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An Interview with Keny Stewart

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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University of Nevada Las Vegas Libraries 2010

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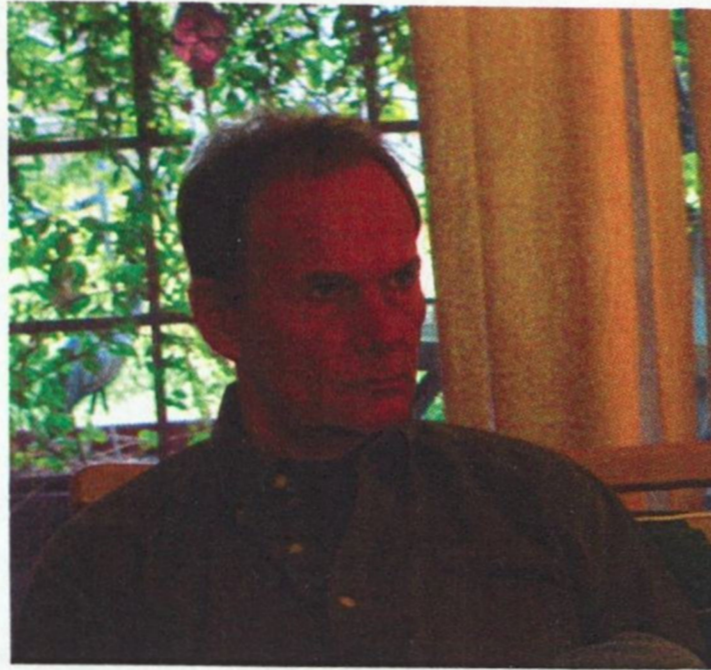
This project was the brainchild of Deborah Boehm, Ph.D. and Patrick Jackson who taught at UNLV and resided in the John S. Park Neighborhood. As they walked their community, they realized it was a special place that intersected themes of gender, class, race/ethnicity, religion, sexuality and gentrification. 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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Preface

Keny Stewart often sits in his backyard and hears the train whistle. In that moment he thinks about what Las Vegas must have been like in the 1940s—a moment made more meaningful by living in historic John S. Park Neighborhood. He enjoys his place, a place he has called home for 20 years. He was there for the beginning of the neighborhood “renaissance”.

Keny moved from California to Las Vegas in 1984 to work as an entertainer. One day a few years later he accidentally drove through John S. Park neighborhood, admired the architecture of the homes and the nostalgic feeling. Soon he was a homeowner, restoring his investment, a labor of love. At the time he worked nights on the Strip and restored his house day. Along the way he made a career change to educator/librarian for grade school level.

He is a former neighborhood association president. He remembers the neighborhood’s battle to maintain its integrity as it went up against local casino developer Bob Stupak’s (whose home is across from his) idea to build a Titanic Hotel—which which followed by other imaginative ideas that the neighbors fought against.

Keny is among the residents who worked with Yorgo Kagafas to attain the historic designation. He refers to the tear-it down reputation of the city and describes how neighbors banded together through communications, meetings, and an overall commitment. There was opposition, but such things as block parties and recipe exchanges added to a sense of community, though it has been replaced by a degree of complacency now that it is over.

Interview with Keny Stewart

January 16, 2010 in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Claytee White

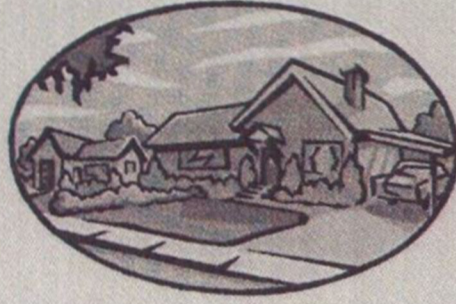
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Voices of the Historic John S. Park Neighborhood

