

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

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AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES VELCHECK

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Molly Graham: This is an oral history interview with James Velcheck on June 14, 2016. The interview is taking place in Piscataway, New Jersey and the interviewer is Molly Graham. Jim, last time we talked a lot about your working life and we got to your time in China. So, can we start there?

James Velcheck: In 1990 and '91, is when I was in China that whole fiasco there. I think I told you the story of how it didn't end up well, as many things that I've been involved with haven't ended up well, but like I was telling you the other day, it isn't my fault. Companies I have worked for have not been that well organized. The company that I left in the '80s, that I had been with fifteen years, that I think I probably told you about it, also making copper foil, was a miserable company. In the '90s, I had gone off on my own. When the China thing ended, I did a combination of tending bar and painting, power washing, general kind of stuff on my own. I wasn't real successful at that on my own. Well, the bartending, that went fine. I did that for fifteen years off and on, mostly on, at least part-time. For a year, year and a half, I did it full-time. It was a small neighborhood bar in South Bound Brook, the Riverside Pub, owned by Donald Csontos and Joe Ponte. He was Portuguese American and that was the connection with the New York City Welcome Home Parade in 1985 where I met the guy who was Portuguese, friends with Joe who owned the bar, and that's where this guy had seen me, was in the bar, tending bar. [Editor's Note: On May 7, 1985 over 25,000 Vietnam veterans marched across the Brooklyn Bridge and down Broadway for a ceremonial ticker tape parade. It was to serve as a welcome home, even though it was ten years after hostilities ended in South Vietnam.] Donald Csontos was the son of Danny Csontos who you interviewed. South Bound Brook was a small tight knit town, everybody knew each other back in those days and that's where I grew up, as I am sure I told you about. 1993 is when I went back to college. I had been in Tusculum College in Greenville, Tennessee. I had taken courses at Middlesex County College; Somerset County College; and Rutgers University College, the adult night school college of Rutgers University. But in '93, I decided I was going to go back into Rutgers and do it for real this time with the intent of not stopping until I got my undergraduate degree. I had taken a course at Middlesex County College in environmental studies, or environmental science, an introduction to, and I liked that. I thought that was interesting. So, what they had told me at Rutgers, I forget who told me, I guess I had a counselor or something, I don't know. But they said, "Come back into University College, there's no reapplication because you're still a student of University College, you just haven't taken any courses for the last, I don't know, year or two, or whatever, but there wouldn't be any application process, and then transfer into Cook College, rather than trying to apply to Cook initially because you might not get in." A transfer is fairly straightforward and that was the way to go. So, that's what I did. It took me until 1997 when I finally graduated from Cook with the degree in environmental studies, with a 3.6 [grade point] average, which is with honors. Oh, give me a couple of seconds, don't shut it off.

MG: Okay. It is a picture of you at graduation.

JV: Graduation day in May of 1997. That was me getting my degree. We can make you a copy of this too if you're interested. At Passion Puddle on Cook Campus. I had like a hundred and fifty credits by that point from all of the colleges I had been to. Rutgers accepted all my credits but you needed a hundred and thirty-five to graduate. You needed a certain number of major

credits. So, I had lots of credits, but I needed to get all of the major credits. That's why I ended up with such a high number by the time I finished.

MG: I wanted to ask you more about the Welcome Home parade and your visit to the Vietnam Memorial.

JV: Yes, the Wall was 1982 or '84, I forget which, when it was dedicated. I wasn't interested up until it was dedicated. Maya Lin, the Vietnamese architect student, whose design was chosen for that, it was very controversial. [Editor's Note: On November 13, 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. was dedicated. It was designed by Yale University architect student, Maya Lin, who was born in Ohio in 1959 to Chinese immigrant parents.] Now, a lot of the veterans were unhappy with the design during the construction and there was a lot of angry words about it, that it was a black gash in the earth, it was ugly. So, I didn't really have an opinion one way or the other. I wasn't really interested. I was involved in working and raising a family. But once it was dedicated, I developed an urge to see it and that festered for a while. Finally, after several months, during that summer--well, I don't remember the time of year it was dedicated. I was going to say spring, but now that I'm thinking, maybe it was Veterans' Day. Maybe it was the next spring that I finally mentioned to Sara that I had an interest in seeing it. So, she said, "Why don't you go down there by yourself one weekend?" I got all the letters from my mother that I had written home. She saved them all. So, I took them all with me and went down to Washington, stayed at the YMCA for a night or two in Alexandria. I remember it cost fifteen dollars a night, but in those days, I was even poorer than I am now, so it was an economical trip. It wasn't any kind of splurge. Gas, and I may have taken food with me, and fifteen dollars a night was about the cost of the whole thing. I went down there and I've been back, I would say, a hundred times since to the wall in Washington. When I was working in Virginia in the early 2000s, commuting back and forth, I would oftentimes stop. Memorial Day was always a holiday, so I was always coming home that weekend. There are a group of us from the battalion who would get together at the Wall every Memorial Day and Veterans Day. I wasn't always there on Veterans Day, but I was there oftentimes on Memorial Day, to see some of the guys. Now, the last couple years, I've been going down on Veterans Day with my Vietnam Veterans Chapter here in New Jersey, and I usually run into somebody down there who I know.

[Tape paused.]

JV: Right. So, I went down there. You asked me what got me interested in this kind of stuff. That was in '84, I think, or '82, whenever it was dedicated. I wasn't active in any organizations yet at that point. But that was what started getting me interested again in the whole veteran thing. That, plus the New York City Parade in '85. I wanted to go to it, so I did. The estimate was, as I recall, about twenty thousand Marines or twenty thousand total. I don't remember. But they had said, "Marines to the front," in the form up at Cadman Plaza in Brooklyn, where we were then going to march down onto the Brooklyn Bridge and through the Canyon of Heroes, down Broadway or whatever it was, down to Battery Park at the foot of Manhattan. I wanted to go. I know some people had said then, and I heard afterwards, that, "No, too little, too late. Society disrespected me when I came home, didn't appreciate my efforts, so too little too late."

