

Isabel Chanslor, Neighborhood Development Center

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Central Presbyterian Church, St. Paul, Feb. 11, 2011

Q Please introduce yourself.

A I work for the Neighborhood Development Center and I am the manager of the U7 Project.

Q What are your earliest memories of University Ave.?

A My earliest memories of University Avenue is when I moved here. I moved here in '91 and I moved here like three, four days after the big Halloween storm. So it wasn't really a great first impression for someone from the South to be here with what seemed like 30 feet of snow all around me. And I had to shop for the house, so I came to University Avenue. I asked a neighbor where do people do shopping around here and they said, well you can go to West St. Paul or you can go to University Avenue. That's in St. Paul. I'm very much a shop local type person, so I went to University Avenue and found Cub Foods and that's just where I started shopping and it's where I've always shopped actually. I remember it was...it's a very different community than where I come from. I come from very small towns so the Avenue was just long. It was like never-ending and so diverse. So that was really a nice surprise for me to move here and know that not only was my culture on the Avenue, but other people. It was diverse enough for me to be comfortable. So I was really pleased with that.

Q Talk about your impressions of the street back then.

A When I first came here it was a very interesting sight. There's so many different types of businesses and the variety was pretty vast. But I think what really struck me was the Asian, ethnic businesses that were on the Avenue and where I can shop, which I...in the military there's a lot of Korean influence around the shops and stuff so you can get access to a lot of Korean foods. So I was very used to that. So it was very familiar to me to kind of walk into the shops and get the noodles that I was used to getting and those things. So I was really pleased about that. But I did notice there wasn't a lot of Latino shops. Although there were Latinos, there isn't a lot of Latino-specific shops. And to this day I think that's pretty much the same. But for me it was just really a right fit for the type of shopping that I do – buy local and really a lot of ethnic foods and just the fact that you could go to Herberger's or do different things on the Avenue – I don't really have to go to a mall to kind of get access to what I need. And the food is amazing on the Avenue. I love all the different, just the different opportunities you have to explore very unique foods and authentic foods and some of it's some of the best in the Twin Cities I think.

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A I think why new people to the State of Minnesota, or even new people to the US, the reason why they come to University Avenue is because it seems to be affordable to come and live in the area. To open up a shop is pretty affordable still. So if you are an entrepreneur or you have that mindset, this seems to be just a really easy place to come and begin that story for yourself, or begin that venture. I think that that's always been the case in the recent history of University Avenue. I'm not sure when the light rail trains

were running, but I know it's been...that's what I've heard of it and that's what I've seen in the time that I've been here – that its very simple to do that as an entrepreneur, to kind of open up a shop, buy it or lease it and really be accepted as a legitimate business on the Avenue.

Q What role does University Ave. play in the economic and civic life of the Twin Cities?

A If I'm not mistaken, University Avenue is one of the busiest corridors in the State of Minnesota. So it's long and at places it can be very populated with a lot of businesses and then we have some areas where it's kind of sparse. But I think it has a huge impact on the State of Minnesota. There's a lot of business going on so there's a lot of revenue that's being created on the Avenue. I don't think people understand to what degree of the revenue and the sales tax or whatever it is that's being collected on the Avenue, the investment that's being made by individual businesses – I just don't think people have a clear idea of what that is. But I know that everybody understands, like if you're thinking about blocking Snelling Avenue what that means. Snelling and University – that intersection – or the intersection of Lexington and University or Dale and University – these are major, major intersections for everybody from public transportation to deliverers to people that want to do business or if you just want to go to A-Z. This is really where you're going to be and how you get around the larger area. If there's one thing as a new person you know, is if you know where University Avenue is, you can get anywhere. So I mean it's really nice. All I knew is if I was lost if I went north enough I could find it or went south enough I would run into it and then I could find my way home. So being a new person I had that experience moving here in '91. So as long as I knew where University Avenue was I knew I could get to the West Side pretty easily. And I think that a lot of the people that shop on the Avenue really don't go into Minneapolis, so they don't know what that experience is like. I think a lot of people that do their shopping like me on the Avenue kind of get all of their needs met, their basic needs on University Avenue. So I think it has a huge impact on this community and there are people that I know that are from suburbs who come here, still, and get particular unique items. They drive all the way here on a Saturday or on a Friday before they go home for the weekend and they get their goods and go home. Or I know there are grandparents that moved away from University Avenue – their grandchildren have to drive them in to get their, to get the stuff that they want, when they have stores that are out there in the suburbs now that probably could service their needs they're like, no; we're going to this particular store, this is what I want. So its really interesting to see all the different types of people that come around and have to shop here, feel like that's what their responsibility is or that's just what they prefer.

