

Florence Littman Oral History Interview
Southeast Seniors Neighborhood Stories & Memories Oral History Project
December 1, 2018



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Abstract

Florence Littman has been a resident of Prospect Park since 1963. In her time in the neighborhood, she has served as the president, vice president, and as the chair of the zoning committee of the Prospect Park and East River Road Improvement Association (PPERRIA). Florence also worked as a teacher, and received a graduate degree from the Humphrey Institute since she has lived in the neighborhood. A New York native, Florence met her husband to be, Walter, in Madison, Wisconsin when she was working on her first graduate degree. Walter had accepted a job in the math department at the University of Minnesota when they met, so Florence came to the Twin Cities with him after she finished school. At first they lived in an apartment near campus, but when it was demolished, friends in the neighborhood drew Florence and Walter to Prospect Park. Florence first attended neighborhood meetings over building TCF Bank Stadium, and after becoming a regular meeting attendee, became the board's vice president. Her involvement in the neighborhood continued from there.

Florence's interview covers her work with, and the history of: the Barber/Gopher Oil fight with the neighborhood and subsequent development of townhomes at the site; the zoning of Fourth Street and the businesses' interaction with people in the neighborhood; the start of the yard waste recycling center that was originally expected to be a cement crusher; the restoration of the roof of the witches hat and the preservation of the roof tiles; the decision making and installation of new streetlights in Prospect Park; the pros and cons of being next to the University; working with developers over these zoning decisions; and the general connectedness of people in the neighborhood.

Southeast Seniors Neighborhood Stories & Oral History Project

Interview with Florence Littman

December 1, 2018

Julia Turnbow, Interviewer

Florence Littman: **FL**

Julia Turnbow: **JT**

Track 1

00:00

FL: My name is Florence Littman and I've been living at 76 Clarence Avenue Southeast since 1963—same house. We're very lazy people. We don't want to move, and our intention is to be carried out of here, to stay here. It didn't start out that way because, in many ways, I consider myself to be an immigrant. I'm from New York. I went to graduate school in Madison, Wisconsin and met this wonderful man who had already taken a job at the University of Minnesota. So I came here for a weekend to see what it was like. Now, as far as I was concerned, Minneapolis and Indianapolis were the Twin Cities. That's an old New York joke. I came here, and I must admit, I was appalled. I said to my future husband, "Let's go downtown." Well, he took me over to East Hennepin. I don't know how many of you know what East Hennepin was like then. I eventually did figure out where downtown was, but I was not a geography major, you see. And I said to him, "Well, surely you don't intend to stay here." Remember, this was before the Guthrie Theater. This was before there were any good Chinese restaurants. This was before so many things. I felt this was some sort of punishment to be living here. And, by the way, I wasn't crazy about Madison either, because that was too small for me. The people I met were wonderful and they were very, very helpful, but still, it was just very difficult.

And I figured, well, Walter didn't say anything, but I said, you don't intend to live here. So I thought silence meant agreement. So everything I bought you could take it down, you could collapse it. Nothing—I didn't feel very permanent. Well, of course it turned out differently. We moved from a very small apartment to a very nice duplex. And then they were going to tear down the duplex. Wish I had known then what I know now. And our duplex was right near the U [University of Minnesota], and Walter could roll out of bed and be at the U. And I could roll—I was taking classes then. It was very easy to go to school. But that was torn down and we bought this house in Prospect Park which was—neither one of us had ever lived in a house. We were totally out of our element, but we were very lucky. People gave us recommendations. And all the people we hired were very, very honest. They could have told us anything that we needed, but

they didn't. They were honest and we were lucky. And we made a lot of friends. And I feel I live in a really great place. And I'm really very, very happy to live here. In spite of all faults, I think this is the greatest neighborhood to live in.

JT: So I'm Julia Turnbow and I'm interviewing Florence Littman for the Southeast Seniors Oral History Project. Our next question: when you first moved here, what do you remember the neighborhood being like?

FL: Well, I was very happy to move into Prospect Park because we had friends here and also because we were being kicked out of where we lived. We'd probably still be living there. It was almost the same—it was called the Motley Neighborhood. And, though I didn't have the network I had there, it was very close to the University. It was very difficult to find a house in Prospect Park. There were only two available, and the other one was even worse than the one we bought. The house needed a lot. My mother came to see it. I guess she told me later she cried afterwards when she saw it (laughter), but we had a lot of work done on the house, and we did some work and it's really—well, it's our house. We're probably longest owners of—people have lived here for a long time—we're only the third owners of this house. In some ways it was a more convenient neighborhood.

We had two buses which were more convenient than the LRT [Light Rail Transit] that we have now because they were closer. We had two grocery stores—two small grocery stores, and they were great. There was the grocery store over on Warwick. And Saturday mornings he always had food out, and people congregated there. He would even deliver. You could call and you could deliver. Then we had Zipoy's which was close, which was also great, and Zipoy's was so good. It had one person—they were doing nothing but taking care of the vegetables. So I hardly ever had to go to a big store. It's really nice to be able to shop at a small store. The owner can say, "Say, we just got this in. I know you'll like it." In that way it was very nice. I knew people here and, even those that I didn't know, I met, and it was really very pleasant.

But I got involved in other things that I never expected to. And that is I heard there was a neighborhood association. I was working—I was teaching then, and I didn't think too much until I heard that there was a proposal to build a new stadium right on the dividing line: half in Minneapolis, half in St. Paul. And I was appalled at this because we had lived actually in Stadium Village—the Stadium Village neighborhood. And we lived near the stadium, and that was—you know there was all this parking, all this—it just was not really conducive to, you know, a peaceful life. I believe—and one of the planners told me this—you want excitement out in the street and peace at home. And, when you lived near a stadium, you don't have peace at home.

So I went to a neighborhood meeting, and I introduced a resolution against the stadium. And I was told, "Well, you're not on the board. You can't introduce a resolution." I was appalled at this. "What?!" So I didn't go back for a while. But then they changed the rules. Not because of me, but I guess for some reason they changed the rules. And I started going to these meetings. And they were very interesting, but I often brought something with me, to—some embroidery or something with me. But I listened, and eventually, I stopped doing the embroidery and really

started to listen. And one day the president said to me, “Hey, would you like to be more involved?” And I said, “Oh, yeah, sure.” And it turned out, I ended up being elected vice president. Oh my God! I don’t really know anything. And I spoke to the president who was someone I knew. He was the son of a friend of mine—it’s Jerry Stein. I said, “Jerry, I can’t be much of a vice president. I don’t know anything.” He said, “Don’t worry Florence; I don’t know anything either.” Jerry was getting a degree at the Humphrey Institute at the time, and people there when I later—they might say, “Oh Jerry, he spent all this time—,” and he said, “Yeah, he was here, and boy, did he devote himself to the neighborhood.”

So I learned a lot from Jerry. And I learned a lot being vice president and, of course, the rule here—the unwritten rule was, if you are doing something in what was then PPERRIA [Prospect Park and East River Road Improvement Association] and you’re not going to do it anymore, you find somebody else to take your place, or else. I don’t know what the or else is, but I didn’t want to find out. So that is how I became president. And I ended up being president for about ten years in all.

JT: So, when you were president of the board, which board was that?

FL: I was president of the Prospect Park and East River Road Improvement Association. It’s the oldest—advertisement—it’s the oldest neighborhood association in the Twin Cities. And it was certainly one of the most active. We really gave them a hard time.

JT: And when you weren’t vice president or president of the board, what else were you up to?

FL: Then I was chair of the zoning committee for many years. When I was president, it wouldn’t have—well, it was—when I was president of PPERRIA—even when I was even just on the zoning committee and on the board—committee chairs were on the board. I should say, you know, if you live in Prospect Park, you never have to watch television because you can go to a meeting every night. And it seemed at some times, when there was a hot issue, that we did do that.

JT: What did PPERRIA stand for?

FL: Prospect Park and East River Road Improvement Association. Now for some reason which I objected to and lost, it was decided that was too old-fashioned a name, and it was changed to PPA Prospect Park Association. There are Prospect Park Associations all over the country and all over the world. And, since we’re an old neighborhood, I thought the old name was fitting. We also had a wonderful logo that was done by Ralph Rapson who was one of the most famous Minnesota architects, who lived in the neighborhood, and contributed an awful lot of his expertise, and it was changed for something that looks like it was made by a computer because it was made by a computer. So things have changed.

