

An Interview with
Carol Saloman

at the Historical Society of Missouri St. Louis
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interviewed by Dr. Blanche M. Touhill
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Oral History Program

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International Women's Forum DVD 51

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PREFACE

The interview was taped on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets []. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [""] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

Carol Soloman 5-22-2014

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

MAY 22, 2014

CAROL SALOMAN INTERVIEWED BY DR. BLANCHE M. TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: ...of your views: where you were born; your family in a general way; your elementary school; maybe your high school. Did a teacher say something to you that inspired you or your high school teacher, elementary school teacher or your parents or your playmates? Who really convinced you or said something to you that set you on the path of life?

Carol Soloman: Well, I had two older brothers. I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio but I moved to Miami Beach when I was eight years old. My parents put the three children on a train to go to Florida. My father had heart disease and they went ahead to get settled and then they put my brothers and myself...I can't believe they did that...on a train and we went to Miami Beach and I had parents who really felt we could walk on water. They were just supportive and I think at a very early age, we were totally comfortable in our shoes. We didn't get bad messages or negative things. We just had very positive reinforcement. So I do think that they gave us the wings to do whatever we chose to do. I was the youngest of my two brothers and they were very achieving people and had lots of friends over. They had their fraternity parties at our house. So I was the little sister who sat on the steps listening to everything and modeling a lot after that. In high school, I was a cheerleader. I was the captain of my cheerleaders and very involved. I was vice president of my class and involved in student council and politics of the high school and, in Miami Beach at that time, it was a very sleepy little town and lovely place to live and not at all what it is today. It was a family at our high school and I would say that I enjoyed the people and the activities there and always felt like I could do whatever I wanted to do. As far as my education, I wasn't as interested in the studies as I was my friends but I was active in the school and had a very successful high school career and then I went to the University of Miami.

Blanche Touhill: Let me ask something: When you were put on the train, in those days, didn't they have sort of nurses that took charge of children or elderly people?

Carol Soloman: You know, I think my brother, one was 14 and so they were in charge.

Blanche Touhill: A semi-adult, yes.

Carol Soloman: And the other one was a little younger. So we didn't really get into too much trouble.

Blanche Touhill: And they looked after you?

Carol Soloman: Yes, they did. I don't have too much memory of it except that it was a nice ride to Miami and I guess my parents had a lot of confidence in us.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, well, I think a 14-year-old boy, he was in high school...

Carol Soloman: Mm-hmm, and they were good boys. It wasn't so much like today. So I feel like I had a lot of very nice teachers and I had an English teacher who was very positive and a strong person who I really looked up to and I think respected and I think she probably had an influence. I had a driving teacher who was wonderful to me and he was a football coach also. We just enjoyed a nice friendship together and I respected him also.

Blanche Touhill: How many were in your class?

Carol Soloman: There were about 300. It was a large high school. We're having a reunion this year, 57 years and I think about 75 couples are attending. It was a close class and we all have gone other places but our class was a very achieving class, went on to do a lot of remarkable things: wonderful doctors, researchers.

Blanche Touhill: So where did you go to college? The University of Miami?

Carol Soloman: I went to the University of Miami; however, I got married after my first year. I was 18 years old.

Blanche Touhill: And you dropped out of school?

Carol Soloman: I did. We moved to St. Louis. I was at the University of Miami. I had met my husband in high school and he was at the University and I went to St. Louis and had...I didn't have them right away but I had three children

after that and it just seemed like I fell into a very busy life. He was involved in the sports business and his father was a very prominent Democrat politician and so it was a very hectic life and I was involved in some of his business and the social aspects, traveling with the team and entertaining and going to Washington and I think that watching my father-in-law operate, he was a very savvy politician and savvy man, Sidney Soloman, I don't know if you knew him.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Well, I know his reputation.

