

**Oral History Interview of
Evelyn Husband-Thompson**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall
August 11, 2017
Lubbock, Texas**

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This interview features Evelyn Husband-Thompson, former wife of astronaut Rick Husband, who discusses the launch of Columbia STS-107, and the aftermath of the disintegration of the shuttle.

Length of Interview: 02:01:03

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David Marshall (DM):

The date is August 11th, 2017. This is David Marshall interviewing Evelyn Husband-Thompson at the Southwest Collection Texas Tech. Lubbock, Texas. Okay, we were talking yesterday about the NASA experience for spouses especially, and at the end of the day I asked you if there was anything—if you had thought of anything else or might think of anything else to add to that or did we cover it pretty well?

Evelyn Thompson (ET):

We did. I think I mentioned yesterday—I know we did in conversation, I don't know if it was recorded or not, but Rick was a huge fan of John Young, and so he would say different comments that Rick would write down and keep in a file because he thought they were so profound and interesting. And one of the things that John Young relayed to Rick early on in his career was, "Don't give everything to NASA. They'll take your soul if you let them." That was coming from someone who had been working at NASA for decades, and walked on the moon, and lived a long life already, and it was really great advice that Rick really took to heart, and I think that advice probably also extends to the spouses as well. As with any career, it's easy to get really wrapped up, and especially as an astronaut's wife, because I will tell you, preparing for launches is a very labor intensive job, and I jumped into it with both feet. There's a humongous misconception in our culture that being a stay at home mom is a boring, lifeless job, and my cousin blessed me so much one time saying, "You're the busiest person that I know." So it's still a matter of choice of what you choose to spend your time doing, but I was not bored, and not lazy by any stretch, staying home with my children and it was a choice that Rick and I very happily made. It was an important choice, and preparing for these flights, spouses typically have to do a fair amount of work. It's completely at your own discretion whether or not you host a reception in Florida prior to the launch, but almost everyone does. These people—your close family and friends, have travelled from everywhere, all over the country and even the world, to come see this, and so it is their only opportunity to get together and gather, and so everyone pretty much has. I don't think there has ever been an astronaut that has flown that probably did not host some sort of reception. If they were married, if the astronaut's married, then that falls upon the spouse, and so months leading up to that, it's planning a wedding level of activity in a different location. You have to decide on the location, and catering, and there is a guest list, a very long guest list. But the kicker, unlike planning a wedding or a major event like that, is the date can continue to move all over the map. So for Rick's first flight, I believe that his launch—they call it slipping, so the date slipped a few times for his second mission, STS-107. It slipped quite a few times, not officially, so mercifully, we didn't have to notify people a number of times, but there's a crew secretary that's assigned to each crew, but works very diligently with the crew member, but the spouse as well, and so develops these lists. Just incredible data of emails, and phone numbers, and contact information, and then they, subsequently, each guest is sent a pretty hefty information packet of passes, and schedules, and time, and so it is just a highly orchestrated, very planned event with multiple things that have to happen. There's a background

check on every single guest that comes, especially if they are international, so there's a lot more information that has to be taken because you are entering onto a secured facility at Cape Canaveral in Kennedy Space Center. So you can't just go into the secured area to view the launch without security clearances, so it is a pretty involved process, and so the spouses, especially around a launch, find themselves extremely busy. The other thing that I got really involved—and Rick and I worked as a team, and so it was a very fun thing, but we thought and strategized on both of his missions of what IMC would fly. There is a limited amount of items that can be flown. There's an official list of items flown, and so those would be items, such as the items that Rick flew for Texas Tech, so items that you see displayed at Texas Tech, and you read about, those were preselected. There's a lot of very stringent parameters that NASA places on items that are flown with their size, with their weight, and also with their composition, so in other words, you couldn't fly something made out of glass, or you could not fly something that was too heavy. We would make recommendations, but there was some parameters that had to happen with those, and those items are taken months before the mission. I want to use the word—they were hermetically sealed. I don't know what the official word is, but they were sealed in plastic, and well documented, and then placed in containers that were loaded into the orbiter long before launch. Rick would not have access to those items during the launch unless he predetermined that he wanted to hold up an item or have that, so he had very limited access. He couldn't decide during the flight, "You know, I want to find that little flag from Texas Tech and display that." It had to be something that was planned months in advance. so he had an official flight kit, the OFK, and that was a list of all the items that he would fly officially, and then there was a personal flight kit. He flew on STS-107, on the last mission, he flew my wedding band, and he—unfortunately that was destroyed in the accident. It was ironic that I realized not too long after the accident occurred that our marriage had sadly ended because of his death, but—and our weddings were destroyed in the accident so it was pretty profound to understand that, but the role of a spouse was not that different on a regular basis as being a military spouse. I found it to be a very similar—the difference was in the past, we had lived on military bases. So everybody was there for the same reason that their husband or wife was in the military, and that was their job so it was a little different when we moved to Houston because we lived in a community and everybody did different jobs. But the area of town that we lived is heavily populated with NASA employees so it still was not anything that anybody was that alarmed or surprised about. I mean, it was still cool that Rick was an astronaut, but in our subdivision alone, there were eight or nine. So that's just what—there was a lot of people that support NASA and work at NASA, and in our church as well. So it was not an unusual occupation as much as it would be anywhere else. The spouses, a lot—I would say the vast majority came to Houston with their own careers, and continued to pursue those, and so I think it was a pretty labor intensive balancing act between the intense schedule, and [i]nflexible schedule that the astronauts had. Their life was not their own as opposed to maybe other jobs. I really found that Rick had to work really hard. When I needed him for something it was just nearly impossible for him to break away. It's a very demanding job, very intense job as you can well

imagine. For the spouses, I think they have to be long suffering, and very understanding, and it's a commitment that you have to make as a couple if you are going to be a success at it.

DM:

As the flight approached, you had a flurry of things going on, people coming in from out of town and what not, but also, I would think, some emotional pressure considering probably some nervousness about the upcoming flight and this kind of thing. Was it advantageous to have these other activities going on to distract you from that, or did it just add to the strain?

ET:

Interestingly enough—so Rick's first mission was in May of '99 and my children—our children—were pretty young. Laura was eight, Matthew was three, so having a three year old was plenty good enough for me to be busy and have other things to focus on besides Rick's upcoming mission. He was the last member of his class of '95. They were the Escargots—was their nickname, his astronaut group. He was the last one assigned, so he had waited a very long time to fly, and I was just very excited for him. That was the reason that we were there, so we had been there already four years, in Houston. So it was an extremely busy time, but I had already gone through that thought process of what if something happened? He was a test pilot before that, and had flown a lot of different missions, and obviously, everyone's aware of the risk. Nobody's pretending otherwise, but the word that Rick liked to use and what I completely understood and endorsed and felt the same way, is that it is a calculated risk. It was something that he chose to do. I shared that it was something he shared with me on our first date back in 1977 that he wanted to be an astronaut, so this was not new information. It was not a surprise that he wanted to do something that was risky, but he and I both agreed getting in a car and driving around Houston was pretty risky. So it's a calculated risk and you prepare and do the very best that you can to prepare for that, and you leave the rest in God's hands and that is what we did. I wasn't all that uptight about it. It was a very strange experience though when the mission was at hand and he was in quarantine, and our first evening meal I show up for, everyone has their last will and testament, and we all are witnessing each other's—not ours, the spouses—but the crew were signing as a witness for that. I thought, well this is a different dinner party. I've never been to one like this before. I said, "What on earth are you doing?" Everybody was very light about it. The majority of Rick's crew had flown before, so there weren't—I'm trying to think how many rookies were on that first mission. I would have to think about that for a second, but the majority had flown before, and were lighthearted about it, and had sense of humor about it. Nobody is climbing into a space vehicle with the intention of dying, and don't really expect that that's going to be the end result. They know it is a possibility, but honestly, every time we get into a car, every time we climb onto an airplane as a passenger—we all don't live in a bubble and so there are car accidents. There are airliners that crash every day, and we make that decision to take that calculated risk, and so I don't really think that it felt any different than that to be perfectly honest. We all knew about Challenger. We knew that a space shuttle

could not make it home safely, but we really didn't have this sense of foreboding or concern that it was going to happen. Of course, we didn't want it to happen, but felt confident that probably everything was going to go okay. I know that Rick and I, we talked to it to that level, but it wasn't something that we belabored. We'd already been married for so many years, that I'd walked through him flying all these different test aircraft and all these different things, and so it just wasn't a fear factor. I don't think we could've been in that business. We couldn't have walked through that if we had that much fear, and he wouldn't have been able to function well, so it is something that they come to terms with. I mean, it's what all of us have to face if we want to do something and make a difference. You have to overcome that.

DM:

You know, really, the test pilot programs were good in that regard that they had been in situations like this plenty of times before.

