

Meredith and Dick Poppele Oral History Interview
Southeast Seniors Neighborhood Stories & Memories Oral History Project
November 9, 2018



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Abstract

Dick and Meredith Poppele, as a couple, have both made significant combined contributions to the Prospect Park and surrounding areas, whether those contributions be through Dick's work as a former UMN physiology professor, or Meredith's involvement in the Southeast Seniors, or their general work in neighborhood affairs. What is gone over in the interview involves discussion of those contributions and of the other various changes they've seen throughout their time living in the area. Some of those changes include those revolving around different developments like the railroad or highway (Interstate 94), or the more recent light rail that impacted Prospect Park and surrounding areas. The interview also touches on Glendale housing's history in the neighborhood. Lastly, the couple shares their view on the changes that they have seen been made in the surrounding school district, and specific schools like Pratt school, which is located in the neighborhood itself. They provide information about these school district changes, through the eyes of someone who have sent their own kids through them.

Southeast Seniors Neighborhood Stories Oral History Project

Interview with Meredith and Dick Poppele

November 9, 2018

Simone Hendrix, Interviewer

Simone Hendrix: **SH**

Meredith Poppele: **MP**

Dick Poppele: **DP**

Track 1

00:00

SH: This is Simone Hendrix. I'm interviewing for the Southeast Seniors Oral History Project. I am interviewing Meredith and Dick Poppele. The address is 97 Arthur Avenue Southeast in the Prospect Park area. The date is November 9, 2018. I guess we'll start off with, how did you two originally decide to move here and when did you decide to move here?

DP: Well, we moved to Prospect Park because of my employment at the University of Minnesota, because we wanted to live near where we worked. And we decided that when we accepted the position at the University, which was in 1967. Initially we lived on Superior Street, which is also in Prospect Park but near the Franklin Avenue bridge, where we rented a house for three years. And then the opportunity came to buy a house up on the hill which was 97 Arthur and that's—so we moved here in 1970.

SH: Did you have any people that you already knew in this area or maybe what was—or any other deciding factor for moving here.

DP: Well, initially, yes. Meredith's aunt was a prominent psychologist in Minneapolis and was the director of the Sheltering Arms School for Retarded Children, and she sort of shepherded us around Minneapolis when we first came she was our only relative this far west because we're all from the East Coast. After we lived in Superior Street, we got to know a few people in the park including the Roses who lived right behind us. And, when we moved up to Arthur Avenue a year later, they moved to a house behind us. Again, so we had a continuity there.

SH: Since you were part of the University, do you know any or have any good connections with anyone else in this neighborhood who also worked for the University?

DP: That's a good question because, in 1967, I was hired by the Department of Physiology. The chairman of the Department of Physiology lived at 1 Orland Avenue, which was right down

the street from where we are. My next-door neighbor was a professor in the Physiology department. My next-door neighbor two doors down was also in the Physiology department. On the next block behind us there were two other members of the Physiology faculty. So just for Physiology alone, yes, there were quite a few people from the University—faculty members.

SH: Could you tell me briefly a little bit about your time at the U [University] or how you came to have the position that you had?

DP: Well, yes. I came to Minneapolis in 1961 as a graduate student. Actually, Meredith and I both, we were married by then. We had a little boy who was less than a year old at that time. So I attended graduate school in physiology, and got my degree in 1965. And 1965 we left Minneapolis and went on a post-doctoral stint in Italy. We lived in Pisa, Italy for two years. And, when my post-doc was up, I had a couple of job offers, but one of them was from the University of Minnesota, and it seemed to me the best of the ones that I was offered, so I came back.

SH: And Meredith, what was your education like?

MP: Much of it was casual, just being here and doing the shopping here and constantly seeing neighbors and dog-walkers. And people with [unintelligible] get together, work on good causes, and I think we quickly felt at home here. By and large, it was a very welcoming community.

SH: Could you maybe talk a little bit about how—you said that you got involved with Southeast Seniors, this program—maybe a little bit more about that?

MP: Ah, yes. I was aware that it was coming into being here, but I don't remember just how the business was connected, but it was a non-profit. People had to be thoughtful and careful of what they were going to do so they were it would be helpful to the community, not a hindrance.

DP: Remember when you joined the board of Southeast?

MP: Did I join the board? Oh, I probably joined the board after one term as general member; I was secretary for several years.

DP: Then you chaired the board, right?

