

Don Fraser, former Mayor of Minneapolis

Arvonne Fraser, author & activist

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis
August 18, 2011

Q The first question is for you, Don. Having grown up in Minneapolis, you attended University High School, your father was Dean of the Law School...where did your family live in Minneapolis while you were growing up?

D In Southeast Minneapolis, on 7th Street between 8th and 9th Avenues.

Q What are your earliest memories of University Avenue or the areas adjacent to University Avenue? Riding streetcars, going to games...what do you first remember?

D Well, I don't remember University Avenue as a separate conveyance, but it was in the way of almost any place I wanted to go. When I went to high school, which was at University High on the campus, I had to cross University Avenue. And from then on, I kept being connected with University Avenue one way or another until I finally went off to the war.

Q Don: during your high school years, how would you characterize University – was it bustling, was it busy, was it gritty....what did it feel like?

D I recall it as a two-way street that carried a lot of traffic and was not distinguishable with any other character from other streets.

Q What about the streetcar? Was that a conveyance that you used often?

D Not in my connection with University, no.

A He walked.

Q Let me go back to you, Arvonne. You went to the University as a student. What do you remember about the U of M and University Avenue during your time as a student?

A Well, again, University Avenue was sort of a street you crossed from Dinkytown or you took the streetcar. I took the streetcar often because for a while I lived in South Minneapolis, so I would take the University streetcar and transfer on Hennepin. And I remembered this morning, in thinking about University Avenue, that just when the streetcars were going to be taken off I took one or two children on it. So our oldest child still remembers the streetcar because I took them for a ride on the streetcar before they were demolished.

Q Which we all regret now, I think.

A Yeah.

Q Do you remember any of the particular institutions or stores or buildings on University Avenue that you might have frequented?

A My recollection of University Avenue goes back to the 1930s because as a farm kid my mother had a cousin, I think, who lived about University and Lexington. And whenever we came to the Cities we stayed with them. So there was a ballpark across the street and Brown & Bigelow and Montgomery Wards. I just remember this as a high point of my life because we came to the Cities and stayed on University Avenue and my father went off to South St. Paul to deal in cattle. But then when I went to the University again it was Dinkytown that was the focus and the campus and as I mentioned I rode the streetcar to and from. But also what I remembered about University Avenue is once a parade – when Harry Truman came to town – and we were, I guess we were both still working at the DFL. Or he was active and I was working. We had a car caravan – a presidential caravan – from probably the Dykman Hotel. But I remember past the University and it was to the Prom Ballroom and there I was introduced by Orville Freeman, who was the party chair at the time, to President Truman and I remember how small he was. Also later at the Prom Ballroom I think the DFL even started the Bean Feeds there because I also remember meeting Eleanor Roosevelt there at another event. I thought a great deal, thinking about this program, about University Avenue – not just around the University but all the other things that went with it.

Q Well there were many notable restaurants and a lot of major institutions – manufacturing and retail....it was the place where businesses wanted to be. Until 60s & 70s..... I'm glad you mentioned the parade because I want to ask you if you remember any major political happenings or parades or presidential visits. Anything else you can think of....

A On campus or on University Avenue? Those were the two major ones. I can't go back in my head enough to know what the event was with Eleanor Roosevelt. It had to be after Franklin Roosevelt was dead. I know it was a DFL event and maybe she was campaigning for Stevenson, but we'll have to check that because I don't know when...well the Prom Ballroom through the 1950s.

Q It was there up until the 80s I think.

A Yeah, I think so.

Q Talk about Dinkytown and what you remember about....what role did it play? Did it have a lot of retail shops and eating places....?

A Oh, Dinkytown was sort of the center for campus. There was a bookstore, Dayton's had a store, Sims Hardware, there was a bakery, a grocery store. Since we lived – and still live – near Dinkytown, I may get my history mixed up a little bit but it was the community shopping center. And now it's the post office and a lot of bars and restaurants. So it has shifted a great deal. The shopping center has shifted to East Hennepin but back in the 1950s, when we were first married and we moved into his parents' house, took over his parents' house because they left, there was East Hennepin and there was Dinkytown and the two shopping centers. I've always been fascinated by East Hennepin, where it and University converge, because well there's Surdyk's liquor store. Surdyk's liquor store was, I think, on University and East Hennepin and now is up a block. But when I was newly married, you could hear almost any language, any

European language on East Hennepin because so many people were immigrants – some after WWII from Latvia, Lithuania, etc. - and the older people, probably pre-WWI. And there was a Sears – besides Surdyk's there was a Sears – and it was a big shopping center but Dinkytown was the other one.

