Interviewee: Childers, Roger
Interviewer: Shannon Calloway
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Calloway: Mr. Childers, you're okay with this being recorded?

Childers: Yes, I am.

Calloway: Okay, great. Let's start at the beginning, I guess. How long have you been working with Callaway Gardens?

Childers: Thirty- two years.

Calloway: Thirty- two years, so what date does that start you at?

Childers: Well, I started here in 1975. And prior to that I was an assistant professor at Florida State University from 1970 to 1974. And then, the reason why I mention that is that while I've been here 32 years, I've been sort of involved with the Circus for 34 because for 2 years, '73 and '74, I was hired, or retained, by Callaway Gardens in a consultant position to work with Callaway and the FSU Circus.

Calloway: Okay. As a consultant for---?

Childers: Callaway Gardens hired me. They were trying to update and make some changes in program content for the Summer Family recreation program that the circus performers basically were counselors for. So I was retained. I came there in 1973 and I spent a summer basically observing the recreation program and the counselors and their skill set. And then basically drafted a report given to the management at Callaway Gardens as to. you know, "this is what I think you should be doing." Then they in turn, shortly after I gave them that report, asked if I would come back the next summer and make some of these adjustments and what have you. So I agreed to do that, and so during that, I guess it was '73- '74 I get so confused as to what year it was, but anyhow I met with the early childhood curriculum, and a physical education person. I was in leisure services and studies, and then I had someone in art education, and I got some directed individual study programs for students varying from an hour to two hour credit to do some program designing in various programs. And then basically we had some in-service training to teach them certain skill sets, etc., etc. And then when they came up here in the summer I basically worked with Dickie and was really in charge of, if you will, the recreation program working with Dickie. And then after that summer the management here at Callaway Gardens inquired if I would be interested in coming back and working full time as head of the recreation division here which had golf and hunting and fishing, a stable, fast food services, etc.

etc. So that's basically how I blended in with the Circus.

Calloway: Okay, and that's not where you're still working?

Childers: No, no no. I am now, currently, in an area--- I work in two areas. I work for the Foundation, the Ida Cason Callaway Foundation in attempting to get funds for the Gardens, for the educational programs, etc. by going through foundations and corporations, what have you. And then I also work in promotions and sponsorships on the resort side, trying to help them with their marketing efforts as it would relate to promotions and sponsorships. Over the course of time, I've been in almost every operation here. I've been--- basically I came here as the director of recreation, as I said I had all the recreational facilities. And then I went into sales, I was head of sales and then I was head of marketing, and then I was in a position called sports and promotions which we had a PGA golf tournament, I ran that and some other things, and then I sort of migrated back over into charge of sales, and then went into operations I ran some restaurants and other things here. And so now I'm at the tail end of my career working in development and promotions. So that sort of is my bio.

Calloway: So you've been all over the Gardens.

Childers: Yeah, really I have. And you know, and it's been very rewarding and it's been a lot of fun.

Calloway: Well, great! And I know that you weren't around at the very beginning, but kind of--- what do you know about why the Gardens started hiring the Circus to begin with?

Childers: Well, I was also a student at FSU. I went to FSU in 1962, I transferred from a junior college and did my major, my junior- senior year, and then I went on and did my graduate work at Penn State. But I attended classes, I was a recreation major, and one of my professors was Jack Haskins. And Jack is, I guess you would say, the father of the Circus, and basically the individual that brought the Circus to Callaway Gardens. And the story, of course I wasn't here then, but the story that was told to me by Bo and by others was that, I guess it was about 1960--- '58, '60--- somewhere around there; the beach, Robin Lake Beach, was opening up and Bo Callaway wanted to have some kind of extravaganza to sort of, if you will, inaugurate or ribbon cutting type of event to bring something to the Gardens. And he'd heard about the FSU Circus and he called Jack up, asked him if his circus troupe would come up and about in that time Jack had a circus troupe that did travel around. I remember they were in Europe and they were all over the place back then. And they came up and so Jack turned around to Bo and said, you know, why don't I do this--- why don't I come up and do it, but why don't I stay the whole summer and we'll do recreation programs for kids. So that was sort of the seminal moment, I guess you'd say, for the Circus. And from there it moved on and on and on. And to the best of my knowledge, that's the story, so--- [laughs]

Calloway: Okay, then what was the original role of the Circus? Where they always these

camp counselors as well as performers?