MP: Yes, that was one two-year term.

SH: Besides your work at the Southeast Seniors, do you have anything to say about any other job occupations you've held maybe in this area?

MP: Not really. The other opportunities that came along were mostly not very demanding. Plenty of personal interaction and good will all around. Southeast Minneapolis churches all participated to a greater or lesser extent in working on a Meals on Wheels meal-delivery service for people who found it difficult to get to the grocery store or do their own cooking. So that was just another opportunity that came with the Southeast Seniors.

SH: Since you guys have lived here, have you noticed any significant changes of any type in the neighborhood? Maybe like—this is not completely related—but like housing prices or just big kind of economic changes?

DP: Of course we've lived here going on 50 years now, and of course prices have gone up. I mean, I would say home prices today are more than ten times what they were when we moved here, but one has to take into account the inflation of our economy over that time too. As far as changes, changes have been very slow here.

10:00

The biggest change that I've been aware of is that most of the University faculty have either retired, died or moved away. And new faculty seldom picked this as a place to live. So, right now, I know of maybe five or six faculty members at the University that still live in Prospect Park. But I said, when we lived here, it was probably the majority. Many of the streets that were University employees or University faculty. The difference that we now have a lot of students living here, although you wouldn't know it—I mean, really. Housing hasn't changed to accommodate that in any great way, and a lot of them have become part of the community.

As far as the community is concerned, I would say it hasn't really changed that much. At least my generation people—there are very few left because they're retired and moved away, or they've passed on or whatever. But there's always a new generation coming in so, as far as the character of the neighborhood is concerned, I haven't—I would say there has not been an enormous change over the period that we have lived here.

SH: Back to your work specifically with the Southeast Seniors, or I guess at Southeast Seniors or just in this neighborhood in general, you've mentioned a specific—it was a 2020 or a project that you were involved in?

DP: Oh, yeah, right. Well, if we want to get historical here, I mean, Meredith's a little bit shy about all the things that were done when she was active, and Norma Olson our neighbor across the street—as well as several women in the neighborhood who were very active both politically and in neighborhood affairs. And that, in fact, is a big change from today, because in those days, women tended not to have an occupation, but were the live-at-home mothers, so to speak.

[Phone interruption]

They had much more time to work on things like this. Our across-the-street neighbor was on the Minneapolis Planning Board. We had people that were on the—acted in the City [of Minneapolis] in other ways and reacted in the community. So Southeast Seniors is one example of the kind of projects that the women in the neighborhood really initiated.

She also mentioned Meals on Wheels, and there were others as well. I wanted to get that in because I think that's an important point. Today, I think, most families are two-income families and people don't have the kind of extra time that they did 40-50 years ago. So that I think has been a big change in the character of what goes on in the neighborhood. It isn't that people aren't as interested and so on and as talented; it's just that they don't have as much time as they used to.

And you mentioned the, you know, more currently. Well, maybe we can get into that. I mentioned to you Prospect Park 2020. That was an offshoot of the Prospect Park East River Road Improvement Association, which is now called Prospect Park Association—shortened the name. And that is a neighborhood organization that has been in this neighborhood since 1911, I believe, something like that. It came into existence when the city first laid out this area in the 1800s—late-1800s, early-1900s, and there was a lot of new development going here. We were the suburbs in 1900. The city was way down by Main Street, okay? And a trolley came out here, but that was like going out to the suburbs. So the suburbs started to get more population.

This house, for example, was built along with two other houses on this hill in 1907 as part of a larger here that sold off a larger more of properties and they put in more housing. They were going to do the same thing with Tower Hill. Tower Hill apparently has a lot of gravel under it. So there was a big plan afoot to level the hill, mine the gravel, and then plat that for more housing. Well, people that lived here didn't like that idea at all, and got together and actually—my understanding is they purchased the hill so the city couldn't do that. And that was the beginning of the neighborhood organization. And I think that was again around 1911.

And so the organization's been active since then. So that's over 100 years of a neighborhood organization that's been constantly meeting and working on neighborhood affairs. The only other neighborhood that is as old as that is [the] Marcy-Holmes area [organization] which was actually founded in 1896, I understand, but they didn't meet continuously. There was a period when there was no organization working. So we claim to be the oldest because we've been in constant activity since that period of time (laughter).

SH: Other than that, I remember that you mentioned something about a rail station.