But, they missed a good day. Did I give you a copy of what I had written for the magazine? The Khe Sanh Veterans?

MG: Yes.

JV: Okay, that basically tells the whole story.

MG: Yes. I think I read it out loud in one of our earlier sessions.

JV: Okay.

MG: What was going on in the media to address finally acknowledging the efforts of the Vietnam War veterans?

JV: Well, these kinds of events—and there were these parades going on at that time, maybe all within that same year, I don't know, to welcome home Vietnam veterans in the mid-80's, where we were all home at least ten years already and most of us, as many as fifteen or more years, because most of us were there in '67, '68, '69, and here it was already '85. By the early '70s there were very few people still there. All the combat troops were out by '73, and then of course, the Fall of Saigon, at which point there were only advisers and embassy guards and such. [Editor's Note: On March 29, 1973, the last combat troops left South Vietnam. On April 30, 1975, Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, fell to the North Vietnamese who had violated the peace agreement and invaded the South. The last Americans were airlifted out of the American Embassy.] '75, the whole thing was over. So, these things were played up in the media. They were mentioned. A number of Vietnam veterans started to be active in veterans' organizations at that time. I joined the Vietnam Veterans of America about thirty years ago, which would have been '85, right?

MG: Yes.

JV: '86? So, that got me involved in that. At the time, I belonged, and still belong, to the same chapter, Chapter 233. It used to meet in New Brunswick on Livingston Avenue at what was the Electricians' Union Hall. It might have even been across the line into North Brunswick, I don't remember, but we were associated with New Brunswick. It was something over thirty years ago. It may have been thirty-one or thirty-two years ago that I joined. About thirty years ago, we moved from there to our present location in Metuchen, to the American Legion, where we started having meetings. At that time, I joined the American Legion. So, I know how long ago it is because the AL send me a card every year and it says on the card thirty years of membership. So, I know it was thirty years and that was when I joined after we started going there. I joined VFW in Manville. At some point, joined the First Marine Division Association. At some point, joined the DAV, Disabled American Veterans, all within the mid to late '80s, into the early '90s. Then, in the late '90s, early 2000s, is when my wife got me life memberships in several of these organizations because from '99 to '03, I was working in Richmond, Virginia on the Philip Morris Project, and she was the one getting all this mail for renewal, renewal, renewal every year. She said, "To hell with that. He's making pretty good money. I'm just going to get him life memberships in these organizations, so I don't have to deal with this every year having to write

checks to these organizations." So, I got life membership in DAV and a couple of the others-- American Legion, VFW. She didn't get me life membership in the First Marine Division Association and that has since lapsed. Since our chapter dissolved, I haven't kept up a national membership in it. I'm eligible for DAV, Disabled American Veterans, because I have a Purple Heart and I think I probably told you the story about how I got the Purple Heart, trying to recover the body of my assistant gunner when they saw me, and rather than shoot me and give away their position right below the wire, they called in a mortar round and it landed quite close. I just got a little piece of shrapnel in the back that I hadn't even felt at the time when I got it. It was tiny. Anyway, that gets me into DAV and it makes me eligible for burial in Arlington. So, Sara and I have had--we don't talk about it every day, every month, maybe not even every year, but we've had for a number of years, an ongoing discussion about where we are going to be buried when we die. Well, we've inherited plots in Bound Brook where my parents are buried and where our baby daughter--did I tell that story, too? Where she is buried and where we just buried my mother in February, there's a place for my brother and there would be room for Sara and me, but I don't want to be there and she doesn't particularly want to be there. I want to be in Arlington because having a Purple Heart is like a minimum that you need. Not just any veteran can be buried in Arlington. Whereas most any veteran can be buried in one of the other national cemeteries. Here in New Jersey, the big one is Arneytown, down in New Egypt area, South Jersey, into the Pines. Not far I guess from Fort Dix. I've never actually been there, but Sara's argument about Arlington is that it's too far away, that nobody will come to visit us. Of course, my response is, "They aren't going to come visit you anyway. And even if they do, you aren't going to know it."

MG: Sara gets to go with you, if you go to Arlington?

JV: Yes, if I go first, they would leave a spot next to me for her. If she was to go first, they would leave a spot next to her for me. So, we would be together. Not every husband and wife, particularly husbands, might want their wife right next to them for all eternity, but it would be fine with me. [If] you get cremated, they'll bury an urn or if you're not cremated, they'll put in a casket. It's, I believe, all at no charge, but transportation to get down there and all that and whatever the funeral director might do here, that would all have to be paid for, but the actual internment is no charge. Now I was to one -a funeral- in Arlington. I don't know if I told you this story or not, but while I was working in Richmond in 2000, 2001--oh, it was 2001. It was September of 2001 because 9/11 had just happened.

MG: Yes, you showed me the pictures.

JV: Okay, I have pictures that I took--I snuck pictures there and almost got caught.

MG: At the Pentagon.

JV: With the motorcycles racing by to where I had just been and all that. Yes, I told that story. But one of the guys from our battalion had committed suicide right around 9/11, not in any connection with 9/11, but his own demons had gotten the better of him, physical pain from wounds and mental pain from what he had gone through. I don't know any of the details about what he went through specifically because I didn't know him while we were there. I got to know

him at reunions afterwards. His funeral was scheduled for the day after 9/11, 9/12, something like that. They put it off for a couple of days because of the damage to the Pentagon right there. But I was in Richmond at the time, so I took the day off and I went up there. There were a couple of us from the battalion, maybe three of us. One of his good friends from California flew out, Ernie Buckley, and there was another guy there. I forget his name. I knew him well. So, I've been to one. I have lots of pictures of it. I had asked both the widow and the Marine in charge of the ceremony, the chaplain, or whatever he was, if I could take pictures and they both said, "Yes." So, I took pictures and gave prints to the widow. Also, I have all that. It was very touching, yes. I'd just like to be in Arlington. Not that I would know where I am either. [laughter] I remember my father-in-law used to say that he thought he had a relative who was in Arlington, but I looked up and I couldn't find anybody with the same name in the directory of all the people buried in Arlington. So, I don't think he does. So that's our burial story.