Carol Soloman: His reputation, and he was very kind to me and he used to have a lot of parties and he would like to go to bed early so he always left me with the people and I think I learned a lot of handling people, being with people and all those niceties of what we do. It was a nice exposure.

Blanche Touhill: Were you a sports enthusiast?

Carol Soloman: Yes, I was at that time because that was my life and about 12 years into my marriage, I kind of got restless and I had always enjoyed plants and flowers and the downstairs of our home had...someone told me you could take a violet leaf and make a violet plant. So pretty soon, in my basement, I had all these lights and thousands of violet plants and I also ran the plant sales at Community School for the scholarship fund with Mary Behrman who was a close friend and pretty soon people started asking us about their plants, their plants at home, would we come and look at their plants, design some spaces. So we did do that and one thing led to another and a husband said, "Will you come to my office and do that?" and pretty soon we built a very nice business and Mary didn't want to work as intensively as I did and so I continued with it for a long time, probably for 15 years and grew a very nice business. It was a maintenance and we did banks, shopping centers and then went to take care of them.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and what was the name of your company?

Carol Soloman: Creative Greenery.

Blanche Touhill: Were you one of the first in St. Louis to do that?

Carol Soloman: Yes, one of the first. It was a long time ago and it built to about 35 employees so it was a very nice business but...

Blanche Touhill: How did you happen to decide to make that niche?

Carol Soloman: Into the business? Well, I got divorced after 20 years of marriage and I wanted to continue my children in private school and continue a nice lifestyle and also, I liked to achieve things. So there was an opportunity. I had loved plants and I loved people and so it was there and I continued growing it and I had a lot of connections.

Blanche Touhill: Due to your father-in-law?

Carol Soloman: Father-in-law and the many years I was in St. Louis, had a lot of friends and one night I was at a dinner party with Richard Ford. I don't know if you know Dick.

Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Carol Soloman: And we were talking and he asked me what I did and I said I was a plant lady and I said, "What do you do?" He said, "I'm a banker" and he said, "We're building a new building in St. Louis" and he said, "You should go to New York and talk to our design team." So I did and at that time, it was a very small business and they interviewed us and my brother lives in Dallas, he was in the advertising business so I said, "Get something together. I'm going to New York. You've got to make me look good." So he did. There was a FedEx package at my hotel and met with the designers and we bid on the job and it was just a few of us at that time and we got half of the contract which was about \$100,000 contract. Then they gave me all these contractor forms to fill out and I went to them and said, "You know, if I took this contract, you can be sure that I will deliver for you. I'm proud and can do this job." So we did it and I was measuring my dog shed and my children were employees, you know, all this but I finally decided I would talk to them and when they renewed the contract a few years later, we got the whole contract. So they were pleased and it was a springboard to us being able to hire more people and then I ended up selling it to a publicly held company many years later, what they bought were they contracts because we had these recurring revenue contracts so it was a very nice business to sell. So I was able to retire and I met...then I went...

Blanche Touhill: Let's go back: What was it in your youth that made you like plants?

Carol Soloman: I had a grandmother who loved plants and an aunt who had a beautiful home with plants and I remember always going to their houses and they had roses and...

Blanche Touhill: And were they in Miami?

Carol Soloman: Cincinnati, that's where I was born. I was a little girl.

Blanche Touhill: So you learned very young.

Carol Soloman: I didn't learn about it but visually, I was exposed to it and I just liked it. I just loved living things and very aware of nature.

Blanche Touhill: What about the colors, you must have had a good sense of color.

Carol Soloman: I think I had a good taste for that. I didn't have any formal training. It was only by my own...my art; it's my art.

Blanche Touhill: When you went to Miami, did you have a little garden?

Carol Soloman: No, my mother had a little but she wasn't so interested in plants but we lived on the water. We had a lovely yard full of palms and hibiscus and natural, native things but not so much a formal; it was really by trial and error, reading, talking to people. I would buy trees in Miami and befriend many nursery people and talk to them and see what would grow where. In this industry, they're very good kinds of people, like farming, agriculture.

