

INTERVIEW WITH PAM SCHWEITZER: REMINISCENCE IN ACTION

Interviewer:

EDUARDO PRADO CARDOSO

Universidade Católica Portuguesa
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8050-334X>
oeduardoprado@gmail.com

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE:

Pam Schweitzer is a writer, theatre director, lecturer, and trainer who has dedicated her career to reminiscence work for decades. After studying English at University of East Anglia and Drama at the University of Essex, she taught drama in South London and later worked as a Drama Advisory Teacher in Barking & Dagenham. Her early work with local communities and young people sparked an enduring interest in using lived experience and oral history as the basis for theatre. She wrote extensively on Theatre-in-Education, co-editing a directory of the movement, publishing anthologies of scripts and resources for schools, and reporting on the field for the Arts Council.

In 1983, she founded Age Exchange Theatre Trust, the first professional company dedicated to reminiscence theatre, where she served as Artistic Director until 2005. The company toured across the UK and Europe, staging productions drawn from older people's memories and establishing the pioneering Reminiscence Centre in Blackheath. She went on to found the European Reminiscence Network in 1993 and the older people's theatre company Good Companions. Her later work

has focused on cross-European projects such as *Remembering Yesterday, Caring Today*, which explores reminiscence in dementia care.

Pam's contributions have been widely recognised: she received an MBE in 2000 for services to reminiscence, was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Arts by the University of Greenwich in 2017, and is an Honorary Fellow of the same university. She continues to engage in international fora, advancing the practice of reminiscence theatre and its role in preserving social history.

KEYWORDS: Reminiscence; Theatre; Older People; Oral History; Education.

First, let me thank you so much for agreeing to the interview. One of the most interesting aspects of your work is that it has been archived, and I reckon this was your concern from the beginning, to have everything archived and to provide a future, to have a conversation with other people about it.

It fascinates me how reminiscence work is highly collaborative, because what I have noticed from many of the transcripts and documents at the Reminiscence Theatre Archive¹ [at the University of Greenwich], is that you were so interested in getting people together to do it, from academics to social workers and people from many fields. How did that occur to you? How did this desire to collaborate come about?

Pam Schweitzer:

Well, the first time we did it, we used the verbatim to make a play. We weren't used to working in that way. What happened was that we made a play first through improvisation with professional actors. And they were also involved in collecting the memories. They were saying, "gosh, they really do express it very well themselves", you know. But we didn't, with that very first show, try using a verbatim method. It was purely improvised.

¹ This interview was produced in the context of a research supported by the FCT-Mobility funding, number FCT/Mobility/1322895826/2024-25.

When it came to the next show, I had met somebody who wanted to show me a film of something that had happened up in the north of England, in Lancaster, at the university, I think, or at the theatre. David Thacker who did this play, and I was shown it by this new colleague I had. And she said, could we write a new play about Christmas memories? And that was how from then on, we started to make sure that everything was transcribed.

But also, it was the actors themselves [who] were saying, “this is such good material, you know, what are we going to do with it?”. Because the play will give X number of performances and then it’ll never be seen again. So right from first go, we made a book to go with every show. I remember visiting another director for some advice and he said, “you know, you couldn’t possibly do a book in that sort of time scale. I think it’ll take you at least a year”. And I respond rather well to that kind of challenge. And so, we sort of stayed up all night for a few nights and found out from a local printer how you could lay out text in galley form and put in the photographs that the older people had given us to go with their stories. And from then on, every performance was followed by showing the books and offering it a peppercorn price of a pound a copy or something. But it meant that the people who’d given their stories had an investment in the whole project, I think, not financial, but psychological. “Oh, so we’re interesting, are we?”. *That’s interesting.*

Then there was a cycle established whereby you would announce the theme, advertise it in the local press or in particular circles like nationality or locality. And we’d have a simultaneous method of getting things transcribed and working on a production. We were very lucky because from about 1984 onwards, there was an acceptance that we would work hard to get the book out at the same time as the show. And it was crazy, because it meant going without sleep for long periods, sticking down bits of text on the paper so that the page layout was perfect. The loo in my house became a dark room where photographs could be copied and summarised, you know. And then we would come back to this pile of transcript and see how the different themes emerging could give us the basis of the book and the play. It was a huge effort to do it, but it was really worthwhile. When the old people heard their stories, they wanted to say, “Yes, that’s me, by the way”. I wanted to draw attention to the fact that they had been considered worth recording, I think.

