

# NASA JOHNSON SPACE CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## ORAL HISTORY 2 TRANSCRIPT

JAMES KIRBY HINSON AND SHIRLEY HUNT HINSON  
INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA WRIGHT  
LOUISBURG, NORTH CAROLINA – 2 MAY 2000

WRIGHT: Today is May 2, 2000. This joint oral history is being conducted with Kirby Hinson and Shirley Hunt Hinson in Louisburg, North Carolina, as part of the Johnson Space Center Oral History Project. Interviewers are Rebecca Wright and Kevin Rusnak.

Thank you for allowing us in your home to visit with you individually and ending our day by speaking with you as a joint effort since you have been a couple for thirty-three years in just a few weeks, on May 31st. We wish you a happy anniversary for that date. But we'd like to hear about your life together, because so much of it was spent not just together but as part of NASA. Who would like to tell us how you met and go from there?

J. KIRBY HINSON: Thank you for those good wishes. We're glad you're doing this as part of the other interviews, too. I started work with the Space Task Group on July 9, 1959. And when? We met one week later?

SHIRLEY HINSON: I started work on June 30th, 1959. I think I saw you at lunch time on the 9th.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I remember the day she saw me. You've heard this story, I guarantee. I walk into the cafeteria, and here are these two little blue headlights in the middle of the room that you can't keep your eyes off, and they remained pointed toward me during the entire

meal. I ended sitting where I was facing her. And you can't eat with someone looking that hard at you. [Laughter] We actually met a few days later and became close. And interestingly enough, we did not date at work. I mean not at all. Some people thought I was a myth. Some of Shirley's workmates thought I was a myth for years.

SHIRLEY HINSON: They teased me that he was a myth because no one ever saw us together at work. But one thing he may not know is, the Coke machine was in Building 104, which is where I was and he was in Building 58, so every day if he came to my building after a Coke, somehow or other I ended up out in the hallway. People would say, "He's coming after his Coke."

J. KIRBY HINSON: Yes. I knew that she showed up a lot. [Laughter] But we'd have nice conversations there, but it was conversations at the Coke machine. I don't think we ever had lunch together, did we?

SHIRLEY HINSON: We never ate together at lunch time. We did not date at work.

J. KIRBY HINSON: There was no particular reason for that. Neither of us was ashamed of the other. It's just work was work and dating was dating. We might make a date at work, but for the most part at work I was doing my thing and she was doing her thing and loving every minute of it.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I think one thing nice, though, is we worked in different areas. I was basically in flight support always, and Kirby was in systems engineering and flight systems. What made it interesting is he didn't know my work, I didn't know his work, but we could come home at night and just talk work for hours and hours and hours. I educated him and he educated me.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Swapped perspectives.

SHIRLEY HINSON: So we knew a lot more about the program by knowing each other than we would have had we not known each other.

WRIGHT: First thing, you both met at Langley [Research Center, Hampton, Virginia].

SHIRLEY HINSON: Yes, but we were both from North Carolina. In fact, he had been right by my house.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I went to college at N.C. State, and in my freshman year I re-met a friend who had lived in Wadesboro, where I grew up. His father was an Episcopal minister, Bill Latma [phonetic]. The weekend after hurricane Hazel hit North Carolina—

SHIRLEY HINSON: Which was October 1954.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Within a matter of days there, I met him and he invited me home for the weekend. Well, his dad was now minister in Louisburg. So we drove right up 401 right past that house. I saw this little girl out there in shorts, mowing, and I blew the horn and waved, but I didn't know who it was. [Laughter] But I came that close to her once, four or five years before we met, which I thought was interesting.

WRIGHT: You said you dated for eight years, is that correct?

J. KIRBY HINSON: Dated exclusively for eight years.

SHIRLEY HINSON: Yes, basically. After he bought a car, I never dated anybody else.

J. KIRBY HINSON: And that was a long time. I did not buy a car—

SHIRLEY HINSON: He didn't have the money to buy a car. He was paying college debts.

J. KIRBY HINSON: First six months that I worked, I gave a little money to my family. At the end of that six months, my starting salary was \$5,430 a year, and at the end of six months, I paid back more than \$1,500 in college debts, just wrote the checks and that was it. That was equivalent to about a year and a half of college. The next semester I sent my older brother, who had been in the Air Force, I sent him to school for a semester to see if he could get back into the swing of studying, and he did and went on to graduate from N.C. State and become an aeronautical engineer working in the space program. But I committed to paying for his

school for one semester. He spent more in that one semester than I spent in any one year. All he had to do was pick up the phone and call and I'd send him a check.

At the end of that semester, he traded cars. At that time I did not have an automobile, didn't need one. I was living with two guys in a person's home that we had the upstairs and they had the downstairs. We paid like \$10 a week for a bedroom and our bathroom upstairs. They both had cars, and one of them went everywhere I needed to go, including dating.

SHIRLEY HINSON: But not often enough. [Laughter] But we did date on the phone a lot. Sometimes we would talk, and what we talked about now I can't tell you, but sometimes we'd talk on the phone four and five hours a night.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Oh, I can tell you. I went in halves with one of my roommates and bought a guitar at a pawn shop for \$30, learned how to play "Ol' Black Joe" one note at a time, and called Shirley and said, "Listen to this." [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: And he did. He played "Ol' Black Joe" on the phone. We dated on the phone a lot until we bought a car.