Blanche Touhill: But really, your garden and your connection with companies that provide these things came when you came to St. Louis?

Carol Soloman: Mm-hmm, it did, just because, with the plant sales at my children's school, it grew from that, yes, and it grew and I did have a garden in St. Louis, a beautiful garden. I had a small home but the garden was great, very beautiful but it was just by the love of...I think my plants and flowers knew that I loved them and responded and I took care to. It was really before plants became so popular. It was very early.

Blanche Touhill: I understand because I remember sort of when companies would begin to go into large buildings and water the plants and put the mulch down...

Carol Soloman: Yes, beautiful planters.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and I sort of remember the time before and the time after so I do know that was sort of a new business.

Carol Soloman: I think, too, when they started building these glass buildings with partitions for employees, it was very stark so they needed the green and also provided some good natural environmental things.

Blanche Touhill: But that takes more than just being interested in flowers.

Carol Soloman: Yes, it does.

Blanche Touhill: That's color; that's design.

Carol Soloman: Yes, it's a lot. It's design. I think I was born with a sense of design. My grandmother also had a lovely home and loved beautiful things and I love beautiful things and love a beautiful home and I am an artist. I also am a jewelry maker. I design beads and sell them at art galleries in Durango and Santa Fe.

Blanche Touhill: When you were in elementary or secondary school, did you draw all the time?

Carol Soloman: No, I didn't. I don't draw so much. I can't do hardly stick figures, no, but I just can look at things and just have an appreciation for that aesthetic and in some things, I can't design, like, in an office building, if there was a contained space like an atrium, very contained, I had someone who could do that. It must be the left side of the brain and the right side but I could walk into a large space and say, "Here's what you need," but small...but I didn't really study that. I just...

Blanche Touhill: It was part of you.

Carol Soloman: Yeah, and improved by doing it, you know. I did it a long time and just improved but people told me they could always tell when they walked into a space if I did it. It was a signature of mine and they say the same thing with my jewelry. They can tell it's a Carol Soloman necklace or...

Blanche Touhill: Did your children take up this?

Carol Soloman: Well, my one son is artistic but he builds homes so he has that expression and my daughter has great taste but she runs a book company for elementary education.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes.

Carol Soloman: And my other son is a golf professional so I think they're very different. We gave them wings to just do what they wanted to do.

Blanche Touhill: Was their father athletic?

Carol Soloman: Yes, he was athletic and very competitive and a killer as far as winning, very much.

Blanche Touhill: Was his father like that?

Carol Soloman: Very much so and his mother, my husband's mother was a very sweet, loving woman and a homemaker and she taught me a lot about giving and doing because she was at my doorstep sometimes just sweeping the leaves off the steps and doing a lot for me.

Blanche Touhill: So, go on. So you had this business and you began to get contracts and once you began, then you got more and more. Did you travel around the United States to get plants?

Carol Soloman: Yes, always went to Florida to get plants and to Homestead. When we needed large trees, I'd always go personally to pick them out but there's plant brokers, we had relationships with the big nurseries and Homestead so I had a woman who did all the buying and she could make a phone call and we'd get trucks in every week. We had a warehouse and a lot were for the jobs we were doing.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, so you knew ahead of time what you wanted to do?

Carol Soloman: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Then you just had to find the plant that was healthy and available?

Carol Soloman: Yes, we dealt in high quality. We weren't the cheapest but we were good and they were all guaranteed and all of that. Then I opened a retail store where Spicers used to be on Ladue Road.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes.

Carol Soloman: It was like a plant gallery.

Blanche Touhill: Really?

