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USHMM
FIRST PERSON - SAM PONCZAK
MAY 1, 2019

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Welcome to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.
First Person
Anna Grosz
May 1st, 2019

>> Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. Please be sure to silence all electronic devices. Thank you.

BILL: Good morning, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program, First Person. Thank you for joining us. This is our twentieth year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Anna Grosz, whom you shall meet shortly.
This 2019 season of First Person is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship. I am very pleased to let you know that Mr. Louis Smith is here with us today.
(Applause)
BILL: Thank you, Lewis.
First Person is a series of twice-weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our First Person guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue through August 8th. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.
Anna will share her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows we will have an opportunity for you to ask Anna a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our on-line conversation: Never Stop Asking Why. The conversation aims to inspire

individuals to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises. You can ask your question and tag the Museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and the hashtag #AskWhy.

Today's program will be livestreamed on the Museum's website meaning people will be joining the program online and watching with us today from across the country and around the world. We invite everyone to watch our First Person programs live on the Museum's website each Wednesday and Thursdays at 11:00 AM EST through the end of May. A recording of this program will be made available on the Museum's YouTube page. Please visit the First Person website, listed on the back of your program, for more details.

What you are about to hear from Anna is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Anna Grosz was born into a Jewish family on April 20, 1926, in Racsa , Transylvania, a part of Romania, as Anna Seelfreud. The arrow on this map points to Racsa.

These photos taken in 1919 show Anna's parents, Samuel and Ilona Seelfreund. Samuel owned a vineyard and was a wine merchant, while Ilona cared for Anna and her five sisters.

In 1940 Racsa fell under Hungarian rule. Jewish people in Racsa became subject to antisemitic laws. Under the new laws, Anna's father's vineyard was confiscated and he was conscripted into the Hungarian Labor Service. Samuel never returned home.

This photo from 1943 shows Anna and her sisters. In order from left to right are Clara, Elizabeth, Margaret, Margaret's daughter Suzanne, Violet, Anna, and Gisela.

In March 1944, Nazi Germany occupied Hungary. Hungarian officials agreed to turn over hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews to the custody of the Germans. Anna, her sisters and her mother were placed into the Satu-Mare ghetto, indicated by the red arrow, and then deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The black arrows at the top point to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Nazi authorities selected Anna and three of her sisters for forced labor while they sent her mother and her two other sisters to the gas chambers.

In June 1944 Anna and her remaining three sisters were sent to Stutthof concentration camp indicated here by the red arrow. Later they were transferred to Praust, a subcamp of Stutthof.

In February 1945, the SS evacuated most of the prisoners, including Anna's three sisters, marching them on foot; Soviet troops liberated them around March 11, 1945. Anna was left behind with other injured and sick prisoners because she had previously broken her leg. On March 23, 1945, Soviet troops liberated some 600 prisoners at Praust, including Anna. Anna later reunited with her sisters Gisela and Clara and found out her sister Elizabeth had been shot during the forced march.

We close with this photograph of Anna in 1946. Anna would remain in Romania until immigrating to the US in 1964.

Anna, together with her husband Emory Grosz and their two young sons Alex and Andrew, were allowed after much difficulty to leave Romania and begin their new life in the United States. They settled in New York where Emory went to work as a fabric cutter in New York City's Garment District. Anna found work as a seamstress in a clothing factory working with fellow Hungarian-speaking Holocaust survivors and refugees. Anna worked at the same place for the next 27 years driving 2 ½ hours to and from work each day.

