

Helen Mountney Interview, May 2017

J: June

H: Helen

J: Hello, is this Helen?

H: Yes, it is. Is this June Hussey?

J: Yes, it is. Hello, Helen, how are you?

H: I'm fine thank you. Nice to talk with you. I've heard about you.

J: And I've just been reading all about you. It seems we have some things in common.

H: Oh yeah, like what?

J: Well, like our love of writing, for one thing.

H: Oh, I've always liked it. As I said in my typed bio that I did, it's one thing I seem to have always liked to do.

J: Yes, me too. Well, I look forward to chatting with you. Before we get started, I just wanted to go over a couple of things. The first thing, they may have told you this, but we are recording this conversation so that I can get an accurate transcript of our interview.

H: Ok, I did hear that yesterday.

J: Yes and so, I know that you are going to be talking about your life and it may get personal at certain points, so if you do say something that you don't want to appear in the transcript just say right then and there, "Oh, please don't include that part." And we will strike it from the record, ok?

H: I don't think I have many secrets.

J: Ok, that's what most people say but...

H: I don't like to flaunt stuff so, like my book, I don't flaunt that around here. I didn't come in to be like that.

J: Ok, well, the other thing, I just wanted to go over the purpose. They may have gone over this with you, too, but I get to interview residents of Woodbury Mews and other Watermark Communities all around the country. It is really, really gratifying work. I enjoy meeting all the different people and hearing their stories. Why we do this is because we like to share our residents' stories with other people out there who may have never set foot in a retirement community, may be just starting to think about, "Gee, what am I going to do in my future?" We find that by sharing our residents' stories and experiences, it kind of opens people's minds to the possibilities for themselves. I'm going to start by having you introduce yourself to the extent that you would like to, and then after that I will get into some specific questions about the move itself. I've read the things that you have sent and I hope that you will go into detail as you did in these written examples about your life because I think people will be really interested in hearing about where you are from and your background and all of that kind of stuff. Just because you sent it to me in writing don't assume, I'm not going to be able to put that into the interview unless you say it, ok?

H: Well, anything I have written on that bio I gave to the girls in the office here is fine for publication, except for, as I explained before, I don't flaunt my writing. I just do it and don't talk about it too much.

J: Ok, why don't we begin, I'll just invite you to introduce yourself and talk about the things you

do want people to know about you, where you're from, anything about your life that you would like to share, go ahead.

H: My name is Helen Mountney. I came from a small residential town; it's about five miles from Philadelphia that has an easy transportation system by rail. And I worked there a lot of years of my life. And went to school in Philadelphia for about a year and a half. And one of the first things I like to say is, I have two quotes that I like and I just saw one in print that I haven't seen but I've always liked it and one is kind of funny. I keep saying, "Just keep one foot in front of the other and keep moving," and the other one is more serious, "A hundred years from now, it won't matter what your bank account was, the sort of house you lived in or the kind of car you drove but the world may be a better place because you made a difference in someone's life." And that's how I've lived my adult life I think. I came from a family that backed scouting for both boys and girls. My husband and I lived that way, too. We were both active in Boy Scout and Girl Scout work and enjoyed it. Then I was a secretary most of my life, in law offices. One time, I spent 15 or 16 years in a big law office in Philadelphia and enjoyed it very much. I didn't have any idea of coming to a retirement community. I thought about it but it wasn't the thing I was going to do. I lived in the same house most of my life. My husband and I were married in 1954 and we came back and bought the family house from my mother who was then a widow in 1960. And I stayed there until June 2016 when I moved here and sold it in two days. I'm glad I did. The reason I sold was because it was a very expensive town in which to live for taxes and other purposes. And I had one income only. I had been a widow for almost nine years. And I got a card in the mail that somebody wanted to buy my house. I kind of put it aside like, I don't know why I'll keep it but I will, because I was a pack rat. I got an invitation to come to Woodbury Mews for lunch and find out what the place was like. Before the day was out, when I walked out the door here from the living room, I said to myself, "I can see you in here." And here I am.

J: Wow.

