

Episode 8

Why I Believe JOHN & JILL KENNEDY

[BEGIN MUSIC]

We believe in God the Eternal Father... We believe in the bible...and in his son Jesus Christ...to be the word of God. We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous... We believe that through the atonement of Christ all mankind will be saved. We may say that we follow the Admonition of Paul. We believe all things, we hope all things, and we've endured many things.

[MUSIC]

NARRATOR: The Mormon Channel now presents Why I Believe.

RICK STARR: Hello and welcome to Why I Believe. My name is Rick Starr and today we're very privileged to have Brother John Kennedy and Sister Jill Kennedy his wife here with us. Brother Kennedy is a judge on Utah State 3rd District Court and he also along with Sister Kennedy they were a Mission President couple in St. Petersburg, Russia. And so today we're going to talk about a whole bunch of areas. First of all welcome to the show. We appreciate you being here today.

JILL KENNEDY: Thank you.

JOHN KENNEDY: Yes.

RICK STARR: Good to have you. I'd like to start with a little bit about your background. I'm going to start with you Brother Kennedy and you're growing up years. You're a convert to the church and how you were introduced to the church.

JOHN KENNEDY: Well, my grandparents were from Sweden on my mother's side. They were living in Minneapolis at the turn of the 20th century and were contacted by the missionaries and a very interesting story on their part to for conversion. But they joined, they were baptized in 1914. My mother came along just before they were baptized and she was baptized at age 8. She married a Catholic fellow in the late 30s and he was my dad. They agreed that my brother and I could join what ever church we wanted to. As we grew up my mother took us to Primary and I must admit that it was not my favorite experience. But my brother and I both attended Primary when we were little. But when I became oh about age 10 I had some friends who were active in the Catholic church and I started attending the Catholic church and I received my first communion in the Catholic church. My brother and I were active in scouting and in a troop. At that point we were living in Milwaukee Wisconsin and we moved. My father was a manager of a Highers Root Beer Bottling Plant and he was transferred up to Minneapolis. We moved up there and we wanted to stay involved in the scouting and so my mother knew from her childhood days

a fellow who happened to be the scout master for the LDS ward then it was the ward there in Minneapolis and so my brother and I attended that branch and gradually over time we learned more about the church and and we were both moving forward in scouting and we received our Eagle award on Sunday the 3rd as I recall the 3rd of February 1957. We received our eagles and that same day we were baptized and confirmed members of the church.

RICK STARR: That's amazing. So what age was that then?

JOHN KENNEDY: I was 15. Just barely and my brother was about a year and half older than I.

RICK STARR: So you were kind of reintroduced to the gospel or the church through scouting.

JOHN KENNEDY: That's right.

RICK STARR: Well that's great. That's a great scouting success story being that scouting is such an integral part of what we do with our young men. Helping them to grow and use life skills. That's great. Did you stay active in scouting after that?

JOHN KENNEDY: Yes, over the years I've been involved, you know, I've been in different positions in the ward involved in scouting. I was teacher of the teacher aid young men and then I became Bishop and so very much involved in the scouting. While we were on our mission in Russia they don't have scouting as a church program. We have the Aronic Priesthood activity program. And they really hadn't been doing much on our mission on that front and we had a couple come over Dee and Carolyn Gross from Salt Lake City both of them were Silver Beavers in scouting. Very accomplished. And we assigned them to start a scouting program for our Aronic Priesthood there. We called it scouting but it was really Aronic Priesthood activity and they've been keeping that up since then.

RICK STARR: So that's great. That's great. Sister Kennedy, how did you meet your husband and come to be introduced to the gospel?

JILL KENNEDY: Well, when I was growing up I grew up in the Chicago area and I went to a lot of different churches. I was actually baptized as a baby in the Russian Orthodox Church. My mother's family was from Belarus and I was baptized in that church. As a teenager I was active in the Presbyterian Church in Arlington Heights where we lived. Then I went off to college and in our Sophomore year we met in German class and started to date around Christmas of that year and that's when John started telling me about the church. He was the first member of the church I ever really knew. He tried to keep all of my association with the church positive. For instance he gave me my engagement in the Junior Sunday school room of the ward building that we attended.

RICK STARR: (LAUGHING) That's romantic. (LAUGHING)

JILL KENNEDY: Yes, and I attended quite frequently with him. Didn't quite know what to think about it. I was a little, thought the story of Joseph Smith was a little strange and we were married

before our senior year in college and then decided to go to Stanford Law School and so we moved all the way across the country to Stanford, and our social life when we got to Stanford was pretty much the church and the ward there. The bishop there kept asking me if he could send the missionaries because I was not a member and I kept telling him no. That I wasn't interested in joining the church. But...

JOHN KENNEDY: Tell them about what the bishop said in terms if you don't want to join the church you can still have a church job.

