

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH RONALD NALDI

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Shaun Illingworth: Thank you very much for having me here today.

Ronald Naldi: My pleasure.

SI: This begins an interview with Mr. Ronald Naldi on January 13, 2016, in North Plainfield, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth, and also present is Nicholas Schaefer. Thank you for letting us take over your home. Could you tell me where and when you were born?

RN: Sure. I was born--well, now, this is always confusing to me-- they say, "Is the place you're born in the hospital or where you live?" So, I was born in Somerville Hospital, but my parents lived in Plainfield, New Jersey. So, I guess they say Somerville on your birth [certificate], but I really was from Plainfield, so, Plainfield, in 1942. That's it, Plainfield, yes.

SI: For the record, what were your parents' names?

RN: My parents, my father's name is Edward. Actually, it's Ercole--he never liked it, which means Hercules. He never went with that. He went [with] Edward, Edward Naldi, and my mother's name was Dea Rita Doganieri, yes.

SI: Your father was born in the United States and your mother emigrated from Italy.

RN: Correct, yes.

SI: Beginning with your father's side of the family, what do you know about your father's family background, where the family came from?

RN: Yes, very interesting. My father was born in 1915, I think--let me just think--1916. He was born in New York City, Little Italy, Mott Street. His father died when he was six months old. So, his mother lived there in New York for a couple years, maybe three or four or five years. She was a very independent woman. She was left fairly wealthy, because she moved to Whitehouse, New Jersey, bought property and she remarried and lived in Whitehouse. My dad was raised in New York City for a while, and then, Whitehouse. He went to Flemington High School, which is now Hunterdon Central, and I guess he had to work for his father when he was sixteen. So, after his sophomore year, I think he worked for a couple or three years, two, three years, went back to high school, graduated. Well, I don't know how far you want to go.

SI: Were they still there when you were growing up? Did you know those grandparents at all?

RN: I did. I knew my step-grandfather and, of course, my grandmother, yes. We actually lived, for about eight or nine months, on, we called it "the farm," in Whitehouse, when I was growing up, between eleven and twelve years old, ten or eleven years old, something like that, yes.

SI: Can you describe that?

RN: Actually, less than that, I was seven years old. Yes, it was pretty interesting. I loved it, I really loved it. We called it a farm. It was a nice house, not many neighbors, neighbors across

the street, not many neighbors on the left of us or one on the right. He had a pond, he had cows and pigs, he had a barn, with the hay, chickens, a lot of chickens. I used to do the eggs sometimes, collect the eggs. What else? Let's see, oh, he had a grape arbor in the front, which I loved. He would pick the grapes and they were tremendous. So, even though I was there for only eight or nine months, our family, it was a very memorable time, got to know my grandmother better and my grandfather. I was bitten by a dog, too. No, I have to say that was a very memorable part of my life. When I was seven, the German shepherd of a friend of mine, I went to his house, I bent down to shake hands with the dog and the dog bit me. I got thirty stitches, came home wrapped like a mummy. My mother came down the steps screaming, but it affected my life, really, yes.

SI: Do you not like dogs?

RN: I don't like German shepherds. I love dogs, don't like German shepherds. It's amazing, because, when I see a German shepherd, I actually just sort of freeze. This is after how many years? a long time. One of my teachers had a German shepherd. I would walk in the door, he'd be there, very friendly, but something about him and I could still feel it. I would say, "Could you put him in the other room? Do you mind?" and they did. [laughter]

SI: Was that a voice teacher?

RN: Yes, many years later.

SI: What about your mother's side of the family?

RN: My mother's side, my mother was born in Spinete in Italy, a very small town, two thousand people, in the Province of Campobasso, or the Province of Molise, the Region of Campobasso. [Editor's Note: Campobasso is a province within the Region of Molise.] Her father had moved to America when she was three, I think. He came here for work and he stayed for five years in America. He was actually born in America, my grandfather, which is amazing, because my great-grandfather used to go back and forth--he'd leave for America, he'd leave for America--and some of his children were born in America and some in Italy. So, my grandfather was actually a native-born citizen, born in America. Of course, so, he has two citizenships. My mother and her brother and my grandmother came to America in 1929, right in the Depression, just as it hit, in December, right after the Great Depression, sailed on a ship. She was eight-and-a-half and she remembers it tremendously, because her mother was so sick and she was in the cabin, so that she and her brother ran all around the ship. [laughter] She remembers that. She goes, "Oh, my God, we ran around the [ship]. We were like little devils." Anyway, everyone else got sick and they arrived and my grandfather was here. She immediately went to school, despite not speaking the language, but, when you're eight-and-a-half years old, she picked it up in, like, three months. She would pronounce everything in Italian and never missed a word in spelling--can you imagine?--because, in Italian, there's no spelling bees. If it's "*Pipeline*," it's pipeline, they go, "*Pipeline*," that's how she pronounced it, so, P-I-P-E-L-I-N-E, whatever the word was. So, unless it was something like one of our strange English words, like "through," T-H-R-O-U-G-H, how do you pronounce that, right? "Gough (my son-in-law)" but she adjusted quite well.

SI: Did she talk at all about what life was like before they came to America?

RN: Of course, always, through pictures and everything, definitely. The town was very small and the kids had to--I guess, when you're in that era, they really helped. She learned to sew when she was two or three. She learned to crochet and knit when she was four. She carried water from the fountain, helped her mother with the chores, very straight-laced and disciplined, school, church, school, church, learned Latin in school. Then, in the summer times, because her grandmother was--not a servant, you wouldn't call her a servant; a right-hand person for a very rich family, she did all the work in the house--they went to Naples in the summer.

SI: Really?

RN: Yes. So, my grandmother, my mother and her brother went to Naples for a month-and-a-half and they remember that, because they were in nice hotels and it was very nice. They were not well-off at all, but, obviously, had enough to live.

SI: The immigration laws change periodically. At some points, having a father who is a natural-born citizen makes you a citizen.

RN: Yes, she is, she is, a citizen from the beginning, yes, she and her brother, yes, were, because her father was born in America, yes, sort of like [2016 Republican Presidential candidate and Texas Senator] Ted Cruz, right. [laughter]

SI: Yes, exactly.

RN: They're going to go into that in a little bit, I think. I don't know why, yes, whatever.

SI: She did not face any issues in coming to this country.

RN: No, not at all, no.

SI: Where was the family living when they came here?

RN: When they came here, my mother's family lived in Bound Brook and had an apartment. They lived in Bound Brook, yes. In fact, we ended up--I was in Plainfield for six years, let's call Whitehouse one year, it wasn't, and then, Bound Brook from seven until when I graduated from high school. I was in Bound Brook, too, yes.

SI: How did your parents meet?

RN: That's interesting, yes. My mother always talks about it, I could tell you, and she's in assisted living now in Ocean Grove. Her long-term memory is phenomenal; what happened three minutes before, another story, like, "Ma, I just told you." "Okay, okay." Anyway, she had a bunch of girlfriends and they would go to the August 15th [celebration], which is called the Feast of the Assumption. In Italy, it's a big, big thing and Bound Brook was, a lot, Italian-American. So, they were going to this feast. They called it the Feast of Monte Carmelo and they

went to the feast. There's fireworks and dancing and everything, right. So, my mother and her girlfriends went there and my father and his best friend were working, by that time, in American Cyanamid, which is Calco, in Bridgewater. It's called Bound Brook then, it's in Bridgewater. Calco made chemicals. I don't know if you know that; you know about Calco?

SI: Yes, American Cyanamid. [Editor's Note: The Calco Chemical Company, founded in 1915 in Bound Brook, New Jersey, originally manufactured dyestuffs. After being acquired by American Cyanamid in 1929, Calco expanded into the manufacture of sulfa-based drugs, polymers, herbicides and other chemical products.]

RN: American Cyanamid, yes, yes, chemicals, and my father actually was in on the first batch of plastic. He was in on the first batch of plastic in America. They made the first; he was in on that, that deal. Anyway, so, he and his best friend worked at American Cyanamid and American Cyanamid, of course, was in Bound Brook. They worked until a certain time--I guess they worked until eight or nine--they went to the festival. So, they were renting a room from one of my mother's girlfriends, who had met my father and his friend casually. So, she said to my mother, "This is Ed Naldi, this is John Shikoluk, and they're nice guys," and one thing led to another, a whirlwind romance. He asked her out and they went roller-skating in Plainfield and gallivanting. He had a nice car, because his mother was well-off. He had a green, I think she said it was a green Dodge or something really good-looking. He had a couple girlfriends; supposedly, he had a fiancée, too. If you saw the pictures--you ever hear of Ann, oh, God, what's her name, famous actress in the '30s? Ann Sterling, is that her name? no. Carlene, who was that actress?

Carlene Naldi: Sheridan.

RN: Ann Sheridan, if you ever see pictures, beautiful. My father's girlfriend looked just like Ann Sheridan, [laughter] I'm serious, right, gorgeous, and she was tall. My grandmother loved her, my father's mother loved her, because her father had a dairy business. So, it was like, "Wow, you're marrying into money and you have a good position, she's good," right. This'll be off the record, the next thing I say, okay.

SI: Do you want me to stop recording?

RN: No, you can edit it.

SI: You can have it for the family.

RN: This is a funny story. [laughter] My father told his girlfriend, "I have another girlfriend. I'm really serious. I'm sorry." She took it real well and, after a bunch of time, half a year or so, he came to introduce my mother to his mother, which is the custom, right. "Mom, this is Dea Doganieri. I love her. We're going to get married." She goes, "You left Betty for this little shit?" [laughter] Can you imagine? My mother broke down, obviously, right, and my father said, "Mom," and, of course, he consoled my mother. Afterwards, she apologized and they got along. So, they said it was a great relationship, but it was--the first time, "You left her for this..." Can you imagine? oh, jeez. So, that's the way it started, yes.

SI: You said that there was a large Italian-American population Bound Brook.

RN: There was, yes.

SI: What about out in Whitehouse, New Jersey?

RN: Whitehouse, I think, mostly, believe it or not, I think it was Polish immigrants, Russian immigrants, Italian, too, but I think, mostly, I look at the yearbook for my father, there's no definite ethnic component, really. A funny story, I'll tell you a funny story, though. My father was walking--they used to walk home from high school, about ten miles, after football practice--and it's a long walk. I don't know how long ten miles takes, probably takes a couple hours, right, at least. So, it was dark, getting dark, and they used to go along Route 22 to get home, whatever road that was then. A guy came by in a big car, like a Lincoln or Cadillac, put the brakes on, stopped. My father was sixteen or so. He said, "Are you related to Giulio Naldi?" which was my grandfather, who died when my father was six months. My father said, "Yes." He said, "I knew your father." This guy, you have to imagine, it was farms, it was a woodland, it really was nature, [laughter] stopped the car in the middle of nowhere, recognized my father's face from his father, in the middle of nowhere. Isn't that something?

SI: Yes.

RN: My father used to always tell that story, and the guy just drove off, didn't know who he was or anything. Things like that happened. [laughter]

SI: You said that he entered high school, but he had to leave to help his father.

RN: To help his father's restaurant, my grandfather in the restaurant. My step-grandfather had a restaurant. He was a chef. My original grandfather had a tremendous store. It, like, sold olive oil and all the Italian goods, pasta and everything, huge. He was a very well-educated man. He spoke seven languages, they said. He was a connoisseur of the opera. He knew [opera singer Enrico] Caruso in 1916, '15, '14. He knew Caruso. So, he was a very educated man. So, anyway, my father, his stepfather was a chef, a cook, cook, really, had his own restaurant. My father helped him for a couple of years, went back to high school and graduated, yes.