After finishing high school their two sons attended university and went on to very successful careers and are now retired. Alex was an attorney at the U.S. Patent Office. Andrew was a geologist with the federal government. Anna has four grandchildren and a seven-year old great grandson.
After their retirement Anna and Emory moved to the Washington, DC area in 2003. Anna's husband suffered a stroke in 1999 and Anna cared for him until he passed away in 2009. She also was the caregiver for one of her sisters prior to her death and for her sister's husband.
Anna volunteers with this Museum's Visitor Services. You will find her at the Visitors Desk on Tuesdays from 10 am until 2 pm. Anna speaks about her Holocaust experience to children at local schools and colleges.
With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Anna Grosz. Anna, please join us.
(Applause)
BILL: Thank you for joining us Anna, and for your willingness to be our "First Person."We have a really good audience today.
ANNA: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Anna. I'm a Holocaust survivor. I came to tell you my story and to see what hate, prejudice, and anti-Semitism brings to the world and to people. That's why I am here. I'm fortunate enough to talk to you. If it wouldn't have happened, I wouldn't be here with you. I have wanted to tell my story about my life in the concentration camp.
BILL: Can I ask you before you turn to the concentration camp, tell us about your family and your early years before the Holocaust began. Tell us about your family.
ANNA: We lived in a small town, Transylvania. Not the horror movie stuff. Our town had only 50 Jewish families. All poor people and about 1,000 Christian people. We got along very well. My father was a very intelligent man. People liked him. And hard-working man. I could say that he never said anything about anti-Semitism. That means that we thought that all of the people hate the Jews. Unfortunately I don't know why. I don't think the Jewish people divorced them as a nation. They are good people and bad people like in every nation.
BILL: Anna, you said your parents were very respected.
Tell us about your mom and dad.
ANNA: My father was a very hard working man. He had a vineyard in the little town. We had a thing that made brandy and we were not poor, but not wealthy people. My mother was a very respected person. The whole family was respected. And we were friends with all of the people there. In that little town. So then in 1940 our country, Romania, was invaded. And from at the Germans and Hungarians, because Romania before the first World War I was Hungary and because the Hungarians were LI and German was on the side, that side they gave to the Hungarians. So in 1940, they occupied us and for four years from 1940 to 1944, they invaded the whole nation. We couldn't go out in the street. Only with a yellow star. I was 14 years old then. The other thing is they didn't let Jewish people go to high school. I was ready to go to high school. I could go there. My father, parents, and older sisters -- I have five sisters. The older sisters were educated. But from me down, the other two sisters were not educated. And the other terrible thing that happened is they took all of the young men to forced labor. So they remained there, because the Jewish people took them for forced labor.

BILL: When your father was taken for forced labor --
ANNA: My family was taken not for forced labor, because he was 54 then. But they -- our neighbor probably not the whole town was that they liked us, you know. So he denounced him that he's a communist. So he wasn't a communist.

But it doesn't matter. The man said he is a communist, and they took him to Budapest in a camp. He wrote one postcard from there to us. My mother remained there with the six girls, and my older sister had had a little baby, two years old, she came home -- she was married -- because her husband was also in forced labor. So we were there. My mother, the six girls, and the little granddaughter. In 1944 -- really in 1940, it was humiliation. And in 1944, they came and said they have to take us out from the -- our house. So we had to leave our house as it was with five kilograms of clothes and food. We left the house there. There was food on the stove, cat, dog, geese, chickens, but everything and the house where it was and we had to leave. They took us by carriages to the closest city, Satu Mare. That was the ghetto. Not just us, but there were other places there. We lived very close to each other and slept on the floor, because we were taken from the city to the ghetto. So we did not stay there too long. About two weeks, and they started to take the people to the place they shouldn't.
BILL: Anna, may I interrupt for a quick second for our audience. In March 1944, that's when the Germans occupied Hungary. That's when you are forced into the ghetto.
ANNA: Yes. In 1940 to 1944 we were just not knowing what happened in the world. Other countries had taken and killed Jews. It is unbelievable that they could not know anything about it, because we would do something in the four years. Not a word. It is not like here you have a TV and they say everything in the TV. Even things you are not supposed to hear. You hear it. We had only a radio. And we knew the news that happened there. Not anywhere else. From there from the ghetto, they took us to the train station. They took us in boxcars like that. I was the 92nd in the car. If I wanted to tell how it was there for four days, we traveled in that wagon. I would have to take four days to tell how we felt there. Because the children started to cry, the old people prayed, other people cursed. Why are we here? We couldn't move or reach the food. From time to time, the German came into the wagon and said who has jewelry or money? You have to give it, because otherwise it is going to be taken. Not a surprise to us that it happened. We were not prepared for something like that. We did not know. I have to say that we did not know what happened in other countries. So there were people who gave the jewelry or the money. The train started to empty, because in the corner and what we kept our things there. It has to be empty sometimes, because it just was in the corner there. And it started to move and it was all on the floor. So we gave the jewelry. The train stopped. Then the people were shot dead. Even if they gave the jewelry. Then after four days like that, we arrived at night in Auschwitz. We could see it was Auschwitz. And a lot of people were dead. People made noise and the Germans started to say get off of here. It was a terrible chaos there and the neon lights came to our eyes. I was so dizzy that I couldn't know where to go. Then they started to say women and children in one side. The other side the men. A man came to us. Later we found out he was hanged. All of the sudden I found myself with my three sisters on one side, and my mother and my older sister with the baby, 3-year-old baby, and my younger sister, 14 years old, in another side. My mother started to say where do you take my daughters? In German, she spoke German. But nobody answered it. Just were told to

