

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Shirley Brodecky Myers**

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Interviewer: Pat Pollicoff

Transcriber: Sylvia Vacek

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Richmond, Texas

14 Pages



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*Transcript*

POLLICOFF: I am with Shirley Brodecky Myers at the Gus George Academy in Richmond, Texas. Shirley, let's start with some biographical information. When and where were you born?

MYERS: I was born in Sugar Land in our house; my mother was afraid of the hospital. The doctor came to the house. It was a cold day my daddy and grandparents said. I was born on January 10, 1939. We lived on Sixth Street, and the hospital was on Third. When I was three years old, we moved to the middle of the block, to a bigger house that had two bedrooms instead of one. I still own that house on Sixth Street.

POLLICOFF: Tell me your parents' names?

MYERS: My mother's name was Genevieve Nowak; she was Polish. My daddy was Charles Henry Brodecky, and he was born in Tavern, which is a little town in Fort Bend County near East Bernard. My mother was born in Chapel Hill. They lived a half-acre from each other on separate farms in Pleak, Texas. My daddy went to work for the Marshall Canning Company around 1936, when they first opened. They got married in 1937. He eventually became the superintendent, and worked there until he retired. My mother loved being a housewife. At one point, she did go to work for the canning company for about six years when I was in college, but she was not happy. She was happy being a cook, a cleaner, and nourishing everyone. That was her deal. I have one sister almost seven years younger than I. Her name is Mary Lee Sebesta, and she still lives in First Colony in Fort Bend County.

POLLICOFF: What year was she born?

MYERS: December 4, 1945.

POLLICOFF: What year did your parents move to Sugar Land?

MYERS: When they got married on October 30, 1937, they lived for six months in a rooming house because there were no rent houses available. When a house became available on Sixth Street, they moved to that house. You had to work for the sugar company or a company approved business to live in one of their rent houses.

Here's a good thing. When my nephew was going to college, he started living there and is still living there. The house was built in 1914.

POLLICOFF: When was your daddy born?

MYERS: My daddy was born on October 30, 1913, and my mother was born September 2, 1914.

POLLICOFF: How long did they live?

MYERS: My daddy died very young when he was 64. He died on July 8, 1978. My mother had just turned 78 when she died on October 26, 1993.

POLLICOFF: So he went to work in the cannery, and what did he do there?

MYERS: He was the superintendent. I always thought that my daddy was really smart. He could have been an engineer because he was really good at math, and his job entailed doing things with math. He was in charge of the operation of the plant. He had to go out into the fields to check the crops to see when they were ready to be harvested. He checked for crops such as corn and green beans. The reason the plant was closed was the plant was canning basically dry pack such as dried beans. They were not doing any fresh crops. The Brazos River Authority was charging them \$250,000.00 to treat the plant's waste because it was going into the Brazos River. Because of the cost they were not profitable and they were sold to Sara Lee. In two years, Sara Lee didn't think the plant was profitable enough, so they closed it down.

POLLICOFF: What year was that?

MYERS: My daddy was in his late fifties, maybe '55, and so it would be about 1968, somewhere about there.

My parents were first generation Americans. My mother's daddy came from Poland, and her mother was born in Chapel Hill. Her parents had two children when they came to America. My mother was the third child, born in Chapel Hill. Eventually, they had at least ten children.

My daddy's mother and dad came from Moravia; my grandfather was 19. At 29, he married my grandmother. She was 19 and had been in America about two or three years when she met him. My grandmother's brother came over earlier and sent for her and her brother. One of the brothers became real well known in the Czech community. He was the editor of the Vestnik, a very respected Czech newspaper. He was also very involved in helping Czech people who came to America. He received an award for his outstanding work promoting his Czech heritage from the Czech Heritage Society one year.

POLLICOFF: Moravia is close to Czechoslovakia?

MYERS: It is a real small part in the Czech Republic.

POLLICOFF: So, basically you were brought up in Czech culture.