- Carol Soloman: With white tile...Northwest Coffee went in there after us but it was a lovely, beautiful space and that was fun. It wasn't a real profitable retail store but it was a showcase for plants.
- Blanche Touhill: Then you could make connections for your other business through that?
- Carol Soloman: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: What happened to your friend who helped you at Community School, did she go into business with you?
- Carol Soloman: Mary Behrman was for a time and she is now passed away but she did not want to continue with it. She didn't want to really work that hard but we'd drive around in an old equipment truck from the hockey team and it had a hole in the floor and then, as things grew, we could get a nice few trucks.
- Blanche Touhill: How long did you stay in that business?
- Carol Soloman: I'd say I was in it about 17 years.
- Blanche Touhill: And you were the president of the corporation?
- Carol Soloman: Yes, I owned the business.
- Blanche Touhill: And how was that? Was that exciting?
- Carol Soloman: Very exciting because most of the employees were young people...
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, of course.
- Carol Soloman: ...and out of horticulture school and very young and I think I was a hard boss but I was fair and really wanted to do what was a good thing for my employees and managed them.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, that's a business that it has to be right.
- Carol Soloman: Yes, it has to be right and it was and they were very good and I was respectful of them and I think it gave them all a lot of lessons also. Maybe if they would be sitting here, they could maybe say that I impacted their life.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, oh, I'm sure you did.

Carol Soloman: And one of the times I was in Miami buying trees, I called some of my old friends from high school, one being a man who was really a lovely friend, not a boyfriend, just a lovely friend and he and I had lunch and then we've been together ever since.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness.

Carol Soloman: We lived together 12 years. We decided we wanted a new adventure. I was selling my business; he was a lawyer and he was winding down. So we'd commute back and forth, St. Louis/Miami and finally, we wound down and we decided we'd love to have a new adventure together, be away from our families and just have a life together so we took three 8,000 mile car trips out West...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, how wonderful!

Carol Soloman: ...and we put sleeping bags in the car, tents, sometimes we'd be on the beach; sometimes we'd be in a great hotel but we ended up coming to a place called Durango, Colorado and we thought it was beautiful. There was a college there. There was more than just a ski town. It was beautiful mountains, great hiking. We like the outdoors and so we thought we would try it and we loved it. We've been there 15 years. So that was our story together, was a love story too and he has also been a wonderful partner and I think I had experienced several relationships and what I appreciate about this man is that I always tell him, he gives me my wings and I'm me and other times in my life, I have felt pressured to be somebody, to accommodate somebody else and I think the Women's Forum and the whole evolution with women has provided me with that confidence, strength to do it on my own, no matter what.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you obviously were a pioneer in business.

Carol Soloman: I was early in that, yes.

Blanche Touhill: And I think you had to have confidence in yourself to go into a business and to become the president but I, myself, lived through the women's movement and there was a psychological change. You did have a feeling that the other world was gone and that this new world, that there (wasn't?) that pressure before to be the homemaker and the mother...

Carol Soloman: That's right.

Blanche Touhill: You could do something in addition to all those things.

Carol Soloman: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: And that didn't mean you didn't love your children...

Carol Soloman: Or your husband, that's right.

Blanche Touhill: ...or your husband or anything but there was an aspect that could come out.

Carol Soloman: Yes, of being your own...

Blanche Touhill: And be a leader, and be a leader.

Carol Soloman: Yes, yes, it was wonderful.

Blanche Touhill: So how did you get into jewelry?

Carol Soloman: Well, Mary Behrman, my partner, loved to do beads and when we were doing jobs, sometimes she'd stop at an antique store and we'd bead around, flea around and I think I was...finally, I just said, I'm going to try this too. Then there was a woman who was getting a divorce and she had a beautiful bead collection I had heard and her mother told me she would like to sell it so I went over there and it was Dorothy Moog's daughter...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, I know.

Carol Soloman: Donna.

Blanche Touhill: What was the name?

Carol Soloman: Donna Nussbaum.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, I know Donna and I knew Dorothy.

Carol Soloman: Dorothy was lovely.

Blanche Touhill: And I knew Dorothy's son.

