

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH NANCY ESHELMAN

Interviewed by Ford Risley

Conducted under the auspices of the  
Pennsylvania Newspaper Journalists Oral History Program  
Department of Journalism  
Penn State University  
2018

Risley: Alright, well, it's January 9, 2018. I'm here at home of Nancy Eshelman and we're doing an oral history interview for the Pennsylvania Journalists Oral History Program. Thanks for doing this.

Eshelman: OK.

Risley: So let's just start with some basic questions. When and where were you born?

Eshelman: I was born in Edgewater, New Jersey, which is a tiny little town by the George Washington Bridge, right across from New York City. My father worked for Alcoa and when I was 6, we were transferred to Lancaster which was a culture shock for me. So I grew up in Lancaster County.

Risley: And that's where you went to school?

Eshelman: Yeah, Lancaster Catholic High School. Millersville University. I eventually got a master's at Temple.

Risley: OK. And what did you study in college?

Eshelman: English.

Risley: OK.

Eshelman: Millersville didn't have a journalism program but they had journalism courses. I took what they had, and I had a wonderful teacher. Her name was Leah Fudem. She had been a journalist years ago you know, a rare, rare woman journalist.

Risley: And she inspired you?

Eshelman: Yeah, she did.

Risley: Great. So I guess you've always been interested in writing?

Eshelman: I guess I always was. I wrote for the high school newspaper. I wrote for the college paper, so it was just kind of a thing. I didn't go to college until I was older. I got married right after high school. Had two sons, and then when my younger son started first grade, I went to college.

Risley: And how old were you?

Eshelman: Oh, I thought I was really old. I was 26.

Risley: Really old, huh?

Eshelman: And I really, you know, in college I felt like I stuck out like a sore thumb. But I realize now that most people probably didn't even notice. Because I remember I had a Spanish class. The professor was going around asking questions in

Spanish, and you had to answer them, and he asked me in Spanish if I had any sons, and I answered, "Yes I have two sons," and he started laughing, "You obviously didn't understand the question." And I said, "Yes, I did," and he was shocked to find out that I was older, but I felt old and I felt like I looked old.

Risley: But you still found time to work for the student newspaper even with a family?

Eshelman: I did a little bit of writing for the student paper, and I also had a part-time job at Weis Markets and my kids and so —

Risley: So you were busy.

Eshelman: Busy, busy, busy. I've always been one of those people, even when I was in high school and before, if I had homework, I came home, and I sat down, and I did it. Friday I came home, I did all my homework so that if something happened on the weekend, I'd be free, you know, and that's the way I was with college. I was always ahead. Always worked ahead.

Risley: Good training for a journalist.

Eshelman: I guess.

Risley: What was your first job after college and what did you do?

Eshelman: When I was in college, I had the opportunity to write feature stories for the *Lancaster Intelligencer Journal*, which was a morning paper. For their women's section because they only really had an editor. They didn't have much staff. So, she used a lot of freelance people, so I did a lot of writing for her when I was in college, and it was the '70s.

Risley: I was going to say what years are we talking about here?

Eshelman: Let me see, I think I graduated in '77, so this would have been '75, '76. I was writing like "the first woman fill-in-the-blank." "The first woman lawyer," "the first woman pilot," "the first woman banker." There was a whole lot of that going on, so I did a whole lot of those stories and —

Risley: It was on a freelance basis?

Eshelman: Just thinking back to it, like, I would write like 45-inch stories, and they'd print the whole thing. It's not like today. It's just a different time. We wrote these long, long stories with lots of pictures with them. So that was my first real, I got paid for this job. After I got out of college, I badgered Lancaster newspapers for close to a year before they hired me full-time. And then I went to the Sunday News, to the women's department, and I mean there again they had a huge women's section. Maybe like 24 pages that we were filling every Sunday, big long stories and a whole section, a section within a section on cooking and recipes and all that kind of stuff. So really wrote, wrote, wrote a lot of stuff.

Risley: So it was just good experience and being able to write and report on a big level?

Eshelman: Right, and I learned layout there. We did weddings and engagements. Every week there'd be 25, 26, 27 weddings every week.