JT: So of all the projects you worked on when you were either president of the board, or when you were on the zoning planning committee, what of your work are you most proud of?

FL: Well, one thing I'm proud of, and that was fairly simple, is that I got us incorporated as a 501(c)(3). And the reason that is important is one of the meetings we had with what I will talk about with Gopher Oil is the owner of Gopher Oil said—you know, people like to brow beat you. They think they can intimidate you. And he said to me, "Why should I negotiate with you?" It wasn't only me—we had—obviously you do everything at a committee. "Who are you anyway?" And I said, "We are a Minnesota Corporation just like you." And that kind of took the wind out of his sails for a little bit of time. We also got an attorney. We were very lucky. I often got people to do—that was free—the incorporation by a neighborhood attorney.

The other—beside—we call it the Barber Oil/Union Oil/Gopher Oil fight. This is a fight that lasted almost 100 years. The other one I think was important was the 4th Street fight or what I call the "The Street Industry Wanted." That only lasted 90 years. I think the other lasted about 96. But a few things were quicker. The Cement Crusher Fight was not as long.

10:02

But people used to say that, when you move here, something happens to your genes and you get this protectiveness of your neighborhood and are willing to fight for it, even if you know you are going to lose. Because sometimes you lose, but it means you've done enough to stop the next thing.

JT: Yeah. So I know you mentioned a couple of these, but what were the stories of some of these local controversies that you dealt with when you lived here?

FL: I think I'm just going to mention a number of them and then go back to a few of them. There are more—when I went back over notes that I had—and a lot of this was before computers and is handwritten—there was fight over the closing of Emerald Street and Orlin Avenue. I was vice president then. There was a fight over the streetlights. There was a little skirmish—saving the roof of the tower which I'll mention briefly because that was short. There was the Barber Oil Fight. There was a 4th Street Fight. There was a Cement Crusher Fight. And there was a usual fight dealing with—well, there were constant fights dealing with the planning department and dealing with the University which I like to call the gorilla on the fence. The biggest fight though probably was the Gopher Oil Fight.

And, when the neighborhood was first—I don't like to use the word settled, but first developed would be better than settled—there was a lot of industry down near the river. And then they started planning the land down the river and there got to be more and more houses built. So eventually, you know, hindsight is 20-20, and you can see there is going to be a fight. And certainly there was. And there was a company there called Barber Oil and they did all kinds of things that were kind of smelly. The dealt with turpentine and oil and stuff like that. And the residents—well, they never used the word pollution because I don't think we had that word then, but essentially they talked about the smells and the problems. Now, as I said, this was our longest

fight. It started in 1906. There were all kinds of protests against the kerosene, the gasoline, the paint-jobbing and so on.

Now the city had a number of opportunities in which they could have gotten rid of it by zone or lease—made it a non-conforming use, which of course means that you could continue what you're doing forever but you can't increase, and that makes some people move eventually when they want to enlarge, as they should because that would have been even more of a nuisance. And the neighborhood went to court on a number of these items and won, and there's a whole long history. I got involved much later. The city decided that to work—they were doing a new zoning code, and we thought—we got the city to let us do a 40-acre study, which means it only has to be—it has to be at least 40 acres. Ours was much bigger and it must—we gerrymandered the study in such a way to take in the oil company because our plan was to get it down-zoned to residential, as it should have been, and as we tried to do many times and were defeated each time.

And we worked—I was the co-chair of that committee. Now we had a certain amount of luck on that committee in that we had a council member who was for us. And we had a very good state representative named Phyllis Kahn and, without her help, we never would have won. And she had a very good legislative assistant. And we owe getting rid of that—when you go by now, you see these nice townhomes, but there are pictures of what it was, and it was really a problem. And a number of things happened there.

JT: How close was Gopher Oil to houses?

FL: There were houses all around it. There were houses all around it, and there were two things that happened there. They processed, in addition to everything else, they processed 2,4-D there, and the people who were working there were getting rashes. So they just opened the windows—the 2,4-D went out. Guess what, all the trees around there were killed. Okay, they did pay for replacing the trees, but that's not really the point. Then later on, I think in 1977, they had a turpentine spill. So the place was a problem, and we wanted to get rid of it.

When I started working on that, I went to Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and they told me the site was clean. The owner named Fred Bame kept on saying he had the cleanest site—cleanest site—well, that kind of—you know, it couldn't be the cleanest site if you were dumping stuff since 1906. What do you think we were, a bunch of idiots? Well, we weren't.

So I found the court cases—the earlier court cases, and the earlier court cases had a list of everything they were doing there, and all the stuff they were doing there and dumping, it was quite clear this had to be a polluted site. But what are you going to do about it? Well, I tried dealing with the Pollution Control Agency and I got nowhere. Phyllis started and she—dealing with it as our—and the first letter she got from the Pollution Control Agency, well, they couldn't find anything, but they would check again in the winter. But the letter also said, considering the age of the facility and what's been done there, it's very probable that there is a problem.

Well, problem was it was—the soil had to be removed to bedrock. Luckily, it hadn't gotten into the river yet, because of the rock there. And they—let's see—I did write this down because I'm

trying to remember how much—. They had to remove an incredible amount of soil, and I do not remember—oh, yes—53,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil were removed.

JT: Where did they even put this contaminated soil?

FL: Oh, they dumped it someplace. Well, my big fear is that they were going to thin-spread it over Prospect Park when we weren't looking. But no, they did bring it to a site. And it took quite a bit of time. The other thing was it took quite a bit of time to figure out what was going to go on there. Now, the planners aren't always your friends—I must say that. I know they get a lot of pressure because as one—someone in zoning told me, he said, you know, “Zoning and land use,” he said, “It's one percent legal and 99 percent political.” And, from my experience, it is. And during the times—did I get the dates—during the times that I was president of PPERRIA and involved in some other capacity all the time I had, oh, I guess, every Monday—I know every Monday I was always at a meeting and there were certain nights and (laughter) it got to be so funny that the kids—my kids who were small then, and I was always working then—I was teaching—had to be up early, but I guess I just went on adrenaline. The kids would say, “Daddy's got to babysit tonight.” And I would say, “You know when I'm home, I'm just Mommy. When Walter's here, it's babysitting.” You've got to train these kids out of that.

But there were so many meetings and so many people put in so much time to do this. It never would have happened without all this great help and with Phyllis. And finally, when they decided, it was—it finally actually became a superfund site. That's how. So here I go from being told, oh, nothing wrong with it, you know? And the owner who I wouldn't believe anything that he said saying, “It's the cleanest site in the state,” you know. It's a superfund site. And they did have the problem was that the owner claimed that he'd bought it from Union—or Barber Oil, the original had sold to Union—to Union Oil, and Union Oil had sold sellings in there. Gopher was the last owner, and he claimed that Union Oil had tricked him into buying this polluted site.

Now nothing could have been further from the truth. And, when I testified, I had tapes where we did this—

JT: What was this place that you were testifying?

FL: I had to testify in the court hearing. I guess I didn't say that. Gopher Oil took the people they bought it from, Union Oil of California, to court saying you tricked me into buying, you know? That was a bunch of—that was just so dishonest. And I had tapes of a meeting in where the owner, Fred Bame was claiming how clean the site was. And I said, “Well then why did you get it for such”—I looked up what it cost which I do not remember off the top of my head. And I said, “Why did you get it for such a cheap price then?” And he said, “Oh, I know how to get a deal.” Make you think of something? I know how to get a deal—I'm a good business person. Well I knew he was—it was obvious he was dishonest, but the court decided that he was right. Now, I had tapes of him bragging what a good deal he had. However, since he did not testify, they could not use my tapes. That's what my attorney told me. I did not know that. I got a lot of pressure from the Gopher Oil attorney. They hired the guy who did the Exxon-Valdez case, so he was a very good attorney. And he convinced this poor, uninformed Minnesota jury that this poor

Minnesota crook—they didn't say it was a crook—was hoodwinked by big bad Union Oil of California. And nothing could have been further from the truth.

20:07

But, even when we'd testify, we had the lawyer for the city was terrible. And he just did not ask me the right questions. And, you know, there was so much I could have said, but I couldn't say it because he didn't ask me the right questions. And I told him things. He just didn't use it. And I don't know if it would have made any difference, but it would have made me feel better if the right things were there. So they won that.

JT: How much longer after that case where Gopher Oil and Union Oil were fighting did the city finally decide to make it a superfund site and have them clean it up?

