

Interviewer: Benjamin Luton. Interviewee: Douglas Victor

Ben Luton
Interview 1
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Description of Interview: Doug Victor touches on the history of the Elmwood Neighborhood of Providence and some of the urban ponds in Providence, focusing on the problem of runoff as a historical problem. He describes his particular neighborhood in Elmwood, some of the recurring social equity problems and since the 1970's, and his role in the neighborhood as a social and environmental justice advocate and as a homesteader. He talks about some of the neighborhood projects and responses to social equity problems and to runoff. He talks about the Elmwood Neighborhood and South Providence in terms of cultural difference and social and ethnic difference. He briefly describes his relationship to the Urban Pond Procession. During and after his interview, he talks about a need to record and interview the remnants of holdovers from the new, landed owner class, which developed in South Providence in the late 19th and early 20th century.

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March 20, 2013. 103 Princeton Avenue, Providence, Rhode Island. 02907. An Interview with Doug Victor.

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Doug Victor: Good, and it's recording as we're speaking? So, one of the things that I did, thinking about this interview, is I pulled out this, this booklet,

Benjamin Luton: Oh, wow.

Victor: *Elmwood and Providence Statewide Historical Preservation Report* from the renowned Historical Preservation Commission in 1979, I believe was the printing of this.

Luton: Would that have a history, like of houses here and around the street?

Victor: It—The first edition was 1970 actually. It has several things that I thought would be really interesting, many things. First of all, you know, just talking about this street, this street used to be called Henry Street.

Luton: Oh, wow.

Victor: So. And also, this—where this house is, and the house where you live—was part of something that was called—lets see here—Moore's, Moore's Nursery.

Luton: Moore's Nursery.

Victor: This was all Nursery Land.

Luton: Wow, that's incredible.

Victor: That's right. So, half of, half of, um right up to Peace Street, half of Peace—No, just up to Peace Street, half of Whitmarsh, half of Princeton, and half of Moore Street, down to Updike, this was all nursery. These, these three blocks were nursery. And so you can see, I don't know how good your eyes are, but you can see it, you can see it right here where my thumb is.

Luton: Oh, wow.

Victor: So that whole block was nurseries.

Luton: There was a garden here.

Victor: That's right. Now, if we look here, what do you see on that side of the map? I see another pond. And, it says what?

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Luton: Long Pond.

Victor: Long Pond, so you get to see how long Long Pond was, if you are thinking about investigation of Long Pond, or somebody might be. As I said to you, this pond was buried over in, at some point in the 1800's to create a park. And so, that is now Bucklin Park, and I think also not totally Bucklin Park but some of those neighborhoods there should see the overlays of some of the streets. So, and when it was filled in, it was filled—My understanding is, it was a dump, and people dumped their trash—

Luton: Like a refuse.

Victor: Yes. And that was how they filled it until it got high enough. And, when we were planting trees over at Bucklin Park a few years ago, people were digging, and they were pulling up interesting old bottles.

Luton: Like medicine bottles?

Victor: “Where did this come from?” “What is this,” you know? So, I’ve always sort of thought that wouldn’t it be interesting to have some kind of a site-specific architectural dig, like a core sampling dig sort-of thing, to go down to where the bottom of Long Pond used to be just to kind of look at the history of, or look at the artifacts that could be found.

Luton: And, Mashapaug is just south of it, it looks like right there. That’s less than, I mean, that’s half of a mile or less.

Victor: It’s not very far at all. So again, if we see, there’s another map that I’ll show you. If we look at this map, then that shows you Mashapaug Pond. There’s yet another, there’s probably a better map to look at. Here. So here is Long Pond, and here is Mashapaug Pond. So, it gives you kind of the size of that pond. It was not, not so small, not tiny, not tiny. Now, I have no idea about this pond or this pond. One of the things that I was looking for was a series of ponds that came through actually Elmwood Neighborhood. This triangle here, between Greenwich Middle Road, which is now Elmwood Avenue. It was not Elmwood Avenue until this became a suburb of Providence, and it was the wealthiest suburb there was. And, some of the grand houses were built at that time, (5:00) and Elmwood, this Greenwich Middle Road, 1730 here, was redesigned into an avenue that was tree-lined with elm trees, and the elm trees got hit with the blight, and most of them died, actually. And so, that’s part of the problem, that whole piece of those trees dying is part of the whole problem of run-off that is ultimately going into, well, if it funnels, where does it funnel? It all funnels into Narragansett Bay, through the Pawtuxet, we’re all in the Pawtuxet watershed here.

Luton: So this was a problem even in, I mean how long ago was, was, were elmwoods (sic) lining the road? That was awhile back, and so I mean.

Victor: So, the Dutch Elm Disease, when did the Dutch Elm Disease strike? Um, Two, two things, just to keep my train of thought.

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Luton: Sure.

Victor: So between. And this road, Pawtuxet Road is now Broad Street, so the neighborhood that you and I live on, is this neighborhood between these older, between Elmwood and Broad Street.

Luton: That's incredible.

Victor: So, there are some pretty good photographs... there are some good photographs, and photographs of the housing stock, not just the, some of the old farm houses that existed, this was sort of flat, not fertile sort of cow pasture land, and there were some, a few farmhouses out here that existed, so they weren't fancy but they're also promoted, they're also photographed and documented in this book. Every house in Elmwood Neighborhood has been inventoried and rated for its historic and architectural value. And there's one structure in Elmwood that received a hundred out of a hundred points, and that's Bell Funeral Home on Broad Street. And so, so you can see this is the house next to you was the Webster-Knight Mansion,

Luton: Oh yeah, I see the—Here's the house, right here.

