Transcript of Interview with David Kennedy

Interviewers: Jen Lawrence and Ria Fulton
Date: November 19th, 2011
Location: Knight Memorial Library, 275 Elmwood Avenue, Providence, RI

Ria Fulton: All right, perfect.

Jen Lawrence: Yay.

David Kennedy: Right there like the sleeves on a vest.

[Laughter]

Fulton: So, just to mark the tape again, I'm Ria Fulton.

Lawrence: I'm Jen Lawrence.

Kennedy: And I'm David Kennedy.

Fulton: And we're at the Knight Memorial Library on November 19th, 2011.

Lawrence: So David, again, if you wouldn't mind briefly telling us your relation to the Reservoir Triangle area.

Kennedy: Well, it was a recreational area, especially around the pond. Blackstone, Blackamoor Pond, and Roger Williams ponds. And there was a lot of throwing people in, and, you know, things along that line. Making rafts and getting partway and tipping them over, you know, it's no fun unless you do something like that. It was, I remember after one of the groups had started up, they had, around the turn of the century -- not this one, the past one -- it was really, really, it was a city beach. They had sailboat races there, sailboat lessons, and it was a beach, you know? Then, I guess, just around 1900 or whenever Gorham's opened up, people started getting sick. And the water started turning a funny color, and no one could figured it out, and nobody I guess bothered to figure it out, so it just kind of closed, you know? People just left it alone, "well, I'll go somewhere else." Because you didn't have the social conscience, I guess, that you have now. There was a kid a while ago, I want to say somewhere a little over ten years ago, that drowned in the pond, which supposedly happens every winter. They sent police divers down, completely covered, face, everything, hands, feet... and they found two, in the cove itself, two big fifty-five gallon drums. So they rolled them over to see if, you know, he got stuck under there and he wasn't. And according to the police report they were out of work for an entire week, and they had some massive, massive blisters and rashes and things like

that all over their body. And I mean, being completely covered in rubber you wouldn't think that should happen, you know, they're taking every precaution. I still see some barrels behind where Stop and Shop used to be, but I think they're open and it says "Hazardous Waste." But Tommy, who's involved in one of the groups too, he lived over there on Adelaide, the very end of Adelaide, and that was for the longest tim deemed "Cancer Alley," yes, "Cancer Alley." But there was a lot more houses there, and, you know, was it from pollution from Gorham's? Was it, it was mostly employees that worked at Gorham's and Textron. Was it asbestos? My father quit smoking, like forty-two years, at one point, after his first heart attack -- he died of lung cancer! But he was also around asbestos and stuff, so, you know, you don't know. You can't say, "A-ha! This is what happened." His daughter, well, because I'm a third-time cancer survivor too, all right? You know, who knows. But now, at one point, Textron also was going to go down and put meters into the basements of different houses, all right. And they've never been in to check them! [Laughter] You know? So, you know, they went through the motions, all right. Now we had another meeting with Textron a short time ago, and five or six years ago they were going to remove all of the shale, which was probably holding a lot of the pollutants and stuff like that. So we watch them bring dump trucks, dump trucks and stuff like that, taking them out. So they're handing us the same leaflet that they handed before. [Laughter] [5:11] "Yeah, we're gonna remove all the shale." You told us you already did that, all right? Now they were dumping some of the soil that they were going to take out. The soil has taken up -- it's more like the size of this building. Trees are growing on it now. You're gonna take this away? It's just from one, now, on the original deed, from Textron to the City of Providence, transferring the property for one dollar, and it said right on the deed "not to be used for residential, can be used for light industrial, no schools, no nursing homes," so they put a school on the middle of it, you know? And I said to the Superintendent of Schools, who was smart enough to hit the road, he said "I got a mess on me." I said to him, "You know, I appreciate the spot you're in, you know? In Providence it's all industrial waste everywhere, it's all brown fields. We did have a better economy, but you know." I says, "But I just don't want to be in your position like five years, ten years, whatever, down the road when these parents are coming to you and saying, you know, 'You knew, and you went and did it anyway.'" So the school was built, and we don't see a whole hell of a lot of other progress. Now as far as I know, there was a gas station right there in front of the Stop and Shop. Those tanks are still in there. There's been no, you know, nothing in the way of taking them out. Well, maybe they drained all the gas out of it. I don't know, you know? They also tested these two or three massive, massive tanks they had over there at Gorham's or Textron. Underground tanks. What's in there? Well, they told us it was water, part of the fire extinguisher system. Okay, you know, I was born at night but it wasn't last night. [Laughter] Show me some samples or something! Being untrusting right to begin with, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you, all right? [Laughter] Textron is not out to make friends, they're there to make money, you know. And they're going to do it the cheapest, you know, way possible. And we've seen, residents around the area have seen them just taking short cut after short cut after short cut. [8:30] I know another guy I should hook you up with too, because he works for the city, and he's very active. He's the one that's got another daughter sitting at home with cancer, and I may be going back again at the end of this month for more chemo, all right. So it's like, I don't know, you know? I don't

