall apart for one reason or another, it's likely to be replaced by another ghetto, and that's exactly what happened in the North end of Hartford. And then when the first synagogue was built in Simsbury, there was another option for Jewish families, because now they could go to synagogue locally in Simsbury. But that was for more affluent families, just as it is for white affluent families.

So perhaps you can see from that that Bloomfield had a large supply of affordable housing, which is always a need for growth and for change. To show you how fast things happened, in the 1970s my children in public schools were in a majority -- 70 percent white, 30 percent minority. By the late '80s, my last to graduate was in a minority -- 30 percent white, 70 percent black. I had, was involved with the Human Rights, Human Relations Commission, as its chairman and member for a number of years, and I was employed by the Town to be the Affirmative Action Officer and stayed on as advisor to the Human Relations Commission. The Commission has since, has since disappeared. You'll probably ask me questions about the ordinance and those kinds of things, but I just thought that you needed to know about Bloomfield's position, the availability of housing here, and a history, at least on the East Side, of some black population. Some people in town were not as unhappy about the arrival of black

people as some people were. But, that could be that some of us had lived with black people for a long time. Okay, I'm now your "prize."

JD: That's very helpful, Mrs. Wright. Thanks for giving us an overview to start. We've been reading some things and are doing some interviews like this, and when you put all of these things together, it makes more sense. So Aleesha and Meredith, go ahead and take off where you'd like to go with this.

MM: I'm going to take the first four questions. I know that you said you lived in Bloomfield all of your life, but would you tell us exactly where in the town that you lived and for how long?

AW: I grew up in Bloomfield and lived here until 1952 when I got married, and then I did live in Newington for 9 years. And then I came back to Bloomfield. I've always lived on the west side. I grew up on a small dairy farm, and when my father developed that land to get his money out of it for living at the end of his life, my husband and I bought a lot on the land that I had grown up on. And, just a little aside, I was raised to never go on other people's property. Fence lines were sacred. You did not go over fence lines. So we couldn't even go over there to pick a flower or do anything. As it ended up, they drew lines to straighten out the property and I now live on lot, I used to live on a lot, that had half somebody else's land and half mine. So I learned to go in the back yard [laughs].

MM: When you think back to the 1960s and '70s, why did you decide to live in that house? Did it have anything to do with maybe jobs, your family, cost of homes, schools?

AW: Well we wanted to build our own home. It was a nice hillside site. It was near to my aging parents. We had one child at the time, and hopes of others. I was just, I loved Bloomfield and my husband had come to care for it and so we really, by choice, came back to town, with the voice of one prominent citizen in Newington ringing in our ears, saying, "Why do you want to go back to that N----- town?" [racial epithet against African Americans], which didn't leave a very good taste in my mouth about him [laughs]. But we came back knowing that the town was changing, and wanting to be a part of it.

JD: Can I just ask here -- did we figure out what year you moved in here?

AW: 1960, '61.

MM: Why did you move to Newington for those nine years?

AW: Because there was housing available, moderate-priced housing. Actually, we looked at the \$11,990 houses in Bloomfield, and signed up for one there, and then my mother-in-law got generous and put a little money up, so we moved to a bigger house in Newington. But Newington, at that time, was a pure white community, and absolutely no diversity, and... I didn't like some of the attitudes that I experienced.

MM: Did you own your home at the time?

AW: We owned in Newington, we sold, and then we owned in Bloomfield.

MM: How did you happen to buy that home -- who sold it to you?

AW: We didn't have to deal with realtors because we bought the land from my father and then built our own house. But I have lots of experiences with realtors that I can talk about if you're interested [laughs].

MM: Okay, in the 1960s and '70s were there other housing options that you ever considered? Did you ever think about moving, or did anybody, maybe the realtors, encourage you to move at the time?

AW: [long pause] I can't remember if there was anything specific to us, but that comment, from the Newington man, he was just more outspoken than some people. Lots of people were thinking that, I'm sure. But he happened to be a big mouth, so he expressed himself. We didn't deal with any realtors in our change, so we didn't have any experience in that area.

AY: Okay, I'm going to take over from here. Do you have any children?

AW: Yes, I have four.

AY: And do you mind giving their names?