H: It's a cute story but it's true. I've told several people that. It was just my first impression and I thought I can live in this. And I can live happily and more easily than I could in a house that was beginning to need some very expensive repairs. Now, I don't have to think about that.

J: Right and you had lived in the home, well, it had been in your family for 87 years?

H: That's right, my parents moved in there in September of 1928 so that was almost 88 years. And I have no regrets. I shouldn't say that; I have a few regrets. I'm very contented here and I have an apartment on the third floor and basically I have a nice view. My living room is on a corner so I look two ways and unfortunately when leaves are on the trees now it sort of obscures the lower view and it's kind of interesting up here.

J: Well, take me back to before you got that card in the mail and before you got that offer on your house, you were living by yourself in that house?

H: Yes, my husband died on leap year day, February 29, 2008. So I had lived in there, it was pushing nine years, by myself.

J: You said you had thought about retirement communities but had kind of just put that in the back of your mind.

H: I used to jokingly say, "They're going to carry me out of this house in a six-foot box." But that didn't happen.

J: So what was going on in your mind and in your life that made you suddenly open to the

possibility of moving?

H: Well, finances number one, I guess. Because, as I said, the house was going to need some major repairs. Frankly, I didn't have the background or finances to take care of big repairs and it could stand some upgrading. But now I don't have to worry about that. I have a loft in my apartment, I brought an awful lot of things here that probably nobody else would but I'm going through them because I didn't have time last year to go through everything. I moved quickly. This apartment was getting ready and they weren't going to hold it. They gave me a date they would hold it and that was it. We took care of that.

J: So did you look at any other retirement communities besides Woodbury Mews before you made up your mind?

H: I went to one about two weeks before. By the way I did all my thinking and preplanning by myself. I didn't tell a friend or a member of the family I was thinking about this. That was in February of last year. And I went to one other because I had some acquaintances that lived there and I just did not like their way of living. First of all, here I get three meals a day seven days a week. And at that one, you still had to cook your own meals, eat by yourself, go to the store to begin with to buy your food. You had to use their bus service I guess and go where they would take you. And I still have my car here now. Now, I don't have to go to the grocery store and buy my big groceries. The joke is, when you go to the grocery store, you come out with ice cream for your freezer, cookies and junk food. I get up early so I go to breakfast here. A lot of people I know don't go to breakfast. They get up late and eat something in their apartment. I knew of some others, some of their finances and their ways of living. This one seemed to be better for me than the others.

J: And you mentioned that you made the decision by yourself on purpose. Is that just kind of the way you are or was there a reason you didn't involve your kids or anything?

H: I didn't want them to sway me, yes or no. It was a big decision to make so I put a day on it, last March. Easter was the last Sunday. And I said after Easter dinner, I'm going to take my papers and tell them. And they were shocked, happy. And one of them works for a company very close to here that is a uniform company and they order the uniforms for the dining room and anybody else that wears a uniform here from that company. And she said, "Oh, I know of that company. I know the people that come in to pick up the orders for their uniforms." She said, "That always sounded like a nice place." And it's only about eight or ten miles from where my son and his wife live.

J: That's nice.

H: And that day my son said, "What do you want me to do?" I said, "Why don't you make an appointment with the office here, with Jean," because that was the girl I had been dealing with, and I said, "Make an appointment and get a tour here." And I said, "If you want me to go, yes, I'll go, if you want me to stay home, I'll stay home. I've been through it a couple times." So they made an appointment after work and they came through here and they called me and they said, "You made a good decision." And I said, "Well what does my daughter-in-law say?" "She's ready to move in."

J: We hear that a lot. Good.

H: When they hear the things we have for our benefits, three meals a day and housekeeping comes in once a week, it's very nice.

J: Yes, it is.

H: And that was my decision and from there we moved.

J: Good. So you had sort of made up your mind you wanted to do it regardless of what they thought but it must have been a nice relief to know that they were supportive.

H: Oh yes.

J: Good.

H: (Omitted).

J: So what are some of the similarities in your life now, to before you moved and what are some of the differences? Just kind of do a compare and contrast, before and after your move.

