

# AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE MIDTOWN DISTRICT

RENO, NEVADA



Prepared for  
Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County  
1105 Terminal Way, Suite 108  
Reno, NV 89502  
by  
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AN ORAL HISTORY OF  
**THE MIDTOWN DISTRICT**  
RENO, NEVADA

Featuring interviews with

Jack Bacon, Jonathan Bascom, Mark Bonnenfant, Sadie Bonnette, Tammy Borde,  
Bernie Carter, Christian Christensen, Kasey Christensen, Neal Cobb, Randy Collins,  
Paul Doege, Jerry Fenwick, Ivan Fontana, Joe Granata, Jack Hawkins, Tim Healion,  
Christine Kelly, Renee Lauderback, Jan Leggett, Barrie Lynn, Duke Morin,  
Barry O'Sullivan, Rader Rollins, Hillary Schieve, Jessica Schneider, George Siri, Jr.,  
Jeff Siri, Sam Sprague, Peter Stremmel, Angela Watson

Alicia Barber, Ph.D., interviewer

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# CONTENTS

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Preface .....	iv
Introduction.....	v
Chronicler Biographies .....	vii
Chapter 1: Jack Bacon .....	1
Chapter 2: Jonathan Bascom.....	18
Chapter 3: Mark Bonnenfant.....	39
Chapter 4: Tammy Borde.....	61
Chapter 5: Bernie Carter .....	78
Chapter 6: Christian and Kasey Christensen.....	101
Chapter 7: Neal Cobb.....	128
Chapter 8: Randy Collins.....	153
Chapter 9: Paul Doege .....	170
Chapter 10: Jerry Fenwick .....	194
Chapter 11: Ivan Fontana and Sadie Bonnette.....	217
Chapter 12: Joe Granata .....	245
Chapter 13: Jack Hawkins .....	270
Chapter 14: Tim Healion .....	283
Chapter 15: Christine Kelly .....	314
Chapter 16: Renee Lauderback and Duke Morin.....	331
Chapter 17: Jan Leggett .....	357
Chapter 18: Barrie Lynn .....	378
Chapter 19: Barry O’Sullivan .....	398
Chapter 20: Rader Rollins.....	426
Chapter 21: Hillary Schieve.....	443
Chapter 22: Jessica Schneider.....	452
Chapter 23: George Siri, Jr. and Jeff Siri.....	473
Chapter 24: Sam Sprague.....	489
Chapter 25: Peter Stremmel .....	503
Chapter 26: Angela Watson.....	517

## PREFACE

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The Midtown History Project, of which these oral histories are a component, was initiated by the Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County (RTC) in 2015 as part of its Virginia Street Bus RAPID Transit Extension Project. That broader RAPID project aims to create connectivity between the University of Nevada, Reno, downtown Reno, and Midtown, encourage economic development, enhance safety, and improve livability in the Virginia Street corridor. Its primary transit-oriented elements include connecting RAPID to the University, improving safety for all modes of transportation, correcting ADA sidewalk deficiencies, and improving traffic operations.

Led by professional historian Alicia Barber, PhD, the history project consisted of archival research, oral history interviews, and the creation of historical entries for Reno Historical, the Reno history website and mobile app hosted by the Special Collections department, UNR Libraries at [renohistorical.org](http://renohistorical.org). Participants in the oral history interviews were photographed by Patrick Cummings. The research materials, stories, and photographs gathered through the Midtown History Project will enable the RTC to more effectively integrate the analysis of historical and cultural resources into the broader corridor project by documenting the historical context as well as the significance of this area to Reno's history and development.

A decision was made to focus the history project on Midtown, as the section of Virginia Street deemed most in need of research and documentation. At the onset of the oral history project, research was conducted to identify significant sites and themes worthy of exploration, as well as prospective chroniclers whose firsthand experiences could illuminate those topics. Interviews began in April 2015 and extended through April 2016. Over the course of those twelve months, thirty individuals participated in interviews about their firsthand experiences and knowledge related to the Midtown area, past and present.

After the oral histories were recorded and transcribed, each participant was given the opportunity to review and approve his or her transcript before its inclusion in this volume, which was deposited in the Special Collections archive of the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries in 2016. There, the full audio recordings and release forms are available upon request. Excerpts from the oral histories also appear on the Reno Historical app ([renohistorical.org](http://renohistorical.org)), accompanying entries for the specific sites to which they relate.

The transcripts in this collection have been lightly edited for readability, while not altering the meaning or intention of what was said. While accurately reflecting the oral history recordings on which they are based, it should be kept in mind that these transcripts are records of the remembered past, and we do not claim that the recollections are entirely free of error. Accordingly, they should be approached with the same prudence exercised when consulting any other kind of primary source of historical information, from newspaper accounts to diaries. All statements made here constitute the remembrance or opinions of the individuals interviewed, and not the opinions of the RTC, the interviewer, or the archival repository in which they are found.



# INTRODUCTION

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While “Midtown” is a relatively new term for the popular Reno district it denotes, the neighborhood itself has been a busy commercial and residential area for nearly a century. Bounded by Liberty Street and Plumb Lane, Plumas Street and Holcomb Avenue, today’s Midtown District is a place of innovation and revitalization, but also of longstanding history and architectural charm.

Virginia Street itself dates to Reno’s founding in 1868 and has been central to the community ever since. A bustling thoroughfare from the start, the street ran perpendicular to the transcontinental railroad line and pointed toward its namesake of Virginia City, where many early travelers were headed. With the relocation of the University of Nevada from Elko to Reno in 1885, North Virginia Street linked the commercial district to the fledgling campus on the hill.

In Reno’s center, Virginia Street was long populated by a diverse mix of resident-oriented businesses, from banks, restaurants, and theaters to popular retail institutions like Woolworth’s, Sears, and the Gray Reid Wright department store. After the state legalized gambling in 1931, it also became the center of the city’s casino district, crowned by the iconic Reno arch. A few blocks to the south, the Virginia Street Bridge over the Truckee River, constructed in 1905, became a recognized symbol of what was known until the 1960s as the Divorce Capital of the World. Here, the street is lined by numerous civic and architectural landmarks like the Riverside Hotel, Washoe County Court House, historic downtown Post Office, and Pioneer Theater-Auditorium, all of which are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Further south, Virginia Street quietly stretched out toward Carson City and points beyond. Prior to the construction of U.S. Route 395/Interstate 580, it served as the north-south highway through town, and for decades, Plumb Lane marked the southern edge of urban development. To its north, South Virginia Street was filled with comfortable single-family homes fronted by grassy front lawns and abundant trees.

Change arrived in the 1920s with the arrival of South Virginia Street’s first commercial buildings. Some were single-story neighborhood markets. Others were service stations, cropping up to cater to the increasing numbers of automobiles traveling along the highway. Many were two stories high, with shops or cafés on the ground floor and apartments above. Almost all were made of brick, Reno’s signature building material, and several were designed by Nevada’s premier architect, Frederic DeLongchamps.

As Reno grew and its casinos expanded, resident-oriented businesses increasingly sought out the more spacious environs of South Virginia Street. From the 1930s through 1960s, the corridor gradually transformed into a bustling urban thoroughfare, with charming family-oriented motels joining the landscape in the 1950s. Before long, commercial buildings outnumbered houses, and residents flocked to the area’s shops, restaurants, and services. In 1965, the Nevada Department of Transportation embarked upon a major project to widen the street to accommodate more vehicular traffic, in the process reducing the width of the sidewalks considerably.

With the completion of U.S. Route 395 several blocks to the east, South Virginia Street instantly changed from a highway to a surface street, bypassed by the majority of through traffic. Shopping patterns changed as well. Shopper’s Square opened on the former Casazza Ranch on the northeast corner of Virginia Street and Plumb Lane in November 1964. That same month, ground was broken for the Park

Lane Centre, a much larger open-air mall on the other side of Plumb that opened in March of 1967. In later years, Meadowood Mall would open further south on a vast expanse of former ranch land. The area now known as Midtown went into a period of decline, not abandoned but certainly neglected, no longer oriented toward pedestrians, tourists, or everyday shoppers.

The revival of this established neighborhood began to accelerate at a somewhat unlikely time, coinciding with the nationwide economic recession that began in 2008. Attracted by the area's central location and relatively inexpensive rents, entrepreneurs of various types began to move into many of the district's older commercial buildings, opening restaurants, bars, and specialty shops. Today, longstanding businesses stand alongside these newer arrivals, many of which have already become iconic destinations.

This oral history volume contains interviews with thirty individuals who have firsthand recollections of this area. Some of their experiences go back more than half a century, like those of George Siri, Jr., whose father, George Siri, Sr., opened Reno Frozen Food Lockers (now the Ponderosa Meat Company) in 1947. Others are more recent, like those of Jessica Schneider, who opened Junkee Clothing Exchange in the historic Shoshone Coca-Cola Bottling Company building in 2008. Several, like Rader Rollins of Statewide Lighting and Randy Collins of College Cyclery, have owned family-run businesses on the Virginia Street corridor for decades. Although each experience is unique, they connect and intertwine, weaving a rich tapestry of stories about a neighborhood that is constantly changing, yet benefits from a timeless appeal based largely on its diversity and pedestrian-scale charm.

Alicia Barber, Ph.D.  
September 2016

# CHRONICLER BIOGRAPHIES

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- Jack Bacon                      Jack Bacon moved to Reno with his family in 1975 and founded an art gallery the following year, at age eighteen. In 1998 he purchased the building at 516 South Virginia Street, where he operated Jack Bacon & Company, dealing in picture framing, custom book publishing, historical autographs, and appraisals. He sold the building in 2012.
- Jonathan Bascom              Reno native Jonathan Bascom got his start in the coffee business in 1998, when he took ownership of a coffee cart at Washoe Medical Center. In 2002, he opened Dreamer’s Coffee House at the Riverside Artist Lofts. In 2012, he reopened Dreamer’s at 701 S. Virginia Street.
- Mark Bonnenfant              Mark Bonnenfant’s grandfather, Fred Bonnenfant, purchased Peerless Cleaners at 698 Forest Street in 1949. After the death of Fred, Sr., Mark’s father, also named Fred, ran the business for many years. Today, Mark manages the family business in the original historic building.
- Tammy Borde                      Tammy Borde bought the Chocolate Walrus in 2004 and moved the business to its current site at 1278 S. Virginia Street. She also owns the Sierra Nevada Chocolate Company at 1290 S. Virginia Street and for a time operated Lulu’s Chic Boutique at 1298 S. Virginia Street.
- Bernie Carter                      Bernie Carter grew up in eastern Nevada and moved to Reno in 2000 after time in Oregon, Las Vegas, Colorado, and Genoa. He began to purchase property in the Midtown area in 2008, starting with the building now housing Carter Bros. Hardware Store, operated by his brother, Tim. Carter’s other Midtown projects include the Sticks development and numerous rental properties.
- Christian Christensen  
and Kasey Christensen      Christian and Kasey Christensen met in Hawaii in 2000. Christian, a Reno native, worked his way up in numerous kitchens before becoming a chef himself. They were married in 2006 and founded the restaurant Súp at 719 S. Virginia Street in August 2007. The couple moved the restaurant just up the street, to a renovated historic bungalow at 669 S. Virginia Street, in 2011.
- Neal Cobb                          Neal Cobb’s father, Jerry, founded a number of local businesses including Modern Photo, a shop that moved into the building at 520 S. Virginia Street in the early 1950s. His father also ran Modern Radio &

TV and the KNEV-FM radio station out of 538 S. Virginia Street. Neal worked in both buildings with his family and shares his own early memories of the neighborhood.

Randy Collins

Randy Collins moved to Reno with his family in 1963. In 1973, he began working at College Cyclery, then located on Arlington Avenue. In 1975, the shop moved to its current location at 622 S. Virginia Street, and Collins became a partner and ultimately the sole owner.

Paul Doege

Born and raised in Cleveland, Paul Doege moved to Reno in 1980 and that December, purchased Recycled Records, which had been founded in 1978 at 1440 South Wells Avenue. He moved the business several times, to South Virginia & Kietzke, then to Keitkze & Moana, and finally, in 2012, to 822 S. Virginia Street in Midtown. He also had branches in Sparks and near UNR.

Jerry Fenwick

In 1946, Jerry Fenwick's father, O.T. "Fen" Fenwick, moved his family from California to Reno where he managed the Sherwin-Williams paint store then located at 1460 S. Virginia Street, current site of the Stremmel Gallery. Fenwick shares his own memories of the neighborhood.

Ivan Fontana  
and Sadie Bonnette

Sadie Bonnette, originally from Vallejo, California, and Ivan Fontana, born in Italy, met in Reno. Together with a partner, they opened Midtown Eats at 719 S. Virginia Street, in 2011, soon becoming its sole owners. They opened the cocktail lounge Death & Taxes in a duplex at 26 Cheney Street in 2013.

Joe Granata

Joe Granata's grandfather moved to Reno around 1904. Joe was born in 1937, and as a child, lived for a time in the Giraudo Apartments at 717 S. Virginia Street. As an adult, he worked as a firefighter and spent a great deal of time in the Southside Fire Station once located at 532 S. Virginia Street. Now a retired fire captain, he shares his firsthand memories of the Midtown area.

Jack Hawkins

Jack Hawkins grew up in Missouri and earned an architecture degree from the University of Kansas. After several years in Australia and Phoenix, he founded Hawkins & Associates in Reno in 1994. With offices at 1400 S. Virginia Street, he has worked on numerous Midtown-area projects, including the Stremmel Gallery, Lulou's, 8 on Center, and 777 Center Street.

Tim Healion

Tim Healion opened the legendary coffee shop Deux Gros Nez with his partner John Jesse at 249 California Avenue in 1985. The two later opened the Pneumatic Diner, and eventually Healion helmed Deux Gros

Nez alone until its closure in 2006. He also founded the popular bike race, the Tour de Nez. In 2014 Healion helped open the Laughing Planet Café at 650 Tahoe Street.

Christine Kelly

Christine Kelly began to work at Sundance Books at the store's original location at 1155 West 4<sup>th</sup> Street. Eventually she became the store manager and then owner. In 2011 the store, now called Sundance Books & Music, moved to the historic Levy House at 121 California Avenue, where Kelly is also publisher and executive editor of the publishing company she founded, Baobab Press.

Renee Lauderback  
and Duke Morin

Renee Lauderback and her father, Duke Morin, have both operated businesses in the historic Martha Wingfield House at 735 S. Center Street. Duke was first, using the house as offices for his contracting solar heating, and roofing companies. Later, Renee opened her own company, General Gutter, here, and in 2014 began to convert the entire house into the Mountain Music Parlor.

Jan Leggett

Jan Leggett's grandfather, Sidney Leggett, was one of Reno's early advertising men. He ran a billboard business at 1039 S. Virginia Street and three motels: the Oxbow Motor Lodge, Ho Hum Motel, and Sutro Motel. Jan shares his memories of the properties and the neighborhood.

Barrie Lynn

Realtor Barrie Lynn leads historic tours of the Midtown and Wells Avenue neighborhoods for the Historic Reno Preservation Society. Owner of several historic properties including her own home, she has conducted extensive research on the area and its residents. A passionate advocate for preservation, Lynn led the effort to establish the Wells Avenue Conservation District in 2013.

Barry O'Sullivan

Born in Reno, Barry O'Sullivan recalls spending time at his grandparents' house at 706 Holcomb Avenue, where he now lives. His father began to purchase houses in the Midtown area for rentals in the late 1950s and also constructed some new apartments. Barry took over the property management business after his father passed away in 2003. He is an expert on the neighborhood.

Rader Rollins

In 1974, Rader Rollins moved from Las Vegas to Reno, where his family had opened Statewide Lighting at 1311 S. Virginia Street the previous year. He began working in the store while still a student at UNR, eventually becoming its owner. He discusses the changes to the area and the expansion of the family business into Statewide Lighting & Accents.

- Hillary Schieve opened a Plato's Closet franchise at South Virginia Plaza at the corner of South Virginia and Mt. Rose Streets in 2007, and a Clothes Mentor franchise next door in 2011. She served on Reno City Council from 2012 to 2014, and in 2014 was elected Mayor of Reno. She discusses the early years of Midtown and her experiences as a businessperson and civic leader.
- Jessica Schneider grew up in Gardnerville where her first business was called the Jitterbug. Once in Reno, she ran an interior design studio called Decorating with Style from 2000 to 2008. She opened Junkee Clothing Exchange at 960 S. Virginia Street in 2008 and was instrumental in the early branding of Reno. She opened Sippee's New and Used Kids Clothes in 2013.
- In 1954, George Siri, Jr. bought his father's interest in Reno Frozen Food Lockers, the storage and butchering business his father, George Siri, Sr., had founded with Willie Carano at 1264 S. Virginia Street. In 1974, George Jr. partnered with Don O'Day and Bruno Mastelotto to create the Ponderosa Meat Company. His son, Jeff Siri, also worked in the business while growing up.
- Originally from Fernley, Sam Sprague moved to the Reno-Sparks area in 1969 and later entered the U.S. Army. He founded Micano Home and Garden in 2003 at 1350 S. Virginia Street after traveling around Mexico to purchase art and handcrafted goods. He was a participant in the early meetings that led to the formation of the Midtown District.
- Peter Stremmel moved with his family from California to Reno when he was just a child. His father, Bill Stremmel, was in the horse-booking business and founded Stremmel Motors at 1492 S. Virginia Street in the mid-1950s. Peter founded the Stremmel Gallery at 1466 S. Virginia Street in the early 1970s. He is now the Executive Director of the much-expanded Stremmel Gallery.
- Originally from southern California, Angela Watson moved to Truckee in 1992 and to Reno in 1994, when she purchased Black Hole Body Piercing. She later moved the business to 675 South Virginia Street from its original location on California Avenue and around 2003 moved to its current location in a renovated house at 912 S. Virginia Street.

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## JACK BACON

Owner, Jack Bacon & Company, formerly at 516 S. Virginia Street



Jack Bacon at his home in Reno, 2016. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Jack Bacon moved to Reno with his family in 1975 and founded an art gallery the following year, at age eighteen. In 1998 he purchased the building at 516 South Virginia Street, where he operated Jack Bacon & Company, dealing in picture framing, custom book publishing, historical autographs, and appraisals. He sold the building in 2012.*

Alicia Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is November 12, 2015, and I'm in Reno, Nevada, with Jack Bacon, who was the owner of the building at 516 South Virginia Street, to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Mr. Bacon, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?



Jack Bacon: Yes.

Barber: Thank you so much. I'd like to begin by talking a little bit about your background. Can you tell me where you were born and where you grew up?

Bacon: I was born in Southern California in Loma Linda. I moved to Reno when I was seventeen in 1975.

Barber: And what brought your family here?

Bacon: My father came to Reno and became a developer. He developed some apartment complexes here, so I came to work for him. My parents split up. My mother stayed in Southern California and eventually moved here, so she lives here now. So that's what brought me.

Barber: What's your father's name?

Bacon: Jack Bacon. [laughs] As is my son's.

Barber: Were you already out of school at the time?

Bacon: Yes. Well, I finished my last year of high school at Reno High here, and I went to TMCC for about a year and I just couldn't settle down, so I started my art gallery business when I was eighteen. So that's how I got going.

Barber: Tell me a little bit about that. How did you start that business? Did you have a physical space?

Bacon: Yes. I had worked for another shop in town called the Frame Shop. Francis and Shirley Rae were the owners, and I worked for them for about a year, and I really liked being surrounded by the artwork and so on.

My father and his two partners put up the money for us to open up a frame shop of our own, so we had a space over in Sparks. It was on Greenbrae. We were there about a year, and then we moved to Plumb Lane for about seventeen years. That's when it really took off, when we moved into Reno.

Barber: What was the name of that business?

Bacon: Frame Up.

Barber: So it was purely framing? It was custom framing?

Bacon: No, we represented quite a few artists at the time, and it was a perfect time to get into business because we got to know a lot of the artists locally and got to know a lot of the people. Reno was still kind of a smallish community. It really opened a lot of doors for me as I progressed into my publishing career and my other pursuits in autographs and appraising and so on. But my relationship with the artists that

we represented at the time really was a lifelong bond, and quite a few of them have passed on now and I miss them very much, but we had a big impact on each other over the forty years.

Barber: Can you tell me about a few of them? Were they affiliated with the university or was it kind of separate from that?

Bacon: Well, I don't know about the affiliations. Lyle Ball was one of the prominent ones. We had several showings of his artwork. The very first book I published was a book of his artwork. It was a limited edition book. We had a long association with him. We published some of his prints, so we were quite active with him.

Mary Chadwell is another significant artist we worked with. She just passed away in the last few years, in her nineties. I also published a book of her miniature paintings, and it's a miniature book as well, called *Mary Chadwell Miniatures*. And we worked with Pat Bergstrom, who has done some significant things. She did all of the portraits of the Prospectors' presidents that hang in their club rooms, almost all of them. I think the last few, she didn't. But Ruth Hilts is another extremely significant local artist that we worked with and admire very much. I'm probably leaving people out; there were quite a few of them.

Barber: Did it seem at the time that there were very many other places to show art in town?

Bacon: Well, Stremmel has been around a long time. I'm not sure why I clicked with these artists in our gallery. It was just a good fit in the community. People liked coming to the open houses and coming there on a regular basis to look at the artwork. It was kind of a Who's Who of Reno at the time, from politicians to top business people and so on. It was a great time, and we got to know everyone, so it opened a lot of doors.

Barber: Your location when you were on Plumb, was that in a building that's still there?

Bacon: Part of the building is still there. The part where we were is gone. At Lakeside Plaza, where the Albertson's was, the part we were in was torn down. And that's when we moved, right before that.  
[laughs]

Barber: Were they planning to build something else there?

Bacon: Well, they moved the Albertson's back away from the street to give them more parking, so it took a little bit of the building with it. I think they only tore down one or two stalls, which happened to include one we were in. But it was time to move, anyway.

Barber: Was it? So where did you move at that point?

Bacon: We moved to the pink shopping center, Southwest Pavilion, south of town. And that was pretty far out at that time, so it was a struggle, a little bit of a struggle, but our clients were extremely loyal and took care of us, so that was a huge blessing, and we kept doing publishing and doing art shows.

I became partners with another shop in town at one point, as I was trying to move into the appraisal side of the business more and more, and that didn't work out the way we wanted it to, so we broke up. We had purchased the building on Virginia Street. I ended up owning it. I think I bought it in 1998 and did picture framing out of there on a more limited basis, mainly for my established clientele. We had open houses for artists and we did receptions for the books that we published. Sometimes we'd combine the two. I've got some photographs of some of those receptions for you that you'll like. And they were nice. They were great parties. We had them all catered. Washoe Steakhouse always did a great job for us. Those were fun open houses, especially in the winter. [laughs]

Barber: Why in the winter?

Bacon: Well, it was just cozy, and the way the building looks with the style of windows, you could light it up properly, and it got dark early in the evening and you could see the people inside and having a good time with all the artwork. It was a really special feel in there. Those are the things I'll miss about the building, that's for sure.



Jack Bacon & Company, 516 South Virginia Street. Photo courtesy of Jack Bacon.

Barber: So initially the publishing that you were doing was specifically works of art and then you got into publishing different types of books after that?

Bacon: Yes. I'd always had an interest in historical autographs from when I was a teenager, and we incorporated that into our business. We sold autographs of historical figures, always have. And as the publishing progressed, the direction I wanted to go in was publishing limited edition books signed by prominent people, with the market being collectors of rare books and special beautifully bound books, that kind of thing. So we were doing two things, publishing local artists and also doing books.

One of the first books we did was with President Ford. He gave an address at Butte College—I don't remember what year it was; it was probably in the eighties, late eighties—on his views on the War Powers Act being unconstitutional. A good friend of mine put the event on, and I suggested that they do a book to raise money for the college, and they asked me if I could do that and I told them I could. So that's how I did my first limited edition signed collectible book. This was President Ford. I've done two books with Ford and enjoyed my relationship with him very much.

That's how it got started, and then as we progressed, some of the public figures who knew about the quality of the books and how they were handled sort of sought that out. So we started catering to some people who wanted full access to control of their books. They didn't want a big publisher telling them what to do, and so we solved that problem. And that opened the door for some really great books that we were able to do that a small publisher wouldn't ordinarily get to do. I'm very proud of it. I think we've published almost fifty books. It's about forty-six or forty-seven books since 1983.

Barber: And several more political figures were included in that, right?

Bacon: Yes. Paul Laxalt, U.S. senator and governor from Nevada. Moya Lear, who was a very prominent philanthropist here, and wife of the creator of the Learjet. That was a fascinating friendship to have. You learn a lot about someone when you publish their autobiography, and I've found that we've commonly become very good friends, so those are things I'm very grateful for.

Barber: When you talked about having control of all parts of the process, did you actually do the designing and the printing as well for those books?

Bacon: My role has been to design the books, sort of orchestrate the structure of the book. In a very few cases, I was involved in editing and suggestions, ideas for what could be done, and then orchestrating the printing and binding and in some cases, the distribution of the books. A lot of the people I've published wanted to have books available for when they made appearances in public, to sell or hand out copies, so we filled that need.

Barber: So they were pretty small runs, usually?

Bacon: Yes, usually we'd do about a thousand books. In the case of Karl Breckenridge, we keep printing more, so he's an active author. People like him very much, and he sells a lot of books, which is nice to see.

Barber: You really have had a couple different branches to the business. You've had figures who are not from the Reno area, but then you really have done a lot of specialized books on Reno and Nevada.

Bacon: Yes. I did a book with Buzz Aldrin on the fortieth anniversary of the moon landing. It was a book of photographs and his comments from the mission. It was a beautiful book, all bound in silver leather, sheepskin, lambskin like you would make a woman's purse out of. It was just a gorgeous book, and he signed all the copies, and we see those being sold all around the country now. I always admired Buzz Aldrin, so it was a great opportunity, and he was happy with the book.

It has been all over the place, but the books I've done with Guy Clifton have been significant. His book on Jack Dempsey was great. He did one on Jim Jeffries, but I didn't publish that. That was through the rodeo or newspaper. And the last one on the history of the Prospectors Club was a really great book.

Barber: That's just coming out this year, right?

Bacon: Yes, in January.

Barber: Publishing, especially independent publishing, is a notoriously difficult business. It seems like it can be very economically challenging to get profits that are needed.

Bacon: Yes, it can be. And in some cases, in my publishing, that's not the point of the book. It's to make it available. Some people have a few copies made for family distribution. There are a lot of reasons why people would want to have a nice book made, but every once in a while one takes off. It's a very satisfying thing for the authors as well, especially their first book. To go through the process and have it come to fruition, it's a great feeling. I've enjoyed that.

Barber: You've talked about the building on South Virginia Street. Did the business with the name Jack Bacon & Company start as you moved into the South Virginia Street property?

Bacon: Yes. When I split up with the other business, I wanted to make sure that my name was attached to the new one so people knew where I was, and that was a simple way to do that, and I'm glad I did it.

Barber: Did you look around at a lot of other places in town trying to decide where to locate? I wonder how you came across this building.

Bacon: We looked at a few places. What's the name of the Italian restaurant that was on the corner of Moana and Virginia? Is it Two Guys from Italy?

Barber: I'm not sure.

Bacon: I think it was Two Guys from Italy. We looked at that building. It was a little more than we could spend. The one we ended up with at 516 South Virginia was a little smaller than we needed, but it would work. We actually had some plans drawn up to add on to the back of it, like the current owners are doing. We never did it, of course. But it worked out well for me. We had a small cutting room in the back, and the gallery was big enough. When we had an open house, if it got too busy, it spilled over into the back parking lot and nobody minded that. We could do rotational viewing of artwork and it worked out pretty well.

Barber: This building, I think, dates to about 1930, and it had three different storefronts or three front doors on the building. Were they separate storefronts when you went into the building? Did you have to knock down walls?

Bacon: No. When I got the building, it had been owned by Walt Collins, who had the Board of Trade across the street, and the Marie Callender's franchise in Reno, and the 516 location was sort of their center of operation for those businesses. They had redone the interior of the building. The only working door was the center one, so the other two, the ones on the right and left, were false doors. They were nailed closed, to put it simply. But it was well done. They had taken out all the asbestos, and so I didn't really need to do anything, just move my desk in. It was nice. It was very comfortable in there. The most comfortable I've ever been in my workspace was in that building.

The Walt Collins connection is one that a lot of people in Reno will remember. I didn't know him. I do remember the Board of Trade.

Barber: Was that a restaurant?



The building in 1986, when owned by Walt Collins. Nevada Historical Society photo.

Bacon: Yes. It was a very busy place downtown in its time, when it seemed like the economy was more vibrant downtown and everybody met there, the stock people and the real estate people. It was a mover-and-shaker's place to go. Then after that, I think it was owned by Adele's.

Barber: Oh, that's still a restaurant space today.

Bacon: Yes. You know the place now?

Barber: Yes.

Bacon: I can't remember what's in there now, because I don't go by there often enough.

Barber: I think it's called The Bridge.

Bacon: The Bridge, that sounds right. So Adele's owned it for a while, I ate there, and then I think they decided just to have one location in Carson City and be content with that. So then it changed a few times after that, and I can't remember all of them. That's another research project, I guess.

Barber: So Collins was selling that building and locating somewhere else?

Bacon: Right. He sold it to a man from Nebraska who had won a lottery, who had come to Reno and bought two or three buildings. I don't really know for sure, but he had taken this money that he'd won and made some real estate investments.

One day, my father—I'm not sure I should tell this story, but I'll tell you and we can talk about it. One day my father was playing golf with one of his buddies, and the man said to him, "Did you make an offer on my building at 516 South Virginia?"

He said, "No. That must be my son Jack Bacon."

And he said, "Well, somebody else made a higher offer, but since you're my golf buddy, I'm going to let him have it." [laughs] So I think that's called the good ol' boy network. I'm not sure that's something I want printed, but there it is. Anyway, that's how that happened. I know the other offer was five thousand higher, so there you are. That's how we lucked onto that.

Barber: So it was in pretty good condition as an office space then when you moved in?

Bacon: Yes.

Barber: Did people use the front door when you were running it, or did people come in the back?

Bacon: I tried to initially get everybody to start using the back. We had to go through a little training period, but it worked, and they loved coming in the back. There have been times when Reno has been less safe, and keeping the front locked was probably a good idea. I know that some of the other businesses who had been in there, who had employees unsupervised, kept the front doors locked. We had a buzzer. The buzzer was still in there when I left.



My clients never knew who was going to be in there when they walked in. Could be the governor, could be a senator. It was kind of amazing. It was a wonderful time for me. It was a great time in Reno. It was exciting. You never knew who was going to call on the phone because of the book publishing, and it was just great. I miss that part.

Barber: I'd love to hear some stories about some of the events you had in there, anything that is especially memorable to you.

Bacon: You have to have more than an hour. [laughter] But it really was that way. I'll give you one example. We published a book called *Legends*, a book of photographs of famous people who had been to Reno for one reason or another, and it went all the way back to Will James. We put in portrait photographs of each person, and every other page was somebody who is still living. We had Clark Gable, who is obviously gone, and Marilyn Monroe, but in between were other entertainers and writers and so on who'd been to Reno. And there were fifty people who autographed those books, and the proceeds went to the Boys & Girls Club. It was a great project.

I asked Jay Leno if he would write the foreword to the book because he understood celebrity and loyalty to causes like that, and he seemed like a good pick, and he was somebody I admired. I had written him a letter, and one day he called my office. I pick up the phone and it's Jay Leno. [laughs] I tried and tried to talk him into it, and he said, no, it was a conflict. He didn't want to be seen as a legend. That was his explanation. I said, "Well, I'm not making you a legend. I'm asking you to write about them."

He said, "Well, it's a perception in Hollywood. I don't want to go there. But is there anything I can do for you?"

I said, "Well, we have an auction every year at the Boys & Girls Club." So, at any rate, he set up four tickets for a taping of *The Tonight Show* and hotels and the whole bit, so we auctioned that off the next year. He's a good guy.

But you never knew who was going to call on the phone. It was like that a lot, so I had fun, still have fun.

Barber: Did you have much of a staff? Who worked with you?

Bacon: I usually had just a picture framer and I did have one part-time secretary who worked with me. My wife did a lot, too, so usually I did most of it myself. That's why after forty years I was ready to get out of the retail part of it.

Barber: Can you walk me through it a little bit? If we walked in the back door, what would we see and how did you have things arranged around you, as people walked in there?

Bacon: I didn't do a lot to the building. If you walked in the back door, there was a tiny sort of a kitchenette where staff could have their lunch or something, and the restroom was there, and on the other side was our cutting room on the left. Then you would walk into the main room, which was our gallery. We had two big tables in the middle of the gallery for putting frames together. When we had an art show, we just put nice tablecloths on them and they were serving tables for wine and cheese and all the usual things.

Then if you turned right and walked north in the building, you'd pass the entry. There was a nice little foyer that had the same kind of wood-framed panes, like the windows were, with the squares of glass. That's where they had the buzzer, so it was kind of a buffer zone for somebody who might come in. It was pretty.

Then you would take one step up, and I think that's because of the three sections of the building. There was a step-up that couldn't be fixed. So then you would enter my office, and that was where Walt Collins had his office. It was just a real nice, cozy room—it had a big, beautiful built-in bookcase, which was perfect for my reference books. I moved in there, and it was very comfortable.

I sat facing west at my desk, and I could look out onto Virginia Street. When they put in the men's club across the street, it sort of changed the ambiance of the night, the warm and fuzzy night scene there. That sign just blasted light into the building, and even the blinds didn't work. I've got a photograph from the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* that reminds me of it, where the kid's looking out through the blinds and the light is coming in. It's pretty close, so you can get that mental image. [laughs]

Barber: Do you remember when the club went in, or just when they put the sign up? Had the club always been there or was there something else over there, just the hotel?

Bacon: Well, it was the Ponderosa Hotel. I forget the name of the owner of the club, but they owned two or three in town. It was kind of a rude awakening to have that sign put in there, especially after the city had banned billboards in Reno. I wasn't happy about that. And the images were a little shady, and driving your kids by there wasn't the best thing in the world, so I sympathized with people who were upset about that. But, at any rate, we managed.

Barber: Did you run your appraisal business out of that same office, too? We haven't talked about the appraisal business, and I'm kind of curious how that started.

Bacon: I wasn't doing as many appraisals, but I did do them there, yes. I didn't start doing a lot of appraisals until after I sold the building. I kind of shifted gears, and no longer did the framing, so that freed me up to do that. I have published books since I sold the building, so I just do both now.

Barber: What year did you sell the building?

Bacon: We owned it sixteen years from '98. So, what's this, 2015? Yes, so about 2012 or 2013. It might have been 2012, right, December 31<sup>st</sup>, that Mike Cox bought it. Then he kept it for about a year and then resold it. I don't think he was ever able to find a renter that pleased him. He obviously wasn't in a hurry to rent it out, and I knew he'd entertained several ideas. Looks like the right thing has gone in there for now.

I think I was the longest owner of the building at sixteen years. After I did the research, I think the longest business that I identified was Vic's Barber Shop, who went in around 1940. It went out in '54. Am I right about that? If you look at the building, if you're on the front sidewalk and you look down the left side wall outside, you can see the barber stripes are still there. Somewhere I have a photograph of that. It's kind of hard to photograph, but it's there. There used to be a barber pole there when there wasn't a motel right next to it.

Barber: Do you know about some of the other tenants that have been in the building over time? You're right, there's been a lot of turnover, especially with three storefronts.

Bacon: Yes. I kind of prided myself on having it for so long. But Vic's sort of fell off the planet. I'm not sure what happened to him. I hope he didn't work too hard as a barber.

Barber: I'll try to track him down.

Bacon: World Photo was very interesting. It wasn't Harry's Business Machines, was it, that was in the middle?

Barber: No. I think there was a Friden.

Bacon: Yes, there was a business machine place in the center.

Barber: There was a music store, a piano and organ company in the forties, lots of different things.

Bacon: When I was in high school—I graduated from Reno High in '76, so it had to be that year—there was a company called Flowers of Extinction. It was the strangest thing. And they would sell dried flower arrangements that they had recycled from other events. [laughs] You can interpret that any way you want to. They didn't last too long.

Barber: That was in this building?

Bacon: It was, and I remember seeing it. Also somebody brought me a painting, an oil painting, a small one, of a building that looked just like 516 that I was told was identical to it and was right next door. And you'll have to check this another way, but it had a hamburger place in it, and it was where early on kids from Reno High School would go for lunch. That's all I know about it.

Barber: Right next door which direction, do you think?

Bacon: North.

Barber: Before the motel?

Bacon: Right. It's like they built two of them, but I've never been able to confirm that any other way, but the painting looked like that was true. And I did know the name of the hamburger place at one time, and you might be able to find that out.

Barber: Okay. I'll look into that.

Bacon: Karl Breckenridge might know that one.

Barber: So tell me about the neighbors. I don't know if the motel next door was operating with tourists, or if it had become more of a weekly or monthly rental by the time you moved in.

Bacon: It was more of a weekly thing, and it was always well maintained and I never had any trouble. Although, there's a pretty funny story: one time we had some heavy rains in Reno. I think this might have been about '97 when we had our flood. And the owner of the motel put in some new rain gutters and he ran them through the building, and then the stem wall of the motel faced my parking lot. There was a little cutout in the stem wall, and he put the rain gutter facing out there, so the water would run across my parking lot.

One day I went to work and it had frozen that morning. I drove into the parking lot, my car spun around about three times, and it was like an ice-skating rink. It looked like that. It was perfectly smooth, clear, flat. [laughs] So I asked him to change that, and he did right away. That was quite a surprise. But other than that, I think that part was uneventful.

Barber: Then there were a couple different businesses on the south side. I can't remember what was in 538 South Virginia before the Starbucks moved in.

Bacon: Statewide Camera was there. I've forgotten the name of the owners now, but they did a lot of picture framing and they sold photography equipment. For a long time they did passport photographs, and as things changed with immigration and so on, it became really difficult for them to do that, and I'm not sure what the laws were or whatever. That was kind of their bread and butter, actually, so they stopped doing that. They eventually sold the building to Dave Seoane, who rented it to Starbucks, and he rented the basement out to some other people. There are some offices down there. That building was used in the movie *Charley Varrick*, with Walter Matthau. It was filmed in the Mapes.

There was an Italian restaurant called Festina's at 538, and after that it was a Japanese restaurant. Suki-yaki was a big thing there. I remember taking a couple of dates there when I was in high school. It was a nice Japanese restaurant. You'd go in and you'd sit cross-legged with the low tables and all that.

Anyway, they used that restaurant in this movie, and in the basement they built a prop that resembled an opium den. When Dave Seoane bought it, that was still there. I went down and looked. I don't know what they've done with it now. It's probably gone, but it was still there ten years ago. So it's kind of fun to watch that movie. It was fascinating to see those scenes.

Barber: A lot more attention came to the area, I think, with the Starbucks going in. Did you notice a change right away?

Bacon: Oh, for sure. It was a very good thing. The city came in and paved that parking lot. The city put a lot into it. When I moved in, the sidewalk was quite narrow and the stoplight was right in the middle of my sidewalk. I could almost not open the front door, it was so close to the door.

I had all kinds of things happen, but one time I was standing in the gallery and there was a guy in a wheelchair going up the street. He tried to go around on the sidewalk and as he held on to the stoplight, he slipped and fell into the street. The bus stop is right there, and the bus was just starting to leave. It stopped in time, but it could have been a very bad scene.

When they started doing the work on the Starbucks deal, I went over and talked to the city people and explained what had happened, and a couple of weeks later they came back and said, "We're going to

widen the sidewalks, and you won't be charged for it, assessed anything for it." I think he said, "We found some money in another project," whatever that means. So they did it, they widened the sidewalks, and it solved the problem, so I think that made it better.

Barber: And they only did that in that one little area, didn't they?

Bacon: Yes. We lost a couple of parking spots, but I wanted people to come in the back door anyway.

You know, when they started that project and they were doing the parking lot and all that, they found some artifacts from the fire station, so they actually got held up with a kind of a short-term archaeological dig there. They found badges and some other things like that, nothing really important. But it stalled them for two or three weeks, so that was interesting to go and look at that.

Barber: Right. The fire station used to be between your building and 538.

Bacon: Right, exactly.

Barber: I still need to look into that a little bit more, but it's interesting, because the fire station looked like a house.

Bacon: Yes, it was like a house with a big porch on the front. And the tree that was in the front yard is still the tree that's at the Starbucks in their little seating area outside. So that's original.

Barber: Do you remember the fire station being there?

Bacon: Yes.

Barber: At some point I'm sure they just deemed it kind of unsuitable as a fire station.

Bacon: Yes. There were two engines in the back. They had built on a garage in the back. I thought it was a good location for a fire station.

Barber: Would the trucks go back toward Center Street, is that how they got in and out, or did they actually come out the front onto Virginia?

Bacon: I think they went out through the alley, which went north and south, because there was no paved driveway coming out on to Virginia Street. That didn't happen until the Starbucks came in.

Barber: Oh, sure. Okay.

Bacon: I was saying earlier that we had looked at building on to my building. When we went to the city, they were going to give us a permit to do it, but they were also going to require us to pave that strip that was city property. That was one of the requirements. So that was one of the factors we took into account. It actually bumped up our budget by about 20 percent. It was a killer.

Barber: And is this when you were contemplating buying the motel next door, too?

Bacon: No, that was later.

Barber: That was a different idea?

Bacon: Yes.

Barber: I'm thinking about some of the parties or receptions you had had in there. Was it your tradition to have a reception in your building every time a book was published?

Bacon: Yes. We probably did two a year, maybe three a year at the peak. We would have showings of artists who had passed. Cal Bromund is one I remember doing. He was a Virginia City artist, and one of my friends and clients knew him and had a large number of his paintings. We would often do that to try to help them sell paintings and make a little statement about local art and the history of local art. I always tried to focus on the art history of the region, and as it turns out, over forty years, we probably had some impact on it, and I'm proud of that. But those were the kinds of shows we did.

We always mailed out a really nice color postcard that showed one of the paintings. We had several shows for Mary Chadwell which were really well attended. People love her paintings. And sometimes we would combine a couple of artists. We would have it catered. We'd always have really nice food and wine. It became a great social event. And we did allow a couple of different parties to happen in there that weren't art-related but people borrowed the space, and those were good, too.

Barber: Did you work as a broker for the artists?

Bacon: Yes. We just worked on a percentage basis. Depending on the artist or the art, the sales were what they were, and sometimes they were great and sometimes it was okay. Over the years, we had many great open houses for artists, and a couple of times we sold out of paintings. That's sort of gratifying.

Barber: Definitely.

Bacon: I do miss those, but it's a lot of work to do those shows, keep up with the collectors and all that.

Barber: So that would be part of it. You would be contacting collectors and letting them know when things were available.

Bacon: Yes.

Barber: People outside the state, too?

Bacon: Yes. More recently, we would try to put paintings online through my website and so on. That was pretty effective. We did sell paintings that way. People who had moved out of Reno and were familiar with the artists knew what they were buying. I think the building is now probably being used for the best purpose, but there was a lot we could have done with it. I just went in a different direction.

Barber: I wonder in the more than thirty years that you were working with art, did you see the local art scene changing and developing in that period?

Bacon: Yes, I think Reno has always been a difficult town to sell art in. I don't know why that is. Artists don't really complain about it, but they're perplexed. I've always been a big proponent of using local artists for public artworks, and the City of Reno has not always gone that route, and I've said so in the newspaper. I've tried to make my opinions known. It hasn't always made them happy, but I've always tried to support local artists, and we have some excellent ones. We have some important ones. In fact, in the next few years I intend to do some books on some of the artists that I've worked with and who I'm familiar with in my appraising and sales history and so on. I'm working on a couple right now. So that's kind of exciting, and I think that will be more of a contribution I can make. After forty years, I learned a few things, so I can share those things.

Barber: And there will be images and text then, talking about the art, too?

Bacon: Yes. I'm really close on a couple of books.

Barber: That's exciting.

Bacon: It is. I would like to do one on Mary Chadwell later on, and I also think that Ruth Hilts is deserving of a book. I'm probably not well informed enough to talk about this, but she was part of the group in Reno called the Bohemians. She's mentioned in a book or a couple of books. They were kind of avant-garde group of people, people who were thinking outside the box and who just lived life in a different way. I've known her since I was seventeen or eighteen, and she's just an incredible person, and I think she's worthy of having a book done about her because she's traveled the state a lot. There was a time when she did paintings of Nevada subjects, like the Valley of Fire down in Las Vegas, and she collected minerals from all over Nevada that she ground up to make into pigments for her watercolors. So there's a whole series of paintings that are done with just Nevada minerals. That's worthy of being written up.

Barber: Did she specialize in landscape painting?

Bacon: Yes, and she painted the petroglyphs. I would say mainly landscapes.

Barber: There was an exhibit at the library at the university a couple years ago about the Bohemians, about that group. I think they showed some of their work.

Bacon: I'm trying to think. She was just in. They just had one of her pieces somewhere. She's in a retirement home. She had a wreck in her car, she's in her mid-nineties, maybe, and they took her car away, which made her livid. It didn't slow her down any, so if you want a good interview, she's great. She's great to talk to.



Barber: With a lot of the books that you were publishing, the art books and other kinds of books, did generally people come to you, or were there any that you pursued that you really wanted to make happen?

Bacon: Most of the books have come to me. The book I did on Johnson-Jeffries for Robert Greenwood, he was a longtime publisher in California and he had done some research. We're both members of the Book Club of California, and he sought me out because of what he'd run into with other bigger publishers. He wrote in one of his books something to the effect that he liked me because I had the wherewithal to make my own decisions, something like that. I felt it was very complimentary. So there are a lot of reasons why people came to me, but, hopefully, for the most part, I've done a good job and produced good works. I always wanted the books to be worthy of having been produced, but I also want them to be something you'd want to hold in your hands, because I loved the book art itself. That's important. I don't want to produce something that's of low quality.

Barber: And you do have an incredible reputation for doing the highest quality work.

Bacon: Well, that's nice to hear.

Barber: So what prompted the sale of the building? You're not closing your business.

Bacon: No. My wife and I talked about it, and we had been thinking about it for a while. We hadn't offered it. People had come to me and wanted to buy it, several people in town who have actually found other spaces. But when this buyer came to me and made an offer, it was more than I had anticipated asking, let's put it that way. And I talked to my wife, and we thought, it's a good opportunity. So we took it, and it turned out to be the perfect thing, because it freed me up to do some traveling and do the appraisals I want to do and to go back to school to update my education in that area. The freedom is nice. I wouldn't trade that now, now that I have grandkids. So it all worked out.

Barber: Well, I'm glad you're not slowing down. It's exciting to hear about some of the projects you're still working on.

Bacon: Yes, I'm getting a little older, but I'm not slowing down. [laughs] I'll take a nap once in a while, which I can do. Although I got caught taking a nap one time at 516. My friend never let me hear the end of it.

Barber: That's when you need the bell ringing to alert you that someone's coming in the office. [laughs]

Bacon: The other bad one was I was notorious for walking away and forgetting to lock the back door. I turned the alarm on but I'd forget to lock the back door. The couple of times that it happened, a friend came by and set the alarm off, and they called me and said, "What are you doing? And where are you? I'll stay here until you get back." It's a small town. [laughs]

Barber: It still is. Well, I think that is all that I really had to ask you. I can listen to stories from you for a long time. I may come back and ask for more.

Bacon: Really, as far as I'm concerned, I've definitely tried to make a contribution to Nevada and Reno in the form of the books, which I feel I've done. Also I'm particularly thrilled that they want to call it the Bacon Building, that that's sort of gotten into the mix. I know that when Mike Cox bought it, he used that name in all the paperwork. So I'm hoping that perpetuates itself. He had offered me the opportunity to put a brass plaque on the building, up on the crown, saying the Bacon Building, and I'm going to talk to the new owners and see if they're still willing to do that, because I'd like to have a nice little plaque so my kids and grandkids could drive by there and say, "That's Grandpa's Bacon Building." [laughs]

Barber: That's how it's referred to.

Bacon: Isn't that funny?

Barber: Yes. It's a nice legacy.

Bacon: Well, it could be the Green Bacon Building or the Bacon Green Building, but I like the Bacon Building. It has a ring to it.

Barber: It does.

Bacon: And it's en vogue.

Barber: Bacon?

Bacon: Yes.

Barber: Everybody likes bacon.

Bacon: I know. It's been a good marketing tool. [laughs]

Barber: Well, thank you so much for talking to me today. I really appreciate it.

Bacon: You're welcome.

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## JONATHAN BASCOM

Owner, Dreamer's Coffee House & Deli, 701 S. Virginia Street



Jonathan Bascom inside Dreamer's Coffee House, 2016. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Reno native Jonathan Bascom got his start in the coffee business in 1998, when he took ownership of a coffee cart at Washoe Medical Center. In 2002, he opened Dreamer's Coffee House at the Riverside Artist Lofts. In 2012, he reopened Dreamer's at 701 S. Virginia Street.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber, the date is January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and I'm at Dreamer's Coffee House in Reno, Nevada, with owner Jonathan Bascom, to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Mr. Bascom, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Bascom: Yes, you do.

Barber: Thank you. You have a number of different connections to businesses along South Virginia Street in this immediate area, but I was hoping you could start by just telling me a little bit about yourself, when and where you were born, and if your family is from this area.

Bascom: Well, I was born here in Reno, March 1967. I was born in St. Mary's Hospital, which is still here, and grew up around the Park Lane Mall area—Apple Street, Margrave, Yori, that neighborhood there. I grew up in Park Lane Mall, spending all my weekends there as far back as I can remember. We were playing on the escalators at Weinstock's to fishing coins out of the little fountain there, walking up and down the mall. In fact, I remember being in the mall when the mall didn't have a roof on it. It was an open-air mall. One of my buddies' fathers was a janitor at a couple of the shops, so we'd drive his van literally down the center of Park Lane Mall so we could clean the various shops that he was contracted for. So that's how long I remember that.

I think one of my oldest memories is when we lived on Apple Street, which is at the back side of Park Lane Mall, and we would walk down to the Weinstock's parking lot when I was a little boy and watch the fireworks, because they were shot off from that area.

Barber: From the mall itself?

Bascom: From the mall itself. I can remember, that's one of my oldest memories, of my mom and I walking down there and finding a good place to sit amongst thousands of people and watching the fireworks display at the Park Lane Mall at the back side of Weinstock's.

I delivered newspapers in that area—Yori, Stoddard, Grove Street, Margrave, Apple. I got my first paper route when I was about ten years old. We'd all meet at Mayfair Market for coffee or hot chocolate and doughnuts early in the morning, because Mayfair Market was there as well. Mayfair Market was where Smart & Final is now. Actually, I think it's one of the clothing stores now. But we grew up there, and we'd have lunches at Bob's Big Boy, which is now a McDonald's. So I kind of grew up in that whole area, and I've been here my whole life except my military time, when I was away.

I think my oldest memory of Reno is of my buddies and I riding our bikes over to these hills, climbing to the top of the hills and seeing all the cattle and the horses out there. Of course, we were kids, and we were throwing rocks to see how far we could throw rocks out there, and seeing all the cattle out there, which is now where the Grand Sierra Resort sits. Back then there was nothing, and they built the MGM. We watched them build the MGM. But that was just a great big open field with cattle and horses in it, and we'd climb up the mountain and watch them.

Also when I was a kid, I used to ask my mom why she would get off the freeway at Glendale. I'd say, "Why are you getting off the freeway here when we live several more streets down?" Well, the freeway didn't go any further than Glendale when I was a kid. It ended. That was the end of it right there. So it's one of my older memories of Reno.

Barber: Is the house that you grew up in still there?

Bascom: No, actually, it was knocked down when I was in high school, and it's the parking lot of one of the business offices that's on Plumb Lane. Margrave was parallel to Plumb Lane, and now Plumb Lane

has all those business offices, and one of the business offices bought our property behind us and made that their parking lot for their building. So, no. Of all the houses, the only house on Margrave that was knocked down was mine.

Barber: What luck. [laughs]

Bascom: Yeah. Of all the homes, if you drive down Margrave, there's only one house gone, is the parking lot. That was mine.

Barber: You could walk to school, then. You went to the school that was in that area?

Bascom: Echo Loder School, I went to Vaughn Middle School, and I went to Wooster High School. I've always lived within a ten-minute walk to any of those schools. So even when we moved out of there, we didn't move very far away.

Barber: Now, were your parents originally from this area too?

Bascom: No, the Bay Area. My father was from San Francisco. My mother was from Ukiah, California, which is just outside of the Bay Area. They moved here before I was born, so they've been here forty-nine years now.

Barber: And what brought them here, do you know?

Bascom: Well, my father was a chef. I'm not exactly sure what brought them to the area. I'm sure my mom has told me that over the years, but it didn't stick. I'm not sure exactly why they came here. They came to Reno because of the mountains and getting out of the big city because they were living down in the Bay Area for a while.

Barber: So you say he was a chef. What kind of places did he work?

Bascom: Oh, you know, just about anywhere, everywhere. I think the oldest job I remember him working at is he was the chef for the Washoe County jailhouse. At that time, I guess all the prisoners or people being detained were at the courthouse in downtown Reno, because he worked at the courthouse. I remember my mom taking me down there to pick him up or drop him off, and sometimes she'd go shopping at Ardan's, JC Penney's, Woolworth's, which was smack downtown. When we were either waiting for my father or dropping him off or something, she'd take me into Woolworth's and I'd sit at the counter and have milkshakes and French fries at the Woolworth's, which was on First and Virginia, and she'd go next door to JC Penney's and do some shopping. I remember that.

I remember going over to Ardan's, which was where Mills Lane Justice Center is now, and she'd be shopping in there and I'd take the elevator to the top and back down to the bottom and back up to the top. I was very entertained by riding the elevators.

Barber: It was such a bustling shopping area.

Bascom: Yes, right there. And I remember riding the escalators at JC Penney's as well while my mom did shopping there.

Barber: So he ultimately came to run Penguin Café. Oh, can you tell me your parents' names?

Bascom: Jack and Joan Bascom. I don't remember much about the Penguin, I really don't, but I do remember my mother telling me that when my mom and dad had it, it was, I believe, the late sixties, I want to say '69-ish, maybe '70-ish. And occasionally my mom would have to go in and help my dad because a waitress or somebody called in sick, and my mom would step in and help. And they had a playpen at the restaurant that they'd put me in while my mom was helping out at the restaurant.

Barber: I would love to see pictures of that. I wonder if they have any.

Bascom: Out of all the pictures I've seen, I've never seen any pictures of me at the restaurant. I think the oldest picture I've seen me is playing in the snow in my backyard. I was brought home from the hospital to a house on Apple Street which is right on the corner of Apple and Kietzke Lane, and now it's the gun store. But I was brought home to that house, and my mom has pictures of me out in the snow in the backyard. So that's the oldest picture that I'm aware of.

Barber: The Penguin was just a couple doors down from where we are now. It was at 719 South Virginia Street. I think it was founded in the 1930s, probably 1935. It's a pretty small storefront, really.

Bascom: Yes, it is.

Barber: And it's one of two storefronts on the ground floor, and then upstairs are the—we call them the Giraud Apartments. That was the name of them for a long time. So we'll try to find out if the Girauds owned the whole building. It seems like they may have. But do you know how long your father was the chef at the Penguin and when he left?

Bascom: I don't. I don't remember that. As I recall, for some reason it was only a couple of years. I know he didn't do it a real long time. I don't know if he actually owned the restaurant or if he leased the restaurant, whether he sold the restaurant or the lease was up, or even if he was kicked out. I just don't know that part of it.

I did know that my dad liked to go next door to the bar. Whenever the restaurant wasn't busy or the rushes were over, he'd go next door and get a drink, because they didn't serve alcohol at his place, but the bar was directly next door, which is now the Shea's Lounge. He'd go right next door to Shea's at the time, whatever it was called, and have a drink. And there were times my mom said she'd have to walk next door and say, "Hey, you've got orders. Get back here." I remember my mom telling me that.

Barber: It does seem like the Penguin was a very family-friendly place, popular with kids.

Bascom: Yes. I had eaten in there when it was a little Italian restaurant for many, many years. I want to say Luciano's, but I'm not sure if that's true, but it was an Italian restaurant for many years, because I'd drive by and think, wow, it's an Italian restaurant. And probably about twenty-five years ago, twenty-

four years ago, we actually had dinner there. My girlfriend, now my wife, at the time, we met there with a couple other people, and I wanted to have the seat that was kind of in the corner with the window next to the door. We didn't get that table, but as I was in there. It was pretty small and simple, and I thought, wow, I wonder how much different this is from when it was my dad's place.

Barber: And I would imagine Midtown Eats has renovated it considerably.

Bascom: Probably, probably.

Barber: It seems like a new design inside.

Bascom: I'm sure it's had some renovation going on in there, because it looks pretty modern.



The Giraudo Apartments building, where Bascom's father once cooked at the Penguin Café. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: To your knowledge, does the Shea family own that whole building now?

Bascom: I believe so. I believe that's the building that they own, because when I came here, talking to the owner of this building, Bernie [Carter], he said he was trying to buy that building over there, and the Sheas were just not willing to give it up. They probably have a little gold mine there, because it's a very



busy bar. I was joking with Bernie, I said, “Now if you could just buy the bar next door, you would own the whole block.”

And he had commented, “Yeah, we tried that. They’re not willing to sell.”

Barber: I heard they had plans to expand Shea’s and that Midtown Eats will be moving to another location.

Bascom: Midtown Eats will be moving to Cheney Street, right around the corner. And I was told by one of the bartenders at Shea’s that they’re going to build their own little restaurant there, so Shea’s will not only be the bar, but it’ll be the little restaurant next door, someone told me like a little burger joint.

Barber: Now, I read that the Shea family started Del Mar Station in this building we’re in now, in 1975.

Bascom: That’s what I’ve been told.

Barber: So did they own this building, do you think?

Bascom: I don’t know if they owned the whole building or if they eventually ended up owning the whole building, but I know Del Mar started as a smaller place and then got bigger and bigger and bigger to where from what I remember, Del Mar Station was the whole building. Right now it’s divided into six individual shops, but back then it was the entire building.

Barber: Wow.

Bascom: And I was in here way back in the late 1990s, early 2000s because they had a few parties here that I was invited to, and it was the entire space, the entire building. I remember that and I also remember that before I was twenty-one, I’d come in here and play pool. At the time I was probably nineteen or twenty. I had a beard and I looked older than I was. I didn’t drink at the time, I didn’t care for alcohol, but I sure did like to play pool back here in a facility that was for adults only. So there were a few times I’d step up to the door and I never got carded, and I’d come in and play pool. I never ordered any alcohol because that just wasn’t me, but I sure did like playing pool back there, or watching the people play pool.

Barber: So if that was the whole entire space then, I guess the divisions now between all of the six different storefronts in this building are not reflective of what the historical divisions were, do you think?

Bascom: No.

Barber: They’re new divisions.

Bascom: Oh, yes. In fact, I’d come into this space before any of the walls were built, because when I was looking at opening my coffeehouse, I was looking at properties across the street that hadn’t been built yet, and I saw the master plan for them. It’s now called Sticks. I also looked here, and my first thought was, oh, god, I can’t be in the old Del Mar Station. And then after I thought about it, I thought, wait a minute, I *could* be in the old Del Mar Station.

So I was able to come over here and tour the building right after Coco Boom closed. I guess when the Carters bought the properties, they asked Coco Boom to finish up and close up shop. So I got to come in here right after Coco Boom had closed, and the first thing I did when I walked in, I thought, my god, it's still Del Mar Station, just with a different name over the door. The original stage is still there. The dance floor was still there. There used to be a ramp that went from this level up to that level, with stairs back here by my bathrooms, that went up to the next level. Those were all still there. The booth areas were still back there. So basically it was Del Mar Station with a different name over the door.

When I came here, we looked at how big my space could be, where I would do my division. This wall over here where my aircraft art is hanging—

Barber: On the south side.



Coco Boom in 2010, when years of neglect had left the Frohlich Building in disrepair. Ravo Y. Nov photo.

Bascom: Yes, the south side facing Virginia Street. That piece of the wall was original. That was there. I originally thought that I would start my wall right there, and I was going to go flush with the wall that was already there, but I was building a pretty small facility and I wanted inches. So that's why we went in about six inches, so that as I did my building to code and made sure I had the right amount of space between tables and chairs, we were able to go a little bit further in. And, of course, this back wall here where the flag is, which is the west wall, that was a big open doorway, so that went up a couple steps to the next level.

Barber: Oh, so when it was a club, it really did go all the way back to—what is down there? Wedge Cheese Shop and a restaurant.

Bascom: And Crème. In fact, it went all the way to the brick wall in the back, and then this one went all the way to the brick wall that way, which is where the Macbeth Theatre is.

Barber: Is that theater still there now?

Bascom: Yes, Good Luck Macbeth.

Barber: Are they using the stage from the Del Mar?

Bascom: They are. The stage that is in the Macbeth Theatre is the original stage from the Del Mar Station, and then the floor of the Macbeth Theatre was the dance floor for the Del Mar Station. I've spent many a nights on that dance floor, and it's the same flooring from Del Mar Station, which is now the floor of the theatre. So if you walk into the theatre, you'll see the old wooden floor. That was back then when I was here, probably in my early twenties.

Barber: Wow. Well, that's very helpful because I think I've been trying to figure out if the historic businesses lined up with the current businesses, but the doors could even have been in different places for these different storefronts along Virginia Street, maybe.

Bascom: Well, I remember when I was coming here for Del Mar Station, we never came in this door here. In fact, I'm not even sure if this door was open to the public.

Barber: On the corner.

Bascom: I always went in the door that was on the St. Lawrence side, around where Wedge is, because when I'd come in the door, I'd come in and the pool tables were right there. They were just off to the right, and if you walked in the door and you took a left, you'd come down a couple stairs into what is now my space. And you can almost see where they patched the wall there—

Barber: There's a little seam.

Bascom: Exactly, because to the right, that's a concrete wall. To the left, it's sheetrock. So this is all sheetrock. Excuse me; this is a concrete wall here.

Barber: The outside wall.

Bascom: But back there you can see where the separation is.

Barber: Oh, okay. That's very helpful.

Bascom: Just before you came down those steps, you could turn right and walk and there was a ramp that took you up to where there were some booths, and the booths overlooked the dance floor or the stage. I can remember sitting in the booths when I was younger, too.

Barber: It must have been one of Reno's largest clubs.

Bascom: It was a pretty good size.

Barber: Did lots of touring acts come?

Bascom: You know, the only acts that I saw here I didn't really pay attention to, but when we had the ER parties from Washoe Medical Center, the bands that played there were bands from the hospital. Those were hospital members who were in a band or were part of a band, so they would come and play there. In fact, one of the heart surgeons came and played one year. He was a guitarist, and I don't remember his name, but he had wild hair. And one year we saw Dr. such-and-such up on the stage playing his guitar at one of the ER parties because he was a guitarist.

I was also here during a couple other concerts way back in the day, but at that time I wasn't here for the concert. I was either playing pool or I was able to get in the door, and I might have been twenty-one at the time, but I came in to scope around and see who was here, because, you know, I was young. I was wanting to meet people and be a little more social because I was old enough to do it, and I looked older than I really was. But I didn't drink. So I'd come in and I remember a few times I walked through here and there were bands that were either on break or getting ready or setting up, and I never really stuck around long enough to sit down and enjoy the concerts, except for those ER parties.

Barber: How would you describe the neighborhood, the surrounding neighborhood, at that time?

Bascom: Well, I'm not sure how it was, because in my early twenties I really wasn't paying attention. It was reputation, you know. I'd heard that this area was a little on the sketchier side and you've got to be careful down there maybe because the entrance to the club was on a side street instead of the front street. And all the times I came in here, I never saw any issues. I never had any issues. I never saw fights. I never witnessed anything like that. I've only heard the stories of people who got in fights and the one person who was shot in the back and the one person who was shot in the lung. These are just some stories that I've heard from people, but never witnessed myself. I guess in my defense, I lived just down the street on Margrave and Apple Street, which was maybe one more mile down the street next to Park Lane Mall, so this was not so much my neighborhood. But it was close enough to my neighborhood that I never thought twice about whether it was safe, because it's not something a nineteen- or twenty-one-year-old thinks about, you know.

Barber: Right. And the neighborhood where you grew up and where you lived was a very safe neighborhood.

Bascom: It was. I don't know if I'd drive through it now, but back then that was my neighborhood. It was great.

Barber: Now, can you tell me about any other features of this building? A couple of months ago when I was talking to you, we were talking about a coal chute that used to be outside.

Bascom: Yes. When we started with the space, there were a couple big metal doors out here on the sidewalk. You couldn't open them because they were locked from inside. But when I finally got inside the building and I got down into the basement during the early stages—there's no lighting down there, so we were down there with flashlights—those metal doors opened up to a coal chute, and there was a great big coal furnace down there. So the coal chute was literally a chute from the sidewalk down into a big bin where I guess they would dump the coal. They'd open up these double big doors and dump all the coal down there. It ended up going into a little storage facility down in the basement with the coal heater right next to it, where you could scoop the coal out of the hole and throw it into the coal heater.

During the construction phase or renovation of this building, there was a guy down there who was, I guess, hired to take it apart. He was down there taking it all apart and hauling it out of here piece by piece. I had spoken with him a couple of times, and he said, "Yeah, I'm just tearing it apart and getting it out of here."

So we had the metal doors taken out because it was nothing but a trip hazard. Every time I'd look at it, I thought someone was going to hurt themselves on a piece of metal that was slightly bent up because it looked like they were trying to pry the doors open. So we had the doors removed and the top part of the hole filled in, because I didn't want to have to deal with a trip hazard down the road. In fact, the metal doors are still down in the basement. They're crazy heavy, and so they're just down in the basement.

Barber: Did it seem like the basement had always been basically for storage and not really a public area?

Bascom: Storage only, yes. I don't have trouble with my head, but some of my other employees would be scraping their heads because they're taller than me. Very low ceilings down there.

Barber: Does the basement extend beyond this storefront?

Bascom: It doesn't go beyond maybe here, where we're sitting right now,

Barber: Halfway back on the Virginia Street side.

Bascom: Exactly. So all in front of us is just dirt, and there's little bit of a crawlspace because I had this plug installed, and I remember the electrician telling me that it's going to be really hard to get to that place, and I said, "Well, that's where I want a plug, though."

Barber: There's an outlet here on the wall. [laughs]

Bascom: It's all concrete wall, so they couldn't drill into the wall, so he popped it out of the floor. But I recall him telling me what a struggle it was to reach that point right there.

Also during the construction phase before all the tiles were put in, there were some heating vents at the very front windows over here on the floor, and you'd pull out one of those heating vents and it was just dirt there. So, obviously the heating vents probably rested on the dirt and then came up. And now the basement goes all the way to the theatre.

Barber: It does. Okay, so it extends further south.

Bascom: Yes, it extends all the way to the end of the building and it doesn't go any further than this brown wall right here. So it's basically just this narrow hallway all the way down.

Barber: Are there other entrances to it?

Bascom: This is my entrance right here, the white door. There's one other; it's in the theatre. And the entrance to the basement in the theatre is in the stage, so you have to literally lift up a door in the stage and go down into it.

Right here, this white wall right here is one of the original walls of the building, because that's the staircase down into the basement. And then at the very far end of the building, right where the stage is at, if you're standing on the stage, you'll see where there's a cutout. You just pull it up and you walk down into the basement. Those are the two areas of entrance into the basement.

Barber: Now, there's some older tile on the outside of the building, right?

Bascom: On the front, yes. I'm not sure where that's from or who did that. It's all the way under all the windows. I don't know who did that or why that was done or what person tried to pretty-up the front of the building with some tile.

Barber: Let's talk about how you ended up here. We have you growing up, and we know you spent some time in the military and also at the hospital. Do you want to talk about what led up to you founding Dreamer's Coffee House?

Bascom: Well, when I was in college, I was getting my bachelor's degree in psychology because I was going to get into the field of psychology, get into therapy, and I wanted to go all the way to the Ph.D. program. And later I thought, no, I'm just going to hit the master's program.

But, anyhow, I worked at Washoe Medical Center during my college years because I got a great position there as one of the orderlies. I got the hours I wanted, and I was one of those orderlies who had a radio, so if somebody needed something or I had to transport a patient to or from a test or surgery, they'd call me on my radio. I had the luxury of being able to go sit in the cafeteria or anywhere I wanted to. So we all kind of set up stage up in the cafeteria, and we'd study.

I'd find myself diverting from my studies and starting to doodle about my future little café. I always wanted to have a little café. I wanted to have a place where people came to socialize, where people came to meet other people, where people came to relax, just because it was a place they wanted to go to. So I found myself doodling more and more and more on paper about what my café would be like.

Then the opportunity came. There was a little coffee cart at Washoe Medical Center that was dying. It was doing terrible, and the owner of it, he was one of the doctors, rumor had it he wanted to dump it because it wasn't making him the big dollars that he wanted. So I went and spoke to this doctor, and I said, "What would it take to buy this from you?" And he threw out a number, and I was flabbergasted by that number.

Anyhow, I started to do a little more research into the world of business while I was still getting my degree in psychology, and it boiled down to the fact that I wanted to dabble in business. I was getting ready to graduate from UNR, and I had to make a decision at that time: do I go on to the master's

program or do I dabble in business? My thinking was, well, once I got into the master's program, that was going to suck up all my time for two years, but if I dabbled now, then I'd be able to see if I liked this or not, and if I didn't, well, then I'd get into the master's program.

So I finagled with this doctor at Washoe Medical Center, and I remember clearly it was like two o'clock in the morning, we were in the trauma quarters where he was hanging out when he wasn't working, and we negotiated and we bickered back and forth about it. And at that time, there was another person who was interested in buying that coffee cart, and I found out what he was offering, and I didn't want to offer more, but I asked the doctor, "How can I be the one to get this?" because I really wanted it. He'd say, well, the other guy really wanted it, too. So I said, "I'll tell you what. I'll give you a \$2,000 credit line at the coffee cart you can use whenever you want."

And he said, "Oh. That's better than the other guy was going to do. Sold."

So that's how I got started, and that was probably at the end of 1997, because I actually took ownership of the cart in January of 1998. So what I did is I sold all of my Pepsi stock. When I was younger and I came into a little bit of money, whether it was a tax return or I was able to save my money, I'd go buy three shares of something or four shares of something else. And I remember one year I got my tax return back that was  $x$  amount of dollars, and I just went down to my broker and I said, "What can I buy with this that over the years will do better?" And I bought Pepsi, and over those years, Pepsi doubled and tripled and split, and I had enough money there that I cashed them all in and I bought this coffee cart. That's how I got my start. And I thought, well, if the coffee cart fails, at least it wasn't hundreds of thousands of dollars. It was very doable. It was the price of a car these days. So I was okay doing that. And I remember the doctor's wife, she worked with me for about a week and she trained me, and, boom, I took it over.

I graduated from college that next semester, at the end of that year, actually, in 1998, and I just have been going ever since then. I took the coffee cart and I turned it around, and I made it double and triple what it was making, because it was more reliable. Apparently when it was being run before, it wasn't really reliable, it wasn't always open when it was supposed to be open, and people just weren't going there. So I made a point to make sure that it was dependable and reliable for all the people that worked there, that I had a couple people who helped me run it so that it was always open, and we worked on the menus. And I started my research. I was very good at research at the time because I'd spent two semesters doing nothing but research, so I had that part down. I turned it around and it started making money, and I'm very good at saving money, so I was just putting it away, putting it away, putting it away.

Then I started to dream about the big café. Now I wanted an actual coffeehouse where I could design the inside and people could come and sit and enjoy themselves. I started shopping around in 2002—well, it was before then, but I found the location at the Riverside Artist Lofts, which was 17 South Virginia, and I remember seeing that that building was starting to be renovated, so I found out who owned the building. It was a company out of Minnesota, and I called them and I said, "Hey, I'd love to open a little coffeehouse on the ground floor of the building. What are you planning on doing with it?" Well, they were going to build lofts up there, and they said they'd love to have a coffeehouse in the downstairs. So I opened that shop up in April 2002.

Barber: So you were the original tenant in that spot after the renovation?

Bascom: Exactly. I was the first tenant in that spot, because when I went into that space, they were doing all the renovation upstairs. They were building the lofts. I believe there are thirty-two or thirty-six, I'm forgetting now, but there were thirty-some-odd apartments upstairs.

When we stepped into the space, it was one great big huge open space, because that's where the casino was, and I was able to pick the corner space that I wanted, and the owners of the building were fine with the space that I picked. I incorporated the casino vault entrance into my space. You could see where the old casino vault was at in the concrete, because the concrete was ten inches, twelve inches thick, and where the door used to be. I was able to finagle it to where my wall went right next to it, so I had the old casino vault entrance in my space. I was pretty jazzed about that.

