YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Tornado of 1985

Personal Experience

O.H 1295

NAOMI HAMRICK

Interviewed

by

Molly McNamara

on

October 31, 1989

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Mrs Naomi Hamrick of Niles has been a life long member of the Red Cross. As a child in school, Mrs. Hamrick became involved in the Red Cross She did volunteer work during World War II She volunteered to help with the tornado disaster of May 31, 1985 Mrs Hamrick stayed all night at the McKinley High School where the Red Cross was stationed She tried to comfort the victims who took refuge at the school. Today, at the age of eighty-one, Mrs Hamrick still enjoys volunteer work. She resides at 1107 Bruce Court in Niles, Ohio with her husband Bill

M This is an interview with Naomi Hamrick, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Tornado of 1985, by Molly McNamara, on October 31, 1989

Mrs Hamrick, tell me a little bit about yourself You started to tell me about going to school down at Youngstown before going to Youngstown State Tell me a little bit about that

- Well, it was then known as the YMCA School in Youngstown. This was back in the fall of 1926, up through 1930 or 1931 I registered for the night classes there First, taking some social sciences because I thought, at that time, I would like to be a social worker I guess maybe I still would like to be. I transferred then to accounting and took that I guess I went through summer and winter--most of the summers--until I could no longer go in 1930-31. Well, in the first place, I changed jobs in the middle of the Depression Well, right after it started I was a secretary at the church and churches were notoriously poor, and they did not have the money for a secretary Then I went to work for the metal products company in Niles and worked there until I was married in 1934.
- M Now, did you stop going to school because of the Depression?
- H Yes I did not have the money, so I quit, of course, intending to go back some day Actually, I had taken my youngest sister to raise, too. She had been with me, so that was really the reason I had to stop I did not have money enough to pay for her care and go to school, also
- M If you can, tell me how you got involved with the Red Cross from the start
- Well, during the war, I became interested and did some Red Cross work My husband went into the service, and my son went into the service I had five brothers in the service a sister, and three brothers-in-law. So all the men in my family were gone But I went to work at Lordstown Ordinance Depot My husband went overseas and I went to work and worked there for about three years Bill went into the South Pacific and was there for three and a half years Bill, Jr, in the meantime, had finished one year of college and went into the service So they were both gone That is when I went to work again

There I did personnel work at Lordstown Ordinance Depot and then quit when I thought my husband was coming home, but he did not come for six months He was in the South Pacific for three and a half years

- M That is a long time
- H So that is when I worked there Then from the time the war was over, I became very active and went to blood banks always. I had been interested in it before I went to work Then when the war ended, right at the time when it faded off, I did volunteer work in it In 1951 we began the blood program in Trumbull County It started in Trumbull County

in September and Niles joined it in October I became active again

- M· What exactly did you do?
- H. In the beginning, I drove a car to take people back and forth to the blood bank. Then, I gradually got into doing any station at the blood bank, except the nurse's stations. I have worked with that ever since 1951. I am not too active since Bill has been ill, but I have always worked with the blood banks. We used to have four a year. We now have twenty-one. It is a lot more work. Then I became very active in Warren and I am not just exactly sure, I guess in the service to military family's department.

The Red Cross has to do two things in any chapter You have to give services to the service ban and you have to take care of disasters. Those two things you have to do Any other thing that you do, like the blood program, the swim programs and all of those are elective for your area. You do not have to do them. I became interested in the service to military families and began to work in that. Then eventually, I just went into the rest of the programs, and I cannot tell you how long ago, but quite a few years ago, I became a member of the board of the Trumbull County Chapter. I was not a member of this board. Bill used to be. But in the last six or eight years, I was active on this board down here. I have remained very active in several departments. Actually, in all of them except the safety services. I am not the athletic type. I never went into that. But I have been active in all the other departments.

- M What departments would those be?
- H The blood department, the service to military families, the volunteer department, and I have helped with the transportation in Niles, worked in the offices, just helping with whatever there might be that needed to be done
- M You sound very well-rounded then
- H' Yes Well, over thirty-five years you become very active in things. I really do not do things unless I very thoroughly enjoy them, and then when I do it, I stay with it and thoroughly enjoy what I am doing Through the Red Cross, I have made many, many wonderful friends and I think maybe that is my reward for what I have done They are very fine people to work with. So I have thoroughly enjoyed it always. Along with that, as far as working with the tornado, I knew what needed to be done That was one of the reasons I was down there People want to volunteer but they do not know always know what they can do and what they cannot do I also was active with the Niles community service and they do not do anything in disasters, but through that I knew what to do with foods and that kind of thing
- M So with your experience then, you knew what to do Let's back up first Let's go to May 31, 1985. Where were you on that day? Do you remember?

