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EDITED ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

KENT S. SLAYTON
INTERVIEWED BY JENNIFER ROSS-NAZZAL
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ROSS-NAZZAL: Today is October 16th, 2020. This interview with Kent Slayton is being conducted over Microsoft Teams for the JSC Oral History Project in Houston, Texas. The interviewer is Jennifer Ross-Nazzal, assisted by Sandra Johnson. Thanks again for taking some time to talk with us today. We certainly appreciate it. I wanted to start by asking you some basic biographical information about your mother. Where was she born and what was her maiden name?

SLAYTON: She was born in Toronto, Canada. Her maiden name was Lunney. [Her] mom and dad were Irish, and they were immigrating from Ireland. They were waiting five years, I think, in Canada, waiting for the green light to join, I think it was her paternal grandmother in California. So she was born there [in Canada]. I think she was like three or four years old when [they] finally immigrated into America.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did they move directly to California at that point?

SLAYTON: Yes, California at that point, yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: When was she born, what year?

SLAYTON: She was born in 1921.

ROSS-NAZZAL: So her family would have been affected by the Great Depression. Do you know any impact that her family experienced as a result of that?

SLAYTON: Yes. It's real interesting, because they grew up fairly poor and lived in the city, and of course at that time nobody knew they were poor. It was just what life was. Mom told me that her chewing gum was the asphalt that would bubble up on the streets. They would peel these chewy bubbles up and chew on that. You saved everything: string, rubber bands, foil; everything was saved. It was interesting, because after she passed away and I was going through a lot of her drawers, I found these little balls of string and rubber bands. I don't know whether that was just a habit, I don't know whether she kept them there just to remind herself that life can be hard and don't forget where you came from. But yes, that was a very hard time, for everybody.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Absolutely.

SLAYTON: I know that my grandmother for a time had to go to work, and they were on what they called the dole, which I guess was welfare, for a time. She would have to go down to the food bank and get I guess groceries for the family. She would never let any of the kids go with her because there was a lot of shame around that. She would go and bring the groceries back. It was a hard time for the whole family.

I think my grandmother for a time was even what they called a cigarette girl. In the old days, when there was restaurants or bars or clubs, the women had this big tray in front of you, and it was sort of strapped to your back. You would walk around, and you would sell cigarettes table to table. That was one of the things that my grandmother did to make ends meet. So yes, it was a difficult time.

But I think that whole generation, it made them all so resilient. Nobody ever took anything for granted moving forward out of that Depression.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did your mom have to work as a result of the Great Depression? Was she expected to do some outside labor?

SLAYTON: Yes, she did. Typical young girl stuff, babysitting. She worked as a nanny for a long time for a family, and that was her main job, which was a pretty cool thing evidently, because they did a lot of camping. Her job was to take care of the two kids. So she did a lot of camping in I guess it was Yosemite [National Park] and all around California, all around the western seaboard. I think she worked also as a secretary, because that's what she then segued into, right after the war.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What did your mom tell you about the steps leading up to the war, Pearl Harbor, and why she decided to join the Air Force?

SLAYTON: She actually was civil service. What happened, and I think the only reason she joined the civil service, was she had gotten married to a pilot, and he had troubles. Evidently he was a

chronic liar, and he would come home in tears. He would say, "Oh my God, we lost John today," and a lot of tears, and a lot of drama. Mom would get together with the other wives, and she'd say, "Isn't it terrible about John?"

And they would go, "What?"

"Well, John went down yesterday; he's dead."

And they went, "No, he didn't. I just talked to him a few minutes ago."

So this guy had some issues, and this just went on and on and on. She loved him terribly, and like a lot of relationships, it would break up and get back and break up and get back. What she told me was the only way she knew she could break off with him was to go to the other side of the planet, which happened to be occupied Japan.

She worked for General [William Arthur] Beiderlinden in Tokyo as a secretary for about four years right after the war. She had no idea [how bad things were], she'd heard horror stories. Of course can you imagine with how horrible World War II was, going to Japan right on the heels of everything? So she expected terrible things; she expected violence. She said the people were nothing but beautiful and gracious. She loved them. She wanted actually to adopt a Japanese child, but the military wouldn't let her do that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Where was she stationed, what base?

SLAYTON: It wasn't a base. If I remember correctly she stayed at what they called the Old Hokkaido Hotel, and the general worked somewhere [else]. When she walked from the hotel to wherever the general was working, she would walk by the Imperial Palace every morning. I don't think it was an actual base. It sounded like they were barracked in the community.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did your mom share with you at all what sort of responsibilities she had? She was a secretary, but what did that involve? Did she give you any indication?

SLAYTON: I really don't know a whole lot past that. I know that she was a secretary, and her job was to type and send messages. She loved it. She loved her job. She loved Tokyo. She loved Japan. Matter of fact, she loved it so much that she said, "When I pass away I want you to put my ashes on Mount Fuji."

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you actually end up doing that?

SLAYTON: No, for two reasons. One is because they've outlawed that. Evidently it's a very popular thing, and I guess there's lots of ashes all over Mount Fuji, so the Japanese government has banned it. Also too, it was just a weird thing. The last time in the hospital, when she was sick, I said, "You still want to do that?"

She said, "I don't know, Japan seems so far away." Which I thought was kind of a weird thing to say. Her ashes far away from the family I guess didn't sound as much fun as it did in her earlier years.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Right, she probably wanted to be closer to you than all the way over in Japan.

SLAYTON: Yes, it was interesting. As far as her time in Japan I don't really know much about her work other than that. She had a roommate she loved dearly, Lolly, and I heard briefly from

her after *Astronaut Wives* [*Club*] came out. I know she traveled a lot. She and Lolly would hop in a jeep and go driving around and get lost out in the middle of the country. I remember once they stumbled into a Japanese village. They were surrounded by these Japanese civilians, and they were scared, they didn't know what was going to happen. They'd never seen a white person, much less a white woman, before. She said they were just so gracious. They made them a meal of rice. She knew that it was just an exorbitant meal for this village, as poor as they were. They poured them tea, and they treated them like dignitaries. She said it was just really an incredible experience. I heard more those kinds of stories than about the work itself.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did your mom learn any Japanese while she was over there?

SLAYTON: She did, she did. Not a whole lot. I remember growing up and hearing little bits and pieces of it but not enough to really fully remember. I know that our golden retriever, who loved water, she named Mizu, because mizu is water in Japanese. So that carried over.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I understand then your mom was transferred to Germany after a time. Why did she move from Japan to Germany?

SLAYTON: I guess her four years were up in Japan, and I guess that's just where they reassigned her, because she then signed up for another four years' civil service, and that's where they sent her. I think Ramstein [Air Base], because that's where she met dad.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did she continue to work for the same general? Or was she working for someone else?

SLAYTON: No, it was a complete different organization at that point. It was still Air Force, but it was inspector general or somebody like that who was her boss was at that time.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What did she think of living in Germany compared to Japan? I imagine it was such a different culture.

SLAYTON: Yes, very different. At that time they were on the base. They were not living I guess on the economy as they say. She was on a base in Germany. I don't know if Germany was a little bit more of a dicey place for Americans to be running around in the streets. I don't know. I never heard anything about that. I know they traveled a lot. Mom loved to travel. She did a whole lot of traveling around Europe as best she could with her girlfriends. Then when she and dad started dating, they would travel.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Can you tell us how your folks met?

SLAYTON: Yes. It was a volleyball game. I guess it was just a game amongst employees and pilots at the Air Force base. She broke her wrist, and dad literally carried her to the infirmary. They set her wrist. I guess it was a couple weeks later, as I remember the story, they found her doctor in his room painting himself with iodine and shooting holes in the ceiling. I'm guessing it was some form of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], I don't know. He was replaced by

another doctor who examined her arm and said, "We're going to have to rebreak and reset your arm. He completely messed this up." So it was a very long healing process, and being a secretary, a broken wrist was a real impediment. Dad just hung around and stayed in touch with her throughout that whole time, and that's when they started dating.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What did your mom think of your dad in the beginning? Did she share any of those stories with you?

SLAYTON: Yes, she really liked him. We always compare relationships to old relationships, and being that her first husband was an incongruent guy, she would say dad was just so honest, and he was so honorable. He was straight up; he was who he was. She said there was no pretense about him. He was just a very natural guy. He was a farm boy. She just liked him, liked his integrity, and said he was a very gentle man. She trusted him.

ROSS-NAZZAL: How long did they date before they decided to get married?

SLAYTON: That's a good question. I don't think very long. I want to say maybe a year. Part of the dynamic at that time was officers were encouraged to get married. Back then the military wanted their officers to be married and to have families. I guess they wanted them to be stable. So there was a lot of pressure to get married. Also too, you had a two-to-four-year tour of duty, so you're gone. A lot of times it's like if we like each other and we love each other and we're going to do this, we probably need to do it fairly soon. So I want to say probably a year.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What do you know about the wedding or the proposal? Proposals today are over-the-top. Did your mother share any of those details with you?

SLAYTON: The proposal I think was, knowing dad, probably fairly understated. I just have vague memories of mom, again dad was not a flashy guy, he was not a real super emotional guy. So my guess is the proposal, I got the sense, was fairly understated. I don't know where it was. I don't know how that all went.

What I do know is that they were the last American couple married in Germany by a Burgermeister. I guess Burgermeisters were like the town mayor, and apparently they outlawed that shortly after their marriage. They were the very last ones.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's interesting. I don't know if you remember this cartoon that came out. I think it was in the '60s. Was it *A Year Without a Santa Claus*? They talked about the Burgermeisters. I thought that was a made-up thing.

SLAYTON: Oh, right the Burgermeister Meisterburger.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Right, yes. They outlawed toys.

SLAYTON: Yes, that was a real thing, and I guess a carryover from the old medieval days. That's who typically married you when you got married in Germany. At least that was the civil part. There was always religious ceremonies. I know they got married legally by the Burgermeister,

and then they had a religious ceremony afterwards, like maybe a week later, I don't know exactly.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was it a large wedding, or was it just attended by a few friends?