DP: Well, yeah, I mean, there have been a couple of things like that. Before the rail station, the biggest crisis that we had in Prospect Park was I-94 [Interstate 94]. I-94 was originally planned to come across the river, along our street, out to the railroad, and then towards downtown St. Paul. It would have demolished this neighborhood completely and cut it in half and taken out most of the housing in this area. So the neighborhood organization—at that time, the president was a fellow by the name of John Jameson and he decided that he was going to fight this.

And, make a long story short, they convinced the state to re-route the I-94 through the woods. There was a woods where the highway is now, mostly on the north side of Prospect Park. And it meant having a huge curve in the highway and so on. But they managed to get that accomplished and save most of the neighborhood. Now the area down in what we call the Motley Neighborhood was pretty much demolished. I mean, the highway went right through there, took out I don't know how many houses—many, many scores of houses were removed. We had a school down there that was populated with people up here that could just walk down the hill—and so—to get there—Motely School, in fact. And so that was all taken out. So that was the big crisis for Prospect Park.

Actually, interestingly, the result of that was that when Wendy [Wendell] Anderson became governor—would be about early 70s—he appointed John Jameson as his commissioner of

highways who was the guy that was working for Prospect Park to get that route changed. In about 2002-2003, the plans to have a light rail route from Downtown Minneapolis to Downtown St. Paul started to take shape. And it was quite clear that there was going to be a station somewhere here in Prospect Park, and the idea was that it was probably going to be on 29th Avenue. So, at that time, the neighborhood got together again and undertook a fairly big study of the area and what would show the consequences of having a light rail here and published a couple of documents that became part of the city plan in 2006. And basically, at that point, it had been decided that that's where the light rail station would be.

So beginning then—that would be 2006, until the light rail actually came into existence which was about 2014 or '13—I don't remember anymore now—the neighborhood has been quite involved in trying to anticipate what would happen with that station, trying to direct any development that was going to take place and try to anticipate the eventual outcome. And so those are two big issues that came up in the neighborhood involving transportation, both of them. There have been others.

20:01

We had a—the name of the company was Barber Oil Company, that dealt with oil by-products down on Franklin Avenue which eventually went out of business, and they wanted to put an enormous development there that neighborhood again got involved with that. And the end result of that was that that area was declared a super-fund site because it was so contaminated by the oil industry that had been there for almost 100 years. And then the River Muse was what finally replaced that. And so these were all neighborhood initiatives that were accomplished through the neighborhood organization.

SH: Meredith, I'm not sure if I asked this, but you said you worked as a teacher at some point. What was the story with that?

MP: I'm sorry, my hearing is not very good.

DP: Did you work as a teacher Meredith? That was the question.

MP: Well, I worked very briefly as a teacher. Along the way, I had accumulated enough credits to be eligible for a teaching license and I did some practice teaching in the early 70s and I didn't stay with that very long. So my—the teaching part of my history is very small.

DP: Then you—that was about that time that she got in a position at the University of Minnesota too where you did work for what, ten years, I think?

MP: Well that was—a little less. Yes, that was very interesting. It was interesting to be on the pivot point between the University and the neighborhood, to hear projects described by various points of view and—.

DP: Well, you worked for the University Senate. Is that right?

MP: Yes. But none of it was in the policy-making capacity, but the academic setting is very stimulating and pleasant for certain kinds of people.

DP: Well, I'll elaborate a little bit. She was the assistant to the chairman of the senate leadership called the Faculty Consultant Committee. And so that position changed every year. So each year she went and became the assistant to a different person. So got to see a lot of the University through all the different departments and working with a lot of the students as a matter of fact.

SH: Meredith, is there anything that you remember learning through that experience of working in different departments?

MP: I'm sorry—I missed the qu—

DP: What did you learn or what did you get out of that experience?

MP: Oh, well, I saw some people work extremely hard, some people work pretty hard, some people were really more casual than they had any of this business being—. But some concerns such as adequate based salary were always important.

SH: I think you might have mentioned a little bit of this, but slightly different topic again. Did you—did any of your children grow up going to any schools or do you have anything to say about that?

