

Interview with Patricia (Toi) Clawson
Thursday, April 7, 2022
The Hill Cumorah Legacy Project

Recorded over Zoom

Interviewee: Patricia (Toi) Clawson

Interviewers: Leo Makalsky and Nikita Massaria

Duration: 47:21

Transcript

[00:00]

Nikita Massaria: OK. So, to start, we're just going to start by introducing ourselves, and we would like you to introduce yourself as well. My name is Nikita Massaria. And, Leo, do you want to introduce yourself?

Leo Makalsky: I'm Leo Makalsky.

Nikita Massaria: And could you please introduce yourself, Toi?

Toi Clawson: Sure. My name is Toi Clawson, and the purpose of the video has to do with my responsibilities with the Hill Cumorah Pageant, as I worked in public affairs for seven years back in the mid... 2002 to—2005, actually—2005 to 2012.

Nikita Massaria: Great. Thank you so much. We'll start with the first question. Leo?

Leo Makalsky: You stated your name. Where are you from?

Toi Clawson: Okay. My father was in the Army, so I grew up all over the continental United States. I'd even lived in Hawaii before it was a state. So, when my parents settled down, they went back to where they were both from, which happened to be Utah. So, I grew up, my high school—junior high and high school years were in Utah, and then my husband and I moved here in 1986, and we have been in the Rochester area since 1986. So, I—it's been 35 years of being from New York, and we love it here.

Leo Makalsky: Does that mean that you were—that you went to Brigham Young University?

Toi Clawson: I did go to Brigham Young. My husband was born in Germany, and he also attended Brigham Young, and that's where we met and got married, and started our family in Colorado. And then, as I said, in '86, we moved here and had two more kids after moving to New York.

Leo Makalsky: Did you—do you have a profession outside of the work you do for the Church?

Toi Clawson: Yes. I was [an] architectural illustrator doing rendering for architects and interior designers. I started that business, let's see—19—this is ancient history now—1980, I registered in Colorado, doing illustration, and then, when I moved here, I continued doing some illustration and then got into some other art. I taught at—the Rochester [Museum &] Science Center had art classes for many years, and I have taught adult education and even did substitute art teaching for public schools.

Leo Makalsky: So, do you still do that now?

Toi Clawson: OK, I'll try to be brief about this. In 2015, my husband and I were asked to be mission leaders of the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission in West Africa, and that is usually a three-year assignment, but due to Ebola, the country had been closed, so we got in in the fall of 2015. And as we were approaching our second—going into our third year, we asked if they would like us to stay an additional year, and that was accepted by the Church, so we were 4 years in Africa. And during that time, our home was rented out to other families. And when we came back during the pandemic, in 2020, we decided we wanted to move back into our own home, so, as one renting family moved out, we moved in. So, other than that time in Africa, Rochester has been our home. So, we have had experiences with almost 300 African American [and] Polynesian young men and young women, from 21 different countries, [who] were in our mission. So, I had a lot of experience during those years doing public affairs [laughs] in a kind of different way

with those young people, and that was really great. I am no longer doing art classes or other things like that, though I do organize an online group here, the Genesee Valley Calligraphy Guild. I do that every month.

Leo Makalsky: Cool. Nikita?

Nikita Massaria: That's very interesting, thank you. Would you mind telling us when and why did you join the faith?

Toi Clawson: Okay. I was a child growing up in a family that were very active, and so I got baptized when I was eight, but I would say, like many other people, I wasn't really converted to the Church until I was about 15 years old and had a very personal, wonderful experience, where it wasn't just, "I'm doing this because of my parents." It was like, "[5:00] I personally believe this," and so that has infused all the other decisions I've made since then.

[Leo says something indistinctly]

Toi Clawson: And I guess that's one of the reasons that, when you talk about Hill Cumorah Pageant, that's one of the things that, for many of the young people—teenagers, young adults, even some adults—they have very personal experiences while they were in the cast or crew of the Hill Cumorah Pageant. So, it was kind of nice to be around people who were experiencing some of those same things.

Nikita Massaria: Yeah, that sounds great. Thank you for answering that. Leo, do you have our next question?

Leo Makalsky: So, what led you to joining the Pageant?

