

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Elizabeth Insley

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Elizabeth Insley conducted by Whitney Dow on September 24th, 2017. This interview is part of the Columbia University Study on White People.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Session #1

Interviewee: Elizabeth Insley

Location: Battle Creek, MI

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: September 24th, 2017

Q: So first of all, can you tell me your name, where you're from, what you do, and a little about your background?

Insley: [11:19:10] My name is Elizabeth Insley. I live in Battle Creek, Michigan. What do I do? Right now, I work with Japanese people to help them learn English and teach them about American culture. They're here temporarily, and I actually come from—I'm an immigrant and I come from Poland. I was five years old when I came with parents and most of my family.

Q: Can you talk a little about that experience coming to America? Where did you move to? What was the experience like coming here? How did you feel? Did you speak English? Did you learn English? How did you feel accepted when you, as a child landing here?

Insley: [11:19:54] Well, I was five years old so my memory is not all as wonderful. I try not to have the stories fill in the blanks, but I just recently learned accidentally that the ship that I came in, I guess it was an eleven-day trip across the Atlantic. I used to think Bathaudi [phonetic] meant "ship" in Polish, but it didn't. It was actually the name of the ship. So even all these years later, because we came in 1966, it was kind of like wow! You know? Because my Polish, you know as a five-year-old, had no English. I didn't even know the ABCs and the two languages are similar in their ABC structure. So I didn't know Polish ABCs, much less anything about English.

And my trip, I just remember the slight memory of having to leave my two oldest siblings behind because there's a twenty-age difference between the oldest and the youngest, with six of us in total. And my oldest brother was staying behind, and he was unmarried, and I was wondering who's going to take care of him. My sister, on the other hand, had been already married, had a child, had a baby who was not much older, or younger than I was. And so I knew she was going to be taken care of. I remember being really sad about that part, but I have no memories of ever really living with my brother and sister because they were older and they weren't on the farm anymore. But they were still my brother and sister. My brother ended up coming a couple years later but my sister never came to the U.S. because she would have been a factory worker just like the rest of my brothers and sisters and my parents would have been. And there, she was considered educated and her husband was educated. She was a teacher. Her husband was a physical therapist, and rough life nevertheless but much more so better life than they—or that she thought she would have, actually, in the U.S.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about the experience of coming to the United States? Do you remember what it was like to sort of land here as a child? Or sort of the first five years of your life here, what was it like? Did you feel like an outsider? Did you feel like an American? How did it feel? How was it coming here?

Insley: [11:22:36] Well coming here as a five-year-old, I was a latchkey kid because both of my parents were working. My brother that was supposed to be taking care of me, he's the closest to me in age. He was nine years older but he didn't do a really good job of taking care of me. I

mean, a teenage boy? I mean, he turned fourteen on the ship or right around that time. So, you know, my parents had higher expectations of what he was able to deliver. So I was a latchkey kid and my parents moved to a community where there was Polish people who spoke Polish. There was a Polish church. The community was kind of divided. They had the Irish church, the French church, and the Polish church. I guess even the apartment we moved into because my father actually had to come before the rest of the family. He came in December of '65. We came in the end of April of '66 because he had to find a job and a place for us to live.

My father's two sisters had migrated to the U.S. before. And there's like a story because even though he had an older sister, the way the tradition fell, he was the first-born son so he inherited the farm. So they left everything they knew. So anyway, coming to the U.S., my first recollection, I guess, of knowing that I was different was going to school. We came at the end of April. I didn't start school until September in a Catholic school run mostly by nuns. And not all of them spoke Polish, but I remember in eighth grade, students coming in and helping me with English. And not understanding anything. I don't have no memory of anyone explaining anything to me. But again, that could be just because I was five. And I was a very, very shy person. I'm very, very shy little girl. I always had my eyes cast down and I didn't have my first friend until I was in fifth grade.