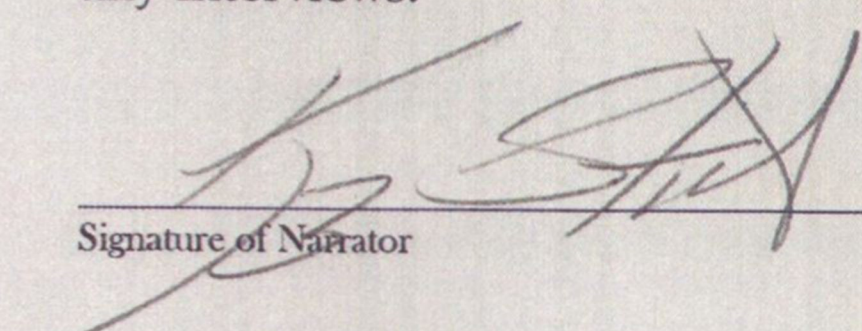


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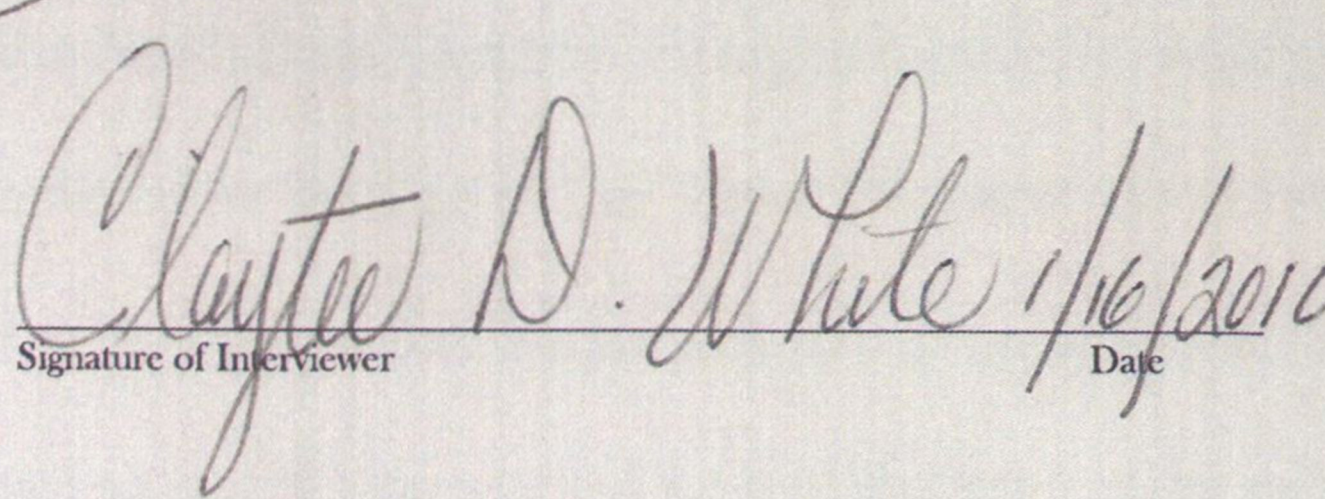
Name of Narrator: KENY STEWART

Name of Interviewer: CLAYTEE D. WHITE

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It is January 16th, 2010. My name is Claytee White, and I am with Keny [Stewart] this morning.

So, Keny, I just want you start by telling me about your early life, where you grew up, what that was like, and where you went to school.

I was born and raised in California, and mostly lived in the desert area when I was kid, then Northern California in my later years. I lived in a little river town called Marysville, California, and then later went to Sonoma State University in the Napa Valley, and I was a theater major. My first major was a theater major, so I was into performing and I was into puppetry.

I got my first professional job on a cruise ship and was working cruises for about five, six years, and then that led me back to San Francisco [California] and I worked in the North Beach area in the nightclubs there, and from there the big goal of any variety entertainer is to go to Las Vegas [Nevada]. So in 1984 I made the big step and said, OK, I'm moving to Las Vegas and getting an agent; so that's what I did. I moved here in '84, got an agent, and worked a lot of the Strip clubs and Strip hotels for different variety shows.