JILL KENNEDY: Yes, I had a job. I was the ward Sunday School Librarian and was sort of funny because people would come running in at the last minute and say, "I need a picture of the Liahona". (LAUGHING) What! I had no idea what that was, but I did do a lot of picture mounting and categorizing but after we'd been there a little while John had a study group with a number of LDS members in the Law School and one of them was named David Benion and he was a returned missionary and he just decided kind of on his own that I was ready to hear the gospel and he didn't ask. He just came to our house and taught me the first discussion and I just said, "David I know what you're doing and I'm not going to join the church". Okay, would you read this part of the Book of Mormon and I'll come back next week. So he came back the next week and it was the second discussion and he said I'd like to set August 22nd as your baptism date and I just laughed. Set whatever date you want. I'm not going to join the church. Well he kept coming and kept teaching me the discussions and all of a sudden I found myself committed to be baptized on August 22nd and I told this story to quite a few people in Russia because I think it's a typical convert story. Up until that day, August 22nd I was in a lot of turmoil. I didn't know whether this was the right decision. The right thing to do. It was really hard. It was a hard time and I remember sitting in the baptismal service with a lot of the people from our Standard Student Ward there to see the baptism and I was sitting there in my white clothes and I remember thinking if I could get out of there without being too embarrassed I probably would do it. But then John took me down into the water and baptized me and all those feelings of doubt and anxiety left and I've really never felt like I've made the wrong decision at all. I've always felt really good about it since then. It's just sort of like along with your sins all that anxiety was washed away.

RICK STARR: All that fear.

JILL KENNEY: Right.

RICK STARR: Yes

JOHN KENNEDY: We had a lot of good friends in those days and we still do of course. We had especially people who reached out both to Jill and to me during that time. One of the other members of the study group who she had mentioned was Elder Quentin Cook who now of course is one of the twelve, but he and David Benion and I were class mates at Stanford and he and his wife Mary were very influential and helpful to us and we had another couple they now live in California and do a lot of church service missionary work. He's a doctor and

they travel all over helping and their name is Robert and Shirley Griffin and they were also very kind and helpful as were other members of that same ward. We had, when we were still back east we went to Harvard as undergrads. We had the same thing there; a lot of good people who were helping us and reaching out to us. I was fortunate to have President Eyring as one of my Home teaching companions and has a freshman their I had Richard Bushman professor of History and noted LDS author that were supporting us and helping us and encouraging us both to be active in the church and and be better people then we otherwise might have been in those days. So, I think any convert story is a story of a lot of people involved in helping in supporting and encourage.

RICK STARR: A lot of caring.

JOHN KENNEDY: Right

RICK STARR: Sister Kennedy, talk a little bit about your conversion story from there on. Was it before or after your baptism you had to gain a testimony of the Book of Mormon and the story of Joseph Smith and so on. Talk a little bit about something that helped you turn the corner.

JILL KENNEDY: Well, I think that processes is very much as it says in the scriptures line upon line you start to look at different principles and then gradually gain the testimony as you practice them. I think one of the things that concerned me about joining the church, because I was the major bread winter at the time because John was in Law school at the time, was the principle of tithing. I just couldn't see, we were paying Stanford tuition and trying to support ourselves and and I just couldn't see how we could do that. But I decided if I were going to be a part of this church I needed to be faithful in doing that so we started paying tithing as soon as I joined the church on my salary. John of course up to this point was paying tithing on what he earned but we started paying tithing on my salary and it was amazing. We seemed to be able to meet our expenses and have money enough to pay the Stanford tuition. We certainly weren't rich. We were poor students like most of the other people we knew, but we did just fine and so I gained a pretty strong testimony of tithing. And then I was interested in a family history and I think that was one of the things that attracted me to the church. One of the gospel concepts that I I felt was a really great thing that you could offer these blessings and ordinances to people who had not had a chance to have those and so I wanted to do family history and quickly found out that at that time their wasn't much you could do in either Belarus which was my mother's side of the family or Italy which was my father's side of the family. My maiden name was Julianee so I started working on John's Swedish family history and put that in order and did some research and we came out here and did some research on the Swedish line and his Irish line. I gained a real testimony of of family history work because I just felt it showed that the Lord was loving and kind and just to be able to give that privilege to people who hadn't had an opportunity to hear the gospel.

RICK STARR: That's wonderful. And you're now serving a as a missionary right.

JILL KENNEDY: I am a church service missionary in the family history library.

RICK STARR: In family history.

JILL KENNEDY: Right.

RICK STARR: Isn't that interesting....

JILL KENNEDY: Yes, I was supposed to be....

RICK STARR: You've kind of come full circle.

JILL KENNEDY: I was supposed to be the Russian expert or missionary who translates Russian which is, I'm not very good at it at this point, but I'm learning.

RICK STARR: Oh, that's great. Well, thank you for your service. If you're just joining us you're listening to Why I Believe on the Mormon Channel and this is Rick Starr. Today we have President and Sister Kennedy. I'm calling you President Kennedy because you were the President of the mission in St. Petersburg, Russia. Also, a judge in the Utah State 3rd District Court and it's so good to have you both here. So far we've been talking a little bit about both of your conversions and Sister Kennedy you just shared with us about that line upon line concept that has helped you and some of the kind of the faith precedes the miracle. Jumping in and doing the things that know build your faith then seeing those miracles happen in your life. President Kennedy if you have anything you could share about in your younger life that helped you become more converted to the gospel. You were reintroduced to gospel through scouting then as you lived the gospel was their anything special in your life that helped you.

