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An Interview with Kim Vilt

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee White

Voices of the Historic John S. Park Neighborhood

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Interview with Kim Vilt

January 12, 2010 in Las Vegas, Nevada
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Voices of the Historic John S. Park Neighborhood



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Today is January 12th, 2010, and I am here with Kim Vilt this morning, and this is Claytee White. So how are you this morning, Kim?

I am fine, thank you.

Wonderful. So Kim, I'm going to start just by having you tell me a little about your early life, just whatever you want to tell me. Did you grow up here in Las Vegas?

No, I grew up in the San Fernando Valley [California].

Oh really! Tell me about that, the kind of childhood you had there in the San Fernando Valley.

Well, my parents' home, where they still live, is in Woodland Hills [California], and it's a rural district in Los Angeles County; so we had about an acre and I grew up with chickens and pigs and the neighbors have horses and I grew up horseback-riding. It was a good blend of city life and a little bit of the country, so a lot of outdoor time, a lot of camping and just being outdoors with the family. It was nice.

Oh, that's wonderful! How many children in the family?

I'm the oldest of four.

OK, and what kind of work did your parents do?

My mom stayed home until my youngest sister was in school, and then she's been like an office manager at elementary schools ever since. And my dad's changed. He was a mechanic when I was little, and then he owned his own business for a quite a while, and he got out of that about four years ago and decided to go into contracting, and about three

months into that is when the bubble burst, and so he decided he'd go back and he works for the City of Los Angeles right now as a mechanic.

OK. Usually we think of Woodland Hills as a very upscale area.

Right, and when I was growing up it certainly wasn't. Now it is. I go home and it's kind of shocking. My dad grew up in a house down the street from where we live, and my grandparents actually live around the corner from that house, so I grew up seeing my grandparents every day. And they bought their house from a friend of the family, and I think they bought it for seventy thousand dollars. Yeah, they were just able to afford it and then the property taxes were skyrocketing and they thought they'd have to move, but then they [the voters] passed the bill, so they froze them [property taxes] and it just kind of worked out for them.

So how did you get to Las Vegas?

Well, after I graduated from college.

Where did you go to school?

Cal State Monterey Bay [California State University, Monterey Bay, CSUMB]. Yeah, it was lovely. I was in the Peace Corps in [the Republic of] Bulgaria, and I met my husband [James J. Vilt] there, who was also a Peace Corps volunteer. And he grew up in Cleveland [Ohio], but he went to law school in San Diego [California]. And his father lives in town, and so he said he would pay [for] the bar [examination] if he moved here. So he moved to Las Vegas for about eight months before [joining the] Peace Corps. And once he left Peace Corps, this was the only state he was licensed in, so we kind of moved here. It's been a little bit longer than we planned on. [Laughing]

How do you like Las Vegas?

Not so much.

What about this area, though?

This neighborhood I think makes it easier to live in [Vegas]. When we first moved here, we were in the northwest, and I think the whole time we lived there, we spoke to one neighbor, directly next to us.

So when did you move to Las Vegas?

In May of 2000.

So, "northwest" meaning up off of the [Interstate] 95?

Yeah, like Cheyenne and 95, and so ten years ago, that was as far as it went. So, we would walk out and really outside of our subdivision was just desert, and I remember just hiking to Lone Mountain. There was no park there; there was nothing there. So, you know, that was interesting. But it just kept growing and growing.

So how did you choose John S. Park as a neighborhood to live in?

We knew a couple of people that lived downtown, and we kind of heard about it, and we liked the older homes and the older neighborhoods. I was pregnant with my son and we knew we were going to be here a little bit and we might as well buy a house, so we started looking. First we did look in the newer neighborhoods and that just didn't appeal to us as much, and then we came down here, and we just liked the feel of the neighborhood.

Does it remind you of your Woodland Hills, growing up there, at all?

Not so much. I'm happy that the kids [have a nice yard]. You know, we have a decent-sized yard that they can be outside and play and we can have a garden and do some of those things, which we wouldn't have that opportunity anywhere else, so it's nice.

OK. So tell me what your husband does for a living.

