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An Interview with Todd Jones

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee White

Voices of the Historic John S. Park Neighborhood

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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This project was the brainchild of Deborah Boehm, Ph.D. and Patrick Jackson who taught at UNLV and resided in the John S. Park Neighborhood. As they walked their community, they realized it was a special place that intersected themes of gender, class, race/ethnicity, religion, sexuality and gentrification. Patrick and Deborah learned that John S. Park had been listed on the National Registry of Historic Places and that original homeowners, local politicians, members of the gay community, Latino immigrants, artists and gallery owners and an enclave of UNLV staff all lived in the neighborhood. Therefore, they decided that the history of this special place had to be preserved, joined with the Oral History Research Center at UNLV Libraries and wrote a grant that was funded by the Centennial Committee.

The transcripts received minimal editing that included the elimination of fragments, false starts and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the narrative. These interviews have been catalogued and can be found as non-circulating documents in Special Collections at UNLV's Lied Library.

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Interview with Todd Jones

January 7, 2010 in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Claytee White

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Preface

In 1991, Todd Jones arrived in Las Vegas to become a professor of philosophy at University of Nevada Las Vegas. He immediately liked the John S. Park neighborhood, where he had friends—members of a poetry group and other professors. He was attracted to the vintage esthetics and the feel of streets lined with large trees. It was a contrast with the explosion of homes being built in the city during the 1990s. Todd knew if ever bought a house, it would be there. In 2000 he did.

He describes his impressions of the neighborhood's history as an old Mormon area. He also classifies the residents as being members of what he describes as three or four very distinct populations: "urban professionals, old Mormons, professors and lots of immigrants from Mexico.

Todd talks about the neighborhood website that once existed and his impression of the political leanings of residents. At one point he worked as a Democrat precinct captain.

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV

Voices of the Historic John S. Park Neighborhood



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This is Claytee White and I'm with Dr. Todd Jones in his office in the Central Desert Complex on UNLV's campus. Today is January 7th, 2010. So how are you this morning?

I'm doing well.

Great. So tell me just a bit about your childhood, where you grew up and what that was like.

I think when people say, "Where did you grow up," I think that means for me, where'd you go to high school, and so I went to high school in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It was really a very nice place to grow up. One of the nicest things was in that just so many areas where there was like sort of farmland and woods getting plowed under, Gettysburg had this enormous battlefield, which couldn't be [plowed under] because it was a historic place, and so all the woods that was there in the Civil War was still there. The county was surrounded by apple orchards, an enormous amount of apple orchards. I think it's one of the biggest fruit-producing counties in the world. I worked picking apples and cherries and things.

That's great. So you would do that during the summer?

I did that in the summers, yeah.

So what kind of work did your parents do?

My father was the psychologist at Gettysburg College. He got there in 1964 and he's still there, counseling sometimes the kids of people that he counseled [before].

Oh, that's amazing. Now did your mother work outside the home?

My mother also, she taught at various local colleges in different kind of adjunct positions.

Good. So this was a natural progression.

It was a natural fit, yes.

So how did you decide on philosophy?

That's a very sort of roundabout thing. I thought I was going to be an anthropologist since I was a little kid. In second grade I remember putting that down. I couldn't check off "cowboy" or "doctor." I said I wanted to be an anthropologist. I ended up going to grad school in anthropology, working in anthropology, and people all through anthropology kept telling me, You know, you seem to be more interested in philosophy, because I was really interested in the philosophy of science questions about what makes a good explanation and how do you trust certain evidence and things. That's why I was always interested in anthropology [but] people actually said, You know, you're actually really interested in the philosophy of science. Eventually I was convinced that was true, so I switched everything and ended up doing much the same work I always did in anthropology but in the right field.

So where did you go to college?

Hamilton College in upstate New York.

And your PhD is from there as well?

My PhD is from UCAL [University of California] San Diego.

OK, good. So that's how you got to the West?

Yep, and just, you know, like everyone, you sort of look for wherever jobs [are] and this is the one that was looking for a philosopher of social science.

That's wonderful. So, after San Diego, what was Las Vegas like?

Well, one of the things that was interesting was the job interviews. People kept saying, You know, this is great; you'll love the weather. I'm like, No, I've been living in San Diego for the last four years, so I don't think I will, because San Diego has the world's best weather. I mean it's 70 degrees all year round.

But, you know, Las Vegas is really a radically different place than any place. The most different thing about it really is the growth, which until last year was just sort of unbelievable. Almost any place you are in the world, you can count on certain things being the same, and [in] Las Vegas, not only was it true on the outskirts of the city—every time you drove they had further outskirts—but even in the middle of the city, you would drive by a hotel that was there two weeks ago and it wouldn't be there. So that was radically different and still takes some getting used to about Las Vegas.