JOHN KENNEDY: I felt that one of the great strengths of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is the Priesthood and as a former member of the Catholic Church I was also interested in Priesthood because it's a very fundamental part of that faith as well. As I met and became acquainted with people who were priesthood bearers I of course watched them very carefully in my experiences in scouting and I saw among those people real blessings in their lives coming from the priesthood and I saw the power of the priesthood demonstrated and it helped me to to gain a a belief in the church. I also read the LeGrand Richards book A Marvelous Work and a Wonder. And he talked about the priesthood at length in that book and that made a big impression on my mind in those days and it's still with me today and those those things helped build my testimony as a as a young man. As I was baptized and started doing things in the church and going off to college I began to feel that I could distinguish the feelings of the spirit in my life and I think that was a major influence on me in those days. Not that I was perfect in all ways, you know, follow the directions of the spirit but I felt that I could tell when I was being influenced by the spirit and that that really made a big difference to me. One of the things that happened to me was when the first day that I met the person who is now my wife, Jill. I came back to my dormitory that night. I had a good friend, my roommate who had also been in high school with me and I said to him, "Gary I had an interesting experience in my German class today". He said, "What was that"? I said, "Well I met a woman that I thought would

make a great wife and mother”. And that was my my sweetheart and now my eternal companion Jill. So, the spirit spoke to me on that occasion and I think has guided me down through the years and is, I’ve been able to listen and hearken to the spirit. It’s brought a lot of great blessings in my life.

RICK STARR: That is great. Let’s jump forward a little bit and talk about your mission; your call to St. Petersburg Mission as a mission President and mission mother. Talk a little bit about that and receiving the call and now you have ancestors from that area.

JILL KENNEDY: Right.

RICK STARR: I’m understanding. Do you speak Russian President Kennedy?

JOHN KENNEDY: No. Both of us of course as we’ve said we met in German class. I had 2 years at Harvard and she had 4. So we were pretty good in German, at least in college, but we had no Russian. I didn’t want to take Russian when I was in college because it was way too hard. I mean who wanted to study that when you could learn an easier language? So, when we were asked to go in and see President Monson which was around end of November of 2000 we really had no idea where we would be called. We were kind of warned when we were interviewed earlier we might be considered for a foreign speaking mission and we were thinking you know, maybe Australia (LAUGHING) as a foreign speaking language. But President Monson right out in front said we’d like to call you on a mission to a Russian speaking mission. We both were stunned with Jill’s family background that we knew about at that time. It was totally out of the blue, but it was still quite a surprise and neither of us spoke any Russian. We started immediately with tutors learning and from January until into April of the next spring. We went to the MTC 6 days a week and spent about 11-12 hours a day learning Russian. So, by the time we went we could say prayers in Russian. Bear our testimonies in Russian. We ended up speaking virtually every week while we were in Russia in Russian. It was a great experience.

RICK STARR: So you started about where a lot of these 19 year old and 21 years...

JILL KENNEDY: Right

RICK STARR: ...old missionaries start off themselves.

JOHN KENNEDY: Exactly

RICK STARR: Yes

JILL KENNEDY: One of the things that we remember about our interview with President Monson that he called us to this Russian speaking mission then he said, “You know, in Russia they wear those big fur hats. Then he pointed at John and said, “You’d look good in one of those. (LAUGHING)

RICK STARR: (LAUGHING) Did you get one of those?

JILL KENNEDY: We did. (LAUGHING)

JOHN KENNEDY: For our first Christmas we had a photograph of the 2 of us standing in front of one of the Russian Cathedrals with these Russian hats on. I had one and she had a smaller one and we sent a copy of that to President Monson. I don't know if they gave it to him ultimately, but any way we we wanted him to see how we really looked.

RICK STARR: (LAUGHING) Just to prove how good you looked in one.

JOHN KENNEDY: Well yes, I'm not so sure how good we really looked but.

JILL KENNEDY: But it was really kind of a stunning call. It was very surprising and our kids were too. President Monson told us that we could tell our family so we did and our son David and his wife had come in from California. It was right after Thanksgiving weekend and they had come in and we were having lunch after this meeting. We hadn't told them where we were going and then we told them what happened and they were all just sort of stunned too and we went to lunch and every time the conversation would die down David would say, "Wow". (LAUGHING) And then...

RICK STARR: (LAUGHING) Everybody was surprised.

JILL KENNEDY: Yes, it was a big surprise and I remember going to bed and thinking it's going to be okay and then about 5 o'clock I woke up in the morning and I sat up in bed and said, "Are they crazy?" (LAUGHING)

RICK STARR: (LAUGHING)

JOHN KENNEDY: Well, we had a wonderful time in Russia. It was a great experience.