ET:

Oh yes, oh yes. So we rolled into that first launch. I will say that launch was probably the most stressful piece for me because of Challenger. So I knew precisely the moment when they went MECO, Main Engine Cutoff, that was the moment that Challenger exploded. That was a little tough, not overly tough, but I remember standing there both times when Rick launched into space, and that's a sobering moment that you take a little nice deep breath after their passed and realize that they're good to go. We felt that, but it wasn't something that was just all consuming. My heart wasn't pounding out of my chest. I mean, I wasn't just terrified. But I will say, both times, especially the second time, but both times, I remember standing—the families are escorted. We stand on the roof of the launch control center, and I am happy to go through that whole process of what they do with us—the families. There's a whole lot of tradition in the hours leading up to the launch, and the crew is going through a lot of traditional things that are kind of fun, and cool, and quirky, that crews have always done, but they have the same for the families. And so there's a particular door in the flight control center where this is a sticker from all the flights, the patch, that we ceremoniously apply to the door as the families after the launch and you see the door with all the stickers, and so that is pretty cool. I remember living in absolute fear because Matthew was three for the first launch, and so he's actually playing with some truck stickers when we do this ceremony with the head of NASA, and all these important people. And I just watch Matthew walking around the room and I thought, Oh no, he is going to stick his truck sticker on the incredibly important door, but mercifully, he didn't. I think he stuck it on a wall. I don't know what he did with it, but it didn't go where it was supposed to, but it didn't go on the door. But they have these huge dry marker boards that the kids are given dry markers, and they draw whatever they want to, and they've done this with every launch of every space shuttle with the kids. So you walk down all these halls and they've sealed them up with plexi glass to preserve them, but the kids draw the patch. They can draw—for Matthew, for the first one—he's three—there's just scribbles. And then I think Laura put an arrow and put Matthew underneath it.

But they draw whatever they want to, and it just gives them something to do, but they realized early on that these are really creative and historical pieces of art, if you will, from the children of the astronauts that are waiting to watch their mom or dad launch into space. And so it's really cool and creative. You can literally walk down the hallways at the launch control center, Kennedy Space Center, and there's all of these murals that these kids produced. So they did that. There's traditional foods that we eat and there is just different things. We have to eat beans after they launch, which I never got, but anyway, that's been a tradition that has gone on forever, so we had our bowl of beans afterwards, but the families have a very integral part, and when you asked me earlier about the spouses, I mean, you have to be all in for that. If it's something that you resent, or you're struggling or you have a separate life—you have to be willing to sacrifice your time, and your energy, and your effort, in order for your spouse to be able to successfully motor through this. There cannot be this selfish pull. This can translate into any arena. It can translate into any occupation, but there has to be a mutual support system with each other, and Rick and I had that. I think we excelled at that, but it's just a very stressful time, and so that brings out emotions that you wouldn't typically have, but the other thing it does, it really pushes you to excellence because you really want things to matter. And so the time leading up to quarantine, spent with family on both missions, and oh my goodness, how treasured it is after the second mission since he subsequently died in that mission. But we were very intentional of what activities we did, and time we spent together, and conversations that we had, and conversations he had with Laura and Matthew. These were not conversations about, "I may not come back," these were conversations with, "I love you. You are important to me. This is what matters," and they were just very intentional. The Christmas before Rick's second mission, we purposefully—even though we were extremely close to our parents—Rick's dad had already passed—so Rick's mom and my parents, we asked them not to come for Christmas. We had Christmas alone. It's the only year we ever did that, but it was so valuable. We just did silly stuff. We played games. We even played Twister which no adult should do past thirty, but anyway, another story. But we played Jenga. We just did all these silly games. Rick got out his telescope, and we looked at stars and I mean, we just, very intentionally, did things together as a family that are memories we still have fifteen years later. As a spouse, it's just very important to be supportive, and be willing to sacrifice your own needs and desires, even just for that season, so that it is a success because we really viewed ourselves as a team. And I remember, both times, but the second time specifically, in crew quarters, Rick just thanking me and saying, "I couldn't do this without you," and you know what? I kind of agree with him. And I know that sounds conceited, but I don't think he could have done it without me because I kept home running, and I kept everything moving along so that he could do this, but it was my pleasure because I knew that that was his passion and his dream. It was something I freely supported and was very excited about. It was just really important to me to see him succeed at that so that was important.

DM:

Did he talk much about some of these programs he was involved in? Like he was involved in design, I think, of the escape vehicle, pod, whatever you want to call it.

ET:

It was the X-38.

DM:

Yeah, okay. And he was—wasn't he also involved in a little bit of talk about or some planning for returns to the moon or possibly a Mars mission? Did he talk about these things?

ET:

He did. He was the safety officer in the astronaut office for a while as well, which he took very seriously. There was a lot of discussion during that time period of unmanned missions, and Rick was very opposed to that because it would remove his purpose in NASA to have missions without people.

DM:

It goes all the way back to early Mercury, that same argument.

ET:

It does, yep. One of the best definitions I ever heard at NASA was that you are given—and this came out in a Columbia Accident Investigation report, the CAIB report, afterwards—that I think a productive criticism of NASA that they hopefully, have continued to really pursue for change, but it's hard to change. Just like it would be hard to change the system at Texas Tech, it's even harder to change a system the size of NASA. But the criticism was is that you are given an incredible amount of responsibility with no authority, and so that was a constant struggle. So you had these people who were at the top of their field, smarter than smart, literal rocket scientists, who are brilliant people, and you're giving them phenomenal responsibility, but you are not giving them any authority. And so that is a huge struggle, and was one of the biggest criticisms of the culture that came out after the accident with the investigation. So that was something that I think was very frustrating for Rick, and he very much since that, on a daily basis—because there were set ways of doing things. One engineer one time made a comment to Rick. He was working on a project that you talked about, the X-38. He hadn't flown in space yet, and the engineer—there's an ego sometimes that goes along with intelligence, and you can—one of my very favorite comments is from Steve Lindsey, who was my causality assistance officer afterwards, but he was also a classmate of Rick's. He ended up becoming chief of the astronaut office, and is a very dear friend, but one of Steve's favorite comments is that he is a legend in his own mind. So there are people who are legends in their own mind, and this particular engineer was very much that. And he told Rick one day, who already was an extremely experienced test pilot, who

had written a number of test pilot—you know, there's a lot of reporting, and documentation, and incredible hard work, and papers that have to come out of testing and research. So yes, flying in space adds a new dimension to that, but I don't think he came back from his missions with big ah-ha moments, now I get everything, but this engineer at NASA made the comment to Rick that he really wasn't interested in the opinion of an unflown astronaut, so that was nice. Honestly, I think that that was a prevalent misconception that there was this giant --

DM:

Gulf between.

ET:

Yeah, that you would fly in space, and then all of a sudden, you're evolved into this incredibly knowledgeable human being, which honestly is ridiculous. Anyway, that was not the case. Nothing changed. There wasn't this big vast increase in knowledge and understanding once he flew in space. He just really enjoyed floating and it was fun to be able to finally do the work that he trained to do for two years, so that was about the extent of that. Even in his faith, he was asked the question many times when he did public appearances of his faith—how it affected his faith, if it changed his faith, and his response was always, “Absolutely not,” which was a very surprising comment. But he would always go on to say that what it did do was just give him a different perspective of God's creation, and that was phenomenal, but it is the same different perspective that you would receive on a mountain top, or in a place on the earth that you've never been before, and you see a completely different geological set up. I mean, it just would be the same beauty where you're viewing something for the first time. He saw colors in space that he hadn't seen before. Sun rises were every hour, and so it is a completely different perspective, but he shared with me after his first mission—because my daughter had her ballet recital and that had to happen anyway, and it really did. When she was eight, my mom flew to Houston and stayed with my children, and I flew out because they were landing at two in the morning. A three year old at two in the morning is not a pretty picture, so we had made the executive decision long before the mission that I would fly to Florida for the landing, and Laura and Matthew would remain in Houston. My mom did the whole ballet recital in Galveston for her, and so afterwards, when I was with Rick alone and we got to have some very valuable conversations that I treasure in my heart, he was able to share with me one on one before he did with the world what his mission was like in space. We talked for hours, upon hours, upon hours, and I treasure it, but one of the things he shared with me is that although the sunrises were spectacular in space, they're so much more beautiful on the earth because they are nice and slow and you can take it in. Whereas in space, they are very fast, and so as far as a spiritual journey, it was just another piece of information about how big God is, and how amazing His creation is, and how much He loves us, and cares for us. It's a different perspective looking at the earth, and realizing how fragile we are, and why don't we get along, and all of those things that you think, and so it is a different perspective. You don't see any walls or borders from space, so all of that is really cool, but at the

end of the day, God is still God, and it's still your relationship with him, and so it really didn't enhance or change his perspective. It was just more information that just made it really great.

DM:

That's very, very interesting because he already had a strong faith so this just played right in with what he already knew.

ET:

It did, yep.

DM:

There are other astronauts who said they looked upon this and said there has to be a God, but Rick was already beyond that point and able to --

ET:

The most amazing thing, which I think is a message that he really wanted to convey when he spoke, is you don't have to go into space. You don't have to travel to the ends of the earth to find the Lord. He's right here, and He is with you wherever you are. That you don't have to be in these phenomenal, unreachable—for most—places to be able to have this connection. He makes himself available to everybody, so that was one thing he really wanted to stress when he spoke to people that it's not contingent on where you are physically.

DM:

When he prepared for his second mission, on his—what do you call it? The final request form? Or what is the official name for that?

ET:

Are you talking about the sheet that they fill out?