Q Have you seen much change in the time you've been here?

A Oh it's changed a lot. I think it's a lot safer now than when I first moved here than in '91. There are some institutions that are here now that weren't here when I moved here, like the Ronald Hubbs Center was not here. Gordon Parks School was not here. Some of the condos for sure were not here. And there are some schools now that are on the Avenue that weren't really in existence before – Avalon School is a school that is a pretty important school in the State of Minnesota. It's a charter school that my kids went to, actually, and they weren't here when I first started. There's quite a few schools now represented on the Avenue that I don't think people are very aware of – all

of the alternative and charter schools that are available, or the public school arms that are available. So it's really, it's really an amazing street if you take the time to learn it and see who's on it and see who uses it day-to-day because the students really appreciate that they can be in an area – and they're 14, 15, 16 – and no need to have a car. They can take the bus up and down University and do a quick 15, 20-minute lunch and get back to school. I think the fact that they have transportation that drops them off right in front of their school to them is really important. But that wasn't here in '91, '92, '93. So I think the things that have come to the Avenue since when I first came, in '91, have really just improved the environment, the safety, the feeling and the connection that other people know from the Rondo days that I wasn't a part of. So those things really make me feel like I'm more part of a community than I used to be, I guess.

Q Several nonprofits have invested in new facilities along University. What impact has that had?

A I think they've had a great positive affect. Wilder Foundation is now on the Avenue. TCF Bank had a big, brand new building. Western Bank established themselves again with a new development – Frogtown Square. So I mean these are just a few of the things that happened in the last 6, 7 years that I think have had a great impact. And I think that there was a certain time like in the 90s where the small businesses felt like, OK no one's investing here and there's a lot of empty spaces and a lot of vacancies on the strip. And we still have vacancies now, but not to the degree that we used to and some spots that were blighted that needed to be developed, have been developed. Where TCF and Wilder Foundation is, was a huge turnaround because I don't know if anyone recalls what it looked like before, but there was just this old strip mall where I'm not even sure who was operating out of there – there was like a furniture store, an antique kind of place – it was just shoddy and it was...it was a horrible building. It was like someone had placed plywood on some of them but they were still operating as businesses. And the parking lot just had holes all over the place. So that's a busy intersection – Lexington and University – and to have it for that many years look like that, it really had a negative effect, I think, on everybody whether you realized it or not. And now to have TCF there and the Aldi's and the Wilder Foundation building to be there, and it's so beautiful, and the residential home that's right next to it. That makes all the difference in the world and I think what it sends is a message of, we're investing again – as a State, as a City, as a County. There are developers who are interested in helping this community get to another place. And I think it sends a really good message. And a lot of the things that were built there are affordable, like Aldi's. So that's encouraging as well. And for the senior housing to be there...it was smart development that happened, in my eyes. Much like Frogtown Square – you know Dale and University now has a place where senior housing is going to be there and accessible. There's going to be seven places for new entrepreneurs to be there and they happen to be all local entrepreneurs. And that's exciting to see that kind of development and for its purpose to be for the people, not just for big box development and we're not really sure who can afford the apartment. I really appreciate that when development happens – to this point when new development has happened on University Avenue – that's been the focus. When light rail is finished and the lines are through and the properties exchanged, I hope that that is part of the principles and the values that all the developers keep in mind. That's a hope of mine. My concern is maybe that's not going to be a reality and I think that's a lot of people's concerns on University Avenue and that would be a shame because I think that the people who have been developing the last ten years have proven that you can do development that makes sense for the community and that that

value really can lead you in developing something that is really going to work for everybody and not just for those who can afford it.

Q What is the mission of NDC?