SLAYTON: It was a few friends; it wasn't a very big wedding. I think I still even have mom's wedding dress in a locker somewhere. I was digging through stuff for today. It wasn't the big white wedding. It wasn't all that. It was just a fairly colorful blue and green dress as I remember it. Just their friends, her secretary pals and dad's pilot guys. Don't know how many people, but it wasn't big. It wasn't big.

ROSS-NAZZAL: How much longer did they stay in Germany until they returned to the States?

SLAYTON: I don't think it was very long, because dad was then transferred. I was born at Edwards [Air Force Base, California]. That's right, [he] got transferred to Edwards. They were in Edwards for two years, I believe, and then transferred to Langley [Research Center, Hampton Virginia]. Think there for about two or three years, and then we moved to Houston, because I was about four then.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You moved around quite a bit.

SLAYTON: Yes. Once we moved to Houston, we were there, that was it, that was the end of the travel, which was nice. For a lot of Air Force families that goes on and on and on. It was nice that they got to plant some roots.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What did your mom tell you about living at Edwards Air Force Base?

SLAYTON: Again, not a whole lot. It's out in the middle of the desert. Pretty austere living. Not a lot of stories about Edwards. I don't think they were there that long. I know I was born there. Dad took me there once. It's pretty flat, pretty desert. Not a lot there.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It's pretty remote.

SLAYTON: Yes. The only story I remember about Edwards was dad told me they had to heat the swimming pools. It could be 120 degrees outside, but because it was so dry, and [with] the evaporative effect, the swimming pools were too cold to swim in so they actually had to heat them, which I thought was interesting. That's the extent of my knowledge of life in Edwards.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I found some quotes from your mom that I wanted to ask you about. She said she had never been nervous about "Don's flying." I was curious if you could elaborate more on that.

SLAYTON: Yes. It's interesting because she loved to fly until I was born, and then I guess some kind of mom switch went off in her brain, and she hated flying. She said it was just the weirdest

thing, she went from loving it to just being terrified of it. She was one of those three-martini-before-you-get-on-the-plane people. It was bad. I remember as a kid just seeing her sit there. She was literally white-knuckle, but when she flew with dad there was no problem.

Dad's skills as a pilot were incredible, and I think she knew that. She had seen how good a pilot he was. She never felt nervous with dad.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did your dad have a plane that he would fly her around in? His own personal plane?

SLAYTON: I don't think so, and I'm not sure what the circumstances were that she would fly with him. What I remember was flying with Alan [B.] Shepard and Louise Shepard and mom in a small plane. I'm guessing it was a NASA plane. I don't know whose plane it was, but I remember I was the copilot. What I remember about that is we went through a horrible storm that stripped all the paint off the plane. I guess I fell asleep. I had my hand in his briefcase, and he's trying to get his papers out. My hand is there. I guess I slept through it, and then I woke up as we were coming out of the storm. There was this giant full Moon. I went, "Mom, look." I guess she thought we were going into a mountain or something, I don't know, it just scared her to death. But I don't know, it's a good question.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I was curious about that, since you mentioned that.

SLAYTON: It wasn't uncommon whenever they would fly somewhere, a lot of times the pilots of the planes would say, "Hey, do you want to fly?"

Dad would say, "Sure." He'd never pass up an opportunity to fly, probably not on the big commercial flights. I'm sure that was pretty illegal, but probably on some of the smaller NASA flights, 20 or 30 people, is when she would experience that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: There was another quote that I just thought was interesting. It was also in *Life* magazine. I was flipping through those. She said, "I'm disgusted with the Hollywood version of a test pilot's wife struggling to keep her tears out of the dishwater." I'm curious if you could elaborate on that as well. Is that something that she spoke with you about?

SLAYTON: It's funny, I've never heard that quote before. A lot of these guys were fighter pilots, bomber pilots, and test pilots. Stuff happened all the time. Even during the NASA era, it wasn't uncommon for a young astronaut to be taking off, flying from NASA to Florida, and a goose would go through the windshield, and that would be it. Losing pilots was a common thing even in the civilian world. I think it was just understood. It's just what the community did. There weren't tears. There wasn't worry. You trusted your men to do the right thing. You trusted the ground crew to take care of the planes.

I know NASA was a little bit different because spaceflight was so unique. That's I think why the women would gather during the space launches; whoever was flying, everybody would be over at their house. I know there was some nervousness with that because obviously sending a man into space was completely new at that time.

But no, not tears. They were just super resilient women. I remember that about Jo Schirra and Mrs. [Betty] Grissom. They were some seriously resilient women. I remember as a kid we hung out with all these families, and we did not misbehave. These were military wives,

and they expected a lot of us kids, and we behaved well because of that. It didn't matter whose house we went over to. We knew what we were expected to do. Long answer to your short question.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It's good information. We haven't had a chance, and won't ever have a chance, to talk to those women.

SLAYTON: Yes. Just a complete little side story. Rene Carpenter was a lot of fun. She was just this funny fun woman. What I remember about her was during the summers we would all go to Florida for the launches. We all stayed at Henri Landwirth's Holiday Inn hotel. We would all spend the day in the swimming pool. Periodically we would all swim over to the side and if Rene was there we'd say, "Do the witch's laugh; do the witch's laugh." She would do this cackle that would just send us squealing and then we'd go off and swim. It's like when people ask Carol Burnett to do her Tarzan yell. It's that kind of thing. I don't know if anybody's ever told that story about Rene. But they were all amazing women. They were incredible.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What did your mother think when your dad was named as one of the first seven astronauts?

SLAYTON: Don't guess we really talked a whole lot about it. I think it was just mind-blowing. Nobody knew what it meant. The space program was a complete new thing. Mom was used to Dad flying new things. That was his job. Every time there was a new plane, his job was to fly it. This was like a new kind of a plane. I don't think anybody quite understood what that meant.

Knew that it was a big deal, knew that it was into space. Certainly pilots like Chuck [Charles E.] Yeager and people like that had kissed the envelope before, but nobody had crossed over.

It was very exciting. I think he was picked the day after my second birthday. I don't remember that time, unfortunately. Just know that it was just a whirlwind, and lots of press, and lots of hoopla, which was very uncomfortable. Mom and dad rose to the occasion, but they were never comfortable with all that. That just wasn't who they were.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I've seen pictures of you. As I'm looking through these pictures, it looks like you're wearing diapers, and they're in the house out at Edwards. I wondered, "What did she think about it?" She looked very happy. She's chatting on the phone and playing with you. But I thought, "Wow, can you imagine that." I was wondering what you thought of it now, seeing those images now on the Web. People can go out there and see you wearing a diaper.

SLAYTON: Yes, and unfortunately I don't remember a whole lot of that. I look at these pictures. I have some vague memories in Virginia. I remember snow. I got dad's gene for pushing the envelope. Evidently I climbed everything. At two years old I evidently climbed to the top of a crane. They were dredging the creek behind our house, and there was one of those big cranes with the bucket they drop down. They couldn't find me one morning. I'd gone over the fence, and I was sitting at the very top of the crane. It was a real problem, because everywhere we would go, if they didn't watch me, I was at the top of whatever was the nearest tree.

I'm just now putting pieces together. My aunt told me that my dad was such a wanderer and adventurer that his parents had to literally tie him to a tree while they were doing farm work,

not strap him to the tree, but they would tie a rope around his waist and then they would tie the length to the tree. Because they would turn around, and he'd be gone.

I guess I got that, and it really worried them. One day, and I remember this, we stopped off. Dad put me at the bottom of an oak tree. I went straight up to the top of the oak tree. Then he coaxed me out on a limb that was rotten, and the limb broke. I fell, and he caught me. I remember mom being mad as a hornet. I remember she was really upset with him for that. But he was trying to teach me a lesson. You can't be two years old crawling up trees. I remember, and the lesson worked, because I'm still afraid of heights. It worked. I probably didn't go into flying because I think that tempered me a bit. That's all I remember about those days.

I remember Virginia was beautiful. I remember as a kid looking out over the rolling hills and the oak trees. I remember as a child just going, "This is beautiful." But the whole NASA stuff, that was grown-up stuff. That was just so far off my radar, unfortunately.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did your mom share any of those memories of those early days and the *Life* contract and all of the press coming to the house and your dad being one of the first? Is that anything she ever shared?

SLAYTON: Yes, and I do remember a fair amount of that. I know that the *Life* contract was sort of an attempt I guess to have a filter. I don't know if that's the right word. But instead of having dozens and dozens of press coming over all the time, *Life* was the portal. They were the ones.

I remember they would wake me up in the middle—well, it wasn't the middle of the night. For me it was the middle of the night. It'd probably be like nine or ten o'clock. I remember being wakened up, and dad and I used to play chess and *Life* photographers were there

and they were going to do a photo shoot. So there's pictures of me in my pajamas playing chess with dad. That was just how it was. They'd say, "Okay, we're going to do a little family shoot." You would just do your part.

But then the press was kind of relentless, particularly during the flight. They would be on your front yard. We kids, they'd cut us loose, they didn't keep us locked up. They'd say, "If you get cornered by press, you just politely excuse yourself and run home." The whole thing was very political. They just didn't want us or I guess the wives randomly speaking without that filter, that organized filter.

As much as it's a civilian program, it was also highly political. Also, we were in a Cold War with Russia. This was a proxy war, and winning this was absolutely essential. Not only I guess to national security but to national morale.

We were all told, "Look, this is very serious business, and you need to live your life accordingly. You can't just say anything you want or do anything you want because the world is watching you." That we were all very much aware of.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did your parents tell you that? Or was that something that your mother had heard from NASA?

SLAYTON: I don't think that was ever explicitly told to me. Maybe it was. It was just understood, because again, I remember being with friends. We'd say, "Can we go off down to the creek?" And there would be NASA people around, and they'd say, "Go ahead, but if you run into press just remember answer politely and come on home." They didn't want us saying a lot,

because at that point everybody's making everything out of this. I guess they wanted to control it as best they could.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you know if your mom received any sort of training from public affairs from NASA about how to work with the media?