I bought a house, not this one. My first house was over in the north area, a house that was built in the Seventies. And then at one point (I think I had mentioned this in our last session) I actually was driving down this street accidentally and saw these older homes and went, Wow!, because it reminded me of more the Northern California—San

Francisco type of homes—and very quaint and different. I grew up always fixing houses anyway; whether it was a rental or my own house, I always knew how to do a lot of the work. So when I saw this house and inquired about it I saw that, Oh man, this is going to be a huge project; it's going to need a lot of work. So I knew it was going to be an investment, but it was an investment of love. I thought, OK, this is something I really wanted to do, and I loved the neighborhood, I loved the architecture and the uniqueness of the neighborhood, so that's when I bought the house. And I was still performing then, so I would work on the house during the day and perform at night and did that for several years. But then, a lot of the times when you're a performer, it will take you away from home because I'd work in Reno [Nevada], I'd work in Lake Tahoe [Nevada], I worked in Atlantic City [New Jersey], New York [New York].

I got tired of traveling at that point, so I said, OK, here I am at the crossroads of my life, so I decided to go back to school. I already had a degree, and so I looked into education, had a lot of friends who were teachers, and thought, OK. I went into a two-year program to get my certification for teaching. I always loved working with kids anyway because I did the puppets. So that's how I became a teacher. So now I've been teaching for seventeen years, and living in this house here at 1144 Sixth Street for twenty years now.

What grade level are you teaching?

I'm an elementary teacher. I taught first, second, third, and now I'm a library specialist; so now I work in a program as a specialist where I teach all of the grades K through 5. I see all of the kids during the course of the week, which is perfect because when I substituted in the library one week for somebody who was on track break, I went, Wow,

this is my forte: storytelling and voices and just all the characterizations of different stories. So that's when I went back to school again and got my second certification in library science. So now I operate the library.

Oh, that's wonderful. And you know that you have the resources of the UNLV [University of Nevada, Las Vegas] library.

Oh yeah, sure, I've been there many times.

Fantastic. So you told me how you came to this house. Tell me about the house, and start at the beginning. When you first walked through this house, tell me how you learned the history, and describe it to me.

The history was very difficult because, you know, the house had been here for so many years, and so naturally you're curious about who built it, who designed it, and again, I walked you through it and the architecture is so different in this house and you wonder, Who designed this and why? Just like the roofline. It's a two-door design and you go, Well, look at the little nooks and crannies that they put in here.

And then the history of the families that lived here. I grew up in the Fifties, so this reminds me of like a *Leave It to Beaver* house or a *Father Knows Best* house, just those perfect 1950 kind of homes, the two stories with the kids living in it and the parents and all that.

I didn't get a lot of the history in the beginning. The Internet wasn't around or wasn't that strong back then where you could actually Google™ anything and find out stuff about any history. So I got some history from neighbors who had lived here, because when I bought into the neighborhood, there were still some original owners; so I did a lot of questions about who lived here and things like that. The funny thing is I've

actually had a couple of people knock on the door, on occasion, and say, I grew up here. Can I walk through? Can I see the back yard? And they would tell me stories about what it was like when they lived in the neighborhood.

Can you remember any of those stories?

I remember one gal who stopped by and she said there were no houses in the back. It was just a field. So if this house was built in 1940, I think the house that's behind me right now was probably built in the Fifties, so back then it was just an open field, and she said, We used to play with the neighbors. And [John S.] Park Elementary School which is just two blocks up this way, is one of the oldest schools. It's over fifty years old. So whatever children or students were in this neighborhood, that was the school that they went to, and Las Vegas High School as they got older, which is just downtown.

It's an interesting feel when you walk through a home or when you live in a home and you feel the vibrations, if that's not too out there, about who was here and what happened. My whole goal was to restore the house, fix the house up, you know, try to keep it as intact as possible.

Can you describe the house for me?

