

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

Interviewed by: David Marshall

August 10, 2017

Lubbock, Texas

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Evelyn Husband-Thompson, former wife of astronaut Rick Husband. In this interview, Evelyn describes how she met Rick, his personality and dreams to become an astronaut, his journey that led to NASA, and their faith in the Lord.

Length of Interview: 01:32:00

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Background information and childhood	05	00:00:00
Meeting her future husband Rick at Texas Tech	08	00:08:32
Rick balancing faith, family, and work	12	00:18:35
Getting Rick out and having fun	15	00:28:13
Establishing relationships with his heroes; NASA history	19	00:40:31
Challenges she faced as the spouse of an astronaut	24	00:51:01
Examples of astronaut training and family participation	27	01:02:18
Rick's involvement with the boy scouts and sports	32	01:14:33
Times that Rick had to ground himself, his guilt	35	01:24:08

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David Marshall (DM):

The date is August 10th, 2017. This is David Marshall interviewing Evelyn Husband Thompson at the Southwest Collection, Texas Tech, Lubbock, Texas. Okay, can we start then, with your date and place of birth?

Evelyn Thompson (ET):

So my name at birth was Evelyn June Neely. I was born September 18th, 1958. I was born across the street from Texas Tech University.

DM:

Oh, is that right?

ET:

So I was born in Lubbock, Texas. There used to be a small woman's clinic called Taylor Clinic, and it was located across the street from the Tech stadium, and that's where I was born. This place is near and dear to me.

DM:

Um-hm. Did you live here through your childhood?

ET:

No, so my parents were here briefly. My dad was a student at Tech. He had served prime military service in the Marine Corps, but my parents were both born and raised in Amarillo, and so eventually, we moved there.

DM:

Okay. Did you meet Rick up there in Amarillo?

ET:

Rick and I went to Amarillo High, and he was a year ahead of me in school, and so I always thought he was really cute, but we really never had a conversation, so to speak, but lived a mile from each other, but we met at Texas Tech.

DM:

I'll be. Okay. Well tell me a little bit about your childhood then.

ET:

So I'm an only child, and very spoiled. Grew up in Amarillo. Went all through school. The first time I ever lived away from home was when I came to college here at Texas Tech. My parents were very involved in my life and very attentive and supportive, and one of the benefits of being

an only child is that we got to do a fair amount of travelling. So my parents were huge fans of the symphony and opera, so we would go to Santa Fe for the opera. We went with—travelled with a group a couple of times to Europe, and to Vienna, and different places for the opera and for symphonies, so I had to be an adult—be a kid in an adult's world sometimes, but neither one of them ever graduated from college. My dad made it to three different Southwest conference schools. So he went to UT, and A&M, and Tech, and I think by the time he gave up, he had over a hundred and eighty hours, but just never enough towards a degree, and so he took over my grandfather's business, and so he was in the oil business in Amarillo. But they were huge proponents of me going to college. I don't even remember it being an option. [Laughter] It was just like, this is what you are doing.

DM:

What about choir? You went to see the opera.

ET:

I did, but I was in choir at church. So I grew up at First Presbyterian Church in Amarillo, and was in a hand bell choir and youth choir, but I didn't sing that great so I never was in a formal choir. Rick was the one that had the voice, but I just was involved in many different things and just loved being super involved with Young Life and different activities. I was on the tennis team, kind of, at Amarillo High. I wasn't that great, but enjoyed myself a lot.

DM:

Now, what about academic disciplines in college and high school? Your interests?

ET:

I always – English was always my favorite subject. I enjoyed history quite a bit as well. Not so much the math and science. I knew that it was important, but it was always less fun and more difficult. So when I came to Tech, I really wasn't sure what I wanted to study, but I had always been really interested in law, and so I started off in prelaw, but noticed that the law students never went to bed here. The lights were always on in the law building, and so at the ripe old age of eighteen, made the decision that was not what I wanted to do, so ended up majoring in telecommunications and really enjoyed that degree and that study, and minored in English and just really enjoyed that.

DM:

When you were a child, what were some of the other influences in life? You mentioned church?

ET:

Yeah.

DM:

Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

ET:

Right, so my parents were very faithful church attenders. I remember actually accepting Christ as my Lord and Savior when I was thirteen. There's a wonderful youth camp in Palo Duro Canyon called Hidden Falls, and went to that several different summers and that was life changing for me.

DM:

Where is that?

ET:

It's in Palo Duro Canyon. It's just outside of Amarillo, and it sits on the canyon rim, and it is just a spectacular view. That was very meaningful. I just really – I don't know – there was a lot of friends through church. It just seems like we did everything together, and a lot of my friends went to the rival high school so we always joked about that because we went to different schools, but just thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. Some of them, I still keep up with. The majority, unfortunately, I've lost contact with, but that was just very meaningful. It meant a lot to me to go to Amarillo High. Both of my parents had graduated from Amarillo High, so it was very fun to be a Sandie, and follow in their footsteps. We were the first class to go all the way through the brand new building, so I graduated from high school in 1976, so we had a couple fun things with being the first class to go all the way through, and then having it be the bicentennial so that was just a big deal for us. But the scary thing is, years later, you go back to college reunions – or high school reunions – and you don't recognize anybody. It was just like, what happened to us all?

[Laughter]

DM:

This is true.

ET:

Yes. Like I said, I was really involved with church. and loved playing tennis and just being involved with that. and was in the National Honors Society and then just different organizations. It just seems like I stayed pretty busy all the time, and when it came time to go to college, the two colleges that I was really interested in were Texas Tech and Trinity. The reason I was interested in Trinity, I love San Antonio, and it used to be a Presbyterian college. It's not anymore, but we had stayed actually in the Trinity dorms one summer when I went to San Antonio for a hand bell festival and I just thought, This is the most beautiful campus, but Tech's is just as beautiful. A lot closer to home. So when I visited both campuses, I really wanted to live

in Lubbock, and just is the perfect distance from home where you can enjoy being away, but your parents can get to you. You can get to them if need be.

DM:

This is right. And there was no climatic adaptation?

ET:

No.

DM:

Like some people come from eastern areas and go, what?

ET:

Yes. Right, and so that was terrific, and Lubbock, I don't know, had a lot of things that were different than Amarillo and that was kind of fun too. So the campus – and I loved going to a big University, and Trinity was really small. My daughter ended up graduating from Trinity University and absolutely loved it. It's just a different campus life. I loved – I mean, Rick and I dated all through college and loved going to all the football games and just participating in all the fun stuff on campus, so it was fun being here.

DM:

Oh yeah. Were you involved in a Presbyterian organization while you were here?

ET:

No, I wasn't. I probably was not the strongest in my faith when I went to college. I went to First Baptist here when I did go to church. I joined a sorority, so I was a Kappa, and made a lot of friends through that. We had Bible studies in the dorm, actually, that we got involved in that I really enjoyed. Lived in Wall Hall when I first lived here, and then the last two years, we lived off campus, two of my roommates. It's just such a great place.

DM:

Right. Tell me how you met Rick.

ET:

So [clears throat], excuse me. I'm going to take a little sip of water. [clears throat] Sorry. So my freshman year—I started at Tech in the fall of '76, and Rick had already been a student here for a year because he graduated in 1975, so he had already been at Tech for a year. And January twenty-eighth, 1977, I went to a basketball game with four of my friends, and we ended up sitting in the colosseum at Texas Tech, one row apart from Rick and a bunch of his friends. I recognized him as I came up the steps. I think I had gone down to get a Coke or something and I

came back up the steps to our seats and noticed Rick. [clears throat] Excuse me. I noticed Rick, so I smiled and said hi to him, and he nodded and said hi to me. I slipped back in my seat sitting behind him. He told me later that the whole rest of the game, he just racked his brain on, who is that?