Risley: Did most of the women who worked for the newspaper work for the women's section?

Eshelman: Oh, yeah. I mean that was just what you did.

Risley: So you did that for several years?

Eshelman: I worked there for several years. By that time, I was divorced and I needed money, so I volunteered to work any overtime they had, so we had this arrangement where I worked Monday through Friday for the women's section and then I went in Saturday from 3 to midnight when we were putting paper out, and I did all the editing and the layout and all for the B section of the paper, the local news section. So as a result of that I somehow, towards the end of my days at Lancaster newspapers, I got moved out of women's and into news which was kind of a big thing because there just wasn't a lot of women doing news at the time. So and then —

Risley: What kinds of things did you cover on the news side?

Eshelman: Oh you're going to make me think. It's been so long. I don't even remember.

Risley: Was it government or courts? Or —

Eshelman: Well, because we were a Sunday paper, it was more like do ahead in advance kind of, they were almost like they were news but they were almost feature-y, you know? Because Lancaster had an odd setup with those three separate papers. So the only breaking news they did is if something happened Saturday night.

Risley: Right. So you essentially had two jobs for a period?

Eshelman: Yeah, it was fun.

Risley: I bet. So do you have any really memorable experiences from those times?

Eshelman: A great one that I remember and this kind of, and I remember this because it crossed over from the women's into the news. The women's section was a pre-print, it was printed on Friday morning. And Park City mall was going to have this big psychic fair. In advance of that this woman had come into the office, and I had done a feature story. She had read my aura, and so I had done a feature story on this woman coming in and reading my aura and how there were going to be all of these people at Park City, and they were going to do taro cards, and

this and that. Well, that story was written and pre-printed, and then Friday morning, we got wind that Park City was calling the thing off because the conservative Christians in Lancaster looked at this as the occult. And so I got to write a news story for the paper saying that “the thing that you’ll read about in our pre-print, it’s really not happening because it’s been called off.”

Risley: That was an interesting story to write.

Eshelman: So that was my cross-over story.

Risley: That’s funny. Did you ever run across any issues as a woman working at the paper at that time? Any sort of problems or with –

Eshelman: Not too much with people. I just felt that the climate there was such that there were no women in management. There were no women in any sort of responsible position, and I didn’t see much chance of that happening, and that’s one reason why I went to Harrisburg.

Risley: When did you join the *Patriot-News*?

Eshelman: 1985.

Risley: Was that as a staff writer?

Eshelman: They had an opening. At that point they were going to take their Lebanon bureau from one person to three. And so my first job was in the Lebanon bureau. Not Beirut, but Lancaster County. And this all was because of Boscov’s. Boscov’s opened a store in the Lebanon Mall, and Al Boscov wanted to be able to advertise in the *Patriot* with the same ads that he had for his stores in Harrisburg and whatever, so they beefed up the Lebanon coverage. They had a Lebanon edition of the *Patriot-News*.

Risley: I’m sorry what?

Eshelman: A Lebanon edition of the *Patriot-News*. Daily and Sunday.

Risley: Wow.

Eshelman: So I went into the Lebanon bureau. That was quite a learning experience.

Risley: How so?

Eshelman: Because I hadn’t really done a lot of hard news before like daily stuff, so this was like the daily, going to courts and going over to the commissioner’s meetings. There was a lot of learning there for me. I enjoyed that.

Risley: A lot of local government, courts, police?

Eshelman: I love courts. I think I'm a frustrated lawyer.

Risley: Really? What makes you say that? What do you like about court stories?

Eshelman: I just think that the courts are just so interesting. You think that there's two sides to a story, but there's really six. You know it's, I don't know. There aren't many court cases that are black and white. There's always a lot of grey in there, and I always found it fascinating to sit through trials. I really liked that.

Risley: What was the *Patriot-News* like at that time?

Eshelman: Very different. I came from a place where we had three separate papers and here we just had one big staff and everybody was working together, and they probably didn't have that many more employees, but it seemed like it. It seemed like it was this huge newsroom with so many people in it because in Lancaster we had different newsrooms for the different papers. So it just seemed like a bigger, freer place, like people were wandering around and doing things.