- $H \cdot$ I was out someplace, I remember that I rushed in late and got dinner I had gotten dinner over fairly quickly and I was in the kitchen and heard fire engines and ambulances and everything going in all directions So I finished and walked up to the corner to see what had happened I met one of the neighbors and they said, "Oh, there's been a tornado" I heard it, but I just thought it was thunder. I really did not realize that it was a tornado She told me that it hit out at the cemetery and in that area So I immediately jumped in the car and went down to Mr Thimble's, and found out he was gone His son was there and he said that they would not be back for a couple of days I knew that the shelter should be set up at the high school I went down there before anyone got there, before Warren got there Of course, they had the supplies We were just there and the school was open Mr. Sidick was there We could not get a telephone line through to Warren to find out where the first aid department was and so forth So I got in the car and went to Warren I went up the back way, out Park Avenue, and in that way. I got into the Chapter House and they said, "How did you get here? We cannot get out of town"
- M. I was just going to ask you how you got there.
- Well, I went out Park Avenue to Highland Avenue I went in Highland Avenue They had not gotten that far yet and they said, "Well, a van and a truck are on its way down to Niles with people" So I came back that way and brought a doctor and some of the people down so they could be there At that time, we did not know whether there were any injuries.
- M I was going to ask you You said you did not know what the extent of the damage was yet?
- Η No We had no idea how much there was or whether there were people that were injured or not You have to be prepared for that When I got back to Niles, the truck got through That was kind of interesting They started down and the police gave orders that no one was to come through into Niles. They would not let the Red Cross van through. They finally said they had not received word yet that the Red Cross was to go through anywhere So they finally convinced someone on a motorcycle and he said that he would take them through So they got in the car and had not come very far when another alert was sounded They had to get out of the car and go find a spot, which delayed them Then the policeman who was bringing them down got a call that someone was holding up one of these dairy stores, Lawson's, and it was right on his route, so he had to stop They had to stop while he went in and arrested the guy, put him in his car, and then brought them as far as they needed to get them through to Niles So they finally did make it They had all the first aid equipment and everything Within and an hour or so, Akron and Cleveland trucks and vans arrived and they had the equipment to set up the shelter They had the cots and the bedding and everything Of course, long before, arrangements had been made to use the high school There was a little confusion Another group decided

to set up at the Junior High School.

- M. Yes I remember that
- I went up and told them they should not be there and the policeman told me they were going to set up a shelter there and he did not care what anybody said. I said, "Well, it's alright, but you will have to move it" So I ended up moving it back down at the shelter Very shortly the man who was in charge got in from Cleveland He went up and they moved it in a hurry. You only have one shelter, you do not try to have two So they moved all the food and things They were accumulating a lot of things up here.
- M That fast, they were accumulating things?
- Oh, yes Food and everything They brought it all down to the high school then So we set up in the cafeteria and they set up the beds in some of the rooms. Of course, there was no electricity, and by this time it was getting very dark. We finally got generators so that we could have some light. We had two generators and two lights and guess where we had to put them? In the men's and ladies' restrooms They had to have them there So we still operated with flashlights I ian home and gathered up flashlights and candles and cans and things to put them in. That is what we worked with all night.