Toi Clawson: So, if someone—we moved here in '86, and from the time we came, our children were hearing from other Latter-day Saints in the area, you know, teenagers saying, "Oh, this is so cool, and it's so wonderful if you get to be in it, but your whole family has to do it together."

And my husband was working for a data processing company here in Rochester (I'll just say, it's Paychex), and for him to take 17 days off—*completely* [laughs] take 17 days off—was a huge ask. And so, the first time that became possible was 1995, and so our family applied along with, you know, 13- to 15-hundred other cast members who were applying, and we were accepted in 1995. We did that, and it was an immersive experience, unlike anything that our family had ever done before, 'cause you go on vacation, and you have downtime and everything, and the Hill Cumorah Pageant, there is almost no downtime. Our children *loved* it. We—by the time we did it, we had a 16-year-old, 14-year-old, like, an 11-year-old, and a five-year-old. And all four of them, as we finished, the first [laughs] thing they said is, “Can we do this again next year?” and my husband was like, “*Absolutely* not.” [laughs] It's just like, it was very intense, and for families, it's like 10 to 12 hours a day. My husband did get a major role, and so that meant we would frequently be staying out there longer because he had to go through the dress rehearsals and stay until 11:00 or so. So, it was it was really intense, but incredibly fun, and I knew that, as much as my children wanted to do that, it wasn't going to happen for Dad.

So, some more years went by. My oldest kids went off to college, and my two sons said, “Please, can we do this?” So, in 2000, I volunteered to work on the beard and wig staff, where you're actually helping the cast get ready every night, and putting the beards on the major characters, and the wigs and hairpieces and headdresses and stuff. So, that was a volunteer where I was opting in and saying, “I'd like to help.” The next year, I did not work to continue that. But then, the following year, I was asked if I would handle the food services, feeding over 400 people every evening during the performances, and *that* experience was a different side. So, I was a cast member in '95, I was support staff in 2000, and then it was 2003 and 2004 that I did the food services. And that was—again, it takes a lot of people to help. You know, it's not just

the six or seven hundred who are onstage; it's all the people who are helping with other pieces of that.

Leo Makalsky: So, when were you able to become the public affairs director for the Pageant?

Toi Clawson: That took place in 2005, and that was something that my husband and I were asked if we would take that on together. So, in 2005, it was our first time to do that. The responsibilities for that were really to try and help the—to help *draw* media attention, and then, once the media came to get stories, to help them get things that would be interesting to tell their readership or, in the case of television, what their viewers would be interested in. So, we learned as we went, what things were. There had been some other people before us who gave us information of how they had done things. That—my husband, because he got other responsibilities—I continued [10:00] doing that from 2006 to 2012 and had some high points of interest. In 2008, when Mitt Romney was looking to be a potential Republican nominee [for President of the United States], the first time, we had some interest by NBC [sic; ABC] *Nightline* to come, and they wanted to film about the Pageant. In fact, I sent a link to both of you of that snippet, from the ten-minute thing that NBC [sic; ABC] did.¹

Leo Makalsky: Oh, I was able to catch that.

Toi Clawson: Okay. In those cases, NBC [sic; ABC] *Nightline* had to send their contracts of what their stipulations are, and our Church headquarters countered with, “Here’s what you have

¹ An article based on the *Nightline* segment is available on the ABC News website: Dan Harris and Mary Marsh, “Mormon Pageant Unites Hundreds,” *ABC Nightline*, Aug. 10, 2007, 9:52 AM, saved in the Internet Archive Wayback Machine on Sun., May 8, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220508221436/https://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/story?id=3459111&page=1>. A bootleg copy of the *Nightline* segment is available on YouTube: Jeremy Richter [YouTube user], “Mitt Romney, Mormonism, & Hill Cumorah Pageant On Nightline” [videotape of the August 2007 ABC *Nightline* segment “The Romney Effect”], YouTube, uploaded Oct. 24, 2008, <https://youtu.be/g11NW7-sVFo>, saved in the Internet Archive Wayback Machine on Sun., May 8, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220508222325/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g11NW7-sVFo&list=PLEfs9naIINhSbkPz-Wjo13V5TCvnHP0Lg&index=5.#>.

to do if you're going to be on Church property, and you're filming," and so forth. It was it was very interesting to have Dan Harris come and be interviewing different cast members and then to see what the final edit looked like when they actually put it up. Another highpoint came—you can imagine, in Western New York, you are very limited in how many outlets there are. When I first started, *faxing* people was how you were getting your message out to news outlets, and then it'd be, "Send it in an email," and hashtags came into use while we were doing this, and—just Facebook and the rise of social media and all kinds of things were just kind of coming on.