MYERS: A long time ago, people married within their own cultures and their own faith because it was very important. Czechs married Czechs, Polish married Polish, and Catholics married Catholics. My mother came from a family with eight sisters and two brothers, and everyone basically married a Czech or Polish. They all stayed Catholic until they died. One aunt separated from her husband and never got a divorce. Another one of my aunts met a soldier at a dance, and they got married six weeks later because he was going back into the service. He was not a Catholic and not Polish, and my grandmother would not go to the wedding. My grandfather went to the wedding. This couple stayed married for 56 years. It was a different time then. My dad's mother did not like my mother at first because she was Polish and my daddy was Czech. After they married, she loved my mom very much.

POLLICOFF: I think there are a lot of stories like that in a lot of families, but that was unusual for them to marry outside of their tradition.

MYERS: Yes, it was.

POLLICOFF: Was she Catholic?

MYERS: Yes, my parents were Catholic. Her parents were Catholic, and I am telling you that to the day they died, every sibling, and there were ten, practiced their Catholic religion.

My daddy's parents moved to the valley, so we didn't see them often. He had a couple of cousins, but basically our home reflected Polish. My mother was extremely close to her sisters, and if they fought, they never stayed mad. It bothers me today when I see families that do not talk to brothers or sisters because they are mad. That never happened. If somebody had something, everybody was invited. It was a very close-knit family. My grandmother died when she was about 63. I was 12 years old at that time. One of the aunts was matriarch of the family.

My mom's family always comes together (as a reunion) to celebrate on Easter Sunday, but now we celebrate the Saturday or the week before Easter. My relatives get together and at least 80 people come to these reunions. It was great being in a close family growing up. I had about 27 first cousins, and there were five of us close in age.

We spent summers together spending a week at each other's house and a week at our house. It was nice, and I would not give up this experience for anything at all. My mother was a wonderful cook but she was not fancy. She could make the best fried chicken, roast, and chicken soup. It was what you call comfort food. She liked cooking, and she liked having company over for Sunday dinner. She was an immaculate housekeeper, and I am her daughter...

POLLICOFF: How many children were in your father's family?

MYERS: There were three boys. My father was the oldest; they were all seven years apart. Isn't that interesting? His parents stayed farmers until his daddy died really young, at 61. His mother remarried her first sweetheart, and they went to Michigan where they lived until they died.

His middle brother joined the service. He made it a career, and they lived in Taiwan and all over. They settled in Arizona. His younger brother just died two years ago. He was in his 80's. He lived in the valley, and was a farmer and Mayor of Rio Hondo. When he couldn't run for Mayor anymore, because of his busy business, his wife ran and became Mayor of Rio Hondo. She was very politically active,

POLICOFF: It sounds wonderful. You grew up in Sugar Land with a wonderful close family.

MYERS: I lived on Sixth Street, and Leon Anhaiser was my neighbor two houses down. Allen Dernehl was on the left, and Allen's mother and my mother were really good friends. Beverly Haverland lived behind us, and we all played together. Our favorite thing was croquet, and our yard did not have any barriers. Of the kids my age on my street, I was the only girl. We would play cowboys and Indians, and I was always mad because I could only be Dale Evans. The boys could choose from different cowboys, but I couldn't. The boys had China berry fights, and on Halloween, you had to hide your water meter because the kids were bad and would steal it. They marked on your porch screen and on your sidewalk with chalk. We had a boy on our street that was very mischievous.

POLLICOFF: Not Leon.

EDITOR'S NOTE: See Leon Anhaiser's interview on the FBC Historical Commission website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=30576>