MG: What was your motivation for joining these veterans groups? What have they meant to you?

JV: Well, it's as you get older and as your career is established or even winding down, your family is established and on their own. In the early days of our family, my wife and my kids, I was the man of the house. I made all the decisions, father knows best. Whether he knows best or not, he's in charge. But then, over the years, as the kids got older, there has been a migration of authority within the family. So now Sara is the head of the family. The kids come to her with general communication and questions and scheduling, and the whole bit. It happened over a period of years. In 1990 and '91, when I spent that five months' total in China, it was a learning experience and a building of confidence for Sara because she was running things on her own. A branch came from a tree next door through the roof. Had to get the roof replaced. The sewer line collapsed. She had to get the sewer line replaced. The twin boys turned seventeen, so she bought them a car to share—an old car. She had never done any of these kinds of things before. She found out that she could function on her own and make these kinds of decisions. So, it was all good. As far as the Marine Corps or the military organizations, like I said, it was the things that were happening, the parades and the memorials and all that, plus the fact of being older and ready to look back at some of this stuff. That combination was the motivation for getting involved and getting back in touch with people. War veterans, those who have actually seen combat, are generally more likely to want to connect with the people that they've served with and that's the battalion reunions. I've been to a half a dozen of them. The veterans' organizations, those are different in--and you'll see tonight at the VVA meeting--most of those guys are Navy and there's only a couple of Marines in the organization and nobody that I served with, although there is one guy from my boot camp platoon who belongs--no, that's the Marine Corps League he belongs to. Well, there's a guy who was a brother to identical twins who were in my boot camp platoon who is a member of the VVA, but he doesn't come to all the meetings. Anyway, this is the same thing about going back to places like Parris Island and veterans going back to Vietnam where they served. Nobody was interested in going back in the years right after they left. Never want to see that place again. Parris Island. I may have told you the story about 2007 when we had a mini reunion of our battalion guys. There were twenty or twenty-five of us who went back to Parris Island, because we had been pushing to have a battalion reunion at Parris Island. We had been to San Diego, but we hadn't yet been to Beaufort, Parris Island. So, when it was decided for the next reunion, it wasn't going to be Parris Island, twenty or twenty-five of us said,

"Well, we'll go down there on our own." So, we did and some of us had connections with people at Parris Island, so they arranged for a tour and a bus and a Marine to show us around. The Marine colonel who was in charge of the rifle range arranged for us to get on the rifle range and actually interact with recruits when they were at the rifle range. While they were eating their lunch, the recruits, they sit in formation and eat their boxed lunch for lunch under this covered concrete-floor-cover-open-wall-kind of structure but they let us split up among them and I actually talked with some of them. I said to the group of six or eight that I was in immediate vicinity with, I said, "Believe it or not, in thirty, thirty-five, forty years, you're going to want to come back here and do this." To a man, they said, "No, sir. Sir, when we leave here sir, we're never coming back." And I said, "I would've said the same in your place but you change." So, that's what it's all about. It's change and wanting to reconnect with the past and with people that you served with.

MG: When I was the oral historian for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, most Vietnam veterans preferred to be interviewed by another Vietnam veteran. So, I am wondering if that is also part of it. There's a shared language and common experience.

JV: Well, you hear that a lot, that veterans will only talk to other veterans who went through something similar because they understand them. There is some validity and truth to that, but it's not only that. When my family was young, or when my friends who weren't in the military, I would've talked to them and there were times that I did try to talk to them, but nobody wanted to listen. I have all these slides or what were slides--now they're digitized pictures of Vietnam--and I would want to show them to the kids and the wife periodically over the years and nobody was really interested. At least in my case, it wasn't that I didn't want to talk about it, it's that people didn't want to hear about it. Those who would be most likely to want to hear about it or communicate with you about it would be people that went through something similar. So, I think that's important, that somebody who shared experience and you can communicate back and forth with about what you went through, but at least as important, maybe even more important, is the interest of the person that you're talking to. You are very interested in what I'm saying, so I feel perfectly comfortable telling you about it because you're interested in it.

MG: Is there anything that you would have told another Vietnam veteran that you have not told me?

JV: I don't think so. I mean, I think I've pretty much told you--I can't recall really holding anything back. I know I wrote in an email to Mike Archer, the author, a little while back when we were talking by email about the experience and the bunker on Hill 689 when I was cut off from everybody else and had enemy troops around me. I think I told you that story. I said to him that my behavior there was one of the things that I've been somewhat embarrassed and felt some guilt about because I just took off where the rest of the guys had gone, rather than do my job and engage those three NVA, who were coming down that trench line at me. Why they never shot at me, I don't know because they were only yards away from me. They were thirty, forty yards away at most, close enough to have heard their voices. Why they never shot at me, I don't know. But I don't know if I actually remember it, but I said, that what fleetingly went through my mind was that yes, if I was John Wayne, I would stay here and engage them, but I'm not John Wayne, so I went tearing out of the back of the bunker and up over the hill where the

other guys I'd figure had gone who had left me there. So, I don't know if I had ever actually told you that about feeling the embarrassment and guilt when I told you that story, so I may have held that back a little bit, but I'm telling you now. I can't think of anything else really that I've withheld as such.

MG: When did you tell your family the whole story?

JV: I don't know if I've ever told them the whole story. I think I told you about when the family and I were in Alabama and I was trying to find any family from Wilton Thomas, the guy who had gotten killed accidentally. I guess I hadn't told them enough about him and why we were there and how he died because afterwards, my wife Sara told me, she says, "We were starting to worry about you that day and starting to think that maybe it was you who had accidentally killed him." Well, he was in a different battalion even and we weren't in the same--and I may not have told them all that. Certainly wasn't even part of it. I was nowhere near and didn't find out about it until quite a bit afterwards, but he and I had been quite close on the Caribbean Cruise that we went to before that and we went on liberty together in San Juan and all of that, Saint Thomas. He was a machine gunner and I was rockets, 3.5-inch rocket launcher. So, we were weapons platoon.