JILL KENNEDY: It was a great experience.

JOHN KENNEDY: When we got home we started again with some of our family history research. I found a book that had some of the Swedish information in it. As I was tracing back the ancestry in that book I found that some of our relatives actually came from Sweden way back in the 1600's. Those same relatives, in fact, had origins from Finland and so I wrote out to all of my cousins you know who thought they were pure blooded Swedes and have been kidding me because I'm half Irish over the years said you're really part Finish and then I found out that one of our relatives even farther back in the early 1600's was a Lutheran minister in Finland presiding over an area that later in 1938-39 was taken over by Russia and that area that he presided over included Weiburk which was in our mission in Russia. So, we actually were called thinking that it was Jill's background through her mother with Belarus when in addition to that I actually had relatives who were in the same area that we presided over when we were in Russia.

RICK STARR: That's amazing. So....

JOHN KENNEDY: It really is.

RICK STARR: ...it's a homeland for both of you of sorts.

JOHN KENNEDY: Right.

RICK STARR: How did it go when you first got there. Starting out in that new and foreign situation?

JILL KENNEDY: Well, we had been there as tourists to St. Petersburg in 1993.

RICK STARR: Okay.

JILL KENNEDY: And we arrived then 8 years later and I think we were both surprised at how much change there had been in that that time period. Of course '93 was right after the Soviet Union broke up and so there'd been 8 years then and it was much more commercial. Things were much more readily available. It always has been and still is just a beautiful, beautiful city. I think that some of the problems that you have in the situation like that is that it's also probably one of the more affluent areas in Russia and I think because of that people are less willing to listen to the gospel. I think the missionaries who went out to some of the other towns farther away from the city people were more interested in meeting the Americans and talking to them about the church. It was a little easier to make contact with people. But in the city they are used to a lot of tourists and a lot of Americans who are coming there. The members who are there are wonderful, dedicated, devoted, making great sacrifices to participate in the church. Many of them don't have very good transportation. They don't have cars they have to use public transportation. Sometimes it would take them 2-3 hours to get to church and so they had to be really dedicated to stay active in the church and their was just some wonderful members we met while we were there. The other thing I think is interesting about a mission like Russia is we had wonderful missionaries. The mission department sent young men and young woman and senior couples to us who were strong and active and could handle both the language and the conditions cause living conditions were not great for the missionaries, they were fine for us, but for the missionaries sometimes the living conditions were not real wonderful and it's a tough mission. We had no cars and no bicycles so all the missionaries used public transportation exclusively also.

JOHN KENNEDY: We had about 120 missionaries when we first arrived and they were, as Jill said, wonderful and we had good leaders that were already in place both within the mission structure as well as within the local member structure. The area of our mission really was

probably the size of New Mexico, Arizona and Utah combined and that's how much land there it.

RICK STARR: That's really big.

JOHN KENNEDY: And it stretched from the above the Arctic Circle all the way down to the city of Klenengrad. Which in the old days before the 2nd World War was Kliningsburg and we had probably 3000 members of the church in that area that all had joined within oh probably 10 years presiding the time that we arrived so, a lot of new people. There were no stakes so as mission president I was also in essence the Stake President because I presided over not only the missionaries but also the...

RICK STARR: ...the districts.

JOHN KENNEDY: We had 1 district and I was presiding over that plus we had a number of other branches who were scattered around so it was an interesting, interesting time and a lot of challenges not only with the language but the differences in customs and so forth. We did a couple of things that I think were helpful to the church and I think to the local members. One of them was practice that had been started by Gary Anderson who was a president that preceded us 2 presidents before I came and he was able to have some of our missionaries go into the Hermitage which is the 2nd or 3rd largest art museum in the world. It's just this beautiful collection of art put into the setting of one of the Czars and Czarinas great palaces. The winter palace in St. Petersburg ah which has probably over 1000 rooms I would say in it.

RICK STARR: Wow.

JOHN KENNEDY: So, we had some missionaries who had been rendering some service there. While we were there which was from 2001-2004 we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the church coming into St. Petersburg or Russia and at the same time it was also the 300th anniversary of the founding of St. Petersburg by Peter the Great that was in 1703. So there were people coming from all over the world for this celebration and almost everybody who goes to Russia and to St. Petersburg goes to the Hermitage cause of tourist, so it's a major center and we volunteered our missionaries for extra service during that period of time and I think at one point we had oh probably close to 90% of our missionaries that were rendering at least some hours of service during the week in the Hermitage. They would help with the tickets they would help with people who didn't speak Russian to serve as translators and so forth and it was a great experience and a lot of high profile exposure for the church and all was positive except there were a few kind of critical native Russians who wondered why these young Mormon missionaries from many of them from America why they were featured so prominently there at the Hermitage and the head of the Hermitage who is a national figure there in Russia because of his position said, "Well these are fine people, they speak good Russian, they wear nice clothes, and they smile a lot, so next question.

RICK STARR: Who better could you have.

