

CT
247
M369
2012

AN INTERVIEW WITH DONNA AND TOM MARTIN

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

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

©The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project
University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2012

Produced by: The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries
Director: Claytee D. White
Editors: Barbara Tabach, Joyce Moore
Transcriber: Kristin Hicks
Interviewers and Project Assistants: Barbara Tabach and Claytee D. White

The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of Dr. Harold Boyer. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank the university for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project.

Claytee D. White, Project Director
Director, Oral History Research Center
University Libraries
University Nevada, Las Vegas

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV

Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project
Rancho High School Class of '62



Use Agreement

Name of Narrator: DONNA MARTIN

Name of Interviewer: CLAYTEE D. WHITE

We, the above named, give to the Oral History Research Center of UNLV, the recorded interview(s) initiated on 4/31/13 along with typed transcripts as an unrestricted gift, to be used for such scholarly and educational purposes as shall be determined, and transfer to the University of Nevada Las Vegas, legal title and all literary property rights including copyright. This gift does not preclude the right of the interviewer, as a representative of UNLV, nor the narrator to use the recordings and related materials for scholarly pursuits.

I understand that my interview will be made available to researchers and may be quoted from, published, distributed, placed on the Internet or broadcast in any medium that the Oral History Research Center and UNLV Libraries deem appropriate including future forms of electronic and digital media.

There will be no compensation for any interviews.

Donna Martin 4/31/13
Signature of Narrator Date

Claytee D. White
Signature of Interviewer Date

Library Special Collections
4505 Maryland Parkway, Box 457010, Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-7070
(702) 895-2222

Preface

Hailing from Indiana and California, Donna Guiffre Martin and Tom Martin came to Las Vegas in the early 1950s as their parents sought new opportunities. Donna's father, Gus Guiffre, quickly established himself as a local television personality, while Tom's father took on a variety of entrepreneurial opportunities. Like many of the young people in Las Vegas, Donna and Tom enjoyed riding around town; horse-back riding; football games; Helldorado – and, of course, Rancho High School.

This interview covers both Donna and Tom's early years before their moves to Las Vegas, as well as their memories of first homes, childhood experiences, early adulthood and their current lives.

This is Claytee White. I'm with Tom and Donna Martin. They're going to give your full names and they're going to spell those for you in a few minutes. It is January 31st, 2013.

So how are both of you today?

I'm fine, Claytee.

Great.

Great. So first, Tom, give me your full name, the name that you gave me earlier.

Okay. It is George Thomas Martin, the third.

And everything is spelled normal?

Just normal, correct.

Okay, good.

Donna would you please do the same thing. And then if you will start after that tell me something about your early life.

Okay. My name is Donna Giuffre Martin. The Giuffre I will spell; it's G-I-U-F-F-R-E. I was born in Frankfort, Indiana in 1944. My father was a city fireman. But because of a lot of ill health in the family, the doctor said we needed to move to a warmer climate. People had told my dad with his voice and his personality he should have been in radio and television. So we packed up the car and headed West and we stopped in Phoenix, Arizona to see my grandmother, and my dad went to one of the radio stations there and they told him if he was serious that he needed to go to school and get a first-class engineering license before he could become a disc jockey.

So we moved on to Southern California and he used his GI Bill and went to radio school. We came to Las Vegas for Helldorado. My mother fell in love with it and said why don't you see if you can get a job. There were only three radio stations in town at the time and no television. So he called—it was KRAM then, K-R-A-M radio—he called the owner at his home

and the man liked his voice and hired him over the telephone. And told him, he said, you'd probably like a contract or something. And my dad said, well, yeah. So he said come to the house. And he wrote something out on a paper towel.

So he went back to California and packed up. We could not find a place to live in Las Vegas. So my mother, my sister Toni and I stayed in Glendale, California. And my dad slept on army cot at the radio transmitter and pleaded every day on the radio for someplace for his family to live. Finally, a family called and they said we're going to be out of town for three months; you can live in our house for three months. So we packed up and moved to Las Vegas and that was in 1952.

So where was the house located?

It was in North Las Vegas. So we stayed there for three years.

Three years or three months?

No. Three months. I'm sorry. We moved around quite a bit in that time. There was very little in Las Vegas, a lot of dirt roads, very few paved streets. We eventually lived in the Crestwood area for a while and then we eventually moved up to Twin Lakes and we lived there for a while until—I always liked horses and my dad always talked about his family on television. So for Christmas one year one of his fans sent me a horse. And so we boarded her at the Twin Lakes stables for a while and then my parents bought a home not far from there, but where we could have her in the backyard.

Do you remember how much the home cost?

Twenty-eight thousand five hundred dollars. It had a half acre of land. It was a big home. It was right almost back to back with Jim Gans that you interviewed yesterday. So we lived there.

My early, early days I did a lot of horseback riding, rode in the Helldorado Parade, did a

few—I wasn't a real good cowgirl. I tried barrel racing, but I wasn't great at it. But I had my horse until I went away to college. And then nobody else in my family rode, so we gave her away.

And your sister never learned?

No. She would get on her once in a while when we would have company come to town. But the horse took off with her one day and she said, wait a minute. My dad said you're supposed to go whoa. So because no one was exercising her when I wasn't around, I said I'd rather give her to somebody that will give her a good home than sell her. So I gave her away.

Do you know who gave the horse to you?

I cannot remember her name. Her husband was an executive at the Sahara Hotel is all I can remember. And my dad had never met her. We didn't meet her until she decided to give me the horse. Then we went to her home. They didn't tell me at first they were going to give me the horse. They said that the lady was ill and would I take care of the horse for a few months. So we brought her out to Twin Lakes. Then about three months later at Christmas they told me that she was mine.

But early on I would ride anybody's horse that they would let me on. James Cashman Senior had two horses. And one of my best friend's father, in his job working for Mr. Cashman, was to take care of those horses because he had a horse. So I used to ride Mr. Cashman's horses all the time. Mr. Cashman had a silver-mounted saddle that he kept on display in the dealership showroom and he had another white show saddle. He had my girlfriend and I convinced that if we cleaned those he would let us use them in the Helldorado Parade. I mean it was slave labor; we spent hours and hours and hours cleaning that silver. I've got some pictures over there with the saddle. He let us use his things when we were riding in the parade.

