

Marriage

Interviewer: Sara Harding (granddaughter), 3/28/24

Sara

okay now I'm recording should I ask you yeah well it says I'm recording... do you want like a lawyer present

John C. Elsey

You can do whatever you want.

Sara

interrogation.

Mavis L. Elsey

what are your topics tonight.

Sara

Um so I get the fun ones. I get his mission and I get how he met you and your love story and then also how he met Omi. So I get I get the juicy stuff. What do you want to talk about first grandpa?

Mavis L. Elsey

He will, he will.

Sara

Are you recording? Yeah, I'm recording. Oh, you can say grandma say hi for posterity

John C. Elsey

We're recording now. Yeah, we're recording. What do you want to start with?

Sara

What do you want to start with?

John C. Elsey

I don't care. You're asking the questions.

Sara

Well, do you want to go in order because you went on your mission after you were married? That's true. So do you want to talk about meeting Omi?

John C. Elsey

I can do that.

Sara

Okay. You can say whatever you want. Yeah, Grandma wants the details.

John C. Elsey

Well, I met Omi at Sunday school, the first time I saw her in our ward. She was living with another family in our ward. And I remember there was a fireside that night. I said, do you want to go? And she said, yeah.

So, the first time I picked her up for a fireside, I have no idea what the fireside was about. But I know we spent

a lot of time talking and that was the first time and I think I talked to her, saw her every day, since then.

Sara
Really?

John C. Elsey
The family she was living with had a son who I think had met her in Germany and he had arranged for her to come over. But after we got going together, she moved in actually with my family, so she lived with my parents.

Sara
Oh so she lived with you guys?

John C. Elsey
She lived with my parents.

Sara
before you got married?

John C. Elsey
Yes.

Sara
Oh.

John C. Elsey
Yeah, we met in January.

Sara
Some people would say that's a scandal, Grandpa.

John C. Elsey
Well, my parents were there, I mean, we had an extra bedroom, and so she...

Sara
Were you guys dating when she lived with your family?

John C. Elsey
What?

Sara
Were you dating when she lived with your family?

John C. Elsey
Yeah.

Sara
So you started dating that fireside.

John C. Elsey

that fireside and we saw each other probably every day from then on.

Sara

How much longer after you met her did she move in with your family?

John C. Elsey

Within a couple of months, I think.

We met in January and I think by March she was living with us, March or April, and she worked with my dad. He got her a job at the University of Utah, and I think she became his secretary. I'm not sure it was initially, but she worked as his secretary, but I think officially, because of nepotism rules, she was the secretary officially of another guy, but actually it was my dad that employed her, said she was a good secretary, best he ever had.

So we got going together, and then she lived, you know, like I said, in her house in March. In June, I had a summer job in Baltimore, so I lived in Baltimore. She used to live with my parents, and then I came back in September, went to school, and I was always planning on a mission, and that was fine with her, but she said, why don't we get married before?

I said, well, okay, so it was her idea to get married.

Sara

Now I can ask you about how you met Grandma. This is the good stuff. And Grandma wants to hear you talk about her and how beautiful she is.

John C. Elsey

Okay, we're recording. We're recording, yes. Well, I've been married to Liana for about 13 years, and she was really good. I mean, all the time we were in my mission, she wrote every day, graduate school, we came back from my mission, went to Boston, and then to Illinois, and she was good all that time.

And then we got to California, bought a house, had three kids at the time, four with Susie, which we had there. And she just seemed to, she was very attractive, and we've worked, and now it's like, well, here I am.

Is this all there is? And I think she felt that life was passing her by. So she got looking around, I guess, and got involved with somebody else, and left. So I was really devastated. That was the worst thing that I've experienced in my life, was the divorce.

Nobody in our family had ever been divorced, and I thought "oh, man". But there's nothing I could do about it. I would have done anything I reasonably could have done to keep things together, but there was really nothing I could do.

And I don't think she was very happy being a mother at home with the four kids. I think she was looking for more out of life. Anyway, she left, and so I'm thinking, what do I do? Well, we talked about the kids, and she asked if I wanted the kids, and I said, absolutely.

And so she said, OK, can I visit? And we had a friendly agreement that the kids could visit her right here, and she lived nearby, and would take them every other weekend, and then a couple weeks in the summertime.

And I think we got along pretty well. I remember my son, John, talking one time, we were driving and talking about broken homes and kids that are suffering, and I said, well, you're from a broken home.

