

## THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

December 13, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about ER's immense workload. In the interview segment, ER discusses Levittown, New York, and other developments in housing with William Levitt, real estate developer.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, William J. Levitt

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(00:10)

[ER:] What question have you today?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I think this is a very good question, one that uh calls for a complete answer. It's from Mrs. Mildred Ephram of East Orange, New Jersey. She asks, "Why have you undertaken so much? What is the particular drive behind such a tremendous task as you set forth for yourself? Don't you ever have the inclination to do something completely personal, or even frivolous?"

[ER:] Well, I do-do things that are frivolous and personal all the time, but um I think probably what you're thinking about is why do I serve on the United Nations, uh why do I do a radio program, why do I do a television, why do I write a column, why do I write a page in a magazine, and so forth. Those are--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Oh, but those are just some of the external things that you do. You do a great many [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] more things than that.

[ER:] Well, after all those are my regular jobs. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] And um the reason I do them is that I think we're living in a very crucial period. And it's a period when all of us um should do what they can to bring before people uh the problems of the day the questions that the people have to think out. And um the best way to do that is by uh um talking over the air or uh writing a column or answering the questions that come in on the page in the magazine in. And so as long as one is able to do it, and I happen to be a very healthy person, why it seems to be uh a good thing to do. I happen not to have any ties which keep me from working hard and from doing uh a full working day, and so I can do it and, therefore, do-do it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Now you mentioned that you do have uh a great many personal and even frivolous things that you do. I think that you might explain this -- some of those things to this lady who has written in this question.

[ER:] Well, I go home, for instance, as a rule to the country on-on um Friday night or on Saturday. And at least have uh -- even during the General Assembly or the Human Rights Commission meeting, if it's in this country, I have one full day, as a rule, in the country. And um there I try to be as frivolous as I can. I see friends, I have people to stay and um I try to have a good time. [Elliott Roosevelt: Well, I think that you uh--] I go to the theatre here occasionally.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Surely. You don't uh -- I think that the impression gets out that you have no time to do anything except rush madly from one place to the next, and uh attend meetings, make

speeches, write columns uh, in fact, most people I think have the idea, the idea that anybody that follows you is completely worn out and out of breath after five minutes of trying to keep up.

[ER:] During the session of the United Nations, of course, either during the Human Rights Commission or the General Assembly, I am very busy, I don't have as much time uh to myself. But uh even then I manage to do quite a number of things. I manage to write jingles for a birthday party the other day and um I uh do a certain amount of sewing all the time and a certain amount of uh reading, not as much as I'd like to but still I do some. For pleasure I mean. I do a great deal of government reports and things on the work I'm doing but I do some even for pleasure. So that I'm -- and so sometimes I just dine or have people in for dinner for pleasure, pure and simple.  
(4:58)

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Alright, now I think we should take up another phase of this question that was put to you. And that is the part that dealt with the particular drive, where you get the energy uh to carry out all these different things [ER: Well I just--] Most people feel tired most of the time, more or less.

[ER:] Well I just said that I was a very fortunate person because I was very healthy. I- I am a very healthy person, it's very rare [Elliott Roosevelt: Well there's lots--] that I have anything the matter with me.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, there's a lot of healthy people in this world that don't do anywhere near what you do.

[ER:] Well, I guess that I--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's not quite all the explanation. I think that --

[ER:] I'm well organized, I imagine [Elliott Roosevelt: Partly--] I always had a lot to do and always managed somehow to organize it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And don't you think that you come from a rather active line of forebears?

[ER:] Oh, on both sides.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] On both sides. Uh, for instance, uh-eh maybe you can tell it better because I'm not sure that my memory serves me right but Uncle Ted was always uh a very active person and uh ahh it seems to me that he never slept more than four hours a night or something.

[ER:] Well, I don't think it was quite as--I think-I think it was six. [Elliott Roosevelt: Six.] Let's give him two more hours.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] Alright, but he--wasn't he ah he a very uh, always--

[ER:] Well, he was an advocate of the strenuous life!

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's right, mhm. But what did uh was that inherited as a characteristic by him and by you?

[ER:] I don't know. I don't know because his mother was certainly not an advocate of the strenuous life. She came from the South and was -- uh I-I gather from all the family stories that she was not exactly a-a violently energetic person. But um perhaps his father, perhaps his grandfather, my grandfather Roosevelt uh must have been a fairly active person. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] And a very well organized one.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm. And the Hall family uh--

[ER:] Well, they, of course, had great vitality, all of them I think.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And uh, now uh do you-do you think as the years have gone by that you have increased in vitality or have you always had this uh [ER: No, no.] desire to do a good deal?