Also, I've made a decision, rightly or wrongly, quite early on, that we would be talking to people lower down the social ladder. I sort of worked on the assumption that older people of the upper classes and upper middle classes would be quite capable of writing their own memories, but the older people who were at the bottom of the pyramid wouldn't, and would have horrible memories of school and struggling, and literacy was an issue. Because the text was all verbatim, it felt familiar to the old people. It was in the language in a way. It was very specifically the turn of phrase that people born in the 1920s and 1930s would be using. And I think that's what made it particularly rich. I mean, nowadays you could probably do it with an audio record, or you could even have it transcribed by AI or any other format. But it was more difficult in the case of ethnic minority material because that was collected in different languages. We had to provide interviewers who could convey the experience of people from the same language group as themselves, which was quite complicated.

We'd already done one book right in the first year in 1984. We'd done a play called *A Place to Stay*. That was a first, and it came from people saying, "well, we did settle down here, but we thought of it as a place to stay and not as home". Because home was always the land they'd come from, or their parents had come from initially. And they'd almost all come on the basis that they would go back. But life and work and romance took over. And people stayed and stayed and stayed. And then they couldn't go back and wouldn't go back. I think it was important to record those memories, because look at what's happening now and the shame of it all. I think the stories are full of riches, but it is complicated by language.

The last time I did a project with ethnic minority elders, we had got all the interviews transcribed and we'd set up two parallel companies, one Caribbean elders, all of whom had been nurses. They'd come and train over here. And they stayed and they looked back on a lot of very fulfilling times, very challenging when sometimes the patients didn't accept them for being black. And the black nurses from the Caribbean islands and mainland were shocked and carried on. They just faced it down, but it can't have been comfortable at all. And we made a little play about those memories and what it was like to leave the Caribbean and come to Britain. What were their hopes, what were their fears, challenges? That was very interesting. We also had a separate group who were from Africa and how they'd

made out when they came to England and a lot about their homeland and what they were leaving behind. A lot of investment in higher education as well. It proved to be quite difficult to make a play of those people's memories, partly because there were a lot of tensions and different notions of how to encapsulate this material in a theatrical piece. So it remained a bit rough-and-ready, but I'm intensely aware that there's a mass of material there, and it's been made into a book, the video – which can be looked at and enjoyed, very interesting stuff. But there's a lot that hasn't been dramatised or gone through the last stages.

There's a book called *Mapping Memories*, which is a treasure trove of stories across people's lives, a selected group of about 12, 15, maybe a few more elderly people who were interviewed in sections about different times of their lives and what was happening to them. And the other area we used, the other kind of method we used to explore the ethnic minority memories was a very interesting one. It was around a project on memory, *Making Memories Matter*. It was absolutely fascinating. We paired up professional artists with particular elders, in this instance, from minority groups and speaking the language in common. And each of those old people and each of those artists came together as a pair. They didn't know each other before. And we paid them to do a number of sessions with the older person about their life and about their journeys through life. You could read their stories by stage. So all their school days were recorded in the same way. All their growing up, all their decisions to leave. They were all put into sections. It sort of archived itself, really. But now I'm very intensely aware that it's underused, and I'd like to collaborate with another organisation or individual who has the interest to listen to those tapes. *Tapes*. Those were the days. I have very fond memories of cutting up strips of tape off wheel-to-wheel. And certainly, I know some of the best material was conducted on a 20-pound Philips tape recorder cassette.

Now it's always smartphones, isn't it? We lost some of the charm.

When you said, very interestingly, about how the [publication of a] book gave the participants a sense of acknowledgement and recognition, did you always have this in mind, about the effects of doing reminiscence?

Pam Schweitzer:

I think it was very clear that people who would give us interviews were investing in us in a way. Nobody else was at that point, we're talking 30 odd years ago, nobody was prizing what they had to say. It wasn't fashionable to be listening to old people talking and recording it and making a fuss about it. And that wasn't on anyone's agenda really. The Oral History Society had begun but that was more academically oriented. And I didn't want an academic format. The essential element was accessibility for people who hadn't given their stories, but who would enjoy it and would take a share of that positivity about what they had to say. And I sort of knew from taking lots of reminiscence sessions, that there was an enthusiasm there to get it right. So, some people at the beginning, when I had merged 2 stories and gone for the best telling of one of those stories, would say, "well, why didn't you go on and do the scene I gave you about such and such?". And we had to say, "well, we'll pick and choose themes that fit together. But would you like to have your story in the book?". And then people said yes. And then they said, "but we don't want our names on there. Don't put our names on". So, for the first two books, I didn't put the name on, and then they said, "Why isn't my name on that?". So, there's a sense in which they were conscious of something that could be gained by having some of the stories written out.

