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Harpers Ferry Center Employees Oral History Project, 2015-2019

Irene Kirilloff
October 3, 2019

Interview conducted Betsy Ehrlich and Lu Ann Jones
Transcribed by Teresa Bergen
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The narrator has reviewed, corrected, and edited the transcript.

START OF TAPE

Lu Ann Jones: Is this okay? Because first of all I want to say let's do introductions here. You are?

Irene Kirilloff: Irene Kirilloff.

Lu Ann Jones: And you are?

Betsy Ehrlich: Betsy Ehrlich.

Lu Ann Jones: And I am Lu Ann Jones, and it is October third, 2019. And we're in Frederick, Maryland. And we're going to be doing an interview about Irene and Nick's design firm and work with the National Park Service. Correct?

Betsy Ehrlich: Correct. Right.

Lu Ann Jones: I just wanted to say that in terms of how these interviews might be used, that we will be, I don't know if you've explained. But we will put them, first of all, the first goal is to get them in the archives in Charles Town and to have them as part of the permanent collection. And then I'm trying to get more and more of our interviews out into the world. So again, we're doing some audio productions. And three of the Harpers Ferry interviews are in that mix. So I haven't heard the mix yet, so I'm really thrilled about that, to really be featuring the work of people who are really working behind the scenes, etcetera. So it may be kind of out in the public. It will definitely be in the archives and could be used by researchers and educators down the road.

Irene Kirilloff: Okay.

Lu Ann Jones: So is that okay with you?

Irene Kirilloff: Yes.

Lu Ann Jones: Excellent. That's great. So, Betsy, you always take the lead, and that's great. So, do you want to get started?

Betsy Ehrlich: Sure. Yeah. So I do want to say it right up front that the hope was that we would have both you, Irene, and Nick here today. And we're sorry that Nick couldn't participate. But knowing how closely you have worked through all of these years, and having worked with you, Irene, knowing how well you're able to articulate things that sometimes Nick is trying to articulate, that I know you can finish his sentences. (laughter) And I think

one of the exciting things about this opportunity is that you cover so many bases in terms of what the Park Service has needed and used and benefited from in terms of the fact that Nick was an employee, you have been a contractor, he has come and gone from the Park Service, and you're still working with the Park Service. So you have perspectives that combine things together that I don't think anybody else does. So I think this is a really neat opportunity. So you and Nick are family, you're colleagues, you're business partners. I find that all amazing. You're NPS contractors. Nick was an NPS employee for several years at Harpers Ferry Center.

Betsy Ehrlich: Can you tell us how your education, work experience and your relationship led you to careers so closely intertwined with the NPS? And kind of specifically, what were your individual paths into the design profession?

Irene Kirilloff: We met in college. We were both in graphic design. But Nick had started in painting and ended up in graphic design. I'd been in graphic design from the beginning. He arrived in college late, because he'd been in the service. And so—

Betsy Ehrlich: What school?

Irene Kirilloff: Maryland Institute. MICA now. He'd been in the air force for four years. So we met in college, even though he was older than I. We were very competitive. We had a group of five students who were extremely competitive graphic designers. And so we didn't start out particularly as friends. We did end up as friends and obviously ended up getting married, and have been married for 51 years tomorrow.

Betsy Ehrlich: Wow. Congratulations.

Lu Ann Jones: Happy anniversary. Congratulations.

Irene Kirilloff: We sort of had different paths in what we were planning. Nick has always been interested in sort of interpretive stuff. He started out working for the American Chemical Society for their magazine, trying to visualize these complex chemical formulas and ideas, which was something that I could never have even attempted. From there, he went to a job, a small design firm in Baltimore. That was not the place for him. From there, he went to—this is young, right out of college, you understand. The kind of thing where you keep a job for a year, and then for three months, and then move on. Then he went to the Naval Institute, at the Naval Academy. He was a book designer. University presses are very competitive with each other. They publish constantly. He was a book designer and did a lot of award-winning books. Things like *Torpedo Boat Sailor,* not exactly something

you and I came across on the bestseller list. But really handsome, interesting books. This was the kind of thing that interested him.

Irene Kirilloff: Somewhere along the way, and I can't tell you exactly where or how, Nick crossed paths with Vince Gleason and found out about the National Park Service, specifically the publications program. Vince was a real visionary, and Nick saw that in him. Nick was not particularly interested in a government job, per se. But what Vince was trying to do with publications in the parks, and also just Nick's interest in that kind of information, it intrigued him.

Irene Kirilloff: And so he went to an interview with Vince and showed him his portfolio. Vince said he had no jobs at that time. This may have been actually when he started at American Chemical Society.

Irene Kirilloff: So years later, this is several jobs later, somehow Nick found out that the Park Service was moving their design headquarters to Harpers Ferry. So he got in touch with Vince, and Vince said, "Oh, I'm not interested. I don't need anybody." Whatever, whatever. Then he said, "Did you do the Beethoven piece?" And Nick said yes. And he said, "Come on in." So he remembered a piece from Nick's portfolio. Nick went in and met with him. And of course they were moving to Harpers Ferry. And Vince did give him a job as a designer in publications.

Irene Kirilloff: So Nick arrived at Harpers Ferry the first day that Harpers Ferry opened, the center opened. He arrived wearing a coat and tie and, you know, dressed for work, guys. And Vince wasn't there, and no one knew that he was coming. There wasn't a place for him to sit. There was nothing.

Irene Kirilloff: After an hour or whatever kind of wandering around, chatting a little bit, he decided he'd go have a cup of coffee. Which in itself was a challenge in Harpers Ferry in those days, as you might imagine. So I think he ended up in Charles Town getting a cup of coffee and came back another hour or whatever later. Vince had turned up. And oh yes, actually, yes, this is Nick Kirilloff, he's here, etcetera. So that was Nick's start at Harpers Ferry.

Irene Kirilloff: Nick's relationship with Vince was always testy. Vince was not an easy man. Nick respected him greatly. Certainly what Vince had in mind for the Park Service, and we all know what that was like those early years with Vince setting up the system for publications. Very successful, and very challenging. Ultimately, I think, with the introduction of Massimo Vignelli and that whole process, I think one of the best programs that the government's done in publications and just design in general, because later, of course, it did affect waysides, too. So we got to love the Park Service.

Irene Kirilloff: I'm going to switch a little bit, because I've sort of left myself out of this.

Betsy Ehrlich: Yes, I was going to say.

Irene Kirilloff: After I graduated from college, I took a job at what was considered a very chi-chi, very successful design studio in Baltimore. Lion Hill Studio. So they did, you know, you did a job every half an hour. It was just one of those, the pace was like that. Very challenging. I learned a whole lot. I ended up hating it very quickly. I was paid 75 dollars a week. I had to live at home, because I could never have afforded to not live at home. I thought to myself, what am I doing? This is where I've arrived. But I have to say that every day that I got up and thought, I hate going, I knew that I would learn something. And the pace at which they worked there really did teach me a whole lot about not just thinking through a design and planning it and executing it at my leisure, or at least with a week till the next due date. This was a whole different kind of thing, house on fire kind of design work.

Irene Kirilloff: So I lasted, I'm trying to think, it might have been six months. It might have been a little more. But I got a call, of all things, from the government. From the navy. Navy recruiting office. A man called me and said, "I got your name from someone that we interviewed for a job. And she suggested you would be a possibility for this job." When I was in college in my junior and senior summers, I had a government internship as a designer for aerospace research. I don't know exactly how that happened. But it was wonderful. I got paid a whole lot of money. So I stayed with that, after my senior year when I graduated, I stayed with that job for three more months beyond the summer. So I stayed till maybe October, something like that. They would have kept me, on a temporary kind of thing, they would have kept me forever. But that was another like, what am I doing in aerospace research doing cartoony things for employee sort of newsletters?

Irene Kirilloff: So that's when I took the studio job. But I had already been with the government. And so, they were thrilled that I had already done a lot of that entry stuff. And so when they called, I went in for an interview. I loved my boss, the man who became my boss. So I became a designer of recruiting aids materials for the navy. Which means I designed brochures, I designed billboards. Hey, guys, who gets to design a 24-sheet billboard when they're in their first year out of college? So it was great. It was government, but my boss really protected me from a lot of that sort of bureaucratic aspect of what I was doing. And because the other designers there were navy men, most of them sort of sergeants who had once been on a ship, and so I became the art director for navy recruiting aids. Then they hired a Chicago advertising firm, and then I got to work as a liaison with them. So it was a wonderful experience, which only lasted a few

years. Because at that point, Nick also was working for the navy at the Naval Academy, at the university press. So we were communicating, we could talk to each other. You know, this was days of long distance, great expense and so on. We could call three numbers and we could talk to each other on the phone, ten times if we wanted to. So as a courting couple, that was really an asset. I mean, it really helped.

Irene Kirilloff: So, we got married. And I commuted. We lived in Annapolis. Nick walked to the academy and I commuted to the Navy Yard in Washington. After a year or a little more of that, Nick got the job in Harpers Ferry. What we decided was that we would move to Harpers Ferry. And I would leave my job and do freelance work.