So, in 2011, as we were looking ahead to the 2012 season, the next year, another friend and I put up a very rudimentary Facebook page that essentially was just saying, "Here are going to be the dates for the 2012 Pageant," and just a little bit about that. And the Church at that point had not gone into social media, and so Dwight Schwendiman, who was the Pageant President at that time, got a phone call from Salt Lake, saying, "We don't want you to get ahead of us. Please take down your Facebook page." So, we obediently took it offline.

And—then, about February, an interesting thing happened where, in Mesa, Arizona, where the Church has another large Pageant for Easter, the people put up a Facebook page, and, in two weeks, they had *24,000* likes. And that made the Missionary Department at Salt Lake kind of re-evaluate what their aversion to Facebook had been. And they said, "Hold on. You know, maybe you've got an idea here." There were six different Pageants around the United States that were related to the Latter-day Saints, and they got all of us on—this was pre-Zoom, but—they got us on a phone call where we were all getting information about how to set up webpages and looking at different things that we might use for—because each Pageant is a little bit different. Some of them are musical; some of them are pageants more like what the Hill Cumorah was. But as we put all these different things together, and we were starting to look at, "How do we want to

message and what are the things we want to say to those potential people who might be coming to watch the Pageant?” it really became an exercise for us to recognize what a great tool Facebook would be for the people out west, California, around the *world*, who wanted to know the dates, and what had hitherto been very much a—you know, put it on the Church’s message boards, and then try to get it out to congregations and to get into newspapers and everything else—Facebook just leapfrogged right into where people were getting their information from. So, that was really nice, and my final year, 2012, was the first year that we really got into that.

And it also coincided with the 75th anniversary of the Pageant, that it was, at that point, the longest-running outdoor pageant in the United States. And so, we had some celebrations that year of specific things that showcased what the Pageant had been like back in the late ’30s, World War Two, when it was—one year where it wasn’t shown, and doing a whole tent that was focused on the 75th anniversary. Well, then, the *Book of Mormon* musical and Mitt Romney’s second presidential bid meant that we had a very different environment. And, whereas before, we had been shaking the bushes, trying to get people [15:00] to come, like, “Can we get the Finger Lakes paper?” and “can we get Syracuse?” and somebody downstate, and so forth, in 2012, we had AFP TV from France. We had Discovery Channel. We had the Disney Channel. We had Al Jazeera. We had *New York Times*, *New York Times* religion editor, the *L.A. Times*, NPR Radio, *Wall Street Journal*. We had *everybody* coming, and it was a whole [laughs] different ballgame because then, each morning, as I would be doing a press review of that day of who’s coming into town, what kind of interviews are they looking for, how are we going to—who will we assign to be with them as they’re [craning?]-you know, doing audience interviews and that sort of thing—it was an exceedingly wonderful thing to have, but at times a little bit overwhelming. And one of the nice things that happened was that many people came just because they were

very tired of covering Mitt Romney on the road or, you know, other things, and they were just looking for a different angle to talk about, some background thing about Latter-day Saints, and the Pageant provided a little-known, interesting trivia bit. But what they went away with were [sic] very different than what they thought they were coming for.

The *New York Times* had sent a film crew because they really wanted to say, you know, “Who are these Mormons, and what’s it like at Pageant?” And we allowed them to go backstage and to be in where the cast were. They came to the devotionals before performances. They came to rehearsals. They came to all kinds of things. And finally, the last night they were there, the producer pulled me aside, and she said, “I just don’t get this at all.” And I said, “What?” [laughs] She said, “I have been here three days, and I have never even heard Mitt Romney’s name mentioned until I asked someone, ‘Well, what do you think of Mitt Romney running for president?’” She said, “I expected to find this being a love fest because you’ve got this Mormon person running for president, and that there would be banners and paraphernalia for Mitt Romney,” and she said, “there are people here who have not even decided if they want to vote for him.” And she said, “This isn’t what I thought it was at all.”