DM:

Oh, but he recognized you?

ET:

He recognized me. He knew he knew me, but he wasn't sure how, and then he remembered the name Evelyn, but he didn't remember my last name. In fact, he did remember a name, but it was the wrong last name. It was the name of another girl that went to Amarillo High that also was named Evelyn. So way back when, at Tech, you went through a Tech operator to call other students, so he called the Tech operator, who I've joked about as just some invisible person in an invisible room somewhere on campus nobody ever knows, and asked for Evelyn Neely. She, thankfully, had my name, and so he called me and I instantly knew who he was because I had remembered his name. He visited with me for a little bit, and that was the twenty-fourth of January, in 1977, and asked me out for a date. We went on our first date the twenty-eighth of January. We went to a little restaurant here in Lubbock that was called Smuggler's Inn, and had a delightful dinner, and I asked Rick all about himself and so he told me that he had wanted to be an astronaut since he was four. This was on our first date. He told me he also wanted to be a Dallas Cowboy, but he was realistic and realized that that probably wasn't going to happen. Like being an astronaut would be more realistic, but actually, for Rick, of course it was, just with his background. He told me specifically his goal, and why he was studying what he was studying, and the trajectory he was on here as a student, and what his plans were. What I guess really attracted me to Rick was that he was very humble. Even though that's an intense thing to pursue, he was very laid back, and just very approachable, and friendly, and kind, and so he was very intriguing to me because I had never met anybody that had a goal like that before, but he just was a very genuinely kind person, and just, I could tell that he wasn't egotistical. He really was very kind. I mean, he was nineteen and I was eighteen, so we began to date after that. We dated throughout the time we were at Tech.

DM:

When did you get married?

ET:

We married in February 27th, 1982. So after we graduated—we graduated from Tech May 10th, 1980, and after we graduated, Rick—he was commissioned into the Air Force that day as a second lieutenant.

DM:

Oh, is that right?

ET:

So we both attended our school's graduations and then we had the commissioning ceremony, so it was a big day. And Rick used to joke, and it cracked me up—he just had a really funny sense of humor, so on May eleventh, all during the day, he goes, “It just seems like yesterday we graduated from college.” I said, “Yeah, because it was.” But he was just so funny. But anyway, we were really happy to be finished, and we didn't—he knew that he was going to go into the Air Force, and he actually had a deferred assignment because they had a glut of pilots, which is not the case now. But anyway, so he was deferred for six months, so he worked for an engineering firm in Amarillo. So I moved to Amarillo briefly, but ended up getting a job at WBAP Radio in Dallas, and so I moved to Dallas. We knew that we weren't going to get married for a while. We really hadn't talked about it specifically. We knew that that was the direction we were headed, but I really wanted to work for a little while, and enjoy the degree I had just earned and so he was in the same boat. We had very smart counsel that starting a marriage with pilot training is not a wise way to launch. I'm very thankful that we listened to that. He needed to be able to focus on that, and I needed to spread my wings and see what it felt like to be on my own, so it was a very important time for both of us.

DM:

So how long were you there at WBAP?

ET:

I was at WBAP a little under two years. After I graduated, I got the job and just absolutely loved it.

DM:

What was it?

ET:

I was an account executive, so I sold advertising. It was a fun station to work for because they carried the Mavericks, and Paul Harvey back then, and they really had a lot to offer and they were very highly—rated. People really liked the radio station. I think it is still pretty strong, but it was just a lot of fun. I was in the Dallas office even though the station was physically in Fort Worth, so I lived between the two cities. I lived in Bedford and would commute into Dallas, but then had to go to Fort Worth some too so it was perfect. We dated all through that. It was—

DM:

How often did you see each other?

ET:

I mean, this is before cellphones, and skypes, and all that great stuff. We saw each other probably once a month. Maybe every couple of months. I mean, we talked on the phone almost every day, but we—and that was hard. It was difficult. I went to Enid. He went through pilot training at Vance Air Force Base, and so I went to Enid a few times to visit him and he came to Dallas.

DM:

So he was at Enid before y'all got married?

ET:

Yes.

DM:

Okay, all right. Was he doing mechanical engineering in Amarillo?

ET:

Yes, so the firm that he worked for was Southwestern Public Service. He had interned with them several summers. His best friend, David Jones, who lives here in Lubbock, his dad was one of the engineers there that hired Rick. He really enjoyed working there. They did some really interesting projects that Rick got to be involved with. So it just was a really great transition for him after school, just to be able to go back there and work and have something profitable to do while he is waiting for his active duty to start.

DM:

Yeah. You know, he had a very intense career. He really kept his nose to the grindstone obviously. Was he like that in high school? Did he talk about – oh yeah, I know he wanted to be an astronaut since he was four, or that is what I've read. So in junior high, high school, was he on this track already and bam, bam, bam, he went in that direction?

ET:

Very much so. Yeah, he was pretty intense about his academics and I didn't come into the picture until college so I just know what his mom told me, but he was always a very strong student. When we started dating, he was a much better studier than me. Rick said that I brought a lot of balance in his life where—I think he would have studied twenty-four seven if he had his druthers. But that wouldn't have a whole lot of fun so he needed to have a little bit of balance there in the midst of all of his hard work. But there were many, many, many weekends that he lived in Murdough and I lived in Wall, so I would sit in his dorm room and just try to study, and sometimes I'd even just take a nap. He would just—would be studying. I can remember many Friday nights, instead of us going—we would go out one night a weekend, but one night he

would devote to studying. What he would really like to do is finish it up on Fridays so he could have a little bit more time over the weekend, but he still studied. I mean, he just studied all the time. That carried throughout his career. I know later in this interview as we progress through Rick's life, we will talk about it more, but one of the things that I think is profoundly important is that he had a big shift change of priority later in life, and it was super important and it is legacy that he has left for his kids. Although the studying and the prep work was mandatory for what he was trying to do, fly a space shuttle and train for that, he found a healthy balance. Later, I would love to talk about that more in depth, but he was able to prioritize and put God first, put his family second, and his career third. Doesn't mean that his career was not important and required focus, but he just learned how to balance that. I am so grateful because if he hadn't been able to accomplish that, his children wouldn't have any memory of him because he would be at work all the time.

DM:

That point comes out very strongly in what I've read—the newspaper articles where you are quoted. And can you give me—so it's here. We are going to talk about it. Can you give me an idea of when this happened though? Was there a moment? Was there a year? Was it a gradual transition?

ET:

On the priority reorganization?

DM:

Yes.

ET:

Oh yeah, there was a moment.

DM:

Oh, really?