SLAYTON: I don't know. That's a good question. I'm sure there were meetings. I'm sure that they were sat down and talked to about the press and these are the people you talk to. I don't think they were heavily coached. I think it was just a world that none of them had ever been in before. Being pilot wives, I'm not sure they really knew what to do.

I know mom appreciated that. I know mom appreciated any time that NASA would create a buffer between her and the press or give her guidance or structure. She didn't want to say anything or do anything that would be improper or inappropriate. I'm sure they were, but I don't remember her ever talking about that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did she share with you any details about going to the White House when JFK [John F. Kennedy] was in office?

SLAYTON: Yes. You bet. They went several times, I know. I don't remember this. I wish I remembered this. Supposedly he put me on his shoulders during one of the visits. I can't find any pictures or any memory of that, but mom and dad told me he put me on his shoulders. But again I was all of two and a half or three back then.

I remember the ticker-tape parades. And I remember sitting down on the floorboard of the car gathering up all those streams and rolling them into little bundles. Because I guess that was the greatest meaning of a ticker-tape parade down a New York street, rolling paper into bundles, for a three-year-old.

They went to the White House a lot. I know it was amazing. I think mom talked about it a lot. I still have some of the little place cards and things like that from those trips. Met a lot of different people. Met a lot of famous people. I think I mentioned in that article I wrote that she had come back and she had mentioned she had met a woman named Janis. She didn't talk a whole lot about the people that she met. She said, "Oh, I met so-and-so."

The only two stories I remember was she said, "I met this woman Janis and she was really drunk and the men were making fun of her," and so, true to mom's nature, she took her aside and cleaned her up and got her some coffee and some water. She didn't really know who she was. She knew she was a singer, but she didn't know who Janis was. Told her you're at the White House, you're here for a reason, and you're a pretty young lady, behave accordingly.

She told me that story when she got back, and I said, "Was that Janis Joplin?"

She goes, "Yes, that's who it was."

I'm like, "Oh my God, you met Janis Joplin." Then a couple months later she overdosed. So I remember that.

I also remember they ran into Charlton Heston, and I remember this because that was right after he had done *Planet of the Apes*, and dad loved that movie. dad was not a big movie guy, but he really liked that one. Mom said, "Oh, Deke, this is Charlton Heston, he was in *Planet of the Apes*."

Dad said something like, "Oh, okay. Well, nice to meet you. I don't follow actors very much."

Charlton's response was, "Yes, well, I don't follow astronauts very much either." So I remember that from that story.

ROSS-NAZZAL: A little tit for tat. What did your mom think of going to the White House and having to dress and being more on a public stage at that point?

SLAYTON: She loved it. Mom loved it, and she loved to travel. I know that she was just always very excited to go. For her the White House wasn't, "Oh, I'm going to the White House, and this is all about me." What mom would typically do is she would go to these events and then she would sidle up to somebody, and she would spend the evening having deep conversations with one or two different people. I guess the way this goes is you don't get to spend too much time with any one person. She was meeting a whole lot of different people, but she was always most comfortable if she could just sit down with one person and just get to know them. Other than that conversation with Janis she didn't really relate any other personal connections. She enjoyed it. I know she loved it.

You had asked the question did she have any hobbies, and I got thinking about that. She did not. She loved to garden, she loved nature, but her hobbies, I think, were people. I think her hobbies were her relationships: me, the NASA wives, dad, our community we grew up in, all of her friends. That was her world. That's where she invested all of her time and energy.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You had mentioned also in that article that she was fairly shy. Just hearing you talk about how she would spend time at these White House gatherings with one or two people, getting involved in a deep conversation with them. Would you share more about her personality, and how she overcame being such a timid person?

SLAYTON: Yes. I don't know whether she was always shy or whether it just sort of came upon her. She talked about being very shy in school. I guess it's kind of an anxiety disorder. As a therapist now, I look back. We call it shy, but probably kind of an anxiety disorder. It would really hurt her feelings, because she was an attractive young lady, and she didn't talk to a whole lot of people. People would call her snooty. "Oh, you're so pretty, you're better than all of us." That really hurt her feelings. So she realized, "I've got to get on top of this thing."

I think she developed an attitude of fake it till you make it. I think she said, "Put your head up and take a deep breath and just do life. Live life. Don't let this thing be a problem." Everybody who knew her, nobody knew she was ever shy. As a kid I remember she would get what I'd call appropriately nervous before certain things. I think she just really enjoyed people. I think that's the way she got out of the shyness.

When you're shy, you're very self-conscious. You don't want people looking at you or talking about you. I think she probably found that by sitting and talking to other people about their lives somehow helped her. Then in time, as she would get more and more comfortable with people and talking with them, she just became an outgoing person. It just became who she was.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You seemed to indicate that you had some of those similarities as a child, and she tried to encourage you to become more, I don't know, open with others.

SLAYTON: Yes I remember talking about this, because my path was kind of the same as hers. Like I said, I was a wild man as a kid. I remember getting lots of spankings by my first grade teacher. But I remember coming off of a summer and walking into school and seeing all my friends, and it's like, "Oh I haven't seen these guys in so long!" Everybody turned around and waved at me, and all I remember is thinking, "Stop looking at me." I remember thinking, "What just happened? What is this?" It was just the weirdest thing. It was like a switch was flipped.

I had also gotten really sick that summer and had spent some time in the hospital. I was on IV antibiotics for about a week and a half. So I have no idea what happened. I don't know if there's any connection there. That's when she told me. She said, "Yes, I struggled with this thing. Don't let it rule you." She told me, "If you're uncomfortable with somebody and you don't know what to say, ask them questions about their life." So I kind of adopted that myself, and probably why I've become a therapist. In the process of doing that I found that I like people, and I love learning about people. Like mom, I think the more I got to know people, the more I grew to appreciate humanity as a whole.

I think one of the things we do is we're so prone to look at people and go, "I don't know about you," and we just don't get to know them. What I've learned as a therapist is when you get to know people, it doesn't matter how weird they are or how horrible their stories are. When you really get to know them there's a very likable side to almost everybody.

I've worked with some pretty horrible people as a therapist. I think I learned what mom did, and that is when you get to know somebody, we're kind of all the same inside. We may approach our challenges differently, we may handle the difficulties of our lives maybe less or more honorable, but we're all the same. That was kind of the messages I got growing up.

My parents were very tolerant people. I rarely ever heard criticism from either of them about anybody. We just didn't talk about people. If you were frustrated, you talked with them. That was the message. If you've got an issue with somebody you sit down and talk with them, you don't talk about them. So I appreciated having that kind of a value to grow up with.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Were your parents political at all? Were they supporters of either [party]?

SLAYTON: No. Everybody is in their own way. Being military, decisions made can affect you. When you're military and the president declares war on somebody, that changes your whole life. I'm pretty sure the politics of NASA and the politics was important to them, but we never had signs in our front yard. I never remember any arguments about any of that.

I would probably say they were both independents. I don't remember them being any one thing or another. Again, as a kid, I didn't pay any attention to that. But as I got older, and I would ask my mom and dad who they were voting for, I remember they would vote both sides, just depending on what the needs of the country were at the time and who was the best man for that job.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Having been a California girl, what did your mom think of moving to Texas? Do you have any idea?

SLAYTON: Yes. It was brutal hot and humid, and it was the South. Houston wasn't really hard South, but it was South. She didn't grow up with any prejudice. The town, it was a little Quaker town, Friendswood, that's just not who those people were. We did have people around, if I

remember, that had some prejudices and I remember mom and dad commenting on that. I remember them disapproving of that. But it was just the South, and mom grew to love Houston. Houston was a pretty neat town back then.

Dad was a fisherman. He loved the water, mom not so much. I remember both of them, because dad grew up in Wisconsin and mom in California, that Houston heat, they hated it. It was just awful. But we also spent a whole lot of time outdoors. I remember most of my life was spent outdoors, either at people's houses outdoors or working in the yard outdoors.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You've mentioned that some people around you had some prejudices. Just to clarify. Racial prejudice or other?

SLAYTON: Racial. Yes. Again, not a whole lot. I just remember hearing one or two things from different people. I remember both mom and dad very quickly pushing back against it. I only remember those moments just because they were so unusual. I remember when I was a kid going to them and saying, "Mr. So-and-so said this," and they would just say, "Don't pay any attention to that. He doesn't know these people. He doesn't know. Don't judge what you don't know. Don't have feelings about what you don't have any information about."

On a slight tangent to that, and again I don't know if this story has ever been told, but I remember being in Russia with dad. He and a bunch of astronauts and cosmonauts—and this was after the [Apollo-Soyuz Test] flight—and they were all standing around. Typically what they do is they find common ground, and everybody would toast about that. I remember somebody had put out a toast about Islam. It was sort of a like us against them kind of a toast.

I remember dad did not speak a whole lot of opinions. Dad was not a pushback kind of a guy. He would just be quiet. Typically if he didn't approve of something he just wouldn't comment on it, but I remember this one time he chimed in very quickly. He commented that first of all, there's more of them than us, and we don't know them, and just because there are some of them that are problematic does not make everybody problematic. I remember it just got real quiet. Again, I can't say it as well as he said it. It was very eloquent and very to the point, without a lot of words. I just remember it got real quiet real fast. Everybody stood there, and then somebody made a joke, and then everybody laughed, and they toasted.

That was just the people my folks were, very tolerant people. Also, I think when you're military and you travel around the world, you tend to get to know [others]. You get out of your bubble, and you realize that people are not what you're told they are. You need to get to know them, you need to actually eat with them and live with them in order to have any opinion about them.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You told a story in the article that you wrote about your mom [at] a rest stop and picking up some food. I wonder if there are other examples of her questioning racial stereotypes or segregation. Was that normal for your mom to do?

SLAYTON: Again, that was not a big part of the world. There wasn't a lot of conversation about it. It wasn't a big part of our daily lives. That time at the rest stop, again, like I mentioned in the article, I'd never seen a restaurant where there was two doors: [one for whites, another for colored people]. I just didn't even know what to make of that. That was not the world we lived in in Houston. That's just not what that was like.