My two worlds never really intersected even though I lived in a Polish, somewhat Polish, community. No one befriended me, or until I became a little bit more Americanized, I think, and started putting my guard down. So being a latchkey kid, I spent time alone.

Q: How do you feel now? Do you feel like you're an American or do you feel like you're Polish?

Insley: [11:25:39] That's a really tough question! Because what do I feel about being, yeah, Polish or American? I'm both right now because there's so much of me that is Polish. One of the biggest arguments that I've had ongoing in my thirty-three years of marriage has been food! And offering food to people who come to the house, and not just once. You know, "would you like something? Here, would you like this?" People saying, "Well, no thank you." Well, American way, which I just recently discovered is, "OK, you're done." Well, not in my culture, not with my mother! There's that background of you offer, you keep offering because the polite way, of course, is to say no and then you know you're going to be offered again. My husband very American. You don't do that! You don't bother people like that. So that part of me is very Polish.

My cooking, big, big influence. My husband says I have somewhat of the depression syndrome of knowing that I—reusing things, fixing things because we only came to the U.S. each of us had a suitcase. And starting all over, that was hard. And so growing up my two worlds never really intersected and I have chosen to intersect with my husband and my three children of some of the Polish, you know, this is what I do, this is my background. It's like my daughter, for the longest time there was a—I would always say this word *dupka* which is actually a diminutive of like your behind. The end of a bread, of a loaf of bread, and it's like one of my favorite parts and hers, and she always thought it was a *dupka*. And then when she went to live on her own, she

[laughs] was talking about *dupka* and she thought, oh that was an American word. No, it's not. It's a Polish word.

But It's just I am both. I can't separate those two. And if I may go even further, I didn't become a naturalized citizen until 2005, partly because I saw so many Americans not valuing their privileges in the U.S., mainly like their right to vote. I remember having really strong conversations with college friends and acquaintances of like, why don't you vote? I can't. Don't you know how important that is? And when 9/11 happened, that was the first time that I really saw a benefit for me to be able to say I couldn't say I'm proud to be American because I saw so much unity in the U.S. And I decided to get naturalized, finally, because I didn't see the benefits before. You know, what was my benefit? Most Americans weren't voting as their right and privilege to do so, and I wanted to gain more of that. And as I got older, you know, having American children, the thought of ever being separated from my family and my future family was starting to also come to a different place in my mind, that it was important.

Q: Do you feel like you've been accepted as an American and accepted into mainstream American culture?

Insley: [11:29:44] Yeah, because I came to the U.S. at age five and I don't have an accent and I—

Q: So can you put my question in your—

Insley: [11:29:50] Yeah, OK. I'm sorry. Can you repeat that question?

Q: Do you feel accepted as an American and by mainstream American culture?

Insley: [11:29:58] Yes, I do feel accepted by mainstream America now because I came to the U.S. when I was five. I don't have an accent. If anybody notices an accent, it's like, "Well, you're not from the Midwest." And what I always say, I was raised in Massachusetts. "Oh, yeah!" You know, because I'm not Midwest and if anything, that also has shaped me, living in the Midwest. I'm more of a Yankee, truly, than what I think the Midwest identifies itself as. So yes, I definitely feel—like going to college. I think it was starting after I left home. People didn't see a difference until I started opening up or doing something a little bit ethnic. Then people say, "Well, where are you from?" And then I would tell my story because – I shied away of telling my story until my college roommate in Boston said, "Wow, you're so lucky. You have like all these traditions, all this heritage. I don't have any of that." So it wasn't until that point that I started talking more about who I was, where I was from, the ups and the downs.

But I'm the only one of my siblings, the five that came over, that probably would say there's been no difference. All the others are definitely Polish, speak with a Polish accent. And there's a division within the sibling group because they don't understand me and I have a hard time understanding them, and it actually even boils down to our parents. They had different parents growing up than I did, which was really significant. I didn't see the different kinds of stresses that they had in Poland. I saw calmer parents, I guess. My mother wasn't actually as nice, evidently. She had a much shorter fuse for them than she did for me. And is that because of

location change, and that I was the last one, and you kind of burn out, and you pick your battles? But I mean, I think it's probably accumulation and being an older mother. But I had different parents. They have different stories. So yes, I was definitely treated after going away to school where people didn't know me, that I was an American.