I agree. So tell me, where did you live when you first arrived in Las Vegas?

When I first got here, I lived by the Liberace Museum on Tropicana [Road] because it was close to the university, and then I had an apartment behind the MGM [Grand Hotel and Casino], and then I guess in 2000 I moved to the John S. Park [Neighborhood].

So what pulled you to John S. Park?

That's a good question. I'd say two things. Around 1996, I had a good friend who saw a house for rent there, and she couldn't afford to put the down payment on the rent, because all of my friends were starving, bohemian artists and poets. They all were people I met doing poetry readings at Café Espresso Roma. And she found this fairly cheap place for rent but it needed a big down payment. She didn't have that, but she knew I did. A lot of people from this poetry circle—I was sort of the gainfully employed one—they would

have me drive them places, they were always borrowing money from me for down payments and things people were asking. So there was a house down there [that] they wanted me to help them put a down payment [on]. And she ended up moving there and about five or six of her friends kind of all moved there, who were all sort of friends of mine, and so there was a kind of group poet house in that neighborhood. So I would go there and visit them and I really liked a lot of things about the neighborhood.

There was a sociology professor named Barb [Barbara] Brents who was one of the first UNLV professors I think to live in that neighborhood, and she used to have a lot of parties at her house for new faculty members, for anybody I mean, for people she befriended, and they would come down. It's a very different neighborhood than any neighborhood in Las Vegas. It's a very unique neighborhood.

Describe it to me.

All of the houses are old, that's the main thing. I think it's probably statistically true that the majority of houses in Vegas were built since the Nineties. Most of those houses [in the John S. Park Neighborhood] were built in the Fifties. And so I mean it has a really very different look and feel. I mean it looks like a kind of old vintage neighborhood from Los Angeles [California] maybe from the Thirties or Forties. There is an enormous amount of trees; I think there's more trees there than any other neighborhood. So it's a neighborhood with trees, which you just don't see anywhere in Vegas. It really looks more like a small town. There were things there that you just didn't find in Las Vegas. I remember my parents would often say to me things like, I was like, Ah, you know, I don't have this or that, and my father would say, Well, just get it at a yard sale. I was like, There are no yard sales in Vegas. I lived in apartment complexes; there was no yard sales

in apartment complexes, right? But there were yard sales there [in John S. Park], like all the time. I mean it was just like an ordinary sort of Eastern or Northwestern town. So that was really striking, and I thought eventually, if I ever bought a house, that's where I'd buy.

So, are you still in the same house now that you purchased in the beginning when you first [moved to John S. Park]?

So in 2000 I bought a house and yeah, I'm still in the same house.

What about the community? You went there because of the artsy part of the community, the poetry and all of that. We look at that community as being a lot of art, a wonderful immigrant community now, just all kinds of diversity. What was the social life like there, especially since you knew so many artists?

I would say actually surprisingly the artists are not a big part of it, I would think. This is my opinion, right? I mean in 1995 there was that group there in that house and you would sort of think, this would kind of be a mecca for it with cheap rent. They were the only ones. There were very few. There were some older people who were, I'd say sort of artisans. They were realtors who really like vintage houses and they sort of worked in professional arts communities but they weren't sort of young, starving bohemian artists, which you would think in other cities, there would be a lot of; there weren't, there. I mean there were sort of all older people with families that liked the esthetic, so there was some of that, but there wasn't a sort of young arts scene.

When I moved there, it was primarily an old Mormon neighborhood because there was a giant tabernacle there, and so most of the people around there were [Mormons].

And there were very few professors. So it was mostly this old Mormon neighborhood, a

few people who really liked the esthetic of the vintage houses and those people are still there, and, to my knowledge there almost no professors. I mean Barb and her husband Mike were the first there. I was one of the second, I think. And then both of us sort of began telling people kind of about the neighborhood, like, whenever a new person would be hired in Sociology or a new person in Philosophy or English, I'd say, Hey, this is a really good neighborhood you ought to think of moving there.

And so, little by little, a whole group of professors started moving there. An interesting thing was that about within two or three years, everybody started having kids, so that was when we started clicking and forming a community around that. When you have young kids, you really want to talk to other people that do and want to figure out what's going on. So there were about five or six professor families with young kids that ended up getting together a lot.

Now, what I think is most interesting at that time is that there were three or four very different populations there that actually did not interact much, and I think that's important and interesting because they were somewhat invisible to each other, kind of coexisting in this neighborhood, right? There were, I just call them the sort of "vintage esthetes," the people who really liked the old houses' style, who were young urban professionals; there were a few of them that lived there. There were the old Mormon people. There were the professors, right? And an enormous number of immigrants from Mexico, moving there.