FL: Actually, the city—eventually the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency got into an agreement with Union Oil decided to clean it up. And that they sort of had to. Union Oil cleaned it up, and what we tried to do was, by this time, we had flown to many—one of many committees—over 96 years you have a lot of committees and a lot of people. I mean, I guess I should count—many of the names—not all, but it would make quite an interesting roster, you know, to have the names of these people that we owe a great, great debt to—. We formed this committee to negotiate—once the site—it was going to be clean. They took a number of years to clean it. Boy, did they take—I went the first morning when they started taking the soil away. Some of the neighbors went to see—you know.

Well, the question was, what's going to happen to this site? Well, the city and the planners agreed they would zone it for office building and high-density. That's not what we wanted. We wanted lower density. And the council member then who had not been particularly friendly to us on many things and the planners who—I don't know who take—which way, you know—who was pushing—well, probably the elected people were pushing the planners. They just insisted on that. Well, we went—at this point, we had some money. We had neighborhood revitalization funds. So we asked Unical to give us the right of first refusal so we could buy it. Well, they decided they didn't want to sell it to us. They didn't want to sell it to a neighborhood group. “Oh, you're a neighborhood group, who are you anyway?” You'll be different people. So I said, “Well, we're a Minnesota Corporation, you know, we've been around for X numbers of years,”—didn't work.

But there was a developer—Brighton Developers—and when I talk about developers, they were one of the two developers that were honest with us. And they had done another project for us which I'll talk about later. And, when they did that other project, I said, “How come you're doing this? I know you're not making much money on this.” And they said, “Well, we're really interested in the Gopher Oil site. We're going to make money on that one.” So they came to us with a plan to build 52 units of housing, a certain percentage low-income and—and so Union Oil—I think it was called Unical by then—was willing to talk to Brighton Development—not to

us. But, of course, Brighton Development was talking with us, and they were going to do what we wanted them to do. You got to get in somehow.

And so Brighton Development wanted to buy it, and they wanted Union Oil to get a zoning change. So it was Unical. So Unical went along—we got it zoned to I think R3 which is a residential zoning for that. And what Brighton did was we paid for it with Brighton, so Brighton had a say that they would be responsible for all the pollution on the site, so it was a—Brighton got the site for \$10,000 which is nothing, but they had to be responsible for all the pollution and so Brighton got—there is some kind of insurance for that. And I believe that we paid for the insurance with our NRP funds, which was only fair.

And then we worked with Brighton. And they were a very good developer to work with. There were some issues, however—some things did slip through. And that was this question of the noise—a noise wall should have been built right away. And the city—the planners should have told us that. We messed up on that and maybe Brighton should have known, but it was eventually done. It was done later. But the good thing was, we got housing. We didn't get huge buildings, and I have nothing against big buildings. However, when they're next to single-family homes, it just isn't appropriate.

A lot of things went on; the negotiations went on with Brighton for a long time. We had a few neighborhood people who didn't like Brighton for some reason. But they were very good at—they were warned. And they'd worked with a lot of neighborhoods, so they knew what to do. And they were a known quantity. They did the houses of the townhouses on Bedford, so we had worked with them. So, whenever I go by there, sometimes I rub my eyes, because I remember what it looked like before. And sometimes, even though it took us 96 years to do it, I think it was pretty unbelievable that we could do it. But then, again, we had a lot going for us. We were very lucky.

JT: Just for clarification, you said the NRP funds were some of what went into that. What was the NRP fund?

FL: Okay, the city started a program. Of course, that's one of the troubles of having things that almost in your DNA. You assume everybody else knows. And that's one of the problems when new people come into a neighborhood group. You have to make—because some people won't ask questions, so you have to look around, make sure you see people's faces and you know they don't know when you have to explain.

The city started a project where they were to give neighborhoods a certain amount of money to use any way they wanted to use it within certain boundaries. I mean, you couldn't use it to have a great big party every year, but there were places you could use it. And they were divided into different kinds of neighborhoods as to were you a were a stable neighborhood that needed it, or you were a neighborhood in transition, or you were a neighborhood that was really down on your heels. So we got less than many other neighborhoods, but then we were able to leverage this money. It's very good—you have to get some money so you can leverage it for other money. And we had people who were very good at grant writing. As I said, for some reason—I don't know—the world must have tipped, and a number of people must have just rolled into this

neighborhood who had all these skills. That's the only way that I can possibly explain it. Because, aside from learning a lot from doing things, I learned an awful lot from my neighbors and from the business people that I dealt with.

JT: So what were some of the other controversies you had?

FL: Well, the next one I will call, "Fourth Street: the Street Industry Wanted" Fourth Street was originally, in the first ordinance—which was in 1913—it was zoned industrial. And then in 24, when we had our first zoning code, it was still zoned industrial. Now the interesting thing was the houses were there before the industry, so I don't know why they had their heads on backward. There was some attempt to change things—Judy Carrao, one of our very good council members closed the end of Malcolm so the trucks couldn't go through. You could only get in from Bedford. So that was a help. Fourth Street was a very—except for the industry, it was a very quiet street. In fact, there were fewer burglaries there because nobody knew where it was. However, there were two companies there that were problems. There was a place called Kampe Tire and they did tire retreading and all kinds of smelly stuff there. And they had a history—although at one point the zoning was changed and they couldn't—they were not allowed to expand. But, of course, they did expand. Very frequently industries get introduced to things they're not supposed to do, they do it, and then the city says well, they did it already so that it'll go through. That's the way to do it with the city. It's much easier to get forgiveness than permission.

PPERRIA tried to help Camp Attire relocate but it wasn't easy because nobody really wanted that smelly business. There was also a business there called Gopher Machinery. And that was an old fight because Gopher Machinery had torn down a number of houses and expanded when they shouldn't have. But then they tore down some more houses to make a parking lot.

JT: When was this? Just generally, even.

FL: I was not here for that, but I knew the story. But it was probably in the—well, it was certainly before the 80s. And there was a family who lived on that block—the DeWitts—and this man was a retired engineer, and he was so angry that they had done that, that the city—that he went to the city and the city agreed, yes, they can not use that as a parking lot, because that's not zoned for a parking lot. They can't park there. So he would watch out—Mr. DeWitt would watch out and he was a very elegant older gentleman. He always wore a hat and he always opened the door for you. He was just delightful. And every time Gopher Supply parked a truck there, he called the city, and they told him. So this was a very long, unpleasant fight. Well, Gopher refused to have anything to do with us. And they finally were going to move, but they still wouldn't let us—we must have had some NRP money then.

30:03

They wouldn't let us do anything because we—because Brighton expressed interest in that site. Eventually though, I guess Brighton probably pretended they had never heard of us, and Brighton bought that site to build tin townhomes there.

JT: After the one's they had bought from Gopher Oil, or—?

FL: Gopher Oil was—okay—that's the question—Gopher Oil had nothing to do with Gopher Supply.

JT: Okay.

FL: Gopher is our animal or something here. So Brighton agreed to purchase and build townhouses on both those sites, because both those sites were going to be available. Oh, yes, we contributed \$600,000 of our NRP money toward that. So we helped subsidize—and they built this nice little development. Now, there was the other interesting fact is there was one house there that somebody wanted to buy and tear down, and that was a house that was the house owned by the grandfather of Julia Wallace who lives in this neighborhood. And she decided to move—the house lived in what was the house was on University [Avenue]. And they were buying—this part of University—gonna tear it down. So they agreed to let her buy the house for a dollar if she would move it—it'd save them money from tearing it down. And I remember she said to me, "I don't know. I think I'm spending all my retirement money and moving this house. I must be crazy." But she did move the house. It's a lovely house on a larger lot there because the house was wider. And it was so—I remember Mary Alice Kopf—people who have lived here a long time will know who she is.

And I took Julie out to lunch and we made her a certificate—a certificate for being outstanding in stick-to-it-tiveness. And, if anybody ever else got a certificate for stick-to-ittiveness—but Julie really worked very, very hard to move that house. And it's great that an old house—it's a lovely, lovely house. And that house got—Julie's living there. She sold her house on this side of University and moved to the other side. And I think that's a great story. It was very, very difficult doing that only because—mainly because Gopher Supply and Kampe Tire were very angry with us—Gopher over the parking lot. They were just very—and they really wanted nothing to do with us over that.