Sometimes there were issues about grammar because they didn't want grammatical mistakes included. But often it was grammatical expressions which made it very rich for the listeners, because they recognised a turn of phrase or something which would have had a meaning in the 1930s or 40s. I mean, that's difficult to explain, but it's something about the notion that language changes over time, and that if you interview people at one time, and then they reproduce that, it's going to take you in at a deeper level, perhaps, in touch with how they express themselves. But it's not academic. You know, I'm not anti-academic, but I think we need to think about non-academic ways that engage people in the same stories but viewed from a different angle.

One of the things that happened is that after every performance, we had an interview with the group who just watched the show. I would say something like, "I saw you were very moved by the scene in the cafe. What did that remind you of?". Then they would say another story in greater depth. It was a progression,

really. Looking back with all those productions and so on, there was a feeling on the part of the audiences that they needed to progress that work and that it might have special meaning for people with dementia. We only felt that because some of the venues we played were saying, could you do a special project for some of our people with dementia? We did have an inn there, but I would say it was really difficult to get the work valued, especially in care homes and different forms of residential living, because it relied on the head of department or the care home manager or whoever it was to give it a lift and to encourage the staff to maximise the use of it. Because in the early days, the staff would think, “gosh, they’re going to watch a play, I’m going to go and put my feet up, have a cup of tea”. So, it took ages really to say, “well, but this is also for you in case you want to refer to the things we’ve mentioned”. And use it, you know.

When I did work with oral histories, which were commissioned, very often they ended up in a university, but sort of untouched by a human hand. And I thought the memories that we collected and been lucky enough to have transcribed, and we felt that some kind of obligation to archive them in a way that extended their life, really. That became clear as soon as we started transcribing, it overlapped with the period in which the organization was given four, I think it was four computers. It was really early for a voluntary sector group to be given computers, to learn word processing. And we had two or three, four maybe, sort of apprentices in oral history, and they learned how to transcribe and how to edit. Not so much editing but certainly transcribing. And they were paid by the government. They were people who had been quite long-term unemployed, and they could apply to this body. I think we all were aware that we were sitting on very valuable memories and were looking endlessly for different ways in which they could be celebrated.

I wanted to talk about the exhibitions we created there, because by the time in 1987, we opened a reminiscence centre. It was the first, and possibly the last. But it was taken up and copied by reminiscence organisations in Denmark and in Sweden and in... Spain, and not Portugal, never Portugal – so this is a great pleasure [to exchange with an academic based in Portugal]. We employed professional theatre designers to create an installation to go with every show wherever possible. So there would be, say we were doing a big project on wartime evacuation of children. We then created an environment in the reminiscence centre which could

serve as the venue for the show with children. It was a children and old people show. They came in from local schools. They played the scenes that the old people had given them, and then they worked with the old people to create scenes. But also, this environment was very important, that they would say, “you know, what would we have? What would be there for us?”. And come back talking about significant objects which should be there to be displayed, or recordings that you could go into the room and listen to. There were a lot of different ways of exploring the memories, and one of the richest was the exhibitions, and people would come in and say, “wow, is this a hot field, what is this?”, you know, because it was theatre designers who designed and architect built. My husband was an architect and helped a lot with making things possible with building materials and things. It was a great place, actually. It was free entry, and I’d come in and have a cup of tea and then spend the rest of the day opening the drawers and looking at what was there and talking about memories with a friend or whatever.

Reminiscence work has so many possibilities beyond staging, right? Exhibitions, books, but also further discussions with both the participants and the audiences. Did you always see it this way? Was it thought from the beginning, this idea that it should have so many shapes and forms?

