

Interview with Sharon Conard-Wells

Interviewer: Lucy Boltz

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Location: West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation
224 Dexter Street Providence, RI

Summary: Sharon Conard-Wells, the executive director of the West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation, speaks about what brought her to community activism and housing development. She has lived in the West End since the 1980s and has since moved out of the neighborhood. She shares the stories of some old-time neighborhood members.

Lucy Boltz: It's Lucy Boltz, that's me who's interviewing and could you introduce yourself?

Sharon Conard-Wells: Sharon Conard-Wells

LB: And could you talk about where we are right now and then we can move into

SCW: We're at the offices of the West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation in Providence, Rhode Island.

LB: So could you start off talking about the history of the West Elmwood?

SCW: The neighborhood or the agency?

LB: The neighborhood.

SCW: I don't know how much I can tell you about the neighborhood, not being from here. I remember I can tell you some anecdotal things that I can remember. There's a gentlemen that passed away, Stinson Fowler who used to tell a story about having lived on the Eastside on Benefit Street and how he moved to Bellevue Avenue and how it was all white when he came, when he was actually running from poverty, coming here, looking to get out of the ghetto. And how he could have bought two houses over there for, and how he was living over here and fighting to bring the neighborhood back. [1:26] He talked about there being a lot of French and Irish in the neighborhood when he lived here. I know that on Linwood [sp] Avenue, the factories were on Dexter Street and the houses up and down where were workers lived and sometimes the houses in front would be where the employers lived and the houses in the back were where the servants and the employees lived. And that's why the lots on Linwood [sp] are deep so that they could accommodate the people that worked in the factories on Dexter Street. Some of those kinds of stories that I can share. I told you about Jessie Smith who tells a story of having lived in the West Elmwood neighborhood which was now where the industrial park and Huntington Avenue are. And that's where the African American single family community was and so urban renewal which was to give people jobs actually displaced the African American community from this neighborhood and dispersed them to wherever they bought their new houses. [2:40] So I know those kinds of stories, but I'm not sure if that's what you're looking for in terms of history.

There's a gentlemen, David Dillon [sp] who used to be a councilman. When he was the councilman, did a book on the history of the neighborhood. He should have some information for you. He doesn't live in the neighborhood anymore, but he does still live in Providence. The other stories I have are from people like Naomi Craig [sp] who passed away this year. She talked about the Alma Mater when she went to Gilbert Stewart, because it was an elementary school, then it became a middle school and it went back to a - and she tells that story having lived here so long. But those kind of people are gone, and the stories kind of go with them. So talking, I think this is a great thing to do if you can talk to Jesse and David, who still have that history. [3:49] And I think it's very important for the neighborhood, and that's why I said I'd like to see the finished product because I think it's going to be great in terms of having that history.

LB: You mentioned that being the African American single family area- what does it mean to have single family housing? [4:10]

SCW: Well now it's two family housing because there's a perception that if you have a two family house you have the income, but it really was a sense of accomplishment for working class to own a home, to own a piece of the American Dream, to have somewhere to raise their family and plant their food. It was stabilization. It was a sense of pride. We believe that home ownership does bring a sense of pride. [4:40]

LB: You said planting, and I know people had gardens. Did she talk about gardens?

SCW: Jessi? Neither one of them talked so much about gardens. When you talk you found out much more about what the churches did, how churches impacted lives. Walked to Sunday School. She tells those kinds of stories. Jessi tells some very interesting stories about her dad having to deliver coal to a _____ and Father Trainor actually told an interesting story- building Steven's Hall. [5:20] It's on Elmwood Avenue and we bought it from Johnson and Wales. It had been their dormitory. They moved all of the dormitories out of the neighborhood. So we bought it from them. Turned it into 32 low income apartments. It had been 50 apartments and what I found out was across the Street on Elmwood Avenue, was the old beautiful Victorian homes where middle income men would live with their families and that building was where they put the coal. So, that's just a bit of history you just wouldn't know, and not too long after we redeveloped the site, someone walked in one day and brought us a picture of the original building. So we have a picture of what it looked like way years ago, what it looked like before the state when we bought it, and what it looks like now. But Jessi tells the story of remembering delivering coal to that building. So there's just this sense of seeing the different rebirths of a property that's still standing and still becoming _____ part of the community. [6:36]

LB: Has that happened to a lot of the structures- that they've been reused in ways.