DP: When we lived on Superior Street, we were right down the block from Motley School, which was an elementary school a lot like Pratt. And so our oldest two—I should say, when we came back to Prospect Park in 1967, we had three children that time. The oldest was—let's see—would have been five, I guess. And the youngest was about two. So the older two—older son and daughter—both went to Motley School for the time we lived down there which was three years. When we moved up here, then I think they all started at Pratt. Now Meredith can help me out on this because this was the time, this early—late 60s, early 70s when the Southeast Alternative program started. And Southeast Alternatives was a program among the schools—the elementary schools in Southeast which included Pratt Elementary, the Tuttle School in Southeast Como, Marcy School in Marcy Homes neighborhood. And I think those were the four. And so they took on different missions: Pratt School was called “continuous progress” Tuttle was a traditional school. Marcy had two ?? , the “open school” and the “free school”.

So at some point our oldest boy went to Marcy. Jessica I think stayed at Pratt which was the continuous progress, and I don't remember what Kristen did. Did she go to Pratt too? I think so? Anyway, we had two daughters and a son at that point. And then, in 1972, our youngest boy was born, and he eventually went to Pratt School as well. So yeah, they all went to public schools. From Pratt, by the way, and Marcy, the next step was Marshall U[niversity] High, which doesn't exist anymore. But that was the high school. By the time Kristen got to high school level, the school had—the local school—the high school for this area was South High. And so both our younger two—daughter and son both went to South High. So yeah, except for that which is out of Southeast, they all went to Southeast schools.

SH: So you said that—your kids went to—some of them went to different elementary schools?

DP: Yes, because, as I said, the Southeast Alternative Program allowed students to go to whatever program best fit their learning needs. So, as I said, one of them was called the traditional school at Tuttle which kept the same kind of classroom orientation and so on that we'd always had. In Pratt, they called it continuous progress, so that meant that you weren't held to any particular level. You could be doing work in one level and one subject and a different level in another subject. At Marcy, there was no—I mean, it was completely open. You did what you wanted, basically. So there were quite different programs. So elementary children were not all of the same mind. They went to the program that they fit best in.

MP: And there was a fourth model.

DP: Which was?

MP: First of all, I should mention this was—this award—substantial amount of money for the time, was one of maybe half a dozen nation-wide for interesting and promising-looking programs to develop and this being a pretty open-minded community, many parents were eager to try the free school model. It was—

DP: And that was at Motley for a while wasn't it?

MP: What?

DP: The free school—wasn't that at Motley?

MP: It maybe is about Motley for a [unintelligible] time, but then—

DP: Then of course the highway went through and made a mess of that.

MP:(remove line)

DP: Yeah, that's right. So there were four programs. We didn't have a child in the free school program.

SH: Were you involved in any way in your kids' schools or do you remember any specific controversies that occurred with those schools?

30:05

MP: [Unintelligible].

DP: Controversies Meredith

MP: Controversies—oh.

DP: I don't really remember any. I thought it went pretty smoothly while it was in existence. I mean, I remember we both served on the PTA in some form. I remember being on a curriculum committee at one point. We used to park cars on Saturdays to raise money because the football was still going on here and generated traffic, so schools had their parking lots set up so they could park cars on game days and make a little money for the PTA. Yeah, and then I don't remember much in terms of any controversies.

MP: The [unintelligible] had its own history which was significant. It inherited the University of Minnesota which had been going for decades—I don't know how long. And, in the midst of this offering of five alternative programs, children from two different backgrounds—those that lived in the residential area of the north side schools and those that lived elsewhere in the city—could elect to become free school members and some took that road. Some did not.

DP: So, just to clarify a little bit, the University was much more involved in public education in those days. This program was one that actually originated with the University. Before that, the University used to have its own elementary school where they did some experimental work there, but it was largely for training their students who were becoming teachers. The University had its own high school which, at the time we were here, was also a part of the Minneapolis Public Schools. So it was called Marshall University High School. Before that, it was just called University High School, and they had their own program there. So there was a lot of that kind of work being done here at the University which was in a way experimental, in a way trying out different kinds of programs and so on—what works best for at the elementary level, what works best at the high school level. And so this program we just described really came out of that work. Unfortunately, that work hasn't continued. I mean, the University right now is minimally involved, I would say, in the public education in Minneapolis or in the area.

[Phone interruption]

SH: You've been talking about the level of involvement at the Pratt School in particular. Would you say or do you think now about the University's involvement in schools, do you think is it mostly—have you noticed it's in the Pratt School?