What about the Gay community?

Yeah, but it was not very visible, I'd say. You would see people who looked gay, like walking their dogs and stuff there, but they probably interacted with each other more. So there might well have been a large Gay community but they didn't interact with us.

It's interesting. If you asked people from each of these communities what they neighborhood is like, I think if you asked the old Mormons they say, Oh yeah, this is a great neighborhood and it's full of Mormons. They wouldn't mention the professors. I remember people at the time talking about this young, vibrant neighborhood full of professors that was sort of gentrified. Well, there are six or seven families, right? Probably fifty Hispanic families, I think. Nobody would mention, No, this is really becoming a Mexican neighborhood. This is transitioning from an old Mormon neighborhood into a completely Mexican neighborhood. To us, they were fairly invisible. I mean we knew each other, we interacted with each other, we talked to each other. And I remember people talking at the time, asking about the neighborhood, and asking about the gentrification and the artists and whatnot and I was like, Well, this is true and there were a few of us, but the actual story that everybody was missing is this is completely transforming into a Hispanic neighborhood, with Mexican immigrants. You know, it's kind of like in New York City in the late Eighties or early Nineties, I think. You could probably interview people in neighborhoods and they'd say, This is a great yuppie, gentrifying neighborhood, and you could interview other residents and [they would say], No, this is an old Italian neighborhood. Despite what people might say, they didn't interact. People did not, I mean because mainly there was a language barrier, right? The Hispanic people probably talked to their neighbors, talked to their friends. Very little interaction between the growing Mexican community, the older Mormon, and the young

professor, all kind of sharing the same neighborhood, not really interacting with each other. Not hostile or anything. And I was really struck by this at the time because they were sort of kind of invisible. Because people would often talk to me about the neighborhood because there was a lot of growth and change and transformation in it, and the questions they would all ask me would always have nothing to do with the fact that it's really becoming a Hispanic neighborhood. Nobody sort of seemed to notice that, even though that was true.

So, what is it like today?

I'd say a very large overwhelming majority Hispanic neighborhood, and that again is probably something like not noticed because the people there sort of talk with their friends, interact with their friends, and their friends aren't sort of Hispanic casino workers, right? So when they think of the people, they'll think of their friends and their neighborhood community and what they interact with; they won't think of that. But I think if you actually sort of did the numbers and the statistics, somebody who would be good for that would be Jack LeVine, who knows literally who lives in every house and everything about that. I think I remember him talking about houses for sale two years ago and that 90 percent of them were Hispanic sellers, or buyers. So I mean he would know. But I think other people, this is like people in the Flamingo Club, if you ask them about the neighborhood, they would probably never mention [Hispanics] because to my knowledge there's nobody in the Flamingo Club who is Hispanic. So, you know, people who talk about this neighborhood and this vintage neighborhood, right, people in the neighborhood can have radically different experiences of the same neighborhood.

That's amazing. Were you ever a member of the Flamingo Club?

I don't know how they count membership, but I've gone to some of their parties.

Tell me about the club and their parties.

I can't tell you a lot about it because I think my wife has been to more [events] than I have, and I've been to two, but I think the club was started by [UNLV professor] Heidi Swank. She was somebody who bridged two different communities. She was someone who was there as a sort of young professor, but she also met and befriended a lot of people who were there; I think really for the houses and the look and feel and the esthetic, and so she met a lot of them and she really liked the look and feel of the esthetic and she said there ought to be more sort of celebration of people who like this esthetic and people who like it down here and like this kind of art and houses and architecture. I think she started the club. What's interesting is a lot of the people are older, in their fifties and sixties, so they're people who moved there for the esthetic and who really like that esthetic. It's one of the few places where there's sort of a meeting of the different communities. And there's probably a big overlap between the Gay community and the esthetes. There was not that much with the professors. Heidi is a nice bridge.

Your wife is a professor here at the university?

No, she is a freelance writer and editor, and she did a lot of work for a lot of companies in New York and still does. Nowadays you can do things over the Internet. You can do things from anywhere. So she works from home every day.

Is there a connection with First Friday and the John S. Park Community?

I would say a small connection. That's again one of the things that people will want to push that I think is more a myth than true. Again, I think statistically, it's a big Mexican neighborhood. I think people don't really realize that but I think that's what it really is.

That's what the sort of population is. And the professors that live there are sort of forty-something with young children, is what they mostly are. Those people aren't going out a lot on Friday nights. And the fifty, sixty-year-old esthetes, they're not really going out a lot on Friday nights. First Friday, if you go to that, is full of twenty-somethings, all twenty-somethings looking to meet other twenty-somethings, and it's a good question where they live. They probably live in apartments all over Las Vegas. But if you go to First Friday, it's sort of thousands of people all in that demographic. It ought to be the case.