know. Was it playing in the water all the time, you know? Was it... I don't know, you know? And they let it go too much for too long, and now it's "Well, we don't know, so...", you know? But, as the issue of cleaning up Mashapaug, I think it would be pointless myself, because you know where Spectacle Lake is, up by Twin Oaks there, which is supposed to be the worst, right there. And I've looked at maps of underground streams and things like that, that feeds into Mashapaug. And Mashapaug feeds into Roger Williams, which feeds into the bay. I think you'd have to start with Spectacle first. That's the first one and it's feeding into Mashapaug, you know? And now they're talking about draining the ponds at Roger Williams Park, and it's just not, you know, I don't know, you've got -- I don't see it happening without a lot of federal help, you know? That's not like two guys with a bucket and a shovel, you know? And it's like I said, the history of it, you know, I was away from it so long, too, I don't really remember what the water looked like. It looked like water, you know? Just kind of, you know, except for when you get the algae bloom now, and I go down to a friend of mine, Mark's, who has like three properties right there on the water. Then it's bad. Then it's bad, you know? Greener than your eyes. [Laughter] I'm colorblind anyway [Laughter] along with eighty-three percent of all males. But, you know, seeing in his backyard, you know, it's in, that's why I brought his number too. I mean, it's, in his interest, he has a beautiful piece of property. Big rolling lawn goes right down to the edge of the pond, you know, same as the school teacher, Kathy, she lives down the street. She's got a little sailboat there, you know, and I don't know that she's too crazy about, you know, sailing in that and taking the possibility that they can dump. Even though, like I said, you know, the guy, the skier, "Ah, water's fine." But if you go in there, you get a gulp, I don't know, you know? I mean, I would do it, but I'm nuts, you know? So, unfortunately, that's a lot of what I remember, you know? Because those are the things you don't just put in the back of your head... because that was it. It was there, you played. You know? Any other questions you can think of? [12:16]

Fulton: So I know you said that you don't, that in order for Mashapaug Pond to get cleaned they'd have to start with—

Kennedy: Spectacle.

Fulton: Spectacle Pond. But assuming, somehow, that were to happen and we could have a remediated sort of area, what would you like to see for the pond and the neighborhood, you know? If it could be cleaned.

Kennedy: Change the color from green to maybe blue. [Laughter] I don't want to see people being able to play Jesus Christ and walk across the water there, you know? It's a shame, over on the other side, there's a city launch and a city fishing area and stuff like that, and I go over there and fish. I don't even have a license, I don't care, you know? Something that, with a path, you could walk around and look and not smell it, all right? That's also part of the pathway to the winter geese. They come down through this way and go down to wherever they go, I don't know. You know, make it something attractive to the area. That's all I can think of, you know? I mean, I thought of, if you want to make it a boating area, and a swimming area, that would just be so out of the question it's

ridiculous. But, I mean, that would be the long-term, you know? You settle for what you can get, you know?

Lawrence: I'm interested in the term that you were using, "Cancer Alley."