He said, oh, no, no, everybody loves us. We're not from a broken home. So he didn't view him in that situation,

because everybody likes us, and we're OK. So I was glad about that. Well, I had the four kids, and I wanted to get married, but I needed somebody to take care of those kids, and that was the most important thing.

So we had single adult activities at the time, and I remember calling the bishop and asking if it was OK if I was thinking dating, and I don't know if he said dating or attending single activities. And he said, that's OK.

And I said, OK. So I started dating. There was a woman in our area. She was in our ward. I'm not sure. I don't think she was, but she kind of set up this matching program. She ran a computer program of matching up single, so I said, OK.

I said, well, "Just tell me Iris", (Iris Eaton was her name), "Tell me who some of the women were". She said, "OK, I got a list of about 10 that I think you can date". And I said, "OK, but who's going to want to date a guy with four kids, young kids?"

So she said, "well, I'll check". And so I told, she knew I had a PhD, and that was kind of a plus. So I said, "put the best light on it that you can". So she said she talked to some of these women. And she said, yeah, there's a couple of them.

So I talked to some of them and took some of them out. Mavis was one of them. And we kind of got along from there.

Sara

Was it love at first sight, Grandpa?

John C. Elsey

Well, yeah, in a way. I mean, I was dating some other women as well. And there was one that, well, she was a singer. She's very attractive. And she... well I don't know if I want to talk about that or not. But I was dating her.

And I remember praying and wanting guidance. And I remember praying one night. And it was Mavis that popped in the mind. And I said, yeah, yeah, she'd make a good companion and mother. So I took her out.

We went to dinner and dancing, I think.

Sara

Was that your first date? Dinner and dancing?

John C. Elsey

Yeah, that was our first date- dinner and dancing. Yeah, we had a good time and I think I called almost every day after that.

Sara

You were so nervous?

Mavis L. Elsey

[whispering: I didn't know how tall he was before I met him]

John C. Elsey

I remember coming home, my mom was quite short and I remember coming home to my mother and talking about her and I said, but mom, she's so short. My mother said, well, good things often come in small packages.

Sara

That perfectly describes you Grandma!

John C. Elsey

That was good.

Sara

okay so that was your first date any funny first date stories or like first impressions? So grandma you didn't know how tall he was grandma - what were you told that he had a PhD and four kids?

John C. Elsey

Well, I gotta answer that.

Mavis L. Elsey

I like the fact that he had an education because I was even accused of, when I was in college, by my sister and her friends- don't record this- of being ivory tower -ish. You're too ivory tower -ish.

But I always wanted a professional person if possible, but a person of really good character and not the kind that would come home and pick up the paper and put his feet up and say, "Oh, give me a beer". "I had a hard day".

So I didn't want anybody like that.

John C. Elsey

What Grandma said about that, that I've always liked, she said, you know, I'm using my PhD as maybe to get some influence and some interest and...

Mavis L. Elsey

This is a misstep on my part, it came out wrong.

John C. Elsey

She said "I always liked the fact or I admired or was in awe of the fact that he had a Ph.D. - until I got to know him". I always liked that, "it was not very impressive that you got to know me".

Mavis L. Elsey

We were sitting at dinner with Mason Stout and he was a doctor, doctor.

John C. Elsey

He had a medical degree and a PhD.

Mavis L. Elsey

He didn't have his medical degree then, but he had a Ph.D. in chemistry or biochemistry or something. I thought, I can't believe I'm in the presence of people like this.

John C. Elsey

And we were just normal kids, right? Normal guys.

Mavis L. Elsey

No, but I was just impressed. I was just very impressed.

John C. Elsey

Yeah, that was it "impressed". "I was always impressed that he had a PhD until I got to know him". I love that story.

Sara

Love that too. So how long did you guys date?

John C. Elsey

It took a year for the divorce to be final, and it was August when the papers were filed. And so we started dating in September or October of 1968, and it wasn't until August that the divorce was final, and then we got married in October, a couple months later.

Sara

Okay, okay But after you prayed that's when you knew grandma was the one Yeah, did grandma know at that point to or was she still on the fence about you? Did you know pretty early on grandma?

Mavis L. Elsey

I thought this was my golden opportunity. I was 31 years old when I got married, but the next month I turned 32.