WRIGHT: Then your careers started moving very quickly in the sense that you all had so much to do with the Space Task Group. How did that affect your relationship, or did it?

J. KIRBY HINSON: I think it just kept us alive and keyed up and interested in all parts of our lives. And still does. Just thinking about it, it still does.

SHIRLEY HINSON: We get [the Johnson Space Center's] *Space [News] Roundup*, and I'm sorry that e-mail has caused the articles in *Space Roundup* not to be what they used to be. I wish they were back to the old paper, but we still get that and thoroughly enjoy it. I love seeing people on the move and who's been promoted. It's a little bit disturbing, though, that the more and more time that we've been away from it, we don't recognize the people's names. But we've been retired now eight years.

J. KIRBY HINSON: That's right. Very few that we do recognize, in fact.

SHIRLEY HINSON: That's amazing. I'm not that old.

J. KIRBY HINSON: We've been retired how long?

SHIRLEY HINSON: Eight years.

J. KIRBY HINSON: That's like an engagement.

SHIRLEY HINSON: It really is. We have eight years on either end.

WRIGHT: During those eight years quite a bit happened because you both were traveling and you both—

J. KIRBY HINSON: We went to Houston.

WRIGHT: Tell us about that move. You weren't married at the time that you moved, is that correct?

SHIRLEY HINSON: Let me tell you one thing. I'd go to the Cape, and they had scrubbed the mission. I would beg for them to send me back home. And they said, "We may go in three days," and I says, "But you can send me back to Langley, and I'll come back day after tomorrow." That's just to see him. I did not want to stay down there waiting two or three weeks for them to decide when the mission was going to proceed. Back then, it was like one day at a time. At midnight tonight, you knew you weren't going at seven o'clock the next morning, but every time they scrubbed a mission, I said, "If there's any chance that it's not going for two or three days, let me go back to Langley." See, they ran a chartered plane back and forth then all the time, so it didn't matter if they took us back.

WRIGHT: As long as there was an empty seat, huh?

J. KIRBY HINSON: But I guess neither of us ever had any consideration of not going to Houston. They moved this wonderful work and all the people doing it down there, and we just went.

SHIRLEY HINSON: The only reason I really hated to go at the time when I went is my parents were getting old.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I can tell them a little bit about that. When I first met her in 1959, she would see an old man walking across the street having a little difficulty, and tear up thinking about her daddy getting old. And her daddy was at that time fifty-nine.

SHIRLEY HINSON: He was sixty-eight.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Sixty-eight years old. He lived to ninety-one, and somewhere in—

SHIRLEY HINSON: One of the cutest things Daddy said when he went to Houston, “Would you let her come back every year on my birthday and Christmas Eve? I’m not going to live much longer. I’m already supposed to be dead.” Kirby said, “Sure.” Twenty-three years later, he got to spend Christmas Eve. Twenty-three years later.

J. KIRBY HINSON: And the funny thing is, way back then, I told her, I said, “Shirley, you don’t have to live through that but once. There’s no reason to do it this early.” And he was spry and active, but he was from the old school that thought when you retire, like when you get to be sixty-five, that’s it. You can’t farm vigorously like you used to. It’s time to just go away, I guess. But he got over that feeling. He stuck around a long time.

SHIRLEY HINSON: But I bought Eastern Airlines as long as they were in existence. [Laughter] I flew home three times a year. In fact, we had never been together on Christmas

for twenty-three years until after Daddy died. We have never been apart for forty-one New Year's Eves.

J. KIRBY HINSON: That was one cute thing that we did by moving to Houston. I never begrudged her coming home on Christmas for a week or so. For a lot of reasons, I started not doing that at that particular time, and it was a long time before we spent a Christmas together.

SHIRLEY HINSON: Yes, 1983. From '59 to '83.

WRIGHT: Did you move at the same time, or did someone go to Houston before the other one?

J. KIRBY HINSON: No, close together. Two weeks or something.

SHIRLEY HINSON: You went on the 29th of March and I went on April 13th.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I got there on April Fool's Day. I thought that was really great.

[Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: One fun thing about the day that I got to Houston is I went into this airport, and I had this women that was taking care of everybody that moved to Houston. I guess you've heard of her. She put me in this hotel and put me in a room and the air-

conditioner wouldn't turn off, and I froze to death. So I called him and told him that I needed to change rooms, and so they changed rooms. I just assumed they would change the location if anyone called in. Well, Kirby kept calling me, and I never answered because they kept giving him that room number that I had moved out of. And he lost me.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I lost her for three or four hours. I was at Ellington [Field], and she didn't know a number down there to call me. I knew she was in that motel, and they would not tell me what room she was in, and they would not connect me with anything but that room that she wasn't in any more.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I finally called them and asked them had I had any calls.

J. KIRBY HINSON: She said, "Yes, thirty-seven." [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: But see, I had no car. I was in a strange town.

J. KIRBY HINSON: But I drove up there just distraught. I didn't know what was going on. They called her room when I got there. I said, "Where have you been for four hours?"

SHIRLEY HINSON: Talking about traveling, a week after I got there, Kirby went on travel for about seven or eight days.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Back to Langley.

SHIRLEY HINSON: And left me his car, and I learned Houston. I was never was lost in Houston.