Q: Where did you move to? Originally you moved to Massachusetts. Can you tell me a little about where you moved, the community you moved to and you grew up in?

Insley: [11:32:49] When we got off the boat, we landed in Montreal and took a train to Springfield, Massachusetts. And then we moved to Chicopee [Massachusetts], a very small community called Chicopee. You know, it was small. I had nothing to compare it to at that time. I felt safe. It was predominantly white, very, very few anyone of color in my high school. We did have a Puerto Rican section in our community and there was some divisiveness there because it wasn't as clean in that area. But that area had a really nice bakery so my mother would go there to get some of the baked goods there, and there was a soda, I guess they sold in the big bottles before they were called two-liters, glass bottles of soda. And that was such a treat in my family, that we would get that from there. But there was that Puerto Rican section that I had, and my parents, until coming to the U.S., they never saw anybody that wasn't white.

And I don't have any memory of it being significant, of color, I guess. I don't have anything, but I do have a memory of my teenage brother bringing someone home that was a very dark, black young man and tall. My mother, always a very welcoming, always offering food to anyone who walked through the door, and I remember her pausing because she was surprised that there was

somebody who was a different color coming in. But I also remember clearly that she just stepped into being that Polish mom of, you know, “Here, sit down. What do you want to eat? This is what I have.” And my brother was the tester in the family. He was kind of that black sheep in the family, and I often think of how much of that was contributed because he came to the U.S. at such an important part of his life. I mean, if I was thrown in into school and not—he was thrown in at age fourteen, really, really tough, tough age.

Q: Isn't Chicopee on Cape Cod [Massachusetts]?

Insley: [11:35:40] No. Where is Chicopee? Chicopee is what's considered western Massachusetts. It's off of the Massachusetts Turnpike. It's closer to the west part. It's probably about three hours from—

Q: Near Pittsfield [Massachusetts].

Insley: [11:35:57] Well, no. It's further south. Connecticut's about an hour away, Enfield, Connecticut. Very—

Q: So it's in the Berkshires [Massachusetts].

Insley: [11:36:08] No. It's not considered part of the Berkshires. It's east of the Berkshires. It's not part of the Berkshires, but not far away. A lot of, well Massachusetts had so many great

universities, and hospitals, and well, it's an old, old state so there's a lot of rich history. And Chicopee had some of it, but it was mostly a factory community.

Q: What was the jobs that your parents moved to take? Where did they work, growing up?

Insley: [11:36:44] My father ended up working in like a tool, die shop. And my mother worked in a place that they made like fabric, or did some sort of, I'm not exactly sure. I think they processed – I'm not really clear on that. And then she ended up working in a cosmetic factory, which I ended up working summers and a little bit through college as a source of income to pay my college bills. My father, I remember, I used to be always sad because he would walk to work. It was about a fifteen, twenty-minute walk and he would leave while it was dark certain parts of the year, and then he would come home while it was dark. He was a man that worked outside as a farmer and he was stuck in a really [cries] tough place. Coming in smelling like oil and dirty clothes because my mother had to wash my and his clothes, and my brother's clothes because he also worked—I guess started working there too, because my other brother was eighteen when we moved here. The clothes were not able to be mixed, and we had one of those old Wringer washing machines that you had to roll over and wash clothes with, and that was kind of interesting because we didn't have a dryer or anything. I'm trying to think. Where did my mother dry stuff when we first lived in an apartment? I have no memory but I'm sure there was some sort of basement or something in the first apartment that we lived in.

Q: Do you remember, was there a time in your life when you started to think of yourself not as Polish but as white? Did that happen?

