

RINA MONARCA INTERVEIW TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWER: Candacy Taylor
INTERVIEWEE: Rina Monarca
DATE & TIME: August 20, 2012 1:26pm
LOCATION: Rina's Beauty Centre
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RECORDING: Marantz 661 - 24/96
LENGTH: 01:33:04
TRANSCRIPT: 22 pages
KEY: CT – Candacy Taylor (Interviewer)
RM – Rina Monarca

CT: Please state your full name and the number of years you've been doing hair.

RM: My full name is Rosaria Monarca and I've been doing hair about thirty-five years, I think, since I was sixteen and I'm fifty-two, so.

CT: Is that R-O-S-A-R-I-A?

RM: Yes, but no one calls me that. I've been called Rina since I was a baby.

CT: And you are from Sicily?

RM: Yes, I was born in Sicily.

CT: What brought you to the US?

RM: My parents came here when I was seven. At the time, in the '60s, it was '67 that we came here and there was a whole block of people being immigrated here. My father had a brother who was born in the United States, then they moved back to Sicily and then the war broke out. Since he was an American citizen, my grandfather sent the oldest son to the United States when he was about eighteen, with just a few dollars in his pocket, you know, typical story. And he said, "When you can get your brothers to the United States, try to get them there too." Because Sicily was pretty devastated after World War II, but then it took quite a few years by the time all that happened. My father was married with four kids and we had just moved into a new house. My mother had never seen anything other than her hometown so when these papers came allowing us to come to the United States, she would say, "Let's just rip them up." And my father said, "No, we'd be crazy, everybody's leaving. I could get a job and I could make a ton of money and work for five years and make our money and then come back. So that was sort of the plan, but when you get here you don't realize, you know, you need a car, you now are paying rent, because we used to own our own house and [had] no taxes at the time either, once you own your house, that's it, there's nothing, there's no heating that we had to deal with [like] in Connecticut so all the expenses with four kids was huge. So the five-year plan turned into the ten-year plan. So we were living in a

family house of six apartment houses and they needed that building because they were going to rack it down and do something else with it, so they offered \$300 to move out into another apartment or \$4,000 if we bought a home, it was an initiative to buy houses so that was a down payment at the time, so my father thought, we're just going to buy a house and take the \$4,000 and that's when my mother panicked and then she realized, we're never leaving.

CT: And where were you?

RM: In Middletown, which is just twenty minutes south of here. So my Mom panicked and thought we're never going to leave. Once you set roots and buy a house and at that point it had been a good ten years that we had been here already so my mother had just lost it and she said, in '78 we're leaving. And my mother's very sweet and she suffers from depression and stuff so I always felt bad for my mother and when she said, "Who's going to come with me?" My brother and my sister, all four of us are like one year apart, my other sister was already in Italy. My sister Nella was running a restaurant and she was only seventeen, eighteen, Joe was busy, you know, being a guy and I was like "Ma, I'll come with you. Don't worry about it, I'll come with you." And I was only fifteen. Then I turned sixteen in November and that January when my girlfriend came to the high school, she said, "I'm in hairdressing school. I love it." I said, "What do you mean you're in hairdressing school? Don't you have to be a certain age?" She said, "Sixteen, that's all you have to be, sixteen. I love it. That's what I'm doing. So, I went with my brother and my sister-in-law, all three of us and we had been there now a few months and we were doing great." So that's when I had my plan. I could see myself doing that. You know every time I went to the salon which wasn't very often, I went to the salon, maybe once a year to get my hair cut and my mother too, once a year. But I loved the atmosphere, I loved doing hair, I always used to do everybody's hair in my house so I could see myself very easily being a hairdresser. So I thought, alright, now I can go to Italy and I won't be just a high school drop out, I'll be a hairdresser.

I got my license and I did it in record time. I did it in a year, to the day. I went in the morning at eight. Some days I stayed until ten o'clock at night, just to put in my hours because I still needed to hold on to my part-time job, it was this little bakery and nobody was there and I used to hold it open for the owner so she could leave early and I gained thirty pounds eating doughnuts, it was horrible. But I held on to that job because I needed gas money and so forth and my sister actually was the one who helped me pay for hairdressing school. And at the time, we weren't really talking to my father much. He would just go to work...he saw it as you're taking your mother's side, and so he didn't really talk to us much. He was always working too. So my sister and I, I was sixteen she was seventeen, we made the plan, she basically helped me pay for it, which at the time was \$1,000 and now I think it's up to something like \$18,000 for hairdressing school. It's outrageous, it's ridiculous. But back then it was \$1,000 and she helped me finance it because she was working full-time and she graduated early from high school.

CT: So when you left with your mother, your mother was essentially leaving your father?

RM: No. Italians from that generation just don't up and leave and they do not divorce. Catholic... and all that.

CT: That's what I was thinking, so she was just moving.

RM: She said, "I need a break and I need to leave." So when we got there, she thought she was just going to say, "here I am, just for a little while." And after a month, her girlfriends, her family

said, "Go back to your husband. What are you doing here? You can't stay here, indefinitely." They really kind of shunned her. I kind of saw that but then I got a job right away. And my sister who had been in Italy already she went to high school there, she took me to the best [hair salon] in Sicily. In the city of Syracuse. She said, "Rina, try here." And he was busy actually and he said, "Okay, well maybe I'll call you." And then I went to two other salons and it was like "well if you want to hang out without pay." And that's how they kind of work it in Italy and then when you start producing, then they give you some money. And I thought, I went to school and I got my license but that really didn't mean anything in Italy. Then Mario called me and I think he liked me because I spoke English, he thought that adds a little flair, a more international look to the salon. And he already had eighteen employees and I was one of the older kids there. I was eighteen, there were twelve year-olds, thirteen year-olds...in Italy, you have to finish the eighth grade to drop out but a lot of kids don't even make it to the eighth grade. A lot of kids just start sewing or something else and the parents back then weren't so into education and interestingly enough now Sicily has the most educated people because there's no jobs so they keep sending their kids to school and the university is free so now it's gone way to the other side where everybody has even their master's and their doctorate but no job. It's free, so as long as you can keep up the grades, you can go to school. But when I was there at eighteen, I was one of the older hairdressers. But you know already having been in school, I caught on really fast and I really loved it.

CT: So Mario had eighteen people working there?

RM: Yes.

CT: So how large was that salon?

RM: That salon was smaller than this one here. This is 1500 square feet, [the salon in Italy was] maybe 1,000 square feet. People were sitting everywhere and in Sicily people don't take appointments either. So sometimes you would have people sitting all along the wall, standing, waiting...because Sicilian's can't keep an appointment so you just walk in and they are willing to wait. I remember one Christmas, we did 100 people in one day and those twelve year olds were working like professionals, they were excellent.

CT: So what do you think was different about their training? Just that they had more experience and they had been doing it longer?

RM: They just start at a very young age and young kids don't tire. It's amazing. We would come in and we would have a set of shampoo kids and their hands [would be] cracked and dry [from] shampooing all day. My Italian at the time wasn't very good because I speak Sicilian, not Italian and so I was a little embarrassed about that.