ET:

So he was training for his first mission, STS-96. Kent Rominger was the commander, and Rick was studying four to six inch binders full of paper every day, reviewing and studying. They would train during the day, but in the evenings, he would just have to read for hours and study. Nothing had changed from college. He was still having to study. He reviewed all of the stuff. He would come home, and eat dinner, and try to study it and he was exhausted. The kicker was that Kent Rominger, who ended up absolutely praising Rick and went on to become the chief of the astronaut office, but he—when Rick passed away, he was actually chief of the astronaut office—but Kent pulled Rick aside one day. His nickname was Rommel. Rommel pulled Rick aside and

he said, “Don’t get me wrong with what I’m about to tell you. I think you’re a great pilot, but what you’re doing for this mission is not good enough. You’re not cutting it and you need to figure out a better way to learn this material and utilize your time.” Rick was devastated because he was so conscientious and worked so hard, and he was very devastated by that. As a result of that, he came home and talked with me about it and he prayed a lot about it, and he figured it out. He figured out that if he came home every day and when he came through the door, he was my husband, he was Laura and Matthew’s dad. Every day, he came home and was just, “Hi family.” He would come in the back door from the garage and help me with dinner, play with Laura and Matthew, interact with us, and just not be anything more than just my husband and their dad. They were younger then, and so they went to bed mercifully before midnight so they—because when Rick passed away, Laura was twelve and Matthew was seven. This would have been a timeframe where Laura was ten, and Matthew would have been five. They really treasured that time with them. He really treasured that time as well, and spent all kinds of time with them, but when it was time to go to bed, they went to bed and we went to bed. We are both night owls and it was a huge shift change, but it payed such dividends. We would go to bed very quickly after Laura and Matthew did. He would get up three o’clock, four o’clock in the morning and just start pouring over this stuff every day. It was something that—and before that, he would have a quiet time with the Lord. He would spend time every day in prayer and reading the Bible. Sometimes he would read the Bible over an hour and pray. It wasn’t a five minute little devotional get her done kind of thing. It was something that he was very dedicated to. We still have the chair that he sat in and poured hours of time with the Lord that’s very precious to us. It is in Matthew’s room now. He definitely shift changed. What happened was a complete metamorphosis from mediocre work to probably the most efficient he had ever been in his life because he shift changed everything. He put the Lord first and the Lord honored that. What God provided for Rick, excuse me, what God provided for Rick was incredible stamina, and focus, and an intentionality of getting things done in the priority order that needed to be, not just at work, but in his life. He was spending time with his family, which mattered most to him. He was spending time with the Lord, and then he was doing a much stronger job at NASA. Rommel noticed a change pretty quickly, and Rick felt so much more confident every day when he would have to go through the simulators, and just the different things that they would do to prepare for the mission. There was a huge turn of confidence more than anything for him. He was learning the systems and understood what he needed to know instead of just feeling like he was little bit behind the power curve all the time and just trying to keep up and just really—just running. There was a settling in his demeanor that you could just—there was a quiet confidence there that I just noticed just began to grow. It all comes from priorities being set and forever. That mission went extremely well. He continued to apply those principles through his training for the STS-107 mission, but I am so proud of him. I am so thankful that he made those decisions because it was life changing and because of that, his children have a legacy that they remember him instead of just what they read about him or what we tell them about Rick. They have their own memories with him.

DM:

STS-96 was 1999?

ET:

May of '99.

DM:

How much earlier did this happen?

ET:

That mission, I can't remember the day that he was assigned the mission, but they had under a year to train. It was pretty far hosed, and STS-107 was postponed unofficially almost seventeen times. Officially, I don't know what the official number is, but unofficially, the launch date moved seventeen times. What a blessing from the Lord because it gave him more time with us, and we developed very strong relationships with the other crew families. The kids did, so it was—we had no idea we would be paired together the rest of our lives instead of just for that mission. I am very grateful for every second that we had. It was frustrating at the time. Of course, we invited friends from all over to come for the launch and those dates just kept changing. It's like trying to organize an event the size of a wedding, but you are having it—it's a destination wedding because it is in a different state. You are organizing this event that is a thousand miles away, and the date changes every so often. People understood, and they had to be really flexible, but that was challenging. My part in the story was just the organization of all of that because that stuff—Rick had no time to deal with our guest list and stuff. He had input, of course, who he wanted to invite, but I did all the footwork on that.

DM:

Like you said, it bought more time—

ET:

Absolutely. Huge blessing.

DM:

You mentioned somewhere, perhaps in a media interview, you mentioned—this was well after you were married—you mentioned him as your best friend. Did you always feel that way?

ET:

Very much so. We connected almost immediately. That first date I felt so comfortable with him. Our parents—his mom was from Maryland, but his father grew up in Amarillo and went to Amarillo high—was a little bit older than my parents. Our families had known each other. Our parents had been in a dance club together and knew each other, not real well, but definitely knew

of each other and had had conversations before. It just felt so comfortable. There was just so many commonalities with us. Even on our first date, we had so many friends that we both knew and connections. There was a lot of ground covered quickly because we came from the same background,, and culture and friend base, and everything, and so it was very easy to develop a relationship. Even when were on our walk with the Lord at that time, we were both probably in our weakest place. The very first Bible study Rick ever went to was with some friends of mine. We knew that it was important. We just didn't have the maturity to prioritize it like we did later. It was definitely a spiritual journey as well.

DM:

When you were dating, he was on this driven career track. Did you try to find ways of pulling him into a good time for a little while? In a social event or something like that?

ET:

Oh, absolutely. Well, I was in a sorority and Rick was not in fraternity so he was very put off the first time he called me and I answered the phone Kappa pledge Evelyn. He almost hung up. We wouldn't be having this conversation today if he had. Thankfully, he hesitated and thought he would give me a chance, but I don't think he was very pro-sorority. For any other reason, just had this wrong perception that it was egotistical stuck up girls that were just—I don't think he had ever had a conversation with anybody that was in a sorority or that were pledging and so he just wasn't a fan. But he was a great sport and ended up going to all of the dances with me that my sorority had through the years, and was very supportive of that. My closest friends were from the dorm and they still are. In fact, my roommate that I lived with in Wall hall, I am going to stay with this weekend. We made friends that we've kept for life and those people, Rick was just considered some of his closest friends as well, and it was just a quality group of people that we did everything with, so that was very, very important.

DM:

That threw a nice mix into his life too then.

ET:

Absolutely. That's what he said. He would have studied twenty-four seven, so he had fun. He had friends at Murdough. He had a little renegade in him. There were things that they would do, but he, for the most part, studying was kind of his primary thing. He did some off the wall stuff too, for sure. He was not just a perfect person by any stretch.

DM:

What about after you were married? Did you find some things to draw him into that were more entertainment oriented than career oriented?

ET:

When we got married in 1982, the Air Force had assigned Rick to go through a training in Homestead Air Force Base and so we moved there. That was the very first place that we lived, and I remember moving into our condominium there and there was a sign at the theater. It was something like, "No knives, glass, or guns allowed, or ice cream allowed in this theater." I thought, where on earth have you taken me? We were south of Miami at Homestead Air Force Base. It was my first exposure to military life. Rick had already been in for a year because he went through pilot training, but there is such wonderful community within the military so you make friends really quickly. Everybody's moved from all over. There is a lot of commonality there because they have similar goals, but they're from all different parts of the country, and so I absolutely loved it. The women, the wives, we all really were in the same place in life. Most of us were just out of college and trying to figure out this military life, and just made phenomenal friends. I think that was one of the biggest joys of Rick's military career were the people that we met and all the places that we lived and still maintain those friendships. They're still there. Even years after Rick's gone, we are still very close so that's a very important component. We got involved with church not as much in Homestead because we weren't there that long, but once we moved to Valdosta, that was the first time we really jumped in with both feet. Rick sang in choir at church and I got real involved with the youth groups. We really found our niche in doing something other than military, and really found some areas that we could pursue our passion so that was really helpful.

DM:

You started bouncing around then quite a bit. You were in Florida, and then Georgia, and then off to California. So how was that?