A: [11:38:50] Did I ever think of myself as like not Polish and white? I guess my father, like when he would come home from work, he would like turn on the television and watch, and I used to watch a lot of television because that was my babysitter. But I remember “The Jeffersons,” and my father wouldn’t let me watch “The Jeffersons” for some reason and I couldn’t quite understand that, and I always thought my father was prejudiced. And it wasn’t until I met my husband and he made sense in saying that my father wasn’t prejudiced, he was just ignorant. He didn’t know differently. And I think that’s when I kind of discovered the differences, that I was white. Polish, I’m always Polish. I’ll always be Polish. American is the citizenship I have. Even though I’ve lived here, I’m still Polish.

Q: What about in your personal life? It sounds like you grew up in an area where you weren’t really exposed to black Americans very often. I’m guessing that maybe this happened when you went to college or when you left home. And what was that experience like, to leave this small, insular, Polish community and move into the wider world and start being exposed to black Americans?

Insley: [11:40:25] Well, being exposed to a bigger, black America, I actually commuted to a local college for two years because I didn’t feel I was ready to go out into the big, wide world, and financially I couldn’t afford it. College was certainly cheaper back then but so were the incomes. And so I commuted, actually, to the school, American International College and I actually got involved there as a student. I ran for student council, the student government, because I kind of wanted to experience more. I knew that what my family had, ideas for me,

were not the ideas that I had of where I wanted to be, and at that point I was still ashamed of being Polish, though. It wasn't a good thing.

And that college, AIC [American International College] as it's called, was in a rough neighborhood of Springfield, Massachusetts. But it was like, yeah whatever. I mean, yeah OK. Everybody lives in a house and so it's not as clean. I didn't have trouble. My parents never went there. I had to do everything on my own. But yeah, that was probably my biggest exposure. And if truth be told, there was a young man, a student there, I had a little bit of a crush on that was African American. He was such a nice guy, just a really nice guy. But I would have never, ever told my family anything like that and kept it all to myself, and then actually told it later on in my life.

Q: What was the response when you told them later on, though?

Insley: [11:42:13] But not to my family. That was not, you know, that's a line I wouldn't have crossed because I was already different. I married an American for one thing. He didn't speak Polish. So I had an "X" against that because I was the only one that didn't marry a Polish fella. And my mother did teach me very early on when I was going out into the world that she didn't need to know everything, and she worried a lot and she gave me permission not to tell her everything. So that was something I wouldn't have gone there with her.

Q: One of the things that white Americans have a very different experience than you is that my family came over here a hundred years ago. I'm the descendent of immigrants but I have a very

different experience and one of the things I'm interested in is sort of the relationship that we white Americans have to history. And I was wondering, as you grew up and became American, became aware of the racial divisions, and our history, our historical relationship to slavery, to segregation, to oppression, what do you feel like your relationship is as now a white American living here to our past? Do you feel like you're connected to that at all? Or that you feel like you're totally disconnected from it?

Insley: [11:43:53] I don't think I am connected to the past with Americans because my past is not in this country, but I do feel an obligation as a human being that the past anywhere—and if there's any correlation for me in my life is the, during World War II and the Jewish people and seeing how people, just by being different, were lumped into a group. And I think with that history, anyone that is oppressed who's singled out for being different, to me, is just wrong. And if you think about Jewish people, I mean, they're white. So many got murdered. My father fought in World War II but he didn't talk about it. I went back to Poland with my father and my second brother to Poland when I was eleven, and one of the sightseeing things we went to, they took me to Auschwitz, but didn't warn me at all about it. And that has been a huge, significant part [cries] because I was eleven, and that was a long time ago. And those snapshots are so, so clear in my mind of the atrocities that human beings can do to each other. So when you talk about the history and possibly the slavery that transpired in the history in the United States, and the differences that happened in the U.S., I correlate it to the Holocaust, and seeing differences there.