A couple of things about First Friday: one, it's amazing how there are almost no places to eat there on First Friday when they have thousands of people there. One kind of theory of capitalism is that, when there's a niche, it'll get filled. It doesn't. I mean, you would think, there's thousands of people there, they're all looking for restaurants and everything, [and] there's one small restaurant, I guess, that people go to, a Mexican [restaurant], but there really is very few.

Those people, you would think, hey, this is a great neighborhood; I'd like to live here. I think there's very little of that that I've seen. They don't then say, I'm going to come live in the [John S.] Park Neighborhood. Those are mostly sort of single-family houses. People who go to First Friday don't have families. They don't have kids. I mean they're young people looking to meet other young people, so they're not thinking about, hey, I think I'm going to buy a house or rent a house. Most of the houses there are buyers or single-family rentals.

So, I think there's actually very little connection with First Friday. Now, that said, I never miss a First Friday. I always go to First Friday. I've gone to every First Friday since they opened it, just about.

So what is it that pulls you to First Fridays?

I really, really like art, still, and I mean it's great art and I like that kind of vibe. I like that I can walk from my house to it and that, you know, there's music and there's poetry and stuff. I mean, you know, much as most people sort of give that up when they get married and have families—I've mostly given it up—that's like the one time I still kind of go back to my bohemian life.

So, what are the locations around the area that you go to on First Fridays?

I just walk from my house to, I guess probably the first thing I go to is the Funk House, and then I just take a tour from there. I go up there through the streets and to the Arts Factory. Now there's a very nice flower shop called Gaia. Take a look at that and you might want to talk to them too, the people that own that, Heidi and Peter [Frigeri], because they're new. They just bought that. It's a risky place to kind of open a business, right downtown, and it's right across from the Arts Factory. The people that own that store live in the Huntridge neighborhood that's a lot like John S. Park on the other side of Maryland Parkway. They live in the Huntridge neighborhood, and they opened this store there. They sell a lot of exotic plants and things. So that's always fun to go to. They always have a lot of nice events. They have a guitarist in there. And it's always nice to be surrounded by plants, which you don't see in Vegas a lot.

What do you see as the political leanings of the neighborhood? Is there anything particular when it comes to politics that's peculiar to John S. Park?

You could probably look up the actual statistics on that, and statistically I think it's sort of a heavily Democratic-registration district. However, I know this as well as anyone because for the last election I was the precinct captain, and I go door-to-door to every house in the neighborhood and sort of talk to everyone, and I would say, like Las Vegas, a lot of the people are very strongly apolitical. I remember in the 2004 election, there was an enormous percentage who did not know there was an election. You'd think, well, surprising for Las Vegas, but, you know, really not. I mean people in Las Vegas, they often work in casinos and whatnot. Las Vegas has always been kind of isolated from the national culture, largely, and I mean that neighborhood maybe has some pockets of more attuned people and stuff, but for the most part, going door-to-door, people knew very, very little about the candidates. So I would say it's probably like most Las Vegas neighborhoods, where people are pretty militantly apolitical.

It might seem like it has a strong political character because there is sort of a vocal minority. One of the things I guess you will find, there have been some political issues involving the community that galvanized people a couple of times. The first one was the helicopters. In around early 2000s, there was an enormous number of helicopters going over a lot, low-flying, I think for maybe Grand Canyon tourists, for a hospital, for the NASCAR races, and actually caused damage like to the houses. I mean they're old, old houses. They would fly over and your house would shake. And there was a meeting organized about it and I don't know who organized it—that would be a good question—about what could be done about the helicopters. Everyone showed up, and that was interesting, and that was all branches of the community, I guess, except Hispanic.

Where was the meeting held?

The meeting took place in the [John C.] Fremont [Junior] High School, which is right there. Myrna Williams conducted the meeting. She was the County Commissioner at the time. I think that was one of the things that led to her getting voted out, because she was not really very receptive. She seemed to be perceived as being a kind of defender of the business interests (the helicopters). And I think that's one of the things that really helped [County Commissioner] Chris Guinchigliani.

Now Chris G. is really kind of an interesting politician in the neighborhood because I think the neighborhood as a reputation for being a very liberal neighborhood. I think it's not true. I mean when I moved there, it was all Mormon families, so these are very conservative families who were there to be at the tabernacle. So probably in terms of raw numbers, you have still a number of very sort of conservative Mormons. You have fairly conservative Catholic Hispanic people there. You've got your professors who tend to be more liberal, and the esthetes and Gays were more liberal, I guess fairly vocal. But I bet you if you actually like did numbers and did surveys on every one of the houses over here, you would actually find it a very conservative neighborhood.