A Neighborhood Development Center has been around for about 18 years and they are focused on building opportunities for people to become entrepreneurs and to take them through that process, but to also build communities from within, strengthen the economies of local communities and neighborhoods. So it really is based on those principles of communities have, and individuals have, all the assets that they need to change their own outcome or to kind of create their own outcome. So NDC is kind of built on those principles of organizers and community developers that really know what it takes to do development in communities, with communities, or having communities lead the way. So NDC has been around, cultivating entrepreneurs in low income communities and also taking risks in developing as well – being real estate developers and doing things like Frogtown Square, which if it doesn't work we're on the line for. So we're not only just spurring on people to become entrepreneurs and to take risks with their own livelihood, or just their own personal investment, but we're also taking risks in these neighborhoods. And I think people respect that and identify with that. So one of the things that we say to businesses right now on University Avenue that are very concerned about the light rail construction and losing 30 to 60 percent of their revenue during the construction period, which is going to be pretty lengthy, is that we're in it with you. We have properties on the Avenue as well and so we truly understand. If we fail, I lose my job. We could lose our whole organization. So I think that they start to appreciate that. Not that we are in the same, same position as they are, but we're pretty similar and we do have incubators on University Avenue that have entrepreneurs in them. So we're really invested financially in the Avenue and I think that really helps in the way that we work with people and how they respond to us. My role at NDC is to be the project manager for a collaborative that's called the University Avenue Business Preparation Collaborative and it's made out of eight organizations – community development organizations – in the neighborhood who about two years ago through all of these discussions about light rail knew that businesses were going to be affected by the construction period and could also be benefiting from the light rail once it was up and running, but that we needed to help prepare them to do that. So my job, with a team that's made up of different types of people – small business consultants, designers – is to be part of that little help package. So we go door to door, we talk to people about the light rail and how they can prepare for it, whether its savings, looking at their financials, tightening up their management skills, marketing, expanding their market, increasing their customer base now so they can kind of take them through the storm of light rail, and just really thinking very strategically about, is where this spot is on University Avenue really where I need to stay? How am I going to do here? And then access issues and talking to them and connecting them with the resources from like the Met Council, to be sure that they're in communication with the construction crews and the management and have a voice in how customers can access their building during the construction period. So we're jacks-of-all-trades – the team. We address everything from façade improvement ideas to getting people lined up for energy audits and having them go through what we call a financial health consultation that's pretty extensive. And if you sign up to be part of the project, then you meet with a financial consultant every month to kind of review what work you're doing and how are you using the tools that we have made available to you to kind of really have a good grasp of your business. What

are you really selling every day and what's your inventory and what's your profit margin and what do you need to do to prepare and project for a possible reduction in sales? So it's really fun. It's a lot of fun what we do but as the time is ticking and it's 2011 – we've been doing the work since I came on board November 2009 – so we've been interacting one on one with businesses since then. And you know construction starts next month and I just didn't think this date was going to come that quickly. I just feel like I was hired five months ago, it seems like, and a year and a half has passed and I'm glad I'm young enough that my heart's not going to quit on me. Because it's a scary thing to see what these business owners are going to go through and what they need to do to prepare and we just don't have the capacity to reach each and every one but we're hoping that what we have done and what we continue to do with the ones we do have contact with, is going to be impactful enough to help them stay strong through all of this.

Q How has NDC facilitated the development of new businesses, particularly along the University corridor?

A We have restaurants – some that are brand new, year-old, some that have been around for 25 years and are institutions within themselves. One is a steakhouse, which is fabulous and has a great story behind it and has been here for 25 years, that we're helping in the U7 Project as well to help them prepare for light rail. But they are just a fabulous Greek family – the two brothers run the restaurant now after their father retired, the mother is still at the cash register taking everybody's orders and money, and the daughter and the grandsons and the nephews – it is a wonderful place to go to and have a great steak or burger. But it's the fact that they've been on the Avenue for so long that it's just who they are as people. Every time you come in you just feel like Norm at Cheers, you know? He knows your name, he's always happy to see you, he's so cheerful and it's just an incredible establishment. And then we have new restaurants. There's an East African restaurant that's one year old as of January and it's run by two women who are best friends and they are just really incredible. They are not here from the United States – they immigrated here from very bad situations – and are pretty well-known in the Twin Cities area, especially in the Eritrean community – and are struggling to keep the business going but have such a fire in them about why they're doing it. It's not just a restaurant. It is a place for the community and it's a place for women and it's an example of what women can do here in America. They're just so red, white and blue it's amazing, but also very connected to their faith and very much in their community doing all kinds of things. I don't know where they have the energy to run a restaurant that's open 7 days a week until 9:00 at night and to do all the other stuff that they're doing. They are just inspiring. And those are really...when you meet business-to-business that's really what I'm running into are these people who have just incredible stories. There's a barber shop/salon on University Avenue that's been around for about 25 years – and there's a lot of barbershops and salons on University Avenue. I think if you really stopped to count them, there's like 20, 22 different types of barbershops and salons on University Avenue. But this particular one is, what they're very prideful of is that it was started by one woman and now her nephew runs it. He used to hang out at the salon and the barbershop and now he took it over when she became too ill to run it. And he's very young and very invested in keeping her name and the brand of the salon just alive and strong. And what they're very prideful of is that they've kind of been the place where a lot of the barbers and beauty professionals kind of started and then spun off into their own shops on University Avenue. So there's a lot of shops where the