Pam Schweitzer:

From almost the first show onwards, I think. It reflects the fact that we were valuing the material. Have you had a look at the exhibition material? There are sections on the exhibitions, the installations. They have a lot of... what’s the word for it? Sensitivity. People could react to the environment and begin to talk about their share of memories connected with that. So it was a terrific trigger of memories. And because people came in off the street, two or three at a time, they would talk about the things that had been triggered by this exhibition, and they were changed every four or five months. It was tremendous speed. I can’t believe we made five shows in one year. It was completely crazy. But things were like that in a way. And I don’t know if it would be possible now because we needed to raise the money before anything could happen and then conduct the interviews. And what you were just

saying then is exactly what I've just been saying at the European Reminiscence Network [in Prague, September 2025]. It's how reminiscence relates to other areas of work.

[Shows the slide of her conference presentation on computer]

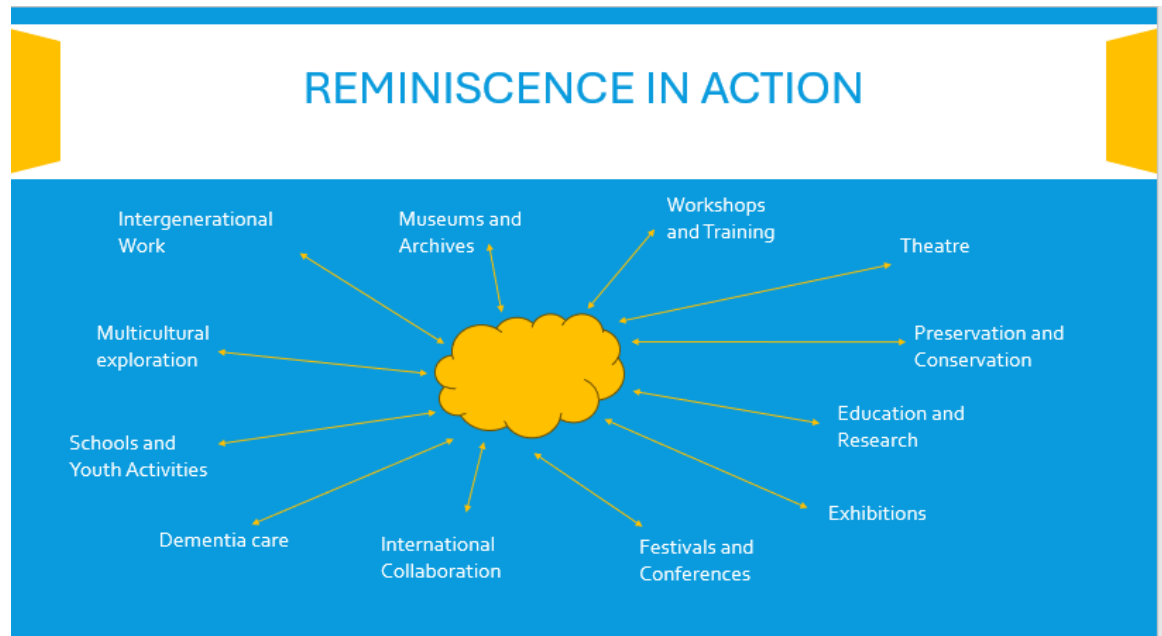


Figure 1. Slide presented at the European Reminiscence Network Conference in Prague (2025). Kindly provided by Pam Schweitzer and Nathan Finlayson.

This slide shows the flexibility of reminiscence. The fact that it can relate to so many different spheres of work and life. Anything from theatre here down to, say, dementia care, or working together with international contacts, to create festivals and conferences, to preserve, to use the skills of archiving to preserve these memories. That's terribly important because the people we interviewed would have perhaps been interviewed in the 1980s when they were already 80. So we would have lost all those memories if we hadn't preserved them.

We can work closely with multicultural projects and bring our knowledge of interviewing and recording and transcribing to those groups. And we can have a presence in museums and archives where people come into a museum and they can either join a reminiscence group or they can explore the material themselves and exchange the stories, or they can be engaged in intergenerational work, where they work in schools with storytelling and singing. Thinking about an African elders'

group who went into a day centre and went into a school and worked with the children and the older people, and they learned quite a few African songs and sang them and did a nice mime of the things that the older people remembered about their lives.

So, the slide's quite useful. It shows so many different connections, and I could probably have added another half dozen. What is it about reminiscence that enables that set of connections to be made? Perhaps we can say the common elements would be listening, honed listening skills, and empathising, reflecting back the stories they've heard to make sure they're clear and understood. And curiosity, it's important to have a curiosity about people's stories to want to know and to have reasons to want to know. So very often reminiscence is supported and funded because it's looking at a particular area of working life where it can be helpful and where it brings people together to participate in a project. I think that is important. But I think that bubble in the middle is useful to think of, actually, and all the offshoots of those skills and that work.