Q Don, can you talk about the house and then characterize the Marcy Holmes neighborhood?

D The neighborhood was built, to some extent, around the Marcy School. So the people I got to know, the kids I knew and the families were connected with that school. University Avenue stands as a point of reference but not as a place where events happen from my perspective. I do remember one occasion in which I got into, with a group of other children, into some kind of a conflict with another group of children and we were somehow put down into a large hole in the ground and kept there and then finally had to get the police to let us out. One of the memories that I carry forward from that time. I had four other older siblings and over time they would gradually disappear from the household. The next oldest was two years older than I was and he tended to stay around almost as long as I did. But our activity in the neighborhood tended to be centered around things that, for example, my mother was interested in. She had a group called the Female Improvement Society – the FIS – that would meet from time to time. We didn't have many activities at our home, outside of the things that my mother promoted. I went to the high school that was at the University and when I graduated from that I enrolled in the University itself, but within a few months was inducted into the US Navy because I'd signed up for the Naval ROTC. So I stayed on the campus for another year or two, but it was under the Navy control. Then when I left and then came back there wasn't quite the same atmosphere that we'd had prior to the war. My interests tended to focus more on the fact that I was enrolled in law school and in time became more actively involved in politics. So I tend to focus my thoughts in terms of what happened to me, not so much what happened to the neighborhood during these years. After 1948, my father...I think it was 1948 or a year later, migrated to California to take another teaching job so we were offered the house and this was close to the time we were getting married. So I was in our home with Arvonne and we began to raise a family.

A Then he ran for the State Senate and, of course, it was the district – southeast and northeast. So we spent our lives in southeast Minneapolis.

Q Can one of you describe – in geographical terms – what the Marcy Holmes neighborhood embodies?

A Marcy Holmes neighborhood – and I was president of it and now am vice-president of the neighborhood association, though he started the neighborhood association about 50 years before that, of the whole southeast...

D University District....

A ...Improvement Association, yeah. It included Prospect Park and all the southeast neighborhoods. Currently Marcy Holmes is bounded by the River, Mississippi, by East Hennepin, which makes a sort of semi-circle around the sort of north side, and 15th Avenue of the University itself. So it's kind of a neighborhood nobody knows because they drive up University Avenue and it's mostly to the left if you're going to St.

Paul. I hesitate to use north and south because the river turns and so it's northwest, south...the directions aren't square with the world. But it was a University neighborhood very much in terms of faculty. I can name a number of the buildings that are named at the University for people that used to live in our neighborhood – Rod Schafer of the Law School, Quigley of political science, one could go on and on. And then, and of course now it's a lot of students as the rest of us...interestingly there are a number of people who, like Don, who've sort of lived there all their lives. Or they lived there as kids, went away and came back. On our corner is a mini-mansion that kind of went to ruin, but a young man – young; he's in his 40's – came back, went away and came back and took it over and it is back in it's splendor. He even got pictures and put back a cupola on it. So it's the oldest neighborhood in the city because it's old St. Anthony. And when Don talked about Marcy Holmes school, he's not talking about Marcy School where it now is. The Marcy School was at 9th and 7th and he went to it and our children went to it and then Marcy School and Holmes School merged and is now on the Holmes School site.

Q Can you tell me the story...how did Marcy Holmes neighborhood acquire its name?

A Well, because of those two schools – there was Marcy School and Holmes School – and I think that's how it acquired its name.

Q Do you know how those two schools got their names?

A Oh, there were...Oliver Wendell Holmes I think is...very interesting. We went to a funeral a few years ago of a woman who had taught at Marshall for years and years – math – and lived in the neighborhood. And how did I get the...I think her father or she...graduation or something, was related to Oliver Wendell Holmes, it was fascinating, anyhow. Sorry...the neighborhood is full of these stories.

Q Don, one of the stories I've been reading about involves your early work, I think when you were first in the State Senate, it was the time when Interstate 94 was being mapped out and there was a lot of controversy about the route it would take and I believe that one of the proposed routes would have destroyed even more of Prospect Park than it actually did. How did that involvement with neighborhoods and I-94 and trying to find a resolution that was more suitable for the neighborhood?

D I don't have a specific recollection of that particular challenge. But highway design was an issue in our neighborhood for quite a while. Not only was there 94 that affected the Prospect Park, but also 35W came through our neighborhood – in fact came right next to the block that we were on. That was a large issue. We got involved in efforts to kind of put a kind of a bridge or cap over part of it so we could use that as a way of getting from one side to the other. So that had the - particularly the 35W – had the effect of appearing to split the neighborhood and although that's been overcome somewhat by neighborhood practices, it's still a dominant physical feature of the area. And it also, where it intersects with University is a major, well highway event, I guess.

