

Robert Anthony Roy
Narrator

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Interviewer

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Transcriber

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Minnesota

CS: Cole Steinberg

RR: Robert Anthony Roy

CS: This is an interview conducted as part of a larger faculty and student research project initiated by Dr. Julie Luker of Concordia University St. Paul. Today is June 24th, 2022, and I'm here with Robert Roy. My name is Cole Steinberg, and I am an undergraduate student at Concordia University St. Paul. Today I'll be talking to Robert about what life was like in the Twin Cities. During this interview, I'm going to ask you to reflect on your childhood life experiences as they relate to a variety of social topics from that time period. For the purposes of this interview, we have defined childhood as birth through 17 years of age. To begin, please state and spell your full name.

RR: Easy. Robert Anthony Roy, and that's R-O-B-E-R-T. Anthony, A-N-T-H-O-N-Y. Last name is Roy, R-O-Y.

CS: Please identify your race and gender.

RR: I identify as Italian American, Caucasian, and male as recently as this morning.

CS: Please state your date of birth.

RR: I'm sorry?

CS: Please state your date of birth.

RR: Oh, June 22nd, 1948.

CS: Finally, please share where you grew up, such as the name of the neighborhood, or nearby street intersection. Include any major moves you made during this time period.

RR: There were no moves during that time. I grew up in the village, what was in the village of Falcon Heights. The house that I grew up in was two houses off the corner from the intersection of Hamline and Larpenteur. It would've been on the northwest side, and that house had been there quite some time. In '48 when I was born there, the house had been there for a little while. Falcon Heights was a developing village at the time, so that's to say, where's my birth? Falcon Heights. Where? Hamline and Larpenteur baby. I can put you right in that position.

CS: Okay, thank you. I would like to learn more about your family life. Let's begin with the memories you have for immediate and extended family. Please share some memories that you have about these relationships.

RR: Let's try and keep in some chronological order. Like I said, an Italian American family. The family great-grandfather, great-grandmother immigrated from Italy. They grew up in the Desoto area. It was Little Italy in the Twin Cities. Mom married my dad, and they moved to the burbs, and they lived on Idaho Avenue in Falcon Heights. Just before my birth had purchased the home that I grew up in. Things I can remember that are graphics in my mind, every Sunday was a feast. Everybody's name ended with I, [Rosini 03:21], [Inosendi 03:22], [Komachini 03:23], down the list. Dad's side of the family was about 75 percent Italian. The name Roy came from Regalo, and I think Ellis Island decided that Regalo wasn't right, so it became Roy, and Mom was a [Branca]. As I said, most of the relatives were Italians, very tight knit group of people.

On any given Sunday, as I say, it was not uncommon to have 15, 20, 25 people dropping in, and that meant that the dining room table would be full of food. People dropped in, they ate, they patted us kids on the heads, told us how big we were getting, went through that whole drill. Just a wonderful group of people to have been reared in. As I got older, of course, that generation, which would've been previous to mine, started to pass on. I don't mean to sound morbid, but as a young kid, between zero and 17, I attended a lot of funerals. Like I said, I'm not throwing morbidity in here, but Italian tradition, very much kept up, the church was strong, and the family core was strong. As a kid in the family, you weren't going to be exempted from this, because my parents were worried that it might affect me later, or I might freak out about it. We grew up, that was the norm.

That was the norm. Roman Catholic by birth, attended St. Rosa Lima School, and that was at my parents' behest. First eight years of my life, or first nine years' kindergarten non-inclusive, Catholic upbringing, that played throughout the family. Well, most of the Italians that came, well, hell, all of the Italians that came over as far as I know, were Roman Catholics, tight-knit group. My family, my immediate family, June and Ward. June and Ward, right from TV. Mom stayed home. She wore the apron, she cooked. My maternal grandmother on my mother's side lived with us, which was the way the game was played, and Dad was a, was involved in sales with a number of various companies as I was growing up. Dad spent some time on the road. Mom was the matriarch, and grandma was the super matriarch, if you will.