We did all the construction. It was my first project, my first construction project, so of course I hired an architect and I hired a great contractor to come in and do the renovations. At that time, I didn't have a lot of knowledge about that, so I felt like I paid for more than I should have, but we got it up and running and it was beautiful. It had eighteen-foot ceilings and 1,800 square feet. I had seating for fifty people. I had sofas and club chairs. I wanted it to be the atmosphere of the inside of my house, so I wanted the living room and I wanted the dining room and I wanted the patio and I wanted the TVs up on the wall, and I wanted all the art on the wall, and basically wanted it to be as if you were coming into my house, because basically you were. You were coming into my house to have coffee, and so that's why I tried to create that atmosphere with the sofas, chairs, tables and chairs. We had counter seating, computers, art, trivia monitors. We had all of that.

Barber: It was very comfortable. I remember going in there.

Bascom: It was a great space, it was a big space, and we did great for years. Then what happened was in '08 and '09 I felt a little bit of a pinch. I think I felt the pinch in the summer of '08, or maybe it was '07. In the summers I was just so busy that I just had trouble maintaining supplies. And that particular summer, which might have been the summer of 2007, just wasn't that busy of a summer. And then '08 came and things started to dip, and when '09 came, it was even harder. I remember in the summer of '08, Hot August Nights did not bring much business into my place. And for Street Vibrations, I wasn't that busy. I remember feeling that pinch.

It was probably in 2009 when it was really hurting, and I think I reacted too late, because I started feeling the pinch, I started feeling that things were getting harder and harder. It was getting harder to pay the bills, so I was starting to get behind and get behind. And by the time I realized, hey, I'm in trouble here, I was pretty far behind in certain things, and I was starting to let staff go and I was starting to work more hours and have less staff on. I was cutting corners when it came to necessary people that were really needed to run the facility. So then it just got the point where I wanted to negotiate with the building owners, to say, "Hey, I need a rent reduction or I'm not going to make it."

And by that time they were like, "Yeah, we're going to let you go. It's time to move on."

I said, "Well, I'm going to leave at the end of my contract."

They said, "Yeah, that's okay."

So I wasn't terribly upset about it because I think during the last two years of my business I was so stressed out. I was so worried about how things were going, because I'd spent my first six years just rolling like crazy. I mean, it was just a fast-paced, fun environment, and we were all having a good time. And then all of a sudden, my last two years, it wasn't easy anymore. There wasn't enough money to pay all the bills, and things were getting tighter. And because I don't have a business background, I have a



psychology degree, I was able to handle the staff well, but I was having trouble taking care of the books and maintaining the books. So I learned all from that experience.

I closed my doors in November 2009. I wanted to stretch it to the new year as far as I could, but I didn't want to close my doors for Christmas. So I made sure that I closed my doors before all of that, because I didn't want to be one of those places that closes at Christmas. I could have pushed it to January of 2010, but I decided to cut the rope a little bit early and get out by November 2009.

Barber: I would imagine that City Hall would have supplied a lot of the customers for a lot of that period, and they cut so many people. I mean, city staff was cut drastically, which could have had an impact, too.

Bascom: Everything around that area. And when I started to look back on it and to start evaluating what was going on, I think where I saw the biggest cut was in food. I think people just weren't buying lunches. They weren't buying breakfast sandwiches anymore. They weren't coming in and having a sandwich every day. People were still coming and getting their coffee. We were selling more and more house coffee because it was cheaper, but people were really cutting far back on the food, because I think when times were tough, you cut back on taking yourself out to lunch five days a week or stopping by the coffeehouse and getting a breakfast sandwich and a coffee and stopping by after lunch for a coffee and a snack. So I think it was the food where I felt was the biggest cutback.

When I closed in 2009, I was feeling okay about it, because my stress level was out there. My wife was also pregnant, and I thought, well, this will be a great opportunity for me to stay home and take care of my children. My little boy was born shortly thereafter, and I was a stay-at-home dad for about three years. It was really hard in the beginning, just like any new thing is, but then I got to the point where I really enjoyed being a stay-at-home dad. Two years into it, I thought, "I've got to do something. I've got to do something." And that's when I think I started getting interested in getting back into this, doing it again. I had all the equipment, all the furnishings, all the supplies.

Barber: Oh, you kept everything?

Bascom: I kept it all, put it into a warehouse. And I think I realized that I wanted to do this again, but I wanted to do it on a smaller scale. I didn't want the great big huge coffeehouse that required five, six people a day just to run it. I wanted something smaller, simpler where we could get away with two or three people a day running it, and I was going to be one of those employees, because I wasn't one of the employees down there. I stopped in and I helped here and I helped there. I was really good at cleaning, so I wanted things kept clean and maintained at all times, but I had staff that made all the product, I had staff that did all the inventory, I had staff that did all the deli preparations, and I just showed up and I drank coffee and I socialized. Here I wanted a different role. I wanted to be the main guy. I wanted to be making the drinks, making the sandwiches, prepping the delis. I wanted to be cleaning the place. I wanted to be just one of the guys working here.

Barber: Tell me what year that was that you started actively trying to figure out where you would do this and what that process was like. You talked about finding this place and talking to Bernie and getting involved with it, thinking about Sticks, but was there a Midtown at that point yet? Was this the only area where you were looking?

Bascom: I think it was either still in an embryonic stage or it was just about to be born, because I had heard the word “Midtown” before but didn’t know what it meant. Way back in the day there was a restaurant down here on Virginia. Where Mt. Rose and Virginia meet, I think it turns into Wrondel that circles around. There was a big building back there, it was called Midtown, and that was the restaurant Midtown. I think it was called Midtown Eats, but it was a great big huge restaurant, bar, cigar bar. It had a deli. It had a bakery. It was that big building. Now it’s some charter school, but way back then it was called Midtown, and it was an awesome place. It was awesome to be there. One of my buddies worked there. So when I heard the word “Midtown,” I thought, “I thought Midtown closed years ago.” So the word Midtown was out there, but I wasn’t exactly sure what it referred to.

When I started doing my research for a new coffeehouse, I was researching three different locations, and here I’m doing traffic studies, I’m doing residential housing studies, I was also researching what kind of businesses were in the area, because I’ve always believed that the business I have has to cater to the residents and the employees of my inner circle first. I can’t start a business that is geared on tourism. I have to take care of the people that live outside my doors, that work outside my doors. That’s my primary customer base. If I get tourists in here, bonus, but I wouldn’t be in a place where I had to depend on tourism.

So I was researching these three different locations and doing all those studies, and the location that I liked the most, which I did the most research into, it turned out that that facility was going to cost me nearly as much to run as my old facility, and I didn’t want that. I didn’t want to get back into a facility that was going to cost \$35,000 a month just to run, and I didn’t want that kind of financial responsibility. I wanted something simpler, something easier, something smaller. So I abandoned that once I started doing all the numbers and figuring out all the finances and working all the costs of goods sold and how much product I was going to have to sell on a daily basis just to pay the bills.

Then I went and looked at another location. I did a little bit of research in there. I’d drag all my friends and my family over and say, “Okay, this is what I’m looking at.” And we’d sit there, and none of my friends, none of my family liked this location, this location number two. They were like, “No way. No way.” And I’m trying to sell it to them, and nobody liked it but me.

Then I came to this spot here, because as I came into this area, I thought, well, there’s lots of residents in here, lots of residential areas around here, and it’s starting to develop. And my biggest attraction was that it was still on Virginia Street. I believed that half of my advertising has to be my storefront, because if I can’t afford advertising or I’m not doing a lot of advertising, then I want the visibility of ten thousand cars driving by daily to see me.

Across the street over here where the Sticks project is at, I had been told by a real estate guy that there was developer who had bought the property and was getting ready to develop it, so I was able to get copies of what that property was going to look like. I was starting to be told by the real estate person what the vision for this Midtown area was going to be like in the next four, six, ten years.

That’s where I got introduced to the project across the street, which was owned by Bernie Carter, and then I just contacted Bernie myself. I heard he was a local business guy, and I didn’t want to necessarily be going through the middleman to get my questions answered. When I first called Bernie Carter, he was very personable. He was very willing to talk to me, and I could stop in and pull into his office and ask him a question if I wanted to, and he took the time to see me. So that’s when I started dealing with Bernie Carter on almost a weekly basis, multiple times a week, to get any information.

The building that I wanted across the street wasn’t going to be available. It wasn’t going to be one of the first buildings built. It was the perfect size; it was like 968 square feet. It had Virginia Street

visibility. It was perfect. The real estate guy had recommended why don't I look across the street at Del Mar Station, and thought, oh, no, no, I can't be in the old Del Mar Station. And then, like I said earlier, I thought, wait a minute, I *could* be in the old Del Mar Station. Anybody who's been to Reno for any length of time will know Del Mar Station, the term "Del Mar Station."

So I started doing my research over here. I was able to get into the building and check it out. It was pretty scary coming in here in the beginning because there were no windows. It was all boarded up. My back door wasn't even there. My back window wasn't even there. That was just sheetrock. I was a little disappointed that there was only going to be one entrance and exit and it was at the front of the space. We didn't discover the door until later, during construction.

Barber: Oh, there *was* a door there.

Bascom: There was a door there, because it was all sheetrock from the inside. It looked just like this. But on the outside, you'd look at it and go, you know, I'll betcha there used to be a door here. So we came in here and we ripped all the sheetrock off. That far corner back there had all sheetrock. And while we were ripping sheetrock off, we found the window, too. So I asked Bernie, "Hey, can we put a window and a door in here?"

He said, "Absolutely. Great." And Bernie was kind enough to do the windows in my space first, because none of these were windows here. It was just all boarded up, and it was sheetrocked on the inside, so this was all sheetrock here. When it was a club, it was walls.

Barber: On the Virginia Street side.

Bascom: Except this door. I believe the door was there. Along here, there were all booths and tables all along here.

Barber: Was there evidence of there having been windows there previously?

Bascom: Well, when it was the bar itself, no. I believe it was strictly walls, because I remember walking through this area here, and it was dark. These windows up here, those had ten years of paint. We had to break all the windows and replace them because they were so painted over.

Barber: The high windows on the St. Lawrence side.

Bascom: Yes, the high windows on this brick wall here. That's how thick the wall is around those windows.

Barber: It's thick. [laughs]

Bascom: But anyhow, that's how I got my start here. And I did my plans. I redid my research down here. I walked the neighborhoods. I do what's called a ten-minute walk, where I'll go in ten minutes in multiple directions, because I think that's my inner circle. My primary customer base is within a ten-minute walk to the facility. I was amazed how many houses were in my ten-minute circle.

And I negotiated with Bernie, and was a little smarter about the construction this time around. In fact, I was here almost every single day, and I'm the one who painted it. When it came to the construction bid, I said, "Well, shoot, I could save \$3,500. I could paint this cheaper than \$3,500." I should have paid the \$3,500. [laughs] But I saved it. I told my contractor that I needed the weekend to paint it, and I think he kind of got a little snicker because I think he knew that two days was not going to be enough for me.

Barber: You did the ceiling, too?

Bascom: I did the whole space. And it did, it probably took me five days to paint it, and I did two coats on the ceiling. I rented a sprayer from Home Depot and learned how to do that. I had to tape the facility more than once. At that time, there was a scaffolding in here, so I was able to do the very fine paint trim along here, and I think that's what drove me the craziest. Over in this corner here, I had four colors that came together, the red and the brown and the yellow all came together, and over here I had two colors coming together—so it was just quite the experience painting it. My kids came in and threw some paint up on the walls, but I had to paint over that as well.

Barber: Was the skylight put in at that point or is that older?

Bascom: No, that was here. Apparently, there are two skylights in the building. The other skylight is over the theatre, but it's sheetrocked over so you don't even know that it's there from inside the space. But I've been on the roof. I wanted the skylight to remain and I wanted the glass to be cleaned up. I tried cleaning it myself, but it was a little more of a difficult process to get up there and clean it. But I wanted to maintain that light there.

Barber: That's nice.

Bascom: That was the whole reason why I did the tile roofing there, because I had sunlight coming in and I was trying to create a façade that would be like a little Italian façade there. That's why you've got the yellows and the purples.

Barber: Tuscan yellow.

Bascom: Exactly. I had more plans for it, but then during the building phase, I ran out of money and I wasn't able to finish it. But that's why I put the tiles up there, because I had the natural sunlight coming through, through the skylight, which would have helped create—it was going to look like some apartments there.

Barber: That could still happen, right?

Bascom: Down the road.

Barber: So when was your opening here?

Bascom: For here, we did a soft opening. We kind of just unlocked the doors on July 31<sup>st</sup>.

Barber: Of which year?

Bascom: Of 2012. But our official day was the first week of August. The first week of August we put the tables and chairs out there, we tied balloons to the umbrellas, and we did all that the first week of August 2012.

Barber: Was anything else open in the building at that point?

Bascom: Yes, Crème. Wedge, next door, opened I want to say two or three weeks before me. Cynthia, in the dress shop next to me, I believe she was open about a month before me. She was the first to open. And then that theatre at the end, they opened a while after that. Now, at the very end, there was a little juice bar, which is the very last space in the building, and he was building his own little juice bar.

Barber: Bernie was?

Bascom: No, the guy who was going to have the juice bar. He was in there sanding it and doing all the work himself. I remember, to be a part of this building, to be a part of this project here, with Sticks, with Bernie's projects, we had contracts about what we could and couldn't sell as products, because he didn't want any of us competing with each other. He wanted us all working in collaboration instead of competition. And at that time, I wasn't going to be allowed to have fruit smoothies on my menu because of the juice bar at the end of the building, and that was really kind of upsetting me, because I thought, "A coffeehouse without fruit smoothies?"

So I opened my doors, and the guy at the end was dragging his feet, and every time I'd walk in there, I thought, "this guy's not opening for months." So I went to Bernie Carter and I said, "I want to do fruit smoothies until he opens."

And Bernie said, "Absolutely. Until he opens, you can put fruit smoothies on your menu."

So I had just a little tiny sign that said "fruit smoothies," and I sold a million of them that summer. And apparently one day, he pulled up one night, the owner, the guy who was opening the fruit bar, he emptied it out, hit the road. So I went to Bernie and I said, "I want fruit smoothies on my menu." And that's why I have the big fruit smoothie menu on the wall.

Barber: Wow. Okay. [laughs]

Bascom: Which I'm glad of, because I do a million of them.

Barber: People like those a lot.

Bascom: It's the perfect drink for the summer hot days.

So when it came to the building opening, we all opened very close to one another. It was, I'm pretty sure, Cynthia in the dress shop first, and then Crème next door to me, the little cheese shop, and then myself and the theatre opened up.

Barber: How do you describe the size of this, by square footage, or by seats or how would you say?

Bascom: Square footage. I'm just a little over 1,000 square feet.

Barber: It's got a nice cozy feeling to it.

Bascom: That's what I wanted. When I first came in, I thought, well, we could go here, we could go there. I wanted to make sure that I didn't go beyond the steps because that level was higher and I didn't want my customers to have to deal with steps, because then you have a trip factor you have to deal with. That's why I thought, well, we could build the wall there and we could build the wall here. And Bernie had already kind of defined where the spaces were going to be, but I came in and I thought, well, do I negotiate with him about altering it a little bit more, a little bit less? And as I looked over it more and more, I thought, you know, this'll work because it's small and I want small, and it's simple and I want simple. And I don't want more space, I want less space.

Barber: Now, since you opened, the idea of Midtown has strengthened and now it's kind of skyrocketed, really, in popularity. Have you had a lot of a relationship with the Midtown business owners, with the business association?

Bascom: Well, I have talked to the Coalition before, the Midtown Coalition. I joined the Midtown Coalition because it was all about artists and the arts, and since I have art on my wall (not today but typically I have art on my wall), and I wanted to have musicians come in, I was all about the arts. So I joined that Coalition just to be a part of that.

Barber: And they did the Art Walk.

Bascom: They were part of the Art Walk. The church, Living Stones, I believe they were the bigger factor in the Art Walk, but I think they collaborated with the Midtown Coalition. But, you know, as I've been down here, I've been getting to know the other small business owners around here, and we give discounts to the people who work next door and across the street, because I think as us being part of a community, we should help each other out. I've been told that we get a discount over there and we get a discount over here, so that's part of being a Midtown employee.

Barber: So has it been what you hoped for? I mean, have you seen that sense of community not just among the business owners, but do you have regular customers who come in?

Bascom: Oh, yes. It's been nice. I can honestly say that my third year was better than my second year. My second year was a whole lot better than my first. I see things getting better, a little bit busier. I have regular customers that come in who I can almost depend on, because I know that they're going to be here. And I get a lot of good people that come in and they want to hang out and just visit. That's what I like. I want people coming in and hanging out. I don't want them being in a hurry. I don't want them to ever think that they're rushed because I need their table. I want people to come in and relax and take it easy. I get a lot of students in here, and I like that, too, because I was a student, too, and I know the importance of finding a comfortable place that you can go and study, someplace that you feel comfortable to be there.

And I wanted students to know that they could be here for that. So I do have lots of regulars that come in. I have a few small groups that come in, who meet regularly, whether it's a meeting or a gathering. I like that. I even have some of my old customers from my old coffeehouse who stop in here regularly because they drive by me every day on the way to the courthouse or on the way to one of the bank buildings. So I've kind of captured them back as well.

Barber: Is the sign that's outside from your original store?

Bascom: Yes, it is. Both of them are. In fact, that was one of the first things I wanted to go up on the wall during the early part of construction. I had one of the sign companies put those up right away, because that was part of my announcing that, "Hey, we're coming back," and so I wanted my original signs to go back up there.



Dreamer's Coffee House on the corner of Virginia Street and Saint Lawrence Avenue in 2016. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: How did you come up with the name?

Bascom: Well, it goes back to when I was sitting in the cafeteria at Washoe Medical Center studying for biology and chemistry and psychology. I kept putting my studies aside and dreaming about my little café, doing floor plans and, well, what would my menus look like and what would the facility have and what would the atmosphere be like. And when it came down to naming my first little coffee cart at Washoe Medical Center, I struggled with "What the heck am I going to call my company? I have to register my company." And I thought, "Well, I've dreamt about this for years, so let's call it Dreamer's. And let's do apostrophe-s, because I am the dreamer." I dreamt it up and now I'm living it, so that's why I call it Dreamer's Coffee. A lot of people think Dreamer's, meaning that usually you drink coffee to stay awake, not to dream. And I thought, well, I called it Dreamer's Coffee because I dreamt it up, and I was literally

daydreaming about my own little café when I was in college. And I thought, “Let’s call it that. Let’s call it Dreamer’s Coffee House, and it’ll be mine.”

Barber: Do you have further aspirations for the place? Like five years from now, what do you see?

Bascom: No, no, I don’t right now, because when I had the old coffeehouse, I did, and I was shooting for more and more and more and more. I had coffee carts. At my height in 2005 and ’06, I had three coffee carts and I had a full-service coffeehouse, and that was a lot of work for one guy to do, and I found myself running around taking care of supplies and repairs. It was almost a nightmare, a logistical nightmare, taking care of all the paperwork, taking of all the necessities to run three, four separate locations and the staff behind that. At my height, I probably had sixteen, eighteen employees that were on my payroll. And I remember doing a payroll once thinking, “What am I doing?” So if I reopened, my whole point was to go simple and to go easier. I’m not getting younger, and the coffee’s not making me younger. So I thought, “Now that I’m getting a little bit older, I want simpler and I want easier and I want to work it. I don’t want to just be here to check on things and leave. I want to be behind the counter making the product. I want to be socializing with all the customers that come in.”

I love the idea that when people come into my coffeehouse, especially in the morning hours, that the owner’s going to make their coffee, and the owner is going to make their sandwich, and the owner is going to help them at the cash register. I love that about it. If I ever opened a second location, then that would be lost somewhere, and I think it would probably be lost here at this location, because I’d have to go to another location and I’d have to develop that location. Meanwhile, this location wouldn’t have that special attention, that personal touch that I like so much.

So the idea right now of opening another one is not in my near future. The plan is let’s make this one as good as I can possibly make it. Let’s make it exactly the way that it is in my head. And there are things here that still need to be done to reach that height of doing all the little things that I want done.

Barber: And it really seems like that spirit is behind a lot of these Midtown businesses. There seem to be a lot of owner-operators who are the workers behind the counter.

Bascom: I love that. I frequent other little coffeehouses on my day off, because I’m a coffeeholic and a coffeehouse junkie. I can’t go to 7-Eleven for coffee, and I don’t like making coffee at home. I want to walk into a coffeehouse and I want to be hit with the smells and the atmosphere, and I want to see who I might know or who might be there. I might want to say hi, and I want to be recognized, and I don’t mean recognized as a coffee owner, but recognized as a customer. I love when I walk in the door and someone says, “Hey, you want your usual today?” I love that. One of the others that I go to is run by the owner as well, and I love that. There’s another little coffeehouse in town that I go to occasionally, and it’s run by the owner, and I love that. I like walking in and have people know who I am. That’s important to me. There are other coffeehouses around where the owners are nonexistent, and that’s their choice. But here, I’ve got to be the most active employee.

Barber: Well, I’ve really enjoyed speaking with you, and I want to thank you so much for talking to me today.

Bascom: Well, thanks for letting me ramble on. I’m good at it.



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## MARK BONNENFANT

Manager, Peerless Cleaners, 698 Forest Street



Mark Bonnenfant at the front counter of Peerless Cleaners, 2016. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Mark Bonnenfant's grandfather, Fred Bonnenfant, purchased Peerless Cleaners at 698 Forest Street in 1949. After the death of Fred, Sr., Mark's father, also named Fred, ran the business for many years. Today, Mark manages the family business in the original historic building.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm in Reno, Nevada, with Mark Bonnenfant at Peerless Cleaners, which is at 698 Forest Street, to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Mr. Bonnenfant, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Bonnenfant: Yes, you do.

Barber: Great. Thank you so much. Well, I'm really delighted to have the chance to talk to you. This business has been in your family for a long time, and this building has been in this area for a long time. I'd love to start by just asking a little about the background of your family and how long, to your knowledge, your family has been in Nevada.

Bonnenfant: Well, the Bonnenfant side came over from France in, I believe, the year 1900. My great-grandfather was a shepherd, so he worked the hills of the Sierra Foothills throughout the Sierraville, Loyalton area. He was always going out, like most shepherders did. They'd go out in the summer, work the hills with the sheep, and then during the winter they would come and stay in town and then do odd jobs from there.

My great-grandfather had twelve children. I think it was three girls, nine boys. They lived in the northeast part of Reno, which was the Montello Street area/4<sup>th</sup> Street area. My grandmother was born on 4<sup>th</sup> Street, where Abby's Highway 40 is now. That used to be her house. Then my grandfather was born in 1907. They worked mainly on the railroads, and my grandfather decided to get into dry cleaning in the twenties when he was in his twenties, because he wanted to get out of the railroad. He didn't like the railroad business.

Barber: And what was his name?

Bonnenfant: Fred Bonnenfant.

Barber: Was dry cleaning kind of a new technology at the time, or do you know anything about it?

Bonnenfant: No, dry cleaning was invented in the 1800s. It was invented by the French, but it really had nothing to do with my family's history. My grandfather decided to get into the business, like I said, in his twenties when he thought it'd be more lucrative than the railroad business, because in the railroad, a lot of them were leaving, working outside of town in harsh conditions, so he wanted to try something else.

Barber: So did he found his own company at the time?

Bonnenfant: Yes, he founded Blue Goose Cleaners. He actually started with Reno Cleaners as a young lad, but then when he branched off from that, he started his own cleaners called the Blue Goose Cleaners, and I believe that was on C Street in the twenties.

Barber: Over in Sparks.

Bonnenfant: Correct.

Barber: Did they live over there?

Bonnenfant: Yes, they lived over there. They actually lived in the upper floor of the cleaners, and the business was downstairs. Then the business caught fire and burned to the ground, basically, so that's when he moved his business from Sparks to Reno.

Barber: With the same name?

Bonnenfant: No. I think he may have bought the actual Lustrlux Cleaners from somebody else, but I'm not quite sure on that one. But he set up shop under Lustrlux Cleaners in the late twenties, early thirties, to the mid-forties when he purchased Peerless Cleaners.

Barber: Do you know where the Lustrlux business was located?

Bonnenfant: That was on Sierra Street. That was North Sierra. The Flamingo Hilton had a walkway, a skyway that used to cross Sierra Street and would drop into the actual property, but they removed the skyway and since then, of course, the property's been sold and it's been vacant most of these years.

Barber: Okay. So then it was your grandfather who bought Peerless Cleaners?

Bonnenfant: Yes. Bob Cantrell, who was the original owner of Peerless Cleaners, tried crossing Highway 40 one day and got hit by a car and he was left in a body cast for the rest of his life. He ended up dying like a year or two after that, because I guess he just didn't heal or something. Then my grandfather purchased the business in 1949.

Barber: Then did other family members work in the business at that point, too?

Bonnenfant: His wife was always by his side, and she was always right there with him, working night and day, seven days a week, basically. It was one of those kinds of businesses where he worked from sunup to sundown.

Barber: What was her name?

Bonnenfant: Her name was Maxine Bonnenfant. She was a friendly face around, and most people, customers enjoyed her company. This was basically a family-run business. My dad didn't start until the fifties when he got out of high school, and so he ran it after my grandfather passed away in the early nineties.

Barber: What's your father's name?

Bonnenfant: Fred, as well. I have a brother named Fred, but I'm the only son that took over the business. My stepmother married my dad. She worked at the business as well. I've had daughters work the counters. So it's been family on and off for all these years.

Barber: And it's an historic building by this point. I mean, what do you know about the building itself and any additions that have been made to it?

Bonnenfant: In the fifties, the business was growing pretty good. My grandfather was doing quite well. He added on what's called laundry room. A lot of people don't understand that dry cleaning is separate from laundry. Laundry means that you're washing. Dry cleaning means you're using fluids to dry clean clothes. So he added a laundry room so that he could do a shirt laundry, and in those days shirts were folded. They were not hung on hangers. So you needed more space because they stacked shirts and they actually stacked sheets and bedding and those kinds of things. They needed more room to produce that kind of volume, so they added on, and then they added a new boiler room and offices, which we are currently sitting in, in the fifties.

Barber: This is on the south side of the building—

Bonnenfant: Correct.

Barber: —this extension, because we can see an outside wall, a former outside wall inside of this office. [laughs]

Bonnenfant: Yes.



Peerless Cleaners and Beatty Hat Works opened at Forest & St. Lawrence in 1947. Mark Bonnenfant photo.

Barber: So did that continue then, that combination of dry cleaners and laundry in subsequent years?

Bonnenfant: Yes, it did. It's still going strong today. However, the equipment's changed a bunch of times. We started with what was not really a polluting chemical. We've never been what's called a perchlorethylene plant, which is what most dry cleaners use, that taints the groundwater, and that a lot of people are really worried about and up in arms about. I don't know how you'd call them—your "tree huggers" or Sierra Club people are really against toxic chemicals in the Earth, and I don't blame them, in

that thought process. That's kind of how the state went in the nineties, because we never really had to adhere to any kind of EPA or government regulations until the nineties. But we did a lot of that ourselves, because we know that pollution's not a good thing.

A lot of dry cleaners used to dump their pollution on the ground out in the middle of the desert, light it on fire, and walk away from it. That was real common for a lot of dry cleaning and auto shops, and a lot of those chemicals ended up in the groundwater. But our fluids that we used to use didn't end up in the groundwater; it was more the kinds that evaporated, so it wasn't really good for the ozone, either. But we changed off of that, like I said, in the nineties, and we went to a synthetic hydrocarbon, which is basically nonhazardous. Also we use what's called GreenEarth, which is a silicone dry-cleaning fluid, which you can probably drink if you really wanted to, without any harm. But it does clean clothes, and it's up and coming. It's a real popular chemical fluid that a lot of dry cleaners are using because of the regulations.

A lot of states and countries, Canada, a lot of these countries, are not allowing certain chemicals to be used, and a lot of your your malls where dry cleaners are have stiff regulations to keep dry cleaners from moving in because of the hazards that are associated with most dry-cleaning companies. Most of them won't allow a new dry-cleaning plant without proving that you're a nonhazardous producer.

Barber: So the chemicals have changed a lot over time. Has the other equipment changed over time, or do you actually have stuff in here from the forties and fifties, even?

Bonnenfant: I have some stuff in here from the forties, but very little. All the processing equipment has changed. All the machines have changed. A lot of automation has been introduced because labor is expensive and dry cleaning is expensive, and you try to keep an even balance to all those things so that prices don't skyrocket.

Barber: I know a lot of laundries in this town through the years, especially in the peak of the tourist era, really had a lot of business with commercial properties. Was that ever a part of the business model here with hotels and casinos?

Bonnenfant: We do a lot of wardrobe. We do casino wardrobe for, let's say, Silver Legacy, Harrah's, Nugget, Eldorado. Through the years, we used to do Harolds Club back in the day. We even were part of Mustang Ranch, for Joe Conforte, did the cleaning of a lot of famous people throughout the years, and established relationships with certain people that's part of the history of this town, for sure.

Barber: So did the business—did it or does it—have delivery trucks and everything?

Bonnenfant: Yes. We've always had delivery trucks and what you call the delivery route business, where you go to people's homes. We always have had that. Dry cleaning has definitely changed over the years as far as catering to a customer. Now we even have drive-thrus. Back in the day, it was just common for everything to come into your drop store or your plant, with people bringing it in to the counter, but a lot of people in society are busy. You know how busy we get now. We have bag drops to drop boxes right to your desk, right to your office, right to your front door, back door, all these things. They're even coming out with a locker system nowadays where you put your stuff in a locker and the dry

cleaning goes to a locker. You have apps now that notify you when your dry cleaning's done. You have all kinds of things that have really changed in the industry.

Barber: So are you always monitoring these kinds of things, trying to think what you want to adopt?

Bonnenfant: Yes, and we recently merged in with a franchise that's called CRDN. It's a textile restoration side of the business where it deals with insurance adjusters going through people's homes that have caught fire or flooded, and you take out textiles that need to be restored and cleaned. It's kind of the wave of the insurance industry now, too, because you can save people's clothes instead of throwing them away and then insurance covers that, or they cover the cleaning now. So that's kind of been a direction for a lot of dry cleaners, too, because dry cleaning is just not as popular as it used to be, with trends going outside of the dress codes, so to say.

Barber: When did you personally start getting involved in the business and how? What was your first kind of involvement?

Bonnenfant: When I was twelve years old, I used to clean the dryers for lint and search pockets, because that's a constant, searching pockets for pens and makeups and lipsticks and gums. Of course, as a kid, you're looking for money, but those days it was just quarters and dollars. Nowadays, people leave substantial amounts in their pockets, and I guess they always have, but we try to get that back to the customer. But as a young chap, that's what I would do, sweep floors, when I was twelve years old. So that's forty-one years ago, and I've been in and out of the business for forty-one years, but full-time for twenty-eight years.

Barber: When you were first starting, were you getting paid for that work, or was it just a family responsibility?

Bonnenfant: Oh, no, I was getting paid. Dad had to pay me. That was part of the deal. It wasn't big bucks, but it was to keep me out of trouble in the summertime.

Barber: Are your parents still alive?

Bonnenfant: No. My father passed away in 2010, and my grandfather passed away in 1991. But the business wasn't doing so good under my father's reign through the nineties, and so he sold it in 2006 to Norm Davis, who's the current actual business owner. We maintain ownership of the property, and then he got in it. He was a laundry tech, so to say, a soap guy, he understood the laundry side of the business but not really dry cleaning, which he just recently got into. We formed a, so to say, partnership, so I run the business and he's kind of my partner.

Barber: Let's talk about the neighborhood a little bit. You've really been aware of this area, at least from when you were a kid and were kind of working around. It's changed quite a bit over time. Can you talk a little bit about the neighborhood and how much of an impact it has had on the business?

Bonnenfant: Well, this used to be a two-way street out front. They changed that back in the seventies, I believe, to a one-way street, so that impacted some of the business as well. The actual neighborhood's been spotty. You know what I mean. It used to be a really nice residential neighborhood. We've had ups and downs. The Del Mar Station that used to be down the street was quite the nightclub, and there have been other nightclubs that have come and gone that have created an atmosphere. We've had our issues with theft, vandalism, all that kind of stuff, to where we have cameras everywhere now.

Since Midtown popped up on the scene, things have definitely changed for the better. It's more lively on a positive note. I'm still seeing crime, but not as much as I used to worry about and see. I've put people in jail for breaking and entering. I've had issues where you see drug deals and those kinds of things, but all that's kind of curtailed. Things have definitely cleaned up in the neighborhood.

As far as I've seen some of the houses have been restored and turned into business around here, and then, of course, Midtown's turned other things into restaurants, and a lot more restaurants are in this neighborhood now. Parking's become a big-time hassle. I don't know, it's exciting to see, very exciting to see.

Barber: That's true. There's the new development that went over here where we now have Great Full Gardens and a whole strip of things. That's a very popular spot at lunchtime in particular, it seems.  
[laughs]

Bonnenfant: Yes, yes. A lot of the people aren't too excited about the hotel next door—we'll leave names out of that—but we still have our mixture, some things good, some things bad, but the positive direction is mostly what I see right now.

Barber: Can you remember when the Ponderosa Hotel was being used primarily as a tourist destination?

Bonnenfant: Yes, a casino.

Barber: That would have been the seventies and into the eighties, even, I wonder?

Bonnenfant: Yes, the early eighties, I believe, is when it stopped being a casino, and I think that's when it sold. It closed for a while, but then they turned it into weekly rentals.

Barber: There was an enormous sign of a big pine tree, an evergreen, a Ponderosa pine outside.

Bonnenfant: Yes. I used to go in there all the time when it was a casino and hang out after work, go have a beer.

Barber: This lot is interesting, being on a hill. You're kind of in a triangular space here. Does it seem to work well, the way that the building has been set up?

Bonnenfant: Yes, for most intents and purposes, it's a really useful lot because you can use the back for coming and going with vans, and the front's for the customers. Back in its inception, this was a ditch out back here. It's still there. It goes all the way from the river to Virginia Lake, and it's an underground

ditch that if you see in all the old photos, it's there. It's a real ditch that funnels straight to Virginia Lake and fills it up.

Barber: Do you think that that was ever used—I mean, is that a source of water, that ditch, for the company here?

Bonnenfant: It's not a source of water here for our company, to my knowledge. There are wells all around this area that most of the city does draw off of, but as far as what we draw off of, I'm not quite sure.

Barber: I was looking at the old maps and wondering where that ditch pops up again above ground because it is underground for a while. [laughs]

Bonnenfant: It really doesn't until you get pretty right at Virginia Lake. It's pretty much on the other side of that Save-Mart/Union 76 or whatever that gas station is. And that's a manmade lake, but the ditch probably flowed that way before the lake was ever put in. That's my guess.

Barber: People sometimes confuse this building with being the Commercial Soap Company building, which was on this site before, and you've got a picture of the Soap Company building hanging in your lobby there. Has that been something that's been of interest to you?



The Commercial Soap Factory, on the site of Peerless Cleaners from 1906-1935. Nevada Historical Society photo.



Bonnenfant: Yes, definitely, because the Soap Company came from the Virginia City, American Flats area. As a kid I spent a lot of time playing around American Flats, but I didn't really know the tie-in until somebody recently told me that that's where they actually moved the Soap Company from, to this location, until its demise in 1934, I believe.

Barber: Right. Yes, in '34, '35, it just burned down completely is what my understanding is.

Bonnenfant: Yeah. We still get termites popping up through our cracks in the floors because there's still wood underneath the concrete that's being devoured by termites. So every now and then we get a good termite floating, flying things that go everywhere. It's kind of nuts.

Barber: It's not the kind of legacy you really want. [laughs]

Bonnenfant: No. I still have soap from the actual place, bars of soap that I kept. There are different formulas they had: mechanics, deluxe.

Barber: Oh, we're looking at actual bars here!

Bonnenfant: And the actual address or the Soap Company's name.

Barber: Oh, that's amazing. How did you come across these?

Bonnenfant: Apparently they were left here on site somehow. I have a whole box of them.

Barber: Wow. [laughs] That's amazing. I'll have to take pictures of these. Oh, you've got a whole box of them. Wow. [laughs]

You have some pictures that we were looking at here of the building at earlier stages, and I wonder, if we can look at them here. And I'll explain the one that we're looking at so we can match this up the picture later.

Bonnenfant: This one here especially shows brand-new equipment that hasn't even been installed yet.

Barber: This is a picture that has two cars parked in front of the business.

Bonnenfant: And one of them is the delivery van from that year.

Barber: Oh, yes! When do you think that dates to, what decade?

Bonnenfant: I would imagine it's '47 or '48.

Barber: Okay. So there's equipment, you're saying.

Bonnenfant: Yes, there's a press right here and what we call a puffer right there, that have yet to be installed.

Barber: Oh, the press is in kind of a crate.

Bonnenfant: Yes.

Barber: And is that equipment in the building now? It's kind of long ago—

Bonnenfant: No, but there are things that are just like it, yes, absolutely. This place has been changed so many times over the years.

Barber: And there was a different sign outside.

Bonnenfant: Yes, the sign that's out front now was built in the sixties. My grandfather designed it, or had it designed and then he went with that. Back then they were not really into the neon signs as much because they thought that was old-fashioned or passé. So the newer signs that rotated and blinked were what was up and coming, and that's kind of what Reno's all about, signs here and signs there.



The Peerless Cleaners building with its original sign, ca. 1947-1948. Mark Bonnenfant photo.

Barber: Right. [laughs]

Bonnenfant: So we went with a new sign back in the sixties.

Barber: You think that original sign predated your family's ownership? Maybe it was original to the building?

Bonnenfant: Yes, that was original to the building because I believe this picture is original. But, of course, in this picture, it's not there.

Barber: Okay. There's a later picture with an awning over the front.

Bonnenfant: Yes.

Barber: But not with this addition that we're in right now.

Bonnenfant: Yes. There's no sign in that picture, which is interesting.

Barber: There's a house next door that's still there.

Bonnenfant: Yes.

Barber: A lot of original houses in this area date to before the area was even a commercial district at all.

Bonnenfant: Yes, and the Casson, so-called Casson Apartments, which are not called Casson anymore, are on the St. Lawrence south side.

Barber: Okay. That apartment building that's still there. Is that the one they've renamed Midtown?

Bonnenfant: Yep.

Barber: Okay. But what was it called originally?

Bonnenfant: Casson.

Barber: Casson? Was that a family name?

Bonnenfant: I believe so, and I believe that was its original name from its inception.

Barber: Okay. So you mentioned Del Mar Station. That building itself is actually a very old building that we're thinking might have been owned by the person who owned the Commercial Soap Company, August Frohlich, for a while. He might have been the one who built it in the twenties. Predating Del Mar Station, there were a couple of different lounges in that corner, Coco Boom, I think, and a grocery store. There was a café called Heric's Café that was pretty popular. Do you remember, just growing up, were there any other businesses in the area around South Virginia Street that you recall going into, restaurants or any other kind of businesses?

Bonnenfant: Well, I remember the building right behind the Del Mar Station was an electronics store—the name escapes me now—and when I was a kid I'd go in there and buy electronics stuff. When I was a kid, I took electronics class and I was always repairing radios and TVs and those kind of things. So that I remember, right here.

I'm trying to think what else. Of course, you had your Maytan Music Center forever over there. Going down Virginia Street, it's kind of all foggy now what was really important back in the day, other than just shoddy motels, and that's pretty much all I really remember.

Barber: By the time you were growing up, it was about the time that South Virginia was being displaced as the highway, from being the main highway, by 395.

Bonnenfant: Right.

Barber: Because it went into a period of some decline for many years.

Bonnenfant: Yes. I remember when they first put in Highway 395, and that was in the seventies. I think they stopped it right at South Virginia Street. South Virginia and Kietzke is pretty much where the highway ended at that time. I remember when they were building all that. It's interesting, because as a kid growing up, you traveled 4<sup>th</sup> Street because that was the highway, and all those places were the car dealers and all that, which were always on your main streets. And Virginia Street was the same until they started putting them on Kietzke, and then, you know, as the story was told when my mom grew up here, Kietzke was a dirt road. Everybody has that kind of story through their forefathers and whatnot, that this was a dirt road or this was country.

Barber: Right. You mentioned Montello and that area of East 4<sup>th</sup> Street and north of it. A lot of it was knocked down in the mid-sixties as part of an urban renewal project. Do you happen to know if the houses that your family had lived in are still standing?

Bonnenfant: Supposedly the houses that my family lived in were where the freeway is. You know, that was a mixed-race neighborhood. They had every kind of background—the Italians, the French. There was every kind of race in that neighborhood back in the day.

Barber: I heard there were African Americans that had some boardinghouses there.

Bonnenfant: Yes, and my family had a lot of African American neighbors that they loved. Everybody got along, just from what I gathered. That was not a problem back in those days.

Barber: That's what I really heard of that area, too. And the school that was up there was just a very, very diverse school, Orvis Ring Elementary, which isn't there anymore.

Bonnenfant: Yes. I'm not sure which ones my grandma went to. My grandfather did very little school. He only went to eighth grade, he didn't go to high school, and ended up dying a millionaire, but no high school. I'm not sure which middle school or grade school he went to. My grandmother, I think, went to Orvis Ring and then she went to Reno High. My dad went to Reno High, I went to Reno High, and my daughter went to Reno High, so there's a little bit of legacy there. But Reno High wasn't where it is now. It was on Fifth Street, I believe, in those days.

Barber: Yes. It seems that since there have always been cleaners in town from the very beginning, they always seemed very competitive with each other. [laughs] And I wonder if that is something that has been significant to you. And also I wonder with a small business, a family-owned business, an independent business, if there's the same issue that a lot of businesses experience with national chains and the big-box store kind of effect. Does that have an impact on you?

Bonnenfant: Well, I'm lucky. I was brought up in the business where my grandfather was really good at it, and then my father and then me, and I've got a lot of knowledge behind my actual upbringing, my skills. I've been trained by the best people, as far as I'm concerned. Then I got recently certified, and according to them, I'm the only certified dry cleaner in the whole state, but I don't know the truth about that anymore. Back when I first was certified, I was, and that's only been four or five years now.

Barber: What's the entity that does that certification?

Ben: It's the IFI, International Fabricare Institute. They're the ones that work with the government on trade and labeling, so they're basically a legit certification process.

Barber: Great.

Bonnenfant: But, yes, a lot of dry-cleaning companies don't go through a lot of training. A lot of these people don't even know the training process, how to get from Point A to Point B. A lot of people are learning on your clothes. [laughs] And in my business, it's not the case. We're legit.

But as far as your original question, competition, I don't really look at it that way for myself because I think I'm the best. I'm sorry to say, but that's just the way I think. I mean, we do the best. We try, and, of course, everybody makes mistakes. Some people will say, "Well, you ruined this." I mean, in dry cleaning you do thousands of garments a day. Well, we do. And, you know, you only ruin one a month? I mean, the ratios are pretty high with us, not against us, so to say. But when you ruin one piece of clothing and one garment, it could have ramifications that can definitely pinch your butt.

There were a lot more cleaners ten years ago than there are now. They're definitely starting to decline and not increase in numbers because it's too expensive. The business is too expensive to run and start. To start a dry-cleaning company now is hundreds of thousands. It's not something where you're just going to pay a couple of thousand dollars and get going. And if you're going to buy one from somebody that's already in place, you're still going to pay thousands or hundreds of thousands to even carry on a losing business, let alone a profitable one.

Barber: There's a lot of overhead?

Bonnenfant: Yes, yes.

Barber: Can you tell me a little bit about staffing and what you know about what staffing was like as far back as you have any knowledge of, and how it's developed today as far as numbers?

Bonnenfant: Well, I could tell you ten years ago I only ran probably twenty-five—well, not even twenty—employees. Now I'm up to fifty. We've got a lot of drop stores. We've purchased other plants,

other locations that we feel are prime. We're currently expanding. The restoration side of our business has helped us create revenue to go into different areas and to think differently, pursue other locations that are going to fit up-and-coming changes in our society. We've got Tesla coming in. We're thinking about expanding in that direction. We've tried other areas that haven't worked. We've had successes, and then, of course, flops. But we keep trying, and we're doing okay and we look forward to the future.



Peerless Cleaners in 2016. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: So you have other physical locations right now under the same name?

Bonnenfant: Yes, I have another plant in Gardnerville that's an actual running plant that has actual dry-cleaning machines and steam and all that kind of thing. Everything else is mostly drop stores, where people drop and then we pick up with vans and bring it back and forth.

Barber: Oh, okay. So there is opportunity. It's interesting thinking about how there actually are fewer than there used to be just because it's difficult to be successful in the industry.

Bonnenfant: Right. And then you've got people that are successful and carry a name that it's hard to go up against, and that's where we're lucky, because we've been around long enough, people trust the name. You got your two-buck-Chuck-type dry cleaners and they tend to do all right, but the profit margins are so small that you really have to do a lot of cleaning. My dad always said, "You know how many pants I have to do just to buy a press or a dry-cleaning machine or even a delivery van?" It was one of those

things where it takes many pairs of anything, dresses, pants, shirts, to profit anymore on anything. So it's a volume business, it really is.

Barber: And it seems that having the name recognition over time is definitely an asset. Have you been pretty satisfied with the name?

Bonnenfant: Yes, it works for itself, absolutely. [Barber laughs.] Of course, a lot of people say, "Oh, I love the sign." The sign has drawn so many people, and people take pictures of it all the time. To me, it's just one of those things I grew up with. I probably take it for granted.

Barber: Well, it's really fantastic to see a lot of the photographs and the soap and see that heritage visibly around.

Bonnenfant: Yes, I'm proud of it. I'm definitely proud of it, because I look at it as, well, my grandfather started it, my dad ran it, and they all worked their whole lives at it, and I kind of have, too. I mean, I've had other jobs, but this one I took full-time when I turned twenty-five, because I did other things. I didn't think I was going to be a dry cleaner, but it was one of those things that I guess was in my blood. I went with it, and it's been good to me.

[Break]

Barber: All right. We are back from doing a little tour of the premises here, and I'd love to talk about some of this machinery. There are some pieces of equipment out there that look pretty old and sturdy, and then some things that are kind of new. I wrote down a lot of the names here, so I don't know, I was kind of scrawling. Tell me the size, tell me how many square feet the whole plant is.

Bonnenfant: Ten-thousand-square-foot plant.

Barber: Okay. And we were seeing elevators. Is that elevator original?

Bonnenfant: Yes.

Barber: You were telling me it had been hazardous at times.

Bonnenfant: Yes. My father almost died on it in the early seventies. The cable snapped, because back then they didn't have elevator inspections, so the cable had worn out, and it tossed him out when it snapped, and the elevator landed on his foot. My grandpa picked it up, and my dad crashed from the second floor to the first floor and was in intensive care for two weeks.

Barber: But recovered fully from that?

Bonnenfant: He basically recovered fully, but he did have issues up to his death that were actually related to his death. He had broken his leg in fifteen different places so that they could never rebuild it. They

should have taken the leg but they didn't, and he wanted to keep it. They kept on saying this or that, and it came down to a knee replacement that ended his life.

Barber: Oh, okay.

Bonnenfant: So that was all directly related to that.

Barber: Does the elevator still suit your needs? Does it work?

Bonnenfant: Oh, absolutely. You have to use it for baskets of clothes going up and down and clothes that are finished downstairs are brought up. We've thought about changing that out to something, I don't know, less cumbersome. The elevator is a cumbersome thing. It's got to be worked on, the cables have to be replaced, up and down all the time. They make lifts now that can go through that space that can come up and around in a circular motion that you don't have to constantly lift the door open, because it's a heavy door. Close the door, push the buttons, and wait for somebody to come push the button to bring it back down. It's just one of those things—it's yesteryear.

Barber: It looks pretty neat, though.

Bonnenfant: When I was a kid, I used to ride it until my dad almost died on it, and nobody's ridden it since.

Barber: Yes, it's no longer recreational.

Bonnenfant: Nope.

Barber: So, with the presses, it's interesting to me that there are manual presses and then there are presses that have a pneumatic operation. Can you talk a little bit about the presses you have out there?

Bonnenfant: Well, the presses that are nonpneumatic are just what we call stompers. You're putting just your good ol' body into pressing the clothes with force. Your legs put a lot of the force onto the garment to create a pressed look. Pneumatics do it with air cylinders, and there are valves and all those kind of things that make it more efficient to vacuum the clothes for the steam and to keep moisture away from your actual finished product, because water is your enemy in the dry-cleaning business.

Barber: So those manual presses actually have a foot pedal that you stomp on.

Bonnenfant: Yes. Where pneumatics is all buttons and stuff and you compress, you have to have air compressors and you have to keep your air compressors clean because they push oil through, and a lot of your pneumatic presses are a real messy thing, and they're real cumbersome as far as keeping them working, because they have plastic tubing that cracks, splits, and, of course, they need all kinds of moving parts. When you go with an actual old-time press, there are very few parts. They just go up and they go down. They don't have all these funky little things to them.



Barber: I suppose you do all the repairs for those that are needed?

Bonnenfant: I do. I can repair anything in this whole place.

Barber: So there's a lot of equipment out there that helps keep clothing in the right form.

Bonnenfant: Correct. Form finishers or tensioners, as they're called nowadays.

Barber: So there are different ones for different kinds of clothing? There was something you called a pant topper?

Bonnenfant: Yes. Well, I don't know how you'd say it, but the way you look at a garment, how it's pressed from, let's say, the sleeve to its tail or its neck to its back, requires different things to create production in a timely manner. You always want a flow of production. You don't want your production to take more than a minute a garment, so to say. You want to be able to go that fast, and if you're going slower than a minute a garment, you're losing money. So on average, you're trying to get a garment done a minute, and I don't care if it's the laundry or the dry-cleaning side.

Barber: Maybe I should take it from when somebody brings laundry, something that they want cleaned, to the front. What's the process that it would go through? Say they didn't really have specific directions, but "Here's a whole pile of stuff and we need it cleaned"?

Bonnenfant: And that's what a lot of people do. They drop it on the counter, because they're not the professional. They're looking to us to actually know what we're talking about and carry it from that point on. Now, what we do is divide it between dry cleaning and laundry. Then you go right back to the care label. The care label will tell you, wash or dry clean, dry clean only or a lot of garments say do not dry clean. We get garments that say do not wash and do not dry clean. You've got a lot of different facets of the business that make it really a headache, too. Especially if you're going too fast or if you have people that aren't trained correctly, you end up with a lot of problems.

Barber: There was a room downstairs that was for sorting. Is that where all the sorting happens?

Bonnenfant: That's where all the sorting happens after the garment has been tagged. Now, the CSRs, or customer service representatives, go through the clothes the best they can with the customer and try to discuss what we think is best for your garment. Of course, people always try to tell us what they think is best, but then we end up having the final say.

Barber: So it gets labeled and then taken down to the basement.

Bonnenfant: It gets categorized, so to say, and then it goes to either, like I say, the laundry works, where it gets processed and inspected that way, or the dry-cleaning side where it gets processed and inspected that way. And sometimes they cross. A piece will end up in dry cleaning and then the dry cleaner will say, no, this has to go to laundry, and the same with the laundry, nope, this has to go to dry cleaning. That happens daily.

Barber: So with all the racks that are on the main floor, as often comes to mind when you think about taking something to the laundry, do the clothes just move around on these racks?

Bonnenfant: At this particular location, we don't use the—what do you call them? I don't even know the name of them right now. It escapes me. But a lot of our drop stores use them, because that's how you get the garment to the front of the business, so you're not going around looking for it. But this system that was set up here is all by numbers, and it was a numbered system. It's called a lot system. Back in the forties, that's when it was established, but now it's conveyored dry cleaning, which is what we're going to be going back to, because bar coding tells you where your clothes are by just a push of a button on the computer. So there's less walking for your CSR to go pick it out, grab it, whatever. Plus now it's cross-referenced with the bar code to the actual garment.

Barber: Oh, okay. That's the system you're putting into place now?

Bonnenfant: We're putting it into place. A lot of cleaners are using it. It's automation, and it's about doing away with your productivity or labor costs, because that's always a continual expense.

Barber: So we were downstairs and there were some rooms that had changed. Some have been the same all the time and a couple have changed. It looks like the dry-cleaning room, the dry-cleaning machines, were always in the same spot.

Bonnenfant: The dry-cleaning machines you just saw are from the twenty-first century. When I first started here, we used a carbon-based dry-cleaning machine, which actually dumped packages of carbon in the actual fluid, and dumped what we called diatomaceous earth in there, and you mixed all that together with some soap, and that was what we called paint thinner. That was basically the actual fluid we used to dry-clean with. Those used to run through big, big machines, and it smelled, because back then dry-cleaning fluids all smelled. And back in the day, you'd come into a dry-cleaning establishment, and that's what used to hit you first. First thing when you walked into dry-cleaning establishment was the smell. Those days are gone. As you noticed, you didn't smell anything.

Barber: There's no aroma out there at all.

Bonnenfant: Nothing. No residual, nothing harmful, nothing that could cause any kind of problem.

Barber: But I remember that smell you're talking about. [laughs]

Bonnenfant: Growing up as a kid, it was just like, "Oh, I'm at my dad's work," and he'd come home, he'd smell like it. Back in those days, it was real common that you knew what that smell was, depending on even what the chemical was you used, because there were a bunch of different ones, so you knew what chemicals somebody has out, what they're using.

Barber: So those machines are different machines, but they're in the same location that the earlier machines had been?

Bonnenfant: Basically. The older machines took up a lot more space because the filters were enormous. Then what they called stills, like stilling alcohol, they'd still your fluids because you're trying to keep your fluids clean. Dry-cleaning fluid, it gets dirty by going through dirty clothes, so you have to clean it. Nowadays, filtration has come a long way by the process of spin disks, they're called, to actually still using Tonsil powder, which is a form of, I don't know, coral from the sea. They crush it and it helps trap dirt and particles and those kind of things.

Barber: And they call it Tonsil powder?

Bonnenfant: Tonsil. And it's mixed with diatomaceous, which is some of the stuff that they mine right here in Nevada, kind of like a clay.

Barber: It has a lot of different uses, I think.

Bonnenfant: Yes.

Barber: So then there was an area that you said used to be the drape room, and what is that used for now?

Bonnenfant: Well, basically that's used for producing most of our hotel wardrobe in a large volume. We do a large volume in hotel. Casinos try to pay real cheap to get a lot of work done in a very short period of time, because what they give you today, they need back tonight. You're trying to push it through in a rapid motion, so you need a lot of space to do that because there are a lot of garments.

Barber: This is uniforms you're talking about?

Bonnenfant: Yes. Wardrobe is what the employees wear, yes.

Barber: So not performance clothes for anyone performing at casinos?

Bonnenfant: No, we do some of that, too, absolutely. Sammy's Showroom, we used to do quite a bit of that. Then, of course, a lot of entertainers through the years—my grandma found \$2,000 in Sammy Davis, Jr.'s pocket once. So we do performers. There's, of course, studded gowns and those kind of things, sequined this, sequined that, that's what we do.

Barber: So there's a room that you haven't talked about. There are these doors that are outside an explosion-proof room? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Bonnenfant: Well, back in the days when the temperatures that your fluids reached could become flammable, whenever you heated up a garment to dry it, you were approaching temperatures that are dangerous. So you have to be careful not to exceed those, and it can happen, one, with steam. A stuck valve can get something too hot, or, like I was saying, a lighter in a pocket can touch a spark, and metal-on-metal contact can create sparks and then explosions and those kinds of things. So they had to have

explosion-proof motors, explosion-proof doors. That's basically a room that's called a vault. It's concrete roof, sides, all the way around, and the windows are reinforced with metal, so it's a safe zone.

Barber: And there are these very heavy metal doors that are off to the side that aren't covering the door front, but they could be released in case of fire and close that room in?

Bonnenfant: Correct. They have a burn tab on them that if it melts through, the doors seal the room.

Barber: That's fascinating. Then can you explain what an ozone room is? I'd never heard of that before.

Bonnenfant: Well, an ozone room is basically a room that has a machine that's an ozonator that pumps certain kind of ozone particles, I believe, into the actual garments to mask—I think it's a temporary thing. It just masks the actual smoke and/or smell of anything that gets in and inundates garments, textiles. You're trying to remove that for future use, period.

But some things you can't save. Some things are just ruined when the smoke hits it. You get—what do you call it—burn, of course, if it melts or gets to a certain temperature, you're scarred, your clothes are scarred. At that point, certain things can't be saved, but nowadays, it's just about trying to save as many garments as possible, because a lot of people are attached to their clothes, and they don't like going out and buying new stuff. And then a lot of garments you just can't get anymore. So it's more about trying to keep customers happy and restore their textiles.

Barber: You had mentioned, and I saw that in early years of the company—I don't know if this is while your family owned it, but there was a hatworks.

Bonnenfant: Yes.

Barber: And you were pointing out that the downstairs is where the hat maker worked?

Bonnenfant: Yes. He made hats. He would stretch them. He would sew bands on them. He would form them. He would make them out of different kinds of materials. Of course, you had beaver to cloth to plaid to tweed. There's all different kinds of wool styles of hats. In those days, in the thirties and forties, everybody wore hats, so it's one of those things that you had to have.

It was kind of like now you have sewing pretty much on site, too. They didn't really have a whole lot of that, but nowadays it's requested. You always have somebody asking, "Can you sew a button on? Can you sew this? Can you sew that?" Hats, we still do some, we just don't make them. We don't tailor them. We clean quite a few varieties of them. But it's just not one of those big moneymakers that we would allow to take up space like that spot that I was showing you. It took up a lot of space. Kind of like the drape room took up a lot of space when we used to do drapes, because you would do housefuls of drapes, especially in the springtime. Spring cleaning and drapes were everywhere. Not anymore.

Barber: The trend has just gone away? People don't use drapes as much?

Bonnenfant: No, blinds and those kind of things, window coverings, are completely different than what they used to be.

Barber: Do you know if that hat maker was operating down there after your grandfathered acquired the business?

Bonnenfant: I believe not. I believe not, because I had pictures of that room being used as a press room after that particular picture.

Barber: Then there were other pieces of equipment you were talking about. I don't remember what a puffer was. What's a puffer?

Bonnenfant: A puffer's the thing that has a form on the top where you lay your clothes over it, and you can either stretch your clothes or form your clothes over a styled end. It can look like an arrow; it can look like a shoulder; it can look like what we call a mushroom. Then you form different pieces of clothing around it so that it takes wrinkles out or makes them look appropriate.

Barber: Then you have the collar-and-cuff machine, and that's just a special kind of pressing for those specific parts of a shirt?

Bonnenfant: All it does is press collars and cuffs. Then we have another machine downstairs that presses just the sleeves. Then you have another machine that presses just the front and the back of a shirt. There are different applications for different garments. Like you were saying, the toppers just press the top of the pants. Then you have a leg tensioner that just presses the bottom pair of the pants, not just the actual what we call a legger. This is the one that was standing up downstairs. I probably didn't go over that. Well, if it was running, I could show it to you, but it just actually jerks on the bottom of your pants and blows steam through it, and they come out styled and formed to that actual process.

Barber: I have to admit, it never occurred to me how many types of equipment would be employed all the time in a plant like this.

Bonnenfant: And it's not a cheap way to go. A lot of cleaners can't afford to go those kinds of routes, but it does affect your time, your production, and you hope to pay for it with productivity in a rapid succession.

Barber: You said that there's a weekly cycle. It's pretty quiet now. We're here on a Friday afternoon. What's your weekly cycle like?

Bonnenfant: Well, we start at four in the morning, so that's when things are really getting geared up. By six in the morning, baskets are moving and people are nearly running into each other, and clothes are going on conveyors, and flinging things around, and it gets quite hectic. And depending on a flow, especially after a holiday, it's really hectic down there.

Barber: So it's really more about time of day than day of the week, pretty much?

Bonnenfant: Correct. Well, Friday is the end of the week, but when we have storms like yesterday, it keeps people from coming into the stores. They don't want to drive, so stores end up being slower.

Barber: Right. Well, thank you so much for the tour. I think we'd love to come in and take some photographs of some of the equipment here.

Bonnenfant: Well, hopefully, I will find those pictures, and it will give you more detail of the past and the history—

Barber: Oh, terrific.

Bonnenfant: —because those were really, really neat.

Barber: Yes. Oh, thank you so much.

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## TAMMY BORDE

Owner, Chocolate Walrus, 1278 S. Virginia Street  
and Sierra Nevada Chocolate Co., 1290 S. Virginia Street



Tammy Borde inside Chocolate Walrus, 2016. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Tammy Borde bought the Chocolate Walrus in 2004 and moved the business to its current site at 1278 S. Virginia Street. She also owns the Sierra Nevada Chocolate Company at 1290 S. Virginia Street and for a time operated Lulu's Chic Boutique at 1298 S. Virginia Street.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, and I'm in Reno, Nevada, with Tammy Borde to conduct an interview for the Midtown History Project, sponsored by the RTC.

Tammy, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Borde: Yes, you do.

Barber: Thank you. I want to start by getting a little bit of background on you. Can you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised?

Borde: I was born and raised in southern California and I became a police officer there. Then I moved up to northern California as a police officer with another department, and I got injured on duty. I have family that's been here for a long time—I think we're on our eleventh generation. So I when I got injured, I moved closer to family.

Barber: And did you at that point immediately think about going into business for yourself?

Borde: Well, yes, actually. When I was injured, I'd read the *San Francisco Chronicle* every day because I was stuck in my apartment, and I could have sworn that I read in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the Chocolate Walrus was for sale at the time. When I came here, it just happened to be that my cousin was getting married, and so I bought stuff from the Chocolate Walrus, and I said to the owner, "I thought I saw an ad in the paper in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that you were selling this."

She said, "No, but if somebody offered me the right amount of money, I'll take it."

I said, "What's the right amount of money?"

She said, "This."

I said, "It's sold." So three days later I handed her the cash and I owned a business. [laughs]

Barber: What year was that?

Borde: That was 2004, I want to say. I'm guessing.

Barber: That was located where it is now?

Borde: No, it was actually on Grove Street. I shut it down for a month, and I got this place in the meantime. I had to take down the horrible wallpaper and the horrible god-awful carpeting, take care of all that, and just start moving things in about a month later.

Barber: What's the address of this storefront, the Chocolate Walrus?

Borde: The Chocolate Walrus is at 1278 South Virginia Street.

Barber: What was in it immediately prior to that, that you needed to renovate from?

Borde: It was apparently an antique shop as well, because my neighbors at the time were both antique shops, and the carpeting down in the basement level was from Caesars in Tahoe. It actually had the little Caesar in it. It was kind of cool, but it was pretty gross, so it all got dumped. [laughs]

Barber: Did you look at other locations? What attracted you to this location?



Borde: I did. I looked at all the areas. I looked at a lot in this area. I just knew it had a lot of potential, and it needed some love.

Barber: What else was in the surrounding storefronts at the time, do you recall?

Borde: There was the antique mall across the street at the time, and they had Julie's next door, and then I think her name was Karen or Kathy who had the other antique store on the other side of me. Statewide Lighting was there, and I just liked the Statewide Lighting look. It was surrounded by antiques, and I sort of wanted to blend in with that area. So that's why I liked this and chose it, and it was a fit.



The Bennetti block in 2016. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: Do you know how long the Chocolate Walrus had been in business before that?

Borde: Well, I'm the fourth owner, and I have met two of the other three. The only one I haven't met is the second owner, and she did pass. They came into the Chocolate Walrus when she passed, and they asked if we could be a part of her memory, the party they throw after the funeral. I said, "Absolutely, we'd love to." I'd been trying to get a hold of her and I found out she was very ill.

Originally, the Chocolate Walrus was in downtown Reno, and at that time the lady that opened the shop made the x-rated chocolates, and she was antiquing with her lover at the time. She was a lesbian. She saw this display of walruses, and she said, "I'm going to name it the Chocolate Walrus." She bought a walrus, and she ended up having a collection of walruses throughout the store. I have one piece of that collection.

When I was Vegas one time, I ran into her. She came up to me at a show, and she's like, "Oh, my god." Her name was Cynthia, and we had a really, really great conversation. She brought me articles about how people literally protested her. She had a Catholic priest out there protesting, out there with picket signs back in the day. I want to say she was at 300 Virginia Street.

Barber: Maybe somewhere on the east side of the street in one of the smaller storefronts?

Borde: Yes. I have never been able to find it. The stories she was telling me were absolutely fantastic, with the picketing. But the picketing, she said, gave her a lot of advertising. She said, "They worked on my behalf." [laughs]

So, anyway, she had sold the business to another lady, the lady who passed away, because she was moving down to Vegas at the time. But when Cynthia owned it in the eighties, she would bring in Chippendales to Reno.

Barber: They would perform at a casino?

Borde: I don't know where they performed, but she would have a setup, and she said it was a wild fun time. Everybody in town, the women of the town, just loved it. It was the eighties and it was a little scandalous but a lot of fun.

Then she sold to another lady that moved it to Old Town Mall, and that was the lady who passed away. That lady ended up selling it to Doreen [phonetic], and Doreen's the lady I bought it from.

Barber: Did it always have the same kind of inventory? You said that it had the chocolates from the beginning. Did it exclusively sell those, or did it have other things, too?

Borde: Well, we manufacture the chocolates.

Barber: Right.

Borde: Somebody who owned the business always made that here. It was Cynthia who made it originally, and I know Doreen made them, and then I brought in my mother to make the chocolates as well. So somebody always made them, because it connected with the name, the Chocolate Walrus.

Barber: Right.

Borde: I guess we've taken the inventory in a whole different direction since I've owned it.

Barber: So what was there to learn about chocolate making?

Borde: What was there to learn? What was there to learn about everything? [laughter] Everything. Absolutely everything. I found people that were very prejudiced. People wouldn't wash my windows because of what we sell and what we do and even because of our chocolate. Well, it's chocolate, for crying out loud. [laughs] One window washer had seen a chocolate penis, because it was right up front, and I said to him, "It's chocolate." [laughs]

He said, "I don't care."

I said, "Okay." It's been a wonderful journey, it really has been, but there have been some peaks and valleys. It's just been a great learning experience. It's been wonderful.

Barber: So for many years you just had the one business, the Chocolate Walrus?

Borde: When I bought the Chocolate Walrus from Doreen, I got a chocolate company for free. It was named Sierra Chocolate Company, and it was out of Gardnerville, from what I understand. Doreen got it out of a bankruptcy, and she just put it in with her business. So when I got the Chocolate Walrus, I got Sierra Chocolate Company as well, because she incorporated that. I got the whole kit-and-caboodle when I bought it.

We were selling chocolates to a couple florists in town. I loved this one florist, and it was so funny, they sent over a customer of theirs. This is old Reno. She came in, she must have been in her late seventies, and she was drooping with diamonds. She walked into the Chocolate Walrus, which is, of course, an adult boutique.

She said, "So-and-so florist sent me over here."

And I said, "Oh, oh, oh, I'm so sorry!"

She said, "Oh, honey, don't worry. It's a good cocktail story." [laughs]

I said, "True, it is." [laughs]

She said, "I need some of your flops."

I said, "Flops of what?"

She said, "Flops of your butterscotch. It's so fabulous." My butterscotch chocolate.

I said, "I don't have flops, but I'll make you some." [laughs]

She came in for a couple of years and was a great customer. She was just a doll. She continuously came in for our chocolate.

Barber: So did the chocolate company have its own storefront when you acquired it?

Borde: At the time, it didn't. It actually was downstairs from the Chocolate Walrus. It was a very small unit. We didn't require much. Then the antique store went out of business—she was retiring—and a lighting company came in and that family went through some hard times. The couple ended up getting a divorce and they needed to be bought out of the lease, and so that's when we took that space over.

Barber: Is that the storefront on the end that you're talking about?

Borde: No, that is the one directly south of the Chocolate Walrus. We took that over, and we were there for about three years. Then the owners of the Chinese restaurant that was just south of that, two spots south of the Chocolate Walrus, got evicted, and we took over that place. That's when we moved the Sierra Nevada Chocolate Company. We changed the name from Sierra Chocolate Company to Sierra Nevada Chocolate Company, and we moved it next door, two doors down from the Chocolate Walrus.

Barber: Do you remember approximately when that was?

Borde: Chris would know. I want to say six or seven years ago. We'll go with seven. [laughter]

Barber: So the chocolate company was supplying candy to a lot of different entities at that time?

Borde: Yes, we sell wholesale across the United States and to Canada and Mexico, and then, of course, we supply our own store, making it truly the name Chocolate Walrus. We do all the fun candies for

bachelorettes and birthdays and get-wells. Anybody can send flowers, but who can send a booby basket? [laughs] It makes it very, very fun.

Barber: So having a storefront for Sierra Nevada Chocolate then gave you a whole new audience, right?

Borde: Yes, it did. It gave us a whole new audience, exactly. So that's when we started doing the non-rated chocolates, our truffles and our barks and our caramel apples and our chocolate-covered bananas, and the list goes on and on and on. Now we sell coffee and we're looking to even expand it even more.

Barber: Yes, I saw the shop has wireless, so you're encouraging people to linger.

Borde: Yes, exactly. And we're going to give it up upbeat look. We're looking into upgrading our look right now, so we're really excited about that.



Tammy Borde's Sierra Nevada Chocolate Company in 2015. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: Were any of the basements open to the public at that point, or was it all office space?

Borde: From day one, the Chocolate Walrus had inventory downstairs. I love costumes. The very first year I opened, on August 1<sup>st</sup>, I brought in some costumes, and we did so well with it, the following year I

did more costumes. By the third year, we needed to expand, and so that's when I opened up the basement, with all the costumes downstairs. I have a business coach now, and she said to me, "I never knew you had costumes." It's so funny to me because we've had costumes since day one, and we had literally 1,600 square feet of costumes by the second year we were in business. So it's very funny to me that people didn't know that we had costumes. So, God rest her soul, when Julie passed away, that's when we expanded to her space.

Barber: Julie had the north storefront?

Borde: The north storefront. Julie was here for twenty years, and she was absolutely fabulous. She was just amazing. She knew everybody in town, because she had originally started in downtown Reno and twenty years later moved here.

Barber: Do you know her last name?

Borde: You know, I don't.

Barber: I'll look it up. I'll try to find out. I saw that her store also had a sign that said "Eileen's Attic." Do you know what that was?

Borde: Yes. Julie and Eileen were best friends, and they were truly like Lucy and Ethel. I used to call out "Lucy! Ethel!" When I ran away during the day, I'd come over here just because they were like having the neighbors Lucy and Ethel. They were so fabulous, so kind, just absolutely amazing people, and I adored them to death. Eileen, unfortunately, had to quit. She got cancer. Can I tell you a story?

Barber: Please.

Borde: Oh, my god, it's going to be the best story in the world and it's going to make me cry. This truly tells you what type of people were in this area. Julie and Eileen were in business, like I said, for twenty years. A year and a half before Julie died, Eileen got really sick. It was Christmastime, and Eileen wasn't supposed to make it, and the whole neighborhood got together, and got her husband, who was Charlie, who's still alive, some hospice care, because he didn't know about hospice. The whole little tract here helped out.

Eileen was bedbound and called Julie, and said, "Can you do me a favor? Can you go to Walmart and get Charlie some jeans for Christmas? He loves these jeans from Walmart. Can you please get him these jeans so he has a present to open for Christmas?" Because we didn't expect her to live until Christmas.

Well, myself and some other people in this neighborhood belong to a charity club, and I broached it to this group of people and I said, "Hey, Charlie really needs some help with some finances because Eileen's daughter is back east. Can we pitch in?"

We pitched in five hundred bucks and gave it to Charlie as a Christmas gift. So Charlie ended up having some extra money, which meant Eileen had extra money. So as soon as Eileen found out about this extra money, she called Julie to go get this pair of pants. It was so funny because Charlie ended up bringing down her daughter to see her before she passed, and it was all based on this \$500 that started

everything. And then Julie said, “Where the hell did they get money to bring her here, and I still have to go to Walmart? Do you know what it’s like at Christmastime to go to Walmart?” [laughs]

And I walk over in front of my [unclear] and Julie just went off. And I said, “Julie, I’m so sorry. It was me.” [laughter]

And she said, “I should make *you* go to Walmart.”

I said, “I don’t know what jeans those are.” [laughs] So it was just so cute how it just kind of all circled around and intertwined.

Then we lost Eileen. She went right after that, probably about a month later, and then out of nowhere, Julie got sick. Julie had been sick before. She had cancer twice, lung cancer. I guess the doctor would go and put monitors on her chest, and she said to me, “I need two big chocolate boobs to put on my boobs the next time the doctor comes by.” [laughs]

I said, “I’ll supply you some pasties, too, sweetheart.” [laughter] I said, “Did you do it?”