He's an attorney, and right now he actually works at the Justice Court, so you can see it from the window.

So he can almost walk to work.

Yeah, he can walk to work. It's less than a mile. And he administers the Justice Court.

When you moved into the neighborhood in the year 2000, there were some political activities [going on]. Well, there have been some political activities here in the neighborhood since you've been here. Can you tell me some of those examples and how you participated?

I think the biggest example was probably trying to get a limit on how high the skyscrapers could be built. It was during the boom and everyone was kind of prospecting and trying to build these thirty, forty towers, like right in the backyards of people on Fifth Street. So there was a lot of activity about that. We signed petitions, you know, wrote letters, called our local city representatives who were supportive of it.

How did you hear about them in the beginning?

In the beginning, I think, probably just from neighbors that lived on Fifth Street. We do block parties every year, several times a year, so there was always talk of it there, petition-signing, presentations. [County Commissioner] Chris G. [Guinchigliani] lives in the neighborhood, so she was very vocal in support of controlling the height on just that one part of the corridor.

Probably the other biggest political issue would be the homeless at Circle Park. I think anyone who lives downtown—we're all aware that the homeless are our neighbors and no one has a problem with it. You go to the Starbucks™, you go to the grocery store.

It's not an issue. It was becoming an issue when we had a lot of people kind of camping out at the park, and there were incidents of people coming into the neighborhood. We had our car broken into. Several people had had homes broken into. Just things like food, a shower taken, you know, cash, jewelry stolen, people were defecating on people's lawns, you'd find condoms and needles and I think someone had exposed himself to children at the park. So it was a real safety issue. And so we had gone, several of us, and spoken at the City Council.

Tell me how that goes, when you go to the City Council. Give me an example of what that's like.

It's much smaller than you see on TV. I think it's a little different in that respect. But it's just a chance to go up and speak and say your piece, and they were looking for alternatives or ways to kind of facilitate helping the people that were at the park and keeping the neighborhood safe.

When the issue was put on the agenda for the City Council, tell me the entire process. How do you know about that? Who decides who goes that day? How were you organized to do all of that?

We have neighborhood associations. John S. Park is a nationally registered historic neighborhood; so we have a neighborhood president and vice-president, and there are several other neighborhood associations, like the West Circle Park neighborhood, Huntridge neighborhood, so kind of the presidents of those neighborhood associations get out the word, there's flyers, e-mails, we have a Downtown website, Facebook™ page, so there's a lot of information sharing that goes on. And then just word of mouth because I

mean you see people around; everyone is walking and talking to neighbors. It's kind of nice in that respect.

So, several people had met with [City Councilman] Gary Reese. I think they had spoken to people at NPR [Nevada Public Radio, also National Public Radio] about it, and Chris G. had helped facilitate getting this on the [City Council] agenda. So when it was on the agenda, it was a public meeting and people could come [and] speak. And quite a few neighbors came and spoke.

What was frustrating, what actually ended up happening, was someone was killed at the park, and they closed the park down, which was not at all what the neighborhood wants or intended. We had been pushing for a community garden, because we thought increasing the positive uses of it would just increase foot traffic and decrease the negative activities that had been going on. But we didn't get much support for that, unfortunately, and they closed the park, and it's been closed now for about a year.

So what are the plans now for the park?

As far as we heard, they're putting up a giant veterans' memorial and that's it.

So does the neighborhood agree with that?

No. People aren't very supportive of that at all.

So are you going to get up in arms again?

People have. I think the issue right now is, I don't know how much is moving forward on it, because it was an over-one-million-dollar monument, and I guess some veterans group was going to pay for this and the City wasn't paying for it, but they did not have support from the neighbors. And I think the park was going to be closed. It was just going to still be this monument there, and left like that, which I find really ironic, considering so many

of our homeless are veterans. So I don't know. So right now I don't think there's any movement on it.

The first issue that you had talked about was the high-rise development. Did that operate in the same way with the presidents of the associations getting together?

Was that organized like that as well?