All in the same house, very, very traditional Cole. If you saw it on TV, you saw it in our house. It was that thing. Did we all sit around and watch the black and white TV in the evening when the Ed Sullivan show came on? Yeah. Did they have to suffer through Lawrence bro? Yeah, all of that stuff was just the norm. I had, I had, let me put it that way. Had two brothers and a sister, one of my brothers passed, but all four of us lived in the house at the same time, at one point in life. It was a typical Minnesota home. Of course, we had a basement down here in Texas, no such thing, okay? There are no basements, the main floor was, your typical dining room, living room, kitchen type thing, and then the upstairs was without walls.

In other words, it was the shape of the house wide open, and that's where the boys lived. Now, my sister, she got the benefit of a spare room downstairs, because she was the girl. We boys slept upstairs. There was no air conditioning, none. I can tell you that the upstairs of that home, on a given day in July in Minnesota, was a sweat box. Got along well with my brothers and sister, no infighting, no rivalries, so to speak. It was more of a, the older brother, of course, he was the idol, and then my next brother was honoring him, or worshiping the things he was learning from him. I was, in the early days, hell, just a little kid, seven, eight years old, I watched.

My little sister, who was five years my junior, well, let me put it this way. We're all born five years apart. My little sister, when I was eight years old, she's three, she's four. I'm babysitting her, and at the same time, we're watching what my brothers are doing. Good way to grow up. no strife. No strife at all. There was just nothing that would make you wake up in the morning and say, I'm afraid to get out of bed, or I don't want to go outside, I'm afraid. No, it was very, very much like, I keep referring to June and Ward growing up. I can't even pull up a negative thought to tell you the truth. Always had food on the table. I guess our fair share of kid necessities. Did I need a baseball bat? Well, hell yes. Did I get one? Well, hell yes. Did you need a boat? Did I need skates?

We lived in, I will call it, a very middle-class environment. We were not rich by any means, any stretch of the imagination, but we had stuff that kept us in the middle of the entire group that we associated with. We were probably as a family, middle, maybe a little lower middle in the Roseville area, because Roseville was starting to grow, and was pulling in a lot of, I won't say wealthier, but better off people than my dad as a salesman. We were able to keep up with the Joneses, let's just put it that way. I bored you with enough of that. Now, what do you want me to shut up and listen to?

CS: Well, no, you did pretty good. Actually, you got ahead to the economic status portion, so we can go over that, 'cause I think you covered who in your immediate family was working, where you fell socioeconomically. Now I would like to know about your experiences with religion such as Catholicism, Lutheranism, et cetera. Describe what you can recall about your family's religious practices when you were growing up.

RR: Very, very by the book. Yes, you had the family Bible sitting on a table in the house. That's a given. Like I said, the first eight years I was taught by the nuns at St. Rosa Lima out on North Hamline. My brothers went there, my sister went there. Very strict Catholic school. All the jokes about the nuns and the rulers and all that, it's true. It's as true as I'm sitting here in front of you. It was woven through the family, I think as we kids aged, starting with my brother, my oldest brother, who is 10 years my senior. When I was 10, he would've been 20, they made their own choices. First off, when you were younger, we all went to church together. Then as we started to age, it was, well, Dick isn't going with us today, but you and Ronnie and your sister are going, okay.

Well, then Ronnie got older, and it was, well, Ron doesn't have to go to church today if he doesn't want to. Catholicism through our youth, our early youth was a very strong bond, but as we aged and we all started making selections about what we thought or didn't think was

important in our life, everybody was married within the Catholic church. That's one of those boy God's going to get you if you don't. After that, started going their own way. To answer your question more directly, staunch Catholic upbringing, but at a certain point, turned loose to our own devices saying, you now know we're going to give you everything we can give you within the church structure.

Which was, if you're familiar with Catholicism, from baptism through first communion, through confirmation, and once you finish confirmation, my parents felt like they had accomplished their goal. We brought you up Catholic. After that, the choice was ours. As I indicated in earlier conversation here, I saw my brothers move on, too, church isn't so important on Sunday. I'll go with the fan, especially Christmas, especially Easter, that thing.

Grandma, oh God, grandma, she was the housekeeper for Father [Pioletti], who was the Monsignor of the Holy Redeemer Church in the Italian community off Desoto Street, close to downtown St. Paul. Grandma would, I do not exaggerate. She would say five rosaries a day between cooking for the family. Italian grandmas always cook. They always say the rosary. She would sit at the kitchen table while the tomatoes were stewing or whatever was going on, and she would silently do the rosary. That's a microcosm of what I grew up in. That doesn't account for who I am today, but that's the religious environment I grew up in. If that answers your question, Cole.