AW: Not at all. I have two by adoption and two by surprise, so never think that you know all of the answers, folks! [Everyone laughs]. The first one is Stephanie and the second one is James. They were both adopted. Then after we had been married 13 years, we had Douglas, and then after 17 years we had Allison.

AY: When were they born? When and where were they born?

AW: Stephanie was born out of my reach, so I don't, she's was born in New London area, born in 1955. We got her when she was 4 and a half years old. And the next year we got Jim, who was born in 1961. And then Douglas, who was born in 1966, born to us. And Allison, who was born in 1971. Douglas and Allison were both born in Bloomfield.

AY: Where did they attend school, and can you describe your experience with schools and their experience with schools?

AW: They attended public school, all four of them. They were proud, I think with some help from their mother and father, to go to a diversified school. They knew there were problems sometimes but they had friends on both sides of the... [unintelligible] so they were comfortable. I would have to say that they benefited from the fact that a good number of the years of their time in school we had a Jewish chairman of the Board of Education, a man who was dedicated to quality education, and he really worked hard to keep the Bloomfield schools where he thought they should be. And I think that all of the children going through the schools at that time were benefited by that. What experiences did they have?... We once had a birthday party at our house

where Allison and her black friend who happened to have the same birthday had a party together, and that was fun. She was a beautiful child. When they got involved with athletics, of course, it was a mix. My son Jim played a little junior varsity football, and he had two or three regular friends who were black. He was lucky, no, Douglas was lucky because there were some children his age, black children his age, who were in our neighborhood. So, unless you get people living together, they don't get that everyday exposure that is so critical, so essential to coming to understand people. And that was behind, my later activity in the Human Relations Commission.

AY: Could you tell us about your neighbors in the 1960s and '70s?

JD: Can I just ask -- which street did you live on?

AW: Foothills Way, which was, people who would buy a lot and develop, it wasn't a subdivision. It was approved as a subdivision but the lots were sold one at a time, and a lot of variety in the neighborhood, from colonial to splits to ranch to, ours was a ranch with a walk-in level below.

JD: And I apologize -- which elementary school was near there? Which one did your kids...?

AW: The kids went all of the way across town to... to School Street, Metacomet School. They rode a bus regularly. Now, where am I?

AY: The question was, if you could tell us about your neighbors in the 1960s and '70s. As far as, maybe race, and any, whether there was any discrimination?

AW: '60s and '70s.... We moved to Bloomfield in '61 and all of the neighbors at that point were white. By the '70s.... they were still white with one exception. There was a black administrator for the Social Security Department, a judge in the Social Security Department, across the street from us. By the '80s the next two houses beyond me had black doctors living in them and the neighbor on the other side remained white and that neighbor is still there. So it was gradually changing but... because of the price of the neighborhood it was professionals largely, on both sides of the color spectrum. Now did I cover everything or is there still something more to go?

AY: Did any of your neighbors stay or move?

AW: [long pause]... One several doors up the street left in the early '80s because they were [unintelligible] white flight, the value of their house, but that's the only one that I recognize, that I knew about that felt that way, in the immediate neighborhood.

AY: And I know you talked about how your street changed over time, but how has it remained the same?

AW: Houses are all maintained very well. Another big change is that the children have all grown up. When the school bus goes by now, it has 2 or 3 kids in it. And that's regretful, regrettable, I feel. I think that Census figures would show you that Bloomfield is half a minority population, half black, but they're the people who have children in the schools. I represent some of that other

fifty percent, old-timers who have stayed because we love Bloomfield and we're probably going to die with our boots on in Bloomfield.

AY: We've heard reports about racial steering and block-busting in Bloomfield. Did you experience or witness any of these? Or when was the first time that you witnessed block-busting or steering?

