

Stanley Gardner, Summit-University resident

Interviewed by Peter Myers, St. Paul, January 2011

Q What are your earliest memories of University Ave.?

A I believe I moved to St. Paul in about 1957, after being discharged from the 11th Airborne Division. I was stationed in Germany at the time and I was discharged on about November 17th or 18th of 1957. I went to work for Gillette Company, worked for them for 17 years. When I left I was a Personnel Administrator – they called it Personnel then, I think they call it Human Resources now – and went to work for the State as the State Director of EEO – Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action. I worked for the state for 5 years, left there and went to work for PCL – Pool Construction Limited. I worked for them for four years and then I started my own business in 1984 – Mechanical Contracting. And then about six, seven years ago I started a consulting company and I called it the Phoenix Group. So that's about the history of Stan Gardner.

Q How about the places where you've actually lived over the years?

A Well when we first were married, which was in 1954 or 55 – we lived at 317 North Avon, and then we moved down at 1088 North Dale, and then to 727 Thomas, and then eventually we moved here in about '65, '64-'65 and we've been here ever since.

Q By the time you moved here, I guess Rondo was gone and the freeway had already been dug. Is that correct or were you here at the time they were digging the trench?

A You know, I don't recall what year the freeway was built. I do remember houses being taken under eminent domain, if I recall correctly. And there was a big controversy about whether that was for the public good or what. It was in the '60's or so, maybe the '50's that they built the freeway. I don't recall exactly. As you said there were some concessions. Initially it was to be surface. Eventually they did dig a trench to lay the freeway in because of the noise factor. Did that make the people happy? Some, I'm sure it did. I'm sure some were...those who were displaced didn't care for it.

Q What do you remember about the Rondo neighborhood?

A As I recall there were a lot of houses that needed to be torn down anyway. There were some bars and the people of St. Paul, that I knew, called that area Lower Rondo. Of course, it ran through Upper Rondo, too, if there was such a thing. I just recalled that Lower Rondo was down around Rice Street, in that area. The middle part was probably around Western and Upper Rondo was from probably from Dale to Lexington.

Q Let's talk about University Avenue.....

A As I recall, University Avenue was kind of like the hub. Everything that was anything was on University Avenue – Montgomery Wards, I remember Sears when they built their building down there on Rice Street, which was close to University Avenue and that was probably the biggest chunk of land they could get so that's why they built it

there, but it was just off of University Avenue. Long before Grand Avenue, University Avenue was the hub. It was the place to be, you know. I guess people referred to it as the lifeline to St. Paul, the entryway to St. Paul. But it was. It was the place to be.

Q Do you recall if there were many African American-owned businesses at the time?

A I don't recall how many African American businesses were on University Avenue. Most of them were around Rondo and in that area up there, which was about four, six blocks off of University Avenue – south of. And to the best of my knowledge that was kind of like the hub of the black community, of the African American community around Rondo, which is now Concordia. But that's where most of the people conducted their business. I'm sure there were some in Frogtown, too, but as I recall it was around Dale and Concordia, or Dale and Rondo at that time.

Q One of the most interesting intersections is the Dale and University intersection....Do you have any memories of that particular area?

A I do. The area around Dale and University, contrary to popular belief, was not the Faust. It was not a notorious theater. It was, when I was a kid, according to my wife, a young man I should say – we were both in our 20's; I was 20, I think she was in her teens – we used to go to the Faust and it had some very nice movies, like most movie theaters. It became a notorious theater but that was long after...and theaters started closing up everywhere. But Dale and University was kind of like...it was kind of like the hub. I remember the shopping mall there. Many may not remember that it was designed by a black person by the name of Fisher and it was built by Kraus Anderson if I recall correctly and that was kind of a neat thing. I think Fisher's been dead a number of years but it was a very good jewel that we had, that people could point to and say, yeah that was us.

Q So you remember when the Faust Theatre was a nice, respectable place to go?

A Yes I do.

Q What do you think caused things to go downhill for a while there....

A Well, I'm not quite sure what caused it. I think there were a number of factors that contributed to the demise of that corner, so to speak. As I recall there was a lot of prostitution. I recall Councilman Bill Wilson at the time getting involved in trying to eliminate that and there was Ron Pauline from the Aurora-St. Anthony Block Club and a number of residents of this community who would go down there and hold up signs, placards – I don't recall exactly what they said but it was trying...the attempt was to try to discourage the johns from frequenting that area. I think that was probably the biggest contributing factor to the demise of Dale and University, as far as I remember.