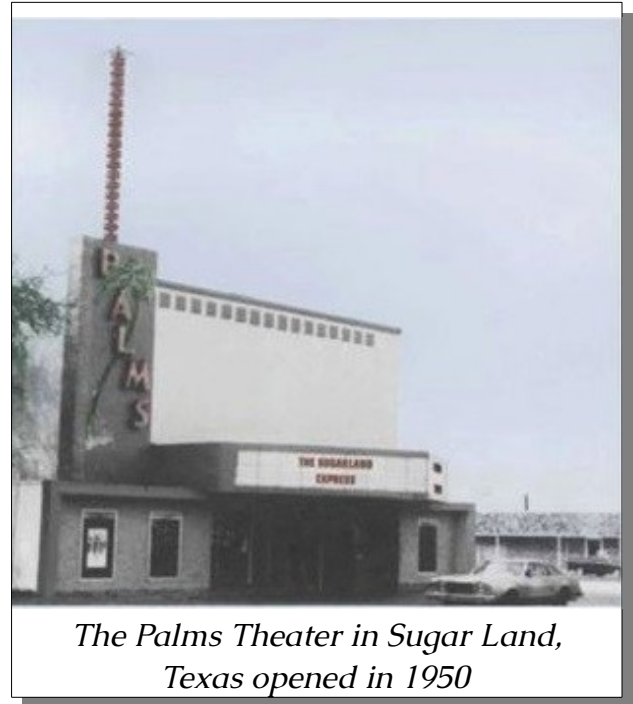
MYERS: Oh, no, not Leon. I have to tell you that Leon is my very successful friend. We did not have extra money. Our parents had jobs and worked to have things, but you are talking about it being a luxury to go on vacations. We didn't do that, but we had friendship. Look at all Leon has done! I would never have dreamed that I would have done all the things I have done in my life because of how little we had growing up. It was a wonderful place to grow up in.

I went to high school at Sugar Land High School, and I was a good student. I loved being a twirler in the band. In high school, I worked at Palms Theater on Highway 90. I made fifty cents an hour, and after the first year, Mr. Morton made me chief confectionery girl, and I made fifty-five cents an hour.

POLLICOFF: Chief confectionery girl was responsible for what?

MYERS: I had to do an inventory of candy and order everything. We got to see the show free. So, when I had a date, it was nice because they didn't have to pay anything for me to go on a date. After about a year, he asked me to be cashier, and I made seventy-five cents an hour.

My scariest deal was one night when the popcorn machine caught on fire. Allen Dernehl was working also and told me to call the fire department. So, I called the fire department. I was so worried about the money that I had with me. We had a wooden box with \$300 in it. That is not a lot of money today, but back then it was. I took that box of money, and I went outside into the crowd until the fire department came. It wasn't anything major, but I was more concerned about that money than I was about my safety. I never thought about anybody robbing me when I was out there. It wasn't like you hear about robberies now. Mr. Morton was really good to me, and I really enjoyed working with him and his wife. She was also a cashier.



*The Palms Theater in Sugar Land, Texas opened in 1950*

I got a Fort Bend County Roundup Scholarship for \$500, and I went to Sam Houston. The first year there, I got a job making fifty cents an hour! I lived in a small dorm and my total tuition for Sam Houston was \$1,000 for the 1st year.

POLLICOFF: It has been a while since college tuition was that reasonable! A thousand dollars back then was a lot of money.

MYERS: I also had a job on campus working for the ROTC making fifty cents an hour. I was limited to working ten hours a week. I made \$20 a month at college. The second year, I joined a sorority, and lived in the sorority house.

I am a charter member of Alpha Chi Omega. If you go into the sorority house, my name is on the charter. Even being in the sorority and paying my dues, I don't think it was much more than \$1,000. Every year I worked on campus, and every summer, I went to work for the canning company.

POLLICOFF: So during the summer is when you worked for them?

MYERS: Sugar Land was so small, and I always had a job. I was so fortunate that they called me to come back to work for them. I must have been a good worker. In the summer for six weeks, I worked for the canning company and I sat in a weigh house. When the trucks came with corn, I had to weigh the truck with the corn. When they took the corn out, they came back with an empty truck and I weighed the empty truck. That is how the farmer got paid. Some of it was from the prison system. Guards would come out and these trustees would bring in the trucks. They would stand out of the trucks. I was there all by myself. Do you know where the old Dr. Slaughter's office used to be? Right across there was a weigh station which they have torn down now. It was near where NalCo is now. I did that for six summers and got minimum wage.

After I graduated from college, in the summer if I worked for twenty days then I got a nickel raise. I think I was making a \$1.25, and then I got \$1.30. That was big money. Then one summer, after I worked weighing corn, I went to work for NalCo because they had fired a girl in the corrosion lab and they needed someone. My daddy had talked to Mr. Kirkpatrick, the president of NalCo and he said they would hire me for six weeks, which I thought was wonderful. I loved that job, and Mr. Noe was my boss. It was fantastic. I had to take shorthand, I had to do letters, and it was the best job. I almost quit college because it was so good.