It has a whole different look. Hardwood floors. It has a basement, which is very unusual in Las Vegas. It has curved ceilings when you walk in. The plaster is the old lathe plaster, so if you go to nail a nail in the wall to hang a picture, I mean you are going through some tremendous pressure with plaster. It's not drywall. It's very thick plaster. Of all the people I've had here who have helped me fix things, they all said, I can't believe how well-built this house is. When I had the house re-roofed, it had wood-shingle roofs, and so naturally they had to tear off all the old wood-shingle roofs, and the contractor at the

time said, Oh, we're going to have to put a sub-roof on and blah, blah, blah to put the tiles on and all that. Well, when they pulled all the wood shingles off, it was tongue-and-groove wood slate across the top of the roof. He said, I can't believe they went to this much trouble and this much quality for the roof, underneath the roof. So naturally he didn't have to do a sub-roof. The wood was perfect.

I wonder how much the house sold for the first time.

Ah, that would be interesting. You have to look at prices in the Forties. Yeah, incredible.

You got to remember that this was like one of the first probably unique residential neighborhoods because all the homes are custom, and there was no Las Vegas Strip in the Forties, so these had to be people who were working downtown. Most of those professions had to be downtown because downtown was all there was in the 1940s.

So tell me about the neighborhood itself, whether it's friendly, why you like the neighborhood, and then I want you to get into some of the political activism.

The neighborhood when I moved in was very, very quiet. Like I said, some of the original owners were still here, so that was fun. A lot of them have now dispersed and have moved on, retired, or unfortunately have died, and other people have moved in.

What I noticed when I bought in in the 1990s was that there was a renaissance at that point of people who wanted these kind of homes, and if you go around now and look in the neighborhood, you'll see a lot more yuppie-style, more diverse neighborhood, very culturally spread, and people who are fixing them up, who say, Wow, these are great houses, you know, we want to live in this neighborhood and fix it up.

I used to walk the dogs in the neighborhood all the time [and] ride my bicycle in the neighborhood. I always feel safe in the neighborhood. Yeah, I do. What I love about

it, you get spoiled in a community like this because we're so central. I mean, my car, I drive maybe one or two miles to everything that I need. It's that close. My work is close and all the shopping is close. So I don't have to go on the freeway. It still has that old-fashioned kind of neighborhood feel where I can go around the corner to the store.

The neighborhood for the most part is very friendly. Most of the people enjoy living in the neighborhood. And that gets to the point of our political activism. My point when I would go down to the City Council so often was, I can live anywhere I want. I chose to live in this neighborhood because it was so different and so unique and I love the homes. So that's why we kept fighting for the integrity of our neighborhood, you know, we love this place.

Do you remember the first fight?

The first controversy (I think it came up in our last conversation) was when Bob Stupak, who owned the Vegas World [Hotel and Casino] back then (it was way before the Stratosphere [Hotel and Casino]), he wanted to build a Titanic Hotel [and Casino] with a huge iceberg and a huge ship and all this. That sounded like a great idea, you know. The bad part about it was the location. It was one block from Fifth Street. So we would've seen the iceberg from our backyards, we would've seen the ship from our backyards, and we just thought it was going to spoil the look of our neighborhood. We went many times down to the City Council because Bob Stupak had a lot of money and he'd had these huge promos of what this was going to look like and he had his television production crew do all these commercials. So we had a hard fight. That was our first fight to save our neighborhood.

Did he live in the neighborhood at that time?

Yeah, he did. And that was the strange thing. He lives catty-corner from me.

So how did he justify wanting that, yet living in this type of a neighborhood?

Didn't bother him. Unfortunately, that was the mindset of so many Las Vegans at that time, and somewhat still is, especially with a lot of the councilmen: Tear it down and build whatever. Look at the history of Las Vegas. Look at how many historical buildings are gone, because they were imploded and we built something new, and so that was the nature of things. It doesn't matter about the history of those homes. We want money. We want tax revenue. That was the mindset of a lot of the politicians.

Do you remember any specifics in any of those City Hall meetings? Or preparing for those meetings: how did the community prepare?