And so, I asked *her*, I said, “What’s the story *you’re* going to tell?” She said, “I’m *dumbfounded* by all these people who are willing to come together to do something at great personal sacrifice, that the only reason is: They believe it!” And so, she talked about—she said, “I had no idea they did service projects; they did all these things.” And she said, “And just to get a Broadway-sized musical up,” you know, “having over seven thousand lighting instruments, to have soundboards that are bigger than are used for rock concerts, the sound system that is trucked in—I mean, all the things”—everywhere she went, she just kept saying, “this is so much bigger than I thought it was. I thought it was just, you know, a few hundred people get together

and put on a little show.” And she said, “This really is so much more than I thought it was, but the reason behind it is what I didn’t understand.”

When the *Wall Street Journal* sent—[thinking] well, let’s see—John Turner is his name—and he actually is a professor—at that time, he was a professor, I think at George Washington University. [*Editor’s Note: As of spring 2022, John Turner is a professor of religious studies at George Mason University.*] And John is very familiar with Latter-day Saints; he’s done several books on Brigham Young and other early Church historians—er, history figures. And when he came, he called me ahead of time, and he said, “I can’t be there for performances; my family’s going through, but I really want to do a story.” So, we brought him backstage and had him just interview some of the people who were going to be major characters and so forth. And he stopped me as we were on the pathways behind where the costume center was, and he said, “I just have to tell you something.” He said, “I’m a father with kids,” and he said, “every single teenager that you’ve stopped or who’s said, ‘Oh, hi, who are you?’”—he said, “I have never met so many respectful teenagers in my life.” And he said, “My kids, my oldest is only 12.” And he said, “But if I could have a 16-year-old who is willing to just stop [laughs] on a sidewalk and have a conversation with me, like all of these young people that I’ve met here, I would be the luckiest dad alive.” And I’ve kept up [20:00] with John a couple of years after that, when he was doing another book on Mormonism, and he said, “My experience among the cast there still stands out as one of the most respectful and awe-inspiring things about the families who made that commitment to be in the Pageant.” So, his piece on the Hill Cumorah Pageant was very different than other people[’s].

But, in 2012, we also had *Slate Magazine* come, and Max Mueller came, and he said, “I’m not interested in who those Mormons are. I want to talk to the *anti-Mormons*.” So, he went

out front, because there are lots of protesters who come the nights of the performances, and Max Mueller just interviewed them. He let them share all [laughs] that they wanted to, and then he did his piece for *Slate*, and in his, he said, “These people obviously have no idea what they’re talking about.” And then, he took the five or six points they made and talked about how misguided they were.² It was [laughs] definitely surprising to me to read his piece, but it was also great.

Discovery Channel, they were with us for three days. They actually wanted to film in the Sacred Grove, which took some more Church clearance to have that happen. But they wanted to have some experiences with cast members who could essentially tell the Joseph Smith story, or who could talk about their personal reasons for “Why did you come here with your family?” And so, being the point person for all of the media, that was my opportunity to set up interviews, and for the most part, because of how the Church tries to run public affairs, I needed to be close by, because as they had questions or, like, “Did we hear that right?” or whatever, a few times we had to interrupt some of the... The Church has a number of Church history sites around—the Joseph Smith Farm and some other places—and so, at times, we had to interrupt things, and that’s where my credentials with the Pageant, I would say, “I’m sorry. Film crew’s going to come through. You’ll have to wait half an hour while they are going through the Joseph Smith log cabin,” or something like that.

So, as we were orchestrating all of those different pieces, I think the stories that came out of that *afterwards* were helpful, and they weren’t stories that I crafted. They were individual interviews with real people. And in some cases, the reporter who had come from Paris, he—after being in the Sacred Grove, he said, “Would you mind if I just went back and spent half an hour

² The article in question is Max Perry Mueller, “A Spirit of Persecution,” *Slate*, July 19, 2012, 9:11 AM, saved in the Internet Archive Wayback Machine on Sun., May 8, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220509010714/https://slate.com/human-interest/2012/07/the-hill-cumorah-pageant-helps-explain-mormon-identity-photos.html>.

by myself?” And I said [chuckling], “You’re—this is open to the public. It’s just when we have film crews that I have to be present.” And he said, “I may never make it back to the United States again, and I want to go back and feel in that Sacred Grove what I just felt for an hour and a half.” And so, he went back into the Sacred Grove by himself and just sat on a bench and pondered. Later that day, when he found me at the Hill Cumorah Pageant, he said, “That’s one of those moments that I’m going to treasure.”