CT: Why?

RM: Because it's like speaking slang and not proper Italian.

CT: So is that a dialect or a different language?

RM: It's almost like a different language all together. It is a dialect.

CT: Could you compare it to the [American] south? Is it like having a strong southern accent or even more...

RM: But the words are different. For example, a boy in Italian in "ragazzo" in Sicilian it is "caruso." So it could be completely different if you don't know the actual "ragazzo" and you say "caruso" people look at you like, oh where is she from? [laughing]. Or she hasn't gone to school. Maybe she did the fifth grade kind of thing. And that to me is horrifying so I just kept my mouth shut for a long time until I got the phrases down. And knowing Sicilian, you understand Italian fairly quickly. You hold it all in and then you can let it all out when you got it. At least that's how it all worked for me. Because I was embarrassed because they would say, "She's the American." So if I would make a grammatic[al] error, they would say, "She's American" so that excused me.

CT: So can you tell me a little about...because my knowledge of Italian culture is pretty limited, but from what I've heard the south is very different from the north?

RM: Not really. If you go as an American I don't think you'd see the difference at all.

CT: No, I know, but from an Italian's perspective?

RM: Even as an Italian. You know Italy is really small. It's very different from here to...let's say Arizona, it's very different but we're still all Americans. In Italy, the northern [people] are sort of lighter and taller, they consider themselves a lot of times more Austrian, like that's even better...that's changing now. You know back in the '70s, yes, if you were from the north...I remember this one woman said she was afraid to go down to Sicily. It's like are you kidding me? It's like saying you're afraid to go from Rocky Hill [Connecticut] to Hartford [Connecticut], it's the same thing. You know obviously there's bad areas, but Sicily, really the towns are so small, I used to come home at 11:00 at night on a bus and never think twice to walk up to my house by myself.

CT: So is there is a visual difference? Are people darker with kinkier hair?

RM: There is sort of that stereotypic...yeah, as you go further south [you see] darker and kinkier hair and as you go further north there's more lighter and straighter hair. But look at me, I'm Sicilian and I don't have kinky, heavy hair, I wish I did.

CT: Were you blonde?

RM: No, I'm dark, that's my natural hair color. I've gone blonde now, more recently since I've gotten more gray, it's easier to go blonde, you don't see it so much.

CT: I wanted to find out what you learned from Mario.

RM: Mario was really a true artist, I mean sometimes he would do a haircut and we'd cut the whole thing again and check it and check it and check it and every hair had to be perfect. If he had the right client in the chair and he had the time he could really get into it and he would take two hours to cut one person's hair and it would be perfect. The way he would brush the hair and how it would fall, I mean he acted like he was doing a photo shoot for that one client. Especially if he found something about this person that he liked and she was willing to sit there, he would take the time. But he was also a great businessman because you can't do that all day, you'd be closing your doors. He had to keep eighteen people busy. So he's the person I really learned [from]. I don't

have to stand here and shampoo for fifteen minutes. At the end of the day, fifteen minutes a piece for each client, you're saving like four hours of shampooing. You could pay someone minimum wage to do that and in Italy it was not even minimum wage, there was no minimum wage. It was like ok, "I'll give you \$20 a week if you shampoo for me." And if you're doing nothing and you're learning...the way I calculated [it] I paid \$1,000 to go to school and basically barely learn anything and now I'm getting paid \$20 a week, 20,000 Lira, which isn't very much in dollars, but I was learning and I saw how much there was to learn when I saw everybody blow drying the way I did for you in those photographs, that's what I wanted to learn to do. That's what I have to learn to do. Because you know you kind of do people's hair and it's like, "Oh, that's good hon." And they think you're sweet because you're young and [they say] "you'll learn." But that's not what I wanted to hear. I wanted to hear, "I love it!" And that's what it takes, it takes years of really [working hard]. I was a little over the top. I worked from 8:30 in the morning at Mario's I would come home on the 8:00 bus and then in the summer I would work until 11:00 doing hair around town. It started with...I did a cousin's hair, a neighbor's hair and then they said, "Wow, who did that? Can she come to my house?" Because it was also convenient, and like in Sicily, nobody wants to sit in the salon for hours and that's what was happening in the salon so if I could go to your house and do you hair quickly, it was very appealing to a lot of people. But before you know it, I had the whole town coming after me. "Can you do my hair? Can you do my hair?" I was walking down the street with my aunt. And this man came up and it was her architect and she said, "When are you going to finish my plans? And he goes, "Isn't this your niece?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "You're the hairdresser? You said no to my wife." I wasn't taking any new clients. So he said, "When you take my wife, I will do your aunt's project. So my aunt says, "You better do her hair, otherwise I'll never get my house done [laughing]. So that's what it came to after four years of being in Italy. I was really working a lot, seven days a week, fourteen hours a day.

CT: So you had an incredible passion to do hair.

RM: Yeah, it wasn't just the hair though, because I'm a people person. And frankly I was a little bored in Italy when I didn't do hair, you know you just kind of sit around in a small town and there wasn't much going on.

CT: What was the town you were in?

RM: Melilli, you know in a small town there's not much going on. Television to me was ridiculous. I didn't get the jokes, I didn't get the humor, Italian television is terrible, not that American is any better but there wasn't much to see and I didn't read well in Italian and I had some books that my sister had left and I read all of them so once you finish that, there wasn't much to keep me amused, but doing hair and meeting people around town. I actually got to know a lot of people around town and doing hair was sort of an excuse too, to be social and to make some extra money. 20,000 Lira was not enough really. I lived with my grandparents and they never charged me rent or food or anything like that. They took me in completely but I wanted clothes and I wanted that little extra. And I was charging very little money, so you know everybody wanted that, because at the salon where I worked it was very expensive. So I could do the same work that I did in the salon for one-tenth the price.

CT: Another reason why you were in high demand.

RM: Yeah.

CT: So what brought you back to the US?

RM: My sister Nella. Before then she was managing a restaurant and she was a kid herself. And the owner was actually a hairdresser from New York that took over his sister's little pizzeria, he expanded [the business]. The typical sort of American [attitude]...if it's good small, bigger is better. And he bought two other restaurants. And Nella, she was just a high school kid running the restaurant and they went bankrupt, because one restaurant was doing well but the other two kind of drew from the one restaurant, so they went bankrupt. And she came back to Sicily to get away from everybody and she had gone down to ninety-five pounds and she's very intense. So she came to Sicily and she said, "What do you do other than work?" And I said, "That's about it. I work a lot." And she said, "Well looking at what you're doing, going door to door to door, you can do that in the US and what you make here in a week you can make there in a day." I said, "Probably. But I love it here." Within a month...she kept talking about the US... remember so and so and what's going on with...well she got me homesick and we were close, so she said, "Why don't you come back?" I said, "Well I can come back [to the US] and I can always go back [to Italy] if I don't get the job I want and if it doesn't work out." So she goes, "Yeah, you can always come back here." And I said, "Alright." And so I came back with her.

CT: Were you in your early twenties then?