CS: How important, or relevant is religion to you now as an adult?

RR: Religion, we made sure that the boys, my two boys were brought up as Catholic children. Not to the point of going to Catholic school, but that they were exposed to every Sunday at church. When my sons were young, until they got to be the of age, when I started to make my decisions, it was important, then they knew that Sunday was church, and they knew that Christmas and Easter were religious holidays. Now 2022, I guess I qualify as what we call a C&E, Christmas, and Easter. Christmas and Easter, and the boys, although only one of the boys still lives in Texas here with us, that's a day they'll get together with us, and we do a church thing.

Now, ignore COVID that threw a wrinkle into everything, but let's say up until 2020, religion existed within the family, and we were Catholic. Is it as important now? My wife is still very involved. I not so much. I identify as a Roman Catholic. All the penance of the church I still believe. The boys, I've got one in Buffalo, he's with the Coast Guard, and I've got one here who's an engineer, and we let them make their own decisions on that. How important is it to me now? Not nearly as important when I was growing up. Do I still identify? Yes, absolutely.

CS: Okay, thank you. Now, I'd like to learn more about the neighborhood in which you grew up. If you move during childhood, you may wish to reflect on more than one neighborhood. This is fine to do, but please indicate as you do it. Please describe what comes to mind when thinking about the neighborhood in which you grew up.

RR: Boy, you're opening a can of worms there, brother. Never moved, grew up in Falcon Heights. Grew up at 1365 West Larpenteur. There were a lot of kids my age during the timeframe. Let's say I was born in '48, let's say about, let's say '56 when I was about 8 years old.

Started to find out who was around us. Now, to set the stage for that, most of the lots in the area, there in Falcon Heights where I grew up, were by today's standards quite large. Houses weren't always very close together, and so we had neighbors who could be an eighth of a mile away. By the time I was 8 or 10, started to interact with kids in the neighborhood, you saw them out playing in their backyards, but their backyards may have been hell a long way off.

We somehow found out that we all liked baseball, and we all liked hockey, and we all did a lot of the same stuff. I hate to say it, but pretty much Mayberry type stuff. We grew up with slingshots, and fishing, and playing hockey, and it was a good core group. There was probably, oh, 20, 25 kids that fell within about 5 years of age of each other, so there was big kids, what we call the big kids, and then us kids. Developed a lifelong relationship with my friend Dave, whose yard was adjacent to ours, but his house was far enough away, you could call it a block away, but the backyards are joint. Via that passageway, if you will, the backyards, we bonded and became friends.

That's where we set up the tent and camp out on a given Friday night and sneak some ginger ale and stuff into the tent, which we weren't supposed to have, and mind you, ginger ale only. We on any given day, if it was summer, we were playing baseball. You've seen the pictures, your glove has slipped over the handlebars, and the bats across the handlebar, and you're riding, and in our case, we rode the Falcon Heights Elementary School, which had a huge playground. In the winter they had a hockey rink, and in the summer, there was a couple of backstops, so you could play pickup ball. Did a lot of that, did a lot of that. In the winter, like I said, the warming house was there. You threw some logs in the fire to keep it warm, and we played hockey.

All of the kids from the neighborhood for whatever this is worth, and as much as me—I keep in touch. The fact is all of them turned out pretty good. One of the girls, circuit court judge in the area, a lot of the other kids I grew up with went on to musical scholarships, Philharmonic performances, and we were middle class kids, so it surprised me, but as young kids, we just played, that's all. We just played. We played a lot. We didn't get in trouble, we never got into the, let's do something daring and see if we can piss off some parents or something. If it wasn't baseball, or a little bit of football, I won't say we didn't own a slingshot or two, and I won't say we didn't own a BB gun or two, but it wasn't to shoot out streetlights or to take out headlights in people's cars. It was just a part of the rite of passage, I don't know.