I remember there was a lot of racial tensions and race riots. Everybody's rioting back in the '60s, whether it was war or race. I remember mom and dad. They never really said anything. I don't have any quotes in my head. All I remember was they just felt that everybody needed to have a voice. Everybody needed to be treated equal. I think they just understood this was a time of change, and it needed to happen. But there wasn't of talking about it. Maybe amongst adults they did.

Again, dad was not a man of a whole lot of words. I don't think there were great lengthy philosophical discussions around the dinner table. Also, the one thing I appreciate about my parents was they were very good about keeping the adult world away from us. That was probably again part of the whole NASA thing, but that was also in think just good parenting. You only get so many years of your life to be a kid. They did a good job not burdening me with a lot of grown-up stuff. If it was something I needed to know or something that was important or a change, then we talked about it. Or if I'd come forward with a question then we'd sit down and talk about it.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You also mentioned that your mom was spiritual, I think last time we talked. I wondered if you could explain what you meant by that. I know you said you didn't really go to church growing up.

SLAYTON: No. Probably like a lot of Americans, we would go to church on Easter Sunday. Drag dad. Mom grew up I think Methodist, and dad grew up Lutheran. All I really know about religion and spirituality for my parents was that I know dad's dad, in the small town of Leon, Wisconsin, everybody did everything for everybody else. He was a farmer, but he also was the

guy who plowed the roads. He took care of the Lutheran church and kept the grounds and did a lot of work for the church, but he wasn't a member of the church. When granddad died and they wanted to bury him at the church, because that church was part of him, they wouldn't let them. Said, "You can't bury here because you weren't a member."

Everybody went, "What do you mean? This is not right."

"Sorry. Not a member." And that was it for dad. That was the end of any organized religion.

Mom, again like I said, would take us to church. I think their faith was not so much of a religious faith, but again it was about connection with people. I grew up in a very nonjudgmental world. Both my parents loved nature, and they respected nature. They respected people, very live and let live kind of people.

Mom was not an overtly spiritual person. I probably couldn't even remember a conversation where I would sit down and have talks with mom. I remember I would ask them questions as a kid. I would say, "What's this? What does that mean?" They would answer it, but we wouldn't go real deep into it.

That was that time too. Back at that time, people didn't talk about their religion, you did your religion. You didn't talk about it. Again, they weren't religious so there really wasn't any language. We have more of a spiritual language now, I think, that we kind of know how to talk to that. Back then I don't think they did. It was just sort of an understanding. I just kind of knew that mom had a faith. She had a trust in a higher power.

Dad did too. I know he did too. Because he mentioned something in his book [*Deke! U.S. Manned Spaceflight from Mercury to the Space Shuttle*] right before he died. I think he was just so mad at religion as a whole. Unfortunately in our culture religion and God are so tied in

together that if you reject religion then you don't have any other option other than to reject God. I think as he got older he understood that's not necessarily the same. You can have one without the other. Again, then there wasn't a language for it.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I thought we would turn our attention to your mom's decision to create a group for the astronaut wives. I wonder if you would talk about that, and if you have any idea about what happened at those events. Did you ever get a chance to go and witness what was happening?

SLAYTON: No. I don't. I never went to those. Again, mom's nature, kind of back that question up a little bit, when we moved into Friendswood there was a main street through town, and all the kids in the neighborhood had to cross the street to get to the school. It wasn't big. It was a two-lane road. I remember as a kid, we'd stand there, and we'd wait for traffic, and then we'd run.

I think mom one day saw this happening, and it freaked her out. She said, "We need a crossing guard." We called it Mayberry R.F.D. [Rural Fire Department] because we had one police officer in the whole town. She said, "You need to be a crossing guard."

He goes, "Well, I'm a police officer, I can't be the crossing guard." So she was the crossing guard. She organized that. She got a bunch of other people involved in it, with all the proper whistles and signs and vests. Our police officer understood that that was an issue. The community got behind [the idea]. I think they finally hired somebody to do that. That was just her. She would see a need, and she felt the need to do something about it.

So I think what happened with the wives was—going to the grocery store and just living life was kind of an unusual experience, because there was press out, and a lot of times they would get ambushed. I think, like a lot of other famous people, unfortunately your life becomes very restricted. You don't get to live as freely and spontaneously as everybody else does.

They were all military wives. They knew how to do that. This thing was unheard-of. There was no precedent for it. I think mom just said, "Let's just [meet] a couple times a month." I don't remember how often the meetings were. I don't think they were weekly. It might have been once or twice a month. They would have luncheons. They'd get everybody together, all the wives, and they would bring coffees and cakes and sweets and snacks, and they would just all get together like a group of women and just talk. "How are you doing? What's going on?" Whoever had a flight coming up, they would talk, "Do you need anything, and how can we help?"

It just became a thing. As NASA grew and the number of the wives grew, that organization became larger and larger. Mom, I think just by proxy of having started it, just maintained it. Unfortunately, I think what happened was marriages got rocky and there were divorces and a lot of the wives fell to the wayside. That was another part of the problem, and I mentioned this in the article, that NASA was such a unique organization, such a family, that other than your family and your nearby neighbors, that was your family, that was your work environment, that was everything. When you were a wife and you got divorced, you lost all of that. That was a really big deal.

Normally, you get divorced, sometimes you lose a few friends here, friends there. You no longer went to the parties. Everybody you knew that you met at the parties or at the White House or at the launches, you were out. Mom understood how hard that was. She wanted a

place that those women could continue to come to and continue to have fellowship even if they were no longer married to the astronaut.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you know how she got the name Mother Marge?

SLAYTON: I think that was just the name that they gave her. I don't know who started that. I know Gratia [Kay] Lousma had told me that. I know they had all gotten together, oh, maybe 15, 20 years ago. In Friendswood there's a little town square with a gazebo. They play music, and there's benches around it. They actually dedicated one of the benches to mom, bought the bench, put a plaque on it. Gratia told me about that. That's the first I'd heard that phrase, Mother Marge. They said, "Well, that's just kind of what we called her because she was kind of like our mother. She took care of us and watched over us, organized us, kept us connected. Made sure nobody got left out." That was a real big deal. Like I said earlier, for lots of different reasons, somebody can get dropped to the wayside and that was just not okay for mom, that's just not who she was. If there was a wounded bird—I cannot tell you the number of times [we nursed] cats, dogs, birds, little boxes with little baby milk things. If there was somebody in need, she was there.

In the wintertime we would go to the department stores, and the Salvation Army guy would be out there ringing the bell. The next thing I know I'd be standing there ringing the bell and she'd be taking him in to get him a cup of hot cocoa. That's just who she was. If there was a ball game on, she was always voting for the underdog. She never went for the winner team. She always went for the underdog every single time. That was just who she was; she always had need on her radar. Who are you? What do you need? How can I help you?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you know from any of the wives, perhaps Gratia or some of the others, if they would come to her with concerns that they had as wives of astronauts, maybe some of their fears that they had about spaceflight or the media, any of those sort of issues?

SLAYTON: She never said specifically but my guess is that that was probably a lot of the conversation at these meetings. Mom was a real social person. She was over at Gratia's house; Gratia was over at our house. Mom was at the meeting. We lived in Friendswood, and not a lot of the astronauts lived in Friendswood. Most of them lived on the other side of the freeway and over in Clear Lake/Kemah area. She was always meeting with people and talking with people. So yes, I'm guessing that that was again part of the reason for the club, was just to give an outlet for people to say, "I'm scared. I'm nervous. My husband is getting ready to do this thing, and it's never been done before." They were probably like informal therapy sessions had over a glass of something.

Mom always called it teatime. One time I could see tumblers with tea in them, and I said, "Hey, mom, can I have some tea?"

She said, "Sure." I took a swig of it and that was when I realized it wasn't tea.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It was adult teatime, right? What about kids in your neighborhood? Would they come over to your house as well? Was she sort of an adoptive mom to some of your friends in the neighborhood?

SLAYTON: Oh yes. We all lived in each other's houses. We would either be at one house or another. Mom would probably have had a dozen kids if she could have. Any opportunity to bring my friends over, even as a young adult oftentimes I'd say, "I'm going out with my friends."

She said, "Well, why don't you all swing on by?"

It's like, "Ah, mom, we got to go."

She'd say, "Bring them on by." We'd come on by, and there would be snacks and food. We would visit for a bit. She liked people coming over. She liked to entertain. She loved it when my friends came over.

Halloween, she would make my costume every year. I'd have this crazy costume every single year. We also lived in a community where they would open their doors and they'd say, "Get out of here. Go." We would wander the city. There was no weirdness back then, there was no shenanigans going on. We would all run around, we would all dog pile up at the house and look at our candy and then we'd head off and get more candy. But yes, I knew mom wanted us to come over and hang out there at the house as much as possible.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was your mom a good cook?

SLAYTON: She was. Yes, she was a good cook. It was the '60s, so good cook usually involved a can of cream of something. It's funny. I was digging through some recipes the other day, and I found one from Louise Shepard. It was her [ham] tetrazzini. I sent that to Julie Shepard, and she said, "Oh my God, I remember that; that was so good." Sure enough, it had a stick of butter and a couple cans of cream of something. But yes, she was a good cook.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You mentioned Louise Shepard. Who were some of her best friends?

SLAYTON: I would say probably Louise, by the fact that they kind of scattered. A lot of the original seven, once they flew their flights a lot of them then moved out of NASA and went on to different things. Alan stayed in Houston, even though he did his flights. I think he went on to work for Coors, had a Coors distributorship for a time. So he stayed in Houston.

Jo Schirra, they ended up moving to Colorado. Mom stayed real close to Jo. I'd probably say Jo was her best friend. I have more memories hanging out over at the Schirras' house. Suzy was like my little sister. We hated each other and tormented each other terribly, but as an only child I guess that was necessary. Jo Schirra was her dear close friend. Then Jo moved to Colorado.