SI: Where was the restaurant?

RN: New York City, I think in the same place that he was born, in that area. I don't know for sure. I have a photo of the restaurant, but of the inside, but nothing about the outside, yes.

SI: Do you remember the name of the restaurant?

RN: No. It might've been (Enrico's?), that was his name, yes, right here, from Bologna, yes. He was my grandfather's very good friend. So, it was four or five years later, my grandmother [married him], I guess convenience or love--who knows?--whatever, never know.

SI: After he graduated high school, then, he went to American Cyanamid.

RN: I think he went to work. Yes, I think he did. He was in the National Guard. That's a funny story, too, because his best friend, Johnny Shikoluk, who I mentioned before, they were real close. My father joined the National Guard. So, he told his best friend, he said, "Hey, you've got to come with me. I joined a motorcycle club." [laughter] So, Johnny goes, joins, and he doesn't know it's the National Guard. The funny thing was, my father, when he got married, he was drafted, but, because he was married, he was given a deferment. He made buttons; I think that's what he did for the war effort. My Uncle Johnny, who joined, as a motorcycle gang, the National Guard, went off to England and fought, yes, [laughter] but he was happy, because he met his wife there in England. So, he married an English girl and we've known them for a hundred years, his family, yes, a great family.

SI: Was your uncle in the infantry?

RN: He was--well, we called him "uncle," but he's not.

SI: Oh.

RN: No, we call him Uncle John, we do. We've called him that from birth, aunt and uncle, Aunt Betty, Uncle Johnny. They are closer than relatives, but he went, yes, infantry and he ended up-- he fought on the front--but, because he was Polish, he understood Russian. So, he became a translator and he rode, rode the little bike, for General--not Patton, one of the great generals in World War II. He translated, my Uncle Johnny, yes. [When] my father was in the National Guard, he drove Norman Schwarzkopf's [father], the first head of the State Troopers, Norman Schwarzkopf, the State Police. My father drove for him in the National Guard. Isn't that funny, these two guys, what they did? [Editor's Note: Colonel H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Sr., served as founding superintendent of the New Jersey State Troopers from July 1921 to June 1936. His son, US Army General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Jr., served as Commander-in-Chief, Central Command during the 1991 Persian Gulf War and was the chief architect of Operation DESERT STORM.] So, he started at Cyanamid right away, Calco. It was called Calco, yes.

SI: Do you have a sense of what he did at Calco?

RN: Yes, he did a couple things. First, I think he started as a [worker], like, mixing plastics and stuff like that, but he ended up as a millwright mechanic, pipes, big pipes. The funny thing was, he was claustrophobic, because he couldn't go in those big pipes, but he still had to do it; so, yes, forty-five years, I think, yes, forty-five years, same place.

SI: That is history in itself.

RN: Yes.

SI: People do not stay at the same company that long.

RN: Yes, I know.

SI: I have interviewed a few people who worked for Calco and they talked about how dirty the work could be, with the mixing and all of that. Did he ever talk about things like that?

RN: Definitely, because the town itself, there were some times in the summer, you could see, like, the yellow smoke. I don't know how it affected people cancer-wise and stuff like that. They don't have any statistics, but, yes, there was a lot of chemical stuff going on.

SI: Do you know if that was why he moved into the other area?

RN: No, we lived in Bound Brook.

SI: No, I meant out of the mixing house and into millwright work.

RN: Oh, I don't know, I don't know that. I think he just gradually went to that area. It was pretty soon into his career.

SI: Was he involved in any union work there?

RN: He was in the union, yes, he was. He really was. He was very, very pro-union. He believed in it, because I have a hat downstairs, a blue hardhat, that has his starting salary--I think it was like, if I say fifty-five cents an hour, imagine that?--and ended up, like, nineteen dollars an hour. So, it was a big progress and he believed in it, he really did. I remember him calling some guys "scabs." I didn't know what that meant at that point, but he believed in it very strongly, because he believed that only by sticking together could they get benefits, health. His health [benefits], I mean, they ended up tremendous. My mother still gets a pension and health insurance for my father's [work], even though he's gone, he's dead. She still gets a pension, health insurance, which is not big, it's not a lot, but it makes a difference for her care, really does. So, that's a good thing.

SI: Going back to your mother, she came here at eight-and-a-half and entered school in Bound Brook.

RN: Yes.

SI: How far did she go in school?

RN: She only went to eighth grade and that's one of the regrets of her life, although she got a GED. She got her graduate [equivalency] later on. She did get her high school diploma, but, in-- would that be 1935?--the way my mother's family was structured, the boys were the most important thing. So, the boys, both of my uncles had master's degrees, beyond master's even. My uncle taught for forty-two years in Manville, was head of the music department, other uncle taught in Kansas, taught in East Brunswick. So, education was very, very important, but for the male. My mother was probably the smartest of the group, I'm serious, and those boys, my uncles, are very smart. My mother is extraordinarily smart. When she went for her first test for memory, she was about eighty-eight, eighty-nine, the doctor said, "Well, she has a little bit of

dementia, it's going that way," he said, "but you know what?" He said, "She has a lot of capacity." That's what he said. So, she can forget a lot and still know a lot. So, she has a very fine brain, very fine brain. So, I think her one regret, I think she could've done what women didn't do, a lot of women didn't, a great education, a profession, definitely could've done that, without a doubt in my mind.

SI: Did she go to work?

RN: She did. She worked at many things. She didn't leave the home until I was fifteen or so, but she sold *World Books*, she sold Avon at night, privately. In politics, she was a Democratic woman in the town, for the local party.

SI: A committeewoman?

RN: Committee, yes, committeewoman, yes, and then, [when I was] fifteen, she went to work in American Cyanamid. She was a clerk for about seven years, and then, she worked in a bank for the last twenty years of her employment. So, she had a varied [career], twenty years in the bank, seven years at Calco and the other stuff. So, she worked. Plus, I don't know how they did it, but they saved money; I don't know how on their salaries. I know that they were given a real opportunity. When my mother and father left Whitehouse, there was a big family thing. She was taking care of her mother-in-law, my father's mother, who was very sick. She had a lot of strokes. My mother was taking care of her, night and day. His stepfather and my father, my step-grandfather and my father, somehow, had a problem. It emanated from the fact that two children were born with my real grandfather, two children were born after with my step-grandfather. Naturally, he was closer to those two children. He tried not to show favoritism, I'm sure, but, at a certain point, when my father and mother were living there, it became a real issue and my father said, "I can't live here anymore." My step-grandfather said, "Your wife can stay--you've got to go," [laughter] to my father, and his wife said, "No, I go where he goes." Anyway, so, they left and they had nowhere to go, really. They were looking for an apartment and a friend of my mother's had a situation where she said, "Look, the American Legion in Bound Brook needs a caretaker. You'll have a beautiful apartment on the side of the [building]." The American Legion in Bound Brook was unbelievable. It was a huge [facility], had a staircase like *Gone With the Wind*, like this, it goes to both sides like this, had a ballroom that was bigger than this whole house, a ballroom, a bar that was on the side and about five apartments upstairs. So, the deal was that my mother and father would care-take the place and live there rent-free. So, the caretaking, you ask, "What do you do?" What they had to do is put the flag up every day, make sure the bar, when people came for parties, they had the ice and the soda and clean up afterwards, and my father had to shovel coal a couple years, in the wintertime. That was it and it was, like, unbelievable. So, I think what they did was, because I was a kid, I don't know--you don't know what your parents really do--but I'm told that those five years, my mother and father saved, like, a thousand dollars a month--wait, not that much, that doesn't seem right--a thousand dollars a year, yes, because, after the five years, they put a down payment on a house in Bound Brook. The down payment, almost, they already had their mortgage. So, [between] my father's salary and my mother's little work, they did things together. They worked real hard, yes.

SI: What years were you living at the American Legion?

RN: '49 to '54.

SI: You were in the apartment.

RN: Yes, I remember it well.

SI: Your parents got married in 1940.

RN: Yes, right, wow.

SI: You wrote it down on the pre-interview survey. [laughter]

RN: Without notes, jeez, that's fantastic.

SI: That was on the eve of World War II.

RN: Yes, it was.

SI: Did they ever talk about how the war affected their lives?

RN: It affected them a lot. First of all, as I said before, my father was drafted. They all went to Washington, DC, when he was going to be inducted. He walked up the steps. My grandmother and my mother went with him and he went up and, of course, everybody's crying. He's going to be gone. They turned around, they waited awhile. He came down the steps, he said, "I've been deferred." So, that was the first thing. So, then, after that, I guess my father had to do something for the effort. I said I think he made buttons. That's what I think he did. I don't know how often he did that. Of course, I was born right after Pearl Harbor, basically, about two months later.

SI: What about rationing or any hardships? Did they ever talk about that?

RN: They never talked about it. I think they had a lot of hard times, but I don't think they ever talked about anything like that. Somehow, they dealt with it. They were very lucky, because, also, the house we lived in in Plainfield when my parents were married, from '40 to '47, I think that's the period of time, the house where they lived--maybe it was '42 to '47, whenever they lived in Plainfield, five or six or seven years--that house, my grandmother on my father's side, my father's mother, owned the house, supposedly. This became an issue also. So, they lived there and I think they paid rent. She said, "You didn't have to," but they did. So, they paid her rent, and then, that's the reason why we moved to Whitehouse, because, at a certain point, one of my grandmother's sisters said, "That's not your house. It's all our house and my daughter wants to live there." So, that family took precedence and that's when we moved Whitehouse for that eight or nine months, yes, interesting. I didn't know this, obviously, until much later.

SI: Did your parents ever mention if they faced any prejudice, particularly in the years leading up to the war and early in the war?

RN: That's interesting; because they're Italian? If they did, they never said anything, no. I do remember one thing that was interesting. My grandfather was a tailor, my mother's father, and he was the kind of guy that, literally, probably never took out the garbage or washed a dish. I don't think he did anything physical, anything, except sew, because he was a master tailor, worked at Bond's for forty years. I guess he was never out of work, but he had to sign up for--the TVA, was that the [thing]?

SI: The WPA?

RN: The one where you exchanged doing, let's say sewing for somebody, like a barter system they had, where you would do something in the town for somebody, sew pants, and then, you had to do something else.

SI: It could be the WPA. [Editor's Note: The Works Progress Administration, or, after 1939, the Works Project Administration, was an agency that was part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and employed millions on public works projects like buildings and roads, as well as in specialized areas, such as the arts, from 1935 to 1943.]

RN: Yes, whatever it was. So, I think my grandfather, for whatever reason, the guy came--it was a snowstorm--and somebody came to the door with a shovel and said, "Mr. Doganieri, you have to shovel the snow," because it was one of the things he had to do. He went, "What? I don't even know how to shovel snow." [laughter] I think my grandmother did it for him, but whatever he had to do, that was one of his duties he had to do. Is that the story? something like that, yes.

CN: That's the story.

RN: Yes, right, it's very funny. He's a funny guy.

SI: Let us get into some of your earliest memories. You lived in Plainfield until you were about ...

RN: Six or seven, yes.