SCW: Well this was a factory. Across the street was a factory. In fact, these two were part of the same building. And it was called Ralph [sp] Fastener and it was one of the Fastener-making factories in the country. And they made the snaps for your jeans. Fasteners, and so when they moved, it wasn't just a loss to the neighborhood and these big structures were vacant. There were jobs and people told stories all the time about having worked here or their parents worked

here or remembering walking by it when it was operating. People like to come in and tell us those kinds of stories. This building is done over. [7:30] This is actually-- what we're sitting in now, Westfield Commons,-- the oldest wood frame building in the area. And that like I said was factories, sixty, seventy years. And a very exciting piece of ____ lofts for me, personally, is that it's one of the first mixed-income projects completed by a community development corporation. And there was a lot of resistance to that. Poor people and rich people can't live together. Which, we weren't targeting rich people. But it was just a lot of doubt and skepticism whether we could do it a mixed income project successfully, and today it's 100% occupied. Teachers and students from Johnson and Wales. There are students from Brown. There are resident doctors from Lifespan, Rhode Island Hospital. All there with low income people. The daughter of a famous movie stars, one of our news casters. So, we're doing it and we're doing it successfully. And it's also deterred crime, prostitution and drugs, and so that's an untold success. Because you don't want to dangle- "hey, look at the rich people living with the poor people" and yet it's the best kept secret in this neighborhood. They are able to do that. They have fourteen hundred square-foot apartments in the West End, successfully rented and I think that's a beautiful thing. [9:12]

LB: Where were you getting the doubt from?

SCW: The funders, mainly, people I needed the money from. Then finally Bank of America and Sovereign stepped to the table and took the "risk" [notated with hand gestures] and [9:33] to share the risk. We had to get investors. It took fifteen sources to do a 15 million dollar project. Some sources were as low as thirty thousand dollars, but you pieced it together and you got it done.

LB: How do you manage that with the risk of gentrification?

SCW: It depends on what you think of gentrification. If gentrification means what I understand from crime prevention through environmental design, to replace bad activity with good activity, then I welcome gentrification. If gentrification means making a place so unaffordable that people can't live there anymore, then I don't welcome gentrification. What we've done- when I call it mixed income, maybe I should define that. First of all most of the projects we do, if you're not working you can't afford to live there. The rents are structured in such a way that you really do need an income. So we're targeting the working poor- people who are eligible according to federal guidelines, but they are working. [10:44] And by mixed income- is more than once when we were doing the home ownership project, we could not sell to someone because they were literally a thousand dollars a year, not a week, a year, over income according to the guidelines. So here we would build this house and because of the levels of incomes that you have to target for federal monies, we could not rent to people who were working everyday just like these people but for a thousand dollars a year, they were paying way too much for rent, substandard housing, heat going out the window. And then next door, someone paying the same or lower rent but they were becoming more affordable because the heat was staying in their apartment. So are you really gentrifying the neighborhood or are you stabilizing the neighborhood. And the fact that people could afford to live anywhere, choose to come here? That's perfect. Now you're creating community. Because you have people of all colors, all religions, all backgrounds, successfully living together. And that is America. I just preached.

LB: That's what this is about. Can I ask you about that the man that moved from Benefit Street.

SCW: Mr. Fowler.

LB: Can you describe that story more?

SCW: I don't know what I can- I know he was a sailor. I know he moved here from the South. He had a wife and two daughters. One of his daughters was quite famous in the art world. She actually was on PBS for her quilting. There was a stamp. She was on a stamp. So this woman was very well-known. And she came out of this neighborhood. And he was very proud to be able to talk about that. He was always considered the mayor of Bellevue Avenue which was where he lived. Because the Cambodians came to him. The Latinos came to him. Everybody came to Mr. Fowler when there was a problem. And he loved to dress very, very spiffy and he was just dedicated to community. And it was real loss when he passed away. But there were a lot of people on this board that brought that kind of history. I've mentioned several of them. [13:18] David Dillon. Those people were dedicated to this community and spent their lives doing something about it. They didn't just talk about it or complain about it. They put their effort to make things happen. Because we were blessed like that to have a really strong foundation.

LB: When did he come from, how long had he been living here?

SCW: Oh, I don't know, that was a long- when I met him he was a senior citizen. He's been gone for a good ten years. So, I just remember stories he would tell about being in the navy or stories he would tell about having moved out to. I think he came up here in the Navy and then he stayed. He was on Benefit Street, and then he moved to the West End- very proud to be a homeowner in the West End. [14:10] And to the end, he kept his house nicer than anything on the street.

LB: Wow. I've seen more connections between Benefit Street and what was before Lippitt Hill and West Elmwood.

SCW: Mhmm

LB: And it seems you have seen that too?