Yes, she and Louise stayed together a lot. I remember spending a lot of time over at their house. I remember one Mother's Day I took her and Louise out because the kids were gone and she was home alone for Mother's Day. So I got to treat both of them to Mother's Day. I was in my twenties then and working. I also remember after mom and dad separated a couple of Thanksgivings over at the Shepards' house. Those were really nice memories, because again the Shepard girls, I grew up with them. They're such sweethearts.

Louise, I thought she was a first lady. In my mind she was the perfect first lady. She was gracious. She was funny. She was natural. She was elegant. I just always said, "Alan," well, I didn't call him Alan, we called him admiral, "you need to run for president so Louise can be first lady. She would be perfect." She was just an elegant woman.

Yes, those were her friends. Also her closest friends were a lot of the women in our neighborhood. We lived on a street called Imperial Estates, and it was horseshoe-shaped. That community became so tight that even, not to this day, but recently we had reunions. Everybody's scattered to the four winds. The community is now destroyed by floods and turned into a park, but we still get together, all the neighbors, all the kids. We just talk about, "What was it about this place?" Who comes back together 20, 30, 40 years later to hang out with your old neighbors? That was that community. I guess her best friend from that community was Lila Livingston, who was the woman who was with her when she passed away. She was in the hospital at that time.

But again I think that was just what mom did. She organized. A lot of the people on the block were NASA families. I'd say maybe half of them were NASA families. Our community get-togethers and the women getting together for tea in the evening was as much I think a community thing as a NASA thing. I just remember there were people over all the time. They weren't huge numbers. It was never large numbers. It was always four or five, just a handful of women. Those were her friends.

Then she got cancer. Right before the flood of '79 she was diagnosed with cancer. That was an awful time because she and dad were separating, she had had cancer surgery, and the house was obliterated. We had had an eight-foot flood in the house. We just had to abandon the house, that was like our third or fourth flood. She decided to move into Houston to be closer to MD Anderson Cancer Center. She lived in a little community of townhomes and again had a handful of women [friends]. Rarely I'd go over to visit where there wasn't somebody there in the living room with her or we would go over to somebody else's house. She was a very social person.

But she also liked her quiet time too. That was the other thing. Some people who are outgoing, they tend to be almost manic in their need for constant social stimulation. But I remember mom too just loved nature. She'd just sit there out in nature and be quiet for hours at a time, or garden, or putz around in the dirt. I always thought it was so weird. Dad grew herbs, which I thought was just weird. Who does that, right? Mom was about birds and plants and gardens and dirt. I just thought, "Oh, God, these people are just so weird." Now I've become my parents.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I was going to say, didn't you tell us that you gardened quite a bit?

SLAYTON: Garden quite a bit, yes. It's contagious.

ROSS-NAZZAL: When your mom got together with her friends, did they ever do anything? Or was it just conversation and tea?

SLAYTON: Yes, conversation and tea. Her mom lived with us probably half of the year. Her mom was an invalid. We were on our way to the Schirras' house to go sailing one day, and a drunk driver nailed us. My grandmother pretty much was an invalid after that so she would live half of the year with us and then half with mom's sister.

Because of that, there wasn't a whole lot of running around. If mom and dad went out somewhere, depending on if it was a community thing, we'd load my grandma in the wheelchair and off we'd go. If they were off to an out-of-city or out-of-state function, I would hang out with my grandma. But yes, it was usually just going over to somebody's house and hanging out.

Back then TV was only what, three stations? When Carol Burnett was on, everybody's watching Carol Burnett. When Jack Benny was on or Johnny Carson, everybody watched. That's what we would do, we would go over to somebody's house. You sit, and we would all watch the show together, because that's what you did. You know, *Bonanza*. It was just in some ways a very simple world in that regard. A lot of coming over and watching and eating and laughing.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you get much help from any of the other astronaut wives? I know JoAnn Carr, her father was living with them for many years. If that was something that you all did. Or primarily it was your mom and dad taking care of your grandmother?

SLAYTON: Yes, it was primarily them. Actually in my young adulthood, again after mom and dad separated and mom had cancer, I had to move back in with her and help her take care of my grandmother, because she was in and out of cancer treatments. She was in Houston at the time and dad was in—I just blanked out on the name of the town. Not Seabrook.

ROSS-NAZZAL: El Lago? Webster?

SLAYTON: Maybe it was Seabrook. Yes, it was Seabrook, then Webster. Yes. But anyway down in that neck of the woods. I don't know if that answers your question or not.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, just trying to get a bigger sense of your mom. I wondered if you would share with us what your mom thought when your dad was grounded from spaceflight. Do you have a sense of what happened there?

SLAYTON: Yes, she was really upset. Whenever we talked about it she would still get upset. She knew the kind of pilot that dad was; she knew what he was capable of. He could pull more gs than anybody else and not go into arrhythmia. Not only could he pull more gs without passing out, even at that it would never kick the arrhythmia in. The doctor said, "This does not affect your health." But because it was the space program and it was all so new, they said, "Let's just play it safe and ground him."

Mom knew the kind of guy he was. She also knew the space program needs somebody who can think by the seat of their pants, needs somebody that can be one with the machine, and that was dad. So when he was grounded, she spent weeks calling the White House every day, constantly. In *The Astronaut Wives Club*, they made a joke out of it. They're all sitting around with curlers in her hair. I think she went over and picked up the phone and said, "I want to talk to the White House."

And they said, "Well, you can't."

She goes, "Okay," and she hung up and then they went back about their hair fixing.

That was not the case. Mom was relentless. She was on the phone. She was on hold. She called every senator. She called the president. She called the vice president. She did not let it go. I don't know what finally happened. I guess finally they said, "Stop! It's not going to make any difference." She was relentless because she knew what dad was capable of. If you don't mind just quick stories about dad to illustrate that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: No, absolutely. I don't think you can separate the two honestly.

SLAYTON: First, what dad had told me—and obviously I wasn't there, but he was in a probably T-38, because that's what they flew back then. What I remember, when I'd take dad to Ellington [Air Force Base, Houston], they would have to put these big vacuums on the front of the T-38 to create an air vacuum to get the turbines to kick, sort of like the battery to kick your car. You had to have massive airflow going through those. He was in a climb, and he stalled out. He fell into what they call an inverted spin which means you're upside down and you're spinning and you're dead. Nobody recovers from an inverted spin.

He told me that he started kicking rudders and doing different things, and he got a little movement. He tried some things, and he got more movement. He kept going, kept going, until he actually got the plane to flip and head straight down. He knew he had to go down fast in order to get the air going through the scoops to kick the engines on, which they did eventually. He got them going. But now he's going I don't know what kind of crazy speed straight into the ocean, because he'd been falling. So now he's just roaring down in. He's got the engines kicked in. He finally got the plane on a level. He said he was just kissing the waves as he was doing that.

He's telling me the story, and I'm just like going, "Oh my God." I remember saying, "Were you not terrified?"

He said, "No." He said, "It's just what you do." It was just instinct for him.

The time I personally saw that he had this little plane called the Stinger, and they'd gotten a brand-new prop, Father's Day, and he wanted to test out his new prop. We all went out to the

airport, and he hops in the plane and does a couple circles around. Then he comes around, and he doesn't come back around. And we all ran, we're running out to the runway, and he comes out from behind the trees. The Stinger was a very little plane, it was a little Formula One plane. He is dragging this plane by the tail behind him and just cussing up a storm, mumbling under his breath and cussing up a storm. We all just gave him space because he was alive and that was good. He's coming past us, and the whole prop was hanging off the front of the airplane. I can't remember whether it was 8 or 12 bolts. They were all sheared like one and a half, and he was upset. I remember asking him afterwards, "Well, so when you lose your prop in a plane like that how far can you glide?"

He said, "About as far as a pair of car keys when you throw them."

I asked him, I said, "Well, what did you do?"

He said, "I felt a slight shudder." What'd he say? "I chopped the throttle."

Which I guess he meant he just dropped it. That's when I realized that he was so in tune with these machines that he felt something was not right and he just knew exactly take her down. He just dropped her straight onto the runway. Within a split second the prop was gone, because I guess it was improperly imbalanced. But that's when I understood that's what these guys do, that's who they are, they are so connected to the machine that whatever happens, they can respond.

I think the Apollo 13 accident was a good example of that. These guys were trained to do that. Mom knew that dad was capable of this kind of thinking and that he would be absolutely essential for the space mission. So long way around, coming back to your question, it wasn't, "I want my husband to fly. It was this is his life and this is his dream and he's probably one of the best you've got, and you're now cutting him out of the picture."

ROSS-NAZZAL: How did your dad react to what she was doing, but also to the decision to ground him?

SLAYTON: I'm not sure what he did. I know he pushed it hard. His approach from what I remember was to go to doctors. He went from one doctor to another doctor to another doctor trying to get as much of a paper trail that said he was okay. When NASA just flat out said, "No, you're not doing it," not only did he not get to fly that flight that he was supposed to fly or any flight after that, they also wouldn't let him fly solo anymore.

This life of flying from Houston to Florida or California or wherever, he now had to have a copilot with him at all times, which was humiliating. It was like he had been sanctioned. He couldn't fly by himself. That really bothered him, that just irritated him to no end. That's when he started vitamins. I think Linus [C.] Pauling had come out with a study about vitamin C, and dad said, "I'm going for it." Man, I just remember every morning it was handfuls of vitamins and lots of cardio. That man was probably two to four hours a day cardio, which eventually got him a clear bill of health.

Apollo-Soyuz was the last flight, and he called in every favor he could, it's my understanding, to get on that flight. I think he pushed it. He was a military guy, so he probably wasn't going to get on the phone and call the president like mom did. But I think he pushed it as hard as he could through the chain of command until he was just told, "Not going to happen."

ROSS-NAZZAL: Let's talk about that mission. How did things change once your dad was cleared for spaceflight? What happened when he was named to a mission? Do you remember him coming home telling you and your mom that?

SLAYTON: Oh yes. That was massive. That was just like a dream come true. His 16 years of hard work. I think he probably told mom. They didn't tell me a whole lot, because if it didn't happen I don't think they wanted my grandmother and I to go through another disappointment. We knew that there was some mumbling about it, that there was a chance he could be, but we all kind of went, "Well, we know how this goes." So yes, when he came home and said he got the flight, oh my God, it was so exciting.