Victor: Right. And, and they were industrialists. They actually started Fruit of the Loom, and they also had money, and they built, they were responsible for creating the library across the street.

Luton: Wow [inaudible]

Victor: Hence the Knight Memorial Library. Knight Family: K-n-i-g-h-t. This was another house on our street, the Smith-Malmstead House. And when I moved in thirty years ago, that was also a—The Malmstead Sisters lived in that house. They were two older sisters who never married, but they lived in the house that their forbearers built. And that was not uncommon thirty years ago to find you know holdovers from the sort of new kind of owner class, landed folks in this. So, I don't know how this sort of all fits with what you have in mind in terms of interview.

Luton: But. It does, it does fit I mean, because we're, we're, I mean we're interested in the city, and there's a couple of projects. Like this one is focused on the pond, but then there's another project that the class runs on... And so, basically, this is really, this is like prime material for it.

Victor: Right. Good, good. And this is the big apartment building behind my house, here, the Whitmarsh Apartments, and that I believe is the second, it's the second oldest apartment building of its type in the state, and it has a lot of historic significance. Now you see Elmwood Avenue here in 1936, you know, you see trolley cars. And this was the first schoolhouse in Elmwood that is now not there anymore. And this building is still

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remaining. This is now a parking lot. (10:00) There's a little laundry mat here. Bamboo Garden is here, and there's a couple other—

Luton: Wow.

Victor: —stores on this side, on this front. This shows Elmwood Avenue in a photograph in 36', prior to its real kind of paving and having lines down the road. So it shows you also kind of the difference. And these were the elm trees that came, that were, that came through. And again, here it shows you a trolley. This was I believe the original Knight House on Elmwood avenue that is next to Hodosh Dental here. There's a big piece of property there that's part parking lot and part just field maybe for lack of a better more accurate term for urban, for urban, for that type of urban piece of property. And that house burned in—and these were the parents of the people here.

Luton: Ok.

Victor: Yes.

Luton: They were around before Fruit of the Loom, before that certain industrialist?

Victor: Yes. I must say that there is a necessity to investigate anything that I'm saying to verify it, because there are a lot of neighborhood lore (sic), and once a story is told sometimes it's believed to be true. So we have, and I think this is the case in general, because we have story and myth, or we have myth and truth, or story and truth, and they kind of always live hand in hand together. Just individually as individuals we have our own stories, and we have our own what's really true. And so, you know, I think, I think you know some things are documented, and even if something is documented and written down it doesn't mean that it's really accurate. It may be really referring more to the story than to actual, what actually happened. We see that with history all of the time. History needs to be rewritten from a variety of different perspectives, obviously.

Luton: Yes.

Victor: Yes.

Victor: And when I moved here, this Elmwood Avenue once again had no striping on it. And it was probably five years after I moved here that the state, it's a state road, although the sidewalks are owned by the city, so Elmwood Avenue kind of has been this road that has been kind of like, "Oh, it's the state's responsibility," this is the city, from the city, and the city kind of says... and the state says "It's the city's responsibility," and you kind of get nowhere quick. And in terms of a, you know even though there's several, five, seven million dollars coming into just to redo Elmwood Avenue this year, it has been a huge piece of coordination between two big kind of bureaucracies, one the city government, and one the Department of Transportation. And so...

Luton: What are some of the problems that are coming in from that sort of meeting between the bureaucracies?

Victor: Well, and then some of us neighbors inserted ourselves into the process, because we wanted to be part of what was happening on Elmwood Avenue, because we have seen you know in this past six years our property values just plummeting. This part of the city, this neighborhood has got hit probably one of the deepest declines in property values. So we have been saying we need to re-neighborhoodize Elmwood Avenue to make it work for the neighborhood. No longer can it be a four-lane highway if you will, and DOT is primarily responsible for the state highways, but there are many roads that are (15:00) infrastructure roads through neighborhoods that they've also do own and are responsible for. So they have a real task, one of their tasks that we were working to achieve was for them to change their mindset about specifically Elmwood Avenue not being a thoroughfare from Warwick and Cranston to Downtown, to move traffic. Yes, it needs to move traffic, but yes, it also needs to be a neighborhood road. And how does the moving of traffic and, and, and, how does the moving of traffic and the transiency, instead of having businesses on Elmwood Avenue that we all feel like you know we can go and have something to eat, we can shop, we can have different kinds of shops, we can have coffee shops, whatever it needs to be for the diversity of the residences that are here, it's not just for me, it's for everybody, and how would that, if that were a vibrant sort of neighborhood-oriented retail district from end to end, Elmwood avenue, you know, would there be so much transiency? Would we have so much, would we have the trouble of prostitution? Would there be the trouble of drugs? Would there be so much litter? And my answer is: No, there would not be. So what other contributing factors that set this climate up on Elmwood Avenue? And so you can imagine the kind of the scope of some of the conversations, when the folks at DOT, who are engineers, who kind of think in a certain way, it's not that they are bad people, it's not that they're not doing their jobs, but for them to consider some of the ways of looking at a thoroughfare, to socially humanize it for the neighborhood is a real—it takes a—it's a bit of an adjustment, so and I think we've done pretty well. A couple of things that happened between the city and the state on Elmwood Avenue is that the sidewalks and all of the infrastructure from the sidewalks is the city, the state is the road itself, so we have this kind of thing going on. For instance, to coordinate, the redo of Elmwood Avenue, and maybe every twenty to thirty years, it will be resurfaced, and money will come in for that, but if the city doesn't have the funds then to upgrade the infrastructure on the sidewalk, and the sidewalks, say, the storm drains which are antiquated, which get blocked up, it causes street flooding around the entries of our streets into our neighborhoods, it creates havoc for pedestrians who have to walk around it, jump over it, if you are in a wheelchair forget it. You can't get to the accessible part of the sidewalk, you know. So it makes life tough, and those storm drains also are engineered in such a way that they have a very narrow slit and if some branches or some trash gets in front of it, it will just block it, and it won't really take the water in, and then the storm drains are an open slot, and in the winter if we have a lot of sand on the roads, and it, then we have water to follow, rain to follow, the sand goes into those storm drains and fills up the basin of the drain. The basin of the drain ultimately spills out into the underground sewer system, so that goes through underneath the roads. For much of our neighborhood if not all I believe that household sewage, and runoff go into the