go to this side. So we had to do what they told us to do. And the left side with my mother and my two sisters and the baby, we never saw them again. The four of us went to the other side, and they chased us in a room and they -- we had to take off our clothes. They shaved our head. I have two braids. They put a long, thick braids. They put it in a box separate. But the rest who had small and short hair it was just on the floor. And we just looked at the others. We were so stressed. We found each other in the big room, like this one, and they disinfected us. They gave us a gray dress with a number on the sleeve, because they did not have time to tattoo us. We were the last -- Hungary was the last country that they deported. They did that a long time before us. I didn't think about some things like that. So they chased us again in a place, and we had to sleep there. It was a barn. You could see the horses were there. So we just collected there after what we just went through, and everybody got to sleep. In the morning, I was looking for my sisters, and I could not find them. I could not recognize them. The way they looked. The way they changed with no hair and the gray dress. I called them by names, and that's when we found each other.
BILL: You found each other.
ANNA: Short time after that, a person came. A Polish person, but she spoke Hungarian. The first question is where are our parents? Where are the rest of the people? Then she said you crazy, stupid people is what you are. You don't know what happened to them? Look up there in the smoke. Their are your parents. We just looked at her. Is she crazy? I didn't even know what the -- I was a young girl. I never saw that in the town. So she said why didn't you hide or do something? You don't know what happened to us? We are here. She was surprised we didn't know. We did not believe her. She thought she was a mean person. She wanted to scare us or something. But we did not believe it. So from there, we were disinfected, they took us to a barracks in Auschwitz. They called it number C, and we went in the big barracks like that. We slept in bunk beds and in the morning we had to stay and be counted. Every morning and every night. They counted us. I don't know why. Because they couldn't turn away anything. But they counted us. After counting us, they gave us the breakfast. We couldn't eat it at all. It was one dish and some carrots. They were not -- it was sand on top of the dish. All five we had to drink from the dish. The fifth one in the end had no food. So we were running in the first time.
BILL: Anna, you said you lined up in rows of five. It was you and your three sisters. Tell us who was the fifth person?
ANNA: We had the girl from our next town. We always had her with us. We had to hide always because when we were staying after, they always took out who was very skinny or very fat out. And we never saw them again. So we had a problem with my sister, Elizabeth, because she was skinny. They told us we were even overweight, then they pulled us. We had to hide her. We were afraid that they would take her. But every day they took from our barracks, and we never saw them again. One day they came and said we were Jewish people who were healthy looking. Then they took the people to go to work. That's what they said. So luckily we all five were brought in the working people. I say people. So we were this. 500 girls were chosen for work. They took us in the train and took us to a place. We arrived in a huge place there, a farm. A big farm. You couldn't see the end of the farm. And we were aught that we have to take out the vegetables from there, mostly beets, and carrots and some potatoes. That day we did

