

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:00:23

Tonia Merideth

Good afternoon.

00:00:00:28 - 00:00:01:21

Nadine Armstrong

Good afternoon.

00:00:01:23 - 00:00:21:07

Tonia Merideth

Thank you for joining us for an oral history interview for the Virginia Museum of History & Culture exhibit, A Better Life for Their Children: Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington, and the 4,978 Schools that Changed America. My name is Tonia Merideth, the oral historian. Would you please state your name and the school you attended?

00:00:21:10 - 00:00:29:01

Nadine Armstrong

My name is Nadine A. Greene Armstrong and I attended the Rosenwald School at West View in Fluvanna County.

00:00:29:03 - 00:00:42:05

Tonia Merideth

Thank you. So we like to get just a little bit of background on our narrators. Could you please tell us where you were born and tell us who your family was, who your parents were? If you had any siblings, and where you grew up.

00:00:42:08 - 00:01:17:01

Nadine Armstrong

Okay. I was born in Fluvanna County in West Bottom, which is part of Bremono Bluff. My parents were Kortwright T. Greene, Sr. and Audrey E. Gillam Greene. My father was from Washington, D.C.. My mother was from Bremono Bluff. And my siblings are Kortwright T. Greene, Jr., Vernon Orlando Greene, Sr., myself, and Althea Deborah Greene (Price), Cornel Greene Sr, and Michael Greene.

00:01:17:03 - 00:01:25:06

Tonia Merideth

Thank you. Could you please tell us what memories you have of growing up in the area?

00:01:25:09 - 00:01:51:03

Nadine Armstrong

Oh, gee. I remember as a child, pretty much maybe about three years old, being able, you know, running around in the yard at the house, my grandmother's home. It was a two story home. And we always came there when my dad was going away in the military. As a child, I was able to just go out and play in the yard.

00:01:51:05 - 00:02:28:08

Nadine Armstrong

We had chickens and, you know, and cats, dogs and stuff like that. It was sort of a farm - had a garden. My grandmother had a garden. Tomatoes, potatoes, corn, stuff like that. And we just had fun just running around, playing in the yard with a woodpile, had a couple of horses. Dan and Margaret. And it was just mainly my siblings because at that time, at the age we were, we couldn't go anywhere other than the school, which was across the street.

00:02:28:10 - 00:02:51:22

Nadine Armstrong

But we weren't allowed to go over there because we were too young. So we mostly just stayed at home and played with each other, had fun playing with each other, and of course, being kids. We were always into something, the chickens had a chicken house. We were always picking after the chickens. My grandmother even had a few pigs that we could play with.

00:02:51:22 - 00:03:18:12

Nadine Armstrong

And they were the type that would allow you to play with them. I mean, I couldn't do too much as a three year old, you know, because - I was just round and waddley-like. But it was fun just growing up in the country. My brothers - Kortright was the oldest. He was four years older than I.

00:03:18:14 - 00:03:44:19

Nadine Armstrong

Vernon was one year older than I. So they were kind of rough as boys, you know, as boys can be. And I always considered me - but I guess being the only girl and they wanted to do things that I wanted to do, but I couldn't do because I was smaller, you know, so. And they wouldn't let me for the most part.

00:03:44:22 - 00:04:16:03

Nadine Armstrong

So, you know, they considered me always getting in their way. But like I said, growing up in the country was - it was a wonderful thing for me. And I think I - by doing so, by being able to do so, it was very educational for me as well, because I learned a lot by being on a farm, you know. And with Dad being in the military, that was also a whole rewarding experience other than being on a farm, so.

00:04:16:06 - 00:04:21:13

Tonia Merideth

Can you please tell us what year you attended the school and how many years did you attend?

00:04:21:15 - 00:05:05:29

Nadine Armstrong

I started in 1930 - and I'm sorry - 1954. I wasn't even born at '30. 1954. It was the first grade, but actually I was able to go over to the school a year before I started because I live right across the road from the school. So Mrs. Inez Kerr was the teacher for the first through third - the first and second grade, and she would allow me to come into the classroom before my time and just sit down and play with clay because I was so quiet, I'd never disturb the class or anything.

00:05:05:29 - 00:05:32:09

Nadine Armstrong

So she allowed me to come in and sit down and play with the clay while the kids were studying or doing whatever they were doing. And occasionally, of course, she would also make me learn along with the students. So in other words, sometimes I would have to do the ABCs, you know, and sometimes I'd have to get a pencil and start writing my letters as well.

