

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

November 11, 1950

Description: In the interview segment, ER interviews television host and "number one shopping expert" Kathi Norris and her husband Wilbur Stark.

Participants: ER, Kathi Norris, Wilbur Stark

[ER:] Visiting with me in my living room today is a young lady known as the number one shopping expert in the country, who brings her knowledge and advice into your homes through television. She is Kathi Norris, who is seen and heard on NBC television. Miss Norris.

[Kathi Norris:] Mrs. Roosevelt, thank you very much. It's indeed a pleasure to be visiting with you in your living room today, I thoroughly enjoy it.

[ER:] And before we go any further, I also want to introduce your husband, Wilbur Stark. As I understand, he plays an important part in your work [Kathi Norris: Mhm.] Mr. Stark.

[Wilbur Stark:] Well, really I don't. The only thing I actually have to do is just say, "Take it easy, dear. Take it easy." [ER, and Kathi Norris laugh]

[Kathi Norris:] That's important sometimes, but I really, I can't let it go at that because he plays a much more important part in my work than that.

[ER:] Well, it's- it's fun I think when two people are working at something together. That makes um uh a sort of joint-job, which is grand.

[Kathi Norris:] It does, and especially when he takes most of the burden, that makes it even more fun.

[Wilbur Stark:] Do you mean by taking care of the money part of it, dear? [Kathi Norris laughs]

[Kathi Norris:] Well that sometimes is a burden too. [ER chuckles] But, basically the business affairs. (1:19)

[ER:] Well, before the broadcast you were telling me so many things that I know our listeners would like to hear, I hardly know where to begin. I think first we'd like to hear a bit about your program, a behind-the-scenes account, so to speak. Do you personally have to try out all the things you recommend to your audience?

[Kathi Norris:] Well, I usually try to try them out mainly because I'm curious and enjoy using them or trying them, but I don't necessarily recommend everything that I show to the audience. Uh there are many things, much to the chagrin of some of the manufacturers, [Wilbur Stark chuckles] that I show that I don't recommend at all but I only show them because mine tries to be a shopping program in which I present the items that are new, interesting, practical, and available--or about to be available. And I think that if an item is going to be available and it isn't necessarily the very best, or at least if I, in my use, have find something about it that I don't like, then I pass that along to the viewers too. And where my husband comes in is he sees that I'm thoroughly insured against anything that might result from that. [Kathi Norris and Wilbur Stark laugh]

[ER:] Well, eh-I don't think in any way uh that you, really should recommend ev-everything, and yet um people have different tastes and different needs [Kathi Norris: that's--] and something that you yourself might not want at all would be something that somebody else would want very much. [Kathi Norris: that's true.] And in a shopping program [Kathi Norris: Mhm.] on television, you really would have to cater to a very wide uh area [Kathi Norris: Mhm.] of taste and interest. (3:05)

[Kathi Norris:] That's uh exactly the reason that I don't recommend everything because sometimes uh-uh well, for instance if I take a toy home and, and try it out on my own child and she breaks it, I can show it and say that it--originally I thought it was good. My child break--broke it--your child may thoroughly enjoy it. [ER chuckles]

[Wilbur Stark:] I think sometimes they get enjoyment out of breaking it too.

[Kathi Norris:] Well, now that's a point, but why pay good money for that? [Kathi Norris and Wilbur Stark laugh]

[ER and Kathi Norris overlap here]

[ER:] Well, I've um I've found that usually children uh like things that aren't really bought toys at all, they're just the things they happen to find around the house--

[Kathi Norris:] That's right, like a coffee pot.

[ER:] And, and turn into toys!

[Kathi Norris:] That's--we uh Pamela was playing this-this morning with a-a coffee pot that I had once tried for the program that is a pump--a coffee pump. And frankly um it- it lost its value as a coffee pot and she thinks it's the most valuable toy that she has at this point.

[ER:] Well, that's very apt to be the case, I think. Um one is--um one must, however, do a great deal, I should think uh of just looking round to find all these things, how do you do that?

[Kathi Norris:] Well, in the first place, I think the um part of it is that I have a very wonderful staff, and secondly, I--instead of looking around, because we feel that once an item gets into the store, it's sort of old hat, why we go to the, directly to the manufacturers and uh plead with them that before it's anyplace else, may we show it? (4:39)

[ER:] You get them, in other words, to keep you informed [Kathi Norris: Yes.] as to what are the new things that they're going to [Kathi Norris: Mhm.] have a, so that you're a little bit ahead of the stores [Kathi Norris: Yes.] always [Kathi Norris: Mhm.]. You're telling people ahead of time [Kathi Norris: Yes, mhm]. Uh but I should think you'd have to almost uh not only go to the manufacturers um but go in person and see--or do you do that, Mr. Stark?