JOHN KENNEDY: That's right. So when the celebration had been completed and things died down a little bit the head of the Hermitage held a special meeting to honor all of those who gave service and we met in the Hermitage Theater where they conduct ballets and symphony performances and there were probably 200 people that came to that. About half of them were our missionaries and so the head of the Hermitage gave a speech in Russian and thanked everybody for their service and said how much he appreciated and how much the nation was grateful and then he turned to me and he said, "Would you like to say anything?" And I thanked him, I stood up and I tried with my Russian, I thanked him for the honor of being able to serve there and then I said, "We would like to sing for you." And without rehearsing we had all of the missionaries stand and I said, "Would you please sing for the leader of the Hermitage the Russian hymn (SAID THE HYMN IN RUSSIAN) which is High On A Mountain Top and so the missionaries sang and they were singing in harmony it was just beautiful and the acoustics in the room in that hall were wonderful and it brought tears to all of our eyes it was really an emotional, spiritual kind of experience. But those kinds of things happened regularly, you know, where you had wonderful spiritual experiences on a bigger scale and many of them on a smaller scale.

RICK STARR: That's really neat. For any of you just joining us this is Rick Starr on the Why I Believe show on the Mormon channel and I'm very privileged today to have Brother John Kennedy and Sister Jill Kennedy with me. We're talking about their mission and they served as the Mission President couple in St. Petersburg, Russia. Was there any conversions you said you had about 90% of your missionaries offering some sort of service during a 300 year celebration they were having there. Was there any conversion stories that came of that or maybe even just a change of perception of what the church is in St. Petersburg?

JOHN KENNEDY: I think there were both conversions and had a change in perception and you know you never really know all of the influence that you're having. I remember one situation we had a couple that came into the Hermitage from South Africa and didn't know anything about the church at all or have any real interest in the church as far as I knew and while there in the Hermitage the gentleman the male of the couple had a heart attack and they were not equipped believe it or not and this woman didn't speak any Russian and all and so our missionaries helped facilitate bringing in adequate medical help and also served as translators for this woman not only then, but as her husband recuperated and was able to get back enough strength so the doctors would allow them to travel and when they returned to South Africa they sent to us a very warm and grateful card expressing their feelings, not only about what had happened but towards the church and how we were in the right place in the right time for them. So things like that happened. There were other young volunteers with our missionaries while we were there who were influenced and became interested in the church and at least one that I'm aware of that joined the church because of that friendship.

RICK STARR: That's wonderful. Sister Kennedy you had a story that you wanted to share.

JILL KENNEDY: I just wanted to share a story of the spirit and the influence of the spirit in our lives there. We got there of course in July and in September the housekeeper that we had who had been there for 10 years who is not a member of church, spoke only Russian quit. And, I thought what are we going to do? I didn't know where to go to find somebody. But just a week or so before we had been out doing some sight seeing with one of our children and we had taken along a young Russian girl who spoke pretty good English and she was just a delightful young woman and she mentioned to me that her mother who was also an active member of the church was a concern because she had a job where she had to work 3 days on and 3 days off. Which meant that many times she had to miss her meetings on Sunday and it was pretty good job and pretty good pay and jobs were hard to find and she was concerned and but was really looking for a job that would allow her to attend her meetings every Sunday. So we sent out word to the various branches in St. Petersburg that we needed a new housekeeper at the mission home and mission office and there were a couple of applicants and we interviewed them and I just felt quite strongly that we should pursue Tatiana this woman who was looking for a new job and John said to me, "well before we hire her you need to go to her apartment and see how she keeps that". So we did and and we went and and she had she served us some cookies that she'd made and her apartment was lovely and I said I think this is the right thing and then we offered the job to her and she just started to cry and she said, "I have been praying so hard for some way to support my family". Her husband had died. "To support my family but also be able to be active in the church", and she was just a wonderful person. I didn't consider her an employee. She was a friend and she spoke no English or very little but we managed to communicate and just such a great person and what a wonderful opportunity for me and also for her to have her prayers answered.

JOHN KENNEDY: She was a great help. We would have our missionaries come in in large numbers on a regular basis and when they were new missionaries coming in the old new missionaries going home we could have up to 17 or 18 of them stay in our apartment. We had couple of rooms where we had a bunch of bunk beds and so she was really into being able to accommodate those changes with all the bedding and everything that had to be done but in addition her main job was, you know, keeping the mission office clean and helping down there where we had a lot of offices. People coming and going all the time and so she worked very hard and was a real help. Jill suggested that we had been able to meet her daughter when when Jill and some other visitors in town. That was another thing that happened. We would get people that would come, church people, church leaders, sometimes parents coming to pick up their children. Sometimes total strangers and sometimes people we knew who were not members of the church would come into town. I never had time to go with all of those people because of the duties of the office but, Sister Kennedy would try and make time if she had it in her schedule and help those people. We had one experience that again involved the Hermitage. We had a friend who was a high school friend of mine whose husband was suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease and they were not members of the church when they wrote to us and told us they were planning to come to St. Petersburg. He had apparently been able through technical help been able to plan this whole trip himself even though he was completely wheelchair bound and not able to do anything other then to move his eyes basically. He was fed intravenously, he was on a respirator. So they came when they went to the Hermitage