Q: Were you affected by it because you felt – did it just make you sad that it happened or did you feel like you as a Polish person had a relationship to it? Can you talk a little bit about your reaction? Because you clearly still, all these years later, have a really strong reaction to it.

Insley: [11:46:26] [cries] Yeah, because it was just so horrific! Oh, my gosh! Seeing these glass cases full of human hair that would be made into cloth, the gold teeth that were extracted from the victims, the ovens that [cries] these people were placed in. Seeing those showerheads. [pauses] A picture is not a thousand words in that case. And I love history, anyway. That was like probably the beginnings of my love of history, and I remember buying a guide there that I still pass on to history teachers locally when they're talking about the Holocaust because there's these black and white photographs. And history has a way of changing. So [pauses] I think because the little that my mother told me about the war [World War II] and my father's aunt— here, see I use the word "aunt" which is northeastern [United States]? Yeah, I can't use the little black bug. Sorry.

My father's aunt was a nun and there was an exhibit in Battle Creek years ago about the hidden children of the Holocaust. And I remember seeing it, the map, and I'm like, oh my gosh! That's where she probably was. So her convent probably were saving kids. I saw a picture of a birth certificate and I said, "Oh, my gosh! That looks like mine!" And so the connections, I think the Holocaust experiences, or not personal but just from being Polish, being sensitive to how cruel people can be to each other, just kind of manifested itself to the black experience because these people physically look differently. I remember my mother telling me about how did they identify Jewish families? Well, it was drop your drawers. The males would drop their drawers and they

would know if the family was Jewish. And with the hidden children exhibit that they had in Battle Creek, they talked about boys being dressed as girls so that they wouldn't be discovered. I mean, I got all that. I know where they were coming from. And then if your skin color's different, I mean you have no way of hiding it.

I remember many years ago in a book club, we read a book called *The Color of Water*, I think it was called, of a mother that pretended she was something else. And different experiences through the candid conversations that I kind of had started with people I've met of just, of color, whether it be black or not, Hispanic. People put people in boxes. I know one young man who, he says, "A lot of people think I'm Greek or Italian, but I'm Mexican." [laughs] And because he's been in this country for such a long time, he sounds American. But he's not Greek, he's not Italian. And we, I put people in boxes too. I'm guilty of it.

Q: Do you feel like that as now a white American, you get any benefits from being white?

Insley: [11:50:48] Oh, I definitely get the benefits of being white, no doubt about it. And being a white American, I certainly get benefits of that as well. It's just not right. Don't get me started on the differences being in a very patriarchal society. That's another documentary. [laughs]

Q: Well actually, I mean, it's actually not totally. I've talked to a lot of women and most women who we talk to bring that up and say that being a woman has had the much bigger impact on my life than being white. So being a woman has a bigger negative impact on my arc through life than being white has had a positive impact. Is that something that you've experienced?

Insley: [11:51:40] I think I'm white first. I think the privilege comes with being white, and then the privilege becomes being a woman second. Yeah. But I know I'm a white, privileged woman.

Q: Can you tell us any of those experiences where you saw that you were getting preferential treatment or you saw receiving privileges because of that? You felt it. It made you aware of your whiteness and in the moment?

Insley: [11:52:23] Well just being white, traveling to the south still, I feel like in restaurants I'm placed in seating that's more white. I feel there's a separation. [sighs] I try really hard not to notice because I'm just going about my day, but I see unfairness. Like there was an experience just two days ago that wasn't necessarily affecting us but I saw the differences, not as a white woman, OK. But we were at a huge event in Grand Rapids [Michigan] called ArtPrize, my husband and I. And he witnessed a car, one car hitting the other on a light. The second car bumped the big truck in front and the man that came out of the truck that got hit—usually the person who gets hit wants witnesses. Well, that wasn't the case. He came out kind of as like—he got himself bigger. Let's put it that way. And came out and the driver of the car was a younger, probably in his twenties, black young man with a black man passenger, and in a car that was definitely aged. Stick shift, at that, and I drive a stick shift so I know how sometimes the car can like jerk and stuff.