[Wilbur Stark:] No, frankly I don't. I uh spend most of my time in trying to sell other shows. [ER, Kathi Norris, and Wilbur Stark laugh]

[ER:] Now, Elliott is looking at me sternly, so we have to wait for a minute. [ER chuckles]

(Break: 5:14-5:25)

[ER:] So far, Miss Norris, you've made it all sound very simple, but I have a feeling there must be some problems. Would you tell us about some of them?

[Kathi Norris:] Well, I think everything involves problems, and some of mine are--I- I- I can tell the brighter ones, maybe. Most of them actually stem from the um fact that television today is um a medium in which maybe most of us are somewhat-uh, well--we can't predict everything that's going to happen, such as the day I attempted to demonstrate a new type of rolling pin and I wanted to see that everything was set up just perfectly before I ever did it on the air. So I made the dough and had it out, then I went about and did something else on the program first. And by the time I got to the demonstration of the rolling pin, well the lights had done something perfectly horrible to the dough and I couldn't roll it; it was just like glue! [Wilbur Stark chuckles] And the rolling pin had worked beautifully at home! So, at first I didn't quite know what to do and uh I washed it off and started again, bravely, and it st-it just gummed all up around the rolling pin, so I finally hit upon the fact that it was the lights and simply explained it as being one of the things that happens on television that you just can't avoid. Then, of course, I'm always saying if- if I really believe that something is thoroughly wonderful and- and start to show it as such, it seems to me that something always goes wrong, either the plug isn't plugged in- in which--if its electrical and then I have to scrounge around looking for a- a socket or uh something that- that in my enthusiasm I have uh-uh forgotten to do and, therefore, uh those are most of the problems connected with the show, I think. Those are things that happen right on it. (7:10)

[ER:] Well, one always has problems of that kind, I think.

[Wilbur Stark:] Well, I- I- I think one of the other problems, and I--and I think it's a particularly good one too, is the fact that some of the viewers' problems are transmitted to Kathi. For instance, as a result of having the Shopper show on for almost two years now, she uh actually shops for many viewers, even for things that she doesn't have on the program. So that uh very often Kathi will get a- get a request from a viewer for some odd, interesting thing that the woman can't find anywhere, and Kathi and her staff have to go shopping for it. And they do.

[Kathi Norris:] Have to? But--we don't really have to but we enjoy it because we get such a- a thrill out of realizing that she's gotten it.

[ER:] But you really do go shopping for things when people write in like that?

[Kathi Norris:] Oh, yes.

[ER and Kathi Norris overlap here]

[ER:] Oh, we--I wish I'd known sooner! [Kathi Norris laughs] Because today in my mail [Kathi Norris: Yes.] I got a request from a little girl--from the mother of a little girl [Kathi Norris: Mhm.] who said I must know where to get everything and she wanted a monkey for her little girl [Kathi Norris: That, I--] [laughter] and would I please get one through Mrs. [Vijaya Laksmi] Pandit, as she heard there were a lot of monkeys in India.

[Kathi Norris:] I'll tell her a better place to get one. [Kathi Norris laughs]

[ER:] You know a good place to buy monkeys?

[Kathi Norris:] Yes, I do. As a matter of fact this parallels an experience of my own, because one of my viewers wrote me that she had seen an organ-grinder on the street with a sweet-faced monkey. Now, at least your lady didn't ask for a sweet-faced monkey. [ER laughs] So would I kindly find her a sweet-

faced monkey, but it--this expression that the organ grinder's monkey had--it had to duplicate that expression, so we-- [ER: Good heavens] Yes, they named it Kathi. [Kathi Norris, ER and Wilbur Stark laugh]

[ER:][loud exclamation] Oh, I think that's wonderful!

[Kathi Norris:] And I get progress reports on Kathi the sweet-faced monkey. [Wilbur Stark chuckles]

[ER, Kathi Norris, and Wilbur Stark overlap here]

[ER:] Oh, that's wonderful. Well, you and I should compare our mail every day.

[Kathi Norris:] Yes--

[Wilbur Stark:] I'd love to go out there and talk to the monkey too.

[Kathi Norris:] Or-or, you send me uh any-any of your shopping requests and I shall send you those questions that they ask me that I can't answer. (9:00)

[ER:] You can't--[ER laughs] Well now I want to change and talk about something else because the other day Elliott and I discussed the ever-present problem of married women with children having a career. Surely you come under this heading, and could you tell us how you accomplish this with such apparent ease and success.