Childers: You know, I think a lot of great things in life happen accidentally. And I think---you know, here was Bo thinking he needed an act, and there was Jack probably thinking, you know, if he could have something for his circus troupe, get them a job and do that thing, of course he was in the recreation department in the curriculum at that time, so I think that's what prompted it. And it started from there and it just sort of grew. And, I mean, it's sort of like---when you go to the program it's almost like Happy Days, you know? [laughter] It goes back to the '50s and the '60s and it has survived basically because of its uniqueness in that you have these circus kids who are performers and, you know, they perform and all of a sudden the guy that's working the high wire or the lady that's the trapeze artist is your counselor, and that bonding is very, very, very unique. I mean, you can go to a lot of camps, and that's not to say that the camps and the camp counselors aren't special, but, you know, there's sort of a hero worship with the kids that come into the program, so--- I don't know if I answered your question, but—

Calloway: No, no, that's great. That's actually the same thing Dickie Brinson had said about it. Kind of on that same note, I had read that Hal Northrop, who was the president of Callaway in 1962 had said that the FSU Circus was the "soul of summer" at Callaway Gardens—

Childers: Yeah. I mean, there's no question about that. Now I can tell you, I have been intimately involved with the Circus, golly, I can't remember how many years, but off and on. When I came there, as a professor and then coming up here with the kids, there was two years, and then when I came up here and I worked full time, there was another four, that's six. And then I moved on to other areas, but then I came back when I was on another assignment so I had it for another--- I guess, over the course of time, eight or ten years, and I think the thing that really sort of made me aware that this was kind of a very unique experience for people that came here was that they had an incredible proprietary interest. And that, we used to do these, and I guess they still do, coffees. I think it was on Wednesday or Thursday, I can't remember which it is, but we would have these 9 or 10 o'clock in the morning we'd have these little coffees. And they'd have some sweets and fruit and coffee, and we'd invite anybody that wanted to come--- parents, primarily. And, you know, they'd come down there and sit around and tell us how they felt about the program. And sometimes it was stuff that you didn't want to hear, but a lot of times it was kind of an emotional experience. I mean these people really--- when they were critical they were critical almost like, you know, family. It was like they would tell you things that you didn't really want to hear and so, you know, you're all wet. But then if you step back from it and just thought about it, it wasn't that they were trying to be mean, it was that they had this linkage to the program and then ownership that they felt was part of their family experience, and they had expectations that were almost, at times, unrealistic. You know what I'm saying? And then I think the other thing that struck me is that, having been here 32 years, what's very fascinating to me, I guess 15 years ago I was meeting circus students, and I was meeting kids that had been here to the Summer Family program, and now they were bringing their kids back. They had married, and they were bringing their kids back. And now, not too

long ago, to make me feel really old, I'm starting to see them, they're bringing their grandkids back. And I think that's pretty unusual of, if you will, a resort. And then, I guess, the other thing I would say is the repeat. The repeat of the people coming back now is not as high as back in the '70s and the '80s- -- I think our repeat was like, 70 - 80% of the people that came came every year for like, five, six years. It's not that way anymore because there's so much competition, and I think families are looking for a multitude of different experiences for their summer vacations. But anyhow, that's the best I can tell you.

Calloway: Yeah, I've noticed that, that a lot of the families are repeats and generational.

Childers: Mm-hmm.

Calloway: And a lot of the circus performers grew up going to Callaway, and grew up knowing all they wanted to do was be in the circus.

Childers: Oh, yeah. I think probably the most poignant event, or the thing that really was, it was like--- now we have a tent that stays up all year, but when the Circus came to town and they would put up the tent, that was a real big thing in Pine Mountain--- well, I mean, Pine Mountain is like 900 people, but I mean through the whole community. And the kids, the circus students who were here, I mean, the churches would invite them to come and the kids would go. I mean, I go to a Catholic church here in Pine Mountain and the kids would go there, and they were over in the Baptist Church and Methodist Church, and they were really so just into the community. And the community just really loved them. Not so much now, because again there's just a lot more going on, but back in those early days it was very, very, very, very--- you couldn't wait until the circus kids came. And then, of course, we couldn't wait 'til they would leave. [laughter] But anyhow, that's okay.