The next summer, they called me again and said, "We need someone to sit out in a field on Highway 90 going to Rosenberg because we are having trouble with the railroad company on where to build our new building. They have tracks where the trains stop for crossing, and we don't know where to build this road crossing to our new building. So we are going to hire you and pay you \$150 for one month. All you have to do is sit out in that field under a John Deere Umbrella with a piece of cardboard on the grass. Time the trains when they come by so we can see how long they stay at those crossings." So for one month, I did that job. I stayed there and timed the trains.

POLLICOFF: Was this in July or August?

MYERS: It was in the middle of July because I had already finished my other job. It was hot, but I was under a John Deere umbrella. You would not believe the sunburn where I had my watch. I had to park my car on the highway, and only one time did someone stop and ask if I had trouble. I had to walk across the railroad tracks in this grass. They made a trail for me, and I wasn't scared. When I went to lunch, someone had to come and stay there for me. Somebody had to be there all the time.

POLLICOFF: So you went to Sam Houston for four years and you got a degree in education.

MYERS: Yes, I have a Bachelor's Degree in Education. After college, I got a job, and I was the first academic student teacher at Sugar Land Junior High. Sugar Land High School and Missouri City consolidated in 1959. I was in academics at the junior high, and the other student teacher was out in shop somewhere. I taught English. My last name started with a "B", and when I went to physically register at Sam Houston, the "B"s were scheduled the second day of registration. I went to register when they opened up the Sugar Land location. I was ecstatic because I did not have a car and this meant I could live at home. I taught at the junior high, and to be honest, I kind of had a bad experience. The teacher that I was with didn't like me because I was not a 'yeller' and I did not scream. She thought I needed to have a louder voice for junior high kids. I felt that I could do discipline without being a 'yeller'. I never applied for a job at Fort Bend after that.

Dr. Wheeler's daughter, Jonellen, and I went to Sugar Land High together. Dr. Wheeler was our dentist, and my daddy had gone fishing with him. He was president of the school board and asked why I did not come and apply. He asked me three times, why I didn't apply. I just didn't feel comfortable there, so I applied in Rosenberg.



EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read the interview with Dr. Wheeler's son, Leslie Armin "Buddy" Wheeler, III, on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=48162>

I was the first teacher they hired that year. When I went to apply, the superintendent did the hiring. They had an opening in the junior high and high school. He said, "I see that you did your student teaching in junior high, so that is where you are going to go, to the junior high."

POLLICOFF: So you taught English in junior high.

MYERS: The principal, Mr. Nelson, had lived in the very house we moved into in Sugar Land. We moved into his house when he moved to Rosenberg. I taught for 35 years at Lamar Junior High. When they had to divide the school into two schools because of enrollment I went to George Junior High. After three years of teaching, I got my Master's Degree in Education from the University of Houston.

POLLICOFF: Good for you. We kind of skipped over a big portion of your life. Did you marry?

MYERS: Yes. I met my husband, Clarence, at Sam Houston at the Newman Club, which is a Catholic organization. He was from Galveston, and he had served in Korea for two years. When he graduated from high school he went to Texas for a year, and was on the freshman swim team for the first year. His grades were not good, so he went into the service. He served in Korea for 16 months, and when he came back and enrolled at Sam Houston, I met him.

After I graduated, he still had one more year to go. We felt that we could not afford to get married because I felt I could not get a job near Huntsville. So we waited until he graduated from college.

When we went to Houston to look for apartments, we saw an efficiency apartment for \$75. When you walked in, the couch laid down into a bed. It was a nice kitchen, but he said, "This reminds me of college, let's go back to Rosenberg." So, we came back to Rosenberg and got an apartment. He went to work in Houston and later he started his own business. He was a photographer, and he had a business in Rosenberg, and I had a job at Lamar. While he was getting his business started, someone told him the school needed bus drivers in the morning. So, he went and drove a bus because it did not interfere with his business.

The best thing he ever did was to teach swimming lessons. We have a pool, so he taught swimming lessons at our house. The pool was built in 1980, and the first year someone asked if he was going to teach lessons. He had never thought about it. The first year he had 40 people, and eventually he had 162 people. He taught nine hours a day. He never once advertised. It was by word of mouth, and he taught swimming for over 30 years.

POLLICOFF: So he drove a bus, taught swimming and he also had photography.