That said, people of every stripe still love Chris Guinchigliani because she was outspoken, she was clear, she was very honest, she cared about the neighborhood. I remember one time I got outside and a tree had fallen on my fence and was bending it, and Chris was out there trying to get the tree off the fence at, you know, 6:30 in the morning. She didn't have to do this. I mean she and her husband always walk the neighborhood every morning, and she was sort of out there. People knew she really cared about the neighborhood. She's has very liberal political leanings. I don't think anybody cared about that. I mean, that's where the sort of conservatism and apoliticalism sort of

takes a back seat to kind of the personal connections. She's somebody I think everybody in the neighborhood always feels very strongly about and I think people could see the contrast between her and Myrna Williams at the time.

So there was that big helicopter thing that really politicized the neighborhood somewhat. That made it easy when the Stratosphere thing happened. The Stratosphere [Hotel and Casino] had some plans to build a giant rollercoaster. One of the things I remember and I remarked on it at the time was there was a Woody Allen movie [*Radio Days*, 1987] where in the beginning he talked about how horrific his childhood was, his talk about that he grew up underneath a rollercoaster, which is what they were trying to do to the neighborhood, right? And nobody liked this, in the neighborhood.

OK, so the Stratosphere is right there on the corner of Las Vegas Boulevard and Sahara [Avenue]. So was the rollercoaster going to come over that far?

I think it was supposed to go over the Strip, down onto the other side, right where the neighborhood is, and then sort of back up. And they said there would be no noise, but nobody bought that because we hear screams every night from the thrill rides at the Stratosphere now. I think because people had already kind of come together about the helicopters, there was sort of a habit and a precedent of, when there's neighborhood stuff, you know, you turn out. So, supposedly when there were kind of town meetings and hearings on that, there were lots and lots of people that went to that. So that was another big political event. And a guy named Ben Contine was sort of very involved in the fight on that.

There was another political issue: the closing of Circle Park was a big one, and that actually sort of has sort of riled up people more in the Huntridge [neighborhood] than

in the [John S.] Park, but the John S. Park people, there are a lot of I guess older residents of the community that are sort of passionate about that park. They were there in the Fifties when it was built. And there's I guess probably I would say some frustration with [City Councilman] Gary Reese because there's a real mix of opinions about that. I mean when the park was open, a lot of homeless people were in there and started using it. I guess the probably older, more conservative people in the neighborhood were of the opinion, get them out, this is not good for families and children, this is bad. Sort of younger people with a more left and ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] leaning say, Look, you can't just wholesale chase people out. At the same time, they didn't like going to the park and feeling harassed either. So there's been kind of a stalemate. Gary Reese closed the park. Nobody likes it being closed but nobody knows how you can open it without that being a problem. I don't know why they can't solve that. Every town in America has that problem, and other places solve it; they haven't solved it there.

So when you say Gary Reese closed it, is that what the public thinks, that it wasn't really the whole City Council, it was Gary Reese.

Gary Reese is the vice-chair of the City Council. He has a lot of pull, so there's the general belief that, if he wanted it open, it would be open, and if he convinced people to open it, they would. So people think that's Gary Reese and not the City Council. And so there have been community meetings on that, too.

When there was somebody killed in a house about two years ago, there was a town meeting on that and surprisingly, everybody came. I mean the whole neighborhood turns out for that. Those are sort of interesting and nice things about the neighborhood, because I've been in a lot of other places [and] nobody would come.

And there are occasionally things like there are block parties that people have on various streets, and there it's pretty nicely mixed. Again, the exception is the Hispanics. I think the most sort of interesting part of the story is that it's giant, largely Mexican neighborhood—that's the population center—and they're sort of the least visible and the least vocal. They are very rarely at any of these meetings, the helicopters or the Stratosphere or the crime or anything. And that might be something true about America in general, like worrying about their immigration status and whatnot, they want to lie low and, you know, they're trying not to [be too visible]. So I think that's an interesting part of the neighborhood is that's a fact about the neighborhood that it's kind of invisible. I'm trying to change that somewhat. I mean my boys are learning Spanish in school, my neighbors next door are Mexican, so we always talk across the fence and the boys talk to them.

Oh, that's wonderful. What kind of changes have you seen from the time you moved in till today? What are the major changes?

The major changes I guess would be going from an old, white, Mormon neighborhood to a largely Hispanic neighborhood. You see when you walk to school—there's the John S. Park [Elementary] School—people all walk their kids to school, which is nice, [and you] almost never see any white kids. It's almost a hundred percent Mexican [parents] walking their kids to school. To my knowledge, I've never seen any white kids walking to school there.