It was. It was organized similarly. I think there was a little bit more of a media push as well, because the opposing sides of that have a lot of money and were very well-organized and, you know, they had the Carpenters Union [United Brotherhood of Carpenters] flood the public meeting when it was there, and we're thinking, Carpenters aren't working on an iron-steel skyscraper. So it was very political. But then of course everything fell apart, so it became a non-issue.

There was also an issue in the neighborhood. Now I don't know if this was before 2000, I don't know my exact dates, but the Stratosphere Hotel [and Casino].

That was before 2000, but I'm familiar with it. We've heard neighbors talk about it.

So what have you heard about it?

Just when they were looking to build the rollercoaster, I guess, going across, how loud and destructive that would be. Already you can hear them when they're out on the—I guess it's swings that they have, or they already have a rollercoaster up there, on some days you can hear it. So, building a rollercoaster going across just wasn't a very good idea. I don't think anyone was supportive of it.

Now tell me, how did you and your husband find this house?

I guess a pretty traditional way that anyone finds a house. We had a realtor, and we gave this area that we were interested in, and this was just one of the houses that we [saw].

So describe your house to me.

It was built in 1946. It's a nice old house. It's three bedrooms, two bathrooms. The master bathroom and bedroom are additions. I think the original part of the house kind of ends, if you can see where the piano is; so it was really quite small, and right now it's just under fifteen hundred square feet, so it was probably at a thousand square feet when we moved in here. It's cozy.

But the houses are very deceiving, though. They look so much smaller from the outside.

They do, yeah. But it's just a nice, open plan. It's a nice little family house for us.

And you started to describe it as "cozy." Go ahead with that.

Yeah, I just always feel that it's just kind of nice and friendly and warm in here. We put a lot of work into it when we moved in. We uncovered the wooden floors and had those redone. So I believe what I'd heard from neighbors. My neighbor across the street, she moved about three years ago, but she had been here since the Seventies, and she was just a lovely older widow, so she gave us a lot of information about the house. There had been a fire in the early Eighties [1980s] that destroyed quite a bit of it, so when they rebuilt, I think they kind of went with a Tudor-ish theme on the outside, with the beams and some changes in that. They raised the ceilings in the living room and redid a lot of the, I guess, electricity and bones of the house, and that's when they put the addition on.

But, yeah, so we don't have some of the really interesting, original charm that some of the other houses have. Our neighbors, for example, around the corner, they still have the little door that the milkman would put the milk [in] in the morning. They bought the house from the original owner; they were the second owners. And they're both

architects, so they completely redid the house and it's just lovely. They moved about four years ago and sold it to another couple. That house is beautiful.

OK, so now, the architects, are they still in Las Vegas?

They moved to Denver [Colorado].

OK. I would love to have talked to them about redesigning one of the houses.

Now that you're on the National Register of Historic Places, what kind of discussions do you hear about that now because at one time there was a little contention in the neighborhood.

Right, and we heard about that. I think people were confused as to what that meant. I think a lot of people felt that that meant they couldn't change their house or build on it or do anything, but if you drive around the neighborhood, you see that people have definitely modernized their homes.

I guess what was also kind of surprising is, being on the Registry, there's no real protection to make sure that things stay somewhat in the character of the neighborhood. There's a little bit of protection, but if you go around the corner, across from that beautiful house I was telling you about is a huge brown thing, that used to belong to other friends of ours, and it was the original, you know, nine-hundred-square-foot home, and when they moved, the neighbors next door bought it, and I think now it's about two-thousand-and-something square feet. And he had tried to make it pretty much encompass the entire lot, and the garage was half the size of the house, and that didn't go through the City Council. But what he ended up building is something much more modern that you'd see out, kind of in the northwest.

So, there aren't these strong standards to maintain. There's nothing that says you have to have a certain roof or color of the house or landscaping or anything like that.

I think you're supposed to go through, to get some approvals before [making changes].

But I think, as long as it's within the code, they'll approve anything.

That's correct. Talking about block parties, have you participated in the block parties since you've been here?

Oh yeah, several.

Oh good. Well, tell me about the block parties, how they're done, how they're organized.

They're fun. There used to be a couple that lived here, an older couple, and they were really the ones that were in charge of it. So since they moved about a year-and-a-half ago, it's died down a little bit.