DM:

Yeah, you mentioned it earlier. I can't remember what you called it.

ET:

Yeah, I can't remember exactly what I called it either, but it's a great wrap up of exactly what your last will and testament would be, and just your special desires, and it's just a nice summation so if something does happen, here's what you need to do. So that was super helpful on both missions, although I never expected to have to access it.

DM:

Right, but he did mention for the second mission, "TELL THEM ABOUT JESUS. HE'S REAL

TO ME.”

ET:

He did, in all capitals.

DM:

You said that's here at the Southwest Collection?

ET:

It is.

DM:

Wow, okay. That just speaks volumes for him right there. He also—he took on that second mission—we were talking yesterday about his choir interests, he took a CD of the Texas Tech choir, and listened to some of it, I think, in space. Didn't he?

ET:

He did. He sure did. So that was just a really cool dimension of Rick that I really treasured, that although he was this really smart guy who studied engineering, and loved to fly, and was so analytical, and linear about every way he approached things, music was a passion for him. Music is mathematical, but it was more than that, and it just fed his soul. And I just loved that he was able to continue to pursue that throughout his life. He always sang in our church choir. His best friend, David Jones, that lives in Lubbock—they met when they were little boys and were in choir all the way through, and David made the comment after Rick's funeral in Houston, he said, “Rick is the only one I know that could sing at his own funeral.” Because they played a recording where he sang a solo in part of a song that our church choir sang, and so they played that at Rick's services. But it was just something that was always a passion for him and a release, and Gene Kinney was the director of the Texas Tech choir at the time when we attended Tech. And that was just his joy to get to participate in that, and he loved that man. Just absolutely loved that man. I can remember several of the teachers that he had here at Tech—engineering professors are very different than music teachers. And so there were a couple who had absolutely no patience or understanding when Rick had to travel with the Tech choir, because I remember there was a couple events that they travelled, and they gave Rick such a hard time. He had to really bust his buns to get the work in and get everything completed so they wouldn't count him as unexcused, and count his work—because his grades clearly were a huge big deal to him because he had the ultimate goal of applying at NASA. And so he really took it so seriously, but it was a real struggle between the two studies of supporting that, and there were a couple of teachers that didn't have a lot of patience with him, but there were some. There were a few professors that he had here at Tech that—I remember Mr. Powers, and I don't think he's even still living, but he revered the man. There were just several professors here that just connected

with Rick in such a personal way, and it made such a difference for him in his pursuit. He went through a lot of personal struggle, but made the decision to join the Arnold Air Society here, and to go through ROTC. It was a very pivotal place for him, but I remember the day here on campus when he signed the papers, and he was so uptight because it is a big decision, because he is making a commitment upon graduation to be commissioned into the military. And so he was—he knew that was the step he wanted to take, and it was the step that he needed to take, but I just remember how uptight he was about—I mean, it was a very serious thing, but I was very excited for him and he was even—not embarrassed. Embarrassed is not the right word at all, but he was a little bit uptight about having to wear the uniform. I think he had to wear it one day a week. I can't remember on the days. They had—Arnold Air Society had meetings. This was back in the seventies. The military wasn't that well thought of, and he had to get his hair cut. His hair was a little bit longer, and it was just a little bit of a difficult transition, but I was just so proud of him because he really stuck with it, and General Barnes was the head of the ROTC program here at the time, and Rick just absolutely revered him as well. And so there was just a lot of really strong teachers here that I think just had such a positive influence on him and really encouraged him. And so when we graduated in May 10th, 1980, as I mentioned yesterday, that day, we went through the graduation ceremony, and then he had on his military uniform, and his mother and I pinned on his second lieutenant bars, and he was a second lieutenant in the air force, so it was a pretty big deal. Pretty big deal.

DM:

Yeah, glad he had a good experience here. Can you talk about flight 107?

ET:

Sure. So right after Rick completed his first mission—he landed early June of '99—he found out, not too long after that, that they were considering reassigning him to a mission that he would be the commander. Which was crazy because he had waited four years for his first flight assignment, and to show you how long he had to wait. It's the little things in life that we get so excited about, so yes, he got assigned to be the pilot on a space shuttle, but what Rick was truly excited about when he was assigned his first flight, that now he got to park in front of the astronaut office, and had an assigned parking place. It is all about the parking place. This is such a big deal that when they threw a party for him, his class, to celebrate that the last one of the astronaut class of '95 was assigned a mission, the cake had a parking place on it. [Laughter] So everybody got it because before that, he had to park way out in the boonies, and hike in to the building, to the astronaut office there at Johnson Space Center. So it's all about the parking place. He found out pretty shortly after his mission—I can't remember exactly how long, but it wasn't very long at all that they were considering this, and it's pretty unusual. because typically a pilot would fly two missions as a pilot before you would fly as a commander. So for him to be considered to be a commander for the second mission was a huge compliment, and he was not one to receive it, but I can brag about him. But it was just a huge credit to his ability in

leadership, and so they had assigned the entire crew of STS-107, in which is how it is normally done. The mission specialist already, and payload specialist, had been assigned to the mission, which was very involved actually, because they had a lot of experiments and a lot of work that they were going to do on this mission. So they had already begun working on that without a pilot or commander. Rick and Willy were the last two to be assigned the mission, but I remember Rick coming home the day that he was assigned the flight, and instead of going on and on about, “Yippee-do! I’m the commander of this,” he talked to me about how amazing his crew was, and went through each one and just told me all about them—about their families, about who they were. Just who they were as people, and two of them were his classmates, and so Mike Anderson and Kalpana from his class, his astronaut class. And so Mike Anderson was one, and his wife Sandy lived one—Sandy still lives one block over from me, but they were our closest friends, and so I was super excited about that. So close to Mike Anderson that Mike was who Rick and I had chosen for his first flight to be his causality assistance officer. We couldn’t pick Mike again because he was going to be on the flight with Rick.

DM:

Right, but you were prayer partners too.

ET:

We were prayer partners. We prayed together as couples. We went to church together and just really close friends. Just love them dearly. Still very close to Sandy. So we were very excited about that. Kalpana was originally from India. Just one of the nicest people I’ve ever met, ever. And, you know, brain the size of a planet. Super smart woman, but just so kind, and sweet, and nice, and interesting, and lovely. So very excited about that. She was one of those people that just had a smile on her face every day, no matter what, and even when it was really tough training, she would always say to the crew, “We are training to go into space,” you know? It was just because she’s just like, “I can’t believe we are getting to do this,” so she was a huge encourager. Dave Brown was a Renaissance man. That’s what Rick would call him because he was a medical doctor. He was in the military, but he was also—he had been in the circus as a gymnast, and was a videographer. He recorded hundreds of hours of video of the crew, and he was just a very interesting guy. He was the only member of the crew that wasn’t married, but he did have a girlfriend. I think he had a couple of girlfriends actually, but just super nice guy, and Ilan Roman, one of the most interesting men I have ever met was from Israel. So he’s Israeli’s first astronaut, and his wife Rona, their four children, just delightful, amazing people to know. We were so excited because we knew post-flight that we would all go to Israel, and oh my goodness, dream of a lifetime to get to do that, and amazingly enough, we were still able to do that even after the accident, so that was a bittersweet treasure that we still got to experience. Laurel Clark, medical doctor in the Navy. Amazing lady. Super smart, but mom. They had one child, Iain, and that was very important to her, and so she was very dedicated to him and to her family. Just an amazing lady. Willie McCool, Rick couldn’t say enough how he could not ask for

a better pilot, and this would be Willie's first mission, and Laurel's as well. Willie was just delightful. He was energetic, and fun, and excited, and had a very positive outlook. Very dedicated. Very driven. Rick was able to mentor him as Kent Rominger had mentored Rick, and was very encouraging. Willie was very dedicated to doing the very best that he possibly could, and his roots were here in Lubbock as well, and his parents are still here, and we just immediately hit it off with every member of the crew. So it became a family, and typically, crews are together nine months to a year, fly their flight, and then it's just a pleasant memory. There's a lot of post-flight trips that happen, where these items that have been flown, they appear—do a lot of astronaut appearances at different locations to efficiently present them back to the institution or whoever the entity is that they have flown those items for, and do a wonderful IMAX or some sort of video presentation of their flight, a synopsis of it that's always really interesting, and fun. And they do that two to three months after the flight so that was a surprise to me after he flew in space the first time. I'm thinking, Yay, you are home, but no. He was out of town for the next three months on these trips everywhere doing the post-flight stuff. We enjoyed our crew family so much and Rick was just a very strong, kind, leader, and very well respected by his crew. He was very short on touting his own ability, but very long on praising how strong his team was, and just was very proud of every single one. So they worked so well together, and we had, I believe it was thirteen children between all of us, and so we were all very family oriented, and so it was a really special time. We went canoeing together. We went on picnics together. We celebrated holidays together. We had parties together. We just spent a lot of time together, and that was really special and important. They worked so hard, but they were also very much focused on their families. It was interesting. They have a thing at NASA called a round robin, and so it is a media event where you, as the astronaut, go into the building that it is setup, and CNN may be in one room and then FOX news is in another room, and MSNBC is in another room. Whoever the media—and PR's in another room. It is called a round robin and so you just do one interview after the other and it just kind of knocks it all out in one swoop instead of having to do this all the time. So they would schedule those periodically and especially right before the mission they would do that. On Rick's resume, in hobbies, he listed that one of his hobbies, his favorite hobby, was spending time with his family. I remember specifically Miles O'Brien interviewing Rick with CNN. He was with CNN at the time, and he said, "I've never seen that on a resume before. Tell me about that," and Rick was just so amazing to eloquently share how that's what really matters and was able to share his priorities, and ironically enough, later I spent several days with Miles O'Brien and got to know him pretty well, and was able to reiterate what a blessing it was that family had been a priority to him, especially after his untimely death. So that was a very poignant situation, but because of that, Rick was very focused on the families taking breaks together and, especially when the mission slipped and the date moved to a later date, he just told everyone to go on vacation. He just was very generous with that because he really knew that the families needed to spend time together. Clearly, they loved him to pieces because he was just very balanced in his view, and not just so driven that we just have to—you can be too prepared, and so he was very driven just to have a balance. Felt very