SCW: I mean the other interesting thing is when I looked at our incorporation papers, there were very prominent names on that paper and I don't know how all those people got together or if they are names that just happen to be the same names of people I know, have heard politically or around and about. But the people who started this agency, started it to do home-ownership. There was in the 70s some sort of federal program to do zero down payment home ownership. [15:01] And they got together and they built a couple few houses. One of them, I actually was going to church in the neighborhood, and she told me, "You know, you bought my house." I had no idea she'd been living in the house. She like I said, she was probably ten, fifteen older than me. She was the first owner of that house. I met someone who actually benefitted from this program years ago. It was a house on Benedict Street. And she keeps it up very nicely. At least

she did when I saw her. So, when the program was defunded, there was an attorney in this neighborhood named Paul Kelly, and he too was a resident of the neighborhood, raised his children here. He, put the, I think was \$90 that was left in the corporation program when it was defunded. And every year, this man paid the incorporation fees to keep that corporation valid, and I'm not sure why he did it. But he had a little passport. It was about this big. He kept the ninety dollars and he paid to keep the corporation alive. He had been on the original West Elmwood Housing Board in the 70s. Like I said, he raised his children here. He lived on Potters Avenue until he passed away. And he defended, because he was an attorney, a lot of people who got into trouble in the neighborhood. He was like the neighborhood's attorney from what I've learned. Then when I moved here in the late 70s, early 80s. It was around the Vietnam War, and there was a lot of immigration. Also a lot of disinvestment and a lot of burning of properties for whatever reason. A lot of dumping. And around the same time the city had stopped doing large item pickups. Where if you had a couch, you put it out and it got taken. They started charging. So, with the disinvestment in this neighborhood, there was a lot of people to come when they didn't want to pay the fees to take something to the dump, they would dump it here. And because there were people, a lot of immigration here, there wasn't a lot of voice. There wasn't even people who understood that it was wrong, and fewer people understood what to do about it, even if they knew it was wrong. [17:37] And Father Trainor and Sister Angela, started something called the Indo-Chinese Advocacy Project. At the same time there was a group called Keep Providence Beautiful. And there was another group called, I forgot the name of the other group. It was out of John Hope. And they were all targeting, trying to help the neighborhood survive all that was going on. And they were out knocking and doing some real grassroots kinds of recruiting. And that's how we all met, started working together. There would be seventy, eighty people at a community meeting. Fighting for issues, standing up for things, demanding meetings and making some interesting things happen. But we were all volunteers. And we were called the West End Coalition. [18:29] And the coalition was structured and I didn't do this- that the residents ran it. And if you were part of a church, community group, you could be on an advisory committee. But you could not run it, because it was run by the residents and we did uh, so many clean ups. Gathering up all the stuff that had been dumped in our neighborhood. And year after year we won the dubious distinction of having collected the most trash in the city, something I really wanted to stop winning. But we were able to do that. I remember Father Trainor, myself, David, Rony Allen, Speaker Smith, Dick Patterson, we would pay for the kids to flyer the neighborhood. Here's five dollars. I'll pay for, I'll get 'em copied. And finally someone said, if you were a non-profit, you could get a grant. I didn't even know what that meant. But one of the businessmen offered to pay. I was in the room for these meetings. One of the business men. I think he was the owner of J&M Supplier at the time. Offered to pay his attorney to create the non-profit status. And Father Trainor said, "Well, I think my parishoner still has that old one, West Elmwood Housing." So he said, "Let me look first." And they organized this meeting. People I had never met- Mr. Fowler, Mr. Kelly, and several others came out of the woodwork, who were on this old board. And then you had all these new young people. And we all met. [20:18] At this church- and we talked about what was going on, what we were trying to do. And they said, "Yeah, we want to stay involved too." I actually was the one who made the motion that we would be West End Coalition WBNA, and West Elmwood Housing. But we had this new board of blended older people of the old- and people from the new, and from there we took off. And so for the first few years, we kept doing what we were doing- advocating, trying to get investors interested in the neighborhood. We worked with the

city to assemble properties to investors. We fought for the guaranteed loan program. We made a lot of things happen over the years. I remember where the Met School is, there was an Ice house there. On Dexter Street. And there were cars on the roof. And I was incensed every time I drove by and saw those cars on the roof. And finally someone said, "Sharon, call the police department. [21:83] And because there was brown stuff going in the sewer system from factories and nobody could find out what the factories were doing. And I just went... Finally someone said, "Sharon, why don't you stop complaining and do something about it?" I said, "I don't know what to do. That's why I'm calling the city." And he goes "There's now laws on the book against it. You need to get a law on the book about it." So, I called at that time Representative Murphy and he was, "Thanks for giving me enough notice. Today is the last day to submit bills." He said, "But if I submit this, you're going to have to take it." I said, "Okay" And he took a bill from Pawtucket and just changed the name from Pawtucket to Providence. And he guided me through the process of getting an ordinance. Enable an ordinance at the state before the city can enact the law. And I went through the process. And I just kept taking pictures of the cars on the roof and saying, "Would you do this in your neighborhood?" And we got it through. And then he said, "We got a lot but there's no teeth in it. Now you need teeth." What does that mean? So, there's a lot of things that this agency have done that are still today around, but people don't even understand that this agency was an active part in it.

LB: So for those cars to be on the roof- they were just abandoned there?

SCW: I have no idea why there were cars on the roof. All I know is one day they were finally gone and the building was demolished and a few years later, the MET School went in there. But, I just, I never understood why there were cars on the roof, why they allowed it, who even would think putting cars on the roof, and why the roof could even hold them. But there were pieces of cars- it was just horrible.