MG: I wanted to ask you more about when you worked at the pub. Oral historians and bartenders have in common people telling them their stories. Does anything stand out to you about that time period?

JV: That's kind of a myth I think as far as the bartender part. I mean, if you're a good bartender, you're too busy to spend too much time listening to somebody's story. Now, I was a very good bartender. I didn't push drinks on someone, but I was moving all the time. Today, you go into a bar, not that I go into bars all that much or--well, on occasion, in more bar/restaurant kind of things. Today, they don't have the same service attitude as what I always had, but even back when I was tending bar, some of the other bartenders they moved a lot slower than I did, even though I was older than most of them. I got plenty of compliments over the years from people to whom I was their favorite bartender because in what time I did spend with them I communicated with them when I was able to, but they understood that when I was busy I wasn't going to stand there and listen or talk. This was a neighborhood bar. It was a bar with a kitchen, rather than a restaurant with a bar. Mostly local clientele. South Bound Brook--grew up around South Bound Brook because of 287--was that light industrial office area in Franklin Township there. So, a lot of people would come in for lunch. They had a good lunch crowd. When I worked full-time for that year, year and a half, I worked during the day. So, there was the two owners there at lunch time and me. Basically, the three of us tending bar. Then there was a crew of women, maybe as many as four or five of them at lunchtime working in the kitchen making lunch--mostly burgers and fried food, and French fries, and that sort of thing. The way that they recruited their part-time bartenders was, when you had a regular who had been coming there for years, sitting on the outside, sitting on a stool and drinking, when an opening would develop behind the bar, it was, "Hey Joe, you interested in jumping behind the bar and being one of our part-time bartenders?" That's the way I got into it because Donald Csontos was a friend of mine. He was a year younger but we grew up together in South Bound Brook, so I was going to the Riverside. When they had an opening, I ended up behind the bar. Kind of like when Darcy was born. I had no intention.

Or, the way I went in the Marine Corps; I had no intention of going in the Marine Corps. But somehow, I found myself in the delivery room when Darcy was being born, partly because I had been at the Riverside before that. [laughter] Found myself in the Marine Corps after John Mitzak went in, without having really thought about it. Tending bar was the same way; I found myself behind the bar. Over the years, over that fifteen years that I tended bar, I had a number of people who were in the same situation. They had been customers, patrons for a long time and found themselves behind the bar working. They apologized to me. They said, "I apologize for any hard time I had given you when I was a customer because now I know what it's like behind the bar and what you have to put up with from all these people." Yes, it was good extra money, never paid any income taxes on it or anything. I'd make a hundred or a hundred and fifty dollars a night. It was a number of years ago, so it was good, but then it got old. I quit it before the bar changed hands and now it's a fancy restaurant; "foo-foo" place I call it. Sara was in there recently as a work lunch or dinner because she works right over there in that Franklin Township area, just outside South Bound Brook, for Budd Van Lines on School House Road. She said it was really quite interesting to find herself back in there because she spent quite a bit of time in there too because I was there. [laughter]

MG: How old were you in 1993 when you went back to school?

JV: I was forty years old in 1987. So, six years later I was forty-six. I was forty-nine when I graduated in '97, I remember that.

MG: What made you decide to finish your degree and go back to school?

JV: Well, it was something over the years. It was twenty-eight years from the time I took my first college course to the time I finished my last one and got my undergraduate degree. It was something that I always had a desire to do, but I'd go back and not be able to continue, the university-college thing, the courses at Middlesex and Somerset. Of course, I don't think I ever intended a degree from those, but I always had an interest in learning, in going back to school. Then, for whatever reason, in '90--well, the China thing had ended in '91 and I was doing the bartending and power washing and painting and that kind of thing, and realized that I didn't want to grow old doing that kind of stuff, so it was really for career purposes that I said, "I need to get this degree and go on to some kind of real work before I'm too old." Now, at forty-nine when I finally graduated, that's pretty old career-wise, but I was lucky in that I ended up getting into this quality management stuff. I may have told you the whole story about that, but this was another example of things happening--whether you believe it's somebody up there, some force directing all this stuff, or whether you believe it's just coincidence, it doesn't matter. All these things happen, and if one of those things hadn't happened, the path would've gone off in some other direction. It's like the story about meeting my wife and I know I told you that whole story. The string was going to school in Tennessee and it goes back to the Depression where this part of the country is where people had money to send their kids to school at a small school in Tennessee so they still recruit. It was because of that that I ended up meeting my wife here in Piscataway with the other guy from Piscataway and the girlfriend and all that. So, it's the same kind of thing with school and career in my case, where the copper foil company that I had worked for, for fifteen years in Franklin Township--that was a miserable company to work for. Once I graduated in '97, I had kept in touch with them that I would stop in and talk with the guys every couple of years or