So, some of the people who came were just getting a story, getting back, trying to edit it, trying to make their deadlines, and they were in a big rush, but the cameraman of the Discovery Channel, he said, “My wife and I have four kids,” and he said, “the family’s here.” He said, “When I go into dressing rooms, and we were doing things, and I saw how much love there was between dads helping their kids get ready and moms getting their daughters’ hair braided and all these things,” he said, “when I go back to my wife, I’m going to tell her we need religion in our life, because my kids don’t treat each other [laughs] this way. I want to do *something* to capture what you guys have here.” So, those were some of the things that the average person in the Hill Cumorah Pageant would never see, would never know, would never be privy to, but because of my role for those seven years, I got a front-row seat to those kinds of things.

There were times that the news agencies had a certain angle, and they came with their story already written about how the Mormons were, and all I could do is, you know, give them an opportunity to find out for themselves why people came, what their motivations were, what the experiences were [that] they had while they were there, and it was always educational. [laughs] Every year, as I would wind down from the 17 days, I would just—I would always be [25:00] intrigued at what I learned that I *never* had imagined would happen at the beginning of the season.

e: I understand that you said that people experienced a lot of growth in their faith during the Pageant. Do you think this is mainly because of a personal experience with the Pageant itself or because of the bonds formed socially during the Pageant?

Toi Clawson: Oh, no doubt that the two are interrelated. The first year that we were in it, our 16-year-old—I mean, if you think back, 1995 was probably before you two were born. It—it was [laughs]—I don't know how old you are, but back then, if you wanted to stay connected to somebody, you got their phone number, but it would usually be their mom or dad's because, you know, back in '95, no teenagers were having phones, and you had a phone that was connected to the wall. So, for my children to stay connected to the friends they made in Pageant in 1995, it really took a lot of work. You would snail-mail letters, and you would try to call a home number and hope that you could get somebody. So, by the time my youngest child, the fifth of our children, was going through it, if she wanted to stay in touch with somebody, she'd get their email, she'd get their personal phone number, she'd get all that information, and staying connected was much easier. We had some families that my children got to know because I was in it for those consistent seven years back-to-back, so there were times where we'd be coming back together with people who were from California or Arizona or Texas or Canada or wherever, but we were coming back together to spend those 17 days, and so, during that time, there *are* a lot of wonderful experiences you have together. It's almost like a family reunion of sorts. And even though it is 17 days of *grueling* [laughs] time, it really forms a bond.

So, my youngest child had to make my schedule happen. Even though she was younger, she had to be going out with me, and if I had a 5 AM call, because one of the local television networks was going to be trying to get their feed to get their morning show in, I had to meet the truck out there at five o'clock in the morning, which means my daughter had to go with me at 5

AM, and then we would be there all day long. And if we were staying till the close, because she would be in the cast, would stay until the end of the run-through or the cast rehearsals, we wouldn't be going home, back to our home, like, 20 miles away, till midnight. So, it was not something that you do lightly or that you say, "Yeah, I'll go out for an eight-hour day." 16 to 19 hours was kind of all the performance nights. That's what it was for me because I had early mornings, and I had to stay till all the reporters went home.

Leo Makalsky: Thank you for that story. So, on a bit of a less light note, how did you react to the cancellation announcement in 2019?