AW: We were suspicious because certain streets would turn over, as we said, so fast. The town became aware of a national organization of communities who were trying to, trying to keep the real estate people honest. It was called National Neighbors. And it was made up of communities that were suburbs of areas that, which had in the core a substantial black population, which because of the accruing effects of education and mortgage availability, meant that black people were moving out of the city. And the National Neighbors group was certainly not going to fight the move. What we, what our purpose, what their purpose was, was to try to keep the move gradual enough so that people had the chance to assimilate, to be assimilated, so that white neighbors could find out what it was like to have a black neighbor, what the reality of it was, not what they had been told or heard from some source. And in order to try to figure out what was happening as far as steering was concerned, we set up teams of a black couple and a white couple. They would go separately to look at the same property, and they would have a checklist to very little details about how they were treated, because sometimes it was very subtle. It never was blatant, because it was against the law to discriminate on the basis of color. But it was something about whether or not they were invited to come back, how cordial the real estate agent was when they met them, whether they had to call two times to get an appointment or whether they got an appointment right away. Whether or not they were shown something of similar price in some place besides Bloomfield -- that was critical. Because we felt, going back to my favorite town of Newington, does anyone here come from Newington? We felt that it was very strange that other towns that had affordable properties were not getting some of this change. And the only way that we could survive as an integrating, I'm saying "integrating" community, was to feel that there was some activity going on in other places too, so that we didn't find ourselves singled out as the only town that was being involved in this movement. Does that answer that question?

AY: How did you become chair of the Bloomfield Human Relations Commission....?

AW: By default! [laughs]

AY: ...and how did it respond to racial steering and block-busting?

AW: It was through the Human Relations Commission that we were active with National Neighbors. We tried to set up occasionally a discussion group of people who were interested in the future of Bloomfield and interested in being positive about what was happening around them, and getting answers so that they could talk to other people who were not as positive. We, of course, our big thrust in the '70s was our sign ordinance, which you've probably read about that.

JD: Would you go ahead and explain it, because I'm not sure if they really get it.

AW: Well, I think my attitude toward it probably has changed a bit, as I've known more realtors as persons, individuals. There's no question that from our survey from our couples that went out, they were treated differently, many times, not always, but many times they were treated differently. The sign ordinance was an attempt in the '70s when the tide was already running pretty strong, and let me tell you what would happen, the reason we got onto signs. Realtors put signs up when the house is for sale, and then they put another sign up when it's pending mortgage or something, and then another sign when it's sold. And, if I just came out of a 90 day contract to sell my house, so that could mean that there could be a sign in front of my house for 90 days. And then beyond, if they wanted to keep the sold sign there. And what was happening was that some of the streets that were being worked on, to turn, were getting a snowstorm of signs, great big signs, askew and straight and every which way, which didn't do much to make the neighborhood look better, but also reminded the people going into that neighborhood, every days of their lives, [thinking] "My neighborhood is turning. I might be the last one here. Maybe I'd better get out now, while I can still run." We just felt that that was.... detrimental to the town of Bloomfield's goal to be an integrated community with some sanity. And that the only way that we could attack, that we could come up with, and this was National Neighbor's idea, too, was to try to do something about the signs ordinance, the length of time that they could be up, the size of the sign, I don't remember all of the details now. But it was a way to try to get some of those signs off the street before they had outlived their usefulness. You don't... when you're in your first house and it's a big investment and you're anxious to make money on it when you sell it, although they didn't make as much money on it in those days as they do now, you are really threatened when you feel as if others in the neighborhood are leaving. And if you're constantly reminded of it, you get kind of a fire lit under you that maybe you've got to go too, and that's why we attacked the sign business. Of course, the real estate industry came to testify at the hearing we had before this was passed, and "Oh, we don't do things like that," and there were people in the room who had had them done to them, so that was a little hard to take. Maybe that particular realtor didn't do things like that, because I'm not carte-blanching, [saying] everyone did. But it was certainly, when you could drive down a moderate-priced neighborhood and see 6 or 8 signs on a short street, that's not a healthy sign, that's not a healthy condition.

AY: According to a 1974 Hartford Courant article, you said: "Most homebuyers are not crusaders who buy with plans to integrate or desegregate a neighborhood... But this choice rests with the buyer, not the agent." Do you think that you could elaborate on what you meant, maybe, as far as block-busting, who was responsible -- the realtor or the homebuyer?