responsible. There were a lot of decisions that he had to make, especially on the timeline. This particular mission, there were—they jokingly—and so I always have to struggle to say it right—but they sleep shifted. There was, I think it was a blue team and a red team so the crews—twenty-four seven, there was half of the crew was up and working. So there was never a time that the entire crew was asleep, so twenty-four hours a day on this mission there was science being conducted, and it was the most efficient way for them to carry out their mission. Why I have to struggle to say it right with sleep shifting, they called it sheep lifting just being funny. When I say it, even to this day, I have to really focus to say sleep shifting instead of sheep lifting. They worked really hard on this timeline and so even up until the point of quarantine, I can remember him being on the phone with the flight doc, and going over a timeline and really being an advocate for his crew, because even if it says on the timeline from—I'll just make up a time—from midnight to eight AM, you are sleeping. In reality, if—and no one goes to bed and is asleep in the next second, so all of us need a shift change of routine that gets us ready for bed, gets our body to wind down, so that you can go to sleep, and then you need a period of time to wake up so you can transition to the day. And so it is not any different in space, it's actually much more complicated in space because they're very purpose driven on what their jobs are there, and to be able to turn all of that off, and you are sleeping in a completely foreign environment. You're floating, and even using the restroom, getting clean, getting ready for bed, all of that is totally different, but yet it is the same, so you have to come up with a routine that helps you to be able to transition. He thought very diligently on this timeline to make sure that his crew was well rested because it was a marathon, not a sprint, to get through all of the seventy plus experiments and different things that they were trying to accomplish in their sixteen days in space. I think his crew really appreciated Rick being an advocate for them through that timeline, and all commanders did that. That was what their responsibility was. So do you want me to go ahead and go through the launch and everything?

DM:

Yeah, if you don't mind.

ET:

Sure. So Rick went into quarantine on the ninth of January in 2003, and I remember us having dinner at our home for that last night that he was home, and while we were having dinner, Matthew or Laura, I don't remember which one, said, "There's somebody in our backyard." I said, "No, there's not." You know? The typical mother response, but actually, there was someone in our backyard. There was somebody in our backyard with a flashlight, and Rick went out there to find out what it was, and basically, this was a very high visibility mission because one of the crew members was Israeli, Ilan Ramon, and so there was a security concern. We had to take measures that other crews had not because of the place and time that we were then that there could be problems, and so they had assigned security at all of our homes, and this person was in our backyard looking at our shrubbery and just making a security analysis. It would've

been really helpful and nice that they might have knocked on our front door first and said, "Hey, we're going to be in your backyard with a flashlight. Hope that's not a problem. Just to let you know, we are back there," but they didn't do that. Anyway, so our very last dinner, that happened, but Rick spent an important time with me, and especially with Laura and Matthew because I was going to see him again. They were not. And put them in bed, which was really important for him because I think he had to report, I am going to make it up, but maybe about nine PM, to crew quarters which was about three miles from our house, at Johnson Space Center, and so he prayed with them. I remember Laura crying and it was just really hard for her to tell him goodbye, but he was very encouraging and said that time will go by quickly, and I look forward to seeing you, and he prayed with them and sang to them, and did all the bedtime routines with them. And then I—we spent a few minutes together, and he hopped in his Camaro, his '75 Camaro that he was still driving. He'd had it restored and he had it the whole time he was here at Tech.

DM:

Really?

ET:

Yep, and he drove to Johnson Space Center to report in quarantine. So I was able to spend the next few days with him for meals. Just a couple of designated meals, and one day, there was some items that he needed from home. He could actually come home during the day if Laura and Matthew weren't there. He just wasn't allowed to be around anybody, and he couldn't eat any food that wasn't prepared by NASA because they were really wanting to monitor that as well. They wanted to avoid food poisoning, so he wasn't allowed to eat any food other than food that was provided for him. But he came home during the day just to get a few things done. One of the things that was super important to him, and he couldn't do it up at crew quarters, not because they were opposed to it, there just wasn't any place to do it. But he felt very driven, and felt it was very important to record videotapes for Laura and for Matthew, and these tapes were not just your plain videotapes. They were devotional tapes. He shared with me that this was something he felt very compelled to do and wanted to do. It's one of the things that Rick considered to be of upmost importance as a parent. He wanted his children to have a relationship with the Lord, and it was paramount to him and so he would go through these little devotional books. Matthew had one and Laura had one. With them every day that he could. It was a short deal. It was a little Bible verse and a little story that went with it and a short prayer, but he would do those with him every day, and so he felt it was of upmost importance that he record videotapes for Laura and Matthew, and so he did that in the midst of everything else he was trying to do, and to do his job really well, this was equally important to him. And so he recorded a lot of tapes at home during the day when they were gone at school, and he would set the video camera up and for five minutes or so, he would go through their devotionals and then he would look at the camera and he would tell them how much he loved them, how proud he was of them, how much he missed

them, and was really excited to come home and tell them all about his mission, and just that he loved them dearly. And so he did that for every single day that he was in space. He recorded the tapes and then the tapes were given to Laura and Matthew on the morning of his launch on the rooftop of the launch control center. After we watched the launch, they were given these tapes and they watched them each day during the sixteen days he was in space. So as we prepared for launch day, he spent the first four days in crew quarters there in Houston, and then the tradition is the crew flies out to Florida for their final three days of quarantine, and a little bit of training left. Their training's pretty much done, but they just don't want to get rusty with everything so there's still some things they review. There's still some things that they go over, but they're pretty much finished with all of their mission training, but the weather was so bad that they were not able to fly to Florida in their T-38's which was a huge disappointment. So they had to fly on a—NASA flew them out on one of their private jets, and so Rick brought his car home, dropped it off at the house, and then I ran him out to Ellington to fly. But there's a scene in my brain that I will never forget where he walks into the kitchen and Laura and Matthew are at the other end of the kitchen. We have a pretty big kitchen. And Matthew yelled, "Daddy," and started running towards Rick, and both of us had to tell him to stop. Of course, that is a heartbreaking memory for me now because that was the last time Matthew ever saw his dad, and it is just very painful. But we wanted to follow the rules and do what we were supposed to do and stick with that, and we did. And so I took Rick out to Ellington and let him out. Told him I'd see him in Florida, and so we flew the next day. They flew the families out on a NASA plane to Florida, and so for the next few days, we were there with all of our family and friends. So for the kids, it's just a blast. We are on the beach there in Florida, in Cocoa Beach. It's just a lot of fun. They have a lot of fun stuff planned, but this mission was different because of the security issues. So we were assigned special agents, and everywhere we went, whether we went to Ron Jon's Surf Shop or if we went to the beach or if we went to the grocery store, we had security. It was pretty funny and pretty interesting, and we also were staying at Patrick Air Force Base because Rick and I had made a trip to Florida about a year before just to scout out the best place for the families to stay. Typically, they stay at a condo. There is a really nice hotel kind of condo place that we have stayed in the past, but for security reasons it was determined that we would be better served if we stayed at Patrick. They even had Navy seals in the water protecting us because they said that the families were soft targets, and so they just wanted to make absolutely certain that there was not an opportunity for something to happen. So my kids have hilarious stories about being in Ron Jon's looking at t-shirts, and bathing suits, and beach towels, with these men in suits trying to pretend that they're there just shopping too. I have a hilarious memory of running to the grocery store when we first arrived, and they had to sweep the store before I could go into shop, with dogs. And then I went into the shop just to buy a few things. Some cereal, and milk, and just a few things. Thank heavens nothing personal because all of these men went in there with me and when I checked out, the checkout lady said, "Are these people here for you?" and I said, "Unfortunately, yes," and I didn't tell her the deal. I should have, probably, but I often thought later it would've been hilarious to have said, "Yeah, I am getting ready to go to prison. This is