She said, “I sure did.” She was a prankster. [laughs]

So anyway, so that’s how this neighborhood has always been, and that gives you a sense of it.

Barber: So then you moved into that storefront just last year, I think?

Borde: Julie’s storefront, yes. Her daughter auctioned off everything. There was so much stuff, a lot of it had to be auctioned off because of some other things that came into play. It ended up having to close very fast so she didn’t have to tack on any more expenses. There are a lot of expenses in death. So she brought in an auctioneer, and there was so much stuff. And then afterwards we had to clean. There was just a peg wall and then there was my store, the Chocolate Walrus. [laughs]

Barber: There really was just a thin wall between you two?

Borde: A peg wall. You know what peg wall is made out of? [laughs]

Barber: No.

Border: Chopped-up cover board, I think. [laughs] I don’t know what it’s made out of, but I thought, “Oh, my god.”

Then my business coach said, “You should take over this place, because you spend so much time on Lulu’s, that’s a couple hours a day you could save time on, and nobody knows you have costumes.”

Then I talked over with my landlord, and they said, “Sure, Tammy.”

So we did that, and God bless Julie’s soul. Just God bless her to death. She never fixed a damn thing. [laughs] She jerry-rigged everything. Jerry must be her middle name. [laughs] I mean, it was so funny. Probably about eight years ago, the actual owners came into town, and it was in the middle of winter, and little old Julie was just sitting there with her little floor heater, and that’s all. They walked in there and it was freezing. She didn’t have a heater, so they bought her a heater, but the way they had it put in, it was crazy. She never fixed anything.

So we’re pulling up this, I don’t know, thread of a carpet, and we find a dance floor. We always hear about this nightclub, because I have customers who constantly come in and talk about the amazing nightclub that was here. That’s a lot of stories in itself. And I said, “There’s the dance floor!” [laughs]

Barber: Was it a wood dance floor?

Borde: It was wood, but it was like little pegs of wood cut—it was really cool. It's still there. We didn't touch it. We just went right over it. [laughs] It's very cool. We always thought it was south of Chocolate Walrus because we'd hear about these tunnels. The customers would come in and say, "Oh, there were tunnels and rooms and this, that, and the other." It was very scandalous, the stories that would come in, and we thought, "Wow!" So it makes sense, we found the tunnels. [laughs]

Barber: So that allowed you to take your costumes out of the basement and move them to the ground floor.

Borde: And move them to the ground floor, exactly. And we did not find Jimmy Hoffa. [laughs] We thought we would, but we didn't.

Barber: So that doesn't have a separate name, then? That's still part of Chocolate Walrus?

Borde: It's going to be The Costume Shop of Chocolate Walrus, but we just haven't presented it yet. We're going to call it "The Costume Shop," and then underneath it, "of Chocolate Walrus."

Barber: Now, in the meantime, you had also started running a boutique at the end, at the south side?

Borde: Yes. We shut that down to open up this, because our ultimate goal is to open up more Chocolate Walrus stores, and there's only one of me. [laughs] So my coach said, "Shut that down," and my landlord transferred my lease. So that's what we did.

Barber: So was that originally called Lulu's? Was that its original name, the one on the end?

Borde: I called it Lulu's. I named it after my mom.

Barber: So there was already a shop there?

Borde: Before I moved into it, the corner shop, which is three shops south of Chocolate Walrus, it was a liquor store, and the owner had been there for a couple years. The problem is that he would sell to all kinds of people. [laughs] And it just wasn't conducive to the Chocolate Walrus, and that's why I took it and rented it. I love my landlord to death, but he'd rent to a lot of different people. So that's why we took that over, and I just thought, "Okay, what are we going to put in there?" I had no clue, and so I just did clothes. And then prior to the liquor store it was a wedding shop, and prior to the wedding shop, there was another adult shop. Prior to that, I don't know.

Barber: So you're consolidating a little bit.

Borde: Yes, just trying to, yes.

Barber: It sounds like even when you first came here, before there was an idea of a Midtown, there was a sense of a community among the business owners.

Borde: Yes, definitely, going back to the Julie and Eileen stories. I mean, I'd walk in and Charlie would already have snowplowed my sidewalks. Absolutely. And here's how Midtown started. Being a former police officer and knowing that the area wasn't that good, I knocked on my neighbors' doors and I said, "We need to get together and have a meeting all together." Three of us—Chris from Bangkok Cuisine, Chris from Sushi Pier, and me—the three of us thought, "Hey, this is a great idea. Let's do that." So we collectively knocked on everybody's doors. Then DeeDee from Sports West and Hillary Schieve came in, and then Sam Sprague came in. So we collectively got together, and I said, "You know, let's just find out what's going in the neighborhood. Let's collectively get together and start something. If I get robbed, I want you to know about it, or tell you what happened with the street issue or whatever, and possibly even do some advertising and events together. This can lead into endless events."

Chris from Sushi Pier called me up one day and he said, "What do you think of the name of "Midtown"?" He said, "There's a Midtown in New York. There's a Midtown here. There's a Midtown there."

I said, "Midtown it is. That's what we'll call it then." [laughs] And it was literally that simple. [laughs] So that's how it came about.

Barber: And did that become a formal business organization right away?

Borde: Yes. Actually, Chris, Chris, and I sat down for about three hours and wrote some bylaws. Then from there, different groups would pound out more of them, and then our meetings would pound out even more. For the first year, we pounded out the bylaws of what Midtown was supposed to be, and that's what happened to get it going. And eventually it grew into what it is today. It morphed into this. It's like a little butterfly.

Barber: Do you remember what some of those early bylaws were? What were the things you were most concerned about or thought were important to include?

Borde: One of the things that was very important to me and to a lot of people, was to make sure that we handled the money correctly. We knew that we wanted to do an association-fee type of thing, and we wanted it to be very easy. We didn't want it to be astronomical. And once we started getting everybody enrolled, we wanted to make sure that there wasn't any misappropriation of funds, and so that was one of the things that we did. We tried to make sure that that was safe and secure.

The next thing we did was define our boundaries. Midtown went all the way up to the south side of California Street and all the way down to the north side of Plumb. We went all the way to the west side of Wells, and then we went the same distance west of Virginia Street. Creating our boundaries was very important, because California Avenue had their own little thing going on. Vassar Street had their own little thing going on. We didn't want to exclude anybody, but we wanted to make it our own. So basically it was all the businesses that started in the south of town.

Barber: It is, but you were always thinking north, too.



Borde: Oh, yes. We were thinking long-term, and there were a lot of people who were involved with it—like I said, DeeDee from Sports West, Hillary, Chris from Bangkok, Chris from Sushi Pier, Sam from Micano's, myself—we were thinking long-term, and we never wanted to exclude anybody.

Barber: Did you find that the people who were interested in that organization were primarily folks who had established businesses here post-2000?

Borde: As a matter of fact, I think I still have the original list around here somewhere. I do. I have the original. Yes, because what's-his-name from Miguel's Restaurant was involved, what's-his-name that owns Portofino's, he was involved. We had a lot of people who started to establish their businesses here long before us. Chad from Chapel, who was on the south end, he was involved as well. And we just wanted to keep things neighborly.

Barber: Did it take a little while to gain momentum and for people to understand what Midtown was?

Borde: Oh, absolutely. People might think, "Oh, she's a beautiful star that just instantly appeared." No. [laughs] We got the ball rolling two years, two and a half years before everybody started hearing about it. We had meetings a couple of times a month, with those who could make it, because we're all small businesses. Everything's pulling us in all directions: marketing, research, buying, hiring, firing, human resources. That's what small business does, and we get pulled in a thousand directions, so we're not always available. So there were about two years of prior stuff that most people didn't even realize was happening.

Barber: So what was the impact of the recession? It was happening about the time that Midtown was getting off the ground, and these are all small business owners. Did that play a major role? I'm sure you were all aware of that. Or on the other hand, did that make the property more affordable?

Borde: It did. You know, there are peaks and valleys in everything. With the fact that there was a recession, on one level that was a good thing, since my smaller items would sell, and people were staying at home. [laughs] And what do you do when you stay at home when the kids go to bed? Watch another *SVU* or have a little fun? [laughs]

Small business has its peaks and valleys, and it's constantly changing, and that was one thing about Midtown. It constantly changes to the new. Same thing with RTC, same thing with Reno, everything. It has its peaks and valleys. You've just got to drudge through.

Barber: So as the Midtown concept developed over time, different activities became part of the district's purview, right?

Borde: Yes, and once Jessica became president, she was very good on the activities level. She was amazing with it. She's a great marketing person, and she really got that ball rolling. She did a great job.

Barber: Was the Art Walk the first event?

Borde: Oh, you want to know what the very first event was? No, I don't believe so. I have to think about that. I don't think so. You know, I have records around here somewhere. [laughs]

Barber: Did it seem important to have events that would attract the public?

Borde: Yes. And like I said, Jessica from Junkee's was at the forefront of that. She did a great, great job. I want to say that there were a couple other events, small things that we got going beforehand, and we were present at different events that were going on around town, as well.

Barber: So how has the development of Midtown into a very recognizable district with more and more businesses that people are attracted to affected your business? Have you seen a very visible increase in business? Do more people walk by?

Borde: You know what I love to see is how it's morphed into the butterfly that it is. It has just been absolutely amazing. People are starting to walk. I think it's important that we get out and stroll and have a coffee and get a small bite to eat or shop a little or whatever it is. It's been nice to watch. It's like watching a baby grow up. I didn't think it was going to be this. I'll never forget that phone call when we decided to call it Midtown. I said, "Okay, that's it." [laughs] Literally, I was driving home, getting off on the off-ramp, and I said, "Okay, sounds good to me. I'll bring it up at the next meeting." It passed. And here we are today. [laughs]

It was about making the change in the neighborhood to make it different for all of us, and all of us have worked very, very hard at it—and at different times. There was a time I had to step away from everything because of family matters and Jessica took a role with it, and she did an amazing job and she brought something new and fresh. Everybody's brought something new and fresh to it, and it just keeps on morphing into this beautiful butterfly that it is today.

Barber: Were you an officer in the Midtown District organization?

Borde: Oh, yes. I didn't want to be president. I was vice president. [laughs] They said, "Tammy, be president."

I said, "No. Chris, you be president."

"Okay." Everybody voted and it passed with a majority. [laughs] I want to be behind the scenes.

Barber: It's interesting now with the renovation of the bank that's across the street into a pretty substantial mixed-use development.

Borde: I know! It's so funny, because I'm out looking for property right now for my mom, and everyone says, "Midtown is the great property and the most expensive," and ooh and ah.

And I think, "What?" [laughs] But it is. It's doing great things.

Reno's always been part of my family, because my aunts, my uncles, my godfather, my godmother, everybody's here, all my cousins. And we were the odd sheep, so we always came here for all the holidays and stuff, a couple times a year. After growing up in southern California and moving up to northern California, and then moving out here, one thing that Reno has that I don't think any other place has, is that it's so accepting and it's all okay. I would never be able to have what I have if it wasn't

for Reno. And I travel a lot with my business. I'm leaving for Vegas tomorrow and Iceland after that. I travel a lot, and it's so nice to come home to Reno. Reno is really home and it's just so accepting.

I was burglarized and we caught the burglar, and at his court hearing, I said, "You could have come to Reno and changed your life, because people are so accepting and there's so much work out here, if you'd just do it." I said, "You screwed up."

And the judge turned around and said, "Good point." [laughs]

I said, "You could have changed it." Because that's one thing that so great about Reno is that everything's okay. You want to do this? Fabulous! You want to do this? Fabulous! We support you. And it's so funny how many people shop small business here in Reno. It's a custom to do that. We try not to go into the big box stores. We try to shop the markets that are smaller. We go to the small mom-and-pops. We don't go to the big chains as much. A lot of people make a point of that.

Barber: So who do you find your customers are?

Borde: Locals. The majority of them are locals. And repeat customers, people who have staycations out here. I tell them, "You're going to love Reno. Maybe you should think about retiring here." Now I stop telling people. [laughs] I'm like, "Horrible neighborhood. Horrible!" [laughs]

Barber: Do you get all ages?

Borde: All ages from eighteen up. Reno has just become such a big hub, and it's just wonderful. It's such an artsy town that's just whatever you are, it's okay here. We love you. [laughs]

Barber: Let's talk about the building a little bit. Have you had the same landlord the whole time?

Borde: Absolutely. Love them.

Barber: Do you know how long they've owned the building?

Borde: Since 1980-something. They're great. They're out of California. And I'm telling you, Reno is the biggest little city. Back in the eighties, my aunt who lived here in Reno did the bookkeeping for my landlord's sister.

Barber: In Reno?

Borde: In L.A. She was in L.A. and moved here to Reno, and that's how they have that connection, and they never knew it. I thought, "I haven't called up my auntie." She was in Houston, and I was in Reno, and I said, "Oh, I rented a place on—," blah, blah.

She asked, "Where at?"

And I told her, and she said, "Oh, is so-and-so on it?"

I said, "Yes. How'd you know that?"

And she said, "Oh, I know her sister. I know them very well. I do their bookkeeping." [laughs]

I asked, "Where?"

She said, "I still fly in to do her bookkeeping."

I said, “You do?” [laughs]

Barber: Do you know how or why they acquired this property?

Borde: Investment. They do investing. They have family here as well, and lots of mutual friends. They’re very global people, absolutely amazing people, very charitable. About once a year I send them a “Hey, can we get some funds for this charitable event?” note: “I’m doing this charitable thing and it’s in this town. Can you send over some funds?” And I get a check made out to that charitable organization. That’s how good these people are.

Barber: So tell me about these buildings. You have an intimate knowledge of a lot of these storefronts and the basements. You were talking about a resident of the space that has been here for a long time.

Borde: Yes. George. [laughs]

Barber: Do you want to talk about that?

Borde: We love George. George is our resident ghost, and I don’t care if you believe or if you don’t believe in ghosts, you just come here and I guarantee you’re going to meet George. I have had employees that would not go downstairs. Do you want me to tell you about incidences?

Barber: Sure. I’m curious when you first became aware of this. Do you remember? Was it from someone telling you, or was it an experience? Were you told beforehand?

Borde: No, I wasn’t told beforehand. I experienced it. I don’t remember the very first experiences because we’ve been here so long. I mean, my god, it’s been a decade. But I’ve lived with it so long that it’s just George. [laughs] And we have so many incidences that occur. He’s a jokester, he’s a prankster, he likes to throw things and he likes to have a party. He likes to have a good time. [laughs] At Sierra Nevada Chocolate Company I have this big refrigeration system, and there was a subwoofer that was on top of it. Well, my morning chocolatier made his cup of coffee and he’s walking back to the kitchen, and he turns on the music. The next thing you know, the subwoofer literally goes up and at him from about three feet away, and it smashes not into him, but it smashes his coffee mug. George and that chocolatier are not best of friends. [laughs] But like I said, George is a prankster. I have many employees who will go downstairs and he’ll play with them. He’ll whisper in the back of their ears and say, “Hello.” [laughs]

I think it was last weekend I had a customer in, and it was late at night and we were talking at the counter. I have my toy area, and above my toy area is a bunch of adult games. Next thing you know, three or four adult games just fell off the shelf and my customer said, “Oh, my god, did we just have an earthquake?”

I go, “No, that’s just George. He’s my resident ghost.” [laughs]

But he watches out for this place, too. He’s very protective, and we think he is the bartender from the Chute. I want to say about seven years ago, there was a customer who came in and she said, “Oh, my god, this is—.” I didn’t know the name. She said, “This is the Chute.” And I forgot. She said, “It was the best bar.”

There's a lot of history to this bar, apparently, and I got a lot of tidbits about this bar. She started talking and telling me stories. I said, "Oh, that's fantastic." And something happened and she said, "Oh, that's probably just—." I forgot his name, and that's the sad part. She actually gave me the name of the bartender, because it was a paranormal experience at that moment. She was like, "Oh, that's just probably Joe, the bartender." But his name wasn't Joe.

And I said, "Well, we call him George around here."

She said, "Oh, yeah, he's a prankster."

I said, "Totally a prankster, totally!"

The antique store one south of me had many things. Apparently, he broke a really expensive crystal ball, and she told him, "Now, you just need to stop with that, because that was expensive." And there was no paranormal activity, but she had a customer who came in, and she had a chandelier hanging from the wall. Apparently, George didn't like this customer either, and the chandelier came off the hook, off the wall, and went at them. It didn't land on them, but it went down and crashed, a very expensive old crystal chandelier.

The experiences are endless. I have had employees who wouldn't go downstairs. It's just there's paranormal activity all the time. Things fall that shouldn't fall. Things get swished across mid-air. [laughs] You come in, you have to just pick up things after George. It's just part of business. [laughs] It's been fun. But he protects the business, he does. He's here. He protects it.



The block ca. 1985 when the Chute was a well-known Western-themed gay bar. Nevada Historical Society photo.

Barber: So what other evidence have you found of businesses or tenants that have been here before you? Does it feel like a historic building? You found the dance floor, I guess, from a previous tenant. Is there anything else? It's been here since 1946.

Borde: It has. I thought it was here actually longer than what you said, which was quite a big surprise for me. You know, you just learn to go with an old building. I've had NV Energy out here, I've asked the phone services company, "Can you remove this?"

"Oh, no, we're not touching it." [laughs]

"Why? It is just going to stay there? Where does it go?"

"I don't know."

"Okay." [laughs]

Barber: So there are five storefronts. Do they have connected air conditioning vents?

Borde: I'm smelling the paint right now because my neighbors are moving in and they're painting. The smells do go through the buildings. We thought at one point they had connected vents, but it's been closed up. They have this outside—what do you call it? It's kind of like back in the Laverne and Shirley days, how Shirley and Laverne lived down below and there'd be a little bitty window that's only about four or six inches tall. They all have that, which connects to the old heaters that we just block off now. We don't even touch them. It's an old room.

Barber: This is at the rear of the building.

Borde: Yes, it's actually right here.

Barber: On the east side, okay.

Borde: It's all in the back, and you just find odd things all the time. I think the coolest thing that I ever found was the carpeting from Caesars that was in the Chocolate Walrus. That was pretty cool. There used to be a stage up here in Julie's. I don't know what that was for. [laughs] It was just a separate stage that had been there so long it kind of stuck to the floor but wasn't quite attached to the floor. So that was kind of cool, and it was really heavy. [laughs] I think that was from a bridal salon that Julie said was there at one time. So we just find different things. It's been adventurous.

Barber: Tell me about your online and wholesale sales.

Borde: The Sierra Nevada Chocolate Company also has erotic chocolates out the back door. That's where Chocolate Walrus erotic chocolates sells across the United States, all of our naughty chocolates. We have a great time with that and it's very fun, like I said. It's fun to do. We're working to improve our online sales right now. But having the brick and mortar is very important. It keeps people in touch with other people. It's nice to touch and feel and see and interact. It's an experience. It's interaction. We can't be always behind the computer, typing at the keyboard. Interaction's nice, and it's nice to have people come in, whether it's for sexy time or for a costume for a mystery party or, for some chocolate and a coffee.

Barber: Do you have other aspirations for your businesses here?

Borde: I do. I want to open more Chocolate Walrus stores, and we're looking at opening up a Chocolate Walrus store in Las Vegas this year. We're very excited about it. So that's why we did a little condensing, because there are only so many hours in the day. Now I don't have to shop for the fashion. And the lady that moved in at the end of the corner, from what I understand, is doing wonderful. She has a consignment shop and does bridal gowns on consignment. She has clothing upstairs, and she's a good neighbor. So it's given her an opportunity to have a great space. We're looking forward to the future. We definitely are. And it's nice to see what else can start here and morph into something bigger, like Midtown.

Barber: And hopefully, these independent businesses can remain here. A lot of people have expressed concern that as an area becomes popular it can start pricing out a lot of the entities that started it to begin with, that made the district.

Borde: Well, one thing that's been so good about my landlord is that he understands that, and he's a gem. So it's not too crazy. I don't think Reno would do that to ourselves. We know we're Reno.

Barber: I think that's about all the questions that I have for you. You've been so kind. Thank you for taking the time.

Borde: Awesome. I talked your ear off. I don't know if I gave you what you needed. [laughter]

Barber: Thank you so much. You certainly have.

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## BERNIE CARTER

Real estate developer and property owner, Midtown and Downtown Reno



Bernie Carter outside the Sticks development in Midtown, 2016. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Bernie Carter grew up in eastern Nevada and moved to Reno in 2000 after time in Oregon, Las Vegas, Colorado, and Genoa. He began to purchase property in the Midtown area in 2008, starting with the building now housing Carter Bros. Hardware Store, operated by his brother, Tim. Carter's other Midtown projects include the Sticks development and numerous rental properties.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm at 50 South Virginia in Reno, which is the former downtown post office, with Bernie Carter to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Bernie, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?



Carter: Yes, you do.

Barber: Thank you. So we're focusing today on your activities in what's being called Midtown, and we'll talk a little bit about what that means to you and what you know about how it came to be known as Midtown. But before we get into that, I'd like to get a little bit of background information about you. Are you a native of Nevada?

Carter: I am not. We actually moved here when I was in the third grade, and my father went to work for Kennecott Copper in the maintenance department. Prior to that, he worked for Boeing, and prior to that, he was in Colorado working for some mining interests there.

Barber: So where did you move here directly from and what town did you move to?

Carter: Directly from Seattle, Washington, and we moved to McGill, Nevada, which is in the eastern part of the state. McGill and Ruth, Nevada are actually where I lived through my formative years until I graduated from high school at White Pine County High School.

Barber: So he worked for Kennecott until they left the area out there?

Carter: That's correct. When the mine ended up shutting down, they moved him to Arizona to work for some copper interest that Kennecott owned in Arizona.

Barber: And were you out of school by then?

Carter: I was out of high school by then, not out of college.

Barber: Was there one high school that the whole area went to, or were there a couple?

Carter: That's correct. White Pine County High School is the only high school in the area. It's a county high school and it serves all of the county. So it would be like Washoe County if you only had one high school. Most of the rural counties only have one high school because the population is so small.

Barber: And you had siblings.

Carter: I did. I'm the oldest of seven children, and we lived in a very modest mining town home and grew up there. The interesting thing is the emphasis in our family was always education, so out of the seven children, all seven of them have college degrees and four of them have advanced degrees.

Barber: Tell me what it was like going to school there and living in that area, which is quite rural.

Carter: It was very rural, but it was probably the best place I could have possibly grown up. It was during the sixties, and there was full employment because the mine kept everybody employed, and it was a great place. It was a very small community, pretty isolated, but as a result of that, you knew a lot of people in town—not everybody, but most of the people in town.

I remember instances where I would be in high school and miss the activities bus for football practice or basketball, whatever the case was, and we would literally get out on the road and hitchhike with our letterman jacket on. You felt no angst at all, and you were picked up by the first driver, and they would take us from either Ely, which is where the high school is, to Ruth, which is six miles away, or from Ely to McGill, which is thirteen miles away. So it was an unbelievable experience and a great opportunity to be raised and grow up in that area.

Barber: And McGill was a company town.

Carter: It was. Both towns. Ruth was actually where the pit was, and so it was a company town, and then McGill was where the smelter was, and it was a company town. Both of them at one time were completely owned by the company. They truly were company towns.

Barber: Did you have a sense of what made that different than growing up in other towns might have been? Did the company have an ongoing presence in aspects of your life?

Carter: Oh, absolutely. I think there are a couple of aspects of it that were unique. First of all, it was a very homogenous community, so because you had full employment, you had very little crime, almost no sexual crime. In those areas, there was prostitution in the restricted area in the town. So you had very little crime whatsoever, because you're isolated and because you know everybody, which gives a sense of security.

It was a homogenous town, so there weren't rich people, very rich people, and there weren't very poor people, because all of them worked at the mines, all of them had a living wage. The other thing is that there was continuity, which really made it a stable community. You may have in the smelter three different generations working right next to each other, from the grandfather to the father to the son. So you had continuity there.

The safety issue was amazing. For example, we left on vacation for a week one time. We all piled in the car and my folks took us to Colorado, and we left our front door open. It was open for a week. Nothing was disturbed. It was a little dusty. But if you can imagine leaving your front door open on a main thoroughfare through town, it was just amazing. But that's the security.

It was a fairly religious group. There was a very strong LDS contingent there. We were Catholic, and there was a very strong Catholic community, although not as big, and then the Methodists were there also, and Episcopalians. Actually, a Greek church also was in McGill. So, a pretty religious community and very conservative.

Barber: You said your family valued education very strongly. What were the discussions that you had growing up there in high school about where you might go to school, or what were your aspirations career-wise?

Carter: Career-wise, the aspirations were just to get out of town, as most high school people are. That's what you're looking for is what do I have to do to get out of this town because it's too small, it's too confining, all those things that you go through. You realize years later that there was no better time than the time that you had. But for us, education was a way to get out of town, and it was very common in that community to have an emphasis on education.

I ran into a gentleman probably six, seven years ago, and he asked me how many people grew up in my county during the time that I was there. And I said there were probably five to seven thousand people in the county, the whole county. And he called me a liar, he said, because there are 50,000 of them in Reno. And the reason there is, is because they would come over to UNR and go to school and graduate and not go back. So there are a lot of people from that area who are in this area now as a result of that.

It was a great place. The education was great. It was a very conservative background, and the emphasis was not just in our family but in many families to go to college. It wasn't so much where you went to college; it's that you did go.

Barber: So where did you go?

Carter: I ended up going to a little school up in Oregon, Willamette University, which is a little private school. My father was on the school board, and our superintendent of schools had gone to a school called Lewis & Clark, which was in Portland, but in the same athletic conference, and he recommended Willamette. So I actually spent a year after high school at the Air Force Academy Prep School and then went to Willamette for a year, and then came back to work in the mines.

The mines always provided an opportunity for children of the employees of the mine to work in the summer. So if your father, your mother worked for the mine for Kennecott, then they would always give you a job. It may be on the bull gang, which means you're out, just a day laborer, but they always had a job for you, which was an amazing opportunity. So I came back and worked that summer, and between that summer and the next fall, Willamette had raised tuition, and I couldn't raise enough money, because, remember, I was one of seven. There was no money to go to school. You had to make it yourself, which was, in retrospect, probably the best opportunity.

But as a result of that, I didn't have enough money to go back that fall, and, fortunately for me, UNLV started football that fall. Bill Ireland, who actually grew up in McGill, had recruited me to come down to UNLV and play football and offered me a full-ride scholarship. So that fall I went to Las Vegas and played football on their very first football team. Incidentally, we were 8-and-1, amazing for a first-year team.

I just didn't like Las Vegas at all after being in Willamette. Now, Willamette's in a very small town, Salem, Oregon, state capital, a very conservative liberal arts school. So I left UNLV after the fall semester, after playing football the fall semester, and went back to Willamette because I had enough money for tuition for one semester, and spent the semester there.

Then the next fall, of course, I didn't have enough money again and went back to UNLV and finished up at UNLV, and have a degree in business from UNLV. Then fifteen years after, in 1986, we were at that time living in Colorado, and I went back and spent two years, got an MBA from the executive program at the University of Colorado.

Barber: And prior to that, you lived in a couple places doing what kind of work?

Carter: Right out of college, I worked in an insurance company in Las Vegas and then we went back up to Salem, Oregon. At that time I was married and we had one son, and I got a job in a bank there as a collector. I spent a year doing that, and then actually came down to my sister's graduation from UNR and ran into an old professor of mine, Dr. White. I told him I was really looking for something to come back

to Nevada, and he told me about a savings and loan that was looking for an operations officer. At that time, there was Home Savings & Loan with Bob Banks and Chas Horsey. A week later, I had the job, and a week later we were back in Reno.

Barber: Those were going to be two of my questions—what got you into property development and what brought you to Reno.

Carter: We worked for Home Savings & Loan for—I think it was five years, and then I had an opportunity to become the general manager of Stremmel Motors, which at that time was a Volkswagen, Porsche, Audi dealership. Pete Stremmel and I actually were both at Willamette. We were the only two kids from Nevada at Willamette, so that's where I first met Pete was at Willamette. We had talked when we got up here, and we would go to social events and things, and actually at one of the social events is where I met T.J. and Debbie Day, who ended up being partners with us later in life and actually lived just a few blocks away from our home, our starter home, our very first home over in Sparks. We had our first 1,240-square-foot home, which was our starter.

When I worked at Bill Stremmel Motors, Bill ended up selling the dealership after three years. Prior to that, Pete, Steve Stremmel, and Bob Jones found a project out in Fernley called the Flying Circle Ranch Estates, and it was 160 acres that the rancher wanted to sell right on Farm District Road. He needed to keep ten acres for himself, and there were 150 acres then that we were able to subdivide into five-acre parcels, and we ended up having to put water to it because of the fire requirement and because there was arsenic in the water. So we ended up running water to it, put the gravel roads in, subdivided it, and then sold off the parcels. The interesting thing was that we had enough interest at that time so that we had simultaneous closings, so we had enough people lined up to buy property at a higher rate than what we bought it at, to pay for the entire property on the same day.

Barber: Now, was there great demand for housing in Fernley at that time?

Carter: There was, especially for these little estates, these little five-acre estates, and it really worked out very well for us. We also carried paper back, which means we ended up carrying the financing for some of the lots for five years, because financing on raw land is almost impossible to do. Banks just don't lend on raw land. So we found it very lucrative for us to finance the properties.

Barber: Was this in the eighties?

Carter: It was in the late seventies, because we moved to Colorado Springs in 1980.

So then after Stremmel Motors, one of my roommates at Willamette again was a guy by the name of Russ Ferguson, and Russ Ferguson was a headhunter in Denver who worked for an employment-seeking place. He actually recruited me to work for the largest commercial developer in Colorado Springs as the CFO, chief financial officer. So that's how we ended up going to Colorado and becoming more and more in the development business and finding out more and more about it. I was the CFO for three years, and then ended up buying out some of our own projects and becoming a commercial broker and then going from there.

Barber: What was that company called?

Carter: It was called Schuck Development Company.

Barber: What was it about that kind of business that appealed to you? Maybe it's changed over time, but what was it that interested you?

Carter: I think the interesting thing for me was that for a young person it was an opportunity to invest in your community, and as a broker, you found pockets of opportunity where you could make a lot of money, at least during that time period in the late seventies or early eighties. That's really why, as a commercial broker, as an example, when I was a CFO I wrote a check out to a young kid that had sold a large piece of land out by the airport, and he represented the buyer and the seller on the transaction. He was about four years out of college. He played baseball for Arizona and obviously got his degree, and then came to work and he waited tables until he got his real estate license. He had shortly gotten his license and put this transaction together. It was one of his first transactions. And I wrote a check out to him for his commission for \$600,000. Now, keep in mind that's in the early eighties. That's a lot of money.

So, looking back as the CFO, you're thinking, "I can do that. I know how to do that." So you got into the brokerage business, and one of the things you realize is that they provide a service because they help communities develop. And if they have a consciousness about it, as opposed to just going after the money, they can actually make a significant difference in how a community evolves and develops.

And we were the largest broker in Colorado Springs by far. We probably did 85 percent of the business, so it was really incumbent upon us to be very cognizant of what we were doing. Steve Schuck, the president of Schuck Corporation, developed out by the airport. At that time, "Star Wars" came in. Remember Reagan had the "Star Wars" thing. Colorado Springs was the Space Command, so there were a lot of high-tech companies that were coming into Colorado Springs. And he did a very quality job with his developments, and so I think that kind of rubbed off that it's easy to do a development, but you've got to do a quality job and get the right tenants in there to make it be a successful one. That was my first real exposure with commercial development.

Barber: So what prompted you to leave Colorado?

Carter: Well, we actually brought a project in 1986 called Spring Creek in Elko, and Spring Creek was owned by MCL Properties. I was a broker in Colorado Springs, and we'd gone down to Pueblo, Colorado, which is just south, and talked to MCL. They had a thing called Pueblo West, which is just like Spring Creek, and we were trying to get the listing on it. The gentleman told us, "You know, I think we're going to do the listing ourselves, but we've got this project up in Elko that we'd really like to sell and get out of."

So I talked to the guy who was with me, Jim Morley, and I told him, "Jim, there's probably only three people in the country that even know where Spring Creek is that would even have any interest at all, so let's see if we can pursue that." So Jim and I took a look at that. Jim decided not to do it, and I ended up calling my brother and T.J. Day, and the three of us bought out Spring Creek. I ended up personally buying out the notes, because they did the same thing; they would carry paper back or carry loans back for five years. So I bought out their portfolio of loans, and then we bought 638 parcels. Now, keep in mind the original project was 5,500 parcels, so this was the very end of the project, 638. They had sold

fourteen in the last two years. So it looked like we were going to be there a long, long time. And then I moved the family out there, set up an office in downtown Elko, started reselling the lots, and we sold out 638 lots in about eighteen months.

Barber: This was a ranch becoming a housing development?

Carter: It was one-acre parcels. Exactly. It had been subdivided already. The lots were all improved. Now, some of the lots, because they were the last lots, weren't the best of lots, and so when we negotiated the price, we obviously got the best price we could, and ended up selling them to individual developers and individual property owners.

I'll tell you a funny story that occurred in regard to that. Obviously we were trying to fight the sales problems of young people trying to buy a home and trying to sell to builders. There were few builders during that time period in the mid-eighties in Elko. And there was a great demand because T. Boone Pickens had challenged the board of directors at Newmont about getting more gold reserves out of the reserve status and into the actual development status. So, as a result of that, Newmont geared up for more development, and we just happened to be on the cusp of that when that occurred.

We had a young family who came in one time, and keep in mind that these are one-acre parcels, and the lot that they wanted was listed at \$12,500. They came in and said, "Listen, we've been with our builder." She was pregnant. They had a one-year-old with them. "And he said all that we can afford to pay is \$11,000 for this lot, so we need to have a discount from \$12,500 down to \$11,000."

Now, keep in mind that when we set this up, it was in a showroom, a car dealership showroom in downtown Elko. We put a kitchen table in with kitchen chairs, because most of the decisions that the people in Elko make are over their dining room table. That's how we set it up, and we had a little play area for the kids.

They came in and they said, "The most we can pay for this lot is \$11,000."

I looked at them, and I said, "I'm sorry, I can't sell it to you for that." She looked at him, she got a little teary-eyed, because this was their dream. This is what they really wanted to do. And I said, "But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll sell it to you for \$10,000." Now, keep in mind that our cost was way below that, and so it wasn't a big sacrifice on our part. But I said, "I'll sell it to you for \$10,000." We had it set up so they could actually sign the paperwork and we would take it to the title company three days later, because it was a contract, and they could own the lot. So they walked out with a \$100 deposit, and they owned the lot.

He went to work that day—he worked swing shift—and the following morning when I went to work at eight o'clock, there was a line of people wanting to buy more lots because he'd gone to work and talked to those people and told them that we were willing to work with them and that we weren't trying to take advantage of everybody. And as a result of that, it sold out very quickly.

Barber: Did you continue to give other people breaks on that?

Carter: Oh, of course we did. I mean, it was crazy. A normal salesman would have held tight and said, "No, I'm sorry. I can't do it for that," because typically if somebody offers you \$11,000 and you're at \$12,500 you try to negotiate in the middle somewhere. That's a typical scenario. But it was obvious to me that this is what they wanted to do. They had their heart set on this lot. They had a builder that was ready to go. And \$1,000 wasn't that important to us, but it was really, really important to them. And so

why not do it? So we did, and they built a home. When we left, they were still there. But that's how we operate. We don't try to take the last nickel off the table, and it's held us in good stead, that philosophy.

Barber: Now, the brother you said you were working with, was that Tim?

Carter: It was not. It was my brother Rick. My brother Rick is a general surgeon in Arlington, Texas. I'll tell you a funny story about Rick. Rick went to UNR but did not graduate from college because he was able to get into medical school after his third year, so he never actually graduated. So it's been a number of years, and my son Jon was actually getting married up at Lake Tahoe, and at the rehearsal dinner, I made a point to point out to Rick that out of the seven kids, that he was the only one that actually never graduated from college. Of course, he graduated from medical school and did his residency and is a surgeon. And that it's been an embarrassment not only to our entire family, but to his kids, because when they applied for college, "Where did your dad graduate from college?" And he didn't.

So during that time period, I'd gotten a hold of John Lilley, who was the president of UNR at that time, and actually we got a hold of medical school transcripts, and there were enough credits so that he could graduate from UNR. So I presented him his graduation certificate at the rehearsal dinner, and, of course, he cried and everything. But it shows you the emphasis that we had on education and that you can do some fun things and make your sibling regret that he's your sibling, basically. [laughs]

Rick was the investor, along with T.J. Day. There were the three of us. We all put in equal amounts of money, and that's how all of our projects are. People always assume that T.J., who's a wealthy individual, always carried everybody else. But in each of our projects every partner puts in the same amount of money, the same equity dollars. So we did that, and it turned out obviously very, very well for each of us, and it was a good project to start with.

After that, in '87, '88, our children were still in high school. Our second son and our daughter were still in high school. Our son had graduated from Elko High School. We moved back to Colorado Springs and let them complete their educations there, and they did. Then in '95, we ended we up moving to Reno, or actually to Genoa and built a home down there and then were there for five years and then moved up to Reno in 2000.

Barber: Had you continued to work with T.J. Day that whole time?

Carter: I had. After we did the Spring Creek transaction, we went back to Colorado Springs and we got involved with some similar projects. There was a project down by the river in Colorado Springs. It's not a river, it's more of a drainage facility, but it was an old farm supply store. It had huge buildings, and there was a group of them and they were right along the river between the railroad tracks and the river. We'd acquired that through a couple of different things. There's some warehousing down there. T.J. was involved in that also, and Rick was involved in that. It was similar to what we've done in Midtown, because there was a group of artisans that were down there. It was a low-rent area, and we helped develop the commercial aspect of it.

T.J. was involved there, and then when we moved to Genoa, we were actually having lunch one day, and he said, "Bernie, we've got projects together. I know you have individual projects. I've got individual family projects. How about if we set up this family office and we'll operate all those things out of the family office." At that time, he was with Hale, Day, Gallagher, a commercial real estate firm. He

stayed there for a couple of years and then ended up moving his office over to Dacole Company, and Dacole Company has been there for, I guess, eighteen years.

Barber: So did he found that or was it a preexisting company?

Carter: No, we started it. We started it from ground zero.

Barber: When you moved to Reno in 1995, was it specifically with Dacole then?

Carter: No, it was not, no. Colorado Springs just got too big for us, and at that time, our children were raised. They were in college or out of college, and it was just my wife and I. I've been married for forty-five years. When you have to wait for a stoplight three times, it's too busy, and so we decided to move back west. Of course, we were familiar with Reno, having lived here before, and ended up buying a lot down in Genoa, a three-acre lot, and building a home down there.

Barber: That was in '95.

Carter: That was in '95, right. Then in 2000, what we found is that we were leaving Genoa every morning. It was probably about '98, '99 when we started Dacole, and at that time I told T.J., "I'm only going to drive back and forth three days a week, no more than that." Well, you know how that works out. Three turns to four, turns to five, to sometimes on Saturdays. My wife was coming up here for shopping on a regular basis and medical and all that stuff, so it just made sense for us to move up to Reno. So we rented a home in Reno, ended up selling our house in Genoa, and we've been here ever since.

Barber: Tell me your wife's name.

Carter: Susie.

Barber: So let's start to talk about Midtown, maybe how your activities first started in that area. What came first in that area? And did you do other things in Reno before working in that vicinity?

Carter: No. We had commercial development that I was involved with in Texas and in Colorado. We still had the ones in Colorado.

But in 2008, which is, of course, the worst time probably that Reno's seen ever—2007, 2008—a building came up for sale down on South Virginia Street, and we looked at it. We thought it was a great buy. It was an antique mall. The lady had to sell it, and so we were able to negotiate a purchase and buy it. And the question is, well, once you buy the building, what are you going to put in there? My brother Chris, who was the younger of the seven, actually came up with the idea, and he said, "How about a hardware store?"

My brother Tim, that is here now and running the hardware store, actually has a degree in electrical engineering from UNR, worked for Bechtel Company and was working for Nucor Steel in Alabama. He had been in corporate life and just about had enough of that, and so we recruited him to come back and help in the hardware store. So my brother Rick, myself, T.J., so the three that were



actually involved in Spring Creek, and then we added Tim because he was going to operate the business, and started the business at 1215 South Virginia Street. That was our first acquisition.

As things got worse in Reno, we realized that there were two ways that Reno could come out of this, that it was definitely not going to continue to be a gaming town entirely, that it had to make the change. So what do you do as a community? You sit back and wait for somebody else to come in and modify your community based on what their values are and their perspective, or as a businessperson do you step up and say, "We're going to take the initiative and we're going to create our own environment"?

So that's what we did in Midtown. We first bought the Del Mar Station [701 South Virginia Street] and the Aces Tattoo building [681 South Virginia Street] where Never Ender is now. That was the first acquisition. We then acquired the building where Süp is [669 South Virginia Street], and then we bought the lot across the street and started the Sticks project. The reason we did that is because we looked at other cities. We were familiar, obviously, with Boulder. Two of my children graduated from Boulder. One of them graduated from Stanford. So we looked at those communities. We looked at Palo Alto. We looked at Burlingame. We looked at San Mateo in the Bay Area. We were familiar with Eugene, Oregon, a little bit with Boise, with Boulder, Colorado, with Austin, Texas, and we saw how they had created these small-town environments in their center cores, and they were all college towns, and as a result of that, the city prospered.

So how could we do that? We thought that one of the challenges is that if we have these young people come into our community, or stay in our community, that they have a certain expectation of quality of life and what they want to do. My son went to Stanford, and he told me that he spent more time in coffee shops than he did in the library. We didn't have that environment in Reno. My son earned a degree in electrical engineering before he went to medical school. So if we're going to attract that type of individual to our community, how are we going to do it? Well, we've got to provide that feeling of a small-town community where they feel comfortable, where they can go and have coffee and sit for hours and not be harassed, where the prices aren't horrendous, and where there's a bunch of small-town vendors. If you look at all those communities, there are some actual chains, but most of them are small-town local entities that are successful.

So how do we create that in Reno? We looked at the downtown area and there were too many big boxes there, too many casinos, and so we started looking south. And when we started buying the Del Mar Station, it was obvious that that was the place to try to make it work. And by owning the two strips on both sides of the street, we own about 300 feet of South Virginia Street right there, and then we acquired a couple more buildings. But that was enough volume that you could create a catalyst to help develop in that time period.

During that same time period, Troy and Jessica Schneider and Hillary Schieve were working at Midtown, and we were probably about three months behind them. Of course, we knew about Midtown, we were part of it, and in 110 percent, but they were the ones that actually came up with the concept of Midtown, and so that's what we've done.

It's worked out very, very well, I think, for the community. We've had people that have actually moved here. I spoke with a lady from Portland, Oregon whose son had been admitted to the Davidson Institute up at the university, and she moved here from Portland. She had spent a month looking around the city and ended up moving into our Old Southwest, which is part of Midtown because of the environment that it created for her, which is so similar to Portland.

So that was kind of how we got involved with Midtown. We've expanded it and we're continuing to build down there. Last night they had the Art Walk, and I think there were seven to eight

thousand people in Midtown. The beauty of that was that there were children in strollers, children that were walking, there were whole families down there. When we started Midtown, I told people that was my objective. My objective was to create an environment where I could bring my four-year-old granddaughter down and shop and eat and feel very safe and comfortable, and I think we're pretty well along the road to do that.

Barber: It really is unique in Reno to have that critical mass of these smaller storefronts all together and that dense urban fabric, so it seems like a very good place to create that.

Carter: It is. It's very unusual in Reno, and I think over the last three or four years, if you've seen any articles, any national articles about Reno, they always mention Midtown, because that's the environment. And it is, it's difficult to find that to create your own environment. So we're very fortunate to be able to do that and put in the small shops and the shop owners that are there.

We've made a conscious effort not to go after national chains, and to go to mom-and-pop stores, because we believe that that's basically the soul of Reno and that's how it should be. I will give you an example. There's a store down there that a lady opened up. It's right on South Virginia Street, and she had been a very small store, like 200 square feet in the basement of a building, and she moved into this store. She and her husband did all the tenant improvements, set up the store, operated it, and have been very successful with it. Shortly after that occurred, her husband had a car wreck, became disabled from his normal job as a carpenter, and she's been able to keep their family going as a result of this store. So those are the type of things that make it worthwhile to me. That's why you do these things.

Most of the people that go in there either haven't been in business before, so this is their opportunity, this is their chance to follow their dream, and they're going to work 110 percent on it. The reason is a property owner like that, first of all, they're willing to work 110 percent. Second of all, they're the ones that will stop by and pick up the Coke bottle that's in the street, because it's their community, it's their store. That's what they do. And that's the type of pride that we need in Reno, and we really didn't have it, to be honest with you.

Barber: That woman you mentioned, was that in one of your properties?

Carter: That's correct, yes.

Barber: What business is that?

Carter: It's called Dressed Like That. Cynthia.

Barber: Kind of a retro dress shop.

Carter: Retro dress shop. Actually, as of today we have not lost a single tenant of the tenants that we've moved in in Midtown. We've had one tenant move out, Picasso & Wine, and that's because they bought their own facility. They were so successful there, they were able to buy their own building on Vassar Street and set up there, and then they've also set up in Summit Sierra. So their business has just blown up. They've just gotten too big for our small facility that we started with them.

But same thing, two sisters and a mother that came from Colorado and had a dream, they were 110 percent behind it, we helped them, supported them, got them into the space, and from there I absolutely take no credit, because they were just dynamic and they made it work. But that's the type of success we like to have in Midtown.

Barber: Let's talk about the Sticks development. First, was that a vacant lot when you encountered it? And then can you talk about your whole vision for that? It's a very unique approach to developing that space, and I wonder if you could just explain that a little bit.



The Sticks development, partially under construction in March 2015. Alicia Barber photo.

Carter: Sure. It was a vacant lot. It had originally been, I think, two motels or a motel and a couple of homes around the site, and it was a vacant lot when we bought it. It was a development that was going to have work/live space, and, of course, with the recession, it didn't work.

So we acquired the land and interviewed architectural firms in our community. We try to do everything locally if at all possible, so we put out a request for proposals, which is, I guess, pretty unusual to the American Institute of Architect members, and we got back thirteen proposals. From those thirteen proposals, we selected three different firms to work with us on both the building and the land planning. We ended up selecting the Worth Group to do the land planning portion of it, and then we've used three different architectural firms to do the rest of the work.

The reason we did that is because we didn't want to look like a strip center, so we didn't want it to all look the same, with just a different façade on the front of it. We've got different elevations. One of our buildings has won an American Institute of Architecture Design Award.

Barber: Which one is that?

Carter: The very first one where Chuy's restaurant is.

Barber: Who designed that?

Carter: The VanWoert Bigotti group designed that one.

We've used actually four different firms now for the design work in there, and we developed five to six thousand square feet at a time, because we don't want to develop the whole center and then end up having to compromise on who you want to put in there, because if you've got 20,000 square feet and you've got a loan, then you're looking at it and saying, "Well, I need to put somebody in there to make the loan payments," and then you start compromising what your concepts are.

So our concept is to work with small mom-and-pops. We'll probably try to put a couple of national chains in now just because of the traffic that they garner. We've put three restaurants in, and we won't put any more restaurants in because we end up having a traffic problem. We're looking at retail now. Of the four spaces that we just completed, we have two of those four that are leased, and we've got strong interest on the other two. The buildings aren't even completed yet, so they'll be leased, and then we'll complete the last stage, which will be five to six thousand square feet, and we'll talk with different architects about developing those.

Barber: So, so far you said you have four architects. You've got VanWoert Bigotti, and the Worth Group.

Carter: The Worth Group, right, and then we used Martin Harsin. It's called Origin Eight, is the firm. And H+K Architects.

Barber: Which one did Origin Eight work on?

Carter: The last ones, the ones that we just completed. The ones that were just completed that are right on South Virginia Street and Thoma Street, those are the ones that he just completed or almost completed. So those are the three that we used.

Then we worked with Max Hershenow of H+K on some of the project, too. He ended up not building any of the buildings, but conceptually we sat down with Max and talked with him a lot about how to do things that we're doing.

Barber: How do you see the community interacting with that space now and in the future?

Carter: What we're doing in the space, which is pretty unique, is we're not maximizing the foot coverage of the space. We have two plaza areas, and we'll actually have the third plaza area that will be open for live entertainment. The plazas are designed to have seating areas that will actually have sculptures in that are more of a creative center as opposed to just a retail center. That's what we think we need to do. We need to have that place where—in Boulder, Colorado, for example, at Pearl Street Mall, they have a big area where kids can go and play and it's sand, and they've got the huge boulders there, and a place for old guys like me to sit and watch the kids play. And that's the type of environment we want to create there.

We will end up probably having an area where there will be a permanent stage for very small-venue activities. If a quartet wants to play, if someone wants to get up and play their guitar, then they'll be able to do that. There's nothing like that in Reno. There's no place like that in Reno. And surrounding it will be smaller retail shops, anywhere from 1,200 to 1,800 square feet.

I think it'll end up being still a place where young people, young professionals will want to go and to hang out. If you think about it, there are different perspectives of where you want to be. You're at home, you're at work, and you're in whatever the third place is. So what we want to do is create an

environment where they want to be in that third place and they want to be in Sticks, because we think it's good for our community.

Barber: Now, the Carter Bros. Hardware Store, that's what you said was the first that you were working on there, and that was an antique mall when you encountered it, but that had been the Sprouse Reitz department store?

Carter: That's correct. It was originally developed for Sprouse Reitz.

Barber: Do you know if the building is pretty much the same as it was originally?



Carter Bros. Ace Hardware Store at 1215 South Virginia Street, 2015. Alicia Barber photo.

Carter: It's almost exactly the same as when Sprouse Reitz had it. The interesting thing is that it has a full basement. When you walk in, there are two sets of stairs that go down to a landing, then you walk into the basement, which was all original. One of the things that we did do, we took the stucco ceiling out of it and exposed all the beams in the store, because it gave it a much better open-air feel, for a hardware store, particularly. And in the basement, you walk downstairs and that's where all the nuts and bolts are and electrical and hardware and stuff like that.

Tim had a great philosophy. All of us go to hardware stores and we get frustrated by—at least I do—that you go to buy a package of bolts, and there's three bolts in it, and you need four, and they're all prepackaged. So what Tim developed was a process where you can go in and you can buy one bolt. He has the largest selection of commercially available nuts and bolts in the Reno area. So you go down there and you can find a single nut, a single bolt, a single washer, a single pin, and buy one or three or five or

four, whatever you need, as opposed to the prepackaged ones that sell you an odd amount, because then you've got to pay two packages as opposed to one. So those are the things that Tim did.

When we opened that up, if you look in the roof of that hardware store, there's actually an airplane that's up there. It was a plane that we got from Bill Eck. It was one of the planes that hung at the Grand Sierra over their Race Book. Bill had it out at Stead, and we were looking for what to do historically for Ace Hardware. And Ace, the name Ace, came from the World War I Aces. Those were the guys that actually started Ace Hardware, and that's where the name came from. So we actually have on the side of the airplane the original logo for Ace Hardware that shows an airplane with an Ace on the side of it. We thought that was kind of a cute thing to have.

Then we have a history of it, and there's actually a captain's name that's printed on the side of the airplane. The captain was my brother Rick's wife's father, who was a World War II ace, and they called him "Ace." His name was Spellman. He was one of the first guys in the airplanes that actually bombed the country of Japan, going up to Alaska telling the stories about being minus-40 degrees in the airplane and they couldn't touch anything because it would tear the skin off them. It would freeze instantly. It's just an amazing story. So they called him "Ace," and so that's what the name is on the side of the airplane. So it's all tied in, it's all historical, and we actually have a little plaque that explains all of that in Ace Hardware.

Barber: How did you hang it in there? Was that a process?

Carter: Oh, funny story. So we pick it up at Stead, we put it on a car trailer, and we're bringing it down South Virginia Street on a car trailer. What we've done is we've taken one wing off and the other wing is stuck up in the air. Our plan was that when we get to Ace Hardware, there are double doors, so we'll put the tail in and just kind of swing it up and pull the wing in. Makes a lot of logical sense when you're up at Stead talking about it.

So we get down to Ace Hardware and we can't get it in the door. We're literally in the middle of South Virginia Street taking the wing, the other wing, off this airplane to be able to get it in Ace Hardware. Across the street is Ponderosa Meats, and the lady that works at Ponderosa Meats, over the loudspeaker, because you could hear it from Ace, I think she said, "Bob, you've got to come to the front. You're not going to believe what's happening out in front of our building." Because we were out there with this airplane, taking it apart. [laughs]

The airplane doesn't have a motor in it, so it's not really that heavy, because it's basically aluminum, and we actually manhandled it up and it's hung up there. It's got the propeller on it and all that stuff. Funny things that happen to you that actually are true stories. That's what makes then the funniest is that they're actually true.

Barber: So what in that building is original, that you know of? Are the floors?

Carter: The floors are original, the ceiling, the walls, everything's original. It's like most of our projects, we end up taking off things that people have added through the years, and taking it back to what it was originally. I think the walls actually have a covering on them that we left. The rafters and ceiling and everything are all original. We put a new roof on it, insulated it, that kind of stuff, added heaters. But the basement is just the same as it was from the time that Sprouse Reitz built it.

Barber: These community hardware stores are really disappearing. Has it really caught on? How has business been there?

Carter: We contacted Ace Hardware, because Ace Hardware is a co-op, so each one is owned by an individual. We contacted them and they brought their people out and did demographic studies, and said that there are two places they would support a hardware store. One was up off of Robb Drive, which is right next to a Home Depot, and the second one was out in Spanish Springs. Those were the two that their demographic studies indicated would be the most successful.

In retrospect, if we had gone to either one of those, we'd be bankrupt. We looked at it from this standpoint: at the time that we started the hardware store there was not a single hardware store inside the McCarran loop. All the big boxes had gone outside. The only other one was a little hardware store called Shelley's over in Sparks off of Briargate Boulevard.

So we thought it makes sense to come downtown where all the old buildings are. That's what you want, people that are repairing and working on their lawns and stuff like that. So we decided to put it in the center core arena. Ace Hardware said, "Well, you're on your own. You probably won't make it, but you're on your own."

So we, in our typical McGill fashion, said, "Okay, we're going to make it work," and so it has.

The interesting thing to me is that Tim has had almost double-digit growth from day one. Second of all, he's a part of the Northern California Ace group. Without the growth that Tim has seen in his store, that whole group would have either been flat or minus. So, fortunately enough, we were—I won't say smart enough, but we had enough nerve and believed in what we were doing that we put it in downtown Reno and it's been, I think, successful since then.

Barber: Now, which brothers are actually included in the Carter Bros., the name of that?

Carter: Tim actually owns the hardware store. The real estate is owned by the same people involved, so it was Rick, T.J. Day, myself, and Tim. Those were the three, and those were the ones involved with Sticks and with Midtown also. So we tell people that there are four people involved, and we say the collective "we," and of those three, three of the four of us live in Reno and three of the four of us are brothers. So when you deal with us, you deal with a very small group. It's not a big management company. It's not a big investment group. It's just us local guys.

Barber: Now, the building that was Del Mar Station is a quite old commercial building too. Do you know much about the history of that building?

Carter: It actually was won in a card game. That's where the name Del Mar came from, and the gentleman won it in a card game. Before that, it was a series of small shops. I talked to Skip Avansino, and his mother actually had a dress shop in there at one time. It was retail shops that have been cobbled together into one big building.

Barber: How did the name come out of a card game? I don't get it.

Carter: The story I have heard was that it was the guys playing cards with Del Mar, and that's where he lost the thing, and so the guy called it the Del Mar Station. When it started out it was a live entertainment



nightclub in a very, very difficult, tough part of town. When we first walked the building, my brother Tim, who graduated from UNR, pointed to a place in the building where he had his butt kicked three times because, he said, “You know, if you wanted to get in a fight, you felt pretty feisty, you’d come down here and you’d get in a fight. This is the corner I had my butt kicked.” Tim’s a big guy. He said it took a couple of them to do it, but he had his butt kicked there.

Then from there, when we acquired it, it was a Spanish nightclub called Coco Boom, and those gentlemen were in there for a couple of years and then ended up moving to some larger space with more parking south of town.

Barber: So it wasn’t vacant when you brought the property?

Carter: It wasn’t, and it was one big building, so we actually had to divide it, and it’s back into six small bays. It had one big common bathroom, so we had to put all new plumbing in it, all new electrical in it. Of course, the front was all boarded up. It had big sheets of plywood and stuff, because they’d taken all the glass out because it was a nightclub. So to open it back up and put the windows back so you can get retail space, that was all a part of what we did.



Saint Lawrence Commons, 2016. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: There’s some great architectural detail on the outside of that building.

Carter: There is. It’s been pretty well abused with sandblasting and painting and a variety of different things, but as you would expect, the true architecture shines through.

Barber: Isn’t there tile? Is there tile on the outside?

Carter: There’s tile on the outside, and if you look up above, there’s actually architectural brickwork around each one of them. We thought about going through and having it sandblasted again, but it would just destroy the integrity of it, and that’s the only way you’re going to get the paint off of it, so we’ve left it, and it’ll naturally peel off and we’ll not repaint it, so the paint will naturally peel off. One time they’d



actually painted the brick and then painted the mortar white. So you just live with it, and it's part of the character of the building.

Barber: Do all those buildings have basements? Is there one basement?

Carter: There's one basement that's connected under the front three buildings. So where Dreamers Café is, Dressed Like That, and Good Luck Macbeth, there's a basement that's about a six-and-a-half-foot basement that goes completely through those two, and it's back about halfway.

Barber: Does it seem like that was ever open to the public?

Carter: It was never open to the public. It took us two containers, trash containers, to clean all the stuff out of there. You can imagine. At one time it looked like they had entertainers down there because there were some seating areas with large mirrors they would use for that, where the entertainers would probably get dressed and change clothes and stuff like that. But they had stored all their off-season stuff, Christmas stuff, junk, busted chairs. It was an amazing experience, not a good experience, but an amazing experience to clean that out.

Barber: And now Dreamers Coffee House is on that corner, and they had been in the Riverside Hotel before that.

Carter: They were at the Riverside for a number of years, and then had actually been out of business for eight years. Jonathan had been out of business for eight years, and so when he heard about what we were doing down there, he wanted to be part of it and got back in the coffee business.

Barber: Now, are there other properties we haven't talked about that are in the area called Midtown that you're working on?

Carter: There are. We own one at 955 South Virginia Street, which is right across from Junkee. It was a building that was built in the seventies and when we acquired it, it was an executive office suite concept that wasn't working. We acquired that building and converted the first floor to retail, which has Happy Happy Joy Joy, which is a toy store, and then Sippee's, which is a children's clothing store on the first floor. And then the second floor has small office suites that run anywhere from two to six hundred square feet, so they're designed for individual offices. We acquired that building, put a brick façade on it, gutted the first floor, put the retail in it, and exposed the ceilings.

Then we acquired 737 South Virginia Street, which is in the heart of Midtown, and we acquired that primarily because it was a bad, bad property. There were bad things happening in that property. It was designed for three tenants, and in the back there was an additional tenant. That tenant actually had caught fire, and it was some kind of a drug deal. The story that we hear is they would sell drugs out from the alley. They would literally hang a towel out the bathroom window, and it was a drive-thru.

So we acquired that primarily to get rid of that environment in Midtown. Subsequent to that, we ended up redoing the building from the standpoint of stripping down the old siding, putting a new roof on it, new insulation, new electrical, new plumbing, fixing the siding. The original wood siding that was

there was an old house. It was actually the original ranch house in Midtown. We now have three tenants in there: a clothing store, a skincare person, and one that sells apothecary-type things.

In the front of that building just a week ago we set up four sculpture pieces, so it's the only actual sculpture garden in Reno, and it'll be in Midtown. We think that'll be a positive. It's the only one in town. We've set some seating areas up there, and we think that's critical to the growth of Reno.

Barber: And were you going to say in the back there was something else?

Carter: In the back there's a lady who does life-coaching-type things. She's been in business for a number of years. It's a small space. I don't know what the term is, but it's almost like yoga-ish-type things, you know, where you get in contact with yourself and your spirit and all those good things.

Barber: So that is probably one of the oldest properties in the area.

Carter: I believe it is. As a matter of fact, I've been told it is. It was the original ranch house, and it is one of the oldest properties in Reno.

Barber: And it's in pretty decent shape?

Carter: It is now, yeah. [laughs]

Barber: Bringing it back. [laughs]

Carter: Bringing it back, exactly. Like I said, most of the time we spend taking apart things that have been added through the years and going back to the core properties.

Barber: Well, I don't want to keep you too long, but I also want to just ask a little bit about what involvement you've had, if any, with the emerging business groups that are centered in Midtown. I have the impression there are a couple, and there've been some things that have kind of changed over time.

Carter: There is. We've developed the Midtown Merchants Association, which is really positive. As a matter of fact, Tim's been the president of that, I think, until just recently. We've started marketing Midtown as the Midtown area. Then the city of Reno actually designated Midtown as a specific part of the transit corridor, so it's got its own definition by geographic boundaries. As a result of that, we've been able to make modifications that only pertain to Midtown. For example, you can't have a drive-up in Midtown. There are certain restrictions that have been placed, and it was all through the cooperation of the city and all the merchants down there, to get together and say, "Do we want this or not?" And the city was very good at allowing us to give input into actually developing that plan for the Midtown area.

We do some things in Midtown that we probably shouldn't do. If you drive down Midtown now, you'll see that there are banners on the poles, the light poles that don't have signals on them. We went to the city first to ask permission to put up the banners, and the city said, "Great idea. We like the concept, but guess what. We don't own the poles."

So we said, "Okay." So we went to NV Energy and said, "This is what we'd like to do."

And they said, "Great idea, but we don't own the poles."

So we bought our own scissor lift, and on Sunday morning we brought our own banners, our own holders, and we put them up ourselves. We figured that if nobody will take ownership of the poles, then nobody can tell us to take them down. So now we have—I think there are thirty or forty different banners that go through Midtown that say “Midtown” and identify that.

Barber: Was anything else on those poles? They’re just poles?

Carter: Just poles, just light poles. I mean, things have been attached to them through the years and now are gone, where people would put up yard signs or there were old signs that the bands were still there but the sign was gone. So we didn’t take anything down to put up the things. They were just vacant poles.

Barber: But they are the light poles?

Carter: Yeah, they have the lights.

Barber: But still no one claims ownership of that?

Carter: Or no one that will admit it, and they’ve probably been there so long, nobody even remembers who put them up and who they belong to. I think the city has a maintenance role—it’s part of their responsibility to maintain it. And keep in mind, that used to be a state highway, so it could be the state put them up. Who knows?

But, anyhow, it’s one of those things that we asked, not permission, but forgiveness if we get caught or we do something bad, but that’s kind of the approach we’ve taken in Midtown. If it’s good for the city and good for our community, then let’s do it and we’ll see what happens after that.

Barber: Do you know where the name Midtown came from?

Carter: I don’t. There are a number of Midtowns around the country, and from what I understand, it came from a bartender who said, “You know, this is Midtown. You guys should call it Midtown.” I was not part of that conversation, so that’s just a rumor that I’d heard, that actually a bartender came up with the concept of calling it Midtown.

Barber: Do you think there’s a desire to distinguish it from downtown?

Carter: Oh, definitely. I hope that eventually they merge. I hope that if you look at Reno today, the existing projects that are south of the river have actually, I believe, improved our city community significantly. And I think that we need to start working from the river up to the university. And if we’re able to accomplish that and do the same type of thing, generate the same type of walkability, the same type of feel, the same type of small community, then they will be like two different historical districts, the Downtown district and the Midtown district. But for everyone that comes in our community, they merge, and it’ll be the best for all of us.

Barber: Do the boundaries of Midtown as they’re defined make sense to you? What are those boundaries?

Carter: It's from California Avenue, down south almost to Plumb Lane, and then goes from Holcomb up to parts of the Old Southwest. There are two different divisions of Midtown, so there's a residential division and then there's a commercial division. The reason that that's important is that the residential division has certain restrictions, again as a result of being in Midtown, for height restrictions, for new construction, for the character of the buildings that are being built, and then the commercial division has its own height restrictions, but it has much more leeway as far as flexibility in building commercial enterprises.

So you have the people that live there that want to protect what they have, and you have the people that are in the commercial portion of it, to not only protect but create the environment, and oftentimes those two are opposed to each other. So by creating two different sections of the Midtown District, we're able to appease both of them, and they're both comfortable with what's going on.

Barber: So you've been involved with this area for, it seems, about seven years, you were saying?

Carter: That's correct.

Barber: Can you talk a little broadly about how you think that area has changed in that time, if it has, and what more change you would like to see?

Carter: Well, I don't think that you could talk to anybody who was here eight years ago and was from that area who would say it hasn't changed. There have been significant changes. There's retail that's going on down there. We have a lot fewer people who are down and out. When we bought the 737 place, we did that on purpose to help solve that. There are a lot less drug transactions that are going on. Like I said, people would feel more comfortable down there.

I think what's happening now is other people are investing in that portion of the community too; it's not just us. So, for instance, Tom Johnson redid the Maytan Music, has taken an old building and redone it and has made a very positive impact. You have some developments on Center Street that have done the same thing, 8 on Center and the commercial building that's across the street from it. You have the Brasserie, which was the old water supply place [Crystal Springs], converted to a brew pub-type thing and he has done a wonderful job. And they actually just acquired the frame shop on South Virginia Street and are doing a similar type thing there where they're leaving the exterior of the building, but going inside and recreating a whole different environment.

You've got people that are acquiring more and more of those buildings and redoing them, repurposing them for a higher purpose—what at least I would consider to be a higher purpose than what they are today. We have some guys that just recently acquired the adult bookstore and have plans, once that lease is over, to modify that and change it into a much more, I guess, appealing, from the Midtown perspective business segment, than the adult bookstore.

So I think it's changing and evolving significantly. You look at the bars that are there—Craft, Public House—they've all evolved significantly from buildings that were either very poorly managed or empty. A lot of these buildings were empty, and so now you've got vibrant businesses operating, and that's extremely positive. And I think it's going to continue. You're going to see more and more of those things happen so that as you walk down Midtown there'll be a plethora of different businesses. Hopefully a lot of them will be mom-and-pop businesses that'll be extremely successful.

Barber: Of the things the RTC now is working on with their physical improvements for Virginia Street, what would you like to see out of that project specifically?

Carter: Specifically what I'd like to see out of the project is obviously a number of different things. When we looked at those different cities and how they were successful in their midtown developments or in their downtown developments, all of them developed parking structures that were half a block or a block off of the main artery. So what we would like to see is to be able to do that, create parking down there, because we're still a driving society. A number of people walk, a number of people live in the area and ride their bicycles, but we're still a driving society. Without people who drive to Midtown, there would be no Midtown. So what I would like to see—and they just recently did this in Fort Worth, Texas—is they created parking structures that were half a block behind, so the last half of the block helped support the businesses there. I would like to see that.

I would like to see the wider streets, wider sidewalks. That's important. And I think that in the plan that they have, they've indicated that there will be parking on both sides of the street and a line of traffic going either way is the optimum solution for the tenants that are there. And I think that eventually will be the optimum solution for our community. It's, to me, the best solution. There have been a number of different ideas about left-turn lanes, about bicycle lanes. All of those impede and create a scenario that, in my opinion, should not be on South Virginia Street. Every other street that is a block away has bicycle lanes, so there's not a challenge with that. Left-turn lanes aren't really critical. In my opinion, they're a waste.

I would rather have wide sidewalks. Some of the sidewalks down there are eighteen inches wide. You can't put a stroller on it or a wheelchair. So let's make those wider going into that area, so they're six feet wide, so that you have walkability. All of those areas in all those communities I talked about have very walkable sidewalks, and that's the biggest challenge for Midtown.

So I hope with RTC's development and what they're doing down there, that's their first priority, and then to create a very safe portion of the balance of the streets. I think that's the goal for everybody, so hopefully that's how it'll end up. If that ends up being the case, then I think there's no boundary to what Midtown can continue to do and develop.

Barber: That's terrific. Is there anything you feel like I should ask you about or you would like to talk about regarding Midtown?

Carter: Last night was the Art Walk in Midtown, and we had, I think, seven or eight thousand people there. The first one was seven years ago. We had sixty people show up. I think we had over seventy artisans. What the Art Walk is, is each business—there are seventy different businesses—sponsor an artist, and so the artist is actually there with their art, and they talk to people about it, and it goes all the way up and down Midtown. It starts basically at Statewide Lighting this year and goes all the way up to Living Stones Church, which is just a little bit beyond the boundaries of Midtown.

But to have six or seven thousand people down there from sixty is a huge, huge difference, and they were all enjoying themselves. There were no problems. We didn't have people that were inebriated. We had families down there. We had live music. We had vendors, food vendors down there. We had restaurants that were fully occupied until nine o'clock last night. That's a vibrant community. And if we

can continue to do that, I think that Reno will continue to prosper, and it'll be part of what Midtown does, is to be the lead.

And I think it also shows other places in our community that you can do those things. Sparks over in Victorian Square could do exactly the same thing. Fourth Street, they're doing a similar type thing. But I think, at least in my conversations with them, they always refer to Midtown. "We want to be like Midtown." The Riverwalk, they've got their merchants down here, and the same type of thing, "We want to be like Midtown." That's the best flattery that you can have, is that those other people are looking at it and saying, "You did it. You did it right. We want to follow that image." And if they'll do that, then our whole area will be extremely successful, successful from the standpoint of not volume of life, but quality of life. To us, that's more important.

Barber: Well, I want to thank you so much for talking with me today.

Carter: Thank you for the opportunity.

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## CHRISTIAN AND KASEY CHRISTENSEN

Owners, Süp, 669 S. Virginia Street



Kasey and Christian Christensen inside their restaurant, Süp. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Christian and Kasey Christensen met in Hawaii in 2000. Christian, a Reno native, worked his way up in numerous kitchens before becoming a chef himself. They were married in 2006 and founded the restaurant Süp at 719 S. Virginia Street in August 2007. The couple moved the restaurant just up the street, to a renovated historic bungalow at 669 S. Virginia Street, in 2011.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and I'm in Reno, Nevada, with Kasey and Christian Christensen, owners of the restaurant Süp, which is at 669 South Virginia Street, to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Kasey and Christian, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

K. Christensen: Yes, you do.

C. Christensen: Yes.

Barber: Thank you. So we're, of course, focusing on your restaurant in the Midtown District today, but I also want to understand the journey that each of you has taken to reach this point, and I'd like to start out by getting a bit of background information on each of you. We can go back and forth in this first part.

Kasey, do you want to tell me a little bit about where you're from, where you were born and raised, and where your family's from?

K. Christensen: Sure. I was born in Dothan, Alabama, and lived there until I was seven, so I was born in the South, and we ended up moving to Southern California for a little bit, came out there to visit my grandpa and grandma. My grandpa wasn't doing so good, so we moved out to the West Coast—a huge change coming from Alabama. But we lived there and I stayed there until I graduated high school when I was seventeen.

I graduated a year early and I moved to Hawaii, kind of on a whim, just decided to try something totally different and wanted to get out of Southern California and wanted a different style of life. I worked for a nonprofit there for a couple of years. I was in Oahu first and then I moved to Kauai, and that's where I met Christian, and then we have a whole story together after that.

I worked for the Sheraton and I taught preschool in the morning and then was a cocktail waitress at night and have just kind of always been in the service industry. Most of my career has been working in kitchens and working in the front of the house, so it's been fun.

Barber: Great. Thank you. So, Christian, it's your turn. Tell me where you're from and where your family is from.

C. Christensen: I was born and raised here in Reno, and my grandparents came over from Denmark with the Garsons and a couple of the Danish families in the area. My grandpa worked for Crescent Creamery for his whole career here, and that was—I don't remember where that was at, somewhere downtown, I believe. And then my mom was born up in Idaho and she moved down here, and my mom and dad have been here ever since.

My dad was in the school district for thirty-some years. My mom was a dental hygienist for forty-four years with the same doctor, and she just retired a couple of years ago. Her dad was actually the food and beverage director at the Nugget, with John Ascuaga, for his career. He started out as a dishwasher and worked his way up to the food and beverage director by the time they had the big tower. So I got a good influence of cooking, I think, from him, and then from my Danish grandma, who was doing cookies and pastry.