DP: Well, when I said the University is not as involved, I think they still have practice teaching programs. They still have their students working in local schools and things like that, but they have not, in my understanding, taken any leadership position with the school board or any other part of the school system here in trying to shape the way the various programs come together. There was a big time during the 70s when the population of elementary schools was going down. Birthrate had declined after Second World War and there weren't as many kids, and so the city became worried about that and in fact closed many local primary schools throughout the city. Many of them were torn down—Motley was one of them—and consolidated a lot of elementary programs so that where, in our day, there was an elementary school in almost every neighborhood. Today, there are very few neighborhood schools left. There are largely elementary schools taken from many, many neighborhoods together. And that was a trend that started, I think, in the 70s, and I think it continues today. I think the idea of consolidation and

bringing together programs under one roof has been really dominant and certainly at the high school level, but also at the primary school level.

And so we've been fortunate here to have a neighborhood school. We feel fortunate anyway, although that school itself was closed for ten years. It was one of the programs that was closed down when this consolidation took place, and it served as a community education center for ten years until it reopened on—I'm going to be bad on dates—but I'm going to say about ten years ago—maybe a little less than that.

Pratt School reopened as an elementary school. It started with kindergarten, first or second, and it was intended to go all the way to the fifth grade. I think they do now have five grades there. And it is very well attended. I think they have over 400 students. By the way, the reopening of that school was largely due to pressure put on by this neighborhood and its organization. That didn't happen in Southeast Como, for example. The Tuttle School was not a public school anymore.

SH: You're giving me a lot of schools—I didn't know about this area. I think I'm going to jump a little bit back. Meredith, I remember you talked about your involvement with the Southeast Seniors and you mentioned how you remember there was a program like this before, or they did the same kind of thing—the oral history.

MP: Was I calling it Meals on Wheels?

SH: I think it was something else, like a study on—I think it was different populations. I'm not sure if it was immigrant or there was something about that maybe.

MP: I don't remember what I said about interaction with immigrants. It would be relevant, but it wasn't something that I became involved in at all.

DP: The only other program I can remember from that era was a housing program that was called First Southeast Corporation. And this was something that was started again in the Southeast neighborhoods to assure that housing that was turning over at that time was going into family housing rather than student housing or something else. And that—Meredith wasn't involved with that, but I was on that board of directors. And, what we did, was to buy houses that were coming up for sale, fix them up if it was needed, and then sell them to a family. And it was—this was not a charity. It was a regular corporation that was set up. And they didn't make a lot of money on this, but they didn't lose any money either. But they turned over a number of houses. And then sometime later—I think it was in the late 70s—that the Federal Housing Authority started another program which allowed you to set up a non-profit corporation to do this kind of thing and have some federal support for it. So that started another—we called it the Second Southeast Corporation, and they came and did a lot of the same kind of things, but had some public money to work with.

40:02

But the initial one was, again, an initiative of the Southeast community here to help itself.

SH: I was just bringing that up because I remembered very specifically you said something about there was like—they were doing a study and they noticed—or from doing the study, they found out there were a lot of similarities between different, I think, it was ethnic groups in this neighborhood—I can't remember which ones—maybe Italian—I'm not sure.

DP: And this has not been a highly diverse neighborhood, historically. It's become that recently I think partly due to students and, if you consider the area to include the West Bank, of course that's been an enormous influx of East Africans there—immigrants. Although, let me step back from that a little bit, because I'm not taking into account our Glendale Community here, which is Part of Prospect Park, okay?

SH: I was going to ask about that.

DP: Glendale was started after the Second World War and it was—again, that was a gravel pit down there. The city, I guess, owned it and decided to put in some housing there. And through the efforts of Hubert Humphrey and a number of others, they built the Glendale Garden Apartments, I guess they called them at the time—I don't know. But they were largely for returning veterans from the Second World War. So it was a lot of veteran housing there, a lot of student housing at that level. And that was the case for a fair amount of time, but then it became part of the public housing effort of the entire city. And I don't know exactly what the details are about that. But, at a certain point, there were a lot of people moving to Minneapolis, many of them coming from the Chicago area and Detroit when the industry started to fold there and looking for more jobs. So there were a lot of particularly African-Americans coming to Minneapolis. And so this, among other housing developments here, became one of the places that they chose to live. And so that was true for maybe five or six or seven years, I don't know.