But industry was really inappropriate there, and it shouldn't have been allowed—they should have been non-conforming uses and treated as such—and not been able to expand and the city should have given them more help in moving. We didn't want to put them out of business, but it really was in the wrong place, and since the houses were there first, it never should have happened. So there's a lot of—more education had to be done with the planning department and, as far as I'm concerned, that continues to this day (laughter).

JT: So what was the story then with cement crushers?

FL: This involves land north of University behind Fourth Street, and a lot of it was polluted. I mean, I went on a tour there with Kathy O'Brien and other people on the committee, and it was like the rape of the earth. But they had big dogs there. We couldn't stay too long because they really didn't want people there. Well, there was a proposal—came up at a meeting—at a zoning

committee meeting where I was out of town, and so someone came and said he wanted to put a cement crusher there, and I must say, I think maybe one of the differences between the people I met here and where I grew up was—well, I'm not Minnesota nice—how could I be? And I grew up in New York, and in New York City, we're much more apt to say what we think than be polite here.

And I got back and I was chair of the committee but I was out of town. And I found out that people just sort of didn't object. I went berserk. What?! Because sometimes really giving someone a hard time right away—a lot of people are just fishing, and sometimes [if] they know they're going to have a fight, they go elsewhere. And, by this time, we had a reputation for being fighters. It's like when you're a new teacher, you have to have a reputation or make up a reputation for being tough and mean. You can soften up later. It's the same thing—well, when you're head of a neighborhood, you do your homework, you're there, you get there first, you leave there last, you're going to have a hard time with them. And sometimes you might go away or you'd be willing to negotiate, and sometimes—and I think we had that in this neighborhood, but that particular night, that committee didn't.

Well, we were very lucky on that one. We were lucky and unlucky because the city did not give them—they didn't get their—they went to the city for a permit. We had some people on Fourth Street did an environmental assessment worksheet. Now that's not nearly as good as an environmental impact statement, but it's the quick—as my advisor used to say—you do some quick and dirty research. So we did quick and dirty research. We got what we needed. And the city attorney did not agree with us. The council members said, "Oh, what can I do." Well, she could have done a lot, but she just didn't do it. But luckily, we had another weapon. We had Phyllis Kahn and her legislative assistant.

So we had a big meeting December 26th. Can you imagine? Everybody showed up who had to go. And the city attorney was against us. However, the attorney for the state was for us. And the reason that he was for us—part of it was because Phyllis's legislative assistant used to work for the state attorney's office. And they looked and they said there's a loophole in this law and we will come in on your side. The loophole says that your building, if you're going to crush cement, has to be X size. By the way, I should tell you that this was going to be 1,000 feet from single-family homes, plus it was going to have all these trucks going through with the cement. Now you're supposed to cover these trucks, but most of the time they're not covered. Now cement dust is not the best thing to be breathing in. So there were all these issues.

So, when this came, we told them through our—by the way, we had an attorney. I was lucky. I found an attorney to do this pro bono. He was a wonderful guy. He'd been a hippie in one life and now he became an attorney and he was on our side. He was willing to do it for—I think for cost, maybe even less than cost, and he was very, very good. And what we told them is your building is 17 acres. You are doing this outside. Well, we went to court and we won the first round, and they decided to appeal. And here I think I could convince him to do it again because we were on the—there were a lot of gray areas and things. But that was not a gray area. And, of course, we did our research. Well, shortly before the next case, the owner called me and he said, "Let's talk." And I said, "Okay, I'll meet you in the council member's office."

Now one of the things you do—you want to—you know, neighborhood associations don't have that much power, but you've got to look like you do. And one of the powerful things you can do is you meet with the—you have the provided council members on your side, and it was in the winter I remember. So we went to the council member's office—I certainly did. I left my coat and my boots and everything, and I walked in looking like I'd been there the whole time. And that kind of helped. And then I did really quick and dirty research because what happened was, in-between the owner had called and he said, "We've given up on the cement crusher. We want to do a yard waste recycling." What did I know about yard waste recycling? Nothing.

And, I don't know, we didn't have the Internet then. We couldn't—. So it was kind of hard to look that up, so I called the Sierra Club and I called every place I could call. I said, "What do I do?" And they said, "Look, the worst yard waste recycling is better than the best cement crusher. But this is what you have to ask them to agree to. So I did that and we got there and we presented and he said, "Okay—sure. Okay." And he became one of the best business people we ever had to deal with. He became, first of all, for the next ten years, he kept on apologizing for ever thinking of (laughter) a cement crusher. And I said, "No, it's fine. It's fine." But the other thing was, when we did our cleanup every year, he would send over his trucks. He'd send over his employees. He paid if we gave the volunteers hats or gloves. He paid for that. They came to the—you know, we'd have a big pizza party afterwards and it was really great. So it's kind of interesting how things sometimes work out.

40:03

JT: So what are some of the funny stories from when you've been living here?

FL: Before I tell you about the funny stories, I wanted to have some of the things that happened and some things you won. You had to have certain experience. First of all, you had to know you got there first to the meeting and you leave there last. You have to do your research. You can't let people accuse you of nimby. That's the first thing they want to accuse you of. You have to have a very good reason. You can't say I don't like it because I don't like it. You have to show how it's detrimental and how you could improve it. And even if it isn't detrimental, sometimes there are things you can improve and very frequently business people would say, "Oh, well, I never thought about it. Well, if you like a different color, that's okay with me." So there are times that it's just very, very easy.

You also have to know about zoning. It has to be your bible because the planners don't know. At least not much about zoning. And the planners don't talk to the zoners. You have to have friends and eventually I did have friends in zoning. You have to have a good council member. That doesn't always happen, but you also have to have relations with the other council members. And I hung around so much that there was someone in zoning—unfortunately he's not alive anymore, and I would ask him questions. And one time he said to me, "Here's my phone. Here's my home number." He just gave me his home number. And, when I called him, he said, "Look. Call me at

home.” And he would tell me all kinds of things. And I remember one time the council member who was not particularly friendly to us said, “Florence, how do you know this?” And I said, “Well, you know I keep my ear to the wind. I just keep track of everything.” I don’t know if that convinced her.

The other thing was there was another—there was something called the walk-through where a council member would just bring up something that wasn’t on the agenda. I read every agenda and it wasn’t there. And I doubt it was this council member who loved me so much, but she didn’t like my council member. So this person would call me and say, “Florence, you didn’t hear this from me, but your council member is going to do a walk-through, you know, on this.” And I would show up too. But I showed up to lots of meetings. I was not employed outside at the time, so I had the time. And one of the reasons I wasn’t, I was having so much fun doing this that I really (laughter)—any other job that I could get. I couldn’t get other teaching jobs because I had too many years of experience, which I found out when I applied for the teaching jobs. And other jobs—nothing was really as—beside teaching which I—nothing really was as exciting as this.

So I decided that—so what I was going to do. And, I don’t know, the question was, I keep my ear to the ground. And our council member would see me down there and I’d say, “You know I keep my ear to the wind. You know I’m a committee meeting junkie.” So then it would be a walk-through and then some council member would ask me—other council member—would ask me about it. And there are a few things that were funny. One of them was that—this is more recently—place where they have that asphalt—corner of Bedford and University—there’s been a 7-11 there for years—then it became a Super America. They were a terrible tenant. They never shoveled. I reported them all the time for not shoveling. It’s cheaper to pay the fine than to pay someone to shovel. And then, when they finally shoveled, they would push the shovel onto their boulevard so, if you got off the back of the bus, you’d be met by a wall of snow. And I was lucky; the first time it happened I didn’t realize it.

And eventually, they sold to Super America which was just as lousy a neighbor. Well, Super America wanted to close it, but not really. They wanted to put a self-service gas station. That’s really great, you know, come make your Molotov cocktails here. And we were just incensed. And the then council member went along with it because, as I said, she never—she was fun to go out to lunch with, but she never saw a development she didn’t like. And we had many contentious meetings. But I had Phyllis and she was furious about that. And I know she roundly disliked my relationship with Phyllis, so she probably never knew we’d been a friend for many, many years. But not like that—Phyllis was interested in what went on in her neighbor—

Anyway—it got to a planning commission and I testified against it and there was a council member there—from another Southeast neighborhood—not particularly beloved by his neighborhood either because he was one of these development people. He’s not—this was a while—he’s not in office now. And he said, “I never ever ever thought I would agree with Florence Littman, but in this case she is right. You shouldn’t have a self-service.” So I thought that was funny.