Q Then do you remember how the city finally was able to get rid of the Faust Theatre?

A I think what happened was it was more or less that it became no longer a popular hangout for people. I think that – from what I saw – that Rice and University became kind of like a popular hangout for the people, probably around Western and Rice and

that area down there. You know, I really don't know. I know that the Aurora-St. Anthony Block Club – Ron Pauline – got some money to build a market down there on the corner, where the Faust was, and a jewelry store and a couple of other things, which tended to run a lot of people off. You know they decided, well you know this is not the place to be anymore, so... I think that helped. Ron Pauline, I think, along with Councilman Bill Wilson at that time, and certainly others in St. Paul were very much part of cleaning that up. But then, of course, a number of us pointed to Selby Avenue as being the, you know, the bad place so to speak.

Q Talk about your involvement with any University Avenue neighborhood organizations.

A Well, I was a board member of the District 8 Planning Council. I was also a board member of the Aurora-St. Anthony Block Club and most of our efforts were to keep the area, I guess, more or less pristine. Most of us didn't want to see it return to the way it was in the 60s and 70s, so we worked hard to limit what we thought would only serve to drag the neighborhood down. Like the Unbank. We did not want to see those come in but that became a point of contention on the District Council. There were some people who wanted to talk about what the Unbanks were charging. There were a lot of people in the neighborhood who used the Unbank and I thought, personally, it was unfair for us to try to limit what was coming into the area because there were people in the area who were using those services. And that we had to have, in my opinion, consideration for how they felt about things also.

Q Can you think of any important events that happened on University Avenue?

A Unfortunately, in the African American community one of the things that we have not done well – and hopefully it's changing – but we have not been politically involved to the extent that we should be. We do not go to meetings. We do not let people know that we are unhappy with certain conditions. We certainly let people know that we're unhappy with the prostitution and the other activities around Dale and University Avenue, but we really haven't been as actively involved as I think our community should be. Hopefully that's changing.

Q Have the black churches played a major role, do you think, in community involvement and creating solidarity?

A The churches certainly have been a factor in the lives of many people. Personally, I have not experienced any real activity with the churches. But for a lot of people the churches have been the hub of the African American community. And I suspect that they will continue to be into the years that are coming. And that's the way people are. And in my opinion the churches have had a great influence on what has been done and what will be done in this community.

Q Another major influence has been the influx of immigrant-owned businesses...

A I don't know if you know Ngi Huynh. He said to me one day, Stanley in order for a community to be viable, when money comes into the community it must turn over seven times before it leaves. That'll make the community very viable. I think from our Asian brothers we've learned a lot. Our Asian brothers and sisters have been much more risk takers than we were. How we became non-risk takers, I don't know. But they've come

in and started businesses and I think we've learned from them. If they can do it, we can do it and I think many of them have helped us. I think one of the outstanding things I ever had happen in my life is when I served on Cy Thao's campaign committee. And Cy called me and said, we're going to have a little victory party today at the Laotian Family Center. Can you come? And I said, well you know it's a holiday and he said that's why it's only going to be an hour and a half. Can you come? And I said, sure. So I put on my clothes and got my birthday suit on and went down there and I had the most entertaining time I've ever had in my life. I even got to sit at the elder's table. I thought that was just so neat and I think it inspired me to try to do better. So that's basically where I'm coming from. I think we've learned a lot from our Asian brothers and sisters. Their work ethic was much different than ours. Many of them don't mind working 10, 12, 14 hours a day. We've gotten into the Americanization of working 8 hours and you're finished; the rest is leisure time. Well, what I've tried to do is say I enjoy some of the stuff I do and it's fun. So I don't mind working 12, 14 hours a day. And as I said when it gets to be a job, I'm gone. I don't need to do that. But I think they've made us better. I think our Asian brothers and sisters have made us much better. I think they've been a credit to their community. I really do.

Q What kinds of things are you hearing from people about University Avenue?