Call it rite of passage. Just stuff we did, and if one kid got a BB gun, boy, we all had a chance to go shoot at a target or shoot at a cardboard box. That, if it paints a picture for you, of what was just a bunch of kids who played together. Nobody knew anything about the economics of any kid you played with. We all dressed the same. If it wasn't Levi's, and t-shirts, or whatever mom could get at Kresge's, it was pretty standard fair. To this day now, I know some of those parents, some of those families of those kids were pretty well to do, but it never showed up down at the level we were functioning at. None of us ever gauged another kid by the car their dad drove, whether he had a Buick or a Cadillac or a Chrysler, like my folks, it was Chevys. It was blue collar stuff. I don't know if that gives you an accurate picture of that, but if that answers the question you asked.

CS: No, absolutely it does. If you had to describe the best part about growing up in your neighborhood, what comes to mind?

RR: The best part was, we had free reign from seven in the morning, till the lights flicked on at night, the streetlights came on, and that was our signal to head home. In between there, there was no check in, there was no, “Where are you going? What are you doing? Who are you with?” Had free reign to grow up, and we did a lot of that. The best stuff was the experiences we had as kids that, there were kid experiences. There was an empty lot in the neighborhood that was known as dirt hill, because it was just a big empty lot, and then apparently the contractors, when they built some of the other houses, dumped their screw over there, so there was a hill, so we had dirt hill. Well, in the course of growing up, dirt hill became the same place Audie Murphy would have his war zone, and so we would play Army over there, and we would dig trenches, and we would dig fox holes, and we'd play Army. When we got tired of that, we'd grab the ball bats and gloves, and we'd go up the street to Falcon Heights. The best part hitting it on the head was, we were trusted, we were left to grow up and if one of us screwed up, not that that didn't happen, but if one of us screwed up, all of the parents bonded on the side of you screwed up. Not, “Don't pick on my kid.” They bonded together, and they said, you don't do that. That's not anything you do, and we went, got it, got it. Won't happen again. The best thing, they let us be kids.

CS: Great. Kind of leads us into our next section here. Next, I would like to learn about the values shared by your family and your neighbors. Values or principles or standards that help guide behavior. What memories come to mind that demonstrate what these values were for your family and your neighbors?

RR: Somebody needed help, you helped them. Somebody needed something that you had, you made sure that they got some. Everybody looked out for everybody, everyone else's kids. It wasn't just my parents' job to watch me and my sister and my brothers, the neighborhood watched us, and made sure that we were not doing anything stupid. Well, that was too stupid, and that we were safe. We didn't have the same fears parents have for kids today. Things like abductions, the abuses, all the crap. It didn't exist. The neighbors, the families, the ethos of that whole group was, we watched out for each other, and they watched out for us kids. Well, it was not a real social coffee clutch neighborhood. We all knew the names of the neighbors. They all knew us kids by name, and where everybody, excuse me, greeted adults with respect. I never knew an adult by a first name. How's that? It was Mr. or Mrs. Mr. McGrath. Mrs. [Lilyquist]. Mrs. Glendening. You may have known their first name was Edith, or Mimi or something, you as a kid didn't do that. It was that a neighborhood where there was a respect for adults, and the kids were trusted. I don't if that answered your question very well.

CS: It does. Now I'm going to ask you all about leisure time. Describe some of the ways in which you, your family and your neighbors engaged in leisure time when you were growing up.

RR: Leisure time in my own family, as a family unit limited. My father was a workaholic. My father made a modest income. My father worked a lot. He was on the road a lot. Dad started out as a grocer, which surprisingly just about every Italian that came into the country was a grocer. Dad grew up in the grocery business. Used to have a store down on, what's now probably not the

better sections of town, but down at Selby and Dale and had a small grocery store there, and that's where it all started. That meant that from the crack of dawn, until into the evening, dad was at the store.

It wasn't even a mom-and-pop operation, 'cause mom wasn't involved. Pop was. We kids were mom's charge at home, so dad ran the store, meant that dad put in long hours. Did that leave for a lot of family time? Not really. I can recall one vacation in that entire span of time we're talking about here, where we loaded into Dad's 63 Chevy, and we drove to California because we wanted to—dad thought we had to see Disneyland, and we had a couple of relatives who had gone big time on us, who were living out there in the Modesto and out in the Napa Valley, and had made big and cattle ranching, and the winery business. Family time together, church on Sundays, and other than that, dad put in a lot of hours, and mom put in a lot of hours just doing what moms do.