J. KIRBY HINSON: And I never caught up with her. She knew Houston better than I did for the rest of our lives there. [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: The first day I drove to work, I don't know whether you remember the freeway you used to come in on Griggs [Road], you still do come in on Griggs, and we were in the rented buildings all over Houston. I was in the HPC [Houston Petroleum Center] building which was at Wayside and Gulf Freeway. I came in from my apartment and I came in on the left-hand side at Griggs, and I had to get off at Griggs. I only had one entrance to get off, and it was like three or four lanes in. I had never driven in traffic like that. But I got over there.

J. KIRBY HINSON: But she had plenty of acceleration in that '61 Chevy. [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: But, anyway, I learned Houston in his car while he was on travel.

J. KIRBY HINSON: In one week she learned something very dramatic about Houston that some people never learn, and that is it's set up north-east, south-west. It's not north-south. If you get to thinking of the Gulf Freeway as south, you will stay lost all the time. They turned

it forty-five degrees. Yet there are some streets that are north-south, east-west that have names that everybody knows. That's really confusing if you don't realize that.

WRIGHT: So at what point in this eight-year engagement did you decide to make it for real?

SHIRLEY HINSON: I don't know. He never asked me to marry him.

J. KIRBY HINSON: She keeps telling that story.

SHIRLEY HINSON: [Laughter] He didn't. The funny thing about it, and I'm sure you've have interviewed people, but a couple of people told me, said, "You're crazy to keep dating him. Give him an ultimatum. Say you want to marry him or not." And I says, "I don't want him unless he wants me." But a lot of people told me that.

Another cute thing got told to me one time. In fact, this was [Eugene F.] Kranz's retirement party at the museum. They said, "A lot of people in flight control would have asked me for a date, but they knew there wasn't any need because you were Kirby's." [Laughter] They told Kirby that that night. I thought that was cute.

WRIGHT: So you took time off these new careers to get married.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Not very much.

SHIRLEY HINSON: This is good.

J. KIRBY HINSON: She came back from one of these Christmas trips, and I was hunting deer at the time, off and on. I had an antlerless deer tag that I had not used. So, yes, I did, I tied that around her finger, and I say, "Would this do until I can go shopping?" [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: And then he went on travel again for two months, off and on. In March, I said, "Are you ever going shopping?" [Laughter] But he didn't have time, really.

J. KIRBY HINSON: But do you remember what period this was? This was between the Apollo fire and May when we got married. The other thing that was going on is that there was really a lot of activity on that paraglider business at Langley. They had gone out on a contract. What you wanted me to tell, was that the honeymoon?

SHIRLEY HINSON: Yes.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Okay. We go on a honeymoon, and we had reservations at the Holiday Inn at Stewart Beach, Florida, where we did some really wonderful fishing. We left there and went over to Fort Myers, basically right across Florida, to fish for tarpon in the river over there. I had never ever made an advanced reservation before, but we did it that day. My officemates knew that I like Holiday Inns. They decided someone had to go to Langley to review these proposals coming in from the contractors. So they called me. They didn't know Stewart Beach. They just kept calling around until they found somebody that

recognized the name, and they said, “Oh, they made an advanced reservation there in Fort Myers, Florida.”

So one of the guys that worked for me—and I didn’t have the power to fire him—called me the morning after we get to Fort Myers and says, “They’re having a contract review on those paragliders up at Langley and somebody has to go up there. Could you go up there?”

And I said, “Are you crazy? I’m on my honeymoon.”

And he says, “I know, but isn’t it almost over and couldn’t you come back by Langley?”

And I said, “What am I supposed to do with this bride?” He says, “Well, uh.”  
[Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: “Let her go on back to Houston.”

J. KIRBY HINSON: They didn’t really have an answer for that except let her drive back to Houston. And of course I wasn’t going to do it. I used all the English language that I know, even the French words, and then we proceeded to pack up the car and come home, because it just destroyed the trip. No one will ever take responsibility for the decision to call me, not the guy that called me and not my boss at the time, who was John [W.] Kiker, who had been asking for five years, “When are you going to get married? When are you going to get married?” I must done it too early or something. [Laughter] But other than that, we had a nice trip. I did not go to Langley.

What else happened? Because when I got back, as I mentioned in our discussion, Frank Borman was already out at [North American] Rockwell redesigning all the systems. We got really, really busy on the Apollo parachute system, fortunately. That was a really hard and joyful effort all of us were on, I guess. That got me away from the paraglider. And what did you do when we got back?

SHIRLEY HINSON: I went to work.

J. KIRBY HINSON: You went to work.

SHIRLEY HINSON: With two rings on my hand instead of one. [Laughter]

J. KIRBY HINSON: We planned the wedding from the time I gave her the ring.

SHIRLEY HINSON: In March, I asked him, "Are you ever going shopping?" because he asked me would that antlerless deer tag do until he had the chance to go shopping. In March he had not been shopping. Meanwhile, I had gone downtown and found what I sort of wanted as far as a setting goes, not the stone, and I told him where it was. So we went downtown one day, and I drove around the block while he went in the store. This was in the latter part of March, and all the rest of March goes by. All of April goes by.

On May 1st, he says, "I need to go downtown today." I think it was a Saturday. I'm not sure what day it was. Anyway, he said, "I need to go downtown today." So I figured, "He's finally going to pick up something." Came all that night and we sat there and sat there

and sat there. We watched TV and about midnight I said, "I've got to go bed. I'm tired." About the only time I ever gave you an ultimatum, but I didn't give it to him except, "I've got to go to bed." Finally, he pulled it out from under the sofa. He had it hid under my sofa. He pulled my ring out from under the soft and gave it to me.