[ER:] When I was young, I was nowhere near as strong as I am today, but I think that is because you have less strain on your strength as you grow older. (7:41)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Uh, I'm not quite sure that I understand that. You mean that when you get older [ER: Well--] that you can do things without as much um effect on the constitution?

[ER:] Well, uh-uh when you are young, you're having children for instance, you have little children to take care of and watch over, there's a good deal of illness, you have a good many drains on your um your-your health and strength. But um when you get older, that's all over, you've developed as rule a philosophy of life; therefore, you don't worry in the same way. I remember very well when I was young, I used to worry if I thought there wasn't going to be uh-uh -- a meal wasn't going right or something's going to be upset and wrong in the way it was served. Now it wouldn't bother me in the least.

[Elliott Roosevelt laughs] And, and all the things that when you were young seemed desperately important sink to their proper places as you grow older. Therefore, you don't have the frazzle and the strain of little things. (8:53)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] In other words, the little things uh take on their proper proportion?

[ER:] Yes.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And uh you think then that you would -- if you were giving advice on this subject that you would say, "Don't worry about the little things. Don't build them up in the mountains. Go ahead with the jobs that you have to do and do them the best way you can but don't worry about it."

[ER:] Yes, I would. That's -- you get much less strain.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, now uh do you find that uh you need to carry out a certain amount of physical exercise in order to keep yourself tuned up, so to speak, in order to do all these mental jobs that you undertake? (9:36)

[ER:] Well, I think that everybody should have a certain amount of exercise. I don't get any in town but I try to walk in the country. I don't try to take very active exercise anymore, but I think everyone should have some.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And you'd recommend for uh, well, a lot younger people than myself but you'd recommend--

[ER:] I would recommend that you do regular exercise every day! [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Alright, but I thought I was in the sort of the older classification with you, you see, so I--

[ER:] Oh yes, nothing doing. [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] So young people must uh exercise strenuously to keep their physical body up so that they can carry out the mental tasks in order to keep up with you, is that it?

[ER:] That's it.

(Break 10:24-10:32)

[ER:] The problem of adequate housing at reasonable cost is still a grave interest to a great many people. So to discuss the present situation and the future outlook, I've invited an outstanding expert on the subject to be my guest today. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you, Mr. William J. Levitt.

[William J. Levitt:] Well, I'm glad to be here, Mrs. Roosevelt, and um particularly to talk about housing.

[ER:] Thank you. Now, your houses and your revolutionary building practices are well known to everyone, Mr. Levitt's Long Island development, having been widely publicized. But as a sort of review, will you tell us, Mr. Levitt, what your houses cost and what that cost includes: the size of the house, appliances included, and so on. (11:26)

[William J. Levitt:] Well, our houses for the coming year will be eighty-five hundred dollars. In that price, we've got just about everything that you can imagine that is included. We have a refrigerator, a washing machine, a television set. This time, it's much bigger than it was last year, it's a nineteen-inch screen. We have Venetian blinds, with -- all the legal fees are included, just about everything we can think of. That, of course, includes the ground, and the grounds are all landscaped. It also includes, for instance, the proportion share of all the swimming pools that we have in Levittown and the recreational areas.

[ER:] That is a great deal that goes with an eighty-five hundred dollar house, isn't it?

[William J. Levitt:] Well, we've tried to give a little bit more than just housing. We feel that people can get four walls almost any place but that doesn't make a home. We've got to give them a little bit of room to breathe. We've got to give them a little bit of the better things of life.

[ER:] And do you think about the children when you're planning and all that sort of thing? (12:34)

[William J. Levitt:] Oh yes, we've got children's playgrounds, as well as playgrounds for what I would call our adult children because the people of Levittown are very young people.

[ER:] Are young people?

[William J. Levitt:] Oh yes, very young.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mr. Levitt, you say your houses for next year are going to be eighty-five hundred, what about this year's houses (Elliott Roosevelt laughs)?

[William J. Levitt:] Well, let's talk about that for a moment. This year, the price was seventy-nine ninety, and I think with pardonable pride I can say that we were about the only builders in the United States that did not raise a price. We took cost increases right along the line but we took them on the chin. We took them and we absorbed them and we did not place -- pass them along to the public. Now it's reached a point where we just no longer can absorb them and remain in business. And so we've increased very slightly from seventy-nine ninety to eighty-five hundred.