my last free day,” because clearly, this was not a normal situation. But we had incredible security. My friend, Jannetta, that stayed at, I think it is the Hilton that’s there in Cocoa Beach. They had snipers on their roof because all of the official Israeli guests were staying at that hotel, and they had security people on horseback along the beach. So we definitely had that security contingency there. Despite all of that, it was a lot of fun. Everybody was very excited that the days were finally here for them to launch into space. Rick and I had amazing quality time together. There’s a wonderful place on property at Kennedy that is a beach house that was not destroyed, that used to be owned privately, but now it’s on government land. The government bought it, and it’s been used for years at Kennedy Space Center for a lot of events, but the most important one is the location for a barbecue with the crew families and their invited guests just prior to the launch, and so you have a limited amount of people that you can invite. You can invite five, and so Rick would invite, of course, his mom and his brother, and my parents and then a close friend. So he had his closest friend, David Jones that lives here in Lubbock, that was invited to that dinner. At the dinner, it’s just a very relaxed, wonderful time on the beach there at Kennedy Space Center. It’s a very special place because you don’t—there’s only very special reasons that you get to be there, so it is a very interesting evening, and it is the last opportunity for the family to spend time with their loved one. All of them had to go through the same process that we did in Houston of making sure that we had a flight physical and get approved to be able—so everybody has their big orange badge that they are wearing saying that they don’t have cooties. So we had a tremendous evening and that’s typically—not one, it’s two. It’s usually two days prior to launch that the barbecue takes place. So we did that and then I had the reception for all of our guests the day prior to launch. Of course, Rick isn’t at that reception so like I shared earlier, it is like getting married except one of you isn’t there. I believe I had Rick record a video message though that I played at the second reception so that was really cool for him to be able to at least thank everybody for coming, and for their support. I had special speakers at both receptions. Steve Green, is a Christian artist and he sang at both of my receptions which was very special to both Rick and I. But it was really nice. I had both of my receptions at Calvary Chapel, which is on Merritt Island. It’s near Cocoa Beach, and it was just important for Rick and I. We finally figured out we wanted our reception to be at a church, because that’s something that matters so much to us, and we were able to pray together and worship together and just share the joy of being there for this amazing event. So the morning of January sixteenth rolled around, and we are in place to go to launch, and that morning—my kids are not morning people and I’m not either, so it was unusual for us to be up so early, but of course we were. And I remember walking out on the balcony with my daughter, with Laura. She was twelve and playing with her beautiful long blonde hair and stroking it, and we were just looking at the water and at the sunrise and I said, “This is a day we’ll never forget. Laura, this is very, very special.” We were very excited about the launch and for it to all go well, and so we rode in a motorcade out to the launch site. My kids, the most cool thing of all, was that we got to run red lights. So there was an exorbitant amount of motorcycles, and cars, and escorts to the launch site. But we went out for the launch and went through all of those wonderful traditions of the breakfast, and the sticker

placement, and eating the beans after the launch, but I remember it was very similar to the first time when I walked out on the roof. At first, it was just us and then I became aware moments—they don't take the families up on the roof until just prior. They come out of a nine minute hold so we're not up there for very long. They've tried to work it as best as they possibly can that we're not overly stressed even more than we would be, so they really plan it out well. And so after they come out of the nine minute hold, we're escorted up onto the roof, and I was kind of surprised and pleasantly so, for both launches that all of a sudden all these astronauts appear from nowhere or behind us. Flanking behind us in support, so that was really sweet. But we were on the roof and I just remember standing there with Laura and with Matthew, and just very excited, but there's also a sense of needing to let go. That there's absolutely no control over this. My husband, who I treasure and love all with all of my heart, that is my everything, is strapped into that vehicle three miles from me, and there's not a thing I can do about it. And he is going to launch into space, and pursue his dream that I fully support, but it's an odd feeling. Probably not that different from taking a loved one to the airport and watching them leave, and it is just being willing to take that moment and being willing to let go when there's a selfish part of you that that's a very hard thing to do and you have to make a conscious effort to do that. So I remember that that morning just looking at the shuttle ready to go with all the lights on the launch pad, and thinking about his first launch and how similar the day was. His first launch, although it was in May and this one was in January, they were both just really pretty days with very little cloud cover. And so I remember too, this time because Rick was the commander, I was more aware of the other families and just wanting to make sure everybody was okay, and well cared for, and we were all very excited and proud of what our family members were getting ready to accomplish. So we stood there on the roof and the countdown started, and with no more delays, I remember hearing Rick say over the loud speaker how excited he was and the mission control said, "Good things come to those who wait," and with that, the final countdown took place, and they launched into this clear, beautiful Florida sky on that January morning, and we stood there. Again, Laura said that I loved to stroke her hair. It was just a very calming thing to me to stand there and do that, and we looked up into the sky and we could see contrails crossing the sky in the shape of a cross. Laura and I noticed that specifically because we had noticed that on Rick's first flight and I said, "Oh my gosh. Look, there it is again," and it was just a beautiful morning. I had no sense of foreboding or fear or concern. I shared earlier that, because of Challenger, we knew at the certain exact point when they went to MECO Main Engine Cutoff, when they were cleared for that, that that was the moment that Challenger exploded. So that's a little bit of a stress to watch, but not overly so, and so we watched and were very relieved and happy when they made it past that point, and watched until we could not see anything else. And some astronauts walked up to us after we had no more sight of the shuttle, and presented us with flowers, and personal notes, and gifts that each crew member specifically put together for their family member that was up on the launch control center. So Rick wrote me a personal note and it basically was a love letter. Just how much he appreciated me and my support. Just very sweet. Wrote Laura and Matthew both really wonderful notes about how honored he was to be their

dad, and how much he appreciated their support, and love, and being, there for him and putting up with the schedule that we had had to go through for such a long time for them to be able to fly in space. The devotional tapes were given to them that morning, as well as little astronaut beanie babies that he had picked out for them. So it was just very special. Everybody's very excited. We were escorted off the roof of the launch control center, and walked through a wicket of people clapping, and cheering, and very excited for us, and we went back into the launch control center and ate our beans. There's a period of time before everyone is allowed to move around Kennedy Space Center, so we're sort of sheltered in place because of the toxicity of the launch itself. And so they kind of have come up with a creative way to occupy our time before there's an all clear to leave the property, so that came pretty quickly, and it's an interesting thing. When you show up for a launch as a family, you have to have your bags packed, be completely moved out because you're going to be flown home that day. If the launch scrubs, then you take all your packed up stuff back to wherever you're staying you go. But this particular day, of course the launch was successful so we were on our way home. So in the same day that I watched my husband launch into space, I flew home to Houston, and I'm back into a life of no security, no help, no escorts, and we are back on our own. So we went out to dinner for Mexican food, as you do in Houston, and commented that night how amazing it was that in the very same day that we were in a motorcade and so high profile, that we could come back to Houston and be so low profile. And honestly very thankful for that. I wouldn't want to have to live in that lifestyle all the time. So for the next sixteen days while Rick was in space, Laura and Matthew went back to school. I went back to all the things that I was involved in. We still had laundry. We still had homework. We still had all of the things that everybody has, and it honestly was not that different of a schedule than when Rick was home. I joked, I said, "I guess if anybody calls and asks to speak to Rick, I'll just say, 'He's orbiting the earth right now. Can I take a message?'" But I didn't get to say that. I thought it would've been really cool to say, but there were a few things that were obviously very different. So I could turn on the NASA channel, and watch Rick's mission. A lot of it, to be quite honest, was very boring from a video standpoint. It was like watching grass grow because some of the experiences they did were not something that would be riveting to watch on a screen. The data, later would be riveting for a scientist. But they did multiple experiments, but it was fun because I could turn on the NASA channel and hear Rick's voice occasionally. I could see his wrist or see his ear or see different parts of him as they're showing the different experiments, and sometimes actually see him. I would always tune in. I knew when they were going to do different press events, and so—I had a schedule of those, and so I always made sure that I got to watch that. There were a few times that I also went up to Johnson Space Center and sat in mission control in the gallery and was able to watch space walks or different things that they were—they didn't do any space walks on his mission, but they just had different events that we were allowed to go up there and observe and so that was fun. We also had two video conferences. Back in 2003, they didn't have the technology yet to Skype in space or make phone calls, which later came, which is crazy to me. But anyway, at that time, to have a video conference we had to actually physically go to Johnson Space Center. Rick and I

could email each other every day, which we did, which they promised were private, but I never believed that. So I was always—he always told me, “Be very careful what you say. Make sure that you only say things that everybody could read,” so I was very careful. So anyway, we went up to NASA twice to do these video conferences, and we had about thirty minutes while they were in range and lined up for it to work and, were able to—it’s exactly like a Skype or FaceTime—and able to converse with each other, and he would do stupid astronaut tricks for us. He would do little flips or drink a water ball or play with food, just show us different things. So Laura and Matthew got a kick out of that, and it was just fun. So just because your husband or your dad is astronaut doesn’t mean that things are any different. So I can remember the second time we went up and actually, this was the last time we ever talked to Rick.

DM:

twenty-eighth of January?