Do you remember their names?

Mike and Jan Britain, I think. And they were just great. They would organize it and there would always be a bouncy house and activities and someone's teenaged kid's band would play and someone would be doing skateboard demonstrations and it was always a big potluck, so everyone would bring food. It was just a nice little get-together. And then the past couple of years, I think really the West Circle [Park] Neighborhood Association, Lance Kirk, he's been more in charge of organizing those, and so they've been nice. It's been a nice job, but I think it's kind of moved over a little bit. The last one at least was over in front of their house.

So, do you think the political activity then has spurred some social activity?

I think this neighborhood, at least since we've been here, it's always been pretty social, which made the political activity easier, because there was the network. We've seen a lot of people leave since we've been here: a lot of older couples retiring, and the folks across the street moved back to Puerto Rico, and his son and his wife now live there and they have a little girl, and they still come back and visit, but he would be the one where someone walking through the neighborhood that didn't belong in the neighborhood, you know, just someone we didn't recognize, he'd follow them to the end of the corner, and you know we would get calls from the neighbors, like someone, you know, just keep your eye on this person or that. So, yeah, there's a lot of strong connection that way that I don't think you find in other neighborhoods.

I think that is wonderful. So does that mean then that the crime lessened at some points?

I think at some points it did. When it peaked, in my experience in the past ten years, it's tended to be an organized group that has been coming and kind of hitting houses systematically, and so Metro [Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, LVMPD] has really been, you know, involved with trying to bust that. Or it's been some of the homeless population. I know at the house across the street, they'd actually seen the two men leaving.

That's sad. I think that's very sad.

It is, yeah.

Do you see any influence from any particular church in the area? At one time, the Mormon Church was very, very influential in this community.

Right. The church [chapel] is gone, if you've noticed. About six months ago they actually leveled it, but I think it had been closed almost since we've been here.

She just moved, gosh, I want to say one or two years ago, but the original owner of the house down the street, she's Mormon and she had been very involved with the Church. I think her grandsons and another grandson own a couple of the houses. Debbie [Deborah Boehm] and Patrick's [Jackson] house, they actually bought it from her grandson, I believe.

Other than that, I haven't really noticed much influence.

Now, not just talking about the Stratosphere, but do you see any influence here from the casino industry, a lot of people working in the casino industry or anything like that?

I haven't noticed it. I think probably more of the people that we know and talk to like work at UNLV or are artists or, you know, that kind of thing. So I haven't noticed too much of an influence other than in the history that a lot of these homes were owned by [casino employees].

So tell me about the population mix in the community.

It seems to be a good mix. A lot of [residents] recently have been younger families, when we first moved there that have kind of been moving in. Young professionals. The Hispanic families. I don't know, it's just a good mix of people. Some of the older folks have been moving out; I guess in the past couple of years we've kind of lost that, but it's remained fairly steady, I guess, as far as who [lives here]. Most of them are owners, too, which is nice. With the recession and the housing boom, we've seen some more renters come in, and there is a difference. Some of the people, some of the homes have really

been kept up well, not so much in this little neighborhood but like Tenth Street past Oakey [Boulevard]—there was a drug house. Everyone knew it was a drug house. I don't think the owners knew. They were in Mexico, but some friends of mine ended up tracking them down in Mexico and talking to them and they kicked everyone out and so the house has improved drastically since then.

But that's good that you had that kind of communication. Someone found the owners.

Yeah. I think people were just so sick of, you know, the police always being at the house and feeling threatened walking by the house.

Who are some of the influential people that you've met in the area? During the political campaigns, I know you've mentioned Chris G. and a couple of others. Are there any other names that come to mind, the influential ones here in the neighborhood?

[Attorney and poet] Dayvid Figler lives up on Sixth Street. And there's another judge that lives up on Sixth Street, I believe; I don't recall the name. Just a lot of local artists, you know, probably like Marty Walsh; she has a gallery at the Arts Factory. And Steven Ligouri lives next door; he's a sculptor. We actually bought our house from him, and then he moved next door. He grew up in this neighborhood. I can't think of anyone else that comes to mind.