believe it or not the Hermitage had no way for him to get in in a wheelchair. It was not accessible. Except one door which they told us, well we only open that door for the president of the country and so we you have to figure out some other way to get him inside. So his wheel chair with all the equipment stuff weighed about 600 pounds. He had some full time people helping him and with our missionaries we actually carried him up the front steps and carried his wheelchair separately up the front steps, connected together with all the tubes and so forth and got them in and of course their gratitude for the help that they received from the church and the these missionaries who were willing to you know take part of their preparation day to help them get in they were very grateful. He has since passed away but his wife every time we communicate she repeats her gratitude for that help that she received from the church to make it a special experience for her husband.

RICK STARR: Well that's really great, that's really great. You know I had the opportunity to interview previously some of your missionaries on this program and that was a delightful program. I really enjoyed talking to them and I'm interested to hear a little bit more about your relationship and about the missionaries you worked with.

JOHN KENNEDY: Well we had as Jill said wonderful missionaries and we tried to do some things that were fun and enjoyable. We would hold special zone conferences where we would sometimes go outside the box a little bit in terms of what we taught what we were what kind of experiences they were having. We would try to do team building in that context. Where we would have contests and so forth and I think the missionaries enjoyed those kind of things. But one of the things that I remember and I thought was different about our message was on the way from St. Petersburg to the town of Skofe which was maybe 300 klm away from St. Petersburg. There was a side road that went off of the main highway and the first time we drove on that road I saw a sign and it was pointing to the town that was located on that side road and the name of the town is in Russian translated, would be corners. You know like 4 corners. But the word the Russian word is ugly and it was spelled just like we would spell ugly, u-g-l-y. They put on this sign because it was getting down close to the border of Russia. They had the language not only in Russian but they also had it in phonetic English spelling. So they had the word u-g-l-y written on the sign and so every time we would go down which was every 2 months or so we would stop at that junction and I would have who ever was with us the elders that were with us or sisters go out and stand next to this 'ugly' sign (LAUGHING) which had the word ugly and then an arrow pointing and they would stand so the arrow was pointing right at them (LAUGHING) and we would take their photos and we would then hang the photos in the in the mission office as kind of a badge of honor for the missionaries who traveled down to Skofe with us. We tried to do things like that that would be, you know, little change of pace little different for the for the elders and sisters so that they would have some memories of fun in addition to a lot of hard word that they did.

RICK STARR: That's neat. Sister Kennedy.

JILL KENNEDY: The other thing that I think was an interesting part of our mission was that we had a number of Eastern European missionaries; Russians, Bulgarians, Armenians. A few from Europe also, but mostly Eastern Europeans and...

JOHN KENNEDY: We had one from Mongolia

JILL KENNEDY: Yes. We had one from Mongolia and most of them were just delightful and very dedicated. They did not have an MTC experience at that time. They just came directly into the mission and so it was a hard transition for a lot of them but I remember there was one young man who came from a very small town in Eastern Russia and he had been Branch President there and he came to the mission. We had the usual dinner and welcome and then took pictures and John would interview the missionaries at that time and I was usually in the kitchen cleaning up and getting ready for breakfast the next day and this young man came into the kitchen and he had a wad of rubles in his hand and he, I'm sure under very reduced circumstances, compared to what we had had saved this money and most of the Eastern European missionaries were supported by the church and he handed me this money and said, "I have saved this and I want to help to pay for my mission", which was just the sweetest thing and I said, "Well I think that's just wonderful that you want to do that. I want you to talk to President Kennedy about that and see what he wants you to do". But it just showed to me that he was just very dedicated to this service and that he had sacrificed to make it possible.

RICK STARR: That is amazing. They they have alot different circumstance over there then we do don't they.

JILL KENNEDY: Yes, they do.

RICK STARR: Are their any particular conversion stories that were touching to you through your presidency there.

JOHN KENNEDY: I think they all were touching.

(EVERYBODY LAUGHING)

JOHN KENNEDY: They were.

RICK STARR: Memorable.

JOHN KENNEDY: Everyone was, you know, really remarkable. There were many miraculous things that happened in the process. We were, I think, blessed by the conditions of the time when we first arrived. There was a lot of friendliness towards America in Russia at that time. It tended to wane as we were there over the 3 years. Largely because of what was happening in the world scene. But still the people who were kind to us were were truly remarkable. We had a district president who is now serving with his wife on a mission in Helsinki at the temple. They were just called a couple of months back. But this Brother was a doctor. A cardiologist in Russia and one day he was in a great hurry rushing from

one place in the city to another and he came across some missionaries who stopped him and said, you know “We’re missionaries, we’re representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and we’d like to talk to you”. He said, “Oh I’m in a hurry and I can’t talk to you today. I’ll be back here a week from today if you’re here I’ll talk to you then. Well a lot of times people will give the missionaries that kind of a promise but not, you know, deliver on them so the next week the missionaries were faithful enough to be there so they were there and sure enough this Brother came by again and they were able to start teaching him and they taught him a couple of discussion and then asked if they could go to his his apartment and maybe teach his wife and he said, “Oh, I don’t think she’d be interested. Well they ultimately were able to convince that that was a good idea and they did in fact. She ended up joining the church and then he joined later. Not too much longer after she did, but she joined first. They were very interested in the church because of the churches belief that families can be together forever and they had lost their daughter who was about 19 years old. Not to long before the missionaries first contacted this father and so when he and his wife heard about the churches belief in the eternal nature of the family and that we can be united together that made a huge difference in their lives and ever since has made a great difference in the life. That kind of story in one way or another is repeated almost in every conversion story that we that we saw.