A call went out over the 1adio for food and clothing and it began to come in Sunday morning, it was piled, great huge piles, all over the building The fire department came in and told us we had to get it out of the halls and get it moved So I called Betsy Wallace on Sunday morning. I think I got her at Sunday school I asked her if she would line up some of the neighbors here and bring them down so that they could pick out the clothing, sort it so we would have clothing to give to people. Children's clothing, particularly baby's clothing, and that sort of thing Because this was piled in great, huge piles These girls, there must have been ten or twelve of them, came in and worked Betsy Wallace and the girls worked all day Sunday and they sorted and marked so that we would know sizes These people came in who lost all of their clothes, lost everything, and we were able to give them some clothing Baby things were at a real premium Of course, all stores were closed, but the Red Cross could get in to get baby food until we could get some there. There was somebody at all of the markets around Of course, they could not let the people in the store, they just had to go get them what they wanted because there were no lights It would have been bedlam. There probably would not have been anything left in the store Anyway, we were able to do that sort of thing through the night and over the weekend When people are caught and left with absolutely nothing, it is pretty bad Of course, there was no gas in all the places, there was no electricity A lot of people cooked with electricity. We could cook at the high school We did have gas They could cook there We served food to places like McKinley Towers, where everything was electrical

M I did not realize that you cooked for all of those people

H They took food to them This was all donated food. The Red Cross unit with food had not arrived yet All of the fast food places out along the strip had all this food. They were closed, but they cooked the meats and brought them to us. We principally started out to feed the people who were working, the National Guard had come in and then there were many, many volunteers that came, and they started out to take coffee to them and send them sandwiches. So these fast food places were all bringing in all these sandwiches

M I did not know they did that

H They did They were all very good McDonald's, Burger King, they all brought it to us We were distributing out in the areas where people were working. Of course, there were people, just some of them were guarding their own homes that had been partially destroyed. It covered a lot of areas. The area off of North Road, there was the area down here off of Vienna Avenue, there was the Shadow Ridge area, there was the area clear out on 422, and that is where the buildings had gone down and where most of the deaths were. How we got by with the damage that was done and only nine deaths, I will never know. But it was a remarkable thing.

All the people that were there working, trying to get rubble cleared away and the roads cleared, and so forth, we started out by trying to feed them through that night, and that is how we did it With this, of course, by morning, if we did eat anything we did buy it and the Red Cross eventually did pay for it. Or we needed something and we would just give them money that was out of our own pockets to pay for it because we would need coffee or cream or something We were receiving all this food, and of course, the electricity was off at that high school and the cafeteria was pretty well cleared out because it was summer, school was going to be out, or it was out

M I think it was

H They were all set up for graduation outside, then they set it up inside I know there was a lot of commotion at that time So the convenient market down on the corner of Main Street and Federal Street and several places brought in ice. We put it in the cooler and we were able to keep meats and so forth Some of these places just sent meat in to keep the food cold At that time, I was on the board of health, when the state board of health came in and someone said, "Well, one of the members of our board is at the shelter and I am sure everything is alright." So they came in. But we had enough ice that we kept everything very cold There was no spoilage of food Ellen Sharkey eventually took care of the kitchen She would organize and send these groups out at night, there were probably eight or ten cars with two or three people, who would take food and coffee all night and all day long to these people I think it was the next Tuesday that the Red Cross food wagons came in. Up until then, we did it

M All out of the high school?

Η All out of the high school and all with donated food Along with that, people are so generous, we had that cafeteria half full of food, canned goods, bread, a lot of things A lot of these people had no facilities for fixing anything. Their food was gone I cannot remember the name of the street off of North Road, but every house on that street had something happen to it Two or three were completely demolished. I know the one at the end totally went into the creek. These people had nothing and they came, some of them, a few of them stayed at the shelter I do not think we housed more than ten people, but there were people who came in and offered their homes So people would come in and they did not have any place to go, and a couple times these people were right there and they just took the one home with them and kept them all night Then the shelters were, by 9.00, set up with beds Of course, they were working in the dark, too They worked only with flashlights. That was all taken care of and everyone, there were a number of people, probably thirty, that was without any place to stay that night, was housed by various people in the city, except maybe ten or twelve who stayed at the shelter We did use the shelter somewhat, because these people that were out working in the area had worked all day and this was at night and the National Guard and some of them were just totally exhausted, and they would come in and sleep a little bit and then go back out and work again

The amount of clothing that came in was astronomical Not all of the clothing was usable One of the things they do not need in a disaster is dirty clothes, and we had a lot of them that were so filthy dirty you did not even want to touch them The people that were going to get them had no way of washing them We got evening dresses We even got a tuxedo or two. But then one of the churches, I do not remember which one, the Red Cross made an arrangement with and they went over everything and packaged it and had it ready so they could give these people clothing Little children, particularly, because everything they had was gone. That happened a lot of times They had what they had on their backs Families with young children would come in and they had just what they had on their back Everything else would be gone So we were able to give them that help temporarily and help them get through those first days

Then the food wagons came in and the Salvation Army moved in over on Woodglen. The Salvation Army moved in and they began to feed those people They continued to have to work in that area though, for over a year After the Red Cross food wagons came in, we closed the kitchen down there, used up what food we had, and did not accept any more from anyone, and gave out the food, the canned goods and the bread and so forth, that they brought in to us and disposed of all of it. Then we closed that after five or six days. This was a twenty-four hour operation We worked around the clock.