Oh, that's wonderful. Now, I'm going to come back in a few minutes because I want you to tell me more about your father and his career.

So Tom, would you like to tell me about your young years?

Sure. The first part is kind of short and sweet. I was born in Hollywood, California, February nineteenth, 1944, and lived there and started school until 1951 when we moved to Las Vegas.

The school I attended was Michael Teraina Elementary; we've seen it [name has changed]. It's right on Sunset Boulevard. I was kind of surprised it's still there, but that was the grade school.

But then when we moved to Las Vegas, my dad came up and bought a home. My mother had never seen it or anything; he just bought the house. We were on Mesquite Street, which is the third street south of Bonanza. We were at Nineteenth and Mesquite. Our house faced the north out toward Sheep Mountain. It had a big picture window. And there was nothing between our house until you got to Nellis Air Force Base. We would get up early to see the glow from the "A" bomb tests at Mercury. Off to the east a little, the Davis Ranch was there; that's where Davis Nursery is down about 25th and Bonanza now. It was just a house and kind of an out building with animals and that. But we lived there until just about high school age and then we moved just a block over and two blocks down to the corner of 23rd and Walnut. I went to Sunrise Acres Elementary School here and then to Rancho.

Sunrise Acres started at first grade and went to?

I don't know that they had kindergarten, but they had first grade. So I started there at second grade and went through to the eighth grade. Sunrise Acres School is still there, but it's not on the same piece of property; it's further to the east. When I went to school there, they had some temporary portable buildings. They were kind of rectangle shaped and I remember that they had crossing guide wires overhead with turnbuckles to hold them together. We had oil for heat; we

had an oil furnace with a Lyca face front. When the wind blew real good like it does here, the chalkboards would actually move on the walls. But in those classes, I think I spent about three years in those buildings. Then they had some cinderblock buildings, as well. I think the two lower grades and then the upper grades. Then they finally got rid of those. But that was Sunrise Acres back then.

Wow. Amazing.

When we went to Rancho there were only three high schools in Las Vegas at the time. It was the original Las Vegas High and then Bishop Gorman, the Catholic school, and Rancho. So I went to Rancho.

Good. And we're going to talk about Rancho in a little while. But before we get to Rancho I want to know more about your parents and what they did for a living.

So Donna, let's go back to you and talk about both parents. Did your mom ever work outside the home?

Yes. When we were in Indiana, she was a secretary. When we moved here she worked at the Horseshoe Club for a while. She would sit in a booth and call the jackpots, ten dollar jackpot on number fifteen or twenty-dollar jackpot on number twenty. She did that for several years. But because of ill health she had to quit working and she was a housewife for most of the years that she was alive.

So what was the purpose of having someone call the jackpots?

I believe they just wanted people playing to know that people were hitting jackpots so you would continue playing hoping that you would hit one.

And that was what she did all day?

Yes. Eight hours.

I have never heard of that job before, so I really appreciate that.

Yes. I think that was pretty common back then.

So all of the small casinos had them?

Uh-huh.

And you could see the entire floor from where she sat?

Yes. She was a little elevated and she could see the floor. But I think the floor men would tell her what machine because somebody would yell, but she wouldn't necessarily know exactly what machine it was. So they would tell her what machine and how much the jackpot was for and she would give it over the loud speaker.

Interesting. I don't know why no one has ever said that. And your father, tell me more about what he did.

Well, when we first moved here he was a disc jockey. Channel 8 was the first TV station to go on the air in 1953 and he did the first newscast and they paid him five dollars a night. They wanted him to shave off his mustache and he said for five dollars, no way. He was known for his mustache; everybody remembered his mustache.

Then he became what they called a local personality because Las Vegas was too small for the networks to come in. So they would have local people host. He hosted the afternoon movie for eighteen years on Channel 8 and five years on Channel 5. He was the captain of the Showboat on Saturday nights and hosted a movie for the Showboat Hotel, which is no longer, for several years. And he did a lot of local and some national commercials, appeared in a few very small parts in some TV series that they filmed here in Las Vegas.

He was very, very involved with the community. When we were young the hotels did not set off fireworks for the Fourth of July. So the firemen had a big fireworks display at Cashman

Field, the original Cashman Field. Daddy would emcee that every year and he did that for thirty years. After he had his heart attack and couldn't work any longer, they had him as their guest of honor and they had a firework display made on his profile; that was very touching.

But for thirty-odd years he did the Jerry Lewis telethon, the local segment; he hosted that. For many years he hosted telethons for the Heart Association. One year they put him in a jail in February, the Helldorado jail, and put him in a striped suit on Fremont Street doing his radio show to raise money for the Heart Association. It snowed on him, he got pneumonia, and they had to take him out in an ambulance. But he was very involved in the community and people really loved him.

Give me his full name.

Well, his legal name was August Anthony Giuffre, but he went by Gus Giuffre. On my mom and dad's 30th wedding anniversary, which was in 1969, to show their appreciation for all he had done in the community, they had a huge party for them at the Sahara Hotel Convention Center. I was looking at a newspaper clipping this morning; it said there were twenty-five hundred people there. That's where they first told him that they were going to name a street after him, but they didn't do it until many years later. But there is a street named after him close to the airport and nobody can pronounce it. Nobody ever spelled it right. Even the newspapers and everything, for as many years as he was on TV, they always spelled our name G-U instead of G-I-U.

But he was very, very involved in the community. He was a real people person. When he had his heart attack, he didn't have any insurance and people started sending money. They said you found my dog for me twenty years ago or twenty-five years ago and they'd send a little check instead of flowers, which made my parents feel really good because he had just gone into a new job at a new radio station and hadn't been there long enough to have medical insurance. But

he was so loved in the community. He was in intensive care for a month, so the hospital bills were mounting up. And Jerry Lewis hosted a golf tournament and then did a special show at the Desert Inn to raise money and paid off my dad's hospital bills for him.