Irene Kirilloff: So we arrived in Harpers Ferry, we had camped in Harpers Ferry and hiked in Harpers Ferry. And we thought, what a way to live. So we got there, and we decided well maybe this isn't a way to live. (Betsy Ehrlich laughs) There was no grocery store, there was no drugstore, there was no doctor, there was no nothing. Not even a school for children, so we decided, not that we had any at that point. But thinking ahead. We said okay, so what's the closest thing that we could possibly live in? So we went to Frederick. Drove through Frederick and said okay, maybe. There was an apartment building on Church Street. And I said, I think I could live there.

Irene Kirilloff: So, just as things would have it, we ended up living in that building on Church Street. Nick went off to Harpers Ferry to work. I didn't know what to do with myself. There were a couple of employment agencies in Frederick, and I went to them and I said, "I'm a graphic designer."

Irene Kirilloff: And they said, "You're a what?" They didn't even know what a graphic designer was.

Irene Kirilloff: But, my salvation was, Barbara Evison, Boyd Evison's wife, they lived on Church Street across the street from us, and she and I became fast friends for life. We still are. So for my first few months in Frederick, I don't know what I would have done without her friendship and her sort of taking me a little bit under her wing.

Irene Kirilloff: I started doing some substitute teaching, because that was the only thing around. We decided to buy a house. I became the contractor and the plasterer and the painter and the wall scraper and the everything. So I had a fulltime job. I mean, we completely redid a house in about a year. I worked at it every day. And Nick worked at it every night when he got home from work.

Betsy Ehrlich: That's the house you're still living in.

Irene Kirilloff: No.

Betsy Ehrlich: No. Okay.

Irene Kirilloff: No. On Third Street. We've done two! And then we had our daughter, Marta. And we moved to a new house on Church Street and did it all over again. And then, I guess I was pregnant with Katya. And I started teaching at several colleges. At MICA, at Hood College. I taught a course at GW [George Washington University in Washington]. This sort of segues into what Nick was doing, because this was the bicentennial and a lot of the work Harpers Ferry was doing had to do with the bicentennial. And so did the course I was teaching for teachers, how to bring in sort of that period into their classroom in a way that would interest students currently.

Irene Kirilloff: So this was a really great time in the Park Service for Nick, because there was a great deal of money being spent for some really unique artists, posters and whatnot, and a lot of new publications. And so that was a real sort of design challenge, and real design boost.

Irene Kirilloff: Somewhere along the way here, Nick became the chief of graphics.

Betsy Ehrlich: Do you know what year he started at Harpers Ferry?

Irene Kirilloff: Well, the day the place opened. I'm sorry, I—

Betsy Ehrlich: Okay. You had mentioned that. Right.

Irene Kirilloff: I'm not good on the dates.

Betsy Ehrlich: So then we get into the bicentennial. I'm just thinking—

Irene Kirilloff: Actually, the bicentennial was very soon after, 1776.

Betsy Ehrlich: Right. So this first couple of years were really ramping up and into that bicentennial.

Irene Kirilloff: Yes. And I think Vince was already very much preparing for that.

Betsy Ehrlich: Yeah. Big, dynamic time to start.

Irene Kirilloff: Yes, yes, very. Especially because of course all of that funding was available. Vince was working pretty independently of anybody, as we all know. Sort of a freewheeling entity of his own in the Park Service. He had a lot of freedom in what he was doing. There was a strange component to the setup there. He had a designer in Washington, Dennis Mcloughlin,

who was also sort of an independent designer who was at Vince's beck and call, and that I think created a lot of maybe, I don't want to say bad blood, but certainly some confusion as to what is the process here and who actually *is* the chief of graphics? Because sometimes when Vince didn't like something that Nick was challenging him on, he would go to Dennis and have Dennis do it. (laughs) So, anyway, I remember hearing a little about those things.

Betsy Ehrlich: But if Nick had grown up in a college environment of competitive design, as you described, maybe he was well-suited to that.

Irene Kirilloff: Well, he was. He was. Except as you know, Nick's nature is not one to be, you know, very assertive and out there. So I think that Vince needed someone to be much firmer with him in response to his attitude to his employees. And Nick was not that person. But what Nick did do is, he had a vision, too. Long before anyone in Harpers Ferry was thinking about computers, Nick came to the realization that that was the next thing. And so long before Vince could be convinced to look that way, Nick bought a computer, took some classes, asked Vince to send him to a conference on computers and graphic design, and just started taking steps toward lining that up. We had a lot of fellow designers who'd graduated from college. We were considered, we were the beginning of graphic design in colleges. So to have us then so quickly have to change, and a lot of graphic designers just couldn't make that transition. I'm just so proud of him that he was just so forward-looking. He had a very analytical mind. Part of the reason he was really good at interpreting National Park Service things, and later interpreting National Geographic things, because of that way of thinking. So computers really suited his thinking. Once he got interested and once he started to understand what the potential might be, he was adamant with Vince that this was what the Park Service had to do.

Irene Kirilloff: It was interesting, because a lot of design firms privately were struggling with the same thing. Certainly, the government, which moves much more slowly and makes decisions much more slowly, was having a lot more trouble arriving at that as sort of, we're going to buy Apple what?! So I think that Nick was really instrumental in changing what Publications was like at that point. Maybe that was one of his really, really big contributions there. Who knows when Vince, screaming and kicking, would have arrived there? Dennis supported that, but Nick led the charge and really got that going. And you probably were around for some of this, also. Right, Betsy?

Betsy Ehrlich: Well, yes. I was in the exhibits group when the transition into computers was happening. So I wasn't a part of it in the Publications office. But I know there were different perspectives, different types of software being played with, different systems. But I didn't ever have a sense of who was

kind of leading the charge, and who was just sort of having to figure it out and keep up with the pace of things. Because it was a huge change.

Irene Kirilloff: Yes, it was.

Lu Ann Jones: Can I ask you a question now? How would you describe the style of graphic design when you came into the profession, or when you were learning? Was there a certain style that was considered current?

Irene Kirilloff: You know, it was the early days of graphic design, so some of the famous names of graphic designers that you see in history books were out there doing it. They were in New York. They were the names that we were hearing. One of our instructors took us on a field trip to an ad agency. Because that was considered sort of the height of it, being an ad agency designer. But it wasn't something that suited all of us, obviously. I really wondered at one point, so what do you do if you don't go to an ad agency in New York? But obviously, the field was opening up in many ways. I think that the Park Service, because of Vince, was one of the leaders. It was just everything was happening at the same time. It's interesting when I look, there's a book out, *The History of Graphic Design,* and Nick is mentioned in it. And I'm like oh my God, so we're the history of graphic design. (laughter) Because these were the early days.

Irene Kirilloff: I can't say that there was a style, particularly. I know that in the Park Service, one of the things was that every brochure, everything, had a totally different look. It had the look of perhaps the region or the story of the park, but also the designers themselves. I think there was a lot of personality being shown. I think it was a very confusing image for the Park Service. And I think that Vince realized that and was studying what was going on with sort of European design and some of this uniformity that brings sort of information to an important level. Again, we have to respect Vince for being able to see that that really was a much better direction for informational graphics.

Irene Kirilloff: I guess Vince started to introduce the idea of the Unigrid. Nick went to New York and spent several days working with Massimo Vignelli, talking through things and so on. I think they had a very good relationship. Eventually, Massimo came to Harpers Ferry as well, for a week at a time a couple of times, I think. I think what he introduced to the Park Service was of great value. I think that it evens the playing field. You can recognize that you're dealing with the same kind of entity, and then, there's room for individuality, but not the kind of individuality that's so confusing. It's much more information-based, and this is really where it needs to be. Not sort of personal expressions of various designers.

Irene Kirilloff: In that way, too, Nick, Massimo sort of did the plan, they worked through it together, they talked through it. They arrived at what would be possible, what wouldn't be possible. And then Nick got left with it. So that implementation was left to him. So a lot of what had to be worked out, as we all know, it doesn't all just work because it looks good. It had to fit the many formats and the many kinds of information, and the many issues that parks had with certain aspects of it and so on. So there was that process, too, and I think Nick had a lot to do with that.

Betsy Ehrlich: Did he talk about the challenge of introducing the Unigrid to parks? And the reaction, the resistance or acceptance generally of the Unigrid program?

Irene Kirilloff: Sure. Yeah, yeah. Well, you know, change is hard. (laughs) And so, yes. Parks found it generally really hard to accept that there was going to be this look. There was going to be this arrowhead. Their name was going to be in this size type. I think that parks felt that their identity was going to be gone, instead of understanding that really, we're all part of a system that people have to understand, and that it's helpful to people to sort of look for information in certain places and in certain ways. So, yes, there was a lot of resistance. I'm not surprised. I mean, this is normal human nature. So it took a long time. And you know, we still occasionally find a park that says, well, no, I'm sorry, we have to have a much bigger arrowhead. Or whatever it might be that is *their* thing. Sometimes parks understand, once you talk to them about it.

Irene Kirilloff: Another thing that happened is that Nick took on changing the mapping for the Park Service. Developing mapping standards. Because every map on everything was different. Nick studied all of the European Swiss mapping systems and whatnot. Spent probably a couple of years developing a system for the Park Service that was standardized. So that when you look at a map, you know exactly what you're looking at. You know what the park looks like because it's a certain color and its boundaries are determined in a certain way. All the point sizes were determined based on information and the hierarchy and so on. I remember that project. Working with a lot of cartographers all over the world and arriving at that system.