We planned our wedding in North Carolina. We got married in a little church about four miles from here and planned the entire wedding by mail and phone calls.

J. KIRBY HINSON: And at that time you had to get blood tests and all kind of crazy things.

SHIRLEY HINSON: And I had to get a form from North Carolina shipped down there. I went and asked my sister, "Do I have to have a special form to get my blood test on?" She wrote back and said, "Yes." I immediately sent her a self-addressed, stamped envelope with a seven-cent air mail stamp on it and says, "Please send me the form." But we planned the wedding and got married the 31st. I didn't give him a chance to get away. Got married in one month. Got my ring the 1st and married the 31st.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Right. We didn't believe in long engagements.

WRIGHT: Set up house quickly in Houston and was just rolling right with the space program.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Absolutely.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I had already moved into a two-bedroom apartment before we got married. I had moved right across the porch from a one-bedroom apartment to a two-bedroom apartment so he'd have room for all his stuff.

J. KIRBY HINSON: My airplanes. I was even building airplane then.

WRIGHT: We've learned from talking with you earlier today that life was busy. Your lives were busy as individuals and now that you had decided to put yourselves in a two-bedroom apartment, you were really busy trying to build your life together. How were you able to work through the pressures of so much to do with so little time?

SHIRLEY HINSON: We understood each other's work.

J. KIRBY HINSON: There's an expression that's common today called "time-deprived." We never felt that.

SHIRLEY HINSON: Never.

J. KIRBY HINSON: We had twenty-four hours in the day. If we couldn't get these things done, we'd just modify what these things were. I've never felt other than that. Busy is just wonderful. The times that Shirley can get me to do the most things around the house is when I'm the busiest. She loves it when I work on my little airplane, because she can come in and say, "Would you glue that drawer face back in there?" And it's nothing to me; I just glue

that drawer face back on. It's the old thing of if you want something done, give it to the busiest person you can find. And that's the way life has been for both of us.

SHIRLEY HINSON: There's one other thing that we did that made our time together a very good time, too. If we came home from work and we were tired, we'd take a short nap immediately and not try to cook, because I worked just as hard as he did and sometimes harder. But I'd come home and I would not try to eat supper immediately. We'd take a short nap and be well rested or watch a TV program or something like that, and then eat and stay up afterwards. We had quality time together because of that. We were never tired, never at each other mad or anything like that. And if I worked late, then he would take a nap and stay up with me. So we still had our time together, even though we had weird hours. He would work late on a project or bring work home, but we still had our time together.

J. KIRBY HINSON: There were a few times when particularly I would take an extended trip, like that trip out to Ames [Research Center, Moffett Field, California] to that vertical motion simulator. That was probably the longest.

SHIRLEY HINSON: Seventeen days. You sent me over an astronaut's house to send you some money.

J. KIRBY HINSON: That was so great.

SHIRLEY HINSON: You gave out of money.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I gave out of money, and Mike Coates was going to fly out there.

SHIRLEY HINSON: This was pre-credit card days, too.

J. KIRBY HINSON: He was one of the young astronauts. I called Shirley and said, "Take the money over to Mike Coates and give it to him. He's flying out here." She called me back before he got there and says, "You didn't tell me how good-looking he was." [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: He had the most gorgeous blue eyes.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Beautiful, piercing blue eyes.

SHIRLEY HINSON: He did. He was a nice-looking astronaut.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I think she almost fainted when he answered the door.

SHIRLEY HINSON: So gracious, too.

WRIGHT: Sounds like there were a lot of surprises in your marriage over the years. [Laughter] Sometimes even though you worked on different sections or different systems and you had both mentioned you never worked on a project together, was there ever a time when you had information that for some reason you weren't supposed to share with

anybody? Did you ever find times where you felt some of the work you were working on was classified and you couldn't even tell your partner? Or did that ever come as part of your marriage?

J. KIRBY HINSON: No.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I think the only time I had anything that he didn't know was like the Atlas booster and, of course, he probably knew it but we didn't talk about it because that booster was a military booster and all the launch trajectories and everything were classified and the insertion conditions was classified.

J. KIRBY HINSON: In my case, the weight, the landing weight for the spacecraft could be traced back up to the launch weight and then the people would know what kind of payload the Atlas could carry. We didn't talk about this.

SHIRLEY HINSON: But when I would be working on things like Skylab re-boost that we weren't supposed to talk about, he was working on it, too, in our different area.

WRIGHT: I'm sure it helped because you were both in the same program at NASA.

J. KIRBY HINSON: We generally were always working on the same program until the later stages. I think I started on Space Station a bit earlier. In fact, I guess I tended to start on most of the vehicles a little earlier.

SHIRLEY HINSON: But that helped me a lot because he would know what the mission was going to be and the objectives and everything. And he would teach me those things.

J. KIRBY HINSON: And I really shared what the mission was, too, even though I didn't work her part. I really cared what those missions were. I was fascinated with orbital mechanics. Got a good mathematician here. But orbital mechanics just drove me crazy. It was so absolutely straightforward, I couldn't believe it. So I enjoyed learning those kind of things and all the way through the program, early just to know what the missions were, and later for the docking and rendezvous kind of stuff.