Wow, what a town.

Yes. So he was very loved.

Wonderful. Tell me what it was like being the child of a celebrity in a small town like this?

When I was young I went to a new show every week. They may still do it; I don't know. But whenever a show would change at the hotels, they would have a big press opening. So I would go with my mom and dad all the time. I was always at shows and things. I got to see shows when they had big name entertainment, which was wonderful. It was nice because my dad was so well liked that people were always very kind.

Great. Did you take advantage of the celebrity?

I don't think so. I don't know.

That's wonderful.

Tell me more about, Tom, your father and mother and what they did.

Well, my father never got married until he was forty years old and then I came along four years after that. But my mother had worked as a secretary when she met my father. She was working as a secretary in an insurance company in Los Angeles. My father had done a number of different things in his past. He had done police stuff. He had his own detective agency, I guess, for a while. He used to be involved in the automobile industry. I know he used to transport cars directly from Detroit out to Los Angeles where we lived. And he also was involved in an auto dealership or something. I was pretty young and really didn't pay any attention to that.

But the thing that brought us to Las Vegas was a horse race track on Paradise Road where they

built the International Hotel and then it became the Hilton. Well, before that hotel was there, there was a racetrack, a horse racetrack, a very nice two or three-story cant-levered building. It was really, really nice. My father had the parking concession for that. So he put all the money he could get together and got some friends to go in with them. That was going to be Dad's big hoorah; he had the parking concession. I have a younger brother, seven years younger. He told my brother and I and the neighbor kids that we'd be out directing traffic on horseback and it was all going to be this big hoorah. But the track went bust.

How long was it active?

I don't know, but I think it was around a year or maybe only one season. The problem with that was at that time in the early fifties most of the tourists, not all, but most of them came from California, particularly Southern California. They would come to Las Vegas to gamble. But in Southern California horse racing was legal, so they had the big nice tracks, Santa Anita and all the rest of them. So people could go to the tracks down there, probably prettier and nicer tracks than what we had even though ours was new, but they wanted to come up and they wanted live gambling in the casinos. Also, our weather is not real conducive twelve months out of the year for horse racing as other tracks have tried here and didn't work. But anyway, so dear old dad went bust.

Then he did a couple of different things. At one time he got involved with an oil additive for automobiles. It was called Formula 9. It was kind of a precursor to AMSOIL or some of these other additives they have. But it was the first one I had heard of. I remember two of the sales presentations. They'd dip a standard screwdriver in this Formula 9 and you'd try to hold the screwdriver by the tip between your fingers but you could not because it was so slippery. The other thing they did, was pour some of this motor oil in this cast iron skillet and put some

gasoline in and throw a match into it. The gasoline would burn off and the oil remained just as clear. I don't know if that was a gimmick or not, but I do remember that was part of the presentation.

But anyway, then later my father put together or met someone, because he did not invent this machine, but he got with the inventor of the machine that would extract gold out of tailings. Originally in this state when they were doing gold mining they would extract the gold from the dirt and rocks with a cyanide process and ball mills. They would extract the gold. They knew they were not getting all the gold, but there was no way to get the rest of it out economically or easily. So there was still a fair amount of gold left in these tailing ponds. So my dad for a number of years was in Searchlight, Nevada, and they were working these tailing ponds. During that time, summers and weekends I'd be up in Searchlight with my dad.

My mother did not work after I was born and then my brother for a number of years and then she did go back to work. And she worked for Mayflower, the moving and storage people, here locally. Then she found another job; she went to work for Deluca Wine and Spirits. They were down on Main Street at the time. She worked there for a number of years. It was after my father passed away my mother needed to do something so she would have retirement and better insurance, so she took a cut in pay and went to work for the state of Nevada.

Anyway, so my mother had gone to work in Las Vegas and Dad was in Searchlight. And either he'd come home on a weekend or we'd go up there for the weekend. Then from there he went to Katherine's Landing over on Lake Mohave doing the same thing.

From there he got a little house down on the Colorado River just south of Bullhead. There's another fellow, the fellow that helped us move to Las Vegas, Art Harris that had a barbershop in the Sal Sagev Hotel. But he and my dad got these two lots. There was a little

house on each of these. It was federal land, so you could never own it, but it had a ninety-nine year lease. So this little house had a kitchen, dining, front room thing in one half of it. The other half was the bedroom and bathroom. It had another little outbuilding for a tool shed.

But when I was in high school we'd go down on the weekends because we had a boat dock. In fact, even in the summer we'd sleep out on the boat dock. With that water coming down from the bottom of Davis Dam, you had to have a blanket on even in the summertime because the breeze off the water and that dropped the temperature.

One of the times my father was home—this is before we had decorative rock—he had this idea on the side of the house to get rid of this grass. So he killed the grass with gasoline and stuff and he put down black tar paper and he put on just red cinders like they use for roadwork around the state. That worked out real good except when you'd walk on it, it would puncture the paper and then grass would come up on that side.

So one of the times he was down and he was burning the grass. He'd have a coffee can, three-pound can, used to be a common size can, put gas on the grass and then light it and let it burn up. Well, he thought it was all extinguished and he had gas in a can and he put some more down and it flared up. And he jumped back and dropped the can and the gas splashed up on his lower legs and he got third degree burns. So he was laid up pretty good with that for quite a while. As a result of that, the trauma to him, he had a heart attack and passed away at home.

So how old were you at that time?

I was I believe twenty-one. I was gone from the house; my brother was not.

And your mother was already working for the state by that time?

Yes.

Donna, you talked about a lot of the recreational type things you did, horseback riding and

all of that. Tom, what did you do for recreation during those early years, early teen years?

When we were in Searchlight, that's where I learned to drive; I was fourteen and my dad bought this old Studebaker pickup. By the time we went to pick it up, I guess kids had broken all the glass out of it. No windows, no dash, glass, nothing. But it ran fine. So he taught me how to drive.