Irene Kirilloff: You know, I talk about it. I'm so proud of him and what he did in the Park Service. So.

Betsy Ehrlich: Yeah. That's something that I think isn't necessarily obvious when we look back at the various changes over time. Cartography has sort of its own story. But Nick's influence on that, I don't think, is as obvious as one might think, because he was a designer. And you focus on the design changes, and you focus on the Unigrid and the implementation of the

Unigrid and the evolution of the Unigrid into the wayside system. But the mapping standards, the cartographic theories and attitudes, I think, that they're rooted in a design sensibility early on with Nick's influence, is really important. Because that is, it creates that known quantity today of what is a National Park Service map. We don't have these specific set of standards. It's rooted in that early thinking about you need to be able to know what you're looking at. So that evolves. But it evolves within a thought process that he started.

Irene Kirilloff: Right. And that came before the Unigrid. Because how could the Unigrid have created this system with mapping that was all over the place? So in a way, the fact that this standardization of the mapping happened over the years really did help fit into the program of just unifying things and making them more understandable and clearer. So, Nick spent a total of 20 years with the Park Service. With a break in service after 15 years. He left for five years. And came back and spent another four years, I believe, or so. And then left again to go back to National Geographic. And retired from there.

Betsy Ehrlich: So the first break was also National Geographic.

Irene Kirilloff: Yes. Nick was hired as an art director for illustration at Geographic and spent five years there. Found the commute extremely difficult and came back to the Park Service really because he found that he didn't think that he could continue that grind to Washington every day. Came back to the Park Service and applied, spent his next job at the Park Service applying that Unigrid system to waysides. So in a way, it was a perfect timing for him and for waysides. Because he knew that Unigrid system in and out. He did not want to go back to Publications. He really was ready for a change. So that was a really good change for him. So he spent four years working on that system and implementing it, and working as the chief of graphics for waysides. And then left again.

Betsy Ehrlich: So, to clarify, when he came back, did he approach someone at Harpers Ferry and say hey, I'd really like to come back and focus on waysides? Or did somebody from Harpers Ferry inquire with him? How did that connection get made? That he would pursue expanding the Unigrid into the wayside medium?

Irene Kirilloff: Well, I remember him coming home and saying, you know, I am finding this really, really difficult, this commute. Nick was working sometimes till one in the morning. National Geographic is a deadline situation. Your job is done when the job is done. And extremely stressful. Extremely rewarding. Wonderfully respectful of their employees. There were great benefits. There were wonderful things about Geographic. Nick has wonderfully fond memories of it. But it took its toll. So the commute on

top of a job that is that demanding was really too much. So Nick decided that he really needed to start looking at something else.

Irene Kirilloff: I'm sure, you know, he has many friends you'll probably be interviewing in Harpers Ferry. He put out feelers to say what's going on, what's happening, is there anything there? I can't remember the exact details of it all, but it fell into place. It didn't take very long, either. I guess, in any event, it was ideal in that Nick was not looking to go back to Publications. It was a good new challenge. So he went to Waysides. And after about four years or a little bit more, I think, in Waysides, he decided that he would retire from Park Service. He was ready to retire from Park Service and go back to Geographic with the idea that commute be damned. The train was coming. That was a pipe dream.

Betsy Ehrlich: Yes.

Irene Kirilloff: Yes. It came after Nick retired. (Betsy Ehrlich laughs) It was imminent, it was imminent, it was imminent. So he said hey, I'm going to go back to Geographic. This is interesting in itself. Geographic doesn't just take back people like that. In fact, they've never taken anybody back who left Geographic. But they took Nick back. Which I think was really a coup, and wonderful. And what was really terrific about it, and this is probably off the record.

Lu Ann Jones: Do you want—

Irene Kirilloff: You can stop that for a moment, if you would.

Lu Ann Jones: Okay. [Recorder turned off.]

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah. So he went back to National Geographic, back to being one of the art directors for illustration. And he stayed until he retired. The train never came. The train came after he left. But he was ready to retire. He was probably about sixty when he retired. But he had retired from the Park Service, and then he retired from Geographic. And felt that that was sort of a great time to leave, a great way to go. It was kind of at the height of his career, basically.

Irene Kirilloff: I in the meantime, had been working as a designer. I'd been teaching when the girls were little. But then I started to do more and more freelance work and got some clients. Alexandria City Public Schools was one of my big clients. Hood College was one of my big clients. I did all of their publications for probably about seven years. Won a lot of art direction awards. Just had fun. Then I started a business of my own called The Friends Designs, Incorporated, which was a business based on my artwork, which we sold all over the world through catalogs. I had a

partner, a friend of mine who was a very close friend who became my business partner. We did that for twenty years, while I was teaching, while I was designing otherwise. And slowly I backed out of the business to the point where we decided that we were done. She was done for her reasons, I was done for mine. We sort of sold off what we could of the business and we shut it down.

Irene Kirilloff: Meantime, Nick was at this point of thinking about retirement. One of the reasons that he decided to move forward with the retirement was because we got our first indefinite quantity contract with the National Park Service for Publications. Very shortly after that, an IDIQ contract for Waysides. It was my business, Kirilloff Design, which was the business that I'd been designing with and for, for all those years. I was the owner, sole proprietor, and actually did all of those preparations and bids for an IDIQ contract, which you have to know what that's like.

Betsy Ehrlich: (laughs) Reams of paperwork.

Irene Kirilloff: Oh, heavens. Yes. I really did not know anything about how to do it. So, reading those forms over and over again to try to make sense of what it was I was supposed to do.

Betsy Ehrlich: Nick hadn't done a lot of contracting, or had he? When he was with the Park Service?

Irene Kirilloff: No.

Betsy Ehrlich: Or did he see and help you understand that side of it?

Irene Kirilloff: He had done a little bit of it, particularly, I guess, in Waysides, where things were starting to open up into contracting. He had done a lot of personnel things, which was the real downside of a government job for him, and something that he hated, and probably a lot of other people hated, too.

Betsy Ehrlich: Dealing with personnel.

Irene Kirilloff: Oh, yes. Dealing with personnel issues, dealing with, you know, justifying certain actions, etcetera. But, no, he'd not done a lot, and certainly, I don't think if it had been left to him to do the contracting part of our business that we would have gone into business. So by the time Nick retired, we had so much work that really he had to retire in order to do the work. We were so committed between Publications and the beginnings of Waysides. But also for some Park Service-related agencies, people like, I'm trying to think, was it called Great Eastern or—

Betsy Ehrlich: Eastern National?

Irene Kirilloff: The associations. Eastern National. And then there was one, Southwest Parks and Monuments.

Betsy Ehrlich: Right.

Irene Kirilloff: We were doing work for both of those organizations.

Betsy Ehrlich: National Park associations, yeah.

Irene Kirilloff: At this point, this was all publications. I didn't know anything about waysides. I mean, I'd been a publications designer all my life. So publications came pretty naturally. I could get the grid. That was not, you know, something I couldn't understand and deal with. But then we did get a wayside contract as well. So I was at the ground floor of learning what that is, what does that mean.

Betsy Ehrlich: So you got the contract. You hadn't done waysides before.

Irene Kirilloff: Nick had. Of course.

Betsy Ehrlich: So it's your business, but he's, and at that point when you've got that contract, he was still working at Geographic.

Irene Kirilloff: Not by the time we got the waysides. Publications contracts, he was still at Geographic. But enough work's starting to come in, that sometimes he'd be working at night on Kirilloff Design. So we said okay, we need to think about you leaving, and so on. I, in my usual fashion, saying yeah, we're going to get this contract, we're going to whatever, whatever. Nick called me one day and said, "I gave my notice."

Irene Kirilloff: It was like—(laughter) "Oh. Okay. When are you leaving?"

Irene Kirilloff: He said, "Well, I had to give them three months." Because at Geographic, you can't hire someone to replace somebody like that you know, overnight. You can't just walk out on someone. But he gave them three months' notice and called me and told me he'd done that.

Irene Kirilloff: So, Nick has always been, interestingly enough, the catalyst for a lot of things in our lives. Buying houses, moving to Frederick, having babies. I'm always the one going, "Yeah, yeah, let's talk about that." (laughter) It's not what people see me as, as compared to Nick. But that's really how it worked.

Irene Kirilloff: So we started working. Madly. Together. For the first time. Now, that's not to say I didn't see what he was doing, we didn't talk about what I was doing or he was doing. Often he would bring things to me and say, "What do you think?" That kind of stuff. Now, Nick's approach to design is very different from mine. My approach to design is like his saying "I quit" or whatever, interestingly enough. His approach to design is "Let's think about it, let's figure it out, let's whatever." He's very analytical in his approach. I am like, "Okay, let's do this." So it's kind of interesting. Design-wise, that's where I am. Life-wise, that's where he is.