ET:

I loved it. I really loved being involved in a lot of different things, and discovered pretty quickly that having to move every several years was a hidden blessing because you could back out of all the things you volunteered for and could have a fresh start. I got very involved with the Red Cross and with different organizations on base, and got my real estate license when I lived in Georgia, so I worked for a real estate company and enjoyed that tremendously, but it was nice just to be able to move on and not stay. I have always enjoyed spontaneity. Rick, not so much. We really complimented each other. I brought more spontaneity into his life, and he brought routine into mine. Both are good. Both are very important and serve a good purpose so we very much complimented each other that way.

DM:

Were there expectations that the Air Force had of officer's wives?

ET:

Not particularly. I mean, I suppose we could choose to be as involved or as uninvolved as we wanted to, especially when people had fulltime jobs, that was really difficult to do. I was at the real estate company. I probably didn't participate as much, but they had different wives functions and really worked hard to keep everyone connected. And it is important because when a squadron deploys or has to go on a TDY [**Temporary Duty Assignment**], it's just really important to be connected with other people at the base that are in the same pattern of living. Because we did not live on base at Moody, it was just in Valdosta, it was important to be connected with other people. We had a lot in common. It was just very interesting to have those friends anyway.

DM:

My perception of it is, and you can correct me if I am wrong, but his job was actually getting more dangerous and more dangerous. Now, he moves to Edwards and he is a test pilot. How did that affect you? How did it affect him?

ET:

It didn't affect him at all, that he ever shared with me. I think it is like with anything that you do that has higher level of risk, you have a healthy respect for what you're involved in. With Rick, I always really admired his ability to—even doing pre checks of airplanes, and just what he did, I just had huge confidence that he was very diligent in whatever he pursued. It's a calculated risk instead of just a risk. He was very calm, and, like I said, he was very diligent in what he did. Honestly, you really could not be married to someone in that profession and just be constantly living in a state of fear. That would be beyond miserable. Was I concerned? Of course. I prayed more and more as he moved along the jet fighter assignments. When we ended up at Edwards with the test pilot school, that was one of the most enjoyable and challenging years he probably ever had in his career, but it was tremendous. Lifelong friends were made there. In fact, two of them just came to Amarillo a month ago to see Laura in her play. My daughter is grown now so those were relationships that become lifelong and we thoroughly enjoyed it. We wanted to start a family pretty early on in our marriage and unfortunately, were not able to. I struggled with years of infertility so we really enjoyed a lot of couple time with other couples before we started a family.

DM:

You were married about nine years before Laura was—

ET:

We were.

DM:

Laura was born in '91? Is that right?

ET:

'90. October of '90.

DM:

And Matthew in?

ET:

'95.

DM:

'95, okay. Well it was also—Edwards was a place for him to probably meet some lifelong friends that went into the astronaut corps, I would think.

ET:

Absolutely. Chris Atfield was in his test pilot school class and he became an astronaut before Rick did. Susan Helms as well, so yes, there were. Dick Covey was the keynote speaker at their graduation, and he was the commander of the return to flight after challenger. And he also—his wife ended up being our real estate agent which is crazy. Even more crazy is the house that we lived in at Edwards Air Force Base, I discovered years later was the same house that June Scobee Rogers and her husband Dick lived in when he was the commander of challenger. We lived in the same house, 6842 Lindberg. We were in the same house at Edwards. I probably would have freaked out if I had known that because we had similar fates, but we loved it. Rick got to fly with Chuck Yeager, and met all these people that he had admired his whole life and it was the next stepping stone towards his ultimate dream of becoming an astronaut so it was terrific.

DM:

He had to have known all these guys if he was interested in the program since he was kid.

ET:

Oh, yes.

DM:

I noticed he said age four was when he got interested, and this is Alan Shepherd, and this is early Mercury. Was he interested in that history? Mercury, Gemini, Apollo?

ET:

Very much so. I still, I think have donated articles now to the Southwest Collection that he saved

as a little boy, but he followed all of that just with incredible interest. He even took pictures of when man walked on the moon. He took a picture with his camera of the TV of a picture of Neil Armstrong. All of that just absolutely intrigued him, and that's something that just really lit him up. It was what he wanted to.

DM:

It must have been the icing on the cake for him to meet these guys eventually.

ET:

It was incredible. Absolutely. It was so funny. Once Rick was selected to the astronaut program when we lived in Houston, John Glenn was able to fly. He had been to NASA before. I have a picture of me pregnant with Matthew, and he had a book about John Glenn that he had as a little boy. So we raced over to where John Glenn was and got him to sign the book and got to visit with him for a little bit, so he admired all these people. I remember when he first arrived at the astronaut office and met John Young, who had walked on the moon, for the first couple of months, Rick said it took everything he had not to say, "Oh my goodness. You're John Young," because he just was so overwhelmed that he is passing this hero in the hallway. He kept a file in his desk drawer of John Young-isms. John Young would just say some profound comment about whatever and Rick would race back to his desk and write it down on a piece of paper and had a file of just John Young quotes.

DM:

Is that still in his bedrooms?

ET:

I think it is. I'm pretty certain that it is.

DM:

John's still living in Houston?

ET:

He is, but I just thought it was amazing. These are people that he absolutely idolized and now, he was working with them.

DM:

Did he establish a relationship with any of these guys? They were quite a bit older than him, but in these programs, like Apollo programs, did he see them more than just occasionally passing each other?

ET:

Not really. We went to dinner with Chuck Yeager a couple of times. Salty guy, but accomplishments that are renowned. But he was very kind, and had kind of gone up a little bit of a renegade path, and yet had such phenomenal success in the aviation world, so Rick just had huge admiration for him and just loved listening to him. At different airshows, I remember meeting different pilots that were well known and famous, and as Rick progressed in his career, that happened more and more of rubbing shoulders of people who had accomplished things that will be in history books forever so yeah, he was pretty awestruck by that.

DM:

That would be awfully special. Was he kind of a historian in a sense? Did he read the history of the early program?

ET:

He did. He studied it just on his own. He did science projects. He would always do research about space, and he always-- that was his favorite thing to read about and his favorite thing to study, and so he was totally up to speed on who flew when, and where, and what, and was just very interested in all of that. He learned to fly in Amarillo at Tradesmen's Airport when he was seventeen, got his pilot license. He loved flying and got his pilot's license as soon as he possibly could. One time, we—I didn't tell my parents until afterwards because I did not want to hear no—we went out to the Lubbock Airport and he did take me flying. I can't believe—I was thinking about that driving in today that we only did that once. That made me sad, but it was really amazing. I remember years later after he was an astronaut, he took Laura and Matthew and I flying, and Matthew was so little he sat in my lap. We flew with John Kiker and John Kiker was an amazing man. He helped invent the parafoil that would be deployed when the X-38 or different capsules would come down. He also developed the bracket that held the space shuttle in place on top of the 7-47, but he was just an incredibly intelligent man. John Kiker absolutely loved Rick. When Rick was in the astronaut office, he ended up working with him on a parafoil project for the X-38, but we got to fly in a small airplane with John Kiker. The funniest thing—so we get in the plane and Laura is little and like I said, Matthew was an infant. He was sitting in my lap. John Kiker jumped out of his plane—this is in Houston. There's a little local airport in La Porte. He said to Rick, "Why don't you just take it around a couple of times and come back and land?" Laura grabbed my arm and she goes, "Does dad know what he is doing?" I said, "Yes, this is what he does for a living." It is kind of funny and a little bittersweet that we did not get to fly more with him, but that wasn't something-- I mean, it was very expensive to fly small airplanes and so that was not something we ever had extra money to do or finances for, so that was a huge treat that we got to do that.