RM: I was twenty-two. I went on an interview in this one salon. This guy, he had two salons, one in New Haven [Connecticut] and one in Hartford [Connecticut]. He said, "Can you wait a month? Someone's leaving." And I said, "Yeah, I can wait a month." So I waited a month and I called him and he said, "Well that someone hasn't left yet. I'll have you work in New Haven for a couple of weeks." And then he kind of strung me along. He goes, "Well now he hasn't left yet, why don't you wait a few weeks and being used to working 24-7 and I had a month off with no car yet and just waiting to get on my feet, I really need to be busy and so I started looking other places and I happened to walk into the civic center and at the time, it had wonderful shops, it's a convention center but had high quality shops and it was a very expensive place. So there was a little salon with only three employees and the owner was this Puerto Rican woman, tiny little woman, frizzy tight hair. I went in and I said, "I'd like to apply." And she said, "Well, can you do my hair?" And I said, "Absolutely." She just sat down and said, "Do it." And I said, "Alright." And she even let me cut it. I cut it, I blew it dry, I curled it. She loved it. She goes, "You're hired." She was a wonderful woman but she was in love with this guy who she had a baby with. And the baby was two or three years old and she was crazy in love. I used to drive a Datsun 210 and she had a silver Porsche and we switched cars because she wanted to spy on her boyfriend and she handed me the keys and said, "You do it. You're motivated." And I'm like, "Yeah." Because I was working on commission, so the more you work, the more you make. So I figured the Civic Center was opened from ten to nine. I said, "I'll work all the hours of the salon, six days a week." And she's like, "Great! Do it." So I did. I would work...because again, what am I going to do in Middletown [Connecticut]? I didn't know anybody at that point. Because once you leave for four years, you forget all your friends. So I was working there for almost two years. And then she got married to the guy, he was Argentinian, he was handsome, blue-eyed...but he was such a jerk. And I said, there's no way he's now going to be my boss. But he was. She got married and he kind of figured out one day, he sat at the desk and saw what [money] was coming in and said, "Oh, let's get married." Like literally. They closed the salon for "inventory." That's what they said and they got married. And she had a great business in the Civic Center. He came in and I said, "I'm out of here. I can't work for this guy. He's too much of a jerk." Because you could see, from the outside looking in, it was so obvious. And she couldn't see it. She was that crazy in love with him. And so I opened up my own salon and they

actually fired me when they found out that I was going to open my own place. So I rented a chair someplace else.

CT: So had you saved up money to open up your own place?

RM: Oh yeah. In two years, I'd actually made a decent amount of money because I lived at home and my parents never charged me as long as I was working and putting money away my mother was more than happy to just keep me at home. And Italians are like that. If you're not getting married, why are you leaving, is their attitude [laughing]. So I had saved up money and around the corner was a storefront that was right on the street level and it looked about the right size, about 1500 square feet. We gutted it out, he gave me like three months free rent to do the work and we put it together. My sister and I and Joe my brother who started working for me, the three of us, they were a big part of that, because I couldn't have done it by myself. They helped out with painting and we did a lot of it ourselves.

CT: So did you take some of your customers from the other place?

RM: I took all my customers. Back then you didn't have the cell phone for people to call you and you could keep their numbers. So I had a little book, which everybody does. Back then everybody kept a little book and I knew this older hairdresser that was working in the salon and she did the same thing. Everybody had their little book with phone numbers in it. I didn't start doing that until I realized that I gotta go and then all the sudden, you pull out the book. That's a big clue that you're thinking of leaving and when it was confirmed and they found out that I had looked at a place and then they fired me. But you know if people want to find you they will. So by the time my place was ready a lot of my clients were waiting for me to open.

CT: So what was the majority of your clientele at that time?

RM: The great thing about the Civic Center, like any mall, you get a lot of people walking through, people just browsing because they are shopping and hanging out. They're not in a hurry and that's the big lesson that I learned. So if you take the time to approach people and convince people to get their hair done. They have the time usually because they are hanging out and they'll come in. At that point, I didn't have a large black clientele. It was more like whoever walked in. And it was a very expensive place. I'm talking thirty years ago, a man's haircut was twenty dollars and thirty years later a man's haircut now, I charge twenty-eight dollars. Back then twenty dollars was outrageous for a guy to pay, guys were paying three, five bucks. It was also the time when blow-drying was all new and guys really wanted to start taking care of their hair. In the eighties, when I came back from Italy, honestly I thought the US was so outrageous. A woman tipped me twenty dollars and her haircut was twenty dollars. I thought, wow, this is excellent money. And for like a curly perm, one guy was charging one hundred dollars. You could charge whatever you wanted, basically. This was in the eighties and it was also because of where the salon was located. It was a pretty salon, not a big salon, but a pretty salon with high-end kind of products and people thought being a part of who walks in there, determines the price. It's not necessarily that the hair is going to be so much better but you know on Fifth Avenue, it's going to cost a whole lot more than if you go a few blocks over and that's just the way it is. Their rent is high, but it's not all rent. People will walk in at least once and pay that price, at least once but the trick is to get them back and pay that price again and again and again. And that's where I've been lucky. Your work shows and then people tell other people. I wasn't relying just on walk-ins after about a year, people were sending me their friends, sending me their family.

CT: Tell me about how you got black women to trust that you could do their hair.

RM: Twila {SP??} was one of my first black clients who just happened to walk by and she's doing one of those looking past me things and I said, "Can I help you?" And you know, I'm small and I was only twenty-two and she's like, "I'm looking for color." And she's looking past me and I said, "I can do your hair." And she goes, "Well, I don't think so." And I said, "No really, I can do your hair. I can cut it, I can blow dry it. I'll just blow dry it and if you don't like it, you don't even have to pay me." And she was very upbeat, big, big smile, wonderful. And she said, "Okay, I'll come back tomorrow." And she did, she came back the next day and she said, "You know what, while you're at it, just go ahead and cut it." So I cut it, I blew it dry and upstairs was Etna and all those offices and she's up there and she walks in and all her girlfriends went, "What did you do?" Because it was a drastic change, we cut it and blew it out and she's shaking her head and she's like "Look at this!" And she sent me all her friends.

And then after her, another woman who was beautiful, she eventually married a politician and she was the woman to go to. She always had the right hair, the right dress and this and that, she went to a party, and that's who really sent me a ton of people, because everybody wanted to be like Lynn. She shook her head and her hair moved it was everybody was like "Oh my God. Where did you go?" And so she gave people my name and number. And that's how it all began. You know Hartford is still a small town so when the word gets out everybody starts to...people would come in and go, "I'm looking for Rina." And I'd say, "I'm Rina." And one woman goes, "Oh no! I'm going to kill her!" And I said, [laughing] "Don't worry." She goes, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. But she didn't tell me you were white." And I said, "It's okay. I can still do your hair. Don't worry." A lot of them were grumbling. And some people are uncomfortable. So you know some people don't come back. Because you know a lot of people want to go to the sort of "sister salon" and I totally get that. You've got to go where you're comfortable and not everybody's comfortable having a white woman do their hair or even the environment sometimes. Like I had a couple of girls who have worked for me. One of them was very honest, very cute, she said, "Rina, I just don't like your clients. They're uppity, they're too formal, they look at every minute, if you run late, they start getting antsy, they start shaking their leg." She's like, "I don't like that. I like to talk on my cell phone and be more friendly with customers. You spoil your customers too much. You are right on time, you're always kind of on edge trying to get..." And it's true. I can see that view. Not everybody wants to come in get their hair done and get out. You can have your little conversation, but when it's busy, conversation cuts back a lot. And sometimes I'd rather have the client...if they want to talk, I really don't talk that much, I'd rather have them do the talking. Because I also have to keep my eye on who's going in the back, who's coming out, who's doing what and if something's not right, I have to catch that. So if you're into your conversation too much, now you're lost all day.