Irene Kirilloff: So he would show me things, and they would be really complex concepts. I would say, "Well, this is why I'm not working at National Geographic. This is why I'm recruiting students for Hood College." And that kind of thing. In other words, very different approach. But I certainly had design ideas. I could certainly talk about layout and whatever. It wasn't just my forte to come up with a solution to how do you show the eclipse. Geographic would come up with things like okay, we want to show the eclipse in a way that's never been done before. Oh, okay. And Nick would be, oh, this is really interesting. I'd be—you know, just mind-boggling. But that challenged him, and that's what he liked. And that's his forte. That's why some of the work that, the early work that Nick did in Harpers Ferry and in Publications and then in Waysides, is just exemplary. Because it has that incredible context.

Betsy Ehrlich: Are there examples that you can think of from those early years that really stand out in your mind of those works that he did that were like the new way of showing the eclipse, or—

Irene Kirilloff: Yes. Obviously what I brought to show today are a couple of examples of, not a couple, a few examples of Park Service work. I did not bring any Geographic work, even though I must say, some of those pieces are kind of the height of his design process and success. I will show you this piece, because I'm very fond of this brochure for the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, because it's the first piece Nick and I did collaboratively for the Park Service. So this kind of reflects the two of us, and how we put it together.

Lu Ann Jones: Can you describe it?

Irene Kirilloff: Sure. Sure. Very dramatic kind of image of the Statue of Liberty at sunset. And then a very detailed, very specific diagram done by Don Foley of the interior and the staircases and all of those interesting things that go on inside the statue that we never think about when we see this shell. And then a timeline. A little map. The interesting thing about this brochure was, in a way, Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island are two different entities. They are one and the same, and yet they're totally different.

Irene Kirilloff: So then there's another whole side of the story. Another side of the brochure that deals with Ellis Island. So, again, a very detailed diagrammatic explanation of the levels of the buildings in Ellis Island and what purpose they served in sort of processing people who had arrived on these ships and needed to be checked for medical issues, etcetera, etcetera. So I'm very fond of this piece for those reasons, because Nick and I hashed it out together. It really represents kind of who we are as designers.

Lu Ann Jones: It's interesting you have this huge group shot there, and then the particulars of the individual and personal artifacts there.

Irene Kirilloff: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Betsy Ehrlich: Can you talk a little bit about your and Nick's perspective on the use of color? Because it stands out to me in this brochure, especially side one with the sunset image, this sort of very pink sunset color expanded across the full side of the brochure. And the other side is very subtle in its use of historic imagery and color.

Irene Kirilloff: You know, it's interesting. This is, I find, very typical of how I work. This image of the Statue of Liberty, the large head with the coloration from the sunset, was something that I introduced into this piece. I often hang a design on an image that sets a tone and sets a coloration for the whole piece, and then superimposing other information on it. You know, this is very typical of Nick's kind of interpreting information.

Betsy Ehrlich: Detailed, cut-away, how things work. Right. That was also really big at the time, doing a lot of the sort of Don Foleyesque kind of cutaway, intricate how-things-work sorts of graphics, which—

Irene Kirilloff: Uh huh. Yeah. Yeah. And with the Statue of Liberty, very justified, in that a lot of people never understand what goes on inside the Statue of Liberty. Even if they take the staircase, and obviously that's a limited number of visitors. So, actually, I designed the piece, to a large extent. And particularly, I have to say, this is me.

Betsy Ehrlich: The large historic graphic.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah. Bold, large, historic, emotional graphic. Bruce Hopkins, with whom we have worked so much over the years, used to call us the bleeding hearts of the Park Service. (Betsy Ehrlich laughs) Because that's the other aspect. It's not just that Nick is extremely analytical in his approach to information; he's also quite emotional. I, not being analytical, am very emotional. So a lot of the work we've done in places like Martin Luther King, I'm not talking about necessarily places like Mount Rainier, but

places where there is a really emotional story to tell, that's what hits me immediately. That's the aspect of it that I want to show and interpret. I am a displaced person who arrived in the United States on a ship. I didn't arrive at Ellis Island. But to me, this is, you know, my story. And so the project was just so close to my heart and so exciting to me. And you know, showing this teddy bear, I mean really, and the baby shoes [artifacts featured in the Ellis Island brochure].

Lu Ann Jones: Yes. Yes, yes.

Irene Kirilloff: And again, it set the tone for what is it like to arrive there and stand there in line? You know, my parents arrived with two trunks and two four year-old girls. And I think 50 American dollars, which they thought was a lot of money. Because in Germany at the time, it was a lot of money.

Betsy Ehrlich: You know, before you fold that up, the other thing that I think is interesting about that, I don't know what year you did that—

Irene Kirilloff: Well, probably about 20 years ago.

Betsy Ehrlich: So, early Unigrid brochures often had very sort of blocky structures to them. That was the original sort of—

Irene Kirilloff: A lot of black bars.

Betsy Ehrlich: Black bars and boxes that were either text or graphics. And this is not that. This is very open. This could be done today. It is totally fresh looking and not boxy. So I think it's interesting from that perspective that the very earliest brochures that you were working on, you were already moving way beyond what was being done in that structure.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah. Oh, those Kirilloffs. (laughter) Always pushing the envelope.

Betsy Ehrlich: Well, and was it well received, then? Or was that a—

Irene Kirilloff: It was very well received. There were no concerns or comments. I think that there may have been, over the years, a little bit of sort of that feeling of, so, Nick is the grandfather of this process, and maybe we should let him be, let him do. Both positive and negative. I think there were some people who resented some of that kind of, wait a minute, how come he gets to come back and do this now and tell us what to do? But also a very positive other side of it, where people were like oh, yeah, all right. Good to see.

Irene Kirilloff: So, this is a handbook that, my understanding is, might not still be, but it was the Park Service bestseller. The last I heard, it was still the Park

Service bestseller. Nick and I designed this. Again, early days. One of my favorite stories about this book is we took our grandsons, one of whom was probably about twelve years old at the time, to the Mall in Washington, which we did a lot. And we went to the Museum of American History and went through the place. And sent the boys into the bookstores and said, "Go pick something and we will buy you something to take home with you." And our older grandson brought this book out. And we're like, "Don't buy that. We can give you—" (laughter)

Betsy Ehrlich: We can give you a copy.

Irene Kirilloff: We have a handful of those upstairs. (laughter) But we were so thrilled that this is what he brought out that he wanted to take home. This book is special. It was a project—oh, this is the bleeding heart Kirilloffs!

Lu Ann Jones: We should just say, this is *The Underground Railroad.*

Irene Kirilloff: Oh, right. This is, yes, *Underground Railroad.* We got the contract to design this handbook. Nick had designed handbooks before for the Park Service. Some of them in the Unigrid format. But this was the first one that we ever did together. The subject matter was mind-blowing, as you can imagine. Trying to tell this story. Going through all of these materials, you know, hundreds and hundreds of images. Choosing them to try to tell the story, to try to not exaggerate or mislead, which is so much the story of the Underground Railroad. There are so many myths. And of course the Park Service wants to avoid those. So it was a challenge. But emotionally it was just something that we got very excited about. So the fact that it has been such a popular book just makes us feel wonderful about having done it. And we used, oh, is his name here somewhere.

Betsy Ehrlich: Pinkney?

Irene Kirilloff: Pinkney. Yes. Jerry Pinkney. Nick had worked with Jerry Pinkney at Washington's Birthplace on a piece for two waysides. So we got him as a really well known black illustrator to do sort of the centerpiece, the main illustration for the book. And we have used it since at the Harriet Tubman site. (phone rings) I'm sorry. One of us? [pause]

Lu Ann Jones: I think you were saying you used this for the Harriet Tubman?

Irene Kirilloff: Yes. We got to use this piece again on a wayside for a Harriet Tubman. There are two waysides as you come into the park, just off the parking lot. One of them is titled "The Underground Railroad," and it explains to people what it is and isn't. So we used this illustration, because we thought that it suited so well the kind of swampy, well, maybe not swampy, but water aspect of the Eastern Shore. We got rid of the

mountains in the background a little bit. Made that just a darker sky. But we just thought that it suited so well the story at Harriet Tubman. A piece that you know, I have a lot of personal attachment to.

Irene Kirilloff: We have a lot of work that was done, and much of this, I must say, is sort of early work. This was done for the Chesapeake Bay Gateways, which is sort of Park Service-related.

Betsy Ehrlich: It's an NPS network, right? The Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network and the Park Service is like one entity.

Irene Kirilloff: Right.

Betsy Ehrlich: So did the work come to you through the Park Service contract?

Irene Kirilloff: No.

Betsy Ehrlich: It came to you through the partner.

Irene Kirilloff: Yes. It came directly from them. We did a series of posters for them. These are really big posters. One for lighthouses, one for work boats. I'm trying to think, yeah, actually there was a third that is the colonial Chesapeake. I don't have a sample of that. So we did three posters for them.

Irene Kirilloff: This is a Park Service piece that Nick did while still working for Publications. But it is one of his favorite pieces.

Lu Ann Jones: So this is Fort McHenry?

Irene Kirilloff: Fort McHenry brochure. I think it substantially has stayed the same. Again, you know, sort of using the Unigrid in a different kind of a way. This is early days, but you can see that there aren't all that many of the black bars and what not.