Also, on the question of the visibility of prompts: sensory prompts and prompts of words and with sounds and music connected with that period. In the exhibition, some of the people who were in their 40s didn't really like it because it felt that if they recognised things, it meant they were old. So they pretended not to recognise any of it. This is nothing to do with me. But I think there were a lot of groups from care homes and day centres who came out and were stimulated. There was like a sort of community of memory, really, that they were able to plug in to very strong triggers which would link them with what was on show.

For example, we did a show based on the village in London where our base was, and the stages were very clear there. We went to the funders, we got funding, we went to the press. We conducted the interviews, we transcribed the interviews. We had two or three really first-rate interviewees who triggered each other's memories all the time, both in their 90s. And they became the central characters in the show. We built the other stories around that core. And they all came to the performance when it was finally rehearsed.

Just a word about the productions. They all had professional musical directors, because that was a crucial element in the shows, that we know that music

and songs are powerful evocations of the past. And so, it was important that they were performed well and in a style that was recognisable. Some people might say there was a disproportionate element. Some people said, “we don’t want to use old songs, we want to make people feel modern and write music for it”. I can understand why they did that, but I think they were missing a trick, it was more useful and more productive to play the songs of the past. And the actors would sort of gently encourage the audience to sing, and they wouldn’t necessarily sing loud. But they’d sing maybe a little bit nostalgically, remembering some of the words and some of the tune and some of the places where they heard that music in the past, who they danced with, what they wore, who made it.

In an interview I found here at the archive, to Hiro Izushi [in 1996], you mentioned exactly this period in the 1980s when oral history was developing and how you wanted something different and less academic. I wanted to go back to this idea of history. Do we consider our personal stories as history? I think your work has shown how valuable it can be to preserve personal “histories”. Especially when you consider the acknowledgement of the working class and how they should be included in a conversation about history, right?

Yes, it was a period when there was an element of generosity in the local government and in other local governments as well. So, we were supported by the Greater London Council, which Margaret Thatcher abolished in 1986. And that put paid to a lot of work in the arts, really. A lot of people in local government and public services were cut back, their monies were cut back, and it was the start of endlessly cutting back. But at the same time, there was scope for small-scale projects, including work with ethnic minorities, work with gay rights. Educational liberty, much more flexibility in education than what was to follow, because after that came the national curriculum, which really, a lot of people felt it cut away their creativity.

But there were all these sort of background movements going on. And I think we were lucky because they realised that only a tiny proportion of funding was going towards older people. And they wanted to rectify that – but the funding was

not reliable. Every single project had to have money raised for it under the headings of research, rehearsal, performance, response. And archiving, really. Because this was now based in the archive, in the University of Greenwich, where I was doing some teaching of drama students, we were able to use the archive as a source, because the original sources had died. Of course, they were 80, 90 when they were interviewed, and so they'd all be dead. And now even the younger ones I interviewed are really getting all of it. In fact, none of the theatre company is still alive, of the old people's company, which makes me feel very vulnerable, but not to mention them. It was, I suppose what I'm trying to say is it was part of a movement, really, to value the democratic sharing of memories from different perspectives.

It seems very timely to discuss those democratic values nowadays, doesn't it?

Pam Schweitzer:

Definitely, yeah, and I think the investment might not have been huge in the overall budget, but for us it seemed very generous because paying the equity rate for something as sort of fringe as that... What we were doing was seen as an important sideline, I think. And we had to wait until the money was in place. I got quite good at raising the money, and then, of course, we got a lot of backing from the European Commission. That was a very important development. At the Department of Health, two major funders, you know, unusual. And the European Union link was lost with Brexit. Don't get me on with Brexit because I'll just start crying. It's completely bonkers and hasn't been rescued. There hasn't been the money to find another funder for that. Projects tend to develop and then stop. And I didn't want that to happen. But I do think it's more difficult now, and I don't know if that level of professional theatre work would ever happen again, really. That's expensive, you know? I can't remember how much now, but the equity rate was quite a lot.

I wanted to discuss gender, if you will, because I think from what I encountered, women are much more open, not only to theatre practice but also to share stories.