MYERS: Yes.

POLLICOFF: Was he originally from Galveston?

MYERS: Yes. Do you know who he went to school with? He went to a Catholic High School for Boys with Kirwin and Tilman J. Fertitta. Tilman owns Landry's, The Golden Nugget, and hundreds of restaurants.

Daddy went to school with Clarence. They graduated together. They had a reunion last year, and Fertitta's father and mother were there. It is a small world. We have been married 54 years this July.

POLLICOFF: That's wonderful. How long did he have his photography business in Rosenberg?

MYERS: For about 40 years he took portraits, and for about three years, he took senior pictures for Lamar, weddings, Quinceaneras and sometimes for insurance companies, whatever. But what happened was everything was going digital at that time, and Clarence kind of lost his interest and did not want to make that transition.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The fiesta *de quince años* (*Quinceañera*) is a celebration of a girl's 15th birthday. It has its cultural roots in Latin America but is widely celebrated today throughout the Americas.

POLLICOFF: Tell me about your children. Do you have children?

MYERS: I have two children. Pam was born on March 5, 1969, and she is a teacher. She went to Sam Houston and is married to John Labay. They have been married 15 years and he is a teacher with a Master's Degree. He is now teaching at St. Pius High School and is going to be their tennis coach.

Michelle was born on August 17, 1972. She is a teacher at Fort Bend Oyster Creek Elementary. She has been there ever since they opened. She and her husband, Bill Taylor, have two sons, Zachary and Mason. Zachary just graduated from Austin High School and Mason is a sophomore.

POLLICOFF: That's wonderful. What do you do in your spare time? Are you involved in your church or the community?

MYERS: We go to Holy Rosary Catholic church in Rosenberg. I was on the Parish Council, and I sang in the choir. Right now, I am a *lector*, we are money counters and in charge of the senior group. I am the facilitator for our senior group that we've had for 17 years. I do all the leg work, and I love my little seniors. We used to play bridge twice a month, and we danced in a dance club for 25 years. We occasionally dance today.

I am in a sorority, Beta Sigma Phi, and I love cruises. We used to go to Las Vegas, but my husband now likes to go to Louisiana to the casinos. We have season tickets to Cast Theater. I was a secretary for many organizations, including AARP, Fort Bend Czech Heritage Society and secretary to the state Czech Heritage Society.

POLLICOFF: Do you remember any livestock or crops being grown in your neighborhood?



*Ray Michan, Gloria Michan, Joyce Lolley, Shirley Myers, Aurelia Cerny and Ted Kaspar, members of the Czech Heritage Society of Fort Bend County, are decked out in cultural clothing in Decker Park, February 2017.*

*--photo FBC Museum Association*

MYERS: Yes. In Sugar Land, on Sixth Street and Seventh Street, there was a cotton field where St. Theresa's Catholic Church is. That was a cotton field, and one day I picked cotton for a day and dragged this bag behind me. I made fifty cents! I remember that very well.

POLLICOFF: Everyone should do that at least once.

MYERS: The bank owned the property in Rosenberg across our dead-end street that we live on now. Before it was developed, it was a field where we could go pick dewberries.

POLLICOFF: Do you remember anybody having hired help in your neighborhood growing up?

MYERS: My mother did when she went to work for a while when I was in high school. She had a black lady named Kelly who helped us iron and clean.

We could hear trains, and the whistle would blow at the sugar refinery at noon. If a prisoner escaped, they would blow the whistle a certain number of times. I remember one time a prisoner got out at the end of Sixth Street and got into a garage.

POLLICOFF: So do you remember what it was like with racial segregation?

MYERS: We were all segregated. The Hispanics had their school, and the blacks had theirs. Then in 5th grade, the Hispanics came over to our school, and we were all friends. Frank Dzierzanowski always talked about our class and how unusual it was. We had a lot of smart kids in my class, and successful people who did different things. Five out of thirty-two students got their doctor's degree. But when we had our parties, the Spanish kids never came. It was strictly white kids. They had their own parties, and we had ours. When the Baptist Church gave a dinner for everybody for our high school graduation, they came.

POLLICOFF: So there was not a lot of mixing?

MYERS: No mixing at all.