This man was very—it was just like, oh my gosh. If that was a white person in that car, the scenario would've been completely different, completely different. The white man demanded

that the driver get by the license plate so he could take a picture of him. I'm trying to start a conversation with the white man that, "Hey, my husband saw," and my husband's kind of a quiet man. But he was like, oh my gosh. Anyway, the white man did not want anything to do with me! Now if my husband had approached, would that scenario been different? But my husband felt that I was doing the right thing. It's just, and I was on that side of the street actually and I wanted to talk to that man to say, "Hey!" And I'm looking. There's no damage! He said something, "Oh, my boss. I'm running late for work and my boss is going to be upset with me," and he got all the information from the black young man.

And my husband and I are talking and I'm going, oh my gosh. I'm telling my husband it's like, "We've got to do something." I didn't see the hit. And he's like, "Yeah, we have to do something." The second car, they're still kind of in awe [laughs] of what happened. The guy just kind of drove off and my husband says, "Hey, I saw the accident" and I started talking. It's like, "Yeah, if you need his witness, that's important." And then later on, I'm thinking, oh my gosh, a white witness. [laughs] Because I was retelling the story to someone and the guys were like, "Yeah, thanks!" And got his name in case, so my husband would know who, if he got contacted, who the person was. But it's like, that's wrong! Because it totally would have been a different scenario if it were two white people, "Oh, yeah. No damage. Bye." This was so intentional. I even told the young man that was racial profiling. He's like, "Oh, yeah." I mean, unfortunately not his first. But it breaks my heart that that stuff still exists.

And being raised in the North [United States], I used to be ignorant that that stuff didn't happen as much, that it was mostly in the divided South [United States] because I saw it more traveling

to the South than I did to the North. And being raised in the Northeast, I was kind of sheltered. And then I moved to Dayton, Ohio first and saw more of the North and South divide. And then when I moved to Battle Creek, what struck me really most it was like, wow there are so many interracial marriages in Battle Creek, which I found surprising. I'd never seen it like this before. And even the school that my children attended for elementary, a white principal married to a black man in a private school. Nothing that I had seen quite like that before, and it was like, oh OK. Because it was always other people. It wasn't somebody that I actually got to know and that was like, oh yeah! That's great! You know? Complicates life, I think, for that generation because of the identity, you know, who are they?

I spoke earlier that I work with Japanese people but they come here and they leave back to their home country and they're so the same in that country. In the U.S., one of the things that they talk about is how different everything is. And many of the families that I have worked with really want their children to experience the differences that the U.S. has and that we should celebrate because their country is so similar.

Q: Just hold on for one second. [interruption] So, a few more questions. I wanted to visit, go back and say are—to come back to your relationship to your whiteness. [pauses] I'm trying to understand sort of the relationship between your Polish and your whiteness. Are you happier white?

Insley: [12:01:09] My relationship with whiteness, am I happy with being white? Well, I think that's the easiest way. I mean, I have the easy path. I have less obstacles to overcome. My

children certainly have less obstacles to overcome. Now, if I were a lesbian white woman, there are some obstacles that I would have to overcome, but I'm a straight, white woman. I have so many blessings just because of that, and where I live, because I live in the United States of America. I have those privileges. If I moved somewhere else, I don't know. I don't know what it would be like if that, it would be an advantage or not.

Q: Do you think that you're—because you seem very connected to your immigrant experience, your—and that sort of being part of your identity. Do you think that you, as a Polish immigrant from Eastern Europe, has a different immigrant experience than people from, let's say Mexico or Africa that has a different sort of immigrant path into this country?