Oh, we would have neighborhood discussions where we would sit down and talk, you know, who's going to speak, and I often spoke because I was a real advocate about preserving this neighborhood. And Stupak, you know, he had a big battle because he would even use his employees as part of the vote. He would be paying his employees to come into the City Council meetings and they would stand up to say, Yes, we want this, you know, this is part of our job. It was a tough battle. We really had to go from the sincerity of, We live here, this is our neighborhood, our families are here, our schools are here, and again, to get the consciousness of, you know, You're losing history. (This is before we were [historically] designated.) This is your history of this town, of this city, and you're just going to throw it away. There were other proposals later on where they were actually going to demolish some of the houses to make room for other buildings. We fought that as well.

Good. Tell me about the fight for the rollercoaster.

This was after the Stratosphere started and the Stratosphere tower was built. Bob Stupak still owned it at the time. You know, I've met Bob and he's a great guy, but his thinking goes beyond [reality]. He wanted to put a huge gorilla [on the tower] at one point. He was going to put King Kong climbing up and down the Stratosphere tower and that was going to be a ride. And then he was proposing this huge, giant rollercoaster that was going to come off the Stratosphere and go across Las Vegas Boulevard and then loop in the parking lot that he had across the street. Now again, great ideas, but you know, you need to be in acreage that's far away from a residential community, because we hear the screams now coming from the Stratosphere tower and we just kind of got used to it, but a rollercoaster would've been very, very close. I mean that would've been in back of Fifth Place, so that would've been in their back yards, these people coming off the rollercoaster and screaming down the Stratosphere. I remember that battle too and again, you know, Stupak with his money and his proposals and his commercials, but we actually won that one too. It did not get approved because it was just too huge of an endeavor for a residential neighborhood.

Tell me what you remember about any parts of the process of this becoming a historic neighborhood.

It was a long process. It was basically meeting, going over paperwork. [City planner] Yorgo [Kagafas] was the mainstream in all that. He's the one that helped us with the legalities and the functions of City Hall and what we need to do as first step, second step. I think there was a huge majority of the neighborhood who wanted this because, you know, if you've lived here for any number of years, you wanted to preserve what it was, and getting historic designation was just like a feather in your cap. Wow, this is great!

And I thought it was just such an acknowledgement for Las Vegas. It's like you don't have any historic areas in this town. And again we go back to the tear it down, build something new; tear it down, build something new. And you know you look at the old photographs of Las Vegas and it's like, Wow! Those are gone, never to be seen again.

So it was an interesting process. We got a lot of people on board. It was a lot of work. It was a tremendous amount of work, with writing and proposals and paperwork and meetings and talking, and then going down to the City Council and talking with them.

How did you keep that group together? I mean, people have jobs and families and all of that. How did the leaders keep that core group together?

Well, we had a nice communication. I mean we actually would write letters and [make] phone calls and so we had a nice bank of people who would constantly be in touch with each other. And we planned the meetings. They were right here at Park Elementary School. And they were usually in the evenings, you know, when people could attend, and they weren't lengthy; they were an hour at the most. So we would get the stuff done that we needed to get done, and then move on from there. And we had a huge commitment of people that were there every time and would sign the rosters. Yorgo had that whole book of all the people who attended all the time. But, you know, we got people on board. They really wanted this. Some people say, Oh, we had the opposing team too, who said, No, we don't want historic designation. We don't want people telling us what we can do with our homes. We kept having to educate people and remind people what historic designation meant. It didn't mean that anybody is going to tell you what to do. And then there were rumors about, oh, they're going to have to pay association dues and, you

know, this and this, and it got pretty crazy. There was a divide among the neighbors at one point, because you had the neighbors who wanted to go commercial and one of the neighbors who didn't want anything like this because he didn't know what it was, and I think that was the biggest problem is that we really had to educate the neighborhood on what historic designation meant.

There's another neighborhood not that far from here. It's called the Westleigh Neighborhood (between Charleston and Oakey). They tried for historic designation but it doesn't look like it's going to succeed, because the naysayers were louder.

What do you think happened in that case?

I don't know. I'm not familiar with that case seriously. But I know some of our neighbors here have proposed it, and I think Yorgo mentioned it because part of it is that the City funding is so limited now that they're actually just going to say, No, we don't want to deal with that right now. I'm glad that we got it and we were one of the first. It was important to us because we are the oldest section in Las Vegas outside the little railroad houses that are actually downtown, built in the Twenties and Thirties. It's just nice to preserve what you have.