Gosh, to try and reflect on the family unit doing things together, not so much. I guess if it's still within the sphere of the question, a lot of the stuff came through friends and neighbors. My friend Dave, who I mentioned earlier, his parents had a small cottage up in Alexandria, on Lake Geneva, and so I would get invited to go up there. That was like a vacation for me. I was in this foreign country 150 miles away from St. Paul up in Alexandria. Wherever the hell that was. That was the leisure. My sister, not so much, raised like a little girl, and my two brothers, ultimately my oldest brother moved to Denver, followed his career in sales, imagine that. My other brother, very similar, myself, I chose a different path, and my sister went into healthcare. I guess all of the stuff we learned as kids, all the values in that system, and the leisure time and all that, is still the way we function.

It's still the way we do our biz. We were not a vacation family. It wasn't every year we took a summer vacation. If we got to McLarens Beach, that was big time. If I got to Lake Josephine to go swimming, that was big time. I had an uncle on my mom's side, lived on Lake of Owasso, we could get out there and go fishing. He had a ski plane, so every on a given Sunday, God, we'd all get a ride and fly over the Twin Cities area in his pontoon plane, those were the highlights. That was it. There was nothing exotic about it. Pretty base stuff. Go ice fishing, go fishing off the dock in Lake Owasso. That was leisure time. At 14, 15, I don't guess child labor laws were too big then.

At 14 or 15, if you draw a picture in your mind's eye of the intersection I lived at, the same side of the street I was on at Hamline and Larpenteur, the corner Hamline and Larpenteur was a chiropractor clinic. That was the Johnny come lately. Across from it, across Hamline Avenue, was an A&W Root Beer stand, but not a drive-in type, a walk-in type. Across the street from it, on the, let's see, I even made myself a little map so I could give you good information here. On the southeastern side was a Clark Station filling, and you may not remember, but Clark was that we only bought one grain of gas at Clark. They only sold premium, and then I went to work at Falcon Oil Company, which was on the southwest side of Hamline Larpenteur, and that changed life for me a lot, because at 14 now I had a job. I had regular hours.

Actually, I did, as I look back at it now, a lot of stuff that was relegated to adults was handed to me. I did their bookkeeping. I did the ordering on fuel. Now I'm 14 years old, and I don't realize I'm not supposed to know this. Right about 14, life changed for me, and my fun time became work time, but I loved it because I'm a bit of a social animal, you figured that out, and working in the gas station, yes. We still wiped the windows. We still checked the air. Yes, we did. We checked the oil, and so you socialize with people on a daily basis. If not many tens, even hundreds of people, and got on first name basis with people that all you do is, here comes Bill and his Cadillac. Well, we take good care of him. Here comes Charlie with that crappy Chevy that doesn't barely run, but we'll take good care of him.

That's what changed my life after about 13 and a half years old, and mom's house was directly across the street, so I could have dinner sent over to me if I worked evenings. I'd go to work at 12:00 p.m., and I'd work till 9:00, which under today's laws, probably would've been considered illegal. We didn't think nothing of it. About 6:00, mom had come across the street with a Swanson frozen dinner, or something that was awful to eat, but she'd bring food, and I was having a ball. That was enjoyment, as dumb as that sounds. That was enjoyment. I had as much fun doing that, as I did anything. I guess as I commented to Julie, she asked what the backdrop was. I said, this is a mural of a 1950s service station. This is about a 12 by 15, and that's what my whole shop decor is.

As matter of fact, I've got gas pumps and coke machines, and you go down the list. I was influenced pretty heavily by that, and found that I really, really was comfortable. It was just like falling into that zone and going, yeah, I'm good. I'm good. Just leave me here. That's how it was. That was the relaxation, the enjoyment. My parents, they did what parents did. Dad worked, mom took care of the house, continued to raise my sister who was still too young to be on our own type thing. It may sound pretty boring, but it was actually pretty great.

CS: It sounds like a great experience, especially for your first job. That's awesome. Next, let's discuss your experience with schooling. Please describe what it was like going to school as a child.