Then it was very quick. Things happened very fast at that point. I remember he started studying Russian, and I remember coming home every night, and I started studying Russian with him, because it was a lot more interesting than the Spanish I was learning in high school. He and I would sit there and we'd study Russian at night. I couldn't do two languages at once because I'm not even good at one language, much less three.

But he plowed ahead. A lot of training and a lot of being gone. A lot of Russians coming over to the house. Him going to Russia a lot. It was a flurry. It was amazing. I'm grateful that I was older when that happened, because two years old, like I said, I didn't remember a whole lot of that part of NASA. I was 18 at that point, 17 and 18. So yes, I knew what was going on and I appreciated every moment of it. It was amazing, absolutely amazing.

Where we had been watching all the other families, mom and dad had been in supporting roles. Dad was head of Flight Crew Operations, and mom was Mother Marge. So they were supporting actors for everybody else's flights. When he finally got his own flight there was this

outpouring of the whole community back to them. That was very cool also. Everybody was excited; everybody who was still in the system was just thrilled and supportive.

It was a whirlwind. I don't remember from the time he was announced to the time of the flight. I don't remember how long it was. But, it was amazing, exciting.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did your dad's schedule change much? Or was it still pretty hectic before that point?

SLAYTON: Yes, it was always very busy. Mom insisted that we eat dinner together, so rarely did we eat dinner before nine o'clock at night. I would go to friends' houses, and they would eat at five o'clock. "Why are you eating so early?" It's like, "Well, that's what people do." Dad's schedule was crazy. He was gone more than he was there. He loved his work, and the work demanded that of him, and all the guys. It wasn't just dad, it was everybody. As part of the space race, yes, once you signed on to that, it was mission first. That's what military does, it's mission first, family second. He was gone a lot.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you and your mom get a chance to go over to the Soviet Union with your dad before the flight?

SLAYTON: Not before. We went over after. That was another amazing trip. That was probably I would have to say from a child's perspective, their kid's perspective, the best I had ever seen them as a couple. When dad reentered, right after the flight, I don't know if you remember, something went wrong. I guess part of the protocol is when you're coming into reentry you

jettison whatever fuel is left. They jettisoned the fuel, and it got sucked right back into the ventilation system. They all ended up inhaling rocket fuel.

Dad lands, and everybody's hugging each other. The helicopter comes and picks them up, they're all cleaned up, and about an hour later after that we get this call. It says, "You're getting on a plane, you're going to Hawaii right now." We knew something had happened. We weren't sure what had happened.

Everybody did fine, everybody recovered. In the process they found a spot on dad's lung, and it was cancer. The surgery back then, I still can't believe this thing. It was just the most intrusive thing I've ever seen in my life. To get to his lung I guess they create an incision from his sternum all the way around his rib cage all the way to his spine. This was a massive incision.

We went to Russia probably a couple months after that. Russians, they're very warm people, and there's lots of hugging. The crew and dad had gotten real tight together, the Russian crew, and all the people he'd worked with, that whole team. They were all very close. All I remember was mom was on that side of him like glue the entire trip. Nobody got to that side of dad; she was like his bodyguard.

It was also a time I think where he needed her. That was a time I think where they were really able to be a great team together, not just team for NASA, team doing the job, but I think team together. Because again the job just took him away so often. There wasn't much opportunity for that. Russia was an amazing experience. It was just neat for me just to watch mom and dad just being a together couple for what was it, 10 days.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It must have been interesting back then. The old Soviet Union and dealing with KGB and all those other forces around.

SLAYTON: Oh, it was crazy. I don't know if I told you in that last interview, but we knew we were bugged. We were told, "You're going to be bugged." Dad had told a story where during one of the trips to Russia there wasn't a whole lot to do, so they said, "Gosh, wish we could at least play pool." The next day there's this pool table. It's not like any pool table they'd ever played pool on. There's a pool table there for them.

Vance [D.] Brand's son and I would sit around at night and have political discussions that would usually end up with, "Russia is pretty cool, but it would be a lot cooler if there was young girls around." The next day, next thing I know, I've got some stunning little 16-year-old Russian girl at my side. That's when we realized we really are bugged. You could tell the KGB guys because they're talking into the back of their hands and they're dressed better than everybody else. But that was the world. That was the Soviet Union back then.

Everywhere you went there was somebody in front of you with sirens and a bullhorn, and everybody just pulls out of the way. Everybody gets out of your way. That was the old Soviet Union. But they took really good care of us. They were very very good hosts. Got to know a lot of their families, their kids. We spent a lot of time over at their houses having meals. It was an amazing time.

When we went back again in the '90s, that was after the Soviet Union had fallen, it was real different. Everybody's walking around with bags. I asked one of the interpreters, "Why does everybody have a bag?"

They said, "Well, because there's no food. The trucks are not being maintained. The food is rotting in the fields. If the breadline opens up, that's what you're eating today is bread. If there's vegetables, well, you're eating vegetables today." Everybody had their bag just in case because they didn't have supermarkets. There was the bread store, the meat store, the vegetable store. It was real different. But again they were still very gracious and very warm people.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What are your memories of the launch for that mission?

SLAYTON: Oh my gosh. That was an amazing time. My dad's family, mom's family, everybody was down. A lot of our friends and neighbors were there. It was a reunion. It was massive. Everybody we knew was there. All my cousins were there, and my best friends were there. The whole NASA family was there. It was really quite amazing.

Henri Landwirth whose hotel we would stay at, he went on to found Give Kids The World, which is an offshoot of Make-A-Wish Foundation. Because apparently a very common wish for a lot of terminally ill children is to go to Disney World [Orlando, Florida]. So he put together a compound: nurses, doctors, film crew. Bring the whole family in, give them a 10-day memory, send them to all the Epcots and MGMs and everything at the time, and make a film that the whole family can then have for posterity.

He got us all to Disney World, and I remember that. I remember being with all my friends and my cousins at Disney World. It was like the best family reunion in the world. It was pretty cool.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you have any specific memories of seeing the launch of the Saturn with your mom on the top of the LCC [Launch Control Center]?

SLAYTON: Yes. Dad's rocket was smaller than the Saturn V. Have you ever seen the Saturn V launch? Did you ever get to see one of those?

ROSS-NAZZAL: No. I wasn't born [then].

SLAYTON: Unbelievable. What is it, 1 million pounds of thrust per square inch? Then you look at the size of each of those rocket nozzles. The sound, the heat, the vibration was unbelievable. Those launches were just visceral. Dad's rocket was a little bit smaller because they weren't going to the Moon, but it was just unbelievable. Knowing that dad was in that rocket, knowing that finally, finally after—[gets emotional].

ROSS-NAZZAL: Probably a pretty emotional time for you and your mom, I can imagine.

SLAYTON: Yes. God, it's been 25 years. It's weird. I was 18 then. I think at 18—well, I don't think, I know—at 18 you're still pretty clueless. I look back at who I was back then. When you're 18 you know everything. I look back, and it's like I didn't know anything. Obviously as an adult I can look back at that time. I can appreciate the moment so much more than I did then.

Back then it was just exciting. Back then it was like, "My God, dad is finally getting his flight. Mom is getting a flight. Everybody deserves this." [For a decade they were supporting actors in everybody else's flights, and this was finally their time.] It was just exciting. It was

just exciting. I wasn't worried. I wasn't nervous. Everybody sits and clutches when the rocket goes off. There'd been the Apollo 1 [fire], but that wasn't a launch accident. Up to that point they'd had rockets blow on the pad. They'd never had a rocket blow with a man on it, but it was not unusual. You'd be in the middle of a countdown, and they'd stop the countdown, and the launch was off. Sometimes you'd wait a day, you'd wait an hour. Sometimes you'd wait weeks.

You never knew. You've got your whole family there. You've got all your friends there. If this thing doesn't go off, then theoretically everybody has to go home. Then if it does go off, nobody gets to see it live. You're sitting, and you're clenching. It was amazing. It was just very exciting.

I didn't get tearful. None of that. I guess part of this getting older crap is you get more sentimental, and you get more aware of life. You get more tuned in to the meaning of things. For dad that was a long haul. For him and mom that was a beautiful punctuation. I'm so glad they got it. They deserved that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What was the media interest like in the flight? Was it to the extent it had been for the Moon missions? Or had it waned by then?

SLAYTON: This is what I remember. Even the Moon missions, after like the third or fourth one, the interest tapered down. I remember everybody going, "We're still going to the Moon, this is still amazing." It was a little different. Apollo-Soyuz was interesting I think from the standpoint that there'd never been a joint international mission. We're still in a Cold War with Russia, and that was a pretty scary time. We had tens of thousands of nuclear missiles quite possibly pointed at each other.

That still intrigues me to this day, that we're in the middle of a Cold War, there's probably all kinds of shenanigans going on between us and Russia, and yet we manage to do this flight together and to create team and solidarity together. The relationships lasted up until dad died. I remember the two cosmonauts on dad's flight were there at his funeral. That was a huge thing.

I think the public eye probably wasn't as huge as the [earlier] spaceflights. Vietnam was winding down too. Vietnam ended in [1975]. There was a lot happening all at the same time.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you have a public affairs officer at the house during the mission?

SLAYTON: Probably did. I don't remember. I know usually before there was an event there would be a guy that would come over and talk to mom and dad. I wouldn't remember a name though. A lot of times before the Russians would come over there'd be somebody that would show up. They would just talk and make sure all the pieces were in hand. I don't know if I mentioned this in the last one, but I remember the Russian public affairs officer. I remember him. I remember him because he was a super nice guy and very outgoing, just like your best Uncle Jim kind of a guy. I remember he came over a lot, and he was usually the first one in the door, he was the first one saying hi before anybody else would come into the house.