H: Well, I still am independent. I drive my car, which is parked out back. I can go to the bank or go to the store and pick up things I might need at Walmart or the hardware store or the Dollar Store or a grocery store. I don't go that often because my needs aren't that great now. I've been here 10 months and I've kind of gotten caught up with the little things I might need that are different from what I had before. From living up there, I had to worry about bills for the water and sewer or dealing with anything like that. And the oil company for my heat. You people in Arizona probably don't realize that. Make sure I had oil in the tank throughout the winter; I don't have to do that. And if the plumbing doesn't work, I just call maintenance here and in not too long somebody will appear at the door. It's a comfortable feeling.

J: Yes, I can imagine.

H: If I had problems in the house, I had to take care of them or call somebody to take care of them and pay the bill.

J: Right.

H: I don't have a property tax bill and I don't have a security system of my own to pay for. It all comes together at the first of the month. It's a nice feeling.

J: Yes, and a little simpler.

H: Everything else, I get my mail six days a week. It's nice, I can do what I want to do. I have certain things I'm trying to do with the money that I do have and I'm able to do that with care and adjusting a little bit here and there.

J: What have you replaced all those worries with, how do you spend a typical day there?

H: I have written a few articles for the quarterly here. And I've done that and I have some friends from there that I still keep up with, from where I lived before. My home is about nine miles from here. It's a straight run. Unfortunately, it's all 25 miles an hour and it's monitored very carefully. It's not a fast ride but it's an easy right to get here and anywhere else too. I keep up with them, some of them, for lunch or breakfast. So, I can keep my former acquaintances and friends and get out. Not that I do it every week but I don't want to lose them. I still go through a lot of papers and stuff. It's really just stuff that came in the move and I'm going through that slowly and carefully and putting some of it in a grinding up machine, throwing out a lot. I have a fairly large family and I keep up with them on the phone.

J: I think I read in some of your materials that you probably could have taken five years to go through all the stuff in the house and decide what to do and you had to do it rather quickly.

H: I have a good friend that's a lot younger than I and she came over frequently and helped me. I mean frequently. One day we had a wall to ceiling bookcase that was four feet wide and one day she walked in with a bunch of boxes at 8 o'clock in the morning. And she just yelled for me and she came in the door and said, "Well, today's the book case day." Let's get started. But my husband and I were savers of everything imaginable and my parents were savers to a point. My

father was very methodical. But, the stuff came here because it was easier when my family came to pack it than to go through it page by page or whatever. I have done a good job of getting rid of stuff as I go through it.

J: Right.

H: I'm fine to work on it as diligently as I can. So it could have taken five years if I'd have done it. Back to this book, it was 6 1/2 years to put that book together, from start to finish. I didn't really do anything extra at the house. I managed keeping the yard up with help to cut the grass and stuff and I certainly didn't clean out the garage or the small barn, or the attic, basement. It would have taken several years to go through them bit by bit and do what I should've done with it.

J: So this book, just for the benefit of the folks that are in the audience that may be reading this, so after your husband died in 2008, you started to volunteer at the historical society.

H: That's correct, Haddonfield.

J: So tell us how, it sounds like you kind of poured yourself into that kind of volunteer work and then you got interested. You tell us what the subjects were you are writing about?