So where do the white kids go to school?

For the older Mormon population, their kids are grown and gone. Professors' kids: none of them go there. None of them go to the Park School. They all go to charter schools or

magnet schools in various other places because professors care a lot about education and they're looking for the best school. Park is not a terrible school, but it's not a great school, and so people are looking for the best schools. My kids go to a magnet school at the foot of Sunrise Mountain. All the professors' kids I know, same kind of thing.

When the neighborhood became part of the National Register of Historic Places, there were a lot of changes. Did you hear anything about any of that controversy?

To my knowledge, I mean it wasn't much of a controversy. Again, it's a kind of schizophrenic neighborhood where who's vocal and who you hear about is very different than sort of most of the residents, so the people who were vocal and that make most of the noise and go to most of the meetings are all people who loved it, you know, thought this was a great thing. There probably were a lot of older homeowners, who were used to putting alterations up whenever they wanted, who didn't like it.

The only sort of complaining I heard of this, and this was a really good thing and kind of faded out, but we got a neighborhood website for a while, and that really was interesting and kind of changed the character of the neighborhood because lots and lots of people got on it. It was called the Downtown Neighbors website and Microsoft had managed the site, and then eventually they closed down the site, just because Microsoft was restructuring. But for a while that really had a big impact on the neighborhood, too, because everybody was posting anything that happened, so if there was any crime or anything [people were posting]. So for a while, people got the impression [that] this is a really crime-ridden neighborhood, not because it was, I think, but because things got reported, so everybody knew about it instantly. So, you know, I imagine there were sort of a hundred people on that, all either sort of the esthetes, the Gays, the young professors,

and then again, no Hispanics at all on that website. And one sort of cranky guy who was sort of always opposed to everything, what all of the other people did, including the historic designation. So the only hint of controversy we got was sort of him, complaining about that stuff.

And so, if there was controversy, we just sort of didn't hear about it. Again, these are weird communities within communities. Probably the Mormons talked to themselves, and the nouveau sort of yuppification of the neighborhood, we talked to ourselves.

People seem to believe that crime is much less now, after historic designation.

Would you agree with that, or what you have heard about that?

It's just really hard to know how much crime there sort of is anytime. I mean, in the early Nineties, it was clearly a neighborhood in decline and there was lots of crime right there. And I don't think there's anywhere near as much crime now, right? So, one thing people might be doing is saying, Wow, there's not much crime, because they're comparing it to the Nineties. But you never know year to year. So 2005 might have a lot more crime than 2004 and 2006 might have less. I don't know that the historic designation has done much of it. Everybody I know feels like there's not enough police patrols because every once in a while there's a break-in. Anytime there's a break-in, everybody feels very victimized and feels that it's an unsafe place, and then they hear about somebody else who did, and they start feeling bad and complaining about it. So, everybody feels like there ought to be more, whether that's because it's actually a more dangerous or crime-ridden place or whether it's because people always want more than they've got.

So about two years ago when somebody was killed in their house and there was the neighborhood meeting on that, everybody came, everybody was up in arms, and

everybody had lots of stories about how crime-ridden it is, right? Now again, that's a meeting about crime and stuff like that, so you know I don't hear sort of a lot of complaints day-to-day and stuff about that, but you know when it happens it's a big deal.

So, no, it hasn't been clearly for the better with the historic neighborhood designation, though I guess I'm one of the few in the neighborhood who's never had a break-in. Most of the people I know have had a break-in at one time or another within the last ten years. And so they feel like, hmm, in Summerlin this wouldn't happen. I don't know if that's true or not but they feel like that, right? And so everybody feels, I would say, that it's a somewhat shady neighborhood, and partly they kind of feel a little proud of that, that they're living in, you know, something that's not the gated suburban community, and that might cause them to inflate it a little bit, the worry about it.

What about the neighborhood association? Is that still active and how do people feel about that as a means for airing challenges or problems?

Like a lot of neighborhood associations, that's kind of a function of who the president is. There was a guy named Bob Bellis who was the president of that for a long time, who was very vocal, very active, would contact a lot of people and talk to a lot of people, so there was a sort of palpable presence of the neighborhood association. I don't know who [the president] is now.

I think it's still Bob.

I don't think it is, because I think Bob moved. I think Bob actually moved. So that's visible, because it isn't Bob.

Right next to it there a [community] called Northridge neighborhood, and [UNLV Professor] Greg [Gregory] Brown is very active in that. Because these neighborhoods,

Huntridge and John S. Park and Northridge are pretty close to each other, whoever is the sort of driving force of that, if there's a big personality in that neighborhood association, they become the de facto leader of the next neighborhood, so Brown is pretty much it, I think, for our neighborhood now, even though he's not actually our neighborhood association president.

