

September 28, 1979

Occupation: Teacher

INTERVIEWER: When did you first hear about the incident?

NARRATOR: That Friday. It was either a Thursday or a Friday. I can't recall the exact date. It was ten thirty in the morning. I was sitting in the faculty room where I work and several people came in and expressed a concern about what they had heard about the radiation leak at TMI. We began discussing it. The more it was discussed, the more feelings began to run rampant. I would say that my real concern started just then at the initial point when I first heard about it. Because everyone else was so excited.

INT: Did you know there was a reactor there before the incident?

NAR: No I didn't.

INT: So you had no idea how far it was distance wise?

NAR: No.

INT: What did you think about at that point?

NAR: My immediate concern was the fact that I was carrying a child. I don't think I would have had any great concerns had it just been for my sake or my husband's sake. But the fact that there was an unborn child really scared me.

INT: Did you feel that it was a serious situation?

NAR: Very much so. Very much.

INT: What about a crisis: Would you have classified it a crisis?

NAR: Yes. Especially when there started to be talk of an evacuation. It became apparent that it was more serious than I had realized at the outset.

INT: Did you start seeking out further information?

NAR: Yes. Listening to newscasts and reading the newspaper.

INT: Did you talk about it a lot with friends and family?

NAR: Definitely. We discussed it at length: down to the point of where we did want to go should there be an evacuation. We came up with three alternate plans!

INT: So your attitude started to change the more you talked to people and the more you picked up on the news?

NAR: Yes.

INT: How did you feel other people were reacting to the incident?

NAR: With a great deal of panic. My husband works in Harrisburg and he related a story about the fire siren going off; people overreacted to that thinking it was some kind of emergency. People were scrambling down the street falling on top of each other. I saw panic in those around me. Then when I heard that story about how people reacted in the street; it just really made me realize how upset people were becoming.

INT: When you were listening to the radio or the TV. or the newspaper do you remember any particular sources?

NAR: No. It's all just becoming a conglomeration in my mind with all attitudes and the facts. There were several different stations that we listened to, and we read several different newspapers.

INT: Did you think you were paying more attention to those than usual?

NAR: Yes. I would say definitely.

INT: How did you feel the media handled the situation?

NAR: I would say it varied. From one station to another. I remember thinking there were several newscasters who were kind of cashing in on sensationalist value. And also feeding upon peoples fears. It was presented in such a dramatic way at times; Which I felt was not helping the situation.

INT: How do you feel the government officials handled the incident?

NAR: I feel that the president seized upon a political opportunity to come and visit. I really don't think he was that concerned. Matter of fact, I feel that there was a great deal of bumbling and a great deal of lack of knowledge or lack of input as far as several officials were concerned. I felt like they were handling it with only half the information they should have had. Poor communication, I guess, is what I'm saying.

INT: What about the industry – that being MET-ED and the way they handled it?

NAR: I felt there was a total lack of concern for the people surrounding TMI. The whole affair was handled in a very selfish, self interested way.

INT: Was there anyone you found particularly reliable or somebody whose word you trusted more than others?

NAR: Well, I would say that as a family we all leaned on each other. Be a family, I mean my husband and my parents. We were supportive of one another. To that extent, I would suppose.

INT: Was there anyone you particularly mistrusted?

NAR: I wouldn't say any one person. The whole time I felt a sense of ill at ease. I felt we weren't receiving all the info we should have been getting. So, I was mistrustful of the MET-ED. The fact that they weren't being as informative as they could.

INT: Did you feel that those in charge at TMI were in control of the situation?

NAR: No. Again it was just a general pervasive feeling of uneasiness. I felt that, well initially, there was the leak that wasn't discovered right away. It took them a good while to find out, what was going on. When you're dealing with something that important, its just...it strikes you as a little bit odd that it was handled in such a poor way.

INT: Do you feel that those in charge were in control at the time.

NAR: No. I feel the same feeling that I felt then. There was just a lack of preparedness for that kind of situation. I really, sincerely fear that kind of situation happening again. Either here or at another site around the country.

INT: So you don't have any more confidence of them being in control now?

NAR: No, absolutely none.

INT: What worried you the most about the situation?

NAR: Well, I think I touched on that a little bit before. My greatest fear was the fear for my unborn child. I was somewhat comforted by the fact that she was a 3 month old fetus. I knew at that time she had many of the parts that she needed. That she was getting a good start toward her development. But, even so, I was very concerned as the effects that this would have.

INT: Did you make plans differently than you would have normally done?

NAR: Yes we planned to evacuate the area. As a matter of fact, we did leave that Friday.

INT: What brought you to leave specifically?

NAR: Specifically, it was the fact that I was pregnant. Had I not been, I'm sure we would have remained here. But we all felt a sense of urgency to protect the baby.

INT: So you left on Friday. And how long were you gone?

NAR: We stayed away until that Sunday evening when my husband and I had to return back to work the following Monday. We came back initially deciding to see what the next couple of hours would bring. And it seemed like things were getting worse or at least had not stabilized; then I would leave again and go back where we had been.