H: I had gone to the historical society to do research on genealogy to see what they had, other than the fact that it was a town historical society, they had some books about state history going way back into the 1700s. And I was in there and got into a discussion with two very active volunteers about houses and buildings in our town that had been literally moved from one point to another. And this is from way back and one of the women said to me, "That would be a good job to write up once in a while and get into our library. Quarterly you could put some articles in there about the houses." We knew about at least 10 to 15. I said, "Yeah, that would be good, not right now. I don't have time." And I came home and brought my papers and some thoughts and put them away. This was several years later, when my husband died, I came in the house a few days later, I was by myself and I said, "Now, Helen what are you going to do with yourself? You're not going to clean that attic and clean that basement every day. You've got to get out of this house and do some things to keep your mind going." Then I thought, "I wonder where that stuff is from the historical society?" So I went upstairs and in ten minutes I found it. And about two weeks later, I found myself two days a week at the Historical Society of Haddonfield in the library. So then my time was spent in researching and writing about these houses one at a time. There wasn't too much written about these houses. You had to sort of hunt and peck through what research material they had and people that knew something about it or heard about a house or heard about a building or a church that had been moved. So, one by one, we filtered through this stuff and the articles were coming out once a quarter. And they ended up 28 articles. But before I got too far into it, maybe two or three years, somebody said, "You better keep these together carefully somehow in that library because they shouldn't be separated." I kept that in the back of my head in figuring out what I could do, just a big file or a big staple for something like that, or a brass paper fastener. And then somebody said, "You really ought to write a book." About four years into this, or four and a half, I approached the woman that was the head librarian; she was a volunteer and had been there for years. She's still there. I said to her, "What about a book, could that be possible?" And she said, "We will think about it and talk about it and I'll take it to the board," the board of directors and she did and they said, "Yes, that did sound like a very good idea to put a book together." And I said to this volunteer, whose name is Kathy, "What kind of finances do they have, are they going to

need money?" And she said, "Well, let me talk to them because they have had some books done before." And they came back to me that they had enough in their revolving account for books. And they thought they had enough to do this book. I kept researching to finish writing these articles because, once a quarter, a quarter comes around fast, is the deadline because you don't go to the day it is mailed, you go to the day the editor says, "I need it," which is usually about 10 or 12 days before the quarterly came out in the mail. And we started putting things together and we pulled out the old printed ones already and corrected a few, edited them, added on, subtracted a few things that we weren't sure about, put some things together, retitled them, made some better titles for the chapters. The historical society was 100 years old in the fall of 2014. So we decided it would be great to have that as our goal. So the book signing was in '14. But the historical society closed down for the month of August. I think Kathy and I worked most of August redoing, updating, moving pictures because there's 123 pictures in the book. The book is now 210 pages long.

J: My gosh.

H: With some maps of the town showing where houses were and where they are now, where they had been, some of them are gone. One house was moved twice. Two houses, one came together and they were like mirrored twins and they came from different ends of town and now they stand side-by-side and look like they've been there forever.

J: Cool.

H: It's amazing what we found. Not much was ever said about the families. An old family in Philadelphia named Elfreth, there's an Elfreth's Alley, it's a very famous historical little one block street, it's a very narrow street. One car can get down there if you're careful, there's not much sidewalk and then row homes all the way down. There's a lot we found about the Elfreth Family and what they owned in Haddonfield. So it was an interesting project. I enjoyed every minute of it. I met a lot of people, found out a lot of information from friends and families and digging around, studying the architecture of houses and how they were built, looking to see how the heck they could've moved such large enormous homes. One was brick and they moved it I don't how many feet, at least the length of a football field, and in the move they turned them slightly to get them into place. It's amazing how they could do this with horses and mules, and logs were used for rollers. I mean, now they do it on hydraulic lifts and it's like a 10-minute job. After they get it set, they just run it down the street. There was a lot to do to get the book together and then they sent it to a young girl that does the publishing for you and out it came.

J: Well.

H: It was just 6 1/2 years but for me it was a wonderful feeling that it was done but it left a void in my life because I had no more research there to do. Anyhow, it's over. I always thought that when it got to the point that we were finished finding houses that had been moved that, as soon as the book went to publishing, to the publisher, we would find more. Well, the book has been published over two and half years ago and I'm proud to say no one there has found any more buildings that have been moved. I talked to the woman, Kathy the other day and I said, "Do you realize it's been two and half years and nobody has found another item?" And she said, "Well, I guess you've cleaned them all up." And it was a fun thing to do. It really was a wonderful experience for a single person.

J: It sounds like it.

H: I didn't have any responsibility for any other person directly in my house. If my dinner was a

half an hour late or my lunch was at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, so what? So it was good for a single person. I was able to make things for the family, birthdays and holidays and whatever I did with the three families I have, my three children and grandchildren.

J: And then you mentioned, when you moved to Woodbury Mews, you were interested to learn about the history of that building. I'm not aware.