A You know, some of the problems associated with the LRT are – and I assume that's what's being talked about – are interesting. Some of the older people I've talked to are concerned about being able to get from the south side to the north side of University Avenue. There was one time we talked about putting an overhead bridge in. Well, unfortunately there wasn't enough money to entertain those kinds of thoughts. One of the other things that people that I've talked to have been concerned about is the parking around Hubbs. They feel that's going to be a real problem. If you are familiar with the parking around the Hubbs Center, for two or three blocks around that area you can't hardly find a parking spot even though they have a huge parking lot there to facilitate people who are going to the Hubbs Center. Well, they've got more people going there who are driving than they have parking spots. I think the LRT is going to be a real benefit to the community. It could be a real benefit. But there are some people who are concerned about their business and rightfully so. What's going to happen during the construction phase? Nobody really seems to know. Certainly business is going to decrease. Are those people going to be able to maintain while there's that decrease in business? We don't know yet – some will; perhaps the majority of them won't. And they will have to give it up. They will have to get out of whatever business they're in. What's going to happen after all the construction's done? Well, we're hoping that there'll be potentially an economic boom, much like there is on Grand Avenue. Is that going to happen? Well we're hoping it will but we don't know. You know, nobody can...you can say, yeah it's going to happen. But is it really going to happen? We don't know. We're hoping that it does. We're praying that it does. But the parking and getting from one side of University Avenue to the other side is going to be a problem. A lot of people who live in this area believe that the LRT is not really for them. They believe that it's being put in for the people who live in the suburbs who are going to drive in, park and get on the LRT and go to Minneapolis. Well, that can be a problem. One of the problems my wife has is with the apparent curtailment of the bus system. Right now the 16 runs every ten minutes. What's going to happen once the LRT goes in? Every half hour? Well if it doesn't have the ridership, it may go back to once every hour. Well, what's that going to do to the people in the area who rely on the bus service as it currently is operating? There's going to be a whole new learning curve for them. It runs

every hour now; you can't just run out the door and get on the bus as you used to be able to do. That's going to be a big problem in the wintertime. Big problem in the wintertime. Summer may not be so bad, but the wintertime? It's going to be a big problem. You don't want some older person standing out there on the corner and... I think it's about zero right now, waiting for a bus to come. Maybe they'll try to walk over to the other side of University Avenue. How do they get across? That is a problem. But along with this progress, as they tend to call it, there's going to be some downside to it also. There are a number of people who don't believe that the LRT should have been put on University Avenue. They studied the various routes they may take. The one that came out to be the least expensive and kind of fit with the \$87 million they had, was going down University Avenue. They had looked at it going down the freeway, going down Pierce Butler Route and they finally settled on University Avenue because they never did take the tracks out. They're still down there so they feel they can dig those up. But as you know, University Avenue right now is two lanes each way. That's going to be reduced to one lane. It's needed because if we look at 94 right now, when traffic is coming from Minneapolis toward St. Paul in the evening it's bumper-to-bumper, five miles an hour. I mean and it's backed up for miles. This LRT is designed to alleviate some of that. We're going to have a problem with 94, even more so than what we have now. So the LRT is going to be – or some form of it – is going to be needed; it's going to be needed.

Q Do you think the additional stations are going to be good for the people that live around here?

A With the three additional stations I believe it will be good. I guess my problem is that those three stations are not being built with the \$987 million. It is a cooperative effort between the City, the federal government, Metropolitan Council and others – there may be 3, 4 different government entities who are going to put up money to build that. And the problem with that is for example with the City – well we know they don't have a great deal of money so is it ever going to happen? I don't know. They've approved the concept of adding three new stations, but the money, so I understand, has not really been dealt with yet. So is it going to happen? We don't know.

Q Thinking about University Avenue as it is today, how would you describe it?

A How would I describe University Avenue? It has so many different facets to so many different people. It's not just the Hubbs. It's not just the University Avenue. It's all of those things, but it's more to others. It's the lifeline of St. Paul to Minneapolis, so to speak. Or St. Paul to the University of Minnesota. It depends upon, in my opinion, the circumstances that you find yourself in at the time you're thinking about University Avenue. If you have a business on University Avenue, it's a transportation area where, you know, so many cars are going up and down each day. If you're a person who lives off University Avenue, you probably hope there's not so much traffic. So you know, you have mixed views and I think it a lot depends upon what it is you're looking at University Avenue to be. For example, I know that there's a lot of people on Grand Avenue who are not happy with Grand Avenue and they live just off of Grand Avenue, and to them that is, they want it to be quiet, they don't want...they want to be able to walk down there and not see a whole bunch of people. But the businesses on Grand Avenue, as I'm sure on University Avenue, they want to see a whole bunch of traffic. So you know, it depends.

Q Stan, if you could just talk about what you would like to see in ten years...If you could dream of what University Avenue would look like ten years from now, what would be your dream?