CT: It's a balancing act. I've read stories where, it was a salon in North Carolina, and they said, "Oh we get to talking..." And they dyed somebody's hair green. They said they "just grabbed the wrong bottle."

RM: No, you cannot do that. You cannot have your clients in the back room while you're mixing colors because you've got to concentrate. Some things, you know, it has to be done right. If you like that laid back [atmosphere], and have fun...it is work. You saw how much time it took me to blow-dry somebody's hair, if I start talking a lot, I'd be here all day, all night. And you know it is still a business and that's the piece a lot of people don't understand. Because some clients will

cancel an hour before their appointment, "Oh I'm sorry, something came up. I can't make it." [She responds], "Umm, I would appreciate a twenty-four hour notice if you're going to cancel." And some people take such offense to that little...okay so you're cancelling maybe even five minutes before your appointment and I shouldn't be offended? But you're offended if I say to you, "I need a twenty-four hour notice." It's even written in my card. And I've had people not come back.

CT: Some places charge you.

RM: I don't quite do that. I know most of my customers. I don't need to do that. I mean if somebody calls me and says something happened and I've done their hair and I know them and they never pull that, I totally understand. I don't even have to say I need twenty-four hour notice, but if it's a fairly new client and she's already done this once or twice and then the third time or I'll just pass them to someone else who has a more flexible schedule than me, because if you look at my book, I am booked completely from the moment I walk in to the moment I leave. I don't even take a lunch.

CT: How many days a week do you work now?

RM: Five.

CT: And what are your hours?

RM: Generally I'm here by 9:30 in the morning and I leave about 6:30 Wednesday and Thursday about 9:00. And I do not sit down, not five minutes.

CT: This work is not for everyone, right?

RM: No, no, no.

CT: What do you think it really takes to be a stellar hairdresser, not just a basic stylist?

RM: First I think it takes a good ten years to really get into any profession. You don't just walk into a profession, a real profession. You know we went to a restaurant the other night and it was my husband's birthday and my niece's boyfriend's birthday, so we decided to go out and the waitress was like this ditzzy...just like come on! And at first it was kind of cute and kind of funny, "Oh who had the...crab cake?" It's like, you wrote it down did you make some kind of note who it belongs to? And she did this all night. And my son's dinner was horrible and then my husband only had a salad and they messed it up...they hardly put any dressing in his salad and my husband's really not one that complains at all. So he's like, "I need more dressing." And the dressing was sort of clear and now she brings him this brown dressing. And he says, "This is brown." And now the chef comes out... "What's wrong?" Instead of saying, "I'm sorry, let me just redo this." He says, "Well I know I put in..." He's almost like confirming, this is what I did. It's a salad! And I'm paying what for this salad and you're arguing with me? And at that point my husband said, "Forget it." If you're going to be a professional, yes, you've got to take that seriously. I mean twenty-five bucks for a salad? Come on, it's gotta be great.

And same with your hair, you can't get out of the salon looking like your sister did it. You know your sister can set your hair, your mother can flat iron it, but if you're going to spend money, it's got to be better than what your aunt can do or what your sister can do. That's just who I am too. It has to be done better.

CT: Can you talk about handling different textured hair and can you give advice to people who are not familiar with a kinkier textured hair?

RM: First of all I think you need to look at hair like a fabric and not seeing...you know sometimes people see this person who is very different from them and they are not just looking at the hair, they're looking at the whole package, which is important to do, but at one point, you're there not to fix the client with the conversation and their problems and all that. Sometimes you take on too much all at once, when that first customer walks in, they come in for their hair, first and foremost. Then if you happen to like them and you happen to have a nice conversation, that's just all a plus, but they're there to get their hair done. So someone who [has hair so thick] you can't even get a comb through it, if you need to relax it, it's okay. You just can't depend only on the relaxer to do your work, you need to change the texture of the hair a little bit, it's okay to perm hair, you just can't over-process it and you can't get greedy and expect to get that processing money every couple of weeks. At one point, I tell my clients when you first have a relaxer that's when you should do it, because it's easy, you can set your own hair when you have a fresh relaxer, you need to come to me like one or two weeks before you need a relaxer because that's when it's hard to do, that's when I can get in there and do [it]. You can't do what I do because I'm right over your head with two hands, able to manipulate, that's when you need a hairdresser. Somebody that is beautiful with beautiful hair, doesn't need a hairdresser. They can do it themselves. They can just wash it, throw a couple of rollers in, that's not the client that's going to come back and keep you in business. You need that woman that towards the end of her relaxer or towards the end of her color, or curly perm or people who are chemically-dependent, they are your best clients. But then there are also people, when you do it right they're your most appreciative clients. Because they won't say, "Oh Rina's busy, I'll just go across the street." No they're going to wait for you because if you mix their color a certain way and they love it, that's a client for life. Because they're not going to go to their sister and say, "My hairdresser's busy, mix this color for me." They're not going to do that and that's the client you want and that's the client that wants you. They value what you do. A lot of people don't value hairdressers, they think you're a high school drop out...

CT: Why do you think that is? Where do you think that comes from?

RM: Partially it's true. I hate to say it. A lot of hairdressers are dropouts, like me. It seems like a profession you can get into that doesn't require a whole hell of a lot. You go to school for...now it's not even 2,000 hours, I went for 2,000 hours and now they've cut it back to 1,500 hours, that can be done easily in one year and you can call yourself a professional. You can work at a place where there's a lot of walk-ins, you mess up a haircut, it doesn't matter, somebody else is going to walk in. The money is not bad, in the beginning, if you want to be good, it's terrible, but you're still learning and the money can become really good, if you get good. You can get a decent pay within a year of school in a mall and that's because a lot of people aren't professional. A lot of salons, you'll walk in and their hair is a mess. I hate to say it, but it's true. A lot of stereotypical...it's like over-processed hair, nails that are way too long, they can't even shampoo, I don't know how they even allow that and you know it's the stereotypic...I'm like come on. I had one woman that was here, I was doing her hair and one of the girls that works for me came in [wearing] spandex. The girl was way overweight and she's wearing a spandex dress and now I didn't have the heart to say, "You shouldn't wear that to work." But my customer did. She said, "Rina, if you don't tell her...that's not professional. She goes, "I don't want to look at that." So I told her that so and so said, "Please don't wear that." And she just looked at me like you just want to be a bitch right now. And I said, "You think I'm just doing this? I don't want to be mean to you." And she kind of just

rolled her eyes. At the time, another girl that was working here, I said, "Can you please tell her and talk to her. That it's not me it's actually the client. It's just not professional." And so she had to talk to her. But it's like didn't you look in the mirror this morning? You're in the fashion industry. You have to look a certain way. Not that you have to look like a model everyday, but hygiene and your hair's done and you have to at least put out your best each and every day, but a lot of hairdresser's don't. And a lot of us don't have time to do each other's hair because we're working on clients all the time but that's where you have to take the time.