Risley: Was it more welcoming for women?

Eshelman: I thought so, yeah. Well, when I was hired I started at the *Patriot* the same day as Cate Barron. And she was my –

Risley: And what year was that?

Eshelman: 1985. She was the supervisor of the Lebanon bureau. And I worked directly for her. And now she's the big honcho at the paper so, um, you know, there were always a lot of very visible women at the *Patriot-News*.

Risley: Interesting. So you worked at the Lebanon bureau for a while?

Eshelman: Yeah, for not quite two years.

Risley: Then you moved –

Eshelman: Then I came up to Harrisburg and I did municipal government on the east shore of Harrisburg, Lower Paxton, Susquehanna, all those townships. Sewers and zoning, sewers and zoning, sewers and zoning, school construction, sewers and zoning. And then I got promoted to in charge of everybody who wrote about sewers and zoning. So I got to read the stories from all over the region.

Risley: That's funny. Any particular memorable sewer and zoning stories?

Eshelman: There again we had one, I always seem to run into this. I think it was Central Dauphin was going to build swimming pool in their high school or a high school with a swimming pool. I forget, but we had these metro sections, Metro East and Metro West, and they were pre-done. They came out in the Tuesday paper. They weren't actually printed until Monday night but they were all laid out and ready

to go and I went to a, I had done a cover story for the Metro East on new swimming pool at Central Dauphin and what it's going to look like, and Monday night I went to the meeting and they voted down the swimming pool. They came back and reversed the earlier vote and decided not to have a pool. So once again, I had to come back and do the story "don't read that other story, read this story."

Risley: Readers are really confused.

Eshelman: Now we were able to change that actually in the Metro. We still had time to do it.

Risley: That's funny. So how did you become a columnist?

Eshelman: Oh, let's see. What year was that? 1989. Anyway, Ron Minard was the editor, and he decided he wanted to have three local columnists, and he said anybody who wanted to or thought they wanted to write a local column should write a couple samples and give them to him. And so there was me, and Tony Perry, who's now an actor, and Connie McNamara, who's now a public relations person. And let's see, Tony was Monday, Connie was Wednesday, and I was Thursday. And so we each had a column –

Risley: Weekly column?

Eshelman: Weekly column and in addition to everything else you were doing.

Risley: Do you remember what columns you submitted for?

Eshelman: I don't, I don't.

Risley: Do you remember your first column?

Eshelman: Nope. Do I remember my name? Barely.

Risley: How did you approach column writing? What did you look for when you were writing?

Eshelman: Something that made me say, "Boy that makes me mad!" or "Boy, that's a great idea!" Some sort of emotion. I was looking for some, you know, this isn't right or something like that.

Risley: So what were some memorable early columns?

Eshelman: Early columns? Oh, my. I, boy have a hard time remembering early columns. I have a hard time remembering any columns. Sometimes I read columns and say, "Did I write that?" Over the years, I've written a lot about my family because I find not that my family is particularly interesting, but I find that people really relate to that. If you write about a granddaughter who's graduating from high school or a 2-year-old who's doing something amazingly cute, I get a lot of reaction to those columns. People just say, "Oh yeah, that's a lot like my family,"

you know, and at first, I wasn't planning on doing that but when I saw how they touched people. I remember when my father was very sick. And he was in the hospital, and I wrote this column about being a little girl and how I always felt so secure when my daddy held my hand, and I talked about being on the beach and going in the ocean and how you're afraid of the waves, but daddy had your hand and so you knew you were going to be OK because daddy was always there. And I wrote about now how my dad was in this hospital bed, and the only thing I could do for him was hold his hand. And that column got so much response from daughters and fathers, and people sent me pictures of them walking on the beach with their dads. I mean, it just amazed me how that touched people.

Risley: So you didn't start out planning to write that, you just —

Eshelman: No, I had no idea I was going, I mean I was going to write all —

Risley: It struck a chord with people.