owners came from this particular experience – that they all worked in the same shop a long time ago, for this particular shop. And I think that's amazing. And every year since the nephew took over...not every year, but in the last two years, on MLK Day he does free haircuts for kids and then if older people come in he charges them \$5 a piece. And all of that money goes to a scholarship for students. I just don't think people understand who the business owners are on University Avenue, that they are not just there and drive to the suburbs in the evening. They're very entrenched in this community, have long, long roots and history and are community leaders and are seen that way, and have a lot to do with what the Avenue looks like today. They're just amazing. There's just so many stories like that, of just fabulous families that...everyday heroes that you don't get to hear about. It's awesome.

Q What makes University appealing today?

A Quite a few of the owners of the small businesses of University Avenue live in either...if not Frogtown in the City of St. Paul. So very close to their shops and there are times where because of my relationship and my team's relationship with the owners we'll need something or we were supposed to have a meeting and communication kind of falls through, but they can be there within ten minutes. So you know, I'm just at home; I can be there in ten minutes. So we know that they live very, very close to the community if not right in the community. And I think that's what people are looking for is that experience of working, living, playing all in the same neighborhood. St. Paul people are kind of like that. It's probably why we don't go to Minneapolis too much. I don't know if that's wrong to say but we like really easy life, not too complicated. We don't want to take 20 minutes to get somewhere. We like the whole neighborhood feel and I'm going to walk around the corner and go to the grocery store or go get my shoes or anything like that. We don't want to have to go on a highway to get that done. So I think it's pretty...it's kind of how we are. In Minneapolis you just kind of have to like, get in your car and you're forced to kind of do these things. So I think that's what is really attractive, what could potentially be really attractive to owners on University Avenue is that you could do that. You can get your home at an affordable price, your business at an affordable price and your kids can go to school just about anywhere because of our school system and the way that its set up.

Q What would you like to see happen in the next five or ten years?

A I would love for it to be more attractive – that's for sure. But I would hope that we can keep a lot of the unique, ethnic businesses that are up and down the Avenue, that have their own way of doing business, that really makes it special. So I think that's down the line. I know there are other people who have different visions of what it could look like and people have talked about Grand Avenue and Uptown and Nicollet. I like University Avenue now. It's not perfect. We could use a lot more investment, new investment and opportunities. Physically it could be updated. You know, the signage is everywhere – it's all types of signage. Buildings need to be fixed for sure. I think there's some buildings that could be potentially risky and need to kind of be updated. But I love the mixture of people that we have represented on the Avenue and the types of businesses on the Avenue and I hope that four to five, ten years from now we still have that experience with some new investment for sure and that the people that come from wherever they're coming from – if they've never had the experience of University Avenue beyond just driving through it, I hope that they stop at one of the stops and they walk into one of these shops and realize that this is the most amazing services and food that you

could find. Some of the businesses are in the St. Paul-Minneapolis Magazine. Some of there are...Twin Cities Magazine says it's the best place to eat and I think that those awards have done those businesses a lot of good and people do come to them and they're destination places. I think there are others that don't get that are not noticed in that way and they easily could be. They easily could be competitive with those other businesses. So I hope that when people come on the light rail, that it starts to kind of slow them down, they can come and stop and have a whole new experience that's different than Uptown, different than Grand Avenue, different than Nicollet but just as amazing and wonderful. And more affordable because our prices cannot be beat on University Avenue. I think you can have a great meal at a very, very affordable price that you're not going to get anywhere else.