not have anything to eat. Only coffee they served with the water. Because the campfire wasn't ready yet. We had to go a distance for about two miles and -- I don't know if I pronounced it well, to sleep by it and with the stove.
BILL: That was for the sleep?
ANAA: Yes. We went from the folder in the tent, and it was terrible, terrible hut. It was over 100 degrees. And the stress was short. Some girls found some paper who was cemented. They put it around their leg. Then they took it off and it came with the skin off. Because it got so hot. Then they did another -- they choose another one who was very badly injured. They just took her away from there and brought other people instead, because you've got 200 other people in Strutthof. It was told that we should not eat or take a carrot or beet or anything to eat it, because we are going to be punished. In German they said. So we went and we were so hungry that some girls think just a few carrots and hide it in their dress. A guard was with every 50 people. She saw that something -- somebody took it, wrote the number, they didn't know that. At night when we got home, there were called by the number, what they hid, the guard gave it to the person -- I shouldn't say person. She was a devil. At least 250 kilograms, not pounds. And she came out and the one that stole the carrots or beets, she got 25 lashes on her back. She had to be the next day at work. And that's what happened. Some people still risked it, because they were so hungry. And that happened almost every night since we got there.
BILL: The place was Praust. You said it was a brand new camp. What was the labor?
ANNA: I'm going to get to that. Far away from us was some strange war prisoners who guarded the airport. When the trains went out, they were not working. We had to do a train came and we had to fill it with sand. Fast and little one like that. The other train came and the other train came, and we had to fill it with sand. And the French prisoners, they did it with us.
BILL: For the runway? You had truckload and truckload full of sand that they had to put town.
ANNA: Now that I'm talking here with you, I'm going to tell you the reason. With every 50 people -- I always say people, a German guard. Our guard happened to be a Romanian German from the territories. One day he was asking who can sing in Romanian? So we just said and my sister, Clara, said my sister Anna could sing. She was the solo singer in the school. He wanted me to sing. He put me to sing, and I sang for him any time he wanted me to sing. That happened all year around. We went to work, and we came home. I sang -- we were lucky we had the restroom. Because many camps did not have restrooms. So we can go there. Christmas time came, and the guards wanted us to do a show for them. Christmas-like. So there were many talents in the 800 people there. They prepared everything and the show went on. I was sitting in the very back in the top, because I just wanted to watch it. All of the sudden I see the German come who he named this angel, because he never gave the numbers to the woman, even if he saw that somebody stole --
BILL: He didn't report you?
ANNA: He was a nice man. There were good and bad people. Not all of the Germans and Jews were bad. There are good and bad. So he came to side and said you have to sing. I said because I don't think I'm a talent or something. He insisted I just come and sing in Romanian. I fell and I broke my leg. Right here I broke my leg. Now that's the

end, because even who was sicked more than a few days, they brought another instead, because the 800 had to be always there.
BILL: So every time somebody was injured or sick, and couldn't go to work, we sent them back to Auschwitz.
ANNA: We never saw the person again. There came another one. What happened now? My three sisters and I, we just didn't know what happened. He took us and went to the area and said do something about it. I don't think my sisters should not be taken away. A miracle happened that he then to his girlfriend who was all over us. They put my leg in a cast, imagine that millions of people they didn't care, and one person they saved. That was really, I believe, in miracles since then, you know? So they put my leg in a cast. Not long after that, it started to -- now it was the Germans already knew that the war is ending, because in 1945, the march at Auschwitz already. I think it was from the Russians. But they took the people. They took us from the camps and made marchs. They had to march out, because there were not enough ways to kill them. So they took them in every camp they had to march out.
BILL: Just so we understand, as the Russians were getting closer, they forced all of the prisoners out on a forced march --
ANNA: Not the Russians, the Germans did.
BILL: The Germans were coming. But you couldn't go. You had a broken leg.
ANNA: I was forced to march. 27 people with me including could not march at all. Not just from our camp, but the people who remained out for other camps. So my three sisters had to march, and I had to stay there, because we couldn't march. They took off my shoes, because if I don't march, I don't need shoes. My three sisters left. I remained there. I looked at the hole that was not far from the camp. They just threw bad people who died during the march. They couldn't take it, it was just cold. And they just put them in the hole. I would look at the hole at night with my guard. I thought I would be there tomorrow, but I didn't mind. Because no sisters, I'm still sick, why should I live? To die, it wasn't such a big deal to me. But I was worried and sick for losing my sisters, my three sisters. So another miracle happened to me. A girl who worked in the kitchen came to me and she asked me -- she knew me and she knew my three sisters also. She asked me if I can sew. I was just looking at her, why do you ask me if I can sew? I said, question, I can sew. Why? Because we are making things out for the guards, because the war is going to end. They would run away in Auschwitz. That's what happened. One night they ran away and the next morning the Russians came and I was liberated there. But I wasn't happy with my liberation. This is what we were waiting so long for the liberation. But no parents, no sisters, and the middle of nowhere in Poland and sick. I got the typhoid. I didn't know what to do. They took me in a hurry. They said it was the hospital. I wasn't feeling well. They threw me out, because they needed the place for somebody else. Coming out from that hospital, I didn't know where to go. I was just -- rather be dead and not know what to do with myself. Coming out from there -- from the hospital, I saw in the door the glass and I saw myself for the first time. They gave me a skirt and blouse. They cut again my hair in the hospital, because it was full with lice. So in the Auschwitz, no hair again. I looked in the glass. I didn't know to laugh or to cry. I looked terrible. I couldn't recognize myself. Sick again without hair. I came out crying there. I heard far away somebody in ten languages call for help. Romanian, Hungarian, and Yiddish. Help, help, help. I went close to her. I saw there