Eshelman: Yeah, I was going to write all about things that were happening in government and this and that. Things that were in the world, but I mix it up now. Because I found that my son died of cancer in 2010, and 2009 when he was diagnosed with cancer, I asked him if he minded if I wrote and he said, "No, go ahead." And so I wrote a column that said, "My son has cancer," and I said, "These are four words no mother wants to ever write." And so I wrote about him having cancer, and there was such a response to it that the bosses said to me, "Keep doing this. Keep writing about it." And I wrote about it through his illness and up until he died. And there again, just so many reactions. People just, "my brother had cancer," "my mother had cancer," "my father had cancer." It just touched so many people. Those things always amaze me.

Risley: What do you enjoy about column writing and what don't you enjoy?

Eshelman: I enjoy the emails from somebody I've never heard of saying, "You touched me today." Or I like to write about people who probably have never been in the newspaper before. Somebody told me one time, "If you stop anybody on the street you should be able to write a story." And I like to write about those people who nobody's ever heard of them but they're doing something different or unique or — I had a lady that I used to work with and when we got kicked out of the building and we couldn't smoke in the building anymore, we used to have to smoke on the loading dock, and so I used to talk to this woman — she worked in classified advertising — and it seemed like we always timed our smoke breaks around the same time. And she started telling me about her daughter who had been a teenage mother. I mean she had a child when she was still in high school but was determined to finish high school and did. And then went on to eventually have five children, but she went to Harrisburg Area Community College one course at a time until she became a nurse. And then she got a job. She worked at the Camp Hill prison as a nurse. And yea that was nice, blah, blah, blah, blah. And then unfortunately this lady that I used to smoke with, she passed away. But she had invited me one time to come to a party she was having

for her daughter's birthday, and I went and I met her daughter. So a few years later after she passed away, her daughter called me and she said, "Do you remember me?" And blah, blah, blah, blah. Turns out the daughter had gone to medical school. And not just any medical school but Harvard. And became a doctor. And so I wrote a column about her. And I'm sitting at work and the phone rings. And it's somebody from Oprah's show. And they want to have this woman come on the show because they think she's so, anyway, long story short, I'm making it long anyway, I watch that show. I've never cried so hard in my life. They flew all her kids and all in, and she didn't know they were going to be there. And then some skin care company agreed to pay off her 160,000 dollars in student loans. Because of my column.

Risley: That's really having an impact.

Eshelman: Yeah.

Risley: Are there other memorable columns that you wrote?

Eshelman: Ah, other memorable columns? The ladies at the Bethany Village who were tired of the – Bethany Village is a place where older folks live. They were tired of this broken-down van that they used to have to go on, you know, they would go to the shopping center or they'd go to the casino or whatever, and their van was pretty (poor shape), so they decided they wanted to raise money for a new van, and they were having bake sales and they were doing all kinds of stuff. Couldn't figure out how to make a whole lot of money so they decided to do a nude calendar. And they got this photographer who took tasteful pictures of women in their seventies and eighties in the buff. And did –

Risley: I guess they raised the money they needed, huh?

Eshelman: Oh yeah, because I did a column and they were on TV and they were everywhere and whatever. It was after that movie *Calendar Girls* which was kind of the same thing. So, that was fun. Um, they weren't all fun, but I liked –

Risley: Are there any columns that you wish you didn't write?

Eshelman: My mother was very sweet, kind, quiet person. How she ever got me for a daughter, I'll never know. But she used to read my stuff and go, "Oh, Nancy, you can't say that!" I'd say, "Mom, I already did." "People are going to get mad!" "Yea, Mom, that's the point." "They're going to write letters to the paper!" "Good, Mom, that's what we want!"

Risley: Were there any columns that particularly caused an uproar? Or particularly got people angry?

Eshelman: I can't remember the issue, but I remember I wrote one time about something about a school board. Boy, were they mad. Oh, they were mad. But they got over it, you know.

Risley: So did you think that's just part of your job as a columnist to write things that people are going to like and things that some people are not going to like?

Eshelman: Nobody's going to like everything, I mean, you know. I have a man that writes me. He totally and absolutely dislikes me. He's disliked me for 20 years. I know his handwriting, he writes me letters, and I throw them in the trash before I open them because I know what they're going to say.

Risley: And what are they going to say?