- M You stayed down there, too, right?
- Yes. I think from Friday night until the next Thursday night I came home, I left there nineteen hours altogether I knew what was available and where it was I knew where trained volunteers were and so when they would want somebody to do something, I would be able to call them and get them to me in and until such time as they set up The

state came in and took the whole gym They moved in dozens of desks and twenty-five or thirty telephone lines. The Federal Government came in, and the American Red Cross had another section. Then they took over and from then on, they did what work needed to be done

- M So that relieved your job, somewhat.
- Yes We did not have any more of that, I felt, the Niles Red Cross was responsible for. I knew the Red Cross was responsible, but they did not have all the facilities. They set up a kitchen in Warren at a school there and they began to feed the people of Newton Falls They sent somebody to Newton Falls and someone came down here and they sent truckloads of clothing to Wheatland and that sort of thing We began to move things in and out where we knew there were areas that needed them. We had a truckload of blankets come in Great huge truckloads of food from down south came in Then those were distributed to people who had lost what they had

We had people come in who were just kind of in a daze. The only thing we could do for them was talk to them. So that is what we would do; get them to talk about their difficulties and what happened to them. For instance, there was a woman who lived down on Cynthia Street that had moved in the house the Wednesday before and there were no curtains up in the house. They were going to put them up over the weekend. It was a new house and the rods had to go up, so this was going to be their weekend project. They had everything ready and she was walking from the kitchen through the dining room and she saw the funnel cloud coming. She ran to the basement and stayed down there--of course it passed momentarily--it was not a very long time, and she came back upstairs and opened the door at the top of the steps and stepped right outside. A whole half of her house just disappeared

- M Who was that?
- H I do not remember the name
- I was going to say I might have interviewed her I interviewed a few people down on Cynthia and it sounds like one of the stories that I heard
- H It is amazing how just talking about it helps people
- M I am sure.
- H They did They stayed, some of them all night, and they did not lay down, but they would talk to you. We would give them coffee and try to make them as comfortable as possible in candlelight Then, we continued to feed the people who were working and the volunteers who came in. And I remember my first view of the cemetery. It was the most terrific shock I ever had in my life It looked just like a brush heap, like you would pile a

lot of brush up only it was just huge All of those trees were down Everything was down The Amish people and a lot of other volunteers, were amazing with the volunteer work they do. They came in with their own saws and cleared every tree There were 263 trees in that cemetery They cleared every tree and every twig and every leaf by Thursday night I came home from a show on Thursday night, my husband and I went out for dinner, and there was not one thing in that cemetery and you never saw anything look so awful

- M I know A couple of people told me it looked like Lebanon, it was desolate
- Oh, it was the most horrible thing Of course, no one was hurt there. But it really had more of an effect because it was a large area and it just took it completely. There were several homes in the Shadow Ridge area that were demolished or almost demolished And then, of course, there was more devastation out on 422. The people came in to work, Ethel Bride came in, but other people would come in and say that they wanted to do something Well, they went to the city building and they assigned them where to go to work. They started that right away. Because it was so much and the city workers unfortunately this is one of my greatest gripes everybody else was in trouble but they received double pay.