DM:

I have heard some Air Force pilots say that occasionally they could check out a plane and their wife could sit in the seat behind and they could go, but in your time, that was not a –

ET:

No, it wasn't allowed. The only thing I ever got to do was a high speed taxi in an F-4 and that was it. We had to go through all of the egress training. We had to go through all of these safety things, because we had on a helmet and all of the gear, and I just could not believe that we had to—it was just a high speed takeoff and then they abort, so it just – I really wanted to go.

DM:

Yeah, I am sure.

ET:

That would have been amazing.

DM:

Yeah, golly. Okay, so the move to Houston. When did that happen?

ET:

We were living in England. We were stationed at Boscome Down. He was a test pilot with the royal air force. Laura was four when we moved to Houston and I was pregnant with Matthew. It was in December of '94 and the phone rings, and he had interviewed with NASA months before, we really hadn't heard much. And it was Dwayne Ross calling from Houston and he asked Rick if he'd like to be in the astronaut office and he was able to calmly say, "Yes, I think that would be great," before he could hang up the phone and just woohoo at the top of his lungs so we were pretty excited. We were supposed to live in England another year after that. We'd already lived there a couple of years and loved it so I was a little – it was a little bittersweet. We had really, really great friends there for him, but we were very excited to move back to the states and back to Texas.

DM:

How long was he supposed to be there? There was an exchange program right?

ET:

He was an exchange test pilot with the royal air force so it was a three year assignment.

DM:

Wow, golly. So you were two years there.

ET:

So we got a little over two.

DM:

And then moved to Houston.

ET:

Yeah.

DM:

When you entered the NASA arena, was it similar to being on a military base?

ET:

Yes, there were similarities. The first few weeks, Rick was going through all of the orientation, and they jumped in with both feet on that. It's hitting the ground running. Simultaneously with the spouses—because some of the astronauts were women so they had husbands, but as spouses, they had some nice orientations for us and a little bit of a preview of what to expect. A lot of it, I think was different because all of us were a little bit older, and we either had careers or were raising a family. But there was still a lot of cohesiveness among the spouses and so with their own astronaut groups—each astronaut class is very close within their class because we had a lot of class functions together. So there were a lot of spouses within our astronaut class and it did remind me of the military. We all pretty much came from that experience so it followed that format for the most part, and we had get-togethers that were similar, which was great.

DM:

What do wives or spouses talk about at these events? Is it all about your spouse's career or is it pretty well—were you able to talk about your own experiences?

ET:

Absolutely. I think it would be like any group of people, whether it was a staff get-together at Texas Tech or if it was a corporation getting together, there's a bit of that because you have the commonality of the job and being an astronaut is a job. It is a cool job, but it is a job, so there's the commonality of that. There is some discussion of it. I would imagine that we probably commiserated just with the schedule, and the long hours, and challenges that we were walking through that were similar. But a lot of the spouses had their own careers and own goals that they were achieving as well, and so we were all in a different place in life and so we really enjoyed each other's company, but it just was not all about NASA.

DM:

Yeah, there was variety.

ET:

It was there, but it was not the priority and it was not even a priority with Rick and I, so that—it was important, clearly like any job would be, and it is a cool job. That is what Rick said, “I have a cool job title,” but there were other parts of him, and interests that we had besides that.

DM:

Do you live kind of as a community when you come into this situation or you live anywhere in Houston?

ET:

Well Johnson Space Center is located between Houston and Galveston, so—in Clearlake—and a lot of people select within a diameter of ten or fifteen miles of that because they just don't want to have a ridiculous commute. There are a few that live in other places in the city, but very few, and that is usually because their spouse has a position that's—I can think of one astronaut in particular, his wife was a nurse at Texas Children's and so they finally just decided to move more in town just because the commute for her was so rigorous every morning. But the vast majority live in the same area of town, so within my little subdivision where I live, I am just going to guess without going down a roster, but there were probably ten or twelve astronauts that lived in our subdivision at the time when the astronaut office was about a hundred and twenty people. So we're scattered around several different communities, but all within striking distance of NASA and Ellington Field, which is where they flew T-38, so you just didn't want to be super far away from that.

DM:

Right. Did y'all ever come across Bernard Harris, by the way?

ET:

Yes.

DM:

Really?

ET:

Absolutely, a number of times.

DM:

Oh yeah, I went down there and interviewed him in I think '97, or so.

ET:

Did you?

DM:

Yeah, real nice guy.

ET:

He is, very much so.

DM:

You mentioned challenges, the challenges that you face I guess as spouses, can you talk about some of those?

ET:

There is a lot of loneliness. You have to very proactively protect your marriage and protect your family time, because one of the John Young-isms that Rick wrote down that he had in his folder, John Young told Rick, "NASA will take your soul if you let them," and he was speaking from experience. His first marriage had failed, and he was getting older, and I think recognized that it's an incredibly demanding job. People admire astronauts so much so there's this battle, I think, probably within most to remain humble and not—one of my favorite friends that is in the astronaut office always said that he was a legend in his own mind, but he was joking. It's just being able to keep that balance of humility because the second the flight suit came off, and the jeans and the t-shirt went on, you could be a normal person. If you walked around in blue flight suit in Houston or anywhere, people are instantly interested in you, and you're a rock star. I think that that's something that everyone within the astronaut corps has to come to terms with. Some handle it better than others. I think everyone goes in with good intentions, but they get caught off guard with that as anyone does in anything that would draw attention and a little bit of fame. That was one thing that I think—within the astronaut office—that was just interesting and challenging to observe with Rick, and just with different ones of how to manage that well, but that's one thing I really appreciate about Rick. He was able to stay humble and still take the trash out, and change dirty diapers, and just do what he needed to do. [laughs] So that was good.

DM:

I wonder if NASA kind of emphasized a teamwork mentality because you do have some pretty strong personalities coming into the program.

ET:

You do. When you go through the interview process, one of the most important evenings, which at a cursory glance you might think, That's kind of strange, but it is actually one of the most important evenings. When you apply, you already have gone through a much reviewed process. To be called for an interview means that you have completely passed all the requirements to become an astronaut. If you are called to Houston to go through the interview process, you have on paper, you have everything needed. The two things that happen in Houston are the physicals

to see—and they scan everything in your body. You come out of there knowing you're either the most healthy person on the planet or you've got an issue, but everything was scanned, checked, probed. He—sampled. It's an extremely rigorous health exam, but besides that, they want to see what kind of a person you are. Are you a jerk? Are you able to listen to other people talk or do you have to talk all the time? Are you interested in other people or are you just interested in yourself? Are you this giant ego that needs constant attention or can you be a good representative for NASA because their job was very heavy handed on the PR side of things. So they could not have these people all over the country talking to schoolchildren, talking to groups all over the country and represent a government funded agency in a very bad light. And socially, are you inept? Are you able to carry on a coherent conversation? Are you able to be able to function in a social setting? Because you are going to be in lots of social settings. The evening in the interviewed process that is nicknamed, "Spill beans on your tie night." They would meet at a little local barbecue place, and you were supposed to have conversations. It's kind of a meet and greet mixer with the astronaut office, and so later on when Rick was already in the program, he would attend it sometimes, but it was just if he was available. During the interview process, as many as possible, they wanted to show up at this barbecue place. They would have conversations with you. They just want to see, can you eat food, and talk, and function socially? I know that sounds silly, but it is really important. You are being graded that whole evening on how you function in a social setting. Are you a wallflower? Are you uncomfortable? Do you have difficulty conversing with other people? How do you function with this? Because the reality is when you launch into space—now it's one duration flight, but back when the shuttle was flying—if it was a ten to fifteen, twenty day mission, you're in a very small enclosed area that's smaller than an office, and with six of your closest friends. Are you going to be someone who is pleasant to be around, or someone that you can't wait to get away from? So they, socially, wanted to see how you interacted. That was a very unusual, but very important part of the interview process. They weeded out people just from that. You could have the biggest brain on the planet, and be smarter than anybody, but if you told everybody that, you probably aren't going to get hired. I was very impressed when we first moved to Houston. I've got my little old degree in telecommunications, so I'm meeting all of these aeronautical engineers, and people with their PhD in physics and all these literal rocket scientists. I just kind of wondered what that was going to be like, and was a little uptight about it, and how could I possibly have a—what would you talk about? But I discovered, happily, that these were some of the kindest, most interesting people because they passed the social test, and were able to have conversations with people and be very interesting. That was the face of NASA, and it still is, for the astronauts to go out, and so they never wanted to come from an event and say, "That was really an unpleasant person to be around." That was just an interesting dynamic of it.