My first paying job I was fourteen working at a parking lot for a local grocery store that was right behind Woolworth's. Woolworth's was on Fremont Street and I had to give people a ticket to park in there so they wouldn't just use that parking lot and go into Woolworth; they had to go into the store.

But when I was in high school I worked as a box boy and stuff. With our situation, the family needed the income. So I would work, get my paycheck, give it to my mom and life was good. If I wanted to go to a basketball game or something, I had money for that. So I was working. I went to work our senior year. We took a class—what was that called? Distributive education?

Yes.

It was kind of on-the-job training and you got a credit for working. So I went to work at one of the movie theaters on Fremont Street. I left school our senior year at noon and went to work.

They let you do that? Oh, because of that class.

Because of the class, yes. And I got a credit for working. I had enough credits to graduate. So I would leave at noon, as quite a few of the kids did, and went to work at the Fremont movie theater.

Did you go to any of those openings?

No. My parents did, but I didn't get to go to any of them. I was too young.

With the DE, I was also in DE. So my half a day I took off I worked for the chamber of commerce. My job was to go around to the hotels and pick up different things like placemats and matches and brochures. People would write into the chamber of commerce from around the country and wanted to have a Las Vegas night party. So we put these things together—swizzle sticks and matches and that—and box them up and send them to them. And then when I was working at the chamber I learned to run their Multilith, which is a printing press. Then when I left the chamber of commerce I went to work for Granes Printing and I was a printer for a couple of years, a lithographer.

And what kinds of things did they print?

Office forms—letterheads, envelopes, fliers; that type of thing. So in my earlier life I was a printer.

That's great. So I want to know about the dances at Rancho, like the Sadie Hawkins Dance, the proms. Any of those memorable ones that you remember?

I loved the sock hops that we did in the afternoon. I remember one of the dances when we put dance wax all over the floor and I think I was the first one to fall. I mean people were just really hitting the ground hard that night. That was probably the most memorable one that I can think of.

Back in those days it wasn't anything like the kids today; we didn't have limousines. My girlfriends and I would swap dresses; wear them to different dances so we'd look different, but it was all the same dresses. I really enjoyed them. I was never queen of anything.

Do you remember the Sadie Hawkins Dances?

Yes. I think I went and I don't even remember who I asked. But I went to junior prom. I guess they weren't memorable enough.

Do you remember chasing the boys for Sadie Hawkins?

[Laughing] I was dating someone that didn't go to Rancho, so I didn't chase very many around campus. But I remember I had long hair and I did braids and wired them so that they'd curl up.

Oh, I bet that was fun. What about cruising Fremont Street?

Oh, we did that all the time. And working at the movie theater, you'd stand in the lobby and some of the guys had like doorbells on their car. So right before they would get to the movie theater they would ring that doorbell and we knew they were coming and we'd run out in the lobby and wave as they drove by. Then when I would get off work, my girlfriend would pull up out front, I'd jump in and we would cruise Fremont Street and waste all of my dad's gasoline all the time. Yes, he didn't love that. That was fun. Nowadays you can't drive down Fremont Street.

While she and the girls were driving in their cars, my buddies and I would be doing the same thing because that's what you did. For people that don't know Las Vegas, at the very top of Fremont Street where the Union Plaza is now was the train depot; it was Union station up there. There was a big loop. So you'd drive up and you'd come around the loop. Then you'd go down twenty-five blocks to the Blue Onion and that's where the Rancho kids went. And if you went to Las Vegas High, then you went over to Sill's Drive-In at Fifth Street and Charleston. So they'd cut across that way. I mean, boy, if I had a dollar for every mile I spent on Fremont Street...that's just what you did. And you'd talk to your buddies and the girls were with the girls and stuff. Then got to go down to the Blue Onion and have a vanilla cream coke and French fries or onion rings and then you go do a couple more loops.

So now, this was a weekend activity?

Oh, no.

Oh, it was an everyday activity.

Everyday activity.

Oh, no.

Oh, yeah. All the time.

Oh, yeah. Too much studying is overrated.

Oh, I didn't know that. Thank you.

Oh, yeah, that was a nightly thing. Of course, weekends I'm sure had heavier traffic. But, no, you're with your buddies and cruise Fremont Street.

So what do you think about Fremont Street when you go down there now?

To me it's kind of sad because I remember how it was when we were young. When we just had our class reunion we had one night down on Fremont Street so that the people that had moved away and not experienced the Fremont Street Experience could be there. I guess because it was such fun times back then, I get kind of nostalgic for it.

So how does it make you feel when you see it?

Well, as we get older, I guess we get older. But it's like so much of the thing with the kids and their video games and their handheld games and all this stuff, it just seems like it's just more glitzy and showy. Now, I do like the overhead light show of the Fremont Experience; I think that's neat because it's one-of-a-kind. But the rest of it is kind of cheap and kind of gaudy and I don't really care for the atmosphere on Fremont Street.

What about the new restaurants that they're putting in now? Have you been down there within the last four months?

Yes. We've been to Oscar's.

We were there in October for our class reunion.

So during the class reunion where did you go?

Hennessey's.

Oh, okay. So you were in the heart of it.

Yes, right on Fifth Street. We've eaten at Oscar's a couple of times.

And we've eaten at the steakhouse, Vic and Anthony's in the Golden Nugget.

I've always loved Hugo's Cellar. Oscar's is the newest that we've been to.

For years we would go to the California Club, which is off of Fremont, and they had a real nice steakhouse there. We haven't been there for years. There are so many other places to go. Now that we're in Henderson there are places closer and we like to patronize them.

Great. They've started developing Fremont Street East, so east of Las Vegas Boulevard.

Right. And they're also to the south trying to get housing in there, apartment style, studio housing and things. I think that can be successful; it has been in other cities. I think that area got just about as low as it could get and survived. So it's got to come back.

Great. Have you been to the Smith Center?

Oh, yes. We have season tickets.

Yes. That's great.

And we've been to the cabaret, as well. That's just a great, great venue.

Yes, it is. Tell me about race relations at Rancho.

When we were at Rancho we didn't have any racial problems. We had a Chinese class president and a black vice president. But there just weren't a lot of problems. A few years after we graduated they developed some very, very severe problems.