A I kind of have mixed emotions about University Avenue and what it should look like. In my opinion, over the years it has meant so much to the St. Paul area. It's the lifeline to St. Paul or so to speak, between Minneapolis and St. Paul. It's a very vibrant business area. Our Asian brothers and sisters have done so much to revitalize it and what I see happening is very positive. What I think is going to happen in ten years – what's it gonna look like? What's it gonna be? I'm hoping that it continues the way it's going now. What I see are very positive moves. A lot of people want to be on University Avenue now, whereas before there wasn't so much. But now there is. The thing that concerns me about University Avenue is that the cost of land there continues to go up. Is that going to be an inhibiting factor for people who are small business owners to be on University Avenue? Perhaps, perhaps. If I had my druthers, I would say to the City of St. Paul and the Met Council and Ramsey County – we've got to do some things to help people who want to be on University Avenue to stay on University Avenue or move in on University Avenue. I am not opposed to big box operations. I don't, however...well, I think that's too difficult a statement. I am somewhat opposed to big box operations. They don't tend to have, in my opinion, the same regard for an area that small business owners have. It's like a big box operation like for example Sears – I don't mean to target Sears but if they had a store on University Avenue and they closed it, I don't think it would bother them. They'd go someplace else and open up. A Wal-Mart, for example, does not have, in my opinion, the same kind of concern for the community as a mom and pop store would have. Several years ago we met with the people from Marathon Oil who own Super America. We complained about the store there on Chatsworth and University as being a hangout for people who were pushing drugs or doing things they should not be doing, that were in my opinion and the opinion of many others, dragging the area down. It was sending the wrong message, in my opinion and in the opinion of a lot of other people. Marathon Oil, or Super America told us that they were losing \$1500 a month, so I believe I said or somebody said who was meeting with them – there must have been five or six of us – why don't you close it? Their comment was the LRT is coming. That's valuable land. And at some point in time that place is going to pay for itself over and over and over again. So that was why they kept that store there on University Avenue. I suspect that there are a lot of others who are like Super America who do not have the same kinds of concerns for the neighborhood here as a small store would have.

Q One last question: it's changed a lot in terms of diversity. Can you touch on the diversity issue? Today we see all these different groups living and working together.

A Well, in terms of the number of various groups living in the community – the Somalis, the Asians – generally, the Asians being a big class of people – and others I'm sure, I think it's been a very positive thing for the community. As I said before, we've learned a lot from our Asian brothers and sisters. We've learned some things from the Somali community and I'm sure if you talked to some of the leaders in the Somali community they would tell you they've learned a lot also from being exposed to what we are or what we do in this area. So in general, I think the area – particularly this area, Frogtown and Summit-University – have...it's a lot like Philadelphia. It's a melting pot. And I think we've gotten good things from the Somalis, and from our Asian brothers and sisters and I think we've done some good things and I think these things have been

positive for all the people in this area. I recall 20 years ago, for example...maybe it's been 30 years; time goes by so quickly. When the Asians first started coming in and some of the negative comments that were being made about them in general. Well, those kinds of comments and negative feelings – you don't hear them today. What we hear is the Hmong, the Asians in general, are a very industrious group. They work hard. Some of that has rubbed off on us. Some of us are now willing to work much harder than we did before. So this whole melting pot has been good, in my opinion.

Q Did you want to say something about changing the bus schedules after the LRT is in? Changing from once every half an hour to an hour?

A Yeah the bus thing and there was one other thing that some of the people have expressed – not the younger ones but the older ones perhaps – have expressed some negative feelings about how...and I don't recall exactly what all of those were...I personally have not been actively involved in the LRT. And the reason for that is that there are a number of people in the community who are actively involved in that, much more so than I could. I have given the bulk of my time to working with a group of people called PAC – Partnership Advisory Council – to advise Bethel University what kind of programming and assistance people in the Frogtown/Summit-University area could use from them. Bethel has been very generous with us. We have an office on Victoria and University in a brownstone. We conduct classes out of there – people who want to get an AA degree or a BA degree can go to school there. They don't have to go way out to the Bethel campus in Arden Hills; they can go there. And what we're working on is to try to ensure that whatever the students at the Bethel campus are getting, that the students here are also receiving. Now one thing we found out about Bethel – and I'm sure that some of them have known this for a considerable period of time – but Bethel is a very wealthy school. Many of the students who go there are from affluent families and the families have a lot of wealth. What we found was that a lot of kids in this area don't want to go to Bethel because they feel like they're going to be out of place. You know, here I am a poor kid coming from a poor neighborhood trying to associate with rich kids from rich areas. Well, we're trying to change that culture, that feeling and get more kids involved in going to school out there. I mentioned the AA degree and the BA degrees that you can receive. We've opened that up to adults from the area who maybe, at one time or another, did not have the opportunity to go to school and had to go out and work or whatever. So now we've said, well you can work and attend Bethel and at some point in time we're going to give you credit for your life experiences. So that's working, and people in the area, I think, are getting much more receptive. It does me well to walk through the campus out there - which is just a beautiful campus - and now see a number of young African American kids going to school there whereas when I went to Augsburg some years ago, and Bethel was located on Snelling Avenue, just south of where the HHH Job Corps Center is now – you didn't see any people of color. And now you see quite a few. I should say a few; not as many as we want. But it's not going to happen overnight and we're aware of that. So I think many of us are going to stick around for the long haul, so to speak.