Sara

Worked out perfectly

Mavis L. Elsey

I never wanted to marry somebody that was divorced. I didn't. I really didn't, but I thought, you know, when you weigh it all out, there's more to it than that. What's the person? I just hit the jackpot.

Sara

Grandpa's pretty great.

John C. Elsey

People thought you were crazy for marrying a guy with four kids.

Mavis L. Elsey

Oh yeah, all the negatives.

Sara

Yeah.

Mavis L. Elsey

Now, they thought I was crazy for marrying somebody that had four kids.

Sara

But see, now look, you got the last laugh, right? You guys worked out pretty great.

Mavis L. Elsey

So, yeah.

Sara

Um, what do you, what was your wedding day like?

John C. Elsey

We were married in the L .A. temple on Saturday. My parents went. Mavis' parents were not endowed so they could not go. My friend Mason Stout went. So it was just a small group, went to the temple and then we drove home, had a reception, kind of.

A few people came to our house. They were going to set it up on the patio, but it got very windy and moved around so they had to move it indoors, which was kind of crowded.

Sara

at the um house in Orange

John C. Elsey

yeah

Sara

okay

John C. Elsey

And then we were going to honeymoon in Hawaii, so after an afternoon reception we were taken to the airport by Ken and Helen and flew to Hawaii for a couple weeks.

Sara

Oh, that's fun. That's awesome, that's great.

Okay, what else was I going to ask you about? Oh, I remember what I was going to ask you and maybe this is too personal of a question, but when you were talking about the divorce, how did you, how do I phrase this?

Because I think it's very rare to have an amicable divorce. So how did you choose to keep things amicable and not have resentment or not let that, because you said you were devastated. That could have easily become something that ruined your life, I guess.

Like you could have chosen a very different path after that. So I guess I'm wondering how or do, does that make sense?

John C. Elsey

Yeah.

Well, actually, you know, I was very devastated, but after I met Mavis, things were wonderful. So it was a period there. The divorce attorney asked me if I wanted to sue the other person that Liana went with, and he said, he's kind of wealthy.

And I said, I thought about and "No, I don't want to sue". You just get some money, but you'd stir things up, and I didn't really want that. She just wanted to leave, and when I realized there was somebody else involved that she was really infatuated with, I guess, I knew I didn't have a chance.

So I said, okay, it's the way it is, so we'll do something else. And once I met Mavis, then I realized how blessed I was to get into a really good situation.

Sara

because I think that that's probably one of the things that I admire most about you is how I guess that comes back to when you were talking about living the gospel you tend to just make the better choice, right? And

because that I think for so many people divorce is the catalyst where they can choose to put all the blame on things but for you it was the catalyst to meeting grandma right

John C. Elsey
yeah

Sara
Say what you just said again about how when you were a missionary

John C. Elsey
When we were young missionaries, in those days, a general authority set us apart, and I was set apart by Elder Marion D. Hanks, and Liana was there, and he, I don't remember much of the blessing except one thing he said was, the decisions that you made to this point are correct, and then that's all I remember, and then afterwards he turned to Liana and said, if you need anything, you call me.

If I can help you at all, he goes, I'm very solicitous to her and made sure. If you need anything, you get hold of me, and let me know. Please.

Sara
Hmm, that's cool. I didn't realize everyone was set apart by a general authority.
What do you admire most about Grandma?

John C. Elsey
Oh, there's so many things that I can admire. You know, my condition right now, I've been given less than six months to live, and she has just been wonderful. I mean, never... I've never seen you shed a tear about that, though.

But she's just...

Sara
About you only being given six months to live?

John C. Elsey
She's kind of saying, OK.

Sara
Don't worry, Grandpa, I have seen her shed a tear about it. If that, yes. She is keeping a brave face for you.

John C. Elsey
Oh, yeah. Yes.
There are so many things that.... her steadiness... just... she's not really an emotional person - doesn't show a lot of emotions, but she's just so steady, and there, and so many good qualities. I think the reason you were so hurt when Ken said something about you is- I told you this too- that you've never said anything bad about anybody. I don't think you've never railed about anybody you've never really come down on anybody or talked to me about complaining about how bad somebody else is you've never done it. And just to have someone say bad things about you is being so sensitive that was, it was not nice.

So I don't know, she's just so, she's just so good. And steady in the gospel. I mean When she first heard it, she picked it up and I remember someone tried to talk her out of it and she said "but I remembered how I felt when I first heard the gospel. And I remember the feelings that I had and I'm staying true to them" So anyway,

she's just a great person

Sara

She's a great person. Ooh, okay, this leads to my next question. What marriage advice would you give grandpa?