LB: Just junked up?

SCW: Oh yeah, just junked up cars. [23:30] So I just kept on walking around with the picture. If I look hard enough, I could probably find it in an old file, but yeah.

LB: Yeah, you mentioned before about the churches and one person mentioning how the churches were a big part of the neighborhood. Could you talk about that?

SCW: I don't know if the churches are as active in the neighborhood as they used to be. But at one time I counted and there were twenty-seven religious institutions in the West End. To my thinking, Assumption Church under Father Trainor and Sister Angela was probably the most active. In terms of community development. Providence Assembly of God gets active. Ebenezer gets active. St. Charles gets active. All within their congregation or not necessarily the broader neighborhood. A couple of years ago Providence Assembly of God and five other churches got together doing something called Hope for the City. And they did it two or three years in a row. [24:46] And it was just a gathering of goodness in the neighborhood, in the summer. And it really was a reaction to the kids that died in the pool in Bucklin Park. When, we got to do something positive in the neighborhood. We have to restore hope and pride. And they actually held the first one at the pool and got permission to a baptism in the pool. And that was

five or six churches. Like I said they did it for a couple of years and then it kind of stopped. But, there are, there is Hmong Christian Church over here. There is a Latino Jehovah, American Jehovah Witness. Seventh Day Adventist. I mean you name it- Catholic, AME Baptists, Church of God in Christ. They are all here.

LB: Why did the children die in the pool?

SCW: I don't remember why. But they drowned. I don't remember the story. That was only a few years ago. You should be able to find that. Archives. I don't think it was 5 or 6 years ago. Might have been four years ago.

LB: Have you experienced urban renewal in your life or your family?

SCW: No, because I've moved too much. I come from New York.

LB: I was reading through all these records in the Providence Redevelopment Agency, and it talks a lot about improving the housing quality and improving the housing stock will improve people's lives, and kind of I've been- it's interesting talking to you, because you're doing housing because as you mentioned- to keep the heat in so they can afford more things. But I wonder how has the word blight changed in your memory.

SCW: I don't know that it has. Sometimes it feels that maybe I don't want to say that on tape. It's a battle. When you read the bible, Jesus says you'll always have the poor with you. So, if you understand that, does it mean that just because there's always going to be someone poor, does that mean the work that you do is hopeless and useless? I don't think so. If you change one person's life, is it worth the dollar investment put into it? or the blood, sweat and tears that went into it? I think so, so you have to look at: Is the glass half full or half empty? As far as I'm concerned, even if there's no liquid in the glass, the glass is still full. It's full of air. If I have to think of being positive and being proactive versus just looking at the challenges. The challenges can make you run and hide. But, the first house I ever built and developed. The little boy, and I didn't know it at the time, went to school with my daughter. And the only way I knew it was that my daughter came home and said, "After the assembly, this boy was talking about how he was rich. And she found out that I had done the house. Because up until then, she didn't understand what I do, as a community developer person. So when you take someone who- a single mother who works with her mother and they save their pennies to buy a first house, and the little boy goes to school and says, now he's rich. Isn't that what it's all about. If you do that and then you do it again. We targeted streets and that was the first house on the street. We've since done about four years ago just when the economy started going bad, I was standing on the corner and I looked down the street, and it didn't feel right to me and I said to somebody, "Something bad is happening to this neighborhood." And then I started seeing stray cats and dogs. And I was like, "What the heck is going on?" Well, I started to see it in people's lives even though I couldn't identify it. Those people were on the verge of losing their homes. And, so they stopped doing things, like painting, putting up flowers, planting grass, because they were struggling and I didn't name it at the time. It was only- I saw a difference. It felt different. And all heck broke loose in the news. So what does it mean? Does it mean you don't keep trying? I'm going from doing home-buyer education to doing foreclosure counseling. The good thing about our foreclosure

counseling- we're not counseling people we educated. So if we had more money to help more people, if we could have convinced every bank to require people to have a homebuyer education certificate, before they bought their house and paid our counselors to help people, could we have done at a very small scale, done more to avoid the crisis? People we sold houses to didn't lose their homes to foreclosure. [30:85] That, now some of them began to struggle, because the economy went bad and they began to lose their jobs. But they didn't struggle because of predatory lending. So we have all these anecdotal stories about why things are working. I mean what does that mean for poverty? What does it mean for blight? I don't know.

LB: Do you think blight exists?

SCW: Definitely, look at it.

LB: Okay.

SCW: I mean it's everywhere. And it's not just - yesterday my colleague was going to meet me. He lives on the Eastside. He couldn't meet me. His car was stolen out of his driveway. So is that blight? No, but it certainly is an indicator. So that's happening on the Eastside and not hitting the news. What's happening over here? And he texted me last night, my neighbor, four tires were stolen off the car in his drive way. Now, if it would have happened in the West End, what would they have said? "Oh that's the neighborhood."