CT: Partially this has to do with culture and class right? Within certain cultures that is their best or what is being revered as attractive.

RM: But if you come into a salon as a hairdresser, looking like you need your hair washed are you going to trust that woman to wash your hair? You know what I mean? At one point you have to look outside and say okay, what do I want to be? You know there's a place for those salons and hairdressers they're just not going to make the money they make on Fifth Avenue. Never. That's the difference, where do you want to be? And you can find your niche, like this young lady actually came here and she was doing quite well and she said I want my own salon and I want it like a sister salon. I want it more relaxed, I want it just so I don't have to worry so much. So there is a niche and for me, that's not my style.

CT: I understand that. Can you tell me, in your experience, approximately what percentage of people want hair that they don't have?

RM: I think that's almost like eighty percent.

CT: No matter what they have?

RM: No matter what they have, because you get bored. You know, you'll love your hair after you're done but you're not going to wear that for the rest of your life. Just like you change your clothes. You know, you look great in red, so you're going to walk around in red all the time? No, you're going to walk around in the "in" color. If purple is in, you're going to wear purple whether it looks good on you or not and guess what, because it's "in" it looks good on everybody. And that's the funny thing about fashion. If the color is new and in, everybody loves it.

CT: I don't know. I know what I like. I won't just go with what's trendy.

RM: But you do without realizing it.

CT: Well there are some trendy things that I do like but then there are others that...

RM: Yeah, you have to mix it up a little bit. Because what happens is if you wear a dress you bought ten years ago that you loved, chances are, you don't love it anymore.

CT: That's not true for me.

RM: You do love it still?

CT: Yeah, there are some things that may seem dated that I will get rid of but there are other things that I know look better on me and that's when I feel my best.

RM: Maybe you should look at old pictures. Remember when the maxi dresses were in, you know the bell-bottoms. When they're gone, you look back and think, Oh my God, I walked in those? You know those big heels that looked like stilts. In a few years, not even a few years, I bet you within a year or two, when those go out and no one else is wearing them, they will look ridiculous if you pull them out.

CT: But then they come back [chuckle].

RM: And then they'll be okay again. But when they're out, they're out, and so if you're still insisting on wearing that style. You know people know, unless it's the classics. Like the bob, you can't go wrong with the bob. Sometimes it's a little flatter, sometimes it's curlier, fuller...but it's still a bob. There's the classics, and then there's the trends, and trendy is fun.

CT: Can you talk about the trends with the Keratin hair treatment and the difference between the Dominican blowout treatment and the Keratin treatment that you do?

RM: The Keratin treatments, okay so there are the relaxers that chemically straighten your hair and no matter how much you wash your hair, your hair is straight. Basically the elasticity is pulled out of your hair and it straightens and straightens and straightens until there is no more elasticity left. And that's when it's over-processed. You want the hair like an elastic band, to bounce back a little bit, not completely but bounce back a little bit. Now relaxers are great when it just took some of the elasticity out. If it's done well, it's great. But it grows out and now let's say you have an inch of really kinky hair and then this soft, straight hair on the end so most people feel oh, I have to keep up with the roots to make it all smooth. And then there's this trend that people want to grow out their relaxer but then they can't even comb it.

The Keratin treatments come in various strengths, it comes in a cream where you just put it in and you blow it into the hair. Now the difference is you don't chemically change the hair texture. It just coats it and it's just a cream that's basically like a setting lotion that just sits in the hair so that when the humidity hits it, it repels a little bit so that the hair doesn't get all frizzy. Then there's the one that's good for about a month or four washes, that you spray into the hair, you dry it in and it creates like a little bond over the hair so again, when the humidity hits it repels it a little bit.

Then there's the Brazilian blowout. The Brazilian blowout is basically one brand. They've come out with different brands since then, but the higher the formaldehyde the better it is. It really works. It creates this really hard bond in your hair. So what you have to do is you wash the hair like seven times you strip it completely of any oil or moisture and the hair is dry as a bone and then you dry the hair so now your hair is dry and dried and you wet it completely with the formaldehyde-based keratin. Now when you wet it all down then you dry the keratin right into the hair, which creates a bond. And once it's dried into the hair then you have to press it with a flat iron at least 450 degrees. And you have to do that between five and seven times and iron the hair, over and over. Once the iron hits the formaldehyde, it turns into a gas and that's what's bad to inhale. If you're a salon that does this day in and day out, all day, it's really bad for you to be inhaling all of that. We don't do them that often, just one a month maybe, sometimes not even that and sometimes a couple a month because they're expensive, but done on the right hair, it's beautiful.

CT: So were Brazilian blowouts made for Latin hair?

RM: Right, on that hair.

CT: So how do you feel about it being done on African American hair?

RM: It depends. If you have really kinky hair, it's really not worth it because you can't touch it up every two months because it's too outrageously expensive. It's for people who have that real heavy wave and not a real tight curl and who want to wear it straight all the time and then it's good. It holds your blow dry, it's for people who know how to blow-dry their hair. And once they've got it nice and straight, it will hold it for them because there's this coating in their hair, that when you go to brush it, it's easier to brush and then it re-activates when you flat iron it. It really holds your hair and the shine is incredible. It's like putting this product of shine right over your hair. It's in your hair. It's not rinsed out, it's not changing like a chemical relaxer does. The chemical relaxer dries out your hair, it changes the hair-texture and now you have to neutralize it and then you have to condition it, because a lot of the natural shine and texture has been taken out of it. Just like color, any chemical, that's why this is not a chemical relaxer, and that's why there's a twist on the words as well, because it sits on your hair, it doesn't strip your hair.

CT: My mother has been getting a Brazilian Blowout.

CB: About every three or four months.

CT: But then you thought it was straightening your hair too much?

CB: Yes.

RM: It will over time.

CB: But then [my hairdresser] would roll it on rollers and when I first got it, it was really nice.

RM: And now she's over-doing it.

CB: But now I've noticed it's not holding the curl as much.

CT: Why do you say she's over-doing it?

RM: So the first time, you had no chemicals in your hair right?

CB: No I had a perm.

RM: Oh, and it was holding better?

CB: Hmm mmm.

RM: Then maybe that's it. Because it was the old relaxer in your hair helping...

CB: But I don't frizz at all anymore. And that's what I wanted because before with a little bit of humidity my hair would be out here [gesturing], all curl gone, everything. But now...