[ER:] Well, that's really remarkable to have been able to absorb them. Um are all your completed houses sold? (13:35)

[William J. Levitt:] Oh yes, Mrs. Roosevelt. Not only are they sold but everything that we will have completed by July first next year has been sold.

[ER:] Good gracious! Why you -- you're building for a certainty then of absorption. But what happens, for instance, if um people put a down payment on your eighty-five hundred dollar uh house, and in the interval before it's completed, you have to put the prices up, what do you do about that?

[William J. Levitt:] Oh no. We don't do that, Mrs. Roosevelt. If we had contracted for a price of eighty-five hundred dollars, we would deliver at the eighty-five hundred dollar figure regardless of what had happened to prices.

[ER:] Yes, you just take the loss [William J. Levitt: That's right.] if you had to take it. Well now, are veterans the only ones allowed to purchase these houses? (14:30)

[William J. Levitt:] No. Up until about a year ago, everybody that either rented or bought a house in Levittown was a veteran. But then about a year ago, we felt that we ought to also permit the non-veteran that really needed housing to come into Levittown. And so we changed the rule although still abiding by the rules that government had laid down regarding veteran preference. And we have a percentage of non-veterans also. Levittown today, and I'm guessing and I think it's about right, is about ninety-five or ninety-six percent veteran. [ER: Mhm, I see.] The balance non-veteran.

[ER:] Now you spoke about government rules. Did the government assist you in your project? (15:15)

[William J. Levitt:] They assisted in so far as insurance of mortgages, and this becomes a little bit technical of course, is concerned. All mortgages on houses there are insured by the Federal Housing Administration. To that extent, yes, the government assisted.

[ER:] I see. Well, that's uh the way a great many of-of the houses have been built -- that have been built.

[William J. Levitt:] Oh no question about it, Mrs. Roosevelt. If it hadn't been --

[ER:] They couldn't have been built any other way.

[William J. Levitt:] That's right. If it hadn't been for the government, why, this great housing boom that we did have and that we do have right now just could never have come into being.

[ER:] Well now, with these new houses and with the difficulties that are uh certainly coming because uh costs have risen in so many fields and areas um are you going to have to perhaps change -- uh cut some of the luxury features of your houses because you put in good material, haven't you? And uh would it mean that you would give -- perhaps cut down on some of the material? I ask you because I remember a fight that went on in some of the early housing that I was interested in as to whether one would put closet doors on the closets (ER laughs). (16:31)

[William J. Levitt:] No, I remember that too. I liked when you characterize the items of equipment and the things that we used as luxuries. I suppose compared to some other places they might be luxuries. We like to think of them as necessities. Uh we like to think that a person is entitled to a washing machine and should not scrub clothes on a washboard any longer as we did a hundred years ago and perhaps a whole lot less than that. And so we're not going to cut those things out. We're going to keep every single, solitary one of them. And on the contrary--

[ER:] Well now, television one might class as a luxury or do you find it important for the happiness of your young people so to speak? (17:13)

[William J. Levitt:] Well, I- I find it so important to begin with to my own happiness [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] because I really like television so much that I think that everybody ought to like it. And from the things that I find out from other people I think they like it as much as I do. But seriously, I think that television, particularly to a young couple that has babies let's say or a baby, and doesn't particularly want to have a baby-sitter, certainly cannot afford a maid, I think television is a necessity. And this year we've made the television even more attractive because we've made it big-screen television rather than small-screen television. That's part of that price increase incidentally.

[ER:] Well, I um--I think that's interesting and I'd like to ask you a question. Last July, the Federal Housing Administration increased down payments and how has this affected the purchase of Levitt houses?

[William J. Levitt:] That's a very interesting question, Mrs. Roosevelt. Not only did they increase down payments last July but, you will recall, that just very recently in October [ER: Yes.] we had the famous Regulation X imposed which increased down payments very, very substantially. I think that the increased down payment is very definitely going to restrict the market in the future to those people who have the money to put down on a house. Unfortunately, it's something I've been saying for a long time. More people have less money and less people have more money. And so comparatively there are going to be fewer people able to purchase either our houses or anybody else's houses. I think it is definitely going to cut into the amount of houses that will be built because no builder, including Levitt, is going to build houses unless he is reasonably sure that the market is going to absorb them, buy them.

[ER:] Well, naturally you couldn't. That would be out of the question.(19:10)

[William J. Levitt:] That's right.

[ER:] Um my-my husband sometimes used to worry as to whether we were not trying uh to build houses that did have too much in them. Now you said, what I think is true, that you are entitled to a great many of the modern things today because people feel that they know about them and they want them and they feel unhappy if they don't have them. And yet, of course, uh even our parents got on without a great many of these things, and perhaps having a house is more necessary than having all these things. What do you think about that?