I remember we had gotten this book called *The Great Russian Space Bluff*, and evidently it was an expose of all the Russians who had died. Apparently the Russians would put three men in a two-man capsule, and you can't do that with suits on. They'd send three men up without suits, and they had I guess incidences where they didn't survive. This was all in the book, and it was on our bookshelf. All I remember was—and this is to answer your question—the guy came

over, before the Russian guy, and he looked around and asked mom a question, and she went, "Oh." I remember she ran over to the bookcase and pulled that book out and put it in a cabinet.

Then the Russian guy shows up. He comes over, and there's lots of hugs and hellos. His eye went over to that cabinet like a laser beam. I later on found out from our guys that that's part of your training, to look for what's not there. He saw a full bookcase with one book missing and his brain locked on that. Again, we were told in retrospect by our guy—I don't know if that was a security guy or public affairs officer.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you have squawk boxes in your house? Was that something you remember?

SLAYTON: I don't remember that. I don't remember. When we were watching the reentry, I remember we watched that on TV. There might have been a squawk box in the house at that time. It's funny, I don't remember, probably paid more attention to the TV than anything else.

ROSS-NAZZAL: How closely were you watching the mission? Were you still going to school at that point? Or did your mom give you the chance to take the week off?

SLAYTON: Well, no, actually it was the summer between senior and freshman year. I was off school; I was just completely absorbed in that. That's what we did. A houseful of people, a lot going on. Spent a lot of time in Mission Control, I remember that. I remember sitting for hours and hours in Mission Control with my mom and my aunt just listening to the flight, listening to the guys talk, just getting up to date on what was happening.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you get a chance to talk to your dad while he was in space?

SLAYTON: I have no memory of that, isn't that interesting that you ask that? If we did, it might have been a really brief, "Hi, dad" kind of a thing. But I have no memory of talking to him while he was in space. That's interesting.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you recall what your mom was focused on during that mission? Was she just laser-focused on the flight? Or was she also juggling other things and still meeting with friends?

SLAYTON: No, she was enjoying it, that's what I remember. It had been a long 16 years to get to that point so I think she was very much enjoying it. She was absorbing every second of it. She was on it. Her sister was there too, her only sister, so it was wonderful for her to have her sister and have that support. She was soaking it up, it was 24-7, that's what we were about.

ROSS-NAZZAL: A lot of the earlier missions, the press was pretty much camped out in front of people's homes. Was that the case in Friendswood?

SLAYTON: I don't remember a whole lot, because again we were inside. It wasn't that big a deal. I think you hit the nail on the head. Apollo-Soyuz was not the big deal that the early Mercury days were. I think there might have been some interviews. There might have been some press. But it was nothing, it was just nothing like the media storm of those early days.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I think last time you had mentioned the Marge Slayton Day that was down at the pharmacy in Friendswood. Do you know what that meant to your mom? Did she ever talk about that and what it meant to her to have that moment during your dad's flight?

SLAYTON: I just came back, before COVID obviously, [from] California. I went to go see her sister, my aunt. I still have the banner. It's this big giant banner, says "Marge Slayton Day." I took that to her. I still had that. That was a big deal to mom, because her morning ritual, I'd go to school, and she'd go to Brown's Pharmacy, which was also a malt shop coffee shop, and she would meet her friends. They would have coffee before they would get about their days.

She knew everybody in town, and everybody knew her. She wasn't just Deke's wife, she was Marge. She was her own person. So yes, when they had Marge Slayton Day I think that was just really touching to her. That was the community just commenting on her. It wasn't like yes, well, Deke has got his thing going but this is your special day. I know she was just really deeply touched by that.

Funny how you remember names. Cal Thomas of *Eyewitness News* I think came down. Again, back then there weren't 50,000 different media people. There was the news guy, like Walter Cronkite. In Houston it was Cal Thomas, and Cal Thomas was there with the whole film crew. I remember mom asking him somewhere in the middle of an interview or before the interview, "Do you have the Doris Day lens on?" And they both laughed, and I asked her later on. When you're a kid and your parents say things like that it's like, "God, how embarrassing! What is she talking about?"

Turns out that I guess Doris Day—and I've gone back and looked at some old Doris Day movies—they would either put gauze on the film or they would rub a little bit of Vaseline on the

lens, which would just soften the image enough to blur out any wrinkles or any blemishes. So I remember her asking him, "Did you make sure you got the Doris Day lens on for this interview?"

He goes, "Yes, yes, we have." It was a lot of fun for her.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I looked at the air-to-ground transcripts, and they mentioned that to your dad while he was on orbit, so apparently it was a big deal. Your parents ended up divorcing after the mission. Did you have a sense why?

SLAYTON: Yes. The whole NASA experience, it was hard, it was hard on them all. Part of your questions, you referred to Terry McGuire. Terry McGuire was the psychiatrist NASA brought in to work with the NASA families, because it was mission first, and these guys were gone all the time. The wives, they weren't neglected by any means, but I think they were left to fend for themselves socially and emotionally. Their guys were gone all the time, and they were raising kids by themselves.

Dad was an avid hunter, so when he wasn't working he was hunting or fishing. He was gone a lot. I remember when he and mom were divorcing, he and I were talking about it. He said, "I probably should never have gotten married. I was built to fly; I was built to be a military man. I don't think I was built to be a good husband." I think he was aware that he had the right stuff for being an astronaut. He didn't have the right stuff for being a husband. There'd been a lot of stress. It was a beautiful time.

Again I think the flight was just amazing. Space Shuttle kicked in right after that, and dad was on the West Coast all the time. I think it wore on them, and finally mom just said, "I

think we need to do something different here. You need to move on with your life, and I need to move on with mine." She had come down with cancer at that point in time. I think she was probably thinking, "I may not have a lot more years, and I think I would like them to be peaceful. I don't want to be struggling with my marriage for the next whatever years of my life."

That's when they made the decision. Even after they made the decision they didn't divorce for a long time, I want to say like 10 years. It couldn't have been that long. It might have been. It might have been. Because again, they loved each other. They respected each other, and they liked each other. I just think mom, she was a mom, that was her job. I can only imagine when you're geared to be the wife on steroids, and you've got a guy who's never there. I think she said, "I want a more meaningful life than this."

I don't think she had any intention of having anybody else in her life. I think she just didn't want to be upset all the time. Like I say, she didn't know how many more years she had left, and she was taking care of my grandma.

When they finally divorced it was still a very sad moment. They'd been apart for years. They had a really good relationship. There was no animosity at all. But I remember when the divorce finally went through. I remember thinking, "Well, great, mom, finally this is over with." She was sad, because what I've learned as a therapist is separating and divorcing from somebody is not the same as when you get that piece of paper in your hand that says, "Done, formal, end." There's another layer of grief that hits at that time. I remember her going through that. I remember that was hard for her, and dad too. It was definitely hard for him.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You mentioned Terry McGuire. Gratia had told us that they formed that group for the wives. Did your mom ever participate in that group or go see him with your dad?

SLAYTON: Yes, I did too. Because again, everybody's struggling. I think NASA kind of realized—once they found their stride, and once we got out of the space race with the Russians—I think they realized that NASA is the families. It's not just a mission. It's just not astronauts. It's the families. It's the community. They realized the need to take care of the families a little bit better. They hired Terry.

I know mom and dad saw him. I don't know how often. I don't know how many times. I know I went to go see him maybe half a dozen times; for no other reason than I think he just wanted to make sure I was okay, because mom and dad were struggling, and they wanted to make sure I was okay. I was okay, but I remember talking with him.

He was a really neat guy. He was the one that said, "I think you need to go into therapy." My wife has later on joked with me, and she says, "I don't think he meant it that way."

But I took it that way. He just said, "You're just really good with people. You listen well." I would say probably a big part of me being a therapist has to do with Terry McGuire, because I got my bachelor's degree, which was a long slog. I had a job at the time working at a drug clinic. He said, "You need your master's."

I said, "I don't want to go back to school. I don't want to do this."

He says, "You can't go anywhere without a master's, you've got to get your master's." He hounded me until I got my master's. So I attribute a lot of where I am professionally to him, as well as to mom and dad.

He was a great help to the families, but he was also kind of a secret too. I didn't realize that until later, because when I was working on my master's internship, there was an internship

available at NASA, and I thought, "Well, this would be great, I can go, and I can do mental health with the NASA family. I can do my part, be part of the team."

Part of the interview, they said, "What are your experiences with NASA?" I mentioned his name. Oh my goodness, man, eyes got wide, pens went down, doors got closed. They said, "How do you know about Terry McGuire?"

I said, "Because I talked to him." I thought it was—it's like no. In the early days that was a secret, I guess.

He was also a psychiatrist, and those were the days too where if you talked to a psychiatrist you were crazy. I think probably again for the PR [public relations] reason, astronauts going to see a psychiatrist, that would probably have gone all wrong. That wasn't the case but I think that was the fear at the time. That's the sense I got, anyway.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's very interesting. We didn't know about it until Gratia had mentioned it to us this past summer. So I wondered about that. Besides taking care of your grandmother and battling cancer, did your mom turn her attention to anything else once the divorce was finalized?

SLAYTON: I know she was still struggling with cancer, in and out of MD Anderson way too often. I think she tried to do some volunteering. I'm trying to remember who that was with. I remember she had tried several times to do some volunteering start-ups and they didn't really pan out because she couldn't keep the schedule going because of the cancer. I think a big part of life was just the community. What I mentioned in the article was she was I think the only, at least the only of the original seven wives, that came back to the reunions.

I know my stepmom wasn't real happy about that. I remember going to those too because these were like my uncles. If there was a reunion in Houston, man, I was there. I remember being there with all the guys. Some of them still had their old wives, most of them had new wives. John [H.] Glenn of course had Annie. There was dad and Bobbie and mom. Mom was her own person, mom was her own entity, she was a NASA personality, and she was as much of the original seven as the original seven were, which I thought was interesting.

I guess to answer your question, she was very involved in anything to do with NASA, and anything still going on with the wives. If there was any NASA thing happening she was definitely on that, but also very involved with her friends, and very involved with whatever were the people in her world, which at that time again was my grandmother. That was a lot of care, along with the cancer.