SI: Do you have any memories of that early period?

RN: It's funny how you remember things, like, I remember--I actually know exactly where the place is now--Pleasant Avenue. I do have memories of growing up. It was a nice neighborhood, like about eight houses, a lot of room to play in the field on the left. The school--you know what I remember?--the school, because I remember, in first grade, we were spelling "hippopotamus," "rhinoceros," first grade. I always thought that was remarkable. I look back and I always remembered that when I was older. I said, "My goodness, what kind of education." It was tremendous, right. I remember birthday parties there. I remember, my brother fell off the porch in the back. I remember, my friend Richie (Gallo?) came over, my cousin, and we were playing in the backyard, in Plainfield, and he went like this and he put a spoon [on the ground] and the spoon went into the ground and disappeared. We had, like, a cesspool or something that was

eating the [spoon], [laughter] that was like a hole. It was like--what would you call it?--a sinkhole. Oh, my god, so, they had to get that fixed. What else? I fell off of monkey bars. I had tonsillitis when I was three, had my tonsils removed, which I don't know if it had any effect on the voice, I'm not sure. What else?

SI: Since you obviously have had a long career in the arts, growing up, was there a lot of music in the house?

RN: Yes. As I said, my uncle was a music teacher. My mother loved music, loved opera, too. We always had records playing. My mother had her Victrola record player and we played records all the time, all the time. I remember hearing the (Great Tenor?) album when I was, like, about twelve. I heard ten wonderful tenors singing arias, but I heard classical music way before that. I was in a choir in second grade when I came to Bound Brook, the first couple months I was in Bound Brook. They selected people to sing for a choir that went to Princeton, to sing. I was seven years old. So, I always sang, yes. My uncle, as I said, was a musician. I took clarinet when I was seven. He was my teacher. [Mr. Naldi whistles.] That's some of the worst memories of my life. He was a great teacher for everybody else, but, for me, I think he expected me to be fantastic. So, I felt a lot of pressure, as a little kid, and those lessons were really hard for me. [laughter] I never told him, really. I probably should've, but they were tough. They were tough. He was a tough teacher, good teacher, but I wasn't ready.

SI: Did you continue with him?

RN: I continued for a couple years, and then, by that time, I was good enough to be in bands and stuff, which I did all through high school, grammar school--memories, huh?

SI: Do you go to school in Whitehouse?

RN: Yes, I was in second grade. We went in the summertime, like maybe June, so, three months before school, went to school, this little public school down the street, went there until January, so, four months, yes.

SI: Then, you went to ...

RN: Bound Brook, yes.

SI: Do you have any memories of differences in quality or experience?

RN: I don't think I was aware, but, no, I wasn't aware of that. I think, at that time, public education--I'm sure it is true today, I really believe it's true today, too--the teachers were great. I mean, they really were. They were memorable. They had nicknames, "Tugboat" Annie Wilson, stuff like that, Miss Wilson and Mr. Deppen, who [were] disciplinarians and really good, yes.

SI: What was the first school that you attended in Bound Brook?

RN: Lamonte, Lamonte School in Bound Brook. It's still there, right? I think it's still there, yes, Lamonte School, end of second grade, third and fourth. Then, I went to Smalley School, which was a brand-new school. I was in the first year of Smalley School, fifth and sixth; seventh and eighth, what was called, at that time, grammar school at Bound Brook High School, grammar school, and then, high school was nine, ten, eleven, twelve, yes.

SI: It is interesting that you bring up the fact that Smalley was a new school. I know that a lot of the infrastructure in public education was expanding because of the Baby Boom.

RN: Right.

SI: Did you get a sense if it was crowded?

RN: No, it wasn't crowded, but I remember that it was very new, obviously. Everything was clean and shiny. Lamonte was an old school. I mean, even at that time, it was old, a certain kind of--not dingy, but a darker quality. Smalley School was bright and open. So, yes, it was nice.

SI: Do any teachers stand out in your memory?

RN: Absolutely, they do. There was a woman named--well, Miss Buono--was that her name, Miss Buono, right?

CN: Yes.

RN: For some reason, in fifth grade, I don't know, I was an extrovert then. I don't think I am now, but I was then. I was really acting out something in fifth grade, because I was pretty funny, really, quite frankly. I mean, people would just be laughing. I would tell jokes, I'd make funny faces, whatever. So, at the end of the year, she actually had me sit in the front of the class by myself with my back to the class. I was a good student, but I think I was sort of bored, maybe, I don't know, but, in sixth grade, I had a teacher named Mr. Deppen. He died, tragically, very young. I'll never forget him, because he had such an enthusiasm for teaching, very strict, but fair. I remember that what happened [was], an incident--you might want to edit this; this is interesting to me--in fifth grade, I got glasses. First time you need glasses, you go to the chart and you go, "Oh, my god, I can't see that," [laughter] and you never knew, right. So, I was sort of proud of them. Some kids don't like them and I was sort of proud of my glasses. I had them on and this kid, his name was John, he came up--the teacher left the class--and he goes, "Ronnie's green glasses," things like that--hit them with a ruler. I said, "John, stop it, stop it." The teacher was not there and he continued and I hit him. I hit him. From that point on, this kid John was like a nemesis. It's like he never did anything after that, truly, but I didn't like him. You know how sometimes, when you're a kid, you don't have real reason--that may have been the reason--but I didn't know. I just know I didn't like him. So, in an assembly in sixth grade, he sat down in front of me and I pulled his chair out from under him and the kids went hysterical, right. Mr. Deppen, who I was talking about, grabbed me by my collar, took me on the side and said, "What is wrong with you? How could you? You could've hurt him. You embarrassed him," gave me a whole [dressing down]. I remember that to this day, it was just so riveting and, really, it made me say, "Whoa, what am I doing?" I know I'm a kid, but you still had to have

some sense of decency about you. So, that really sort of straightened me out. He was a great guy, fantastic, great teacher. I remember him very well.

SI: Do they have actual music programs there?

RN: Yes, we had a choir, we had a little choir. Yes, we did, fourth, fifth, sixth, everywhere; in fact, I remember, in fourth grade, we had a talent show. We all sang and auditioned and we sang. It was really great. I think that music was very, very important and, as I got into seventh grade, it exploded, because our high school music director was the most influential person in my life of anybody, by a mile, Gene Ferguson. He was an opera singer. Still, part of him was thinking of a career, but he was a totally dedicated conductor. He loved conducting. So, he was torn--he wanted to sing, but he loved conducting. He was such a disciplinarian and, yet, the kids loved him. That's really hard. As you go through life and you see all [types of] teachers, you tend to be either very, very nice and kind and gentle and a halfway good disciplinarian or you're a very hard disciplinarian and people don't perceive you as being very nice. It's hard to find the line where people respect you, love you, and, yet, you're a disciplinarian. This guy could get in front of a choir and, in high school, people are wise guys. There's always wise guys, right, I mean, guys who talk, mouth off and say things. This guy would just say, the name "Stevie, for example, and these kids, after a while, loved him. They needed that discipline. Anyway, he came with a background of classical music. So, in seventh grade, I sang the lead in a Gilbert & Sullivan operetta, seventh grade. My voice had changed in the summer--he'd vocalized me--and I was a tenor already. So, as I said, seventh and all through high school--even Carlene sang with me in sophomore, junior and senior year--we sang leads and we sang operettas and did *The Messiah*, *Elijah*, the Rossini *Stabat Mater*--what else?--the Verdi *Requiem*. We did everything. This guy did it, and then, later on, he left the high school, after I left, maybe three or four years later, and had a big career in Germany, sang. He just died a couple years ago, phenomenal man. We keep in touch with his family, just phenomenal, just phenomenal, I can't tell you.

SI: Did you have outside coaching and teaching at that time or was it all in school?

RN: No, just in school, yes.

SI: Outside of your love of music, did you have other interests?

RN: Athletics, yes. I loved baseball and basketball, even liked football. I didn't play that, but I was the captain of my baseball and basketball team my senior year and I think I have four or five varsity letters. I loved it. I mean, I really loved basketball so much that I actually thought I might play it in college, but, of course, I was too small, but I really loved it. I loved sports, still do.

SI: Who were the big rivals for Bound Brook then?

RN: Somerville. In fact, a very interesting story--this should be on the tape, really--my senior year, it was coming down to sports and music. I had a scholarship to Michigan State University, East Lansing, for mathematics, of all things. My goal, at that time, was to teach math on the seventh and eighth-grade level or high school and be a coach. I wanted to be a baseball and

basketball coach. I'll digress a little bit here, tell you just two stories at once. I had the scholarship, graduated from high school. Unbeknownst to me, Mr. Ferguson, Gene Ferguson, the choir director/teacher, the choir director, had sent tapes of me to Indiana University. So, after I graduated from high school, going to Michigan State, I got letters from Indiana saying, "We're awarding you four scholarships in music." So, here I am going, "Whoa, I love to sing, but am I going to be a singer?" I chose Indiana, because that was my path. I used to say to Mr. Ferguson, "You cursed me--you kept me in music," [laughter] but, anyway, I digress. So, in high school, Somerville was our big rival. At that time, I auditioned for a couple Metropolitan Opera auditions for the high school kids. Also, Opera New Jersey, I don't know what they call it now, but they had a competition where what they would do is pick an opera--that year, it was *Don Giovanni*--and all the arias from there were sung by people who auditioned and they picked people to sing an aria. So, the best people, some sopranos sang their arias, tenors sang *Dalla sua pace, Il mio tesoro*. I was chosen. Now, the concert's coming up. It's two weeks ahead. Saturday night, we're playing Somerville. I had scored sixteen points in the first Somerville game, which was my career high, by the way. I was a point guard. Basically, I would bounce the ball to the left, to Billy Hockridge, or bounce the ball to the right, to Mike Mauro, and they'd shoot. That was my job--I played defense. I wasn't allowed to shoot by the coach, but, that game, I shot and I made, like, took eight shots, made seven, whatever it was, and two foul shots. So, two weeks before the game, I said to the coach, Coach Barile, I said, "Coach, this is very tough," I said, "I think I have to miss the Somerville game." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, I was picked for the New Jersey State Opera auditions as the winner and I'm going to sing an aria on that Saturday night, the same as the Somerville game." He said, "Really? Okay," and he let it go. I was in practice, right, and, a couple days later, a couple of days before the game, I said, "Coach, you know I'm not going to be here Saturday." He goes, "Oh, yes, I forgot. Okay." So, I did that and, when I came back from that concert, after the game, I was benched for the rest of the year. It became a cause célèbre, because the town, actually, wrote to the newspapers and to the local Board of Education and said, "Why isn't Naldi playing?" Barile had to explain himself, but that was a very negative incident. He was a great guy. I don't quite understand, looking back, why he was so harsh on that, but, then, again, I guess a form of discipline, I don't know. What do you think?

SI: Could be.

RN: I mean, I'm trying to put myself in his position--I think I might be bigger than that. I might say, "Well, his music, he's eighteen years old, seventeen years old, music's going to be his life, missed the game for a really good reason. He didn't flake out." I don't know, I might have, but I always loved Coach Barile and I still do, but that was a very negative incident, music and sports, conflict. [laughter]

SI: I want to ask a few questions, before we get into your college years, about your family life in the early 1950s.

RN: Sure.

SI: Were there any aspects of Italian tradition that you would see in your family?