Eshelman: Oh, he writes, and he writes real little, and then he writes in the margins, and he calls me a "liberal feminist," this, that, and the other thing, and they all say the same thing. So you know, I don't bother anymore.

Risley: But he keeps on writing.

Eshelman: He keeps writing.

Risley: That's funny. How did the newspaper business start to change during your career?

Eshelman: Oh, my goodness. One of the things I notice all the time, and this isn't just the *Patriot*, it's everywhere. It's all sort of morphed together now. Like when I worked at the newspaper, say there was, oh I don't know, a shooting or a bank robbery. You went and you reported on it, and if you couldn't find somebody to talk to you, you beat down doors 'til somebody did. Now they just put, "According to ABC channel 27, there's been a bank robbery." And I just sit there and go, "We would have gotten killed for doing that." We, well, they wouldn't have printed that back then. But we all rely on, the news, because I see the TVs doing it, they say, "according to the *Patriot*" or "according to Penn Live," or according, so everybody just feeds off each other now. It's so much more immediate and everything's so quick, and, you know, in the old days, you wouldn't dare take a picture of somebody. The photographers would have gotten so mad at you if you would have taken, if I would go out to interview somebody and I would take their picture, oh, the photographers would have been mad. But now it's like, "Yea, take your cell phone along and take a picture of that person," you know. Everything just blends together. It's just, it's so fast and it's so immediate, and it's so unedited, you know.

Risley: How have things changed for women?

Eshelman: They're so much better. I mean, women can do anything. I mean, when I first started there, the idea of a woman in sports was absolutely unbelievable. That just didn't happen. And now there's lots of them, you know, and I know when I worked in Lancaster they didn't let women do the police beat because they didn't want them going out after dark by themselves, you know.

- Risley: Was your column always a weekly? Did that change over the years?
- Eshelman: It was always a weekly. It was on Thursday, then it was on Wednesday, then it was on Sunday. Now it's still on Sunday now, but it's on Penn Live on Friday, and then you'd see the same column Sunday in the paper, which makes it a little interesting sometimes how you have to write it, like if you're using time references and stuff like that, it can make it a little interesting, but when I retired—I took a buyout in 2008—and they asked me to keep writing my column. At first they asked me to write twice a week, and I said, "That's not retirement, so I'll just do the once a week," and still for me to this day, after how many years did I say it is? The hardest thing for me is to get an idea. Once I have an idea, I can write anything.
- Risley: I was going to ask you what is your process for writing a column? Do you sit down and just bang it out or?
- Eshelman: I usually walk around all week going, "What am I going to write about? What am I going to write about? Oh my gosh, what am I going to write about? Oh, it's Tuesday, now let's see, maybe I'll think about something tomorrow." Then it gets to be Thursday, and I say, "It's due tonight. What are you going to do?" You know, but if I have an idea, it doesn't take me very long, but and if I'm passionate about something, it takes me almost no time. I don't know if I can say, if I can say this, it's not a bad word or anything. David Newhouse, when he was the editor of the paper, used to tell me the best columns I wrote were the ones I vomited on the page. And that would mean that I was so angry about something I would just pound it out. I did that one time. I was driving to work, and I was stopped at a red light, and I saw a man in a car who was stopped at the red light, too, but facing me. I saw him hit the woman in the car, the woman who was his passenger, slapped her across the face. And I was so angry, and he hit her once or twice. And I kept thinking, "I need to do something. He can't get away with that." The way the traffic was configured, there was nothing I could do, and so I went to work, and I sat down, and I pounded out this column: "To the woman in the car on Union Deposit Road, I saw what he did to you." And I wrote like an apology to her for not stepping in, for not doing something, and just told her that you don't have to take that from him, you know, and that column won an award, and I swear to God, I wrote it in 10 minutes. I was just so mad, so mad.
- Risley: And where did you come up with the idea of writing it as a letter to the woman instead of just expressing your, simply expressing your outrage?
- Eshelman: Because I wanted to talk to her. Because I figured he's a lost cause, but she needs to know that she can get out. There's a way. And here's the phone number. Call it. Go, you know.
- Risley: But you said just coming up with ideas is often the hardest?
- Eshelman: Yeah, it is. I'll sit around and think, you know, what holiday's coming up, or what time of the year is it, or what can I write about. I don't know, it's difficult

sometimes. What's in the news, you know. I'll go on the computer and just read news to see what's going on. What can I write about that's.