H: I haven't done all that. This is an old factory building and the part that I'm living in is part of the old building. My windows are like two yards high, at least. My windowsills in the four windows are 16 inches deep. That's how thick the walls are.

J: Wow.

H: Yes, this was a, I have the information but I haven't studied it and written up an article for our newsletter as yet. It was a piano, suitcase and trunk factory in one end of it. Then it started around 1875. About 100 years later there was a fire and what was left they have used as the base of this building and then added onto it for the new part. I'm in the old part. My living room is on a corner. That's the beginning of the, it's set back, the new part of the building which is much, much bigger than the old.

J: Tell me about your apartment beyond what you've mentioned. I know you don't cook your own meals but do you have a kitchen?

H: Yes, I have a little kitchenette. It's a large corner really, off the living room. It has a full stove, and it has cabinets and drawers, an oven, refrigerator, as I said upper cabinets and one under the kitchen counter. I thought I might do some cooking but I just don't seem to have time to be bothered right now. Maybe I will.

J: It's nice to have the option I guess.

H: Yes it is. I brought some pans and some dishes and things I would need to cook with and staples. It's so much more sociable to go down and eat a meal with your fellow residents here.

J: Now, let's talk about that for a second, because you were living by yourself for many years and presumably eating by yourself a lot of the time.

H: I was.

J: Was that a big adjustment to you, to be eating with other people all the time?

H: It's so much nicer to be eating meals every day with people and not watching television. In the morning, I always read the Philadelphia paper but now I usually have someone to eat with for breakfast. I'm an early bird and I am there when the breakfast door opens at 7:30 because I like the morning hours of the day. And then at lunch time we are not assigned to a table that we have to come to every day. We rotate tables around. You go down and tell them how many you want for a table and, if you and a friend are going to dinner, they try match you up with two other people at the table or one other. The tables are for four mostly. There's a couple for six. And this is a way you socialize and meet your fellow residents. And I've been able to meet quite a few.

J: And you didn't know anybody when you first moved in?

H: No, I didn't know anybody by name. I have seen one female who is not too well. In conversation with her, I found she is a year behind me in high school but I haven't gotten to know her because she's not well enough to do that. I found one gentleman here that, actually two, that I know of but I didn't know them before. And that doesn't make any difference but it was funny to match people up. It's so nice and you never eat at the same table, I don't, the same crowd. I do meet one girl two or three days a week for the evening meal but that's not a

steady thing. But it's nice to be able to socialize. I don't miss the eating alone. I do not enjoy that at all.

J: Is there anything you would advise people about their own journey, to explore their own futures? If someone has never set foot in a retirement community, would you recommend they go around and take a look?

H: Here or anywhere?

J: Anywhere.

H: I suggest they look at a place and think about, are they alone, are they eating alone every day, do they enjoy that or do they like to have company? Do they want to cook the rest of their life or would they rather have the opportunity to have sociability at the meals? I hadn't really even looked at retirement homes, but when I heard the basic things that went on here, I really liked it. And I have been able to make friends easily here. I had a goal when I came, to learn everyone's name in six months. I didn't make that goal. I guess there's about 150 residents and some don't come to all the meals. They eat in their rooms, eat in their apartments. But that is their privilege; the meals are there whether you eat them or not and you can go as you please. This is a very friendly atmosphere. And I'm really surprised at this, how friendly even the employees are here with us, the residents. They speak when you pass them in the hallways or doing things, they're friendly even though they are on a different level. They just are friendly people. They speak to you whether you want them to or not. I'm talking not just the office staff, the receptionist, but the waiters and waitresses are very friendly, even the maintenance men. What else do we have here?

J: Housekeepers.

H: The housekeepers, they're friendly. They eat at a separate area for their lunch. If you go by, they speak to you and say, "Good morning" or "Good afternoon" or whatever it is. And "How are you?" or whatever. I've had cataracts removed in January and I've had some problems thereafter but they're almost over. But they knew for a couple months I was waiting for an appointment on May 1. I don't know how many people Monday afternoon said to me, "This is May 1, did you have your appointment with your eyes?" They remembered.