Another funny thing that happened—someone came from public works and said, “The roof on the tower needs replacing. Not exactly replacement. The tile itself is okay except for a few broken tiles. But what is under it is rotting and it’s just too expensive. It’s over \$30 thousand to do it—to take the tile off and put the new underlayment,” or whatever they call it on the—I used to remember what the terms were—“and put the tile back, so we’ll put an asphalt roof.” And our council member who was Kathy [Kathleen] O’Brien said, “Well, okay. But you have to go to that neighborhood and you have to tell that to those people.” And she said he stood on one foot and he stood on the other foot and held onto the desk—and then he said, “We’ll put the tile roof back.”

The reason I know about that is because Kathy called me right away. I was present. She said, “Guess what happened? Well, we had a party and they did have to replace some of the tiles. All the tiles on that roof were numbered because they were different shapes going around. And I was given one of the tiles as a memento of what happened. And they did. It was very interesting to watch. They piled up the tiles. They were really worried about people stealing them, but I don’t think that happened. The company in Georgia that made the original tile still existed and they put the roof back. And I just thought that was one of the greatest and funniest stories. You do have to have a reputation for being tough and doing the work. I didn’t know—well, the city told us—public works told us how much it would cost to do. But there aren’t that many—that’s a very important landmark. And an asphalt roof just would have looked junky on it. I mean, one of the beautiful things about it is the roof. And I’m so glad that they did it.

JT: What about the lights?

FL: Oh, that was a—you know, the worst fights are the fights where the neighborhood is divided. And the city decided—I think it was around 2000—the city decided to look into better lighting. And we were looking into it too. It was very dark here. We had these 30-foot-high lights that looked into people’s houses, and a committee worked—I was on—guess what? —I was on that committee! And we thought it would be very nice idea to replace them with lower level lights that were pedestrian-friendly lights and to do decorative lights—nice-looking lights. Well, it started a big argument. In general—that’s only in general—many homeowners were for it and many of the landlords were against it. But there some homeowners who were against it too.

And one of the problems was how are we going to pay for it. Now we could pay first. We could pay for some of it with NRP—with the Neighborhood Revitalization Funds money. As I said, we got—we were able to get some grants. We had some very clever people writing grants. And houses would be assessed. It would be on your taxes for at least ten years. One of the problems was that it took a number of years from the time—okay, the way the city would do this, you had to—it was a petition process. So there had to be enough people. And it was only people who owned property. You had to have people who—

The committee worked at least three years on this and one of the big problems is certainly then because we didn’t have email, we didn’t have all this other stuff—is notifying people. And we had leafletted, we had made phone calls, we had a neighborhood newspaper called Tower Talks. We had articles in there. And a number of things were tried. What happened was the bank, which

is now Wells Fargo—it was Northwest then—built a drive-through bank which meant that people leaving the bank would drive through the neighborhood. It created a lot more traffic and it was very difficult for the people on that section of Orlin. We tried all kinds of things—making it one way while people just went out any way they wanted to go, narrowing it, nothing worked. It was finally decided that street should be closed so people couldn't get back into the neighborhood. And this created an argument with how the people in Orlin wanted it, but other people said, "I have to drive another three blocks to get into my garage." Well, we had a number of meetings and some of them were very contentious. And when we had the final meeting to decide—

50:04

We had this big meeting where people were going to vote on it. And there were a lot of—and it was this huge meeting and there were a lot of very angry people trashing the committee. In fact, I think I personally was accused of teepeeing somebody's house. Now, I didn't even know what teepeeing meant. I didn't know that meant putting toilet paper on someone's—we didn't do that in New York where I lived, so (laughter). I thought that was the funniest thing. It was someone who was rabidly against the lights. And this man got up—I never saw him before and I've never seen him since. I don't know where he came from, and he got up, and he said, "You know, I came here all fired up to vote no, but now that I've listened to the reasons for doing this, and how it protects the neighborhood from unnecessary traffic, safer for kids who want to cross the streets, you know, it's really not much of a discomfort to have to travel three extra blocks in my great, big, heated American car to get into my driveway, so I am voting for the closing.

And it was amazing; the opposition just melted away. And people voted for it. Now, if we on the other side had said that, it would have been ignored. And, as I said, I never even got to talk to the man and say thank you. I don't know, where he was like, you know, an apparition from somewhere—but it happened. And when you look back on it, it's very funny. I mean, you never know where this will come. I do—since I remember now—I do want to go back, and I'm sorry about this—as far as the light fight was concerned—with the light fight, what reminds me of with the closing of Orlin, that was just a vote. With the light fight, it was by petition. And our council member who did support us on this. And I must say, with a council member I didn't get along with, I worked with her when certainly we got along. And I do remember on this she was accused of things that she did not do. And I got up and I defended her. She was—I remember afterward she said to me, "Why did you defend me?" I said, "Because you were right. That's why." (Laughter). And she was quite amazed I guess. I don't know why.

And she decided that the vote should be 52 percent. Now later on—ours dragged on for about three years. Later on, the council changed it I think maybe to 60 or 75 percent. So there was a lot of—what do we call it—alternative facts on the lights that were propagated by the committee that was against it. Now, we did not—at the time it was 52 percent—it was later changed. There were two people in the neighborhood—two residents who were rabidly against the lights, and

they made up a lot of stuff. And you know, when you tell the big lie and it goes out, no matter how hard you—it's just very difficult to fight the big lie, because that got there first. You know, it's who reads the retractions in the newspaper, for example. So we had to deal with that. We did win on that. Now, the other side—first they filed grievances against PPERIA which was the name of the neighborhood association.

JT: And these were the people who didn't want the lights?

FL: Yes—who didn't want. Grievance after grievance, but PPERIA offered to mediate at our expense, and so the people in the city who decided there is an office for that—throughout their case, they said, "Well, if you don't want to mediate and the other side is going to pay for it." Then they went to court to sue the city, and that was thrown out because the city does have the right to put in lights. In theory, the city didn't even have to ask us. They just could have done it. But one of the things—it did mean assessing people. So I don't know why exactly. And, in many cases, you don't want the city to just do it. This one was so long drawn out and it created some—there was some people in the neighborhood who didn't talk to each other for years after the fight. And one of the things I could say about that—neighbors can disagree, but it doesn't mean you have to throw sand in each other's faces [stop talking to each other]. My neighbor up the street was very much against the lights, and I was very much for it. And I said to her, "You know, we are friends. We disagree on this, but you know, if you need me," she was an older lady—what I considered older then (laughter)—"you can call me at any time. You know that—because we disagree, but—"

The light fight got to be known all over. I once sat next to somebody at a dinner, and she found out where I lived and she asked me if I knew her aunt who happened to be the lady on the street who was so against it. And I thought, "Oh, God." And she said to me, "You know I think my aunt is crazy for opposing the lights." Okay—good—I don't have to defend myself, you know, on this. So some of that—we did get the lights, and we should have gotten more of them, but I think it made a big difference. It is still better lit. It is not as good as it could be, but it certainly is better lit, and I'm happy that we have it.

JT: What has it been like living this close to the U [University of Minnesota]?

FL: Well, I was once asked by the person who was the U of M liaison for the neighbors near the U. Poor woman—she was a messenger. She was not—they never sent—ever sent a decision-maker. They always sent the messenger. And poor woman—she used to get beaten up roundly, but she knew that—what else did we have to do? "Just go back and tell them. Just go back and tell them." And she asked me to give a lecture on what it was like living at the University. And I said, "You know what I'm going to say. You don't want these possibly impressionable students to listen to this." She said, "No, I want to hear."

And the talk was entitled, "Living near the University: It's a blessing and a curse." And of course the blessing is there are so many wonderful things going on at the University. There are classes—you know—there is something where you can pay much less for a class. You don't have to do that if you don't—. Just most of the time you can go to the professor and say, "I'd like to sit in. Is that okay?" And I only had one professor say no to me in my [unintelligible]. He was

just too full of himself. The others welcomed it. One of them said, “You’ll have to do all the readings.” And I said, “Fine. That’s what I intended to do. Can I ask questions?” “Sure.” You know—you can—it was great. I had a wonderful time doing that. And there’s a museum there and you meet all kinds of other people. And I think I always want to live near a University because you need that.