[William J. Levitt:] Well, uh of course, that is the old argument, Mrs. Roosevelt, as to whether or not we wouldn't be much happier if we lived under the standards of a hundred and fifty years ago, a nice simple life. But uh that opens up a brand new field. We have to be faced with the reality of today and today we are used to steel kitchens and Bendixes and the things that go along with them.

[ER:] But I was just thinking about the down payment uh side of it, do you see, whether one could make a down payment on-on just a house.

[William J. Levitt:] I realize that.

(Break 20:24-20:35)

[ER:] Now I want to ask you something that has often troubled me and troubles a good many people uh eh who-who do have building operations on a big scale. Uh out on Long Island you're quite near the United Nations, aren't you?

[William J. Levitt:] That's right.

[ER:] And um I've heard occasionally that uh there's been some trouble because of -of the fact that people wanted houses and the housing was segregated. Now have you had any trouble about that at all?

[William J. Levitt:] Well, not particularly trouble, Mrs. Roosevelt, but that again brings up a problem, a problem that is as old as man himself. We haven't had any trouble on it, no.

[ER:] But have you a policy -- have you made a policy? Or don't you?

[William J. Levitt:] The community in Levittown is all white. It started out that way and I know of no community in Long Island or any other place for that matter that is mixed. It either becomes one or the other.

[ER:] And um that uh goes right straight all the way down the line. You- you have to have complete segregation all the way?

[William J. Levitt:] Well, there was a community for instance on Long Island that opened up, oh, about a year ago. And they advertised that this was the only community that was going to be completely without discrimination. And the community attracted every kind of person of every race and every color and every creed. And the community today, just one year later, is just like Levittown except in reverse, exactly only one color and one creed. It just couldn't become both. And yet it was advertised that all people were welcome. But it only attracted one kind.

[ER:] Mhm. I uh--that seems a very difficult question because I know of some people in the United Nations for whom it was so difficult to find any place to live just on that basis you see, of

uh discrimination and uh it bothers me because it's awfully difficult in- in the uh situation you are out there for instance [William J. Levitt: Well.] with Indians.

[William J. Levitt:] It not only bothers you, Mrs. Roosevelt, but it bothers us very, very much. We would like to be able to settle all the problems of the world, we would like to, once and for all, get rid of all the petty animosities and the jealousies and the feelings of man against man, but honestly we're just not big enough to do it. (23:20)

[ER:] You can't, you really [William J. Levitt: Maybe somebody is, but we're not.] you really find that you couldn't have, for instance, an Indian family living next to a white family?

[William J. Levitt:] Well, as a matter of fact, it's very peculiar that you should mention that because it so happens that we do have an Indian family. Uh I don't again know what you mean by Indian [ER: I mean--] I am talking of the American Indian.

[ER:] No, I was not talking about [William J. Levitt: We have a--] I was talking about the Indians from India [ER laughs].

[William J. Levitt:] [Laughs] No, but we do have an American Indian and we do have a great many Chinese families. [ER: You do?] Oh yes, from the United Nations. And we do have an assortment of various kinds. Uh we do have, for instance, uh one couple in there that I happen to know of personally uh the woman is a Hindu, the man I believe is an American. (24:11)

[ER:] Mhm, I see, and that works?

[William J. Levitt:] Oh yes, that seems to work all right.

[ER:] Well, perhaps eventually the whole thing will work. It will be on different faces and perhaps eventually [William J. Levitt: Well.] it will work.

[William J. Levitt:] I've been accused of being a perennial optimist and I'm convinced that someday, it will work. (24:23)

[ER:] Well, I hope so too. But I'm interested because that means then that I- I had an idea that probably you only sold houses. Do you rent them at Levittown?

[William J. Levitt:] We did and we still do. The first six thousand houses that were built in Levittown were built exclusively for rent and only for rent. And those houses today are still for rent when somebody vacated one on a revolving basis. They're all rented today. But we always have a certain amount of people who are always moving out, being transferred to another city or people who are buying other houses or our houses, either in Long Island or elsewhere. And we have a waiting list on that and people are constantly renting. Uh the breakdown today, for instance, of Levittown's fifteen thousand houses, approximately six thousand are for rent and the balance have been bought by purchasers. (25:22)

[ER:] I see. Well that seems a good-good thing because there must always be some people who aren't sure enough of staying, [William J. Levitt: Right you are.] who aren't sure enough of keeping a job in one place or who have the kind of a job that means moving, people who know that they can't stay in one place, they must move.