And then, as a result of the Vietnam War, there were a lot of refugees coming from Laos and Vietnam who included and there was one group of Hmong which are I guess from Laos—mountain people—that were two big groups that moved to the USA. One of them came to Minneapolis and St. Paul and the other to California. And the ones that moved to Minneapolis-St. Paul had an enormous effect on the population here. Many of those folks lived at Glendale. There's a big community in St. Paul as well. So, for many years, we had a lot of immigrant families there from Southeast Asia. And then the next group that came through were the Somalis. And now there's a big group of East-African and ?? there as well.

So that's been the major diversity in this community has been through Glendale, and it's been a series of first domestic immigrants and then foreign immigrants coming through the area and picking that as a starting place. And I put it that way because we worked with those folks for quite a while, and I was working with the NRP [Neighborhood Revitalization] Program—the most recent one, NRP 2, and was helping to steer that effort a little bit. And we brought in a large number of people from the Glendale area in the Somali Community. The way NRP worked, by the way, was that the program made a certain amount of money available to each community and then helped them decide how they were going to spend that money. So we had citizen advisory committees and so on that worked on this to decide how the money was going to be spent.

And so there was a group of people from Glendale from the Somali community that had decided they were going to lobby for an effort to put together a training program for their people who were coming into this area to teach them how to live in rental housing and what all the issues were and even to understand how you go about buying a house and doing things like that. Well, make a long story short, that program was selected among many and it started out—it was called the SWIM Program [Somali Women in Minnesota]. And one of the outcomes of that was that, through that program, there were a number of families—I think there were eleven altogether in the first year—that through what they learned through that program and the help they got from that program, went out and bought their own house.

And so that was an indication of how this Glendale community was actually working—people coming from even from foreign countries that didn't even know how to use a gas stove and had to be taught how to live in these kinds of housing all the way up to eventually finding ways to buy their own home. So, in my view, that was a very successful program. I think it actually got some recognition in Washington too for the kind of work that they did. But that's been our main claim to diversity here. Other than that, I think we're pretty homogenous here in the rest of the community—not so much anymore.

SH: Do you have anything to say or anything that you've seen related to that, not exactly, I guess from being directly involved, but were there any conflicts that you were witness to related to that?

DP: Well, you know, every neighborhood has its conflicts and one I remember was a big issue about street lighting here for a long time. The city wanted to put in—well, what we have now is very friendly street lighting to make the streets and sidewalks and so on more safe at night, then take out the big high, illumination that we had. And it was quite a controversy about that. Not so much that the people didn't want their lighting, but they didn't want to pay for it. And the city wanted everybody to—that would be taxed for a period of eight of ten years to pay for the lighting. And somebody said, “Well, it's not worth that much, I'm not going to do that.” And so that turned out to be a fairly big controversy and, at the time, it seemed very important. In retrospect, it doesn't seem so important (laughter). But things like that go on all the time in neighborhoods. We had a street closing that caused a lot of hassle and people—“I always drive there. You can't close that street.”

MP: I think there's a lot to be said for the question of who contributed the most—people moving in from the outside, whether it's the greater US, Hennepin County or whatever. And those who stayed for a long time, but were very active in influencing their neighborhood.

DP: Yeah, that's right. I think the stability in the neighborhood is largely due to people don't move away. And to give an example, the house next door, family moved in there shortly after we moved here, five or six years later, and raised two girls there. And they moved away, went to school, got their jobs, and then eventually the woman was widowed and she decided to move out and sell the house. So the house is now occupied by another young couple—one boy, two years old, just getting started. But the woman that moved away moved into St. Paul, didn't like it. Eventually she came back, and she now lives in an apartment at the end of Arthur Avenue here.

And her daughters, one of them is a college professor down in Mississippi, I think. And the other one lives and works here. She just got married recently and they bought a house on Franklin Avenue because they wanted to be back in the park. And so that's one example.

49:55

There are many other examples like that where the family's grown up, kids moved away, and they moved back into Prospect Park.

SH: Are there like—you might have mentioned something again, the amount of kids that are in this neighborhood? Would you say it's—

DP: That's a good question. I mean, it's—

SH: Like younger kids.

DP: It's a little harder to tell than it used to be. And you know about this. But kids don't run around real easy anymore. When our kids were growing up, I mean, they were all over the place. There were kids from everywhere. Sometimes they were in our backyard. Sometimes they were somewhere else. We had a little whistle we had to blow when it was time for dinner so that they would know to come home. And nowadays, people—the kids stay pretty much to their own house. So we don't see them as much. However, I would say over the past ten years, the number of kids on this block has grown quite a bit. So we're seeing a lot of young families moving in and a lot of kids again. And, as I said, the school is full. They do bus kids in for diversity, but it's a full school.