LB: Actually I also know someone who had their car stolen out of their drive way.

SCW: And I know people- it happened to a cop in Reservoir Triangle. [Laughing] So yeah, but if it happens here, people say it's expected and it's the neighborhood. [32:10] I mean all over, so yeah you've got dumping. We own a lot that is in a secluded part of the neighborhood. I can't tell you how many times we pick up mattresses and tires and toilets. They said, "Sharon, fence it." "It is fenced." They're doing it on the sidewalk in front of it. It's because it's dark so they're not seen. A tenant-owner, like a an investor owner, the tenant left and left a bunch of stuff. He doesn't want to pay to get it thrown away. He puts it on a truck and dumps it here. A contractor, who's doing a demo job, wants to lighten what he has to pay for fees. Or it could be someone you paid to do the work, and he doesn't want to- so if I pay you to clean out a unit because my tenant left stuff in it and I charge you \$50 and you're going to give thirty to the dump. You could come over here and dump it in my lot for free. So, I didn't want to clean it, until I found a way to put up a night camera. I couldn't figure it out! I cleaned it, I want to catch somebody. So, that's blight to me. [33:36] And then it stayed there. We cleaned it up and two nights later there was more. So I called an elected official. I said, "We can't keep doing this. We need help." He made a phone call. It still stayed for another week. So for that week, we were part of blight. Everyday that we wait for funding and something is in disrepair that we own, we are part of blight. Because we own it, doesn't matter that we're trying, it's still blight. And it's next door to someone who trying to live well. A tenant or an owner who is just trying to live well day by day. Nobody wants to live next to it. So yeah, blight is definitely an issue.

LB: You said you develop street by street. What does that mean?

SCW: It means I do as much as I can to buy as much land or vacant housing or substandard housing on a street, and I spend a lot of brain cells, raising the money to do as much as I can on that block. We have a repair program. We have a green loan program, and marketed really tightly on that street. It's available to everyone. People see you on the street. They start to talk to you. And then you go, "Oh by the way. You want to get your porch done. Maybe we can get you a loan for that." "I wish I could fix up my house. When you fix up that it's going to look great. And make ours look worse." People say those things when you're on their street. Glad you're doing this. I've been sitting next to it for three years. Maybe now I'll spend some money. I was thinking about leaving. Now it may be worth it to do something. And to have a loan to give to those people and then we have the technical understanding about greening. We say to them, "Well, if you spend a dollar more square-foot you can get this kind of roof that does this, or these kinds of windows." They are glad for that information.

LB: What do you see as the connection between the neighbors? Are they knowing each other a lot?

SCW: Some do. Some don't. So many people are working two and three jobs, running after their kids. Just trying to be responsible. And then there's language. And culture. I'm teaching myself Spanish right now. I'm learning a whole lot about the Spanish- Mexican Spanish, Spanish-Spanish and Dominican Spanish are very different in some ways. So you have that which is also culture. You have Cambodians, Laotians, Hmong, Vietnamese, Africans from Burundi who have lived in refugee camps, Nigerians, Liberians, Sri Lankans, African Americans from the South. African Americans from New York. And then you've got Italians and Irish. We actually got a Jewish guy that lives across the street. So, it's hard when people are that diverse and then on the other hand when they begin to talk to each other, it's a good thing. So you have a sense of community when people [37:08] And those same people are so busy, either within their own culture, within their profession or within their family. That leaves very little time for the broader community. How do you define community? You're in a community at your school. You're in a community within your masters degree topic, you're in a community when you're at home. You're in a community amongst females.

LB: Do you live around here?

SCW: Not anymore.

LB: You moved out recently?

SCW: No, I moved out some time ago.

LB: Where do you live?

SCW: In Warwick.

LB: How is that different?

SCW: I don't know anybody there. I'm the only Black on my street. Some of the neighbors don't

speak. I come here for my dry cleaning. I come here for my pharmacy. [Laughing] The only thing I do is physically sleep somewhere else and half the time my- it doesn't feel like I moved out at all. No, my husband wanted to move because he was a police officer and he was arresting too many people that he was seeing back on the street. [38:27] That's why we moved.

LB: Do policemen - that happen to more of them, that they have to move out?

SCW: Not many of them stayed here. [Laugh] What is it called- residence requirement. That if he worked for the city, he had to live in the city. As soon as they lifted it, we stayed and then they put it back in place. And then they lifted it again. [Laugh] So, they don't have to live here. When they did, they weren't moving to this neighborhood.

LB: Was your husband from this neighborhood?

SCW: No, neither one of us.

LB: So what brought you here?

SCW: My husband was an electronics engineer and he was promoted to technical manager and so we wound up here.

LB: But then he went into the police department. That's quite a change.

SCW: That's what I said for a while.

LB: Wow.

SCW: Mhmmm.

LB: I don't know what more to ask you but it'd be great to follow up with the people you mentioned. And I don't know are you willing to contact them before---?