Betsy Ehrlich: Right. It's not boxy. Having that original flag graphic just take up the entire side one—

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah.

Betsy Ehrlich: --with just a minimal amount of text at the bottom. So it's poster-like.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah. And that's what's wonderful about this piece. We have it hanging, actually, in our studio space, because we love it so much. Because it is a poster. It's a flag.

Betsy Ehrlich: And it's within your home state.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah. So, we did a series. This was one of our first projects that, it was actually a Park Service project for the Boston Harbor, I'm sorry—

Betsy Ehrlich: Boston Harbor Islands?

Irene Kirilloff: Boston Harbor Islands. The thing about Boston Harbor Islands that's really interesting, was certainly interesting to Nick, is that this water treatment system, this is unbelievable, space age, water treatment system. Then on the other hand, sort of the farming, the fishing, the whatever aspect of that area so that we got to go to this space station. (laughs) It was really a water treatment station. These eggs, you know.

Betsy Ehrlich: That you see when you fly into the city.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah, yeah.

Betsy Ehrlich: It's right there. It's hard to miss them.

Lu Ann Jones: So could we talk a little bit about the philosophy and challenge of waysides? The interpretive philosophy, the design challenge?

Irene Kirilloff: Sure. Well, the doctrine of waysides is basically that it be site-specific. So that theoretically, the wayside does not belong there unless you're looking at something that it explains or enhances in some way. So that's pretty specific. We often go on site visits and the park wants to do this or that here. We sort of say, well, why do you think you want to do that? Because it doesn't belong here. So that's an easy one. Because parks often will pause then and say oh, yeah, duh. So maybe we should put it actually where that story is. Or maybe we should tell some other story. So that's the first thing.

Irene Kirilloff: So one of the waysides that I remember seeing early on that is, I think, sort of a perfect use. And Betsy, you have one that I was so thrilled when you mentioned once at a meeting and it happened to be Nick's solution to a problem at Dry Tortugas. But the one that I saw was a wayside that had been photographed. It might actually be in the guide to how to do waysides. But it shows a field. There might be a crop on it, I don't remember. Basically, not a significant crop. It's kind of a golden field. And in front of it, a wayside with men and weapons. I looked at that and I thought, wow. Okay. You don't have to say a word here. This says it all. So that's ideally what you want. To almost not have to say a word. Well, I mean, obviously that rarely happens. It's much more complicated than that.

Betsy Ehrlich: Well, I wonder how much of your early years working on billboards came back to you when you started working on waysides. Is there a connection?

Irene Kirilloff: Well, you know, I'd never even thought of it that way. I have a copy of this 24-sheet billboard. One of the sheets is probably about eight times the size of a wayside. So that in a way, you can't even envision your billboard. It's beyond envisioning. I saw it once in Washington, off the Beltway, actually on a billboard. The billboard I had done was for a Navy nurse. And it was a Navy nurse holding a Vietnamese baby in her arms, standing against the rail of one of the mercy ships. It was like, whoa. It was really fun to see something that size that I had designed. But I guess it really would apply, certainly. As far as how much information can you put on something while you're driving past it?

Betsy Ehrlich: Which, similarly, you're a pedestrian when you're looking at waysides. But you're walking past something. And you have those few seconds to decide whether you're going to glance and take it in, or just turn your eyes onto something else more interesting on the landscape.

Irene Kirilloff: Right.

Betsy Ehrlich: So it's always seemed to me that there's a little bit of a similarity between driving by a billboard and walking by a wayside.

Irene Kirilloff: Sure. And we all have heard the stories about what waysides require as far as attention, and what people actually give them, which is not much. So I think you asked kind of what our approach is to interpreting.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. And maybe even if you have an example or two. Like here's the challenge and here's how we had to—

Irene Kirilloff: I have one that was really kind of a fun challenge. This is, excuse me while I dig around a little bit. Actually this is, yeah, okay, these two. We got a project that was just two waysides. A really quickie sort of simple project from Yellowstone. In one particular area of the park, they were using solar to help with lighting and power. They sent us some really, really bad photos and said, "We need a panel about this and a panel about that." What Nick did with this, which I thought was just brilliant, was put that highlight on there. There's their crappy photo. I mean, obviously enhanced as best we could. But that highlight, I think, is what made it.

Irene Kirilloff: The second wayside that we did, they sent us a photograph. This is, unfortunately, bad printing. There actually is more to be seen of the building in the sky. You can kind of squint at it and see a little bit of it. This was a daytime photo. So what Nick did was create the night sky, the night photo, and then the use of the lighting on the buildings. So you

know, this is what I think is really, really turning something around. Taking something, and we often have images that are not wonderful from the parks. Sometimes they are all there is, because that photo was taken of something that happened there. It's not going to happen now, it's not going to ever happen again. And whoever took it had a Brownie camera or had whatever they had. So you make the most of it. So this is, I think, a really good example of how you take something that was a very simple project, and really make something of it. You know, that's the challenge, and that's the fun.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, so who would make the decision at the park that they were going to have a wayside exhibit about that?

Irene Kirilloff: I guess whoever was involved with this solar lighting was very proud of it, and felt that it was really something to promote. This is not an area that visitors particularly visit. But I guess there's always a lot of pressure on the parks to show their involvement in these kinds of projects, and so I think that was really the impetus for getting these waysides up there. To sort of say hey, look what we're doing. But you know, someone went out and took a couple of snapshots and sent them. I guess we probably bid on these two exhibits. I don't imagine there's any other way we could have gotten them. But in any event, there we are.

Betsy Ehrlich: One of the things I think I want to touch on, and I don't know if this is the right moment, but it seems like the connection between Nick's focus at National Geographic, which was as an illustrator. So he's hiring and working with illustrators. He's got a vision. But he's guiding, directing and responding to what illustrators provide. Which, when you talk about what parks provide, they have their idea and they have these maybe not so great graphics. But he's taking it there beyond what's sort of given. I wonder about the sort of parallels between working with artists when you're starting with a blank page, versus working with something that's maybe not so great but still taking it to where you need it to be.

Irene Kirilloff: You know, I'm really glad you asked that. Because Nick has heard, time and again, and actually at Geographic, that you know, he sort of missed out on the painting. He sort of started out to be a painter. But someone said to him, "Yeah, but you paint with Photoshop." And it is so true. Nick's sort of layering and feathering and all that is literally creating a painting. You know, a visual that is beyond just whatever he was given as far as a photo.

Betsy Ehrlich: Yeah, this is an entirely different graphic, this Yellowstone by night wayside.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah, I mean, how did you create that particular graphic from what you started with?

Irene Kirilloff: This is literally the photo that we were sent, turned into a night photo through Photoshop. I mean, through layers and layers. Well, here. You can start to see a lot more of it here than you could before.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes. Yes. So all of this night sky was created.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah. The stars, the everything. Yeah. I mean, there was no beam of light anywhere.

Lu Ann Jones: I want to take a photo.

Irene Kirilloff: Sure.

Betsy Ehrlich: I think the result, while it seems looking at these waysides, it always seems to me, they look so simple that they look obvious. Like how hard can it be?

Irene Kirilloff: Right.

Betsy Ehrlich: You have one graphic and you have a small block of text. How hard can it be? But what would that have been without that vision of what it needed to be graphically?

Irene Kirilloff: Exactly. And that's what I love about waysides. The fact that, the challenge is, how do you arrive at that? And we don't always. You know, parks say, "Oh, no, no, I have to have those two other photos on there, too," or whatever it is that makes it not where you were going. But basically, that's what, I love that about waysides, that they can be that simple and yet they can tell that story. Yeah.

Betsy Ehrlich: But arriving at simple isn't so simple.

Irene Kirilloff: Oh, no, no. Simple isn't—

Betsy Ehrlich: Envisioning that graphic, which like an illustration or like working with an artist.

Irene Kirilloff: I'm not sure that I'm going to get this back in here. This might take all of our—you know, I'm just going to leave it here and we will go on.

Lu Ann Jones: At some point, could you talk about this Bloody Sunday.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah. You know why, this is interesting, too. This is not an exhibit that was done for anybody, or was ever going to be produced. Nick and I, in bidding on an IDIQ contract, perhaps the most recent one, which was about five years ago, were asked to design an exhibit for I guess it's what—

Lu Ann Jones: The Selma to Montgomery march.

Irene Kirilloff: Mm hmm. Selma, Montgomery. Actually, I don't think it was the most recent idea [unclear] was probably—

Betsy Ehrlich: This was many years ago.

Irene Kirilloff: Ten years ago.

Betsy Ehrlich: Because we were not allowed to do that after a period, because we had a complaint that the requirement to produce a sample was asking for work to be done.

Irene Kirilloff: I see.

Betsy Ehrlich: So while we wanted everybody to be, everybody was going to bid to have the same original materials and the same starting point, so we could see what everybody would do with it, we weren't able to do that again.

Irene Kirilloff: Right.

Betsy Ehrlich: Because it has an old arrowhead, it has a black and white arrowhead, so it suggests to me that that's quite a while ago.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah, yeah, you're right. This was. And I know that the project was done years later. So, anyway. So we designed this exhibit based on the materials that we received as part of the IDIQ contract. And of course we got really interested in it. (laughs) We used a photo of concrete sort of because these people were beaten down to the bridge, ground, whatever. So you asked about it. That's the reason. I mean, obviously the coloration was to imply that this was sort of blood, dried blood. But it was just something we invented for the process.