sitting there with her diary, not knowing nobody around. What do I do? I have no strength, but I helped her to the hospital there. She remained there. I met her after two years.
BILL: After all of that, you've been liberated. You are in terrible condition. You are alone. What did you do then? And when did you connect with your sisters?
ANNA: Well, it was dangerous to go around. The Russians still looked for the Germans. I found other people like me wandering there. We went to sleep in the train station, because there was nowhere else we could go. So once a girl looks at me, and she is asking me do you have a sister Gisela. I said yes. I was liberated with your sister Gisela and Clara. I asked what about Elizabeth. She said Elizabeth was shot down with host of the people from the 770 people who left the camp. 230 remained alive. The rest was all shot on the way, because they couldn't walk anywhere. So wandering there for a month. Nobody cared. Not the Russians, not the Germans. I didn't know -- I knew that my sisters were alive. But I didn't know where.
BILL: By yourself for a month.
ANNA: By myself for a month there. Once I hear from far away I heard music. It was May 9th. I heard music. I always loved music. I wanted to hear the music. Then the French and the Polish girls, they danced. What do I do there? I can't dance. I still have a wounded leg. So I was sitting like this, and watching, and then all of the sudden I felt a hand on my shoulder. I was scared, and I turned my head, and then he said madame maisel. I turned my head. He called me that because of the way I looked there. He was a French war prison. He gave me chocolate and cigarettes and then I could buy some food.
BILL: So trade cigarettes for good.
ANNA: Cigarettes and chocolate. So after just wandering there, what do I do? One day I found that train station, and they took us home to Romania. So then I met my two sisters.
BILL: In your town?
ANNA: Yes.
That was the most terrible day in my life. We had to go back from the nine people that left the house knowing that it is true. We can't not have hope anymore that it is going to come somebody home. A man told us I saw your father alive after the war, but he never came home. We were waiting for him every day at the train station. But he never came home. We had to start a new life, the two of us. And that's why I think it was the most terrible time in my life. Then we had to sit down and the few of us eat. Not even at a table. But the table was built into the wall. We sat down, and we couldn't even cook. It was a young mother and two older sisters. Then I am allowed to cook. The laborer came and brought us food. We had to start a new life. And no man around, because all of the men were killed at that age. Because of the forced labor, they were dead. A few came home, all too old, or young, but not our age. So we had a problem to get married also.
BILL: Because there was just no men.
ANNA: No men. Finally a cousin brought another cousin who brought a man. My older sister got married. He managed to have a vineyard and as I said before, we were not very many people, so we had to eat. But my brother did not want to stay there with us. He wanted to move back with his wife, my sister, to the city where he lived. But he

couldn't leave us. Me and Clara there by ourselves. So I wanted to -- I had to get married. I was already 20 years old. And 21. And still not get a man. I felt like an old maid when I was 21. This is not a joke. And then a miracle happened to me again. Because I went to the next city, I don't know, and I met there a girl who I was together in the ghetto and in the concentration camp also. And she was already pregnant, and she asked me if I got married. I said no. And then she said how come you don't look so bad? (Laughter).