Toi Clawson: I actually was in Africa when it was announced that it would be closing. And the first thought that I had was, "Wow. I'm surprised it lasted as long as it did," for two reasons. It is a *ton* of work, and it's not just local people. It involves people, as I say, from all over the country. I had several friends who lived in Texas, who came every single year to work in the beards and wigs. The beards and wigs were fabricated on a level that is only known for television and close-ups because they were *really* high-class. It was not just, you know, something that's slapped on and very poor quality. It was television-quality. And so, those things were being made and fabricated by some of the women who worked in the beards and wigs. They would take things home and be working all year long to actually fabricate those pieces. So, when all of those people were coming together so frequently and doing so much that's very intense in whatever their specialty is, it [30:00] was a huge drain on families, frankly. And the people here in Upstate New York, I think—Rochester, Palmyra—it was almost more than they could bear. It was *really, really* a lot of work. People *loved* doing it, but it meant that they couldn't do something else for that time *every* July. So, I think that was starting to be fraying for some people.

And another piece of it is, starting in 2017, the Church began filming, using a different medium, to tell the stories of the Book of Mormon, and that essentially is what the Hill Cumorah Pageant was [sic] its purpose, was to tell about Jesus Christ through the lens of the Book of Mormon. So, as the Church began to do filming out in Utah at a *fantastic* set out there in Goshen, Utah, the way to reach a larger audience had started being put in place. The first of those films actually was released in the fall of 2019. My husband and I came back from Africa in early July of 2019. So, a few months later, as the Church released the first of these Book of Mormon videos, they were segmenting some of the stories that were told in the Hill Cumorah Pageant and doing it in a very different way, with a new medium that was much more personal, could be translated into different languages, [and] could have worldwide impact.

It really was *astounding* for many of my friends, who—in Sierra Leone—who are not literate. They believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God, but they don't know how to read because, for one thing, they had a ten-year civil war, and 1,200 schools across the country were blown up and demolished and *learning*—70 percent of the population in Sierra Leone is illiterate. The adult population just can't read. For those people to be able to access stories of the Book of Mormon on their *phone*? It was [an] *incredible* thing. Those same people would never have the opportunity to come to the United States, to a small place in Western New York, and see the Hill Cumorah Pageant. It was thoroughly exciting to me to see that. And my husband and I continue to have contacts in West Africa and it's—obviously, not everybody *has* a smartphone, but for people who do, to be able to share that with friends and family, and to watch something and to hear it, that is communicating the message that the Pageant was trying for those seventy-plus years to do.

Leo Makalsky: I just had a quick follow-up. Were you *glad* that they had pursued this different avenue to tell the story of the Book of Mormon, instead of doing the Pageant?

Toi Clawson: When I heard that they were starting to film, I had mixed feelings, partly because I know how the personal experience of being in, like, a Broadway show, how that impacted my children. Leo, you asked me how *I* felt about the Pageant being announced that it was going to close versus my children. Let me share with you for a moment [laughing], to put my two daughters, who are married and have teenagers—both said, “*Mom!* How could they stop this? I really wanted to come and bring *my* kids to be in the Hill Cumorah Pageant because I’d like them to experience what *I* got to experience.” So, when I said that I could see it was wearing on the local people, and that it’s a huge expense for the Church—it also was a big risk when people come together, and you have people breaking their ankle or falling off a stage or doing other things. Risk management did not like [laughs] the Pageant was going on because you have children as young as two years old on stages that are 30 feet up in the air, in pitch dark, and when you do a “lights out,” the only thing you have is the track lighting at the edge of the stage to say, “Do not step over this barrier, or you could fall 30 feet.” That’s not something that OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] wants to have, and it’s not something that the Church wants to keep having. [laughs] So, on one hand, I was recognizing that the risk management had been assumed for a long time by the Church, that they felt it was worth having those risks. [35:00] But the other side of that, with my own family saying, “I would have *loved* to have come and have my children experience the same thing I did,” there’s always a point where that’s going to end, and you’ll be the last ones to be doing something.

Leo Makalsky: Our final question, if, Nikita, you want to ask it.

Nikita Massaria: Yup. Thank you so much. Our last question is, how did you feel personally when COVID impacted your involvement with the Church, and how did it affect your relationships with other people who were involved with the Church? Were you able to see them as often? And did you feel like you were able to communicate as effectively?

Toi Clawson: Hmm. So, COVID didn't bring an end to *my* connection with the Pageant because mine ended back in 2012. But are you talking about, just, organizationally? How did COVID affect us and our worshiping?

Nikita Massaria: I just meant the Church, not the Pageant.