[Kathi Norris:] Well, I feel that my uh when you say that I am a married woman with children and have a career, I consider that being married and having a child is my career. And aside from that, I am a working mother. And I think that there are certainly a great number of working mothers in the country today who uh more than ever I believe--who can uh appreciate that it isn't really too difficult, but I think one of the important things is to always remember that marriage and uh being the--a mother or at the head of the--assistant head of the family--[Wilbur Stark chuckles] is the real career and that the job should never uh supersede that career.

[ER:] Well that's interesting and I'm coming back to it in a few seconds from now or minutes from now because it's hard never to have the job interfere with uh the home [Kathi Norris: You're right.] and we'll come back to that in a minute, Elliott's going to say a few words.

(Break 10:24-10:46)

[ER:] You just said, Ms. Norris, that to be a successful working wife and mother um one must always remember that one's first job is to be a wife and mother and one's other job must not interfere with that but you have to be on television at a certain hour every day [Kathi Norris: Mhm.], and uh I happen to remember when my children were young how many illnesses there were, how many things came when um Mother really was almost an essential then at times! And how do you manage to always be there?

[Kathi Norris:] Well, as a matter of fact um I- I don't think you can, really. Uh Pamela goes to school in the morning, we leave the house about the same time; sometimes I leave a little bit earlier for the studio. But um I have stayed out on occasion when she was- when she was ill, and I think that that that my viewers uh most of whom after all are mothers uh can understand that perfectly well and that's another case in which my wonderful sweetie comes in because he can always step in and do the program quite well. But, uh I think that it's uh an important thing for-for mothers who are at home all the time without any jobs, sometimes envying those of us who do have jobs, to remember uh that we have those problems

and those days that are extremely uh hard on us, really. For instance, I live in Peter Cooper Village and I know that I can look out my window in the morning and I see the other women in their uh house coats sometimes or at least in their little morning frocks getting breakfast or doing dishes and uh just around the house and they don't have to rush and be sure that their lipstick is on and so on. And I often think to myself, or occasionally, "that must be nice." But then I'm sure that when they see me going out at eight o'clock, eight-thirty in the morning, all dressed and ready to start an-an exciting day, they probably look out and think to themselves, "oh how heavenly that would be, that looks like real fun." But, I have said to my own viewers that I--when they are at home watching the show, with their children, they should remember a little incident that happened to me, well just the other day, and I think it's repeated often enough for those of us who work to repeat it again, uh, that when I started out Pamela said, "Don't go to the studio this morning, Mommy. Please don't go." And uh- uh fairly holding onto me, and I really, I had to go, so um but I thought to myself if those mothers who look out the window and are at home with their children could realize this--that we go through emotionally when we do go to work uh with our children, I think that they would sometimes turn around and give their own children a big hug and be sort of happy that they're staying at home with them all the time. (13:42)

[Wilbur Stark:] Well uh- I uh I'd just like to say this, Kathi, that, uh--

[Kathi Norris:] That I don't have to work?

[Wilbur Stark:] No, [Kathi Norris laughs] you don't have to work. I don't think any woman really has to work [Kathi Norris: I know.] but I think every woman should work, whether it's at home, part-time, or at some hobby that she particularly likes. But I think the thing that uh most women should consider more than the fact that they stay with their children at particular times or with them is what actually their thoughts are. Because if the thought is for the child at all times, regardless of the fact that you're away for an hour, two hours, or eight hours, the time that you spend with that child means a lot more to the child and just the fact that lots of mothers I think and--I don't know of any but uh I'd rather not say, but I- I think that lots of them do just take the children and accept them and the fact that they are at home and they actually resent the fact that they do have to work with them all the time. Therefore, I think that if a mother gets away for a while, and she's the right kind of a mother, that she'll spend more time and thought and creative time and thought on the child.

[ER:] Well, I [ER clears her throat] I do agree with you, but it makes an enormous difference, the relationship between the mother and the child and the fact that the mother does give herself completely to the child when she is with her [Kathi Norris: Mhm.] would make a tremendous difference. [Kathi Norris: Mhm.] But um nevertheless, I do think that um probably that uh desire on the part of your small daughter for you to stay home was something that is in a great many children. Children are very possessive [Kathi Norris: Mhm.], and she just wanted to insist that you belong to her. It wasn't really anything but that. But um she wanted to claim you that day and see that you do what she wanted. (15:33)

[Wilbur Stark:] Who was that wonderful woman who had twelve and worked?

[ER, Kathi Norris, and Wilbur Stark overlap]

[Kathi Norris:] Doctor Lillian Gilbreth [Kathi Norris chuckles]

[ER:] Oh, Dr.-- yes. [Kathi Norris and Wilbur Stark laugh] She's an old friend of mine [Kathi Norris: Oh-] I've always loved her and loved the way she did her work and- and brought up those children. And now, we must stop for a minute before our last uh talk.