whatever and they knew that I was graduating. The owner, well there were two owners, but the head owner, he wanted to get this certificate stating that the company was certified in quality management, to the international standard kind of thing, and it's a marketing tool. If you got this certificate hanging on the wall, some companies, especially the auto industry and some other industries in this country--it's bigger in the rest of the world, but in this country, you have to have it to participate in some industries. He saw it as a marketing tool, but nobody else in the company was interested in going through what it takes to get certified to this. So, he brought me in, knew that I was available, as a part-time, twenty hours a week or whatever, quality management person. They joined this consortium to go through training together and create all the documentation for this system, and then presumably go on to stand inspection to get certified. Well, it didn't go that far because I learned quite quick in going to these meeting and then coming back and trying to teach these people that unless everybody, at least all management in the company, is involved and on board with this stuff, it ain't going to work. So, it didn't work, but yes, they never did go through the whole program. But that got me involved with STAT-A-MATRIX, which is the company that I still, if something comes along, I would work at, and that goes back to 1998, when I first started working. Doing that quality management, STAT-A-MATRIX was the company that was doing the consortium, getting the state grant from the Department of Labor to pay for it. So, the companies didn't have to pay, and that was a big motivation for them to get involved in it because they figured it's not going to cost us anything, but they find out there is a cost because you have to do all this stuff; either send your people there, pay for your people to be there, come back, training and implementing and all this stuff. There is a cost. It's the same thing with the training company that I ended up working later that it was the same kind of thing where it was training provided through grants from the New Jersey Department of Labor. Also New York, we did training in New York, but there is a cost in that your people are not productive while they're in this training or doing this stuff. But that's what got me. It was graduating from college and getting involved in the quality management stuff that got me the Richmond Project because that was through STAT-A-MATRIX where I ended up working full-time in Richmond, at Philip Morris--although we're not supposed to say; it was a big secret, hush-hush project getting Philip Morris ready for FDA regulation. Back in the late '90s and early 2000s, the FDA wanted to regulate the tobacco industry and Philip Morris makes cigarettes—Marlboro--and they were always the big player. So, that was what we were doing was getting them ready for FDA regulation from the quality management standpoint, documentation and all that stuff--auditing and record keeping and the whole bit. Well, that project, they told us, was supposed to last through 2006. So, Sara and I were making plans to move down there because I knew somebody down there who lived at the end of a mile-long dirt road with ten acres in the country and was thinking of downsizing because he just had both knees replaced. He was older. I met him through my son Peter through rabbits. Peter is big in rabbits--American Rabbit Breeders' Association--and knew this guy because he was big in rabbits too, so he had introduced me. I went hunting on his ten acres down there in Virginia. It was north of Richmond, about twenty miles or so, but it was beautiful country. Then, in early 2003 or the end of 2002, Congress shot FDA down on regulating the tobacco industry. So, the whole project fell apart. Of the ten STAT-A-MATRIX people who had been there at the beginning and a good part of the way through it, I was the very last one to leave at the end of April of 2003. Then after that, I did a combination of other projects for Stat-A-Matrix that were shorter duration. I eventually, shortly after that, started working for Manage Assist, which is the training company in Hazlet. They were in Edison and then Hazlet, where it was also Department of Labor grant-

funded training, but it wasn't quality management. It was supervisory skills and computer courses, continuous improvement, philosophy and stuff like that. So, I was a trainer for a while and then I became a grant writer. So, for a number of years I did that. Once or twice I ended up leaving that. I wasn't an employee. I was a 1099-er. I was a contractor in the early years. Just like I was with STAT-A-MATRIX, I was with Manage Assist. When there was work, I work and get paid. When there's not work, I'm not working and I don't get paid. But, I was doing the part-time bartending and all the other stuff. A couple times when STAT-A-MATRIX projects came along, I told the Manage Assist I'm not available for this because I'm going to do that. 2005, I think it was, I went to Maine for a six-month project in Portland, Maine with a company that made testing materials for animal health. I've done other projects here and there for STAT-A-MATRIX over the years. Then in 2011, I left Manage Assist completely. I had been an employee for the previous year or two and it was getting old. I mean, this grant writing--I was doing mostly all grant writing at the time. Although I was successful at it, I probably got a hundred companies--it was almost a hundred percent success rate in getting companies approved for these grants. I got Johnson & Johnson a fifty-thousand-dollar training grant. That's how good I was at grant writing, but it got old. In 2011, STAT-A-MATRIX Project came along for Memphis. I spent eight months in Memphis with, again, another tobacco project. This one was an R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. A company they had acquired, American Snuff; they made moist snuff. I did that for eight months. People say to me, "How do you like travelling all around the country away from home doing these projects," and my standard response is, "Anything that gets me out of the house can't be all bad." Then they turn to Sara and they say, "What do you think about Jim travelling all over on these projects?" She says, "Anything that gets him out of the house can't be all bad." That's always been a big part of this. When the Richmond Project was first proposed to me, it was proposed as a one-year project. Now, other than the couple of trips to China—maybe two months or three months was the longest one--I had never spent much time away from home and Sara had never spent time on her own. By 1999, when the Richmond Project started, the kids were off on their own, but my brother was living here. He had been here since '93, my disabled brother. They proposed it as a one-year project, but that Philip Morris would pay for a trip home every two weeks. We discussed it, and Sara said, "You ain't been making much money lately. So, this will be good and we will make it work. You'll be coming home very two weeks." Well, that lasted for a short time, but then the kids started moving back into the house with their spouses and offspring. I started only coming home when I had to come home. Three and a half years this project lasted. That last couple of years, particularly, I was only coming home when I had to come home--holidays and if something was going on that I had to be home for. Other than that, once a month or so, she was coming down to Richmond to spend a weekend or a long weekend with me because they were putting me up in a two-bedroom apartment. Bert, the guy who was my apartment-mate, he had a girlfriend in Oregon, so he was periodically flying to Oregon. So, on weekends he was going to be away, Sara would come down and most of the time she came down by train because that was more flexible. Philip Morris would pay for her to come down or for me to go home. Basically, they would pay for conjugal visits. But with an airplane, if you make an appointment or a reservation in advance and then something comes up and you can't come, you got to pay to change and all that stuff, but with train you don't have any of that. So, she came down by train a number of times. She drove down once. It took her all day because she went all back roads. [laughter] She never tried that one again, but she was coming down. And we liked Richmond. We'd go to wine festivals and beer festivals and music festivals. There's always things to do in

Richmond and things to see, between Revolutionary history, Civil War history, the countryside, the city. Neither one of us is city people, but we liked Richmond and that's why we really were thinking of moving down there, but then that never happened. Now, with the kids and grandkids here, we're pretty much stuck in New Jersey.

MG: That was a perfect segue because I wanted to ask you about your grandkids, when they were born, what their names are, and also how your kids' lives unfolded.