RR: As I alluded to you earlier, it was strict Catholic upbringing. Kindergarten was Falcon Heights Elementary. That was a walk of about a block from the house, and as a five-year-old, I walked to school. That's not, isn't that cool? It's because at five years old, you were trusted enough, and nobody feared the things that make up today's world, if you will. That's where you first started to socialize with kids. Kids you didn't know, kids you met 'cause you all showed up in the same room, and you all had playtime together. Hooray for kindergarten. Then came Catholic school, and that was a must. The growing up in Catholic school, like I told you, it was stern, it was staunch, it was by the book.

The nuns were the teachers, if that's proper terms, not gender specific, but the nuns were the teachers at the school, and of course the priests were the figureheads of the school. Did that for eight years. I knew my parents did not have a lot of money, but at the time I was going to grade school, I did not know that there was a cost associated. I thought you just went to school. Well,

Catholic education costs money, that type of thing. In about eighth grade, the light went on, and I went, where are they getting the money for this stuff. I still got a sister behind me for five years. My dad said, well, you guys got to make a choice, and this went all three of us brothers, as we came through eighth grade. You can go to Cretin like I did, which was a Catholic high school, or you can go to Alexander Ramsey, which by the way, let's hear it for Ramsey. You can go to Alexander Ramsey, and go to public education. Well, in eighth grade I had this awakening. It was called Girls. In the Catholic schools, even when you went out for recess, there was an imaginary line on the playground. Boys did not cross that line over here, and girls didn't cross the line over here. It was as sexist as you're going to get. Girls, boys, and never the twain shall meet, and don't be caught standing at the imaginary line talking either.

When I had the choice to go to Ramsey, which would've been in '63, '62, well that was Fairview. Fairview in '62, then Ramsey in '63 through graduation, I jumped at it. I said, oh hell yes, we can talk to girls, oh, I'm going to like this. That's when the educational system, my schooling, changed a little bit, in that I left a very controlled and very strict environment, and into a much more liberal, loosey-goosey environment where, boy, you met a lot of strange people. These weren't just the Catholic kids that I saw every day 'cause we all wore uniforms. We all dress the same. The girls all dress the same. Here you're going to high school now, and it's, man, that's a cool madras of shirt. Oh, the dude's got bell bottoms. That's cool. That's where the change came. That was when I called my secondary education after Catholicism. That was my school of experience.

CS: Okay, cool. For our final topic, I'm going to ask you to reflect on local and global issues such as war, poverty, discrimination, social unrest, et cetera. In your opinion, what were some of the biggest local or global issues affecting the people in your neighborhood when you were growing up?

RR: Politics were not talked about, discussed even what I can remember all the adults being together. I don't remember politics ever being a topic. Oh, I had a crotchety grandpa who'd say that the son of a that's a mayor, they ought to kick his. You'd hear that from the really old dudes. My parents were very apolitical, very apolitical. About the only political thread I saw from them, was when Senator Kennedy was about to run for president. Of course, what was the determining factor in my parents' eye? He's Catholic therefore he's qualified.

To that end, as a matter of fact, John Kennedy campaigned at down Larpenteur Avenue, and I shook his hand and Jackie Kennedy's hand, as he sat in the back of a Lincoln convertible, and that was as political of anything Cole, anything I can remember in growing up, because we had a village and there was a mayor, and that was Mayor Warkentien. Don't ask me why I remember shit that's 60 years my junior. The mayor was the titular Falcon Heights. We knew he existed. We knew there were things like city council meetings, and that's as much as we knew. My parents were not attendees. I don't know very many people in the neighborhood that were attendees. I guess if it ain't broke, don't fix it, and so we were living the good life, and nothing was wrong.

We didn't have crime; we didn't have food shortages. We didn't have any bad crap going on, so politics, not so much. Not so much. I think I can say if we're going to pick a lot of political parties, my parents had a democratic leaning. Hubert Humphrey, John Kennedy, Paul Wellstone was much later, but leanings toward the democratic side, but they never called themselves a political party. I don't remember them saying, we're Democrats, and the neighbor's two doors down they're Republicans, or they're Whigs or something else. It wasn't a discussion. Quite frankly, I never got involved in political arena until Vietnam, and then I got immersed in it. That's when I started to formulate political ideas, but that's long after I'd left home. I was 17 and out the door in 1966, so my politics started then. Family politics, cold or just wasn't much, man. Nobody got too jacked up over anything.

CS: This is the end of our interview. Your responses are invaluable, and we really appreciate that you took the time to do this today. Thank you so much for participating.