Kennedy: Yeah, that's—

Lawrence: And, kind of, when that came about, and when that awareness started to form, really, about the danger of the pond and the brown fields—

Kennedy: It would probably be about twenty years ago. I've got to get a hold of this guy, Tom, who works for the city. He's coming up on retirement next month so he don't care, you know? [Laughter] He don't care. Well, although we never did anyway, you know? He wants justice for his daughter, you know? [15:00] And you know, they just discharged big, massive pipes of industrial waste with no regard whatsoever. And you might be able to say, "Oh, they didn't know any better back then." Ah, bull crap! You know, come on! You know? When they did finally close up, they hired a small company to clean out the big tanks. A guy retired from that one job as a multi-millionaire because there was so much silver, so much gold in those pipes. Pulled it all up, just cashed it all in, you know? We know that Gorham's was originally made for, at Rhode Island School of Design, you know? And I mean, you see so much of their work around the state. Down there, here... and I'm trying to think of what it looked like in 1900 when it was... if you look down here, the early nineteen twenties, there was not a business allowed on this street. You know? They were all elm trees that grew over the top of Elmwood Avenue. The hurricane of 1913, and you go and you look down to Ontario Street, even on Elmwood Avenue, you can see some of the old, massive mansions. They still have elevators in them and stuff. Remember the show, Bob Villa's This Old House?

Lawrence: Yes.

Kennedy: He's done three or four houses right up through here, further up the road, and they were mansions from the big executive vice presidents and everything like that, from Gorham's. And I can remember growing up over here, all right, and -- well, I was a paperboy to this big brick building, to give you an idea of what the neighborhood was like. And the doorman would let you in at the front door and look at his watch. So you'd go, and it was a four-story building, drop the papers, all right? Around the back door, in the back, he'd look at his watch, he'd call back the front doorman, "Okay, they're out." There were movie stars! I don't know if you've ever heard of Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea? He lived on my street! When he wasn't in Hollywood. But I mean, that was the type of neighborhood it was. But those are the things you kind of miss, you know? Having a place to go and splash. If you're a kid, you know? I don't know, I think I'm getting long-winded.

Lawrence: No.

Fulton: No, it's great.

[18:11]

Kennedy: And always fun. Saturday mornings you'd get up, get your bike, grab your dog, right to the park, right to Mashapaug, right to anywhere. You didn't have to come home for lunch because there were apples growing here, and grapes and stuff like that were growing everywhere. Eat lunch out, you know? And of course you'd come home to "Where've you been? [imitating yelling] Ar rar rar rar!" you know? I don't know what else I can add to it. Well, like I said with Cancer Alley, it was the end of Adelaide Avenue there, and it just seemed to have a higher rate of cancers and because there was a higher percentage of people working at Gorham's and Textron, you know? And Textron also did a lot of government testing, missile testing and missile -- you know? So it's not like they were just making pewter vases, you know? [Laughter] Well, I can't think of anything, really, else to add except for my disappointment, you know? Of course, I don't know what it would smell like if they drained the pond, you know? That would be, that would be, and how would they fill it again? That would be a logistic nightmare, I guess. But they talk about doing that, they must be, you know, five steps ahead of me, you know? [20:00] So you know where Spectacle is?

Fulton: Yes. Roughly… I can see how that, the path that connects…

Kennedy: So you know where the restaurant Twin Oaks is?

Fulton: No. I've heard of it…

Kennedy: Oh uh,

Fulton: [Simultaneously] but I don't know that I've seen it…

Kennedy: That was a, during prohibition that was a speakeasy [laughter], I think it was thirty people that used to sit in there. They had two big oaks outside there, so that's how they got their name Twin Oaks. But yes… They never got arrested or anything like that and now they seat, I think it's like three hundred and sixty people or something. But you have all different rooms and everything like that, you know? Yes, and I don't know… And it probably actually comes from before that somewhere, you know? I mean it would be nice if you could dam up every one, but that's not feasible either. Because then you'll get silt deposits. I used to live right off the, practically right on the Pawtuxet River, right on the Warwick-Cranston line and that was a constant flooding out – the basement of the house flooding out and everything… But that was a nice river to kayak from Situate right out to the bay. Well… anything else you're thinking of?

Fulton: I'm trying to, one of the stories that I know a couple of people have mentioned, and I guess it relates back to Gorham and the neighborhood. So I guess there was like a junk pile where Gorham used to dump their stuff that some people talked about playing around when they were kids. Over where the baseball field is now?