POLLICOFF: None of the African Americans?

MYERS: No. When I worked at the movie theater, the blacks had to sit upstairs. Hispanics could sit in the theater, but not the blacks. I am embarrassed to say this, but when they integrated schools, and they said we were going to have blacks come to our school, it really worried me. I thought, "How am I going to tell them apart?" Isn't that something? To me they all looked the same through that window at the movie theater, where I sold movie tickets and took their orders for sodas, popcorn and candy! I never had any reason to socialize with them except for Kelly, the really nice black lady that came to our house. I will say this from my heart. I was never prejudiced, and I could not do that as a teacher. I saw that each kid could have been my kid. How can people mistreat them? Color is only skin deep and has nothing to do with your inside or who you are.

POLLICOFF: That is an interesting thing to actually admit. You didn't see them as individuals, but that changed as a teacher.

MYERS: Yes, it changed a whole lot.

POLLICOFF: But that wasn't true for the Hispanics.

MYERS: Hispanics were in our class, and one of my Hispanic classmates became a principal. One of them worked for Fort Bend in the personnel office. She is retired now. So I had interactions with them at school, but not socially out of school.

POLLICOFF: This is some of the major changes that you have seen over your lifetime?

MYERS: Oh, yes.

POLLICOFF: Anything else that you think is major that you saw change over your lifetime here in Fort Bend County?

MYERS: Well, I think that was a big one because I moved from Sugar Land to Rosenberg. We have been there for 54 years, and I still think The Hill is a safe place for the home. My nephew lives in the house and he has friends of all nationalities. When I go to these graduations, I am amazed at all the Chinese people that are here.

POLLICOFF: As far as medical care, did you have good access to medical care in your youth?

MYERS: Oh, yes. Dr. Slaughter and Dr. Kuykendahl were our doctors, and Dr. Wheeler was our dentist. We had really good medical care. We had everything here. We had a swimming pool where you were taught swimming for free in the summertime. We had a drugstore, a clothing store, a bank and a grocery store.

POLLICOFF: Most of your shopping was done right there in Sugar Land?

MYERS: Oh, yes.

POLLICOFF: Did you ever go to Houston for anything?

MYERS: Every summer Beverly Haverland and I rode a bus to downtown Houston to shop for clothes. We were in high school. Our moms let us go by ourselves. It was an adventure!

We went to Sears on South Main once a month, and I couldn't wait because I got peanut clusters there. My daddy worked real long hours, and on Saturday, we would go to Rosenberg to buy fresh meat. My daddy was so old fashioned that he did not believe in a freezer. Everything we ate had to be fresh. He would bring things home from the canning company that he would get out in the field when he went to see if it was ready for harvest. My mother could have canned it, but he said, "Oh, no." It had to be fresh.

POLLICOFF: Even though he worked in the cannery, your father insisted on everything being fresh?

MYERS: Oh, yes. Everything was fresh. There were cans that we would open, but we liked fresh things, particularly fresh meat. We did go to Rosenberg because they had a swimming pool that was open at night, and we went swimming at night. Rosenberg had a Dairy Queen, and Sugar Land had a drive-in restaurant. We went there one night when I first heard White Christmas. I can remember hearing that on the radio because the radio was our form of entertainment. We did not have a TV until I was in the eighth grade. My friend, Beverly, had a black and white television at her house, and I would watch the game shows during the daytime.

We never locked our doors, and we didn't have an air conditioner. My daddy was so old fashioned. The canning company was moving because they built a new building. They were selling their window units and my daddy did not want an air conditioner. We had a big window fan and it was cool. We never noticed it at night.

After I went to college, and there was air conditioning in my dorm, my parents got an air conditioner. More people were putting in air conditioners. Your cars did not have air conditioners, and sometimes if you wanted a radio you had to put it in because cars didn't automatically come with a radio.

Our first car did not have air conditioning either. It was simpler. One of the things that I feel sorry for kids today is that they have to have a cell phone and an internet connection to live in the modern world. You have to have all these things that take from your paycheck. We only had to pay for a house, a car, food, and the basics. It was a much simpler life then, and we did so much more visiting and socializing with kids. It is just different today.

POLLICOFF: I have enjoyed this interview, and thank you very much.

Interview Ends