

Gail Rutkin Interview, November 2014

J: Jill

G: Gail

Interview starts at 4:28

J: Good afternoon this is Jill.

G: Hi this is Gail Rutkin.

J: How are you?

G: I'm fine.

J: Oh good, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us. I really appreciate it.

G: No problem.

J: Thanks. Well, I don't know how much they let you know about the interview but generally it takes about 15 or 20 minutes. I have a few little standard questions but mostly we're just excited to hear about your unique perspective on making that move from wherever you were before to a retirement community. There's a lot of people out there in that situation and we're happy to learn any details that you can give us, so thank you in advance.

G: I have a lot of things to tell you.

J: Oh good.

G: Where should I start?

J: When did you move to the community please?

G: I moved approximately last February.

J: Pretty recently then and where were you living immediately prior to coming?

G: I was living in Fairfield.

J: In a home where you had lived for some time?

G: I'm sorry?

J: Had you lived there for some time?

G: Yeah, I lived there for about 30 years.

J: Oh, ok definitely some time then. Are you from the Fairfield area originally?

G: No, actually I'm from New Jersey originally.

J: Oh ok, alright. So you moved a little bit but then you really stayed where you were for over 30 years.

G: Yes, that's correct.

J: A lot of people have that same situation where they can stay in the same town, stay in the same house and then they have the task and the challenge of the downsize and picking a retirement community. How did you go about that part of the process? What made you think "hey I think I might want to move to a retirement community?"

G: I raised and nurtured 15 children.

J: Oh my.

G: And the last one left about two years ago, she had a baby, with her baby and when she left, I really didn't like being alone. And I wanted to be with people who were dealing with the same issues that I was dealing with having to do with aging. That was kind of why I decided to move to a retirement community. There's all the things about the snow and landscaping and all that but that wasn't my real reason. My real reason was that after having raised 15 children it was time for me to move on.

J: And these 15 kids were they all yours? Did you have foster kids?

G: No, I have two birth children, I have two adopted children and 11 foster children.

J: Wow that is wonderful. That is really amazing. I'll be darned. So the last child left?

G: The last child left about two years ago and she had a baby, a two year old and she left. She went back

to her hometown which was Stamford, Connecticut and it was enough for me. That's enough children.

J: Yeah, 15 is a good number, that's a nice round number.

G: Right.

J: And did you also work?

G: Yes, I worked full-time.

J: Oh you did, what did you do?

G: I have my degree in special education in social work.

J: Oh, ok and that was from somewhere in Connecticut also?

G: Yes, I worked in the inner-city.

J: Oh wow.

G: All my life.

J: That's really impressive. Interesting and then you thought "ok, time for me to have a change here."

Did you embark upon a big research project? Did you visit lots of places?

G: My kids visited lots of places and eventually chose this one for me and I trusted their judgment.

J: Ok, so they did a little bit of research and visited around.

G: Right.

J: And then the decision was made and you must have probably visited?

G: Right.

J: Ok, alrighty and then what happened? The downsizing process, how did you go about that?

G: Oh my God it was horrible.

J: Oh really?

G: I got rid of a lot of stuff. I gave stuff away. I consigned stuff. I just made big piles of stuff. It's always a difficult process and I hear from people here the same thing. I'm enjoying being here because the people that I live with are dealing with the same issues around aging such as loss and how to spend your time and giving up driving, crisis intervention and such. When I got here I found that there were some issues. There was the initial adjustment issue which was difficult, involvement in the larger community, although I still work and I volunteer.

J: Where do you volunteer?

G: I volunteer at the YMCA. I teach a book club.

J: A what?

G: A book club.

J: How nice.

G: I work in a day care center as a consultant.

J: Oh you do?

G: Yeah.

J: That's wonderful; they can certainly learn from you after all your experience.

G: I've made a lot of friends, a lot of friends which I didn't have before.

J: Is that one of the biggest differences do you think of moving to a retirement community?

G: Oh yes, yes there's just so many people that I'm friendly with. It's just unbelievable

J: Well, people sitting alone at home aren't going to have that opportunity, are they?

G: Right, I mean really it's just amazing. And I really didn't think that was going to be for me because I've been raising kids for 40 years but it turned out that having lots of friends was for me.

J: That's awesome.

G: Some of the things that I've done here since I got here is formed what we're calling a dining room committee and the purpose of the dining room committee is: one is management, [another] sets up people with dinner dates.

J: Oh, how nice.

G: Yeah, they set up people with like four or five dinner dates. However, after the five dinner dates are

over people are just sort of standing in the middle of the floor and not knowing what to do. So I set up a dining room committee where just, like I have a buddy system and I have assigned different people to the newcomers so that somebody always has a place to sit. And if we notice that people are still wandering around and it seems as though they really don't fit in yet we approach that person and ask if they're interested in sitting with us. One of the things that you find in a retirement community are a lot of these little cliques and groups but ours have broken up, ours have really broken up. They just aren't happening anymore.

J: I really love that you're helping people smooth that transition. That's really important.

G: Yes, that transition is so difficult. I mean I remember for myself how difficult it was.

J: The eating part is one aspect of it, of course. People probably get to know each other during the programs and activities and meet at the gym. What types of programs and things do you partake in there at The Watermark?

G: I go to the gym.

J: Oh you do?