SH: Yeah, I passed by it today when I was coming here.

DP: By the way, the school is probably our biggest claim to fame here in terms of diversity. That school right now is close to 50 percent minority. It's one of the top-performing elementary schools in the city.

SH: Didn't know that.

DP: I guess when you get over 50 percent minority, you're not minority anymore, right? (Laughter).

SH: I know a lot of the kids at Pratt originally, there's like a tie to the Glendale—the neighborhood—

DP: Yes. Many of the kids at Pratt are Glendale residents—that's entirely right. And most of those kids are students of color, either East African or Asian or something like that.

MP: Which thrills some families and it's just a sour note for some. There are those that applaud the fact that a high percent of people of color versus—actually, I don't know. I have no idea what the numbers really are.

DP: Well, I heard these numbers recently, so that's the only reason I know.

SH: Do you know anything about—we mentioned elementary schools like the middle school, high school, any like—

DP: Yeah—middle school—we didn't have a middle school. And I'm not sure if Marcy didn't have a middle school, but the Seward school across the river has been the middle school for this area anyway. Because I said Pratt only goes up to fifth grade, and I'm not sure about the other elementary schools here. And our son went to Seward Middle School. What's it called? Mathews or whatever—I forget the name. Anyways, it's a long time ago.

SH: You also mentioned one of the high schools—did you say it closed down?

DP: Well, yeah. Marshall they said started out as University High School. It was owned and operated by the University and they taught the classes and did all that. And then, at some point, it merged with the Minneapolis public schools and became Marshall University High School, which was a public school and drew, as Meredith mentioned earlier, students from this area and also North Minneapolis. Then, at a certain point, that was closed—part of this big closing of schools that I mentioned—and the students at Marshall then were all sent to South High. And Marshall became a private building for a while. It was a lot of offices in there and everything, but it ceased to be a public school.

SH: I guess we've talked about a lot there is to talk about.

DP: Well, we've talked a lot about schools—right. And we could talk a little bit more about the neighborhood, I guess. I got involved with the neighborhood quite a bit early on when I was—when we were first here, I remember I worked with a woman named Florence Litman who was one of the women I was talking about that really were the leadership in this community. Florence has been particularly effective in keeping this organization together. She is very much interested in development and housing and zoning and all of that and, in fact, she has a Ph.D. at the University in that area from the Humphrey School. And, when I came here, it was during the time that this oil company down here was going through some changes and were going to move out and so on. And I remember being quite involved in that process of dealing with the oil company and making sure that we weren't going to get inappropriate development there and so on, and eventually getting that declared as a superfund site. Which cut off a lot of the ideas about development right away because you can't build on property that's contaminated.

And I continued to work with Florence on—she had a committee was called a zoning committee or—I think it was called a zoning committee. I worked with that for quite a while, while I was at the University, but then my duties at the University got pretty heavy. I became a department chair among other things. I didn't have much time to work any longer with the community, although I stayed active with the organization. And then, as I approached retirement, there was an opportunity here through this NRP Program to get re-involved. So I did. It was called the NRP Two Program. I chaired the activities committee that decided how the money was going to be spent and so on. So, as a result of that, I got to be a lot more familiar with what was going on in the neighborhood and what the issues were. And I became more active with the improvement

association, and then eventually I ran for president. I was the president of the organization for what five years, I think.

And, during that time, we were starting to deal with the issues related to the light rail coming through and so on. And so we set up long-range planning committees; we set up the zoning committee to deal with development. And the result of that was that we, through our long-range planning committee, we eventually morphed into another organization called Prospect Park 2020 which took on some really serious issues with regard to how we were going to see this area developed, and so we applied for a grant from what they called the Funder's Collaborative at the time which was a group of foundations that set up a fund to help communities deal with the coming light rail and help them do the planning. So we got a grant from them, we hired a bunch of consultants to work with us, and came up with a grand plan for how we wanted to see this area developed—worked with the community on that. We had a lot of community organizations—community meetings with members of the community giving their ideas. We built a model of the area, what it might look like, and had people work with that. So it was a lot of that kind of work that went on.

And the result was that although we had—well, first I should describe what the real issue was here. On this side of University Avenue we have a historic district which has been here for over a hundred years and so on and pretty stable.

