

Ryan Kidder, graphic designer

Interviewed by Peter Myers at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul,
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Q What are your earliest memories of University Avenue?

A It was a big, busy street. Of course, I moved in, in '91 with my dad and his wife so I was a young kid – probably like six years old or so. So, yeah, just a lot of hustle and bustle but I was too young to really come up with my own feelings of the place. It's just the place you grew up. I have a lot of positive things, experiences with the Avenue, sure.

Q How would you define Frogtown?

A I'd say Frogtown is a place with a lot of pride. One of the first things I remember in my community is, as a small kid, people marching in the streets. I remember that before some of the negative things that would pop in my head. But I never saw that, when I split time between Frogtown and Mac Groveland. You didn't see anybody taking up issues in the streets in Highland Park, you know? So that was something I thought was pretty neat and I'll always remember it for sure. It's kind of that sort of activism and pride in the neighborhood that people in Frogtown have, I think.

Q How do you see University Avenue changing?

A Well, the businesses – some are still there, but I know there's certain corners like Dale and University that are completely, utterly different. You wouldn't even recognize it from the early 90s to this year. You know there was some pretty unflattering businesses on that corner and I know it changed from like an adult theater to then they just bulldozed the corner and it kind of sat vacant for a while. And then it became a community market at some point. I remember that quite well. That was there for a while. I'm not sure what exactly it was between then and the Rondo Library. That was probably the first time I started paying attention again - when I saw this big building being constructed.

Q Describe University Avenue to someone who had never been there.

A I'd use the word eclectic. The stores are just...they're diverse. They cover the gamut from odds and ends to groceries. So like anything you want you can get on the Avenue, for sure. Which is kind of cool. But I'd tell them to check it out and pop in restaurants. There's a lot of different flavors and things to do and people to meet. It's a good experience.

Q How has the avenue changed since you've known it?

A I think certain communities, like some of the Asian immigrants, have really developed the area and just that entrepreneur spirit that they've really grown. Not only restaurants but Asian American Press and I can recall the Hmong building is on University Avenue. They've really taken to, I guess, really building up their community and providing places for shopping, food or anything. You also see a lot of East African folks starting their own businesses and it's just kind of a cool mix.

Q Talk about your work as a graphic artist.

A I got hooked up with NDC and U 7 actually when I came to them for assistance with my small business and I showed them some of the design work that I'd done. And they said, we might have a job for you. So I said, I'll take it. It's been probably the most rewarding work that I've done in my early career so far. Going out to actually meeting the clients. It's not like working in a big ad house or something, where you're doing data entry design. I mean, I'm out there, we're in the community, we're going to these businesses, we're meeting the clients and really asking them, what makes you unique and what do you want to showcase? Rather than working with an in-between person that...I hate to say it, but sometimes we want to exploit their position or something. We really want to do what they see fit in their eyes for their business. So I think that really means a lot, especially as a designer working for the community; that really helped me be who I am today. So I really want to make sure that we're really focusing on what they need to survive not only now, during construction, but in the long run too and give them something that they're proud of and that they feel like they're an active participant in.

Q When you meet with a client, what are their issues they're trying to solve?

A We have a wide range of clients. Some people know exactly what they want and exactly what they don't want and other people that have no experience in marketing, no experience in design or creative processes and how that translates into more profits or more exposure. So some of what we do is almost like creative education or marketing education to kind of say, these are the tools available to you and we try to suggest maybe something like this would help your business and how do you think that fits into your vision of your business?

Q: Why do you think immigrants have been attracted to University Ave?

A That's a good question. You know, I don't know. I'm not an economics expert or anything. I don't know, maybe it's they see other people like them being successful and they want to get in on the action, it seems like the place to be I guess. But I guess if I was a small clothing retailer I wouldn't want to move right into the same building as Wal-Mart, but I'd want to be next to other small businesses too.

Q Do you have a favorite story about University?

A I'd have to say meeting the folks at NDC and U7. I mean, I never knew what was all going on so close to home. And once I got in there and started working with everybody there and working with the clients it's just been...I've learned so much about my community and about economic development and about community organizing and it's really kind of whet my taste for kind of the work I hope to do in my future, really. I've met a lot of fascinating people. Not everybody at NDC is from Frogtown, but they all have a passion for doing right by the people of Frogtown and the people of the Avenue and I find that really reassuring as a young professional that there are people out there that care about small business and care about the changes that are happening.

Qdifferent points of view....

A I've heard it all. Some people say light rail is just the worst thing ever and then other businesses are saying it's going to be great. But yeah, I've heard opinions that run the spectrum of good and bad. But there's a lot of chatter out there about it. You can hear businesses...if you're having lunch somewhere you can hear business owners and people talking about it at the table next to you. If I'm at work at the NDC, there's plenty of talk there about what's going to happen and how it's going to affect businesses. But I think that's indicative of the fact that it's going to mean different things to different people. And inevitably it's going to hurt some businesses and I think it absolutely will help some businesses too. But such is life; it's not all a bed of roses, you know? There's always some bad with the good. It'll be interesting, to say the least.

Q What are your professional or personal dreams for the kind of work you might do five or ten years from now?

A Hopefully I'd like to be doing kind of like, basically grassroots design, you know? Designing from within the community rather than from outside the community via design house or ad agency although I think that would be great, professionally. What's personally more rewarding is sitting down with a client, face-to-face like we are and saying, what do you value? Where do you want to go with your business? And myself being able to help them along that path and use my talents in a positive way. I think I'm really interested in kind of the ethical aspects of branding. A lot of flags have gone up with my work at the NDC about what it means to help businesses with branding and how to do that justly. How can I say it? Like with community development there's a lot of people from the outside that come in and say, we want to change your neighborhood. And you've got to wonder...OK, but why? What are their motives, you know? I don't want to be the designer or the creative that comes into somebody's business and says, I want to change your business. I want it to be this. I want it to be about them. What can we do as an industry – as a creative industry – to help you get to where you want to be? Because I think you see a lot of things being lost in other neighborhoods that could have been I guess highlighted or put a spotlight on rather than redevelop. But it's a tricky process, you know? It's hard to navigate.

Q Frogtown seems to have a very strong grassroots activism. What do you think it is about University Avenue or Frogtown neighborhood that seems to invite citizens to come together?

A I think maybe people recognize the power of togetherness and the power of community. When times are tough you look to your neighbors to help build you back up. And I think when there needs to be a change and you say to your neighbor, tell your neighbor what your fears are and what you want to see different; I think there's a more...less reluctance to not get together. So I think people are more willing and more...I guess that bond is closer, you know? Yeah, it's definitely a different sense of community in Frogtown. It's just a different chemistry, a different vibe, you know? Although there may be more conflicts than other neighborhoods, but that unity is stronger too.

Q How do you see people from all these different races and cultures kind of come together?

A I think generally there's definitely a sense, a strong sense that we are all in this together. Obviously, there's history on the Avenue and sometimes there is a reluctance

or maybe a...maybe I shouldn't say reluctance but a tendency to maybe not exactly trust...OK why are these people coming into my business? What are you trying to do here? So that can be challenging but we try to...that's when we try to really assure them that we want to facilitate what your vision is with your business. And if they don't want to do anything, they don't have to do anything but if you want a website, if you want to re-brand your company in a way that you see fit we've got the tools to help do that.