Risley: How would you describe your writing style as a columnist?

Eshelman: I think I write pretty basic. I mean I think a third grader could read my columns. I don't like big, fancy words, or I like to just write like I would talk to you.

Risley: A conversational style?

Eshelman: Yeah. I always, when I taught, I used to tell students, "Please don't use five-dollar words when a 50-cent word will do. Use a 50-cent word, you know.

Risley: How did you balance the job with having a family?

Eshelman: It wasn't all that hard. I mean, I worked days. My kids were in school. We did homework together, or you know. My kids were, by the time I was working full time, my kids were probably middle school, so it worked out. It worked out.

Risley: Was the *Patriot-News* a good place for someone with a family?

Eshelman: Oh, yeah. They were terrific. I remember when my mom was very sick, and I called her — she had cancer — and I called her one day, and I was telling her, "I'm coming down after work," and all of a sudden, I could tell. The only way I could describe it was I knew the cancer was going to her brain. She wasn't making any sense. And I just jumped out of my chair, and I said, "There's something wrong with my mom. I'm outta here." And nobody cared. I don't want to mean that they didn't care. I mean they were like, "Go, go, go," and that was any time anything ever happened with my family it was always, go, go, go. Very, very supportive people. I remember one time my granddaughter lived with me, and she had a little guy, he was not quite 2 at the time, and she was going to take a shower, and she left the bathroom to get a towel or something, and he went in and shut the door and locked himself in the bathroom with the shower running. And they couldn't get in, and she called me at work, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, I'm outta here," and ran home. By the time I got there she had pried the back window open and had done the swan dive in the window and got him out of the bathroom.

Risley: That must have been scary.

Eshelman: Everybody was really good about that, you know.

Risley: What was it like writing columns about your son when he had cancer? Was that hard? Was it cathartic?

Eshelman: Therapeutic. It was so therapeutic for me. It was just very, very helpful to have to sit down and put the words on paper, and this is where we are now, and you know. It was tough, it was a tough time in my life, but I think writing the

columns really helped me. And people, aw, people were so nice. People I didn't know, cards and meals, and it's just unbelievable. So, and you know it's funny, because my son, now he was fine with me writing those columns. My dad was always fine with me writing about him. I remember when he was in the hospital, and I did that column about holding his hand, he had a breathing tube so he couldn't talk, but he had somebody hang the column on the wall in his room, and everybody that would come in, nurses, cleaning ladies, he'd grab them by the arm, and he'd point to it, then he'd point to himself, "That's me, you know, that's me!" He loved being in my column.

Risley: That's sweet.

Eshelman: My mom, not so much. You know, you kind of know who you can and who you can't.

Risley: You said there weren't any columns that you regret. Were there any times that you pulled any punches or you didn't speak out as forcefully as you could have or?

Eshelman: Hmmmm.

Risley: Or maybe wish you had done something differently?

Eshelman: I feel like maybe I could have written them better. I was really, really lucky. I had for many years, and this is an odd thing, but when I would write at the *Patriot*, I would tell them, "I want somebody to edit my column. I want somebody to tell me, "This could be better,"" but it always seemed to me that people were afraid to do that, like they thought it was my child and they were telling me it was ugly, you know, so it took me a long time, but they finally gave me this copy editor Doug Dohne. Wonderful, wonderful copy editor. And he would read my column, and he would call me over and he would say, "This is good but like this word here, is this what you really mean or do you mean this verb?" You know, or "You're using an 'is' verb, but is there a stronger verb you could (use)." He made me such a better writer. I mean, I just think that having a copy editor, I can't imagine people who don't want their things edited.

Risley: But it took several years for, to really find him?

Eshelman: Yeah, it took a long time because people would just say, "Yeah that's good. Let's print it." And I would say, "No, tell me what's bad about it! Help me with it. Help me make it better."

Risley: And he really improved your work.