ET:

It was, which is the anniversary of our date. Our first date. And it was also the anniversary of Challenger, years before. So that morning, we had an early video conference, and so we rolled in and Matthew was very grouchy. Laura had said something that really ticked him off, and so he—we’re in this room, and we have to sit at a table with a camera on us and so you can’t just—it’s just like a FaceTime or a Skype, so you have to sit there. So Matthew got mad and walked over somewhere in the room where Rick couldn’t see him. So Rick’s having to try to parent Matthew from space and say, “Hey, Matthew,” or whatever. I don’t know. He just was trying to humor him to get over what little funk he was in over something that had set him off, and he was mad with his arms crossed, but he eventually came back and laughed it off and had a good conversation with Rick. We had just a lot of fun even though it was really early. About six in the morning, but we were able to talk with him, having absolutely no idea that this was the last conversation that we would ever have, and so I’m so thankful that the very last words that we all said to each other were, “I love you.” And we said it over and over again. Interestingly enough, as our time ran out on our conference call, the screen froze and so we had a frozen image of each other, and I remember saying to Rick, “I am not getting any audio feed anymore,” and he said, “Me neither,” and I told him, I said, “I just see – your face is just frozen on the screen.” He said, “I’ve got the same thing, but we can still hear each other so let’s keep talking,” and so we just kept saying, “I love you. I can’t wait to see you. I love you,” and so those were the last words that Rick and I ever spoke to each other, and what more could I ask for, for final words? So I am very thankful for that. Later that day, because it was the anniversary of the Challenger explosion, Rick payed an amazing tribute to the crew, and I remember seeing June Scobee Rogers on TV at an event that was the precursor to flying—to having another teacher fly in space. Barbara Morgan, who was the backup for Christa McAuliffe for Challenger. I remember looking at June and watching that and thinking, I can’t imagine walking in those shoes. I can’t imagine what she has had to endure and how she has made it through, not knowing that four days later I would be

in the same tiny club with her as the wife of a fallen commander of a space shuttle, and not only that, to have this woman reach out to me with incredible help, and advice, and love, and has become a very dear friend. But I—that day, clearly didn't think or even realize that that was going to be my story in a few short days. But the sweetest thing at the very beginning of the video conference that morning on the twenty-eighth of January, the very first thing Rick said to me was, "Happy dating anniversary." And he remembered our date in Lubbock back in 1977, and it was a special day that we celebrated every year, and talked about, so that meant a lot to me that despite everything else he was having to remember and keep up with, that that was important to him and that's just who he was. He had his values in line. So let's talk about February first. So leading up to the landing, we had to pack again. This was a tough challenge because my kids were in school. They're trying to keep up with their schedules, sports, and school, and all of the things that they are doing, and so it's a huge thing to—I mean, it is fun to travel to Florida, but twice in two weeks, and just for all the pomp and circumstance, it's kind of a big deal. There was a huge reception planned at Ellington Field in Houston when the crew returned. The entire school that Laura and Matthew attended—they went to a private Christian school, and the entire school had made a huge banner. And everyone—school was out—and they were all going to go out to Ellington to welcome the crew home. So it was just very well publicized, and supported, and the whole school was behind us, and we were very excited. So we got everything packed up, flew with the crew families, went back to Cocoa Beach, and stayed at a different hotel that night, and I had thankfully remembered to bring those videotapes that Laura and Matthew had watched every single day during the mission where their dad had talked with them and prayed with them. And so that morning of landing, they were able to watch the last devotional tapes. In those tapes, Rick said to both of them that he was going to be landing that day unless the weather was bad, but that he would be landing that day and he was very excited to see them and me as well. So he just poured into them with love and prayed with them, and I put those tapes carefully in the little video cabinet before we left to go for landing. And so the night before, the crew families, we all went out to dinner. Everybody's excited. Matthew bought a little tiny bottle that had a ship in it. He said, "This will be something daddy thinks is really cool," so he—it was just a little gift shop there at the restaurant. Very inexpensive, but he wanted me to buy that because he wanted to show that to Rick the next day, and so I bought that and we—they had a hard time going to bed. They were very excited, and I was in the same boat. I had a hard time sleeping and in my bedroom, there was a little TV, and so I had the NASA channel on and never turned it off the whole night. So I would wake up and hear Rick's voice occasionally as the commander because he was going through all of the sequences they have to go through to prepare for landing. And so it was really fun to get to hear his voice and I just thought about our life together, and how proud I was of him, how happy I was the mission had gone well because it had gone exceedingly well, and how much I was looking forward to hearing all about his mission, and sharing with him how things had gone with us, and just that reunion was highly anticipated. I was very excited to see him. I actually misspoke earlier about watching the sunrise and saying, "This is a day you will never forget." That happened on landing day. So

Laura, I got my kids up, and I walked out on the balcony and I played with her hair and we looked at the water and I said, "This is a day you're never going to forget, Laura," of course having absolutely no idea the significance that February 1, 2003, would be for all of us. And so we got ready, and were running late like we always are, and the shuttle's not going to wait for us to show up before they land, so we kind of needed to keep on our schedule. So we got everybody ready and had another motorcade for the families, and so we made it on time, and Laura and Matthew were excited and I was very excited. And we went to Johnson Space Center and the setup was very different than for launch because for landing, there's a lot less people, and it is a lot more relaxed, and nothing had ever happened. There had never been an accident before so there wasn't an anticipation of fear or gosh, I hope everything's okay. It's just like anything. When you go to the airport to pick someone up, you don't really—you might think about it, but it's not something you dwell on or you feel this sense of foreboding, and it was that way for us. We were very proud of them and very excited the mission had gone well, and so we didn't anticipate any problems. We got out to the landing site, and we were sequestered off in a separate section with just a few people. I had a few guests that came, but a handful, and Rick's mom was there and brother, and family members for some of the other crew as well. And so we had the huge countdown clock in our field of view and the landing strip, and I was very excited to see my family and friends and was talking, and I could hear in the monitors. I could hear Rick's voice and so I kind of was tracking where they were and what was going on, and I knew that they were going to go through a few minutes where there was no communication just because of the place of where they were in the atmosphere that it was that they couldn't communicate during that time. So was prepared for that. Not worried about that. There were a few astronauts with us, but not that many, and I kind of noticed, but I noticed later when things went badly, but a section over from us were a lot more of people dressed more in business attire, and they were NASA related, and aerospace related, and more official guests, but they weren't with us. We weren't comingled. We were separated. My parents weren't with me. They were in Amarillo watching on TV. I remember standing there, and being very excited. It was another beautiful day. Clear and pretty and not even cold. It was just perfect, and the kids were running around and just having fun. It was a very festive atmosphere. Everybody was very excited. Laura and Matthew were very excited because they hadn't been to Rick's first landing so they'd never seen a landing before, so they were very excited to see that as well. And so I took a photograph—or a friend did—of the three of us standing there by the countdown clock. It's a really huge clock. It was about eleven minutes out, and we're standing there with huge smiles on our faces, and just very excited to be there. And that picture is a very poignant benchmark in my life because I look at that picture and I just think that was one of the last moments before the accident so it was a very, very huge benchmark to look at that picture even today. So I continued to listen to Rick. I didn't hear anything at all that was of concern. I didn't notice his last words until later when I heard recordings of it, and saw transcripts of what he said, so I didn't notice that his last comments were cut off. I had no sense of concern whatsoever, and so about a minute out, I remember asking Steve Lindsey, an astronaut that was also our family escort and such a

dear friend, I said, “Steve, which direction are they coming from? I can’t remember what you told me?” And Steve just had a really weird look on his face, and kind of not what I wanted to see at that point, and he held up his finger to indicate, hang on just a second and was on his phone. And so I thought that was a little bit odd, but didn’t get too concerned. But then [sighs] the clock—the countdown clock went to zero, and I knew a minute or so out that we should’ve heard a massive sonic boom and we didn’t. And it was silent on the landing strip. So I got that feeling of that rush of fear. That rush of dread. Wondering what on earth was going on. I didn’t instantly think, Oh my gosh, they’re dead. I didn’t think anything. I just got that feeling of fear in the pit of my stomach, and so I looked at Steve and I said, “When are they landing? Where’s the sonic boom?” And he was on his phone. All of the business attire people were on their phones, leaping off of the bleachers and running, and I just thought, what on earth is going on? And I remember looking back up at the sky, and this clear blue sky that had been beautiful just moments before was completely overcast, and later, I thought about that and I thought it’s like God closed the curtains. It’s like the drapes got pulled shut. I remember looking at the sky and thinking, Is Rick dead? What is going on? What has happened? This cannot possibly be the end of his life. He’s only forty-five years old. He wanted to live a long life. He wanted to make such a difference. There’s no way that this can be the end of his life. This can’t possibly be it. I’m trying to rationalize. I am trying to grasp what’s happening. Laura and Matthew are standing next to me. Laura’s holding onto my arm, asking me if her dad is okay. Matthew’s not saying anything, he’s just holding my hand really tight. And I turn and I looked to Laura, and I said, “Laura, I don’t know, but I think they’re going to have to take us back to crew quarters and update us what is going on.” Just prior to that, I remember looking at Keith, Rick’s brother, who’s an airline pilot, and saying to Keith, “Why have we not heard the sonic boom?” And he looked at me and he said, “We’re not going to hear a sonic boom.” Keith already knew, and Rick’s mom, God love her, sat there just in disbelief as I did. You’re in shock. We’re trying to comprehend something that is incomprehensible. We can’t possibly imagine what’s happening. So we are escorted rapidly out of the viewing area into vehicles, and I remember passing this precious man that was a special agent. His name was Roger, and he looked at me and he said, “Evelyn, I am so sorry.” I remember thinking, why is this man apologizing to me? Why is he sorry? I knew, intellectually, that he was saying that because he already knew that something was horribly wrong, but I didn’t want to believe that, and couldn’t comprehend it, and so it was just very odd. The other sensation I remember that was very uncomfortable as we are escorted into these cars, that all of a sudden, the media that I had been completely unaware of and hadn’t even noticed. It had been kept away from us, and was still being kept away from us. But from afar, they were all hyper focused in on us, and looking at us, and taking pictures of us, and so there was a part of my brain that’s comprehending what’s going on, but still, it’s just so surreal, and hard to grasp, and not possible to take all in. My primary and only focus were my kids. I just wanted Laura and Matthew to be okay. As we climbed into the car, I was in the front seat, Matthew was in the middle seat. And both of them, they just wouldn’t let go of my arm, so my arm was just extended into the backseat, and they both have a—we all have ahold of each other