Carol Soloman: Yeah, Hub was the husband. I don't know her son.

Blanche Touhill: I think it was Jim but I'm not certain. His wife was Mary but I knew the Moog's. They were lovely people.

Carol Soloman: Yeah, lovely. So I went over to Donna's house and she had an entire wall of beads from floor to ceiling and at that time, I had a small home and I said to her, "I really don't need all these beads." I had some of my own. She said, "I'm not taking this apart. Either take it all or take nothing." So I took it all and after...

Blanche Touhill: Did you put it in the basement?

Carol Soloman: I put it under beds and closets and the basement and my husband, now husband, he was great. He carted those beads around. We moved several times and, you know, he'd open a closet and there were the beads. Then I really became enamored with them and when I sold my plant business, being that I like creative, I just did this. I sold them off of my neck. I wasn't really in business with them, nor am I now but now, I do sell them in art galleries.

Blanche Touhill: You don't go to these art shows and sell them?

Carol Soloman: No, I don't. I don't really want to be sitting at a bead table, having to produce. I do it for the passion of doing it and, of course, when someone likes it, it makes me very happy, and buys it, I'm happy but my husband tells me, I make about five cents an hour but I have a great time. It doesn't matter. I don't have to eat with it and it brings me a lot of joy and I still love to create beautiful flower arrangements.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, you do?

Carol Soloman: Mm-hmm. I don't do that as a business but I have done many parties for people who want something special and if I can help them, I will do that and I've become very active in Durango. I'm very active.

Blanche Touhill: So talk about Durango.

Carol Soloman: Durango is wonderful.

Blanche Touhill: So you sold your property here...

Carol Soloman: Yes...sold...I kept it a couple years and rented my home and tried it out there because I left my daughter here and my granddaughter but, you know, you don't get everything and moving away from here, I knew that I would have a wonderful life with my partner.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you can come back anytime you want to.

Carol Soloman: Yes, I do. It was a good decision. So I went there and...well, one other reason I liked going there is because it had a lot of social services going on and when we went to visit, I saw lots of agencies and one was a women's resource center and I became very involved as a board member, as a development director and just loved it. I liked working directly with women which is what I would have rather done but I worked a lot on the inside of the organization, raising money and programming, which I still am on their advisory board but I met a lot of wonderful people. I think you always get more out of it than what you give.

Blanche Touhill: You were talking about your bead business and, really, so you sell retail to art stores that sell, in turn?

Carol Soloman: Yes, it's mostly consignment. They take them...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, they like it. They like something and they say, "I'd like that" or "Can you design something else."

Carol Soloman: Yeah, they have maybe 18 pieces in their gallery, in the case.

Blanche Touhill: And this is both in...

Carol Soloman: In Santa Fe and Durango, yes, and another thing I'm doing most exciting, in this town of about 50,000, wonderful people, people retired, come from all walks of life, very wonderful community and we have a river front that has really not been developed. There's a lot of bad stuff on it as a lot of towns, old towns, old mining town and so had a vision to really develop that river front into something wonderful, a new arts gallery, the symphony. We have a wonderful summer music festival, science center, so that's what I'm working on now and I guess, Blanche, thinking about the International Women's Forum, my life, I am not an intellectual book person but all these experiences, I've just garnered so much from being around people and learning and watching and being able to make friends easily and build good relationships and trust and so now, with this project, I know all the players in Durango and they have confidence in me. They've joined the team. Across the country there's people who have volunteered on this project. So I think that's a real strength and I've learned a lot of that by associating with wonderful people. Eliot Stein was a wonderful friend of mine for many years. I mean, he's not alive now but I would say, and looking at your notes, that you asked about people who have influenced you and he was definitely a wonderful mentor when I

started my business. We were very dear friends all through many of those years and, you know, he was just a wonderful arm to lean on and the most comfortable as he had that way about him and he didn't do for me but he gave me a lot of confidence also. So being around people like that have given me that assurance, to just plow through and work out problems and the Forum has been great because it's a wonderful network wherever you go. I haven't used it that much but in Santa Fe there's a wonderful group of women that I've attended some of their meetings. So it's just a very powerful group of women that I gravitate towards and respect and love being with. I'm not saying I don't love lots of people but this is a very special connection and has been.