Calloway: I was wondering about the small, sleepy town's reaction to this influx of 26 or 30 college students every summer.

Childers: Well, you know, in some respects it was a love/ hate relationship. It depended who you were, you know? Of course the guys in the town didn't like the boys coming in because the boys dated the local girls, which there were not many. I mean, you know? But there was a certain amount of rivalry, but I think it was all in good fun. I mean, back in those days, when I say those days I'm talking '70s and '80s--- probably mid to late '80s it started to change--- but back in the '70s to mid '80s there was, at Callaway, it wasn't so much community as there was the lifeguards, there were the water skiers, and there were the circus kids. And there was a rivalry, and they used to play tricks on one another. You know? It was--- the life guards and the skiers, when the circus kids were performing, I remember one day they snuck into the dorm and got all the girls and guys underwear and they went up to the top of the water tower and tied up their underwear, you know? So now the FSU kids had to get back at whoever it was, and they'd go and they'd play a prank on the skiers. And it was sort of a fun kind of relationship. It never got out of bounds; it was just typical college kids having a good time.

Calloway: Right. And the lifeguards and the skiers, those were local Pine Mountain kids?

Childers: Well, some. Now the skiers were very much like the FSU kids. We had a ski show back then, and it was almost on par with Cypress Gardens, not quite but almost. And our skiers came from Auburn and from Alabama, University of Georgia, and back then--- I don't know if they still do now, but--- these school had ski clubs and it was a competitive type of thing. And we would go out and we would hire these college kids. Now, the skiers, you know, they would be from three or four or five different colleges. The lifeguards tended to be--- we had some college kids but most of them were high school from Lagrange and Columbus and Pine Mountain, but they were all kids, students, and they all got along together well.

Calloway: I've noticed in the past couple of years this kind of rivalry between the lifeguards and the water-skiers and the circus performers has gotten--- not so playful anymore but actually more of a rivalry, have you noticed?

Childers: Oh, really?

Calloway: Yeah, and Dickie was actually commenting on that, too, that he's noticed it's kind of gotten away from a friendly rivalry to an actual rivalry. [laughs]

Childers: Really? Well, you know, I think that might have to do with the level of supervision. Back in the '70s and the '80s the people that were in charge of those programs---like I said the skiers were college kids, but we had a guy that was a college graduate and. you know, he was a professional skier, and he was an adult. And the guy that we had in charge of the lifeguards, he was an adult. And back in those days, too, you know, a lot of our supervisors in the summertime, we hired a lot of coaches in the area. So there was, I think, a lot more adult supervision. And then, too, we used to have a lot of parties together. I don't think they do that anymore. I used to have, like, we'd have a beach party and of course we would have a volleyball game and the skiers versus the circus kids and that kind of thing. Or softball games, or fun things, you know, to do. And I don't think they do that anymore. And the lifeguards today are really young. And the skiers we have here are not on the same level. They're ski instructors, not performers. So, I—

Calloway: It's a little different chemistry.

Childers: Yeah, oh, definitely a different chemistry. A totally different chemistry today. Even the program, I mean, the people that come to the family program are so much different today. It's just a totally different set of circumstances. The best of the time was the '70s and the '80s. Because in the '70s and the '80s you had people that came out of the '50s and '60s, and it was just a different--- the parents were different. You know what I mean? It was just a totally different set, you know? You spent a lot of time with the kids, and there was--- Today, I mean-you didn't have the drug issue, you didn't have really the high alcohol issue, and I'm not trying to say that one generation is better than the other, but I think there's distractions. The

distractions weren't the same.

Calloway: Right. So it's kind of on both sides--- it's a society thing.

Childers: Yeah, yeah yeah. I mean, we, I think--- in fact, I just called a friend, well a guy, he used to work for me here, and he was here back in those days, and he was my beach manager. He's now the director of the Bryce-Jordan Arena at Penn State which is a 15 - 20,000 seat arena where they do the basketball games and music shows and all that kinda stuff. But anyhow, I called him up just out of the blue to chat with him, and I said to him, I said--- "You know, I took a walk over to the beach today, and I had to call you because I had a flashback." I said, "You know, that was the most incredible show that you did." And what Bob did was he got Dickie and he got the person ahead of the ski show and some other people, and they put a Fourth of July show on using skiers and using lifeguards and using circus in front of around, back in those days, 8-10,000 people. And it was the most unbelievable show. And that brought those kids together. They were all involved in a program that was really, really spectacular. And they don't do that anymore. You know?