Kennedy: Yes. That's on the other side, the other side from where I lived. Oh yes. I mean, back then – Well you know there was no environmental concerns or anything. There was nothing. You know and now, you know… people would, not the EPA but the… well, even like the EPA. Sometimes they can go over board. They can go overboard. But when you have companies that are just knowingly, knowingly doing things, all right? And I remember when we had gone down one time in front of Textron and picketed there, and they weren't doing anything. And we went up and gave the guy who was supposed to be in charge of all this a handmade pig award, put it on his desk for him, you know. [23:16] And you know what? Didn't get anything done. I think it was more of a "hush this up, go through the motions, hush it up"… and you know. But yes, that was right on the deed: "not to be used residential, schools… It could be used for small industrial." Not that I, I don't know who would take the mountain now, you know—

Lawrence: I'm sorry. When did you personally start getting involved with, like, understanding the remediation that was going on and…

Kennedy: About seven years ago. Yes. But then the whole thing would fold and, you know, and then another group would come along. Ulterior motives… I wanted it nice down there, you know? And you know, different – I don't know what happens. Just different people go different ways, you know? Maybe they were told "no" once, you know? That's about it, you know?

Fulton: I was wondering if you had any other, sort of, memories of the neighborhood. Because I'm sure – and you're talking about how different it looks now than it did then. What were some of the places you used to go to in the neighborhood or any other good stories from…

Kennedy: …Park, Mashapaug, Blackamoor Beach, Blackie's Beach. That's about it. And… but Roger Williams which is now just as bad as that, you know? The ironic part is that they know that it's so bad but they let you fish there but you have to have a license. You know they're telling you, "don't touch the fish. Don't even think about fishing in there unless you pay us," you know? I do tend to get, you know? I don't give them my empty soda cans and stuff like that. I take them back myself. I paid for that. I paid for that. The guy next door to me, he got laid off. I'll give them to him. And there's quite a few people. You got laid off; it's tough making ends meet. He takes them to Massachusetts. No, you can't have them. I already paid for them. And don't get me going on the taxes…! There are some people that, you know, like the tent city in downtown Providence. I think there's, you know, they could have been a little more proactive. Go take your money out of the banks, all right? And start, I mean, every small credit union and stuff like that… take quarter page ads like that. Go patronize them, you know? It's not going to make a big big big horrendous dent but, you know? I love election time… Especially when they call up, all right? Well, no, when they get me on the porch too. I go through a whole rant about… the great thing about democracy is the benefit of the secret ballot ,you know? And, I choose not to tell you. I choose not to tell you. I mean there are so many things wrong. [27:57] My mother is eighty-four. She complains about the

government, because back in her generation, her day, the government could do no wrong. Could do no wrong. Now she reads the paper, "I don't trust those SOB's, they're all thieves." You know, it's… so the whole society itself has changed. You know, and thank god because, you know, it's making possible things like this. Things that affect our next generation, you know? I've got a little granddaughter. She'll tell you she's four and three quarters [Laughter]. Not four and a half, four and three quarters, all right? "Get it right, Grandpa David, four and three quarters." We have to look at them, you know. You know, youth was good. What I was saying about here… living up around here. If you got caught walking across someone's lawn, go home. Go home. Because everybody knew who you was. And they were already on the phone to your old man. [Laughter] You know? So it made no point to hide, you know. Because if you didn't show up at the house, the old man was out looking for you. It was a different, different... I remember, I was on the bus one day, talking to this old black woman who sounds like she's from down South. She was looking at these kids, you know, with the pants hanging down to here and the BVDs up to here and everything. And she's looking and saying, "My god, when I was bringing up my boys they would never take a hand down from one of their brothers. It had to fit perfectly. [laughter] I don't know how I kept them in clothes." But… but, my hopes is I'd just like to see something, you know, cleared up down there. Even, there was some talk about, in some areas, making little wooden footbridges to cross areas that you just really can't pave or anything like that. And that would be, that would be a nice walking area. I know a lot of people in my neighborhood walk those streets there. So that would be a nice area. Especially if geese are there. You know. I came out of my, now, I don't know if you know exactly where Union Street is, but I came out of my driveway one morning. I just walked down to see if anyone's around, right? And there's a big massive deer there. Yeah! I mean, a big one! Not a baby deer or something, right? There was a big massive deer. We get coyotes, fox, everything right around there. Them things with a mask on them… look like a stick-up man with the pointy claws.

Fulton [31:46]: Raccoons?