RICK STARR: I’m sure there’s a lot of different perception of the church that the missionaries would run into. From your point of view as a mission president couple what do you see as the major road block or or perception that you needed to over come toward the church.

JILL KENNEDY: Well, I think most Russians consider the church an American church and they also consider the Russian Orthodox Church a Russian church. As a matter of fact the name Russian Orthodox in Russian means True Slovak church and so I think most people in Russia consider themselves members of that church whether they’re active in it or not. Probably 10% of the population attends church with any kind of regularity, but they consider themselves Orthodox. We even had a missionary who ran into somebody on the street and said, “Oh, I’m not interested, I’m an atheist. I’m Russian Orthodox”.
(LAUGHING)

RICK STARR: (LAUGHING)

JILL KENNEDY: But, I think that most of them feel that has been a state church and they feel that that is their church.

RICK STARR: Kind of a tradition.

JILL KENNEDY: Right.

RICK STARR: A cultural tradition.

JILL KENNEDY: Right and as I said most of them don’t attend church, but I think that they feel that’s their heritage.

JOHN KENNEDY: I think in terms of overcoming hurdles, one of the things we did was to offer English classes because most Russians were interested in learning English. And so, because we had missionaries who spoke English, many of them, we would provide free English classes. We spent a lot of time working on the lesson format for those classes and I think a good number of the converts came into the church through those classes through that door. But understanding the doctrine of the church for people who weren't really strong in any Christian faith prior to the being exposed to the doctrine of the gospel was hard and they needed to learn and grow and gain their their own individual testimonies in order to join the church. Our missionaries were very helpful. While we were serving our mission the Preach My Gospel program was introduced. In reality most of our missionaries I think were teaching the gospel through that same method. They would learn the lessons, but rarely would they verbatim give those lessons. They would try to adapt to each individual what was needed. So, as time went by we found that most of our members were learning the gospel and learning it quite well and they would participate in Priesthood meeting and Relief Society and Sunday School and so forth. They were really interested in doing that. Getting into the doors of a Russian apartment and most of the Russians live in apartments, was always hard because people had their guards up. Especially in a big city like St. Petersburg. So the Missionaries had a hard time going from door to door ever having anybody listen to them in the big city. Out in the smaller cities it was easier I think, but in the big city was much tougher to do that.

RICK STARR: Yes, I remember some of the missionaries on the previous show talking about the English classes. That they used that as a tool to introduce people to well to English and to give them that service but as well to share the gospel with them and they had some success with that. It really worked well.

JOHN KENNEDY: It did.

RICK STARR: For those of you who are just joining us this is Why We Believe on the Mormon Channel. My name is Rick Starr and today we have Brother and Sister Kennedy. John and Jill Kennedy joining us. They served as Mission President and Mission Mother in St. Petersburg, Russia and had some very interesting experiences there and just moving on since your mission I know you've had some interesting callings. Sister Kennedy you have served on the Primary writing committee and also on the General Primary Board. Correct.

JILL KENNEDY: I have. I did. Quite a while ago at this point.

RICK STARR: Talk a little bit about that.

JILL KENNEDY: Well it was a wonderful experience working with just great people. I served with President Quan Yung and then with President Mickelene Grassley and those 2 presidencies and then shortly after that service I served as a committee on the writing committee that wrote the manuals that are in use today.

RICK STARR: I see

JILL KENNEDY: And that was a very interesting experience because we were originally told on that writing committee to take what materials were out there for children and were already transplanted and to adapt them into new manuals that would be more international. I think the concern was the manuals were to American.

RICK STARR: To culturally American.

JILL KENNEDY: Yes and so they wanted us to come up with some manuals that would be more universal and we struggled with that for quite along time on the writing committee and looked at all the materials and went through them and tried to figure out how we could do it and as a committee and with our supervisor who was head of child curriculum at that time Tom Rose. We formulated a plan that we felt the older children in primary especially should be coordinated with the adult Sunday school and so when the adults were studying the Book of Mormon the children were also studying the Book of Mormon.

RICK STARR: Oh.