and other people got into the car with us. Very loving. Everybody's very somber. Very concerned. Very fearful. I mean, it's just—we're walking through a crisis now, and we don't know even what it is. The rest of the world probably knew before we did what was taking place. So they drive us back to crew quarters. We walk in into the crew quarter's area where we had anticipated having this incredible reunion with our loved ones, whose bedrooms were still there for them with their belongings. In Rick's bedroom, his gym clothes, his wallet, his comb, his toothbrush, all of his personal items are in this duffel bag there beside the bed where he slept before he launched into space. His name's still on the door, and all three of us just collapsed on that bed. Interestingly enough, we really didn't cry. I think we were in so much shock, those tears would come later for months and months, but for that moment, it was hard to even cry. We were just in shock. So I call my dad, who's in Amarillo. He answers the phone, and he's sobbing. I said, "Daddy, I don't know what is going on, but I think something's happened to Rick. Do you think he's okay?" And my dad says, "Evelyn, he's not okay." And he's sobbing and I said, "Do you even want to talk to Laura and Matthew?" And he said, "I can't right now." And so we got off the phone pretty quickly, but I knew then that Rick had perished in the accident, and they weren't going to tell us anything at crew quarters until they had facts. They didn't have facts yet. They didn't know. It was a little while before all of the information. I think Dallas News was starting to cover debris falling all over the metro area, and in East Texas, and so the news was coming, and NASA was starting to understand that probably something was horribly wrong, but they couldn't give us instant answers and they shouldn't. They needed to wait until they had information to give. Clearly, any of us could—we had TV sets there. We chose not to—we didn't turn anything on. We were living this historical moment. We were not viewing it, so it was not an observation like it had been when Challenger happened, and I was riveted to the TV like everyone else that whole day. This was now my precious husband, and our dear friends, and so it was not something that I could view as a bystander or watch. And so we all, as crew families, did what we could do best and try to cope, and process, and agonize over what we knew was probably taking place. I don't really have a great perception of the timeline that happened in the next few hours, but I do know that eventually, we were pulled into a conference room there in crew quarters, and the head of NASA, Sean O'Keefe, and some high ranking astronauts came in, and told us definitively that they had solid information that the space shuttle had broken up during reentry and had disintegrated over East Texas. And that the crew, that no one had survived—that they were absolutely certain that there were no survivors. Simultaneously while we're being given this information, in a place somewhere else on site at Johnson Space Center where Rick's mom, and Keith, his brother, and our other family and friends had been taken, they were being briefed the same information. So at that point, I asked if Jane, Rick's mom, and Keith, his brother, could be brought over to crew quarters and they said, "Absolutely." So they brought—each of us had family members, brothers and sisters, and parents that we had brought over. Keith was also engaged to be married, a really sweet amazing gal named Kathy, and so I wanted her—she had been widowed before—and I wanted Kathy there with us as well, so they came. I can remember some of the crew children just wailing, and it was just a very surreal,

impossible moment in all of our lives, and at some point, President Bush called, and was put on a speaker phone, and just expressed to us his gratitude for our sacrifice, and heartfelt sympathy for our loss. And I was and still am a huge fan of George Bush, but I have to tell you, at that moment, I could barely even comprehend the words the man was saying even though I had enormous respect for him and still do. But at that point, it was words that I could hear in my head, but I couldn't process, and I know that that's shock. Shock is a merciful thing, I learned later, because once that shock wears off, and your body is allowed to grieve, it's a pretty catastrophic shift change. So I'm very thankful that the Lord designed our bodies and coping mechanisms with shock as we face enormous grief suddenly and tragically. We hung out at crew quarters for a while. Ironically enough, Barbara Morgan just happened to be at Kennedy Space Center. Barbara Morgan was the backup for Christa McAuliffe for Challenger, and loss that entire crew and knew all of those people extremely well, and she was about to be reassigned. She had gone back into the teaching profession, but was getting ready to be reassigned back to the astronaut corps, and that was what I had watched on TV a few days before with June Scobee Rodgers. So she just happened to be at crew quarters and ended up sitting and having a conversation with me. And I remember some of the crew children playing video games and just different things to distract as they hurriedly made arrangements to get us back to Houston as quickly as possible, because the original plan had been to stay another day, because the crew had done so many experiments and medical experiments and testing, their post flight medical evals were much longer than normal. And so we were going to be staying an extra night in Florida before we all returned to Houston. So they had to quickly run back into town to Cocoa Beach, which is about forty-five minutes to an hour away, and pack up all of our things and get them back out to Cape Canaveral so we could be flown home. And I am so grateful that I remembered—the Lord prompted me to say, “Don't forget inside the video cabinet in my hotel room are two videotapes that Rick made for the kids. Please make sure those get into my suitcase,” because we weren't packed up. We were going to be there another day. I mean, I even had underwear laying around and my pajamas. I mean, I didn't tidy up the hotel room. It wasn't horrible, but we did not prepare for moving—for travelling home and so these precious people had to show up in all of our rooms, and gather everything, pack it up, make sure all of our belongings were together. So it took several hours and they prepared for us to fly on these planes back to Houston without our family that we had just lost, and so it was just beyond difficult, but I remember thinking, Okay so we need to have food, especially for the kids. We haven't eaten. We need to make sure that our homes are protected in Houston because now, the whole world, I'm sure, just like Challenger, even though I hadn't turned on the TV, they all know our names, and they know that we are here and our stuff's in Houston. And so I asked for security for all of our homes because—and I completely know that it was the Lord because I did not have the presence of mind to think up things, but realize that. So they provided—they jumped through hoops and made sure that all of our homes were protected and had security, especially from the media to protect us when we arrived back in Houston, and they came together with food trays. Nobody was hungry, but the kids ate a little bit and I remember when we finally got on the flight to go

home, I remember looking at Matthew and I just said, "When we get home, if you want to play with Danny, that's totally okay." Danny was his little best friend that lived across the street that he'd grown up with since they were babies. And Matthew looked at me and he goes, "I can play with Danny?" and I said, "Absolutely." And I realized for Matthew, and I'm sure for Laura as well, is just thinking, my life is over. Nothing is the same. Everything is different. Nothing is ever going to be the same and for me to suggest something that's just a normal activity, I think was huge for him that that was possible. I just remember watching him sitting on that airplane just in such a place of shock and despair, as all of us were. So when we landed back at Ellington, we got off the plane, and I remember the director at Johnson Space Center waiting at the foot of the stairs for us, and just telling us how sorry they were. And I recognized, almost immediately, that the entire astronaut corps was lined up out on the tarmac, waiting for us, and all of them were very close friends, and people that we dearly loved, and just the look of pain and grief on their face was so difficult. And they had cars ready for us, and police escorts once again, and so the short drive to my home from Ellington Field, it's about a ten minute drive, seemed like an eternity. We left Ellington Field and went to Highway 3, which runs in front of Ellington Field and drove down that and all the cars on Highway 3 pulled over because they recognized that it was the families returning home. I remember seeing a flag at Ellington, and it was flying at half-mast, and it began to dawn on me, everybody knows. This is a big deal. It's been in the news. This is not just our loss. It's something that our nation is experiencing, but I have to tell you, because it was my own husband and our close friends, it took a while to even understand, and pull the lens out from just the focus that we had as a family, but realized that there are a lot of people that were sharing this loss with us. The only radio station I ever like to listen to in Houston is KSPJ. It is a Christian radio station, and it is just a really great radio station. And Steve Lindsey—we were in Steve's private car to go home, and Steve turned on KSPJ and all they were talking about was the accident and praying for the families, and that was the first time I had heard anything publicly about it. And I just was so moved driving down Highway 3 and seeing all these cars pull over and everybody getting out of their cars and taking their hats off and putting their hands on their hearts, and I have to be honest, I remember looking around thinking I don't have any idea how I'm going to do this. How am I going to live, not just in this community, but just live without Rick? And it just seemed impossible, but I've got two little kids in the backseat who need me to be strong, and we still have to live life. We all three didn't die today. [sniffles] Just Rick. And so I knew that we had to find a way to navigate through, even though it was going to be really hard, and so we drove down Highway 3. We turned on Clearlake City Boulevard, and my church was over there to the right. I knew that that was going to be a really important place for us for strength, and I remember seeing everyone pulled aside on the road because they knew we were coming somehow. Steve made the short ten minute drive to my house, and as we pulled up into the driveway, the police are already in front of our house protecting it. Our front yard is filled with flags that I had asked to be put out by a friend to welcome Rick home the next day, so I'd asked her to decorate [sniffles] out in front to welcome him home, so that was all there, but on our front porch, it was covered with bouquets of flowers,