AW: That member of the press was kind... they weren't always that kind. Would you read the quotation again? [Reads the clipping.] There are very few people who deliberately go out and put their heads into a noose that they can see is beginning to be tied tight around other peoples' necks. And very few of us who were in the moderate-priced housing market can afford to do a thing like that. But when white buyers were being directed to other communities and black buyers were being directed to Bloomfield, we felt as if we were being picked on. And as though something was happening to us that we couldn't control. So that's why we say that the choice should be the buyer's, not the real estate agent's. As far as I understand the regulations for real estate agents, they're supposed to show similar listings in several different communities, to give people a real choice, to let them see the way things really are. But we, and our testing showed, that this was not happening. That our black customers were being directed to Bloomfield and,

toward the end of this time we're talking about, toward Windsor, because Windsor also shares some border with the North End of Hartford. And another key to it, and probably true in Windsor as it was in Bloomfield, was good bus service up and down Blue Hills Avenue, so that you could stay in touch with your church, your neighborhood that you'd come out of. And that's critical. And probably as the fervor that I once felt, and I still believe that we should be living in integrated communities, I do have to say that people make choices where they're comfortable. And if .... if you're a Chinese person and you know that a Chinese friend has moved to a certain neighborhood and there's a house available, that makes you interested in that house. But we didn't feel that when the real estate agent got a person with no inclinations like that, and that person was then shown other towns, if they were white, and Bloomfield if they were black, we really felt that they [the agent] was making choices for the buyers, limiting the buyers choices. Not making choices, because they couldn't do that, but they were limiting choices.

JD: There's a couple of people around the table who have other questions as well. Is this a good time to jump into those?

Naralys Estevez: I'm just wondering what sections of town experienced the most turnover, or what streets....

AW: At first it was the east side, because that's the closest to the North End of Hartford and the most available housing. But for the years for when I worked for the town, which was from 1977 to 1991, in Personnel, when I was the Personnel Officer, when I heard, when we hired a new person who was going to be an administrator or department head or something, I very deliberately took them over to the East Side and drove up and down the streets and then said, "This is an integrated neighborhood. Now tell me what's wrong with it?" [laughs] Because we had also had capital improvement grants from the federal government, CBDG or whatever alphabet soup it was, and we had put money over there into improving drainage and curbing and things that made the neighborhood look as if it was cared for, cared about. Would you repeat your question?

NE: That was mainly it.

JD: You said the East Side happened first....

AW: The East Side, but very quickly, because, you know, one of the misapprehensions out there is that blacks can't afford good housing, or fancier housing. Well I've got to tell you something, they can afford good housing, some of the black families can. Maybe they're working, two people, but what white family isn't doing that these days, too? So I lived in the, not the top neighborhood in town, but an up-and-coming neighborhood, and we got, we have, I guess the neighborhood is at least half-black. So it's a myth to say, to equate black buyers with inexpensive housing because that's not the case. But it did first happen in Blue Hills because that was the most natural place for it to happen, that's where the long-time families who had been in Bloomfield for 40 years, black families, they lived over in Blue Hills.

NE: Did you say you lived on the west side?

AW: I lived on the west side. Blue Hills neighborhood is basically up and down Blue Hills Avenue. And perhaps over as far as the railroad tracks, which Bloomfield has, which neatly go through sort of the center of town. And so I lived on the west side of that. But just because my father had a farm there, that was the whole reason for being there.

JD: Other questions around the table?... I have one, I'm curious. As you think back to white families that you knew of, that moved out, it sounds like you're aware of families that made choices to move.... Those that moved out, as far as you could tell that were moving for racial reasons. Did you get the sense that they were moving more to avoid blacks living on the same street, or blacks going to the same school with their children?

AW: Schools became an issue early on..... One of my greatest disappointments, assuming that there's no member of the press here, that in spite of the fact that the town of Bloomfield has been very good through taxpayers' dollars to support the public schools, that they have not been able to achieve test scores that are comparable. And it just... I'd love to get at the roots of it. I've talked to teachers who are very very concerned because they could not get parental cooperation and, you know, in many cases, a family where both are working, and it's hard to cooperate on a daily, daytime schedule when you're working and you can't leave the job. But, that doesn't help the teachers to relay their messages to the parents that are necessary to be relayed. Once again, we have a strong superintendent and I have high hopes for him. Of course, test scores generally... we've had more trouble than anyone else, except Hartford.

JD: You also mentioned, you said that you could tell us more stories about realtors. It sounds like you've had a number of experiences with realtors over time..... some of them painful perhaps.