Irene Kirilloff: We did a large series of exhibits, some of them very, very big. I mean, sort of the height of the room and whatever, in Baltimore, for the Winds Falls Trail. This was an early Park Service project that Nick and I did at Wind Cave. We did the surface, which was interesting. We went to Wind Cave and found out that we were doing the surface. We were doing the prairie. And that turned out to be very interesting. I thought well, why are we not going to the cave? Here we did sort of the cave under the prairie, so that

people would understand, kind of. You're standing here, with all this grass, basically, and underneath is this labyrinth going on. There's a, they kind of go on and on, but there's one—oh, I really liked these. These are trailheads in the park. They were relatively small. I think they were like 24 by 36. You know, the prairie out there is huge. It goes on forever. So things disappear on the landscape. The waysides were in huge stone structures that the park had built, probably CCC stuff. With big logs holding them and so on. So then the waysides would be inserted into metal frames and into this structure. Because the bison come and scratch on any surface they can find. And so waysides don't hold up. These had to be at trailheads. So they're protected by posts so that the bison can't come and lean on them and scratch. But they needed to be something that could really stand out in the landscape. So we used this yellow sort of to really help, you know, people to notice them in the landscape. But I just thought they were really a nice solution with these big animal heads.

Irene Kirilloff: I don't know what else we have. We skipped some. These are still part—oh, this was a project we really enjoyed. It was done for Cape Charles, Virginia. It was part of—this is Boston. This was part of the Chesapeake Bay Gateways projects that we did. Obviously they didn't use the grid, although we did try to establish. There hadn't been many waysides done before we started doing waysides for Chesapeake Bay Gateways. And so we tried to give them some kind of a look that would kind of connect with Park Service, but establish their own thing. And there was a series of six of these. They're very tall, actually. Kind of disproportionately tall. We used a lot of skies. A lot of skies as background, obviously. You know, how much sky is there really above a photograph? So that was a tool that we used. There was a map of the actual—there was a walking tour of the area. And this is, again, a question of one of those pieces of graphic, it wasn't pieces, it was several pieces of graphics that were actually published in a newspaper, I think, originally, about the meteor that created the Chesapeake Bay. Who knew? I didn't at that time. So, again, it was a question of creating sort of an atmosphere for that to live in, to explain what happened there.

Betsy Ehrlich: So these are all real colorful, elegant wayside solutions. I'm thinking back to when Nick came back to the Park Service and started in Waysides, building on the Unigrid system into the wayside program. But there was a much bigger transition that was happening then, too. It wasn't just the application of the grid. It was a transition from kind of the flat color, Pantone 454, whatever it was, screen printed with a—

Irene Kirilloff: Background.

Betsy Ehrlich: --picture and a block of text. Which you know, you still see some of these out there today. To this full color, rich, complex layout. It seems to me

that Nick was driving that or leading the way in that transition from a very different kind of classic style of blocks of text, blocks of images, into something that was much more sophisticated.

Irene Kirilloff: Sure. Sure.

Betsy Ehrlich: I don't know if you can talk about sort of what that initiative and that effort was like. Because he was obviously working, he's one person who's working with people who've been doing these things for years. What is it like to bring an office along into the Unigrid and into that more sophisticated approach to the design?

Irene Kirilloff: You know, I think Nick is a terrific art director. That really probably is—well, I can't say that, because I also think he's a terrific designer. But I think being able to work with illustrators the way he did at Geographic and at the Park Service, and it is the same as working with designers in trying to get them to see your vision, and to help them make theirs better. I think a lot of people, when you have a good art director, it's like having a teacher. A lot of people who come to work for the Park Service didn't come from rich design backgrounds. Some did. But a lot of them came and started doing sort of government design work. And whoever was guiding them was what they sort of live up to expectations. So I think that Nick was highly respected by some, a little bit resented or maybe a lot resented by others, because he did have this vision. Just like Vince had a vision for how he wanted things to be run and how they wanted to tell the stories, Nick had a vision of how he wanted them to look. And he did that all along. Wherever he went, he's always done that. You know, he has this very amenable, pleasant sort of persona. But that is not all there is. He really has an agenda. And design-wise, Nick has an agenda. That's called being an art director. We have met head-on over a lot of things in our day because each of us has a vision. I mean, a lot of this is partly me, too. The changes that you see and the work you see. I mean, I'm still doing it. And I'm doing it alone. Nick is no longer art directing. Nick is no longer designing. Katya is doing all of the digital work. At this point I am still the one choosing the interpretive directions. I hope that she will be doing that, too.

Betsy Ehrlich: Yeah, can you talk about that a little bit? Just how she got into kind of becoming part of the business, and what her sort of role—like what's her background and training and experience with this, obviously, not just as a daughter but professionally? And then where you see her role going now.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah. You know, it's hard to have three designers in the family. We have an opera singer, too, which is a nice relief, you know? But three designers. Two designers is a lot. And three designers is a whole lot. Katya started out in the arts. She went to a high school that promoted the arts. But she

took classes in photography and loved it. Went off to a summer program in photography. Came back, and took photography the next semester. The teacher who taught photography told them that the reason he was teaching photography was because he had a free period and he had a camera. And that unfortunately was the death of what would have been, I think, a really good early start for Katya.

Irene Kirilloff: So she ended up in drama, in acting. Went to NYU, Tisch, and spent a year. And that was not it. She knew, I think, pretty early on that that really wasn't, it got her through high school. It was where she found people that she could relate to. It was more interesting than having a teacher who said, "I have a camera and an hour." And so that's how she ended up there. And happened to do well enough to get into Tisch.

Irene Kirilloff: So she dropped out. And went back, got more and more interested in photography. Back into that interest in photography. Took some great photography on her own. And decided to go back and actually study it. So she went to Art Center in Pasadena, in California. Many, many years later.

Irene Kirilloff: When she started in photography there, she was a wiz at all the technical stuff. Very good photographer. But also just, it came very easily and she's very fast. And so as Nick became less interested in the work and not able to work as quickly as he used to, sometimes we pass things on to her to finish or to take over or whatever.

Betsy Ehrlich: Was he art directing her?

Irene Kirilloff: Initially. But then he stopped and I took over. So this is, we're talking now a lot of years. We're talking ten years, easily. I can't--

Betsy Ehrlich: That she's been working with you.

Irene Kirilloff: Yes. And very fast. It worked out really well. She was living in California. Initially we couldn't send it by the Internet. But we got to the point where, you know, ten minutes later she had it, whatever it was. And the next day, I had it. We have it down. I must say that we do not invent the wheel with each wayside. We've got our wheels pretty well invented. I like to think that the technical aspect of things is pretty, I mean, we've got it down. It's okay, so how are we going to do this so it's not the same old, same old? How is this going to challenge us? How is it going to be fun to do?

Lu Ann Jones: My transcriber will be grateful if you spell your daughter's name.

Irene Kirilloff: K-a-t-y-a.

Lu Ann Jones: Thank you.

Betsy Ehrlich: One of the things I want to sort of transition to is the idea of what all this media that we're doing in the Park Service, the publications, the waysides, etcetera, are interpretive media. That's, you know, the catch phrase. We're not just providing information. We're interpreting. And the theories of interpretation have changed and evolved over the years. I wonder from your perspective what does that look like and how do you speak to that? Especially as you go out to site visits and people start talking about things like audience-centered techniques, etcetera. How's that?

Irene Kirilloff: I'm sorry. All the what techniques?

Betsy Ehrlich: Audience-centered techniques.

Irene Kirilloff: Oh. You know, this is a good question, and I'll tell you why. I've been asked by people who want to work in the Park Service, for the Park Service, doing the kind of thing we do, "Well, how do you get to do what you do, and what does that mean? What does it mean? What's interpretation?" You know, I'm very pressed for an answer. I have to tell you, this is going to sound very strange. The reason it's so hard to do what we do well is because it's innate. It's something that knowing the parks, loving the parks, having them as part of your life, you really get, you really get that you're not there to decorate. That you're not there to prettify or even to explain just straightforwardly. You're there to grab someone's attention enough to share with them what isn't just visible in the scene. And what is that? How do you tell someone when they say, "I'd like to work for the Park Service. I want to do whatever this is." I truly have no words for it. They probably think I'm being evasive to just say, "Oh, you just do." (laughs) You know, what is that? I think some people are better at it than others. It has to do a lot, I think, with intellect. You have to be able to understand, truly understand, what you're looking at and what it would take to get someone else there.

Irene Kirilloff: A lot of people who want to do waysides want to decorate waysides. We've had to redo waysides for people who decorated them. We've had the Park Service come to us and say, "We need you to take this project. This is urgent and really serious." We'd be handed the work that had been started. And it was not interpretation. It was putting down some things that they'd been handed. What's the difference? Well, I think it's a real thought process. It's really getting it. It's really understanding what might be the story here. Because anybody can put down a couple of photos and put the captions down that relate to them.