Toi Clawson: The Church, okay. When—let me back up a little bit—when we were in Africa in 2018, the Church announced that they were going to be moving to a new way of doing their Sunday meetings. I'm not sure if you're familiar, but Latter-day Saints usually have *three hours* of church [laughs] up until that point, where you would have a sacrament service for the first hour, and then you would have a Sunday School, and then you would have youth and children and the women's group and the men's group, and... So, it'd be three hours. And in 2018, they changed the pattern, and they said, "From now on, we're going to have two hours of Church, and we want people to have more Church teaching happening at—in their homes." And, as part of that, they introduced a new curriculum called *Come, Follow Me*, and it was taking each of the major scriptures, the four different scriptural texts that Mormons have, and they would have a *home-centered* study program.

So, as I say, literacy is a challenge where we were. The specific country we were in, in West Africa, has much higher illiteracy than Ghana or Cote d'Ivoire or other places in West Africa. So, for Sierra Leone to have a *Come, Follow Me* program, and to be having people teach at home, was a *real* stretch because many of the people couldn't read those lessons to their

children. They loved having the colored pictures and so forth, but they needed someone who could read to help them with that.

When we got home from our mission in 2019, we were staying with family because our home was being rented out to another family at that time, so we stayed with our daughter and her husband and four kids. When COVID hit, all over the world, people already had a home study program right in their own *home* that would guide them through weekly messages that they could study as a family. So, with my grandchildren and my daughter and her husband, my husband and myself, we continued having Church every Sunday even though there was no meeting house to go to, and we weren't singing hymns with other people and having the Church services that we were connected to normally for the rest of our lives. During those pretty much—let's see—two-thousand... 2020, in the fall, we started meeting again—so, for the six months or so, we were still having Church every Sunday, but it looked very different. It was very personalized. It was very unique. And we found a lot of comfort in this fact that we had something set up beforehand that would help guide us in a scripture study.

And it was also kind of wonderful that, periodically during that time, more of the Book of Mormon videos were being released. So, it kind of aided, kind of like teacher's aides for parents, to be able to have these videos, that they could show something [40:00] and then, on a more intimate level, talk to their kids, you know, on whatever level they were at. I had different conversations with my teenage grandsons about some of the things that they were watching. The Book of Mormon begins with a story of a family, and Nephi is the main character, and he's—it's the Book of Nephi that has been written. But his brothers, who don't believe their father, and they're, you know, kind of saying, "Our father's a visionary man. We don't believe he's a prophet. We don't want to—" and they show a little bit of the questioning between those two

brothers, where one of them asks the other one and says to his older brother, “What if it’s real? What if God really did speak to our father and told him to leave Jerusalem?” And the older brother replies and said, “Well, even if it’s real, he should keep it to himself.” And that little interchange, it’s not scriptural, but it’s conducive with what we learn about their characters. That little interchange allowed me to have a conversation with my grandson to say, “What do you think of that? If someone is questioning, ‘Is this person really speaking with God?’ and someone else says, ‘Well, even if they speak with God, they should just keep it to themselves,’ what do you think of that?”

So, I felt like, during the pandemic, we’d been given tools so that we could keep having the sacrament. We don’t have a paid ministry where you have to go to a priest for having, you know, the sacraments and those kinds of things. We have a lay ministry, so every father—grandfather, in our case—young men who are 16 years of age—they have the priesthood, and they could bless and administer the sacrament every Sunday. So, my husband is in his 60s. He hadn’t been blessing the sacrament for *many*, many years. But the sacrament prayers are right in the scriptures, so Church continued at home as a home-centered Church all through those months. And in some places, especially in Polynesia, where we’re doing some of our literacy work, and also in West Africa, they’ve had [COVID] resurgences, where they’ve had a mandate where no one can meet together. So, in those cases, where a father *can* read, he’s been able to bless the sacrament and still give that to his family.

Leo Makalsky: Okay. We want to thank you for joining us today and giving us such delightful insight on your experiences with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Toi Clawson: Thank you for using the whole name, Leo.