G: Yes, actually I have OT and PT but aside from that I work out in the gym. We formulated small groups. Small interactive groups based on something called the pie method and I'm going to be facilitating one of those groups. The group has I think no more than 11 people and we remain a group. Each week, actually it's every other week, there's a theme and we discuss it and it's a well known method and everybody gets to speak for at least five minutes. Now that's a lot, so we said three minutes without interruption.

J: Nice.

G: So it's "everybody's got a piece of the pie", that's why it's called the pie method.

J: Oh ok.

G: It's wonderful, it's just wonderful.

J: It's a great way to get to know each other.

G: You really get to know the people in your group and we have a Sunday night group that meets that's led by a family therapist and she always brings a topic and we discuss the topic and we give input. We get to know people even better and what else are we doing? I want to adopt a school.

J: You want to adopt the school? Oh, ok.

G: Yeah, I want to adopt a school in Bridgeport, in the inner-city.

J: I know Geraldine's school we used to do a lot with her, I'm not sure if they do that but there's certainly a lot of schools who could use your help.

G: Right, well probably we'll adopt Geraldine's school.

J: That is wonderful, to be able to have those kids benefit from the visits and the programs.

G: Right, we're going to make it work. It's a challenge, a challenge because you have to get everybody on board, the principal, the teacher. So I'm going to start with something simple. I'm going to start with pen pals.

J: Nice.

G: And send pictures of us to the kids.

J: I think that's wonderful. I love pen pal programs.

G: Rather than everybody suddenly going out, especially in the winter, I think starting with pen pals would be good.

J: Well, that's especially important considering the fact that kids don't write nearly as much as they used to.

G: That's right, that's absolutely right.

J: Picking up a pen and using a piece of paper is a good exercise for them these days.

G: Very good exercise for them. What else is going on around here? (Inaudible) asked me to take pictures of the new residents so I do that when they come in and get a little bio. That's a lot, right?

J: Yeah, that's a big difference from what it was like before you moved, I'm sure. Like if you had to say one thing that's really changed between being in the house and, say, a week in the house and this week coming up here for you, just in general?

G: The people, the people, the friends I've made.

J: Ok, definitely, yeah that's so important to be active.

G: Because I'm so active in the community. I know a lot of people.

J: (Inaudible)

G: So it's just worked out so well for me. I never thought it would but it has worked out so well.

J: Well, that makes me want to ask you this question next. Just based on what you just said, what advice do you have for people who are considering moving to a retirement community? Because you know you had one impression, you had a certain expectation and some of your expectations were probably accurate but some of them weren't in a good way, which is nice.

G: Right, right, right, well I think people have to know that there's going to be an initial adjustment and that that may not be that easy. As much as you might want to go you know the people who I see that are new, we had 11 new people in October and everybody went through that initial adjustment. I mean there's a sense of loss when you lose your home, when you lose driving, when you lose whatever it was that you were doing. There's a sense of loss. So the initial adjustment is difficult. So people should be prepared, I think, for knowing that it's going to be an adjustment. It's going to be different.

J: And then that's on the challenge side of it and how about the other side, the parts that surprised you that maybe were easier or more fun, anything that folks might take in balance with the tough part?

G: Right, right, the people.

J: Comes back to the people, huh?

G: Yeah, that's been just wonderful for me.

J: That's great, that's terrific. When you were back in the house, how did you see your friends then? Get in the car and go or take a taxi or have them come see you?

G: Oh yes, I have two kids who live relatively nearby so they're here all the time and I have one in New York and one in New Jersey and they're not here quite as much. But everybody wants to come swim in the swimming pool.

J: Oh, how nice, how fun. Now, how do the kids feel about The Watermark now that you've been there for a little bit?

G: They are delighted that I'm here.

J: What's that?

G: My kids are delighted that I'm here.

J: Oh good, good, does it give them peace of mind or...?

G: It gives them peace of mind. They know I'm being taken care of if I need to be taken care of. You know, there so many levels of care so they know that, you know, if I need something I can get it.

J: That's great, that's definitely a load off their mind. You did so much for them now it's time for them to know that someone's there to help you.

G: That's right, that's right.

J: Well wonderful, that basically goes through my list. These calls are short but I would love to hear if you have any other advice, any other thoughts or surprising things about living in a retirement community. Anything else you have to offer before we go I'll certainly love to hear it.

G: Let me think about that for a second, no I think we pretty much covered everything.

J: Ok, alright, great well thank you again. Have a wonderful day.

G: Thank you.

J: Thank you for all the wonderful things you are doing in the community I really appreciate it.

G: Now what do you do with this information?

J: What we do is we take a look at it and we put it together in terms of ways to speak to other people

who are out there potentially thinking "oh, should I stay in this house forever?" "Oh, I'm afraid to make a change." Or what can we do to reach out to them? And we often send a postcard and tell them about different residents' perspectives and invite them to come to the community to have a lunch or whatnot. Very low-pressure. Very much just, wherever you end up, even if it's staying at home, you ought to do some research. You ought to be knowing your options and make an educated choice even if it's just to stay put right where you are.

G: No question.

J: Well, people do need to kind of take advantage of whatever they can do to make their life better, wherever they are, and be good to themselves and do what it takes to be happy and healthy. But you know, I haven't been through the process myself. I can sympathize with some of the challenges and really admire some of the great parts, but it helps us so much to hear from someone who's actually been there. And then I think those folks really respect that because they want to hear from someone who's been in their shoes.

G: Yes, yes of course. It's been very interesting, I appreciate it.

J: Oh you're quite welcome. Thank you for your time and have a beautiful day.

G: Thank you.

J: Bye-bye.

G: Bye-bye.