Blanche Touhill: And so right now you live in Durango but your project now is the waterfront?

Carol Soloman: Yes, it's the waterfront.

Blanche Touhill: And do you think that's going to be the most important thing?

Carol Soloman: If it could happen, it's...

Blanche Touhill: Well, it will happen.

Carol Soloman: I hope. It's a long-term project. Yes, I think it would be my mark and certainly worth...it would be a wonderful project, yes, it would be, and my husband and I also traveled the world. We've been almost everywhere and when we go, we stay several months. We don't just pop around.

Blanche Touhill: Do you rent an apartment?

Carol Soloman: Often but when you go to countries like India, we don't do that but we stay a week in each place and we just have had beautiful travels.

Blanche Touhill: And that must affect your art too.

Carol Soloman: It does, it does, and I love the markets. I love talking to the people. It does make a whole change.

Blanche Touhill: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life be like?

Carol Soloman: I thought about that question. I don't think it would be that different. I wouldn't be using the technology but I think it would be the same. I

would love people; I would love to make a mark on the world and help people, the same.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and there were women born 50 years before who did things like waterfronts and...

Carol Soloman: Right, made changes.

Blanche Touhill: Made changes, cleaned up the (milk?) and the water...

Carol Soloman: Right, oh, yes.

Blanche Touhill: So you would have been...

Carol Soloman: There were women artists.

Blanche Touhill: There were women artists, yes.

Carol Soloman: So I think it's probably easier in ways today but women added to...

Blanche Touhill: I think being president of the company was something truly unique.

Carol Soloman: Yes, oh, yes. It was wonderful.

Blanche Touhill: Is there some award that you treasure?

Carol Soloman: Well, I was honored in St. Louis by St. Louis University Entrepreneurial Studies for being one of the top 25 small businesses. That was a very lovely award and then I was honored as Volunteer of the Year for the Women's Resource Center and then this Arts award was a wonderful...they represent all the things I love but I work not for awards or recognition, you know. It's just a wonderful way to...

Blanche Touhill: Actually, your award will be this river front project.

Carol Soloman: It would be wonderful.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, when it becomes possible.

Carol Soloman: Yes, we're doing a big feasibility study now.

Blanche Touhill: But you got the money for the feasibility study.

Carol Soloman: Yes, we raised \$60,000 real quick.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and that's really...

Carol Soloman: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Once people start on a project, they're buying in. They're buying in.

Carol Soloman: Yeah, I hope. Yeah, we have very important people who have bought into it and that gives it credibility too. So, lovely.

Blanche Touhill: Is there anything you want to say that we haven't talked about at the moment?

Carol Soloman: No, I think living in St. Louis and being among this group, it was a wonderful place to raise my family, for their educations, it was wonderful and I couldn't have thought of a better place to live those years. I'm very happy now to have a new adventure and not the same old friends, same old restaurants, everything. It's fun to move along and I don't feel I'm ever anchored in one place. I like new things and that's why traveling is wonderful. No, I've had a great life. I always say, if a truck got me tomorrow, I've done pretty much everything. So you can't...

Blanche Touhill: Isn't that a wonderful thing to say.

Carol Soloman: You can't do more than that, can you?

Blanche Touhill: You can't do more than that.

Carol Soloman: No.

Blanche Touhill: And you would have blossomed if you had been born 50 years earlier but it was easier to blossom in this world.

Carol Soloman: Yes, it is easier, yes.

Blanche Touhill: Well, thank you very much.

Carol Soloman: Well, thank you. It was lovely to be with you and thank you for your time.