DM:

Did you ever get the impression that they were also watching spouses? Like, "We like you, but I don't know about your spouse." That kind of thing?

ET:

Yes and no. That's a great question. When we went to England for the exchange test pilot program, we had to submit a picture of our family. I laughed about that. I said, "So that's really interesting." We sent a very nice posed picture of us in our Sunday best. In that particular assignment, they were looking at us and wanting to know what we—because we're representing our country on a foreign base, an exchange program. We got a little bit perused on that.

DM:

Oh, I'm sorry. It wasn't in England where they wanted to see this? This was the application for the exchange.

ET:

No, England wanted to see.

DM:

Oh, England wanted it? That's interesting.

ET:

Yeah, it went through the U.S., and then England wanted to see it as well so we had to look okay, I guess. Whatever that is. Regarding NASA, there really wasn't a focus on the spouse, but I noticed that it is very similar to the military, especially when they flew, they wanted to really make sure the spouse was taken care of. It sounds so pure and wonderful, but the real reason was they had spent millions of dollars training these people and the last thing they needed was somebody to become an issue or a problem while they're in space or training to go in space, so we always had astronaut escorts that were assigned to us so we picked. We always picked people we were close to.

DM:

Oh, you did? You got to pick them? Okay.

ET:

Um-hm. Those guys would be our liaison between the astronaut office and the families during the mission specifically, but were available for many other things as well, but just extremely helpful. Rick served in that role for other launches as well, and would travel—you travel with the families and are with them through the whole launch, mission, and landing process and unfortunately, with our particular situation where it ended in tragedy, they are still connected with me today.

DM:

Is that right?

ET:

Yeah, so I could call any of them for help on anything NASA related or not, and they would be very willing to do what they could, so it's a very strong relationship and very coveted. It's a huge trusting relationship to select someone to do that for you.

DM:

Right, right. It sounds like NASA had figured out quite a few things by the time y'all got into the program, because there were a lot of problems with Apollo as far as the relationships between spouses for one thing, and I don't know how much support there really was, and how about for you? Besides that, were there other support programs for the spouses?

ET:

Before or after the accident?

DM:

Hmm?

ET:

Before or after the accident?

DM:

Before.

ET:

Before, I suppose if there had been anything that had come up, I would have been aware of people that I could be in touch with. Once he was assigned a flight, there's a family support office, and so they were in regular contact with us. There's a crew secretary that's assigned to each crew, and she worked very closely with the families. We never felt left out. We felt very integrated into all of the training flow. They always had opportunities for us to watch the training or even be involved in the training. Just do fun things like that, especially for the kids. They really made an effort to make us feel a part of it as much as they possibly could, but we didn't feel shut out from it at all.

DM:

Can you give me an example of being involved in training?

ET:

Sure. So one of the things that they had to learn was if the orbiter, the shuttle, was at a certain altitude that they would be able to eject. And so if they ejected over water, they had to learn how to—they had a parachute, and so they had to learn how to land on the water with a parachute, get

out from under the parachute, and inflate a raft. They did all of this at the Neutral Buoyancy Pool. We got to go over—I've got pictures of Laura and Matthew when they're little, and we would go over and watch Rick train to do this. One of the funnest days—at the old pool—the Neutral Buoyancy Pool used to be on sight at Johnson Space Center and they moved it to a different facility off sight. It is now the Sunny Carter Training Facility. In fact, there's a Sunny Carter building at Texas Tech that Rick dedicated years ago. We came for that dedication with his family, and he told me then his goal was to never have any named after him, because that would've mean something bad happened. So I never forgot that. But anyway—so this particular training was at the pool at Johnson Space Center and Laura got to pull—they hoisted Rick really high up in the air on kind of the—not a meat hook—but I mean, it was a platform that went up really high. And then she got to pull the cable that released him to make him fall into the pool, so she thought that was pretty fun. They did different things like that where we got to participate and enjoy. They had a shuttle mock up in building nine at Johnson Space Center, and the kids were invited for several different things when they would learn how to egress out of the shuttle and just different things that we could go and watch and have fun with.

DM:

I'm just so glad to hear that.

ET:

Yeah, it was a real treat. I remember one Christmas picture that we took, Rick's in his space suit, and he is holding Matthew because he's a baby, and Laura and I are standing there. On the caption on our Christmas picture I put, all the men in this picture are wearing diapers. [Laughter] Which was true. So that was fun.

DM:

Besides having that kind of support, did you have to attend any kind of instructional courses or anything like this? Like this is what is going to happen, your husband is going to launch. Was there any orientation in a formal sense?

ET:

No, not really. And if there was, I don't remember it. I just—Rick was great at communicating with me, and so I felt very well informed. In fact, one of the things he did, which I appreciated greatly—long before he ever flew on his first mission, he was a family escort for another flight and he took me with him, so we went to Florida. I got to see the whole drill of everything that the families did, and the processes and there's tons of tradition. There's all kinds of different little things they have to do and participate in that goes way back to the beginning of the space program. And so I just got to see all of that as a bystander and it was really, really helpful when our time came for him to fly in space to have had that experience, but he was just so generous to take me, and I got to tag along and see all of that and it just really helped me. Officially, NASA

couldn't afford to do that, and to transport everybody back and forth to see one, but it was kind of on the crew member of each family just to communicate well. Like I said, the crew secretary and the family support office provided any help that we might need, and the liaison between the families and the astronaut office, but primarily, that was on the crew member.

DM:

That is interesting. He was pulling you into his fraternity experience there, as you had kind of pulled him into your sorority experience at Tech.

ET:

Absolutely. No kidding. I hadn't thought about it that way, but you're right. Well we felt very much a team.

DM:

Yeah, was he involved in PR the whole time he was at NASA or at least close to mission time? Did they have him going around the country making presentations?

ET:

I think six months out he's not allowed to because training becomes so intense, so he's not allowed to be as—attend any. In fact, he had received an award where he got his master's in aeronautical engineering from—well it is actually mechanical engineering with an aeronautical emphasis from Cali State Fresno. He had taken it off sight at Edwards. He had gone through that graduate program, and they gave him some big award, and he was not able to go and accept it, but the reality was is that he was camping through the YMCA with Laura that weekend and he was not going to miss that, and that's again, the priorities which how awesome is that? I mean, years later, nobody goes around and says, "I am really glad you went to accept that award instead of camping with your daughter with a planned camping trip," so very proud of him. But anyway, I'm trying to remember what your question was again.

DM:

Well the PR. Was he?