J: Wow.

H: "And how did you make out?" And this was waiters, waitresses. I mean it was unbelievable to me how many people remembered.

J: Yeah.

H: On my personal thing.

J: Well, it sounds like you're describing a community where people care about one another.

H: Well, they do. I don't have too many negatives about the place. One thing I like, I've never heard bad language here. What goes on privately in little groups or something I don't know but in the open I've never heard anything. It surprises me.

J: It's refreshing in this day and age, isn't it?

H: It's certainly refreshing to me that it's like that in a mix of men and women here.

J: Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you think would be important for people to know when thinking about their own futures?

H: Well, think about the three meals a day here and the housekeeping. That's important because the housekeeping here, they will come in and change your bed and do the bed and the linens and your towels, wash them and bring them back all folded up, the clean ones. And they

do the bathroom floors, the kitchen, anything that is not carpeted is washed up quickly and the vacuum cleaner is run. They don't dust all your bric-a-brac and stuff like that. But boy, that is a big item, those things I think. It's a big item. I don't have too many negatives about this. I have a few things I wish they would improve and one is communication between the office and the residents. It's hard to get to know sometimes. We have new people working in activities and we are just hoping that maybe the communication, when meetings have been changed or activities have been changed and we would get to know things. We've had a change of staff. Now, do you know Alan that had retired? I don't know his name. He was from the staff. He lives in Florida.

J: Oh, Allan B.?

H: I guess, not real tall, very nice, friendly, do you know him? Is he still working at all for your company or is he still in retirement?

J: I'm not sure about that.

H: He was here for four months, he did a lot for us. He lived up on this floor where I live. It's up a little bit higher than the regular third floor and he would know about this building, the old part of the building. There aren't that many apartments in the old building

J: It sounds like you picked a nice one.

H: Yeah, I did. That's why I moved in a hurry. I had to move in a hurry or I would have lost it. I couldn't afford to pay the rent here and live at home. I didn't have that.

J: Well, I hope that when people hear your story and come to say hello to you that they will take a look around and maybe be pleasantly surprised, like you were.

H: I am pleasantly surprised. You can do what you want, when you want and if you want, here. They will say, "Oh, you missed this thing," or something and I think well I missed it, I'll make another one. I don't care if I go out. And you can come and go as you please. There is a bus service and it does some things you can do. I have not used it. I have not gone to anything where I couldn't drive. So I think I've covered some of the things I have listed here that I thought about.

J: Good, well, I think we've been through all of my questions as well, unless you have anything else you'd like to add that you think people should know.

H: No, I think I've covered the waterfront here.

J: Ok.

H: If you have any more questions or whatever, I'm not secretive about my life. I just don't like to flaunt it, that's all. I was lucky and I fell overboard and came up dusty with doing that book is how I feel about it. They have it here in the office. It's not in the library. It's a history book about Haddonfield really. I have a friend that wants to see it and I told them that I would drive them around and show them where the house came from and where it moved to and it will make more sense. One house they cut in half and moved both halves and made them houses.

J: Wow.

H: Was kind of interesting to put all these pieces together.

J: It sounds like a fascinating subject.

H: Well, it was to me but see to somebody else who's not inquisitive. I was just inquisitive and nosy, I guess. It was fascinating.

J: Well, someday I'd like to write a book. I don't know what about but maybe a subject will fall in my lap.

H: If you have help to work on it. I didn't have to worry about the publishing. I just had to worry

about getting the information and they had pictures in our historical library. Day after day pulling out pictures and getting them in order and writing the captions and things underneath.

J: It sounds like fun

H: Well, I thank you for the time. I hope I've been helpful to you.

J: It's been really lovely talking with you, Helen. And getting to know you a little bit.

H: If you have any other questions, you know you can give me a call.

J: Ok, sounds great, thanks again, you enjoy the rest of your day there.

H: Thank you for this opportunity. I've enjoyed talking with you and answering your questions.

J: Thank you very much, we appreciate it. Alright, bye now.

H: Bye-bye.