SHIRLEY HINSON: The other thing is when we knew things were being done wrong, as we perceived them, whether they were or not, we were good soundingboards for each other.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Complained. And all the other words.

SHIRLEY HINSON: If you wanted to vent any emotions, we would let the other one vent and just take it.

WRIGHT: You shared with us, Kirby, earlier, but I don't believe we've had a chance to get that on tape, about sometimes when you came home from work, you had a special way of turning on the television.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Wasn't that on the tape?

WRIGHT: No, I missed that. Could you repeat that for us now? It was so great.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I told them we would come home and watch "Days of Our Lives," and I told her we'd complain about the acting, complain about the writing. We'd complain about the directing, and Shirley should be a director. She would make an excellent director in the movies.

SHIRLEY HINSON: The Trench people [in the Mission Control Center] thought I tried to direct them, too. [Laughter]

J. KIRBY HINSON: It isn't you're trying to make people do what you want; it's that she has this attention to detail that directors need. Like, you don't want your hair parted here and the next thing parted here and he hasn't been anywhere. She notices things like that. Drives me crazy.

SHIRLEY HINSON: John [S.] Llewellyn [Jr.] nicknamed me "Shirley Smart." [Laughter] Did he tell you that? He always called me Shirley Smart because I was always smarting off, I guess.

WRIGHT: You kept them all in line. That's quite a challenge.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I did. I did. I mean, I tried to. They know I tried to.

WRIGHT: Did you have other people that you knew in your association with work that you saw couples get married and have marriages as a NASA couple?

J. KIRBY HINSON: I'm thinking.

SHIRLEY HINSON: Clay [Claiborne R.] Hicks and Frances [Hicks].

J. KIRBY HINSON: See, I wasn't real close to them because that was an association that you had that basically was a work association.

SHIRLEY HINSON: But he was so good. Clay Hicks was just absolutely out of this world. And Bob Arnold.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Yes, I knew Bob. I went to school with Bob.

SHIRLEY HINSON: And his wife was about fifty miles from your home town. She's from Albemarle.

J. KIRBY HINSON: And she didn't sound the least bit hicky. [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: Just wait until you hear these tapes. [Laughter]

J. KIRBY HINSON: I nicknamed her "Corn Flake." They eventually got married.

SHIRLEY HINSON: She was one of those that said I should give him an ultimatum. I kept telling her that I didn't want him until he wanted me.

J. KIRBY HINSON: And I hate to tell you this, but they're not together anymore.

WRIGHT: Was that something that you both watched as your careers went through NASA? Did you see other people not react to the pressures of the job as well as you were able to?

J. KIRBY HINSON: I think that was not just NASA people, but people in general. We saw a lot of marriages fall apart.

SHIRLEY HINSON: It became more—

J. KIRBY HINSON: Easier to do, I guess.

SHIRLEY HINSON: Well, more socially acceptable for divorce. When we first started work, if a man was divorced, he was not included anymore.

J. KIRBY HINSON: And there was some question about whether a divorced man could ever be President. You know, it was that kind of thing.

SHIRLEY HINSON: It was not a favorable thing to do.

J. KIRBY HINSON: But I'll tell you, NASA did not put pressure on our marriage.

SHIRLEY HINSON: It did not. It did some people's marriage, but I think they allowed it.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I think NASA was an incidental part of that. It was a personality thing more than anything else.

SHIRLEY HINSON: You can tell for sure that it didn't unless you wanted it to by looking at Gene [Kranz]. He had six kids and a good marriage. You never heard him say anything except something endearing about his wife and family.

J. KIRBY HINSON: All girls?

SHIRLEY HINSON: One boy, I think.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Five girls. One of them worked for my office as a co-op kind of person.

SHIRLEY HINSON: But I think things like that happen only when it would have happened anywhere. I don't think it was the pressures. They may want to attribute it to that, but I don't think it was that. I think it would have happened anyway.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I mentioned my traveling for some extended periods, if you call seventeen days extended. I do, being away from home that long. Shirley was more likely to have to work late at night, preparing for a mission. That might be until midnight, four or five nights in a row. The only thing that ever caused me to do was to worry that she was getting overly extended and tired. It never hurt our marriage. We both had patience with each other in those things.

WRIGHT: Were you able as well to share the duties at home?

J. KIRBY HINSON: No, I really don't.

SHIRLEY HINSON: He was taken care of in the old-fashioned way.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I was. I was taken care of in the old-fashioned way and only in recent years have I realized what a—

SHIRLEY HINSON: How hard I worked?

J. KIRBY HINSON: No, an inside-out world it is that has two people working. That's one part of today's society that I enjoyed. I mean, you get two people go off to work and, if anything, she worked harder than I did, at least more hours, particularly in the mid years, both having a great time at work, doing really hard jobs. And we'd come home in the evening, I never

would have thought of cooking. I didn't think very much of taking her out to eat so that she didn't have to cook.

SHIRLEY HINSON: He didn't know what the inside of a grocery store looked like.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I didn't know what the inside of a grocery store looked like.

SHIRLEY HINSON: Or the dry cleaners.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Nor did I want to. [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: Or a department store.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I did occasionally pick up the dry cleaning.

SHIRLEY HINSON: You did pick up the dry cleaning, if you got off work before I did.