Eshelman: He really did, and I find myself now, what I like to do is write a column, put it away for a while, and then come back and try and kinda look at it like he would. Is that the verb I really mean? I pay a lot of attention to verbs now, and I think that's because he emphasized that so much. He just was, he was a big help to me.

Risley: That's good to hear, that's good to hear.

Eshelman: Yeah, copy editors are among the most underrated people in the world, I think.

Risley: They are unsung heroes.

Eshelman: Yeah, yeah. Great people.

Risley: So what's the retirement been like? Have things changed in terms of writing a column for you?

Eshelman: I feel out of it. You know, you don't hear the scuttlebutt in the newsroom that maybe would lead you to want to write something. Um, so in that sense there's a disconnect, but on the other hand, I get out and about and I hear things from people and you know little snippets of this and that, and maybe that would be a good column, you know, so it's different.

Risley: Well, is there anything you'd like to add that we didn't discuss?

Eshelman: Hmm. Just that I hope that they'll keep having columns. I don't know that there's —

Risley: Newspapers?

Eshelman: Yeah. Well, I don't know, I hope they'll keep having newspapers. I'm not even sure about that.

Risley: Well, in their current form.

Eshelman: I was just talking to somebody this morning who shall remain nameless. An old-timer from the *Patriot-News*, someone who's actually still there but has been there a long time, and he said that to me. He said, "I still resent the fact that we don't have seven-days-a-week newspapers." I said, "Me too, you know."

Risley: So that brings up a good point. So what do you think is the purpose of a local columnist?

Eshelman: Well, to get people talking about things, I think. I mean I never, and I always used to say this to people, "I don't care if you don't agree with me, I want you to think about it. Think about something. Have an opinion." One of the things I noticed was, I'm sure not everybody has followed the saga of Harrisburg and its longtime mayor Steve Reed, who was the mayor here for 20-some years, and I mean he was the mayor the whole time I worked at the *Patriot*. And you know he kind of went down in flames with people filing charges against him and claiming he moved money and took things and did this and did that, and one of the things I noticed with the — and I'm not faulting them for it — the young reporters who were at the *Patriot*, this was all they knew. They came in and they heard that the

current mayor and the current city council and all, and you know the people who were prosecuting him saying, "He did this, and he did this, and he did this, and he did this," and you know, "We're charging him with all these things." I just had to stand my ground and say, "Whoa, wait a minute." And I wrote this column and said, "Look at what he did for Harrisburg." I wrote this column that said, "When I came to Harrisburg, you couldn't walk down Market Street without putting your head down because there was nothing but peep shops and X-rated movies and just horrible things. You know, he gave us the Whittaker Center, the university, City Island. He gave us a baseball team. He gave us a hotel. Without him, we would have none of these things. And before you go throwing stones at him, let's remember all of the good things he did." I got so many responses from people who said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," because people aren't just, they aren't thinking about that.

Risley: They're just thinking about the here and now?

Eshelman: Yeah, and there were some of the here and now ones who was, "Yeah, but he's a thief," and it turned out, you know, when he went to court it was all kind of like, you know, "We charged you with 175 charges, we're throwing them all out but 3," but, you know, so you know he got probation and whatever, so, but I just think it's so important for a newspaper to have that sort of voice of – I'm not saying reason – a continuity, a time, for people that have been there a long time and remember what happened back here. It's nice to have young people come in and work for a newspaper because they'll often see things that the rest of us didn't see because we're so used to them, but it's also somebody who has institutional memory, that's what I'm trying to think of. That, you know, it's good to have somebody with that voice from the past that kind of can look back and say, and I think in some ways I'm that. This week they asked me to write a column about the groundhog because 10 years ago they sent me to Punxsutawney, which was one of the worst experiences of my life. And so I wrote a column about "it's been 10 years and I'm never going there again," and I got an email from Phil the groundhog that said, "Don't make me come down there again." You know, all the young ones on the staff, they just love this groundhog and the fun and going up there, but I'm the grouchy old lady on staff so.

Risley: Somebody's got to do it.

Eshelman: Somebody's got to be the grouchy old lady.

Risley: That's funny. OK, well I think that's a good way to end.