Q One of the senses I got from the people in Prospect Park and it's probably true of Marcy Holmes – I get a sense that these are neighborhoods with people who are very aware and active in the politics and commerce...they really care. What do you think about those particular neighborhoods helps to cultivate people that seem to be so

passionate about the particular place they live, and quite effective sometimes in making their voices heard....?

A Partly I'll give him credit for that. The starting of the UDIA – the University District Improvement Association – but I think even before that, the University plays a real role. We're affected by it – both students and faculty. I think when we went to school, to the University, a lot of people commuted but a lot of people lived in the Dinkytown neighborhood. Then the whole business of World War II and the faculty was...we had a tremendous faculty when we were there...we were there, I was there when it was sort of a girl's school because all the guys were off to war. But we had...and then they came back what? '46, '47? But we had people who, faculty members, young faculty members, who went on to Berkeley, Yale, etc. but very active and passionate. But even before that, Don's father had taken on the legislature and a few other people so I would say it's partly the influence or greatly the influence of a University community. They tend to be active.

Q Speaking of active, talk about this phenomenon of Snyder Drugs and Mr. Sengupta. I know that he has owned it for many decades. Talk about some of the gatherings that you may have attended in that place and what goes on there besides selling pharmaceuticals.

A Tom's Drugstore...I don't know when it started but we get invited to these meetings that are at about 7 or 7:30 on a night. Drugstore's closed. You go to that drugstore and the sign is in the window you know, "Support Wellstone," "We're For Universal Healthcare," etc. etc. Tom is an Asian Indian. They came to the United States and went to Louisiana State University, I think, migrated to Minnesota because he admired Humphrey so. I don't know when he bought the drugstore – probably when we were in Washington. But anyhow, he has this potbelly stove that doesn't work – it just sits there – and he puts chairs up the aisle and down the aisles and people sit crowded together and he has somebody talk. He picks a topic, somebody talks for a little while and then its...its not question and answer; it's a big discussion. He gets amazing people – Wellstone used to be one of the people who came often and obviously talked there. He tries to mix...he tries to bring in young people. He brings in people from all over the city almost, urban area, and really works to get a mix of people. I think he chooses the audience, sort of, depending on the topic. I don't think he ever sends out a notice; he calls everybody up. But he's become an institution because even apolitical people – neighbors of mine – everybody goes to Tom because he also dispenses...maybe I shouldn't say this...sort of medical advice, too. When you get your prescription filled, what does he do? He keeps telling you, be careful of this...

D ...that's right. He's very conscious of what you're buying and what you need to do.

A So you get extra advice along with your prescription. But he's an amazing guy, both politically and just his interaction with people.

Q I can imagine there'd be some very lively discussions given the nature of some of the people that might be in that neighborhood.

A Yes. And we're old enough to know that a lot of the people who used to come are dead. But he keeps bringing new people and he's concentrating on young people right now because he really wants to get people involved.

Q Do you think his store fills the niche that used to be occupied by the town hall or the town square?

A In a way; or the neighborhood...the influential café in a small town. Yeah, although as I mentioned, he picks the audience rather than the people coming together. I was going to say he picks the audience from his customers, but I'm not sure which comes first.

Q I can imagine that he tries to get a lot of the DFL candidates...to come by and...

A They do. They do.

Q Can you think of times when you've gone there to hear interesting speakers? Can you name a few that you've heard?

A Well, Harry Boyd is often there who's a very interesting person and interested in civil society, he would say. And he works with students and to get people thinking about public policy and acting at the grass roots level. Who else have we seen or heard recently?

D Well, he gets a number of faculty people to come and he'll ask them to make a speech or at least have an opening statement.

A Oh, Hy Berman is often there providing the historical background and comments and...

D Altogether it's a fairly complex set of speakers, but it's hard to just pick out a few.

A And it's not a normal topic. He doesn't talk about the latest political gossip or even the latest campaign. It's much more philosophical in a way and much more long-term. He's concerned about the inactivity; he's concerned about the movement to the right...long-term political, I think rather than philosophical.

Q Thinking of issues, Don, if you think back to your time in the mayor's office, what were some of the big issues of the day?

D Well, one of the biggest that I was directly concerned with was dealing with noise from the highway systems and we were able to get a legislative act adopted that provided that in planning for these interstate highways that there would be a noise reduction system developed. That was picked up and passed and finally became law and has affected highways, particularly in urban areas, all across the country.