Tell me what kind of power this neighborhood has garnered from the activism, now.

Well, now it's been quiet. Now it's been very complacent. It's like, you know, we fought and fought for the historic designation. But the other thing is that people backed off. The developers backed off, because they would say, Ooh, don't go around that neighborhood. You got a really strong resistance to anybody building any high-rises or anything else that's going to interfere with the style of that neighborhood. And so we were well-known at City Hall. I mean, they knew our faces and they knew our names [because] we were

down there so many times. That hasn't happened in a few years now. I don't remember making any trips downtown. We get those mailers from City Hall about the proposals, about rezoning and this and that, about people that are proposing projects, and so we fought many times because that was when everybody was building, everybody had to build a tower, and it's like, OK, it's fine that you want to build a tower, but you can't do it a hundred feet from our neighborhood here.

Tell me the mechanics. When you would have gotten one of those notices five years ago, that someone wanted to build a tower, what happened?

Well, the neighborhood would call each other, like [former neighborhood association president] Bob Bellis. [Then] I was president at the time. And then you'd call the other associate neighborhoods and you would say, Well, look, there's a City Council meeting proposing this and we're opposed to this and we shouldn't do this. Sometimes we would do a neighborhood meeting to talk about it, and then other times we would make the plan to go down there. And there were times when we'd go down to the City Council and we'd be thirty-strong, you know, different residents in the neighborhood. And you know, if you've ever watched the proceedings, they give you a chance to speak and oppose it. [Mayor] Oscar Goodman was always in favor of us. He was always really good about preserving the neighborhood and helping us out.

Tell me about being president of the neighborhood association.

That was an interesting time. Bob was either traveling or moving, so I got voted in. And at the time I didn't mind. It was a lot of work. It was a lot of work, especially with the communication factor: you got to communicate with all the neighbors and phone calls and letters and all that. And then at times I would run the meetings. I would speak at the

meetings. We were basically about halfway through this [historic designation process] at this point, and we still had the opposition team from the other neighbors, so that was the biggest factor. It's like, OK, you know, you got to the point about, you were kind of in the middle. You got neighbors coming to knock on your door and, Why do you want this?, and blah, blah, blah, blah, and again, it all came back to the education and the enlightenment of what historic designation meant. So many people were so afraid: oh, their taxes were going to go up, we're going to have to pay money, and this and that. And so a lot of it was just word-of-mouth, you know, helping spread the word that, Look, this isn't going to make any difference. If anything, it's going to enhance your neighborhood. It's going to enhance your property.

Did that political activism cause the social networks in the neighborhood to increase?

Yeah, it did. It did.

What kind of activities do you see socially?

Oh, well, we did block parties, which is real fun. They did a recipe exchange once. It's kind of died out now because like I said, it kind of got complacent. There hasn't been a lot of activity in the last few years.

The nice part too is that you can still walk down the street and see those same neighbors and talk with them and we'll talk about our homes. You have such a multitude of different people here. You have artists, you have professionals, and you've got educators and you've got just typical families. Kind of everybody knows one another in the neighborhood.

What kind of needs do you see in the neighborhood now? Are there any reasons for the neighbors to start getting together again for any special projects?

Not that I foresee, because again the building has died out. I think if anything happened, if there were developers who wanted to come in and encroach on the neighborhood, I think we would have to build up as a community again and oppose that. But since that hasn't been a problem, the neighborhood has been pretty much OK. Everything has been fine. I think outside your regular neighborhood needs about fixing the streets or the sidewalks and safety and security, that sort of thing, I don't think there have been any major problems. Again, we haven't been bothered. People have left us alone. It's like, OK, leave us alone. We're just this quiet little neighborhood here.

Do you see any differences in safety in the neighborhood prior to historic designation and after historic designation?