RN: Sure. In fact, I was so surprised, later on in college, when I would say things I did, especially with celebrations, food, holidays, that I was so shocked that their families didn't get together more. We had dinner every night together. That was very important. I didn't realize that some people didn't. I thought that was what you do. We had big feasts at Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Easter, holidays, whatever. My family would get together and it was a very, very important part of growing up. I just never realized that some people didn't have these traditions. I would say, like Christmas Eve, my goodness, we have all this food.

[TAPE PAUSED]

RN: Where were we? Oh, feasts, okay, so, Christmas Eve, for example, right; well, that's, obviously, many cultures have Christmas Eve, ethnic. I don't know, do Germans have that? Do Germans have Christmas Eve?

CN: I am sure they do.

RN: The Polish do, definitely, the Polish do, yes. French don't, I don't think the French do, for some reason.

SI: I am not sure.

RN: I'm not sure, either, but, anyway, of course, we had the fishes, the fishes, the eels and all the stuff, and we continue that to this day. Of course, I would go to college and tell the people that and they'd say, "Oh, that sounds really good." So, that was something like that. So, yes, I remember those things, things like that. Of course, the Catholic religion was very important. Many of the Bound Brook people went to Catholic schools and the elementary kids went to Catholic education after school, Catechism. I remember Catechism very well, because I remember we used to do first Fridays and, when you're a kid, after Communion, they would have a little breakfast, hot chocolate and they had crumb buns and these other little buns. I don't even know what they are, but the memory of that, you just never forget things like that. So, it's very interesting. That was very interesting. So, that was very important, the religion.

SI: Were there activities, like youth groups? Were you an altar boy?

RN: I never did that, I never did that. No, I didn't do the altar boy [thing], but I did consider, when I was, like, fourteen or fifteen, I did consider--like, every Catholic boy must think of being a priest, somewhere along the line--but that quickly evaporated, considering the alternative, "Oh, no, I think I won't."

SI: What was the name of your church?

RN: St. Joseph's. My mother got married in St. Mary's, which was down the street from her house, but St. Joseph's in Bound Brook. It's funny, St. Joseph's in North Plainfield is here also, St. Joseph's, yes.

SI: Was it the case that one ethnicity went to one Catholic church and one went to another?

RN: In a certain way, yes, and they had a lot to do with location. Because Bound Brook is a small town, people walked everywhere. So, location was important, but St. Mary's was, primarily, had a Polish pastor and it was a Polish church. There were a lot of Poles. In fact, today, I think it's called St. Mary's of, whatever, Czestochowa or something, I think it is, even now, yes.

SI: Was St. Joseph's mostly Italian?

RN: I think so, I think. I can't say for sure. I'll tell you the truth, I was not so aware of ethnicity then. I mean, everybody, most everybody, I knew was mixed. So, I didn't know.

SI: Did they still have the festivals when you were growing up?

RN: I don't even know; I haven't kept track of Bound Brook. I don't know, I really don't know. When I was a kid, they had them, yes.

SI: Would your family be involved in planning them?

RN: No.

SI: Just going.

RN: Just going, yes.

SI: Were there a lot of different ethnicities in your neighborhood?

RN: Definitely, yes. It was, very much. I think, out of fifteen homes, there might've been three, three Italian people at that point, yes.

SI: Did everyone get along?

RN: Oh, yes, definitely, as far as I know. [laughter] When you're a kid, you don't know too much, talk to your parents. You think you do, but you don't.

SI: Do you think that you ever faced any prejudice coming from an Italian background?

RN: I only know of one time in my life, that was obvious, and it was very strange, very strange. Much later, I was singing in a Presbyterian church in Memphis, Tennessee. We lived in Memphis for a while and the choir director was a very, very good friend of mine, and still is. In a rehearsal, he said to the choir, he said, "Listen," he goes, "you guys got to sing like a WOP. You've got to sing like Ron." I had never heard that before and I was, like, in my twenties. I never really heard that so obvious and he didn't mean it. He meant it as a compliment, sing with legato, said, "Sing with legato, sing like Ron, like a WOP, like an Italian." I was so shocked to hear those words come from him. So, I told him, I said, "I don't think that was very nice." He

said, "I didn't mean anything by it," but that's the only time I ever really [saw it], in my face, but I'm sure, behind my back--do you remember anything, in high school or anything? Do you?

CN: No.

RN: No.

SI: You two met in high school.

RN: Oh, yes, eighth grade. [laughter]

SI: Tell us about that.

RN: Well, she was a cute little girl from Pennsylvania. She had freckles and red hair [laughter] and she's still cute. I didn't like her at first, but we were cast in the operettas together. Through the years, as the years [went by], my junior year, I sort of said, "She's sort of nice." My mother always liked her, by the way. So, we were going together in junior and senior year. We got married after my freshman year in college, yes, been together for a long time, fifty-four years, yes.

SI: Wow.

RN: That's a long time, right.

SI: Yes, good, congratulations.

RN: Thank you.

SI: That is rare these days.

RN: A lot of luck, good genes. [laughter]

SI: You actually went to Michigan State first.

RN: No.

SI: That did not happen.

RN: No. As I said, what happened was, basically, that when I graduated from high school, after I graduated, I was committed to Michigan State, but Indiana offered me the scholarships. So, I had to make a real quick decision. They wanted to know by July the 7th or something like that. I graduated June 30th, they wanted to know by July 14th, whatever it was. So, I just went through my mind, talked with my mother and father, talked to some people, Mr. Ferguson, "What do you think? Can I do it?" He said, "You can do it. You can be [a singer]." So, I contacted Michigan State first and said, "Could I get out of my scholarship?" They said, "Yes," and I did; so, went to Indiana.

SI: You went out to Bloomington.

RN: Yes.

SI: What was that like? Was there a culture shock?

RN: Oh, that was really something. First of all, I went--(Arlene Blomberg?), was that her name?--(Arlene Blomberg?) was a classmate of mine. Her father was taking her to Indiana. So, somehow, I hitched a ride with them. We drove to Indiana and I'd never been anywhere, really, just to Pennsylvania; crossed Pennsylvania, Ohio, Columbus, Ohio. "Oh, my God," I said, "whoa, where are we?" Indiana, it was just--I felt totally isolated. I knew no one, except Arlene, who was off doing what she had to do in her academic field. I just knew nothing. So, I already felt overwhelmed. I was in a dormitory. My roommate was a guy from Indiana, Bob (Lewis?), who was from Winamac, a really nice guy. Did you ever watch, see, *Hawaii Five-0*, Danny, the guy Danny? looked exactly like that, just the same height, same wise guy, same guy, good roommate, tremendous. We have this little room, bunkbeds, and I found out early that the main thing that college guys did was, you couldn't wait for Saturday, to go out in the park, out in a field, wherever they went, and get drunk, which just blew my mind. He would come back and I'd go, next Sunday morning, I'd say, "Did you have a good time?" He said, "Yes." I said, "How could you have a good time? You don't even remember. What'd you do?" He doesn't remember anything. "How could you drink and not remember what you do?" because I never understood how that could be a possibility. Why would you do something like that, right, to your body and to your mind? So, college was really--I think my learning curve was, I was here and I think it went from here to here in about three weeks. [laughter] First of all, I had class at seven-thirty in the morning. Music people, when you had eighteen hours of credit, didn't mean you went to school eighteen hours. Chorus alone was nine hours a week, one credit, voice lessons, three credits, three times a week. I mean, I thought that was even, but a lot of the things were many hours for the credits. So, I was going to school, like, twenty-four hours, and then, you're involved in the opera, which would rehearse extra, other things. So, I'll never forget this, I auditioned. I knew two arias. I sang the one I felt was better, which I still quite love, from *Rigoletto*, Questa o Quella sang it and I thought I did well. They clapped, it was good, okay. I'm a freshman. I look up, about the fourth day of class, and there's a board that has the casting of the operas. So, *Magic Flute*, there's an "A" cast and a "B" cast, because they always have two casts. So, I see my name. I said, "Oh, my name," and the guy next to me is Tom Wright. I met him, he's from Oklahoma. This kid was eighteen years old, but knew everything about opera. He was in music history. He wasn't so much a performer, but he was a music historian, eighteen years old, knew everything about opera. I said, "Tom, look," I said, "there's my name there." I said, "Tamino--is that a good part?" He goes, "Tamino? That's the tenor lead." "Really?" I didn't even know that Tamino was the tenor lead. When they asked me to pick my teacher, they had this whole list of Metropolitan Opera people--I didn't know anybody. They were famous; I didn't know them. "So, who do you want to study with?" I went, "Who should I study with? I don't know." "Well, Mr. Charles Kullman?" "That sounds good." He was the tenor of the Metropolitan Opera for twenty-five years. I didn't even know who he was. [laughter] So, anyway, Mr. Charles Kullman, I walk in and this is a famous Metropolitan Opera tenor. So, we start to take lessons. He's a very nice man, oh, my God, he was so wonderful, but he didn't

know--it was his first teaching position and, basically, he was a performer, still performing. So, basically, you would imitate what he did. You'd sing and he'd [say], "Do it like this." So, after about three weeks of doing Tamino, he goes to me, he says, "You can't sing Tamino. [laughter] It's too hard for you." I said, "Well, I'm going to do it." He said, "Okay." So, I did do it. I made my debut when I was eighteen, singing Tamino, and it went on from there.

SI: How did that experience differ from your earlier performing experiences?

RN: Well, obviously, it's opera, much more difficult, much more difficult, much more disciplined, bigger range, bigger demands, I mean, more demanding, an orchestra. It was really quite challenging, but I guess I did okay, because, I mean, the next four years, I did something like, I think, fourteen leading roles. I did four secondary roles, were big roles, was in choruses--I mean, I did everything. So, it was tremendous.

SI: How many hours a week did you have to devote to this?

RN: Oh, my goodness, jeez, well, first of all, I had school, which was about--homework and everything, that's demanding as heck. In fact, my first two years, I think my academics were not--I mean, I did the best I could, but I was so overwhelmed with school, getting married, everything else, I mean, it was like [Mr. Naldi makes an exasperated sound]. So, my grades were a little bit not great, but, the last two years, I did pretty well and, my graduate year, I did phenomenal, as far as academics, but I learned how to study, too. I mean, I guess in a week, we had, if you were in an opera, you're spending five hours a day in rehearsal, for the time of your opera, which is probably a three-week period. That's in addition to school and taking voice lessons and everything else. So, I look back and I think, "Thank God for youth," because I don't think I could do anything like that today. I mean, it's just overwhelming, really, truly, yes.

SI: The list of teachers that they put in front of you--were they faculty members there?

RN: They were faculty members, yes, they were faculty members, very, very famous, Madame [Dorothee] Manski, Martha Lipton, I remember some of the names now, Hans Busch, Tibor Kozma, Margaret Harshaw, who I studied with later on, many, many famous people who were on the Met rosters, rosters of opera companies throughout the world, fantastic, famous, famous people.

SI: Do any of them stand out in terms of their teaching style?

RN: The thing is, I only had two teachers--I actually had three, three voice teachers--Kullman was the first, had him for two years. I had a guy named William Shriner, who I didn't know, but I thought I liked his methods, lasted only one semester with him. Then, Margaret Harshaw was my last teacher, very influential and a very, very famous singer. She was a mezzo soprano who became, after ten or twelve years at the Metropolitan Opera, she became one of the world's greatest Wagnerian sopranos. So, she changed from a mezzo to a Wagnerian soprano, sang *Lohengrin*. So, she was very famous. She was from Philadelphia. I was her first batch of students. She was a great influence on me. She became many times more famous in later years

because she taught everywhere. She taught at Curtis [Institute of Music], she taught at Indiana, she taught at--I forget where else--but she had a thousand students who were famous, yes, very.