Betsy Ehrlich: So the kind of probing that you do when you're figuring out, what is the park really wanting from us? What is the story that's here? Which of the two of you, or maybe it's both, you're both asking questions. You're both

probing, you're both trying to figure out what is the story? What's really going on here?

Irene Kirilloff: You know, when we first started working together, one of our first projects, maybe our first site visit, I'm not sure. We went to Mount Rainier. We went with Bob Grogg as part of the team. And who was the writer who's gone now, who was so abrasive? Terrific.

Betsy Ehrlich: Dick Hoffman?

Irene Kirilloff: Dick Hoffman. We went with Dick Hoffman, Bob Grogg from Harpers Ferry, and then I guess some people from the park, maybe, and Nick and I. I remember standing at the site visits, sort of listening to them all. Thinking, you know, trying to follow what everybody was saying. Trying to figure it all out. I just remember at the next site visit I had a few things to say. Then at the next site visit, I had a lot of things to say. And pretty soon, it wasn't like what are we talking about? It just became second nature. I can't even explain to you, osmosis.

Irene Kirilloff: I remember from that site visit to Mount Rainier, feeling a little bit like, you know, the apprentice. We were standing talking, and of course it was totally cloudy. No mountain. And so there, they say the mountain is out when you can see the mountain. Because you so often can't. So we arrived and we spent two days on the ground, or maybe even three. We were standing, talking about an exhibit that was actually a weather exhibit that's one of the examples in your binder of exhibits. Someone said, "The mountain is out." I was like, where? Literally, I'm standing there.

Irene Kirilloff: So I finally, I walked over to Nick. They were standing kind of in front of me. I walked over to Nick and I said, "Where's the mountain?"

Irene Kirilloff: And Nick said, "There."

Irene Kirilloff: Well it was like, there! In my face! And it was covered with snow. I just literally didn't see it beyond a lake. But I'm looking for like a mountain somewhere. And this mountain is like on top of us. Because we were up, pretty high up at Paradise. So that wasn't what I was looking for. But it was so funny. That's kind of how I felt about that whole site visit. Like, where's the mountain? But it didn't take long. And in my usual fashion, I took over the talking after a few site visits. (laughter)

Lu Ann Jones: When you say by osmosis, is it like the environment you're working in? All the things that people are saying around you? The whole sensory—

Irene Kirilloff: You know, site visits are complicated. Depending on where you go and who the rest of the team is and so on. You know, there are lots of agendas. So often site visits begin with a lot of people having to get their little say in, and establishing their territory and all of that. So there's a lot of that kind of thing—not all parks, not all parks—but some parks will bring out a huge team. And they all have their issues with each other. (laugh) You're standing there going oh, God, you know, well I don't think we should do it that way. So you just sort of have to wait out some of it. Because some of it has nothing to do with what you're there for. In fact, sometimes a lot doesn't have to do with what you're there for. So I try to just keep them focused, because sometimes site visits can get away from you. And you literally can run out of time. So that I try to be really polite but really focused, and show them that I am. Because eventually it tends to get people focused.

Irene Kirilloff: A lot of site visits are about where are we going to put this? Well, what kind of feet are we going to put on it? Well, do you really think whatever? And do you think it should be two inches over this way? There's a lot of that kind of thing, and a lot of noise. So I try to not get into that. I very seldom have to get into that actual discussion. Although sometimes when they're putting it somewhere that I don't think it should be, I will. But if it's about two inches or what kind of feet it's on, I just let whoever's dealing with that, deal with that. It's interesting. You know.

Betsy Ehrlich: If you had advice for people who you work with in the parks on a site visit or a project, what characteristics make them really effective in working with you, so that the site visit doesn't get bogged down in the weeds, or so that you do get to the kind of solutions and the kind of conclusions that you need before you run out of time?

Irene Kirilloff: Stick to the topic. You know, focus. We don't need to be talking about, "Oh, we always have people who go off the trail there." There's a lot of this kind of stuff that has nothing to do with what needs to be done. So that's the biggest thing.

Irene Kirilloff: Parks often forget. This is different. We just did this, or are doing, this big project in Gettysburg. The man who is the interpretive ranger for the park is amazing. This is totally a case where you have someone who really knows their subject matter, who stays totally focused, who hears what you have to say and responds to that. Then you go to a park where the pre-proposal was done a year ago. They obviously had a hard time arriving at that, and now they've forgotten all their reasoning for why they said this is what we're going to do here. So they start to redo it, to rehash everything. Now we sometimes do a little of that. When we go on a site visit and we see that a park is making decisions in their pre-proposal that we don't agree with, we certainly will say, "Well, why would you do that here, why

not where we just," whatever. But to have them literally go back, "Now why did you say that when we were here?" (Laughs) You know, this kind of thing. That makes it really hard. So I think if parks could be reminded to sit down with their proposal like we do before we come and take a really good, hard look at it so that they're familiar with it again, that would help.

Betsy Ehrlich: It's good.

Irene Kirilloff: But you know, some of this is human nature. Some of this, literally is part of how you, this is what a site visit is. You go through this finding out who's really the boss, finding out who's really the person who knows what they're talking about, and so on. And it kind of sifts out.

Betsy Ehrlich: Well, and there was a decision-making process with any type of media that you're working on with a park. I find that things can float unresolved for a long time until you say okay, we have to put this in words now, and we have to make a decision now. And that can trigger some of these issues that had remained unresolved. But now, because we're producing something, it needs to be resolved.

Irene Kirilloff: I try to avoid that being at close out.

Betsy Ehrlich: (laughs) Yeah.

Irene Kirilloff: Because it's a little late.

Betsy Ehrlich: Yeah. Right. Right.

Irene Kirilloff: Try to get it done before then.

Betsy Ehrlich: So have you counted up how many parks and park projects you've worked on? Do you have an idea?

Irene Kirilloff: I would say we've probably worked in 40 parks, easily. I tried counting it all up once, just because I thought I could say we've done 210 exhibits. Well, you know, somewhere along the way, it was like, whatever. We've actually done about 2000.

Betsy Ehrlich: Do you have a favorite? And is your favorite different from Nick's?

Irene Kirilloff: Park or project?

Betsy Ehrlich: Either. You pick.

Irene Kirilloff: I loved going to Mount Rainier because it was my first site visit. I have fallen in love with this whole deal, with this whole process, from the site visit to the handed over production files. So that from that point of view, it was like, wow. You know. I loved it.

Betsy Ehrlich: You were hooked from that project on, doing waysides.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I got what Nick was doing. I got what waysides were. But doing it. Going to a park, which we've always loved. But then absorbing all of that and then having to turn it around into something. Wow. I really liked that. So that really was very exciting.

Irene Kirilloff: The project I'm working on is always my favorite. Because I'm into it, you know? And doing my best. So that's how that feels, which is also nice.

Betsy Ehrlich: Mm hmm. Your favorite project is your latest.

Irene Kirilloff: But you know, I'm just a sucker for the Southwest. So as far as personally, going to Bryce just last week for that site visit was wonderful. Because here it is, one of my favorite parks. And I'm actually working on something. And I have to go to places I've never been, because there are waysides going to be in places I've never been in the park. I didn't get to some of the places I would have liked to have gone. But that's okay. I've been there. But that's what's always exciting about a site visit. You see things and you learn things about a park that you never will otherwise. And then you forget it about six months later after you hand in the project. Or two years later, when you hand in the project, it's like the next thing. So now I'm an expert on Gettysburg, but I'm going to be an expert on geology. (Laughter)

Betsy Ehrlich: Can you talk about, if this ever has happened to you, I imagine it may have, when your ideas about a story or a direction and the park's ideas about a story or a direction have been divergent, and you had to somehow bring it together? How did you do that?

Irene Kirilloff: You know, it tends to be more on a one-to-one basis, dealing with a particular exhibit, rather than--

Betsy Ehrlich: A whole project.

Irene Kirilloff: -- on a bigger scale. Parks sometimes have an agenda that I can understand. It has nothing to do with what should be on that site, what the interpretation of that should be. But it has to do with a political issue that is a sensitive issue, or whatever that might be. So you know sometimes when I think why are you doing this? And they explain to me why they are

doing this, it may not be according to Hoyle, but it certainly is what the park needs to have there. It's a give and take. Well, I certainly have input as far as maybe we can do it differently. Sometimes we change things very much. Sometimes a park is really--we had a project in a park that had had a very bad wayside experience. And one of the contractors we went with actually was part of the team from that experience. It was the fabricator, in that case. So there was a real aura, a real confrontational aura, from the park, because they were very concerned, having had such a bad experience. So they were very adamant about things, just because I think they were trying too much to control things. It actually was a project that turned out because we bid again on another aspect of it, to be several phases of the project. The difference between the first time, the first part of the project and then the second phase that we did later was night and day.

Betsy Ehrlich: They had learned to trust you.

Irene Kirilloff: They totally, yes. It was totally different. But you know, parks have different experiences with contractors, too.

Betsy Ehrlich: We've talked a lot about waysides. I'm curious about other projects that you've done that weren't publications or waysides, but things like identity projects, and the whole sort of NPS identity evolution. So there's the arrowhead, and the Unigrid that Nick helped implement early on in his career. But then later, you were also involved with park logos. I think Potomac Heritage was one of them?