My first job was at Shakey's Pizza on 5<sup>th</sup> Street and I worked there for quite a few years. I went to Pneumatic Diner and worked there for a while, also Cafe Soleil and a couple others, and then I had an opportunity to move to Kauai to do an apprenticeship deal at the Hyatt. I ended up just getting there and they tossed me in the little burger shop down by the pool. I had to work my way up—I had a sous-chef



opportunity there, and ended up getting a phone call from Tim Healion, seeing if I'd be interested in coming back and trying to help save the Deux [Deux Gros Nez].

So I dragged Kasey back here to Reno after we met in Kauai, and next thing you know, we worked the Deux for a little while, and it had some troubles. We left there, went to Colorado, came back, and opened our own little private chef business, cooking for two local families for about four years in their houses.

K. Christensen: I was a personal assistant for them and Christian was their personal chef. We got to work for two families. So we've worked together in some form or another since we met in Hawaii in 2000. Since 2001, basically, either he was back of the house, and I was front of the house, or we were doing the private chef business. It was Christensen's Private Chef, and that was a lot of fun. We got to go into people's homes and cook for them.

C. Christensen: Lots of parties. Then we finally decided to go and start our own restaurant, and that was probably the worst decision ever. Now we love it, but the first four years were really tough.

K. Christensen: We opened Süp on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007. We got married August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006, and then opened the restaurant almost exactly one year later, and it was a really horrible, horrible time to do what we did, and I don't even know how it survived.

C. Christensen: Dumb luck, I think.

K. Christensen: Yes. At that time Midtown wasn't even a thing. We wanted to be downtown, and there wasn't anything we could afford or get into downtown as far as rent, that had a kitchen space available. So we thought, "Well, I guess we could do this area over here." It used to be Luciano's and that had closed, and so we came in there and the Sheas owned it at the time. That was 719 South Virginia Street, where we first opened. We had seven tables inside and four little outside tables. It was super small.

C. Christensen: The tables kept getting stolen.

K. Christensen: They kept getting stolen, yes. It was such a different area at that time.

C. Christensen: We had a crack house next door to us.

K. Christensen: Yes, a crack house next door that the cops were always being called to, and then we had Shea's bar, which is a little shady—you know, gunshots in the back and all kinds of stuff that had happened in that little spot.

C. Christensen: People would pass away upstairs, and the coroner's van would be closing our front door, pulling up in front of it while people were eating dinner there, loading bodies out into the van.

Barber: Did this happen multiple times?

K. Christensen: Twice.



Süp in its original location at 719 South Virginia Street. Photo posted on Yelp by Catherine S., 2010.

Barber: Wow. Up in the apartments?

K. Christensen: Yes. So it was definitely a shady situation.

C. Christensen: The neighborhood at that time, too.

K. Christensen: Yes, it was a little bit scary down there, and so we thought, “Gosh, I hope people still want to come eat here.” [laughs] We didn’t have a parking problem then, which was kind of funny. We started off there, and the first couple of years were really hard.

C. Christensen: The only reason we did that is that we could afford it and there was a restaurant spot available. We just couldn’t afford anything else. I mean, we really couldn’t afford that, but pulled everything together. Man, that was a lot of work getting that going.

K. Christensen: When we first opened, we were only open from 11:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., and so we just did lunch.

C. Christensen: Just Monday through Saturday.

K. Christensen: He and I would be there until one o'clock or two o'clock in the morning, prepping all the food. My mom was our first dishwasher. She would stay with us and come over and do dishes and help to make cookies and all of that, because we opened with maybe three or four employees at the time.

C. Christensen: And now we've got twenty-three.

K. Christensen: We're coming up on eight and a half years, and it's been an interesting journey, though. [laughs]

Barber: Let's talk a little bit about that space. Like you said, it had been a restaurant before. It had been an Italian restaurant, a pretty well-established Italian restaurant. What did you have to do to this space in order to create the atmosphere that you wanted and to help it function the way that you wanted it to?

C. Christensen: The history of that little space was fun, too. I think it was a general store way back when or some kind of little store, and then the Penguin, which was an ice cream—I don't even remember exactly what it was.

K. Christensen: Burgers and that kind of stuff.

Barber: An ice cream shop and then a café.

C. Christensen: And then another Italian restaurant and then Luciano's, and then when we came in, it needed to be gutted, basically.

K. Christensen: It had a false ceiling.

C. Christensen: Three of them.

K. Christensen: Three false ceilings. So we took the false ceilings out to open it up, and then it had windows that were open behind the top windows that were kind of open on top. We had to wall that in because it was all open up there once we took the ceiling out, and it had this fake painted brick that was really horrible in there.

C. Christensen: And it didn't have bathrooms. They had all been ripped out, and the kitchen had been ripped out, too. So we had to go in and do all new tile, all new hardwood, new sheetrock in a lot of spots, and build the bathrooms out. The basement was just scary.

Barber: Oh, I didn't know there was a basement.

C. Christensen: It's like a half basement. It goes down halfway, probably seven, eight stairs down, and it was just scary down there. So we sheet rocked down there, painted the floors, put lighting in, and cleaned it up. We did a lot to that building.

Barber: What did you use the basement for?

C. Christensen: Storage. We couldn't do any prep. There were no hand sinks down there. We were there for four years, and we put way too much money into that spot.

K. Christensen: We put all new hardwood floors, this hand-scraped maple floor into it, and really tried to fix it up. We learned how to tile and everything. We had somebody helping us, but a lot of it was something we just had to get done, so we learned how to tile and to lay all the flooring, and to do all of that ourselves.

C. Christensen: We put FRP [fiberglass reinforced plastic] in.

K. Christensen: Yes, putting FRP in and building pony walls and all this stuff. It was really interesting.

Barber: Now, I've seen the original plans for that building. That's actually a Frederic DeLongchamps design, that building.

C. Christensen: Oh, wow.

Barber: And in the plans, there's actually a door from that restaurant space into the apartment that was behind it. Is there any evidence of that, that you saw?

C. Christensen: I couldn't find it. It was on a different level, too, the apartment behind, because we were looking at taking that back apartment, putting a door in, and using that as more kitchen space. But it's a difference of, I think, eighteen inches, so we'd have to go a couple of stairs up, because there wasn't enough headroom to clear then, so we ran into all kinds of trouble with that.

K. Christensen: I don't know how it had been changed at some point, because we had heard back in the day, too, that the people who ran the Penguin lived in the back apartment, in the back of the house. And at the time we lived there, the Sheas—it was all separate, but we'd have the dip down where it goes into the stairs, and I believe that's where it might have at one point gone up, and they had a different access to the stairs. We shared a wall with the Sheas, and you could smell the cigarette smoke wafting through the walls in our ice room.

Barber: Well, let's talk about the food. How did you come up with the concept for what kind of food you wanted to offer at your restaurant?

Christensen: Well, we lived in Breckenridge, Colorado, and there's a little restaurant there that did mainly just soups and a couple salads, with no tables, no chairs. You go in, line up, order your soup, then you leave. And I ate there almost every day. I loved it. So we always thought it would be great someday to do a soup restaurant like that, but we figured it would need more out here. We'd have to do tables and sandwiches and salads. So we did all that. At the beginning, we thought it'd be kind of cute to have your own trays, like a fancier cafeteria. You order there, we'll have your French press and your coffee and all

this and your sandwich on a tray and bring it out to you on a nice wooden tray, set it on the table. And that didn't even go one day.

K. Christensen: We had to make a lot of changes. It's funny, when there's something that you envision conceptually, and then when you start to put it into practice, you realize that those things are not going to work. We had originally wanted a salad bar, too, and figured that that wouldn't work in that little space because it was so small. So we had to do some changes.

Then after the first year of being open, we decided to change to include dinner. We did a dinner menu, and a whole different style for dinner. It wasn't sandwiches and salads and soups so much.

C. Christensen: We did linens. We switched the whole restaurant around, like finer dining. You come in, you get a menu, we had flatiron steaks and salmon piccata and all this stuff that we did for about a year.

K. Christensen: Corncakes.

C. Christensen: It was a headache, but it was fun. We got to play a little bit. Our menu in the first place, with all the soups, we thought would be kind of fun because every culture around the world has a soup and a style, so you can pull almost any flavor profile and make something. And most people like soup, I think. It's cold the majority of the year. I'd say a good eight months out of the year, you could enjoy it. Summertime were just horrible for us the first couple of years, and now we're pretty even year-round. It's fun. We make everything homemade, every salad dressing, every stock, every sauce, and just figured that's the way that we could set ourselves apart, because you couldn't buy our salad dressing and serve it at another restaurant. That would be our signature. So everything in our place is our own signature.

Barber: How did you begin advertising or letting people know you were there? People weren't accustomed to going to that area for that kind of a restaurant experience. What did you do?

C. Christensen: We opened our doors and then we waited. [laughs]

K. Christensen: One thing that has always been our motto is we really love to talk to people, and so we've always been really involved in the community and going to places.

C. Christensen: Probably too much so.

K. Christensen: We'd go to the bars and hang out and tell these people, "Hey, would you come to a place like that, that serves soup?" It was a lot of self-promotion in that way of talking to a lot of people and getting it out there.

C. Christensen: Just word of mouth.

K. Christensen: Word of mouth. And then we did advertise with the *Reno News & Review* when we first opened. I think within that first year, we did. But it was amazing that I think Reno was really hungry for

something that was a little bit different, and outside of the casinos downtown and some others, there wasn't a lot going on downtown with restaurants or in that area at all.

C. Christensen: Some of your mainstays were amazing, like 4<sup>th</sup> Street Bistro out there and Lulou's down at the end of Midtown, before it was Midtown. I mean, they've been there for quite a while, and Miguel's. You had the good, solid places that have always been there, but our community seems like it's a lot tighter now, to where, before, restaurants would kind of battle against each other, and now everybody's kind of playing nicely. We can call Miguel's or we can call whoever and ask, "Hey, can we borrow a cup of sugar? Do you have something? Do you need anything?" And it's really kind of fun to build that community. I think that's where Midtown has really taken off, is we work together for the most part. There are a couple of people that still hold out and don't like to do that. But with the rest of us, I think that's one thing that started. We opened there, and then the Hub opened, and Mark and us just loved each other and we talk. And then Jessica opened Junkee after that, too, and next thing you know, it's this little core of people.

K. Christensen: I think we realized that we needed each other and that we wanted to see each other be successful. We were out in this ether that was outside of downtown, but we thought, "Hey, we're going to make this work. We're going to figure it out." So there was a real camaraderie.

C. Christensen: Angela and Michael.

K. Christensen: Well, Angela's been there forever and ever.

C. Christensen: Yes. And Aces Tattoo, those guys have been there forever, and Kevin's amazing. All those guys are awesome.

K. Christensen: It was a different time and I think people started to realize it was so organic that it happened. And the way it happened is that we knew we needed each other and we wanted to work together, which was really great. We were supporting each other and being there. Sometimes stepping out and opening a business is such a scary thing, and it's something where we don't have all the answers, and for a lot of it you just learn as you go. So if you can do it with other people who are there, too, you feel like you have a support system, which is really great.

Barber: And there is a sense now of it being classified as a district, and being kind of a neighborhood, rather than just a corridor with a lot of different things on it. Do you recall when you first heard the word "Midtown" or when that started to be established as a thing?

C. Christensen: I think it was Jessica that really pushed for that.

K. Christensen: Yes. Because people were saying a different name, and she said, "No, we'll call it Midtown. We should call it Midtown." I think they were trying to say SoDo.

C. Christensen: Or SoDa.

K. Christensen: South of Downtown is what they were trying to call it for a little bit, this SoDo area. And we said, “No, that’s not us. I don’t know....” Jessica really was the one who, I think, promoted the name, through the Reno Style Show and through all of her promotions. She was really big into advertising. For us as a restaurant, we didn’t do tons of advertising. But I think between the Reno Style Show and when we started Midtown District, we started to put it out there. We decided to brand it as best we could and keep getting the word into people’s names, because then it creates an area for people to come to. And if they’ve heard of Junkee, then most likely they’re going to be down in that area, and they’ll probably see Süp, too. So we were all working together to promote the area as opposed to just promoting our own individual businesses.

C. Christensen: We wanted to brand the actual district, not necessarily to sell our own, but just to brand the area. The main goal of the district at the beginning, I think, was to brand. Brand, brand, brand.

K. Christensen: And it’s been successful. [laughs]

Barber: And have you been involved in that formal business organization, the Midtown District Group?

K. Christensen: Yes.

Barber: And how has that group changed over time? I imagine it has expanded. [laughs] Can you talk a little bit about the evolution of that group, that organization?

C. Christensen: It started small and tight, and then there was a faction that kind of broke off that did the Midtown Coalition.

K. Christensen: Well, technically, the way that the first Midtown District started was as the Midtown Merchants Association. I believe that is what it was called. It started and there were meetings over at Sushi Pier 2, and only a handful of people were going then, and it was trying to get this momentum. To be honest, I didn’t even go to a lot of those meetings. Christian went to a couple of them. I think sometimes when you’re so deep down in the trenches of keeping your business afloat, sometimes you don’t have that time to put into it.

And then at Living Stones, the guys there started doing the Midtown Night Art Walk, which is what they called it originally, and started getting people to come to the area, too. Then when Jessica and Troy kind of took over Midtown District, it really started to gain more momentum. They really were the catalyst for bringing people together and organizing it and promoting it and getting things done, which was really cool.

C. Christensen: They put a lot of their own money and resources into it, too, on top of whatever the dues were. But it was just meant to brand. It wasn’t there to do events. It wasn’t there to do gatherings or art or anything like that.

K. Christensen: Right. When they first started, that was the plan, just getting the name out there, and then over time eventually to build into these events and all these other things. I think a lot of people were wanting events and stuff like that and didn’t quite understand the branding process and how important it

was, or maybe even where their money was going. Sometimes I think people want to see something flashy and big and feel, “That’s what my money went into.” And that’s where I think Creative Coalition was a different outlet for people who didn’t want to necessarily be a part of Midtown District. And so for a while those two were very separate. Now it’s wonderful that they’ve combined forces and I feel like are a united front, which is really awesome, because, you know, we do have to work together.

C. Christensen: There are a handful who were calling it the Midtown Mafia and were just very negative, thinking that we were trying to squeeze them out or take them down or take over in this whole power struggle. I guess you see that in any structure. It’ll happen where you get people who want to do one thing, people who think you’re doing it for the wrong reasons, and disagree, and there’s infighting. But I think that that’s been such a small part of it that it hasn’t really flourished, and that’s been a good thing, because it feels like that’s gone away, those negative feelings.

K. Christensen: Definitely.

C. Christensen: And now we’ve gotten through that part, and it seems like a very healthy organization now. We’re looking forward to the Midtown Art Walk that the church puts on again this July. They do just an amazing job with that, Living Stones.

Barber: You participated in that one last year. There were a phenomenal number of people on the street for that event.

C. Christensen: Yes, and we do a free watermelon bar out in front of Süp.

Barber: Watermelon bar?

C. Christensen: We get a couple of cases of watermelon and just start hacking them up out front and carving them, just giving them away. People don’t understand why it’s free. [laughter] But we wanted to make something, too, that wasn’t—you know, the Pub Crawls and the Wine Walks are all fun, but they’re not as family oriented. So what the church does with that Art Walk is amazing, where we can each do our own thing, whether it’s beer, wine, watermelon, music, art. Anybody can do whatever, and it’s really fun.

Barber: So you said that you did some tweaks at the very beginning after opening, and my recollection is that you were always busy. That place was so small, and there were lines, right?

C. Christensen: There were.

Barber: Were you surprised by that?

C. Christensen: Oh, yes. I mean, we thought it’d be me in the back and her up front, and maybe we’d hire one or two others, and we thought we could handle that, just serve a handful of people a day and get through it. And the first day, I think we had sixty people and the second day it was like a hundred and some, and next thing you know, it just went up and it never let off—I mean, to this day.



K. Christensen: There was a line out the door and out into the walkway out front. Back then we only had seven tables, but they were these big four-seater tables and if there were only two people there, we had to make these little signs that said “I’ll share my table,” because we didn’t know what to do. If you only have two people sitting there, we needed more space.

And then we also talked with Shea’s next door and brought some of our customers over to Shea’s, and they would eat their lunch at Shea’s in this smoky dive bar. I said, “I don’t know where else to put you and I’ve got your food.” So, with the share-your-table thing, which was kind of fun, some people were really not into it, but then for other people, it created more of that community, which I think was so fun. You know, people would say, “I met these great people and I got to talk with them, and we really enjoyed it.” So if big cities can do it, little Reno can start to do some of those things, too.

C. Christensen: It was all out of necessity, and next thing you know, it became a fun thing.

Barber: And you, Christian, you’re the chef. Were you the only chef, the only cook, or did you get more help?

C. Christensen: Actually, from the get-go, my good friend Brian Patterson was with us, and so he and I were the ones in the kitchen getting it all done. Then we had to start hiring other cooks, too. There was so much cutting and dicing and slicing, and that’s why I’d be there until two, three, even four in the morning, then start again at six in the morning. Sometimes I’d come home and crawl into bed for about an hour, if that, and then wake up and then head back down and do it again and cry. [laughs]

K. Christensen: The first day we were open, we counted the drawer out, and it was so difficult. I hadn’t really done that whole process for a while, and I’m counting the whole drawer out, and I just looked at him, and I remember crying and saying, “We have to do it again tomorrow.”

C. Christensen: And the next day.

K. Christensen: And the next day and the next day. “What did we do?” And then we would get so busy, and you’d see friends and family come through, and I remember having moments of thinking, “Why are you here? Just go away.” Because you’re so busy, you can’t keep up with it, and we were still trying to figure things out. It was funny.

C. Christensen: We did it completely backwards. We opened the restaurant, and now we finally are learning how to run a restaurant. Luckily, we were busy enough in the meantime to make it float in between.

But with the cooking, we’ve gotten some really good systems down in place out of necessity, like buying a buffalo chopper to cut our mirepoix for our soups and different griddles to do grilled cheese. Now we assemble our grilled cheese with butter and shredded cheese, the bread, layer them on sheet pans, and we do about ninety in the morning, just layering them all up, and then when people order them, we can take them and put them right on the grill, cook them up fresh, and send them out within four or five minutes. It’s just that we’ve gotten a lot more efficient. It’s been fun to figure out how to make yourself better, faster, stronger, and not lose that quality. It’s been a fun challenge. I love that kind of stuff.

K. Christensen: And you look back and you realize, “I don’t know how we made it,” you know? There were a couple times that we weren’t sure, because of the economy and everything being so bad, too, and then being on a huge learning curve of trying to figure things out.

C. Christensen: Making tax mistakes, owing money and having phone calls.

K. Christensen: We had to have garage sales to sell our stuff to make payroll. And those are those things that are interesting, because people see a busy restaurant and they think, “Oh, you guys are doing great.” Little did they know that we weren’t paying ourselves. With only seven tables, you can only get so many people through the door, and it didn’t make sense financially anymore. We were struggling so hard and thinking, “I know the concept is solid, I know it can work, but it’s just not working here.” It was a real struggle for quite a few years, and that’s what finally prompted us to move.

C. Christensen: And when we did that, it made all the sense in the world. We found that balance for the size.

K. Christensen: Staff, number of people.

C. Christensen: Staff and everything in order to make sense, and we finally got to pay ourselves.  
[laughter]

Barber: Tell me about that process. When you knew you wanted to move, in 2011, how did that go? Where did you look, what were you looking for, and how long did it take to find what was right for you?

C. Christensen: We were looking for a place that already had a kitchen. We wanted to go back downtown.

K. Christensen: Yes, because Midtown was kind of Midtown but not really, and we thought, “Let’s just go downtown.” We had originally looked at a place—the old La Bussola is where we were going to go originally and had plans drawn up there.

C. Christensen: It’s Our Bar now, I think.

K. Christensen: Now it’s Our Bar.

C. Christensen: We also looked underneath that big nightclub—I think it was Rise and 29 North or whatever it was, a really big nightclub on the corner of Sierra and Second. And on the first floor, on the alley side, there was this 20-foot-by-100-foot-long space that had a kitchen in the very back, left over from the casino when it was there years and years ago. So it had a kitchen already, but it was literally 10 feet wide and 100 feet long, this place that we were looking at.

So we started looking at that, and then our friend T.J. Day and Bernie Carter and those guys, said, “Don’t leave the area. We’ve got some plans that we want to do down here, so don’t leave the area.”

And we started looking at the building that we're in now. They purchased that building, and we were able to work together with them to get it to the point where we could open a restaurant.

Barber: So that's 669 South Virginia Street.

C. Christensen: Yes.

Barber: What had it been just prior to being your restaurant?

C. Christensen: Kind of like a homeless nest, a crack house.

Barber: Oh.

C. Christensen: And then before that, it was a palm reader.

Barber: So it wasn't the restaurant space you were looking for. [laughs]

C. Christensen: Not at all. Not at all. It was absolutely the opposite of what we were looking for.

K. Christensen: It was basically a three-bedroom house with—

C. Christensen: A half basement.

K. Christensen: —a half basement and one big bathroom. So our two bathrooms were one bathroom before we did the renovations.

C. Christensen: And our hot kitchen was the master bedroom.

K. Christensen: Yes, the master bedroom is now our hot kitchen.

C. Christensen: And the stairwell to the basement is now our—

K. Christensen: Our dish pit. [laughs]

C. Christensen: —dish pit.

Barber: What's a dish pit?

C. Christensen: Kind of our dishwasher, where all the dishes are brought back and dropped off and then cleaned and sent out. So there's that whole pit area, a dish pit. And then the little back kitchen where all the tickets come out of was—

K. Christensen: That was an addition.

C. Christensen: —a sunroom.

K. Christensen: Right, it was a sunroom and it's an addition.

C. Christensen: So when we started ripping up the floor, it was slanted and not a real floor. The front bedroom and closets and everything we ended up just ripping out. We ripped out all kinds of walls and windows and doors.

The next thing you know, her dad and mom, who had been helping us with this process—he does buildings, renovations, all that kind of stuff—he had the idea of building a deck around the whole side of the building and in front, and he just would not give up on that. We said, “We can't afford that.” And he just kept pushing. He said, “It's gotta happen, gotta happen, gotta happen.” Finally he helped us make it happen, and we're so happy that we did that.

Barber: How many tables did that add out there?

C. Christensen: Oh, forty-eight more seats. So we've got forty-eight in, forty-eight out, and that was probably the best decision we could have made.

K. Christensen: We kept thinking, well, there's just no way, because here we were coming out of having no money in the old place. We did so much of the work ourselves on the new place, too.

C. Christensen: All the tile.

K. Christensen: We did all the tile and laid the hardwood floor again. We thought, “Hey, we know how to do tile. After the last time, let's do all the tile.” But then we had to tell all of our employees, “We're going to be closed for two months.” And so what do we do? “If you want jobs, we'll gladly bring you back in, or if you want to work in the meantime, you can come and help tile or paint or do all these things.” So a lot of them did that. They came over and helped to work to get it done, because we knew we were on this tight timeline. We wanted to stay at the old place until we could get the new place ready, but, unfortunately, the landlord didn't offer us that option, so we had to get out and go for it. But, you know, sometimes you're put in that situation. You just have to make it happen.

C. Christensen: I think when we opened, we probably had \$10 in our own account and nothing in Süp's account. We opened the doors, and same deal, we just sat there, waiting, waiting. And I think I was coming back from the building department.

K. Christensen: No, I was with my dad.

C. Christensen: Yes, with the final C of O [certificate of occupancy].

K. Christensen: We didn't even have money in the cash drawer yet. We just thought, “Okay. We've got it. I think we're doing it.” Because we had told everybody, “I think we're going to open today. I'm not sure.”

C. Christensen: One of our old regulars—he still comes in—he was standing at the counter, a surly guy, and he’s like, “When can I order? I want to order my damn food. When can I order?”

I said, “We aren’t open yet. We can’t open. But if you want to, wait here.” And when they came through with that signed paper, then we started cooking. It’s a weird feeling.

K. Christensen: We didn’t even have a lease signed until that day, because it was all done on a handshake with Bernie and T.J.

C. Christensen: T.J and those guys. Bernie showed up with the lease that day, and he said, “Here you go,” and we signed it. Oh, so stupid.

Barber: So how many seats total are there in the new space?

C. Christensen: Forty-eight inside and forty-eight out. We had twenty-eight inside at the old spot and maybe six or eight outside.



Sup restaurant moved to its new location at 669 South Virginia Street in 2011. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: So obviously it increased in capacity, which is terrific. Were there other changes that you incorporated, going into that new space?

C. Christensen: Yes. We separated our hot kitchen and our cold kitchen. The old space was all compact in one little room, and now we can run our soup line over here and our sandwich line separately, so they

aren't impacting each other. That really helped. We had a walk-in refrigerator that was huge, even though it was outside.

K. Christensen: Yes, the walk-in was huge.

Barber: You said it was outside?

C. Christensen: It is outside.

Barber: Oh, you have to actually go outside to get to the walk-in? [laughs]

C. Christensen: Yes. We've got to do what we've got to do. I found that on Craigslist down in Sacramento and ran down there and bought it, and it ended up being two of them altogether. So I came back with two walk-ins, and I think sold one or gave it away, or whatever we did, to Evelyn Mount for one of her things and kept the other one.

K. Christensen: Then eventually we switched over to having the street names on the tables. We used to take people's names and then be running around the restaurant, asking for, you know, "Sharon? Where's Sharon? Sharon? Is this your food, Sharon?" And it got a little crazy with so many people. So we finally switched to street names.

C. Christensen: Little local street names around us, like Thoma and Cheney and all that.

Barber: So there was a little more organization in your new spot.

K. Christensen: Yes. I think it was just, again, part of that learning process and figuring things out and putting better systems in place to make it more efficient.

C. Christensen: We also opened Creme at the time, so then we could make our cookies there instead of in Süp. We opened Creme with the hopes of just having a little cookie shop, and then we partnered up with Beth Carter, and ended up doing crepes and a bunch of other stuff out of it. Then I think two years ago, we sold our half of that, and she moved across the street, and then we just refocused on Süp.

Barber: So you opened as a partnership with Creme, and then you just sold your part of the partnership.

C. Christensen: Exactly. I was stretched way too thin, because we had a breakfast/lunch spot and then a lunch/dinner, and so it'd be some days working from five o'clock in the morning until eleven o'clock at night.

K. Christensen: And then we had a kid. [laughs]

C. Christensen: And then a kid. It was too much.

Barber: How did the idea for Creme come about? Was that something that you always wanted to do?

C. Christensen: Yes, it was something I wanted to do, and she said, “Hell, no.” [laughter] I said, “It’s only a cookie shop.”

K. Christensen: He kept wanting Süp to do breakfast, and I said, “We are not doing breakfast.”

C. Christensen: I never really wanted breakfast. I wanted to do cookies. Remember, I wanted a cookie shop. I can’t remember the name of it, but had a fun name. But then I didn’t want to do it all by myself, and so there were actually three of us altogether that opened Creme.

Barber: Oh, who was that?

C. Christensen: A good friend of mine, Ralph Merenda, and Beth Carter, who is Tim Carter’s wife. The three of us decided to get together, and we could each pitch in and get it done, and so we opened that in— 2011?

K. Christensen: Yes.

C. Christensen: And my goal was just to do all different kinds of cookies and do wholesale orders for everyone.

K. Christensen: Well, he was supposed to be more of a silent partner in that. We helped him with the concept and helped to get it started and brought some of our knowledge in some of those areas to make it happen.

C. Christensen: And equipment.

K. Christensen: And equipment, yes.

C. Christensen: Then Ralph had to go, so he left, and just Beth and I had it, and then I ended up taking more of a hands-on role. And Kasey didn’t like that either, because I was working way too much. So that’s how that worked out. It was fun. It’s cool to see it still going and thriving.

Barber: Have you always included the little cookie in your meals at Süp?

C. Christensen: Yes. That was by mistake. [laughs]

K. Christensen: We started that because it was—

C. Christensen: It was our wedding recipe.

K. Christensen: It was our wedding recipe, from our wedding cookies. When we got married, we used that recipe as the treats for all of our guests.

C. Christensen: Then we put a recipe in there with a couple of cookies in a nice little bag.

K. Christensen: So that's our wedding cookie that we serve at Süp.

C. Christensen: We started doing it, and then next thing you know, we're doing six hundred a day, and we loved doing it. It was fun, but it got a little out of hand.

Barber: They're small, but that adds up. [laughs]

C. Christensen: Exactly. So Rounds is helping us with our cookies nowadays, because it's gotten to be so many of them.

Barber: Oh, that's good. You can do a little outsourcing. [laughs]

C. Christensen: Exactly. That's one of the big fun things, too. Rounds is doing our cookies and they sell our soup sometimes. We sell our soup up at Beach Hut Deli. We just started doing signature soups at Pignic for them, and then we serve House of Bread bread and New Harvest Farm sprouts—well, there's somebody different now. But we all try to help each other. It's really fun.

Barber: Tell me the story behind the name. We're saying "Süp," but it's not spelled the way that you typically think of soup being spelled. How did you come up with this?

C. Christensen: Everybody thinks it's Germanic or Swedish or something.

Barber: It's an umlaut.

K. Christensen: We knew our focus was going to be soup, and so we wanted to highlight that. And we kept coming up with different ideas.

C. Christensen: The Counter.

K. Christensen: The Counter was one and The Ladle was another one. We had all these concepts, and finally we started looking up "soup," s-o-u-p, in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, and the phonetic spelling is s-ü—with the umlaut—p. So we thought, "Oh, perfect."

C. Christensen: It just jumped off the page.

K. Christensen: It looks like a happy face, too. It makes you smile.

C. Christensen: Sarah Millim helped us with the logo and we just love it. It seems like it hasn't gone out of style. [laughs]

K. Christensen: It's kind of timeless, I hope.



C. Christensen: Just simple.

Barber: Did you ever have an issue where people didn't quite know how to pronounce it?

K. Christensen: Yes. All the time. They say "Sup."

C. Christensen: They still do. We'll be working on the deck out there, and people drive by and scream, "Sup!" as they go by. And as long as people are talking about it, you know, that's a good thing.

Barber: So you really are just a block away from your original location.

C. Christensen: Yes.

Barber: I'd imagine that made it easier to explain to people where you were.

K. Christensen: Yes.

C. Christensen: And easy to move, too. We could just roll our refrigerators down the alley.

Barber: Talk about how the neighborhood around you has changed since you opened the first location. It hasn't been very long. You said you opened that first one in 2007?

C. Christensen: Yes.

Barber: So here we are eight, almost nine years later. How would you say that the surrounding neighborhood has evolved?

C. Christensen: It's totally different. There was a good core of people there, like Recycled Furniture, Shea's, Aces Tattoo. There are a couple of those that have been there the whole time, but then everything else is this infill happening. All these old buildings, they get renovated, and Maytan's getting torn down partially and built back up into this really cool modern building. We keep thinking it's maxed out for restaurant density, but every time a new one opens, we get busier, and I think it just keeps bringing back more people who might have forgotten about us, but now they're coming down to see somebody else and they remember us. It's neat to see everybody growing up around there, and it's cleaned up a lot.

K. Christensen: And the transformation of all the buildings. I think they call it Midtown Commons, where Wedge and all of those little shops are—Dreamer's Coffee Shop, that used to be the Coco Boom Nightclub and Del Mar Station before that. But Coco Boom, I mean, it was really pretty shady over there, and it was really dark and there was a whole different feeling to the area back then. There were others that were there before us, for sure, but there wasn't as much happening as far as new life and new energy and all of this. So it's been awesome to see it transform and to see people invested back in the area and wanting to make it better.

C. Christensen: Like you said, too, back then, when you'd see a Lexus roll up or a nicer car, you knew that they were coming for food. And now you just see that everywhere. Before, it was very rare to see somebody that was dressed well coming into that neighborhood. By dressed well, I mean like having all your clothes on. [laughter]

Barber: Dressed.

C. Christensen: Exactly. Dressed. Because we really would have just the craziest things happen, you know—drug dealings going on on our front tables, and we had to kick people out.

K. Christensen: We had a brownie bandit. When we were over at 719 South Virginia, we had a guy come in and steal a brownie. One of our customers had told us, "Hey, that guy just took a brownie."

C. Christensen: Or took something off the counter. We didn't know what.

K. Christensen: Or took something, right. I think at that point you felt like "Nobody can take anything else! I've worked so hard. I just baked those brownies," you know. And so Christian heads out down the street running after him and—

C. Christensen: Ended up almost to the Peppermill. And right in front of Chapel—well, it's now the 40 Mile Saloon—right in front of there, I finally catch him and grab his shoulder, and he turns and tries to cut me with a box-cutter. So I jumped back, and everybody spills out of Chapel, and some guy drives by in a truck. He's like, "Get in!"

So I jump in the back of the truck and we follow this guy down, I get out, and I started walking, following him again, and I'm on the phone with the police, and I'm about 100 yards behind him, and he keeps looking back and threatening me and all that.

So this truck rolls up next to me, and he's like, "Is that the guy up there?" And it's these two burly-looking guys with beards, and just scraggly. They go up there, pull over, jump out, grab the guy. He turns and tries to cut them, and they were undercover cops. They put him on the ground.

The next thing you know, we're at the courthouse. They dubbed him the Brownie Bandit. And I think it was a year or two later, we got a check for \$2.50.

K. Christensen: Two dollars and fifty cents for the Brownie Bandit.

C. Christensen: But it was the principle of the thing, you know.

K. Christensen: And also trying to clean up the area.

C. Christensen: You can't just get away with stuff like that. So I think between us and a few others, it slowly squeezed out that bad element.

K. Christensen: You can't pee in the alley. You can't pee on that person's building. Because that would happen.

C. Christensen: We'd keep yelling out the windows at people, and next thing you know, they quit coming around. It's not all the way gone.

Barber: So it hasn't really been attributed to a greater police presence, necessarily, but just the fact that there are more active businesses around that have had that influence, you think?

C. Christensen: Right. And I think one thing, too, is I've heard members of the city council, especially the last council, claiming that they helped build Midtown and put it on the map. You know, this council I like a lot, and the other one I did, too, but there are a couple that tried to lay claim to Midtown, and the city never did anything for us. It was all organic, it was all us business owners who started doing the district.

K. Christensen: Well, Hillary Schieve, Mayor Schieve, she was a part of Midtown District and helped to develop it.

C. Christensen: That's what I'm saying, the last council.

K. Christensen: I think that was the thing. Like I said, it was a really organic thing that happened, and it was through business owners and people that cared about the area and concerned citizens, too, who were a part of the Midtown District, who didn't own a business. Maybe they lived there.

C. Christensen: Like Barry.

K. Christensen: Like Barry, exactly. It was because all these people, I think, cared so much and wanted it to be better; it wasn't because the city was giving us all these things or doing all these things. It was more, I think, our vested interest, and then all of a sudden, people started realizing, "Hey, oh, this is good for tourism. Oh, this is good for this," and they started to get behind it, too. It's like you take something ugly and kind of shine it up, and once it starts to get a little shiny, people will start to notice and want to be a part.

C. Christensen: And people like Barry and Paul. Barry would drive around in his truck every morning.

Barber: Barry who? Is that Barry O'Sullivan?

C. Christensen: Yes. He would drive around in his truck, and if there was graffiti, he'd jump out and paint over it. He'd come give us a hand, like clean up around the building, and we'd help him out. He's got buildings behind us, and he is very vested in the neighborhood, too. It's people like that who really make a difference in a neighborhood in general. It's him and us and Junkee and everybody. So I think it's because of people caring.

Barber: So the district has been defined as extending all the way south, in some cases they say to Plumb Lane, from at least Mt. Rose to Plumb Lane. Does it make sense to you to define the area going down that far south as a district? Does it feel coherent like a district to you or like it might become one?

C. Christensen: I think it can become one. The ones on the south end of it feel that they get left out, I think, of certain events. But I don't know.

K. Christensen: This is the thing. When it comes down to it, nobody's going to force you to be a part of something. You have to really want to do that and join it and be a part of it. And I know even Sam [Sprague], for a long time, he's not even that far out, but he would be frustrated because there was so much happening right at that little St. Lawrence intersection with so many things happening there. That was all the buzz. And even Sam Sprague would go, "Oh, man. Come on. Give us some love down here. Bring people down here."

I think it's definitely extending to that area, down to Mt. Rose. I don't know if I feel it, because I haven't had much interaction with many of the businesses past that, and I think it may take a while for it to spread all the way down to that area. I definitely see it getting closer to that Mt. Rose area, though, for sure, because so many of those businesses are actually involved in it and wanting to be a part of it. I think that's the thing that makes the difference. You have to want it and you have to be a part of what's going on, rather than just waiting for something to be given to you.

C. Christensen: I think the density around our neighborhood has just been greater with locations of restaurants, bars, and retail, and there are little spots down there, but it's not as cohesive. So I think it is becoming that. They're filling in all around, and it will happen, and we love them. We all play together. Sam's awesome. He and I go ride motorcycles together, and then the girls at Picasso & Wine, we go do things there, and it's fun. But I think it definitely needs a little bit more, a few more shops opening down there, kind of like the Lobster Shack that's opening in the old Heritage Bank building.

K. Christensen: Some more infill like that. All of that is so important, and I think for those guys that are kind of the lone rangers out there farther out, it's been harder for them. As more people start to come into the area, it'll be better. You know, it's that whole "Rising tide raises all ships."

C. Christensen: And Troy from Lulou's is opening the Japanese restaurant there; that's going to be cool. It's going to happen. It is happening.

Barber: Can we talk a little bit about the foodie culture of Reno and the role that it's playing in the revitalization of the city? It seems like in many ways the restaurants, the eateries, have been at the forefront of how people have seen Reno transforming into this new post-gaming era. And your restaurant has received a lot of press nationally, as one of the keys to that early development. Is that something that you're aware of or that you think about? Does that seem to be the case?

C. Christensen: I don't really think about it, but every once in a while, a list will pop up and we're on there. We think, "Wow." It's just very humbling and shocking, too. But I think that you go to other areas, other cities and other popular areas, and the culture is wrapped around food and drink. Anywhere in the world, really, that's the center, you know, water and food.

K. Christensen: It's so true. It's having a place where people can come and eat and having a place where people join together. For one, it builds community, and people want something different outside of casinos or outside of chain restaurants. And there's a whole movement of people wanting to eat healthier

and know where their food comes from, non-GMO-labeled and organic and locally grown. There's so many of these things that people are more concerned about that I feel like it drives them to be more conscious about the type of food they put into their body. All those things are working for us, because nationwide it's a huge thing right now, all those movements. So that helps us as a locally owned restaurant and one that sources locally as best we can. All those things are helping us out, for sure.

C. Christensen: I guess the foodie culture, where they've got TV shows around all aspects of it, gets people excited and they want to see the real aspect of it and be part of the whole movement. In our town, I think it's been so based on the past of casinos and buffets and all that, where you would have certain restaurants outside of them, but there was never that restaurant culture where everybody would work together. And now I think that's one of the big differences is that community. We can call Mark Estee, the guys over at Pie Face, or Noble Pie Parlor, and ask questions or borrow things, and you want to see each other succeed. And I think if you do that, all the foodie people really want to be part of that, too.

Barber: That makes me think a little bit about some of these food events that have been put on. Can you talk a little bit about Reno Bites and your involvement in that?

C. Christensen: That one's crazy. That was fun. That started five years ago or so. Clint and Natasha—Clint Jolly.

K. Christensen: I think four.

C. Christensen: I think it was five-ish.

K. Christensen: Maybe so.

C. Christensen: They've been evolving, too, obviously, and that's been fun to see, where they wanted to create a Restaurant Week. It goes on in other cities. So they started small. Their first competition I think they did with the Chef Showdown was in the garage, I want to say, over at SoDo.

K. Christensen: Behind SoDo.

C. Christensen: Everybody had to bring their own equipment and food and everything. We were out of town. That year I couldn't do it, but I heard it was really fun and crazy. Then the next year, they started at Czyz's, I think, a Czyz's Appliances down south, and that was just amazing, with the kitchens there and the turnout.

K. Christensen: So it's a Chef Showdown. It's a competition.

C. Christensen: Right, where they basically have a whole pantry of ingredients. Each chef gets their own kitchen that's amazing and big—they did such a great job down there. Then they bring in culinary students and give you an apprentice, kind of like a helper. So they unveil the ingredient, whatever that secret ingredient is for the year. I think the first year I did it, it was a tank full of tilapia swimming

around, and you had to go catch your own fish and kill it, fillet it, cook it and all that, and you had one hour to create a dish. That was fun.

K. Christensen: He won.

C. Christensen: Not that year.

K. Christensen: You didn't win?

C. Christensen: No. But then the second year I did it, it was rack of venison, and they had a huge hacksaw and big old racks, and so we just started hacking things up, and I ended up taking two of the top three prizes on that. I shocked myself as well as other people, I think, because I'm just a soup guy. They've got the other chefs there, and then I'm just the little soup-and-sandwich guy.

Then the following year, last year, I ended up—what was the ingredient? It was whole branzino, a fish from Turkey they flew over. And I ended up taking the same two top prizes for that this year, and now they all hate me. [laughs] So I've got a big target on my back, according to them, and next year we're going to do it again, I hope, and hopefully they'll invite me back.

K. Christensen: I'm super proud, though, because I know how talented he is. I think he was kind of under the radar, being this little soup-and-sandwich guy, but his skill and the level of cooking he's done has been—like I said, we used to do private cheffing and gourmet meals and all of this. So he's got some great skills, and it was awesome to see him win the top chef.

C. Christensen: The reason we created Süp the restaurant was because we wanted to create something that we could replicate and hopefully open multiple Süps in the future, something that we could do and then train and have people run without us having to be there every shift, so we could still have a good balance of life, because that's the hardest thing with a restaurant.

K. Christensen: We're closed a lot of holidays and things like that. Those things were important to us because we've always been in the restaurant industry, and you work every Christmas and you work every Thanksgiving—because that's how it is.

C. Christensen: It doesn't have to be, though.

K. Christensen: And so we said, "No, we're going to close." The first year we were open, we closed every bank holiday. I think that can tell you how overdone I was. But we close for a lot of those holidays, because it's important to our staff. So I give them an option. I say, "Do you guys want to be open on Black Friday this year?"

They say, "No, we don't want to."

So I say, "Okay, great. We'll be closed." Because for us, I realize the importance of family and being able to be in a restaurant industry and still have a family life and not be slave to it.

C. Christensen: That's where these little competitions and events are so much fun, because we get to play. I like that.

Barber: You talked about the possibility of having additional locations. Is that something that's on your near horizon right now?

C. Christensen: Yes. We tried to last year and we failed at that, but the best thing to do is get back up and keep going. So right now we're just going to keep making our place stronger and better and don't really have a timeline for a second one, but our next goal is to open our salad dressing line. We're going to be bottling our salad dressings. We figure we're going to do that, and then after that, possibly look into another location.

Barber: What is involved in creating and having bottled and marketing your own salad dressing? Was there a big learning curve to figure that out?

C. Christensen: We found that there is, yes. We thought it would be a lot easier, and we actually have some friends who do it, and they've been doing it almost since we opened.

K. Christensen: They do sauces and marinades and things like that, and so they've been awesome.

C. Christensen: Mr. G's.

K. Christensen: Yes, Mr. G's Hawaiian Teriyaki Sauce and all of that. They've been so awesome to sit down with and mentor us and give us some hints and tips.

C. Christensen: All the insight, because it is a lot more than just kind of making salad dressing, putting it in a bottle, and selling it. You've got to create the relationships with the stores, and you have to go in and you have to stock your own shelves, and you have to clean the bottles and make sure it's all good and—

K. Christensen: Stick your stickers on unless you get a sticker machine, all these things.

C. Christensen: It's going to be two inches or two fingers from the top of the cap to the top of the shelf, and it's all this stuff that you've never thought about. Then all the labeling that goes into it, where the FDA requires that you to do certain fonts and sizes and colors on your label, and barcodes. It's definitely a learning curve, and we'll get it done this year. We'll start with one dressing first, our white balsamic vinaigrette, and we'll go from there.

Barber: Will you be able to do that in your current facilities, or do you need to have a new location just for that operation?

C. Christensen: We may start in our current facilities, and then if it takes off, we'll open another shop. I figure the more that we can do that, it's even more local stuff. We can offer our own salad dressing and sell it out of our store to the co-op, Whole Foods, Raley's. I love seeing local labels out there like Mr. G's and Francovich eggnog and Great Basin Icky, all that. You go into a store and you start seeing all those, and it makes you more proud of the area and the people that we have here. We've got so much talent in this city. I think that's the big thing in our city now, we've got so much pride, but we also don't want

many more people coming in, so we embrace the seedy vision that people have of us, too. You know, it's almost like, "Keep us weird, keep us dirty."

K. Christensen: Quirky. [laughs]

Barber: How would you define what success would be to you, to feel like you had achieved what you would like to, what you have always had in mind?

C. Christensen: To pay bills and—

K. Christensen: I feel like we're there. It's like everything else—we'll always strive to do more and do better and to learn new things, but for us, I really feel like it's contentment in being happy that I've done something that I'm super proud of, and that we are happy and have a family that we get to enjoy and have our son and all of those things and great friendships and family.

C. Christensen: And community.

K. Christensen: Community, for sure.

C. Christensen: We built it from the ground up and we're proud of it, and it works so far. They could quit coming in tomorrow, obviously, but so far it works, and I'm very proud of it.

K. Christensen: And we don't have to be there every day, working every shift the way we were in the beginning. I remember being sick and my other co-workers and staff would try to send me home. They'd say, "You've got to go home. You're sick."

"No, I can't." Because you felt you had to be there for every little thing and do every little thing. So now, our staff is absolutely amazing, and we wouldn't be anywhere without them. They are my hands and feet and brain, and they do all the little things that I can't do, every little thing. I had to learn how to delegate and give them things to do and trust them to do it and empower them to do it, and that's been huge.

C. Christensen: The restaurant's been kind of like a baby—

K. Christensen: It was our first baby.

C. Christensen: —in multiple ways, where we've had to grow up and learn how to crawl and walk and then run. And now it's kind of self-sufficient, where you can let it play in the other room and not have to worry about it as much. It still falls down every once in a while and still scrapes its knees, and you've got to take care of it.

K. Christensen: You've got to check in on the monitor and make sure it's not doing anything crazy. But otherwise, it can play well by itself and it can handle that and take care of itself.

C. Christensen: And we're proud of it and watch it grow. It's really fun.



Barber: Well, I want to thank you so much for talking with me today. It's really been a pleasure.

C. Christensen: Thank you.

K. Christensen: Thank you.

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## NEAL COBB

Owner's son, KNEV-FM and Modern Radio & TV, once at 538 S. Virginia Street



Neal Cobb at the building where his father ran KNEV-FM and Modern Radio and TV. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Neal Cobb's father, Jerry, founded a number of local businesses including Modern Photo, a shop that moved into the building at 520 S. Virginia Street in the early 1950s. His father also ran Modern Radio & TV and the KNEV-FM radio station out of 538 S. Virginia Street. Neal worked in both buildings with his family and shares his own early memories of the neighborhood.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm conducting an interview with Neal Cobb at his home for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Neal, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Cobb: Yes, you do.

Barber: Thank you. Okay. Now, what we're talking today about are two buildings that are on the east side of South Virginia Street at California Avenue, that your family had a big interest in for many years. I wondered if you could tell us the story about how your family first started to be located in their businesses on South Virginia Street and why.



Modern TV and Radio at 538 South Virginia Street, ca. 1955. Photo courtesy of Jerry Fenwick.

Cobb: Actually, we had two different businesses on South Virginia Street. 520 South Virginia Street [the “Jack Bacon building”] is where we moved Modern Photo into, and at 538 South Virginia Street, we had the entire north side of the building. We had just taken over from a floor company, and there were still remnants and things there. Before that, there were private rooms up in the front for piano lessons and so on.

But my dad wanted to capture any business he could with the rush on television, so we had Modern Radio and Television up front, and he pushed consoles because consoles had FM radios when most radios did not have FM at all, because he was putting together KNEV in the back section of 538 South Virginia Street. And eventually we were able to put KNEV, the first successful FM station in the state, there. The first FM station in the area was KWRN-FM, 1946, and my dad had bought salvage rights from that. That was installed up on Peavine Peak, and the people that got the 99-year lease, that was the Nevada newspapers. So he was able to get the salvage rights and then track down all kinds of parts that were stolen, purchase other ones, and put this whole thing together and then get all of the turntables and the rest of it to have it as a music station, and we went on the air December 25<sup>th</sup> of 1953.

Barber: Tell us your father's name.

Cobb: My father's real name was Everett Bryan Cobb. So he always went by the name of Jerry, and I have no idea how he got that nickname or the name that he really preferred to be referred by. Everybody knew him as Jerry Cobb, period. Now, it could have come from all of the success that he had back in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He was a big shot there, and he came out here trying to save the marriage in 1937 and live in a more wholesome community and away from being a high-profile star in radio—like he had the Sunny Jim Breakfast Club, an early morning club, and he had a membership of 250,000 people. One of them was Liberace. We caught up with him at Modern Photo when it was at 28 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. It was just another door or two down from the Club Fortune, and that's, to my knowledge, where Liberace first played. And he was wandering around, and he sees, "Jerry Cobb. I know—holy cow." And it was sort of like old home week.

And my mom, of course, had done a couple, three, four paintings for Liberace, the one that had him playing the keys, a focus on his hands and his face with his brother George in the back. It was a huge painting, and it hung above their mantel down there somewhere in Southern California. Then he asked my mom to do a portrait of his mother. He really loved his mother. And about that time that my mom got started on this, got everything laid out and worked on the pictures and did all this stuff, this is when the marriage really took its final split, and so there was a break in communications. Later—I think this was early 1980s, possibly nineties—Liberace was playing down at the Sparks Nugget. I'm over visiting my mom, and here's that same portrait of Liberace's mother. So I called down there and I asked to talk to Liberace's manager, and I said, "Hey, Liberace commissioned this thing way back," and I told him the story on it, "and it's just sitting here. If you guys would like to have it, you can just have it. I've already talked with my mom, and she said, "If he wants it, it's all his."

He said, "Wonderful. Can I get back to you?"

And I said, "Well, yeah," and I gave him my number and all of this.

He called me back in about twenty minutes, and he said, "Lee would like to have you as a guest."

So we sat front row center and all, and I had got him the portrait, I think, before. I don't think we lugged it that night. But Mary was with me, and my mom was just delighted. We were getting ready to go, and a guy came out and he said, "Lee wants to be able to talk with Mildred." My mom's name was Mildred Cobb. And it was like it was old home week back there. We just kind of sat on the side as spectators. But I've got wonderful photographs in my collection of Lee when it's very casual, because she would take photographs and she would get most everything down the way she wanted it. Then she would have him sit for flesh tones and eye colors and all of that. So here are these very casual photographs of him in the basement in her studio over at 1260 Ridgeway Court. It's good stuff.

Barber: So let's go over the progression, because we have the story of your father, but he had worked in radio in Milwaukee and was a star, really, was an on-air personality.

Cobb: He was a big-time on air, and when he came out here, he went to work for KOH. He was lured out by Merrill Inch and Wally Warren, who were running KOH at the time. He came out in '37, turned around and went back out there, folded up shop, and we're back the same year.

He introduced people to talk radio. He was the "Man on the Street." There's a whole series of photos on that, too. He brought that along. That was one of his gags back in Milwaukee. He was a very early radio pioneer. He worked his way through the Milwaukee Institute of Radio Engineering. In 1927 he graduated at the age of sixteen, and he had worked his way through paying his tuition and the rest of

that by renting a hall and charging people to listen to radio with a megaphone and a Model-T power source with that coil and tuning in a crystal set. So he was really early in the game.

Barber: How long did he work for KOH initially when he first came out to Reno?

Cobb: I'm not sure, because World War II came about, and with his service, he went in the Navy as a first-class, and about two weeks later, he was a chief and he was teaching down at Treasure Island, and he was made the chief engineer to KSFO San Francisco, and that sounds strange, a civilian station, but it wasn't all civilian. That was the military link to the South Pacific, and so that was all part of his duties. Then he would come up on the weekends and try to straighten out any of the problems that were going on and get the girls, our camera girls and everybody, "Everybody settle down now. The war's not going to go on forever."

Barber: So Modern Photo had been founded before the war.

Cobb: Yes.

Barber: And that became his full-time work even then?

Cobb: Yes. And the whole thing, going into photography, that goes back to that Milwaukee Institute of Radio Engineering, too, because in 1931 he saw a television broadcast from one room to the other, and he knew that that was going to be the wave of the future. So he was very cognizant of the simple fact that images would have similar problems being made up whether they were done chemically or electronically, and he wanted to be in on the ground floor on this, but the dollars never allowed that. It wound up being radio. But he got to be one heck of a photographer because he took it up as a hobby. And then, of course, he taught my mom, and she was a wonderful photographer, too. He had a knack for teaching people things. I like to quote him different times, so I do remember. He made an impression.

Barber: Did he lease a space to open Modern Photo initially?

Cobb: Yes.

Barber: Where was that?

Cobb: Twenty-eight East 2<sup>nd</sup> Street.

Barber: Is that building still there?

Cobb: Yeah. Well, actually, no, it's not. It's part of the Cal Neva, somewhere in there. And some of the older shots that we pulled up, it was comical because we're looking at a 1910 shot down 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, and here's a corset shop and then Painless Parker up the street, the painless dentist. Well, the corset shop, I looked it up in some of the early things that we have at the Historical Society, and guess what the address was? Twenty-eight East 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. [laughs] We got a big laugh out of that. I bet my parents didn't even know that.

Barber: Now, what prompted the move to South Virginia Street?

Cobb: Most of it was wanting to put KNEV on the air and getting a hold of the properties and being able to have them close so you could administer both the station and the photo business. And then they were still having problems with the marriage. My parents married and divorced three times, which was a testament to their dedication to the kids, because that's all that really kept them together. It was a problem between the two of them because they were both incredibly talented, but in different fields, and there was nobody playing the support team person, "Yeah, you can do it," because they were both doing their own thing and they were very good at it.

Barber: So the appeal, then, was that there were two buildings that were neighboring each other.

Cobb: Yes. In fact, you'll see Friden Calculators was once in there at 520 South Virginia. That was one of them that dad leased to up front at 538 South Virginia Street, and they wound up moving in where Jack Bacon is now, at 520. And in 1963 or something, I was working for Friden Calculators, so I was at that same building.

Barber: So he never had a property on the south end of the building, the south part of 538, the one that's connected. He didn't have a business in that one.

Cobb: No. And even the basement area was separated. There were your supports, and they had run fencing down the center, so you stayed out of whatever the other guy had down there.

Barber: So those buildings both became available at the same time. Do you know why? Did the other businesses go out of business?

Cobb: There've been so many changes around. As businesses grew, they needed space, so the need for parking drove it, or kids didn't want to take over for Dad or—it's hard to tell. Well, you have the same vacancies for different reasons now. So it had to be the same. I don't think the human race has changed that much.

Barber: And that was considered to be a desirable commercial area?

Cobb: Yes it was, because parking was actually better than downtown proper. That was an absolute nightmare. In fact, that's one of the things that made the shopping malls so incredibly successful right out of the gate. The first shopping center that we had that was a bona fide shopping center was the Village Shopping Center out there at California Avenue and Booth, and it was just a big hit. I mean, you didn't have to be harassed by the meter maids and this and that, and have your car towed and have a car sitting there with a courtesy ticket on it because it's from Oregon or California or whatever.

Downtown was not friendly to residents. It just wasn't. It was tourist-oriented. When we wanted to hit the movies and stuff, that was, of course, later on at night, where you had one person drop us off and somebody else parked just another block or so south or whatever, and then we walked. But it's always been tough parking there.

Barber: Now, on South Virginia, there weren't casinos, but there were a number of motels that were right around in the area.

Cobb: Yes, and one of the nicest ones was the Kit Carson, and I say the nicest because it was set way back away from South Virginia Street itself, so it was quiet. Of course, Virginia Street back then was [Highway] 395. That was a major thoroughfare. So it was nicely landscaped up front, so you could drive your car in, and the parking and everything was available, but you could come all the way around in a circle and come back out and whatever. It was a nice place.

And all of the other things that were down there, like Glenn Turner's florist shop, that was great, and Heric's, that was right on the corner across the street, I guess it was 703 South Virginia Street, right on the corner. And then you had a little grocery store, the Mount Rose grocery store, and a bar. A friend of mine, when his family first got here, lived in an apartment up above where the Penguin was, at 717 South Virginia Street. You might want to talk with him. I'll give you all of his information later.

Barber: What's his name?

Cobb: Joe Granata. He's another old-timer, too. He'd run across some things where there was a soap factory that came off the back that was associated with that same address, which is fun, and you had all kinds of businesses down there. Just down from the Kit Carson there was a U.S. Royal tire shop, Jerry Coffman's, and I worked there when I was in high school. I had a friend of mine whose parents and brother had Ayres Auto and that was one of the same places where Oden Cyclery was a long time back. And then, of course, that pet food place with the drive-through window—they'd like to claim they were the first drive-through. I was always hesitant to believe that they were going to be passing fifty-pound sacks of dog food out through that service window, but— [laughs]

Barber: A drive-through pet food market.

Cobb: Yeah. There were some major questions with that, because it had a big fire and lost a lot of the animals and stuff, and it turned out it was arson. So that's not a fun routine.

Barber: Do you know if they closed after that or did they reopen again?

Cobb: They didn't as the owners there. But you had another nice appliance place that was right down there, Lusetti's. They had a wonderful name here in town here too. And where the Carter Brothers are now with Ace Hardware, that was a Sprouse-Reitz store. And Sprouse-Reitz and Woolworth's and the 5-, 10-, 25-cent store. Woolworth's was a little bit lower. You had nicer things at Sprouse-Reitz, where you could buy appliances and so on, but not in direct competition with Lusetti's. They were just smaller amounts. They had bolts of cloth and sewing equipment, all kinds of things that the ladies used and the guys, for whatever. But those were nice stores.

Barber: Did Sprouse-Reitz have a food counter or a candy counter or anything?

Cobb: No. You know, they all seemed to compete with each other. Even Washoe Market that was right down on the corner and right next door—it's an antique place now—they had a fountain at one time. But the most popular of all the fountains was back up the street or toward town, and that was Eagle Thrifty. [This was at 445 South Virginia Street—at the time of this interview, the home of Living Stones Church. – Ed.] And all the time that I was working either with Friden or with KNEV, that was the place to go over and get sandwiches and stuff if you just kind of tired of Bud's Burgers, which was another one that was just up the street.

Barber: Eagle was where?

Cobb: Eagle Thrifty. You had Liberty Street, and then there was an Associated station, then there was a house, and then the parking lot for Eagle Thrifty, and it had entrances both on Sierra Street and on Virginia Street, but you could walk over there, and it was nice. There was a gal that could have been—well, you would have wanted her as your favorite aunt to go over and have lunch with. The sandwiches and the rest of it, everything was homemade and they just really took pride in what they were setting in front of you, and it was a gathering place. People liked to meet there and so on.

And if you were in a heck of a hurry, you went over to Bud's Burgers. I had fun at Bud's Burgers. I believe I was maybe twelve, thirteen, somewhere around in there. I wasn't in high school yet. But on Stewart Street, up drives a red convertible and it's full of high school kids, and I was just sent up to Bud's Burgers to get my dad milkshakes and French fries and burgers. So I had this stuff in this tray and I walking across the pedestrian thing, and you knew what those kids were going to do. They were going to honk the horn and startle me. And I don't know whatever possessed me to do this, and I never leveled with my dad about it, but when they did honk the horn, I pretended like I panicked, and, of course, I through the stuff up in the air right toward, and it landed on the windshield of that car and they're all [gestures]. [laughs] I guess I've always been kind of a—

Barber: You're a troublemaker.

Cobb: And then I had to go to—"You'll never guess what happened, Dad." [laughs]

Barber: "Give me more money."

Cobb: Yeah, I need more money to go back up there. [laughs]

Barber: So when your dad moved the business into the building at 538 South Virginia, how old were you? Do you remember that move? Do you remember opening it there?

Cobb: On South Virginia, yes. I was born in '39, so I would have been thirteen.

Barber: So what do you remember about that, about moving things in there? And then maybe just walk us through that building a little bit and talk about how things were set up.

Cobb: Well, the remnants of what was been there before [the Modern Music Center] were still there. Like I mentioned, there were all these private rooms for piano lessons and so on. There were actually a



couple of musical instruments there. There was an organ in one and a piano that looked like it came over on something and was pretty well weathered on the trip.

My dad worked selling radio and television out of there while he was putting KNEV together. So that was the big deal. And, of course, he worked real close with the firehouse that was right next door. And he had a friend up at the university, I think his name was Stanford something, but he was the guy that could oversee and make sure that everything was put together properly and that everything was safe. He was like a city inspector, but he had higher credentials.

After we got KNEV running, it was just on a telephone pole, and the antennas used to get pretty darn hot up there. We had neon tubes that were hanging that would take off some of the residual electronic, the heat and whatever. But every so often, the pole would catch on fire. My dad would just shut down the transmitter and everything. The fire department would put it out, and he'd fire it right back up again. I would have been embarrassed to do that, and I always kind of hid out when that happened. I said, "I don't even want to—" [laughs] But he wanted to keep the station on the air.

Barber: Was that pole at the front side of the building or behind it?

Cobb: It was behind. It would be on the northeast corner and just bordering, just really pushing the property line between that and the fire station.

Barber: The fire station was which direction?

Cobb: It was to the north. It was going toward town. It was right next door, and that's what would be the Starbucks parking lot when they were there. That's where the fire station was.

Barber: Oh, so there wasn't a break between the two buildings. The fire station was in between the two buildings.

Cobb: Yes, it was in between the two buildings.

Barber: What do you think happened to the fire station?

Cobb: Well, they tore it down.

Barber: Specifically to create a parking lot?

Cobb: It was antiquated to start with, and I don't know the history of it, but, of course, the original station was over there where the library is right now. And when they abandoned that, they tried to make it an accessory to the Southside School, an annex to the Southside School, but it smelled of horse waste and diesel. It wasn't well insulated, and they were concerned about the kids, even at that time frame—this would be 1937—crossing Liberty Street.

So that's when they built that building that's still there next to the Discovery Museum [the Southside School Annex]. It's right there on the corner. That's when that was built. But they had to move the fire station somewhere, and I guess that was available, and they added on where they could put

equipment and so on. But to me it looked like it was a regular house at one time. It had a nice little porch on there.

Barber: So was there room to walk in between Modern Radio and TV [at 538] and the fire station and Modern Photo [at 520]?

Cobb: Yes.

Barber: Could you drive a car in between them?

Cobb: I don't know about a car, but that's where we had laid out the pole when they were putting all the elements, the big bays and stuff, on it and before they set it up.



The Southside Fire Station, which once stood at 532 South Virginia Street. Photo courtesy of Joe Granata.

Barber: Now, how did he open these two businesses? Did they open at the same time? Did your mom run one of them and he ran the other?

Cobb: Yes. My mom—and that was going to be part of the divorce settlement—“You keep Modern Photo. I’ve got what my dream was.” They just couldn’t iron out the differences. And, of course, Mom,

to be strapped to this store eight, ten hours a day didn't appeal to her at all, so that was short-lived. I think that they folded it up probably 1955.

Barber: Modern Photo you're talking about?

Cobb: Yeah.

Barber: So that one closed.

Cobb: That one closed. Then Dad sublet the front of 538 to other businesses and kept KNEV going until we moved in, I think, 1962, out to Kietzke Lane, 1100 Kietzke Lane. And up on Red Peak is where we went ahead and dynamited the road up there and brought in the power and the rest of it. Now there's probably ten, fifteen antennas up there, but we are the ones that got the power up there and were the first ones that put that up.

And, of course, that's when I tell my stories with the erection of the antenna. It's an 180-foot antenna, and I put up the first 70 feet of it, and I wouldn't go any higher because this is a floating beam antenna with guy wires every 30 feet, so you've got to free-span it, just wobbling around at 30 feet, and I'm already at 70, and everybody looked like ants. And to go any higher than that, I wouldn't do it. So my dad had to bring in a specialist from Rohn Antennas out of Texas. He wasn't happy about that. He said, "You were doing great."

But after we got the thing up, that's when we were part of the—well, the skyline going north where it's a mountain, but here's this Christmas tree on it, because at the 120-foot level we strung Christmas tree lights, and they were just 15-watt bulbs, but it formed a perfect Christmas tree fallen down, and you could see it all the way as far as you could see the mountain heading south. So that was a big deal.

And it was comical, too, because my dad got real sick one year, and we didn't get up there to take that down. We'd put those up just right after Thanksgiving and take them down right after New Year's. But he got real, real sick, and we didn't get them down until probably June or July, and the studios were in the Riverside. By that time, we'd moved from Kietzke Lane.

We finally took them down, and the next morning over at KNEV at the Riverside, here's all of these people, and who are these people? Well, they were commercial airline pilots and private pilots. "Mr. Cobb, is there any way that you can put that back?" They'd been using it for a navigational tool. [laughs] So that's something else.

So he went ahead and put a thing in the paper: "Anybody have any objections to it?" We did go on the air on Christmas Day of '53—my dad was really big on Christmas—and nobody seemed to oppose. So until 1980, it stayed that way when the final sale to McClatchey went through.

Barber: So really doing retail of radio and TV was a very short period in your dad's life. He just really had that in the front of the original building that housed the station.

Cobb: And the whole thing was to capitalize, to get some fast money coming in. But he really pushed consoles, like I stated before, because they had FM capabilities and regular radios didn't. There wasn't a car radio anywhere around that ever—no, that's never going to fly. And, of course, with all the big money that the newspapers spent on it, they didn't make it go. They were in operation just a short

amount of time, didn't have a customer, nobody had any radios to listen to them, and that's why it went vacant, and he was able to buy salvage on that.

But we had Modern Radio and Pacific Amusements, where we wired in music. Instead of using the telephone lines, he broadcast it in a subfrequency, and he had radios in the dentists' office and Reno High School and those kinds of places, and it just played the background music. Eagle Thrifty, Safeway, they all had them. So that was another thing that kept KNEV on the air, that and he was smart enough to get the phone company and the power company as sponsors. [laughs]

But it was comical because for years and years, anything that he ever made went back into the station, and when he finally sold it, he had all of this money, and it scared him half to death. [laughs] He'd never had actual money: "What you doing here?"

But, you know, he was so incredibly grateful for his education. Just like at the University of Nevada, you have people that really take care and they donate and they have buildings built and so on. Well, on the first effort in '78, the sale fell through because McClatchey had moved on some other stations in California that had a left-handed communist kind of a tint to them, so they wouldn't move on KNEV. It was, "You wait in line until this is done, because this is the purchaser," this McClatchey outfit.

In the interim, you had all of the big building come up with MGM, the Circus Circus, and Sahara and the whole thing, and the price doubled from what he had sold it for, and that's why I've got this little sign—I'll show it to you—it's just a little brass thing that says "No amount of planning can replace dumb Cobb luck." So this was when he sold it, but it was quite a ride.

Of course, now FM is—and he proved his point—it's a superior form of radio, because when you work with AM, you've got the strongest part of the signal, which means you lost all of the other parts, it's not there, and it's accompanied by noise, just this small amount of noise that you don't have on FM frequency modulated radio. That's direct line. You either got it or you don't. You're getting a full signal, and it's pure.

I know where I was going with that. He went ahead in '78 and he got a hold of the last FM station frequency back in Milwaukee, and he nailed that down, and he was going to go ahead and move on a bunch of other stuff from then. But, of course, it was two years later when it finally sold. Well, when he got money in his hand, he sent them 30 grand. He bought the transmitter and put them on. He contacted ex-alumni that he knew and they were friends with, and these were like the owner of Rohn Antennas, Ampex Industries down in Redwood City, California, Fisher Industries made great turntables, Scott made recording machines and tapes, all of this.

He and another friend rented a motor home, and they toured back and forth around the United States and they're seeing all their old buddies, and he said, "By the way," he said, "little old Jerry Cobb, that's me." He said, "I was able to do this. What are you going to do?"

And by golly, they came up with it. They put a first-class station on the air, and so he was a big hero back there. But it was all a thank-you for the education that he received.

Barber: I love that. [laughs] It strikes me, just knowing that building at 538, that you didn't have very much room for a studio or whatever he was broadcasting out of. Can you explain how the space was set up in there?

Cobb: Actually, it was quite a bit of room.

Barber: Was it?

Cobb: Oh, yes.

Barber: Because there was a showroom in the front for the sales.

Cobb: Well, actually, it was cut basically in half, but you had the whole back side of that, and it seemed to kick out a bit. It was wider. Maybe it was because it didn't have those private rooms that were built into the front part of it for that music store that they had there. But he was able to go ahead with the transmitters and stuff, line them up on the north side, and they had a partitioned-off wall, and he had all the turntables and the board and the rest of it, plus a studio room that was all built in, one thing after another, so they were all separated. The background music was now, of course, on tapes and broadcast onto that subchannel that he'd set up, and he kept that going until he sold the place. But everything was there, and there was plenty of room.

Barber: Did the station have a separate entrance in the back?

Cobb: Yes.

Barber: Can you describe that?

Cobb: It was just a set of stairs that went up the back, with a rail on there and you parked. There was plenty of parking back there. And there was a drive that went underneath so that you could take automobiles and stuff underneath that structure.

Barber: Oh, there was parking underneath the building?

Cobb: Yeah.

Barber: Is there still?

Cobb: I don't know if there is or not now. I haven't been in it for years and years.

Barber: So instead of a basement it had the parking.

Cobb: Yes. Customer parking was street level. The basement parking was locked and it was only for the businesses to use. I parked a couple of my cars down there when they weren't running. Then we'd finally get them running and we'd get them back out of there. My dad would work on his equipment down there, too.

The refrigeration place that was next door at 540, they had all kinds of equipment, and they would store their service trucks loaded with tools down there, on their side.

Barber: Refrigeration was just next door in the other storefront at that building?

Cobb: At one time. I've got it listed here. I think it was C.B. Refrigeration and so on.

Barber: So did the station have a sign advertising itself outside of the building anywhere?

Cobb: I don't think that KNEV did, but Modern Radio and Television did.

Barber: And did your father do the actual sales for the store?

Cobb: Oh, yes. And he set up what was going to be played that day, and we played LPs, and we only came on the air every thirty minutes. "This was brought to you by—" and so on and so on. And, of course, some of us that weren't familiar with the names—like when I worked at night—I used to hate to work at night. I had no problem at all with Mitch Miller and the Gang, pronouncing that, or a soundtrack from *Paint Your Wagon* or whatever. But when it came to Toscanini or Debussy, it was "Toss-canny-eye" and "De-bussie."

And I had people call and say, "What kind of a nut are you?"

And I said, "I was just checking to see if anybody's listening." [laughs] "I know better," which I didn't. I just got straightened out over the phone. And it was comical.

I'm real big on Toastmasters now, and my first experience to Toastmasters was because of KNEV, too, because I was so incredibly bad on the air. And my dad came in one day and he said, "Neal, it's like this." He said, "We missed a lot with you going in the service, with everything that happened between your mom and I." He said, "I'd like to set up a little bonding, so I'm going to take you to dinner every Tuesday night." So we wound up in Silver State Toastmasters when it was down at the Sparks Nugget, and walked in there and I knew exactly what it was. And I said, "Dad, you don't have to get involved with this. I'll go." I said, "I know how bad I am."

He said, "No, you don't understand. I want to go through this with you, and I'm serious about the bonding issue."

And I said, "Why in the world would you want to go through this?" I said, "You're a pro's pro." This guy was really good.

He said, "I didn't work as hard as I have to get to this level to ever regress." He said, "Now, if you have a Maserati, you tune it, and so this is a tuning for me. I go back over the same things and make sure that I haven't got sloppy in age or thinking I know it all, because nobody does." He said, "I can't afford that." [laughs] So away we go. So we went through that.

But here was an amazing thing. I'm going just a little off path on this one. In 1962, women were not allowed in Toastmastering, and this whole room was all men, and I thought that was strange at the time, because no women. I said, "Here's half of the population that has a direct bearing on anything and everything that's important to you, and you don't want to hear what they have to say?"

Well, later on, late seventies, between the Sierra Sunrise and an offshoot from them, Washoe Zephyrs, which is now forty-one years old, and I'm a member of that one, they went ahead and they sent in applications with just initials, and they broke that stupid gender thing, because International didn't want to have egg all over their face, like, "Wait a minute. They're biased against women? What, are you nuts? You don't want to be biased against women." [laughs] So now Toastmastering has produced some of the most powerful and just really get-up-and-go individuals that just happen to be women, and that's another tool in their belt to compete. This is a very competitive world, and they're out there in force now and they're really showing their colors, and I love it. I'm a big believer in that.

Barber: Good for you. [laughs]

So then you started to broadcast. You started going on air. How old were you at the time when you started to do that?