J. KIRBY HINSON: There were a very few chores that were mine, like keeping the car serviced, like these "male macho" kind of things. Although I'd open the hood and I'd look and say, "That's not wheels, tires, and brakes to me. Nothing aerodynamic about it," and slam the trunk and take it to the service station. [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: One fun thing, five years after we got married, we bought a home in Clear Lake Forest. I enjoy outdoor work. He says, "I don't like to mow the grass. If you don't want to mow the grass, hire someone." Never touched the lawn mower. He kept telling me to put it in the car and go get it serviced. And I never hired it done.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Absolutely sympathetic. You can either do it yourself or hire it done. It's not something I want to do. I want to spend my time another way. Very unfair, I find out later, because she cannot hire it done the way she wants it done. Period. And the way she wants it done isn't that picky. It's just she wants it done right, and you can't pay to get it done right for any amount of money.

SHIRLEY HINSON: But I enjoy doing it.

J. KIRBY HINSON: We'll show you the lawn mower before we leave, that we fight over. If I could put wings on that little rascal, I know I could get it off the ground. [Laughter] Yes, I do the yard now, part of it.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I think the hardest part of my career—but it never strained the marriage—was during Skylab when NASA had given me that management development program where you take course at the University of Houston and offered me a Ph.D. if I'd go to Colorado. But I didn't want to go to Colorado for three months, and they would not do it at time in Houston. I had to go on site in Colorado, so I turned that down. But I was doing Skylab, taking a course every semester.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Writing a paper for it, which she hated writing papers.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I hate writing papers. That's the reason I like math, I think, because you don't have to write papers as much with math. You say, "Here it is," and tabulate it. Then my college professor that I like better than any professor I had, came to see us and stayed about a week during this time frame. I tried to show him Houston and everything. I just about died. But I was working fourteen hours a day, had a house guest.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Taking care of a husband.

SHIRLEY HINSON: And taking a course at the same time. That was a tough nine months.

WRIGHT: And it wasn't the norm back in the early seventies for a woman to be in such a high position that you were in and then again adding more and more. It was quite a feat.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I need to tell them what Dr. Reynolds said. I had eight courses under Dr. Reynolds when I was in college. I took everything he taught because he was so good. He was the one I was telling you earlier that says, "If you're going out to work, you're going to need to know this." And he would teach us as if he had been to work, and that's one good thing about if you go teaching, you will enjoy having experience because you can teach your students, "You need to know this when you work, and how to do this."

J. KIRBY HINSON: You bring something to your students that they won't get another other way.

SHIRLEY HINSON: He loved baseball games, and we took him to the Astrodome every time. Well, you finish telling this. It is so cute.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Are you talking about the—yes. Dr. Reynolds at the time was in his eighties, and we had a lot of talks about how it is growing old as a man and the way society perceives you. So we told a lot of jokes back and forth, particularly him telling the jokes about this little boy was really ogling these beautiful women as he was walking along in his mother's hand.

SHIRLEY HINSON: This is in the Astrodome.

J. KIRBY HINSON: The mother told the little boy, "If you keep looking at those women, you're gonna go blind." So this really exceptionally beautiful women comes along, and the little boy says, "I think I'm going to risk just one eye." So all night at the Astrodome, these beautiful women coming by, we were going like this. [Demonstrates]

SHIRLEY HINSON: At his age it was so cute. But his coming down to see us, and us being able to take him through the control center, and at that time the rockets and everything were outside Building 2, I think it was one at the time. But being able to take people into the

control center when they came to visit, just working there I could easily do that, was a good thing.

J. KIRBY HINSON: It was a really special thing for friends of mine that visited, that I could call her and she could set up something like that.

WRIGHT: And what a compliment to your professor to see the student.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Oh, he loved it. He loved every minute of it.

WRIGHT: Your families were in North Carolina, and NASA was such a close-knit that so many people, that was their friends when they moved, was all of NASA. Did you find that as well, that it was more of an extended family in a very close-knit group that you became friends with, with people that you worked? Or did you also associate with people outside of that inside the community as well?

SHIRLEY HINSON: The work community was at work, for the most part, very, very, very close-knit friends sit down and talk one on one, as long we would work, but we did not socialize much with people we worked with. We did some.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Before we got married, we did some, and it was mostly "boy-type" things at my office, like hunting and all that. At that time they really would have preferred just me. But we did socialize with our office people, really before we got married more than we did

afterwards. Part of that was because soon after we got married, we moved into a house in a housing development where most of the people did not work for NASA. In self-defense, you make friends around yourself like that.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I think it's really good not to socialize with the people you work with too often, particularly in the same division.

J. KIRBY HINSON: You can't just exclusively do everything with them. If you do, you really get stilted.

SHIRLEY HINSON: Before we retired, we started going out to eat with a couple about once every two or three weeks and everything. That was fun because they worked in a different organization, and we had retired, and it kept us in the who's who and who's doing what and what bad decisions they were making and what good decisions they were making and who's organizationally being put in the right place and wrong place. We were still interested, and are still interested. I wish they printed the phone book still.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Oh, yes.

WRIGHT: We have found those to be a valuable tool in our trades.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I finally threw all mine away, except I kept one about every three years, just for reference, but I had so many, I threw them away when I moved.

WRIGHT: So much of what you did, you did in your area and Shirley did in her area, but you never had a chance to ever work on a project together? Your paths never crossed?

J. KIRBY HINSON: Never did.

SHIRLEY HINSON: There wasn't even a meeting.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I can't offhand remember a meeting that we shared.