INT: When you left, was there something that you took along with you or that you thought about taking with you?

NAR: No. I just packed as if we were leaving on vacation.

INT: You mentioned you parents and your husband were there? Was there anyone else in your life that you were watching to decide what you would do?

NAR: Not really. It was a decision we all came to together. But I really believed in it too. In other words, it wasn't something where I was being swayed by other people. I felt it was the best thing to do and that's why I left.

INT: Did you have any mental pictures of what was happening at TMI or what might happen?

NAR: No. I can't say I had any mental pictures. It was more just a general fear. A feeling more than a picture.

INT: Did you think that anything that happened there might affect your health?

NAR: I considered that briefly. I felt that and still feel that the effects of TMI might not be felt for several years. In other words, there might be something uncovered that we don't know about at this point. But again, more of the concern was for the baby.

INT: Were there other aspects of your life that might have been affected? At that time other than the pregnancy?

NAR: Well, there was some talk about people re-locating. And amid the hysteria some people were afraid that they would never be able to return back to their homes. And of course, when people talked about that, there were some thoughts as to what that would be like. But I don't think that I ever really believed that it would get to that point.

INT: If the worst had occurred, what do you think would have happened?

NAR: For me personally, the worst thing that could have happened was to have a baby who was deformed or whose motor skills or cognitive skills were influenced in some way. I think I couldn't handle that. It was something that really just preyed on my mind the whole time I was pregnant. It's a fear that didn't leave me until I held that baby in my arms and saw that she was healthy and appeared to be very well developed.

INT: In terms of the worst happening there at the plant, did you envision anything when they talked about a meltdown or the bubble? Did you think of something happening with either of those?

NAR: I guess I would say there again it was just the general feeling of uneasiness what if that does happen. What if this radiation leaks out and there is the terrible disaster that everyone's talking about. And at the point where the meltdown seemed most likely, I think that's the most religious experience I've felt recently or at least in the past several years. I can remember hearing the word meltdown and thinking about the implications of that and for the first time in quite a long time, saying what I would consider to be a very, very, very earnest sincere prayer. The word meltdown in my mind brings back to me, the fact that I really turned to God at that point. When I thought about meltdown and the implications.

INT: Were you concerned at all about the food or milk in the area?

NAR: Somewhat. I wouldn't say that was one of my big concerns but it did cross my mind.

INT: Did you picture in your mind any effects that radiation would have on the life around you?

NAR: I read the book Hiroshima when I was at a very influential age. The mental pictures of all the people that were harmed generations later from the bomb and fallout; that's what came to my mind whenever I thought about the implications here.

INT: Did you think about your own death?

NAR: I really can't say that I did. I think that I was so caught up in my baby's health. I thought about myself a little bit, but I don't think it ever got to that point. I never thought about me that much.

INT: What was it that reassured you that you would survive?

NAR: Just an ongoing faith in God. I mentioned the fact that when I heard the word meltdown, and how serious things were becoming, I really started to pray. In a very, very sincere way. It just brought me the kind of faith that everything's gonna work out okay. Everything will turn out for the best the way it's supposed to be.

INT: Were there any biblical stories or events that crossed your mind?

NAR: No, I wouldn't say so.

INT: What about the idea of Satan or the Last Judgment or the end of the world?

NAR: No, not at all.

INT: Did you ever consider the incident at TMI as related to God and his instructing or disciplining of mankind?

NAR: No. I have a philosophy that God has given us everything that we need to make things work. And when things go poorly, it's just because of human malfunctioning or a mistake that we've made. I think he just kind of sat back and let this happen and any lesson that's to be learned. It's not in the spirit of God giving us a lesson, it's for us to take a look at ourselves as far as I'm concerned and say; "Hey we really blew it."

INT: Did you attend a religious service during the crisis?

NAR: No

INT: Does your own faith say anything about the rightness or wrongness of man's desire to use or control atomic power?

NAR: I think there again, we've been given everything we need to make it work. I think that nuclear power is probably one of the best ways to make it not work that I can think of.

INT: Do you think that religious persons or institutions should take a public stand regarding human development and the use of atomic power?

NAR: I can't see any reason why not. I think the fact that people are religious doesn't mean that that strips away from them the right to make statements of a somewhat political nature or of a socialistic nature. It can't see why this should prevent them from saying what they feel.

INT: What position do you think they should take as a religious persons or institutions and why?

NAR: I think they can bring to it an interpretation, a religious interpretation, which they can share with people. I don't thin that it needs to be forced down anyone's throat but they can bring to it a point of view just the same way that someone who is a psychologists can interpret it from their point of view and people can give or take whatever they want from that interpretation.

INT: Other than the pregnancy and your responsibilities towards your family, did you feel that you had any other responsibilities that seemed to conflict?

NAR: No

INT: You didn't feel that the teaching or having to teach in school was a conflict at that point?

NAR: I'm not sure I know what you mean there.

INT: Did you feel that because you were expected to be in the classroom and teaching: that that conflicted against your needs at that point?