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same place. And where does it all go? So we have the DNC market, and when they're storm drain is blocked, it not only floods the street, which can be a problem for their customers, but it also floods their basement, and as a business they have also lost inventory, so, and that's not uncommon. (20:00) That's a not uncommon side effect of this kind of roadway flooding because of the inadequateness of the systems to take the water where the water is supposed to go.

Luton: It's not uncommon for basements to flood?

Victor: Yes, there is a whole sort of flood zone throughout the city that if there's a heavy rain that businesses get flooded and basements get flooded and businesses. What does this have to do with everything? Well, fewer trees, storm drains that don't really do the trick, the city doesn't seem to have the ability to clean out the storm drains because they only have a certain amount of equipment to do that, you know how many storm drains there are in the city and how much manpower they have to put to that, it's limited, so they can't even keep up with keeping the storm drains clean, but you know every season or so those storm drains again, many of those storm drains fill up, so when the state is getting it's federal money to redo Elmwood Avenue what happens is if the city doesn't have the money then to tear up the sidewalks and to redo the storm drains into something that is really more workable in terms of current engineering technology for road runoff, it doesn't get done, the old storm drains just remain. Now, new sidewalks are coming in, but the ability to go deeper than the new surface on the sidewalk is very limited, because there isn't the funds, so there we have some of the state-city thing going on, how that impacts. So the lack of trees, we have sixteen percent, about sixteen percent cited in a Brown report a few years back, sixteen percent of the tree canopy in this neighborhood that would be optimal, one-sixth, sixteen percent. So, without trees, and trees take in a massive amount, a mature tree can take in a massive amount of street water that comes in, which means less has to go into these storm drains, less goes into the sewerage systems, less gets dumped into Narragansett Bay, less gets dumped into Pawtuxet River Shed, potentially less gets dumped into Mashapaug Pond, I'm not quite sure where the feeders are from here, and how that, but I, and, it's not just water, it's road salt, it's pollutants, it's pieces of trash, you name it, it's pollutants from automobiles, you know, you name it, it goes along with it, so all of that is going into, ultimately into Narragansett Bay, and there's a big system that has been in construction to kind of take care of this, big underground storage tank kind of a thing. So, so...

Luton: So, that's one of the big problems for the Elmwood neighborhood or for this area?

Victor: Well, it's one of the problems in this whole, sort of south of Downtown. And as you might notice when you come from downtown, upway Weybosett street, it's like a long hill and then it evens off, and so this is the watershed for the Pawtuxet river, I mean all of it, it even goes way up into Massachusetts, is the watershed for the Narangasset Bay, and a lot of things come into play, but then how can we locally kind of work to, with all of the various variables, including you know antiquated storm drains, to help sort of remediate the situation. So.

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Luton: And part of that situation is brought on, I'm just curious, from the housing collapse? I mean that really hurt (25:00) the neighborhood, you were saying.

Victor: Well, it did, but you know this is a longer-term history than that, because you know the advent of, the advent of the automobile, and then the... manufacturing process, the whole process around thinking about how to have the automobile have a smoother less-damaging to the automobile kind of ride, a smoother ride for, you know...

Luton: Providence used to be dirt road, right? Like a while, I mean, not that long ago.

Victor: Well, of course it did. I mean, what was there in many of the roads, and I've seen many of them actually were cobblestone after, and were filled with, just, just kind of covered over. So, we have petroleum product that leeches stuff out. It just does. And so road surfaces became tar. They became impervious, so they couldn't absorb the rainwater, so it sheet flooded off of things, and we have, you know there's a whole movement afoot in the whole city of Providence to really identify, to really look at the impact of the impervious surfaces in our city, and how that impacts certain things, quality of life, certainly. It impacts road surface flooding, because there's no place for the water to go, because it can't be absorbed. And so, one of the conversations you know could be with DOT, we want to see not an impervious surface on Elmwood Avenue. We want to see Elmwood Avenue be a pervious surface. And that's like so beyond their ability at this point to think about. They can think about it, but it's like, "Where's the money." "And this is..." You know, so Elmwood Avenue is going to be paved once again with an impervious surface, which again is just adding to the problem, and so what we seem to be living with is a lot of these kinds of legacies. And a lot of education out there in terms of people really understanding you know the tie-ins between having a healthy environment and remediating certain things in our manmade physical environment, so they really contribute to a healthier environment for all of us. The other piece of that is planting more trees. We planted probably about three hundred trees in this neighborhood and also the West End across the way in the last two years.

Luton: That's, that's an amazing, that's a great feat to have, I mean, do you want to talk about, well—Where roughly were some of these trees that you planted for just an example?