Calloway: Yeah, its kind of--- separated.

Childers: Well, I think what's gonna happen is I think, Shannon, I think we're at a point, and I said it to a couple of people, I think the program needs to be tweaked again. I'm not sure that the program we have today with the culture that we have, I'm not sure some of the stuff is still relevant.

Calloway: It can't compete, like you were saying there's just too much other---

Childers: Yeah, you know, for example our programs are very, very structured. And my daughter, she went to--- her and her husband and another couple went to a Club Med thing, and so I asked my daughter, I said, "Well, what was it like?" And she said, "Well, Dad, it was really neat." I said, "What was neat about it?" She started telling me how, you know, you got up in the morning and you just went out there and there were these counselors out all in the field and whatever you wanted to do. But it was not programmed, it was not structured. We're very structured and very programmed, and I'm not sure--- and some people love that. Now, me, that's the last thing in my life I want when I go on vacation. You know? I'm one of the ones that want to get up, and I want to just sort of move around, and I might do this and I might do that. And our program is very much structured. And some people like that, and some people find that kind of a pain in the neck, you know? So I think the program's gonna go through a change. I don't think that the issue in that change the Circus will differ, I just think that there'll be some program format changing to meet the new, if you will, the people of the 2000 year versus the people of the 1970s and 1980s. You know? A lot of things change in life.

Calloway: Yeah. The program that is currently running, is that the program that you were brought in to develop in 1973?

Childers: Yeah, yeah--- but, you know, I don't want to make it sound like what they were doing pre- 1974 was so much different. Basically what I did was, what I noted when I came in when I spent that summer was I looked at it and I said, "Now here are the given facts. The fact is you've got these college kids, they're good kids, they have an incredible rapport with the families, but what they don't have is they don't have an organized program." So by bringing in early childhood people which, Penny, Dickie's wife, was the lady that did miracles in what we call our early childhood center because she said, "Look, counselors. We have to have rhythmic activities, we have to have creative activities, we need to have a nap time, need to have this kind of luncheon." You know what I'm saying?

Calloway: Yeah

Childers: And then, you know, we called the elementary school and we said, "Look, you can't have that kind of competitive activity for a seven year old, but you should have it for an 11 year old." And so we started taking activities and doing different progressive types of things to say, you know, "This is gonna be competitive, this is not, now we have to have some rhythm activities, now we gotta take them down to the beach and get water because it's gonna be hot---" So we just kind of did a format like that. But they were doing those things they just weren't taking into consideration the behavioral and physical ability of the kids. And that's basically all I did. I mean, they were doing everything, they just, you know, so that's that.

Calloway: Oh, okay. And that's kind of the—

Childers: Yeah. That's what they do today, I mean it's not much of a difference.

Calloway: Yeah, hasn't changed much. As far as--- since you're in administration, what about the way that the Gardens is being run? Its kind of become more corporate as opposed to a small, family kind of organization.

Childers: Well, you know, I mean from an outsider it probably appears that way, but the reality is that there's always been two entities here at Callaway Gardens. There's been a Foundation which is known as the Ida Cason Callaway Foundation, and there's a resort. Formally it used to be called Gardens Services, Inc., and Gardens Services Inc. was a profit making business owned by the Foundation. And after taxes, after the taxes were paid by the profit organization those residuals would go to the foundation. Now, that being said, it's still that way. However, there's, if you will, a third entity has emerged. And the third entity is a real estate company. Now, what's happened is that in the world of the resort business and the hotel business it is a very, very difficult business to generate profit. And so what has happened is that the foundation has decided to take some of its assets in land and turn that asset into dollars by partnering with a real estate company of very, very high, good reputation: Cousin's properties, which is corporate and is out of Atlanta. And we're building homes. And we've built--- the first phase is about 120- 130 homes. And we have the go ahead now to build another 1400 homes. And so what's gonna happen here is that over the course--- are you familiar with that place in

New York, Chattauqua?

Calloway: Yes.