And, in those days, a lot of people who worked at the University lived in the city. So you saw them. They were your neighbors. They were your colleagues. They were your friends. And my husband was in the math department and I remember, when it came to my final oral, one of them had—an activist in South Minneapolis—and wanted to be on the committee. And he was in mathematics because he’d fought the airport. And I asked, but they said no. I said he’s a real fighter. Because you had to have at least one person from another department. So I asked my then state senator who was Alan Spear, and I said, “Alan, I’m going to call you and I’m going to ask you a question I’ll bet no one ever—no constituent ever asked you.” And there was this silence on the phone and I said, “Alan, will you be on my oral’s committee?”

JT: And this was for your graduate degree?

FL: Yeah, but he was in the history department. That was another department. So I had the greatest committee on them, even though I couldn’t have someone who had fought the airport on it. And it was very interesting. At one point they asked me one—oh—what did they say? What did you learn here that you didn’t know before? And then they started—my advisor started—they all started laughing which is kind of (laughter). Because you know, you’re nervous about that even though you know more about that particular topic. And my—I did know more than anybody because that’s—but you do. That’s what you do for a year or two. But still, you want to make sure because some other questions are thrown at you. But it was really fun and I was very—I had been kind of nervous. I’m never nervous about talking, but then I wasn’t nervous—I was nervous about and it was just fine.

If you’re going to get involved in this, there are a number of things you should know in advance, and it sounds like, if I known it in advance, I might have said, “Oh my God,” but I didn’t. As I said before, you have to go to every meeting. You get there first. You leave there last. You don’t let—when you have people testify, you get your—. You don’t have people—. The planning committee can be a pretty rough place to go, and they can be very nasty. Now—and they want to get out of there as soon as possible. One of the things that the planning and zoning committee of the city has done is they do a lot of things administratively. So you have no idea what they’re doing. They’re saying, if somebody wants to do something in the same zoning, they don’t have to tell you about it. They can tell you what happened, but they don’t have to tell you about it. So a lot of things are just done administratively which probably shouldn’t have been done. Those are some of the things I found out about through my secret networks.

JT: What else was it like living close to the U? You said there’s so many upsides of living close and taking classes?

FL: The other upside is your neighbors because there’s a culture here of getting along, helping your neighbor, and wanting to make the neighborhood a better place, and at least not

worse. And going to these meetings to do it, and I think that's very important. And the other thing that's wonderful here—this is a live and let live neighborhood. Nobody cares if you don't mow your lawn. Nobody's "keeping up with the Joneses."

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Nobody cares what kind of car you have or how you dress or what you do. And that's very nice. I mean, you don't have people who are angry at you because you have some dandelions. I guess there was one exception to it and she lived across the street from me, but she was my friend and she did do some funny things, but she was such a good friend I had to—sometimes you gotta, you know—shut up. But she didn't like—my kids tricycles would squeak; she'd go out and oil them. So it bothered her. Okay—she oiled them—fine. She never asked me, but she wanted to do something, but okay. Although she did get into trouble. She used weed killer on her next-door neighbor's lawn and that got her into trouble, as it should, but she did it there first and she got into enough trouble with a neighbor that she didn't try it on mine.

JT: Were there any downsides for living close to the U?

FL: Yes—the parking problems, the football because that was we lived right near the stadium before which was one of the reasons I was so anti-stadium—the parties. One of the other downsides was the rock concerts they used to have on the riverbank. And we got this—well you people—if they were doing baroque music and white wine, you people wouldn't be complaining. But, eventually, they realized that so much damage was done to the riverbank plus there was a lot of—there were people who were peeing in people's yards. There were people—all kinds of things. Because these were not—these rock concerts were advertised all over the Upper Midwest, not just, you know, in the Twin Cities area. So you got another crowd, and eventually the city finally—they never admitted it, but they realized it was costing more to restore the bank, and they stopped it.

The other problem living here is that there is a gorilla on the fence, and the gorilla is named the University of Minnesota. Now the University essentially has eminent domain because they tell the city and the city takes the property. And this was a problem with a number of things. The University has no boundaries. The University was here before the city, and they think they—what was that Nichols and May thing—they're omnipotent—some Nichols and May thing—and they think they can do whatever they want and generally they do. I say one of the great tragedies of my life is that I didn't go to law school because there were two things I would have liked to have done: one was to sue the city for all the things they did that they shouldn't have done in ignoring the zoning or changing the zoning when they shouldn't have, and the University for not having any boundaries, and they still don't have boundaries, and all the things—the negative things they did. So it's a very, very mixed blessing. And, in my next life, I'm going to go to law school so that I can do this.

JT: How has the University having eminent domain impacted the neighborhood?

FL: They can take property that they want. Now, for example, there was a building owned by Kemps, and Kemps put it up for sale. And the University wanted to buy it. Well, the University's not very good—the University buys a lot of property. It sort of land banks and maybe they'll need them. They bought a lot of properties in the Stadium Village neighborhood and didn't take care of them and eventually tore them down and eventually made it a neighborhood where, you know—which is in many cases devoid. It's full of dorms—private dorms and other things. And the University never has to consult the neighborhood. And, if they do, they don't listen anyway. So I would like the University to have boundaries. Now, the people who live near in St. Paul—the Catholic college in St. Paul.

JT: St. Kate's?

FL: No—not St. Kates's. I can't think of it now. It's a very rich—but they build beautiful buildings. They finally came to an agreement with their neighborhood and they have the same argument: where do you end? St. Thomas. And they did come to an agreement. University of Minnesota never has, and they're like some giant amoeba that's gobbling everything up and, once the University gets something, that's it.

And one of the developers that I worked with—it was Dave Barnhart—I looked at him and I said, “Dave, why don't you buy it?” And he did. And when he ran into problems with planning commission as I helped him, he'd say, Florence, this is your fault. I bought this because you told me to. It was something that was great. We had a great coffee shop there and there were a number of things there. And of course, that got torn down. And, of course, the LRT (Light Rail) and we have some of those big buildings there. But what Dave did was very, very nice for the time that we had.

You know, things keep popping in my head that I haven't mentioned. I need much more time. I have to—I want to encourage you to get involved with your neighborhood. And I want to be truthful about what's involved. You're going to make some enemies, but you're going to make a lot of friends. And you do things that are good. And some people you might—there are people who will disagree with you and still not be your enemies because they'll say, “I don't agree with you, but I understand where you're coming from.” And that's the best you can do. And even with the council members who've been friendly, sometimes you'll say, “Well, I don't agree with you, but I understand why you were doing it.” A lot of these things are a gray area. They're not black and white. Of course, the cement crusher was black and white—I've got to get that in.

In order to do this, you really have to have good communication with the neighborhood. It's easier now, but still the best thing if you can—you know—if people are—is to telephone someone. That makes a very big difference—and explain it. And there are ways—the people who are involved have to know by every means that you can do it. You can leaflet—we don't have a neighborhood newspaper anymore unfortunately—you can call them, you can go to their house, you can ring their bell, you have to let them know because, in many cases, people just want to know. They just don't want you to do things to them. One time the park board—we woke up in the morning and they started putting a sidewalk on Tower Hill. We didn't know—we

made them stop. They didn't ask us. That's our park. So lot's of things—is just let people know. But you need a lot—that's probably the most important thing.

It's good to have the support of your council member. It is much, much better. Now, sometimes they can play tricks. They can say, well, you know, "I'm going to vote for it; I have to—the rest of you guys vote against it." That happens, but you can have some very good council members who can explain—you can explain your case and they will be for you. It's nice to have planners who will support you, and luckily I was around long enough, I got to know them and they got to know me, and it was much less adversarial. And they got to trust me and I could say, this is what's going on at this building. There was someone—can you imagine the nerve—he claimed he had a sawmill. There was no sawmill. You can't have a sawmill and nobody knows it. So I got affidavits from all the people around the so-called sawmill, and there was just no question. Guy came out after the meeting and threatened that he was going to beat me up.

JT: Where was this person who had a supposed sawmill?

FL: It was all on University Avenue where I think the—one of the hotels is now. At me. That was—and therefore he said he should be grandfathered in. The city was ready to do it until they saw the affidavits. When he threatened me though, it was very funny because one of my neighbors was there and he said, "I wouldn't fight with her. She's from New York. She's a gutter fighter. Leave her alone." He walked away. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. You should know what went on before, and we have a history to prove it. You should work with other neighborhoods, and that works too because sometimes the city or a developer will try to divide and conquer and that happened—tried to happen with school closings. You don't let them do it.

JT: What neighborhoods has Prospect Park been—

FL: Marcy-Holmes, Como, and sometimes Cedar-Riverside.

JT: How have you guys partnered in the past?