JV: Well, we have Darcy, who is now forty-four or so, and the twin boys, Peter and Brian, who are forty-two or so. Darcy was two years old when the boys were born. Darcy was the first to get married when she graduated from Rutgers in '93. She graduated in May and got married in August and started graduate school right away. She was a teaching assistant while working on her master's and her PhD. in animal sciences at Cook. She was awarded teaching assistant of the year award, two years in a row. One year from the graduate school and one year from the college, or from the graduate school one year and from the teachers--I don't know, but it was two different awards for basically the same thing, two years in a row--teaching assistant awards, of all the hundreds of teaching assistants. Well, she graduated and then she went on to do a post-doctoral fellowship at NYU medical school doing malaria research, breeding mosquitoes and she still does that. She's got mosquitoes in the lab at Penn State satellite campus, where she's been for about twelve years or so now. She now is Director of Academic Affairs and biology professor, although she is not teaching right now. She's running the school. She's number two on campus with the--as long as hopefully the chancellor will never see this transcript or hear it, but he's the figurehead and she's the number two, who does all the work. [laughter] It's stressful, but she enjoys it and she does a good job. Once they got married, then her husband was the breadwinner because she was in graduate school and he had a number of different jobs in various places in the country, so she was working on her graduate studies long distance in some cases. The fellowship she did at NYU, I don't remember all the details. They have lived in Austin, Texas. They've lived in Buffalo, New York. They lived in South Jersey and for periods of time, she would stay here, at our house, and commute from here into New York City to NYU, work from here to New Brunswick to the campus, but a lot of her graduate work was done long distance, from Buffalo, from Austin, from South Jersey. When she had to be physically there, she would stay here and commute from here because it was close. She'd take the train from Dunellen into New York City. I give her credit. She set a goal when she was young--I may have told you this before. When she was a teenager, she thought she wanted to be a veterinarian. The kids, all three of them, were all active in 4H and rabbits and all that stuff. We had chickens roaming the yard and we had goats here. That wreck of a shed out there used to be the goat house. We had a fence enclosure in front of it, but she wanted to be a vet, so what did she do? She got a job at a local veterinary clinic as a cage cleaner, animal helper, when she was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen something like that, as soon as she could do that kind of work legally, cleaning cages, to see what being a vet was all about. Well, she did that for a couple of years and decided she didn't want to be a veterinarian, mostly because she didn't want to deal with people and their sick animals, but she still wanted to be in the biological field. So, she changed her goal to wanting to be a college biology professor and she worked at it. I have never been a goal setter and as a result, I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up. That's why and how I've ended up doing all these miscellaneous things during the years and in some cases, not doing anything because there wasn't anything available that I was into at the moment because I had

never really set any goals for myself. I give her credit. She achieved her goal. Revised her goal, changed her goals as appropriate, but worked towards achieving her goals. The boys, the twin boys, ended up two years apart in school, even though age-wise they're only five minutes apart. Peter had some learning disabilities and ended up repeating a grade, and I don't remember when, but Brian, on the other hand, was considered gifted with a high IQ and ended up skipping a grade. They didn't go straight through Piscataway Public Schools. We thought what we were doing for them was something good, particularly for Brian, but I'm not sure that it necessarily ended up that way. We recognized that he had ability, so we had him tested and they said, "Yes, he's gifted. He needs some kind of a gifted program." Well, at the time they had laws that said, each child according to his needs, which is not just for those who need extra but those who are able to do more. Piscataway had a gifted program, which was one hour a week; they bussed him to a school and do puzzles or something like that, but it wasn't enough. Metuchen, on the other hand, had a gifted program in one of the public schools, a full-time gifted program in the Edgar School, I think it was. We petitioned Piscataway to pay for him to go there because it was what he needed. Piscataway basically said, "Sue us, we're not going to do that." So, we talked to a lawyer but it never went anywhere. So, we paid, and that was when Sara went back to work. We paid for Brian to go for a year or two at Edgar School. It was okay. Also, and I again don't remember all the details of exactly when--Sara would probably have a better handle on it--all three of the kids ended up in Timothy Christian School out here off Stelton Road in Piscataway, I believe. What's the name of that road out there? Out by Camp Kilmer, what used to be Camp Kilmer. They went there for a year or two and we paid for that. I don't remember all the details about why they went there or why we said, "The heck with all this," and took all three of them and put them all in Piscataway Public School. Well, as part of that, Brian ended up a year ahead of where he chronologically should have been. Peter was a year behind. So maybe he didn't actually repeat a grade in the same school. It might have been during this transition from school to school that he ended up repeating a grade, but not in the same school. Brian, I don't know that he benefited from being ahead of where he should've been chronologically because he had socialization type issues. When he looks back, he thinks--not that he was autistic, but he might have been a touch of--what's that low-grade autism?

MG: Asperger syndrome.

JV: Asperger's, yes. I've read some books about that and all. There was some thought about Amanda may be having some of that because the grandkids, when they were little, Amanda had some issues, Jessie had some issues. It's thought that Jessie's issues might have been largely around the fact that she was spending all day, every day, before she went to school, before she was old enough to go to school, with her mother who was confined to bed with MS and they were both vegetating. They had a house here in Piscataway. We pushed for Jessie to get out of that environment and may have helped pay for her to go to a day care/preschool kind of thing and that was very good for her. She still is not the most sociable kid, but she's much better than what she was. Amanda is much better than what she was. The younger boys, Peter Jr. and Aiden, have had anger management issues, which is what I say is my brother's main problem; that he's got a bad attitude. He's a waste of a human life. When he was young they called him retarded because they couldn't handle him, but we had had him. When he came to live with us in 1993--and I remember that because Sara remembers it was the same summer that Darcy got married, around the same time that Darcy got married and he was with us until a year and a half