Childers: Well, there's a lot of our staff that's been to Chattauqua. And what the thought is is that they would like to develop a southern Chattauqua. Which gets back to what people have sort of always have thought about Callaway as a place of learning, of relaxing, emotional, spiritual, physical, what have you. So--- it's like birthing an elephant at the moment, [laughter]-but that's the process its going through. So the first phase of this is building these homes. And, you know, there is conversation, there's thought, there are people who are sitting there saying, "Okay. How are we gonna do this?" Because, in essence, you know, the mission of Callaway Gardens is "man and nature and nature and man", and how are you gonna do that? You know? You're going commercial, you're building these homes--- that could potentially obliterate the whole primary thing, you know? But while in some ways its--- for me, I mean you know, shoot, I used to walk around the Gardens and there was nothing but trees and water and shrubs, and now I'm seeing homes. But they're doing it discreetly. And they're gonna take an area and make sure it stays in its state as a garden. And bearing in mind that we have 14,000 acres of land here, so we feel that we can still have a resort, and we can still have a garden with some type of program, more so than what we're doing now, and also take this land and turn it into a means of- -- the whole reason why we're doing this is to get money to sustain the Foundation. The money doesn't go to the family or anything like that. So I don't know if that explains it, but that's the best I can do.

Calloway: Yeah, is that was Longwood is?

Childers: Longleaf?

Calloway: Longleaf, yeah.

Childers: Uh-huh. Yeah. That's the first phase. And we're now into the second phase, and the second phase we're just building some homes near the golf course, and of course this is not the best time to get into the housing market but the thing about it is, we're with a partner that has very deep pockets, and can sustain a slowdown. And we're building infrastructure, and we're doing our marketing and we're doing our strategizing so that--- although we're still selling homes believe it or not. In this market, which is kind of--- I'm sitting here saying, "I don't believe this." But we're not selling them to the extent that we were selling them like two years ago. I mean, we were selling homes so fast it was just ridiculous. So, anyhow, that's that.

Calloway: And where does the Noble Corporation fit in?

Childers: Okay, yeah the Noble Corporation is a hotel management company. What has happened over the course of time is that--- to really get, you know, you live in Pine Mountain and, I mean, I moved here, and when I first moved here the deal was that I had to live in Harris

County. I couldn't live in Lagrange, I couldn't live in Columbus, because back then there were only 13 of us that were managers of this place. And the deal was back then they gave you a signing bonus, and the signing bonus was used to make a down payment on a home or buy land. And that's how difficult it was to get people to come here, because it was very, very, very--- I mean, my kids went to school in Columbus, so that's like 60 miles round trip. So anyhow, making a very long story short, we've had, over the course of time, a very difficult time getting managers in. And getting skilled managers in, the competition is very keen. So what has happened is that Callaway, the Ida Cason Callaway Foundation, the board of directors has said, "Look, we're gonna go off, we're gonna manage the Gardens, we're gonna get involved in real estate, we need to have a company come in here to help us modernize the resort." So they hired Noble, and Noble is a management company, they do not own the land or the business. They also have the ability to go out and find investors, and that's the reason why we got the lodge and spa, which is the new hotel we just built. They helped to bring to the table the partners to help build that facility. So now what you have--- in the '70s and '80s it was Callaway Gardens. In the year 2000 it's a partnership, although Callaway Gardens owns clear and free, all the property, but it's engaged Cousins, who is a real estate company, and it's engaged Noble who is a hotel/resort management company, to assist the board of directors, the Foundation, that owns all this, to move this property forward.

Calloway: Okay

Childers: Okay?

Calloway: Okay, and kind of, with all these new changes in management, where do you see the Circus' role going? More involved, or less involved, or is it even affected?

You know, I would say involved, and probably more. You know, to be very **Childers:** candid with you, I think a lot has to do with how flexible the Circus is, and how creative and how tactful Callaway is. As I said to you, I think the program has to change, and I'll give you a case in point. You know, I no longer have any management responsibilities for it, but just, you know I was thinking, "Well, you know if we did overnight camping, you know there's a lot of kids that come here and families that come from cities and they would just jump at some type of overnight camping experience. How would that fit in with the circus? How could you do that? Or do you have to go out and hire kids from another area to do that, or counselors?" I've tried to encourage some members here at Callaway to go to FSU and I think it's time to have someone at Callaway go to--- I think it's sort of, you know--- Callaway Gardens came to the College of Education in 1970--- whenever the hell it was, '73 or '72, they went to the dean of the College of Education they said, "We have this problem, can you help us?" They said, "Go down and see this guy named Childers". Okay? And I think what Callaway needs to do is to say, "Okay. You know we need to go to FSU." And I don't know who they'd go see now, but get someone from early childhood or get someone from the hotel school or get someone from the rec. program or what have you and sit down and say, "Look, we want you guys to come up here for a week on our nickel, and observe, and tell us what you think we can do differently." And I