00:05:32:12 - 00:05:57:01

Nadine Armstrong

But it was it was very neat because I enjoyed going over there. It wasn't something I had to do, it was something I wanted to do, and she allowed me to do it. Now. When I started in 1954, it was a whole different story because I had to go to school, which means every morning I had to get up, get dressed and go to school.

00:05:57:03 - 00:06:26:12

Nadine Armstrong

Now, each morning we started off with the pledge allegiance to the flag and then we would either start with our ABCs or we would do arithmetic. You know, we had arithmetic, we had writing and we then would do - we had a blackboard that was in the middle of the class. There were two classrooms with the school, two classrooms - well - and then there was a third part of the school.

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Nadine Armstrong

The principal was Mrs. Magby. Francis Magby. And the - I think it was third and fourth grade was Mrs. Hewitt, Mrs. Hewitt. And my class with Mrs. Kerr, we would do our first lessons. We had two lessons in the beginning. Then we would have either lunch break or recess, you know, and for recess we would go outside and play. We had different games like Red Rover, Red Rover and jump rope, you know, And there were different things you could - hopscotch, you know. And then was - there was the woodpile, we had a woodpile in the back of the school.

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Nadine Armstrong

It was a big wood - wooden house that had wood in it. 'Cause the only heat we had in the school was wood heat. So we would go back to the wood house where we weren't supposed to go. But you know how kids are. We would go back to the woodpile and play and play hide and seek down there in wood pile.

00:07:28:29 - 00:07:47:13

Nadine Armstrong

And that was a good place to play because you could hide in different places - and hard to find. So we would go back to the woodpile and play hide and seek back there. And we had our recess and recess lasted for maybe 30 minutes or so. And then we would come back and have lunch. And lunch - you had to bring your own lunch.

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Nadine Armstrong

For the most part. We had, you know, your paper bag with - most of the time you had peanut butter and jelly or spam or something like that, you know, and you'd have your lunch hour, you'd have - eat your lunch and after lunch you'd have your nap time. So you got a nap time and you'd take your little nap.

00:08:07:12 - 00:08:35:07

Nadine Armstrong

And I think nap lasted maybe about a half an hour. So after lunch you'd start your lessons again. So we'd have history. Well, not really history. We'd have English, you know, And then, you know, of course, you also had that - we had crayon where we could draw pictures. We'd get to pass - pass out paper. So you'd have your crayons so you could draw anything that you wanted to draw.

00:08:35:09 - 00:08:58:03

Nadine Armstrong

So that was fun because you could draw anything you wanted to draw. And I guess it was just to test you too, so you could learn how to draw figures or whatever, you know. But it was just a matter of you learning how to draw things and drawing with your crayon. And the classroom - you had many things. I mean, there were different things in the classroom.

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Nadine Armstrong

You had your pencils, you had your pencil sharpeners, erasers, like I said, the crayons. Glue, because sometimes we would cut figures out of, you know, with the paper you had the scissors to cut figures and you could glue a hat to make you a little hat to put on your figures and stuff like that. So there were different activities that you could do.

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Nadine Armstrong

It was a lot of things to keep you busy, and that was the main thing, keeping you busy and teaching you because that the main thing with me was that one, two, three, and ABC, those were the things you did every day. You'd learn those every day because you had to learn how to read, you had to learn how to write.

00:09:35:28 - 00:09:56:25

Nadine Armstrong

And those were main - two of the main things. I don't think arithmetic in the first grade was mainly one of the things that we had to do in the beginning, because the main thing was learning how to read and write. So those were the main things that were being taught at the beginning. And Mrs. Kerr, I mean, she was wonderful.

00:09:56:27 - 00:10:23:28

Nadine Armstrong

I mean, she was my favorite teacher for my life. I loved her. And even after I finished school and came back from overseas, I used to go visit her and, you know, as often as I could, she was one of my favorite teachers. And she taught you. She was a great teacher. When you were in her class, you learned. You didn't just, sit there and not get anything out of it.

00:10:23:28 - 00:10:46:00

Nadine Armstrong

You learned when she was your teacher. And that was - that was one of the most rewarding experiences for me. And the reason I said that is because I still think about her. Of all the teachers, she's one that I can - I still remember, and I had - I don't know. I can say I've had many teachers in my lifetime, you know, going through school.

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Nadine Armstrong

But she's the main one I remember because I really learned something from her. And I guess I don't know if it was because of my first grade, but it was something that I really got some education out of.