ago, and finally got him into a nursing home. He doesn't read. He doesn't write. He doesn't socialize. He doesn't use a telephone. He doesn't do anything. He sits and vegetates. That's why he ended up in a nursing home. He had had menial jobs in maintenance and dishwashing and stuff like that over the years, but couldn't get along with people. He'd have a job for a while and get fired. He never drove. He never did anything. But as I was mentioning the other day, it's genetic, in that my mother suffered from the same kinds of things and had to go for shock treatments at Carrier Clinic periodically. My brother would go there and they had him on Thorazine, but I remember a doctor telling me one time that the dose of Thorazine he was on was not too big to hurt him but not big enough to help him, or something like that, because he would periodically--even when he was living here--my point: he was living at home with my parents. They ended up moving out of the house and into an apartment and leaving him in the house. He didn't cook, so they would deliver food to him. When he was working, my father would pick him up and take him to work and bring him home. In those days, he thought that his path to riches was through Bingo, so he would make my father take him to Bingo games at all the various churches and firehouses every night, seven nights a week. He's a waste of human life. Anyway, I always felt guilt, that my kids, particularly the grandkids, that it was genetic issues that came through my mother, through me, to them because the eight and nine-year olds have had anger management issues. Peter Jr. is doing much better and seems to be growing out of it. Aiden is doing better, but he's on medication and I don't know exactly what kind. But my brother is on heavy duty medication. We got him off the Thorazine and onto something more effective and got him onto what's known as the PAAD [Pharmaceutical Assistance to the Aged and Disabled] program here in New Jersey, pharmaceutical assistance kind of thing, where he had four or five prescriptions for heavy duty stuff to keep him under control and full price on it. I remember at one point looking at it. It would've been twelve hundred dollars a month. These four or five prescriptions were costing him like five bucks each. So without that, we and he wouldn't have been able to afford the medications, and he's still on it. In the nursing home, he's still on this stuff and this was the only nursing home we could get to take him because of his history. They said, "As long as he's under control, he's welcome here. But if he is out of control, he's out of here." In October, it'll be two years, but he's still a pain in our butt, because we have to go down there, an hour trip. Every couple of weekends, we're down there taking him out to lunch so he doesn't feel neglected and forgotten. Aiden's on medication and hopefully he's growing out of it too. But now Andrew, the two-year-old, has got issues. He doesn't talk. He's going to be three in August. He's delayed development. Whether that's genetics or something else, I don't know, but it's something I've always been concerned about. So, that's basically the story. Well, my son Peter, Peter, Sr., He graduated high school, from Piscataway. He was in the band. He's been active in 4H and now Adult Rabbit Breeders. He goes all over the northeast as a judge at rabbit shows. His wife is Director of Addictive Services in Atlantic Health Care. She's got a good job in the healthcare industry. Peter has worked for over twenty years at Microstamping in the shipping department in Franklin Township, just down the road from where his mother works, but they live in Brick, down by Point Pleasant, down at the shore. So he's got quite a commute every day, but his wife has got quite a commute going the other way, down south to Atlantic City every day where her hospitals are, where she commutes around between the different hospitals. So, they're on the road a lot and worry about them driving. Darcy is the Director of Academic Affairs. Brian has been in hazardous waste for quite a while. He worked for a number of different hazardous waste companies, going around collecting hazardous waste for disposal, but for the last three or four years, he's worked with Rutgers in their hazardous

waste area. He seems quite happy there. He was doing a lot of travelling with Stericycle, the last company he worked with, which he got me into three or four years ago and it's part-time work that I do. But he and the girls, Amanda being seventeen and Jessie thirteen now, lived with us for five and a half years, up to a year ago because he had to give up his house to make his wife to be eligible for Medicaid when he put her into the nursing home because her MS was so bad she couldn't take care of herself anymore. So she is in a nursing home and not going to be coming out of it. Her doctor had told us years ago that she has MS induced dementia. She hates us for taking her girls away from her, as though we would have ever volunteered to have our life disrupted that way and she hates Brian because he put her in that place, but she can't take care of herself so there wasn't really any option. But now, for the last year, they've been in East Brunswick on their own and they seem to be doing pretty well as their own family unit with Wendy as a mother figure there, which is good for them all. The grandkids are doing well. Joseph, the eldest boy, is a junior in high school in Pennsylvania.

MG: That is Darcy's son?

JV: Darcy's son, eldest son, and Aiden is her youngest at eight. Peter's got Peter Jr. at nine and Andrew [is] going to be three. Peter Jr. is into everything. He's riding horses, he does soccer. They've always got him going to this or that. Joseph plays in the orchestra at the high school. Aiden is into baseball and things, so they're all very active. Jessie is probably the least active of the bunch, but she's in Girl Scouts. Oh, and she plays the trombone. So, no I take that back. She's active also. She's in the band at school. She's going to be in eighth grade in September in East Brunswick, whereas Amanda, will be a freshman at Rutgers in September and she's getting scholarships. East Brunswick gave her a six hundred dollar per year scholarship for Rutgers and the Vietnam Veterans of America--and I have to ask them about that at the meeting tonight, because they told me about it, but she never got any official notification from them--seven hundred and fifty dollars, which she may be able to reapply for every year. I'm not sure. Or maybe it's just the first year. She's also applied for Marine Corps League scholarships, which was due June 1st, she just got in. She's working on the National Marine Corps League, which is due July 1st. She's going to be sending that in. Those are pretty much a given. She'll get something from both of those, I think. She applied for the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Scholarship in Holmdel. Have you been there yet?

MG: Yes.

JV: Okay. She didn't get that because that's competitive and they award two \$2500-dollar scholarships. A lot of people apply for that one. She didn't get that, but she did a very good write up after her visit to the Memorial. I was impressed with that. I should give you a copy of that.

MG: I ran into Brian there.

JV: That's right. You ran into the two of them the day she was having her visit because you had a program going on that day. Yes. So, any other questions about kids or grandkids, or did I pretty much cover everything?

MG: I think you covered it.

JV: Well, something I may have not told you about, or maybe I told you part of it--when Sara and I got married over forty-five years ago, after we got married, she said she wanted to have twelve kids, and I said, "Well, it's a good thing you didn't say that before we got married because I don't want to have twelve kids." But, then we had our three within that couple years. We had lost one in between, I think I told you that story.

MG: Yes.