WRIGHT: Do you have a special memory of a special mission that—I had asked you both, I believe we were talking about the Apollo 11, were you ever together for the lunar landing?

SHIRLEY HINSON: We were together when it landed.

J. KIRBY HINSON: At home. I rarely had any mission responsibilities. Rarely. And Shirley rarely had any real-time mission responsibilities, did you? Unless something went wrong, then either one of us might get called in. But I watched an awful lot of missions at home on TV.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I watched almost all of them in the control center. The one time that we almost work on the same thing was when you were doing the sun shield.

J. KIRBY HINSON: And I worked twenty-four hours a day.

SHIRLEY HINSON: He did. He did. I didn't see him for over a day.

J. KIRBY HINSON: On Skylab I was part of the little team that had one of the possible fixes for Skylab where they had to broken solar array or something, and they had to put a shield up there to shield part of the vehicle from the sun. So we had two or three different umbrella kind of configurations. From the parachute school, it was easy for me to do a fabric thing and roll it up and put it in a bag. But we worked night and day on that thing trying to get it ready. I think we had something like a month to put two or three different configurations together and get the vehicle up there.

SHIRLEY HINSON: One thing that we had that some people didn't have is consideration for the other person, and if we weren't coming home when they thought we were, we would always call.

J. KIRBY HINSON: And we still have that.

SHIRLEY HINSON: We still do that, and there are people who wouldn't do that. "Oh, she'll know I'm still at work." Men who were working late at night when I was working and "Have you called your wife yet?" "She'll know I'm still at work." We never did that. I'd call and say, "I think I'm going to be at 6:30, but why don't you call me at 6:30?"

Sometimes he would, and sometimes I'd say, "Oops! It's quarter to seven, and you haven't called here." He was asleep. [Laughter]

J. KIRBY HINSON: Somebody had to do it. [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: But during the time frame that I was working on the costs control for the control center and the budget area and the hardware and software area, my division chief decided he wanted to work ten hours a day, four days a week, and he moved to Sealy [Texas], built a home, and he came in every Monday morning, and he left every Thursday night. Well, he wanted me there his ten hours every day. And then I have work all day Friday, too. But sometimes he would sit there and it was really good work, but he would do his best thinking after 4:30 when everybody else went home. We played "what if?" He'd say, "What if I delay this particular piece of hardware in the control center six months and move this one up because we need this before we need this?"

I'd sit there and I then put it in that computer and I'd find out what cost it made to us, what it did to the schedules, and everything else, and poor Kirby was at home, and I'm sitting out there.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Hungry. [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: I kept telling him, "You've either got to put Kirby on a ten-hour-a-day schedule or I'm not going to work this schedule." For a couple of years, he never even saw me during daylight because I'd never get home until seven o'clock. Once time I told him, I

says, "I am going to make back gate every day this week." The back gate closes at six. If I didn't make the back gate, it was another mile home. I had to go out the front gate and come all the way around.

J. KIRBY HINSON: While we were working—I don't know how to get into this, except to tell you after we stopped working, I began to appreciate spontaneity. I began to appreciate, "Gee, if I push the grocery cart for her, she can be through in half the time, and we can be home, and we can be able to do something else." And I don't mind that thirty minutes. We started having fun with it. I mean, we're a cartoon in the check-out line, I can tell you that.  
[Laughter]

WRIGHT: You put in and she takes out? [Laughter]

J. KIRBY HINSON: No. We talk to strangers.

SHIRLEY HINSON: That's one thing about living in North Carolina. You don't stand at a check-out line and just not carry on a conversation with everybody around you. Everybody smiles. You go in and out of Wal-Mart, everybody's just smiling.

J. KIRBY HINSON: In the Wal-Mart or grocery store parking lots, if you look at somebody and have a pleasant expression on your face, you don't even have to smile, they will speak. I don't care if they're young or old or black or white or what, everybody speaks, and it's a

little surprising and you have to get used to it. It's very good, but you have to get used to it. It's like, "Huh?" but they do speak.

WRIGHT: Did you retire at the same time?

J. KIRBY HINSON: No, she's older than I am, so she got to go first.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I got to go first. I spent five months at home before, and that's probably the hardest five months I spent working. I tried to edit and delete what I brought home, my personal papers and things. That was so hard to do. I didn't want to throw anything away.

J. KIRBY HINSON: You made yourself sick.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I made myself sick sitting in the middle of the floor trying to throw things away.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Gave herself almost a permanent stomach cramp, really. Really bothered her for weeks after that.

SHIRLEY HINSON: Then I did it again when we moved up here. I did a good job that time. You would have enjoyed going through what I saved.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I did that twice. I could not get ready to leave. I saw the day coming and I wanted two more weeks. "Please give me two weeks," but it was just too late. I had made a commitment. But I did not have time to do what I needed to do at work in terms of getting stuff in boxes and edited and passed on to people and all of that. So the day came and we left, and we have been spontaneous and having fun ever since. And I even try to help her around the house a little.

SHIRLEY HINSON: Somebody asked me one time when did I decide that I was going to retire at fifty-five years old, and I told them as soon they gave me that little green and white printed "Your Civil Service Retirement System" pamphlet that they gave me on June 30, 1959.  
[Laughter]

J. KIRBY HINSON: I've always thought, in the last twenty years at least, there should be two careers for everybody. You should not be able to work more than fifteen years in one really major area like space. You should then be forced to go some and teach or work in art or be a museum curator.