So what was the change? What happened do you think?

Well, I'm not sure. My brother went to Rancho, also. He is seven years my junior. So when we

went, like we said, it just didn't make any difference. There were the two high schools. So as far as the black population, about one half went to Rancho, about one half went to Vegas. I think there was more animosity between Rancho kids and Vegas kids than there were color lines. But when my brother went to Rancho he said that he was afraid to go to the restroom without a couple of his buddies with him because he was afraid of getting beat up, and it probably worked the other way around. So I don't know. He graduated in '69 and actually things overall with society should have been getting better racially instead of worse, but I guess not. But a lot of people don't realize in Las Vegas when we grew up Las Vegas was a segregated community, housing and everything else. I mean it was strictly segregated. And a lot of people don't know that.

At the movie theater the black population had to sit downstairs on the left side. And entertainers like Sammy Davis Junior couldn't go through the hotels when he got off work, which is sad. And they built the Moulin Rouge, which was the first black hotel on the Westside.

It was the first black upscale.

Yes, yes. I mean my parents used to go there all the time. It was a fun place for adults.

That was the first integrated.

Right. But the blacks still were not allowed on the Strip. But the whites would go over there. It was sad when that closed. But it was a very segregated town.

The question was when we were. There didn't seem to be a racial animosity with either the Hispanics, blacks or whites. It just didn't seem to be there.

Among the young people anyway.

Well, our age.

Yes, we were young then.

Rancho was an open campus in '62. Tell me about lunch hours.

Well, some of my buddies would usually go off and go to A and W or one of those places. I don't know if it was a thing that gave us more freedom than what we wanted to do, but we generally left the campus.

And did girls leave the campus, as well?

Occasionally. But I and most of the girls that I ran around with were bussed over; we didn't have our own car. So living up in the Twin Lakes area, we were bussed down to Rancho. Our senior year some of the girls had cars and it was better, but early on we pretty much stuck on campus.

And you got a car when?

Oh, when I got my own car it was after I had graduated. My dad had a little Opel station wagon he let me and my sister drive. It sounded like a sewing machine. But my first car I bought myself and it was probably in '63. So it was after I had graduated.

What about sports? Either of you play sports on organized sports teams, not swimming so much?

Not in high school.

No.

Okay, not in high school. Did you attend the games and were there rivalries?

Oh, yeah.

Tell me about the rivalries between the football teams.

Well, once again, it was primarily Las Vegas High and Rancho. Of course, Gorman was a rivalry and actually Basic was, too, but Henderson was another city far away. But I remember some of the things they would do is—when I say we, it was not myself included, of course—but go over to Las Vegas High's on their football field and take rock salt and put a big "R" on it so it

would kill all the grass in the form of a large "R." And then the Vegas kids would come over and paint red and black "L-V-H-S" all over the Rancho stuff. It was just kind of stuff like—
nothing—

Nothing serious.

Nothing terribly serious. Then we had the Herkimer's bone.

They still have Herkimer's bone.

Still have that. And that was the big rivalry there to see who would keep the bone.

I guess nowadays there isn't quite—we went a few years ago to one of the games at Rancho, the reunion committee. It was one of the newer high schools that we didn't know about as their main competition now. But still when they play Vegas, they play for the Herkimer's bone.

But when we were growing up, the three high schools plus Basic, and now there's 36 high schools or something like that. So I think those hard rivalries get kind of diluted.

One thing I probably should say so people won't listen to this and say you're crazy. It was our junior year that we had a Chinese president and black vice president of the student body; it wasn't our senior year; it was our junior year.

What was it like living in a city controlled by the mob?

It was better. You didn't have near the problems because the mob wouldn't put up with it. If somebody did something wrong, they would wait till they crossed the state line before they did anything to them because they didn't want anything to affect the gaming.

And then, the gaming paid for everything. So you got a lot more bang for your buck; when you went to a show you got a nice meal, you got a souvenir, you got a lot. Nowadays it cost a fortune and you get nothing; you pay six dollars for a bottle of water to take in with you when you go into the showroom. They had a lot more freebies for the customers and everything

because gaming paid for everything. Nowadays they want every room, every venue to turn a profit.

The other thing I think probably, the city in a lot of ways was maybe a little safer for the regular John Q public. The thing is fear is a great deterrent. Back then you never heard of anybody coming into a casino on the Strip and stealing chips or something because, first of all, those people wouldn't have to worry about the police; the police would be not their problem because their problem would be they'd be taken care of by the boys; they'd be taken out because the boys would find out who it was and they wouldn't mess around. Like Donna said, they didn't do it in town.

Las Vegas was all very clean, very clean atmosphere. The dealers and other casino workers weren't even allowed to have mustaches, no facial hair; they had to be clean-cut. That was the rule in all the casinos because they wanted to maintain that very, very clean, nothing shady, anything. So if there was anything shady going on it was probably in the count rooms and officers where the boys were getting their cut. But as far as the players and tourists, they were safe, they never had to worry about being mugged or anything. It was a great atmosphere.

And growing up as kids I didn't have any exposure. But I've talked to so many people in the gaming industry and have been told that if people would come up from L.A. and go bust and lose all their money and they didn't have airfare or whatever, they'd buy them a good breakfast and get them a bus ticket and send them home. And so that built really good feelings, and so people would tell their friends and then they wouldn't mind coming back. Of course, they were going to win it all back the next time. But at least they knew that they weren't going to be just cut adrift.

Wow. But with the size we are now do you think the mob would be able to handle a city of

this size today?

Well, I think the biggest deterrent with the mob, as such—and I still think that there are some corporations, strong corporations that have holes withing their operations – but it was two things. The state, the government, whatever it was, they weren't getting their full cut, and I think that was a big influence. Now, when Hughes came in and the big companies were taking over, then things changed where in the hotels before like the showroom or the restaurants, you had really good meals, you had low prices and that, they didn't care because they were going to get it on the table. The gaming side was going to take it and they didn't have to worry about it. Now everything is what they call four-walled or they lease out their area to the different shops and everything is a profit center and everything has to be profit and only profit for that company that's there within the hotel. It's a different mind-set.