Kennedy: Raccoons. Yes. Raccoons. But you know what it is, there's the bike path right around there on other side that goes to Coventry or West Greenwich, you know? So, I mean, why don't we just send along a little bus… Bus them all away. So then they'd leave. [Laugh] That's why I don't let my cats out at night. But there is all sorts of wildlife there. I'd like to see the wildlife too, you know? Cleaning up the pond where I can go and drop a line in if I ever get a spare minute, and just, you know, just throw it back in, you know? Make for a nice neighborhood spot, you know? So… like I said. I have another phone number here.

Fulton: Great.

Lawrence: Yes. That would be great.

Kennedy: That, he has like at least three of the houses right on the pond there.

Lawrence: He was the one where you mentioned his really nice lawn, or is that someone different… Tim, you said?

Kennedy: No. This is the one with the really, really beautiful, sleek, and then he's got the house next to it and then he's got a few others… Now, I'm looking at that. Now that's not… time to go to the eye doctor, you know? Okay, his name is Mark, that's 529-3917. And I think that's, yes, that is his cell phone number. And he wanted to come today but he just couldn't. And, you know? So, and he knows a lot more about this. Well, he's lived there a lot longer.

Lawrence: And is he a friend of yours? If we just said that David….

Kennedy: Yes. Yes, and tell him about the project.

Fulton: Okay.

Kennedy: Yes. Because I talked to him this morning and he said, "Oh, I wanted to go!"

Lawrence: Yes. We will definitely talk to him. That is perfect.

Fulton: Yes.

Kennedy: I mean wait until you see his… Do you remember the, oops… Remember the movie *The Godfather* and they had the estate?

Fulton: Oh yes, yes.

Kennedy: The compound? Well that's like his area there. [Laughter] He's down at the end of the street. I think its Algonquin, or Crescent. I keep getting those mixed up. This side is his. [34:37] This side is his. He's got a big Bobcat; he plows himself out and stuff like that. And you know his lot, he's got another city lot there that he grows all his vegetables in. He's a complete vegetarian. But, I never would have guessed it! He's a big guy like this! Every other vegetarian I've ever seen has been [laughter] second runner up in a Karen Carpenter contest. You know they're still trying to sell her house? In Hollywood? Yes. No kitchen! [Laughter] All right. I've got to get going and do fifteen hundred things.

Fulton: Oh god.

Kennedy: I've got to find one picture that I treasured. It's something that goes in the bucket list, all right? I chartered, on a charter, out in Newport – it was only sixty-two bucks. You get to sail one of these twelve meter… America's Cup. And you can either sit there and pose like you're posing for animal crackers and do nothing, or you can take part and learn the sails and all that stuff. I was up on the helm, all right? And one of the crewmembers took a great picture of me doing that. I got to find it! I got to find it!

Because my surgeon wants to see it, number one. And, yes, that was a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

Lawrence: That sounds great.

Kennedy: Well, eventually I'm going to get a sailboat and Kathy's going to teach me to start sailing. See, I've been around boats all my life but I've never sailed. So, if I want to, after something else happens… more money… I want to buy something big enough to live on. Twenty-eight footer, twenty-eight footer. I got a friend of mine, Liz, she's only 37. But when she wakes up in the morning, she jumps in her boat, goes down to Key West. But she's only got a twenty-one footer I think. But she goes the inland waterway.

Fulton: Oh wow.

Kennedy: And, It's a way to live. You go down to Virgin Islands, somewhere around there. Rent charters, you know? I got my retirement income. Rent charters. Then when it starts getting real warm down there, it starts to be hurricane season… you come right back up here. Kind of like reverse Santa Claus.

Lawrence: Sounds really nice. Sounds really nice.

Fulton: I'm from North Carolina, so the inland waterway there is gorgeous.

Kennedy: Yes, yes. You know what it was made for, don't you?

Fulton: No, I don't.

Kennedy: It was made for WWII. The Japanese used to sit over there on the coves and pick off the ships, the navy ships as they were going by. So they made the inland waterway.

Lawrence: Oh…

Fulton: I had no idea.

Kennedy: I could be on Jeopardy one of these days.

Lawrence: Yes! Thank you so much for stopping by.

Fulton: Yes, thank you so much. And we will make sure that somebody talks to Mark.

Lawrence: Yes. I want to make sure I do this right…