Cobb: Well, another funny story on that. I was given my own program, I thought. I was given my own time slot when I was in high school, in the fifties, and I came in with my own records. It was really comical, because first thing I do is I put on a Fats Domino. “Blueberry Hill” was the name of the song. And out of nowhere appears my dad. [laughs] And he came over and just very carefully faded down the POD, and then he very carefully picked up the tone arm and he set it in its cradle, and he said, “Son, it’s like this. You have to follow what’s laid out for you,” and he took my record and he bounced it off the wall. I couldn’t believe it. He never did raise his voice or nothing, but he said, “And I want you to follow that. You got that?”

And I said, “Oh, okay. I thought it was my program.”

He said, “You’re paid. You get paid for doing this, so it’s not your program.”

So I was kind of disappointed in that, but it really worked out because there were all kinds of things that he would not play on KNEV, like when the Beatles came in after I was back from the Navy. We just weren’t that kind of a station. He explained to me that you have all these people that are KDOT and whatever, KCBN, the rock ‘n’ roll station, doing this and that, and it catered to the youth. He said, “How many people do you think shop over at Stampfli Home Appliance and Record Room or over at Fremont Humphrey’s Furniture, Home Furniture, or Herz Jewelry or any of these places that bought time on our station? No, we’re catering to the adults, the people that appreciate this music. So this is what we stick with.” So I never crossed him on that. I mean, it was his station. But any of the other records that came in, he gave them to me. I had two of the *White* Beatle albums. Of course, I wound up giving them away, you know, later on, but I didn’t ever buy a record, I don’t think.

Barber: So were you in high school at the time?

Cobb: Yeah, high school after I returned from the service, and growing up through the sixties and stuff. Like we were talking earlier about the town, it got real slow during the winter, and I was working for Ball Sign up until the time the snow flew, and then there’s no jobs available. Everybody’s cutting back, scaling, and so that’s when you have to talk to your dad. [laughs]

Barber: So he paid you. It was a paid job.

Cobb: He paid me. But it was comical, too, because like I stated before, he just didn’t have a lot of money, and when he did, he upgraded the station. He did all kinds of things there. But he would tell me, he said—and he paid everybody else, and he said, “Now, Neal,” he said, “I want you to hold this,” the check, “for a day or two and then go to the bank and ask them if it’s going to clear first before you cash it.”

“Well, okay.” [laughs] I mean, it was that tight.

Barber: That was the check that he was paying you with.

Cobb: That was my paycheck, yes.

Barber: Did you ever work in sales, in the sales part of the business?

Cobb: No, no. Dad handled all of that, and he was such a salesman, it was unbelievable. I remember one time when he was doing the “Man on the Street,” and we’re right there at 2<sup>nd</sup> and Virginia Street. We’re in front of Skeel’s Drug. Before, it was a Hale’s Drug. This was on the southeast corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> and Virginia Street, and he set up there with all of his remote equipment, I think sponsored by Brown Motors. It was a Plymouth dealer at the time. I think they were Plymouth. But here’s people walking back and forth, and he’d talk to them here and there, and this one guy’s coming across from the bank and he sees my dad, and he walks all the way around so he’s on the outside of these cars and stuff. He didn’t want to get cornered by Jerry. So my dad whistled at him, said, “Hey, nice watch you got there. Can you tell me what time it is?”

He said, “Well, yeah.” The first thing you know, he’s coming over, telling him what time it is.

“Well, jeez, that’s really a good-looking watch,” and this, that, and the other thing. First thing you know, he’s got the guy on the air. He could lure you in, he was so incredibly likeable.

And he did strange things, like he bought a whole bunch of FM-only radios, and he gave those to people. He wanted to see if they would buy into being sponsors. And he took one over and he gave it to Roy Powers at Harolds Club, and about three days later, Roy called my dad and said, “Hey, I can’t get KOLO on this thing at all.”

“Well, Roy, there’s a reason for that.” [laughs]

Barber: So did he do “Man on the Street” for KNEV or just for KOH?

Cobb: Well, he did it for KOH and he did it, I think even some for KOLO, and then, of course, for KNEV.

Barber: He did? Okay. So he kept it up on KNEV.

Cobb: And it was comical. It was only in the last maybe five or six years that I ever went to the air races, but I had pit passes for them for year after year after year. But my dad would give them to me and then he would go, and I’m the other end of the remote. So, I mean, the races are over by then. [laughs]

Barber: Did that experience being on air and working for his radio station get you interested in a career in broadcasting at all?

Cobb: Not really. When I went into the Navy, they, of course, had a bunch of background and stuff on us, and they wanted to know what did I want to do, and I mentioned all these other things. They said, “What about radio? You seem to have an affiliation with radio.”

I said, “I don’t want anything to do with it.” I said, “I’ve been drug up in the mountains and stuff, putting up antennas and all kinds of things—I don’t want a darn thing to do with it.”

So I go all the way through boot camp, and when I come out of there, they sent me to Radioman “A” school, but it was amazing—and this was up in Bainbridge, Maryland. I didn’t realize how much I knew. They’re trying to teach you the Morse code and this stuff with these old TAJ transmitters and RBC receivers. I said, “I could tear one of those down and put it back together.” [laughs] It was amazing.



The only thing I learned was how to type, because we sat on circuits where you had to type as the CW would come over. I used to just write it. It was no big deal. But I learned all of that from him.

And my dad was so comical, he would sit there and he's drawing pictures. Well, pictures to him were schematics: "How does this run?" Here's all these resistors and breaker relays and sending it to whatever he was trying to build and make happen, and he always made it happen. He was an electronics genius, this guy, and just a powerful person in the industry as far as the final product.

Barber: It's interesting to think at the time that in the early days of radio one person would have to know how to do everything. They were the on-air personality, they fixed the equipment, they ran the business. I mean, did he do that completely independently?

Cobb: All the time. Nobody touched anything except Dad. And like I say, I've got a full set of photos of KFSO San Francisco. It was not just a commercial station, it was the communication link to the war effort in the South Pacific during World War II. And this was a high-powered station, but it was water-cooled. Can you believe that, the transmitter? Electricity and water. I look at that and I say, "Wow." But here are all of these pictures that he took, and they're beautiful layout photos, they're over at the Historical Society now. But this is what he kept afloat because of its importance to the war effort.

And it was funny, because you look, they recorded their own—they were on metal discs, and I've got some of those. Donnie Curtis [Head of Special Collections, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries] has asked me about those, and I've got a whole bunch of the interviews. They're kind of an aluminum metal record with a vinyl coating on the things, and the engineer recorded those. They didn't have tape recorders at the time or even wire recorders, but they had these turntables and they played from the inside back out, and it was the engineer's job to be on top of that to make sure that the recording equipment was working properly and all of the input and everything was there. But you see these turntables in one of the photos, and alongside of that is that little xylophone thing, the [demonstrates by singing a few notes], you know. [laughs]

Barber: Was there one of those in the station at KNEV?

Cobb: No, no, we didn't have one of those. We now had tape recorders.

Barber: So we talked about that building a little bit. So the building at 520 wasn't Modern Photo for very long.

Cobb: No, just 1952 to 1956.

Barber: But when it was, can you explain how it was set up inside there?

Cobb: Basically it was a drop-off point to have your photos processed, and these they went ahead and took out because they no longer had a darkroom and they no longer had a studio. So they were a drop-off point there, but they sold film and cameras and projectors and so on, any of your devices, screens and the rest of that.

Barber: Are you saying your parents no longer had a darkroom at that point?

Cobb: No.

Barber: Oh, okay. They had someone else do developing.

Cobb: When they first did it, they set it up at 1260 Ridgeway Court, and they were developing there, and then they found out it was just better to go ahead and drop them off at another place just to have service, just almost like the drugstores.

Barber: So the storefront at 520 was like a retail outlet.

Cobb: Retail strictly, yeah. And when it was Friden Calculators, when I worked there in the early to late 1960s, there was just a tiny little area in the back. See, that building had three different storefronts—516, 518, and 520, and now Jack Bacon has got it, he's got the whole building, but those were three separate businesses.

Barber: Did they have basements?

Cobb: No, no basement in that structure.

Barber: So you said the one that had been Modern Photo, 520, later became a calculator store? Is that what you said?

Cobb: Just the 520 section of it, yes, and that was Friden. I was their serviceman, covered a territory from Truckee to Elko and from Susanville to Silver Peak Mining, which was thirty miles this side of Tonopah. You'd turn right on this gravel road and you'd go thirty miles up to the mine, and it was great.

But when Singer Sewing Machine took it over, things changed big time, and I gave them notice, two weeks' notice on there. And they bought a brand-new Plymouth, a four-door sedan, beige, black walls, no radio, and they're telling me what part I'm going to be paying for it. Well, half or maybe even a little better, of the money I made working for Friden was being reimbursed for mileage, and I said, "I'm not even setting foot in that thing."

Barber: So Friden, was that a retail space?

Cobb: It was retail up front, and we had a repair section in the back, maybe the back quarter of it. We had all kinds of machines up front. And they were a major power at the time. I went to school two different times down in San Leandro, a huge factory down there. But this is when you had the calculators that had the full hundred-count keyboard, and they called them rotary because it was gear-driven. It took a carriage across the top and lined it up, lined the numbers and then how many spins it did this, a multiplier unit, and division off on the side. And, of course, all of this stuff worked, but it was a mechanical machine. It had 5,200-and-some odd parts in it. So you get out there, and have to service these things, make sure they're clean and oiled. The electronic part of it was just the drive motor.

Marchant and Monroe and Friden were your big three as far as all these businesses. We had them out at Rocketdyne. We had what they called a Flex-o-writer that ran off of perforated tape. You could go

ahead and cut the tape and then send this and do different things. But they had them with multiple escapement wheels so that you could—like the *Tahoe Tribune*, the *Carson City Appeal*, the *Humboldt Star* used to service theirs. They were called Just-o-writers because it could go ahead and add and subtract units of escapement, so that you could run justified copy, but it was not the old Linotype thing with the heavy slugs and all of that, you know, each letter. But these were the lightweights, so they'd cut that out and they'd adhere them to this drum, and it was a transfer burn thing. Marilyn Newton, our photographer friend, that's where I had originally met her. It was Elaine's—her sister that had passed away and her mom both were key players down there at the *Carson Appeal*.

Barber: So when you said Friden and the other two names you mentioned were the big players, do you mean they were big local businesses?

Cobb: No, they were brands.

Barber: That was the brand. So Friden was a national brand?

Cobb: Yeah, like National Cash Register. They were huge. That's part of one of the stores that was down there on South Virginia Street. Now where do you go to get National Cash Registers? [laughs] And the only thing that I know that Friden makes is the postage machines now, and if you look them up, they're still in business, but since Singer took them over, it just went into a big corporate cut costs, do this, do that, do the other thing, and that wasn't for me.

Barber: Do you remember who you worked for or who owned the place?

Cobb: Yeah, Don Johnson and his wife, Judy. They were wonderful people.

Barber: So you worked in a number of jobs just right in that area. You mentioned briefly that you worked at a tire shop?

Cobb: Yeah.

Barber: Where was that and what were you doing?

Cobb: Well, that was Coffman's U.S. Royal Tire [at 655 South Virginia], and it was the next store or two down from the Kit Carson on the same side of the street. And, of course, you'll see stuff about the Caravan Motel. It was a whole grouping in there. Well, there's a bar and stuff in there. It was the Caravan, and they had a desert motif that was there and all these fun details on the two different types of camels and where this all came about. It was a place that it would quench your thirst, you know. Later on it wound up—there was a book out that was rather risqué at the time, called *Peyton Place*, and there was a guy that took over that same bar, and he named the bar Peyton Place, so that hung for quite a while.

Barber: There was the Caravan Motel and then that row of businesses right next to it. Those are all gone now, that whole building, I believe.

Cobb: There's a building on the next block that's across the street from what would have been Ayers Auto, down there by the pet food store, right across. It's kind of a modern building and it really didn't blend in with everything else that was there. It was surprising because as much glass as the Glenn Turner flower shop [at 681 South Virginia Street] had, that actually fit because we had trees and stuff down there. You know, you'd get maybe the reflections off of it, but that one building we're talking about now, that was really out of place. And there was another one down there that's since gone, and it was *the* place if you were going to shop for children. It was called Hansel and Gretel's.

Barber: My understanding is that's the building that's now the adult bookstore.

Cobb: And that could very well be.

Barber: Did you shop at Hansel and Gretel?

Cobb: No.

Barber: That was for younger kids than you were?

Cobb: Well, it was like going to Nordstrom's rather than Ross. I mean, the top-quality merchandise was at Hansel and Gretel's.

You know what was another fun one that was at 520 South Virginia Street, for a long time there, there was a gal, Nina, LaNina's. She had a boutique in there, and she was well known around town, and she had all kinds of action there. It was funny, she had one guy chasing her, and she come to work one day, and the whole back of the building, the entire back of the building was covered with paper hearts. [laughs] Yeah, it was funny. So everybody had to go over and see that.

Barber: You know, it's such a great example of how so many of these buildings in this area have housed so many different types of businesses through the years.

Cobb: Oh, yeah. Right directly across the street from where Modern Photo was, at 520, there was a Standard station right on the corner, just a small one, and then heading to the north was the Lake Mansion, and there was a body shop if you went up California Avenue, and then across the street was Lyon's Signal station, and that was a real big one.

Standard leased the property, and this man had the franchise—his name was Mike Burke—and he came in one day, and they said, “Well, that's the end of it. You're going to have to be moving.” They said, “And you're either this and that and the other thing.” He said, “But we do have one other place that we can offer you, and it's the only one that we got, so it's take it or leave it, and it's a station in downtown Lovelock, Nevada.” Well, little did these dummies know, Mike was from Lovelock—they didn't do much of a background check—and he wound up parlaying that into owning the two stiffs and stuff, and it was—yeah, that was comical. [laughs]

There was another thing, where the Signal station was, when they eliminated it and they built—well, before the Ponderosa Hotel, they had built the new Lincoln-Mercury retail. So they were building on this and everything's going up just like it should, and then everything stopped. And then the next week, you hear all this jackhammering. You could hear it for, crimony, blocks all the way 'round. They

were red-tagged because of inferior something another in the concrete or the way they laid out the floors in between, and they were in there taking the darn thing apart. So it was quite a while before we had a Lincoln-Mercury place there, but they finally, finally did get it up, and then things were changing and it didn't pan out.

Barber: Huh. So I wonder if they knocked that down specifically to build the Ponderosa. I wasn't familiar with that building.

Cobb: Well, they might have used part of it to build the inside. It's hard to tell, you know.

Barber: That Kit Carson had a really big lawn in front of it.

Cobb: Oh, it was huge. It was great. Just a lot of fun things that you were able to do there. As you came up from downtown with the Reno Bowl, and then the Tower was right next door to it, and, of course, the Tower Theater, it was partitioned off. That was originally built for Scott Motors, and when they went over there, it wasn't insulated and stuff, and everybody was freezing their tail off. So they moved back across Virginia Street, and they were just directly across the street.

They modified the inside of it and cut it in two, and they put the Tower Theater on one part of it and this bowling alley on the other, so when you're in there watching a movie, every so often you could hear the clattering of pins. On the Tower Theater, this was funny, because every other row, the lead seat was a love seat, so you could take your lady with you. Never did get to sit in one of those. I never did.

But that bowling alley thing, Tom Hunter was working down there, and he was a friend of mine from the Aquacades that they'd always put on out there at Idlewild and the ones down on—a benefit one for Ronnie Cox over at Moana. But he called me, he said, "I need a pin boy." They didn't have automatic setters. "Can you help me out?"

And I said, "Yeah, I can help you out."

And he said, "It pays such-and-such." And I was there a couple, two, three hours when this smart-aleck comes in, and I'm down there picking up pins, and he bowls me; he throws the ball at me. And I see this thing coming and I get out of the way, and it lands, and I threw it back at him. [laughs] And I was terminated. I don't understand that. I was Tom's friend. [laughs] But can you believe that?

Barber: Now, it's funny because in the past, there were so many different businesses and things continuing from the area that we really call downtown now or at least around the river, to this area we call Midtown. At this point today, they seem very divided. But it seems in the past, people would just walk from the river all the way down to this area in South Virginia. Did it seem connected?

Cobb: It was connected. You had people coming from the court building—of course, Johnson Chevrolet, you wanted to see the new cars and stuff, and then right across the street was, you know, the State Building, lots of activity there.

As you crossed the street—and I've got photos of this that I got from Ben Scott because the original corner that they had, it was open, which wound up being where they sold used cars. Way back at turn of the century, there's a small gas station there, and before that was an ice cream thing. That was kind of funny. But when they built the nice brick building, here's Scott Motors, and you lead all the way up. Well, those buildings are all gone now, but they were replaced by more modern buildings and

extended out, and so you had Nevada Machinery and Electric that was right next to Woolworth's downtown. They moved in there, and that was a real nice store that they put together. But it was just a continuation of retail.

So you had a lot of action on Sierra Street. Not so much on Center as far as retail. You had, of course, places to eat like The Stein and so on. Before that, that was a fancy dinner house. That was at 116 North Center. But when you got out just a little bit, you had all of this wonderful retail. Sierra Street was a real good one. First Street, of course, and when you got past the red line, even 2<sup>nd</sup> Street was good, and then Commercial Row had always—well, it's called Commercial Row for a reason. But after all the dependence on the trains and what they were bringing in and the rest of that, that got questionable as far as the center. You know, you had the Wine House and businesses like that. So wherever the red line still was was questionable on Commercial Row, but when you went west, of course, then were a paint store that was there, Reno Mercantile, Rauhut's Bakery, Cannan's Drug Store, all of these places. Sewell's [Market] when it was operational, they were there. But you had to get away from the red line.

I always told everybody, I said Reno's always been two separate cities. You have the downtown core for the tourists and the poor people that are habitual gamblers, and then you have the normal town all the way around. We had wonderful shops, and some of them were really close. On that 100 block of Virginia Street, you had the Vanity Shop, the Wonder Shop, all kinds of things that were there. Armanko's Business Supply. The Arcade Building had all these medical people in there, lawyers and so on.

Barber: Let me ask you about some specific buildings because we don't have a lot of memories recorded of buildings like the Reno Mercantile. Did you go in there and shop at all?

Cobb: Oh, yes.

Barber: Could you just describe it?

Cobb: Well, it was a wonderful hardware store. It's almost like—I like Bernie Carter, and I think they've just done a wonderful job with Carter Brother's Hardware, and that's kind of like what Reno Mercantile was. And Commercial Hardware was down there, too, before they moved out on 4<sup>th</sup> Street.

Barber: Can you describe what it was like inside the building?

Cobb: It was neat. High ceilings, and you had the tin, you know, the tin placement, the panels that were in there. They had a big basement down there. Yeah, most of the downtown, right downtown, had basements of one kind and another.

Barber: Was that basement open for shopping? It has a pretty low ceiling in Reno Mercantile building.

Cobb: Yeah. There were things down there under it, but they were oddball stuff. For example, when people would pull out a wood burner and stuff and put one of those pie plates in where the flue pipes that come up and then into the chimney. Well, you take this apparatus out, and you've got a hole in the chimney. So here's this double-spring thing, and it played on the outside, and you pop that in there. Well, they had stuff like that in the basement.

Barber: And then what kind of stuff was in the ground floor versus what was on the top floor?

Cobb: You had a certain amount of better tools. Nuts and bolts and hinges and all kinds of things like that were there. There was a certain amount of mining supplies. You could buy mining equipment for the hand, you know, your picks and stuff and your panning pans, small sluice boxes and so on. There was a bunch of things. Of course, upstairs those were meeting rooms when it was originally built as a Masonic Temple in 1872. So that was separate. They always were able to make sure that the buildings paid for themselves. The Masons were not dummies.

Barber: So did that top floor ever become part of the retail?

Cobb: Not to my knowledge.

Barber: It was always a meeting room, then, even when that building had changed from being—

Cobb: It might have been offices or whatever there. It's hard to tell. I was never up in the second floor, but I was in the basement. But the main floor, to me, it seemed huge at the time, but, of course, you're not that old when going in. And then later on, it was used, I think, as a pawnshop there for a while and a bunch of other things.

Barber: Are you familiar at all, on South Virginia, the building that's now the Ponderosa Meat Company? It was a Frozen Food Lockers.

Cobb: Oh, it was, forever.

Barber: Did you ever go in there? This whole idea about frozen foods—

Cobb: No. Landrum's was always popular with all of us.

Barber: Talk about that.

Cobb: Oh, yeah. Well, that was great. You'd get a stool. What, they had eight or nine stools there. You'd get a stool and you stayed there. In fact, they had little bumper stickers, "I sat on a stool at Landrum's." But it was just good chow and you really got your money's worth, and it was always amazing that this little bitty building, how much good food came out of there. Where the hell they kept in the back, I'll never know, but it was there. But that was a great stop.

And at Circus Potato Chips, we could always get one of the little brown paper bags on there, and that was comical because we no more than got out to the street when the grease was showing through on the sides of the bag. But the next stop was Shoshone Coca-Cola, and that was a good one. You'd just stand out there, looking at her, or waving a bag there, and somebody's looking around, they'd get us a Coke.

Barber: What would happen? Someone would get you a Coke?

Cobb: Yeah. Well, you could watch them bottling. So we were up there putting our nose against the glass, they'd see us, and so somebody would bring us out a Coke, and away we went. Nine-tenths of the time we had to drink the Coke, then give them back the bottle, because there was a deposit on bottles. [laughs] Yeah, that was great. But there were just all kinds of fun places to stop and see what was going on. It was almost like downtown. I used to love to go and look in the windows at the pawnshops and stuff. Boy, they had neat stuff there. I was never allowed as a kid in the pawnshops.

Barber: So in Circus Potato Chips, did they have a counter where they sold over the counter? I thought it was mostly manufacturing.

Cobb: It was mostly manufacturing. I don't recollect a counter.



John Wayne participating in a parade passing by Circus Potato Chips, 1949. Photo courtesy of Jerry Fenwick.

Barber: So how did you get the little bags of potato chips?

Cobb: Well, you'd peek in. [laughs] It was like Ramona over at the original Roaring Camp. I used to go over there and I'd say, "Is Ramona in?" And she'd come out and she'd always give me a little bowl of beans or a bowl of stew and a piece of bread and some milk. I was a bum. She was so neat. Yeah, that was just part of my routine.

Barber: So the potato chip company was the same way.



Cobb: Yeah. Well, that's when we were heading down south for whatever reason. "Well, while we're here." You know? But, of course, when Modern Photo was real close, when I'd head over to the Majestic Theater or like on one of my mini trips, I would have bet you money that the Reno Theater was on Lake Street, and it wasn't. It was on Center Street, right across the street from the Golden. But what I was told to do, because that's where the small amount of blacks that we had and the Indians, they would go to the Reno Theater. It was kind of run down, but they had the best westerns. And these people, they were just great. They were just wonderful, as far as I was concerned, but the warning came from my parents. "Here's enough to get a treat and get into the Majestic."

Well, I'd head around the corner from Modern Photo down around the Club Fortune and past the Western Union and the Gazette Building and all of that and alongside City Hall, but instead of going across the street to the Majestic, I would head east, and that was one of my first stops was getting past that one block where there wasn't much happening and go over to the Roaring Camp.

Then I'd go all the way up Lake Street, and that's when I'm looking inside the hotels and watching what all these old guys are doing with the checkers and that and then the pawnshops and the rest of the activity, watching somebody get thrown out of the Wagon Wheel Bar or some damn thing. That was pretty fun.

But I'd come all the way around the Palace Club and then over coming down Center Street, and then I would go to the movie there. It was half the price of the Majestic. It was the half the price on the treats. They were great westerns, and the people were great. I just wrote off what Mom had to say with her attitudes coming from back east. So that was pretty fun. But I spent a whole lot of my time on Lake Street getting there because I wasn't supposed to be there, and I had to take the out-of-sight route.

Barber: Yeah, that street has an incredible history. It's just a shame that there is so little left to show everything that was there. It's just a complete empty space now.

Cobb: The Penguin, everybody loved the Penguin, and that was really sad to see that go. It was down-home cooking there, too, and that was one of the favorite haunts of not just the kids, but it was always packed.

Barber: So it was a restaurant and a bar or was it just a restaurant?

Cobb: No, no, the Penguin was just a restaurant [at 719 South Virginia Street]. The 715 bar was there, so you only needed one bar. You had a grocery store and the other restaurant—Heric's? Yeah. It was on the corner, but as you got to the other end of it, then here's this smaller one. It focused a lot—it was set up a couple, two, three tables, but they had a counter in the Penguin that had hand-packed ice cream and soda fountain stuff. But then they cooked a real nice breakfast and lunch. I don't think they had dinner there.

Barber: I thought it was just an ice cream place, but they served meals.

Cobb: Well, see, my dad used to love to—he'd walk down there because they went ahead and chopped up onions and stuff and put it in with the hash browns, and he loved that. He thought that was just the cat's meow.

Barber: What was the family who owned that? I wrote that down somewhere, the family that ran the Penguin. We'll look that up. It was an old Reno family.

Cobb: Yeah, Giraudo? I think that's them right there because they had the apartments too.

Barber: Oh, okay. Giraudo. There was a real neighborhood feeling, it seemed like.

Cobb: It really was, and to grow up in Reno back at that time, there's not a better place on Earth to have grown up, and I tell all kinds of stories with the second Italian neighborhood. You know, you've got the Powning Addition, of course, the first one, but the second one was north of 4<sup>th</sup> Street. It went all the way up to the Costello's Ranch and Rancho San Rafael. I was born in 900 block of Ralston. And in 1941, Thanksgiving Day of '41, we moved into 1260 Ridgeway Court, but all of my friends were the Avansinos, the Zuninos, Granatas, just all of these great Italian names. And I come home one day and I asked my mom, I said, "How come we got this silly last name with just four letters, and there are no A's and I's and everything like all of my friends?"

And my mom looked at me and said, "Well, son, that's because you're not Italian." I was the last one to know that. I had no idea. Yeah. [laughs] But I'll tell you the fronts of those houses, in any one of them would have—Bell Street, Ralston, and over on Washington would have qualified for the front cover of *Better Homes and Gardens*, and that wasn't the good part. The good part, these folks grew the best produce anywhere.

And it was fun. Never did figure out what the rules were for Bocce ball, but on the west side of Washington—I don't recollect any on the east side of Washington, but it was about every third house, the driveway was a Bocce ball court, and we'd watch, and they were serious. They'd just have all kinds of fun. And you pick up little things that you remember. Like at this one place they had this glass gallon-jug of wine, and every time something happened, somebody'd take a swallow, and it would leave a ring. And the next guy, when he did something, he'd get a swallow, but it wouldn't eradicate just sloshing around any of the other rings. They just stayed there. There were permanent. It looked like when you cut a tree, and those rings were your age rings. [laughs] I have no idea how potent that wine was, but it had to be pretty decent.

Barber: Well, I think we'll stop here for today. But as I continue to research the Midtown area, which is going to be going on for this whole year, I might come back and ask you for some more stories as I kind of get more familiar with the terrain there. So I want to thank you so much for talking to me today.

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## RANDY COLLINS

Owner, College Cyclery, 622 S. Virginia Street



Randy Collins inside College Cyclery, 2016. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Randy Collins moved to Reno with his family in 1963. In 1973, he began working at College Cyclery, then located on Arlington Avenue. In 1975, the shop moved to its current location at 622 S. Virginia Street, and Collins became a partner and ultimately the sole owner.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, and I'm here in Reno, Nevada, with Randy Collins, the owner of College Cyclery, at 622 South Virginia Street, to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Mr. Collins, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Collins: Yes, you do, Alicia.

Barber: Thank you so much. I'd like to start by getting a little background information about you. Can you tell me where you were born, where you grew up?

Collins: I was born in Los Angeles. My parents lived there, and my dad was a sheet-metal operator and my mom was a bookkeeper. They decided to move to Reno in June of '63 for a change of lifestyle, to buy a motel. So that would be a big change of lifestyle from what they did, and also, Nevada at the time had a big booming industry in the trade of hotel management.

They bought a motel at 101 Grove Street, which was the Revada Motel. That hotel was operated by them until the early eighties or so, and then they sold the motel to the Park Lane Shopping Center. The shopping center purchased the land for expansion of their shopping center and also ran the motel. The motel was actually still profitable for a couple more years until they tore it down in the mid-eighties.

In '69, '70, '71, I worked for a bike shop here in town called Ponderosa Cyclery, and that bike shop also had a slot-car track. I was a kid working with slot cars, and I loved slot cars, I loved bikes. One day they asked me if I wanted to work and put bikes together, so I did that for several years down below—they had a basement down below. That was across the street from where the Peppermill is now.

Ponderosa Cyclery was owned by the Fleischmann brothers, and Merv Nowotny, who was their brother-in-law. They had been operating for about four or five years there, and I stopped working for them in '72. I was finishing up high school.

On February 5<sup>th</sup> of '73, Merv Nowotny opened up College Cyclery and asked me to go work for him. I was still in high school. Merv had an idea of a bike shop that would cater to all kinds of recreational cyclists by carrying imported road ten speeds. The previous shop that he had and I worked at with his brothers-in-law was an exclusive Schwinn shop. So we had a lot of imported bikes at College Cyclery—Peugeot, Gitane, Puch, and so forth. We had the fortune of our timing being not too good because that was right when the recession hit. The gas crunch happened in 1980, but, more importantly, the recession hit throughout that time. It was during the Nixon administration.

At that point, I was a mechanic and operating the shop with his manager who was there for about six months and decided to leave. So I basically took over the responsibility of operating the shop at that point. I was just out of high school.

Merv Nowotny also had a shutter business while in the bike business. This all occurred at 255 North Arlington Street. We leased the building from the city. It was about a 6,000-square-foot place. Then the city sold it and we vacated it in 1975. The location is now a parking lot that was purchased by the Fitzgerald Hotel for their parking. The Fitzgerald Hotel went up in about 1974.

Barber: Was that a commercial building or was it a house?

Collins: It was a commercial building. There were some other small commercial buildings around as well, too, on Arlington. When we had that business going, it was a big multifaceted operation. We did shutters for houses and commercial installations. We also did carpet, believe it or not, too. We had a forklift there for carpet. One of the things that Merv did was to establish both a shutter business and a bike business, to offset each other in the off season. One of the jobs that Merv did was the set for the *Godfather II* at Lake Tahoe, so anytime you see the shutters that were involved with that shooting of the *Godfather*, Francis Ford Coppola's movie, those are our shutters in the background.

About 1974, Merv Nowotny died suddenly. He had a heart attack in his sleep. He was fifty-three years old, if I remember right. At the time, his widow didn't have anything to do with the business at all. She was pretty much just his wife and didn't know how to run the business, so she left it up to me to structure the business and put it up for sale, at some point in the game. Because he died and had surviving brothers-in-law who had the previous bike shop, Ponderosa Cyclery, they were discussing terms to make an agreement to come in and take over the bike shop from Peggy. Then they decided it wouldn't work out, so she decided to keep it and have me run it.

About 1974, late '74, a previous customer of mine, Jeff Sanchez, came into the business and wanted to purchase a bike shop. Jeff taught elementary school at the time. He purchased it at that point, because I didn't have money. I was only nineteen years old, and wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I liked the business and I ran it fairly well at the time, for a teenager.

So we worked together, and within the next year, in November of '75, we lost the lease on the building. That's when we moved here to 622 South Virginia Street and negotiated a lease with the Savage and Son family, who are in the plumbing business, to take over the space next door to their plumbing business. There was previously one tenant before us, which was Styris-Sutton, a ball-bearing shop. That's how we ended up here in Midtown in November of 1975.

So as we speak today in 2015, this is my fortieth anniversary of being in this location here, and we're on our forty-third year in business. So that's how this serendipitous story emerged. Our bike shop is the oldest bike shop in Nevada.



Randy Collins at College Cyclery's original location on Arlington Avenue. Photo courtesy of Randy Collins.

Barber: I wonder when you were trying to determine where to move when you lost your lease at the other site, why you ended up here. Do you remember looking at other sites? Do you remember why this location seemed appealing at the time?

Collins: Well, we needed a certain amount of space. We needed it to be affordable, and we needed a really stable landlord. I can't emphasize that enough. Our success is based upon our landlord, the Savage and Son family, who have been very gracious to us and kept our overhead low enough so we could survive as a business and kept it stable enough where we're not going to have to uproot the shop. We don't like to move. Nobody likes to move.

It was very inviting because it was an older building. We liked that idea. It was at the time still part of the bustling commercial district of Reno, and this is when it was just sort of on its way out. Park Lane Mall had opened up, so those were the big new tenants of the commercial zones here. But downtown Reno was still vibrant at that time, to a larger degree, and same with here in Midtown, or the Southwest, as we used to call it.

So with the factors of affordability, stability, and a landlord who had been in business 83 years at that point, we figured it was a good match for us, and it always has been because they've been gracious to work with, allowing us to make changes to the building for our needs, so we can succeed in the bike business. That's basically one of the main reasons. You can look at a bigger building or smaller building, but it has to have the right kind of landlord to make it successful for the business.

Barber: Did you have to do much to the building to make it work for the bike shop? It had been an industrial supply place.

Collins: Yes, it was a showroom. They had actually finished off some of the showroom. We have evolved from that. Currently, the shop layout is our idea of shop design, floor layout, retail floor layout. We do everything proprietary. We built our own displays, we built our own flooring, we did and do everything in-house so we can call it our own. We don't have outside people coming in.

At the time, we had to put workbenches in to work on bikes. Those workbenches, which are still here, are still very important to the work area, but we had to put up some makeshift partitions. We didn't have all the downstairs space we have the luxury of having now, so we had limited space. We used the space we're sitting in here, our road bike showroom, as spillover for repairs, and that's changed.

Around 1992, we did a remodel of the shop. We said we're going to get rid of some of the old stuff that was just out of date. We were all art students who were involved here at the shop, so we had a background in art. I decided with my then-employee and future partner, Scott Clark, that we were going to revamp the entire shop, make the new proprietary displays that you see here, put the flooring in, and basically make it our own.

We didn't necessarily have a lot of money, but we had a lot of talent, and it was all paint and materials at that point. So that's how we evolved to what we have now. Around that same time, we got access to the basement, so it opened up space for storage downstairs for bikes and merchandise.

That's about the time when the Savage family moved their location over to Gentry Way. They had a previous lot in the back that was for pipe storage and plumbing, industrial plumbing supplies, and downstairs was part of their plumbing outfit as well. When they vacated, we opened up and partitioned up the basement so we had lots of room to move down there. We tried to make everything we did

progressive so that it wouldn't be outdated in ten or twenty years. It's going on twenty-five years, and it still looks fresh. We try to make something that lasts.

Barber: Now, starting in the 1970s through today, with forty years in this location alone, there have been a lot of changes in bicycles, in the actual equipment and in cycling culture, too. Reno's always had a strong bicycling community. There's a long heritage here. I wonder what you see as some of those main developments and shifts that have happened, both in bicycles themselves and how it is to run a shop, but also in the culture of Reno, too, with respect to bicycles.

Collins: Well, Reno, as you may know, harbors a lot of national champions. In the bicycle industry, it was Greg LeMond that was here. There are other people that are national champions in skiing and other sports. It's always been the type of area that is very conducive to those outdoor champion sports training grounds.

Culture-wise, it's changed a lot as well, too. There have been a lot of things that were the same for a long time. When we first started selling bikes here in the seventies, most bikes were all ten-speeds. They were all one type of bike for every purpose, which was really not appropriate for everybody's needs or uses. At the time, model changes didn't appear. They were just basically the same model rolled over into the next year and called next year's bike, but it really was the same bike. Then in 1980, they started to change and actually have model years.

At about the same time, mountain bikes were just starting to happen, and that was one of the biggest movements in the industry. We sold our first mountain bikes in 1978. The first one that we built here by hand we had to cobble together. That was the beginning of mountain bikes, and by 1982 major brands like Specialized, owned by Mike Sinyard, and also Univega, imported by Ben Lawee, started making mountain bikes that were mass-produced, that were in the repeatable affordable category for most people; in other words, with standardized parts and so forth. We carried both of these lines.

During those evolutions, a new culture started, a culture of mountain biking, which is different than what was originally the culture of a road bike or a road-racing bike. Typically, the area of use was limited to streets or road-racing. But mountain biking opened up a new type of riding, a more expanded use of cycling. Mountain bikes changed a lot because they brought forth a comfortable, easy, stable position, not necessarily for off-road but for on-road as well, too. That has evolved since to very specific categories. One of the types is a hybrid that actually is more attuned to what people need and use.

We've always been a needs-based shop, so that's what we usually look at as far as what the customer needs. Manufacturers have finally realized that in the last twelve, thirteen years, designing bikes for specific needs. So now we don't sell one bike, we sell probably ten, twelve different categories of bikes. That actually is a good benefit for both the customer and us, because we feel like we can sell someone a bike that is actually being used. If we sell a bike to a person and they don't use it, we've failed somewhere along the line.

Coming up behind that is the culture as a whole, and the culture has stayed very consistent, for the most part, besides the mountain-bike blip, for the last eighteen years or so. Now things have started to change somewhat, and I think it's accelerating. Most of it is bike awareness. It's always been that a bike uses the public roads, and the public recognizes that there are bikes on the roads. But generally bikes have been described as being something used by children and not by adults. And the perception is that bikes are just secondary to the dominance of cars.

With new awareness, more activism has come into the industry. More bicycle infrastructure has come into local communities nationwide. And in the last, I would say, six to seven years, the Reno area has changed more and become more bike-friendly than it had in the previous fifty years. In cooperation with the RTC and local activist groups in town that really work hard to get new bike lanes put in. Now it's an easier process to change streets to include a bike lane without a cost involved, because it's basically taking roads and reappropriating them to bikes, and it's basically a maintenance project to reseal the road and restripe it to accommodate bikes.

That has been the biggest gain for everybody, but it isn't always accepted fully. When we first plan these bike lanes and try to change the infrastructure of the town, a lot of people say, "We don't want bikes; it's just going to take up our traffic and parking space," because what we do is we narrow the lane down, we put the road on a diet, and we put a bike lane in. It has more of a primary effect than a secondary effect, and the primary effect is that it gives people back their neighborhoods. And when you put a road diet back onto a street, the benefit is that the traffic slows down. It's not a freeway in front of your residential house. Mayberry is a good example. That was one of the first projects we did. Everybody says, "Oh, it's a nice place to live, and also we can ride our bikes and traffic doesn't slow up any," because it's one lane each way, and there is a steady pace.

So those elements have changed the culture. There's been a culture shift, and that's awareness. It hasn't fully realized itself at this point, but it is a big, big start. Along with that, Reno has received awards for being a bike-friendly city. We've just received a university award for the bike-friendly university we've been working on very hard with Amy Fitch to create at the University of Nevada.

Culture also shifts with the advent of a hero. You had heroes in the old days, and we still do. Greg LeMond, who we were developmental partners with at College Cyclery, started LeMond Series bikes. At that time it was a brand new line after he won the 1986 Tour de France. Greg LeMond became the first American to ever do so. At that point, he thought it would be a good opportunity to have his own line of bikes. So we helped design the bikes, and it became a franchise operation. The LeMond family has a connection with College Cyclery that goes back to Greg's beginnings, and Greg's beginnings started in the seventies when he was a local club racer here in the area and had just a tremendous amount of natural talent. That talent was channeled through another friend of mine, Roland Della Santa, who has been part of the bike industry here for the last fifty years. He's a frame builder, and he was part of Greg LeMond's initial start in road cycling. He was his first sponsor and frame builder, and then Greg won the 1979 World Junior Champions on a Della Santa bike.

So Greg LeMond as a hero was a good representative, somebody you could get behind as a country. He went through his trials and tribulations and won the Tour de France three times, which was excellent. That boosted awareness of the sport and cycling in general. Everybody loves a hero. Everybody likes to rally around a hero.

Then we had Lance Armstrong who came into the picture, as well. His discredited Tour de France victories were just that. He is still a rallying point for the culture for a lot of people and an inspiration for them to be part of cycling.

So it's an aggregate of all the accumulated ideas, more awareness, more people on bikes and the streets. Road bikes have come and gone and come again. We started the business selling road bikes, then mountain bikes got real big, and then some in-between bikes, and road bikes came back very strong in 2002 to the present day. Now they've kind of leveled off. Now, we probably sell more hybrid bikes. Everybody can use them for commuting, recreational use, whatever fitness level or most riding you'd want to do. We also sell quite a few electric assist bikes.



I feel that the culture should dictate the need, say for bike lanes, and the products, we feel. When you have that, you have people who are happy on quality bikes and they have a place to ride that's safer. They have a bike that's adequate for their needs and not inappropriate for their abilities. So as you build the culture, you build the experience, and the experience is what changes somebody's life as it relates to a bicycle and the sport.

Barber: I find it really interesting as you're talking about the role models and the heroes. In many ways, they're heroes for individual achievement, they're competitive cyclists, but then at the same time you're talking about that kind of that community ethic and how bicycles, when owned and used by everyday people, can help transform a community. So that seems to be kind of a shift, too, or at least it's two different dimensions.

Collins: Right. And in the case of Greg LeMond, he was a local person, a local boy does good. He went to Wooster High here, and his family have all been Nevadans for a long, long time, and are still here in the area. Greg moved to the Minneapolis area about thirty years ago, but is still active in cycling. But it's a local connection, something to hang our hat on in Reno. At the time there were local skiers and so forth that were very prominent who had a lot of achievements, just another one of those arenas where the area has a penchant for producing those type of champions.

Barber: I'm fascinated by the fact that you were building your own mountain bikes, kind of pioneering that form, in a way. Did that have a lot to do with our geographical location here? Is it because people were interested in riding around in the mountains? Is that what was spearheading it?

Collins: Well, it was new. At the same time, people were doing this in Marin County, and in Colorado as well. It was very new to take a bike that would seem like it wouldn't work off-road and would get broken off-road and use it there. They were cobbled together with big fat tires, which were balloon-tire bikes, one-speed bikes that you see as cruiser bikes today, and made into a mountain bike with gears. And people started riding in areas that they thought were available to ride. At the time there weren't a lot of trails, per se, open to mountain biking, and now there are. I'm a professional trail builder as well, so I build trails in the area here from Peavine and everywhere else to give more access to all the trails and allow the usage of mountain biking generally. But at that time, it was pretty much hiking trails and people would try them out on the mountain bike.

But they found the experience enchanting. When you ride a mountain bike, you void yourself of traffic, and when you void yourself of traffic, you have a different thought process going on. You're actually riding in nature. You're changing the experience. You're changing the experience of how you feel afterwards. You get a different feel for it. So just by the nature of that happening, we had to come up with something that was different. We took cruiser bikes and put gears on them, basically, up until the point when the manufacturers started producing them.

Barber: You talked about activism a little bit, and I'm wondering about the evolution of groups in town. There have been individual activists and people trying to advocate for bicycle use, and Critical Mass comes every so often. Of course, Tour de Nez kind of brought in a different dimension—

Collins: It did.

Barber: —a different kind of awareness of cycling. How far back does that kind of organized effort go? We've got the Reno Wheelmen, and I know there have been other clubs like that. Since the seventies, have you seen different groups come and go or any that have formed and then continued onward?

Collins: Well, I think the Reno Wheelmen are still prominent. They were prominent in the late nineteenth century, too. Now they're still here. That's one of those groups, cycling groups, that is still around. In the 1910s and twenties, there were huge events, and people would come to see those kind of events, as a spectator event.

We did a few large and small here, ourselves. One of the instrumental people who started that event culture here in town was my old partner, Jeff Sanchez. He did the Tour de Comstock, which was a big race that we also incorporated the casinos into, and the entire Reno area and Lake Tahoe. This event and others like the Coors Classic were pretty big in the seventies. They've become a bit of a white elephant. They are really expensive and difficult and involving to manage on that scale anymore, because of road closures as well as the presence by the authorities that is required, just to name a couple of reasons.

Tim Healion and his partner, John Jesse, started a bike race here, and that was a community race. The Tour de Nez was a race that people could go out their doors in their neighborhoods and actually see happening. As an event, yes, it was a bike race, but it was also a party. It was an event people liked to go to. It was downtown here and close to Midtown, and I think that in itself gave people a connection to bikes, because bike racing per se is a very abstract idea. People do not know what's going on in a race. I don't know sometimes myself, either. There are so many odd things going on, because it's an inherited European sporting event.

However, when you hold it as an event where people can see the riders going around in a circuit race, they can tell what's going on—first place, second place—because there's also an announcer. But if they aren't interested in bikes, they can eat food, they can have a party, they can enjoy great music, a great location, that kind of thing, and also bring in kids. The kids always had a kids' race, and the kids would be out there, which is important, I think, for the future of cycling and also for the future of how people raise their families in regards to bicycles and experiencing safe riding. It's important to start the culture with the young, with the parents and young children, who can continue the experience, not necessarily through racing, but as an activity that enriches families and lives. And that's where the racing connection can become an event. It helps expose people to cycling and that it is a fun thing to watch. There's more to cycling than racing.

Barber: Let's talk about this neighborhood a little bit. As you say, it's changed over time, and when you first located here, that was a transitional moment. The north-south highway was getting completed and extended bit by bit, but prior to that, this *was* the highway. We have the motels that are a testament to that, and having your family history with the motels, that's something that you're really familiar with. I wonder at that time in the mid-seventies if many of these hotels and the Ponderosa, which you're right across from, were really being utilized by the tourist population. Did you see the transition happening away from tourism in those motels?

Collins: Yes, and there was a very active gaming business along this street, which was the 395 highway designate. The development as a highway itself was good for the tourism and created a gateway to Reno

from the north-south perspective. What it did ultimately was open the streets up to more traffic, and it reduced the ability to have good sidewalks and pedestrian access as well as bike access or riding. Despite that, it still flourished as a small retail center, to some degree. We had Montgomery Ward's and Grey Reid's downtown on Virginia Street. We had a few large and small stores before they moved to the malls in the late seventies and early eighties. I have seen transitions come and go.

So basically after the fall of tourism on these highway designates, being 4<sup>th</sup> Street and South Virginia Street, and Interstate 80 and Interstate 580 becoming the byways, the motels slowly receded into the background. The Ponderosa Hotel, across the street from College Cyclery, was still an active motel. They brought in entertainers. They had George Liberace, who was Liberace's brother, play there many times. It was a diversified regular hotel, and so were some of the others. They've since decayed, and then at the beginning of the eighties, everything morphed into weekly hotels. So that character has changed hugely. But I would say generally you see remnants of the former along the way, and that's part of the bric-a-brac appearance that is Midtown today. You have some of the past, some of the new, some stuff that isn't relevant to today's higher-end retail or restaurants, but it still somehow has grown organically out of that soup, and it hasn't been a forced project that has changed the character of the streets and neighborhoods.

We look forward to the RTC's new plan for redoing South Virginia Street and improving our sidewalks, because that's one of the best things that we can do to induce people to stay in and enjoy Midtown. Creating wide sidewalks allows people to get out of their cars and walk around and feel safe. There's always been an element of some homelessness in Reno.

So having said that, you have this growth happening in spurts. Frankly, it wasn't up until about the last four years that this all really happened, and it's happened serendipitously. I don't know how, but it seems right, a continuation of the old Southwest neighborhoods as well as the newly remodeled neighborhood to our east, using the design concept of urban infill, allowing for modern styling and energy efficiency. Jack Hawkins, the architect and urban designer, is responsible for many new homes to the east and businesses such as Maytans becoming viable dwellings and businesses.

Additionally, the Marmot property owners have been improving existing properties, and that shows as new investment. People want to be able to walk to restaurants, shopping, and other things, and they want to come to a place that has a different experience than going to a mall. They want to come down to Midtown and California Avenue and have the ability to say, "You know, this is an old part of town. It's got history, it's funky in places, but they have some really nice restaurants, food, and shopping that you can enjoy in another part of Reno." And that's one of the things that it's just plugged into organically.

Barber: You predated Midtown by several decades.

Collins: Yes, right.

Barber: Have you been involved formally in that group as it's emerged? There's a merchants association. There are events that happen. Have you been involved in that?

Collins: Not formally, no. I look at it with a smile, in that I know it's always a gem of a place here. The early marketing that Jessica and Troy did at Junkee's was great, the marketing was good, and it kind of branded Midtown. It has since gone to another committee. At that time, restaurants were the thing, and a

used clothing store was a shopping destination, but we've had other investments like The Cube that went in, the incubator. These are people that are really betting on Midtown and Reno in Nevada. The Cube has been written up in *The New York Times*, in an article about where they're going to go, and they decide to choose Reno, creating an awareness of businesses looking at Reno as a place to invest in. Because we've always had great weather, beautiful surroundings, and a great place to live, it's one of the biggest secrets around. A lot of times people see one dimension of Reno; they see the casinos and they don't realize any other aspects of it. But if they stay long enough, they actually experience the area and all it offers.

So with these newer companies coming in, like Tesla and Switch and the other companies that are moving to Reno, they're interested in a few things for their businesses. They're looking at what the town can offer recreationally to people, what the town has to offer, the assets. The Truckee River through downtown and the area is beautiful. You could spend billions to have such a great asset. It's already here. The Tahoe area is close by. There are many recreational mountain biking areas that we've helped establish and develop on Peavine Mountain and locally around Reno and Lake Tahoe, with the various local trail groups. This all ties into why people are coming here. It gives them more than just a place that has a great tax climate. Reno offers them a great place to live. I think people are aware of that, coming from other cities where they don't have the kind of options that we have here.



The historic Savage and Son building, home to College Cyclery, in 2016. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: I'm curious about the type of business. There are a lot of businesses where independent businesses find themselves simply having to compete with national chains and larger big box stores. I think about bookstores. And there are large sporting goods stores that are national chains that have emerged since you started the business. Do you see them as competition? Does the bike business suffer a lot from that trend of national chains drawing away customers?

Collins: There have been national chains that come and go. Also there's the Internet now, which didn't exist when I first went in business. All these things are channels of distribution for products. They're not

channels of distribution for experience, though. So when somebody comes to our shop, they're going to get an experience, whether it's learning more about bicycles, or the sport, or becoming aware of what they want to buy, or avenues they want to explore. We've differentiated ourselves that way. And the bike industry, for the most part, is composed of many independent bike dealers. Our stronghold is just that. We're unique and we give you a different experience that you can't get anywhere else. The experience on the computer is the same in Des Moines as it is in Fairbanks. There's no difference, really.

The difference is tangible, visceral. There are knowledgeable people working at the shop. When somebody comes in, they can touch, they can feel, they talk, and we can communicate with them. Those are the kinds of differences that we offer. Traditionally that's what people do in retail, and they do it very well. The shops that have survived are the places that pay attention to service and catering to the peoples' needs. The ones that didn't, fell by the wayside. There are winners and losers in the big game, too. They're just in with more zeros than we are, and that ends up being either a bigger gain for them or a bigger loss for them, too.

But we know what our growth expectations are here at the shop. We have tried other satellite stores. We had a store in Sparks in the Greenbrae Shopping Center in 1974 and 1975. We opened a shop there and it lasted for only about six months. We saw the numbers come in, and it just wasn't worth it. Sparks has always been a great community—good, honest working people there—but a lot of the bikes that were purchased there at the time were Kmart type of bikes, which are not what we sell.

Also, in 1980, we opened up a satellite store at the University of Nevada. We figured, well, our name is College Cyclery, we're going to open up a store there. So we opened up a multi-sports store. It was called University Bike, Ski and Sport. And that store was located at 58 East 9<sup>th</sup> Street, directly across from UNR. We opened it up for about six, eight months, and then again we saw the numbers that were coming in. Students have some money at the beginning of the semester when grants come in, and after that, they have pretty good income for pitchers of beer and not much more than that. So that's fine, and we just pulled all our inventory back into the store, so it wasn't a big risk for us.

But we know who we are. We have to know who we are. We know how the growth happens here, and we can't grow more than what reality dictates, and that's why we've always stayed in one location for the most part and tried these other experiments locally. They just didn't pan out. We tried. There again, it's a proprietary thing; we do everything in-house. The marketing—we don't advertise, per se, at all, and the web pages are all done here in-house. Everything's done at the shop, for the most part. So if somebody comes in, they're getting the experience of College Cyclery. They're getting the experience in Midtown of College Cyclery, which of itself has become an institution of note.

Barber: Do you remember the discussion about naming the shop in the first place?

Collins: Oh, yes, yes. It was very interesting. So in February of '73, we said, "We're just about finished building the store on Arlington," and we thought, "We need a name." So we all said, "Well, let's just look in the Sacramento phone book." There's a College Cyclery in Sacramento, so we decided, "We'll just take that name," because that store had been around since the late forties, and it's still in operation. We thought, College Cyclery, we're all college students, we teach cycling here, in a sense, so we thought the name fits really well. So we just basically stole the name. [laughs]

Barber: Did you ever have any discussions with the College Cyclery in Sacramento after that?

Collins: Only later on, probably in the last ten years or so. But that's basically it. We just stole the name. It was easy for us and it fit. [laughs]

Barber: And it's interesting now because now there's so much discussion about trying to make Reno a college town, and promote it as a college town. So it's kind of fortuitous that it has even more meaning now, perhaps.

Collins: Exactly. We're all college students. We like the college spirit, the education. We're not didactic people here, but we do teach the cycling experience. It's what we like to do. So we learn, and they learn as well. But, yes, now with the growth that Marc Johnson's doing up at the university, it's going to be even a bigger platform to be on, and that connectivity from UNR to Midtown is one of the things we try to work on with the bike infrastructure in the town. It's really important, we feel, to have more south, east, and west type of corridors that people can use as transportation, allowing people to get from Point A to Point B while reducing the use of cars and traffic. If you're a student, it doesn't pay to have a car. It's just a liability. So riding a bike makes sense. More bike facilities equals more people out of cars and on bikes, and it is less expensive for them in the long run.

Barber: In the time that you've been open, you must have a lot of repeat customers that come back again and again. Can you tell me about any people who seem to come back and be loyal customers?

Collins: Yes. Recently, in fact, a loyal family just came in this week, the Potter family. There's Chip, Maggie, Bruce, Mary...there are three or four more family members, too. Their mother, the matriarch, is still alive. She brought in one of her daughters from Santa Fe this year to get a bike from us, and so she got a bike and Mrs. Potter was here during the whole process. Mrs. Potter was there at the original store when we very first opened up. So the entire family has purchased bikes from me. Bruce Potter, one of the sons, is getting his bike fixed up now that we sold him in the seventies. There are so many customers who have been loyal to myself and to the shop for many decades. So, yes, there's very much a continued Nevada, Reno connection to our customer base that's been here all along. I could probably name dozens of people from the old store, the first College Cyclery store from '73 to '75, who are current customers, and have been a part of both shops. There are families and individuals, in town and out of town, who still buy bikes from me, or come to us for service, or just come in to chat and talk, and check in with each other, too.

So, yes, there are many families I've sold to for three generations now—I sold their parents a bike when they were in college, and sold their kids a bike, and now their grandkids a bike. That's how the lineage goes with our customers, the older customers. And there again, our new customers are old customers, too. We have plans to be here as long as I'm alive and as long as my wife's alive, because she runs the shop with me, to further the shop.

The shop, we feel, is its own entity. It goes on and on. It is a corporation and a business, but it's a tangible thing. It has roots, a life of its own. We help that entity to survive. So it's important we look at it as caretakers for the survival of the company and the shop itself—for the fact that it does, we feel, important, good work, but also in terms of being able to continue our ideas and our principles into the future, whether I'm here or not. To have it continue is very important.

Barber: There had been several partnerships owning the business for a while.

Collins: Yes.

Barber: And at some point, did you become the sole owner, you and your wife, Amy Collins?

Collins: Yes. Like I say, Jeff Sanchez came in in '74, '74 and a half, when Merv died, and he left in 1989. He stayed in the bike industry to some degree, when he moved to San Francisco. So that partnership dissolved then. At another time, another of my co-workers, Scott Clark, became a partner around 1990, '91. He came into the shop and he did sweat equity with me, so he became a full partner and a very important part of the shop as well. He's an architect now, so he helped design a lot of the displays and layout here. He had his definite talents that still show here. Those were the two partners I had in the entirety of College Cyclery.

Barber: How many people work here now?

Collins: Usually, it's three to five people who work here year-round. It depends. It's seasonal. Generally, the people who stay here stay here for a long time. My average turnover is eight, nine years on the average, and some go twelve, thirteen, fourteen years. Jeff Sanchez, Chad Kortan and Jennifer Capurro, all great employees and partner, were here at College Cyclery for 12-14 years. The people we work with who stay here are one of the most important aspects of College Cyclery.

Barber: Pretty good track record. [laughs]

Collins: Pretty good track record. We feel it's better to cultivate once and not have to cultivate twice with people, and we try to give them a good environment that is stable. We offer security here, in employment and also a stable work environment and protocols that we like to have in the shop.

Other people I've had work for me are still in the bike industry to this date. One is Scott Rittschof; he is in the bike industry and works for a European manufacturer/distributor at this point. Many employees have springboarded off into other fields--some biotech, some other stuff. But they all come back to me and say they learned so much here at the shop—in terms of people, in terms of how to problem-solve, that sort of thing—that has been very valuable to them. Some were engineers, engineering students, and they found they hit a brick wall when they came here. It's very much about problem solving in a different manner, and they had to learn from it. They come back, even though they're still engineers, and they say, "That was the toughest thing I ever did, more than my graduate work in engineering or anything else, but it taught me something." I'm an art student. I am an artist. I have a business degree, too, but I'm an art student from UNR, and it's probably my most valuable education credential. Having an art background helps with the problem solving that has to occur in business.

Barber: That's fascinating. Well, I want to end by talking a little bit about the building itself. So it seems to date from 1940.

Collins: Yes.

Barber: Does it feel like it?



The Savage and Son building, ca. 1950. Nevada Historical Society photo.

Collins: Definitely so, and that's why I could never give it up in a million years. I could not buy a new building. It would just work against me so much. This building is such a quality building to begin with, just how it's built and how it feels. The window frames, doorways, insulated walls are what now you could spend a lot of money trying to replicate and still not be there. It's plaster lathe walls, and it has two-twelve floor joists, ceiling joists. It's built very, very well. Sure, it has some leaks and squeaks and moans here and there, and we put up with that. We embrace it. But the elegance of the space it gives us with the twelve-foot ceilings and the light provides us a good blank canvas to work with.

The Savages, I'm not sure of the exact history, if they built the building. I think they might have. But they moved to this location in the early days of plumbing in Reno. There again, this was *the* street. And if you look at the old photos, there wasn't much behind us. There were a few houses on Holcomb and around, but basically open fields and so forth. So it was the Reno connection that I knew as a kid when I moved here in '63, because where Park Lane was, there was an open field, a horse pasture, with a stream running through it. I used to play up there when I was nine or ten years old, and it was a great place. I remember going to some of these older places, like Savage and Son, the old lumberyards in town, and they have a certain type of smell that's characteristic of something that was built in another era that is still proud to stand and is still serving a great purpose.

Our building is, I say, just as much a part of College Cyclery as College Cyclery. It's become that, anyway. Our first building on Arlington that was torn down was a great building, too, a brick building as well, but we weren't there long enough to say it was really ours. But this has really become home to us, and we've grown into all the spaces. The nooks and crannies we feel we can still arrange and change as we need to in order to grow in the future.

One of our guiding principles is that we have the past to build on, but we're very progressive as far as what we do in the bicycle industry. A lot of people say it's an old building, this and that, and they come in and they're kind of astonished by what we do and what we sell here. We're always on the leading progressive edge of creating through fitting bikes, through the quality of bikes and equipment that we sell.



A lot of the equipment and bikes that we carry are ahead of other shops not only locally but throughout the United States. We don't have a lot of dogma here. We're open to all possibilities for the future. We're very much rooted in the future as well as the past. Our bike selection does that, shows our diversity and integrity, whether with a new or old bike.

We, my wife Amy and I, are both certified fitters. That's a big part of our business that nobody else has done in the last twenty years here in town. Fitting incorporates taking a person and actually fitting him to the bike, building a bike to their measurements. It's a custom bike. You could take a dress or a suit off the rack and put it on, and if you're a big or small person, it won't fit properly. We actually tailor it, we insist on that level of attention to sizing and fit, whether it's an entry-level bike or a \$12,000 road or mountain bike. To us, it all is the same thing. It all equates into enjoyment of the bike and the rider won't have any problems with the bike, allowing the rider to enjoy the sport more. You want them to continue riding and grow with the sport of cycling.

So we try to be progressive in everything we do. Sometimes we take big risks. I might spend \$10,000 on something that doesn't sell; it just happens. But we did it and we can show people we did it. We had the nerve to do it, and that's what we still stand for, is heritage but progressive.

Barber: I love that. I did want to ask before we ended, you're adjacent to and connected to the old Dodge dealership, the building next door that dates to 1923. I would imagine that it was still operating as some kind of auto dealership or auto-related services when you first moved in here, wasn't it?

Collins: Yes, it was. It was Osen Motors, Dimond Motors, and finally Charters & Kline Motors when I was young. I used to see the Dodges there in the window, and it's, of course, one of the best buildings in the entire Midtown area, for sure. There are photos of the building in books, showing the big open windows and the corner space with landscaping and wide sidewalks.

Yes, the dealership's time had passed. There was an auto-body painting shop in the building, too, because it's a big space. For a while, it's kind of ironic, but Fitzgerald's Casino used it for storage. It seems like whenever we have a building, they'd take it over, Fitzgerald's did. We move over here, they take over the next building for storage. So there's a little bit of irony involved there. We've since eclipsed Fitzgerald's. They went up, we've been in business longer, and they went down. We see that happen a lot. I can probably name about eight or nine brands of bikes we've outlived in our business. We continue to keep outliving them.

The building next door has always been kind of a hodgepodge type of arrangement, and when Kathy Tripp took it over, she was the owner of the Ponderosa Hotel. She subdivided the building into smaller businesses. There's a new yoga shop that just went in, which is very promising. I'd like to see the building restored to its natural beauty. It's just been difficult to work with the owner to have it happen that way, though there are people who are interested, who will spend the money to do it. There's not a problem with that. It's just a problem of getting the persons that are currently occupant/owners to realize the potential of it and change it into a better asset for the community. There's actually a storage lot underneath that building where they store vintage cars, Cadillac, Thunderbirds. It's kind of funny that the building housed a car dealership in the forties, fifties, and sixties, and some of the types of cars they sold are maybe in the downstairs area, just in storage.

Barber: I'm curious about a business that's across the street. While now it's Ace's Tattoo, it was Glen Turner's Flower Shop for a long time. Do you remember it as a flower shop?

Collins: Yes. It was the Greenery for a while. A friend of mine, Roxanne, had that for a while, and it's another great building because it's on a corner. Since then, my friend Kevin has taken it over as a tattoo parlor. That's been pretty much how a lot of cities have gone. I guess there's a big need for them, I don't know. Kevin does a good job there.

But yes, the Greenery was one of the flower shops I knew there. They used to have other businesses at the Ponderosa Hotel when it was a hotel before it became the Wild Orchid. They had shops. They had a barbershop and a beauty salon there, in which, for a short time, Diana Sanchez, wife of Jeff Sanchez, worked. They had a few different shops downstairs. Then when Joe Keshmiri and Robert Rusk came in as partners, they opened the first non-smoking hotel in 1980.

Barber: What was that non-smoking hotel?

Collins: The Ponderosa Hotel Casino.

Barber: Oh, they made that non-smoking?

Collins: Yes, the very first one in town. So there was a non-smoking hotel right across the street from us, and it was a remarkable change from the typical casinos. You would walk in and think, "This is different," because most of the time the ambience and the atmosphere is just smoke. This was a smoke-free hotel and casino. They revamped all the rooms and put a lot of money into it. At the time—this was the late seventies, early eighties—there was a triad. You had gambling, smoking, and drinking. In terms of those triads, you take one of them away, it doesn't work. So it didn't work. It failed, but they had the vision, Bob Rusk and Joe Keshmiri, to try it out. Their principles prevailed, but it didn't work as a business plan, so it went back to a smoking hotel.

And later when Joe Keshmiri passed away, his sons took it over and turned it into the Wild Orchid. It's still the Ponderosa Hotel. However, it's a weekly hotel, so it's marginal. I'd say on a weekly basis there's always an EMT or a fire engine there, sometimes twice a week. We can almost set the clock by it. They have had 330 calls for 911 there in a year's time. It happens. You can almost wait here for the next fire engine to pull up. So that's a lot of money that the city of Reno has to spend for emergency services there, as well as in other hotels that are rented weekly. Looking at that as something to improve and change is not going to be easy. People in that social demographic, that economic demographic don't always have money to go beyond a weekly hotel. They can scrape enough money to get in for a week's rent, and that's about it. They don't have the conventional ability to rent a place of residence and pay a deposit, so the weekly motels proliferate. There's a bit of an economic disparity that exists in all cities these days, and this is the result of it. It's just one of those problems we shove under the table. It is still a problem in terms of cost and blight to the neighborhood.

Barber: It's interesting, because the move in the current Midtown District is definitely toward trying to make it a safe walkable pedestrian environment, and a lot of the businesses could definitely benefit from walk-by traffic with people just wandering in. You're a destination. People have come here and continue to come here because this is the place that they want to be going. Do you anticipate the development of that kind of pedestrian-oriented district having an impact on your business?

Collins: Oh, yes, definitely. It works for all of us. During the current process with the RTC and the Rapid Transit Virginia Street redevelopment, we have formed a separate group called the “Great Streets Coalition.” The Great Streets Coalition includes Marlowe Kulley, Jack Hawkins, myself, and a few others, who said, “Look, if we’re going to spend \$63 million, let’s spend it a little better here.” We had an opportunity, so we pushed forward, and with great expense, got architectural drawings that included side streets and put together a plan to relocate parking off of Virginia Street onto the side streets, actually increasing parking. We could have put bike lanes in, and really wide sidewalks and treescapes as well, all the way down South Virginia Street.

The sacred cow is the parking. I don’t feel it’s a big deal, myself. I’m a merchant. I’d say 85 percent of my customers come in here with cars. They park. I do have a parking lot in the back, or they park on the side streets, or they park in the front. Basically I think for the betterment of everybody, for the city, it would have been advantageous to incorporate some or all of the ideas from Great Streets. We would have had more walkable areas and a safer environment, inducing people to visit Midtown as a destination, rather than a place where you drive from one place to another.

You can walk from one business to the other under the new plan, also, but we could have added better sidewalks, and you need softscapes to really make it comfortable for people to dwell. People dwell when they have a place to rest and shade under a tree when it’s hot, and they won’t have to necessarily go into a building or leave. They could get something from a shopping center, and maybe they’ll eat somewhere and spend two or three hours in the Midtown area. It’s a place to go. The better you build the place, the better business is going to be. It works. It’s been proven everywhere in the country, but parking is very much a consideration to a lot of businesses. I say we’re progressive people here. We welcome this kind of stuff. But it is what it is. It’s a democratic society, so we’re on with any plans that happen, but we wish that it was a better plan than the plan currently adopted.

Barber: Have you been part of the conversation for a long time?

Collins: Yes, a long, long time. I have a folder that’s an inch and a half thick that goes back to the twentieth century, from 1997 forward, about South Virginia Street and what we could do with it, or what we could make of it. It’s evolved and it’s died and it’s evolved and it’s died. And, yes, there’s a big part of me that just says, “Get it done.” So now we’re going to get it done in 2017. They say, “Okay, we could just get it done this way, and we maintain Great Streets as a visionary ideal for the future.”

Cities such as Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, have taken all those decrepit past-commerce centers and turned them into places that are immensely popular. Real estate values go through the roof. It is a form of gentrification, but it works. You’re going to be there, you can benefit from it, too. I’m very active in the community. Today I’m on five different boards of directors. So I say we’re doing this, I’m volunteering my time, I’m a professional trail builder. I volunteer hundreds and hundreds of hours of work every year, but we all make it a better place. A large part of being a good citizen, I feel, is to make the place where you live a better place. Where you live, where you’re going, where you recreate, all those places can be better, and it leaves a great legacy for the next generations who will inhabit and enjoy it.

Barber: Well, I want to thank you for talking to me today. I really appreciate it.

Collins: You’re welcome. No problem. It’s been great.

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## PAUL DOEGE

Owner, Recycled Records, 822 S. Virginia Street



Paul Doege outside Recycled Records in 2015. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Born and raised in Cleveland, Paul Doege moved to Reno in 1980 and that December, purchased Recycled Records, which had been founded in 1978 at 1440 South Wells Avenue. He moved the business several times, to South Virginia & Kietzke, then to Keitkze & Moana, and finally, in 2012, to 822 S. Virginia Street in Midtown. He also had branches in Sparks and near UNR.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016, and I'm at Recycled Records here at 822 South Virginia Street in Reno, Nevada, with Paul Doege to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Paul, do I have your permission to record this interview today and make it available to the public?

Doege: Yes, you do.

Barber: Thank you. I'd like to start out by getting a little bit of background information on you. Are you originally from this area?

Doege: No, I was born and raised in the Cleveland area. I went to Ohio State. My parents retired in 1977 and moved out to Reno. I finished my degree at Ohio State in the late seventies. In the early eighties, I was all prepared to go back and work and eventually try to get a record store. My mom called me from Reno. They had gone into Recycled Records, which I had visited when I came out. I worked at Circus Circus and MGM Grand when they first opened, both of them. I was at Circus Circus opening night. So I'd been here at times and had gone in and visited Recycled, which had opened in '78, and I enjoyed it.

So my mom had gone in while I was back in Cleveland and told me, "I just overheard the guy in Recycled Records talking on the phone. He said he was going to go out of business." My parents had done okay for themselves and they lent me the money, with interest, to buy Recycled Records. So at age twenty-three, in December of 1980, I bought Recycled Records for an amount, and borrowed the money from my folks and paid them back in four years with interest. That was back when interest was about fifteen percent, ten or fifteen percent. But it all worked out.

Barber: So you already had had the idea that you wanted to have a record store. Where did that interest come from?

Doege: From Ohio State, going to school in Ohio State. There are a bunch of used record stores around there, and I found that I really enjoyed that kind of place. In fact, before I graduated, I was taking an entrepreneur's course, and in this course, you had to go into business on paper, do all the work, find out what things were going to run, and get all the information together. And I did mine on a used record store.

I was managing Wendy's at the time. I came out here after that. I graduated in spring of '79, and then I stayed in Columbus and I went for a quarter of continuing education in the fall. So I was out here in early 1980. I worked out at Penney's warehouse, and I ended up managing Wendy's here in town. But about halfway through the year, I decided that before getting into my career, if you will, I would do the three-month backpack tour around Europe with the Eurail Pass. I wanted to get that out of my system before I jumped into a career, and was all prepared to go back to Cleveland and work in Wendy's and just save up my money and do something like this.

My parents, obviously, knew that I was interested in something like Recycled, and when it became available it was the right place, right time. If nothing else, it's taught me the merits of being a good kid. I was a good kid. I didn't get arrested. I didn't go out drinking and get all crazy or cause my parents lots of grief. My parents were self-employed as well. They owned a motel, so as a kid, I helped them out with everything, and when the time came, they helped me out, too. So it all worked out, plus they made interest on their money. So that was one of their few good investments, fortunately. It worked out okay.

Barber: Where was Recycled Records located at the time?

Doege: Recycled Records was at 1440 South Wells behind what is now Speedy Burrito, which was Eatos Burritos for a while. At the time I was there, it was called Carl's Roast Beef, the reason being that the owner's name was Carl Guidice, and his daughter ran the place. It was a little roast beef place.

Barber: So, there were small businesses around.

Doege: Yes, it was small businesses all around. Now and ever since I left there, it's been a salon. There used to be the Good Times Bar, which was right on Broadway, and then next to the Good Times was my place. Good Times was a cop bar back in those days. Then there was Stuffed Pizza, which later became JJ's Pie Company out on Fifth. And Michael the Tailor, I think, moved across the street, and everything else has moved in and out since, but I believe it's a salon, still.

Barber: So the founder was going out of business. It sounds a little daunting to be taking something like that over. What was the state of affairs when you got there?

Doege: Oh, he was a mess. He always was a mess even when I shopped with him. He was a pleasant enough guy. We haven't talked very much since I bought the place from him, to be honest with you. We didn't part on the best of terms. But that being said, I remember when I would go shopping, it would take about two or three visits to actually be able to shop because he had had some, we'll say, personal issues, and I'll leave it at that. But it was to the point where if he had a \$50 power bill, he'd open that day, and as soon as he made fifty bucks, he'd close down and you might not see him for two or three days. So I went to Recycled Records an awful lot, but half of my visits or sometimes a little more were for naught because the place was closed. You just had to catch him at the right time when he was open.