think that's where we're at. But I think the Circus is very, very definite. You know, its part of the fabric of Callaway Gardens. The family, the Callaway family- Edward and Bo and Ralph, you know, they feel--- Edward and Ralph's childhood is tied up with the Circus. Bo, I mean, he's so committed to it. So I don't see it going away. And, you know, again, it could be FSU would say it has to go away, it interferes with schooling, it interferes with this--- I think it's just as much an FSU thing as much as it is a Callaway thing.

Calloway: Right. But you don't really see it going away.

Childers: I don't see it. I mean, I don't see it at all. I think, and I said this to Chad, I think the Circus needs to take a look at, the same as Callaway needs to take a look at what it's doing in programming, and of course the other thing is is there's certain things, and I know Dickie has been a tremendous advocate and takes care of his--- I mean we've gotta do something about the housing, we've gotta do something for Dickie's housing. There are some issues that need to be resolved. I went down to FSU with Dickie, I guess, I don't know five or six years ago and he took me to the scholarship houses. I don't know what--- these homes that these kids live in. Anyway, I'm looking at that, and I was saying, "You know, I mean, gee whiz, they should have a kitchen that they can cook in [laughs] and I understand where they're coming from, and why not?" And those are issues that Callaway has got to face. And at the same time as I say that, there's issues that the Circus and its performances that I think--- I mean, there ought to be some clowns in there for crying out load. You know what I'm saying?

Calloway: Right

Childers: You know, and I mean, hell, they've got the school of theater there, I mean it shouldn't be--- I'm thinking, school of theater, dance, whatever, it shouldn't be that difficult. But there's been this resistance. But you know what, there's been a resistance to that, but guess what, the people that are in the stands, they like that stuff.

Calloway: Yeah, they do.

Childers: And guess what, the early childhood kids, they love clowns. And that's just an example. I just think--- you can't just go--- life is not repeating the same thing—

Calloway: Over and over

Childers: Right. I mean, I don't know, I love certain food items, but if I eat it every day after a while I just lose a taste for it, it doesn't become a favorite food item. So I think both entities need to sit down and work that out, I really do.

Calloway: Yeah, the whole kind of future of—

Childers: Yeah, they oughta look at it. And I don't think anything is at--- and I think

Callaway Gardens right now is in such a state of flux because it's going through all these changes, and I don't know about the University, because I have not been back on campus, god knows when, last time I went I couldn't believe everything that was going on there. I mean, to me it was just totally--- my wife and I went down there and I can't remember what road we came in but I said, "Oh, I'll go in that package store and get a bottle of wine" Because we were gonna get a motel room and everything, we were going to, I can't remember a football game or something like that. So I drive in, I cross the road, it took me almost 15 minutes to get back down on the damn road because the traffic was so heavy.

Calloway: It's terrible.

Childers: That's unbelievable. You know? When I was there, gee whiz, when I went to school at FSU in 1962 I think we had 6,000 students, 7,000? There was like 4,000 women and 3,000 men. And then when I went back to teach I think it was in the teens. And now, what it's 30 or something like that?

Calloway: It's 35, yeah

Childers: Holy moly! And then you've gotta Florida A & M, you've got Tallahassee Community College, my god, that's unbelievable.

Calloway: And they're constantly building and making it bigger

Childers: Yeah, it's kinda fun. Last time I went back there, I went back to where I used to live. And it was just totally amazing to me to see where I lived and just ride around town. It's just amazing it really is.

Calloway: Yeah, it is. Well, I'm actually out of questions.

Childers: Okay

Calloway: Do you have anything you'd like to add on the tape?

Childers: No, not really. It's been sort of fun reminiscing, and I appreciate that opportunity. You know. if you have questions later on you can always try to give me a call or what have you, I'd been more than happy to help you in any way. I think you're doing a nice job, I think Dickie mostly would definitely appreciate it.

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