Not really. Not really. I think the police force is more aware that we're a strong neighborhood association, you know, we're a strong community that talks with one another and communicates with one another. So I think police activity is a little stronger in here. If we have any problem, I think they know this neighborhood and know to come help.

Who do you consider some of the influential people in this neighborhood that we want to make sure are interviewed? Anybody special?

Oh, Mary Hausch, definitely. Mary Hausch is part of the Historic Preservation Committee. She was a big factor in the committee meetings and mailings and even used a lot of her own money with some of the mailings that we were doing to different individuals in the neighborhood during the historic designation time. Her husband, of

course, [Nevada State] Senator Bob Coffin was very influential, again, because of his title, and he was a big supporter of the neighborhood, and he grew up in the neighborhood. I mean he had wonderful stories that he went to Park School. I don't know if he grew up in that exact house, but I know that he grew up in the neighborhood, in this area.

And then Bob Bellis, of course, and Yorgo, of course. We had a good team of people [including] some of the City Council and again Mayor Goodman, neutral as he was as a mayor, but he really supported this program. I think he supported the historic part of Las Vegas. He's still all about downtown. You can listen to him today. And we are downtown. We are that community that goes downtown and supports whatever activities are downtown.

And in that case, tell me about Fremont Street East, that the mayor is trying to develop so badly. How do you feel about that in proximity to where you are?

Oh, that wasn't a problem. We were always for any development like that. We were asking in our proposal that we wanted like coffee shops and stores and things in the neighborhood. There are still some seedy motels on Las Vegas Boulevard and some other controversial areas, you know, tattoo parlors and sex shops and whatever, so in our proposed plan we said we'd love to see a whole section of little shops that we could go to, because all of us walk to these facilities that are so close. Fremont East is a great thing. It's the clubs and the music and all that. Unfortunately, in the economic times, it hasn't succeeded very well, but I think it's still a wonderful idea.

I think I have asked all of the questions, but I wanted to ask, any other comments about the neighborhood and what this kind of a neighborhood means to you?

Well, like I said, and I would use this argument when I would go down to the City Council: I chose to live here. When I bought a home, I could've bought it in the northwest, I could've bought it in the southwest, I could've bought it in Henderson [Nevada]. I drove through this neighborhood and felt that this was just a really nice little community that I wanted to live in. You have to love the nature of the older homes, if you're choosing to live here. I just walked you through and I showed you some of the stuff that you deal with when you buy an older home. You have major plumbing problems; you've got this going on and that going on. But it's a labor of love. And when I bought the house, that's what it was. I knew it was going to be a tremendous project, but again, it's like, it's fun to live in a place where you fix it up and you live in it and you feel so good about your house, that this is just such an incredible place.

And we talked earlier too about the nature of the history, you know, like how many families have lived here and how many communities and what happened in the neighborhood. There are often times I'll be in my backyard and I hear the train whistle, because the railroad tracks are not far from here, and every time I hear the train whistle, I think of the 1940s, and how all those passengers came into Las Vegas and got off at the train depot downtown, and even this community, maybe these people were hopping the train to go into Los Angeles [California] or to Utah. So it just has that wonderful, wonderful feel to be a part of this history and what went on in this neighborhood.

It has such a special feeling. And I think most of the people that buy into this neighborhood like that, you know, they like the architecture of the homes, they like the feel of the neighborhood, and just what the neighborhood has to offer.

In this neighborhood there are certain groups: we have artists, we have some immigrants, we have intellectuals, we have a homosexual community, we have the old Mormon community. How do all off those communities fit together? This is one of the most diverse communities in the city.

It is. It's very diverse. Even when we would do our neighborhood association meetings, you would look around at the group of people and it was what you just described: it was a very diverse group of people. But we were there for a common cause: we live here. These are our homes. This is our neighborhood. And it didn't matter, you know. So I'm an educator. It doesn't matter. When I look around my classroom and I see the diversity of people, you know, my goal and my purpose is education, and I don't see the color, I don't see the size. And I think that's what our neighborhood was about: we had a common goal. Our goal was to preserve our homes. This is our place.

I thank you so much.

Oh, my pleasure. My pleasure.

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