Victor: Well, first of all, I did an inventory on these six streets here, from Moore Street up to Plenty. And, then somebody across Elmwood Avenue on the other side of Peace Street, they were planting like seven over there, and we came together. So we planted, in that initial planting, we planted I don't know fifty-something trees. And then I took another look, and the next planting in the same area was seventy trees, so there's about one-hundred and twenty trees, and I extended the area a little bit out to Bucklin Street. Angie Bannerman and I rode around, more toward around Bucklin Park. She's head of the Friends of Bucklin Park, and where Long Pond used to be, and she works for the Department of Health, too, and she's a wonderful person and a friend. We rode around in her car. We identified over on the west end across from Elmwood Avenue, no brainer we

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came up with almost ninety trees that were needed just by you know driving around maybe five streets. After the last tree planting here on these sixth streets I walked around and did another inventory. I counted about a hundred more. There could be about a hundred more just on these sixth streets. So we're talking (30:00) a hundred and twenty, and we're talking about a hundred more? So on sixth streets, which is how many blocks is that. So that's probably twelve, fifteen, twelve, sixteen or seventeen blocks probably, block area. We're talking about to get the trees that can fit on the sidewalk. They can't compete with the mechanicals and with the gas and the water, and so. And, you know there are places where trees can't go. There has to be a certain clearance. Certainly can't go in front of where a driveway is. There are other things where they can't go. So one hundred and twenty, if you add two hundred that's two hundred and twenty trees added to what was already here. When I moved into this street, there were I think two trees on the street, and one was dead. It was in front of my house. So we planted these on the street mostly on Princeton Ave, years ago.

Luton: How long ago was that?

Victor: Thirty, thirty years. Thirty years. So along with this comes not just planting trees, if you will, if you can focus on trees a little bit, not just planting trees, but then the trees need care. Kids who, neighbors, need to understand there's a need for people to be educated about the importance of urban trees. Why urban trees? Well, number one, I don't think people think that when there's, there, if it's a tree rich environment that the trees are going to absorb a lot of the runoff floodwater from the impervious road surfaces, number one, and what does that do? It keeps our bay healthier. And if the trees can absorb it, even if there are pollutants in it, the trees often have the ability to neutralize kind of those pollutants, to take them in, you know unless it's a tree that gets affected by too much salt or something. But, the point is it just doesn't get runoff into the environment, into another water system if you will. The other thing is tree canopy—healthy tree canopy absorbs and catches a lot of the particulates that come from the atmosphere that have been noted to increase incidences of urban asthma, so there's another, beside and also besides cooling in the summer. So there's a list of, besides creating habitat for wildlife and the reintroduction of birds into our neighborhood. You know it probably took twenty years for me to see a pair of cardinals in my backyard. But they're returning. We see raccoons here. We didn't have raccoons before. We're seeing some things return but if we had more trees we'd see more wildlife. And then kids in the urban neighborhood would have an opportunity to live kind of next door to wildlife, not just squirrels and rats, and sparrows and starlings and maybe a few crows or seagulls, but some real wildlife, you know!

Luton: Yes

Victor: And, so.

Luton: So, I mean it does something for the neighborhood, I mean the identity, I mean you know [it] definitely deals with runoff.

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Victor: Right. So what makes for a livable neighborhood?

Victor: I'm one of these people when I go to the Urban Pond Procession's stuff, and you heard me I think when I raised my hand you know in the last one, one of the last ones down here over on Adelaide Avenue, I can't—I have to relate what's happening to our ponds to what's happening in our neighborhoods, because there's a direct correlation between the two. There's a very direct correlation between the two. And I'm a person that really wants to underscore that correlation. And so if we're planting trees in the Pawtuxet Watershed, we're actually supporting a healthier, a healthier water system and watershed, and even though we might not be thinking we are we are, but let's help people connect the dots there if we can.

Luton: Do you want to, would you talk about, would you mind talking about when you moved to Providence or why you moved, maybe what it was like (35:00) thirty years ago when you moved in?

Victor: Providence or Elmwood?

Luton: Elmwood... Providence, too.

Victor: Well, I was living outside of Boston, and I had recently divorced and wanted to do two things: I wanted to live in an urban environment, because certain aspects of my work needed an urban population as an audience, my artwork, my dance work. And, at the time I was actually working in Worcester, and I just. Worcester never appealed to me to live there. It just didn't. And then of course, Boston, I went to school in Boston. I loved Boston, but when I began to look the, you know, I found a house in Cambridge and then there was a brownstone in the South End. If I had bought it I would be a rich man now, but I didn't do it. Just sort of thinking about the intensity of the day-to-day life you know, living there and owning property and parking and trash you know pickup, all of it, you know just like a little too much that I felt like I wanted. And I only knew one person who lived in Providence, and I didn't know the city very well, so I drove to Providence and drove around and familiarized myself with the city, and saw the incredible housing stock here. The value, the property—Prices were very good comparative to Boston also. I don't know how I made my way to this neighborhood, but I did. And, then I found SWAP, Stop Wasting Abandoned Properties, and they had a list of properties that needed to be rehabbed that were abandoned and were off the tax rolls, and they were trying to get them back on the tax rolls. And so I expressed an interest in one of the properties. It was actually in the next block down here, the red slate-sided brick. And, I was in the process of moving toward purchasing that and buying, and I didn't, because I got invited into two dance companies, one in Boulder, Colorado, and one in Tucson, Arizona. Decided that well I wanted to do that. And, actually the house for one person I thought was going to be too much of a project. And these were the days when there was a lot of red lining that happened in these neighborhoods. And you wouldn't see a for sale sign up in front of a house, because if you did you could be rest assured that that house would be perceived as being vacant, would be stripped of its pipes, and wires, and copper, you know light fixtures, and anything else they could pull out of it. Happened over and over again.

Luton: Is that what you mean by red lining?