JILL KENNEDY: And we also felt that if we used the scriptures as a basis for those manuals that those were already translated and we could just say teach this story and then give some ideas about how to apply it and what activities to use and we wouldn't have to have alot of translation and we came up with this idea doing this for the last 4 years in primary and Brother Rose said, "Well", he said, "I don't know. This wasn't really our assignment, but I'll take it to the Brethren to see what they think and we got approval very quickly for that project and then we we wrote outlines for the 4 different classes that coordinated with the Gospel Doctrines classes and then as a committee we wrote 2 of those manuals and their were other committees who wrote the others. But it was a wonderful experience. What a way to learn the gospel yourself when you're trying to put it into terms that children can understand. It was a great experience.

JOHN KENNEDY: You can see who the brains of the operation is.

JILL KENNEDY & RICK STARR: (LAUGHING)

RICK STARR: Now was that your major at Harvard?

JILL KENNEDY: No, I was a chemistry major.

RICK STARR: Oh, Ok

JOHN KENNEDY: While I was in Law School she worked ah for Stanford Research Institute research synthetic organic chemistry so I've been blessed to have a wife who's really much better than I am at Trivial Pursuit for example.

JILL KENNEDY & RICK STARR: (LAUGHING)

RICK STARR: Because she's got all that information in her head. (LAUGHING) Well both of you have been through many different experiences throughout your lives related to the gospel. Both of you being converts and then later on in life becoming leaders of a mission. You know where your principle goal is to help other people become converts and learn the joy of the gospel and and ah those kind of things. As we close up the show today I'm really interested to hear both of your testimonies. I'd like to hear why do you believe the gospel is true and how it's affected your life. Why don't we start with you Sister Kennedy.

JILL KENNEDY: Well the gospel has totally changed my life. I would have had a very different life if I hadn't met John and joined the church and as I study the gospel I am increasingly impressed by how much our Heavenly Father loves us and how he takes care of us and how his gospel helps us to become better people here on earth and have the opportunity to return and live with Him and our Savior Jesus Christ and I have a very strong testimony that the Book of Mormon is true and that it was translated as Joseph Smith said and that it has wonderful, simple, clear, gospel principles in it that makes so many of the questions of Christianity go away giving good answers to those questions. I believe Joseph Smith was a prophet and that we have a prophet today President Monson and that the Lord has put those people in place to guide us through these rather difficult times. I so grateful to our Savior Jesus Christ and for his atonement and what he's done for us which gives us the opportunity to live with our Heavenly Father again as families which is such a wonderful blessing and I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

JOHN KENNEDY: Amen.

RICK STARR: Amen. Thank you. Brother Kennedy

JOHN KENNEDY: Well I share the same feeling that Jill has just expressed and I know that God lives and loves us and I've had experiences where I know He knows us by name and I know that His love for us has the potential to influence every aspect of our lives. I know that his son Jesus Christ is our Savior and I'm really grateful for the atonement and what it means for us in being able to repent and overcome our sins and change our lives for the better and do things. No matter what we've done in our life we can rely on the Savior and repent from the errors we've committed and do things that will bring us blessings in the eternities. The gospel is in many ways very simple but also is very rich in terms of it's meaning and ability to strengthen us, help us to continue to progress in this world and in the world to come. I'm grateful for the opportunities we have to engage in work for our deceased ancestors to redeem the dead. I'm grateful the influence that they have on us, both through our genetic influence but also through the spiritual end where they reach out to us and help us as time goes by. Joseph Smith was a remarkable man and a wonderful person to be chosen as the prophet of this dispensation and as you study his life and learn what he had to go through and see the opportunities which we have in our lives because of him we need to all, I think, feel grateful for the sacrifice in what he did to bring the gospel into being in the latter days. I'm grateful too for the Book of Mormon. I've taught Sunday School classes about the Book of Mormon. It's just a a wonderful testament of Jesus Christ and and so enriching and blessing to us that if the world could understand

that testimony and grab hold of it it would change the earth in remarkable ways. I'm grateful for that. We've had as we've mentioned direct dealings with President Monson. I know that he's a prophet and I'm grateful for his calling, for the example that he's set in his life and I'm thankful that the Lord works through him and helps to lead this church through him. I'm grateful for all those who've served and for our missionaries who work so hard for the members there in our mission and I'm sure the same could be said for missions around the world. What a huge blessing they are for the people of the world. I'm grateful for that and I pray that the Lord will continue to reach out and to influence people and to soften the hearts of leaders around the world and enable us to continue to spread the gospel and and ah enrich the lives and bless the lives of so many people and I bare this testimony as well in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

JILL KENNEDY: Amen.

RICK STARR: Amen. Thank you both so much. Today we've been speaking with President John Kennedy and his wife Jill Kennedy who are both converts to the church and they served as a Mission President and Mission President's wife in St. Petersburg, Russia and also President Kennedy you now serve as a judge on the Utah State 3rd District Court and I appreciate so much that you were able to take the time to come and join us today. Thank you again.

JOHN KENEDY: Thank you.

JILL KENNEDY: Thank you for having us.

RICK STARR: This is Why I Believe on the Mormon Channel. For information on this program and other programs on the Mormon channel please log on to radio.lds.org. My name is Rick Starr have a great day.

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