M I did not know that

H. I was never so mad in my life. That is the union and that is the way it was set up I know one man came into the shelter and he just had a free lunch, which he was not really entitled to, but we did not say no to anyone. There were a lot of people that came in and they would make a donation to Red Cross because it was more convenient for these people who were working at the building to eat there, and they would eat and pay for it. But this one fellow said, "Boy, I am going to need a truck to take my pay home "They worked so hard. They worked around the clock Some of them worked for a couple of days without any stopping at all. That made me very angry and finally I said to him, "I do not believe that I would talk like that around here if I were you You are in a room full of people who are without a home or roof over their head." I was so mad at him I do not know who he was I wish I would have had sense enough to ask who he was and, certainly I would have gone to his boss and done whatever I could so he would not collect any more pay I was so angry with him

People came in to offer their time, and we finally set up a pool There was one particular table in the canteen, and I would say to the people, "If you would go over there and sit down, in a few minutes somebody will come along and they will want someone" Within ten or fifteen minutes, they would be gone Someone would need a volunteer for something and they would come in and get them. That was the only way we could do it You could not keep lists of names, and so forth Then you started out doing that and did, to some extent When the National Guard came in, they wanted records and somebody said, "Oh, we did not keep any," and I said, "Yes we did, for a while," and we had to turn

those over People that brought in the food and that sort of thing, we kept a record of But the main thing was that we fed the people who really could not get anything at home and kept them fed from the night of the tornado until Tuesday, when the trucks came

See, those trucks have to come in from all over the country We do not have a food truck service in Trumbull County They set up a kitchen in Warren which was more centrally located. Up in the county, in Mesopotamia, there was a great deal of devastation and they had to serve up there, too So they put the kitchen in up in Warren where they cooked at one of the schools, East Junior High School, I think they called it It was out on Mahoning Avenue Anyhow, they would go out with this hot food for them and they kept feeding them for several weeks They had to go in to some areas for a long time because some homes were badly damaged and everyone did not want to leave their homes. There was one man over on Woodglen, finally they had to tear down his house, it was not stable after the tornado and he would not leave He moved out to the garage and stayed.

Now, I continued to work with this Some money had come in from the B&O Railroad and from a couple of companies, and some \$85,000 was accumulated. Some of them had taken this, it did not come in designated. The B&O railroad said they wanted it to go to the people of Niles. And in Newton Falls, they did the same thing I think that check was for \$40,000 or \$45,000 They presented it to the Red Cross, but the check was made out to the city of Niles Some of them did take it and put it aside All of these groups that do this funding, the Red Cross, the Federal Government, the Salvation Army, whatever, they all have very strict guidelines and there are always a lot of cases that kind of fall through the cracks

Some of them thought there should be somebody to help with those things that would come up For instance, this happened in the spring In the fall, when children went to go back to school, they did not have boots, they did not have warm jackets, and so forth, and we knew that that sort of thing might happen. So this money was set up, and they held it to be used just for the people in Niles

We had several meetings, the ministers in town finally became interested and they kind of took over on this They had some meetings and it was decided that they would have someone to direct this and pay them out of this money and I would not permit it I absolutely refused I said, "No, you people took that money from an agency that was giving them assistance and it was to go to the people of Niles, so that is where it is going to go." There are volunteers that can handle this For instance, Fremont Camporito was not working at the time, and Frank Basset had retired and they were both very capable people I had hoped they would be able to take over and direct this I stopped any of this money to pay someone, but Catholic Charities came down from Warren that day They were a very reliable group I did not know them personally But Kate McCullough, who is the director there, said she had someone who would come in in the summer months and could direct this

A group from the Methodist Church, not the local church, but from the Methodist brotherhood, said they would pay her salary for the summer So they did, and they set up an office at the Board of Education building and then in the Lutheran Church and Sue

Heatherington was that person They had a board that acted on everything She would inspect and she would get the material accumulated and they would take action on as to what we could do.

The government can give people \$5,000 That is the most they can give The Red Cross has some limitations on what they can do in helping to rebuild Well, there were a lot of people who maybe had enough to repair the house, but would not have enough to furnish and this sort of thing So they worked on that and I worked through the summer in that office As a matter of fact, through the year It took a year. They rebuilt Woodglen Avenue, and totally built two homes A group of people, and I wish I could remember who they are, it is a church group and I think it was originally United Brethren Church from up in Michigan, this is their hobby They are retired.

We had a couple come in here and a couple of women who taught us how to set up this office to help these people and what to do, and then the one woman stayed, and her husband was a retired contractor, and he is the one who took charge of rebuilding all of these places. They were able to rebuild or repair. Sue Heatherington could tell you the names of these two groups. I cannot remember them. They lived up here at the Methodist Church all summer and they were the people who went in. This was all volunteer. The Amish people came in and built the Sisko barn. Mr. Sisko had enough money, enough insurance that he could buy the material, but he could not afford to rebuild the barn. It was a big barn that cost more than he had. But he was able to buy the material and they put it up for him. In a matter of four days, I think, they put up that barn. They went in and did the same thing to houses over on Woodglen Avenue.