Leo Makalsky: I tried. [laughs]

Toi Clawson: There was one thing that I thought of last night that happened—and I can't tell you the year for sure; I think it was either 2010 or '11—but NPR had sent a reporter, NPR *Radio*. And when the guy arrived at the Hill Cumorah Pageant, it was a Saturday morning, and I said, "I don't know what you're going to do with radio because this is a *visual* thing. You know, television comes, and we have people taking pictures for the *New York Times* and that kind of thing. How can you capture this with sounds?" And he said, "Well, I'm going to get a different take on it." And so, he went to the costume area and so forth, and he was—he *dragged* his hand along the costumes that had all these beads and things that looked like bone and other things from a distance. And then, he started to describe what the costumes were like and what different things were. And so, he stayed for the performance, and at the end of it, he said, "Do you mind if I catch some audience members as they're leaving?" And I said, "That's fine." You know, I just had to be the one to introduce and say—to introduce him, so that they knew that this was being recorded for NPR Radio.

And—so, this elderly couple was getting up, and they had brought their own lawn chairs, and they were starting to walk out of the Pageant[']s] grassy area. And so, I asked if they had a moment for an interview. They said yes. And so, he started to ask them questions, and he asked them, you know, what their favorite part was, how far they travel to come, and that sort of thing. And the wife was describing—she said they live near Buffalo, New York, and that they have been coming almost every year for more than ten years. And he said, "Well, what brings you back?" And she said, "It's the feeling I have here. There is just something special about seeing Christ and feeling that he knows me. [45:00] And I always leave feeling like I want to be better."

And so, he thanked them, reached over, and thought he'd turned off his recorder. And then, they started to move away, and he said, "Oh, and you are Latter-day Saints, right?" And she

turned back around, and she said, “*No!* I’m a very active Catholic.” And then, they just proceeded to go to their car in the dark, and he looked at me, and he said, “OK, I’m *Jewish*. I had no idea that you were telling a story that begins in Jerusalem 600 years before the time of Christ.” And he said, “I know why *I* might be interested in this. I don’t understand why someone who’s a *Catholic* would be interested in this.” And then, he looked—because he said, “It’s almost like that couple were a plant. Everything they said was how spiritual this was and how it just made them feel so good, and that they kept coming back year after year.”

And then, he realized his tape had ended. He didn’t get any of the interview that he thought he had. And as he was getting ready to go, I said, “I hope you realize this is one of the reasons that our Church does this. To have something that you come and feel *so good about* when you leave is essentially our gift to the community, a reminder that God knows each one of us, and that this is really our task to care for one another and to bring each other along.” And he nodded. He had a wonderful day there, but it had been an experience that reminded me that it wasn’t just telling *our* story about the Book of Mormon. For every person, they saw what we did through the lens of their own experience, and that story was powerful for them. However they came, we hope that they left better.

Leo Makalsky: Thank you. That’s unfortunately all the time that we’ve got. I know Nikita has classes to get to.

Toi Clawson: All right, thank you both.

Nikita Massaria: Thank you so much.

Toi Clawson: All right. Have a good rest of your week.

Nikita Massaria: You, too.

All three, staggered: Bye.

Dublin Core Metadata for the Interview

Title: Interview with Patricia (Toi) Clawson, Thursday, April 7, 2022

Subject: Hill Cumorah Project, Theatre, Social Media, Public Relations, Journalism, Print News, Television News

Description: Toi Clawson was a public affairs director for the Hill Cumorah Pageant. She was a cast member in 1995 for the Pageant. In 2005, Toi and her husband were asked to do public affairs for the pageant. They did this until 2012. She worked long hours, with early mornings, and she had to stay until all of the reporters went home. She and her family were disappointed by yet understanding of the 2018 announcement of the Pageant's ending. One of her notable social media attempts was when Toi shared information about the Pageant on Facebook around 2012. Unfortunately, she was contacted and asked to take down the social media page by the Church. Then, sometime later, a similar situation happened with another pageant in Arizona, but their page got so much positive attention in such a short amount of time that the Missionary Department re-evaluated its stance and began to think of Facebook and other forms of social media as tools to use for spreading religious information.

Creator: Patricia (Toi) Clawson, Nikita Massaria, and Leo Makalsky

Source: Hill Cumorah Legacy Project

Date: Thursday, April 7, 2022

Contributor: Nikita Massaria and Leo Makalsky

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