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Tonia Merideth

What was the what was a typical academic year? Do you remember what month school started and what month it ended?

00:11:05:20 - 00:11:19:19

Nadine Armstrong

If I'm not mistaken, school started in August and it ended either May or June of the school year. It didn't - it wasn't a full 12 month school. It was it was like nine months.

00:11:19:21 - 00:11:26:24

Tonia Merideth

And you touched a little bit on materials in the classroom. Do you remember any books or workbooks?

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Nadine Armstrong

Yes. We had the regular reading book. It was a primary book. I can't think of the name of it, but it was a primary book and we had the writing books, you know, like the ABC books. And it was a book that you could actually sit down and copy the letters. You know, you saw the letters and you wrote the letters the way - the way they were in the book. The arithmetic books.

00:12:00:24 - 00:12:21:26

Nadine Armstrong

We also had those where you could actually sit down - and they had the numbers written and you just had to kind of what - this was the first grade. So you really didn't, like I say, you really didn't have that much with arithmetic because of first grade. But the reading and writing, the reading, the teacher mostly read and you just had to read along with her.

00:12:22:00 - 00:12:42:23

Nadine Armstrong

You know, look at the reading as she did it. And you just kind of read the letter like you have to the say the letters out loud. A, B, you know, stuff like that. And that's pretty much how you learned because by saying it and pronouncing it, it stuck. Stuck to you.

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Tonia Merideth

Do you remember if the condition of the books, could you tell that they were second hand or had come from another school?

00:12:50:00 - 00:12:56:10

Nadine Armstrong

Yeah, they were. They were not new books. Very seldom we ever got new books. Very seldom.

00:12:56:12 - 00:13:10:12

Tonia Merideth

You talked about the firewood and that's how you heated. So for that. Was that a responsibility or a chore of the boys in the school? Were there different chores for the boys and the girls in school?

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Nadine Armstrong

Yeah. Well, like I said, this was first grade, so you didn't have too much. The kids were too small to do, too much. But yes, the boys were responsible for getting the wood in. They didn't have to chop the wood. The wood was already chopped by some adults, you know. But the boys would have to go down to the wood, the woodshed and get the wood and bring it back up to the school.

00:13:32:01 - 00:13:51:10

Nadine Armstrong

And they always piled it in a corner. They had a special corner that they piled it in. And Mrs. Kerr, I think, was the main one that put the wood in the stove. She didn't - I don't think any of the kids did because, you know, you couldn't really depend, trust the kid to put it in there without maybe getting burned or something, so.

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Tonia Merideth

Do you remember how discipline was handled?

00:13:54:23 - 00:14:29:27

Nadine Armstrong

Oh yes. Discipline. Now I never got punished. I was perfect, girl, if you believe that. But discipline was with a ruler for the most part in the hand. You know, you had to hold your hand out and the teacher

would take the ruler and slap it on your hand. That was - that was the main thing. Now, of course, if you really did something bad, you'd have to go stand in the corner, too, and you had to keep your face turned toward the wall.

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Nadine Armstrong

And I don't know how long you had to stand there, because it depends on how severe the punishment would be. But whatever you did, it depended on how severe that was. But those were pretty much the discipline.

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Tonia Merideth

And was the discipline not just for maybe cutting up during class. Was it also for not turning in homework or paying attention?

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Nadine Armstrong

It mainly was for cutting up in class. If you didn't bring in your homework, you had to do double the next day. You had to bring that in. Plus what you had to do for that next - for that night. So. For lunch you did also - you had the opportunity to buy your milk because we had chocolate and vanilla milk and chocolate milk.

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Nadine Armstrong

I used to like the chocolate milk and I used to like it frozen and sometimes it would be frozen. And I think it was like maybe three cents or something like that for the milk. And you could buy your milk and sometime they would have snacks, you know, like potato chips or something like that that you could buy too.

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Nadine Armstrong

But you bought your own lunch, your bagged lunch - you brought that. But the milk or something, you know, and I think sometimes, you know, it depended on your income or whatever. It would be free for some of the students too.

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Tonia Merideth

So for the school you attended the West View school, could you please tell us or describe to us what that building looked like if you were to walk in?

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Nadine Armstrong

It was like two doors. The kindergarten - I mean, the first and second grade was on the left hand side. That's Mrs. Kerr's class. The second door on the right was for the third and fourth graders, and that was Mrs. Hewitt's class and the class - the room in the middle, which was a third room, that's where the principal was.