RM: Yes, it is wonderful. It is a great idea. Even when I first heard, "not permanent relaxer" I was also of the mindset how could it not be permanent, because once you straighten hair, that elasticity is gone and there's no way to get it back. It won't spring back. Once you stretch it out too much, it's done. Where this is not, this is like putting something over that elastic, but it holds it when you hold it out and it keeps it there but then when you wash it, it springs right back. But it's really hard because it's not good for you. If you're doing it too much you're inhaling it. It's more dangerous really for hairdressers, because you're here all day and you're doing it and you're standing right over people even though we wear a mask and we offer the client a mask also but once that client leaves we're still in the salon with it lingering in the air and you're inhaling it. So if you're doing too many...and then some salons, like in the Civic Center, we had no windows, so that air was circulating.

CB: My hairstylist opens the windows.

RM: Right, you open the window. Right. It's excellent. Yes. And it's an excellent new service that we can do. It's expensive so it's worthwhile.. [phone rings].

CT: I was curious about what you said about Oprah. Could you repeat that for the recording?

RM: I was working in the back room and one of my clients walked in and said Rina, "I just saw Oprah this afternoon and Oprah said something like, 'My experience is that white women cannot do a black woman's hair.' They went to a commercial break and I guess she got so many phone calls for making that remark, she came back on the air and she said, 'It's only my experience and it's always been true that white women just can't do black women's hair — at least my hair.'" I told this client you know "Why didn't you call in and say 'My hairdresser's white' and you love the way I do your hair and 'You should also send your girlfriend Gail.'" Because Gail was living in Glastonbury at the time, right here in Connecticut. And her hair always looked like a mess. And this was way before...it had to be at least twenty years ago when she was just an anchor on the 11:00 news. And she did, she looked terrible. I said, "You should have just said that." And she said, "You're right I should have said that." Because Oprah just made this broad statement and it is unusual [for a white woman to be able to do a black woman's hair]. I agree with Oprah, usually she's right.

CT: Yeah, but I wonder if you know how unusual you are?

RM: I guess so. I'm more surprised that is true, to be honest.

CT: I [being black] went into a high-end salon in San Francisco and a white hair stylist ruined my hair and I had to cut it all off. That experience traumatized me.

RM: Sure, and it's better that a person says, "I just don't know how to do your hair," than say, "Oh sure," and totally mess up. And I hear this a lot. And I do get that look of, are you sure? Because hair takes a long time to grow back, especially if you have long hair. It takes years.

CT: It took me ten years to grow my hair back.

RM: That's a lot. And a lot people think what am I going to do if you mess it up? Sue you? Really? It's a huge deal. Of course I say to my clients, "It's only hair." [Laughing] But I understand. I totally understand. If your hair's not right, you don't feel right. You feel like you want to hide. A lot of people, if their hair feels good and looks good you just feel better about yourself.

CT: You really do, yeah. You also said [on the pre-questionnaire form] "In hairdressing school at the time 100 students a year graduated." But you said, "Thirty years later not even one percent are still doing hair." Can you expand on that a little bit?

RM: I think that's because the initial...is so hard. I was lucky that I started so young and I had plenty of time. I was living at home and I had plenty of time to build and build and build. Now we are going to age where everybody goes to college, but the truth is if you're going to become a hairdresser, if you're going to become a plumber, if you're going to become...something to do with your hands, even an artist, you can't just expect...and say "Ok, I went to school and now I'm a professional." It takes years. It takes ten years. So kids that are prolonging getting older...you know everybody's prolonging their career, their marriage, having kids. We want to sort of be kids for as long as possible. But the truth is if you don't hurry up, like a gymnast, if you're not there by fifteen, it's over. You have to start some professions at like two or three years old. I think it's one of those things that people start a lot of times after a couple of years of college, they figure, maybe I'll try hairdressing. And then you're too old because now you're going to be poor, for a good five years. And it takes at least five years to make a really decent paycheck, where you can pay for your rent, pay for your car, pay for your dinners out. It doesn't all come really fast or big. It comes slowly. You'll be in a salon sometimes sitting there all day without one single client. I had a hairdresser [work for me] when I first opened up, she had gone to college, she was an anthropologist. She worked for me for just a couple of years. She had rented a chair somewhere else and she came on board and she ended up working for Etna, the insurance company, because she had her four-year degree. She said, "I start with benefits, and paid vacations, paid sick time. You don't offer that." And she's right, I don't. I still don't. I can't afford to. It's a small business. She says, "One week I feel like I'm rich. I got a perm, I got colors and I did highlights. I did all this work and I feel like wow, I made some great money. And then the following week, I made nothing. And she just couldn't handle it. And that's why ninety percent just say, "Forget it. This is too much." Because if you're not passionate about it and aren't willing to stick it out, then yeah, it's discouraging, for a lot of kids. And especially if you start as an adult? Forget it. People don't want to hear that.

The other piece to that is... let's say out of 100 hairdressers in school, ninety-percent were women, ten-percent were men. Salon owners? Ninety-percent are men and ten percent are women. Women drop out, because of having kids...but most salon owners are men. And it's a big profession for Italians for some reason in this area, this street, Silas Deane highway, must have at least 100 salons in this strip alone and my UPS man said, "You're all Sicilian." I'm not really sure why that is.

CT: Is there just a large Italian population here?

RM: There used to be a large Italian population. I don't know if it's like the people thing, or if it's more social and welcoming...Italians tend to look at everybody like family it's like "Come in. Come sit, come eat..." And I think that's part of what you need to be to be a hairdresser. So you know if you only eat Chinese, you have to be able to eat a little bit of everything and try a little bit of everything and that makes it more interesting. So I don't know if it's a cultural thing too but it seems to be that way that a good ninety-percent of us who are Italians, own salons.

CT: I'll have to look at the demographics and the statistics.

RM: And also I think most Italians don't get kicked out of the house at a certain age. Italians want to hold their kids home until they absolutely have to leave. Most Italians will let their kids stay home, I left home at twenty-six in the end, when I opened up my own salon, I was still living at home and my mother never charged me rent. She was mad at me for leaving, because I wasn't married...

CT: At what age did you get married?

RM: I got married at thirty-four because I was so into my business and not really into putting time into relationships. And I was way too mature for most guys my age. So when they heard I had a house and a business they were like, forget it, she's too serious. But my parents supported me until I was twenty-six and I have young women that work for me and I feel bad for them, their parents are like, "You gotta pay rent." And everybody's like, "You're home still?" And everybody looks at them like what's wrong with you? Why pay two sets of bills? When you're home you can still have your room and have your freedom. But financially it's important to be able to...when you step out, you gotta step out swimming, not swim or sink kind of thing. It's nice when you know I can swim and swim well. And your parents will hold you until you're ready. Obviously you gotta be doing [something]... I was working. I wasn't just bumming around mooching off my parents. And when I left, I left knowing exactly where I wanted to be. I think that's part of Italian culture.

CT: Do you see that as much in Italian-American culture?

RM: Yeah.

CT: Even now.

RM: Yeah, I guess, because I'm that way with my kids. I was born in Italy and my parents were extreme. They never really assimilated because they never really wanted to be here. So they didn't try to be American. They hung on to some of their values and a lot of their culture so they were more Italian than some of the Italians in Italy. Because they stayed behind where[as] the Italians progressed in Italy, my parents just stood right there in the '60s [laughing]. Yeah they didn't budge. They liked things a certain way.