Victor: No, red lining means when certain neighborhoods, there are no services offered in certain neighborhoods, or maybe no bank loans offered in certain neighborhoods, or maybe there's no real real estate investment in certain neighborhoods. There's real estate investment, there's certain real estate investment there would be. You know, but you didn't see real estate signs, so a lot of times realtors wouldn't consider even showing a house in this neighborhood. So, it was, you know, so I, I, so the woman who was with the Elmwood Foundation, her name was Robina Maixner, and she was living in this yellow house up here, and I stopped just to tell her that I. She was so helpful to me in terms of directing me, and the Elmwood Foundation was at the time. And, I stopped just to tell her I had withdrew (sic) my bid on the house on the next block, and she said, "Oh that's a shame." And, as I was doing it, I got out of my car, and I just kind of I don't know, I parked the car in front of this house, and I got out of the car and I just looked at this house and I said, "Well, that's a house I could live with." And, I had no idea until I talked with Robina and I said, "You know, what's happening (40:00) with this house?" because I'll tell you I just had, I'm that kind of guy. I said, "That's a house I could live with." She said, "Well," she said, "It was just in purchased in sales (sic), and it's available." So I actually was able to purchase this house just before I left for the eight weeks that summer. So I moved in, and three days later I left for eight weeks. And one person I knew came to live here for that period of time to take care of my cat. So anyways that got me into this house. But there were problems everywhere: disinvestiture, houses really not being kept up that well. It was really kind of a—very much of a on-the-other-side-of-the-tracks neighborhood, which in some ways it still is. I never wanted to live on the eastside. One of the things I like about this area and always have is because everybody's different. I mean you look around, and there's so much difference out here. It's just terrific, and it's more like the real world, I think. And, I'm not the kind of guy that wants to live in a small, homogeneous kind of a suburban or even more of a homogenous class-wise urban environment. I just don't. Because I like the diversity. I like a lot of what it brings. I don't like the cycles of poverty and what that brings because that isn't just unfair for people to have disequity in their lives that continue to create poverty and all of those things that happen as a result often times of poverty. That's a bigger social justice kind of conversation.

Luton: Do you think there are different kinds of encounters when the people are so much more different from each other, or what kinds of encounters could you have with people here in south Providence or here by Elmwood now or then when you moved in? I mean is there a connection there between...?

Victor: Yes, there is. You know, there have been waves of immigrants that have come. And a lot of times, the International Institute is right down the road, and their refugee resettlement program was really big and still is working. And, property rents were pretty low in this area, so people could come in and get a place and didn't have to pay top dollar. So, the waves of immigrants, people who could no longer live in Southeast Asia, because of the wars there and the postcolonial stuff that was going on there. The civil

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wars in West Africa, Liberia in particular. You know, Rhode Island has the highest Liberian population out of any state in the United States. The Haitian population...

Luton: In Providence, you have Haitian and Liberian populations?

Victor: Yeah, yeah, yeah oh yeah. There's a church on Elmwood Avenue that's the largest Haitian church in this state. It's right on Elmwood Avenue. You know certainly people from the Dominican Republic. So this is an area that is kind of a gateway for immigration this neighborhood, these neighborhoods here. So that brings an influx of new people. So, you know if I'm out on my front yard twenty-five years ago, I would see people walking down the street, and I'd say hello to them, and I knew they were new from someplace. There's one point that there were these women that were walking and they had this beautiful gait to their walk. Tall, tall straight backs, like you know, and some scarification and tattooing on their skin, and I just said to myself, "I bet those people are from Eritrea. I bet they're from that part of Africa." And, it's a wonderful thing. And so, you know I've made friends and acquaintances in different kind of cultural groups that I probably never would. I'm a community gardener. I've done for twenty-five years. I'm gardening next to all kinds of different kinds of people. We're all different from each other, and sometimes growing different things in our gardens, because our food looks different, (45:00) at the same time.

Luton: Yes, I was just curious about the gardens. You said they're growing different kinds of crops. What kinds of crops might you see by your crops or by what you're growing?

Victor: Different than what I'm growing?

Luton: Or the same.

Victor: Yes, yes. Well, peppers but different kinds of peppers. I don't grow the hot peppers, the little really hot ones that you find in Thai food. You know and a lot of the people were coming from agrarian societies, and when they come here they still grow to sell. And so they sell to—if they're southeast Asian, they might sell to Thai restaurants, and they might sell to Asian food markets their produce: lemongrass, and Thai mint, and cilantro is a big crop, there's many things that are. Many things that are. And the West Elmwood Housing Corporation is involved in a project called the Sankofa Project. And it is a gardening, farming project whose goal is to convert a whole city block of abandoned land, just empty lots at an old industrial site. And, it's polluted, and you can't grow in the soil, so they have to top it. They have to cap it, and then put soil over it, so there's no leaching up of the pollutants to able to farm. And, the goal is to have a community-sustained farming project that grows culturally appropriate or sensitive kind of produce for immigrant groups of people in our neighborhoods, because if you go to the convenient stores you don't find that kind of food. If you go to our convenient stores what do you find that you recognize as food for yourself? And so, if you're an immigrant you probably see less of what you recognize as food that you used to grow when you were in your other country and you grew food. Whether you're West African or

Southeast Asian or what not. There's a whole piece about food justice, and that's part of a social equity piece. So it branches out. You know, all of these, I think all of these pieces are related in some way to certainly to the bigger sense of well being both for us as individuals and us as a very-mixed sort of cultural groups forming a society that's always kind of changing, because it's always in some kind of flux. It's always change. And there's change in nature all of the time, there's always change so it's kind of a parallel metaphor for me there. And, I think that also in terms of our urban ponds, and so it's not just, it's all part of a whole: well-being. Let's think of how well-being is thought of and where it's placed, and often times we think of it as our well being, but do we really think of it as our neighborhoods' well being? Do we really think of it as our urban ponds' well being? Well, now there's a consciousness in the city around urban ponds' well-being. And do we think about it as Narragansett Bay's well-being? Do we think about it as... going off in our planet. There's a lot of people thinking about it in this direction, but it's really all connected, I think.