SI: Do you have any impressions of your fellow students, the people you performed with?

RN: Oh, yes, my goodness, we had some great students. One of my fellow baritones was Roy Samuelsen. He was older than I was. He was a graduate student, I was a twenty-year-old sophomore. We sang *Barber of Seville* together and Roy was of Norwegian background, but from the mountains of Montana or something. He had a fantastic voice. He was a big guy and he had a big voice. I said to Margaret Harshaw, I said, "Margaret, how am I going to sing a duet with this guy? He's got a voice that's about three times higher, louder, than mine." She said, "Don't even worry about it." She said, "What you do is, when you go for the high note at the end, you sing it a little sharp. They'll always hear you." [laughter] So, [singing], "Da-dah," I go, [singing], "Da-daah," and, sure enough, a little trick. Anyway, I remember that. He was one of my good student friends and Roger Havranek and many, oh, Johnny Walker, I'm still in touch with Johnny Walker, great tenor then, Tom West, terrific colleagues, great singers, young singers, Jim Mulholland, gosh, so many, yes.

SI: Were you always performing opera and classical pieces?

RN: Yes, always.

SI: Were you ever interested in any modern music?

RN: Pop? yes, sometimes. So, I sang Frank Sinatra, a little bit, and that kind of [music]. Oh, barbershop quartet, I also enjoyed that very much. What else, honey, anything pops up, basically? not really, right, no, mostly classical, yes.

SI: After you got married, were you allowed to live on the campus?

RN: Yes, we did. We lived in what they called married housing, which was Army barracks they bought for married housing. They were very flimsy buildings, but, inside, quite nice, because we had a living room, two bedrooms, a nice bathroom and a little kitchen, quite sufficient, quite nice, fifty dollars a month, [laughter] pretty good, right. That was great; it was great. The neighbors were all in the same boat. Actually, one of them was a music person, a great, great tenor, and the other people were in sociology and other fields and it was great. It was a nice camaraderie, nice community, yes. It was great. Two of our daughters were born there, two of our three daughters. So, it was great.

SI: When were they born?

RN: I think '62 and '64, something like that, yes.

SI: For the record, what are their names?

RN: Ronene and Rebecca, yes. That was Rebecca, yes. [laughter] She doesn't like to be called Rebecca. Her name is Becca, got us all calling her Becca.

SI: We were just talking in the break about some of the higher-up administrators, the Dean.

RN: Right.

SI: Do any memories of those folks stand out?

RN: Dean [Wilfred Conwell] Bain, I remember very well. He was a zealot for opera. He loved [opera], obviously, a great musician, and he loved opera. He promoted that program and I don't think there was anything remotely like that at that point. Other universities have emulated Indiana since that time, but he initiated, first of all, bringing in, as I said, tremendous faculty, not only in voice, but Abbey Simon on piano, I mean, the great Starker, János Starker, the cello, I mean, world-famous artists in every department, piano, voice, violin, everything, world-famous. So, he brought in--he was the first to do bringing in world-famous people at a university, really. I'm sure other disciplines had, great scientists in science, but he did that in music. Then, he brought in great stage directors, great designers. [Cesare] Mario Cristini was a guy, at that point, when I was at the university, he was world-famous. He was at Indiana University designing sets. He wrote my recommendation for my Fulbright, one of the people. So, I mean, these are the kind of people. So, Dean Bain was a really [great supporter]. He was there every week for the opera. He and his wife sat in the front row, criticized, "No, I don't like that staging. I think the orchestra's too loud there," or whatever. So, he was really involved, hands-on, great man, yes. [Editor's Note: Dr. Wilfred Conwell Bain served as Dean of the Indiana University (later Jacobs) School of Music from 1947 to 1973.]

SI: You earned a Fulbright to Rome.

RN: Yes.

SI: Was that before or after you pursued your master's?

RN: That was actually in my Master's. I had started my Master's in '64 and I had applied then, '64, and I got it in early '65. They told me, at that time, which is very flattering, they said they were the best--I must've picked the right guys--because they said it was the best recommendations they ever had for a Fulbright. [laughter] I know one was Cristini. I've forgotten who the other two were--oh, Harshaw, of course, Harshaw--I don't know who the third one was. Do you remember who the third person was?

CN: Was it Glauco Solimeno?

RN: No. Anyway, I got a Fulbright to Rome, yes. That was memorable, obviously, spent twenty-two months in Rome, was supposed to be that, when we got there, there was a link between the Rome Opera House [Teatro dell'Opera di Roma] and the Fulbright Program, so that we were going to be involved in the Opera House. We would coach with the coaches at the Opera House and be in on the groundwork of getting roles and being involved in the opera

company. Well, in the summertime of my Fulbright, the link between that program died. So, the program was severed and we were assigned to Santa Cecilia, the Academy, Music Academy. I'll never forget, I said to the people at the Fulbright, I said, "Listen, I've been going to school night and day for five years. I have two hundred and some credits," because I needed more for my master's degree, obviously. I had over 150 credits for my undergraduate degree, over 150 credits. That's what I was saying about all the classes I had to take, fifty, forty-some in my master's degree. I said, "I have almost two hundred credits. I didn't come to Rome to go to school anymore. I'm going beyond that. I need coaching, voice lessons, an understanding of the opera." So, what they did for me was, they let me choose my voice teacher, who I found by some friend of mine. I coached with Luigi Ricci, who was a very, very famous coach at the Opera House. I mean, he had coached Titta Ruffo, Stracciari, all these famous, famous Italian singers from 1922 to when I was there in the '60s. So, he was, like, seventy-five, eighty years old already and he knew every opera in the repertory backwards. So, I said, "I'm going to coach with him and take voice." Obviously, I was a pariah because I went against the program, basically, not going to Santa Cecilia, but ...

SI: A pariah at the Academy?

RN: At the Fulbright, because they wanted me to go to Santa Cecilia and I went against their program, but I guess I did well enough that they renewed me. So, it was good. Ricci was a phenomenal guy. He was a short, little guy. He has a famous couple books on cadenzas for singers, on the famous cadenzas, very, very famous book, and he coached, as I said, every great singer that passed through Italy from 1920 to '65. He would coach, you'd get half-hour coachings, right. I never saw anything like this in my life. He'd start coaching, he'd correct you, you'd sing, he'd coach, correct, and you heard this, "Ding," "Oh, very good, *buongiorno, ci vediamo*." [laughter] In other words, he would get up, he goes, "Good day, see you next time." It was a half an hour, I mean, it was, "Boom." I never had a musical session like that in my life, because, especially music, it's like, "We can go another couple minutes, just to get it," but, boy, "Ding," "*Buongiorno, ci vediamo*," [laughter] a funny little man, oh, my god, he was incredible, oh, dear. I studied eight or nine complete scores with him, so, it was very memorable. My teacher, my voice teacher, was a guy who was sort of, not a famous tenor, but had a career. He was five feet tall, literally five feet tall--I'm sure that had an influence on his career, really, so short--had a beautiful voice and he loved the voice, the human voice. So, I had him, his name was Licinio Francardi, had a nice couple years with him, was very, very influential, a nice man, good time.

SI: From these mentors and teachers, does anything stand out that was new that you learned?

RN: As I said before, the most influential person in my life was Gene Ferguson, who got me into the thing. Other than that, I think my teachers--they were all influential in one way or other. I think, as far as my voice, I think the main people have been Ferguson, and then, a soprano named Carol Bayard, who really, when I got to New York, really settled my voice and got it in a good place, and then, in recent years, I've had Bill Riley. I'd say Carol Bayard and Gene Ferguson were the main mentors, those two, I would say. I learned more from them than anybody else, especially Bayard, I think, as technically, because Gene gave me the direction and

the confidence and--how would you say?--the psyche to become a singer. Bayard gave me technique and understanding of my voice, more than anybody else. I would say that, yes.

SI: How long were you in Rome?

RN: From '65 to '67.

SI: 1965 to 1967.

RN: Yes.

SI: That was obviously a time when things were changing at home. The culture was changing quite a bit.

RN: That's right, Vietnam--oh, in fact, a very interesting story on that, too. I was told to report to my draft board for Vietnam, '65, just before I was getting--in fact, I got a letter, like, August of '65, just got my master's degree at the end of August, was leaving for Rome, like, September 16th, something like that. Between that time, like September 1st, August the 31st, whatever, I get a letter saying, "Report to your draft board immediately," in Somerville. So, okay, I went there and they said to me, they said, "You can't go to Rome without our permission." I said, "Really? Okay." I walked out, I said, "I'm going to Rome." I haven't heard from them since then. [laughter] That's my story with the draft board. I don't know what they did with my application, but I had two children, my God. I mean, really, I'm going to cancel going to Rome on a Fulbright, on the boat, just because they said not to go--I mean, really? So, I took a chance and, if they hear about it ...

SI: I do not think anyone is coming for you.

RN: I don't think so. [laughter] Fifty-one years later, I don't think so, fifty-one years, oh, my God.

SI: Could you sense a change in how Americans were viewed over that time?

RN: I was there only until '67. When was our big involvement?

SI: It was increasing from 1965 to 1967.

RN: Right.

SI: 1968 was the Tet Offensive.

RN: Yes, I know my friends were in Vietnam. Her brother was in Vietnam, '66 and '67, and our good friend Steve was in Vietnam in '66 and '67, also, '67-'68 maybe, and so, I don't think the Italians were so aware of what was going on until after I had left, because I left in June of '67. So, I don't think there was much talk about that. I do know there was an image of Americans. I'll never forget this incident, and you said if I had a prejudice against Italians in America, how

about Americans in Italy? I think it was more of that, I really do, because the Italians looked at Americans as being rich, brash, didn't know anything about food, culture, and they dressed badly. I was standing in front of the American Express office on the Spanish Steps, right, Spanish Steps. I was there to get my check from the Fulbright. That's where they sent it. I had come out, I was sitting there, had on my overcoat--oh, no, I think just a shirt and a pair of pants--very modest. A guy said to me, an American tourist came by, right, with, what you might say, shorts that were going this way, shirt was going the other way--it didn't match, let's put it that way, didn't match. The guy goes to me in Italian, he goes, "These crazy Americans, they don't even know how to dress," [laughter] and I went, "E Vero." [laughter] He thought I was Italian. So, I did feel there was a little bit of a prejudice against Americans. In fact, when I went back to Italy some years later to sing, the conductor said some things, too. He thought I didn't understand it, but I did. He said something like, "The Americans saved us in World War II," or something like that. He said, "They think they're such hot stuff," something like that, in Italian. That was the gist of it and I said to him, "I don't appreciate that. I don't think that's [the case]." He knew I was American, but didn't know I could understand what he said. I said, "I really don't appreciate that. I don't think that's very true." I said, "We did save your ass," I didn't say it like that, I said, "We really did save you, because we cared and you're a great country, and a little more gratitude would help," but I think they had an ambiguous relationship with America. We saved them, but, when someone saves you, you feel an obligation, and so, I think--don't you think? I mean, there's something in there, sociologically. I don't know what it is, but I think it's a love-hate thing, because I know that some of the most hysterical movies I saw in Italy, the one especially, Alberto Sordi, remember him? I love Alberto; I fell in love with Sordi. There was a movie where he wanted to be American. He dressed--cowboys and Indians was his thing--he dressed in cowboy outfits, he went to American movies. I'll never forget the one scene where--Italians, for breakfast, have coffee and maybe ...