SCW: I thought an email was sent to you with Mishelle and Jessie's information.

LB: Oh!

SCW: I got permission from them before.

LB: Okay great.

SCW: I didn't think about Father Trainor and Carol until just now, but I did tell them it was about Mashapaug Pond. I know that Jessie lived over there and David Talan is a wealth of information. So I didn't think about them until later. Like I said, I just thought of David and Carol. Maybe they would be willing to do a phone. Jessie and Mishelle are expecting calls from you. I didn't give you anyone's number that I didn't already get permission.

LB: Great great. So I'll follow up with you about Carol and David. [40:50]

SCW: I don't know if I answered your questions because I was telling you stories.

LB: That was really helpful. For me what I'm most interested about is memory and how people remember.

SCW: Mhmm

LB: What they remember and how they tell stories.

SCW: I wish I met you last year.

LB: Why?

SCW: Because last year Naomi was still alive and you would have gotten so much from her, so much from her. She was oh the stories were priceless. And I guess Father Trainor, not Father Trainor- Mr. Kelley and David Dillon have history here too but they've been gone quite a long time. But that's the legacy of this agency. [41:41] So I guess that's why I appreciate it because I do have that background- those oral histories and honestly we've worked really hard trying to create an oral history of this neighborhood. We wanted- the goal and desire was- because I run into people all the time who told me "I grew up over there" and we wanted to do an oral interview like you're doing of all those people, like this hundred year old dentist who grew up here. People said, "My father used to grow up" that kind of stuff. What we wanted to do was duplicate- this was years ago- people say did this- buy little tapes and have it over and again. We wanted to place those duplicated tapes in places like John Hope, the Community Center and here and one of the schools, where people could go and just press a button about what happened in their neighborhood. And the other thing we wanted to do was we wanted to work with the Black Historical Society because we wanted to find out where people lived- and do a history on the house. Because so much has been done to the structures here. We don't necessarily meet the standard for the historical society but there is still history that should be appreciated. So we were trying to figure out our own West End Memorial plaque but we were just never able to raise the money and get the support to do something like that so that history was kind of lost.

LB: Well, the class that did the Gorham [phone ringing]

SCW: I'm waiting for ... Good.

LB: So the class I think they're going to continue the research related to Mashapaug Pond and the areas around it and probably the Industrial Park, pre-Industrial Park neighborhood that was West Elmwood.

SCW: Mhmm

LB: So hopefully it will expand on the research I'm doing.

SCW: One of the things I've found. When I started looking at the old plans of the city, everything that they targeted in the West End, once it got done the name changed. [44:29] So I actually have fought a couple of times because when you look at the city maps even the historical West Broadway, that's the West End on the old maps. Why all of a sudden did it become West Broadway? And it happened with the Industrial Park. How did that become part of the Reservoir Triangle? It was the West End. The only thing left of this neighborhood is the part that doesn't matter to people and so I get very frustrated when I see we're surrounded by downtown. We're surrounded by the city of Cranston. On the other side you've got where if you want to do something for minorities you go to the Southside. If you want to do something for the working poor you go to Olneyville. So we're not just landlocked, we're poverty locked, planning locked. And so I'm always fighting against that in one way or another. Even if we're in a meeting and somebody's trying to change the name of something. I'll never forget when we were in the room and there was a line in our neighborhood. I just went nuts. They were all like. And I just said, "You can't keep taking everything once it becomes positive, you take the name of the neighborhood away. You can't do that." And I get a little indignant. They kind of got a little scared of me. But on the other hand, once you do a project like this which is beginning to turn things around. [45:58] So, you know I mean they can't stop everything that they try. And to see the plans on the shelves. And the intention and then the outcome. Where did it get lost? Where did it get redefined and who was in the room when it happened and who did you invite into the room so that somebody could be in the room? I mean if you have a clandestine- if you have a meeting and you don't tell anybody, they can't be there. If you tell people and they are intimidated by your verbiage, they're intimidated by your suit and tie. They're intimidated by your position, they won't come into the room. So at one point it was, "you go tell them." No, I won't do it. I'll go with you, but you need to tell them. And that's really why some of the respect that we get in the neighborhood is from because we give respect to people. We help them to have a voice and yet we don't want to be the voice. Too many times it's like- that's West Elmwood. Or "ask Sharon." I don't even live here anymore. Don't ask me. People that live here. "Oh, well we don't know who they are." Well, why don't you? You know, so it's hard but it's rewarding too. So, what are you doing with the city's plans when you get them?

LB: When I'm looking through the archive?

SCW: Mhmm, what are you looking for?

LB: I guess I'm looking through the Redevelopment Agency's files for- originally I was looking for traces of the community's response to the Mashapaug Site and I saw a lot of that renaming happening on all the maps from '49 it's part of- by all the figures they research which are if you have a bathroom or a certain type of bathing condition or certain type of when the houses were built- by all those things it was really connected to the West End beyond Potters Avenue up there.