But you're all so close.

Right, because we're close, and that same thing has happened with Huntridge. I think there are some people there who are real active and so they kind of feel like our neighborhood association leaders. Because these neighborhoods are pretty integrated. The character is pretty similar. All the things I've said about one is true about the others.

Do you know [Professors] Deborah Boehm and Patrick Jackson?

Very much.

This project is their idea, and they have a house over there, and they're now in Reno [Nevada], so, we'll see what's going to happen.

What do you like right now about living in John S. Park?

Here's sort of my favorite thing: at night, the streets are almost completely empty. They're sort of full of trees, right? I walk around at night and plan my lectures. You could be in a small town in Oregon or a small town in the Northeast. You wouldn't know you were in Las Vegas. Though, I mean, the kind of nice thing is you can see the skyline of Las Vegas, too, which is sort of nice, so you really can feel like you're in this sort of small town enclave [and] you could walk into Las Vegas kind of at any time. So I really like that.

I like that it is close to Downtown. Now, one of the things that's bad about that, there's actually much less in Downtown than one might think, I think partly because the casino culture everywhere in Las Vegas is so big, it tends to eat every other culture. So, let's say if somebody wanted to open a sort of a club for teenagers, they close, because there's the best club in the world for teenagers and it's part of a casino. So they close. So the same thing about coffeehouses, right? If somebody wanted to offer a small coffeehouse, no, you've got Starbucks™ in casinos.

So what about Fremont [Street] East? Isn't that what they tried to do there?

Yeah, they're trying and, you know, it's one of the things they're pushing and trying, and I wouldn't say it's been a failure but the recession really put a lot of brakes on a lot of that. So I think that's actually kind of on a knife's edge. So there is like the Beauty Bar and the Downtown Cocktail Lounge [Room] and the Kabob Café [Korner] right there. Those aren't failures and they're not roaring successes either. Those are kind of on a knife's edge; they could go either way. No one would be surprised if it closed; no one would be surprised if they became really successful. It seems like right on a knife's edge. Those would be places that were sort of roaring successes, I think, if there were more young people living in that neighborhood. I guess it's been true everywhere. Single-family houses aren't something that young people move into and buy very often. Those are the kinds of people that frequent clubs like that or places like Fremont East. So, again that's not a place that people live near, very much, that demographic. Things that are close to there are the Park Neighborhood, which is, you know, older, families; poor apartment complexes for poor people that don't tend to go clubbing at night; and if you're going to go as a destination, clubbing, there's the Strip, there's always the lure of

the Strip. So it's very hard, I think, for those places to compete. And given that, they do pretty well, but it's hard.

When you said something about walking around in your neighborhood, planning your lectures, would your wife feel comfortable doing that by herself as well?

She probably would, and she does it sometimes; she walks around there at night. I mean it's just always a little iffy for a woman to be walking anywhere at night. So, I wouldn't say she feels completely safe, but she does it sometimes.

Tell me about the business Luv-It [Frozen Custard Incorporated].

I'm probably not the best person to talk to on this. It's just phenomenally popular, and people regularly walk there, they stand in long lines for it. I don't get it. I don't think it's that good. I have no idea why people are so fanatical about Luv-It, but they are. Did you hear about the Luv-In at Luv-It? Yes. I mean that's a nice kind of thing about the Facebook™ phenomenon, that you can mention something casually like that on Facebook™ and one, it's a function of Facebook™ but also it's the kind of neighborhood it is. You get eighty or ninety people showing up to sort of show their support.

So would you tell me what the Luv-In was?

Apparently Mindy Kaling [actress/comedian] on a talk show talked about to the talk show host [and said it was] the sketchiest neighborhood in the world, the very worst neighborhood anywhere in the world. Well, you know, this is fightin' words, because people love Luv-It. And so Jessica Brown put on Facebook™, you know, We ought to go to Luv-It and show our support and show that yeah, we like this place and this is good and this is not the worst neighborhood in the world. And I think Barb [Brents] said, Let's

have a Luv-In at Luv-It. And I think they probably expected ten people would come, but, you know, fifty or sixty people showed up.

OK, this is wonderful. I really appreciate this interview. Any other comments you want to make about the neighborhood?

I do love the neighborhood. It's a sort of a wonderful neighborhood. The houses are really beautiful and interesting. Everywhere you walk around in Las Vegas, most places you see fences, you know; there you don't. I mean you see the houses.

I failed to ask one thing. Please tell me about your house. Describe your house to me.