Irene Kirilloff: Right. Right, right.

Betsy Ehrlich: Can you speak to that process and what that looked like? How did you get involved in logo development for parks?

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah, it's kind of interesting. It's not something that I would consider a specialty. I did the identity for Alexandria City Public Schools. Which was sort of starting with the logo and doing sort of the whole publications look. I've done a few of those kinds of things over the years. But I'm like oh, it's a project? Yeah, I can do it. (Laughter) A Potomac heritage theme, and I looked at what those kinds of logos looked like, and did that one. Then I designed the identity for Association of Public, I'm sorry, you're going to have to help me with this. AAPL.

Betsy Ehrlich: The Association for Public Land-- Wait. AAPL.

Irene Kirilloff: There's an extra "A" in there. But, anyway. So I did that logo. Which I am really kind of pleased with. Actually, they all came at a similar kind of time. So that over a period, within several years, I did those, several things

of that nature. But it's not a specialty, by any means. I know that it is a specialty. I mean, there are things out there that are just mind-blowingly brilliant as far as logos and identities. So, yeah, I've dabbled in it.

Betsy Ehrlich: It doesn't stand out as a—

Irene Kirilloff: As a forte? No.

Betsy Ehrlich: Between you and Nick, were you both kind of involved as you do with other media equally? Or did one of you kind of take the lead in—

Irene Kirilloff: No, I did those. Yeah. It wasn't of interest to Nick. Yeah.

Betsy Ehrlich: So in your working relationship, obviously the way you're talking about your Mount Rainier experience, there's just a ton of creative energy that you draw from the park, and the enthusiasm and excitement about telling those stories. Do you both get that sort of energy? And are you just like buzzing? Or how do you sort of feed off each other, or keep each other focused and energized like that?

Irene Kirilloff: Well, initially, well, it's not Nick's nature, maybe, to have that kind of energy. But, yes. I mean, he loved it. He approached it very seriously. He had a vision. We would have to duke it out as to what we saw or how something should be interpreted. It wasn't always friendly. But we got there. We both have very strong feelings, design-wise. I respect his design sensibility tremendously. And his work ethic as far as bringing something to such completion. I admire all of that. I'm very proud, too, of the fact that I actually can work as an IDIQ contractor and get the job on time and within budget. (Laughs) Which is my forte. And, I think, some pretty nice work. For the last four or five projects, I've been the designer, with very little input from Nick. So what you see at this point is what you get, is me. I'm not ashamed of it. I'm proud of it. I know that it is not sort of, it didn't arrive through the same kind of process that Nick would have arrived at it through. But that's just how different we are as designers. I think that, would you mind turning that off? [Recording paused.]

Betsy Ehrlich: Just jumped to see where we're at now, because you've just covered so many of these questions.

Lu Ann Jones: You're a wonderful narrator.

Irene Kirilloff: Well, thank you.

Betsy Ehrlich: I haven't really had to ask a question. Yeah, I guess we didn't specifically touch on this. And that is what your greatest challenges have been,

working on, or for, the Park Service. And any sort of major disappointments or missed opportunities that you think about that—

Irene Kirilloff: Well, from something as simple as the job that got away, there are many contracts that we see go by and we'd love to work on. Carlsbad Caverns. Oh, what a great place that was! We didn't get it. So that's a disappointment. There are those kinds of disappointments. I can't say that I have been particularly disappointed. I don't have the sort of connections with the Park Service and the relationships that sometimes have been jeopardized or affected by the kind of work we do--the change in roles that took place between Nick being art director, in effect, to being a contractor and having someone that he hired years ago be the art director, present company excepted.

Irene Kirilloff: One disappointment that I can think of was on a publications project very early on that did not go well. And I felt, you know, well, we designed a handbook. It was someone in the process of reviewing it and editing decided to change some pages. But it was a book with foldouts, and sort of could never be put back together again. So it became one of these endless projects. Not from our point of view. In trying to then get it back to where it had been. And we had a little sort of contracting meeting with the contracting office that was unpleasant. It was our only experience with that kind of thing.

Betsy Ehrlich: I was going to say, it sounds to me like from all you've said so far that the projects that didn't go well, or the disappointments, are very minimal.

Irene Kirilloff: Well, that was it.

Betsy Ehrlich: Yeah, that's pretty amazing, really.

Irene Kirilloff: We've never had anything, we've never had anything that didn't. There was one difficult project, it was a wayside project, where the Park Service came to us and asked us specifically to save the day on a project that was on a tight deadline. Very important, very visible project. And we did. The park was one of the most difficult parks we've ever worked with. And coming into the project the way we did, and having a contracting officer who was not experienced, it was a very stressful project. It was a very good-looking project when it was done, and we feel very good about it. A very important one, and close to our hearts because of the subject matter. But it was the most difficult project. We did it as a favor on a very tight deadline about a year and a half into the project.

Betsy Ehrlich: Wow.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah. That was the only project that we've ever had that I felt, didn't feel good about. The result? Yes. The process, no.

Betsy Ehrlich: So, we've talked a lot about your relationship with parks and people in parks. But what about visitors? How do you stay connected to and think about who you're actually doing all this work for?

Irene Kirilloff: Oh, yeah, all the time. Because we are visitors. You know, we go to parks. We still go whenever we can. And we have taken our children many, many times. And now we are taking our grandchildren. About six years ago, we took everyone. So that's like, what, two daughters, a son-in-law, a boyfriend, two grandsons, Nick and I, and did sort of our favorite parks. Took a three-week, sort of Southwestern trip. And you know, some places like Canyon de Chelly, we came across the same waysides we'd seen thirty years ago. Yeah, we always, of course, look at things from that point of view when we go to a park. How is it interpreted? How is it signed? How informed are we about where we're going to step off and where we're going? So from that point of view, yes, we keep in touch with visitors by being them. I like watching visitors. Whenever I go on a site visit, I really like to watch. Here we are standing, talking about what it is that this sign is going to say, and I'm watching what the people around here are doing and what it is they're looking at or you know, the questions they come, "Excuse me, Ranger, Sir," and then they ask whatever. It's interesting. Because of course that's the crux of it, right? We're standing right there. So from that point of view, yeah. Always interested in what visitors have to say. I mean, if it isn't for them, if it's not about them, yeah. The park is the conduit, you know, meaning staff, to who really needs that information. The park knows that information. That's the thing. You come to a site visit and they all know too much. Because in some ways you have to go well, especially like, say, the Civil War park. They know everything. And the visitor sometimes knows nothing. So it's really hard for the park sometimes to figure out that we have to come somewhere from way here to help get them somewhere where they get it.

Betsy Ehrlich: I want to see if there's anything else. I think we're coming close to where, you've addressed all these questions beautifully, and more. But I want to just make sure that there wasn't anything else that you had in mind that you'd like to share with us. Other important topics or stories or things that we might have overlooked?

Irene Kirilloff: The Park Service has given us a life. In every way. From a paycheck for Nick to places we went and fell in love with. We took a definitive trip, a five-week trip with our girls when they were seven and eleven to the parks in the West. This is our trip west. Well, three years later, we did it again. And again. And again and again. Because how can you not? So that it's given meaning in so many ways to our lives. The girls are totally hooked.

Marta and their boys have a trailer and they head out for five weeks every summer and just, wherever. Lucky guys. I'm so envious that this is what they're doing. So I have to say that. Nick has a lot of very good feelings about National Geographic because of the professionalism and the respect of that organization for its employees and everything. So he admires that tremendously. And I understand that. But the Park Service was, I think, a place where he could express all of that interest in these sort of scientific, historical, whatever it is, interests of his. And where he could actually, he didn't have to design something to sell a product to someone. He could design something to tell people about these things that he loved learning about. So that's, you know, it's just been a gift.

Betsy Ehrlich: I'm glad that you've shared that. Because it seems at times, partly because of the contracting process that we have to go through, and literally told to keep your contractors at arm's length--you know, don't get too close, you're not best friends, you know, that sort of thing—that there is that distancing. But knowing how passionate you are about the parks, which is no less passionate than the people who wear the uniform, who work for the agency, is really good to hear and know. Because I don't think people necessarily get to see that or understand that unless they're working directly with you. And then I think it becomes apparent. And I think that's one of the reasons I'm pleased we can do this interview.

Lu Ann Jones: Absolutely.

Betsy Ehrlich: That we're not just interviewing people who are employees, but people who are essentially one of us, but just don't have the uniform.

Irene Kirilloff: Yeah. We really feel like that. (laughs)

Betsy Ehrlich: Yeah, and you've met and visited so many people in this agency that you probably know more people well than lots of us in the agency. Because there's only so much moving around that you can do. But you are touching so many parks and so many people.

Irene Kirilloff: I am so lucky. Yep.

Lu Ann Jones: Is that a good note to end on?

Irene Kirilloff: I think so. Thank you.

Lu Ann Jones: Thank you so much. It's just been a pleasure. As it always is to hear people's stories unfold. Thank you for being such an elegant narrator.

Irene Kirilloff: (laughs) You're very welcome. Thank you.

Betsy Ehrlich: Thank you.

Irene Kirilloff: Thanks.

END OF TAPE