CT: Can you talk about the physical labor that's required of this job? Do you find it physically difficult?

RM: It's hard. Yes. I think because of my stature, I can stand a lot longer hours. But I tell you, if you see the bottom of my right foot especially. I have terrible calluses that really hurt at the end of the day. Luckily for me, I don't suffer from carpal tunnel. A lot of people will get carpal tunnel especially with all the blow-drying we do. I feel pretty lucky that way. Physically, I'm pretty strong. But, yeah at the end of the day, my back hurts for sure, especially now that I'm a bit older.

CT: Your lower back or your upper back?

RM: My lower back will hurt. And a lot of times I'm too busy sometimes to throw on gloves and with all the chemicals on my hands, in winter especially, they get really dry. And that's also again, because I don't take the time. You can take an hour lunch as a hairdresser, you can actually take three hours if you want, you know what I mean? That's just me I think, that I work so much. But hairdressers, generally will go in at 10:00, will take an hour lunch, step out of the salon and then

come back and work a few hours. That's what's wonderful about hairdressing you can make it as much or as little as you want. I know weekend hairdressers that only work Friday and Saturday, make their money for the week. If they have clients that are only willing to see them those days, you can really carve out what you want. Honestly, if I said, I only want to work three days a week a lot of my clients would drop out obviously but a lot of them would be fine with that. They would be willing to just wait for those three days that I'm working. And that's hopefully what I eventually, would love to do is to cut back like that. Because I've been keeping this up now, my God, thirty years, working full-time and time and a half.

But with hairdressing once you've got the basics down, you don't even really have to be great. I'm a good hairdresser, but I don't think I'm a great hairdresser. You know some people are like my boss in Italy, [he] was a great hairdresser. He was a true artist. You could see him totally get lost in his work. It's like the painter that paints. What makes Picasso, Picasso? There are those kinds of hairdressers that are truly artists. I'm more...I can do the Picasso, but somebody has to show me and I'll make it pretty close but I won't be able to come up with it out of nowhere and create something completely new. I don't think I have quite that much talent, where he did. And there's like you know Sassoon, Trevor Sorbie, true artists that really get into it. And also, I think being a man, they're not going home to clean, they're not going home to take care of the kids, they get into more of the hair shows. You can do it in a different level that participate long-term. The big names, the people who open up a whole product line, they're usually men because they take it to another level. They start with a small salon maybe but they can't stand shampooing and washing the floor, see I still do those little things. I still wipe down my own station and buy my own flowers. A lot of those guys will hand it to a manager, run the salon, get their reputation started and then they're off, doing more of the business end, competing and getting their name out. You can take it to that level.

A lot of the products we use, you can go to hair shows around the world. I go once a year to a different country because I love to travel and the hair shows are a good excuse to travel, so I'll go overseas and check out what's new but then you can also be the hairdresser that not only checks it out but also promotes and they pay you to promote their product, like you come up with a hairstyle but then, the photo shoots, working with models, doing all of that, I think is more appealing to men long-term. I loved it when I was younger and I did all that but now at fifty-two [years old], my boss still does that, my old boss, he's like seventy [years old] and he still does that. He's that passionate.

CT: Mario?

RM: Yes. I have a few pictures of Mario and I on stage. I'll show you. And you know I only worked for him, not even a full four years, but I did refer back to him a lot, the way he handled things, the way he expanded. When he moved his salon, how he did it, I remember things that I did [that were] similar and I think I've sort of been a mentor for other people too when they leave my salon, they take away also how you handle clients when they bounce a check, how you handle clients when they don't show up for an appointment, how you handle when someone does something nice for you as well. And I remember Mario holding that line very clear as the business person, as opposed to "I'm your friend and I'm not going to charge you today because we had such a great conversation." And then you still have to pay rent. You have to really be thinking of all of it, you know.

CT: What's the most old-fashioned hair technique that you do?

RM: Hair set.

CT: And what's the newest?

RM: The newest, I would say the Brazilian Blowout. That's huge right now.

CT: How do you feel about regulation within the business because you know over ninety-percent of all hair salons are privately-owned.

RM: That's changing now, in a way. This salon is typical — I'm the owner, I have my employees. The employees get to a point where they think they're good enough and they are. They've built a clientele and now they're in a position where they're kind of bored, they don't want to necessarily have their own salon and employees and the responsibility but they want more than just being your employee and so now there's the salons which I was actually thinking of at one point, maybe going into that direction too and so now they rent chairs. It's like the difference between owning a house and owning a condo. Somebody else does the cleaning, somebody else does the lawn somebody else does all the other maintenance. You come in and you have your chair and you are your own boss, you do whatever you want you don't have to go by the rules of the salon, the hours of the salon, you just go in and you do your thing. And somebody next to you can do something completely different. And there are pros and cons about both things, like having your own house, it's more work, it's more responsibility but it's your pride and joy and if things don't go right, it hurts you more. You take more on by owning your own house, by owning your salon and what your employees do is a reflection on you, like a family. When you have your own condo, there are restrictions. I want to open on midnight on Sunday. Well if you're the only one with a chair, I don't think that owner is going to let you turn on all the lights and turn up the heat and air, just for you, so there are restrictions. Where here, if I want to come in on a Monday, when we're closed and turn on all the lights and do whatever, it's my salon. I can do that. But a lot of people want the condo now, more than the house, because it's too much work. What I do is a lot of work and a lot of people don't want that. Again with hair that's heavy, why would I take an hour on a little girl with a ton of hair? Because I like it. Because I'd rather be busy than wait for that one client that maybe will get the highlights that will cost more. That's great if you can get it everyday, but I can't get it everyday. We went through a huge recession.

CT: How has that affected your business?

RM: It has not. Not really. What I have seen though is that I don't hire as many people. You have to work and be enthusiastic, at least in the beginning. And maybe it's my getting older and getting a little more cynical, but nobody wants to work [laughing]. Everybody wants to party and you can't, if you're a hairdresser, forget Friday night. It doesn't exist, because Saturday morning you have to be here at 8:00 and you have to be on from the moment you walk in and if you've been partying Friday night, it's just not going to do it for your client. Your client could be half asleep, but you have to be awake. And a lot of people don't want that. They want to be out both Friday and Saturday night. And to be honest, by Saturday night, I pass out. And I kind of always have. Partying is not really a part of who I am because I've got to get up in the morning and I've got to go.

CT: Did you have children?

RM: I have two boys, sixteen and fourteen and they take a lot of out me. You know today, even to do this interview, I left them home and I'm always trying to spend as much time with them as possible because now being teenagers, they're gone. They don't necessarily care whether I'm there are not but I do. It's quick, they're out of your life so fast.

CT: What's the most unusual salon you've ever heard of or ever seen?