OK, good. Now since you've been here in 2000, so ten years almost, what kind of changes have you noticed?

Personally, the loss of several good friends in the neighborhood that have moved out. The prices [of homes] skyrocketing since we bought [our home], and then dropping down like

everyone else is. More rentals, I think. And it's kind of been waves. I think you see bursts of people kind of improving and wanting to, you know, increase the value of their home or just the attractiveness of it or restore it and then that kind of dropped off a bit with the economy. So, right now it's probably more at a trough than it was when we got here.

What do you like most about living in the community?

I think just that there is a real sense of community here, and I didn't find that in other places in Las Vegas. It's hard to find in Las Vegas. Not even that this is, you know, perfect, but we've got a lot of friends in the neighborhood and people like to garden and grow things; we had chickens for a while, a few years ago. I think that's probably my favorite thing. It's nice that, you know, Jim is so close to work; he can walk to work. My son goes to First Good Shepherd [Lutheran School], a mile away. I've actually walked up with my daughter and the dog to get him the other day and it's shocking just the mile difference, how kind of isolated we are here, and just kind of how scummy it gets rather quickly, walking up. The contrast, having not walked it in a long time, was surprising.

Now [in] what area of the city does your husband's father live?

He lives out in Desert Shores.

So, how does he feel about John S. Park?

I think everyone has preconceived notions about it, but whenever we tell people that don't live around here where we live, it's always, you know, Oh my God, you live there. Is it safe? But when they come to our house, I think they get a different perspective that it's actually quite nice. He [my father-in-law] likes that there's a yard. You know, I think they like it; they like the older house, but—.

OK. I think you've already told me some of the disadvantages of the community, with the homeless population. With the closing of the park, did that make a difference in the homeless population?

It did, yeah. They closed it. They actually had a number of statistics from the Metro Police Department when they did the town meeting, when it was on the agenda, and when the park was closed for the restoration, they had noted that calls from the neighborhood had dropped. I mean it was drastic. It was unbelievable. And they had statistics on the number of Metro calls and violations for that little park, as compared to all parks that size in Las Vegas, and I think this was something like 90 percent. It was rather high. So we have noticed that drop, yeah.

OK. So any other comments that you'd like to make on the community?

I mean for as long as we're in Las Vegas, you know, I think we're happy to be in this community.

Where do you plan to go?

Right now we've been looking at Oregon, possibly, maybe the Pacific Northwest. We're not sure. We're open. We're very open. But, you know, for now it's great. My daughter was born in this house and, you know, it's been a good house for us, our first home.

And now the next baby will be born here.

Possibly, yeah, hopefully. That would be nice.

That's wonderful. Well, thank you so much. We just wanted information on the neighborhood, and I really appreciate it. Does Jim have any special feelings about the community, things that you would be different from yours?

I think living here has been a little bit more frustrating for him than me. I think he's more affected by the noise, like the helicopter tours. That's really bothered him. They've dropped off, thank goodness.

Wasn't there some petitions against the helicopters?

Oh yeah. That was before we had moved here.

Now tell me about the helicopter tours.

Right. So they use Charleston [Boulevard] as one of their main thoroughfares, and they're supposed to stick to Charleston but they can waver a little bit, so they would fly over our homes.

What are they showing people?

I don't know. I think that's just the route that they would come, to go down the Strip [Las Vegas Boulevard]. And then you get the Flight for Life, UMC [University Medical Center], which is not a big deal, and that's not so constant. But when we first moved here, the helicopters were [really noisy]. I mean at nine o'clock at night, it would just start and go till midnight, and there was nothing anyone could do, apparently, about it. But that's really dropped off with the [downturn in the] economy, so I think several of those have gone out of business.

Other things that your husband [thinks about the community]?

I mean things that we both share in common. Like I love living in a walkable neighborhood, and it just, the kind of things we can walk to here aren't so [good]. You know, like I said, walking to the school was rather discouraging. So I think we're just both ready for a change, you know, getting out of Las Vegas. It's nice to live in the city

of Las Vegas where we live, but I guess as far as cities go, as far as urban environments, this isn't the best for us.

OK. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate the information.

You're welcome.