Luton: Would you mind talking about some of the pieces or projects that you are involved in in terms of justice projects, or ones that you're aware of that are going on in this part of Providence? (50:00) You talked about a couple or a few of them.

Victor: Yes, yes. Well, there are several things. One was advocating for fourteen years prior to Peace and Plenty Park being built. It was a process that stalled out, that politicized, you know, you couldn't believe it. And, so we're talking about a piece of social justice if kids in their own neighborhood don't have a place to play, if neighbors don't have a place to gather to form community, a place that is safe, a place that is clean, a place that is friendly and welcoming. What are our chances of building community? What are our chances of building, of building relationship across culture, language, race, ethnicity, you name it: difference. You know? So, I think our parks and our playgrounds can really serve a huge function in that way. So Peace and Plenty park was created four, a little over four years ago. Community Build Day two-hundred-and-fifty people came. We finally had a process that was working. We got identified by a national non-profit in our planning that called us and said, "We'd like to interview you over the phone." And, and, we gave them a phone interview, and then they said, "We want to come out and see the site." And, this is a non-profit, a national non-profit, KaBOOM!, that builds about twenty playgrounds in the parks, playgrounds in the country a year. And, they said they saw this site, which was a really overgrown, disgusting, trash-ridden lot. And they said, "We want to do this." And they brought the funders, and they brought the facilitation process, and we built that thing. We built that thing. So, now I just appeared before the Parks Commission, because I've been pushing the idea—there were three lots next to the park to acquire those lots to make the park bigger. And thinking about the environs of the park also, not just the park, there's a community garden across the street, how do we, how do we build an infrastructure in the neighborhood that really helps to create more healthy neighborhoods? So, anyways that's *all happening*. So, and in the interim period we have a grant and a, an interim period before the actual construction of the park we wrote a CDBG grant with the city (cee-dee-bee-gee grant with the city) for a design, a community design process, to really, so the community can really have a voice in what happens, how that park get, what happens in those three lots now that are going to be

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developed as the park. But there's going to be an interim period, so there's another project coming in that will be an urban farming, youth-driven urban farming project for maybe a year or two years to utilize that land in the interim period before it finally becomes a park to engage the neighborhood. And that's again growing culturally-sensitive produce. And so, that's one example. We can talk about how that's all related to social justice, but you know kids having a place to play, you know kids having a safe place to play off the street, kids not having to cross Elmwood avenue at a certain age or Broad Street, and sometimes get, in the past there've been reports of kids getting beaten up, because they're not in their own territory, they're on the other side, so—

Luton: Around here?

Victor: Yes, crossing across Elmwood Avenue, crossing across Broad Street, because we have—Bucklin Park has play equipment, so does the Davey Lopes Recreation Center. And, you know so neighbors now know each other in ways they didn't before.

Luton: Before the park.

Victor: Before the park, yes. I'm not saying everything's perfect. It's not. I mean, we're still working on it. It's a—we're always a work-in-progress, whether we're just individuals or we're groups of people living approximately to each other. So that's one example. Another example is creating (55:00) a used book sale at the Knight Memorial Library, which is, you know our library systems are struggling. They're really struggling, and I could not see our neighborhood not having this library. So we have a small fringe group, and we have a sale once a month, and we raise a certain amount of money. And, we have over four thousand volumes of books that are shelved just like a bookstore. Used books, they're inexpensive. Once a month it creates a place where people in the neighborhood can come, look at books, hang out, talk to each other, meet each other. It's convivial. You know, there's often food and tea or something to drink. And, and, we're able to raise some money to support the library. One piece that happened, that was pretty impressive I think with about two thousand dollars, I think about two. Not 2012 in the summer, in 2011, the library had close because when the sun comes in those windows in the library, especially in the afternoon, it heats the inside up. There's no air-conditioning in the library. So, it's going to cost several million dollars to—

Luton: To renovate?

Victor: [To] renovate, and have it be architecturally-sensitive and all of that, because the building is so incredible. That's a big, huge project. So, with the proceeds from the book sale we were able to purchase sun-screening shades that were compatible with the architecture in the library. So, I believe the number of days was about thirty days in 2011 that the library had to close, because it got too hot for employees to remain working, basically.

Luton: Wow.

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Victor: 20—We put the shades up in 2012. There were only six days. So—

Luton: That really made a difference.

Victor: A huge difference! So you think about the neighborhood, you think about the kids that go in there that couldn't go in there if the library was closed. You think about the disruption for staff, think of it all. So, where's the social justice in there? So, a lot of times I think we think of social justice as kind of getting out on the street and saying, you know, whatever: "No way! it's not going to happen this way!" Protesting or something, you know. And there's a place for that, but, but I think just sometimes the simple acts are really—they're connected to real pieces of social justice, or environmental justice, both. So, another is working to create, a—a—on Elmwood Avenue working to create an association of businesses, non-profits, and religious institutions that will become kind of a Elmwood Avenue Association, if you will. So, it's something that I initiated that we're pushing along. It's coming, I think, but slowly. The buy-in is slow, because people have just kind of had to deal with whatever they deal with on their own, and they're not working with each other. If, say, businesses and the like can get more organized on Elmwood Avenue, that they're going to have much more clout, and much more voice in the city, and much more power. And how then does that translate to what happens on Elmwood Avenue for, for life and for shopping, and for being on Elmwood Avenue, and I think that would have, that would have to then contribute, that voice I think would have to contribute to creating the type of Elmwood Avenue that you know many of us really want to see...