CN: Brioche?

RN: Yes, whatever, very light. So, he wanted to be American, so, he had American cereal. He went to his mother--he was living with his mother--so, he went to breakfast and he wanted American, so, he grabbed a dish of, like, cornflakes, went like this, [Mr. Naldi imitates spitting out the cornflakes]. That's the story, "Give me some spaghetti," or something like that. Anyway, so, I think they had a love-hate with Americans.

SI: Were you already fluent in Italian when you went to Rome?

RN: No, I wasn't fluent. That's very interesting, because my mother spoke a dialect, my father spoke--and she spoke good Italian, too--my father actually had a very good accent, I mean, high Italian, Tuscan, very Tuscan, because he's from Bologna. So, I remember, in my freshman year, I took Italian at college. We had to take Italian, French and German, took one year of each, one full year of each as our program, and I took Italian because, "Hey, my parents are Italian. It's going to be a snap." I didn't do well at all, because I really had very little background. I remember even coming back at Christmastime and saying, "Mom, how's this Italian pronunciation?" I went, [singing], "*Cielo e Mar*" right. She goes, "That's not right. It's '*sciello*.'" I said, "No, it's not. [laughter] My teacher said it's '*cielo*,'" which, of course, is right, but she had, like, a Roman, southern dialect. So, Italian was difficult. I knew how to pronounce it well, very

little knowledge, but, in a little while, you pick it up. I actually think, by the end of two years, I was okay. When I went back to sing again, it became a lot better, even better, but I do forget it very quickly. I think I need two or three weeks in Italy to really get the rhythm and the sense and the vocabulary, because that much I lack, to really speak well. I'll never forget, after twenty-two months on a Fulbright, we invited my maestro for dinner before we left, my voice teacher. He and his wife came over, had a nice meal and, by that time, I was doing well in Italian. I mean, I could really go shopping, I could do everything. I could converse, have conversations. He said to me, in Italian, he said, "You know, Ronald," he says, "it's really a shame you didn't learn Italian better." [laughter] It was like, "Boom," shot, right, but I took it with a grain of salt, because I think I did pretty well.

SI: Were you and your family pretty well integrated into the local neighborhood, the society?

RN: Maybe a little bit in the neighborhood. We had relatives there, so, that really was our center. We had cousins and aunts and uncles and my mother's relatives, and so, we went to Spinete a couple times and they came--some of them lived in Rome--so, we saw them quite often. So, the neighborhood itself, we would go shopping, but we didn't know the neighbors too well, I don't think, really.

SI: Did you get a chance to travel around Italy or elsewhere?

RN: At that time, no. I went to Germany with some colleagues to audition in that time, but we didn't do much traveling in Italy at all, no, not all. We went to Spinete, as I said, which is a hundred miles from Rome, about--not that long, eighty miles--south of Rome, went there, went to the beach a couple times, but not really. In later years, we did more. We went to Venice and Padua and all of Italy, actually, Bergamo, Naples, later on, but not then.

SI: Towards the end of your time in Rome, did you start lining up what your next move was going to be?

RN: Yes, and that was a very tortuous time, because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't feel--I'd made my debut in Rome in an opera--I didn't feel really confident. Italy, it was a very precarious situation as far as singing. There was very little. They hired Italian artists, very hard for foreign people to sing in Italy at that time. The theaters were really closed and I never wanted to sing in Germany. That's what I should've--I could've done that. I was offered jobs in Germany, but I didn't want to sing in Germany. For whatever reason, I just didn't want to; I don't know, could've been the language, it could've been that I didn't feel comfortable in Germany, whatever it was. I was young and maybe that was wrong. So, what I figured was, I said to--we talked, Carlene and I talked it over, often--and I said, "I think I need more seasoning. I think I need more time." I was twenty-four, twenty-five. "My voice is good, but not great, not settled." So, I said, "Maybe I should teach awhile." That's what people were doing. So, I wrote letters to Indiana University. They had a bureau where they sent people out for jobs. While I was in Italy, before I left Italy, I was offered a couple jobs, one in Ohio, one in Massachusetts, one at Memphis. Memphis looked good because they offered me assistant professor and resident artist. That sounds good. That's what we did. I accepted that. I knew the person who was the head of the department. I had met him in Indiana. So, I knew him and I said, "That works. We'll be

comfortable," said, "It's new, it's different," and so, I did that. A very funny incident with that, I came back from Rome and we were going to go visit, to see where we would stay, set up before I went there permanently. So, like, in the middle of July, we left the kids with my mother-in-law. I bought my first car, a Mercury Cougar, a stick shift, and went across the country to go to Memphis, no speed limit. Everything was good and we got to Nashville. I will never forget this in my whole life. The popular song was, "Billie Joe McAllister Jumped Off the Tallahatchie Bridge," [*Ode to Billie Joe*], remember? You wouldn't know that. It was, [singing], "Billie Joe McAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge." It was Bobbie Gentry, was a big hit in the Summer of '67, big hit. We're driving across town and she's singing, and then, the station, Nashville station, came on--it's the honest to God truth--the guy goes [Mr. Naldi imitates a fast, rambling Southern dialect]. [laughter] Carlene and I said, "What?" and he goes [Mr. Naldi imitates the dialect again]. I said, "Carlene, we don't understand this language. Where are we?" [laughter] It was like another language. We didn't understand the rhythm, the words. Did you ever have that happen to you? Where you go, "What is he saying?" [Mr. Naldi imitates the dialect again], and then, we get to Memphis and it's 110 degrees, right, in the summer. The humidity was five hundred percent. It was like tissue paper, the air, I mean, it was just dense with moisture, right, sun beating down. Now, in '67, the only cars that had air-conditioning at that time were [for] really rich people, Lincolns, Cadillacs. You didn't need air-conditioning in New Jersey--you put the windows down. You go down the Shore, the wind blows--who cares? At that time, it was a luxury, right, luxury. Of course, the Cougar didn't have air-conditioning. We're in Memphis, we look around and all the windows in the cars are up, right. We're saying, "Oh, maybe if we keep our windows up, that's the secret," [laughter] but they all had air-conditioning. We didn't know. We put our windows up, we go, "Aggh," [laughter] another dumb thing. Anyway, so, we got housing and we're at Memphis State. It's called Memphis State then; I think it's called Memphis University now, yes.

SI: Was that a state university?

RN: I don't think so. Well, actually, Memphis State University, I guess it had to be, right? Yes, maybe now it's not, yes, but it was then, yes. I was a resident artist, so, that was great.

SI: What is the difference between the two titles?

RN: Well, it meant that they expected me to sing in the city, to sing in the oratorios, the operas, give recitals, which is what I did, and that was my job. After three years, I got tenure. So, it was very nice. I got a little too comfortable, because it was a very [nice situation]. We had a beautiful house. Our third daughter was born there. It was a very comfortable situation and I just felt inside of myself, "I don't want to do this." I loved teaching. I was good at it, but I loved singing more, said, "I've got to give it a shot." So, we came back and we've been here ever since.

SI: What year did you leave Memphis?

RN: '73. I got a half a year there. They gave me a half a year's salary and they gave me a year to come back, if I wanted to come back. So, they let me go. So, I wrote the guy, Walter Smith, a nice man.

SI: In your field, what is the tenure process like?

RN: I don't know what they do. I know I got it. I don't know what the details are, only in the sense that they can't fire you unless you do something.

SI: Did you have to go before a committee?

RN: I never went before anybody, I never went before anybody. They just said to me, after three years, "You have tenure. If you want to stay here, you could stay," which I thought was cool, didn't last very long.

SI: In terms of your teaching, was it the kind of one-on-one teaching you had?

RN: Yes, it was, yes, the same kind that I had gotten. Yes, that's what I did. So, obviously, I never taught--well, actually, I shouldn't say that. I actually had taught at Indiana University. I was one of the--the only person I have ever known, I could be the only person ever, maybe it's happened since--but I actually taught as an undergraduate, graduate assistant, a graduate assistant as an undergraduate, for my senior year and my graduate year. So, I taught non-music majors, like French horn players or history majors or something, yes. So, I did that. So, I had some teaching experience and Memphis, of course, reiterated that experience. So, it was good, had some good students.

SI: How many students would you work with?

RN: I would get about fifteen a semester, fifteen or sixteen a semester, plus my recitals and stuff. So, it was a lot of work, but it was nice. It's a nice atmosphere, yes.

SI: How did the performance scene differ in Memphis from where you had previously been in Indiana and Rome?

RN: Well, obviously, Rome's a big-city, so, there's everything going on in Rome. It's like New York City, I mean, slightly smaller, obviously, and a great atmosphere, obviously, the Eternal City. So, Rome has everything. Indiana was a university and, believe it or not, it also had everything, but in a very, very confined space. In other words, it wasn't like, "Go to Carnegie Hall, Town Hall, Brooklyn Academy," whatever. It's where it is, but there was a recital going on every day, if not two or three recitals every day, the violin players, the cellists, the pianos, the voice, plus the seven operas in repertory, twenty-eight operas a year, pretty good for a university, so, many things. Memphis was a lot different. It's a middle-sized town. Culturally, it was limited, beautiful museum, of course, beautiful symphony hall. They had a symphony, but it's not like the New York Philharmonic, smaller and less concerts. They did only three operas a year, if that, less than Indiana, really, and the university gave two or three operas a year, too. So, that was about it, yes.

SI: Do you have any memories of your colleagues in the department?

RN: Absolutely. I had wonderful colleagues. I liked them all. They were supportive, they were brilliant, they were good teachers. So, it was very, very good. It was a nice experience. I loved Memphis. We loved Memphis. It's a nice town. First, when we arrived, in the Spring of '68, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. That was a very dark time. Everyone was worried about us, but it was quite a way from us. [Editor's Note: On April 4, 1968, civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated by James Earl Ray as he stood on a hotel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee.] I have to say that Memphis is a segregated city, at least then it was. It was a Southern city. So, there was a lot of racial prejudice, there really was. It was separate, "separate but not equal," black. So, there's that ingrained Civil War/Johnny Reb/Confederate flag thing there. We were "Yankees," we really were. I mean, they actually called us that a couple times. So, you talked about prejudice before, Italian; I think, again, there was more prejudice, as I said, the Italians to the Americans and more prejudice us being Northerners than being Italian, you know what I mean? I think. Of course, they're thinking, "From the North, you don't think like we do. You're elitist, you're liberal," whatever.

SI: Were your students primarily white? Were there any African-Americans?

RN: I had both, but mostly white. I had a couple black students, maybe four or five, in the time I was there, I'd say.

SI: Being on a college campus in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was obviously the antiwar movement.

RN: Definitely.

SI: Were you aware of that?

RN: Not in Memphis, not much in Memphis, no. [laughter]

SI: Not even after Kent State, no takeovers? [Editor's Note: On May 4, 1970, Ohio National Guardsmen fired on students at Kent State University, killing four and wounding nine others. Some of the students had been protesting the United States entry into Cambodia, while others had been passing nearby or observing the demonstration.]