A Probably inspired by the Prospect Park group, with 94 going, bisecting sort of, Prospect Park and the East River Road started it.

D I don't remember other issues that were specific to southeast, other than the more general ones that were support for the University, which is both a state and to some extent a federal issue. I'm sure there were more but I'm not coming up with them.

A The University is the dominant factor in southeast Minneapolis, sort of the elephant in the room. And there is a new University alliance of four neighborhoods surrounding the University. When the stadium was built, there was concern in the neighborhood about its impact and so as a result there were two, at least a couple of committees formed about it and a number of meetings that I wasn't involved in, nor Don, but I know about them. What was the impact of the stadium on the community? That has sort of evolved into this new University District Alliance, which is composed of Marcy Holmes, Prospect Park, the Como neighborhood and Cedar Riverside – the west bank. And that is concerned with the...you know, many universities around the country have had problems of the neighborhoods around have turned into slums. Yale being, I suppose, the most notorious or the best-known university in which this happened. So the alliance is working on housing issues, on this whole business of transportation because since we are at the confluence of 94 and 35W and the central corridor of course now is closing Washington Avenue, traffic for us is a huge, huge problem. University Avenue...well just the other day at a National Night Out a group signed a petition complaining about truck traffic on University Avenue and sent it I can't remember where, but I got a copy of it and I thought, all these people knew when they moved in the neighborhood they lived near University Avenue and trucks went up and down it. Goods have to move up and down that avenue. It's right by the river. Anyhow, the whole problem of traffic and transportation is a big one. And of course, being in the University neighborhood the students are very concerned about the environment and so the whole business of the environment and sustainable housing and LEED design...you name it and we're sort of interested or somebody in the neighborhood is interested. We did get some money from the legislature but now the economy's tanked and so we don't have very many foreclosures because we're all so close to downtown; especially Mary Holmes. So the, I won't say conflict but it is a little conflict over the land. The land is valuable because its across from downtown. But a lot of the housing is old and a lot of the housing isn't kept up when its rented to students and as much of the faculty and others moved out – a lot to the suburbs, now they're coming back – housing has deteriorated. And as I say, we're kind of lost. Nobody knows about our neighborhood. We're called northeast, you know? Well, we're south of northeast but we're tucked between railroad tracks, the river, the highways and the people only use University Avenue to get to the University and we're kind of lost neighborhoods. It took me about five years to realize that I lived on a street that was a dead end on both ends. It's cut off at East Hennepin, it's cut off by the freeway. I know how to get in and out, but we make jokes, we know people who...the drivers...we can tell if they're lost. And we also have streets and avenues and of course people sometimes forget. We had a party once and some stuff was being delivered – like food – and the driver kept calling and he'd say, I'm at 8th and 8th and he couldn't find our place because he couldn't distinguish between streets and avenues. Anyhow, that's sort of our neighborhood.

Q One more thing...how do you think the central corridor light rail line will impact your particular neighborhood?

A That's a difficult question. Or maybe it's a good question because many of us tried to get the central corridor to go around the University. We were talking the other day, some neighbors, that once that central corridor is fixed, done, students are going to

move to the cheap ends. They'll move into St. Paul, they may...well, I don't know what's cheap on the Minneapolis side. So they'll move into St. Paul, where rents are much cheaper. Again, what's going to happen to all the houses that are now rented by students? Prospect Park is dealing like mad because with entrepreneurs who want to be on that line, near the stadium. Traffic...I mean, we're overwhelmed with traffic now in Marcy Holmes because of Washington Avenue's closure and all the detours and 35W is going to have another lane so people can get from downtown north. I don't know. And, of course, we in Marcy Holmes we can walk across the 10th Avenue bridge to get to the Cedar Riverside station or we can take the bus downtown. And I have neighbors, I have a neighbor who works all over the country. He takes the bus down to the Hiawatha Line and out to the airport. So the central corridor's going to change a lot but we aren't sure what. Just like Hiawatha we're going to have to wait and see. But I think there's going to be much more commercial activity from the Stadium Village, from the stadium to city limits and into St. Paul. I don't know what's going to happen to our neighborhood, except that we are getting more professionals and more families interested, I think. People are moving back to the city. We had National Night Out the other night – there were all kinds of kids. We haven't had little kids in our neighborhood practically since we had kids. So it's very interesting, what's happening.

Q We'll have to wait and see.

A We'll wait and see.

Q Any closing thoughts.....?

D Neighborhood in progress.

A Forever.