Luton: One that is sort of a residential center, or supports a residential area around it—

Victor: Absolutely, but also, but also looking at it from the perspective, simple perspective of improving the business climate. What improves the business climate? So what does? Cleaning the litter, not having the street full of litter, not having people selling drugs, not having prostitutes walking up and down Elmwood Avenue at any time of day or night. Worked hard on that with the police, and they've done very well. You know, it doesn't solve the (1:00:00) problem, you know 'cause we haven't deal with the larger problems around what creates, what creates these presences, say, on Elmwood Avenue in our society, prostitution, drug dealing.

Luton: I'm curious, like, how long, how long has that been a problem here?

Victor: It's been a perennial problem ever since I've been here. Oh yeah, yeah. Early days I'd find drug needles in my backyard. I'd find condoms in my backyard. Yes, yes. Yes. We don't do that very much, but we have an abandoned house right here, house that's boarded up, and that was entered, that was broken into, by people who were prostitutes and drug dealers, and they were living in there, and we had to fight with everybody we could in the city and in the police department to really stop that from happening

Luton: That was going on right before I moved here [in August, 2013].

Victor: Yes. And this is only something that, the owner died two years ago. So it's, it's increased since that happened. Once a house gets identified as a place that it's okay to bring your johns or whatever, or once a neighborhood or a street gets identified as a place, that's when the johns come looking for women or men who are selling themselves, you know? So of course they're gonna' come back, but now—now people come back, and the police are saying, "Well, do you live in the neighborhood?" And if they're at a bus stop, they should be really taking a bus, not standing at the bus stop for four hours, you know, flagging down traffic in their own particular way. So, there's a whole system now of dispersement that's happening. What does it do for the neighborhood? It helps the neighborhood a lot. What does it do for the folks who are being dispersed? That's a real sad part that they're, you know, that they're kind of casualties in all this business. Where do they go? What happens to them? What part of the city do they go into? You know, I mean, what happens? So I think there needs to be, we need to really do the work in our society, we have a moral obligation to do the work in our society that will restructure the disequities that happen, you know.

Luton: You were talking about the Neighborhood Association. Are there other big players or parts of the kind of social justice that's going on here?

Victor: There are players, certainly the AARP Rhode Island has been involved in a whole host of wonderful initiatives in our neighborhood from safe streets to interviewing people about taking public transportation, to interviewing people, elderly people about being hungry in our neighborhoods and not really having access to adequate food. The Rhode Island Environmental—The Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island, many projects that they have that are coming into our more struggling neighborhoods that deal with healthy food choices in our convenient stores. The variety of things, particularly with a social justice kind of bent. And then there are other groups, like the Elmwood Neighborhood Association, which is chaired by Karen Hlynsky, a friend and a neighbor on Lennox Avenue. And that came about as a conversation between she and I, and now the Elmwood Neighborhood Association volunteers are tackling a number of different kinds of issues that affect the quality of life here. And then the Neighborhood Crime Watch for Police District 2 that I chair. I was asked by the city if I would, I wasn't so sure if I wanted to, but I'm pleased I have. And that's having an impact. You know, kind of chipping away, creating better community relations with the police, and having better communication with the police, and, and (1:05:00) addressing not just crime, but addressing quality of life issues. And those vary, those vary. And having those things be processes that are invitational to all people to join, all people to join. So there are a variety of things happening. Brown University has put together with our help, the Student Climate Coalition there has put together, a really very, very nice proposal for some work they want to do in both Upper Elmwood and the West End that will follow the tree plantings, the urban tree plantings and deal with three things: creating a model to get urban tree education into the public schools, and then creating a service model to care for urban trees that have been planted, because they do need care, and then to do a data collection kind of a thing, a research-based kind of a piece where they can monitor bud

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growth and compare with other data that's out there to assess its potential impact on climate improvement, if you will.

Luton: That sounds really interesting.

Victor: So, so, for instance talking about trees again, we have St. Joseph's Hospital up here that has how many acres of paved, impervious surface. And in the summer that becomes a heat island for this neighborhood and probably heats this neighborhood, probably heats our houses up four, five degrees more that it wouldn't if that were not paved, if it were not open, if it had trees that were shading it. What's the energy impact on that? What's the health impact on that for maybe people who are ill and have trouble in the heat either breathing or it's just hard for them? So you know we need to think about environment, we need to think about the natural, what can be the natural aspects that can happen within our urban, pretty densely-populated urban environment that can not only green it, make it more human, make it more attractive but actually address some of these problems, like water drain off, pollutants going into the Pawtuxet River and the Narragansett Bay, Mashapaug Pond, and health, energy, it's all connected. We have to get it that it's really all connected.

Luton: Could you talk about, a little bit about—do you have—what kind of a relationship do you see yourself having with Mashapaug? Or, I think you've touched on how its part of a social justice and environmental justice going on in the city or what needs to be done of those kinds of justices.