ET:

He did. It would go through the astronaut appearances office, and so they did a lot of weeding out and then requests would come. There were very few that were required, but there were a few that were, but typically, our friends that were scattered all over the country, they would request for Rick to come and speak to their kid's school, so he did a lot of that. That was his favorite. He absolutely loved talking to school kids. He had to turn down quite a few PR requests, and like I said, the NASA appearances office had a lot of parameters of what was allowed and not allowed because it's not a paid gig, but they have to pay for the transportation there. Occasionally, they

were allowed to fly there, but it was just in a T-38. But that decision was made as needed with each appearance request. But he had to really taper back on that when he was training. He could not do that very much.

DM:

Did he go through a quarantine program before he launched?

ET:

He did. I think it changed later, but the procedure when Rick flew in space was a week prior to the launch date. They would go into complete quarantine, so the first four days that took place at Johnson Space Center, a specific building that's designed for crew quarantine. The first four days were spent there, and then they would fly out to Kennedy and quarantine there for the last three. I could see him during quarantine because I am an adult. I had to see one of the NASA flight doctors. They did not really go through any kind of exam. It is just like, is your throat sore? No. Do you have a cold? No. I mean they just—are you healthy? Yes. They would take my word for it, but they—anybody under eighteen was not allowed in crew quarters. I think they changed that later which kind of makes me sad, but the reason behind all of that is they have trained for this mission for months, and months, and months, and the last thing they need to have happen is have someone back out at the last minute because they've caught something. So that would be pretty devastating.

DM:

It happened with Apollo 13. I think that is when they started that quarantine so it still continued.

ET:

So I had a big orange badge that said I was safe when I would go visit him in quarantine.

[Laughter]

DM:

Yeah, but you could actually have contact. It wasn't with glass between you or anything like that. That's good.

ET:

No, we could spend time together. What happened for both missions when he was in Houston, I would go and have a meal with him every day. All the crew wives would, and then we could even spend alone time together. Everybody had their own bedroom, and so we could go hang out in there for a while and just have private conversations. We did not have to stay in as a group, and were able to spend time together, but he could not see the kids, so that was hard.

DM:

Yeah, that has got to be tough. Because of childhood illnesses? Because of children's contacts at school, I guess?

ET:

Yeah, they're just germy. [Laughter] They just—anybody who's had children, they know that baby and kid germs are stronger than adult germs. They're lethal. We had to be really careful.

DM:

I wonder is that like reality? I know that with Apollo 13, it was a child's disease—it was a child that caused that, but huh, so I guess that's true.

ET:

I think, for school kids, they have to develop an immunity, and don't I think if we are not around that all the time, that you just don't have that immunity, but there's no reason to take that risk.

DM:

Exactly, exactly. Oh gosh. Were there any spouses that, on their own accord, became involved in PR for NASA, or were called in to give a talk or something like that?

ET:

If their spouse is still alive, I'm not really sure. I can tell you just with the Columbia group, there's been plenty that we have been pulled into post. Same with the Challenger families, and then that's just something that you decide individually. No one's ever pressured me or asked me to do anything. I think they appreciated the fact that I was not caustic about what had taken place, but that came more from my relationship with the Lord, just not giving into bitterness and struggle. Because I will say when the accident investigation report came out, the CAIB [Columbia Accident Investigation Board] report in August after the accident in 2003, that was really tough. Of course, it was human error and of course, there were mistakes made. No one intentionally did anything wrong, but it's difficult, as it is with anyone who faces something that's an accident—when it's human error. That was challenging, but I just decided early on that's not something I'm going to spend my focus on.

DM:

Right, well that is kind of where I was coming from on this, wondering if there was an emphasis on PR for spouses before because there certainly was of your own accord afterwards.

ET:

Honestly, I don't know if people would be that interested in hearing what a spouse of an—I mean, maybe they would. I don't know, but I don't ever really remember there ever being an

interest in it. Now, when Rick and I would travel to Amarillo and he would have interviews, I might get asked a question, and it was just the standard, "I am very proud. This is very special," kind of answer. You know? But I mean, there was not really too much interest in what our response or reaction was, and I mean, maybe mildly so. But Amarillo, our hometown, did a huge piece on Rick's first flight beforehand and came to Houston and did an extensive interview with me, so I think the hometowns probably are more interested in that, where you grew up and just have more of a familiarity, but there really wasn't something that—we were involved in several different documentaries. I can remember they did a lot of B-roll with the families and just different things, but the primary focus was on the astronaut, which I totally get.

DM:

By the way, when he was—I left this out earlier—when he was growing up in Amarillo, was he involved with boy scouts?

ET:

He was. He was a cub scout. I don't know exactly when Rick quit the program, but he didn't make it all the way to Eagle Scout. The statistics are staggering how many astronauts are eagle scouts, but Rick didn't make it that far. I think he got more interested in sports and other stuff later.

DM:

Yeah, well that's why I ask because he was on this career track early on, and that was talked about in that era. They are all boy scouts.

ET:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, he was involved with that and his dad was very involved with him, but Doug was a football player in high school and then in the Navy. He played football for a while, and so I think he was really pushing that with Rick. He played football through junior high and unfortunately, his team didn't have a very strong record, and so that was where he switched his gears from briefly wanting to be a Dallas Cowboy to going back to stick with the original plan and pursue being an astronaut.

DM:

Okay, was he in athletics in high school?

ET:

Not as much. I mean, he loved to play golf, and so that was something that he did on a regular basis, but he was very interested in theater and he was very interested in choir, and so he even pursued that. When we went to school here at Tech, he sang in a couple of operas and he was in the choir here. Mr. Kinney, I remember here at Texas Tech, Rick just thought the world of him,

and he was in choir his entire time that he was here—and just did the theater and I think it was just something that was so totally different than engineering. It was just a really nice escape for him, and he just had a passion for music so he really enjoyed that.

DM:

You've talked about how he went through this transformation in life, and included his family and made sure to include his family and then segment his life into his career and then time with his family. But still, this was an intense schedule. Were there ever times that you just felt like gosh, I wish he was around more? Was that hard on you?

ET:

It was, but I think I was made of the right stuff too, if I can be so bold as to say that. I mean, I had a real commitment to support him, and really believed in what he was wanting to accomplish, and really proud of him. And I saw the effort he was making to balance our lives and not just be so hyper focused on his career that he forgot about us, and so with that, and with his desire to not only be a great provider, but he was a spiritual leader in our home. He had such a focus on that that it was just very easy to respect him, and to understand what his desire and what his goals were. There were times, of course, it was difficult. There were many times that we had to talk through and readjust, and try to find that balance. It is an everyday quest, but I really appreciated and admired his diligence in realizing that was a priority, and not losing sight of that.

DM:

That had to have been very important for him to know, at least, that he was making an effort to do this.

ET:

It was, and like I said, I really felt like we were a team. I didn't feel like this was his dream, and his journey, and I am competing, and in my own universe. There were many things I was involved with, and volunteered a lot at church, and was involved in a lot of different things, but we both worked in children's ministry at church together, and were able to be involved in other things that had absolutely nothing to do with NASA. And I think that really benefited us both where we had other focuses where it was not just on that twenty-four seven.

DM:

Without mentioning names of course, but were there situations where spouses were different about that, where they had a real hard time with their husband or wife being gone all the time?