FL: Yes.

JT: How?

FL: Oh—how. On zoning matters mainly, and that helped. Now don't believe developers. In all the years I've been involved I can say there are two that have been honest with me. And, even when they did things that I didn't like, I understood why they did it, and they understood where I came from. And that's the best you could hope for. And the two were Brighton Development and the Barnharts, and I really appreciate that. I really don't like it when people lie to me, but Kathy O'Brien used to say, "You know, when a developer comes to my office, unless I chase him out of my office with an ax, he's going to tell people I agreed with him—it's usually a him.

JT: What did the Barnharts do?

FL: Oh, the Barnharts—Barnhart—you have to let me tell this story—owns a lot of property here. And he first owned a car repair place on our side of University. And he—and another building—an office building—and he wanted to put up a bigger sign. Signs are always a problem. And someone on the committee said, "Oh my God." He said, "The sign that is there is

in such a terrible place, I have seen a few bicycle accidents there and car—” because you don’t—the sign is in the way. He said, “I’ve complained to the city about that sign and they say, “Tough, it’s allowable.””

1:10:04

So Dave came to the committee and said, “Well then I will take down the sign and I won’t put up another.” Well, I nearly fell out of my chair. It’s the first time anyone ever volunteered to do that. And we said, “What we can do for you though—we can help you work on more signage on the building. Because your building should be seen.” And Dave has been—we’ve worked with Dave on many, many things. And I’m glad we have someone—. I wish they hadn’t sold some of their property because everything they did was very good. Some people that they had sold property to don’t do as good a job. That’s an example of how nice someone can be. I never thought I would ever in my whole life hear a developer say, “I’ll take it down. I wouldn’t want anything that’s unsafe.”

So that was a funny story in a way. First went to Dave before he owned all that property when it was auto-related. And they gave him a permit without any conditions. You could have had conditions to do painting of cars. So I went with our council member. We thought well, let’s see what we can do. We didn’t know Dave then.

JT: And Dave was the one with this developing company?

FL: But that was—this thing that was earlier, we said, “Dave, there are a number of things that you can do here that we wish you promised not to do because of these pollution reasons and because there are neighbors and all of that. And I show him the list he said, “Well, I don’t intend to do any of that anyway. Now most people say, “Well, I don’t intend to do anything, but I’m not going to agree not to do it anyway.” Dave didn’t say I had to see my attorney first, he just said, “Well, I don’t intend to do that anyway. Sure. I’ll sign it.” Again, I was amazed. First developer—probably the first developer in the whole world that ever did that because he said, “Well, I’m not going to do that. That’s not right to do in a place.” So that’s one of my heroes. His son is now running the business, and his son is—well, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Let’s put it that way.

So what you need, of course, is lots of developers like the Barnharts, but we don’t have that. So you do need support of the planners. And I’m sorry this is so disconnected, but—support of the planners. You have to know your history. You work with other neighborhoods. You don’t let developers divide and conquer. You make friends with other council members which will help you. The worst developers are, by the way, the out-of-town ones. You realize the University is not your friend. It’s corrupt as any multi-national corporation. You need all that and you need the will. If it’s your—I can’t tell you in one sentence what a neighborhood is anymore than I can tell you what a zoning czar is except that you have to know everything. You just have to know more. You really, really have to do your research and have it documented because people will tell you you’re lying, and you can say, no, by this case. And I’ve had fun with attorneys. I guess I’m lucky. My father was an attorney, so I know how these people think. I know how they talk. I

even know how they smell. And attorneys will frequently try to intimidate you. But you don't let them.

And one of the things is very frequently people had attorneys, but they weren't zoning attorneys. And very frequently it was an attorney who—that was then; this is now. But even now there aren't that many attorneys who are experts in this I've been told by other attorneys. I guess I hang out with some attorneys. And what you do—and I read as many cases as I could, but sometimes an attorney would say, well, they—. First of all they sometimes they suggest to do something which you couldn't do by zoning because they hadn't even read our [zoning] code. He'll say, "According to section such and such, you can't do that anyway, so don't propose that." They don't like that when—attorneys don't like to be contradicted. I enjoy it, maybe because my father was an attorney.

And they mentioned some case. Now, in most cases, I have read the case. But, even if I haven't, I say, "That case? That case? Don't be ridiculous. That case has very narrow application—has absolutely nothing to do with this case." Well, they don't know whether I'm bluffing or not. I know their bluff. So you sort of reach this accommodation. That was great fun to do that—I mean to beat up an attorney is the greatest fun, and that made my day.

Oh—I could tell you about another wonderful thing. The hospital—they wanted to use a heliport on top of the building—the KSTP building. It wasn't used that often. It wasn't that much of a bother, but then they wanted to use it much more and for commercially to ferry kids to a prom and stuff like that. Now this was in St. Paul, so people in St. Paul called me, and it was kind of fun working with St. Paul—I hadn't mentioned that. And those people; they were great. Now, their planning commission also approved it. Well, we went down to the meeting and these people, they brought vacuum cleaners to simulate the sound of the noise of a helicopter. And they were trying to get the planning commission to—not to—I think they'd almost approved, I guess. They hadn't approved it because it's hard to rescind it once you approve it.

I was the last one to testify, and people didn't—and I mentioned I was from Prospect Park and I see the council members screwing up their faces wondering where it was, and I said, I'm your neighbor to the west, but we have relations. And, by the way, I should have mentioned we did work with the neighborhood association on a number of pollution-related things which—there's so much. And I talked about how—I said obviously—the people for the pilots and people on these—they use the medical things the example and they said and they came in, "When we get that call, we don't walk; we run!" And they had a mother crying, "If we hadn't had that helicopter, my child would have died." That was not the issue. The issue was not the medical helicopter—and of course, they—again, you know—alternative facts. The issue was all the other stuff like ferrying businessmen around and ferrying prom-goers around.

And I testified. Well, I went out into the hall afterwards and who should be there—oh, God—he was a former attorney general—and that's a name I should have thought of before this [unintelligible] —Attorney General Spannaus—was it Spannaus—Warren Spannaus? Oh, golly. I was talking about with Phyllis the other day I think it was, and I go out in the hall and he [unintelligible] —he was a big man certainly for my five feet—barely five feet. He comes over to me and he's wagging his finger at me. "You are a mean woman. You want people to die just because you don't want noise." And I said, "You are a liar. You are dishonest. You are making up facts. You are appalling because—." And he was—and he said—I don't think anybody ever said that. I said, "You know what I said, and that's not what I said. I was talking about those

extra uses and you know it.” And he looked at me and he said, “Do you really believe that about me?” I said, “Yes. I wouldn’t say that if I didn’t believe it.”

Well, I got home and I said to Walter, “You know, this guy, he was originally very good, but once he was out of office, he was, I found out from other attorneys that he was an attorney for the crumbiest uses. I mean, all the things that shouldn’t be there.” So I said, “You know, there is nothing that could have made me happier than telling him off because he deserved it. It is great to be a volunteer and I just was—you know. To have the opportunity to tell someone like that and have him really—I mean, I don’t think anyone ever told that to him. I doubt that he changed his behavior—I never saw him afterwards, but that was one of my great successes—unexpected. Unfortunately, there was—I don’t think there was anybody around who heard it. That was the end. I wish there had been a reporter there who could have recorded it.

JT: So I know you’ve mentioned how you really loved living by Tower Hill Park and the Tower has been such a big part of the neighborhood and Pratt Community School has been a huge part. Are there any other landmarks or features of the neighborhood that really make it this place for you?

FL: Well, we had this wonderful grocery store called Warwick Street Groceries which unfortunately became a restaurant after that. And then it became a number of other things. And it was just the place where everybody would go there on Saturday morning. And, you know, he’d have snacks out and we’d talk and it was just a great place. And also, Zipoy’s also—the neighborhood. And even the bank. When it was Northwest—a number of people in the neighborhood worked there. So it was very nice. If you needed something, they—I know I needed something—I had a kid who went abroad and I needed something or other, and they were able—I mean, they cut the red tape for you because they knew you. And they weren’t asking to do anything illegal. And it was just that there are some people who won’t do anything for you on their jobs. They have blinders on and, you know, that’s not my table. But, here, people were always willing to help you. It was the kind of atmosphere you walked down the street, you know people, you see them walking their dogs, you see their kids. Right now on one side of me there’s a family where there’s—my neighbor next door now grew up here. She was a little girl. I remember her as a little girl and her brothers.