[William J. Levitt:] Well, today, particularly, you've got one big segment-- the military.

[ER:] Yes.

[William J. Levitt:] And we do have most of Mitchell Field [ER: Yes, of course.] in that-- in there as tenants and as soon as they get orders, why just out they go.

[ER:] And do you have uh um what is it on a month-to-month basis for the military?

[William J. Levitt:] No, for everybody we have a year's lease and they can renew if they want to. For the military, the lease is automatically broken and uh there are no recriminations on either side if they have orders.

[ER:] I see.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Are there any instances where the government has come in and has said, "We would like to reserve so many houses for rental to our military personnel uh in particular, and we will keep you supplied with tenants on those houses?" (26:28)

[William J. Levitt:] No, no, no, the nearest thing to that was that the commandant at Mitchell Field discussed with our office some sort of working arrangement which we have since adopted.

[ER:] I see. Well now, uh are you alone in your business or do you have partners?

[William J. Levitt:] Oh heavens no. I've got two very active partners. I've got a father and I've got a brother. And the three of us--

[ER:] Oh, how nice to have it all in the family! [ER laughs]

[William J. Levitt:] Oh yes [William J. Levitt laughs], and then the three of us run this business. I'm only just one-third of it, that's all.

[ER:] I see. Well now, it's a very general question but um, perhaps you can give a general answer. What do you think will happen to this housing problem in the next uh year let's say. (27:10)

[William J. Levitt:] I think the housing problem in the next year is going to become aggravated. I think that if it hadn't been for this unfortunate international situation, which has caused and will cause a certain curtailment in housing that we were well on our way toward solving it. The building industry in 1950, this year for instance, will produce its record number of houses and at the rate we were going we were probably doing pretty much the same thing next year. And we would have taken not only the edge off this emergency but we would have been well on our way to fulfilling the bill. Now however, I think we're going to be drastically cut next year, far greater than the government says the present restrictions will cut. I think it's going to be far below that figure. The result is going to be, I think, an aggravation of the present situation -- almost back again to where we were two or three years ago.

[ER:] That's terrible.

[William J. Levitt:] Particularly if this piles up over the next two or three years.

[ER:] My. Well, then you don't think that housing can be cut any if that's going to be the case. (28:20)

[William J. Levitt:] Not unless we produce. I believe in elementary economics, supply and demand, if we supply enough, the cost will come down.

[ER:] Well, what about your own plans for building next year? Are you planning to build just as much as you could possibly get the materials for.

[William J. Levitt:] No, we are going to build just as much as we can number one: get the materials for, and number two: what we think the market will absorb -- will buy. Very frankly, at this moment, I couldn't give you an accurate answer. I think we're going to build next year about half about what we built it 1950.

[ER:] That because you really don't think that people will be able to buy?

[William J. Levitt:] That's one point. The other point is I think there will be, in the early part of the year particularly, some scarcity of materials. The two are a combination.

[ER:] Yes, the two - the two, I see. And you have to plan um far enough ahead of what um what you're going to need so that you have to set a pattern for how much you'll be able to build.

[William J. Levitt:] That's right. And normally we should be planning down to the last dotting of the I and crossing of the T right this minute. And we're not in a position to do so because things are so uncertain.

[ER:] Well, that isn't a comfortable picture for a lot of people who are looking for houses, isn't it?

[William J. Levitt:] No it isn't. Someday--

[ER:] Who are hoping to buy a home so to speak.

[William J. Levitt:] That's right, it isn't.

[ER:] Well, I must ask you a personal question now. I understand that in spite of the fact that you, I imagine encourage young people to buy houses, is I understand that you rent an apartment in town and rent a summerhouse. Now what makes you do that (ER laughs)?

[William J. Levitt:] Well, that's very simple. Of course, it's been said before and it sounds very mysterious but it isn't when you explain it. Up until a comparatively short time ago, we've always lived in our own home. But the war came along and I went into the Navy and we sold our house and I've been so busy since that I just haven't had a chance to build a new one.

[ER:] [Laughs] Haven't had a chance to build another house!

[William J. Levitt:] That's right.

[ER:] Well, you certainly have had plenty of experience so that you can put into it when you do build a new house all the things that all of your family want. (30:39)

[William J. Levitt:] I promise you, it'll have television.

[ER:] [ER laughs] Thank you so much, the time has run out now, and I want to tell you how much I've enjoyed having you with us today.

[William J. Levitt:] Oh, it's been a pleasure to be here, Mrs. Roosevelt.

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