My house was built in 1952 and like a lot of the houses in the neighborhood, they're really deceptive: they look really small on the outside and you walk inside and it's enormous. I mean you walk in a house and it looks like a basketball court. The house across from me actually has a swimming pool inside it, a giant indoor pool. And this is not uncommon for things like that. The one next to that has a dance studio. These are houses that kind of were built to look small in the front. I mean there's a legend that that's because there were all kinds of organized-crime figures around in the Sixties and they wanted to look like these were modest houses, and you go in and they're palatial, right? There's a book [by investigative reporter and author Sally Denton and co-author Roger Morris] called *The Money and the Power [The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America, 2001]* which is a book about the sort of history and all these sort of crime figures in Las Vegas, and one of the things it said was everybody's dream in Las Vegas in the early days was to go legit and get a house on Sixth Street. Jack Binion and Benny Binion both had houses. Bob Stupak had a house on Sixth Street. All of these look fairly modest on the outside and then you go in and they're enormous and they're palatial and

just beautiful. They have swimming pools in the back. I mean you feel like a Hollywood movie star, you know, living in a house like that. It doesn't look like from the outside, but you go in and it's like that.

So the neighborhood is really nice. The houses are really nice. You can walk to Downtown. The downside is there's not much there still, in Downtown. If there was a much more revitalized Downtown, I think, you would get probably a lot more what they used to call "yuppification" of the neighborhood because there would be a Downtown to walk to. There's not a lot there. Within two years of my moving there, they closed the grocery store that had been there for fifty years, the Myers' Market. And this was just kind of a mystery. If they put a Trader Joe's™ in there, right?

You know that someone is working on that.

That would be great. It really would be tremendously successful. But I mean it [Myers' Market] sat empty. There was a very popular Downtown bar called Mad Dogs and Englishmen. It was a popular Downtown bar and music place. No reason for that to sort of sit empty, and it sat empty for ten years.

The Enigma [Garden Café] was a very big sort of part of the neighborhood, to the extent that there were sort of young twenty-something club kids in the neighborhood, and there were always a few; it was because of Enigma.

There was a wonderful coffeehouse called the Enigma coffeehouse that was on Fourth Street. It was called the Enigma Garden. They had poetry readings there. The person made like homemade tortillas. A person named Julie Brewer, who was one of the people that started First Friday, she owned that coffeehouse; she was the proprietor. She killed herself a year or two [ago, in August 2007].

That was a very successful, very interesting business. The people that worked there were sort of young hipsters and I mean what shouldn't have surprised anyone, young hipster junkies will steal. Somebody ended up stealing an enormous amount of money from it one night and it never recovered. It was one of the workers. So they couldn't pay their rent and whatnot and they had to close. A lot of people who lived there [in the neighborhood] had moved there because of that, because that was one of the places where there was regularly art shows and you could eat there every night. It wasn't like once a week with First Friday; it was kind of like First Friday every day, and that was a real center of the neighborhood. Early 2000s, that closed after this theft. Now, it was amazing that some place like that couldn't reopen, because it had a clientele [and] it was really popular, and it's a weird mystery about sort of capitalism and demographics, why places like that, that really have a clientele and really could make it, don't. There were a lot of sort of yuppie professors there who would drink coffee. Why you can't have a coffeehouse in the neighborhood is a mystery.

There was a place called Thai Town that was right on the corner there of Las Vegas Boulevard and Park Paseo. It was a group of Thai businesses: Thai seamstresses, a Thai restaurant. People in the neighborhood like sort of going there. One day, it was all boarded up; all the Thai people were gone. Nothing ever went back in. Ten years.

That's a strange thing, kind of in that neighborhood, that things can sort of disappear like that, and when there's clearly a demand for something, nothing fills the demand. I think that's the thing that's sort of surprising. So there's a sense that the neighborhood really could be so much better with a few small things, and for some reason or another, that can't happen. Nothing can make that happen.

And would that be your vision for the neighborhood?

Yeah, if you had an Enigma back in, you know, if you had the Enigma or something like that back in, that would really sort of help the neighborhood a lot. Why that can't [happen] is really surprising, and mysterious. You know, in these economic times, not so mysterious, but why five years ago, why in the middle of the housing boom, these things sat vacant for ten years? In another sense, this is not so surprising. The City Council met, you know, in the City Council buildings. If you go around the City Council, a whole bunch of sort of vintage, beautiful houses [are] all boarded up, and they never seemed to sort of even notice that in the City Council meetings because people all lived other places, they drove in, they parked under[neath the building], and they went up. Right around the City Council [building, these boarded-up houses exist]. This sort of shouldn't be happening.

I really appreciate this. Thank you so much.

Good. I hope you got stuff that is useful.

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