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Across University Avenue was a largely industrial area, but many of the industries had either wound way down or moved out. It was filled with railroad tracks and everything. And the city has pretty much preserved that as what they call the Southeast Minneapolis Industrial Area (SEMI) with the idea that, as the industry along the river were to fade away and become more park area, the SEMI would be the kind of place they want to see the industry move to because of the presence of the railroad there.

But their idea about industry and big industry and so on and what was actually happening, where it was becoming much more small industries and robots and things like that, didn't really fit what the city had originally planned. So that left a big question mark. What's going to happen to all the land over there, especially when the light rail comes through? What's going to be the effect of the light rail on all that vacant land? And that's what our plan was all about. We were trying to come up with how that land ought to be developed. So one of the first things that we did was to convince the city that a big part of that, coming just north of the University to University Avenue, should no longer be considered an industrial area, but should be considered residential. And so the development there would be residential and not industrial. And eventually the city agreed with us on that.

And so that started then a lot of developers came in here, wanting to put up new housing. And one of the first ones that we dealt with was when the big sheet metal factory went out of business

there and a couple of developers came in and wanted to put up student housing. And we decided that we didn't want more student housing here. There's plenty of room for student housing near the University. We start putting student housing here, then we're not going to get the kind of amenities that this neighborhood really needed. The neighborhood, at that time—this is going back about ten, twelve years now—really has no commercial area. We have a drug store—period. We used to have a hardware store. We used to have a dry cleaner. We used to have all that. But over time—and a lot of it was near the University—over time, that all disappeared.

And so one of the things we really, really needed here was a grocery store. And we actually hired a consultant, our Prospect Park 2020 group, to really figure out what kind of grocery store, is there a need for a grocery store here, what should it look like and all the rest of that. And it came to the conclusion that, yes, there's a big vacuum here; that a grocery store that comes in here is going to make a lot of money because there's plenty of business here and if there's going to be more residential, it would be even better. So that became one of our goals was to get a grocery store. And the student housing—we eventually convinced the developers of that student housing that it was a waste of time for them to try to put up student housing here, because we were going to fight it. And it was going to cost them more to do it than it would to not, so please don't come here.

And so that began the kind of philosophy that we started then—didn't start, but we were continuing—that we wanted to decide who came and if it was somebody we wanted here, we would help them with their development. If we didn't want them here, we were going to make that very clear that they should go somewhere else. That seemed to work. Number one, we got our grocery store, and we got a lot of new housing along with it. That student housing project never did materialize. Instead we got a park, we got a water management area over there thanks to the Mississippi Water Management Company that is going to be a model for how we're going to deal with run-off water throughout the city eventually. We've got new housing going in there. What—more than—almost a half of it will be affordable housing. So these are the kinds of initiatives that our group in the city here—in the community—decided we wanted to see happen, and eventually and slowly that's what's taking place.

And, by the way, Prospect Park 2020 than incorporated as its own corporation. It's officially a community development corporation. And it, then, has warped even further because that area over there was eventually declared by the city to be what we were calling an innovation district which now includes St. Paul as well. So the area around the light rail station is an innovation district and the various organizations that were interested formed another organization through our Prospect Park 2020's initiative called The Towerside Group which is now also incorporated as a development group and has got a board of directors and they're just hiring a new director that will be overseeing all of the development that goes on now in that area which includes both Minneapolis and St. Paul.

So this all came from what started right here in this neighborhood through our community organization then forming this development corporation and then the Towerside. So we're kind of proud of that sequence, and we're really pleased to see how it's been turning out.

SH: Okay, yeah, I think I've gotten all the information I could probably get for this. I guess I have one last question. It's not super important, but do you have favorite quote or something that you kind of—motto that you like to kind of live by? I just think that's like kind of an interesting thing.

MP: Did you say a favorite quote?

DP: A quote, yeah, some overview. I could paraphrase a little bit what Prospect Park 2020 has set up as their mission statement. And that is to work toward having a community that provides opportunity for everybody; that is a place where we can live, work and play, that welcomes the arts and diversity and it's a place where people want to live. And also trying to respect where we're going in the future. So to understand how our demographics are changing and how our needs are changing and how we can accommodate that through our choice of how we develop this area.

SH: That wasn't like a necessary thing, just—

DP: (Laughter).

SH: Okay. Thank you for doing this recording. I think we're done now

DP: Went a little over an hour—yeah.

[End of Interview]

Total Interview Time: 01:08:00