As far as crime and stuff in the communities, I think that that's inevitable with the population growth. Even if the mobs were still in the hotels, I don't think it would deter all of the crime in the community.

Which places, which casinos in the fifties, early sixties did locals feel most comfortable, more friendly?

My dad used to go sometimes and he'd go to the Fremont Street casinos quite often. I don't know; I think locals kind of went to all of them because they were smaller then. The Thunderbird and the Desert Inn, those are all small, intimate places. I mean even the Starlight Room—it was the top of the Desert Inn; it was on the second floor—but it was a dance floor and a bar area and they had dancing and most of the places had that, but they were smaller and they were more intimate.

And they had great lounges back in those days, wonderful. You could go in the lounge and see

Fats Domino and have one drink and sit there all night or you could see the Righteous Brothers or Louis Prima. I mean the Sahara was really big. I know my folks would go and they would be up all night just about because they had such great entertainment and it was so inexpensive.

How did your mother dress when she was going out?

Oh, she dressed very well. It's not at all like today. I remember when I was a young adult and when you went in the showrooms, a lot of times you wore long dresses. You did dress. And now it's jeans and T-shirts.

But you also dressed to go on the Strip rather than just shows. I remember as a young adult—I was married at the time—and an aunt and uncle came from Chicago and took us out to dinner to the Bacchanal Room, which was then one of the nicest. I probably didn't have a suit, but I had on a jacket and a tie. But when you went on the Strip to dinner and things like that you dressed. Nobody would show up in cutoffs or jeans and a T-shirt. Wouldn't happen.

No flip-flops [laughing].

Yes. And we see a lot of that today. Since we've talked about this, have you been to the Mob Museum?

Oh, yes, I have.

He has; I have not.

Oh, you have to go.

That's what he said. He and his brother spent—go ahead.

My brother was visiting; he lives in Oregon now. When we walked out we realized we'd been in there three and a half hours and we just didn't realize how long.

Isn't it amazing?

Yes. And it's presented so well; that's the thing that's nice. And I think very factually.

Yes. People were afraid they were going to blow the mob and all the good things the mob did out of proportion.

Well, I think it's very fair.

I think so, too. Any other memories about Rancho that you'd like to share? I think we went through a lot of it. We went through the academics, sports, dances, clubs.

I should have looked in my yearbook to get my teeth—

No, no, no. It's fine.

The old school—and we have been back to the new school we were taken on a nice tour by the then principal. The new school is very modern; it's two or three stories and that. It's really set up. It's great. When we were going to Rancho, it was much like Sunrise Acres when I was going there; they were just long rows of classrooms and you walked from class to class outdoors. It had a shade over it for the sun or the rain. But it was certainly much more—I don't want to say rustic; it wasn't old wood buildings. But it was older style and just different. In between classes if you had time you'd sit out on the lawn; that's what you did.

And I heard that various classes had separate places on the lawn to sit.

Oh, yes, senior square.

Something else that was good about going to Rancho, we used to have assemblies and we would have entertainers from the Strip come and perform.

Tell me about that, please.

Johnnie Ray came and sang. Young people nowadays never heard of him. But Wayne Newton used to come and perform. I think Sammy Davis Junior came and performed.

Yes. That was for Negro History Week assembly. But we had a number of other Strip entertainers who would come and entertain. Give us a show.

Yes. One thing about going to school in Las Vegas, too, was when you had a junior, senior prom, you would go out on the Strip and see a show afterwards. Most people in most cities don't have that that they can do.

And they would allow you to come in at eighteen, seventeen years of age.

Yes. I was telling Tom this morning—I looked at a picture. I was a junior and I went to the senior prom with this young man and I can't even remember his name. But he worked as a busboy at the Tropicana and they treated us like a king and queen when we went in there afterwards. They really fussed over him because he worked there and everything and it was great. So we used to do that all the time after a big dance, go out on the Strip or downtown. Downtown then was very nice.

Wonderful. I love that.

Other than the Strip, I was just thinking as far as to go out on a date or something after a ball game or dance, there weren't that many restaurants. Las Vegas was much smaller than it is now. So we would go to places like Macayo Vegas; that was the big deal, or a real special type thing where you'd go to Fong's Garden. But there weren't that many places to choose from. So those were nicer things you'd do; that wasn't just a hamburger and shake.

I love that. So tell me what you did after Rancho, in any order you want to.

Well, after school I went to work out at the Blue Diamond Mine.

At the gypsum mine?

Yes, as a secretary.

How did you get a job way out there?

Well, I was going to business school and they called looking for a secretary and they sent out a friend of mine that I was going to school with and they liked the way that she was performing

her duties so well, when they needed another secretary they called again and they sent me. So I went to work out there. I worked there three months and got engaged to one of the bosses [laughing]. So he fired me. He said it's not good for husband and wife to work together, so he fired me.

And then I went to work at Bank of Las Vegas. I worked there as secretary to the branch manager. I worked there for about four years and I quit. It wasn't going to work, I didn't think. And my parents were having dinner one night with Herb Kaufman who had just come to town to start the Wonderworld Stores and Mother mentioned that I had quit my job and he needed a secretary, so I went to work for him. I worked for him for a few years and then my husband got a promotion and we moved to New York.

So I was gone eight and a half years. We lived in New York two and a half years and he hated it. So the company moved us to Los Angeles. We were there five years when we separated and I came back to town.

So how did you like New York?

I liked the experience. I never felt that it was home. All my family was here. But I really enjoyed the experience. It was culture shock, the cost of living and everything, when I moved there. And I would write these letters to my mother and she thought, oh, you're just homesick. So her first visit I threw her in the car and took her all over and showed her you had to pay to park at the lot at the mall and you had to pay for everything. If you had guests you had to pay so much a night for them to park their car and to swim in the pool. Everything that you took for granted here that went along with renting a place, there you had to pay extra for it.

So did you work there?

No. No, I did not.