1:19:56

In fact, one day—I’m going to tell you a story about that how—well, maybe it’s nosy, maybe it’s—I don’t know what. I don’t think it’s nosy in the bad sense. I see somebody go up on her porch and this is when her mom was living here. She was living in the house that was her mom’s. And I know she’s not home because I saw her leave. It was in the summer and I’m in my—and I guess I was in my garden around my porch. And then I see this person—I never see his face—and I walk around the house. And I think, “Hmmm.” And then I see him go back on the porch. So I go over there, and I say, “Excuse me. May I help you?” And he turns around and it’s one of her brothers. And I said, “You know, I debated whether I should call 911 or confront you because I didn’t know you were coming.” You know, Nancy didn’t say my kid is coming. And I said, “because I was concerned.” So after that, every time he came, he’d send me an email,

and he'd say, "Florence, I'm coming. Don't call the police." In fact, one time I think he even brought me bagels (laughter).

So that's the kind of thing you do. So we do watch out. I mean, if I saw something suspicious happening at a neighbor's house, I would either go over and see what's going on. I must say that here I had somebody working here in my yard and I had left and turned my alarm on. When we moved here, nobody even locked their doors. I did. And, we moved in, and people saw a locksmith. Why have a locksmith? I'm changing the locks. They said nobody locks their doors here. I said, "Well, I do." Now most people lock their doors and many people have alarm systems. I set the alarm, and well, it turns out the alarm went off. Sometimes they go off unexpectedly. And the alarm company tried to contact me, but I think I had my phone off because we were in a restaurant or maybe I didn't hear it. And what happened was the police came and here's this guy working in the yard. And the police assume he's a burglar. He's working in the yard. He's got garden tools and alright. And they started giving him the fifth degree and he was like, "Who are you working for? What's her name?" How long have you worked for her? And he knew most of these answers, but he said it was kind of disturbing—he said, "I thought they were going to arrest me."

Well, luckily the neighbor across the street—in fact, it was the son-in-law of the neighbor across the street who came out—who knew and said—came over to the place and said, "I know him. He's okay. He's worked here for years. He's—always helps in the garden. So it was really nice that somebody—that people know. And often you know if somebody is ill, or if somebody needs some help or people need really help neighbors now, and for me it's very, very comforting. I don't have any family living here, but I have a very extended family. And I know I have people that I could call in the middle of the night. And, when I was in a different position, there were people who knew that they could call me.

And that's what you really need. You really need community. You really need someplace where you have a sense of place and you belong and you're not anonymous. And I know in places where my mother lived in Florida, neighbors just didn't seem to talk to each other. I had two kids in California, and they were all—they never saw people because they went from their kitchen into their garage into their car. A lot of people walk here. I even casually know people who walk here lunchtime—people in neighboring businesses. And I go to a few co-ops. One of them is in St. Paul. Even people there walk here and know that I'm the lady that has the tomatoes on wheels in my driveway. And they say why, and I say tomatoes are much more important than a car.

So there is just a sense of knowing that you belong somewhere and there is some peace someplace which I think gets more and more important. There are some people who've lived here forever, and I guess I'm one of them now. I've lived here since '63, but I have neighbors who've lived here for a long, long time. In fact, we've had some very well known people living here who were in the book. And one of the people who lived here across the street was Maynard Persig who was a law professor. And my son used to go there [interruption] who when he took a class in—not in—it wasn't in zoning law. He took a class on criminal justice, and he would go and he would speak to Maynard about some of these cases. And Maynard—he'd tell stories about these attorneys whether they were smart or jerks. And then, when we went to Maynard's memorial service, we found—I knew he was famous—I had no idea how famous he was. And I remember my son, "Ohhhh ma, if only I'd known how famous he was, I never would have gone

over there to talk about my homework with him.” But Maynard loved it He was all over. He was retired then and he would tell these wonderful stories.

JT: What was he famous for?

FL: He had been a Supreme Court justice. He taught at the law school at the U, and then he—then they had enforced retirement, so then he got a job at William Mitchell [College of Law] and he taught there. And, when he was 92, he told me he was writing a book—his collaborator was in London. We got talking about phone bills or something, and that’s how he told me, and they were writing the book over the phone. He wrote many books, and he was just a wonderful person. We’ve also had—you get to meet people you never thought you’d meet. He was wonderful. He’d tell the funniest stories about some attorneys—.

Ralph Rapson, one of the most famous Minnesota architects, lived up the street. And he came to the zoning committee meeting. He looked at all the plans and, when Ralph got sick, I would bring plans over to his house for him to look at. And he gave a tremendous amount of his time, and sometimes if there was something—Ralph had this wonderful booming voice, and he’d look at something. And I remember one case where he said to someone, “That is the ugliest looking things I’ve ever seen. Why don’t you get yourself a real architect?” And another time he took a plan—he said to someone in the neighborhood, “Make the kitchen bigger.” And the guy said, “I can’t make it bigger because of this, that and the other thing.” And Ralph took the plans and he made it bigger. And he said, “As long as you’re getting a variance, make it bigger. You will never be sorry your kitchen is bigger.” The guy looked at it and he said, “Wow. What are you an architect or something?” Because he didn’t know (laughter) who Ralph was, and someone in our community said, “You’re lucky he’s not a lawyer. You’d be charged.”

We also had a lot of fun on those committees. I must say on the committees, sometimes there was disagreement, but it was never really where people stopped talking to each other. We’d sometimes disagree and we worked it out. And sometimes someone would say, “Okay. And you made your speech.” And we’d laugh because we all felt—we all wanted the best thing for the neighborhood. And that changed when we got—there were a number of changes we—the city insisted we change our by-laws so that we could have business people on. The business people had their own organization. And we worked with them. And I felt it’s better we have our own organization and, when we agree, we’re really a powerful force. And, in fact, I was on the board as a non-voting member which was fine by me, but I learned an awful lot from being on there because I didn’t really didn’t—you know, my background.

And they learned an awful lot from us, and one of the reasons—the reason I was there is the head of the business association called me and said, “What business did you have saying you agreed with such and such?” I said, “We never agreed to that.” “Well, so and so came and we decided we better be.” So, I was—they wanted to make sure—I was sort of the truth person they’d want to know. And I’d say, “No, we—.” And mainly what we started doing is talking in advance to say, would you accept this? Because, if you won’t accept it, we won’t because you know more about your situation. And, if we won’t accept it, we expect you not to. But know the reasons. And that worked very well.

It worked so well that I went to some meeting and some really, really sleazy developer—the kind of guy that was so sleazy that, after you were in the same room with him, you had to go home and take a shower. And at some meeting he saw me there, and I raised my hand to ask a

question. He said, “She can’t ask a question.” Because I was no longer on the board. “She’s not on the board.” They said, “Ah—she can ask all the questions she wants.” Because he knew that I knew. But that worked out very well.

So you have to be somewhat—you don’t have to be a pushover. You’ve got to stand up for what you believe in. Very frequently what you believe—very frequently business people have said, “Well that doesn’t make any difference,” or “You know, that’s actually a better idea.” So you gotta have that too, but it is fun. It is fun to see, when I look at those houses, you know, that the industry didn’t get—Fourth Street—that block—and that we have townhouses on a polluted site, I’m very proud of what the neighborhood did and that it built on things. And you’ve got to have something that you’re proud of, and that you work with other people who felt the same way or that you were in some ways able to convince other people.

The only downside of it was—I don’t know if it was a downside—but when Paul Zerby became council member—and he was also one of our excellent council members—he got into trouble because he didn’t do seat-of-the-pants policy-making. He always thought about things and the council wanted things pushed through.

1:29:59

But he recommended me to be on the planning commission. And the then city attorney told me I couldn’t be because I was too involved. And I said, “But the president of Marcy-Holmes had been on planning commission.” He didn’t answer that one and I said, “Someone from Northwest Airlines,” and he said, “Yeah.” And I said, “I know because I wrote a letter against it.” And he said, “Well, she recused herself.” And I said, “I can recuse myself too, and he said, “No. You’re too involved.”

So I realized—and it was stupid because I couldn’t convince everybody. I don’t even think I could have convinced a majority because of the people they picked to be on it. But I thought, well, I guess I’m so dangerous that they even have a special rule for me that you can’t be president of a neighborhood association. And I said—you know—if you want to be on the planning commission, but it was okay for other people.

[End of Interview]

Total Interview Time: 01:30:49