SHIRLEY HINSON: But I did that at the same place because I worked in trajectory work until—

J. KIRBY HINSON: No, I mean a bigger difference than that.

SHIRLEY HINSON: And then I went into control center.

J. KIRBY HINSON: You could have gone into movies. You could have been a director.

WRIGHT: Still can.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Still can.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I'm going to tell you. I'm retired from retirement. [Laughter]

One thing cute that there's a person here in Franklin County says they had never seen us separated. If one of us goes, the other one is going to be deep stuff. But they said they never seen one of us and didn't see both of us. And that's about the way it was at work, too.

J. KIRBY HINSON: You mean during work, not at work.

SHIRLEY HINSON: Like I never left the house and went somewhere without him. I'd go to the grocery store on the way home from work.

J. KIRBY HINSON: The only thing you did was come to North Carolina.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I'd come to North Carolina.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Which was fine.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I'd come in on Daddy's birthday and we'd come back on Mother's birthday for our two-week vacation and then I'd come back for Christmas.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Her mother's birthday is the same day as mine.

WRIGHT: Which is Sunday. Busy month, but a good month.

J. KIRBY HINSON: One thing that was cute is Jim [James E.] Mager, he was my best manager, one time told me I couldn't come home. He needed me down there, and I says, "The only way I'm staying, you know I take these two weeks every year. Program operating plans, just stay on hold. They say they need on the 2nd. They asked for them on the 15th. If you're still working on them the 15th of next month, I've got my plane tickets. I'm going to North Carolina."

He says, "You can't go."

I says, "Buy my tickets."

He says, "You can go."

I says, "My work always waited for me. No one ever did it." In fact, I started having to tell a little fib as to when I was leaving, because if I was leaving on Friday, they would work me until Thursday night at nine or ten o'clock. So I just got where I used to tell them, "I'm leaving on Thursday."

J. KIRBY HINSON: Yes. My office was the same way about that. I never planned a vacation for about the first fifteen years I worked that I didn't have to postpone it because of some

really important meeting or something which did not take place until after I got back after slipping the vacation three times. It was just crazy.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I used to tell them if I got run over by a transfer truck, the place would just keep right on going.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Yes, I used that a couple of times. I thought that was a good one.  
[Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: They're transfer trucks in North Carolina, eighteen-wheelers to everybody else. [Laughter]

J. KIRBY HINSON: But the funny thing about this being home, we had a new family move in next door that has a little seven-year-old boy. He was over visiting with us one day. He was fascinated with my drawing airplanes for him. He wanted to draw women. That scared me.  
[Laughter] I didn't want to do any of that jazz with him. But Shirley started talking about going home for Christmas, and he says, "I thought she lived here with you." [Laughter]

SHIRLEY HINSON: We've had a good time.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Yes.

WRIGHT: Was there ever a challenge that each one of you might have had during your time at NASA that the other one was able to help you get a difference perspective on?

J. KIRBY HINSON: That's a wonderful question, and I know you want to tie this a little more closely to NASA, but it's awfully hard for some reason. That question, I can't immediately think of an answer. I think it was more general than that for us. It was more we loved the space program. We loved the missions. We love to talk about them. That probably cleared our minds, just in general. But I can't remember a challenge that I was able to help her with. Just general support, like that nine months that she had three things going at one time, all I could do was just not complain. [Laughter] Sometimes that's a husband's job.

SHIRLEY HINSON: He has always handled that real well. Easiest person in the world to live with. And he's probably living with the hardest person to live with.

J. KIRBY HINSON: I can't think of a more direct support for a challenge. I wish I could.

SHIRLEY HINSON: I think, just listening to us, if we had something going on at work that we were not happy with, and there were times—

J. KIRBY HINSON: There were times.

SHIRLEY HINSON: —he would listen. There was like one time in my life I was not really satisfied at work, and he listened to me gripe every night. He finally says, “Get out of it or do something about it.”

J. KIRBY HINSON: Well, she can't stand to be treated unfairly. She ignored so much of that kind of stuff because it was those kind of times, unfortunately for her. But I think she came out of it very strong and made a real contribution. But there were times she was treated unfairly on a personal basis, like who gets raises and who doesn't, that would bring anybody to tears. I sure tried to support her in those times.

SHIRLEY HINSON: He listened, and that helped. You've got to have somebody to talk to.

J. KIRBY HINSON: Like, "Do you want me to call [Manned Spacecraft Center Director Robert R.] Gilruth?"

SHIRLEY HINSON: "What do you want me to do about it? Do you want me to call Gilruth?"  
[Laughter] And then we would start laughing, just like we're doing now. It relieves the tension.

WRIGHT: It certainly sounds like you were able to do some much for each other, so much for yourselves, and, of course, so much for the space program. So it's quite a role model for people to look back on that you can do it with good listening skills and lots of consideration.

J. KIRBY HINSON: And really caring about each other.

WRIGHT: We can't thank you enough for letting us come and spend the day with you and in such a lovely setting in Louisburg, North Carolina. We wish you the best. Is there anything else you would like to add before we close up today?

J. KIRBY HINSON: I don't think I do, but I'm sure I'll think of something after I see you.

SHIRLEY HINSON: And we appreciate your coming. Enjoyed it very much.

[End of interview]