RM: There was a salon in New York City, that I thought was really cool and I can't remember the name. It's still there, it's in the Village and there's like ten pictures up on a wall and there's a line out the door and I don't how many hairdressers. So you stand in line and you point to the picture you want, the cut, you sit down and in fifteen minutes they have to do it. If you don't like it you can stand back in the line again and get it done again. But that place, because it's near the Village and NYU and the kids line up. And most of them were punky, short, buzzed. It's like a quick fifteen minutes, no blow-drying, no anything extra, it's just a quick haircut. And for college kids who just want a trim across their back, or guys that want buzzed, fifteen minutes. Boom, boom.

In London I saw back in the '80s, with all the punk rocker, blow-dry, up with the Mohawk and all different colors, that's fun. But again the trends change and you can't rely on that clientele or that sort of look. That's why I'm still in business, because I do a lot of the classics that people want still thirty years later. The trendy things are fun for a little while anyway.

CT: We went to a salon in Queens, New York called Bollywood, it was a Pakistani hairdresser and they do the eyebrow threading which has become very popular, it was the first time I'd ever seen it, it was fascinating.

RM: Oh yeah, it is.

CT: And then we went to a mall yesterday in Hartford [Connecticut] no maybe it was Hadley, a small town and went inside the mall and there was a store with Indian women doing eyebrow threading.

RM: Oh yeah, you see them here in the mall too. That's gotten really big. And things trend, you know what's gotten big is weaving [hair weaves], and not just black women.

CT: Do you do that here?

RM: I have a young lady that does it. Yeah, that's instant hair. It's great. And it really looks good. If you really know how to do it well, it's great, you have instant long hair, and thick, it's fabulous. The lashes, adding lashes, not just the old-fashioned peel them on, peel them off, now they're kind of on for a while and they'll last several weeks. Tattooing make-up... You should go to a hair show, it's crazy.

CT: Which one do you recommend?

RM: There's one in Chicago in March, there's another one in New York at the Javitz Center, that's the one I go to and that's now in April, it always used to be in March and now it's in April because Chicago has gotten much bigger.

CT: Chicago is a bigger show?

RM: It's about the same but it's gotten more attention because a lot of people are just tired of going to New York for the last fifty years. It's always been in New York City, always in March. It's like a big trade show with a lot of different stages and people just screaming over the microphone, but they're doing hair, they're showing products, they're competing, and that's where you see a lot of the new hairdressers that are punked out and rocked out and overly done. It's fun. As you drive in you see the hairdressers come because they stick out a mile, you know, they're just like way over the top.

CT: One last question, did you see the documentary Good Hair?

RM: I didn't see the whole thing. I heard about it and it's like I live it everyday [laughing] so I thought I can skip that one. I've seen bits and pieces of it. I live it everyday. I do a lot of mixed...Caucasian mother, black father. So a lot of these kids they don't know where they should be taken, to a white a salon, to a black salon, so that's where this salon is really nice.

I'll give you one little story. My customer adopted a little black girl and she was only a baby, maybe not even a year old and as this little girl got older, the mother didn't know what to do so she asked one of her babysitters, who was one of my clients, who was also bi-racial. She said, "Where do you go, because I can't do Maggie's hair." She told her here. Maggie, when she was a baby, she was like this wild little thing. So just cut her hair and don't even worry about it, just keep it short, let her be a tomboy, she was such a little tomboy. One of my customers was sitting and I was doing her hair and she looked at me and goes, "Why does that woman cut that baby's hair?" I said, "Because she doesn't know what else to do with it." Then she goes, "Oh [disgusted tone], then you shouldn't adopt a black baby if you don't know how to do their hair." I said, "That's a little harsh." Through the years Maggie would come in. When Maggie turned about six and started going to school she wanted long hair so her Mom said, "I think Maggie's ready to grow her hair. She's looking in the mirror now and wants long hair." I said, "No problem, we'll grow it." And then I don't know, years later, Maggie now has hair down her back all straight, shiny and beautiful. One of my customers, she had left, she moved away for a couple of years and then came back and she quickly turned around and goes, "Is that the little girl that you used to cut all her hair off?" And I said, "Yeah, you think we know what we're doing? [laughing]."

CT: So is her hair processed?

RM: Yes, we do a very gentle relaxer and we blow it dry. She actually has more of a texturized relaxer. In the summer now she'll just put gel and conditioner in her hair and just let it go a little wild and curly and then come fall when she goes back to school, her Mom brings her in still about once a week, once every other week to have it washed and blown-dry.

CT: Is there any danger to using chemicals on kids or even on adults, with the relaxer?

RM: First of all I think that if you slop on a ton of relaxer on the scalp, it's like sticking your hands in a tub of relaxer. Your scalp is skin and you let it sit forever, you can't do that. Now you wouldn't stick your hand in a jar of relaxer and sit there for twenty-minutes, so you don't do that on the scalp and some people really want it straight at the scalp and they put way too much product. Now if you're sensitive, some people don't feel it, but some people are very sensitive so then it starts burning and then you get scabs. So yeah, it's not so much the children but older people too, if you're sensitive you have to base the scalp with Vaseline or some protective lotion

on your scalp and then as you apply the relaxer, first you have to apply it quickly and thoroughly. If you're someone who works really slow, by the time you get to the front, that back is burning, your neck is on fire, so you have to again, cut down on the conversation and quickly move along with that relaxer, so I start back here at the nape, work my way up by the time you get to the front, this back is ready because it's taken me fifteen minutes at least to apply that relaxer so I start rinsing off the nape area and some people will say, "Oh no I have to stay longer, I want that straight." But I say, "You have, you've sat here fifteen minutes by the time I've got to the front." Now there's the people that totally get that, and then there's people that say, "Oh no, my hairdresser has me sit at least fifteen minutes and then she rinses out the whole thing." And so isn't the back straighter now than the front? So you try, you have to educate people and have them understand, why it's done a certain way, you can't say, "Trust me." [They say], "No, no, I don't trust you." [laughing] "I've had bad experiences. Why would I trust you?" It's like a doctor saying, "Sit down I'm going to do this surgery." No, I want a little more information than that. And for women, hair is like surgery, it better be done right. [laughing]

For children, if they have fine hair, in and out, by the time I finished putting it on, I'm already rinsing it out. And then you also have to look at some people...women will bald in the same patterns as men. So a lot of women, right in the center here [gesturing] they start thinning out, so you can't put that relaxer here sometimes at all, you skip that area and keep it nice and full or sometimes in the temple area it starts getting thin so you stay away from there. Same with color, you know high-lift color and depending on the chemical, you have to calculate for that, you don't just put it on all over. Like I said, Jessica, that I was blow-drying, she had like three different textures in her hair. Her hair is a lot straighter in the nape area, so you have to calculate, that's going to be really quick and the center will take a lot longer.

CT: With my hair, most of my length is from the top of my head.

RM: So you probably shouldn't even perm the back of your hair.

CT: My hairdresser starts up here [at the forehead], so by the time he gets back here [at the nape] it's only on five minutes before he washes it out.

RM: Yeah, and if it's fragile, it's not going to grow so thick and heavy

CT: Ok, well I've taken so much of your day. Is there anything I didn't cover that you can think of?

RM: No, I don't think so.

CT: Well thank you so much

RM: Absolutely.

[END]