ET:

Absolutely, and without mentioning names, a lot of these men and women that are in the astronaut corps, they're married to people who are equally brilliant. I think it becomes very

challenging, as in any arena, where it almost becomes a competition, and I was very thankful that we never fell into that trap. Another trap that I think—which has been a struggle within the astronaut office, always has been, but is infidelity. It's something that Rick and I were very open about and talked about very diligently because we were both very proactively wanting to make certain that didn't happen, and very thankful for that because it is just the kind of job that could really lead to some issues if you're not very solid on that, and set great boundaries and guard rails to protect your marriage, and to protect what matters most. That's kind of one of the things that we were made aware of that I'm thankful we could see what we needed to do.

DM:

And as long as we are not mentioning names –

ET:

[Laughter] Yes.

DM:

How about a contrast between couples that had a faith based life and those that did not, is there a strong contrast there in the NASA arena?

ET:

Absolutely. And unfortunately, even couples that are faith based have to really work very hard to respect and uphold their wedding vows to each other. So there is, unfortunately, a vast amount of people in our culture—and it seems to be becoming worse and worse, who have such an admiration for any kind of success or any kind of fame, and are willing to try to pull you away from the things that you treasure or love the most. And if you do not have a strong resolve against that, you are really setting yourself up for failure. And I would think that goes across the board on whatever career field you are talking about, but especially with this because there are people who—I was kind of floored—I guess when Rick started doing public appearances, and I went to many of them. But was kind of blown away by the level of admiration, and the level of familiarity, and the level of just being in awe of what they were able to do. I'm thinking, Okay well, it is a cool thing. Like he said, it is a cool job, but it's something that would just bring out emotional responses that were pretty stunning with certain groups of folks, and I watched that in the military. Rick was an F-15 pilot when we were at Edwards and he would be—he would put on the F-15 air show, and so even just watching that and watching how people would approach him after that and talk with him, it just kind of achieved this little bit of a rock star status. So it's learning how to manage that, so to answer your question about faith based or not, I just think that the Bible is so clear about who we are in Christ and who we are, and I think that is just such a grounding of ego, and just understanding and considering others more important than yourselves, and just all these other verses. That verse was very important to Rick and just to be able to just have a balance and understanding who you are. On his form that he filled out on a contingency

sheet, which Tech has, he wrote on there if there were any other special instructions because it's basically your last form of testament, and then it is selecting someone to handle all the different things, but special instructions Rick wrote in all capitals, "TELL THEM ABOUT JESUS. HE'S REAL TO ME." His faith was something that mattered tremendously to him and it wasn't just a lip service. It definitely, within our own—I can only speak of what I've observed in other families, but I know exactly what happened within our family, and I just know how important that was and how it provided us such a foundation and solid rock to stand on where we were swept away by whatever tide hit us.

DM:

Did he ever have to struggle at all with that? I know he was a down to earth guy, but was there a time where he kind of had to say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa," and come back down?

ET:

Yes. So he went through a school. We'd been married about ten years and he, unfortunately, became really close to another classmate that was female. She shared with him some private information about her own marriage and struggles that she was having, and they became too close. They didn't have a sexual relationship, but it was infidelity in that it became an emotional attachment with each other, and I did not know about it for many, many years until Laura was a baby, and we were really starting to grow in the Lord, and just had listened to a series of sermons on strongholds and overcoming. And so one of the sermons was on overcoming guilt, and it was a two sermon, sermon because there was just too much information for one. This was a church we were attending in California when Laura was a baby. And so I just sat down with him one night and I said, "What is going on?" And he ended up sharing with me what had happened years before, and he had just been consumed with guilt over it, and it was interesting because he—and these were his words, these are not my words, he just said, "I was just a complete idiot. But one of the things I've learned is that the devil loves a secret. I don't want to keep this a secret from you. The last thing in the world I ever wanted to do is hurt you." He was so consumed with shame and guilt over that, and I had absolutely no idea. I was thankful that we had Laura, and I mean I was able to forgive him. It was still difficult, but I found out just before we moved to England, and we befriended our friends, Angus and Carol Hogg, who ended up becoming lifelong friends. They're going to come visit me in a few weeks in Houston, but Angus—Rick shared with Angus what had happened, and Angus is a very strong believer, and they ended up praying together the whole time that we were stationed in England. I think men need other men to help them stay on track and to stay strong. It's just really important to not be isolated and be in a community with other people who want to achieve, because iron does sharpen iron. It's very helpful to have accountability and just be around other people who are trying to do their best as well. I think that faith based relationship within a marriage, as well as with other friends, is just really vital to be able to stay the course of what you want to do and not fall down.

DM:

Of all the strong things he did, that was strong. That was a strong thing to come to you.

ET:

Oh, it was a very pivotal place in our marriage, and I'll tell you something else, it completely altered his faith journey. So he went from a mediocre relationship with the Lord to—it was very pivotal—to where he was pouring over scripture, and able to accept the forgiveness. Which I think one of the hardest things for Rick was to forgive himself, and so it was a very long process, but to be able to reach that place of forgiveness, and to have that freedom that you can only have in Christ. People who aren't believers look at Christians and think it is just so rigid and you have to live under so many rules, and what they do not understand is that it is the absolute antithesis of that. It's more freedom than you have ever known. There's just a huge comfort in living within the boundaries the Lord has set up for us, and they were set up for our good, not for our frustration. So Rick learned that and his life verse became Proverbs 3, 5, and 6, which is, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths," and that became something he signed on all of his astronaut pictures, and became something that meant more to him than anything, because he understood, and he understood that he could trust the Lord. And it's become a life verse for me because even though Rick died, I still know that the Lord will direct my path and he has. He has done. It's fifteen years later and he has done.

DM:

He was very intense in his career. Did he become intense also in this search, this reading, this study of the Bible?

ET:

He did. He learned to study the Bible inductively in an inductive study Bible. And I probably will not donate those to Tech because they are treasures I still have at my house, but it has a lot of his writing and his study. But he would just pour over scripture and just spend hours on it, and it just was amazing to watch the change and the positive effect that it had on him, and the peace that he had. Because I think before, unbeknownst to me because of what had happened, there was just a tormented spirit there that he constantly struggled with. The opposite of pride, of just not liking himself very much because of that and being so hard on himself, but because I had no idea what had happened, there was no way I could help him with that or pray with him or talk it through, so it was a very important, very difficult place in our lives.

DM:

Yeah, well I was interested in that because Charlie Duke was, of course, very intent on his career, career, career, but then when he went through that spiritual transformation, he was very

intent on learning all that he could. It was that personality and he just absorbed everything he could, so that is interesting that Rick did a similar –

ET:

He memorized a lot of scripture, and was able to share from memory Joshua 1 through 9 the night before they flew on STS-107 with the crew, and their families, and was even able to share why that was meaningful to him. And it's just interesting because in that passage it talks about being strong and courageous because the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go, and that has ministered to me so much through the years because the Lord was with Rick. Still is, and He's been with me, and still is, and it's just extremely powerful, and he had such an influence on our family because of that transformation. Very grateful.

DM:

This was the crew and their families together?

ET:

Yeah.

DM:

Wow.

ET:

It was interesting because Rick was able—even though it was a very diverse group faith wise, and culture wise—he was able to share it personally without it coming across at proselytizing. He was able to talk about it from a personal standpoint as a testimony without anyone feeling like oh my goodness, he's really trying to recruit me to believe the way that he believes, and nobody felt that way. Rick had just a very gifted way to share his faith without it being offensive.

DM:

Part of his personality too, I guess because--

ET:

It was, very much so.

DM:

--He approached people not as towering over them.

ET:

Not at all. He was a very quiet, strong leader. Very respected. *[End of Recording]*