So Los Angeles, you were there for how long?

Five years. I was in Glendale and was there five years, which was strange because Glendale is the city that I had lived with my parents when we first left Indiana. I like Southern California, but this was home. So when my husband and I separated, I came back here.

I hadn't worked in eight years and this has always been a town of not what you know but who you know. My former boss said do you want to come back to work? I didn't want to sit in an office; I was depressed. He said, well, what do you want to do? I said I want to be a casino cashier and he said you what? He says you've never done anything like that. I said, well, I want the noise and the people. So he called Phil Arce, who was the president of the Frontier at the time. So I went to work in the cage; got juiced in. But I worked very hard because I wanted the people to know that I was there to work, not just stand around because I was juiced in.

But after I had been there a year, my former boss and Johnny Carson had purchased TV 5. And he called me and asked me to come back. So I quit the hotel and went to work at TV 5. I didn't do a lot for TV 5 except occupy space. It's tightly regulated by the FCC so I mostly took care of his other businesses. So I had a beautiful office there, but I mostly took care of his—I would help out if the bookkeeper was out sick, I would do payroll and stuff for them. But I really didn't do anything except occupy space at TV 5.

And get a check.

And get a check. I got a check from every one of his businesses.

That's great. So tell me what your career path was like.

Well, through high school I got the job at the chamber of commerce. And then from there I went over to Granes Printing and worked there for a few years. And then I went to work for a company called Atlas Steel and I was in the steel business for seven and a half years. I started

off fabricating, cutting, bending, loading steel and then worked up to foreman and then to superintendent and then I worked into the office.

And that was in Las Vegas?

North Las Vegas. The company is no longer there. The owner was the mayor of North Las Vegas, Bill Taylor. So I worked for Bill. And then I worked my way into the office, so I started doing detailing and estimating and bidding jobs. Bill was the mayor and he ran for the third term and lost; he sold his business and he moved to Hawaii. I stayed with the other company that took over. It was a national company.

I just figured I wasn't going to do that all my life and I ended up getting in the tire business with a fellow named Fred Aberly. He had done our tire service; we bought our tires from Fred. He was looking for a manager and I was recommended. So I talked to Fred and he interviewed an old cronie of his from Southern California, a drinking buddy. But the zone rep was up and he interviewed both and he told Fred that he thought that wouldn't be a good idea to hire his old drinking buddy, so he hired me. So I went to work for Fred and learned tires and that; I had selling experience.

And in '81 I started to buy into the company. My intention was to buy Fred out and be sole owner. But before that ever happened he wanted to sell. I thought he wanted too much money and he thought I didn't want to pay enough, so we sold our business to Ted Wiens, a local business here. So Fred basically retired. He stayed in the industry for less than a year and he just retired.

So Wiens gave him the amount of money he thought it was worth?

Well, Wiens gave him more money than I could [laughing].

That's a big company.

Anyway, so then I went to work for Ted Wiens as manager of their commercial tire division. So that actually turned out very good for me in hindsight. I worked for Ted Wiens just right at 22 years and am now full-time retired and loving it.

And Donna, you're full-time retired, as well?

Yes.

So what do you do with your day now? I know that you do some things with—

PEO. PEO is a women's organization that I belong to. It's an international organization and they're a philanthropic educational organization that furthers women's education. I enjoy that very much. I'm president again this year and this is my third time as president. So besides raising money for the loans, we get involved in the community. Every year we'll take on different projects that we'll help sponsor. This year one of them is Ronald McDonald House. We will go over and cook dinner for the people staying in Ronald McDonald House. Used to, you could cook food and take it in, but they've just changed their rules. So you either cook there or you can bring food in from a licensed restaurant or something. It has to be there within two hours after it's been picked up. So we go over and set up and cook for the people and eat with the people and then clean up the mess and mop the floors and everything before you leave. They collect so we collect and give to them aluminum pop tops off all kinds of cans. A lot of different organizations, I suppose, give them the pop tops.

Give it to Ronald McDonald House?

Yes. And I don't know what they do with them, but evidently it's very lucrative for them.

Okay, good. A few minutes ago you said loans.

Yes. We have a low-interest loans. We have several loans that we do. Usually it's for a woman that's in her third year of college because they want to make sure that you're serious about it. So

we have very low-interest loans that we can give.

We have six projects now. We have an international peace scholarship where we give women from other countries money to come here and study with the promise that they will go back to their home country and work. If they stay here, then they must repay the funds; otherwise, they do not. We have grants for women that have been out of school and out of work for a few years and maybe by necessity they need to go back and get further education. They can go maybe to a trade school or community college or something; we have outright grants for that. We have a new scholarship that we just started for high school seniors that we do. They have to meet certain qualifications. This is an international organization, so we do all of the paperwork locally and then we submit it to the international office, which is in Des Moines, Iowa, and they determine who gets the funds.

So where do the funds come from?

Well, every chapter all around does whatever they want to do to raise money. We have garage sales. We've had bake sales. This year we raffled off tickets to the House of Blues gospel brunch; we got the tickets free from Channel 5. So whatever you want to do to raise funds.

The organization also owns an all-women's college in Nevada, Missouri. It was a two-year college, but they are now putting in some programs that are four-year. So it's a very large organization.

Oh, definitely. That's wonderful.

Yes. It really is very worthwhile. There are thirtysomething chapters in the state of Nevada and there are hundreds in other states like California; I think there are over five hundred in California. So each little, small group, if they raise a few thousand dollars every year it adds up, but when you consider—internationally it's the United States and Canada; there are no regular

chapters in other countries. However, women whose husbands are in the military and that, they get together and have informal meetings, but they don't have any actual established chapters other than the United States and Canada.

So you send all of the money that's raised to Des Moines?

We send it to the state—well, we determine how much we want to give to each—you can designate all to one of the philanthropies or you can divide it up amongst the six, but you save some for local things like Ronald McDonald House. Last year we did for an organization, Baby Bunting, for women that maybe they're unwed or just in need. So we'll buy baby clothes and things for them. We have adopted nursing homes. So we save some of the money to do locally. And then sometimes we'll have a girl that maybe we have sponsored for a loan and she didn't get it, so we'll give her an outright grant of money from our chapter. So we don't send every penny to international, but we do send the bulk of it to international.