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Nadine Armstrong

Okay. And in between the two classrooms used to be a blackboard that you could lift up. So whenever you wanted to write on the blackboard, you just had it down. And if you wanted to share something with the class - with the classes - if you wanted the classes together you just lifted the blackboard up. And like I said of the bathrooms, now, the bathrooms, the bathrooms were outhouses.

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Nadine Armstrong

You had to go outside and there was a bathroom for the girls on one side and bathroom for the boys on the other. And they had, you know, the little covers it was built where you had a cover, where you walked around to go inside the bathroom so that you couldn't see the person in the bathroom.

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Nadine Armstrong

And that's the way it was for both boys and girls, because the boys were always trying to get around there for the girls. But it didn't happen. There was always somebody there.

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Tonia Merideth

Any experiences that you remember in the community about going to a segregated school and - or the differences between the Black schools or white schools?

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Nadine Armstrong

No. But at that time I went to school about one year in '54, and with my father being in the military, we left West Bottom and we went to Fort Belvoir and we were there for three years and the military schools were already together, Black and whites. So that's the way the military schools were all the time.

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Nadine Armstrong

So I had already had that experience. You know, I had already - I was experiencing that with military schools and I actually in the years that I attended school, I don't recall ever having any really serious problems with being mixed. You know, I know there were some issues. There were some issues. But myself, I don't know.

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Nadine Armstrong

I seem to been able - I seem to been able to get along with anybody. And that's the way it was. I mean, I don't know whether it was just me or, you know, my personality or what, but I just got along with everybody. And my best - some of my best friends were white, you know, so. But there were some issues.

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Nadine Armstrong

Now, I'm not saying there weren't, because when it happened, when it first happened, I can remember the - some of the incidents that happened. There were some arguments, some fights, you know, but they were nothing that I was involved in or I had anything, you know, any experiences from.

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Tonia Merideth

But you do remember.

00:19:14:22 - 00:19:17:02

Nadine Armstrong

Oh yes, I do remember. Yeah.

00:19:17:04 - 00:19:23:23

Tonia Merideth

Tell us about your path after you left traditional school. High school.

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Nadine Armstrong

Oh, well, when I left high school, let's see, I finished high school in Kaiserslautern, Germany, in 1964, '67, I came back to the United States, came back home to West Bottom, and then I started business school in Richmond. Smithman business school in Richmond. I attended that for a year and then I started working at Morton Frozen Food in Crozet, Virginia, and I stayed there about two or three years.

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Nadine Armstrong

In the meantime, while I was working there, I ended up marrying Odell Armstrong and having my daughter - first daughter - a year or so later, Odella Armstrong. And then I started working with a program that was called the, what was it? It was a daycare program and it was through at the time, it was through, it wasn't MACA (Monticello Community Action Agency) at the time, it was another.

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Nadine Armstrong

There was another name for it. I can't remember the name at that time, but it was for youngsters and it was right at the Rosenwald, but they had it at the West Bottom West View School, which was the Rosenwald School. And I used to drive the bus to pick up the kids, and they had the kids there during the day.

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Nadine Armstrong

And I think it was about five days. I think it was on the weekdays, five days a week. And eventually the daycare turn - changed and they took it to another - they moved it somewhere else. And so the senior citizen program started, and that's when MACA came on board and I continued to drive the van for the senior citizen program, and they stayed at the Rosenwald School as well.

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Nadine Armstrong

They, you know, participated at that school as well. And I picked the seniors up all around the county of Fluvanna and brought them to that site there. And they would come in and they would have their day, they would have games and they would have lunch, you know, play bingo, different activities that the seniors head. And once they finished their activities for the day, I would carry them back home.

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Nadine Armstrong

So that lasted for a number of years. I think I worked with them maybe about nine years. And eventually I left the senior program, which didn't end. I just left and went to driving a school bus for Fluvanna county and I did that for about ten years. And while I was driving a bus for Fluvanna county, I also started going to Piedmont Virginia Community College to further my education.

00:22:10:16 - 00:22:48:16

Nadine Armstrong

And eventually I stopped driving a bus and started working with a program called Workforce Investment Act, WIA. That's a nonprofit program, like. And I started working with dislocated workers. And while I was doing my grad studies at the college, I also got the job working with them and started working with plant closures. That meant that any plant that had people working for. If the plant closed,

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Nadine Armstrong

everybody working at that plant was laid off and they would be without jobs. And I would help those people that were laid off by bringing them into a program for furthering their education. Some of them didn't have high school diplomas, so we would try to get them back into getting school to help them get their diplomas, high school diplomas or GEDs, not high school but - GED, same thing.