Fortunately, my mom was in—she was looking to get a cassette for my sister's birthday—and just overheard him on the phone saying he was going to go out of business. And she said, "Well, would you be interested in selling it?"

He said, "Yeah." He had other people offering to buy it. As a matter of fact, some people actually offered him more money, but my parents offered him cash. He was a bird-in-the-hand guy, and I think the bird in the hand really helped him out in regards to the situation. From what I understand, he still lives in this area. I'm past whatever our grief was, but it's okay. Whatever happens, happens. If he comes in, I'll say hi to him and shake his hand. I've got no beef. I mean, how can I be angry at a guy for selling me a business so I've been able to do what I love for thirty-five years?

Barber: So what was the landscape of music stores like at that time in 1980?

Doege: At that time, the big guns were—Mirabelli's was really still pretty solid. There were a number of somewhat entrenched businesses in the record business. Eucalyptus Records was on the corner of Plumb and Virginia. If you're heading south on Virginia and you hit Plumb, then on the right-hand side there's the Motel 6, and there's a Chinese place, I think, or some sort of Asian place next to it, maybe even sushi. Eucalyptus Records was there, in that second little end street there that cuts in.

Odyssey Records was downtown. In Sparks you had The Record Corral, which was a big thing. Charlie was out there for a long, long time. He kind of specialized in country music.

Barber: Were these all independent?

Doege: Yes. There weren't too many chains at that point. Eucalyptus, I believe, was a chain, and Odyssey was a chain. We didn't have any of the really big boys. I mean, Tower was the really first big boy. Warehouse and Tower weren't even around at that point. Warehouse came in, I want to say, more in the mid-eighties, possibly. I'm trying to remember some of the other stores around. There was a place that was in—you know where the Savers is on Oddie Boulevard? In that shopping center there was a little record store. I can't think of the name. I know the guy is John who ran it. But there wasn't much other used business. I always sort of had the used to myself. There had been people who tried to do used here, but for one reason or another, they just didn't last.

Barber: Where did the inventory come from in the beginning? Has that changed?

Doege: It's always been just from the general public.

Barber: Has it been local?

Doege: People just like yourself. So say you're moving and you think, "You know, I'm tired of moving this box of records from place to place and never playing them." Or, "We don't play these anymore; we're playing our CDs." Or in some cases, "Grandma died, and what are we going to do with these?" That's how we get our records, from the general public. Knock wood, we still will continue to get them that way. We've been doing okay so far.

It is a finite collection, but it is a very, very large collection because we're all somewhat defined by our books and our music in regard to our culture, our popular culture. Everybody had records, because it was *the* format for a solid forty years, the fifties through the eighties. It wasn't until the nineties that they started to fade out. So there's a lot out there.

Barber: And my recollection is that CDs got introduced in the early eighties, '82, '83.

Doege: Early to mid-eighties, yes.

Barber: Did you deal with them right away?

Doege: We had a few, but they were really, really super expensive. I remember there was a time I kept them in a glass case. If you wanted to see the CDs, I could bring the little CD box out, and there'd be about four CDs in there. But somebody'd buy one, because you had to have the machine, you had to have something to play it on. Eventually, everything changes to where the music industry in itself is reflective of what's happened to record stores. I mean, the music industry is excessively greedy, and the reason for downloading and all these other things that went on was very much self-inflected by their greed, and so they made it difficult. In fact, you're not going to see many—there will still be record stores that will pop up here and there, but primarily they'll be used, because the record industry is such that even now I wouldn't be able to make any money selling new stuff. The new vinyl and the new CDs are still crazily expensive, and there's very little margin.

What's kept me alive during all this time is the fact that I was able to have a margin. When you're buying used, you never make money on the selling end; you make money on the buying end. If you're buying cheaply enough, then when you sell it, you're going to make some money each time, and you're going to make a particular margin where you can make in some cases very good money. You know what I mean? But for the new vinyl that sells today, the suggested list price is anywhere from \$22 to maybe \$35, with most things floating in the mid- to upper twenties. The costs on those things is twenty to twenty-two dollars.

I sell CDs. You've seen those CDs that are called things like "The Essential" so-and-so, "The Essential Waylon Jennings," we'll say. "The Essential Waylon Jennings" is a two-disk set. The list price on it is \$13.99. Any guesses as to what the cost is on it? \$12.75. You're spending \$12.75 to make a dollar and a quarter. So that's why you're not seeing profits. That's what's killed new records—the greed of the record industry. When CDs were first introduced, you had records and cassettes, and with records and cassettes, for the most part, a new release would come out, and it'd be probably \$10. Then CDs came out. Well, with CDs there's a lot more involved in it because you're building whole new factories that have to have whole new machinery in them to make the CDs and put them all together. So they're going to have that cost.

Well, those CDs came out, and most of them were around fifteen bucks. So all of a sudden now, you're five years down the line. Now that machinery has long been paid for, the materials have long been figured out to where they know what it's going to cost to make the stuff, and the actual cost of making a CD is back down to that same dollar apiece that it used to cost to make a record and/or a cassette. But we had people that were willing to give us \$15 for that, so rather than do the smart thing, in retrospect, and say, okay, now that this stuff's all paid off, we're going to start lowering the price of CDs and get them down to the range where it's ten, fifteen bucks each, they would think, \$15? We could probably get \$17, we could probably get \$19. So you have new releases coming out at \$19.99 for a CD with unproven material. At \$19.99, everybody who had bought a CD that turned out to have just one good song, felt ripped off. So that's what really prompted the whole Napster thing.

Then on the other end of things hurting record stores, you had people such as Best Buy, which would be the best example, that was literally talking loss leaders on your biggest sellers. So the new Mariah Carey would come out, and the list price on it is \$13.99, and you're putting it on sale as a new record store for \$12.99 and your cost is \$10. The new releases by the big artists were always the thing that drove people in the doors. They always want to get the new hot thing. And here's Best Buy selling it for eight bucks, because they figure that by selling it for eight bucks, they get somebody in, and, maybe they'll buy it for eight bucks. Then one time they might come in and say, "You know, our refrigerator has been acting hinky lately, and maybe we should get ourselves a new refrigerator." Or, "Maybe we should get a computer." Or, "Maybe we should get something else that they sell." So they take the loss leaders on the new CDs. That was a one-two punch that basically knocked everybody out. Most of the new record stores were gone by 2005: Tower, Warehouse, Sam Goody, and Musicland. Musicland was here for a long time, too. They came with Meadowood Mall, and Meadowood was, what, '82?

Barber: A little earlier, late seventies.

Doege: Was it late seventies? Okay. So that's what basically happened, but we were able to escape all that because we always had our margin and because we would carry secondhand. So we would get things that went out of print. You'd go into the new store, and they'd say, "I'm sorry, we can't get that



anymore.” Well, then that was my niche. Just like when people would come in and ask, “Do you have the new Michael Jackson?” I’d have to say, “No, but Mirabelli’s or Wherehouse or Tower or wherever, they will have that.”

Barber: Was that a deliberate business choice from the beginning for you, or was that just what you were interested in more?

Doege: I think I liked just doing the used thing. It was just easy, and I knew it. I was a hobbyist, if you will, myself. It was a hobby of mine. So I had a feeling for it. I had never done it before. I’d never worked in a record store before I owned a record store. I’d been in retail. My own personal retail thing was I worked for Thom McAn and Chess King; I worked shoes and clothes. But I visited those places a lot, and I had a college degree in marketing, so I had some brains. [laughs]

Here’s the thing. In business, you’re going to make mistakes. They’re going to cost you money, but learn from them and don’t do them again. I did some stupid things, I made some stupid buys, I made some stupid decisions, and each time they cost me money, but for the most part, I never did those mistakes again. Eventually you catch on. You watch what you’re doing. You watch what you’re selling. You notice what’s selling. You know what people get excited about. You know what you see often, you know what you don’t see often, and you can price accordingly. You know your demand. Supply and demand, that’s business. It really is. It doesn’t get much more complicated than that. If a bunch of people want it, and there’s only a few, the price goes up. If there’s a bunch of them out there and nobody wants it, the price goes down. It ain’t rocket science.

Barber: [laughs] It seems that record stores have always had a role in communities that was far greater than just a place to buy music. Did you have a sense of that early on?

Doege: Yes. What I really liked about the whole record store thing is that I think music touches people in a particular way, and that’s why we have things like Record Store Day. Have you ever heard of Record Store Day?

Barber: Oh, yes.

Doege: You’re familiar with that. And that really does celebrate the culture of record stores, the whole idea of going into a place and discussing things with people and being personally in tune with it and grabbing a tangible piece to enjoy. In fact, that’s part of what’s driving the current thing, is that interaction with it, that investment into it, that personal investment in listening as opposed to just hearing something.

We’ve always had a pretty good sense of humor about things. I’ve had a lot of great characters working for me over the years that are the epitome of the stereotypical record store employee, including the snobby ones that could care less about what you’re listening to, and I’ve had some of those. But for the most part, we’ve had a really good sense of humor about what we do. In a way, it loosens people up. We’re very simpatico with their feelings.

Music is a very strong feeling. They’ve done studies on the brain that show that hearing a song that you like stimulates the exact same part of the brain that produces the feeling that you have when you know that you’re going to be with someone you love in the very near future. So picture being on a hot

date with your fiancé, that kind of feeling. The exact same part of the brain is stimulated in that. That's almost close to love, and music can do that. So to have music and that kind of companionship, if you will, to have that kind of feeling with people is a really strong feeling. It's something that you can't necessarily fix at three a.m. sitting in your underwear tapping on a computer. I do \$1,000 of business a month with Amazon. We do a ton of business with all these places, and they're really good for what they do, but sometimes they're not good for "What do I feel like listening to?" There's only one way to do that, in a way, and that's to actually go out and have these things forced upon you, forced in front of your eyes, because sometimes you don't know what kind of mood you're in. You don't know necessarily, you want to get something, and all of a sudden you say, "Oh, my gosh, look, there's a James Brown thing that's got all these James Brown songs. I think a little funk could be cool in my life." You know what I mean?

There are all the different things that hit you at certain ages. Most people's listening tastes tend to rely heavily on the stuff they listened to from about age fifteen to twenty-five. That core stuff will remain with you for the rest of your life as your core stuff, because your hormones are running crazy. All of a sudden, you've broken up with your boyfriend, and, oh, that song, it's just hitting you right here. Your hormones are running crazy. You don't have the responsibilities. In many cases you don't have the family, the career, so you actually had time to sit there. And when you bought your CD or you bought your album, you sat there and you listened to it and you read the lyrics as you went along with it. So all those kinds of things enter into it.

Barber: You've had a number of different locations through the years. Can you walk us through the different locations?

Doege: Sure, I'll give you the years and where we were and when.

Barber: Great.

Doege: The store opened in '78, although I have spoken with somebody who told me it opened in '77. I don't know that for sure, because the lease was up in October of '83, and it was a five-year lease. So going back five years, I would think that would put it as '78, but somebody said they thought it was '77. I bought it in December of '80.

In October '83, we moved down to South Virginia and Kietzke, behind McDonald's, next to Olive Garden. Back then it was Victoria Station instead of Olive Garden, which was a steakhouse, and McDonald's was there. It was a relatively new place. I stayed there for twenty-four years and had stores of varying sizes. I started out as a 900-square-foot store. I moved next door into the 1,200-square-foot store. I took down that wall and had a 2,100-square-foot store. Then I took down the other wall on the other side of the 1,200-square unit and had a 3,000-square-foot store.

We were there for twenty-four years and moved in December of 2007 over to Kietzke and Moana, on the corner where Swensen's was, and we were there through the end of November of 2012 when we moved here. We also had a store in Sparks for six years, from 1989 through 1996. No, it was nine years.

Barber: Where was that?

Doege: It was on Rock Boulevard. Do you know where the S-curve is on Rock Boulevard by Sparks Highway, the old Port of Subs? The first Port of Subs was right there. It's not there anymore. They finally closed it.

But I was in that little shopping center there for nine years, and then from 1998 through 2007, we had a university store that was up just above the freeway. There's a motel that's right on the corner of the westbound utility road, the off-ramp, and then there was a little building right next to that. It was like an office space in the front of an apartment building. We were there for six years.

Barber: So when you had a couple locations at a time, would you spend a lot of time going to the different outlets?

Doege: When we had the Sparks store, the Sparks store and the Reno stores were similarly sized, so I did bounce between the Reno store and the Sparks store a little bit more. Eventually we closed the Sparks store and extended the hours of the Reno store. We used to close at six at both of them, but with Olive Garden starting to really bring in evening business, I determined that it would be better to stay open late and have one bigger store that just had everything in it.

We really did well during those years. That would be probably the nineties until the crap hit the fan in the mid- to late 2000s. The early 2000s were a little harder as well because I had the university store then. But the Reno store, that South Virginia store did really well. The only reason I left was that new owners had come in. They'd bought the place in 2006. Who didn't buy something in 2006 that you didn't pay too much money for? So my lease was one of the first leases to come up, and they wanted to raise my rent 50 percent after being there for twenty-four years. And I was actually told by the management company, before it was sold, that I was literally their best tenant, and that was over McDonald's, that was over Big 5, that was over all the other businesses that were over there. That was over Olive Garden. I was their best tenant. I was the only guy that ever paid his rent on time every month.

Barber: And the only non-corporate one. [laughs]

Doege: Yes, and the only non-corporate one. And then these guys come in and say, "Oh, no, we can get this and so." And they really screwed me around in regards to it. That's when I got that Kietzke-Moana place, and I had to move there with less than three weeks before my lease was up. They were horrible about getting back with me, and then they just threw monkey wrenches in. I don't think they wanted me, for whatever reason, and the place sat empty for a couple years. Now that spot is filled with a nails place and two quickie-loan places. They could have had Recycled Records if they'd just been a little more reasonable.

Barber: Their loyal tenant.

Doege: But it's okay because I'm here, and I am so much happier I'm here, because there is no place in town that I can move to where, if I failed here, I could say, "I'll go there and I'll do better." That's not gonna happen. If I can't do it here, it's time to close. It's the truth. It's just the way it is. This is the area. This has the vibe. This has the surrounding vibe that a store like mine needs. It just fits like a hand in a glove.

Barber: Let's talk about how this came about. When you had to move pretty quickly, you got the space over on Kietzke and Moana briefly.

Doege: I got the location at Kietzke and Moana.

Barber: Were you actively looking right away for another spot?

Doege: No. They gave me a good rate. Well, you've seen how empty it is, so of course they gave me a good rate. I'll tell you what caused me to go to Midtown. One of my former employees had moved away. He was an assistant manager for me, a very good friend. But he passed away in Austin, Texas, and he was buried back here. When we went to the funeral, I saw a bunch of old customers/friends of old employees that were friends of his, at the service, and they all had agreed that after the service they were going to go to the bar where the old Chapel was, that isn't Chapel anymore.

Barber: 40 Mile Saloon.

Doege: Yes. They were all going to meet up there later after the service. Well, I had to go to a couple different things, but I went there to see if some of these people were still there, and they weren't, but Jessica was.

Barber: Jessica Schneider?

Doege: Yes. And she cornered me. I'd met her before once. The first time I ever met her, I used to do a radio show once every couple weeks with Cory Farley. He was on the old KGFK, which was the liberal talk station. It was 1230-AM Reno Media Group. I don't know what it is now. But they had it for a long time. For all the KOHs and all this stuff, this was a little AM. It never made any money because this is Reno.

But I would come on and we would talk records and/or collectibles, and I would always bring on somebody with me. I brought on a stamp person, and I would bring on somebody who collected guns. We got a guy who worked at the Antique Mall who collected old Reno, old Nevada casino stuff, old menus, guns, stamps, coins. I had a guy who used to run a place where if you wanted to do gold mining, he would sell you all your stuff for gold mining.

So we did all these things, and I wanted used clothing. I knew Jessica and I asked her to come out with me, and she came out and we talked, and then she'd say, "You should think about coming down to Midtown." Well, that night she just got in my ear and she said, "You've just got to come down. If you don't, somebody else is going to do this."

I spoke with a couple of other people whose opinions I trusted, and they said, "Yeah, you should get down to Midtown."

So this place was available. It's weird. It had sat empty for about a year and a half, and wouldn't you know it, as soon as I started sniffing around, somebody else started sniffing around, just enough to raise the price. But I still got it at a decent price, and I've got a decent lease that will have the store here for probably at least another three years. We'll be here for at least another three years. I don't know

what'll happen after that. It won't be my problem after that. My wife just retired at the end of last year, and I will probably be retiring in the next year to two years.

Barber: Oh, and selling the store?

Doege: Yes. My manager, Eric, has been with me for over twenty-five years. My assistant manager Ian's been with me for ten to fifteen. Mike Ward's been with me on the weekends for over twenty-five years. Eric's been with me forever, and he wants it. And that's fine. I've got to do what I've wanted to do for—well, December of last year was my thirty-fifth year of running Recycled Records. I did thirty-five years. So that's enough. Anybody doing anything for thirty-five years is a good thing, and, for me, especially being able to have this job for thirty-five years, oh, my gosh.

So, yes, it won't be my problem, but I'll do everything I can to see if I can help set them up so we can be here longer. Then you get into the whole Midtown thing. There's nothing real estate loves better than a hot area, and the unfortunate thing is that they're selling it as hot, but certain parts of it aren't hot. But just that "Midtown" word has that certain power to it. You say, "I'm in Midtown," and automatically you just figure tons of hipsters will be wandering in and out of your store. That isn't necessarily the case with all these places. Center Street doesn't get that—it's one block over, and there are stores in between. You've got Blue Whale and Death & Taxes, and 777 is going to be opening up, but that doesn't necessarily draw people over there. You can't swing a dead cow without hitting ten people at the Art Walk on Virginia Street, but you go over here and there's nobody. So that's part of the challenge of Midtown, to get people to wander a little more.



Recycled Records in 2015. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: So you moved in here in 2012.

Doege: I moved in here in 2012, and my first open day was December 1<sup>st</sup> of 2012. One side note is I that got the lease for this place in April of 2012, and on June 1<sup>st</sup>, they started the Moana Lane rebuild. On June 1<sup>st</sup>, I opened a one-tenth version of my store here. I just wanted to get the doors open and take advantage of the summertime and let people know that “Recycled Records isn’t all here yet, but we’re started here and we’ll be here.”

I can’t tell you how many businesses went out of business from that Moana Lane reconstruction. It was a nightmare. But it was almost fortuitous. This sounds a little nutty, and I’m not giving faith or any of those kinds of things credit for it, but I’m a firm believer that when things are supposed to happen, things fall into place, and you’re sitting there beating the hell out of opening the first door. That’s nature, that’s God, that’s whoever you want to call it, telling you that you’re barking up the wrong tree and you should get the hell out of this.

By the time that project was done, which was also ironic, they reopened Moana Lane three days before we completely moved here. But I was doing business here that was beating what I had there, with only one-tenth of the product that we had back there.

Barber: Wow.

Doege: I was beating their numbers here. So we were able to get in on an Art Walk. We were able to get in on all these different things that would get us exposure, and it really helped a lot, too, that I had six months over there to tell people we were moving here. That really, really helped a lot in having people rediscover us, because, like I said, after being at that one place on South Virginia Street for twenty-four years, they gave us three weeks to move. The only good thing about it was they gave us ninety days to put a sign in the window saying that we had moved where we had moved, but other than that, it was nothing. It was entirely up to me. I had to do all my own advertising to tell people we had moved to Moana Lane. And I did it again when we moved here. Obviously, I do my fair share of media.

So it was kind of meant to be. You know what I mean, when things like that fall into place? What are the odds, the odds of me walking into Chapel? And the only reason I went there was because a friend of mine had died and I wanted to see some of these other old friends and maybe chat with them a little bit. The odds of me, a married guy who has a wife at home waiting after work to just go home and have dinner and watch TV and do whatever I do—and I love my life, I love my wife, it’s all good, but the odds of me just all of a sudden saying, “Yeah, I’m going over to Chapel,” and being there and Jessica cornering me for forty-five minutes and just telling me, “You’ve got to get down here.”

Barber: And she’s quite a recruiter. I’ve heard stories about that.

Doege: Oh, god, she is a force of nature, and I couldn’t be more complimentary. She is—and the word gets used so much, but I have to almost throw that “amazing” word out, because so many people say “amazing” when it isn’t amazing. But the things that she has done and the way she’s done it and her general philosophy is truly unique and so uncommon.

Barber: Now, I think you have had, obviously, an advantage over other businesses that are perhaps opening for the first time in Midtown, in that you were always a destination.

Doege: Right, I always have been a destination.

Barber: Even on Wells Avenue, you might have been part of a walkable neighborhood.

Doege: No, not so much there. On South Virginia, we weren't necessarily a destination, but we fed well off of restaurants, with McDonald's and an Olive Garden. When Olive Garden moved here, that was the first Olive Garden in town, and you couldn't get a parking spot there for a year. You couldn't get parking. People were trying to bring records into the store, and we'd have to walk 200 yards out to their car to help them bring records in. But that's still exposure. That's still traffic. That's still all those things. That's why I was there for twenty-four years. I mean, it really was a good spot.

But I always was a destination. If you were into collecting music, I had my own unique niche in Reno that was beyond the normal record store. I was worth checking out because I had better prices. I was selling CDs for eight bucks when the average CD in the stores was thirteen to twenty dollars. And I was selling them for eight, giving quantity deals. We guaranteed it. You remember, now, back in 1980 a new release was probably eight bucks. A new record or a new tape was maybe eight bucks, right?

Barber: Right.

Doege: So most of my prices were \$3.50, \$4.99, six or seven dollars, maybe. For a couple of big collectibles I'll get ten, fifteen, twenty bucks. There were \$100 records even back then, but in the space of ten years, from 1980 to 1990, all of a sudden you're going into a new store, and buying three CDs was a \$40 or \$50 project that normally would have cost \$20 or \$30. So they could still come to my place and do the \$20 to \$30 thing. We used to sell three for \$20. We'd ask \$8 apiece, two for \$14. We did two for \$14 forever.

Barber: Now, you had a shop up by the university for a long time. College students are often the lifeblood of record stores. [laughs] Do you get that crowd down here?

Doege: Now I get it down here, but I didn't get it then.

Barber: Oh, you didn't?

Doege: No. This was 1998 through 2006. Or 2005?

Barber: So they weren't a reliable customer base.

Doege: No. Napster.

Barber: Napster, right.

Doege: The reason I wanted that store, the reason I opened that store is because I was weaned on a college used record store. When you go down to Haight in San Francisco, Haight is Haight because of the University of San Francisco. Berkeley is Berkeley because of Cal Berkeley. Those shopping areas

and those counterculture areas, if you will, were formed because of those colleges being there. So I thought, "I'm going to just kick butt here."

But by 1998, Napster had reared its head. Downloading was out there. What made it such a great market for a used record store is because college students, number one, never have any money. They don't have any money, so what do they do? They sell their records. Point number two, college students, they never have any money. So since they don't have any money and they want to buy music, they want to buy it cheaper than they can get it new. They'll buy it used cheaper than they can get it new. So you had them coming and going.

But all of a sudden, they could maybe still sell me stuff, but when it came to the buying, now the cheapest option was "So-and-so has that down the hall in the dorm. Why don't you just borrow it and burn it?" And what college student by the year 2000 didn't have a computer, laptop or desktop? It didn't really matter.

Barber: It became clear pretty quickly then.

Doege: Yes. That store never made money. It made money one weekend a year, when the Jazz Festival came, because then they got a bunch of high school kids in, and they let them walk from Circus Circus up to the university to go play, and they'd give them five, ten minutes to run in the store. It was nutty crazy over a weekend, but, in fact, if I had to do it all over again, I would have avoided it at all costs.

At Sparks, though, we did pretty well for a while, but once again, when the opportunity came to go later and bigger, I thought it was a better move to consolidate and keep everything in one place. Two stores is a pain in the butt. There will not be another Recycled Records popping up, no matter what.

Barber: So Record Store Day started in 2007, 2008, I guess? Was that something you were involved in from the beginning?

Doege: No, we were very late to the parade on that.

Barber: You were?

Doege: Yes. I had heard about stuff like that, but I'd never really learned anything about it. This will be my fifth year, I think. I was a few years late. The first year we did it, we had it over at Kietzke and Moana, so it would have been probably 2011.

Barber: That is a national movement.

Doege: It was a national thing, but I wasn't in a new record store. I had no ties with them. Part of our evolution in regard to this is with the death of all the normal record stores, things changed. People used to come to us and say, "I want the new Michael Jackson," and we would say, "Go to Wherehouse." Well, Wherehouse wasn't there anymore, so pretty soon we realized that our mission statement had changed and now our job was simply to get people what they want. So we established relationships with a distributor, and we spend \$1,000 a month on Amazon because there are people who just aren't used to running computers and doing searches themselves, and they come here.



You know what happens is, too, sometimes people get in a certain mood in a record store. It's really pleasurable shopping. Nobody's ever in a bad mood here when they're shopping, like, "Oh, damn, I've got to go buy some music." It's like a bookstore. Even a bookstore has some stuff you don't necessarily want to buy. But music is always pretty much a pleasure.

Anyway, we had gotten into relationships with distributors, who all of a sudden said, "You're not doing Record Store Day. Why aren't you doing Record Store Day?" One of my old employees owns a place next to the movie theater downtown called Discology. It's a little tiny record store, a little bit bigger than this room here.

Barber: [laughs] We're in a very small office.

Doege: Well, this and this, and probably a little bit more, but not much more than that. It's probably 200 square feet, if that.

Barber: That's a little retail space.

Doege: Yes, it's a small space. He had done really well with it in the past. So we saw what it was doing, and we thought, "Okay, yeah, let's get into this." We really jumped in hard, and the past three years, we've kicked ass. We've had a really good Record Store Day. Our last Record Store Day was the best day we ever had by far. I almost doubled the money from each of the previous two. Every year it would double. Now, I won't double what I did last year, this next time. Long story short, I'd put so much behind advertising that even though I made this tremendous amount of money, my bills on the other side made me realize, "Oh, gosh, I've got to pay for all this."

We do it up. We have bands playing all day. We serve mimosas in the morning and beer in the afternoon. That's when we do our big push. We do a fair share of our own marketing, but we get a fair share of publicity from it. The Record Store Day people are very smart. They picked a weekend that doesn't have anything major going on. The only possible thing that could be major going on that weekend might be if an Easter falls on there.

Barber: So is it in April or March?

Doege: It's the third Saturday in April. There's no Kentucky Derby. There's no special big playoff, football or basketball. There's just nothing that falls into that particular area. It's usually sort of dead news-wise, so they were able to take advantage of it.

They also do a Record Store Day on Black Friday, which I think is a waste of time because when you're one voice among millions, nobody hears you. But when you're the only one yelling loud because everyone else is kind of quiet, and don't have anything going on, it's easy to stand out.

Barber: And it's organized specifically by independent record stores?

Doege: It was initially. There is a corporation—I don't know. Record Store Day is a group. I'm not sure who makes it up, but they make the rules and we all follow them, and everybody's agreed to go along with this. They're the ones who determine who to promote and get the artists to do stuff and get all the quotes. They really are very true to the mission of being there to promote record store culture. It's

not there to necessarily sell, to tell people, “This is limited. You want to get this. There are only a few thousand of these. You better get it or else you’re going to lose out,” because we really fight that kind of stuff. When we do it, we have certain rules, because in certain cases there were certain records that were in really, really high demand and selling for big bucks. So you had people who would come in, and their whole idea was just to take it home, put it up on eBay, and double their money. So when we get our Record Store Day inventory in, we’ll check it out ahead of time and we’ll see if something is going for a really high price. And if it is, we won’t sell it to you unless you open that thing right here.

Barber: Oh, wow.

Doege: Because if you’re selling on eBay, the last thing you want to do is sell something opened, because if it’s opened, it could be used, and if it’s used, it doesn’t get as much as new. So we’ll make people open it. Otherwise, we won’t sell it to them.

Barber: So it’s a stated policy before you buy it.

Doege: We also limit people to a certain number of items. In fact, last Record Store Day, we probably had 120 people in here waiting for us to open. We went through the whole line and had raffle tickets. This last year, too, I did a cool thing. We had a raffle for the first spot, sold tickets for a buck apiece, and gave the money to the Food Bank, and the winner got first pick. Then we also had another prize, which was a plus one. So if I said at the beginning, “Okay, you can get three items,” if you get the plus one, you can get four.

Barber: That’s great.

Doege: So we sold those kinds of things. We did it that way just to make it a little more fun. Everybody’s there waiting, and you pull things off the wall, and people go, “Ahhhh.” “So there goes that one. There’s another one.” “I got a bunch of those.” That’s good. It’s a lot of fun. We get a lot of publicity for it. People have a good time. That really is a nice thing about record culture.

One Record Store Day, I remember one day a kid came in with his parents, and he said, “I just got a car, it’s got a cassette deck, and I don’t know any of that music. So I just brought my parents.” And his parents were buying Rush tapes and Peter Gabriel tapes and Thompson Twins and Duran Duran, and the kid’s going, “I love my parents’ stuff, so they’re going to help me get stuff.” Know what I mean? That’s the kind of thing you need. You need to have it in front of you to see it. If you like Tears for Fears, you can type in “Tears for Fears,” and you can see that Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith were the main guys behind Tears for Fears.

But it’s really narrow where they’re sending you. Pandora and Spotify, they’re trying to tell you, “Well, if you like this, you might like this.” That works to a point, but you yourself can probably name four or five different songs that you really, really love that have absolutely nothing to do with each other. You can love a Metallica song as much as you could love “Lady in Red” by Chris De Burgh, as much as you could love “Sailing” by Christopher Cross and Devo’s “Working in a Coal Mine.” You can’t get that when they’re just feeding you this much, but there’s this much out there.

Barber: Giving you a logarithm. [laughs]

Doege: Yes, it is. I'm sure analytics has a ton to do with it, and that is easily fed. I mean, if you like Aerosmith and you haven't heard Ratt, boy, Ratt sounds a lot like Aerosmith. You're going to like them. Or what is it, Triumph is the poor man's Rush? Those kind of things exist.

Barber: I want to talk to you a little bit about the recent resurgence of vinyl and your thoughts on that, and the impact on the business.

Doege: It certainly has helped our business. I'll be honest with you, if there wasn't a resurgence in vinyl, we probably wouldn't be having this discussion. We do okay with the other stuff, the CDs and the tapes, but it's all the different demographics that are represented. We still sell most of our CDs to ages 35-plus. In fact, we have a box of cheaters.

Barber: Cheaters?

Doege: Reading glasses. [Barber laughs.] I go to the Dollar Store all the time and I grab a handful of Dollar Store glasses, and we keep a box of cheaters here, because invariably you get some late 40-something doing one of these things [squints] where they're stretching it out trying to read the fine print. So we give them glasses. But probably 70 percent of our vinyl sells to people younger than 25. There are a couple of different explanations for that, but the one that works best for me is that the millennials, who we were just talking about, grew up with smartphones, where you can push this button three times, and we can have music playing, right? There's no investment. It's just music. It plays that quickly. Boom, it's out there right away. On the other hand, when we grew up—not that you're that close in age to me, but you're not a millennial—

Barber: I'm not. [laughs]

Doege: We mowed lawns or we babysat or we did our chores to get enough money to go down to the record store, to get that album, to get that "I Love Rock 'n Roll" by Joan Jett. And you took it home and you played it, and you played until the grooves got old, and you played one side and you played the other, and it means something to you. When the Napster generation started showing up and all these things were available as free downloads and you're borrowing them and all that culture had already been established, there really wasn't much invested in them.

So what vinyl brings back is an investment into listening to music, as opposed to hearing music. When you get vinyl, first of all, you have this piece of artwork. It's a 12-by-12 piece of art. It's not a postcard like a CD. It's not a tiny little image on your smartphone screen. It's artwork. Sometimes it folds out into something even bigger, and maybe there are lyrics on there, and it's lyrics that are easy to read like in a book, not this little thing you're trying to read in a CD or on a smartphone, if you're trying to read these tiny little lyrics where you have to make your screen bigger to be able to read them as you go along.

You pull the record out, you're cleaning it to make sure it sounds good, and when you set it on the turntable, you're not sitting there thinking, "I don't like song one. I'm going to go to song two." No, you're basically dropping the needle and you're letting it play through. In other words, you're listening to it the way the producer and the artist put that record together for you to listen to it: "We want to open with

this kick-ass song, then we're going to mellow out with this song, then we're going to get back into a rocker with this song." So you get to follow the pattern that was put together. Then fifteen, twenty minutes later, you're flipping the record over to do it again on side two. It makes an experience. You're invested in it. You're involved with it. You're part of the process in regards to making that music happen, as opposed to just a simple push of a button.

Also, everything—and I mean *everything*—sounds really, really good when you have the speakers right here in your ears. Whether it be Apple iBuds or your Apple earbuds or your favorite pair of DJ headphones or whatever, whatever you're listening to, digital or otherwise, is going to sound really nice when it's in your ears.

When you take that same thing and you put it into a room, when you take that mp3, this big file of music that we've muscled into this little tiny file so we could play it on this little phone here, well, it doesn't open up—once you've mushed it, it's mushed. It's in that form. You can make it louder, but you can't bring back all those higher highs that you cut off to make it fit or all those lower lows that you cut off to make it fit into that sloppy little midrange of an mp3. So when you play most mp3s in a room, you notice the deficiencies right away.

If you were to look at a soundwave, a true soundwave, it's a real wave. It's got a curve to it. It's a wave-on-an-ocean kind of a curve. When that turns into digital, you have particular levels that are higher and are lower. So with that same wave that starts at 10 Hz and works its way up to 100,000 Hz, now you have a digital thing that goes like this: 10 to 100 goes here, and then 100 to 500 goes here. So it turns into a series of steps that go up and down.

Those steps from the digital recording give it—and I haven't used the descriptive words because there is no actual word for it—a particular sterility of sound. It's nice and clean and clear. Those of us who had records remember that they had all the snap, crackle, pop, and we're done with that kind of thing. That's what really made CDs sound so nice to us is that they didn't have that. But it has a certain almost extra crispness to it.

That smoothing out of the wave adds something I think is best described as a warmth to the sound. It's more of a fuller sound. There aren't those nooks and crannies caused by an up-and-down sawblade pattern. It's just a smoother, fuller, warmer sound, and it really reflects well in a room.

So, to me, those are the differences between digital and analog. And it's funny, because getting caught up in fads is not necessarily serving the analog very much, because you're getting things that are digitally recorded and then put onto record, and it should be analog recording on a record. You shouldn't digitally record your stuff. You should be in there recording it on tape. But a lot of these things are coming out and they're just recording it digitally, and it sort of defeats the purpose of having the record. People are spending \$25 on these records, and half of them are recorded digitally and they still sound like having a CD on the record.

Barber: So do the albums say that? Do they let you know whether they were recorded analog or digital?

Doege: Usually you can see something on the back. It'll say if it's digitally recorded or analog recorded.

Barber: Interesting. They do describe this millennial generation as being very interested in authenticity.

Doege: There's a lot to be said for that. It is. I had a moment like that some years ago when I bought a Victrola. My wife and I went down to Roseville, and we found somebody who had an old Victrola. It's

one of those wind-up turntables that your great-grandparents had. My parents probably would have had them. My parents were how old, probably, when they had me, anyway? But I put on Hank Williams' "Your Cheatin' Heart," and I sat down and I listened to it, and I thought, you know, I could picture my dad coming home from work, going to the refrigerator and grabbing a beer or iced tea or something like that, and cranking this thing up and sitting back and listening to music. It was a really cool moment. So, yes, when things come to you so easy, good for them. But good for them in trying to find the hard way to do things sometimes, because there's more to it than that. There's much more reward when you have to put some effort into it, than when things come too easy. So, good for them.

Barber: Let's finish up by talking a little about the Midtown Merchants Group. That's the business organization.

Doege: Midtown District Reno.

Barber: Okay. Were you involved with that formally from the time you moved to Midtown?

Doege: I was a member. I didn't go to very many meetings. Initially, all the meetings were at times when I couldn't make it. Eventually I changed my schedule around so I could make it. Then they changed the meeting times again, so I was never able to make it very much. I was basically—gee, I can't say "hoodwinked" and I can't say "forced." I guess the best word might be "coerced" into it by Angela and Jessica, primarily. Be careful what you ask for, because sometimes you get it. There are times it's been very nice for me and for Midtown. It's nice to do some things. It sometimes is very frustrating, and it's very thankless.

Barber: You've been the president for just a little bit now?

Doege: I've just been president since July. Can we say something off the record and then you can determine whether or not it should be put on?

Barber: Sure.

Doege: I wouldn't want to hurt anybody's feelings. The whole Midtown aspect is interesting all in itself. On one hand, you've got a counterculture. It's very much a counterculture neighborhood à la Haight or Berkeley, like we spoke of earlier. On the other hand, you have gentrification. The food here is very gentrified. If you've never noticed, we have really cheap shopping and we have really pricey food. It's a place where you go to Junkee to buy a \$3 shirt and then have a \$14 lunch. Obviously there are exceptions on both sides, but just generally speaking. So there's that fight. Like Art over here bought the building across the street that's going to turn into a venue. It's called The Saint.

Barber: Art Farley.

Doege: Yes, Art Farley. He bought this place just across the street. He likes that old building look and wants to keep that, and he's saying he'll gut it and put his venue in, just like he did with his other building [Brasserie Saint James].

On the other hand, you've got the guys who took the Maytan building and just completely just changed everything and made it new and modern and cool, but it's much more gentrified. Sticks is more gentrified. This is an area that has 1950s buildings mixed in with 2012 buildings.

So to keep Midtown cool involves keeping all those aspects, because if you let it get too counterculture, then the—I won't call them homeless—we'll call them the motel people, become more prevalent. The area becomes more dangerous and things head downhill. On the other hand, if it becomes too gentrified, it'll be a mall. So it needs to have that balance of yin and yang, and there are pluses and minuses to both. We all like the cool shops, the used stores that are fun to go into and funky. My next favorite store besides my own is Natural Selection, over by Public House. We need those kinds of cool little funky shops, like Wedge. On the other hand, you've got Death & Taxes and Midtown Eats and you've got Two Chicks and Crème and Portofino and some of the higher-end bars and some of the lower-end bars.

It's a weird animal, and with the fact that there aren't very many really large stores in this area, it relies on a lot of small businesses. And when you've got small businesses, there are certain people that I like to call soap makers. A soap maker is like this: say you know how to make soap and you send to all these places far and away to get all your particular ingredients, and you make it in a perfectly sterile environment so it's just beautiful. You make beautiful bars of soap. Your ability to make soap doesn't relate at all to your ability to run a business, but when it's small and tiny, the soap maker thinks he can run a business because it's just this little tiny thing and I make such good soap. But I can't spend on advertising. Advertising costs money and if I'm not paying this and getting this back, I don't want to do that, which is a bad business decision. So they don't necessarily know how to run a business. They have great skills at particular things, but running a business is a totally different animal.

You need to be a business. I love music. I love the record business. I know lots about it. But I could run a shoe store or a clothing store or another retail business. I know retail very well. I know what it takes to sell merchandise. That's my primary business, selling merchandise. It isn't necessarily selling records.

Midtown, unfortunately, will always have that particular undercurrent of businesses opening and closing and opening and closing and opening and closing. This is what makes it more complicated when you have outside money that is buying up these buildings for crazy amounts of money and, as a result, are going to be demanding crazy amounts of rent to pay their bills, which is going to make less and less of these people viable. Or all of a sudden the only people that can afford the rent will be "welcome to the gentrification" people, who, for the most part, are decent-run businesses because they know what it takes to make profits. But then all of a sudden you're going to lose that funky bottom end. And if you lose the bottom end, you're going to lose a lot of what the Midtown flavor is.

It's a balancing and juggling act like nobody's business, and you have a lot of these people who just don't get it, and it's unfortunate but, like I said, I don't know what my future here will be in five years. I mean, I get along with my landlords. They're wonderful people. They're really nice. I really like them. In fact, part of me is a schmoozer, and if you can give me some information on this building when I give it to them, that's a schmooze act on my part, showing, hey, I'm a friendly guy. "I thought you guys might like to know this is the history of your building," or something like that.

So as a result, I deal with a lot of very good, nice, dedicated people that "get" it, that are good businesspeople. And a lot of them you've talked to—Angela or Jessica, the Carter Brothers, Art knows what he's doing. Ivan is a tough nut to crack, but he knows business, too. He's not stupid. These guys

know business. They know business first before they know their profession. They need to be a businessperson before they're a soap maker. They need to be a retailer before a soap maker.

Barber: That's a really great way of explaining it. [laughs] And there's a lot of vulnerability because there are a lot of people who are leasing their spaces and don't know what to expect.

Doege: You're just hoping that you keep a few cool people, that these guys won't be looking so much to the dollar and looking more to saying let's keep these unique businesses in here. Right now we're saying we're not going to have any chains in here, but who knows how long that will go. And once again, you get somebody who's got some money, or the wife who makes soap marries the rich husband who says, "Honey, let's put you in a soap business." I'm just throwing that out off the top of my head. It could be vice versa—the husband can make the soap, too, and the wife can make all the money. I don't mean that in any semblance of a sexist sort of statement.

Those kind of things happen: "I've been working at such-and-such, I was an accountant for this big law firm forever, and I made all this great money, and I really like making soap." You'll be able to do your books, but if you don't understand the fact that you need to advertise and that you need to get your product out there and find ways to bring people into your building or onto your website or whatever it takes to get them there, you're not going to do well.

"Oh, word of mouth." Word of mouth is fine if you've been around—I have good word of mouth, but I've been here for thirty-five years. But I still advertise because people still need reminding, even though they know that I exist. Everybody knows Recycled Records doesn't suck. We've all heard the jingle. My last commercial consisted of all these different people singing it in the store. We did it at an Art Walk. We set up a camera and we had people come in and sing: "Sing the Recycled Records jingle." There are all these different people singing the Recycled Records jingle. But you've got to still remind people, "Oh, yeah, Recycled Records is still there. Yeah. Come down and see them." Those are business kinds of things, and we need to get businesspeople that really understand that. I feel like juggling. It's more plate-spinning. I think, "Oh, that one's going to go."

And then the Midtown thing with the RTC. Oh, my god. You talk to the RTC about the bike people. I'm sure you're well aware of the whole bike situation.

Barber: Right.

Doege: Here I'm thinking they brought me into this because they felt that I can market, and I can. Like I said, everybody knows Recycled Records doesn't suck. My degree was in marketing, and I've used it and I've done all my own marketing for thirty-some years.

And then all of a sudden I'm busy arguing with bike people. I don't want to do that. I don't want to have to fight these guys because they have nothing better to do than send emails all day to City Council to talk about bike lanes, and take away my parking.

Already I'm just into this role as president, and already I've got a bunch of people who hate me because they think I'm anti-bike. We don't hate the bike people. We just didn't want to give up all our parking for bike lanes on Virginia Street. That's the only argument we have with bike people, just that if it came to our parking versus your bike lane, we want to keep our parking. Parking here is already at a premium. We are so low on parking. We're not going to be able to buy parking lots and car lots from these guys. The money isn't there for it.

They are going to try to take a couple of the streets and run them one way, like they did just north of Two Chicks, where they went diagonal with them, but even with that, they're only going to be able to pick up a few spaces, because there has to be room for a fire truck in case there's a fire. Every street has to have a 50-foot space for a fire truck to pull in if need be. So they weren't going to get any of that, and we just didn't want to lose it.

So that was the first half of my job as president. I'm trying to set out and do commercials, and then I have a board to deal with. And when it comes to marketing, everybody has their own taste. All of a sudden, the board says, "Oh, we don't like those commercials," after I've spent forty man-hours putting it all together and shooting it and getting people together and going around drumming up business owners to come and do these spots. So it's a pain-in-the-ass job. I change out all the flags. I had to go and remove all the Merry Christmas flags and get the old Midtown flags back up, which is not an easy task.

But it's nice to be able to represent Midtown. It's nice to be able to talk with people like yourselves to be able to explain some of that, to provide better clarification on what Midtown really does mean and how it affects things. It's the first real neighborhood that Reno's ever really had. We've all said "the Southwest," but where did the Southwest start? The Southwest started up at the river and goes all the way down to Windy Hill. So this is the first neighborhood that ever really crept up.

Counterculture neighborhoods historically had always crept up around college campuses, like we spoke of earlier. What prevented Reno from doing that with UNR was UNR's proximity to downtown, and since it was so close to downtown, the commercial area on Virginia Street got eaten up by motels. If you ever wander down Virginia Street, there was nowhere to put a McDonald's or a Gap or a record store, an incense store, a head shop, dot, dot, dot, a coffee or a copy store, a FedEx, Kinko's. There was never anywhere to put all that, because the land just got eaten up by motels from all the business back from before UNR was probably that big of a campus. So we never got our counterculture. So God bless Jessica and all parties involved who started thinking that this could be that kind of place, because this was a nasty-ass place twenty, fifteen years ago. This was a dangerous place. But more power to those who bought back then, right? Now they're raking it in. They are raking it in. Even ten years ago, this place wasn't all that safe, and they're still working at it.

We just had a meeting last night. Fortunately, Madame Mayor is a Midtowner, and so we're going to see about the possibility of setting up a Crime Watch, starting to get cameras down here. We really want to make sure that people are feeling safe. I won't wipe with a wide brush the clientele that is staying at the motels, because there are a lot of very nice people that just live in a motel. They're on a fixed income, and they've figured it out to where they can live in a motel and exist and have their life, but they're not criminals and they're not dopeheads and they're not methheads and they're not dangerous people. But there are still some of those here as well. So we've got to work on that.

We've got to work on defining Midtown because some people think Midtown starts at one area and doesn't end. I mean, Midtown technically is a very, very large area. It goes literally from Liberty to Plumb and Plumas to Holcomb, but that includes Shoppers Square, and you wouldn't think Shoppers Square is Midtown. It also includes the part of California that goes out to Plumas, and includes part of Vassar that goes out to Wells, through Picasso & Wine and Art Dogs, and all those little restaurants. California Avenue is a little more gentrified. California shows what the gentrification looks like without the counterculture, because it's much more gentrified than it is counterculture. All the law offices and things like that, they need it to be a little classier area. But they consider themselves Midtowners. I haven't been able to find a place where I can put a Midtown banner up there yet. And it goes up Center,



so we include the children's museum as part of us. Liberty includes the art museum, so we have the art museum, too.

Barber: Right, because they're not quite the Riverwalk District.

Doege: Right. They're closer to Midtown because it is south of Liberty. It's just not a cut-and-dried thing. It's a weird-looking animal altogether. But it's all right. There are lots of cool little businesses here, and I just hope that it's able to settle at some point to where reality checks in. And it's going to take some of these guys having people break leases and going through all that hassle over and over again to realize that it's better to have the businesses be places that will be affordable than to put too much money behind them. I don't know. It's going to be interesting. It won't be my problem. I'm still going to do my best. I'm going to work hard. I'm still going to do what I can to market this place, to define this place.

Barber: You'll stay in town?

Doege: When I retire, we've got a lot of plans for travel. I have a house in Mexico. My wife, who just recently retired, she's been on the go. In fact, she's coming back Saturday. We have three daughters and they all live up in Washington State. Two of them are in Seattle. So my wife went up. Her last day of work was Christmas Eve, and she flew up and I was up there already, and then I came down on the twenty-eighth, and she's coming back Saturday.

Then we're home for five days, and then next Thursday, a week from today, I'll be in Mexico. We have a house in Rosarito, which is just over the border from San Diego and Tijuana, about forty miles over the border on the Pacific side. So we'll be down there some. She wanted to move or she wanted to live down in Mexico, and I don't want to do that. I want to have an address in the United States, and initially we probably will downsize. Like I said, I've been in Reno for thirty-five years. I have thirty-five years' worth of friends in Reno. If I'm retired, what's to say I couldn't call another retired buddy and say, "Let's go play this golf this afternoon or let's go catch a movie or let's get together and bullshit and have a couple beers and smoke some weed." I'm legal, by the way, just in case. [Barber laughs.] I'm a medical marijuana patient.

So I like that. We have friends down in Mexico. It's a nice place. The weather's beautiful. It's cheap. It's really cheap. We can live easily on \$2,000 a month down there. But you never know what the world situation is going to be like. It's not that I'm afraid of terrorists or any of this kind of stuff, but I don't want to put all my chips in Mexico as a place to live. For a place to visit, even visit on an extended period of time, yes, I'm fine with that. Live, permanent address, no, no. I still want to have ties to the United States and have a place in the United States. It could end up being a condo up in Seattle or something like that eventually, or in Tacoma, something cheap that we could buy and not have to worry about payments. We'd be able to stay and affordably retire.

Barber: So many options. [laughs]

Doege: Lots of options, but I'd like to stay in this area, at least when I initially retire, plus I wouldn't mind when the time comes and when Eric buys it—mostly "when" with a small chance of "if"—when he buys it, I'd like to be able to be around to give him a hand if he needs it. He's very good at operations. He

knows how to run my store like a top when I'm gone. I could walk out whenever I wanted to, knowing the place would be run perfectly well. Operations and management are two different things. Once again, it's a different skill set.

Barber: I don't want to end the interview without asking you about the marketing slogan, and what's the story behind it? [laughs]

Doege: Oh, "Recycled Records, it doesn't suck"?

Barber: Yes.

Doege: You know, I don't know how I came up with it. I did come up with it. I called it the anti-jingle, because you listen to most of these jingles and they're nice and smooth and clean and clear, and they've got four-part harmonies. And I think weird stuff sticks in your head just as well, and the word "suck" is one of those words where it's not a bad word. We all can say "suck" as long as we want all day long, but it's not a really nice, clean word either. It's got an edge to it.

When we recorded it, my manager sings it. We took the guitar totally out of tune. We had him sing it out of tune. I remember it going really well one day when I'd just started advertising with Charter Media. Now, I've done testimonials for Charter Media, I've known them so long. I've been on them for twenty-five years, back before it was Charter Media, when it was whatever the cable company was before it was Charter.

But, anyway, I was writing commercials that first weekend, and it was running on Nickelodeon, and I got a call on Monday morning from the sales manager saying, "We need to change your jingle at the end of your commercial to play on our younger-demographic channels like Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network." And the reason was that his kid had heard the commercial once on Saturday morning, and it's his three-year-old, and he was running through the house singing, "Recycled Records doesn't suck." For a three-year-old, that's a dirty word. If you had a three-year-old and he said, "That sucks," you'd go, "Hey, watch it!" [Barber laughs.]

So we had to literally change it to "Recycled Records doesn't stink," and we had to run that on Nickelodeon and we ran that on Cartoon Network and just on our kids' channels. And we've had other people who had a problem with the "suck" thing. But for a jingle, a brand, a catchphrase, it's priceless. Those are priceless. People pay millions of dollars to get those things established, billions in some cases. [hums the McDonald's jingle]

So it caught on. There are books that tell you when you go to Disneyland, how to avoid the crowds. It's because they realize that when everybody goes into Disneyland, they walk in and they all go to the right, because they all want to go to this one thing. Well, in these books, when you get in, they send you off to the left. Then when everybody is ready and is marching over to the left, they send you back to the right. You stand out better when you go against the grain. If you can go against that grain, that lone voice can be heard when you're not trying to be like everybody else. When you're going to be that other guy, you stand out so much easier. You're not working so hard.

Like with Record Store Day, do it on that weekend when nobody else is doing anything. They want to do Record Store Day on Black Friday. Don't waste the time. I carry the product, I do Record Store Day on Black Friday, we still do all the things we do, but I'm not nearly as excited about it as I am

on the main Record Store Day, and it's sort of a half-assed Record Store Day, as well. You don't really get the best stuff. You get the best stuff on the real Record Store Day.

So that's what brought that about. If you see those commercials, they're really, really fun. We've got a problem with YouTube. We've got to get them back up on our website. But we just got all sorts of people singing the jingle—little kids, old people. Our commercials have always been kind of offbeat and well off-center. You know, they used to do the bank commercials where they would come out and say, "We really like to help people with their loans," and then they go to the tellers saying, "I love my customers," da, da, da. Well, in ours, I would show the parts of the interview that everybody else would be editing out. That's the stuff that I was using. "So we've been there for, like, three or four years," you know, those kinds of statements, where they're just saying, "Yeah, people like that, sure. Well, no, I hate that stuff." I would do commercials that would take all the edited parts showing that my guys are just total idiots and can't do an interview straight, and run those.

We've always relied a lot here on our sense of humor, and you get it or you don't, and if you don't, it's okay, we don't hate you or anything. And if you want to move on, that's fine, too. But, man, I've had some people complain about the "Recycled Records doesn't suck." That's fine. Good for you.

This is the thing at Recycled Records, the first rule of Recycled Records is that you don't have to like it to sell it. You have your own set of beautiful shell-like ears that listen to what makes you happy, and that's all that counts. It's just what makes *you* happy, because these are my only pair, and that's the only thing I'm going to be listening to, and I want to hear the things that I want to hear. And I want to enjoy the things that this particular pair enjoys. And you have your own particular pair, as everybody does in here. There's no right. There's no wrong. There's no good. There's no bad. When it comes to music, if it makes you happy, then that's fine. If it's stupid, if it's crazy skinhead racist shit that makes you happy, you've got other problems, but if it makes you happy, it still makes you happy. You know what I mean? I can't condone everything that's out there. It doesn't condone everything that's out there. But I remember having somebody come up one time, and they had an Osmonds record and a Partridge Family record, and they were just like, "Aren't these the best?"

And I said, "Yeah, they are. Yeah, they are." And when I was that age, I wouldn't be caught dead listening to those things. But he was just so happy to have them, and he was going to take them home and enjoy them. We're all just talking about scratching those itches that make us happy, and culturally it's how we do it best. Our books, our music, our movies, that's what defines each of us culturally. That's why everybody had records. Everybody has books. They might not so much in the future, it might turn into a Kindle or a pad that holds your whole library of everything, but it's still reading material and listening material that you enjoy and that you take on yourself.

How's that?

Barber: That's wonderful.

Doege: Good.

Barber: I want to thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me.

Doege: Sure. That's all right. Like I said, I could fill up those things, too.

Barber: I'm very grateful. Thank you.

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## JERRY FENWICK

Manager's son, Sherwin-Williams paint store, formerly at 1460 S. Virginia Street



Jerry Fenwick at his home in Sparks, 2015. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*In 1946, Jerry Fenwick's father, O.T. "Fen" Fenwick, moved his family from California to Reno where he managed the Sherwin-Williams paint store then located at 1460 S. Virginia Street, current site of the Stremmel Gallery. Fenwick shares his own memories of the neighborhood.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm conducting an interview with Jerry Fenwick for the RTC's Midtown History Project. Jerry's father opened and managed the Sherwin-Williams store that was once located at 1460 South Virginia Street.

So I just want to ask you before we get started here, Jerry, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Fenwick: Yes.

Barber: Thank you so much. Well, I want to start out with just a little biographical information. Who were your parents and where were they from?

Fenwick: My father's name was Oma Thomas Fenwick. He hated the name Oma or Thomas, and went by the initials O.T., and so everything was O.T. Fenwick, but they usually called him Fen. And as I told you in a note, one salesman thought the O.T. was short for Otis, so he would call my dad Otis, and my dad would say, "No, that's not me." But he did it anyway.

My mother's name was Irma May, and she was born in—I honestly don't know. Either Iowa or Nebraska, because there were parts of the family everywhere. I want to say in Nebraska. She was born in 1906. My father was born in 1907. He married a cougar. [laughter] It's too good to pass up. And my father was born in Visalia, California, and grew up in Woodlake, California, which at one time mostly belonged to his grandfather, but through lots of kids and lazy relatives and all, everything went eventually.

Barber: Where did they meet?

Fenwick: I would imagine—my father went to Woodlake High School. He played football, ran track, played basketball. Of all things, he was the fullback on the football team, weighed 170 pounds, was the biggest guy on the football team. Times have changed a little bit—a lot, actually. And my mother went to Exeter Union High School. Exeter is only, I don't know, twelve, fifteen miles from Woodlake, so I would imagine they met that way.

They got married in 1929, just in time for the Depression, and my father, during the Depression, worked for the WPA for a while on construction projects. Maybe I should preface this by saying I'm a lifelong Republican. I got it from my father, and my father got it from his experiences during the Depression with the WPA. He always was a hard worker and he did very well. The WPA there had a regular contractor who was in business who advised them, and he advised how to do this, how to do that, and he watched my father. And he came to him one day and he said, "How'd you like to work for me on the weekends? Because you're reliable, you're a hard worker."

My father said, "Great." That's extra money for him and my mother.

And a few days later, they had one of these "get out and go, go, go" meetings that any governmental agency likes to call. I think you know what I mean. You've probably been victim of a few of them, department meetings or whatever. And the man from the WPA who was in charge of all of this said, "Fenwick, come up here." And Fenwick walks up, and he said, "I want you guys to look at Fenwick here. He's a hard worker. He has two jobs. He doesn't need this one." And he fired him on the spot.

Well, happily for my father, this contractor, whose name was Graham, liked him so much, he said, "You come to work for me." And my father worked full-time for him, until later on he got a full-time job with the P&A Hardware in Exeter. In those days, hardware stores sold everything from ammunition for a gun to appliances to glassware, anything and everything.

Barber: So that had been the man in Exeter who had hired him for the weekends, then hired him full-time?

Fenwick: Right, hired him full-time. But it lessened his opinion, shall we say. Then we'll jump ahead and then we have to go on with something different, I guess. In 1949, he'd been open for about two years in business, there was a big announcement in the newspaper about someone from the Small Business Administration coming to town to talk about loans, and my dad thought, "Gee, I can go down, get a low-interest loan, and I can build the inventory and broaden the inventory for the store."

So he made an appointment and he went down. They were located in a building that was on South Virginia Street, on the west side of South Virginia Street, almost to the corner of Liberty and South Virginia. Nevada Machinery & Electric was in that building, Nevada Automobile Supply was in that building, and then they rented some office space. And he walked in and introduced himself, and a fellow said, "I see, Mr. Fenwick, you're a registered Republican."

My dad said, "Yes."

And he said, "I'm afraid we don't have anything for you." So my dad turned around and came back to the store.

Barber: Was that a government agency?

Fenwick: Yes.

Barber: Was that a known thing at the time that they were so partisan?

Fenwick: Has it changed? If I say what I think, we'd better not have this recorded.

Barber: We'll focus on the history. Okay.

Fenwick: Yes. Well, that's history.

Barber: It is history. So he was working then for a hardware store in California.

Fenwick: In Exeter. When World War II came along, we moved north to San Jose, and when we reached San Jose, my father went to work for the San Jose Paint & Hardware. That's kind of original. He was also quite active in the Masonic Lodge in San Jose during the war.

Following that, he went to work for Joshua Hendy Company in Sunnyvale. I think the buildings are probably still there. They built rockets, sixteen-inch shells for battleships, and self-contained power plants that would generate enough electricity for a town or a village of about five thousand. Those were shipped by the boatload to Russia as part of lend-lease or whatever. My father, conservative and outspoken—I get a little of it from him—his expression was, "We electrified those sons of bitches." That's a direct quote. He's not here to dispute it, but it's a direct quote. [laughs]

Following the war, he got a job with the Santa Rosa Paint & Hardware Company, and he was on the road selling house paint, amongst other things, and his customers, the big customers were the chicken ranches and the dairies and so on in Petaluma, Santa Rosa, Napa County, all over northern California, but there were a lot of them at that time, and they were all painted white. It's just like the pictures of the Kentucky Bluegrass. What do you see? White fences and so on in that part of the country.

Well, the war had been on, and you couldn't buy paint. Lead was a war material. It wasn't to be used for civilians. Titanium was another one. Those were the basis of white paints. Sherwin-Williams'

main warehouse on the West Coast at that time was in Oakland, California, and they would periodically bring the salesmen in to Oakland, pep talk again, and so they were familiar with the warehouse and what was there and the personnel and so on. And on one of these first trips, my dad noticed they had warehouse and then more warehouses full of white Kem Luster Enamel. It's a type of enamel that you would use in a kitchen or even if you're going to paint your automobile—real high-grade synthetic white enamel. Doesn't work well on wood because eventually wood will expand and contract, and that type of enamel doesn't expand and contract. It'll check.

But he got a brainstorm and he started through all of these dairies and so on, "I've got a white paint, but I will not guarantee it to last outdoors because it's going to check and crack." Well, a lot of the white had worn off of the fences. These people wanted white paint. He emptied the warehouses.

He was called in to Oakland. "How did you get rid of all of this stuff?" And when he told them, they were horrified.

And he said, "Every one of those people knew before they bought it that it wasn't built for that, but it was really white."

A short time later, they offered him the job as manager of Sherwin-Williams Paint store in either San Luis Obispo, California, or Reno, Nevada. He chose Reno, Nevada, because he didn't like the fog. [laughs] And that's how he wound up in Reno. Got here in September of 1946. And you couldn't beg, borrow, or steal a house to live in or an apartment. It was right after the war. They were building Westfield Village. I don't know whether you know where Westfield Village is. And those were exclusively for GIs.

The next group of houses to be built were the flattops that are up close to the university to the east, and they, again, were mostly GI. We never even considered that. We started, we lived in the Star Auto Court. Star Auto Court still exists on East Fourth Street, only it's much smaller now. It used to be a U-shape. There was an auto court where the service station is right there next to Coney Island. Well, that was zoned for Orvis Ring School.

We're off the subject again, but I—

Barber: We're on another subject I'm interested in, though, so you can keep going about that. [laughs]

Fenwick: I went to Orvis Ring in the sixth grade, and my teacher's name was Mamie Hildebrand, a wonderful lady who became a family friend over the years and so on till she passed away. All of the Indians in the area went to Orvis Ring. That's where they were zoned from the Indian Colony. Whether they thought I was Custer or whether they just didn't like red hair, every one of them wanted to fight me, and I never won a physical fight in my life. I could out-brain any of them, but when it came to a physical fight, no way. And if not for Mrs. Hildebrand weighing in periodically to break things up, I don't know that I'd be here today.

Anyway, a short time later, my dad found a nicer motel. It was Nick and Paul's Motel. Nick and Paul's was on Stanford Way and B Street, and it was all brick and it was built in a nice kind of a U-shape with separate cabins, and they were all brick. Really it was really quite pretty and it was landscaped—trees, lawn, so on. So there were my father, my mother, and my sister and I, and all of us in this, and it's kind of like you had to go outside to change your mind.

Then a short time later, a fellow buying paint from him at Sherwin-Williams had just finished a concrete block building on Airport Road, which is now Gentry, but it was part of the portion of Airport

Road that is now I-580, so it's all gone. He had built a large washing room into it behind his house and a four-room living quarter. So we rented that.

Then in May of 1947, he bought the home that we had on Alexander Hamilton and West Plumb Lane. It's still there, at 2690. We owned that house until my mother died in 1984. It was 1940-style construction and so on, and I could have had it, but I didn't want it. So my sister and I sold it.

Barber: I just want to ask you a little bit about your motel life there because, as you know, we've done a 4<sup>th</sup> Street History Project. When you were living in the Star Auto Court, were there other families that were living there at the time as their residence, or did it seem to be a mix of tourists and residents? What was it like there?

Fenwick: It was both, but really I never paid much attention. My mother would pick us up after school, and oftentimes we would go to the store with my dad. Then we'd get home. Remember school started in September, and it began to get dark, so we're now wandering around at night. The same was true of living in Nick and Paul's. When we moved out to Airport Road, there were kids in the family that we rented from, and there were kids around, so I was with them on weekends, but we never told them at Orvis Ring that we had moved because the folks wanted the continuity in the school.

Just prior to graduation, after we had bought the—well, when we bought the house on West Plumb, then we told them, and, of course, by then we were friends. Grace Warner was my principal—of course, there's a school named after her now—and she was a good friend and also a good customer for art supplies. So nobody ever said anything or there was no row or anything like that.

And from there I went to Billingshurst. But there wasn't a gang, a group, a group of friends, or anything like that. I had other friends from Orvis Ring, and a number of them lived in the Spokane, Montello, or all of that area, that the city rather half-wittedly redeveloped. You may not want to put that in either, but it's true.

Barber: The Urban Renewal Project.

Fenwick: Yeah, and it's an absolute disaster, as it turned out.

Barber: So tell me—I don't think we recorded when you were born, so how old you were when your family moved to Reno.

Fenwick: I was ten years old, and my birthday is September 20<sup>th</sup>, which means for a birthday present I got Reno, Nevada, where it was cold, and I can't stand cold, where nothing grew, and the Indians wanted to kill me. I wasn't real happy for a few years, but I've since grown out of that, as you know. [laughs]

Barber: So you were born in 1936?

Fenwick: 1936, September 20<sup>th</sup>, in Exeter, California. I was born at home. They did not have a hospital. The doctor was about a half a mile from the house, as it turned out, the way it was arranged. We were on the right side of the tracks. There was a little railroad track. It was called the Visalia Electric Railway. They ran two trains, one in the morning, one back at night. And being electric, it was clean. All it did is it went to a number of the small towns, Lindsay and so on in that area, and picked up freight cars loaded



at the packing houses with oranges and grapes and figs and so on that grew in the area and transported to Visalia, where they were picked up by the main Southern Pacific Lines.

Barber: Very agricultural area.

Fenwick: Oh, yeah. My grandmother was a quarter of a mile out of Exeter, and across were acres and acres and miles of nothing but orange groves. A lot of them are still there. Her house is gone. There's been a very fancy one. All I know is what I see on Google Earth. It's good for something. I looked up the other day just for the heck of it to see.

So I started school, started kindergarten in Exeter in 1941, just in time for World War II, with Bob List, who is former governor of the State of Nevada. All I know about kindergarten with Bob List was my mother was proud of the fact that I knew all of my colors and he didn't. But the List family was quite wealthy. They were in ranching and agriculture in Exeter. Then they sold out at the beginning of the war, went to Lovelock, and then from Lovelock, they moved into the home that's still there in Washoe Valley, but I don't think any of the Lists still own it.

Barber: And now you're all Nevadans. [laughs]

Fenwick: Yeah, we're all Nevadans. Had I stayed in Exeter and graduated from high school, I would have graduated with Kenny Guinn. So, a small town of five thousand people, though, and in a way produced two governors of the State of Nevada and one guy that tells bad jokes. [laughter]

Barber: So the area they now call Midtown wasn't called Midtown at the time, but the Sherwin-Williams store was there at 1460 South Virginia Street. Do you know, was that a new construction at the time?

Fenwick: It was a brand-new building, and it was owned by Parker Liddell. Parker had a history. He held some positions in some of the ghost towns. If you look in the right history books, you'll find out he was a postmaster here or he was something. He was a friend and I would say probably a business associate, too, of Noble Getchell, and he knew Wingfield and all of those people.

A little sidelight, my dad had opened the store, we'd been in business a couple of years, and Parker came to him one day—they got to be real good friends even after he left Sherwin-Williams—and asked him if he'd like to be on the commission over gambling, and my father said no. My father probably would have lived longer if he just said yes, but he didn't want to do that.

Barber: What do you mean by that?

Fenwick: He worked real hard. He smoked three and four packs a day and had a heart attack at the age of forty-eight. Lived to be seventy-six. But when he died, they had operated on him for almost any kind of cancer you can think of. He'd had part of a lung removed. He had esophageal cancer when he died, trying to eat, and drowned himself with the food and the liquid and so on. And I think he would not have worked as hard. So I think—I don't know. He might not have. But he did what he wanted and he did a good job of it.

Barber: So was the building containing multiple storefronts?



Sherwin-Williams, once located at 1460 South Virginia Street. Nevada Department of Transportation photo.

Fenwick: Yeah. 1460 was on the north end, and it was next to a vacant lot. The vacant lot was right on the corner of—and I can't remember what the next street up is there. It's either—I think it's Arroyo, isn't it? [The next street to the north is Pueblo Street. – Ed.]

Barber: We can check.

Fenwick: Arroyo is—anyway, there was a vacant lot. Then there was a brick building. This brick building had 1460, which was Sherwin-Williams. Next door to it was a little neighborhood-type drugstore, and next door to it was vacant. Well, the neighborhood drugstore eventually was owned by neighbors of ours out on West Plumb Lane, and they called it—I forget what they did call it. Later it was sold to a guy by the name of George Warren. It was called SavMor. And George Warren then went from that into the sprinkler business, household sprinklers.

Barber: In that same spot?

Fenwick: No. By then we had left because now my dad had Fenwick's and we were downtown, so I wasn't there. But at the end of it was a larger space, and the main important thing that happened there was that the Tucker automobile was put on display there, and I remember going in and seeing this with the unique steering and the whole bit when he was trying to raise money to build Tucker automobiles. So that's what the building was used for, and like I said, Parker Liddell owned it. The building went from Virginia Street to the railroad tracks, the V&T Railroad tracks, and there was not much space, probably no more space than from where we are maybe to the other side of the patio out here.

Barber: About twelve or fifteen feet.

Fenwick: Fifteen, twenty feet, maybe. When I started Billingham, he was still working for Sherwin-Williams there for a short while in 1947, and I would go to the back of the store and watch the V&T come by every night about five o'clock when it headed for town. So that was a big deal for me because I like trains.

Barber: So you're saying it was only about twenty feet to the train tracks from the back of the building?

Fenwick: Yeah.

Barber: Wow.

Fenwick: Freight and all was unloaded in the front. They had one of these metal doors that opens up, and they had an elevator so that the basement actually extended under the street, and you'd have these two doors come up, and then there was a bar that went in to hold them so they didn't fall, because they had all kinds of dry materials, a water-based paint that you mixed in fifty-gallon bags, and then all of the cases of paint that were backup stock were stocked in the basement.

Barber: Was this a two-story building?

Fenwick: No, single-story. Single-story, the whole thing was, and it went through to—well, at that time, Mount Rose Street didn't go through, but it went through to Mount Rose.

Barber: Mount Rose didn't go through on the east side?

Fenwick: On the east side, it dead-ended at Virginia Street. And across the street, on the southwest corner of Mount Rose, there was a bar called Dougherty's. I'm not positive, but somewhere in my mind it sticks they even had a gas pump, but that may not—you could get gas two ways. But that may be wrong, so don't quote me on that one.

Then on the north side of Mount Rose, there was a house that eventually became Miguel's. Is that where Miguel's is now?

Barber: Yes.

Fenwick: But it was a residence. And then this stuff happened after we were there, but when we came in, we would often come down Plumb Lane. Plumb Lane didn't go through. It dead-ended at Arlington, and it was apple orchards, amongst other things, on the east side of Arlington. Then we had to get onto Arlington. You went up Arlington to Mount Rose, and then you took Mount Rose down to Virginia Street, and you're Virginia Street on into the city, and, of course, it split at Center Street.

Barber: So Plumb Lane came in from the west but didn't hook up with Virginia Street?

Fenwick: No. And it was called Plumb Lane because at the bottom of that steep hill, just before you get to Hunter Lake Drive, there's a stone house off there, and that was part of the Plumb Ranch, and that's where it got its name.

Barber: So in the mid-1940s when this building was constructed, it must have seemed quite rural beyond that.

Fenwick: Yeah, it was. Well, you only had to go—oh, I have to think about this now—to Moana Lane, and Moana Lane was two lanes, and we would go for rides on the weekend. Out to the country, we'd go down Moana Lane. It's where the first four-lane between Reno and Carson City was built, and it went from Moana Lane to Mt. Rose Road, which is what the Mt. Rose Highway was called then.

Barber: You're saying the first what?

Fenwick: Four-lane highway. And I know this for sure because I had a '57 Dodge that had a NASCAR racing engine in it, and I used to test it on the four-lane between Mt. Rose and Moana. There was no speed limit then. "Reasonable" and "proper" were the proper words for what speed you did, and it's amazing that "reasonable" didn't even seem to bother the Highway Patrol too much.

Barber: Now, was there a term for that area? Because they wouldn't have called it downtown, really. But was there something they called that area? Just South Virginia?

Fenwick: Our term was, "We're going down to the store." [laughs] That was it. No, there really wasn't. The only real term that I remember hearing used was the Southwest, and that was from Plumb Lane south, the golf course area and that area, and it was because the Southwest at that time was *the* place to live, and it was a place you went at Christmastime to look at the Christmas lights. They always decorated then. Of course, that's moved over the years.

But no, there wasn't any—there was South Virginia. You went down South Virginia, okay? That would be roughly from where Sherwin-Williams was. Later they built a Safeway store right across from the bar on that corner, and then it evolved into more of a shopping center, and then later Raley's built a market, and that's, I think, a fitness center of some sort today.

Wintertime, it was kind of an interesting trip home because Mount Rose was uphill, followed by Arlington was uphill, or you stayed on Mount Rose, followed by Plumb Lane was uphill, and it snowed in those days, and roads would be slick and you'd get caught without your tire chains or something like that.