Wonderful. I love that.

So in retirement, Tom?

I'm loving it. Every day is Saturday.

I love that. So have you found anything that you enjoy?

Well, I found that I have more time for golf; I've been doing that. We've done some volunteer work. Donna and I volunteered at the Wendy's 3-Tour Challenge Golf Tournament. So little things like that. I am involved in Rotary, and through Rotary we do a lot of giving to the community. Last night we were at a feed the homeless and clothing drive for 150 homeless people.

Goody two shoes.

Well, yeah, and Happy Feet. Our Rotary club gives over four hundred pairs of shoes annually to

at-risk kids and they get shoes and three pairs of socks. I've been involved with the—used to be called Christmas in April and now it's Habitat for Humanity project. It's an annual thing.

Donna and I have gone on an international project. We went down to the Yucatan Peninsula a couple of years ago, Donna and I and six other people. We went down and helped build cisterns out in the jungle of the Yucatan Peninsula. It helps these people get clean drinking water. They just don't have clean drinking water down there; they're getting their water out of hollowed out areas that the animals are in and everything else. Water is a real problem there. So we did that; we went down and dug foundations and cut rebar, tied rebar. Donna was there doing that. We sealed and painted and mixed concrete. That was a nice project.

I'm recently retired, so I can't say it's just been retirement. But Donna and I love to travel. We used to take at least two nice trips a year until the economy about four years ago nipped us. So we're down to one nice trip a year. But now we're going to have more time for those trips, too. So travel is definitely on the horizon.

I love it. So tell me how you met.

Well, we met in high school.

Tell me how you got back together. Tell me that story.

We re-met working on our twentieth class reunion. I hadn't been at TV 5 very long and a girlfriend of mine called and she said I hear they're working on a reunion. And I said I don't know. And she said, well, you're my contact in Las Vegas, find out, call Nancy because Nancy had always chaired the reunions. So I called her and she said, yes, do you want to work on the committee? And I said, yeah, that would be fun. And she said what do you do? And I said I work at Channel 5. And she goes, good, you can handle publicity.

So I went to a meeting at her house and Tom was there. It just kind of evolved.

Everybody on the committee I think was divorced, almost everybody. And so we would go out as a group and do social things. I don't know; we just went to dinner—well, first I brought my car down [laughing] and you took me to lunch while they worked on my car. Then he invited me to dinner. It was five years we dated. So we got married right around the time of our twenty-five year reunion, just after that.

I worked on the first reunion, then moved away. And Tom started working on the second and has worked on every one since. So I missed the ten and the fifteen because of living away. But we've worked on every reunion. So that's how we got back together.

Wonderful. Do you want to add anything to that story?

No. That's just about the way it happened. We'd meet for our committee meetings and do all the work stuff. Might have a little wine; I'm not sure. Then we'd go out cowboy dancing with the whole group. Nobody was dating or anything. We just had a good time. We went to some kind of an art presentation up at Death Valley. We were out there one full day in the motor home with the group.

We went to the Doobie Brothers concert, the whole group. We did all kinds of things together.

Wonderful.

After a while, I asked her to dinner and started from there.

Fantastic. So looking back at Rancho, anything else that you want to say about Rancho, either of you? If you had to do it over again, what at Rancho would you have done differently?

Not much. I might have joined more organizations. Even though I didn't belong to a lot of organizations...you went to all the games; you did all this stuff. I think I just had a great three years there.

I think for myself I would have been more studious. As a young guy I wasn't all that studious. I think that would have been better. If I had wanted to—I probably then didn't have the time for sports. But friends of ours in the class that were involved in sports, they've had these long relationships with the other guys that they went through whether it was football or baseball, whatever, and they've had those ties that I didn't have. I think I'm kind of a social animal and I really enjoy people and relationships, so I think I would have enjoyed more of that connection. But, eh.

Yes. That's what I say. I think it's wonderful.

Thank you.

Thank you so much. I really appreciate this.

Well, it's been very enjoyable for me, too. I remembered a lot of things I haven't thought about for a long time.

That's right. Before this project is over I am going to come back one day only because everybody else I've talked to—you are number five on the list of my interviews, depending upon when people could schedule the interviews. So I have a few other questions about downtown and how it's changing and just a few little things. I want to get just a video clip because I'm going to have everybody else on video. I want to make sure that I have some video footage of you, as well. I just regret that I have thrown away my camera.

Well, I hope you didn't lose it.

I hope I didn't either. So thank you so much.

Well, you're certainly welcome.

[End of recorded interview]

Index

- Art Harris, 11
- Bill Taylor, 28
- Birthplace: Donna, 1; Thomas, 4
- Blue Diamond Mine, 26
- Blue Onion, 15
- California Club, 17
- Channel 5, 7, 28, 31, 33
- Channel 8, 6, 7
- Crestwood, 2
- Davis Ranch, 4
- Family: Donna's father, 1; Donna's sister, 2, 3;
 Donna's father, 6, 8; Donna's mother, 5, 6;
 Thomas' father, 9, 10; Thomas' mother, 11
- First job: Donna, 13; Thomas, 13
- Fred Aberly, 29
- Fremont Street, 7, 13, 15, 16, 17, 23
- Granes Printing, 14, 28
- Gus Giuffre. *See* Family: Donna's father
- Helldorado, 1, 3, 4, 7
- High School football, 20
- High Schools, 5
- Horse racing track, 9
- James Cashman, 3, 4, 7
- Jerry Lewis: telethon, 7
- Jim Gans, 3
- KRAM, 2
- Move to Las Vegas: Donna, 1; Thomas, 4
- Racial segregation, 18
- Rancho High School, 5, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20,
 24, 25, 26, 34
- Searchlight, NV, 11
- Sunrise Acres Elementary, 5
- Ted Wiens, 29
- The Mob, 21–23
- Twin Lakes, 2, 3, 19