Insley: [12:02:35] I think my path to the U.S. came at a time when the U.S. was much more welcoming. My father came first and we came second. I remember that there was a time as soon as I was learning enough English that I had to help fill out like registration papers of some sort. I think it stopped in the early seventies. Like every January, we had to fill out papers of where, who, where, and whatever. I don't exactly remember but I remember filling those papers out for my family so I knew we were different because nobody else really had to do that. I remember talking to my best friend who happened to be my best friend at fifth grade, ten years old. She ended up being my best friend through high school. Her family didn't have to do that so I knew I was a little bit different but I didn't really think much of it. I knew I had that green card that I had to pull out every once in a while that actually was blue, not green.

Q: But do you think that your experience as a Polish immigrant is a different experience that people, let's say, coming from Mexico might have?

Insley: [12:03:58] In the 1960s, people coming from Mexico, I don't think they would have had any different experience than—I don't think any immigrant would have had anything different than—but now, I think it's a completely different story. My parents didn't have any trouble finding a job. I don't think they felt like they were taking anybody's job. They worked hard and instilled a very hard work ethic. I think that still goes for immigrants. I think immigrants take those jobs that a lot of people, a lot of native-born Americans don't want. I think immigrants generally believe in sacrifices. They want a better life. And I think about why my parents came here. It was to give their kids a better life and I am eternally grateful that they did that because, I tell you, my life would have been an arranged marriage in Poland. I would have been a farmer's wife, no doubt about it. A completely different scenario. But the people that come here from Mexico or from South America, Central America, I think it's more of a struggle.

People who come from war-ravaged countries. They're looking just to be able to have a life, being able to have the freedoms that we all take for granted for, having food on the table, a roof over our head. And I don't think a lot of Americans realize the amount of desperation and hope that people have when they come here because this is the land of immigrants. The Native Americans are really the only ones that can say they're truly American, as far as I know. And that's where we're at.

Q: Just a couple more questions. One is I know that you wanted to participate in this project because you wanted to talk about Battle Creek a little bit. Do you want to tell me a little, what are the things that you thought it would be important to communicate about Battle Creek?

Insley: [12:06:31] One of the things that I was surprised about Battle Creek was that it really is a collection of a lot of different cultures. Before the Internet really, when we moved in 1998, even though that was after the Internet, but just getting information, I thought it would—
[interruption]

Q: So let's talk a little about Battle Creek.

Insley: [12:07:47] One of the things that really surprised me about Battle Creek when we moved here nineteen years ago was how many different ethnicities are in Battle Creek because I thought it was like, OK, a small town. Sure, Kellogg's [Company] here, my husband working at a federal facility. But then I was like, oh wow! You know, there's a great store called Horrocks. Oh, and there's Indian, Asian Indians, if you could think about the other Indian, that live here. It's surprising how much diversity is in Battle Creek. I was really surprised and glad. One of the things that we had to consider when we were buying a house is we really wanted to live downtown and that was the goal, but the parameters, or the must-haves that I wanted as a mom because we moved here when I was pregnant with our third, and we had two big dogs. And I was like telling my husband, "I don't want a postage stamp yard." And some of the houses that we were looking at, I just wanted a bigger yard so the dogs and the kids could play and I didn't have

to worry about dog poop. Let's talk about semantics. I wanted to open the door and let the kids and the dogs go, and I wasn't able to find housing that had those parameters.

So we moved to the suburbs, which gave us the lily-white stuff. And as my kids were growing, I discovered that we weren't as privileged as my white community that I live in is, but my kids were learning some of the, "Well, So-and-so is going to spring break." I remember when my daughter was in kindergarten, the good thing is there were, I believe, I think there was like four women that were doctors that were parents. But on the flip side, my daughter was one of a very few families that did not go to Disneyworld for spring break. And it was like, "hmm, this is not real world." We had a lot of, "Well, not all families are alike." And being that immigrant family, you don't need all this extra stuff. And so for educational purposes, predominantly we decided to send our kids to Battle Creek Public Schools. And one of the real perks that ended up is that they got to experience Battle Creek, and because of the school system, they got to experience a larger worldview in our city of what it's like to be who they are. They got to have friends that didn't look like them.