00:23:14:08 - 00:23:46:17

Nadine Armstrong

And some of them that had their GEDs, we would - they would go to college, start classes at college if they wanted to do that. Others, we would try to get them jobs. They would come into the Virginia Employment Commission, get training, do research on computers, apply for jobs, and we'd help them try to get jobs. So either way, they had the opportunity to find some type of service to help them get back into the job market.

00:23:46:19 - 00:24:16:08

Nadine Armstrong

And that was a program that I was able to help them with. And I did that for a number of years, and that was one of the most rewarding programs that I ever worked with. And I did that, like I said, for a number of years, and I don't know how many plant closures I actually worked with, but every plant that closed in the Charlottesville and surrounding areas like Louisa, Fluvanna, all of the surrounding - Gordonsville - all of the surrounding area that every plant that closed.

00:24:16:09 - 00:24:47:28

Nadine Armstrong

I worked with and it was a number, it was a number of people, believe me. And the reason I enjoyed it was because I had the experience myself in a manner of speaking. So because I had to get back out there in the job market myself and being the age I was, I could relate to how they were, you know, and so and how they felt. And so it was like I say, it was very rewarding.

00:24:48:01 - 00:25:01:24

Tonia Merideth

So in thinking back on your education, what did you think about the education that you were receiving at the time and what do you - when you think back on it, what do you think about, you know, the education you received attending West View School?

00:25:01:26 - 00:25:34:23

Nadine Armstrong

Oh, good day. It was like I say, Mrs. Kerr, to this day was a blessing to me. And I think if it wasn't for her, I may not be where I am today because she's the one that gave me the incentive to learn because, you know, she kind of pushed you into wanting to learn and she had this way about her in doing it.

00:25:34:25 - 00:25:49:18

Nadine Armstrong

It wasn't like you had to do something, but you want to do it and you want to do it this way. You know what I'm saying? And that I think that that's the main thing that encouraged me to do what I do.

00:25:49:20 - 00:26:00:18

Tonia Merideth

So in thinking back on the education that you received, did your parents work to try to instill the need for education in you and your siblings?

00:26:00:21 - 00:26:33:14

Nadine Armstrong

Absolutely. Absolutely. My father was very, very into education. Like I say, he was military. He was a lifer. He was in the military for 24 to 28 years. He was very educated, very educated, and he was all about education. And my mother as well, both of them were high school graduates, both. My dad, he did a lot in the military.

00:26:33:16 - 00:26:56:22

Nadine Armstrong

He continued his education through the military and he instilled that in all of us. He wanted us to learn. He wanted us to do the best we could with our lives. And he figured education was the route to take. The best way to - to be able to do it. In order for you to do, you got to learn.

00:26:56:25 - 00:27:18:00

Nadine Armstrong

And that's pretty much what he installed in us, you know. And it - I mean, he had a rough life and he didn't want us to have to go through the type of life he went through. And that's why he installed you know, instilled it in us. But yes, definitely, definitely.

00:27:18:02 - 00:27:29:07

Tonia Merideth

What do you think of the efforts right now to collect the memories and legacies of the students who attended the Rosenwald-Washington schools and the restoration efforts going on right now?

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Nadine Armstrong

I love it. I think you guys should be rewarded in a big way because it's something that should have been done a long time ago because the schools that have been lost shouldn't been lost. They are a part of history and they should still be here to be a part of history. And I'm so proud to be a part of this.

00:27:54:09 - 00:28:24:01

Nadine Armstrong

You know, it's a very rewarding experience for me to be sitting here right now and talking to you and to know that I actually am a person that attended one of these schools and benefited from it and can sit here and talk to you about it, you know, and knowing that something is now being done to make these schools known to the public.

00:28:24:03 - 00:28:51:28

Nadine Armstrong

And it's just great. I'm thankful that you guys are doing this and it is very rewarding and hopefully it will get out there and more people will, you know, benefit from it because there's still a lot of students that are living today that don't even know anything about it, you know. And hopefully, you know, once they find out about it, they will be rewarded as well, because it's great.

00:28:52:00 - 00:29:01:20

Nadine Armstrong

It's great, you guys - you guys ought to be very, very, very rewarded and thanked. And I thank you today for what you're doing.

00:29:01:23 - 00:29:02:21

Tonia Merideth

Thank you.