ANNA: But I said I was 21 again; right? You know what she said to me? My husband has a cousin. And he's -- he wants to get marry. He's by himself also. He can't -- he came home and his brothers came home also, because they were in the camp. They were only the three men there and no woman. So I said how can I meet him? I have to get married, because my sister has to move. She said to me, well, I'll invite you to my house. I'll invite him too. And then you'll know each other. I said when will you invite he? She said next week. I said, no, invite me right now. Because I don't want to go home for nothing again. And she took me serious. I went there, and the next day somehow he -- not next day, two days later, I tried to cover my leg with a dress. I tried to look good and everything. Because a man is coming. I said I'm going to marry him even if he isn't good. Because I have to get married. So the man came, and he wasn't crippled. He was a tall, good-looking man. I was thinking my God. Then when he saw me, two months later, we got married. Two months later, no love or anything, I had to get married. I was lucky. He was a very good man also. We moved -- we got married -- I don't think we had 15 people at my wedding. It was a very sad wedding, because my parents were not there. But we lived in the city, and I had two sons with him. 19 years Romania was a town in the country. 19 years after the war, they did not let us out from there. Only after 19 years, they started to give the passports for some people and other people. So after 19 year, we got the passport and paid for by the Romanians. We had to give us our citizenship there. No more Romania. They let us out and with four suitcases. And the two boys, 15 and 13, and we had to leave everything again that we had there. So we wanted for the VISA in Italy for a half a year, because America rejected people before they got in. So after six months there, we arrived in New York with the two boys with the four suitcases not knowing the language, not having money. Just we are here. My husband had a sister in New York. And we started a new life again. And it was easy, because we were free. We did very well. I was lucky with my children, because they were good in school. We were woking hard, my husband and I. Alex is an attorney. Andrew is a geologist. I have four grandchildren and two great grandsons. And I'm here telling you a story.

BILL: Ann that, I want to ask you two other questions before we close. You shared with me there were several days in particular that were among your worst days of. You said that the -- you think that the two worst things that happened to you was the loss of almost all of your family, and the other was the loss of all of your education. That's why educating your sons was important to you.

ANNA: That's what makes me happy in my life. My sons could have what I couldn't have. And all my family and it was very important for the education. I was 14 -- I think I was 14 years old in 1940. I was ready to go to high school. The first thing was that they did was stopped Jewish people to two to high school. And they took the young for forced labor. I remained without education all of my life. I missed that very much. I'm

happy that my children could have that and my grandchildren. I'm happy that I could live in this free country. I'm asking you people --
BILL: Before you do that. I know you are going to give us your last words. Let me tell our audience a couple of things. We didn't have time for you to ask Anna questions. We couldn't have done her justice without three or four hours. She couldn't tell us what she had to go to leave Romania. It is extraordinary. It is just extraordinary what she had to go through. There's a lot we didn't hear.
ANNA: That was the best thing in my life to leave that country where everything happened to us. I would never even go back for a visit.
BILL: Absolutely. I want to thank all of you for being with us.
ANNA: Thank you very much for being with me.
BILL: Anna is going to close our program in a moment. All of the programs will be livestreamed through June 6th. You'll be able to view them on the Museum's YouTube channel. We hope that you are able to see other "First Person" programs. It is our tradition that our First Person has the last word. I'm going to turn back to Anna for closing comments.
ANNA: I thank you very much for listening to me. I'm asking you young people here to forget about the prejudice and anti-Semitism, and anything.
You should never, ever happen to anybody what happened to us. And it is up to you, because you have -- you are the new people all educated people. You have the occasion to do that. To make this country and the world a better world than it was. Thank you very much.
(Applause)
BILL: We didn't have time for questions and answers. Anna is going to stay behind on the stage. If anybody would like to ask her a question, give her a hug, get a photo taken with her, please do that. My only request is you come up and leave by the steps. We would welcome anybody that wants to come up. Go for it.