SCW: Mhm

LB: But, then they started calling it Mashapaug Pond as the project name and it kind of wiped it out. So I saw that renaming happening and it's hard to find, couldn't find the public hearing records notes minutes that they said that they would keep, but they destroyed both copies.

[48:35] So, it's been hard to find other than the newspapers.

SCW: Do you realize that's waterfront property?

LB: Waterfront?

SCW: It's waterfront.

LB: Yeah.

SCW: It's got a pond and you've got a property right on it- that's what you have. [48:47]
Waterfront property.

LB: Yeah.

SCW: But we also have a train track running through it. And when we try to get neighborhood businesses to adopt Huntington Avenue and put up pictures on it, you know what we ran into? Because we also had a group that was going to do a mural. 'Oh no that part's owned by the city and that part is owned by the state.' "Okay, well can't y'all talk to each other and get us permission?" "I don't know" We could not get the city and the state to give us permission to put up a mural on that wall. Couldn't get permission. To this day, we're not sure which part is owned by which. So you're talking about cleaning the pond. I'm talking about why don't we have trees over there? Is Amtrak responsible for cleaning up around that fencing? Get planters on those islands? [phone ring] If that was anywhere else, when you think about the assets in this neighborhood. We are two minutes from downtown. We are near every highway- 10, 195, 146, 95. All right here. We have Cranston Street. We have Elmwood Avenue. We have buses- Westminster. Three major bus routes up this neighborhood. We have the Armory. We have an ice cream parlor. Until the arrest a few years ago, we had a pharmacy. There's so much vibrancy here that doesn't get built upon. One of the best pizza parlors in the city is on Cranston Street. Rita's Pizza. It's like people go, "Oh, that's the best pizza close to New York I ever had." When we have a party. People are like what do you want? "Can we have Rita's Pizza?" I had to drive over here. I said, "You really should deliver to Warwick." Rita's Pizza, one of the best. It's like a New York pizza for real. [51:01] New York System over here and then we have our express Dunkin Donuts. How much more express could you be? We can't go sit down in the house. How fast did you need to be? So you can't sit down at Dunkin' Donuts and have a cup of coffee. You're in the middle of a storm, go through the drive-through window and don't order a latte. So, I won't buy my coffee. I won't buy my donuts there. You don't want me to sit? So, I know how to walk with my pocket book. My drive cleaning is here. I do my pharmacy over here at Walgreens. Do what they say- that's economic development. Putting it in the neighborhood. Thank you.

LB: I have one more question and it's a follow-up on the naming. When did West Broadway become a name?

SCW: You'd have to ask them that.

LB: When did you start seeing that happening?

SCW: Eighties?

LB: Okay.

SCW: I remember Paul Fitzgerald who now works at FACTS. He worked at John Hope at the time. And he was very active in the West End Coalition and one day he said, "But now we're in no man's land." Because they're on the other side of West Broadway. So Wiggin Village, Coddington Court, and John Hope got separated from the rest of the neighborhood and yet they weren't part of what was happening over there because they only had a home owners association. So they weren't part of the home owner's association but geographically they got split from the rest of the neighborhood. He was the first that said that to me. He said the other side of the West End was no man's land, that's what Paul called it.

LB: Wait how did it geographically split?

SCW: If you have a map. Bridgham Street and Cranston going that way. Well John Hope is over here. Wiggin Village is here on Cranston Street to Westminster but on the other side of Cranston- John Hope is on Westminster Street and Coddington Court is on the other side- so if this became from here back, there was this split right along Bridgham Street where I guess they felt they should be part of that new neighborhood, because they were connected and yet they had to come down to Parade Street to be considered part of the West End. So, it just became really weird for them. They were in no man's land. We're not part of any neighborhood now. Because we're geographically disconnected to you, but not socially connected to this historic thing.

LB: So you mean in public perception?

SCW: Mhm and it was in reality too because if you were a tenant, there was only a home-owners' association. So people that would come- when our office was on Grand Avenue and Potters and people would come to [ringtone] and people would come to ask for services because there was- my friend on the Eastside just got his car back- what was I saying?

LB: They would come all the way over here

SCW: So, Grand Avenue - they weren't part of the homeowners' association if they were a tenant. If it was public drinking or wanting to use the park and things like that- they couldn't go to the home owners's association because they weren't home owners. [55:11]

LB: So why didn't they just have tenants and home owners together?

SCW: I don't know- you. I don't know, but I know they started as a home owners' association and people didn't know how to connect. Now you may not want to put all that because some that stuff is going to be contentious.

LB: Yeah, yeah. But important to know the politics.

SCW: Mmm. I should also mention, to say they're different now in that they engage youth, but it started as a home owners' association, separating from the West End. What were you going to say.