John C. Elsey

marriage advice.?

Sara

Yeah.

John C. Elsey

Well, the Church means so much and it has such a neat way of life that to not have it is not good. So I'd make sure you get someone who has a good testimony of the Gospel. And it's rooted in themselves.

They know it themselves. It's not because of you or because of somebody else, but they themselves have a good foundation or root in the Gospel. And if you could get that to go on together, then a lot of other things can just work out.

President Kimball, I think, said that he felt that any two Latter-day Saints who were really striving to live in the Gospel could make a marriage work.

Sara

Mm -hmm.

John C. Elsey

He said "almost" I'm sure there's almost.

Sara

Yeah, there's almost always an exception, right? No, that's good, that's good advice.
Do you remember how you proposed to Grandma?

John C. Elsey

Oh.....well, no.

Sara

Okay, guess what? Grandma said she doesn't remember either, but she said she was excited.

John C. Elsey

Well, I couldn't really get engaged until I was divorced. So we kind of knew. We talked about marriage. And that's what I really liked about it was we talked for a long time and just had great conversations, I thought.

And we were on the same track. We wanted the same kind of things. And so I think we just kind of assumed we were going to get married. I remember it was in the car one night when I did ask you officially if you'd marry me and you said, yes.

We were sitting in the front seat of my car. But we couldn't get a diamond until the divorce was final. But I think we agreed or I proposed months ahead of that. We decided we were going to do it.

Sara

So did grandma pick her ring out or did you pick it out?

John C. Elsey

Grandma picked it out.

Sara

Grandma picked her ring out.

Mavis L. Elsey

We went to Los Angeles to the Jewelry District because as a teacher I had a benefit. So I was able to get a discount at this place, this particular place. This is the result of it [showing her ring to Sara]. The diamond, the center diamond, is the one that matters.

They're all full cut, but it's kind of a, when jewelers look at it, they say, ooh. They had a different way of rating diamonds then. It was A1 in clarity and A2 in perfection. So it's an A diamond, which is top, but it has a little tiny crack.

There's a little, you know, a tiny flaw, but.

Sara

Nearly perfect.

Mavis L. Elsey

The jeweler said I wish I could get more like that.

Sara

Mmm, that's fun

Mavis L. Elsey

So it's a good diamond. I didn't, I really didn't know anything about jewelry. I didn't know anything about diamonds, I just liked it. And I'm lucky that I picked something really good.

Sara

You got lucky with grandpa and with your ring and you guys were only engaged for like two months right before you got married.

John C. Elsey

Officially.

Sara

Yeah, officially, officially engaged. How did you, when did the kids meet, Grandma?

John C. Elsey

Oh, early on. First or second date. Well, not first day, but probably within a week or so, didn't we?

Mavis L. Elsey

You took me over to the house one night and you took me around to all beds

John C. Elsey

The kids were all asleep.

Sara

Oh, they were all asleep? That's when you met them?

John C. Elsey

That's when they looked the best. They were well behaved when they were sleeping.

Mavis L. Elsey

I was really impressed with the house because it was so big.

Sara

Mm -hmm grandma was after you for your money and your education

John C. Elsey

Lucky me!

Sara

I know!

Mavis L. Elsey

I never had a very big place to live, even as a child, so I thought this was huge.

Sara

Okay, so when was the first time that you met the kids when they were awake?

John C. Elsey

It was within a week or two, I think.

Mavis L. Elsey

Oh, it was maybe longer than that I don't know because, it was... was it on a weekend? or was it... well his his parents were there...

Sara

oh okay

John C. Elsey

Yeah, my mother and father were living there.

Sara

Oh, that's right because they came to help yes

Mavis L. Elsey

I don't remember how that worked because the kids would go with Liana every other weekend. It was probably during a week when they would be there for the whole week.

Sara

Mmhmm.

Mavis L. Elsey

But, I don't know. It wasn't. I don't know how you introduced me to the kids.

John C. Elsey
I don't either.

Sara
Did they like grandma right away?

John C. Elsey
I think so.

Mavis L. Elsey
No

Sara
Grandma says no, Grandpa says I think so.

Mavis L. Elsey
I mean, we were strangers to each other.

Sara
Mm -hmm.