(Break 15:52-16:06)

[ER:] We just spoke about Dr. Lillian Gilbreth and you probably read her children's books, [Kathi Norris: Yes.] the books her children wrote, which I thought were delightful. [Kathi Norris: Wonderful.] And uh I remember her because she was an efficiency engineer [Kathi Norris: Mhm.] devising the most remarkable shortcuts in the house that I have [Kathi Norris: Mhm.] ever seen [Kathi Norris: Mhm.]. But she didn't have many of the things that we have today like frozen foods and concentrates and dehydrated products and ready-mixes so uh I don't suppose she could use all those things, but they do make a difference in teaching children, for instance, how to cook. What have you found about that?

[Kathi Norris:] Well I think it's great fun to teach children, uh-uh, to cook with the shortcuts, and it certainly makes it uh easy and a very nice way, I think, to-to spend time together, to get into the kitchen and open a package and the first thing you know, you have a wonderful pudding or something. But by the same token I think that it's uh a little bit wrong to-to have children t--uh grow up to think that eggs grow in refrigerators for instance, or that uh-uh puddings come out of packages--a as a matter of fact I had an experience with Pamela over the weekend when we were out uh in the country and she looked at a pumpkin and she said, "Oh, look Mommy, there's a jack-o-lantern!" Uh so I think there's something good about knowing that you come from the soil, and I said, "Well, that isn't really a jack-o-lantern, Pam. That-that's a pumpkin, you know, we make pumpkin pies from pumpkins." "Well, it's a jack-o-lantern pumpkin then." So I decided this was the time to pitch in and prove to her that a pie came from a pumpkin because she was, up to now, not at all impressed with my description of it. So we bought some pumpkins and took them home. And baked them, and she, I cut them and she graced them and we put them in the oven and, uh, made a pie shell in the meantime. Waited for them to get tender enough; took them out and squeezed the pulp and mixed it together. I let her do everything I could possibly do toward this pie except put in the spices, which is such a delicate thing that Mommy did that. And then we baked the pie and we paraded it in and gave it to Sweetie to cut for dinner. And he cut it and we said, "no, you take the first bite." He said "uh mhm, good" and we tasted it, and what do you think, I had put in much too much nutmeg, but otherwise we had made a pumpkin pie. [ER and Kathi Norris laugh] (18:40)

[ER:] Well, that's, [ER laughs] that sounds quite wonderful. And now I'm going to ask Mr. Stark, who seems to have a good deal to do with these programs uh just exactly how much do you do on this program?

[Wilbur Stark:] Well, frankly, I really don't do very much. Uh it's a question of getting the right people to work with Kathi and the right people to work on the staff and at the studio because actually it's a reflection of Kathi's personality more than anything else. There are certain basic principles that Kathi and I talk about every once in a while and that's the fact that Kathi's just talking to one or two people, regardless of how many people are out in the audience and how many people are at the studio, that thought always has to be projected and that's all I'm interested in. The greatest thing though that uh the biggest kick I get out of it is that for about fifteen years I've been selling personalities and programs and--

[ER:] Now you're selling your wife!

[Wilbur Stark:] And after two and half years of marriage I finally found out that she was a personality and I-I relish in it! It's wonderful. [Kathi Norris, and Wilbur Stark laugh] (19:43)

[ER and Wilbur Stark overlap here]

[ER:] I think it's wonderful that uh you can work on this sort of thing together because uh it must be an enormous help to her but it also must be a great interest to you, and--

[Wilbur Stark:] [Overlaps ER] Oh, it certainly is. And, I- I can't tell you how proud I am.

[ER:] Getting people to work with her and all that sort of thing must be very interesting. [Kathi Norris: Well, I--] Now, I'd like to ask one more question, even though you were going to say something [Kathi Norris: Mhm, that's fine.]- I realize that you must have a great deal to do, now have you got such a thing as a typical day?

[Kathi Norris:] Well, now, Mrs. Roosevelt, I'd never thought I'd see the day that I would be telling you about my day [ER chuckles], and I don't think there is such a thing as a typical one. Uh I think that's one reason I like to work, probably, is that there is--it really isn't--uh there is no typical day. However, um I certainly enjoy going out looking for good buys, uh uh reading and answering my mail, uh attending the luncheons and all the various things that add up to a typical day, including going home and enjoying Pamela, or going to her kindergarten tea, which I did the other day.

[ER:] Well, thank you both for being here and giving us such an intimate glimpse into your busy lives. Now, it's time for Elliott to say a few words.

[Kathi Norris, ER, and Wilbur Stark overlapping here]

[Kathi Norris:] Thank you.

[ER:] Again, thank you very much.

[Wilbur Stark:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[Kathi Norris:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt.

(21:06)

Transcribed from holdings at Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDRL)
File(s): 72-30(19)

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