Some of the women's stories found at the Reminiscence Theatre Archive are so fascinating, aren't they?

Pam Schweitzer:

I do think that the gender aspects are interesting. More women than men gave their stories over the years. The story is strongly autobiographical, obviously, but important. And sometimes, if it was a minority group, one would bring together a group of older people from that ethnicity to share stories and give people an idea of the kind of thing we were looking for, what could go into a play. Another minority was the Irish material, so that was collected from people in churches and clubs and dance groups and all sorts of things. We did an Indian show, and that was very fascinating. Hearing the stories of the families and how they'd settled and how dangerous it was to lose all contact with their ethnicity and how longing some old people were for Ireland.

By reading the transcribed memories of the Irish, the Caribbean and others, you can really feel like how it was to come to work in England and it impressed me the centrality of work life in several of the projects you did [My First Job, Across the River, Many Happy Retirements, etc.]. Why is that?

Pam Schweitzer:

I mean, you have to eat, don't you? And I think immigrant people of all races and nationalities had to compromise and had to take whatever work they could get, usually way below their standard in their home countries. So, it's the opposite of what Trump's saying at the moment, that all the immigrants are mad or thieves or criminals. In the case of the Caribbeans and so on, they regarded England as the motherland. And they had family over here, so that was the place to go, or America, equally so. I think one of the themes that came out was the sort of painful disappointment about how they were treated when they came. And that they'd been invited, in many cases, been invited to come and take up training in nursing or hotel work or whatever it was. That was popular because you could find a place to live

as well in a hotel. But that a lot of it was a disappointment. You felt the excitement of the people about leaving and starting again and missing their families but making that decision. I think it was really tough for some of those people who had to recognise that they were here to stay. And they'd put down roots with children and with husbands and cousins and occasional trips back home when affordable. But a new life here really, with quite rich cultural resources. And I'd just given a talk on this work to the Irish in Britain organisation, who were very interested and open to what stories had been collected.

I would like to finish by asking about how do you see your own memory journey across the years, since it is not an easy feat to look at ourselves. Have you reminisced recently about any specifics of life?

Pam Schweitzer:

Yes, I was born in the end of May 1945, so I've got a lot of life behind me. But I had a party to celebrate, and my son, who is very good at taking impromptu decisions, decided to ask everybody at the party when they got to know me. And so, I was listening to other people's memories of our meetings and collaborations. It was wonderful because they remembered things I didn't. So, I could see how nice a reminiscence session in which I participated, how nice that would be and how lucky if you turned up some memories that people hadn't had before. That was very stimulating. And my son was joking and saying, "well, you know, mum would do this interviewing business much better than me, but I'll carry on anyway". And he did.

I've often had to join in sessions with my own memories if it required people to get into threes – and if this one's only got two, then I'd go and work with them. So, I have been doing reminiscence for many years, but I haven't had the experience of anybody making something from my memories. Perhaps they're not particularly... well, I won't say they're not particularly interesting, because that's what people used to say to me, "don't interview me, nothing interesting happens to

me. Talk to Mrs. Smith, she's really interesting". And then I know I mustn't talk to Mrs. Smith. I'll talk to this person because nobody else will. That'll be interesting.

But to answer your question, I'm very aware that participating in the process is important to understand it. So when I was doing training and I've only recently stopped doing training courses in reminiscence, if somebody got terribly upset or if somebody was angry about being asked about private things or something like that, I would quietly suggest that maybe this wasn't the right work for them because they'd be exposing themselves to too much damage, really, and pain. And I think some people had been sent on courses but hadn't really considered the implications. For me personally, I've been interviewed about the work, not so much about the rest of my life, but enough. I've said enough.

We go back to the work discussion, right? It takes so much of our time that we become our work.

Pam Schweitzer:

Definitely. I mean, that's why it's been so difficult to stop, because a very, very strong identification with the work means that you're not quite ready to move on. But I must move on because I'm deaf now. I have serious loss of hearing. And that means I'm not so good at picking up the small points on the important nuances of what people are saying. So I've had to pull out of that group work.

But you haven't stopped. I mean, you go to conferences and such, still.

Pam Schweitzer:

Yeah. Well, they're always good, aren't they? Just came back from Prague, which is very beautiful. Of course, we didn't see Prague, but we knew we were in a nice place.

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