Barber: So Virginia Street was kind of the lowest part?

Fenwick: Yeah. Everything went uphill from there, and I think Wells was probably lower yet, but it wasn't evident.

Barber: Can you kind of walk us through the store, if you walked in the front door, how it was set up and what you'd see, and maybe how many people were working there?

Fenwick: Let's see. How many people? There was my dad as manager, there was a bookkeeper, and that would be it. Then there was a fellow that prepared everything for shipping, and there was one salesman. I don't think there was ever two. So what's that make? Four people. The fellow who did the shipping, if we got real—I shouldn't say "we," although I did learn to count change and actually did help out at times. But if they got busy, then the fellow that was working in the basement getting shipments ready, or when he wasn't working there, he was upstairs as a clerk available to wait on people or take money or whatever.

When you walked in the door, there was a large—it went through the store, whatever it was, straight through. Where was the stairwell? I have to think on this. The stairwell, I believe, was on the right-hand side about midway back. It went down. And past that stairwell, they had walled off an office space. I can't remember whether it went all the way to the ceiling or it went up much higher than the so-called privacy things do now, and there were two desks in there, my dad's and the bookkeeper's, and there was a Diebold safe. The safe, we can tell stories about that later.

You had shelves as high as would be like our kitchen, in other words, where you can reach, but not on above that for product, and then there were islands that were open, so you had a shelf, and then maybe there'd be a tier and a tier, and they also held paint. Toward the front windows on the left-hand side, there was a table that held a few wallpaper books. I think that was about it.

Downstairs you had all kinds of dry paint. You had the cases of paint. You also had bins—we'll say fifteen, eighteen inches square, that were up maybe five high that held wallpaper, rolls of wallpaper. They stocked a few things. And then with these books, you could order stuff and within a week you'd have whatever paper you wanted.

Barber: So did customers go downstairs by themselves, or was that just staff?

Fenwick: No, there wasn't anything downstairs for the customers that wasn't upstairs, just more of it, and there was a bench down there, so that you could put together the orders when you'd get an order and they wanted—we're talking now about an order from I.H. Kent Company in Fallon or something of that nature. Well, all of that was boxed and put together in the basement, and then if it was small, it was bought up.

We went to—or they—later we when we had our own store—they went to Greyhound. The various truck lines would pick up, but you'd go down to the post office if you were going to send stuff parcel post. The mail wouldn't take paint unless you soldered the lids because they were afraid something would pop and come open, and it's justified. Then when there were so many different trucking companies at that time. There was no UPS, there was no FedEx or anything of that sort. There was Railway Express. Certain times, stuff had to go that way, or some things would be delivered that way, but it was a slow, expensive, dirty way to get stuff. They were not as conscious as the truck companies were of the way things arrived, except for Pacific Mountain Transport, which belonged to Southern Pacific, and their stuff was just filthy. It all came in in boxcars, anyway. By the time they got on—if you unloaded their loads, you wanted to take a shower. [laughs]

Barber: So you helped out? You were just a kid, ten or twelve.

Fenwick: Yeah, I was ten, and one day my dad said—I took inventory. This is going to sound wrong, but I was real bright. I don't know how bright. I know I'm well over 150. That's all I can tell you. And I

found that out a lot of years later. But I took tests. They gave us an aptitude test in kindergarten in Exeter, and the principal called my mother in, and they were in there a long time, and I was playing out on the playground. And I asked what the principal said. "Just talking about how you did on a test."

"Well, how did I do?"

"Oh, you did fine."

Well, I said then, "Did I do good?"

She said, "You did real good." And the same thing happened in San Jose and the same thing happened again in Reno, and they never would tell me what it was.

Barber: But you were capable of counting.

Fenwick: School was easy and it was fun. Yes, I could count. I got a real good memory. I think you know that, anyway. And I just told you those programs. I did the programs for HRPS [Historic Reno Preservation Society] in the schools and all, and there's no script. It's scripts in my head.

Barber: So you did inventory and things in the shop?

Fenwick: I did inventory. Once in a great while if somebody was in a big rush and they had to give us the fifty cents for the quarter-pint of paint or something, I'd take the fifty cents. I never got in the till, but I would set it on the shelf underneath the cash register, and then when it came time, they'd ring it up. Because a lot of the cash stuff wasn't written up, so it was just, "Okay. It's fifty cents."

"Here's fifty cents."

Barber: So what's the story about the safe?

Fenwick: Well, remember there was a drugstore next door. Well, someone broke into the drugstore looking for money and, I would assume, probably drugs. It wasn't as bad as it is now, but that sort of thing still went on. It was just a wooden wall with sheetrock, or wooden, you know, stick-built between them, isolating these. They weren't individual buildings. And they broke a hole through the sheetrock and they decided they were going to break into the safe. Well, they knocked the dial off of the safe, finally managed to do that, and they pried and they did this and they did that. They never did get into the safe, but it took the poor safe experts like two weeks, and here are all of the books and the petty cash and everything for the store, they're locked inside. Took them two weeks of working to get back into that. So my dad thought so much of the Diebold safe, that when we opened the store, he bought the same model and style, kept it in the back. When he closed the store, he moved it home. When he died, my sister or I didn't have any use for it. I sold it to a fellow that I worked with with the city, who is now the manager of the Reno Employees Credit Union, and he has it in his home.

Barber: That's a good testimony.

Fenwick: Yes.

Barber: Now, the diner had just opened up the street.

Fenwick: Yeah, Landrum's was up the street on the corner. On the other end was a potato chip outfit. There was a small—I think it was a converted house that belonged to Ted, or you may see it listed as D.E. Mattson, and he sold insurance and real estate. He can come into this story later because of the buildings down the street.

I don't remember the year, but by then Bill Stremmel had come to Reno, and Bill Stremmel opened the Volkswagen agency on the south end of that same brick area, and subsequently he closed it, or he went out of it, and one of the city councilmen—and I'll be darned if I can remember his name right at the moment—had a business in there. But Parker, in the meantime, had passed away, and I think his wife and son and so on decided they wanted to sell the building.

Ted Mattson carried my father's insurance at that time, and he came to my dad and he said, "Would you like to buy that building where Sherwin-Williams was?" Sherwin-Williams had moved by that time, too, so we're getting up, I think, into the seventies—no, sixties, because we were still downtown, so it was in the sixties.

And my dad said, "Well, how much?" I don't know what Ted told him. And he made arrangements, and he said, "Yeah," he said, "I think I'll buy it."

Well, the reason Ted came to him is because Bill Stremmel was going to buy the building and Bill Stremmel backed down. He said, "I don't think I want it." And Ted came to my dad, but there had apparently been a written offer made from Stremmel. Anyway, the next thing you know, Ted Mattson comes to my dad and said, "Would you be willing to skip buying the building?" He said, "I'm between a rock and hard place because Stremmel's decided he wants it." And that's how he wound up with the building, and, of course, the whole thing was destroyed, and they built Stremmel Art Gallery, and the rest is history.

Barber: Did he have tenants in it for a while before he knocked it down, or did that all happen pretty quickly?

Fenwick: I can't remember. Once there was a possibility that we were going to have it, and then it went away, I'd lost interest in it.

Barber: So I want to ask a little more about the street at that time. I'm kind of curious. Your father was only managing the Sherwin-Williams store for a couple of years.

Fenwick: Right.

Barber: So why is that? What came about that caused him to want to leave? Tell me that story.

Fenwick: There goes another story. During these trips from Santa Rosa to Oakland and then later as manager of Sherwin-Williams, he met a lot of the managers, district managers, accounting people, and so on in the upper echelon in Oakland, and they got to be friends. I can remember going to dinner with them periodically. When they would come up, they'd take the whole family, and we'd go to a place like the Mapes or the Riverside or something that. That was a big treat, particularly for, what, a twelve-year-old kid, eleven-year-old kid. That was a big deal.

These guys had eighteen, nineteen, twenty years in with Sherwin-Williams, and they were being fired. And why were they being fired? Because Sherwin-Williams paid a retirement at twenty years.

This way they didn't have any retirement. My dad looked at that, and another thing that happened, the first year he was manager, his territory was the entire State of Nevada, except for Clark County, and everything east of the Sierra Crest. That meant Alturas, Susanville, Truckee, South Lake Tahoe, all the way to Bridgeport, Bishop, that whole area, and there were dozens of little mining—or not mining—lumbering towns at that time. Quincy and Portola were bare ones, but there were all kinds of little places, and everybody had a hardware store, so he'd call on all of them, and most of them would buy a pint of this and two pints of that and a gallon of something else, and they were all customers.

Well, he was paid so much, flat salary, and then he made commission, and that first year he made commission like there was no tomorrow. Well, the second year, he began to notice these charges come through, and, of course, every time there was a chargeback, that cut your commission. Well, he finally got hold of something he shouldn't have had that listed the codes that went along with the chargebacks. They were charging expenses from Cleveland, Ohio, which is the headquarters for Sherwin-Williams—I don't know if it still is or not, but that's where they started—back against Reno, which meant it cut his commission, which meant it didn't matter if he sold the same amount, he wasn't going to make the money.

That, coupled with them firing these guys and there's no future in twenty years, he decided he'd go into the paint business. For a short while, he had a partner who was one of the painting contractors, a silent partner, and, in fact, I didn't find out about that until way late. And that's how he wound up in business for himself and parted company with Sherwin-Williams.

Barber: Did he lease the space on Sierra Street at first?

Fenwick: That was on a lease. That was in the Travelers Hotel building that was owned by the Petricciani family, the same people that owned the building that the Palace Club was in. They were not the owners. That was a lease-out deal there too. We were there. We were in the building there for twenty years, although I don't remember how many—I think it must have a ten-year lease, and then the next time—and I suddenly forgot his name—the father came in and he said, "I don't want to lease it." He said, "We may want to sell the building one day." But he said, "I'd give you plenty of notice. Won't be any thirty-day deal."

Those people—well, they were like my father. You shake hands and your word was good. It was better than what's written on paper anymore. So my dad said, "Well, that's fine."

They did a lot of remodeling. They changed the exterior of the store and things like that, modernized it a little bit, changed doors, stuff like that. So they were wonderful landlords. Then Silvio, when his father died, was, what, on the Airport Commission, and he was the owner of the Bank Club when it was torn down—or Palace. Not Bank, Palace Club. So, of course, paid him so much every month, and when we moved in, it had belonged to Hasco Heating & Supply, who moved to 555 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street.

That building was built on a stone foundation filled with mortar. Mortar wasn't the greatest. Every time one of the—of course, those Malleys when they go through, they go [demonstrates]. A Malley is the articulated locomotives that the Southern Pacific ran. Well, the building shook. If you were standing outside, the ground shook when those things went through.

Barber: This is the Sierra Street building you're talking about?



Fenwick: Yeah. So the mortar would sift out, and then one of my first jobs when they opened the store, every time one of those things—every day I'd go downstairs and I'd sweep up four-gallon paint cartons full of this sand, and we'd put them out for the trash man to take off.

But when Hasco had it, they finished the front half of the basement to that building. They plastered it and all and it was beautiful, and they used it for display for their appliances as well as the upstairs. And then they had all kinds of salesmen, and they had broken the back up into little cheese boxes—a lot of them weren't any bigger than this kitchen—and some would hold a desk in a doorway, and then you'd go back there, almost like, I think, an automobile dealer would do. So we had paint stacked here and some of the paint stacked there.

And we took two of the rooms—on one side, we took one of the rooms that had been their office, and we used it as an office. On the other side, we took two of the rooms, and my dad took it out, so it was like this room is with the opening, just broken up a little bit, and we put wallpaper tables in and we put daylight fluorescents in, so you had pretty true color, and that was for wallpaper. We carpeted and put comfortable chairs in there. Then out in front, we were much like Sherwin-Williams. Down both sides were shelves, and then we had a counter row aisle and then a couple of islands on the other side.

Barber: And you were competitors with Sherwin-Williams. [laughs]

Fenwick: Well, and we sold a few things of Sherwin-Williams'. We sold Super Kem Tone because it had a good name and there was demand for it. That was the main thing that we sold of Sherwin-Williams. But we had a full line of paint that was from Treasure Tones. Some of their stuff still exists. Lowe's had it one time; there's an enamel called Vitric, and it stands out. It's white letters with red edges and gray or else a—at one time, they had a Passionate Turquoise label, so, you know, you wouldn't miss it in the dark, but it was a super-duper hard, durable enamel for kitchens or stuff like that or if you wanted to hand-paint your car.

Barber: So I want to ask if you can share any personal memories that you have of that area around South Virginia Street. There are a lot of businesses that we've found that you might have gone into. There was Landrum's, there was the Hansel and Gretel clothing store. Sprouse-Reitz was there for a while.

Barber: Now, Sprouse-Reitz, when I was in junior high school, I would walk down to that for lunch because my seventh-grade year at Billingham Junior High School on Plumas, where the soccer fields are now, was hell at lunchtime, because the main thing those cooks knew how to make was stewed tomatoes, and stewed tomatoes made me throw up. I persuaded my dad, when the eighth grade came along—actually, the end of the seventh grade. But when the eighth grade came along, I didn't learn to ride a bicycle until the eighth grade. I couldn't balance, and we now know there's something that was built in me that wasn't built quite right. But anyway, I always walked and I could walk the legs almost anything on two legs. I could walk fast and cover lots of ground and I liked it. So I could walk from Billingham down to South Virginia Street, and my dad would give me the lunch money. Instead of me giving it to the school, I gave it to a little restaurant called Miolini's. Have you found that? Okay. Let's see.

Barber: Is the building still there?

Fenwick: You know, I haven't looked lately. I think it is.

Barber: Tell us where it was.

Fenwick: I think it may be a beauty shop on the corner. There's a strip. Across the street is an antique store. Now, it was Washoe Market. Next door to it was Sprouse-Reitz. And this building was across the street from Sprouse-Reitz or Reitz and Washoe Market. Across from Sprouse-Reitz was Builders & Farmers Hardware. You should have found that. It was owned by—one guy's name was Ackerman, and I've forgotten the other guy. And then the basement—the reason I remember this is in the basement they had an O-Gauge Railroad Club that met, and they had a full layout.

Barber: So what was Molini's like?

Fenwick: Molini's was a family-type restaurant, and they had a lunch counter and they had tables, and I would buy a hot dog or I would buy a hamburger with the lunch money instead of at school. Periodically, my folks and I would go down there and we'd get a soda or something like that.

Barber: Was it family-owned by that family?

Fenwick: Yeah. The Molini family. I went to school with part of that family. I don't think he was part of the family that owned it. You know, it's like a brother and a brother or whatever. But Richard Molini—and I don't know where he is. I think he may be in Las Vegas.

Barber: So would there be other kids eating there at lunchtime by themselves?

Fenwick: There were a couple of us that went down. You went right by all of these homes that are still there on Caliente and Arroyo and Pueblo and so forth, and a lot of those kids went home for lunch, so I'd walk as far as their house, then I kept on going. But I had two or three friends, we would oftentimes walk down together.

Sprouse-Reitz had a big candy counter. Remember how Woolworth's—were you ever in a Woolworth's store with a candy counter that went forever? Sprouse-Reitz was the same way. So I'd buy a treat or something like that in there. And we bought stuff for the house. My mother would buy in there and so forth.

Barber: There's an upstairs and a downstairs in Sprouse Reitz. How was it set up? Was the housewares downstairs, maybe, and clothing upstairs? Did they have a lunch counter?

Fenwick: No, it would have been the other way. I think most of the clothing was downstairs and an old-fashioned term, "notions." You know. Do you know what notions are? Thread and all kinds of household stuff. That was the notions department. You dated yourself.

Barber: No, you dated yourself. [laughs]

Fenwick: Well, I dated me, but you still knew about it. Anyway, they were more upstairs. It was laid out very much like Woolworth's was downtown. Woolworth's Clothing and all was, for the most part, downstairs.

Barber: Now, was it family-owned? Did you know who owned it?

Fenwick: I don't know who owned it, no. No, I don't have any idea. Where Builders & Farmers Hardware was later was a dental supply. You should find that if you go back through the city directories in that same area because I bought some burs. I used to do silversmithing and so on. I'm a man of many interests. Now with the shaky hands, I don't do any of it, but I used to go in there and buy burs and dental picks and stuff like that to clean things up.

Barber: Because you mentioned it, can you tell us anything about the potato chip company? I'm so intrigued by that.

Fenwick: No, except that they were some of the lousiest potato chips in the world, Circus Potato Chips. Laura Scudder's and Lay's that came along later, but at that time, Laura Scudder's was the one that had the good potato chips.

Barber: So Circus was just a local company.

Fenwick: They were a local company. And I know it's heresy—you might edit this piece out—but it relates to Chism. They were nice people and all, but their ice cream didn't hold a candle to either Carnation or Borden.

Barber: Were you a fan of Landrum's?

Fenwick: No, I was never in Landrum's.

Barber: It was there a long time.

Fenwick: In all of that time, I was never in Landrum's. Part of the problem with Landrum's would have been there were so few stools, and there were people in the area that ate in Molini's and ate in Landrum's and so on, and that was most often full. We liked the food at Molini's. We used to get hamburgers, *really* good hamburgers at Q-ne-Q. Now, you found that, I'm sure.

Barber: Yes. Could you describe it? Tell us about that. We're very intrigued by Q-ne—Q.

Fenwick: It was just a little kind of a hole in the wall and was primarily a drive-in, drive in and get your stuff and drive out because it was right there at the corner of Stewart and South Virginia. You can see how small the area is where that motel is today. It didn't hold very many cars, but it was a big thing for the high-school kids.

Barber: Did the staff have little caps and everything? [laughs]

Fenwick: You know, I don't remember that much. Oftentimes I was in the car and my mother or my father went in and got whatever we were going to have. That was the paramount importance was the hamburgers. I don't know what the kids or whoever worked there looked like.

Barber: We came across a business that we were so intrigued by. The building is still there, and it was a drive-thru pet food market. Did you know about that?

Fenwick: Oh, yes. I bought a parrot from them.

Barber: What was the name of that place?

Fenwick: Reno Pet Food, I think.

Barber: You bought a parrot?

Fenwick: Yes, a Bee Bee parrot.

Barber: Tell us how that came about.



Reno Pet Food Market, once located at 745 South Virginia Street. UNR Special Collections photo.

Fenwick: When we had the store downtown, for lunch hour oftentimes if we didn't go over to the Golden or Nevada Club or something to have lunch—I didn't really like the noise in the clubs, so I would walk. I'd get a sandwich. Tony's Delicatessen, which was at that time on West 1<sup>st</sup> Street in part of the building that was now the back of where the theater complex is, they were down a couple of doors, down 1<sup>st</sup> Street from the corner on that side of the street, across from Home Furniture, which is now the parking garage. I would get a five-cent dill pickle and a—what did we call them at that time? It wasn't po' boys, but that type of sandwich, meat and cheese of some sort, and I'd eat that and I'd walk.

There's one day I had walked all the way down South Virginia Street, and I always liked birds. That's why the camera is there and that's why I take all the pictures and everything. If you ever do a program on birds, I can fix you up. Anyway, I walked in there to look around, and I've always liked to pet the dogs or scratch the cats' ears or scratch the head on a parrot, because I spent my summers with my grandmother and they had chickens and I had a pet pigeon that used to follow me around like a dog all summer and things like that.

So here sat what they called a Bee Bee parrot—they're only about that long—and he was sitting in a cage, hollering or whatever. I walked over and he kind of walked over to the edge of the cage, and I put my finger in and he—you know how they'll tip their head. He tipped his head, and I was scratching his head, and the owner come up to me, and he said, "You be careful. You're going to get bit. He doesn't like people."

I said, "Well, he seems to like me." It had a sign on it, like \$40. Well, I didn't have \$40. I did have \$20. And I forget, I made some kind—or, no, he made a remark. I said, "Well, \$40 is a lot for a parrot."

Well, he said, "I'd sell him for half-price."

I said, "I got \$20."

So I walked back to the store with this cage. He gave me the cage. I think he wanted the bird out of the store because it was a dead item. I carried this cage back to the store, took it home. By then I was married and we were living in Sparks, so it would have been in the early 1960s. He would sit and nuzzle against my ear and against my neck. He had one bad problem also, though, but he'd pinch my collars and would take that short bill and take a little bite out. So I had to be careful what shirt I wore. [laughs] Upset the first wife.

I had him for a long time, though, and he'd ride around on my shoulder and so on. The only sad thing is one day the wife was cooking in the kitchen with a frying pan, fixing breakfast on the weekend or something, and there was some kind of a loud noise outside, and it spooked him and he flew, and he couldn't fly very far, and he came down in that damn skillet. He burned his feet, and I hustled him off to the vet—we knew him—and he said, "I'll try, but I don't think he'll make it." And he didn't. So that was the end of the parrot.

But that's my experience in Reno Pet Food. Then right up the street from Reno Pet Food was Penguin Ice Cream.

Barber: Tell us about that. We're very intrigued by it.

Fenwick: That was an old-time ice cream shop. It was a counter down one side, and they had the ice cream table-type area where you could sit, and they had a few tables in there. They made their own ice cream, and their ice cream was good ice cream. And they gave you—man alive, the scoop she used. You know, now you get things, what, are they about a dime or a quarter? They were big scoops and it was a

nickel. The big deal was to get a double ice cream cone. Cost a dime. But then that thing would be stacked up like this on top. [laughs]

And they made all these oddball flavors. They made licorice, which wasn't so hot, but I did like Black Jack gum, though. That was licorice gum, and, boy, you could tell afterwards. The tongue was black and sometimes the teeth would have a little black around them. And they made peppermint, really good peppermint. They made a raspberry marble that was real raspberries and not syrup and so on. It was good stuff.

Then down the street there was a vacant lot. I think there still is. Isn't there a vacant lot between the drive-in pet food store and the next building? And that next building, when it was built, was Ayers Automotive Supply. I think I spelled it right. And then it was lot of things. For a while, it was Eagle Framing. Now since then Dave Pirtle moved over on to Wells. On that corner's a motel now.

Barber: There's a little market in there, I think.

Fenwick: A market. Is there a market on the corner, just south?

Barber: Mm-hmm.

Fenwick: All right. That was Turner Florist, I think, and that was, along with Orchid Florist, were probably the two best florist shops in town.

Barber: I just get the impression of a very vibrant neighborhood that people walked around a lot.

Fenwick: Oh, you walked everywhere. From the time you could walk, you could walk anywhere in Reno and nobody bothered you, when I was growing up, unless you got into mischief or something, and somebody would shoo you off. But everybody kind of knew everybody else. I had red hair. I was a true red, red, redhead. And with that red hair, I didn't dare do anything because if you're in a crowd and somebody does something, they always remember the redhead. They don't remember the rest.

It paid off one time. I, after school during high school, used to go down to my parents' store, and then I would work there until closing time, ride home with my mother, ride home with my dad or whatever, until 1953 when I was old enough to drive. So I had gone home and they were still at the store, but I had gone down there first, and my mother called and said, "Jerry, were you throwing rocks at somebody's house?"

And I said, "No, I'm here at home."

And she said, "Well, so-and-so—." And, "It was down on Knight Road." Does that mean anything to you? Well, it runs off of Mayberry. It's just a little west of the school there on Mayberry. A fellow had called her and said I was throwing rocks at his house.

And I said, "Call him and ask him what he looked like. I wasn't anywhere near there."

So she called back and she said, "He said you were blond. I told him my son was a redhead." Well, I knew who it was. It was the next-door neighbor, who is David Morgan, who went on to become an accountant and a partner in Pangborn Douglas and Morgan Accounting, which is in part of Midtown.

We laugh about it now, but I went over to his dad and I said, "You know, David gave somebody my name. He was throwing rocks at a guy's house down over the hill here." So I don't know what he said, what Jake said to David. But anyway, we're friends. There was never any problem.

Barber: We looked at that Pangborn Building, and it looks like that it started maybe as a house that got built around it.

Fenwick: It was a house and they put a modern front on it. That was done a lot in the, what, fifties and sixties. I don't think as much in the seventies.

Barber: And it was done a lot in the Midtown area.

Fenwick: Yeah. Well, it was because you've got to realize there's only one way to drive through Reno from one end to the other; that's Virginia Street. Everything else, in their lack of foresight, dead-ends somewhere, dead-ends at the university or dead-ends into California Avenue and the residential area. They didn't give any thought to running more than one street through town.

Barber: So that's why people wanted to modify the houses?

Fenwick: Yeah. Because, well, if you came in from Carson City, you had to drive down Virginia Street until you got to the downtown area where you could spread out and park. So as they began to extend south, the first place they extended was Virginia Street. Center Street was residential for years. Maytan Music was one of the few businesses on Center Street. Then you had Crystal Springs Ice Company, and their big business was actually water delivery. The ice was the sideline. It was Union Ice out west of town that took care of most of the ice business.

Barber: So you think people wanted to have a business on Virginia Street, which is a good location, and the more affordable thing to do was just convert a house?

Fenwick: And then it was zoned. So I don't know who owned those buildings, but it can almost have been Italians, because Italians are good at this. Make use of what you've got and to your own benefit. These people owned the house, you know, so if we put a business front on it, then we can rent it and we make income. And there used to be a lot of stuff where you had the one house on the street, and you had another house back here. This was 10 and this was 10½ or whatever it was. And you lived in 10½ and you rented out 10 to somebody to help pay for all the expenses with 10 ½. It was done a whole lot in that urban renewal area until they messed it up.

Barber: One building that I just love that has always had a lot of business in it, is that Dodge Building, which looks like it just had great showroom windows for cars.

Fenwick: I haven't paid any attention to what they did, but there was a drive-in big roll-up door because they had a garage down the side right next to where Savage Plumbing was. That was where you went into the garage, but the side of the building and the biggest part of the front was all big glass windows. They were the same windows that were there when Osen built the original building, and when we came to town, it was Diamond—no, Dietz Motors. Phil Dietz owned the Dodge dealership at that time, and my dad bought a brand-new 1947 Dodge that I inherited when I first started to drive.

Then Dick Diamond bought out Phil Dietz, and my dad bought a '52 Dodge—no, he bought the '52 from Phil. Then he bought a '55—actually, two '55's from Dick Diamond, and then Diamond sold to two guys called Charters and Klein, and I bought a '57 Dodge from Charters and Klein, and that was the big high fins and the low car, and I drove that almost 100,000 miles until the torsion bar broke. It came with a single four-barrel carburetor, dual exhaust, a Hemi engine, and that was Chrysler's biggest year and they were having union troubles, and they were sabotaging stuff like hell, and they put a muffler backwards on mine that we didn't know about, and it caused a valve to heat and warp, and the valve stuck and the piston hit it, and it destroyed the engine. So Chrysler made good on it, but when Chrysler sent the block, they sent the wrong one. They sent a NASCAR racing engine, three-quarter cam.

So the next thing, I set out and I was buying parts in town that people that knew the factory people, I wound up with twin four-barrel carburetors, progressive linkage, Chrysler 300-C air cleaners on it. The car would do 140 miles an hour out through the flat there, and it did it at various times. But it was set up so that you ran on two barrels up to about sixty, and then it went to four, and then it went to six, and then you went to the gas station. [laughter]

Barber: So was that the only Dodge dealer in town, or that's just the one you were loyal to?

Fenwick: No, that was the only—there was only one car dealer per maker in town except for Plymouth, and Plymouth always sold—there was Dodge Plymouth, DeSoto Plymouth, and Chrysler Plymouth, and those were the other three lines. DeSoto was a midline between Dodge and Chrysler, and Plymouth was cheaper, cheaper accessories, cheaper built, and so on than Dodge. So we had Dodges until 1961, my dad bought a Chrysler, and then when he retired, he bought a Cadillac.

Barber: So I think we're going to maybe wrap up recording pretty soon here, but anything else from that?

Fenwick: Well, I've wasted your time.

Barber: No, we have so many great gems in here. I'm just wondering if there's anything else in that area.

Fenwick: Well, when they first opened the store, they were just disassembling the metal buildings that were in the open area where the shopping center is.

Barber: What were they?

Fenwick: Those steel buildings. It was a motel, apartment-type thing at one time.

Barber: The El Reno Apartments?

Fenwick: El Reno. Those were just going, and then they built that shopping center, and at the end where now Nevada Fine Arts is was Nevada Bank of Commerce, and previous to that, the bank that was out in that area was First National, and I think they're still there, aren't they? Aren't they still on the corner of—I get Arroyo and Pueblo mixed up.

Barber: There's a bank that closed recently that I think was the Heritage Bank. That's being renovated.



Fenwick: Maybe they sold it, because it was originally built by First National Bank.

Barber: And there might be another one there. So I'm not sure.

Fenwick: Well, this is right on the corner—

Barber: But we know the one you're talking about.

Fenwick: —and it was one of the first drive-up banks in the area. Then, let's see, next to Sprouse-Reitz there was a barbershop, and then you had a one-way street and there was a bar, and then they built that two-story office building. And oh, lord, originally Arthur Murray's was downtown on Virginia Street, but I think they were one of the first ones that moved into that building. They had their dance studio upstairs.

Barber: There was a dance studio.

Fenwick: Well, somebody else, I think, had one then later. And across the street on Vassar and South Virginia, what would be the southeast corner, was a service station. I can't remember which one. Then right next to that was Crystal Springs—no, Union Ice Company, I think. Anyway, and their big thing is they had a frozen food locker. Everybody has freezers now. But in the early days, if you had frozen food, you went to the frozen food locker, got what you were going to use that night and maybe the next day on a regular basis. And they cut and dressed game, so they were a big deal with the hunters.

Then you had Builders & Farmers Hardware, and then there was something else in there, and I can't remember, and then there was Molini's Restaurant, and then on the corner, I think, was a beauty shop, and there may still even be a beauty supply in there on that corner. And then next was Landrum's, and the potato chip factory was in there, and then Ted Mattson had his office. I don't know whether that took the whole block or whether there was a vacant lot there. But that was the immediate area that I was in. The rest of it was go-by because up across from—I don't know what bank it is now, but where the Federal Building is now there was the nineteen-cent hamburger joint, Bud's Burgers. Have you found Bud's Burgers yet?

Barber: Was that a drive-in also?

Fenwick: That was a drive-in, and they had this long building that looked like a car wash. I'm not sure. It might have been a car wash that they converted. But they called it Bud's Burgers, and they sold these—they were about hockey puck-sized. They were bigger than the White Castle hamburgers, but they were almost as bad. All it was was a bun, a squirt of ketchup, a squirt of mustard, and a top to the bun, and their quality was about equal to McDonald's, the early McDonald's, which was somewhat like—well, I think you could re-sole shoes with them. But they sold like crazy because they were dirt cheap.

There were several little hamburger joints in various parts of town, and they charged twenty-five cents and put relish on, and they actually had meat that tasted like meat. There used to be one where the Nelson Building is on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, and they had a couple of old cottonwoods. I used to go down there for lunch from the university because for a dollar, you got four hamburgers and, what are they, I guess a 32-

ounce drink. If you bought four hamburgers, the drink was free. If you bought anything less—but they were two bits. By then they'd gone up, I think, to maybe it was thirty-five cents apiece.

Barber: Now, you know the other thing about that area, just the last thing, is that there are so many motels. And at the time when your dad was at the Sherwin-Williams store and for a while after that, they really were functioning as motels with tourists, and I would imagine that tourists would really have enjoyed being in that area.

Fenwick: Well, yeah, but I think mainly they spent the night—they had no reason to want to come into Sherwin-Williams—and then they would get a taxi or they would—we had a bus system that went I can't remember how far down South Virginia. They went out into the urban renewal area, and the hub of the bus system was the Virginia Street Bridge. That was where the buses went north, south, east, and west from there, and it was ten cents, and you could ride to the end of the line for a dime. And they weren't the greatest buses and they were smoky. Well, they've got one that's painted and it very closely resembles the last ones. Before that, they were wider, squarer, and uglier, and their garage was part of that dirt area where Lake Street is, and it's bounded by 2<sup>nd</sup>.

They were going to build apartments or something in there, and that fell through. That's where the old red light district was, the Stockade, and then later there was a motel in the Bundox, which was a really good restaurant, and that belonged to Loomis, who—I don't know whether that part of the family still owns the old carriage house that was remodeled into residence right next to Riverside Park, the tennis courts, and there's this almost an A-frame. That was the carriage house for one of the old houses up on the bluff, I think the Hawkins, but I'm not sure. See, there's a lot of useless stuff, but one of these days you'll run a trip that way.

Barber: [laughs] It all comes in handy and it all links together. I think we'll stop there for today, but we will reserve the right to come back and speak with you again.

Fenwick: Always.

Barber: Thank you.

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## IVAN FONTANA AND SADIE BONNETTE

Owners, Midtown Eats, 719 S. Virginia St. and Death & Taxes, 26 Cheney St.



Ivan Fontana and Sadie Bonnette with their son, Luca. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Sadie Bonnette, originally from Vallejo, California, and Ivan Fontana, born in Italy, met in Reno. Together with a partner, they opened Midtown Eats at 719 S. Virginia Street, in 2011, soon becoming its sole owners. They opened the cocktail lounge Death & Taxes in a duplex at 26 Cheney Street in 2013.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016, and I'm at Death & Taxes at 26 Cheney Street in Reno, Nevada, with Ivan Fontana and Sadie Bonnette, to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Ivan and Sadie, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Bonnette: Yes.

Fontana: Yes.

Barber: Thank you. So, while together you own and operate both Death & Taxes and Midtown Eats, you each have your own individual experiences and different backgrounds, so we'll do a little back-and-forth first to fill in the entire picture. Our primary subject is Midtown, but I'd like to understand the path that led to your current activities here in the Midtown area. So I want to start by getting a little background information on each of you, and we'll do this one at a time. If you could each tell me when and where you were born and just take us all the way through where you went to school up until when you went out into the world [*laughs*], then we'll go and start with the other. So, Sadie, can we start with you?

Bonnette: Sure. I was born in February 1977 in Vallejo, California. I was there until I was about three, when my parents separated, and then we moved up to Hood River, Oregon, where I lived through kindergarten.

We moved quite a lot when I was little. My mom was a single mom, and she decided to move to Lake Tahoe because there was this great opportunity for dealers, where they could make a ton of money, and she was working three jobs where she was in Hood River. So we transferred up there, and we were there for quite some time. We moved around the lake. We started at the "Y", lived in South Lake, and then in Meyers as well, and Stateline, and then we went to go live with my dad for a couple of years when I was in sixth grade—sixth and just up to eighth grade, I think.

Then I moved to Reno for my freshman year of high school. I went to McQueen and graduated in 1995, and then from there, I went to TMCC and got my associate's degree, and met Ivan at TMCC. [*laughs*] Then after that, I actually thought I was going to be a teacher, so I went to the program at UNR with an elementary education major.

In order to put myself through school, I did some work in graphic design. I had taken some graphic design classes at Glenn Hare Occupational Center through the high school. The Internet was booming or very fresh and new. I didn't even know what the Internet was. At that time, I'd never heard of it. And the brother of the guy I was dating at the time said, "Oh, you have a graphic design background. Why don't you come work for me? I'm doing a startup graphic design business."

So I went to work for him in this warehouse, and I would sit with a laptop on a milk crate and a *Web Design for Dummies* book, trying to figure out how to code HTML. The company ended up going under, and I was fortunate enough that Lee Felch, who owns BrandLab now—and it was Octane previously before that—came in to buy some computers, and he swooped me up and took me under his wing and mentored me and taught me everything I know about graphic design.

When I graduated college and it was time for me to make the transition into my career, I was making some headway in the graphic design world, so I decided to just see where it would take me. I stayed there and worked for Lee for four years and then transferred to another company called CLM, and

was there for another four years—I guess four years was the magic number—and then I went to Innerwest Advertising. So I slowly moved up. I was a lead designer and then I was eventually a creative director, and then—I don't know, I met Ivan and all things changed. [laughs]

Barber: That's a good point to pause your story a little bit.

Bonnette: Well, we'd known each other for a long time, but the connection happened later in life.

Barber: So catch us up, Ivan. I think you have a very different beginning. Bring us up to the point that Sadie's talking about, if you could.

Fontana: Well, it is a lengthy beginning, but we'll shorten it. I was born in 1979, in January, in Trieste, Italy. My mother is Italian, and my biological father I don't know. My stepfather is from the Bay Area. So I already was born into a mix of culture, if you will—born in Italy and grew up there, traveled the whole world, you name it, as a kid. I turned fifteen, and I'd never been to the States, but was really interested in watching Hollywood movies and all that stuff as a kid. That's the only thing that you see of America when you grow up on the other side of the planet. So I thought, "Oh, I want to go to America. I love it. It just sounds so fun."

So I came to the States with my stepfather, and we went to Dallas, Texas, because he had some friends there, and we drove up from Dallas to San Francisco, so we saw part of America. As a kid, it was awesome—the Grand Canyon, you name it, a lot of fun. Basically America stuck with me, and I thought, "I kind of want to stay here."

So my father went back, and I decided to stay in Dallas, Texas. I stayed there for a year, and in Dallas, everything was too big. I remember saying that. As a kid, I'd call home and say, "Everything's huge here." For instance, you never see lowriders in Italy, the ones with the neon lights underneath. Here, it's the norm. As a fifteen-year-old kid, I thought, "This is amazing," the gigantic huge trucks that, to me, were like a monster car crusher, but everyone drives one of those in Nevada. So it was fun. I basically ended up saying, "I want to stay here." So in my later teenage years, I grew up here in the States, always going back to Italy and visiting my family, but this was starting to become my home.

I moved up to the Bay Area after being in Dallas, Texas for a year, to stay with my grandfather, and lived in Marin County for a while and worked at Point Reyes Station, at restaurants. That was my first start in the industry where we are now. I remember I was sixteen and some change, and my grandfather said, "I can get you a job as a busboy at Point Reyes Station," where there was a little café. I was a busboy there, and it was more of a summertime gig.

Then over time, I made a trip up here to learn how to snowboard at Boreal, and I ended up getting stuck up in the Nevadas, in the mountains. I started to go to college here at TMCC as well, which is where Sadie and I actually first met forever ago. International business was my major because I thought since I traveled as a kid, I had a little bit of that under my belt. So I thought, "That's something I want to do."

I ended up doing a couple years, and then decided to open a bar here in Reno. That's when I got stuck in the industry and then never really left. I was in and out of the business, and then in 2011, I thought, "Okay. I think I need to start getting serious." I was working for a couple of different places in town. I worked at Granite Street for a year.

Bonnette: Well, and we had Luca. We had our son. [laughs]

Fontana: We had our son along the way. And I thought, “Well, I guess I’ve got to start making some serious life choices and whatever I can do as a, quote, unquote, ‘career.’” Not that I really had one, because I didn’t finish college. But I thought, “Okay. Let’s see. I think I like the service industry.” So we decided in the same year that we were going to have our son Luca, that we were going to open a restaurant, right?

Bonnette: I don’t even remember how that happened. It just happened. We had Luca in March, and we opened Midtown in August.

Fontana: Correct. We got the lease in June. That’s right. We did the build-out.

Bonnette: We got the lease, but we did the build-out. So for him it started in June, but we didn’t officially open until August. [laughs] It was an interesting time. I was ready to leave advertising. The market here in Reno is a little challenging, and when you get in these agencies, the bread and butter is always the stuff that’s less creative and not as fun. I’m sure you know this from freelancing. You get to do the things that you love. I had started my own freelance business and was doing that a little bit on the side, and I wanted to get out of the industry, but we were pregnant. [laughs] So I stuck with it, and then it just got to the point that I couldn’t do it anymore.

We were working so hard. I was fortunate that my mom came and helped us out. I would take lunch from Inner West, and then I would come to the restaurant to work a lunch shift, and then go back to work and finish up there, and then come back at three o’clock and do that in-between shift from three to five, and then I’d go home to relieve my mom and be with our new son. That went on for a few months, I think. Gosh. We were very nervous to take the full leap because we were starting a new business. I had a steady salary income that we were banking on, but it just got to the point that I just couldn’t do it anymore.

Fontana: Too much juggling.

Bonnette: We did that for August. In October, I finally gave my notice, and then we thought, “All right. It’s all or nothing. Here we go.” I remember I just was exhausted.

Barber: Tell me what went into opening that restaurant and looking for locations. Were you open to a lot of different places, or were you interested in that neighborhood specifically? The spot we’re talking about is where the current location is, although I know it’s not for long, but it is 719 South Virginia Street. That space had been a restaurant before. In fact, it had been a restaurant for decades.

Fontana: Forever.

Barber: Can you tell me a little bit about the decision of where to locate and how that came about?

Fontana: Yes. Our first house is right here on Wheeler Street, and so we already were in the Midtown area, living there.

Barber: West of Wells.

Fontana: West of Wells, right.

Bonnette: We were very close.

Fontana: Yes. And we were starting to see a slight bit of movement and change, like people were talking about how 4<sup>th</sup> Street was going to start getting cleaned up.

Bonnette: I feel like Reno's been very long overdue for that change. It would be California Avenue, they always thought, or "Wells, this is going to be the new Mission," like the Mission District, and it would start growing and then fizzle out. I don't think we quite anticipated how—

Fontana: How Midtown was going to blow up.

Bonnette: Right.

Fontana: No, not entirely. But from traveling the world as a kid, I feel like I had a good glimpse of how organically, certain styles start changing and certain movements start happening.

Bonnette: We lived in the neighborhood, so we could see the change every day.

Fontana: Right. The coffee shop here was a great example, when Mark Trujillo opened up the Hub. There was really not much on the street, if you want to call it that, and then Süp was literally in the Midtown area, as far as a locally owned business doing something a little bit different out of the norm of casinos—

Bonnette: And dive bars.

Fontana: —and being a more mom-and-pop business. So I felt like there was starting to be a little bit of a resurgence of more locally young entrepreneur, like-minded businesspeople that had started roots in Reno, whether they were far back or not, who decided that this was their home, so let's start building the format of a community.

When I heard through the grapevine that Süp was going to be moving and they were in the location where Midtown Eats is now, I thought, "Oh, I remember that place." When I was a kid, when I first came to Reno, I went to Luciano's, which was the Italian restaurant there, and I, being of Italian background, know Luciano. He was a friend of my mom's when she was staying here for a while. So it made a little connection. I thought, "Oh, that'd be really weird if we ended up there." We thought, let's find out if they want to lease to us, if they're interested in leasing it out. And it just so happened that it all worked out, and they said, "Yes."

I had a good friend, and we decided to open a restaurant together—me, Sadie, and the chef that was supposed to start out with us. We decided we were going to basically open a restaurant, not knowing anything about the restaurant industry. I knew about the bar industry, I knew about service, I'd worked at



restaurants, but this was running a restaurant and basically putting all your money on the line and saying, “Hey, guess what? Let’s see what happens.”

We opened up that restaurant with every single bit of our life savings that we had put together throughout the years together, and that’s it. No financial backers, no loans, nothing. When you have \$150,000, \$200,000, half a million to spend to open a business, then it’s different, right? For us, it was, “Okay, we need \$10,000 here because we’ve got to make sure that we have this set aside for the booze order that we’re going to have to purchase at the beginning.” And I feel that we were frugal but did extremely well basically opening a restaurant on a very minimal budget.



Midtown Eats opened at 719 South Virginia Street in 2011. Photo courtesy Midtown Eats.

Bonnette: Ivan was working at another restaurant at the time, so all day he would be there with a finishing carpenter, and he was sanding tables and building shelves, all of that—

Fontana: We built the whole restaurant in five weeks.

Bonnette: It was a labor of love, and then he would go to work. So we were both working double-duty for a while there.

Barber: Did you have experience in carpentry or any kind of design?



Fontana: Not too much experience in carpentry. I had a good friend, Jay Barkl, who was a really good friend from when I used to own a bar back in the day, here in Reno. He was a regular of mine, and he used to own his construction company. I said, “Hey, are you ever interested in helping me build out a restaurant?” It was basically more the finishing touches. We had walls, we had floors, we had 80 percent of the plumbing, so it was a matter of paint and build out. We literally built everything up from scratch.

Bonnette: It was cosmetic.

Fontana: Right. I bought all the barnwood from Ty at Craft for \$500, and half the restaurant is built out from that. If we were to have bought lumber for that restaurant, it would have cost us quadruple that. So I feel I made some good connections with people who were reaching out, asking them, “Hey, what do you have?” He said, “I have a whole roomful of old barn wood. I don’t even know what I’m going to do with it. I used everything I needed.”

So it worked out, and literally everything in that restaurant, pretty much, other than the chairs, is built out of reclaimed wood. Everything’s been reclaimed. That was kind of our theme, secondhand, because we were broke. [laughs] We said, guess what? If we can find something that’s been used and also still has a little bit of character—and it was when the whole Farmwood scene in New York and San Francisco had already taken off. That was the new look as far as all that goes.

So that’s where Sadie stepped in with her expertise as a designer with a really good niche for design in whatever realm it is, whether it’s graphic design or interior design. She had all the ideas for that restaurant, and it just came together in a very minimalistic format, and I feel that it’s done strides for—

Bonnette: Well, in the end, it made for a little niche-y place, but it was because I was buying vintage glassware from the thrift stores because we couldn’t afford to buy the fancy Ronas that we have now, and piecing together silverware, and we just played off everything being recycled and reclaimed. That’s what it was based on, and it ended up working. But in the end, it was only because we had no money. [laughs] We were pinching pennies there at the end.

Barber: Did you feel like that was a natural expansion of your design interest and expertise, to move into interior design, or was there a big learning curve there?

Bonnette: Yes. I think there’s still a big learning curve. Sometimes when I sit here and I look around, I’m amazed. If you have an eye for things, it’s definitely a different way of putting things together. You put things together in a computer one way, and it’s very one-dimensional interior design. There’s the fun stuff—lighting’s not actually my favorite, but there’s lighting, and then you have to get down to crucial things that make the space work, which gets tricky, making sure there are outlets and then outlet covers and door hinges. And it gets nerve-racking because something that seems as small as a small room has all of these little complex pieces that go together. I am a detail geek, so I get a little anxiety over it, because I can’t stop. I think, “That’s not the right hook. I’m going to keep looking until I find the right hook to hang those.” Every little piece has to work. And then later you step back and there are certain things I wish I would have done differently, but it’s just the way it goes. Next project.

But every project has been a learning experience. Midtown Eats was definitely just cosmetic. We came over here [to Death & Taxes] and knocked out a wall and had to redo the bathrooms, so it was

picking out toilets and tile and things that aren't very romantic or exciting, but they all make a room work. And then we moved on to this big project [the new Midtown Eats location] where we just gutted it and started completely over.

Barber: We'll get to that in a minute. So with Midtown, the Sheas owned that whole building?

Fontana: Yes.

Barber: I would imagine that part of the appeal of doing something that was entirely new to you, which was a restaurant, was that it's a cozy space, right? It's not too big.

Bonnette: Yes.

Barber: So was that part of your business plan, to have it start small? Did you have some sense of what kind of business you could anticipate? We know that Süp was very busy, and that was part of the reason they were moving, I suppose, right?

Fontana: We had done a little bit of research, traveling around in bigger cities like San Francisco and New York, and seeing a million places just like Midtown Eats all over, in big cities. Basically, rent is extremely high, so therefore they're going to try and get as much in that little space as possible, whether it has to do with a menu or clientele, you name it.

We pick and pull, because we knew that you would go to a lot of restaurants in Reno back in the day, and everything was more spaced out. So we were worried about having tables with literally a foot to a foot-and-a-half distance between each table, and we thought, how are people going to understand that? Then we traveled, and we thought, "Well, we're sitting on someone's lap, basically, right here, and everyone's having a great time."

Bonnette: Right. Originally, it was because we felt it was manageable. This was our first restaurant. We didn't want to go in doing something massive and then fail because our overhead was too high. There are thirty-two seats in that restaurant. Covering the front-of-the-house shifts could almost be done by Ivan and myself and two other employees at the front of the house, just making that work. So in that sense, we could do it. And I love the intimate coziness of the space. When you go into places in San Francisco, it's not like you're just there with the people you came with; you're there as a whole, enjoying the whole experience.

Barber: How did you decide what kind of food you wanted to offer?

Fontana: Sadie was pregnant, and her deal was she was craving hamburgers. At least she wasn't craving anchovies or something, but I'm just saying. So she was craving hamburgers, and we had gone around and tried to find the best hamburger in Reno, if you want to call it that. We were searching, going to numerous different spots, and not having great success. So it led us to thinking, guess what? Let's open a burger joint, and let's do some cool little spinoff from your regular hamburger, lettuce, bacon, and tomato kind of deal. And I think it really took off. We tried to source out the best-quality ground meat we could. We started grinding it, grass-fed beef, and we started finding—

Bonnette: It was trial and error.

Fontana: Yes, a lot of trial and error, and I feel like we narrowed down entirely what we wanted to do. And we were also doing some entrées. The restaurant has mutated and gone through a lot of movement and change. We had veal and sweetbreads on there, and bone marrow, but then we always went back to the core, which is that we're an artisanal burger joint at the end of the day.

Bonnette: And comfort, I think. We started focusing more on comfort food. Before, we were doing the odds and ends kind of stuff that you couldn't necessarily find everywhere else. And yes, we've mutated and changed over the years. The burgers have always been a staple on the menu, and I feel that we've refined those to the point where we think they're pretty close to being perfect, in our eyes. And then we started focusing more on things that make you happy, like tomato soup and grilled cheese and chicken pot pie. [laughs]

Fontana: With quality ingredients.

Bonnette: Just making sure that you're delivering something that's better quality than what you get at some other places around.

Barber: So tell me about the reception of it. Once you opened, how were things received and how did it go at first? Did it surprise you? What was that like?

Fontana: Crazy. Immense surprise. I'm telling you, from day one. It's different when you're already a restaurateur in a town and people know your name. For instance, not to pat ourselves on the back, but if we were to go and open a place somewhere else, people would think, "Oh, Ivan and Sadie from Death & Taxes, from Midtown Eats. Oh, okay. We have to go check that out." Not then.

Bonnette: We were no one.

Fontana: We were just nobodies, and we said, "We're going to open a restaurant." And Sadie knew the *Edible* ladies, Amanda Burden and Jaci Goodman.

Bonnette: I had worked with them.

Fontana: She worked with them on some stuff. And they were our only contacts in the food world in Reno, people who knew us and knew what we were thinking about doing. So day one, we opened up, and I thought, "There's not going to be anybody in here. We're going to be dead."

Bonnette: We thought we'd open and we were going to have some time to get to know things. It had been a while since I had done that kind of work—I mean, I did some bartending and waiting on tables, but it was scattered through my career, like little summer things to make extra money and nothing very serious and nothing long term. So I thought I'd have time to just get back into the swing of things. And it did not happen like that. We were just thrown into it.

Fontana: Day one we were slammed, slammed, and I was running around with my head chopped off—

Bonnette: With Luca in a— [laughs]

Fontana: Yes. In the Baby Björn, and shaking cocktails and running around and just looking like a complete mess, in retrospect. But who's going to complain that from day one it was like that? And it didn't stop, because there was nothing much in the Midtown area, and it was the very beginning of a slight resurgence in Midtown. So, "What's going on? Oh, we heard of that one place." I can't exaggerate. We were cranking out in that little place. We were at full restaurant at twelve o'clock at night in the summertime, eating and drinking. Who does that in Reno now, anyway? It was a really weird time.

Bonnette: But I think it really worked out well that Süp was also in the area, because there weren't any other options. Midtown's not necessarily the easiest place to get to, especially from the freeway, sometimes, and the parking—I know people complain about the parking. Sometimes it's a little hard. But it was nice for both of us, I felt, because one place would be full, and people had a second option to walk up the street and not have to get in their car again. You know, it could be frustrating if they'd have to go find somewhere else to eat across town because they wasted fifteen minutes of their break driving all the way over here. So I think we played nicely off of each other for a while.

It's interesting to see the change now, because I know we were slammed and crazy busy, but we were a destination because people weren't just here already, walking around. Now some people just wander past and ask, "Can we check out your menu?" It's completely different from how it was when we first opened.

Barber: The bar was always known and the cocktail list was always known at Midtown Eats as something that was very special, and obviously a lot of work was put into that. That's something you've really brought to new heights here at Death & Taxes. But let's talk about what your thoughts were when you were first starting with the cocktails, with the drink menu, at Midtown Eats. Most burger places, obviously, don't have a cocktail list of that type. Can you talk a little bit about putting that together, what your thoughts were about it?

Fontana: Yes. Throughout the time of opening the restaurant and traveling and eating and drinking at different restaurants, I started to gravitate towards the cocktail program world, as understanding booze, understanding ingredients, correlating them in a culinary sense, and then starting growth in that format. So we opened up Midtown Eats and I thought, well, I wanted to do a fun cocktail list at the same time. Why couldn't you have a good hamburger and a cocktail? You don't *only* have to have a beer. We will always have beer. Why can't we have a decent balanced cocktail?

I was just talking about this with one of my employees yesterday, looking back at the growth that we've made in our cocktail program. It has been a lot of fun, and all that is, is basically showing passion for a certain format of work that you do. You could do the same thing in graphic design, say, "Oh, I used to do this and I can't believe I'm doing this now," as far as your expertise.

We decided to set out and do a slightly more involved cocktail program over at Midtown Eats, doing as much as we could in-house, from syrups to infusions to certain different ingredients, and even

growing some of the herbs, like mint and basil, so that we could ensure the same quality ingredients. And that's been the most important priority at our restaurant. Not everything has to be extremely expensive, but you do get what you pay for. If you want a cocktail with not just plastic bottle vodka in it, then you're going to have to spend a little bit more for that bottle of vodka. Therefore, the end result is the customer's going to have to spend a little bit more, but are they eating and drinking something that is higher quality and better at the end of the day? Yes. So it evens out. That's where we started with the Midtown Eats cocktail program, and then it slightly evolved, and that was what I wanted to do.

Bonnette: And I think that was probably one of our hardest stumbling blocks when we did open, was the cost. I mean, we had people on a daily basis who asked, "Why am I going to pay—?"

Fontana: Ten bucks for a cocktail.

Bonnette: Ten bucks for a cocktail. Or, "Why would I pay thirteen dollars for a hamburger when I can go get Awful Awful?" And I said that's fine, but you eat the Awful Awful, and it's a good burger, and I love it, but it makes me feel awful afterwards. I want something that's better quality, and the same with the cocktails. Being in Reno, you can get a Bud Lite and a hot dog for \$1.99, so a lot of those people would come in and were totally turned off. But we're happy that we did—

Fontana: Stick to our guns.

Bonnette: We stuck to our guns and did find some of the right people. The right clientele is obviously here, and it was interesting to watch the other bars around, too. Some of their prices were rather low, some of the other cocktail bars, and now their prices have caught up with ours, which is interesting, because there was a time when I would think, "How can you sell a craft cocktail for six dollars? What is in that?" [laughs]

Fontana: It's all about the margin. And when it comes down to business, you have to understand, yes, I want to put out a great product and I want people to like it, and I want people to like our restaurant, but we also need to survive. I feel like Sadie and I have honed in on trying to be both creative and management, and most restaurants and restaurant groups, they have an entire training for what I just said. So it is extremely difficult, extremely tricky, and, yes, we start at five-thirty in the morning, and I don't get home until one, two in the morning. So it's that constant, constant drive, but it's because we have a passion for what we do. And I think that's why we go back to certain restaurants, because we find that same like-mindedness with these people who work here, who love what they do. And that's why we keep coming back, because everything's great. And why is everything great? Because everybody loves what they do, from cooking to washing dishes, literally, to making drinks.

Barber: I'd like to know how the idea for Death & Taxes developed. When you opened Midtown Eats, did you always have the plan of opening another establishment after that?

Fontana: Not really.

Bonnette: No.

Fontana: Not really at all.

Bonnette: When we originally opened Midtown Eats, we went in with a partner, and he was back of the house, and we did the restaurant thing. And then Ivan and I were talking and in the end, we wanted something for Luca, something that was for him. It's fine when you're involved with partners, but we wanted something else. You get in with partners and you start realizing there are those power struggles, and we wanted something for ourselves and for our family, and that's when the idea came.

We had gone to Bourbon & Branch in San Francisco and were just blown away. It was the whole experience. The cocktails were great, the atmosphere was great, and it was kind of quirky in the way that you had to use your password and make a reservation, and we just fell in love with it.

In our minds, one of the things that was greatly lacking here in Reno was that there was no cocktail lounge, no cocktail bar. I feel like even places that do craft cocktails, are still very much a bar. They still have TVs and they're still pouring twenty beers, and it's still loud. And for us, especially after having Luca and being older, getting a night out is rare, and we want it to be special, and we wanted a special place where we could go and not get bumped or beer spilled on you or harassed or whatever it may be. You want to go chill out and have a cocktail and enjoy that, because it's an experience.

So we had that idea, and I know it was not very well received by a lot of people in the community. Oddly enough, when we did, fortunately, find a spot and they found out we were going in here, they had signed a petition because they didn't want another bar in this area. It was a very hard battle to overcome, the perception that we were not just another bar. Because they see Shea's, and think, "We don't need another one of those. We don't need another Bar USA." People just heard the alcohol aspect of what we were trying to do and couldn't grasp the concept.

Barber: That was neighbors in this area?

Bonnette: Yes.

Barber: I wasn't aware of that.

Bonnette: Yes. And they actually took a petition around and had it signed, trying to bring it up to the city to not allow us to open.

Fontana: Another reason why we were opening was, yes, I started wanting to really do a cocktail program and just concentrate on that, but, secondly, the truth of the matter was the restaurant had been opened for a year and some change, and we were just constantly busy, constantly with a minimum of an hour wait. People would say, "Well, where do we go? What do we do while we're waiting?" So they would stumble to Shea's or Public House, which for our clientele maybe wasn't the best place.

Bonnette: Public House on a Friday, Saturday night can get kind of rowdy, and we would have older, more sophisticated folks trying to enjoy a nice dinner, and they would come in and say, "Why did you send me over there? I don't understand why you would send me over there. Can I just have a drink here?" And we would say yes, but we're such a tiny place, there wasn't any room for anybody to wait. So that was also part of it.

Fontana: There was nowhere to wait. People were filling up the doorway. People were filling up the entrance to the kitchen.

Bonnette: So then they would ask, “Don’t you have anywhere that has drinks? We want the drinks here. It would be so great if we could just come and have drinks here.” We were getting that all the time. So we started looking somewhere close.

Fontana: That’s basically what happened. We put our ears to the ground and then started talking to people: “Hey, we’re looking for a place to lease to put in a little cocktail bar, just something simple, small.” And that’s what led us to Death & Taxes. Simple and small. Not simple, but small. [Barber laughs.]

Bonnette: It’s definitely greatly expanded.



Death & Taxes, at 26 Cheney Street. Photo posted on Yelp by Travis E.

Barber: So what was this place like? The address here is 26 Cheney Street.

Bonnette: It was 26 and 30 Cheney, so originally it was a duplex with a two-car garage, which was the Hub’s original location. They originally built that out. And Blue Whale Coffee is there now. What was it like physically?

Barber: I'd like to know how—

Fontana: It was somebody's house. We know that. When we got it, it still looked like it.

Bonnette: There were bathtubs in the bathroom.

Fontana: There were bathtubs.

Bonnette: Yes. So it was split in half. This is the brick chimney that runs down the middle, so that's where the wall was. Everything was white. It was completely different.

Fontana: Complete mirror image, right? Like any old duplex in Reno that you can think of that has turned into mixed use, it was commercial and livable. Many times, even now, you'll go in to one of those and it'll still look like a house. So the transformation of this was fun because we thought, "Okay. Well, this is a bar. We've got to clean it up. It's going to be a little more high-end bar." So we've got to do what we can do, same thing, back on a budget. [laughs]



The interior of Death and Taxes. Photo courtesy of Death & Taxes.

Bonnette: Well, I have a good friend and she has a very nice touch with things and she was probably one of the people who inspired me, because you'd go to her house and her house was just so beautiful, and I'd ask, "Oh, can I sit on this couch? Is it okay if I drink out of this glass?" And she'd say, "Yeah, that's what it's for." She just has very nice taste and very nice collection of things.



So when we had gotten this space, I had asked her, “Hey, I’m going to take on this project, and it’s kind of bigger than me. Would you be willing to come check out the space?”

And she said, “Well, you should definitely play on the fact that it’s a mirror image.” I think that was probably her idea, where we really tried to work with the space that we had and made it a perfect mirror image. So every time I had to find something, I had to find two or four, which kind of became a pain. And then we had to swap the doors, just funny little things. Even though it is a small space, we wanted to play with things. The bathrooms are very obvious and open to the whole entire room, and we have an issue with that, but it’s the way the space was, and we didn’t have the money to redo everything.

Barber: Oh, you mean the door to the bathrooms?

Bonnette: Yes. It’s very obvious. So we tried to play on it by printing “Office” on the doors, like, “I’m going to the office,” so it wasn’t so blatant that it’s the women’s restroom or the men’s restroom very much in the middle of the room.

Barber: Now, you were leasing, though.

Fontana: We were.

Barber: So doing these kinds of improvements while you’re just leasing this space, how does that work? Did you have to get approval for everything from the owner of the building?

Fontana: Right. What happened was we met with the owners of the building, we told them what we were doing, we signed the ten-year lease, and we were ready to rock and roll. And we didn’t know what we were getting into. We’d go to the city, we’d start putting in for plans and all that, and we’d be told, “No. Everything has to be brought up to code,” from electrical to plumbing, you name it. Everything was old knob and tube electrical, all old plumbing. And it came to the point where we thought, “We’re getting into a lot higher than we knew we were getting into.” Just for the raw details, we were looking at a lot more money.

So we talked to the landlord. We said, “Listen, obviously this is not our building. We’re putting in improvements that are going to stay with the building. How can we work with you?” There was a lot of back-and-forth about this, that, and the other.

In the end, we just said, “Well, look. We signed a ten-year lease. We have to do things the way we want it, not entirely, and we have to make sure that we can work here. We can’t cut every corner.” And at the end of the day, the city was holding us up to it. If you want to put a bar in here, you need to bring the electrical up to par, up to code. So that’s basically where it put it us, and so we ended up talking to the landlords. Long story short, we said, “Hey, look. Here are the receipts. Here’s what ended up happening.”

Bonnette: “This is what we’ve put into this to this point.”

Fontana: “Where can we come to some common ground?”

“Well, you can buy the place.”

Okay. Now that we spent all this money on the build-out, where's the down payment going to come from? It worked out.

Bonnette: We got really lucky working with them.

Fontana: They were awesome.

Bonnette: They were awesome. We got to put a portion of the TIs [tenant improvements] towards the down, which covered the down payment, which really helped us out.

Barber: So you did purchase it.

Fontana: We did.

Bonnette: This and the coffee shop.

Fontana: And the coffee shop, yes. That's what's started our new thinking, that we're going stay in this industry now, and we want to make it a slightly lengthy career. If you ask anybody, that's the only way you're going to get ahead in this business. This business is difficult.

Bonnette: Well, and leasing is very challenging, especially when you're doing TIs, because everything has to be approved by somebody, and they may not necessarily agree, or it's just going to come out-of-pocket; they're not going to approve it and not help you with the funds. And then the management. It's great that if something happens in the space, we know we're accountable, and we take care of it. We're not waiting for somebody. I mean, we haven't had the best of luck leasing, and that is also what has prompted us to move. [laughs]

Barber: Let's talk a little bit about what this space enabled you to do with your cocktail program, because you significantly expanded things once you were here. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Fontana: Yes. We were able to really concentrate on just drinks, just the customers and drinks, and not concentrate as much on having to juggle the food aspect. That's when I just started really, really getting serious about the fact that, "Look. We're going to do everything we possibly can here other than distilling booze," because that's not legal, right? But you name it, everything else, we were trying—we tried a certain spirit that was infused with this, that, and the other, and we thought, "Okay, cool. We can do that."

We started doing research, and I give big huge props to different people, older people in this industry that we look up to, from reading their books—Dave Arnold being one of them, *Liquid Intelligence* and stuff like that—because we want to keep pushing the envelope with our craft, with what we do.

That's really what has happened at Death & Taxes, and I know our clients can tell us the same thing. When they've come to our bar from day one and have seen how our cocktail lists have changed, how much more involved they are, the more sourced-out rare ingredients—that's what I started honing on and really concentrating on, not just can I make a lot of money on a cocktail in a cocktail bar. That's not

necessarily what I want to do. I want to wow people in the format so they think, “I’ve read all those ingredients and I can’t believe I really taste all those ingredients in this cocktail.” That is really, at the end of the day, my biggest pet peeve in drinks, when I go out and read this, that, and the other. That’s fine. You can put a million different words on there that people don’t even know, and they start pulling out their phones and Googling all this stuff: “Okay, cool. This is an artichoke amato. Well, I don’t taste it.” My philosophy is that if I’m going to source-out all these crazy things, now we need to make sure that it’s actually still understood by the customer. And it actually transpires.

That’s called balance. You have to learn your palate and learn how to balance that within your own palate. And not everybody has the same palate, so now if you say, “Well, I love really bitter stuff,” that’s fine. But this is too bitter for seven people. And if it’s too bitter for seven people, it’s actually too bitter, I feel. So that’s how I do my research and work and gauging our cocktail program.

When we do a cocktail list lunch at Death & Taxes and at Midtown, the entire staff comes in. I make all the drinks. We all drink them. We talk about them. We critique this, that, and the other, and maybe something gets changed here and there. It’s not, “Here’s paperwork, print out the cocktail list, let’s go.” It is still organic. It is also a joint effort. There’s always going to be a leader because it has to be that way, and this is the position that we want to drive in. Now let’s see where we can pick and pull on certain stuff.

Sadie’s been a huge influence on my cocktail program due to being a man and woman and having different preferences with food and drink. I’ve been able to bounce a lot more ideas off of her because we’re always together, and she’s also in the industry. It’s different than when you’re asking just anybody, “Hey, what does this cocktail taste like to you?” and they’re not even understanding how to dissect it.

Now, at Death & Taxes, my most important question is “How can I keep pushing the envelope within my program?” I will see other people’s drinks, I will go to different bars, and I will get ideas.

Bonnette: It’s always a working vacation. [laughs]

Fontana: It’s always a working vacation. If somebody puts mace in a cocktail, I think, “That’s interesting. I wonder what it would be like if I did that with this spirit,” or this, that, and the other. Constantly, the wheels are always turning. If the wheels are always turning, then that means you’re progressing. I feel when you place yourself a plateau, thinking, “I know I’m a great bartender,” or, “I’m a great chef, and this is what we do here”—when you put yourself in that bracket, that’s when I feel you’re not accomplishing things.

When you’re always learning and you know you always have room for improvement—for instance, the cocktails that I did when I was first opening up Death & Taxes, I might not do those now. I may be a little more involved, and in retrospect, I think, “That wasn’t necessarily right for me.” That’s the constant progression and constant movement, wanting to always learn and never feel like you’ve already got it. I think that’s where people are actually heading. I see that in the cocktail world when we travel in big cities where there are very well-known, renowned bartenders. You can see, it’s not like they’re saying, “This is how I do it and this is the best way.” No. It’s constant growth.

Barber: It’s interesting, because you’re obviously always trying to educate yourself a little bit more, and then you actually instituted a program of offering classes to try to formally educate people about cocktails here. Can you talk a little bit about how that came about? And to your knowledge, was anyone else doing that in Reno when you began that program?

Fontana: I don't know, so I'm not going to say no. I feel that maybe there were some here and there, but not as in-depth. I don't think anybody reinvents the wheel ever, and if somebody says they did, then that's when their great-grandfather did.

I had gone to a class at Bourbon & Branch and I thought it was a lot of fun, and at the end of the day, that's all it really was. We weren't thinking, "Oh, we're going to start doing classes, so let's go and see what other people are doing." I was just starting to get interested in mezcal and I was interested in a mezcal class, so I thought, "Let's go take that class." And it was an absolute eye-opener, seeing the twenty or thirty people—because it was a larger class—who were having a blast, from every walk of life, from younger people to professionals.

That's basically when I decided, "Well, Reno doesn't really have anything like that going on, necessarily. Let's start working on that." And it took off. That's how Death & Taxes has become like an immense machine, because there's so much under this roof that we do, and because of something that I saw that I liked, we decided, "Let's go do it." Then you start putting together the pieces of the puzzle and the logistics, thinking, "Wow. Okay, we've got to juggle a class. We're going to open the bar at four o'clock. We have to make sure that everything is already lined up."

Bonnette: I feel like a large part of what Ivan does, not necessarily me and the other bartenders, is educating people. The more knowledge that people have about what they're actually consuming or drinking, about the love and the time that goes into that, the more knowledge and the more interest they crave. You're educating them, explaining, "No, it's not just a twelve-dollar cocktail. This is what's going into it." It gives it more value and promotes a greater appreciation and understanding of what it is.

And Ivan would get asked all the time, "Can I get the recipe for this? How do you do that? I want to do this at home." So it was also great to be able to offer that. We call it the guaranteed way to always get invited to all the best parties. You make one cocktail, you make it really well, and you bring it to every party. You're not bringing the potato salad. You're always going to come because you're bringing that great cocktail. It's something that in the fifties was very big and popular, home-bartending, and I think we've kind of lost that, but it's such a great, fun way to entertain, to have people over, and I think people love to do that.

Fontana: It's all coming back. That's what led us to do the classes, and that's what sealed the deal on it. Big restaurants do the same thing, asking, "What can we create?" At the end of the day, it's also a business decision. How can we create a little bit of extra revenue in this format here in our down time? Okay, the chef is going to do a tutorial on how he makes his Eggs Benedict or whatever it may happen to be. With renowned chefs in big cities, there are classes going on all the time. So we thought, "Let's start doing something like that in our format."

Like Sadie was saying, the more education that the guest has from this side of the bar and that side of the bar, the better experience you're going to have, no matter where you go. And that's what I said about the people who we were taking the class with in San Francisco. If you have more knowledge under your belt and more instruction, then when you go to a big bar—let's say you go to Death & Co. in New York, and you're on the waitlist just to get in, or you made a reservation and it's crammed, crazy packed, slammed, and you go sit at the bar and you try to have a conversation with the bartender who has fifteen tickets ahead of you, and you start saying, "Well, I'd kind of like something with vodka, but I don't know. I don't want anything sweet." When the person has a little bit of education, they will say

something like, “Look, I love bourbon, I love bitter, and I want it spirit forward. I don’t want any lemon juice or anything in it. I feel like a strong drink.”

Right then, with a small sentence like that, the bartender who is completely crazy packed and truthfully should not be giving you the time to dissect your order right now, is able to just fly with it. And at the end of the day, you might end up getting something that you didn’t necessarily anticipate, using some really fun odd ingredients you never heard about. But it was still in the vein of what you were wanting. When you order a burger, and you order it medium rare, minus the onion, it makes it a lot easier for you to get the burger the way you wanted it.

Learning the lingo of the bar world makes things more comfortable for both people. And that’s one of the more important things, because in other cities you go to, not everybody’s as nice, with great customer service. This dude might be one of the more famous bartenders in New York and he might have a little bit more of an attitude. So you coming in there stumbling on everything might make him start to shut down, but if you have a little nuance of what you’re talking about in the cocktail world, you might spark him to think, “Oh, yeah. I’m going to give this person the best mezcal drink that I have in my repertoire right now.” We find that all the time when we go to different bars. It’s a little bit more accessible. So that was also the reason.

And then most importantly, like Sadie said, when you go to a party and you are the one person who brings the cocktails or the booze or the punch, it’s something that people are left with as a wow. “The steaks were crazy awesome,” and then, “Jesus, that punch was out of control. I need that again.” And we’ve done that to ourselves numerous times. We have a punch right now that we love and we want to have it three times this month.

Bonnette: I think once we drank a punch bowl between the two of us before anybody showed up.  
[laughter]

Fontana: Right. So at the end of the day, more education is better for everybody.

Bonnette: There’s also the nice camaraderie that it builds. They’re not just a customer on the other end of the bar. They’re more involved in the process of understanding what’s happening.

Barber: And people have known this about wine forever, right? It’s part of the wine culture, for people to learn about wine and go to a winery. So it makes sense.

Bonnette: It’s an evolution.

Bonnette: And it’s the same way with food, too. Ivan always often jokes because the mise en place that he sets up and his prep, it’s very much like what you do in a restaurant, only the ingredients are alcohol instead of tomatoes and onions and everything else.

Barber: It seems sort of amazing that you would end up with the new restaurant, the new location for Midtown Eats, right next door. Can you tell me how this came about? Were these properties, the coffee shop, Death & Taxes, and the new location, all owned by the same person before?