and stuffed animals, and notecards. People that already—that knew us, had been by our home and had left little notes to us, and when we got inside the front door of our home, it hit me like a tidal wave. And I knew that everything in my life was never going to be the same. I also knew that God was going to get us through, but I had no idea how, and I didn't know how I was going to make it for the next ten or fifteen minutes. I wasn't even really too particularly concerned about the rest of my life. I just wanted to survive the next few minutes. Laura and Matthew both went to their rooms, and I went to my room, and I started sobbing. It was the first time I had allowed myself to let go since that morning, and I high jacked Laura's Winnie-the-Pooh stuffed animal, [sniffles] and clutched it with everything I had, and began to wail, and grieved in a way that I didn't even know was possible from the very depths of my soul. I could hear Laura in her room next to mine crying, and after a while, I left my room and went out to check on her, and on Matthew. Matthew's reaction was very different than Laura's. He was very angry. He was only seven years old and he said to me, "I will never be an astronaut." And he wouldn't cry, and he was just so angry. Laura's response was different, but just as much pain, but she was able to write, eventually that afternoon, a letter to her dad telling him that he was such an amazing witness for the Lord in her life, and the most amazing dad ever, and she was able to write down things, which seemed to be very helpful for her. But all three of us were just trying to find our way, and I remember my house was already starting to fill up with people that I knew, and loved, and I just knew I needed my parents. And unbeknownst to me, but thankfully, my parent's friends, just moments after the news broke that morning, rushed to their side, packed their bags for them, made flight arrangements for them, and got them on flights to Houston from Amarillo. So they were with me only a couple of hours after I returned to my home. I just—I remember thinking, if I can just make it two more hours until my mom and dad are here, I can make it that long. So they arrived and it was just such a blessing to have them there. My roommates from college, from Tech, both showed up. Sherry January, and Pam Kefir both came to my house immediately. Sherry lived in Dallas. Pam lives on the other side of Houston, and they both got there as quickly as they could. Sherry and Pam unpacked my suitcases, and washed my clothes, and swept my kitchen floor. My church started bringing ridiculous amounts of food to the house, which was the last thing in the world I was interested in, [sniffles] but other people were hungry so that was good. But it just turned into just this massive whirlwind of activity and events.[sniffles] David is giving me a Kleenex. Thank you. [sniffles] So anyway, it was just very difficult, and that night, I just thought there is no way I can sleep. I don't know how I could sleep, but amazingly enough, you can because you're exhausted. There's no exhaustion like grieving exhaustion. So I knew that we all needed to sleep, and so I had a trundle bed in another bedroom and we moved that bed into the master bedroom so Matthew could sleep with me next to the bed and Laura could sleep in our bed so the three of us could be together. And so my parents were there and other people were there too, and it was just controlled chaos, basically, of just trying to understand, wrap our minds around what was going on, what needed to be done. The thing that made this so difficult is the crew bodies were not found for days. We didn't even know if they would find the remains, but they actually did. Rick's remains were found. And

Rick's remains—when his remains were found, they could tell that it was Rick, and I find comfort in that. Not knowing exactly what to expect or that if they would even be found, but it took them days. So even though Rick died on the first of February, his funeral wasn't until the twentieth, so it was a very long, drawn out affair. But before that, there were memorial services that were given and a few days after the accident, it fell into place on the fourth of February that we would have a national service at Johnson Space Center that President and Mrs. Bush would attend, that would be a tribute to the crew. And so, Steve Green and his wife and many other beloved people in my life came, and we had special seating for everybody, and another motorcade, and another ride, three miles, to Johnson Space Center from my house. And so we showed up there that day for this national service that was on TV, and are still in shock, and are still grieving so much, and just can't even wrap our minds around it. Before the service, President Bush and his wife Laura wanted to meet with us, [sighs] and so we were in a room somewhere at Johnson Space Center, and had the privilege of meeting them, and found them to be the most compassionate, and kind, and gentle people. They were actually able to comfort us, and were very precious to my children which meant the world to me. Very genuine. Very transparent. Very supportive. So I remember, because this was a televised service, everything kind of had to follow along a specific timeline, which is nothing because that is all we ever did with NASA anyway. So they lined us up to walk out for the ceremony, and Matthew doesn't function on a timeline. And so we were all in line ready to go and he is in his little suit and tie, and he needs to go to the bathroom. And so the secret service agent that was kind of young and obviously didn't have any kids thought well we really don't have time for that. I looked at him. I said, "Is now a better time for you or during the service outside because he's got to go and that's not going to change." So he just kind of sheepishly shrugged his shoulders, and I remember specifically one of the astronauts grabbing Matthew by the hand, running down the very shiny hallway, and letting him take care of his business so we could have this national funeral. So we marched out to our places, and I was seated with President Bush to my right and his sweet wife Laura next to him on the front row. And to my left was my precious daughter Laura and Matthew sat next to her. I became aware as we sat there—another clear, beautiful day—I couldn't believe that we could still have clear, beautiful, sunny days because everything in my life had changed so drastically. How could we still have a clear, pretty, beautiful day? But we did. As we sat there, I became very aware of just a long bank line of media [sniffs] with all their cameras pointed at all of us, and I knew, I just thought, This is just a historical moment, but it doesn't mean anything to me. My husband has died, and I'm in so much grief. But I was very determined not to cry during the ceremony or in public, and it wasn't—maybe a part of it was pride—but more than anything, it was just a desire for privacy. I really didn't want to do that, so I stayed very determined not to break down, and I just did a little bit when President Bush spoke, but for the most part, I was able to hold it together through the tribute. But a wonderful thing happened during this service, which to this day, I'm so grateful for. One of the things the Lord has given me throughout this journey that's been pretty rough, has been humor. I can tell stories of a few instances where I would have laughed out loud if I could have, but was very thankful.

This happened at this ceremony that we were at, at Johnson Space Center. So we're sitting there and we are all in black clothing, and I forgot to bring a handkerchief. I didn't think about it. I didn't have any Kleenex or anything. So we're sitting there, and the ceremony is clicking along. All of these cameras are click, click, clicking away taking pictures of us, and President Bush is just very sweet sitting next to me and very supportive, and all of a sudden, Matthew, who was not sitting next to me, he was sitting next to Laura. So it's me, and then to the left, Laura—my Laura, and then Matthew. So Matthew sneezes, and this is not a big deal except that it was the grossest, mucus producing sneeze I'd ever seen, ever and to this day, it is still the number one event. He wasn't sick. He didn't have a cold, but somehow, in this particular moment for whatever reason, his nose decided to dump all of its contents, and it went all over his hands, and he's completely at a loss as to what to do, and my Laura, my twelve year old daughter, is not going to assist in any way, shape, or form because it's the grossest thing she has ever seen. So Matthew, out of my reach pretty much, is over here all of a sudden with mucus, and the mucus is on his face. Now, it is on his hands. He's trying not to get it all over his black suit, and his clothing and it is a huge issue. So much so, that President Bush, who was sitting on the other side of me, took note and realized that we had a situation, and all of these cameras are very excited with the media because all of a sudden, the mundane is ended and now, we have got something happening here, and they think Matthew's crying. They think Matthew's just having an emotional moment. They don't realize he is just having a mucus moment, so he is trying to deal with it as best as his little seven year old abilities are, and President Bush leans over to me and says to me, "Would you like my handkerchief?" And I leaned over to him and I said, "That would be lovely," so he pulls out of his presidential pocket, his starched white presidential handkerchief, and hands it to me, and I hand it to my Laura, who hands it to Matthew. Matthew unfolds the handkerchief and begins to clean himself up. He wipes his face. He wipes his hands. He's very thorough. Matthew was a very clean kid. So he's completely mopping his face. Cleaning his hands. Cleaning everything off. Good to go. Hands the hanker chief to Laura, who will not touch it. So I'm reaching across Laura, and we are trying not to involve Laura in this in any way, and I get the hanker chief from Matthew, which is pretty disgusting now, which is very much filled with Matthew's mucus, and so I am at a loss as what to do, and so I hand the hanker chief back to President Bush, who promptly puts it back in his pocket. To this day, I love this man for this. Apparently, all of my friends and everybody who was watching also saw this event, which at that point, I didn't even think about. Nobody could believe I gave the handkerchief back to President Bush, and that he put it in his pocket, and my response has always been, "Oh my gosh, it was his hanker chief. It was a presidential handkerchief. I'm not going to keep it." So anyway, but it was just a very endearing moment on a very difficult day, and it made me smile and it made me realize life is going to go on. We're still going to have moments like this, mercifully, that are going to continue. It's not all going to be hard. Some of it is still going to be funny. Some of it still going to be precious, and I remember that was the first time since Rick had died a few days before that I realized that we're going to make it. Life is still going to go on.

[End of Recording]