Q I certainly hope so.

A It's been fun. It's been fun. Really. The people who are on the PAC committee are...it's an all-volunteer situation but they're there because they're concerned. They want to do the right thing. And I think we're struggling with what's the right thing, you know? We haven't figured that part out yet, but we're working on that. So given another

short while we're going to see some what I believe to be some very dynamic changes with the philosophy of Bethel. For example, one of the things that I think this was done as a result of the PAC – it's called the FSU PAC – Frogtown/Summit-University PAC – being

in existence our campus pastor is now Laura Bunkers. I've known her before she was born. She lived right up the street. Her name was Williams, Laura Williams and her father was my son's judo instructor for a number of years and just outstanding people. But I dare say that Laura would not be out there now had it not been for the involvement of PAC. So slowly but surely we're making progress. I think we even have a board member or two now that are from the African American community. So we're getting there, but it's going to take time and we cannot change attitudes of some people overnight. We can change behavior, as you know. But what we're trying to do is change attitudes. And I think we're moving towards that.

Q It takes time but at least it seems to be going in the right direction.

A Coming from Minneapolis I have always felt that Minneapolis was...at least the black community in Minneapolis was much more attuned to the problems. We tended to get along or to get involved in the community meetings, to get involved in political things - much more so than in St. Paul. Then when I moved over here, after a few years I got involved with people like Jan and Katie McWatt and a few others who were heavily involved in politics and I discovered that's probably a good way to go. So that's what, that's how I got involved. Has it been beneficial? Yeah, yeah. Quite frankly I would like to see St. Paul's involvement, at least in the African American community, parallel that to what has happened in Minneapolis. I think there's a lot of people who've gotten involved in politics like Yusef Mgeni and a number of others – Quami McDonnell. Quami to me is Jim McDonnell. He lived right down the street, in fact right next to Eljin Baylor when Eljin was playing with the Lakers here and we all played at Oxford playground for a number of years. But a number of people in the community are now discovering that if they want to have an impact on what is happening in their community they have got to get involved. I think we'll know more this coming Tuesday at the precinct caucuses and hopefully people will continue to become involved. I think one of the things that has concerned me for a long time is apathy. People have been concerned about what is going on in their community and when they voiced opinions and said things, nothing has happened. There was a lack of communications that we did not fully appreciate. When you're dealing in the public sector, nothing gets done quickly. People have to study it and they have to...you've got your political stuff that you've got to deal with. So I think people in this community just said, they're not concerned about what's going on with us. Somebody needed to come along and say, yeah they are but here's what's going on. We have to be diligent and keep pushing because if we don't, it's not going to happen. An example of that: I don't think the police...ten years ago, maybe fifteen, were as diligent about what was going on in the community, in the black area here as they were in the areas of Highland Park and others. Well, today I have people say, well I don't want to say anything because nothing's going to happen. And I say, that's not true. Well, I call 'em and they don't come. Well, have you ever considered the fact that they may be out trying to deal with another problem and may not be able to get here right away? And to them, they look at your call and say, well that's...we run into that three or four times an hour. To you, it's a big thing. To them, it may not be such a big thing. If you call and they don't come, call again. If they don't come, call again. Be persistent. That way they know that you are sincere, that you really want something done about this. I think we've got some good people in this area – the Chief was the Western

District Commander – John Harrington, who is now the Chief. His right hand man was Tom Smith, who was Western District Commander, who is now Deputy Chief. Colleen Luna, who is now Western District Commander is very...very much she wants to see things done right. One of the things that the Chief and others have been trying to encourage us to do – if there is a problem, to call them because they don't know if there's a problem unless somebody calls them. So I've been trying to tell people through our block club – if you've got a problem, call.