NAR: Yes, I did feel a conflict as far as my responsibility to the kids. I really didn't feel like I a substitute could do the kind of job that I wanted to be done; but on the other hand, I felt like my child's safety and welfare was more important. It was very difficult to decide whether or not to come back to the area or to remain away.

INT: So it did kind of affect your attitude to going to work?

NAR: Yes

INT: Did you have to do things there that you would otherwise not have had to do?

NAR: Most definitely. Many of the kids had either not been instructed by their parents at all as to the implications of the situation. Or if they had been talked to, by their parents, there was an element of hysteria present in many homes and the kids brought to school with them. So it was necessary to take the first two hours of that Monday morning and sit down and explain to the children that, no there wasn't an immediate evacuation plan. The world was not blowing up and we would most definitely be there or most probably be there tomorrow.

INT: Did you have ideas about how it would be best to behave in this kind of a situation?

NAR: Yeah. Definitely working around children the safest route is to be very calm outwardly, even if you are feeling nervous and sick to your stomach inwardly. That really seemed to have a calming effect upon the children.

INT: Was it really difficult for you to behave calmly?

NAR: One of the most difficult things I've ever had to do. Yes.

INT: At that time, did the event bring to mind any past experiences or past events?

NAR: No.

INT: Had anything like this ever happened to you before?

NAR: No.

INT: What about in history, was there anything there that you could identify it with?

NAR: I guess I really didn't think about it from a historical perspective.

INT: If you were classifying the incident, would you say that it was more or less frightening than a flood or a hurricane or a war?

NAR: I'd say it was more frightening to me than all of those. I think that the average everyday lay-man when he hears the word nuclear reaction or nuclear fall out is really not that familiar with what that means. It's just kind of a vague idea of something that can be very harmful, something that can be very threatening, both now immediately and in the future. So from that point of view, people don't really understand as much about it as they could I think it's terrifying.

INT: Where there any TV. shows or movies that came to mind?

NAR: I think every one immediately thought of the China Syndrome.

INT: Have you seen that?

NAR: No I didn't.

INT: Were there any books or stories that you have read that you maybe remembered at that point?

NAR: I think the thing I thought about was 1984. Certainly, this wasn't predicted in 1984, but it was the same kind of futuristic idea. People are generally just going to destroy each other and that's the idea that I brought away from that book.

INT: Did you ever find yourself singing at all?

NAR: No.

INT: What about any daydreams? Did you have any that you can remember?

NAR: I suppose that you could call it a daydream. And again it comes back to the baby that was just a very pervasive fear for me at the time. I used to sit and imagine myself in the delivery room and I could see them delivering this baby who only had one foot or two toes or had a malformed nose or whatever. And even if they would assure me that it was from TMI that every thing had been explored it didn't come from that; I think I still would have been very suspicious.

INT: Have you had any since then, since the baby's been born?

NAR: No, none.

INT: Did you also have these dreams also sleeping, can you remember? Or mostly just sort of day time?

NAR: It was only while awake.



INT: Was your sleep disturbed in any way?

NAR: During the TMI incident I didn't sleep well at all. Maybe an hour at a time and then I would wake up and just be very alert to any noise that I heard. If someone else had the TV on I would listen to hear if there were any bulletins. Just a very restless time.

INT: What changes happened to the people around you from the incident?

NAR: I think people certainly have become more aware of nuclear power and the fact that it has the capability of influencing the lives of those who live near it. I think people were just kind of blasé about it before. I know I was. I'd heard about Three Mile Island and I knew that there was something to do with nuclear power there but it really didn't enter my consciousness that it was as close to us as it is. And the fact that it really could influence my life was something that had escaped me.

INT: Do you feel that the incident has changed you in any lasting way other than you're more awareness about nuclear energy and its uses?

NAR: I think its encouraged me to be more aware of my surroundings and to be more aware of the kind of building that's taking place around me. I guess just to say its made me more alert that I'd better sit up and take an interest in what's happening instead of sitting back passively and letting things happen to me.

INT: Did you hear any jokes about TMI or radiation?

NAR: I heard several but the fact that TMI was such a serious thing to me brought me to those jokes with a lack of humor so that I forgot all of them quite quickly. That was a very flat kind of humor as far as I was concerned. There was nothing funny about it.

INT: Why do you suppose there was so much joking?

NAR: I think anytime there's a great emotional upheaval, one of the best outlets that people have at that point is humor. And I'm sure that that's what was in operation then.

INT: Can you remember any joking from other crises, examples like in Jonestown or when the Kennedy's were assassinated?

NAR: Every time and in every instance, there have been jokes that have been of a very tasteless nature. The kind you often hear on Saturday Night Live. Recently there was a joke about Pat Nixon and the fact that she didn't walk or talk properly after her stroke. And that kind of humor just completely escapes me, but it seems present at every kind of misfortune.

INT: Have you developed an opinion now about nuclear energy?

NAR: I would definitely like to see us explore other alternatives. Nuclear power at this point, really terrifying to me. Because I had such a close brush with it. And I'd like to see us definitely moving in other directions.

INT: Is there anything else that you would want to say about all of this?

NAR: No.