Victor: I think indirectly we need to realize that we all have a relationship with it, because we're all part of the same watershed. I did an experiment a while back, and I said, "I want you all to find your way back home, but you can't, you have to tell somebody how to get to your home from here, but you can't use any manmade landmarks, you only have to use natural landmarks," and nobody could do it. Nobody could do it, it was impossible, cause in our city where are our natural landmarks. We need more natural landmarks. We need to go back to thinking about seeing and appreciating the wonderful benefits that nature can bring to us, even in a fairly densely urban neighborhood, -populated urban neighborhood. (1:10:00) So, Mashapaug Pond was, if you look at a map here. This is really kind of neat. I think there's a... Look at this map. This is Adelaide Avenue. That used to go right to Mashapaug Pond. But where does it go now? It stops here at Reservoir. It doesn't go across. None of this exists now. So, Mashapaug Pond used to be connected to this neighborhood, as did Roger Williams Park, before 95 went in. This 95 separated Roger Williams Park from this neighborhood. There is a tunnel underneath but it's not usable. And we're trying to get this tunnel opened up again for the neighborhood to get access into the park. So the neighborhood had this wonderful park, and in the 50's the highway was constructed—and separated, separated it out. So that was a part of a problem for the neighborhood, it isolated the neighborhood. And then this little—getting back to Mashapaug Pond, the same thing happened here at some point. Adelaide Avenue stopped at Reservoir, it didn't go any further, and then we have a train that comes through down this way, so that might have been part of it. I don't

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know. So I actually didn't—I was living here for several, several, several years and didn't even really know there was a pond back there.

Luton: Do you remember when you first encountered the pond or heard about it?

Victor: Well, I first encountered it on the other side. On the other side, kind of Route 10 sort of track. "There's a pond over there! What's that pond?" You know? But, you know I was busy with my life and busy with my career and doing stuff, you know. And, I was doing other things. I wasn't really focused on the pond. This felt like this was cutoff. This is part of what I'm saying that we can't be cut off anymore from any of it. We have to really connect with it all, and this was cut off here. If this Adelaide Avenue had still existed going right to the pond, I probably would have gone to the pond, because I would have been curious, but there was really sort of no way to get to the pond, kind of, you know that I knew of, I knew that there was a pond, but I didn't really know anything about it, actually. And it wasn't really until the Urban Pond Procession started to kick into gear that I became connected with the pond, and I'm kind of a guy that feels like I'm pretty connected with stuff.

Luton: With the city.

Victor: Yeah, to all kinds of stuff! But you know even people who are connected, it doesn't mean you're really connected.

Luton: Did you know that at one time, there was like a neighborhood right here that was displaced by the industrial park? Some man came to talk to our class about how there was sort of this rural neighborhood with all dirt roads until quite recently that was right here.

Victor: And prior to that Native Americans lived out there, right out to Park Avenue, you know?

Luton: What's your relationship with UPP?

Victor: Well, I'm a great supporter. I've walked in the procession. I show up for things. I'm doing a number of projects, and so haven't really gotten hugely involved in the inside, but I know the folks. We have relationships. I have a good relationship with Holly. We talk on occasion and show up at similar events in the city and things happening in the city. One of my things is I like to try to connect to people with people. At one point, I introduced her to Senator Juan Pichardo. He and I have a good relationship. They were able to have a conversation. I mean things can happen in smaller ways, too. And (1:15:00), but I'm thrilled, I'm so, so thrilled. We need to not—we need to be signs at the park, so that people are not feeding the geese, because people are feeding the geese and more geese are staying, and these ponds are getting polluted. It wasn't heard. It wasn't heard. I'm so thrilled that as an impetus, cleaning Mashapaug Pond, that you know it's coming in, it's flowing into Roger Williams, so you know the next thing is think about Roger Williams. All that remediation that's going on in the park there around that one pond. You know, you know not feeding the geese anymore, and

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limiting the amount of geese, even though that was a little controversial taking the geese out, but they have to be managed. They have to be. It's like deer. You can't not—you can't not not manage them, you have to manage them. It's all part of the—it's all part of the solution. And I think environmental-justice-wise, if I can make an analogy between all of that, you know I think we need to look at in these neighborhoods, we need to look at Peace and Plenty Park, and we need to take Peace and Plenty Park and another park like it, and how far apart to playgrounds and parks—I'm not talking about these playgrounds that are stuck up against somebody's house and there's no place to breathe. I'm talking about a good piece of property where kids can really play and throw balls and not get in trouble and all that business. You know, throughout the West End and South Providence and Elmwood, how many parks could be placed here? How far apart do they need to be throughout this whole area of the South Side and the West End to really promote, you know, healthy neighborhoods? And these parks can be a place, could be a place where programming is happening, information is disseminated, you know, and can not only create community within but can connect you know those local communities, like this six street area sort of goes to this park up here for the most part. Other people come, too. It's not just the six streets. You know, it's another six streets. You know, it's a network. We're all part of the same—we're all part of the same thing. So I'm really thrilled that you know the Urban Ponds Procession (sic) has come up, and it's had such a greater impact than many people thought, I think. It's a group of artists, you know, changing the world. You know?

Luton: Yes, I hope to be a part of it this year, and I'm going to come to the cleanup. You said that's on the twentieth, right?

Victor: Yes.

Luton: Ok, I'll be there.

Victor: Peace and Plenty Park. There are several cleanups happening throughout the city that day. It's a big—it's a big cleanup day in the city. Yes, that'll be great.

Luton: I think we're done here. I think I got a lot here to work with, so this is great. And, yes, so, I guess, if you wouldn't mind—well two things: I was going to record some dead air for a while. It's just part of the recording process. I need to—I might need to use the sound of the room to—when I'm editing the audio, taking out parts and things like that, so I was going to record it for like thirty seconds, and then...

Victor: So what? Can't make any sound?

Luton: Yes, if that's okay. Just for thirty seconds...

Luton: Okay, that's good. And then if you wouldn't mind stating your name and, your name and then—yes, that's it, just your name...

Victor: My name is Doug Victor. V-i-c-t-o-r. Address? (1:20:00) Is that what you said?

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Luton: Address would be great, too.

Victor: Address: Planet Earth, 103 Princeton Avenue, Providence, Rhode Island.
Elmwood Neighborhood, thirty years.

Luton: Thanks. Thanks, Doug.

Victor: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]