LB: I recently heard or was starting to get involved with the DARE group- the tenants and homeowners' association that does door knocking for people in the process of foreclosure and- they were telling about- it must be very different for tenants and homeowners to be in foreclosure.

SCW: Very different.

LB: So how do you approach them with their different interests?

SCW: I don't even know how you tell them that their house could be in foreclosure if the homeowner didn't tell them.

LB: I was wondering how their conversation.

SCW: I don't know. DARE is a very direct and their name is Direct Action and they do that. That's how they operate and they gather information and then they use it to do what they do. I don't know how they got that information and I definitely don't know how they approach tenants because if I was a tenant and somebody came and told me that my house was in foreclosure, I'm not sure how I would react to that. [57:00] Homeowner and you got that information, I would really wonder where you got it from. Personal Banking information. Until it's in the newspaper.

LB: Well, they get it from the newspaper.

SCW: Well, by that time everybody should know. But, again we've had people come here and say my landlords moving out, do you have an apartment. Just found out that they're going to foreclose in three days, do you have an apartment? And I think it is a terrible thing not to tell people. On the other hand, they're trying to collect as much rent as they can probably because they need it to move. So, you know it's a terrible thing to do to people, but I don't- it's not something that we choose to take on as advocacy. We don't have the staff or resources to do the research or do the- that's a very labor intensive kind of effort- very needed because people do need to know. I know there was a group started to start some laws tenants rights. I know Brenda Clement before she left- her position was looking into that. She was working with a woman named ____ Williams. [58:15] Because it is a real issue, a real issue. We're dealing with the foreclosed owner, the foreclosed house. The foreclosed tenant. Very different. We just had someone offer us a house foreclosed and we wouldn't buy it because there was a tenant and we couldn't figure out what to do with the tenant. We're not buying the house. We're not going to be part of telling you to put this tenant on the street and we don't know how to work with that. They're paying their rent to somebody- the bank the servicer I don't know who. But the house has been foreclosed. But, how do we sell a house with a tenant in it? It's a real issue, but we wouldn't but their house. And we struggled with that because if we don't buy the house and somebody else does, they could wind up homeless. But if we buy the house and don't have the

resources to treat them right, we're part of a problem. So, it was a real struggle for us. We're actually setting up a meeting to talk about that because we don't want to turn down another property if there's a solution. But we need to talk to other people who have the funding and the resources to - if we do this, can you do that? And figure out what that means legally- if that person lease but there's no owner anymore, what does that mean for the lease? A level of legality and complexity- we're a developer, but we recognize it as a real issue, a serious issue.

LB: Well, thank you so much for spending all this time and talking to me and sharing stories and your contacts as well. For this, I'll be transcribing the interview, typing it all up and giving you a copy. It takes a long time so don't expect it in a couple days. And I'll be sure to respect what you said here and make sure I tell you what I'm

SCW: Yeah just

LB: When I'm using your quotes and analyzing and all that- that you know what it is.

SCW: Because when you talk this much, you could say something with just the wrong tone and say it the wrong way and I was pretty- I said a couple of sensitive things, that I'd rather not

LB: Have out there.

SCW: Just doesn't do anyone any good. That's all I'm going to say. Because I still have to live here when you go back to California. [1:00:55]

LB: Yeah.

SCW: All those people that I said were true was from my perspective

LB: Yeah

SCW: because you know there's always my truth, your truth and the truth.

LB: Yeah and I don't want to ruin everything

SCW: Thank you

LB: you created.

SCW: And who knows maybe you'll come back one day and actually get our whole oral history together for us because you have such a passion for this work.

LB: Oh, if there's people that wanted to do oral history, you didn't have the funding for it, are there people that are still interested in interviewing people?

SCW: I don't know.

LB: Maybe you can keep that idea floating in mind because it would be, it would be great to have community people interviewing people as opposed to just Brown affiliates.

SCW: Mhmm

LB: And make it just a community-based initiative.

SCW: I don't know.

LB: But I don't want to just obviously people can't do it when they don't have time or support financially.

SCW: Mhmm we were at the time trying to get money to pay people to do interviews. We wanted to train them on how to do the interviews because you may wind up being a very bad interviewer. So we wanted to first train them on how to do interviews and then we wanted to do this "where are you now" you know public kind of outreach. If you're willing to tell us your story about your neighborhood, here's a gift certificate to- at the time Almac's was the supermarket. [1:02:15] You know for half an hour of your time, here's twenty five dollar gift certificate. And some people "We'll do it. We don't need that." But then I wanted pictures. We wanted to make it real. I don't know. I bet I could get a group of young people from the neighborhood to be interested even as an intern program as a high school. I know I could do that. But I don't have the money for it and I also don't have the resources to manage the students. So, it's just a lot of work, but it's a missed opportunity I think. It's sad but true. So, hopefully I've been helpful to you.

LB: Yeah [1:02:58] You've been helpful. Thanks so much. I don't want to take more of your time. That's all.

[End of interview]