I was an only child, so even though I was in my twenties I was still, what, eight years old. That motherly caring and hounding never ended, which is wonderful. Like I mentioned in the article, I think everybody should have a mom like mom. As a therapist I work with some kids that have some horrible parents. So many people have not had good parents, and they struggle with parents. I just wish mom on all those people, because she was just such a good soulful loving person.

Like I mentioned in the article, she loved to go out and eat. It was kind of our big thing. She'd say, "I found this great new restaurant yesterday, let's go back there." We would go there and the waiter would come up, and he'd say, "Oh, how are you doing?"

She would start up a conversation. She knew his name, "Well, hi, John, how are you, doing? How's Nelly doing?"

"Well, she's doing better today."

"Well, what'd the doctor say?" This would go on and on, and he'd take the order and walk away.

I'd say, "Mom, I thought you just were here for the first time yesterday."

She'd go, "Yes." It's like, "You knew all that about him from being here once."

She just went, "Well, yes." Like isn't that what you do, what we all do. That was her. That was her world. If you moved into her orbit, man, she was going to know everything about you she could.

I don't think she had hobby hobbies. I think people were her hobbies. I think relationships were her hobbies. That was I guess where her time went during those years. She and Louise spent a lot of time together; I know that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I think I might know the answer, but I just wanted to ask. If there's one thing you want people to take away from this about your mom, what is that? What is that one thing?

SLAYTON: I guess like I've been saying she was just a warm and inviting person. If she walked into your world or you walked into her world, she fed you. She hugged you. She sat you down and wanted to know everything there was to know about you, not because she was nosy.

She was a prankster. Mom loved teasing and playing jokes. I mentioned in that article she was relentless, but she had this amazing sense of humor. I wrote that article because the person portrayed in *The Astronaut Wives Club* was not mom. Didn't even look like her. There was nothing snarky or dismissive about her. She was just the opposite in every regard. I think that's why they called her Mother Marge.

I have friends that were just amazing friends, but they grew up in families where nobody hugged. I remember my friend to this day coming over to the house. He would lock eyes on mom and he'd go stiff, because there was a hug coming. She was relentless, and she knew it, and she said, "I don't care." He would get a great big old hug, and that's the way it was. That's who mom was. Her whole life was a big hug.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Since your mother was this mom to so many people, what her interest was in the feminist movement. If you have any ideas about that. Was she interested in that?

SLAYTON: I think she was split. She had been a single woman working and living on her own in a man's world. One of the things she told me that she was very proud of as a young secretary was her ability to take dictation flawlessly while staying on the opposite end of the desk from the boss, who oftentimes was stalking her in circles around the desk.

So yes, the feminist movement I think was very much essential in her eyes. She understood that women, like people of color, like everybody, deserve a place at the table, my words, not hers, and that women need to be taken seriously, women need to be treated equally. She was very much in that regard.

She was also a military wife. I remember her and a lot of the other women talking about burning their bras. I remember over teatime hearing a lot of discussion about burning bras, but nobody ever burned their bras. Because again it was a conservative world we lived in. Mom understood the place of a wife in that world. So I think she was on both sides of that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It's interesting that you say that, because a lot of people have talked about how the astronaut wives in particular were very conservative. To hear you say that there was talk about feminism, but they realized their place.

SLAYTON: I know that talk was usually with mom and our neighbors, I don't know as that was ever with the wives. Most of those conversations were at the meetings, and the kids were not at those meetings. Who knows what they talked about at those meetings?

I'm a guy, so take this with a grain of salt. The world was not and still is not the same for women. Women do not get an equal share as do many other people in this world. Mom understood that, and mom knew it wasn't right. She also knew women were amazing and women were powerful, and I'm guessing other wives did too. They knew how to do this military thing. They knew, like we talked about earlier, your guy goes off for the day, you give him a kiss, you hand him his lunch bag, and he may not come home. That's a real possibility.

So you run the household. These guys get deployed. You run the household by yourself. You raise the kids by yourself. You take care of life by yourself. I don't know how many of them were feminists. But I think most women on some level—and again judgment call here—are probably feminists, because we live in a world that's not equal. If you live in a world that's not equal you understand [it's] not the same for me. I think she got that part.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did your mom ever talk to you, maybe later in life, about concerns that she might have had about all the women at the Cape [Canaveral, Florida] chasing after the guys? Was that ever a discussion?

SLAYTON: Yes. That whole Cape Cookies thing. I never heard that phrase until—was it *The Right Stuff*? I guess. I never heard that phrase up until then. I think that was a problem. I think that's why a lot of the guys ended up divorcing. You take a bunch of fighter pilots, testosterone-laden young men, make them famous, send them all around the world, yes, that's a pretty tough burden to bear. The women were everywhere.

I witnessed this myself. We would go somewhere in a large group, and whoever was organizing the event would have this stunningly attractive woman hanging on the arm of an astronaut, escorting him around. This is with the wives there. So yes, I think that was a real problem. I think it was a real challenge for those guys. Yes, that didn't help. Being gone all the time didn't help. Being gone for weeks on end. Yes, I think that was part of the reason why NASA brought Terry in, Dr. McGuire. They kind of realized that this is a setup. This whole thing is a setup for failure. We need to help these families in this regard.

Just a real quick sidenote. This is a little brain fart, but it's a story that needs telling. Mom and Louise Shepard went to go see *The Right Stuff* together, and they almost got thrown out of the theater, because they're sitting there and they were just so blown away by the inaccuracy of the whole thing. They're guffawing and, "Oh, that never happened!" They almost literally got thrown out because of that.

I asked dad about that, and he said the facts were all wrong, who's there and when and where and what and how he said was all mixed up and jumbled. He said, "But they got the feel right." He said the movie got the feel of the time beautifully even if they got the facts all wrong. And mom agreed with that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I just have one other question. I think we talked about this last time, but I wasn't sure if you had anything more to add. That was really the role your mom would play when there was a launch or a landing or even when there was an accident, a tragedy that happened in the astronaut corps. Was there sort of an unofficial/official role for your mom since she was the wife of the director of FCOD [Flight Crew Operations Directorate]?

SLAYTON: Probably informal. Mom never had a role, a title. I don't think any of that was ever formalized. It's just what she did. That's I guess the role she created for herself. So she was where she needed to be, and I guess she did what she needed to do. I don't think that was really formalized. Obviously dad's job was formalized, but I don't think hers ever was. She just was there where she needed to be.

ROSS-NAZZAL: There for the spouses when they needed her?

SLAYTON: Yes. I know every launch—again because I was a little guy, and I was an only child—she was at that house. She was at that wife's launch, and I was there with her. I remember being over at all the astronauts' houses. I remember being over at [Neil A.] Armstrong's house. Hanging out with their kids, just doing what kids do.

After the Apollo 1 fire, I remember she was gone a lot. There was no dragging kids or any of that. I had babysitters then because that was a hard time. It was a bad time. There was a lot of adult conversations and a lot of crying I'm sure. But again that was all kept from me.

I was older then, I was a lot older, I was 10. But yes, I know she was gone a lot with those wives. They all knew this stuff could happen. They all knew that this was the risk. It was just a nightmare that it actually happened. It had been pretty much flawless up to that point.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I think I've hit on all the things I came up with. Do you mind if I ask Sandra, if Sandra is there, if she has any questions for you?

JOHNSON: Can't think of anything. I think you've covered pretty much everything I've been thinking about. I appreciate it.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I wondered if there was anything else you wanted to add about your mom, something we might not have thought about in preparation.

SLAYTON: No. Just trying to think. I guess there was just one silly little story that I didn't put in the article. I remember when mom was living in Japan, her boss would take her to a lot of Japanese houses. I don't know who these houses were, I don't know what the role was. But I remember she was very hungry. Japanese food is very different. I remember her telling me they went over to this house, and there were these lovely little melon balls out there on the table. She went, "Oh my God, melon! I haven't had melon in forever." She popped a couple of these things in her mouth and then realized it was fish.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh no.

SLAYTON: She told me that she looked at her boss and her boss looked at her, and he gave her the look. That look was, "You'll eat that, and you'll not make a face." She said she chewed and chewed. She's never chewed so much in her entire life, getting that raw fish down. Said she had tears coming down her face. Just such a horrible experience. But then again she went on to love Japanese food and sushi after that. But that's the only thing I can think of. I appreciate your questions.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Thank you for giving us time and sharing your memories of your mom with us. We won't get a chance to interview so many of these wives. so it's nice that we can have some of these memories.

SLAYTON: Again, I think the [TV show] could have done a better job. The [show] peripherally hit on high notes but really didn't hit on how amazing these women were as individuals. They were all just interesting people. Each and every one of them was an interesting person. I guess one thing I've learned as a therapist is we're all interesting people. We just don't always get put into interesting circumstances. It's like they say, the presidency of the United States heightens everything about you. All your good points get better and all your worst points get worse. I think that's what fame does to people. It pushes you, and you either rise to the occasion or you crumble, and a lot of these women I think did a beautiful job. Guys too obviously, because we got to the Moon.

ROSS-NAZZAL: We certainly appreciate you sharing more of your morning than you anticipated with us.

SLAYTON: This is legacy. These people are passing. I'm 63 now. I'm not 11 years old watching a Moon launch anymore. So these memories are important. Like I mentioned in the article I wrote, there's only been a little bit made about these people and it's been terribly inaccurate. *The Right Stuff* was horribly inaccurate. *The Astronaut Wives Club* was horribly inaccurate. I think *Moonshot* was very good. That probably nailed it about as good as any of them. I appreciate the chance to tell these people's stories.

ROSS-NAZZAL: … Thank you again. We really appreciate it. We'll get the transcript to you hopefully sometime in the next couple months.

SLAYTON: All right, I appreciate that, thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it. Good to see you both again.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, good to see you too, I'm glad this worked out.

SLAYTON: Yes, yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: All right. Have a nice weekend.

SLAYTON: Thanks, you too, bye-bye.

ROSS-NAZZAL: All right, bye-bye.

JOHNSON: Thank you. Bye-bye.

[End of interview]