RN: No, no, it's the South.

SI: Was it a major point of discussion among the faculty?

RN: Oh, yes, yes, not deeply, but, yes, it was.

SI: You left Memphis in 1973.

RN: Right.

SI: What was your next move?

RN: The next move was to come into this house and see the chestnut stuff [woodwork] there. I tried to restrain [myself]; my wife hit me in the ribs and said, "Don't make a big fuss," [laughter] because the house was a mess, but the chestnut was so beautiful. [laughter] So, we bought this house and that was the first thing. We spent Christmas vacation time, the first three or four weeks, every relative was here scraping wallpaper and getting the house in shape. My mother couldn't stand it, said, "Oh, it's so dark and ugly." Now, she loves it. So, that way, my goal was to sing. I had an agent that I had gotten the year before and sang. So, that's [how] it started.

SI: Tell me about some of your early performances. You obviously have had a long career as a performer, so, we may not get it all.

RN: Yes. Well, it was good, but I started, I auditioned for the local kind of operas, I mean what they call "New York local," Bronx Opera, New York Lyric Opera, companies like that. I got the parts. When I auditioned, I got the parts, got great reviews, starting to sing a little more, everywhere. Then, I was signed by Columbia Artists to sing a thirty-seven-city tour, called the Manhattan Opera Trio, which was the same trio that Mario Lanza sang in, 1947, with George London, George London, Mario Lanza and Frances Yeend. So, the three of us, Larry Cooper, Eleanor Berquist and myself, we did thirty-seven cities in about sixty days, from Maine--let's see, we started; I don't remember where we started. Where did we start, Carlene?

CN: I don't know, I didn't go.

RN: I know, [laughter] but we went to Canada, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Maine, like four states in New England, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, California, Oregon, Washington, St. Louis.

CN: You went to Canada, too.

RN: Yes, I said Canada, through Nova Scotia, yes, I mean, everywhere. I sang our concerts. So, that was cool. That got me more renown, and then, I started getting jobs. Then, in '78, I think it was '78, yes, '78, I was doing a lot of regional opera around the country. In '78, somebody heard me sing in New York City, one of the Met people--I think it was Richard Woitach--and he recommended me to the Met and I was signed in '78. In fact, I had to cancel a contract. That was a big deal, because it was a contact in Charlotte and the guy wouldn't let me go, even for the Met. I said, "Come on, John," or whatever his name was, I don't remember his name. I said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "It's the Met. I'm covering Tamino." It was, ironically, Tamino, the first role I ever did out in Indiana. I said, "You've got to let me go." "Well, no, you can't." I said, "I know you can get somebody else to sing the part." He goes, "Well, I can't get someone as good as you." I said, "Come on, come on, I know you can." Anyway, I think I had to pay to get out of it. So, I was at the Met, covering, for six years, five or six years, five years there. I went on tour, sang on tour, but only on the stage once in those five years. Then, I left the Met, and then, for the next eight or nine years, just did a lot of regional companies. I sang abroad, sang in Europe, sang in Salzburg, different places, and I got back in the Met in '93. I've been there ever since. That's my career in a nutshell. [laughter]

[TAPE PAUSED]

RN: Okay.

SI: You gave us a nice overview of your career. To get into some of the highlights, some of the little stories, what would you say was your most memorable performance?

RN: Wow. Well, I have had a lot of--I mean, I'll never forget the first time that I sang on the Met stage. There's a couple things. First thing is that, in 1978, when I was on the Met roster, even though I wasn't singing performances, I didn't know they put your name on the roster, which they do if you're covering, which is, if someone gets sick, you're covering that part. It's called covering. They put your name on the roster, even if you're not even singing that year. I didn't know that. So, I used to take the bus in. I don't take it anymore, but I used to take the bus into New York. My goal in life, ever since I started singing when I was eighteen, was to be at the Metropolitan Opera. That's what I wanted to do. To an American singer, to sing at the Metropolitan Opera was the pinnacle. That's the peak. That's like Mount Everest, right.

SI: It is.

RN: Yes, it really is, the Metropolitan Opera. It's the most famous company in America, if not the world, right. So, I was riding the bus to New York City and I had the Met program and I saw my name. I went, "Oh, my God," and I started crying, because I had made the Metropolitan Opera. That was the first thing. I've had many memorable performances, but the first time I ever was on the stage, I remember looking up and going, "Holy mackerel, it's the Metropolitan Opera," I mean, just the lights and the people in the audience. Even today, like, I sang Monday night there, just looking out at the audience, it's just a fantastic experience. A memorable experience was, in 1997, I believe, or the '96-'97 season, I was covering a part in the American premiere of *The Makropoulos Case* of [Leoš] Janáček. Janáček, they say now, Janacek, same thing. It's a big premiere and the part I had was a very nice part. I was Vítek, a clerk, and we had rehearsals and the rehearsals were around Christmastime. The guy I was covering couldn't be at this first stage rehearsal, the very first one. So, he said he was coming back at, like, one o'clock, rehearsal was at ten. So, I went on stage for him, stage rehearsal, first staging, no orchestra, just piano. My part was Vítek and he's a clerk. At the beginning, he sings. He opens up the opera. He starts singing and my part, the director wanted Vítek to climb the ladder. Rehearsals, no problem--he didn't tell us that the ladder was straight up-and-down and I said, "What?" I'm in the rehearsal, I'm the first one doing this, he's not there, the first guy. So, I said to the stage director, to the manager, to the conductor, to my colleagues, I said, "This is not safe. I can't--my character cannot--sing the part. I've got to go straight up the ladder, straight, and sing out." I've got to go ten feet in the air, by the way, up the ladder and turn around and sing on this straight-ahead ladder. I said, "That's dangerous." Now, the guy I'm covering, that's doing the part, is much bigger than I am. It's more dangerous for him than [for me], because I'm more lithe and athletic than he was. So, I said, "I'm not doing this. This is not right." So, sure enough, the guy comes to rehearsal later in the day. I said, "Richard," I said, "listen, that ladder," I said, "I don't like that ladder. I don't think that's safe. For us to climb up there and turn around and sing? That's dangerous." He goes, "I was in the Navy, I was in a submarine--no problem." So, I thought it's fine. Opening night, *Makropoulos Case*, Janáček, about four o'clock, I get there early, my back went out. I'm only covering, so, there's no problem. So, I came in, like, my back

is really hurting me. I was, like, hunched. I said, "Richard," he was down by his locker, I said, "I hope you're feeling great, because my back is out. Good luck tonight, have a good show." He said, "I'm fine." "Good, good." So, I'm in the dressing room, the artist dressing room, the opera starts. We start to sing. All of a sudden--I have the thing on, to listen to the opera, little speakers on, listening to the opera--I hear [Mr. Naldi makes a crashing noise]. I ran out of my dressing room--my back, miraculously, got better. I said, "He fell--did he fall?" I started screaming. I said, "I can't believe it, I cannot believe it, I told..." I was, like, raging. Sure enough, he fell. He died. He died on the Metropolitan Opera stage. He died. They canceled the opera. People thought it was part of the opera, by the way, which is so strange, right, kind of a thing. They thought that he fell as part of the opera, until they realized, okay. So, the opera was canceled, they stopped the show. I come home early. Carlene goes, "What happened? What's wrong?" I said, "Turn on the TV." "Opera star dies on stage." [Editor's Note: Tenor Richard Versalle passed away on January 5, 1996.]

SI: Wow.

RN: Well, I had told them--I raged against this--I said, "I told everybody." I said, "You know what? This is unbelievable." The Met called me the next day. They say, "Don't talk to the press." "Yes, okay," which I didn't. I probably should've, right. I didn't, but I said, "Listen, is this opera going on?" "Yes, it is. It starts," the next show is Monday or Tuesday; Monday, actually. So, I said, "Okay, just know I am not going up the ladder. I'm telling you right now, I'm doing the part. No one else knows it, I'm doing the part. I'm not going up the ladder." "Oh, no problem, no problem." Sunday night, the day before Monday, it starts to snow in the afternoon. We went to New York early, got to a hotel, because we had rehearsal the next day; twenty-seven inches of snow. That was the big, big snowstorm in '97, I think it was '97, twenty-seven inches of snow; one cancellation on Friday night, cancellation on Monday, because no one could get into the city. The musicians couldn't get in the city from New Jersey. They had to cancel--the second and third cancellations in the history of the Met and I was involved in those two. So, we went to rehearsal. In staging, someone else, I insisted, went up the ladder, not me. I sang my part, the orchestra rehearsal, everything went well and I did the run of the performances. So, that was very memorable. That was really something, yes, pretty hairy.

CN: And you never said that publicly to anyone.

RN: No, it's true--about the Met calling me? Yes, that can be off the record. You can take that out. It's not going to hurt me now. It's the truth. So, "The truth shall set you free." Yes, so, that was memorable. Through the years, I've had a lot of great performances, enjoyed myself very much. I'm still doing it now and I'm still liking it. Now, I'm the Emperor of the World, in this opera I'm doing now. [laughter] I am--I'm the Emperor of the world, of China, anyway.

SI: Can you walk us through your process?

RN: Sure.

SI: When you get a new opera.

RN: Yes, that's a very good question, yes. Well, first of all, it depends on the language. I've done opera in Italian, French, German, English, Russian and Czech at the Met, plus the singing, of course, in Spanish, and then, Hebrew and everything else, and in Latin. So, if [it is] a normal opera, Italian or French or German, my language is okay. So, I'll get some coaching at the Met, especially for the German and French and most especially for Russian and Czech, which, of course, I have no background at all. They have the most fantastic coaches, so, we're coached often and deeply. If it's a new role which I've never done before, I'll "woodshed" it, which means you go over it and over it and over it a thousand times, until it becomes a part of you, and that's the process. It takes a while. Some people do it in two weeks, some people do it in two years. James Morris, the great bass, said it took him five years to learn *Meistersinger* [*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*], Hans Sachs. Hans Sachs is a famous character in *Meistersinger*. His part alone is two hours, the part--some operas aren't two hours--his part, with the words, are two hours, said it took him five years to learn it. So, it could be a long time. Before that, he said, it took him another ten years to accept that he wanted to do it, because they'd asked him for so long to do it. So, mine haven't been that bad. I think I have learned operas in two weeks, I think I have, and, sometimes, it takes me a long time, longer than that, yes.

SI: What was your favorite part to play?

RN: Oh, man, I loved [*La bohème*, Rodolfo. I loved [B. F.] Pinkerton [from *Madama Butterfly*]. I loved *The Barber of Seville*. Let me look at my roles--what have I done? [laughter] Your favorite opera is the one you're doing you know. That sounds like the typical thing, but it's true, though. I mean, I loved Faust, I loved the Duke [of Mantua from *Rigoletto*], I loved Alfredo [Germont] in [*La traviata*, I loved (Werther?), [*The Barber of Seville's* Count] Almaviva. Your favorite role is the one you're doing, but I'd say *Bohème* and *Butterfly* and Alfredo in *Traviata*, yes. I'd say that, yes.

SI: You said you were initially at the Met, and then, you left for a period of time.

RN: Right.

SI: Then, you came back.

RN: Right.

SI: What led to you returning to the Met?

RN: Well, as I said, I sang a lot of regional opera around the country, a lot of concerts, and I just felt I was really ready to come back and give it a good shot. My voice felt great, I was singing well. I knew they could use me. That's it, yes. I had to audition again and they hired me, yes.