AW: [Laughs]. I think the one, the behavior that we detested the most, was their showing white, and it works out, National Neighbors had done a study on this, an integrating community next to an all-white community, loses about 90 percent of its markets. The white buyers are all taken somewhere else. That's.... we talk about equality in America and we talk about loving our neighbors and we talk about, now we're talking about diversity all of the time, diversity is wonderful stuff. But I bet you that there's still plenty of, I know there's still plenty of communities that if a minority of any kind moved in, they would be.... there would be harsh feelings about it still. So I think that the limiting of our market was one of my biggest aggravations. Because we could compete in the open market. Goodness knows that we had a good supply of housing. So therefore we could have been attractive to other people except for the rumor mill gets going and the racist attitudes get going, and they're promoted. I don't know if you've run into Bloomfield being an All-American Community, and All-American City.....

JD: It's an honor that they won in 1970?

AW: Right around there. And a lot of people in town said, "Oh yeah, we're the All-American Community, yeah, lucky us." [sarcastically]. But it was a recognition of the fact that we were trying to deal with the reality and trying to make the most of it and trying to keep our sense of community through it. I was accused sometimes of being racist because of the things that the Human Relations Commission was doing. When we tried to slow down the process of selling houses on a certain street, we were accused of being racist, that "You don't want any more black

people.” No, we’d say, “Go three streets over and have a black family over there. Just give this neighborhood a chance to churn awhile and see if they can live together.” But the blacks didn’t want to hear that and the whites didn’t either [laughs]. I often found myself on the Commission as pretty lonely characters on there. All that we were doing was what we thought was the best thing that could be done, and trying to make some attempt of keeping our sense of community and embrace new people.

JD: Very interesting. This summer, some other students who will continue on this project with me, we’re going to try to track down some of the people who were involved in the real estate side of all of this. Now, we know that we can track down the real estate companies that were named in the suit to see if any of their employees are still around, so we’ll do the paperwork and try to track those people down. But out of curiosity, did you happen to know any of these people? Were they in Bloomfield or were they from Hartford, the people that were involved in these practices?

AW: Well because it was so discrete, so subtle, it’s hard to make a... statement that says this, this, this, and this. In general, the realtors in Bloomfield were trying to live by the regulations. Because they had a stake in it too. Many of them owned homes in Bloomfield. It seemed like it was more out of town, and sometimes the larger firms that were smart enough to be very subtle. With time, I have understood more, better, that people do seek to go where they have friends, or where they expect to have friends. That is a factor in it, and if the real estate industry could have left it at that, and not said to us, “Okay, this is a white one, we’ll take him to Wethersfield, Newington, and forget Bloomfield,” because of course they could not say anything about the racial mix in the schools, or school standing or anything like that. The only thing they could do was to pretend that this was all that was on the market. But the thing that really really hurts the integrating communities is that they lose such a substantial part of the market. They would lose some because of people’s choice, because there’s common talk about there about what community is this and what community is that. But, when you continue to cut that choice down it really hurts the market, and then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, that people assume that if black people move in, property values are going to go down. And sure enough, they will if the market is limited, sure enough, they will. That may be a great house, and in a good location, but if the real estate industry doesn’t want to show it, it’s not going to bring as much as it should.

MM: What percent did you say the market went down?

AW: My recollection is that it could be as bad as 90 percent, they lose 90 percent of the market. For two reasons. Well, the basic reason being that they don’t want to deal with color, the agent doesn’t want to or the buyer doesn’t want to. And some of the buyers will say straight up front, “I do not want this or that or the other thing,” according to what their prejudices of the day happen to be. And I recall seeing that number and probably that’s in an area where quite a bit of integration is going on, too. Wouldn’t be the first, probably.

JD: Thank you very much for sharing a large part of your story with us.... [reviews next steps] Is there anything else you wanted to close with?

AW: I guess that I still, I still hold out hope for diverse communities, the reality of diverse communities. And of course, we still have a substantial white population in Bloomfield. Of course, it's the older group, not in the schools anymore. We just have a lot of growing and attitude and education to do. Nothing happens fast when it has to do with people's feelings or ideas about things. Just as some of the social issues of the day are seemingly are moving forward, but acceptance is another thing. So, we'll see. One thing that you learn as you get older is that nothing happens very fast, even aging [everyone laughs].