JV: So, then she didn't want to get pregnant anymore. While she was pregnant with the twins, she talked about getting fixed, getting her tubes tied after the twins were born. Now, sometimes the doctor would do it during delivery, but her doctors, they didn't do that. They said, "If you want it done, you have to come back and have it separate and afterwards." Well, I don't remember the details of the indication or why I realized that she would never do that. But when it came time for her to do that she said to me, "I'm not going to do that. How would you like to have somebody go in and cutting in your body?" I said, "I knew you were going to say that. That's why I have an appointment tomorrow to go talk to a urologist about me getting it done." So, that surprised her, but I got it done. I got a vasectomy within six months or so after the twins were born. Well, she still had strong maternal instincts. She had heard a rumor. She's a Lutheran and she had heard that through the Lutheran Church, you could get subsidized adoption. You could adopt a little kid, a baby, without having to pay for it. Well, she looked into that and found it was just a rumor; it ain't true. The Lutheran Church would help you adopt, but it would cost you big bucks. Maybe not as much as through private adoption, but it would still cost. Okay. So, that didn't work out. We then became a foster family for a couple of years. We went through the state, getting accredited as a foster home. At this point, Darcy was probably ten or eleven years old and the twins, two years younger. We had, as I recall, three episodes of having foster kids here. One was a deaf boy, who was a teenager of, I don't know, fifteen or sixteen years old. Two of them, I think, were sisters and the third--young, relatively young; one maybe five years old and one a baby, and a third group that might have been two also. I don't remember all the details. Again, Sara would remember a lot more about it than I would, but the sisters had been taken from a home where there was abuse. The state's role in those days, I don't know about now, was to get families back together after a period of time of having the kids removed. So, they were going for weekend visits with the father or whatever. One weekend, when the social worker brought the kids back to us, I don't remember what the indication was, but there was bruising in the little one's mouth or something, but the father was abusing the kids somehow, I don't remember. The other group, when they would come back from a visit, the older one would misbehave terribly for days afterwards. Finally, Sara was able to get from this kid that, "Yes, well when I spend the weekend with my mother, my mother tells me the worse I behave when I come back here the sooner we'll get back together as a family." That one ended poorly also. The teenage boy who was here was deaf. He was a deaf boy. He was only here for days and he tried to rape Darcy. So, obviously that one ended poorly. So, that was the extent of our experience as a foster family.

MG: Wow. Do you remember how you got connected with the Rutgers Oral History Archives? I remember seeing your business card on my desk. I started a new job. I was going through the desk. I saw your name and I think I just cold called you or emailed you.

JV: I don't remember. Yes, that was over a year ago and I don't remember. I don't know. I don't have any recollection of that at all. When you get old, you know what I mean. You're young and you don't have any recollection, so it's not surprising. I have no idea. I don't know that there was anybody who introduced us. I don't remember coming across information about you and searching you out. I don't remember how you might have contacted me. I don't remember any of it.

MG: I found this business card in my desk.

JV: You found it in your desk?

MG: Yes.

JV: When you took over?

MG: Yes, there were all kinds of papers in my desk, including your card.

JV: Wow. I don't know how that would've gotten there.

MG: Well, is there anything I am missing or anything I have forgotten to ask you in the year and a half I have been interviewing you?

JV: Well, I mean, most currently, right now, I'm doing part-time work with Stericycle and collecting Social Security. If a project from STAT-A-MATRIX comes along I'll do that, but there's been nothing the last year and a half. In 2014, I spent several weeks in California, several weeks in North Carolina, and several months in Ohio. Companies that had troubles with FDA and that through STAT-A-MATRIX, a group of us--well, California and North Carolina was just me, but Ohio was a half a dozen of us who went in to try to help this company that FDA was having issues with them, and it didn't end up well. They pretty much refused to do what we were telling them they had to do and they kicked us out. That project, in reality, would've gone on quite a bit longer although the company had the idea they were having us in for six weeks to do some quick fixes and then we were leaving. So much of what I end up involved in, it's just not organized well. I'm the junior member in all of this and I don't have authority. I just go in and do what I'm supposed to do, but so much hasn't ended up well. The China stuff never ended up well. The Ohio thing. The Memphis project, I don't think ended very well. But this work that I do for Stericycle, it's fairly interesting retrieval work and auditing work. Did I tell you about the project I did last week where I had to sort bottles of tequila for a day and a half?

MG: Yes.

JV: It wasn't hard work. It was okay. It doesn't make me a ton of money. I've been as far away as Missouri on Stericycle projects, where I spent a few days in Missouri, cleaning out a drug

store that had gotten overheated when the air conditioning went out for a week and we had to dispose of all kinds of stuff. They flew me out from New Jersey and they flew another guy from California, and together we packed up all this stuff in this store, put it in boxes, and loaded it on trucks. That was in 2013. As far as what I do with my time, I end up doing domestic stuff, emailing, and some veteran organization stuff. A little bit of hunting and fishing here and there, and end up going in circles a lot. I've got so much I have to do that sometimes I'm like a deer in headlights where I get frozen. Last year, I had the issues with sleep, where I was totally exhausted and some days couldn't do anything. I'd watch old movies on Turner Movie Channel all day. This year I'm doing much better. Health-wise I'm doing okay--arthritis, some blood pressure that's under control. I donate platelets and I'm kind of proud of that. It's my contribution to society, where this Sunday I've got an appointment in New Brunswick to donate platelets. I've been doing that for years. Before that, donated whole blood for a number of years. Every Christmas Eve I used to be at Sara's church on their Christmas Eve Blood Drive, donating blood. So, I keep busy.

MG: Please let me know if you think of anything else. We are going to stay in touch, I am sure. I can always come back.

JV: Okay.

MG: For now, I will turn this off and I want to thank you for all the time you spent with me and for becoming my friend and inviting me to your wedding anniversary party.

JV: Whenever you need some vegetables.

MG: Oh, yes.

JV: Say, "Jim, I'm going to be in your area." August 1st, we start getting tomatoes and peppers.

MG: Okay, hook me up with some hot peppers.

JV: You like tomatoes too? Because I grow the best tomatoes in the world.

MG: Yes, that sounds great.

JV: Okay, sometime I'm in your area I might drop off a bag of veggies. You might find a bag of veggies on your porch one day when you come home.

MG: I will know where they came from.

JV: Yes.

MG: That sounds nice. All right. I will turn this off. I think it is pretty much full.

JV: Okay.

-----END OF TRANSCRIPT-----

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