SI: At this point in your career, from an outsider/amateur perspective at least, it seems as though you have done everything, but what do you see as the thing you would like to do before your career ends?

RN: That's interesting. I still think I have a couple years left to sing. I'm not the judge of that. We'll see what happens on that. If I don't sing any more or if it's very limited--it will be limited, there's no doubt about that, not going to hire an older man to sing twenty-year-old kids anymore. They don't do that--I think that I will look for a job, a university job, teaching, hopefully a university, but even privately, because I think I have a lot to offer to young kids, from my experience singing.

SI: Your résumé says that you did private teaching from the 1970s through the 1990s.

RN: Yes.

SI: Do you have any recollections about that experience, any memorable experiences?

RN: No, that was, basically, to tell the truth, when I came back from Memphis and I taught in those years, a lot of it was necessity. I needed to make some money. I had a lot of good students, I enjoyed it, but I would've much rather been singing all the time. I found out many, many singers, even having big careers, still teach. So, that's part of it, yes.

SI: Outside of your career, have you been involved in any community activities or causes that you have been passionate about?

RN: No, I don't think so. Have I? I don't think so. I think I've been consumed by my career, but it's funny you said that, though, because, lately, I've been thinking a lot about that, in what way I can be a volunteer or do something for others, besides just teaching, which is doing something for others, but something besides that. I don't know. I'm thinking a lot about it, yes.

SI: You have lived in this area for a long time.

RN: This house, forty-two years, yes.

SI: What are some of the biggest changes that you have seen in your time here?

RN: What do you think, hon? The trees have grown bigger. [laughter] The neighborhood is very quiet. There's never been any problems. It's a good neighborhood. The church is down the street. It's a nice community. We haven't been involved too much with the neighbors, really, but the neighbors that we know have been very, very nice. So, I don't know, the demographic has changed a little bit. There's more Hispanic and black, but that's part of America, so, it's great.

SI: I am curious, again, just from an outsider perspective ...

RN: Sure, sure.

SI: It seems like the field of opera and voice has diversified quite a bit over the last, perhaps, thirty to forty years.

RN: What do you mean? How do you mean?

SI: Bringing in people from different backgrounds. It is more based on just ...

RN: Talent.

SI: Talent, than that you have an Italian last name.

RN: Right, right.

SI: Is there any truth to that?

RN: I don't know how to even answer it in a certain way. I think that opera has always been a meritocracy; in other words, the best people, the best talent. I was never aware of any kind of bias towards any kind of type. I think there's an age thing that's happening now, the last twenty years. I do think that's true, ageism. I do think that's a disturbing thing to me, not just because I'm older. No, I think I would've been disturbed if I were twenty years old, because older people have experience and knowledge and wisdom. I don't think it should be thrown out just for youth. I think the same thing is happening in baseball, for example, just to make a parallel. They're letting go of guys who they know will hit twenty-five home runs, knock in a hundred runs, but they're thirty-two years old, to get a kid who's twenty-two who *might* do that. I don't know, I think that something is amiss there. So, anyway, I'm not aware of any kind of bias as far as ethnicity, although it's been rumored that black people didn't have much entrée into opera until recently. That's certainly not happening now at all. In fact, they're having more auditions, especially instrumentally, with curtains, so that the person who's the audition-ee, I mean, the person who is listening to the auditions, does not judge by height, weight, color, gender, whatever. The person plays the flute back there and they judge how good the person is without knowing anything about them, total skill, talent. Voice, I guess you can't do that in voice, because it would block the voice from coming out. So, I guess people's biases, prejudices will always be there some way, but I don't know if it's any less or more than any other time, except for ageism, which that is definitely a bias, no doubt in my mind. I could be wrong. It hasn't happened to me, quite frankly, but it's happened to other people in the field, yes.

SI: For the record, you also made a number of recordings. Could you talk a little bit about those?

RN: Well, it's a great project. These two CDs of Neapolitan songs was a great project [*O Sole Mio* (2003) and *Torna a Surriento* (2004)]. The orchestrator, John Colaiaouco, was the arranger and the sound person and we put this together. Actually, there are forty-five songs and I should've put them on three albums, because they're very generous, like seventy-eight minutes each one. I should've made them all fifty-six, I would've had three of them, but, anyway, it was a love project. It was--not, what do they call it, an ego project? Not an ego project.

SI: Passion project?

RN: No, there's another word for it, when you do it yourself--whatever. It was my initiative. I always wanted to do these songs. I also have another album, a couple albums out. One is with a

composer who wrote songs that he wanted me to do. I did it for him; two composers, actually, Mario Lombardo and Dennis Hyams. I did a couple albums for them, too, so, very rewarding. That's historic for me, [laughter] not for anybody else.

SI: You have been honored by Italian-American groups, but have you been involved with those groups?

RN: I haven't been involved in Italian-American groups. I have been honored by the Italian-American National Hall of Fame, which Gilda knows about, and *Who's Who in Italian-Americans*, The Bound Brook Hall of Fame, stuff like that, Sons of Italy. We have a group in our town, in Bound Brook, called Sons of Italy Monte Carmelo, was Monte Carmelo. It's a group of men who socialize, basically a social group. I was never involved in any of this stuff. I don't know why, haven't been a great joiner, mostly family, not joining, yes.

SI: Since we have been talking to Mrs. Naldi off mic little bit, I wanted to ask, you also went to Indiana.

CN: No, not as a student.

SI: Okay, you were living there at the time.

CN: Right.

SI: What were you doing during these years, from the 1960s up to today?

CN: Being a major partner.

RN: That's for sure.

CN: And raising three children, three daughters.

SI: Did you work outside the home?

CN: I did for a while, yes.

SI: What did you do?

CN: I was--what was I?

RN: Head of customer relations.

CN: Oh, yes, head of customer relations.

RN: For a fabric firm.

CN: For a fabric firm, yes. I enjoyed that.

RN: Did pretty good.

SI: Did you graduate the same year as Mr. Naldi?

CN: Same year, yes.

SI: You performed with him in high school, correct?

CN: We did together, yes.

SI: Did you ever continue?

CN: Gilbert & Sullivan; no.

RN: She has a very beautiful soprano voice, very. She sings in the choir at Ocean Grove, for the last twenty years, and she has a very good voice. My uncle thought she had a better voice than I did. [laughter] I resented him--that's the guy who taught me clarinet--I resented him for that.

CN: He was a very nice uncle. [laughter]

RN: He was a good guy.

CN: But, Ron's mom, as he said before, she said, "Why don't you go out with that cute little redhead, that freckled redhead?" She sort of pushed the relationship, or at least put the thought in his head. I have to say, being the Italian mother-in-law, she's taught me a lot and I say we've taken over the Italian [traditions]. I am cooking, I've learned the recipes.

RN: Yes, she's great.

CN: She was absolutely wonderful.

RN: She only likes Italian food now. I can't even take her to a Chinese restaurant. I like Chinese food, I can't even take her. "I don't like Chinese food." I like Chinese food once in a while. We have a good one over here.

CN: No, take me to a good Italian restaurant and I'm happy.

RN: That's it, French, no, German, no, Asian.

CN: Well, not quite.

RN: Italian; I like Italian food, too.

SI: You have had a more than forty-year relationship with Ocean Grove.

RN: Yes, forty-two seasons, yes, forty-two. That was a real whim. One of the things that I did to sing all over was, there was a church agent named Ann Bynum, back in the '70s and '80s, and, every weekend, I would sing somewhere in New York City, the Bronx, in Washington Heights, Brooklyn ...

CN: High Holy Days.

RN: High Holy Days, Yom Kippur in Teaneck, everything. She got me jobs all over, not high-paying, but you're singing professionally. You're working, it's great. So, she sent me for an audition to Philadelphia, Arch Street Methodist Church in Philadelphia, Sunday afternoon. I had just got over a cold, wasn't feeling great, took the kids, all of us went down to Arch Street in Philadelphia. The strangest audition, it's in a church, got up there, sang, walked in the back. The guy who was the audition guy came back. It happened to be (Lou Daniels?), who was the choir director there for many years. He said, "We want to hire you." There had already been three or four tenors who sang before me and he just came over and said, "We want to hire you. Are you interested in being a tenor soloist?" I said, "That's what I came for." I said, "Sure, it sounds great. What is it? What do you do?" "Well, you get paid this much. You do this, you do that and that, and it's a weekend. You go Friday to Sunday. You have to have rehearsal on Friday night, 2 services Sunday morning and evening." "Okay, good," and he goes, "Would you like to live in a tent? Would you like a tent?" [laughter] and we looked at him. We'd never been camping in our lives, really.

CN: Yes, we had no idea what he was talking about.

RN: "What do you mean a tent? What's a tent?" "Well, they have little tents there and there's one available and you guys could have it for the summertime. It's really, really nice." So, we went and saw this. They have a tent community in Ocean Grove. You probably know about it.

SI: Yes, the Methodists.

CN: It's a historic town.

RN: It's a tent over a floor connected to a cabin in the back, and so, we got a tent. We had no furniture. We borrowed furniture from the ladies down the street.

CN: Oh, so nice, yes.

RN: Oh, my god, we had no bathroom, no shower. We showered outside.

CN: Rinsed off.

RN: Rinsed off from the beach, but it's been great, forty-two seasons, forty-two years. It's fantastic. Now, we have two daughters, one daughter had a tent and she bought a house in Ocean Grove. The other daughter now has her tent. So, it's a family affair. It's great.

CN: And tenting has changed.

RN: Oh, yes.

CN: And, now, it's luxurious tenting.

RN: That's right, it's true.

CN: Hot running water, we have marble floors.

RN: Air-conditioning, couldn't have air-conditioning. We have air-conditioning now. The people next door to us, it's like a palace, anyway.

CN: And the community's fabulous.

RN: Oh, yes, it's a great community.

CN: Tenters are great.

RN: They are.

CN: The people are great.

SI: Is it still mostly Methodist?

RN: It is, yes, except for us. [laughter]

SI: What kind of music do you perform there?

RN: So, basically, it's classical. We sing six or seven solos in the mornings. Then, we have three or four or five concerts in the season for the year. That's it, basically, lead the choir, so, be the choir leaders, which I have done reluctantly.

SI: Is there any part of your life that we skipped over that you would like to talk about?

RN: You pretty much covered it.

SI: Thank you very much.

RN: Let me say one more thing, I'll say one more thing. Okay, what I wanted to add is this--that as diverse and wonderful as my career is, my greatest blessing is the family. I know in Italian-American history and, also, obviously, Italians, the family is the central thing and my family is the central thing, my wife, of course, Carlene, my three daughters, Ronene, Rebecca and Melissa, six grandchildren--I should name them, I will--Sean, Joshua, David, Evan, Maia and Nina, my three incredible sons-in-law, Joe and John and Brett. I mean, if I would pick sons-in-laws for them, I couldn't have picked sons-in-law that were any better. They're fantastic. So,

just that blessing, that my family has been the best, the biggest blessing in my life, without a doubt. They're there for me and they're important and I feel blessed.

SI: That is a great note to end on. Thank you very much, I really appreciate this.

RN: Shaun, thank you so much.

SI: Thank you for your hospitality.

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Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 8/17/2016

Reviewed by Ronald Naldi 9/18/2016