As my son who played soccer, one year there were four different languages on the soccer field. And he kind of had to learn [laughs] that he was actually the minority and he had to learn some of the Burmese or the Hispanic key words in order to be able to play, and I thought that was wonderful. My daughter being able to say that, hey, I can be who I am here because it's more accepting, I think that says volumes to—things that when they were little—I was just trying to raise them. But as they got older and I started to look through the lens of what we were seeing, it wasn't representative of the world. So when my oldest son decided to move to Detroit

[Michigan], I felt that he wouldn't have that culture shock. I mean, there was still some culture shock anywhere you move to a new community. But he would be fine and he said, "Mom, I can do this." And he didn't live in a white community. He knew his boundaries for safety and everything else.

And people talk about Battle Creek being unsafe. I will disagree. I think every community has their pockets of crime. I think you just have to be aware and be a smart citizen. Don't do stupid stuff. Lock your car, lock your house. Just be aware. I lived in Boston. Bad things happened around where I lived but I was fortunate and some of it, I think, is I did certain things that I think prevented me from being a victim as a woman generally. And where did that I learn that? I actually learned that from books and reading, of just how to be a safe person. So for Battle Creek, for me, I've always said it's a great place to raise a young family. I would always run into people that I knew which was always comforting, that you don't get in a big city. I got to know my children's friends and tried to get to the families but that was hard on the ethnicity part. I never really met the Burmese parents. I got to meet some of the Hispanic parents. The African American families, I was able to meet more of those, having conversations.

Traffic is not a problem in Battle Creek. I mean, when people start complaining about Battle Creek and certain intersections, I'm like are you crazy? [laughs] We have so many advantages. And what do you mean, "Kalamazoo's [Michigan] far away?" Really? Kalamazoo's not far away at all. People talk about crime. Well for me, it's very simple in terms of the crime that comes from other places. We are midway between Detroit and Chicago [Illinois]. We're midway. People are going to stop. The [Interstate] 69, that's near us. [U.S. Route] 131, that's not too far.

You're going to get crime. When I used to live in Dayton, Ohio, the same thing. It was [Interstate] 70 and [Interstate] 75 that intersected. There was higher crime just because of location. I think there's so many good things that are going on and I support people coming back.

Now, that being said, do I want to retire in Battle Creek? Sadly, no because my heart is really more in the northeast. When I look out, I'd rather see some more skyscrapers. I'm more of a city girl. My husband is more of the look out and see nothing. So Dayton and Battle Creek have been good compromises but Battle Creek was definitely not a place I really wanted to go to just for culture, although I'm surprised in Battle Creek. We have a wonderful symphony. We have great opportunities for culture that the city is doing really well in building. I think that it'd be a great place to go. The only thing we're lacking for is the young people, and I think if there was less farmland between Kalamazoo and Battle Creek, I think we would be able to have a larger metropolitan area. And Bell's [Brewery] wouldn't be like, "Oh, it's far away." I think also if the corporations were selling Battle Creek more and not selling the Kalamazoo area, I think if housing options had—if there were more higher, income-based housing here, I think people would be good.

I think people have this perception that schools, that Battle Creek Public Schools is a bad school system and I really disagree with that. The grass is not always greener and the other schools are discovering that they—their own populations are not like they think it is. And quite frankly, I think the school of choice has definitely divided the city because when we were looking at school districts here, it's like, what do you mean? There's four school districts in the size of

Battle Creek? Are you kidding me? Because that's a dividing factor that breaks up families, neighborhoods, and the community. That's a negative for me.

Q: It sounds like you definitely have a really good take on Battle Creek and more detail about that than almost anybody we've talked to. That was really interesting. We're actually out of time now so what we're going to do is take some stills of you.

Insley: [12:17:57] OK.

END OF INTERVIEW