Now the houses in the Shadow Ridge area and down on Cynthia Street, those were newer homes and were all covered by insurance with their mortgages, so we had to do very little in those areas. We might have had to help with some clothing or something with the children until they could get straightened around and get their insurance and so forth, but we did not have to help rebuild their homes. Woodglen, we did, and we helped those people all the way. Some of them had some insurance. One man was so proud that he had insurance to cover his. He was not going to need any help. Well he came to find out that he was about \$25,000 short of being able to replace his house and it took a little doing, but this group went in and talked to him and they drew plans for a house. He had enough money from his insurances to buy the materials and then enough left to furnish the house. They went in and built the house for him, there were plumbers, electricians, everyone. Unfortunately, the city of Niles was very busy trying to put up the general lines, but they actually did not do very much to help the individual families. As a matter of fact, to the best of my knowledge, they did nothing

M It was more the volunteers All volunteer

H It was all volunteer work These were all electricians, but these were people who had retired and this is what they do with their lives Some of them left here and--there was a hurricane or something down on the gulf--went down there, and this is their dedication They are wonderful because they have been through it and they know and they gave us a

great deal of information that we could pass on to people when we were working with the group afterward about the insurances and what you can do and so forth. They were very, very helpful to us and saved people a lot But the most interesting part of it was being at the shelter and hearing these people. People would come in with money and whatever they came in with, I took and turned it over to the Red Cross, or they would always ask if they wanted to go to the Red Cross or some other fund. We gave it to whatever they wanted it to go for But dozens and dozens of people came in Hundreds came in and wanted to work.

- M Let me ask you just one last question Out of this whole event, this whole terrible thing, what is the greatest thing that stands out in your mind, if there is one thing, that you can remember?
- H Well, I suppose it would be the generosity of people
- M That really impressed you? It sounds like that It is funny, but everybody tells me that Everybody tells me the same thing
- H You just cannot imagine people being that good
- M Sure you can, in an event like that
- No, a lot of people were not A lot of people I thought should have done something did not do anything, did not give any money toward it. But that happens in every disaster In the disasters that happen now, they did not happen here, so a lot of the people would have forgotten People that you would not expect to hear from and the people that worked, and are still working very hard for the Red Cross, they came in and they do a very great deal and have continued to work with us and with the Niles community service Of course, that is one office here and so the work really does not overlap, but the services you give do You work for Niles community service part of the time, part of the time you work for the Red Cross. The Food program is the Niles community service The same people work, though, in both of them. They have been
- M Is there anything that you can think of that might be relevant to this or anything that you would like to add that I have not come across, or have not asked you?
- You know, I have not really thought about it from the time. Other than being terribly impressed with the people who were so generous with their time and with these groups that came in, like the Amish people had their own bus, came in, brought their own food with them, went home at night, and they worked until dark, and would be back early the next morning. They did it day after day after day. These church people who devote--Sue Heatherington can tell you what they are because she keeps up with them--but the group out of Michigan and the people that were at the church, the men, and they brought their

own cook The Red Cross did pay for their food They lived there and slept on cots all summer There must have been ten or twelve of them at all times, and they are the people who did the work, repaired, actually Woodglen Avenue was and is much better than before the tornado because every house was damaged so every house was painted at the same time. And then we even had a little bit of money left and they bought trees and planted them, gave them to people to plant. So they really came out of it much better. Of course, they earned it because some of them lived in pretty awful circumstances through that whole summer. Fortunately, we took a year, just a year from a day, and every house that we had anything to do with, every home was completed and everything was back in it which was in record time. It took them much longer than that up in the Mesopotamia area. They did not have the direction, the people did not know and for several days, they would not even let anyone in to the areas and they sort of uncovered pockets of poverty up there that was uncanny. The Red Cross went in and worked with them for even longer.

- M I want to thank you very much for letting me interview you This was a great interview
- H Well, I do not know if it was very helpful, but it was pleasant, it was very nice.
- M. Thank you.

End of Interview