Mavis L. Elsey
You know.

John C. Elsey
but I don't think they ever expressed any dislike. "I don't like you" or "why are you here?"

Mavis L. Elsey
You wouldn't have told me if they did.

John C. Elsey
What?

Mavis L. Elsey
You wouldn't have told me if they did.

John C. Elsey
I would have told you or maybe they told you when you were there, but there was never any of that negative stuff. We took some outings together. We went up Baldy one time, hiked there during the day, took the chair lift up.

I think we had at least the three older kids and you were there. I remember when we got to the top, it was windy. We were down behind a rock. You were sitting up in the wind and I said, "come on down here, get out of the wind", and you came down.

Mavis L. Elsey
I remember going up Baldy.

John C. Elsey

You do?

Mavis L. Elsey

He wanted to make me into an outdoors woman. I'm disappointed. I wasn't cut out for that very long.

Sara

Not quite the outdoors woman?

Mavis L. Elsey

He got me a pair of boots, hiking boots, which I never wore. We went up to camp at 10,000 feet or something, in the Sierras, and it snowed that night and we didn't hike in. We had to turn around and go back because of the snow storm.

Sara

You never wore your hiking boots.

Mavis L. Elsey

But I had hiking boots.

Sara

But you did have them. That's close. That's close to being an outdoors woman.

What did your parents think of Grandma when they met her? Because they probably met her really early on, right?

Mavis L. Elsey

I met them, of course, before the kids, I think.

John C. Elsey

I think so. Well, my mom really liked her. You got along well with my mother, didn't you?

Mavis L. Elsey

Oh, really well.

John C. Elsey

Yeah.

Mavis L. Elsey

And your dad was...

John C. Elsey

He was... Not really with it.

Mavis L. Elsey

He was too reclusive. At that point.

Sara

Mmm.

Mavis L. Elsey

He would stay in the bedroom.

Sara
Okay.

Mavis L. Elsey
Listen to the radio.

Sara
How long did your parents stay with you to help?

John C. Elsey
They were there just about a year, a little over a year. They came the end of July in 68 and left in October of 69. So that was a little over a year and four months...three months.

One thing I remember about my mother was her great love and willingness to help. When Liana left, she kept saying she was going to leave, and I didn't tell my parents because I didn't want them to worry.

I was thinking maybe the whole thing would blow over. It didn't, and word was getting out that she wanted to leave. So I finally said I better call my parents and tell them. So I waited till morning, 8 o'clock, so I could call, and they would not be worrying all night.

So I called mom about 8 in the morning and told her that Liana wanted to leave. My mom said, oh my goodness, can we do anything? You want us to come down? And I said, you guys, Mom, can you come down?

She said, yeah, would you like us to? I said, it would be great if you could, but you know, that's a lot, and she said, let me check with Dad. I'll get back with you. And so she hung up, about 30 minutes later she called back and said, we'll be there at 6 o'clock tonight.

They flew down, and I picked her up, and I told Liana she had until 6 o'clock to leave. So she cleaned out her clothes and drove away in her car, and Mom came, and I said "Mom, you saved my life. You came and took care of the kids", and then she was just going to stay until we could work out some other kind of arrangements for somebody to come in and provide some care.

But the longer she stayed, she got more attached to Susie, who was only 2, and Susie would follow her all over the house, not let her out of her sight hardly, and they really got attached. And then when I started dating Mavis, which was in September, she could see that I was serious.

I think this was her thinking. She was serious. I was thinking about getting another wife, and so she said, well, maybe we can stay. She went back to Salt Lake because they just had flown down on the plane with a couple of suitcases.

Sara
How long do they live out of their suitcases, then?

John C. Elsey
Over a month, maybe six weeks. So mom went back to Salt Lake, loaded up the car, took Susie with her, then loaded up the car and drove down. Dad was not able to drive or do anything at that point. And then they stayed.

They always wanted to go on a mission. Dad really wanted to serve a mission. Talked about it all his life, since

he got active in the church. But then his health didn't permit that to happen. He retired.

That's another interesting way things worked. He retired medically from the University of Utah in June. Liana left in July and they came down in September. Well, at the end of July and stayed here.

But mom said later, maybe our mission in life was to be here and take care of the kids.

Sara
Yeah.

John C. Elsey
and just maybe she felt that was her mission and I said "Mom, you saved me"

Sara
Yeah.

John C. Elsey
Kept things going.