Bonnette: This is all one property with the three parcels on it, 26, 30, and 32 Cheney, so it's Death & Taxes and the old Hub. We haven't had the greatest experience with our current landlord at Midtown Eats, so we had been looking for quite some time for a place to move. It's always been in the back of our minds that we needed to move. I don't know if we were ever necessarily looking to expand, but definitely to find a new location. So we had just been keeping our eyes out and poking around.

Every once in a while, we would see William Short, who owned the building next door across the alley. His wife, Pamela, owned the salon, but no one was ever really there. They just had this business, and she'd be in for a couple of hours during the week and that was kind of it. We didn't know what was going on. So Ivan and I were talking one day, and I said, "You know what would be a great spot? The place next door." And we thought, "Oh, that will never happen. That will never happen." And Ivan said, "Well, I see him. I'll just tell him, 'Hey, if you ever think about selling, let me know.'" I believe it was around tax time. He was a CPA, so the only time he was really around was tax season time, before April. In February and March he would be there a little bit more frequently, and Ivan said, "Oh, I'm seeing him a lot."

So Ivan approached him one day, as he was leaving, and just said, "Hey, William." You know, we kind of knew each other because we were neighbors. We would see each other in passing.

Fontana: He'd see the build-outs, see the movement, and see that we were a young couple, that we had a kid.

Bonnette: Right. So Ivan just one day said, "Hey, if you're ever looking to sell, keep us in mind. We're interested in your building if you'd ever want to sell."

Fontana: We had no money. We always get ourselves in a position of, "Well, let's see," meaning probably not, but no harm.

Bonnette: We were in no position. But his response was, "Okay, if you're serious—."

Fontana: Basically, "Name the price."

Bonnette: He said, "Come back to me after taxes and give me a proposal. Let me know." We were shocked, and then we started negotiations, and it was crazy. He had bought that building for his wife, who had gotten sick, and so she was never really there, and he told us, "I never wanted this. I bought it for her and I'm never here, and it's just that I couldn't get out of it."

Fontana: It was crazy. And honestly, he was an amazing person. There are certain people in our young business life—we're not very seasoned, if you want to call it that—but looking back, I feel that we have a knack for understanding what we want and then trying to gravitate to how we can make that happen. William Short would come here and have a beer with me, and we'd just chat. And he would say, "Oh, I like what you did to this place," and this, that, and the other. So being slightly business-minded, I noticed that it made a little impact on him. He thought, "I like what I see." So that was literally his turning point.

Bonnette: He was a very respectable man.

Fontana: Just the fact that he would say yes to some young couple, we thought, “Really?” He asked, “Do you want to buy my building? What backers do you have? Do you come from a ton of money?” And we could start discussing. But I feel now, and looking back to the whole situation, it was his way of giving back, because throughout the process, we were trying to buy the building, but obviously we had just bought this one.

Bonnette: We were having some financial strife in trying to make everything work, and I was trying to take out another SBA, and things just weren’t lining up the way that we had hoped, and it was a little bit of a struggle. And during that time, I guess William was approached by a larger financial backer who said that they wanted to buy the building.

Fontana: Cash.

Bonnette: Yes. He could easily have dropped us, but he chose to work with us. In the end, he was willing to do an owner-carried note with us, and he’s the one who made it all possible. There was some connection there. We were very, very fortunate that it all happened the way it did, because there was opportunity for us to lose it.

Fontana: Right. Entirely. We had signed paperwork to purchase it for way less, and somebody had offered him cash. So that’s the turning point when we realized that he wanted to give it to us, and he said that numerous times. Even his wife would say that. He’d say, “We want it to go to you.” It’s like the grandfather having the old Chevy, and saying, “I’m not just going to sell it. I’m going to give it to my grandson or I’m going to give it to my son,” or whatever. I feel it was that way.

And then throughout the entire process of doing paperwork and when everything got signed, and this, that, and the other, everything went well. And then a month later, he passed away.

Bonnette: It was a few months.

Fontana: And nobody knew. His wife didn’t know, his daughter didn’t know. Nobody knew that he had a terminal disease.

Bonnette: They didn’t know he was sick.

Fontana: He actually had a blood disease of some sort. I don’t know 100 percent what it was, but he knew and nobody else knew.

Now he’s in the sky, and to me, it was his way of saying, “This is how I’m giving back to somebody in the community.” Because from a businessman’s standpoint, he did not do the business move very intelligently. He should have sold it for the cash price and been done with it, given his people money here and there. It was his way of, I guess, giving to us. So we’re really, really blessed, and so that’s what given us the drive to stick with this gigantic, gigantic build-out.

Barber: Well, tell me about it. How’s it going? What are the plans?

Fontana: We're very close. We've done literally everything, we had just a shell left. We had just the brick walls.

Bonnette: We had to replace half the floor.

Fontana: Half the floor had to be replaced entirely, truss and everything, support beams, you name it.

Bonnette: All electrical, all plumbing, all heating and air-conditioning, everything.

Fontana: Huge, huge, huge, huge build out.

Barber: So it had never been a restaurant.

Fontana: No. It was a salon, a salon supply shop, and a flower shop. It was numerous things in the past, but never ever was it a restaurant.

Bonnette: There was always a salon in half of it, half a salon or a hair supply.

Fontana: Yes. So now we're in finish carpentry mode. We've done all of the big bulk stuff. The electrical is done, and we put in a brand-new crazy kitchen floor. Like Sadie said earlier, we opened up Midtown Eats, and we would have been absolutely insane trying to open the restaurant that we're doing right now in our early career in the restaurant industry. Now we know a little bit more about everything.

Bonnette: In every project, we learned. [laughs]

Fontana: Yes. Every project is a learning process, but now, having a little bit under our belt, all the little nuances of how this should happen, we're going to be able to tackle the bigger restaurant in a way better format.

Bonnette: When we originally were looking for a space for Midtown Eats, we wanted an existing restaurant, because we knew that that's the most cost-effective way. Coming in here, it's obviously all about location, being next door to our sister location.

Fontana: And it's not far from our prior location. Because we now have a regular clientele base, we have people who travel from across town to eat or drink at both places, and a lot of regulars in the area who walk down to the place. It would be very different if we were saying, "Hey, Midtown Eats is closed in Midtown, but Midtown Eats is now open south of town." It wouldn't make too much sense for us, and would be in opposition to the name of the restaurant. It was meant to be your neighborhood eatery, your neighborhood joint to go eat and drink and have a good time and be able to walk home. And since Midtown is our home and was our home, we didn't think anything otherwise.

That's what led us to saying, "Well, we need to move because our lease is running out in a few years." And either you close down the business of a fairly well-known Reno staple, or you try to keep it going. We look up to businesses that have been around forever, LuLou's and Casale's....



Bonnette: Miguel's.

Fontana: Miguel's. They can thrive, but a lot of it is because they're family-operated and -owned businesses. It's not like Chevy's, which opened up south of town and closed in six months. I don't know if that was the right restaurant name. If corporations move in and out, it doesn't work very well. They'll just shut it down, and move somewhere else. So that's what we gravitated towards, and I think so far we're doing pretty good at that.

Barber: In the almost five years since you opened Midtown Eats, the surrounding neighborhood has changed significantly. Like you said, there was Süp. Then there was Midtown Eats. Now there are a lot and there are more on the way. Can you talk a little bit about those changes and how you think that has impacted what you've been doing? It's been a pretty quickly accelerating transformation.

Fontana: Very, very quickly. We knew it, right? We felt it.

Bonnette: Yes.

Fontana: That's why we moved to Midtown. We didn't have any idea of how quickly it would happen and how everyone would move in.

Bonnette: It's been very, very fast. It's been good. Even though we are going on our fifth year here at Midtown, we have a total new resurgence this year. It seems that it's somewhat new. I think there's been a lot of attention on the area and a lot of media, and interest, especially from out of town. I work the floor at Midtown Eats one day a week, and I will get a full day where I'll have a couple of regulars who I know because they've been coming to us since we originally opened, but it blows my mind that people come in and ask, "How long have you been here?"

And I tell them, "Almost five years." And they're blown away that we've been there for that long. But they've lived in Reno their whole lives, and this is their first time in and they love it and they're happy and they're coming back. So it's been good in that way.

Also in Reno, I've always felt, there aren't a lot of neighborhoods that you go to and see people walking around, window-shopping, grabbing a coffee and poking around. It feels like so much of a big city right here in this little corridor, especially as of lately. I would think somebody coming from outside probably would drive down this street and think, "Really? This is it?" [laughs] I mean, there's still some work that needs to be done, with the sidewalks and lighting and crosswalks and things like that to make it more friendly. But it is interesting to me, the people who are just wandering and shopping.

Christmastime was a great time when people would say, "Hey, I'm popping in to have a cocktail, and then we're going to do some shopping and check out the new shops." I don't think there's anywhere else in town that you can really do that.

Fontana: No, not as concentrated, unless it's a strip mall. Being from Europe, with a European background and a lot of travel, I can see how this goes back to how America initially started. Everything was old-school, with mom-and-pop joints, where grandfather made shoes, and a place may have been a shoe store for seventy years. Everyone is getting more into their craft. America's been making a huge change in the last five years, especially now in Reno, in understanding craftsmanship in whatever you do,

from carpentry, to metalworking, to bartending, to being a chef, you name it. People take that absolute “This is what I want to do” passion and are now able to make it a viable business and give somebody a great product, versus the whole approach of, “Well, you don’t like it? Take it back to Home Depot.” It is that different way of looking at things. We go to bigger cities and think, “Really? There’s a shoe shop? Who buys custom-made shoes that take you seven months to get? But people are doing that now—

Bonnette: And it’s awesome.

Fontana: —and people want to spend their money that way, and they’d much rather give somebody more money for what they are getting, like a pair of shoes—

Bonnette: Instead of having it manufactured by a machine.

Fontana: Right. It doesn’t have to be Louis Vuitton. No, it’s this local guy who just does an amazing job at what he does, and I want to support him, and I really want to buy that. That’s how I feel Midtown is going, because everyone’s getting more into their craft, and then they decide, “Well, let’s open a spot.”

Midtown’s gotten such crazy press nationwide, and now actually even worldwide, to where people are like, “Whoa. What is that place?” I have two brothers who live in Milano, in Italy, and they worked for the World Expo when it was there not too long ago, and it was weird that one of them was in some presentation and he said that they literally were talking about the Midtown area in Reno, Nevada.

And it’s just a little nuance, but what is that saying is that gigantic corporations in big huge cities are now starting to understand. And we have those people here all the time in our bar because, luckily, we’re able to give the clientele a little bit more of a high-end service and products. A guy that comes here and says, “I’m going to go buy seven million dollars’ worth of property in Reno,” can pop in and have a cocktail at Death & Taxes, and start picking your brain. And it happens, I’m not kidding you, all the damn time, where people are saying, “Oh, I’m noticing. Should I buy in this Midtown area?”

I say, “Yes, you should if there’s anything left to buy.”

It’s a lot of fun, and I’ve been telling like-minded business operators in Reno, “Listen. We had a little bit of a resurgence, and business was not very great four or five years ago for everybody.” Money’s coming to Reno at the end of the day if things are on the up-and-up, money meaning in the format of big stuff—

Bonnette: Large investors. [unclear].

Fontana: Large investors, large companies, corporations. The casinos—and I’m sorry, there’s nothing wrong with them, but we’re not Vegas anymore. Reno’s not Vegas. We were. That’s all people came here for, or Lake Tahoe, which is never going to leave, and so that’s your check on the list as an A-plus when you’re coming to think about moving here. We have people from big cities come in here all the time, sit down at the bar, and say, “I’m thinking about moving here. I love the Midtown area.”

Numerous times it’s been said. You’ve heard it, I’m sure, many times, too.

Bonnette: Even recently, you run into people at the coffee shop, and they say, “Oh, we just moved here.”  
“Where’d you come from?”

“Oh, Seattle.” People move here and they tell their friends how great it is here, and I know we do the same thing. We’re working on Ivan’s cousin and a couple of other groups. We tell them, “Now’s the time. You’ve got to come. Reno’s so great. There’s so much happening here and so much going on, and you’re close to everything.”

Fontana: And it’s reasonable. A businessman comes into play and he says, “Well, oh, my god. That’s how much it costs and that’s how much it is to get a business started here?” Yes. If we were to open a restaurant in New York or San Francisco or—

Bonnette: It would never happen.

Fontana: —Chicago, people would ask, ‘How many millions do you have in the bank account, liquid?’” It’s not how it is here. This is still the wild, wild West right now. It’s so much fun—because I grew up all over the world. When I was in Romania, right after the communist dictatorship was overthrown, I saw a complete 180 in a culture, in everything. So it’s a little bit different. When you see something like that, you can see those little blueprints, and that’s what I see here in Reno. With everyone, I think, do you understand right now, today, this is just the beginning of what Reno’s going to end up being? It’s going to become an amazing destination spot. There are going to be some really big strides being made in this little town. Four years ago, everybody from out of town would have asked, “What’s Reno? That podunk—who’s heard of it—what’s Reno?” Now it’s a whole different conversation. I think that sums up the entire thing. Reno’s moving, and things are changing in a very positive direction, and at the end of the day, it makes it better for everybody to sustain their businesses when more business comes to Reno, more people.

Barber: I want to wrap up by asking just a little bit more about that. This is definitely a very entrepreneurial neighborhood, and there are a lot of like-minded individuals and business owners in this area. I’m curious, have you had much involvement with the Midtown Merchants Group? That’s a business organization, and there are many more informal kinds of relationships. Can you talk a little bit about whether you’ve had involvement, formal or informal, with some of the other business owners in the community and how that’s evolved over time?

Bonnette: We’re not a part of the group, the Midtown District Group.

Fontana: No.

Bonnette: I think our relationships are pretty informal. We have a great relationship with Public House. There are often times when we’ve shared contractors and things like that for doing different jobs. Ty at Craft, we’re very close with him.

Fontana: Same thing.

Bonnette: Right, we have bought wood from him.

Barber: It’s about relationships.

Bonnette: Yes. There's definitely community here, and as with any community, I think there are some people that you tend to develop better relationships with than others, and everybody has separate agendas. I went to one of their meetings. We did it for a second and I went, but I had to take Luca because the meetings were in the evening. It's just not very conducive. We don't have the time to do it. It's not like we don't agree with what they're doing or don't want to be a part of it. It's just that we're trying to run two businesses and open another one and have a five-year-old. So it's time-consuming.

A lot of our relationships have been pretty informal. We have a great working relationship with Mark Trujillo, who was here at the Hub, and now with Joe Marino, who we've become friends with and collaborated with. Ivan has even done some collaborations, through Death & Taxes, with Old World Coffee. Vinnie from Derby we meet with somewhat regularly, and his vision is great and he's doing well. He is not necessarily in Midtown, but with us, it's more about building relationships with like-minded people throughout the community as a whole. We'll say, "Anything and everything you need help with, I want you to succeed, so use us as much as you can," because those are the people that we want to do well, because those are the things that are making our community so unique.

Fontana: Right. We haven't joined a coalition or a membership or anything for this specific area. We're doing that within our own circle of relationships and friends. Butter and Salt is a catering company that's from, what, Tahoe or whatnot?

Bonnette: Yes.

Fontana: But they have done some events here. So basically we're not old or young. We have relationships with a couple that we really look up to who are in their late sixties. And then we have a relationship with Vinnie, who is our age.

Bonnette: No, he's younger than us.

Fontana: Regardless.

Bonnette: I'm just saying it's definitely not restricted to Midtown. I think it's a community as a whole. Barrie Schuster [Lynn], she is amazing, and I maintain a relationship with her, and I go to her with any kind of real estate needs or questions, and she'll reach out to me every once in a while for something. I think overall as a community, it's definitely not restricted just to Midtown.

Barber: That's what I find here. It's a very layered place. There obviously are people who have been in this area long before anything was called Midtown, who had businesses. There are people who have had locations in other parts of town who have moved here or in and out, and it's just a very organic thing. In a way it makes it funny to try to define what Midtown is, and there have been some specific projects and city projects that have given it these specific borders, but it seems very fluid. And it seems that what different business interests need is different, and it's all continuing to evolve in a way that is so unpredictable but so alive.

It makes it really exciting, and in a way it feels like having all these diverse businesses together is what the downtown north of the river used to be like before the high-rise hotel casinos. It's being

reinvented here, and in many ways in buildings that are the age of some of the older commercial buildings in town. You've been working with a lot of older buildings, a lot of historic buildings. Do you get a sense of that heritage or that history, even if it's just through the architecture, as something that is part of this identity for you?

Fontana: It is super important. Very, very important. I feel the same thing. Coming from Europe where everything's old, we bought our house because it was a brick house. We liked it. We didn't want to go out into a tract-home area, because we liked the character of it. And you can't change anything about stuff that's been built this way, and so therefore we thought, "We want to retain as much as we can," and, of course, then you have to add your touch to it with a little bit of updating.

Bonnette: But even with this space, we didn't want to totally reinvent the space. We worked with what was existing and tried to complement it. They're two completely different buildings, but next door, what we were drawn to was just the square kind of mid-century cinderblock building. It's more about working with the space and not losing the character.

In our homes, it's the same thing. You just accentuate and build off of it, not necessarily going in and completely ripping everything out and starting from scratch. It's mind-blowing to me that there have been so many beautiful buildings downtown, and I know it's the cheaper option to tear it down, and they've chosen to demolish these intricate parts of history. It's sad. They're just gone. You can't ever get that back.

Barber: And sometimes it's not cheaper, and they do it anyway. [laughs]

Fontana: Right. Exactly.

Bonnette: It blows my mind, some of the places that we've lost.

Barber: So you are in the middle of running two businesses, and you're starting new things. It must feel pretty good to be at this point, when you look back at everything that you've accomplished.

Fontana: It does. Well, everybody has a different format of gauging success, but, yes, it would be very difficult if we were running like crazy, and then business wasn't that great. It is. It's great. That's the only reason we keep doing what we're doing.

Bonnette: Continuing to grow and continuing to change.

Fontana: And then being able to pay our bills at the end of the day. That's the most important thing.

Bonnette: It's hard. Ivan and I, for his birthday, had the opportunity to come in here and sit down and have drinks, and I think that was probably a first for you [to Ivan]. I sneak in here every once in a while. But it's a completely different experience. We're here most days in the daytime, and I know when he's here in the evening, he's working. And the same thing with the restaurant. Every once in a while, I'll have lunch over there because I'm in the middle of work, and it's quick and easy. But it's a different experience when you get to go in as a patron and be in there when it's hustling and bustling, and sit and

think, “Wow.” It’s crazy to absorb all that, that this is something that we’ve created and built, but we’re usually so far in it that it’s hard to take that stuff away.

Barber: Well, I want to thank you so much for telling me your story today. I really appreciate it.

Bonnette: Thank you.

Fontana: Thank you.

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## JOE GRANATA

Retired Reno fire captain, formerly stationed at 532 S. Virginia Street



Joe Granata at his home in Sparks in 2016. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Joe Granata's grandfather moved to Reno around 1904. Joe was born in 1937, and as a child, lived for a time in the Giraud Apartments at 717 S. Virginia Street. As an adult, he worked as a firefighter and spent a great deal of time in the Southside Fire Station once located at 532 S. Virginia Street. Now a retired fire captain, he shares his firsthand memories of the Midtown area.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm here with Joe Granata to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Mr. Granata, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Granata: Yes, you do.

Barber: Thank you. You are very well acquainted with South Virginia Street and the surrounding area, and we're going to talk about the neighborhood today from the perspective of someone who lived there and on Vassar Street, which is also included in the area they're now calling Midtown. And you're also a retired fire captain from Reno, so we'll get into that a little bit, too, if that's okay.

You were interviewed by the University of Nevada Oral History Program for their project about Italian Americans of northwestern Nevada, and went into your family biography and genealogy quite a bit there. Can you tell me how long members of your family have lived in this area?

Granata: Okay. My granddad told me that he came in 1904. My uncle says he came in 1901. I know my granddad told me 1904. I always thought my Uncle John came first, like in 1900, but since I started doing the ancestry.com thing, I found information just opposite of what I had thought. But I know that they were here at least in 1904. I know that.

My granddad came here. There were five brothers and they married five sisters from Italy. The five brothers came first. Four of them came here, and one of them went to Canada. There was my granddad, Joseph D; there was Carlo; there was John, Giovanni; there was Ed, Eduardo; and Quinto. And Quinto is the one that went to Canada, and I can't find any information on him at all. I've even joined the Canada thing and called up there. They tell me that those people don't want to talk to people in America anyway. [laughs] But I talked to a lot of Granatas up there, and most of them you could tell didn't want to say anything or talk to you. A couple of them said they'd call me back, but they never did.

Anyway, they came here in 1904 and maybe my Uncle John came in 1901. John was a good businessman. He started off washing windows in Reno, and before you know it, he was publishing the Italian newspaper. Now, I don't have the name of it. I've got it in my den somewhere. But he was doing the Italian newspaper and he was selling steamship tickets from Reno, and I have that. I pulled it up on the *Reno Evening Gazette*, and I even have his ad copy for the steamship.

Barber: Ships that left from California?

Granata: Well, wherever, I guess. I don't know. And it said on there "Bring your family to America." [laughs] On the bottom of the ad.

Barber: So, involved in immigration specifically.

Granata: Yes. Anyway, my Uncle John came first, and he brought my granddad over, then they brought somebody else over and somebody else over. Edward came in 1917, I think, if I remember correctly. So there was a little span from 1900 till 1917 or whatever.

John sold steamship tickets. Then eventually he became an insurance man. He had his own Granata Insurance Company. Now, he told my dad that he would like to train him to be an insurance man. My dad said, "Nah, I'm going to stick with being a shoemaker like my dad." That was a bad move, and I'll tell you why, because when my dad said no, his cousin said yes. I'm trying to remember what his name was now. I'm drawing a blank here, but anyway—Lucini, Guido Lucini. So he took Lucini in and he taught him the insurance business and everything, and then later when my uncle decided to retire, Lucini got the business. Then it became Lucini and Parish, and now it's Parish, real estate and insurance.



So I could have been pretty rich if my dad would have said yes. [laughs] But, anyway, he said no, he wanted to be a shoemaker like his dad.

Carlo was also a shoemaker. I don't know what year they got together, but I know that in 1912, my granddad and Joseph Spina were partners. Spina had a shoe shop here in town later that was involved in the Sierra Street explosion, which killed his son Frank.

But, anyway, my granddad and Joseph—both of them were named Joseph—were partners up until around 1927 or so. Apparently they broke off their partnership, and Spina went south on Sierra Street down at Front Street, which is now First Street, on the corner of Front and Sierra on the northeast corner. My granddad went around the corner to 220 Sierra Street, which was right across from the Sears Building.

Before that, their shoe shop was at 40 Commercial Row, and then later I see they moved to 30 Commercial Row, which was two doors down from Becker's Café, a good location. When they split up, I guess, I don't know—I've got pictures over there on the wall I can show you.

This picture here, by the way, is a Q-ne-Q. I don't know how they got it, but it's on the University of Nevada digital collection. I tried to give them some pictures or send them some pictures, but they wouldn't accept them unless I gave them the originals. I don't know how they got the original on this one.

Barber: Okay. We'll take a look at that. It's a picture of the whole staff in front of the Q-ne-Q.

Granata: This is a copy. That's most of them there. Harvey's not in that one, but Papa Hines is, who—well, we're getting ahead of ourselves. And I've got pictures down there of Harvey and Laura.

So now we're back to the shoe business of the Granata family. In 1912, my granddad went back to Italy and brought my grandmother over. I'm not sure where they got married. I'm guessing they got married in Italy. In 1912, my uncle was born. My dad was born in '13, and another brother was born in '20-something.

Anyway, my granddad told me that—you talk about discrimination—the Italians were discriminated against big time, and so were the Irish. They wouldn't allow the Italians to buy a house within the city limits of Reno, so my granddad had to go way out on Vine Street to buy a piece of property. [laughs] And he bought a house on Vine Street, which was just outside the city line, and that's where my dad was born and Angelo was born and probably Marvin, I'm guessing. I think it was in the thirties when he had the other house built.

In the thirties, they kept that place as a rental, and my granddad built a house at Fifth and Center Street. It was University Avenue then, Center Street now, and there's a motel there, 5-something Center Street. Anyway, he built a house there, and then I'm not sure how long after he built the house, my grandmother had colon cancer and she died from colon cancer. She died in 1934, I think, but I can't remember. Without all my notes in front of me, I'm having a heck of a time. [laughs]

Barber: That's okay.

Granata: Anyway, she died around 1933, '34, somewhere in there.

Quinto up in Canada, he was fooling around, so my aunt kicked him out. [laughs] When my grandmother was dying, my grandfather brought her down from Canada to help him take care of her. And in those days, it wasn't good to allow an unmarried woman, according to their ideals, to live with an

unmarried man in the same house. So she had to live with her sister and Edward over on Quincy and Fifth, and then during the day she would come over and help my granddad take care of my grandmother, and then she would go back to Ed and Mary's house. A few years later, he married her. So I never knew my grandmother. Every time we went to the house, it wasn't Nonno and Nonna; it was Nonno and Zia. "Zia" means "aunt." And she was neat. I loved her. She was really sweet.

Anyway, he had the shoe shop until my dad got out of the navy. Then I think around '57 he decided to retire, and my dad and his friend Nick Marcheschi were partners. They bought the shoe shop from my granddad. Now, sometime in the forties, my granddad bought the property on Vassar Street. I don't know when. He bought the duplex and the little house in the back.

Barber: And he lived there in one of them?

Granata: No, no.

Barber: It was purely for rental?

Granata: For rental. What happened is when he married Elvira, who is my aunt, everything they bought was a partnership. Elvira had a son, Delio, and everything they bought was a partnership so it wasn't joint tenancy so that if something happened to him—he could have done tenants in common, too, and done the same thing. I don't know how they did it. But, anyway, they had that, and he retired, and in 1945, when my dad got out of the navy, we moved into Vassar Street.

Barber: So when and where were you born?

Granata: I was born here.

Barber: In Reno?

Granata: Yes. Maybe I should tell you that little part of the story, too.

Barber: Sure.

Granata: I was born in 1937. My dad had a shoe shop—I've got a picture of that over there too—in Truckee. Now, my aunt and my uncle lived in Truckee, Tom Dolly and Gladys Dolly. They owned it. I mean, years later they owned half of Truckee. They had the mortuary, they had the hotel, they had the big house up on the hill. He was the Greyhound guy and he also sold all the railroad tickets in Truckee, and they were well-to-do.

Anyway, in 1937, my dad had a shoe shop up in Truckee, so he worked with his dad, and so did Angelo, my uncle. My dad graduated in 1932 from Reno High School and right after that he went to work for with his dad. Probably before, but after that he went to work full-time. Then in 1937 he had his shoe shop in Truckee.

My problem was I never was interested in asking questions. I really kick myself now for not doing it, but it's too late. Anyway, that was the year of the big snowstorm. I mean, it was so huge,

people were climbing out of second-story windows to ski down to wherever they had to go. The snow was up higher than the door in Truckee.

When I was little, I lived with my granddad and my aunt, and I have no idea why. I was thinking about that the other night. Either my folks were fighting or it could have been the snowstorm. They could have had me down there, because I was born in February '37. They could have put me down with my grandfolks—

Barber: In Reno?

Granata: Yes, to stay with them for a while. Then when my dad got out of Truckee, in 1940, I know, he was down in Reno as a manager of the Giraudo Apartments.

Anyway, when I came home, I could only speak Italian, so I had to have been with my grandparents a couple years, but I don't know. I never asked any questions. That's too bad. [laughs] My mother had to call my dad at work to find out what I wanted, because she couldn't understand Italian. That was the thing. My dad never spoke Italian. We never spoke any Italian in my family. They always spoke Italian, all Italian, when we'd go over for Easter or for Christmas, and the whole family would get together. They'd all speak Italian. My mother and I didn't know how. My cousin Ed didn't know how to talk Italian. His brother didn't know how. We just sat there and looked at them like we were stupid. [laughs]

Barber: You mean when you would go to Italy?

Granata: No, no, no. Here. Here.

Barber: Oh, just at the family's house, they'd all speak Italian.

Granata: Yes, at 512, I think it was, Center Street.

So, my dad was a shoemaker in Truckee, and with the big snowstorm up there, I'm going to guess he didn't have any business at all, because it was so high, people were jumping out of second-story windows, skiing out of second-story windows. That's what he told me he had to do just to get to work. I'm guessing that after that, he just said to heck with it and they came back to Reno. Where we lived first, I have no idea, but I know that when I was in the Giraudo Apartments, I was four and five years old. Okay, now I'm getting to the Giraudo Apartments.

Barber: This is at 717 South Virginia.

Granata: That's the apartments. The whole building is one building, as you know, except for that addition behind Heric's. That wasn't there when I was a kid. That was added later.

Barber: Heric's was on the corner of now Saint Lawrence and South Virginia.

Granata: Yes, or Steiner or whatever it was called.

Barber: Steiner, yes. Saint Lawrence, formerly Steiner.



Joe Granata's father, Elmo Joseph Granata with Lowell Williams behind the Giraudo Apartments building in 1943. Photo courtesy of Joe Granata.

Granata: Going through ancestry.com here a couple weeks ago, I knew that my dad and my grandmother and my mother had been managers at the Giraudo Apartments, and I'm guessing it was because they're all Italian, because all the Italians stick together, right? Paul Giraudo. Anyway, I found out that my Uncle Angelo was a manager in 1937, my grandmother was a manager in 1938 and '39, my mother and my dad were listed as managers in 1940, and that's as far as I've got, because they don't have all the city directories in ancestry.com, here, so you can't find them all.

Barber: Now, do you think that means that when they were managers of the building, they lived in the ground-floor apartment?

Granata: We lived on the ground floor, yes. It was the only apartment down there. And there was a hallway between that apartment and the Penguin.

Here's what I'm guessing. Remember I told you the other day that I had a hunch that August Frohlich, August C. Frohlich, who was the mayor of Reno, owned the Commercial Soap factory, which I also found a picture of that I have, and it's on that CD?

I told you a while back that I thought it's possible August Frohlich had owned that building [the Giraudo Apartments], because I found in one of the city directories that he was listed at 717 South Virginia. Now, between the apartment in the back and the Penguin up in front, which was 719, there's a hallway, a little hallway about this wide, from the apartment to the Penguin with a door in there. So I keep thinking about it, and it just seems perfect that August Frohlich, if he owned that building and he had the Commercial Soap factory and was using the 717 South Virginia Building as an office, that he would have had his office up in front, and maybe even lived there before he built the other houses, because it would be perfect. He would have his office in the front, and he had that little hallway to the back, and the apartment.

Barber: We can look and see. It's interesting because 719, which is the storefront on the south end of the building, is the smaller space because it has the apartment behind it, and then the other commercial space, which is 715, on the north side of it, goes all the way to the back of the building, right?

Granata: That was the bar, 715 was the 715 Bar, yes.

Barber: So then upstairs, I can't remember whether there were four or six apartments.

Granata: Upstairs, I think there were four, I'm not sure.

Barber: Little one-bedrooms.

Granata: My Aunt Tish lived in one. Freddy Harris [phonetic] lived in one. Freddy Harris was one of my dad's best friends, and I just found that the other day. [laughs] It's interesting, every time I go in there, I find something new.

Barber: There were a number of apartment houses, small apartment buildings like that on South Virginia, commercial on the ground floor with some apartments above.

Granata: I don't remember.

Barber: There are a couple here and there.

Granata: I don't remember. All I remember is across the street were houses. There were a couple of two-story houses. In fact, my grandmother lived in one of the two-story houses for a while there, and there were a lot of single-story houses.

Barber: You said you remember there being a little backyard area behind the Giraudo Apartments or something?

Granata: Yes, there was. It was small—about the size of this room, and had a picket fence. Here's the back door to the Giraudo Apartments. It went out like that. [gestures] There was a fence here, a gate right here to the right.

Barber: When you were looking at the rear of the building, there was a gate to the right?

Granata: No, when you were looking away from the rear. And we had a collie dog, his name was Pal, and I used to play with him out there. I used to play all over out there when I was five years old. I used to go around to the Penguin. I went down there one time, and bought an ice cream cone with a slug, and Frank Haddock wasn't really happy about that. He called my mother.

Barber: So Frank Haddock owned the Penguin?

Granata: Yes.

Barber: Ran it?

Granata: Well, it was his business, yes. He later went into real estate, I think.

Barber: I'm interested in hearing about the businesses that were in that building. The Penguin, they're especially known for ice cream, but it was a café? I mean, they had all sorts of meals there?

Granata: Basically, it was an ice cream and soda shop to start with, and then later it was a café, yes. Back in the early sixties, it was still there as a café. We never went in there, but it was kind of a hangout for the high school kids, as was the Q-ne-Q. The Q-ne-Q was a big hangout for the high school kids.

Barber: Let's talk about the Q-ne-Q for a little bit and then we'll come back to some of the other businesses around there that you remember. You have kind of a family connection to the Q-ne-Q. Can you talk about that a little bit?



Harvey Majors and employees in front of Harvey's Q-ne-Q, at the corner of Stewart and South Virginia Streets, 1933. Photo courtesy of Joe Granata.

Granata: Okay. My Aunt Laura—they called her Annie Jack; I have no idea why—Laura Majors came from Oklahoma, and I found her here in 1922 married to Harvey Majors. Harvey Majors, when he was a young man, married a gal by the name of Pearl Doherty in 1915. In 1919, they got a divorce here in Reno. 1922 was the first mention I can find after that of him, because, again, like I said, I haven't looked at all the city directories. But in 1922 he was already married to Laura, so I'm guessing that he got married right after he got his divorce in 1919.

Harvey was a manager for the café in the Overland Hotel on Center and Commercial Row. I see two names, Harvey and some other guy, as the managers of this hotel. Then in 1927 I found in a city directory that the Q-ne-Q was associated with George Morehouse. I'm guessing that George Morehouse owned the Q-ne-Q in 1927. In 1937, it has Harvey and Laura as owners of the Q-ne-Q. Now, Laura came from Oklahoma. Her name was

Atkison. That's all written down. You've got all that information, too. But she was one of, I think, six sisters and one brother from A.A. Atkison. I don't really know anything about her until later, but, again, it shows her in 1922. I told you, and I'll repeat it again, that my Aunt Gladys, who's married to Tom Dolly in Truckee, told me that at one time Laura was a madam in the city of Reno.

Back in the thirties and forties, Shirley Temple was all the rage, and everybody wanted to have a Shirley Temple, so they decided to adopt a girl, and they did. A nurse that worked at the hospital out here on the Twaddle Ranch, and I can't remember the name of the hospital now, told me that they did adopt a girl. She was there the night the girl was born, and they did adopt a girl from a prostitute. I'll just leave it at that. [laughs] So Betty Jane was born in 1933, and they gave her all kinds of piano lessons and singing lessons and everything, just wanted to make a Shirley Temple out of her.

Anyway, they lived at 20 Stewart Street, which is right behind the Q-ne-Q. The Q-ne-Q was right on the corner, and on the south side of the Q-ne-Q was the drive-thru, and it was probably thirty feet or more, and then there was a parking lot behind the Q-ne-Q. Now, the Q-ne-Q has been said to be the first

drive-in restaurant in the United States. Whether it is or not, I don't know, but the 1927 ad that I saw with Charles Morehouse said "Drive up and purchase your food."

Barber: So you'd be served at your car?

Granata: Yes, yes. So that shows that was a drive-in. Now, what the drive-in was—and I know this because I've seen it—was a little window, maybe about two feet, two and a half feet wide, and you'd drive up. Right next to the window was a little ledge hanging out there, and you would order your food, then you'd sit there and wait while they cooked it. Then they would bring it to you, and you'd pay them, and off you go.

Barber: Now, are you saying that it was the kind where just one car would be at the window at a time, and they would stay there until they were served?

Granata: Right.

Barber: So it wasn't where you think of like a drive-in where a lot of cars pull up and there's lots of waiting people.

Granata: No, no. They didn't have any fast food in those days. [laughs]

Barber: Not like the traditional idea where you're sitting there in your car and you give your order, and they come skating to your window or something? [laughs]

Granata: No, no, they didn't have that. They didn't have that. That was in the fifties.

Barber: Sure. So this is earlier. Then could you also go inside and sit down?

Granata: Oh, yes. It had nice booths and it had a big wrap-around counter. On the outside next to the windows it was all booths. There must have been probably ten or twelve booths around the outside perimeter.

Now, I gave you a couple of pictures, and one of them is two guys standing next to the Q-ne-Q, but I have no idea where that picture was taken, because I can't figure it out. It shows the Q-ne-Q sign out there, but it shows some houses behind it. The only thing I could figure would be Stewart Street, but it still doesn't look right to me, so I don't know. But, anyway, you'll see that picture.

Barber: Do you know anything about the name? It's such an odd name.

Granata: Yes. This is Laura Majors about the Q-ne-Q. She says in here she had the Q-ne-Q with her husband in 1928, which is not right, I don't think, as a root beer and ice cream stand. [reading] "Many people have wondered but few people know where the odd name Q-ne-Q originated. Mrs. Majors admitted last night, and in explaining it, she said that it came from an opening and operating of the root beer stand. 'The root beer we sold then was called Q-ne-Q root beer.' She said, 'When Harvey and I opened up the restaurant and gave up our root beer stand, we didn't know what to name the place. Mrs.

Majors liked the name Q-ne-Q so well that we decided to keep it, adding Harvey's name in front of the name to avoid legal complications.'" [laughter]

Barber: So it became known as Harvey's Q-ne-Q. I'll have to look that up to see if we can find out anything about the Q-ne-Q brand of root beer. But you remember going here then as a teenager?

Granata: Oh, yes. Well, Q-ne-Q was there—she sold it to—I can't think of his name now, but she leased it out to Pop Hines. Pop Hines was a cook down there, well known, everybody loved him, great cook. She leased it out to him for five years and then decided to take it back. He had another five-year option, and she had to buy the option from him, and she took it back. I think that's all right in this story, too.

Barber: Is that after Harvey died or something?

Granata: Yes. Harvey died in November 1940, and she ran the place. She wasn't a very good businesswoman, not a very good businesswoman at all. In fact, when Harvey died, he had way over a million dollars, and that was a lot of money in 1940. It was like having twenty million now or ten million or something. But when she died, she lived solely on Social Security. Betty helped her spend all a lot of that money.

One thing Laura used to do, she used to buy stuff and then sell it cheaper than what she paid for it. My dad told her one time, he said, "Listen, why don't you let me be your manager? Let me help you make your investments." She wouldn't go for it, but she lost everything she had. She owned the Davis Café in Sparks. She owned a motel on South Virginia Street. She owned a bunch of different houses, and she sold them all cheaper than what she paid for them.

Betty'd want a Porsche, she got a Porsche. Betty wanted a horse, she got a horse or two. Betty was a cowgirl, and she was well known by all the cowboys. [laughs]

Barber: So what's on the site of the Q-ne-Q is a motel, right? I think that's what's just north of the Jack Bacon building.

Granata: The house is still there.

Barber: There's just a house there, then.

Granata: That's it. That's their house. That's Harvey's house. That's the house that's in that picture. It's been redone. But she sold that place. She sold it to—they were big in the Knights of Pythias, and the guy that she sold it to I knew as a kid.

Barber: So the Q-ne-Q was on the corner of Stewart and South Virginia, and then the house was just a little bit to the east of that on Stewart, and the house is still there.

Granata: 20 Stewart. It's still there. There was a barbershop in there and insurance company, and I don't even know what's there now.

Barber: And the Lake Mansion was across the street—



Granata: No.

Barber: —from it on California.

Granata: Oh, the Lake Mansion?

Barber: Yes.

Granata: There was a big two-story house behind the Chevron station. And also in that CD I just gave you, there's a picture of the Chevron station across the street.

Barber: There were a lot of gas stations in this area.

Granata: In that corner there were three gas stations. There was a Chevron across the street, across Stewart Street was a Texaco, and across California on the other corner was Lyon's. And that was a huge place, kind of like a truck stop in a way. It was huge. It was a big service station.

Barber: And the majority of them would sell gas but also do repairs? Do you think that's how they all stayed in business, a combination?

Granata: Most of them would do gas and tires and oil changes and whatever. That's about all. They didn't do repairs.

Barber: I want to ask you a little bit about Heric's Café. Is that a place where you spent any time, Heric's on the corner of Saint Lawrence and South Virginia?

Granata: Yes, I knew Jack Heric. I remember Jack. I was only four years old, though, when we lived there, but Lola and I actually ate there after we got married. We got married in 1959, and we ate in Jack Heric's café, so it was still there in 1959. It was later, not too long after that, that it changed it into the Peppermint Lounge.

Barber: Which was just kind of a nightclub or a bar?

Granata: It was a go-go place.

Barber: So Jack Heric was someone who you remember being part of the community there?

Granata: He was the owner and the cook.

Barber: I want to talk about Vassar Street a little bit, but I also want to talk about the fire station. You lived down on Vassar Street briefly in the fifties or sixties? When did you live on Vassar?



Pauline Granata and her sister, Tisha Blair, flank an unknown woman at the corner entrance to Heric's Restaurant, on the corner of Saint Lawrence and South Virginia. The houses in the background, on the east side of Virginia Street, show how residential much of the street still was in the 1940s. Photo courtesy of Joe Granata.

Granata: Well, my granddad bought that somewhere in the early forties, I'm going to guess, 142, 144. I'm not sure whether it's 146 or 148, but it's a duplex in front, a little house in the back. The little house in the back was a garage to start with. It was converted into a rental. In 1945, when my dad got out of the navy, we moved into 144, which is the western end of the duplex. We lived there probably about a year. We must have moved in there in '46. My dad must have not got out of the navy until close to '46. My sister was born there in '47. Right after she was born, we moved to Westfield Village because he bought the new house.

Barber: So you were there just briefly just for a little bit.

Granata: Yes. We were there and then we moved to Westfield Village. Now, years later, when my mom and my dad got a divorce, they got a divorce in '57 when I was in the navy, my dad rented the little house in the back. And when I came home from the navy in May of '58, I goofed around for about four or five months or whatever, because I had some money from my navy pay, and he was living in that little house. He told me, "You gotta get a job." [laughs]

I said, "Okay." He told me about the fire department and the carpenter's union hiring, so I went down and put an application in.

Anyway, my mother was an alcoholic. She was one of the first dealers at Harolds Club during the war, and being down there and dealing and all the flyboys coming in from Stead and all that, she ended up being a—actually, the whole family, the family back from Oklahoma were good drinkers, too, I guess, from what I gather. My Aunt Gladys was an alcoholic, my Aunt Tish was an alcoholic, my mother was an alcoholic, my grandmother was a teetotaler, and my granddad, who they tell me was part Cherokee, and I never knew him—he died in 1938—but he was an alcoholic.

Anyway, where was I going with this story? [laughs]

Barber: Well, your dad moved in on Vassar.

Granata: Yes. Anyway, my mother and I never got along, anyway. So she kicked me out, and so I went to live with him in that little shack in the back, two of us in that little place. It was about the size of this whole room here.

Then Lola and I got married, and all three of us lived there for a short time, but then my dad had—because he was sleeping out on the back porch and it got really cold in the wintertime, he decided to go find another place. [laughs] So he went and found another place, and he found a girlfriend also that he married, which was a mistake.

So we lived there when the oldest kid was born. Jerry was born in 1959. We were there until my dad got married to a gal that was a friend of my cousin's, and they both ran the elevator at Harolds Club. They were married a couple of years, and then they got a divorce. He had a piece of property up at Lake Tahoe. That's another story. But he had a piece of property at Lake Tahoe, and he used that to buy a place at 1405 Kirman Avenue, which was owned by a Reno cop, Mike—I can't think of his name now, but, anyway, he did a nice job on the house, had flowers around, really nice place.

So, anyway, we're still on Vassar Street, Lola and I, and he says, "Hey, listen, I'm getting a divorce. If you want this house, if you'll take over and if you'll give me \$3,000, because Josie needs \$3,000 to finalize the divorce, there's a balloon payment and a second." [laughs] I'm making \$400 a month, you know, and she's making at that time a little bit less than I was. But when I went to work for the fire department, she actually made more than I did. I'm a firefighter. She's a secretary. Anyway, I went to work for \$360 a month.

Anyway, he said, "If you want the house, if you'll give me that, and then you can give me \$2,000 later."

I said, "Okay." Well, sorry to say, I never did give him the \$2,000. He died when he was fifty-two years old. He had a heart attack in '46 before he got a divorce, the second divorce. He was laying around the house. We were all living at 1405 Kirman, and he was laying around the house and it wasn't good for him. He was not feeling good about himself.

Finally, somebody gave him a job in Los Angeles being a leather salesman, and he took it. That's a tough job because he's driving from L.A. to Arizona and all over, trying to sell leather. But, anyway, he died when he was fifty-two.

Lola and I, we came up with all the payments, and we sold the place in '69, I think it was, after my granddad died.

Anyway, back to Vassar Street.

Barber: It's interesting because people think about Midtown, which is centered around South Virginia, and then Wells Avenue, as being completely different neighborhoods, but where you were on Vassar was between the two, and they're actually pretty close to each other. I mean, did you go both ways for everything?

Granata: I looked at Midtown on the Internet, and it doesn't conform. It takes in two or three blocks up California Avenue. It takes in Pueblo and all that, takes in Vassar Street. There were lot of businesses on Vassar Street long before it ever became Midtown.

Barber: So what are some of the ones you remember there on Vassar Street?

Granata: Well, Fisharama was next door.

Barber: Finarama. [laughs]

Granata: Finarama, which is two doors down from where we were at. That was owned by Mike Wanco. I don't know if I—did I tell you about them?

Barber: Yes, a little bit.

Granata: Mike and Marlene. Marlene Valverde, she lived on Vassar Street down about, I don't know, three or four doors, when we were kids. And Roy and Russell Fitch and their family lived two doors down the other way, west. Moltzen and Fitch Electric Company was a big company here in town at the time. The Valverdes, I don't know that they owned anything, just a house down there, but later on Mike married Marlene. I talked to Mike the other day and asked him about it because I wanted to make sure I was right. I said, "Did you own the place?"

He said, "Yeah, we bought it." Actually, a doctor started—was it Finarama? [laughs]

Barber: Yes.

Granata: I notice I spelled it wrong also on that piece of paper I give to you. I have F-i-n-e-r-a-m-a. Anyway, Mike said yes, the doctor started it, and he had this business on Taylor Street, his chiropractor business or whatever, and the Finarama was in the same building. He said, "We bought the business from this doctor and we ran it for a while, but then we sold it. And the people we sold it to, they just took the equipment and the name and all that, and they're the ones that moved over to Vassar Street."

Barber: Oh, okay. So it was somewhere else first. This was just a fish store?

Granata: Yes. They had live fish. Mike said he used to keep the fish alive all the time. [laughs]

Barber: There's a business in there now called Art Dogs & Grace. It's kind of a counterculture store.

Granata: Right next to that or the same place?

Barber: I think it's in the building where the Finarama was.

Granata: You know, I never go down there anymore, so I don't know. [Barber laughs.] I don't like to go to Reno. I was born and raised in Reno, loved Reno. It's a junk town now. [Barber laughs.] I just hate to even go downtown.

Barber: Now, when you lived on Vassar, would you go shopping on South Virginia? Was the Washoe Market still there?

Granata: Washoe Market was where that antique store is now, yes, and the meatpacking place was there.

Barber: The Ponderosa, which was Reno Frozen Food Lockers

Granata: Yes, and that's where we used to all take our deer when we'd shoot them, and take them down there to have them processed.

Barber: I heard about this. So you were one of the folks that would go in there. They said hunting season was their big season of the year.

Granata: Yes. You'd go in there and they would cut your deer up for you and save your hide for you and do all the stuff for you. Of course, you never were sure you'd get the same deer back, you know. They were there. There were a couple places in town that did the same thing, two or three different places.

Barber: So you'd bring in your deer and then you'd get it back the next day or something?

Granata: Oh, no, it'd take a couple weeks. They'd have a lot of deer they had to be cutting up. And Landrum's, do you remember Landrum's?

Barber: Yes.

Granata: Landrum's, originally it was owned by somebody else, but in the forties when we moved out in 1946 or '47—it had to be '47 because my sister was born when we were in Vassar Street. So, anyway, we moved in '47. The gal that owned Landrum's at the time was Olive Calvert. She and her husband lived right—we lived on Vale Street in Westfield Village where Meadow comes right into Vale. That was where my house is. I used to sit in my house and the bus would run by. I'd sit there with the door open, and the bus would go by, I'd run out, slam the door, and run all the way to the end of the block and catch the bus. [laughs]

Anyway, Olive lived to the right. There was a house on the corner and then next to that was her house. She lived there for years. They owned Landrum's for all these years. Now, I don't know when they sold it or what, but that was before this one in Sparks came in. That was never here.

Barber: So she owned it. Was she behind the counter? Was she the one who was serving people?

Granata: You know, I don't know. But that place was really popular with the hunters. Four o'clock in the morning you'd go in there and have breakfast, and there was only, what, five stools? [laughs] One little counter and five stools, maybe a little table or something back there, and it would be jammed with hunters getting ready to go duck hunting down in Carson City or wherever. It was a neat place.

Barber: Because this was before all the casinos had all-night cafés or anything?

Granata: No, no, they've always had them. Back in the fifties and forties and fifties and sixties, Reno always had the best food in the world for cheap, really cheap. Forty-nine-cent ham and eggs at the Cal Neva. I mean, how could you do any better than that? [laughs] Good ham and eggs, too. It was good.

We used to, when we were working at Central, every morning, four, five, six of us would go over to Harrah's, and they had a restaurant up on the second floor of Harrah's between Center and Virginia Street, and we'd eat there damn near every morning. God, it was good food here in Reno. [Barber laughs.] Nothing now like there used to be. Nothing like it used to be.

Barber: Do you have any specific memories of eating anything at Landrum's?

Granata: Well, just breakfast in the morning to go hunting, stuff like that.

Barber: Let's talk a little bit about the fire station that was at 532 South Virginia Street, which is currently an empty lot. As a retired fire captain, you were pretty familiar with that fire station. Could you tell me what you know about why it went there and what it was like?



The original Southside Fire House at Ryland and Center Streets. Image courtesy of Joe Granata.

Granata: Well, it went there because in 1908 they built the Southside Fire Station on the corner of Ryland and Center Street, which is now where the Reno Library is. In 1917, they sold that to the school district because they were opening up Station 3. The original Southside was huge. It was two stories high. It had two or three bays in it for different rigs, horses and stuff. In 1917, Reno got its first motorized rig. Now, I say first, but I can't absolutely be sure, because I see John Wagner's [phonetic] got some other stuff in there. But I know that they got their first—I thought the first—motorized vehicle, because they got two of them, one for that and one for the new station on 4<sup>th</sup> Street, which is Northside or Engine 2.



So they called Central, Engine 1, they called Southside, Engine 3, and the one on 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Engine 2. Engine 2 and Engine 3 were built almost the same. They were just opposite in their diagrams. One was the opposite of the other, and the front was different. They sold the 1908 building to the school district, and the school district had it for years until they sold it in the fifties for the library.

In 1917, they opened up that station on South Virginia Street, and we used to sit out there on the porch and watch people at night walk by and talk to them. You know, people would talk to us and everything. There was one old fireman who used to come by there. Every once a while he'd stop and talk to us, and told us he drove the first fire engine out of that station in 1917.

I went to work on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1958. I spent one night in the old main station, and the next night I spent at Engine 3, which is the one you're talking about. Then I went to Engine 2 and spent six months, and went back to Engine 3 and spent a year, and then went back and forth from 2 and 3. I never spent much time in the old Central. [laughs] I was one of those lucky guys, because the old Central was—guys didn't like it so much because upstairs in the old Central was the chief's office and the fire prevention, and all the public came in there, and you had to be careful what you said. Not only that, but you had to gas the vehicles, the fire-prevention cars, and you had to wash all the cars, including the fire prevention. The firefighters had to do this. The operators would wash the fire engines, but the firefighters would wash the FPB cars and oil them and gas them. And it was just not the most popular station.

Engine 3 was a good station. I loved it. In the summertime it was a neat station. Vic Morini, whose granddaughter now runs her shops out of Engine 2 on Fifth and Morrill—Vic used to go out and pick dandelions and make salads out of them for dinner, out of the lawn.



South Side Station, constructed in 1917, once stood at 532 South Virginia Street. Image courtesy of Joe Granata.

Barber: So there was a whole front lawn with grass?

Granata: Yes, “Moose” used to—his thing was to go out and water it. He loved to water the grass with a hand-sprinkler. Moose is still alive. He’s the only one left alive, so if you want to talk to him, you need to let me know and see if I can get him together with you.

Barber: What’s his last name?

Granata: Moore, Don Moore. Don “Moose” Moore. They call him Moose. He’s about this tall and skinny.

Barber: It had a really interesting appearance. We’ve learned that those two, the one on 4th Street and Engine 3 down on South Virginia, were designed by Frederic DeLongchamps, and they were intended to fit into more of a residential environment, it seemed, because the area was residential at the time. So did they have the towers at all?

Granata: No. Engine 3 had a little tower later when I was there. I don’t think they had it before. I can’t remember if any of those pictures I give you show it, but there was a little tower maybe about this high. When I went to work there, the only person who had a radio was the fire engines. The captains didn’t have a radio. Nobody had a radio but the fire engine, and it was an actual telephone receiver, and I’m thinking that that little tower was because of that.

Barber: So when you say the engine, you mean at the station they had the phone?

Granata: No, the fire engines would have this telephone in them, but you could talk to the guy in the watch room at Central Station, and there was usually a battalion chief in there if you needed something or if you wanted to make an upgrade. If you rolled into a fire and you thought, “Hey, this is a little bit bigger than I can handle,” you’d call them, and say, “Make this a—.” Back then, we only had still alarms and general alarms. Now they have still alarms, first alarm, second alarm, third alarm, fourth alarm, all kinds of stuff. [laughs] But we had two: a still and a general. If you rolled in and you had a house fire and you thought it was a little bit more than you could handle, you picked that phone up and you called the watchman, you said, “Make this a general,” and you hung up and you went and fought the fire. Then he would call the other stations and have them respond. Now, we had a watch board about this big, about this high—

Barber: About three feet wide—

Granata: Yes, and about two feet—

Barber: —and one and a half feet high. [laughs]



Granata: Yes. And it was kind of like a pyramid. It leaned back with a straight back on it, and it had all these toggle switches like an old operator would have. We only had four stations when I came to work there. Let's say that the watchman wanted to talk to Engine 3. He would toggle the switch for Engine 3, and pull it down so it would connect him to Engine 3. Then there would be another switch that would ring a bell in that station. He would ring the bell twice, once, twice, and that tells everybody that it's a business phone or business message. If it was one long ring, if you held it down for a long ring, that meant it was a fire, so you knew you were going somewhere.

Back when I went to work there, they just got rid of the ambulance, so we didn't have medicals. But we had a lot of fires, a lot of fires. We made a lot of parking lots, actually. [laughs] Most of them were small grassfires. We fought a lot of grassfires within the city limits, because there were a lot of lots then, before the houses all built up.

But, anyway, back to the watchman. He would ring the one long ring for the fire and two for the thing. Now, if he got the call coming in, people were saying, "Our house is on fire! There's a couple of houses!" he would toggle all four switches, make one long ring, and it would ring all four of those stations at once, and they knew—then he would wait and they would get on Engine 1, Engine 2, and Engine 3, and Engine 4. As soon as they got on there, he would say, "Okay, we have a fire at 755 Sinclair. This is a general alarm," and hang up. And they'd all go.

Barber: So they would send four trucks from four different stations.

Granata: Well, yes, but usually what happened on a general alarm, you would get Central, which had a squad and a pump which didn't have hose, it just pumped water. So what would happen is somebody'd go in and lay the line from the hydrant out to the fire, the pump would come in behind them and hook up to that hydrant and hook up their hose that they laid into the pump, and pump the water to that fire. You had the squad, the pump, and aerial ladder just from Central.

Then from Engine 4, let's say, you would have another engine. So what you have now is a squad and Engine 4, which were both with hose and everything, you had the pump which is just a pump, and an aerial ladder. But you would also bring Engine 3. Now that Central is out and 4 is out, Engine 3 would have to fill in for Central. So they would go into Central and be there with the watchman, in case something else came in.

Now, if something else came in, same thing. If it was a first alarm, 3 would go out of Central, wherever it was, and they got one more fire station somewhere that would also respond, and if it got bigger than that, they started calling guys in from Sparks and whatever else they had.

Barber: So you said there were two things. There was a general and then a still?

Granata: Still and a general.

Barber: What does the still mean?

Granata: That means just the one engine, one engine company, just a still alarm. Like a garbage can or a car fire or maybe a house fire where there's smoke and they don't know where it is. A lot of times you'd get there and then you'd make it a first or a general once you got there.

Anyway, it was neat. Engine 3 was a great place. We used to sit there and watch all the people come down. Our favorite thing was to sit there at about five o'clock in the evening in the summertime when the sun was just going down, and all the women were walking towards us. You could get an x-ray vision. [laughs]

Barber: It's funny for a fire station to have a porch. It just seemed pretty unusual. Then there was a sleeping quarters, right?

Granata: The dormitory. I think it had four beds in it, maybe five. I don't know why they would have five, but there were four people on a crew, the captain and operator and two firefighters, so they had four. That was on the wall next to Festina's or whatever they called it to start with.

Barber: The restaurant on the south side.

Granata: Yes. The beds would be up against that wall on those windows, and on the other wall were wooden lockers. All the lockers were about two feet wide, and about six-feet tall down that whole wall.

Barber: They were wood?

Granata: Yes. Then there was the bathroom and the shower. And then underneath the bathroom were the stairs going down to the basement, where the furnace was located.

Barber: An oil furnace?

Granata: Yes. And above, the whole length of the apparatus room was open, where the fire engine would back in and close the door so it's ready to go out. Behind that fire engine was the kitchen, no walls, no partitions, no nothing. So every time that fire engine started up, you got smoke and diesel and whatever else.

Out of the back door, there were some steps going down, and garbage cans. Johnny Bow was a neat guy. He was kind of a vagrant. [laughs] He was a firefighter.

Barber: He was a vagrant firefighter? [laughs]

Granata: Kind of. He lived in Herlong, I guess it was. Is Herlong up in California up there? Yes. He would come down, and in the fire department you had to be there at eight o'clock. If you weren't there at eight o'clock, you got a ticket. Eight o'clock on the dot, you better be there because that's when the crew changed, and some guys went home. They'd been there twenty-four hours and they're ready to go home.

Barber: Oh, it was that long?

Granata: Yes. John Bow would park his car behind Engine 3 and sleep in his car a couple of hours before, so if he didn't wake up, somebody could go out and wake him up so he wouldn't get a ticket. [laughs]

It was a neat station. It was really neat. Like I said, there's a picture I gave you of Captain Davis standing in front of it. Davis is the one that he got killed in the Lake Street fire, and you could see across the street the houses and the service station.

Barber: So it was built in 1917. By the time you were using it, did it feel dated or did it still work well?

Granata: Oh, it was okay. The only thing is everybody snoring would keep you awake. I mean, you're in a little dormitory about the size of this room right here, but that was up until—hell, that was in the seventies when they built Stead. Stead was the first one, I think, where each guy had his own dormitory.

Barber: His own room?

Granata: His own room, yes.

Now, when I made captain in 1975, I was at Engine 7 up on Skyline. That was a neat station, too, because the captain had his own room up there. The captain had his own room, but everybody else still slept in a dormitory.

At Engine 4, the captain had his own room in the fifties when I went in there, but still the guys all slept in the dormitory. But now every guy has his own room, which is kind of nice, because back then, you'd be surprised how many guys would want to kill guys because they were snoring so damn loud. [laughs]

Barber: Do you remember ever being stationed at Engine 3 and having any significant fires along South Virginia Street?

Granata: There were, but we had so many fires. I don't remember any big ones. Well, I do remember some. It's hard to remember. In fact, one, we went into a place, a big building, we went in the front and then we put the fire out, and it was a good-sized fire. We went in the back and there were 55-gallon barrels of typewriter fluid back there, which could have blown up.

I really don't remember. There was the hotel across the street, which was, what, the Ponderosa Hotel later on?

Barber: Right.

Granata: They had a big fire up there, and I didn't make that one. Back in those days, we had two shifts: A and B shift. But each guy had a number. There were four numbers on A: A1, A2, A3, A4. B shift was B1, B2, B3, B4. You would work four shifts and take three days off. Now, four shifts is a shift on, shift off; shift on, shift off; shift on, shift off. I think we only worked three. I can't remember.

Barber: Because a shift is twenty-four hours?

Granata: I'm trying to remember how, because I've been gone twenty-eight years. Let's say it's four shifts. I think it was four shifts. Then you would take three days off. Well, in those three days off, that has to be an A-shift on duty, because you've got B, A, B, A, B, A, B, A, right? So the only guys who would be off on this day would be your A1s. The next time around, the A2s would be off. The third time

around, you worked four shifts and you got five days off in a row. So now this would be your A3 and your A4. It's hard to explain, I don't know if you understand it or not, but, anyway, we worked 62.8 hours a week.

Then when we went to the three platoon, which was around '72, I think, somewhere in '71, '72, then the whole thing changed. We went to 56 hours a week, and all the A1s and A2s and everything went away. Now you had A-shift, B-shift, and C-shift, that was it, and you would work three shifts, take a four all the way through, no fives, no nothing. Just three shifts and take a four, and that way it worked out so that everybody on A-shift was off at the same time, everybody on B-shift was off at the same time.

Barber: So what's your understanding of why they closed Station 3 or why they stopped using it?

Granata: Because they built the new one.

Barber: Where was the new one they built?

Granata: On Moana. I guess as the city gets bigger you have to have stations within so close to housing, like within three miles—I can't remember what the distance is—and within so far of all the hydrants. So, of course, when they built Engine 3, I had already retired.

Barber: The new Station 3 on Moana?

Granata: Yeah.

Barber: So, really, they used this little station, the Station 3 that you were talking about, for a long time. It was in operation for many, many decades.

Granata: Yes.

Barber: Since 1917.

Granata: The old Central, they moved in in 1900, and they tore it down in 1970—no, they didn't tear it down. We moved out in January 1976. My shift moved out. We were the ones that moved out. So it was there seventy-six years.

Barber: So that was a long one, yes.

Granata: They moved in, I think, in January of 1900, and they moved out in January of '76. Station 3 was there in '17 and moved out in '88, maybe. [laughs] I don't know. I wasn't there.

But, anyway, they were all great. I'll tell you what. The firefighter's job is just a great job. Everybody loves it. You won't find anybody that doesn't love being a firefighter. When we went to work there, nobody wanted the job. Nobody wanted the job. I made \$360 a month. A guy driving a truck around town, a dump truck, was making \$700 a month. Nobody wanted the job. The only reason I took it is I never had a job before. I was in the navy, and I got out of the navy and I went to work for Probasco. Well, I put in for both the fire department and Probasco, and Probasco, the carpenter's union,

called me first, and I went down and started working for Probasco. I worked about two months, I guess, and beat my fingers up. It was cold, ice cold.

A friend of mine, Jim Sherkey, who went to Reno High School, told me he went on a month before I did. Jim told me, "It's the greatest job I ever had. Not good money, but I love it." So I decided, "That's it. I'm going to do it."

My dad came out one time on the job out there. I was working for Probasco building houses out there. He said, "The fire department called. You want to go to work for them?"

I said, "Hell, yes." [laughs]

You know how many people now put in for fire departments? They have three, four thousand guys go down and take the test. Of course, they weed them out. They do their agility test first, and guys who can't make it, they throw them out. So now they're down to a thousand, and they do something else. Now they're down to a few hundred, and then they give the test, the written test.

When they decided to go to shorter hours in 1958, Reno had the ambulance. The fire department had the ambulance, and two ambulance companies were in town. They decided, "Well, we'll get rid of our ambulance because there's two ambulance companies here." Not only that, but the clubs, every time they wanted to get rid of a drunk, they'd call the fire department, and have the ambulance respond.

So, anyway, they also were going to go to short hours, from 70 hours a week—they were working 70 hours a week—to 62.8. They needed seventeen guys, so they put an ad in the paper for a fire department test. They gave the test, and had thirteen guys show up, and all thirteen of them passed. Frank Bussa was one of them who I can get you in touch with if you want to talk to him. So they gave another test because they needed four more guys. They had twelve guys sign up. Four of us showed up. [laughs] Seventeen, that's how they got their seventeen guys. Nobody wanted the job. We didn't make good money, didn't have good benefits. We just got retirement, and it wasn't all that great. But since then, we've done so well, now everybody's mad at us. [laughter]

Barber: But you still love the job, even at that low rate?

Granata: Oh, it was a good job. It was a super job.

Barber: Well, the last thing I want to ask you about, because we talked about it in an earlier conversation, was if you have any memories of the V&T Railroad when it was in operation.

Granata: Sure. The V&T ran right along Holcomb Lane. I gave you a picture of that Vassar Street property and showed you that vacant lot is there. This is thirty-seven feet from here to there, and I'm going to guess it was probably that far from the edge of that lot to the railroad tracks, and they ran right across Vassar Street and on down.

Now, the V&T had their roundhouse right across from the police station, and that's where they would go down and turn it around and head back to Carson City. I remember the V&T. There was a little ditch right next to the V&T tracks, that went alongside the tracks, a little ditch, maybe a couple feet wide. And I told you that story. I think I put in that story about me digging a hole.

Barber: Yes. Go ahead and tell me that story.

Granata: Well, I was nine years old or eight; I don't know. We lived in Vassar. We lived in 144. That was after my dad got back from the service. The Fitches and I and all the kids around there used to play in the wintertime. There was a big deep hole. It doesn't show it now in that lot, but it was a big deep hole, and in the wintertime we'd take cardboard boxes and slide down the snow.

Well, one summertime we're playing down there and I'm playing around. There was a concrete wall about three foot high that ran all the way down that edge of the alley, and there was about a two-foot creek right along that wall, that came down there, and it must have gone under a culvert or something, because that must be the little creek that I remember going down alongside the V&T tracks. But I started digging and playing around there under the wall. There was already an area that was deteriorated. A lot of the dirt was gone. I was just digging around, and pretty soon water starts seeping through, and I'm looking at it, and it's starting to seep a little faster, and I'm trying to push dirt back up in there. [laughs] It starts seeping faster and faster, and I'm pushing dirt in, and it isn't helping.

Pretty soon, it's coming wide open, and it filled that whole hole up with water. Somebody called the fire department and the fire engine showed up. I remember the fire engine showing up. Of course, I ran and hid after that. I was afraid they were going to throw me in jail. [laughs]

Barber: So they pumped it all out.

Granata: No, they didn't do anything. I don't know if they—

Barber: It just seeped back in.

Granata: I don't even know what they did. I really don't. I don't know. What are you going to do? Call the watermaster and tell them to shut off the ditch is all you could do.

Barber: [laughs] Right.

Granata: Now, what they could have done, they had big tarps in the fire department that they used for various things, like mostly for covering furniture if you had a fire in a house and water dripping down. But you could also use it for making dams. It's possible they might have used that to put along that hole and put rocks around it or something to keep the water from coming, but that hole was already full of water. What are they going to do? Just let it seep down through the ground is all they could do.

Barber: So did you ever take the train or do you just remember seeing it go by?

Granata: I never took it. They had that train—in 1951, they did their last run on it. I just wasn't interested. A lot of the kids who went to Reno High School took that train, and went to Carson City that day. Not me. I didn't care.

Barber: It just seems like it might be dangerous to have a railroad line going right through a residential area. Were you, as a kid, told to stay away, or was there anything that happened?

Granata: No, there was nothing there, no arms that come down and keep you from going across or anything. I used to put pennies on the tracks and the train would flatten them out. I saw a car get hit there at Vassar Street and kill a guy in a car.

Barber: Oh, you saw it happen?

Granata: Well, I was there after it happened. I heard it and ran down there.

You had to just be careful. Of course, that train only ran, what, once a day or whatever. It wasn't a big, big thing.

Barber: I can't recall how soon they pulled the tracks up after they stopped the running the line.

Granata: Oh, I'm sure it was in the sixties, I'm guessing, because they paved that whole thing over. They've still got V&T, so you could talk to them and they would be able to tell you.

Barber: Right. Well, we've talked about a lot of different businesses and properties. It's been really helpful to get some firsthand descriptions of them. I thank you very much for talking to me today.  
[laughs]

Granata: I wish I could remember more, you know.

Barber: We all do. [laughs]

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## JACK HAWKINS

Architect and founder, Hawkins & Associates, 1400 S. Virginia Street



Jack Hawkins in his offices at 1400 South Virginia Street. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Jack Hawkins grew up in Missouri and earned an architecture degree from the University of Kansas. After several years in Australia and Phoenix, he founded Hawkins & Associates in Reno in 1994. With offices at 1400 S. Virginia Street, he has worked on numerous Midtown-area projects, including the Stremmel Gallery, Lulou's, 8 on Center, and 777 Center Street.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, and I'm in Reno, Nevada, with the architect Jack Hawkins to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Jack, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?



Hawkins: You do.

Barber: Thank you so much. I want to start by just getting a little bit of background on you. Can you tell me where you were born and where you grew up?

Hawkins: Yes. I was born in Sedalia, Missouri, 1960, a very small town, about 25,000 people, kind of a farming rural community. I graduated from high school, and all my friends went to the University of Missouri. University of Missouri did not have a School of Architecture, so I went to the University of Kansas because they had a reciprocal agreement. It was a great school and it was cheap tuition. So I got a bachelor of architecture from University of Kansas.

I moved to Phoenix. The West was booming at the time, so I lived three years in Phoenix and then moved to Australia, and from 1986 to '89 we lived in Australia, where Lyn is from, my wife. Then came back to Phoenix right in the middle of the '89-'90 savings and loan scandal, which was at the epicenter of the desert Southwest. We were kind of at the epicenter of that recession.

A good friend of mine, Bob Hooft, who was born and raised in Winnemucca—we went to school together at the University of Kansas—he encouraged me to come to Reno. He said the economy was good, and he knew I liked to backpack and fly-fish and ski and all the outdoor activities. So we moved here late in 1989 and have been here for about twenty-six years, if my math is right, and it's been a good home. I worked for another architectural firm for about four years before starting my own practice in '94, I think, and have been here ever since.

Barber: What was that firm you worked for?

Hawkins: That was Larry Henry and Don Clark. It was called Henry Clark Architecture. And Don Clark's still around with Cathexes, and Larry Henry is still around, both practicing in Reno and in Mexico.

Barber: Were you working on both commercial and residential architecture with them?

Hawkins: Yes, I've always done a little bit of everything—some institutional, some commercial, limited residential until I got out on my own. Since then, I've always tried to do half commercial work, half residential. Then I started doing interiors about fifteen years ago, give or take.

Barber: Interiors on buildings where you weren't doing an exterior part of it?

Hawkins: Yes. I started out with commercial tenant improvements, and then I started doing commercial interiors for my commercial buildings, and then I started doing residential interiors, too, and then got into some landscaping. Just a little bit of everything.

Barber: So arriving in 1989, 1990, what was your perception of the kind of architectural environment that was here?

Hawkins: Well, it's interesting. Australia in the late eighties, mid eighties, late eighties, was going through quite a boom. Sydney for years had been a very provincial town, and all of a sudden it was

becoming this Pacific Rim super city. It's extremely gorgeous, so the architecture was becoming very, very progressive. I wasn't in Sydney. I was in Adelaide. Adelaide is a city of a million people, more like a San Diego, L.A. climate, but it was also going through a boom, and, again, the architecture was pretty sophisticated— more so than what we were doing in the States, I thought, from a design standpoint.

Then when I moved back to the States and then here to Reno in '89, trying to practice modern architecture was a big uphill battle. Reno was just behind the times then, to be blunt and frank about it, architecturally, and so I had a lot of pushback, and I just was befuddled at the low expectations of architecture at the time. That's not to say that people here weren't trying to do good work, and there is a good legacy of good architects practicing here in the past, but it was just the climate wasn't there for good progressive architecture. There are some great old buildings, and everybody thinks because an architect practices modern architecture, that they don't love old historic buildings, which is just not true. I love good old historic buildings. That doesn't mean I want to save every building, but the good ones I want to save and then have good modern buildings to complement them. I see cities like Portland. Portland's, I think, an excellent example of a place where they've mixed good modern architecture with preserving their great historic buildings, and I'd like to see Reno progress that way. We tend to tear our good buildings down, and then we build faux buildings that try to look old, and both are tragedies.

Barber: How would you say you developed your aesthetic? In architecture school, were you particularly influenced by people you'd studied or had become familiar with?

Hawkins: That's a really good question. I think I was influenced a lot by the exposure I had in Australia. Glenn Murcutt, he's a Pritzker Prize winner. I think that was maybe ten years ago he won the Pritzker Prize, which is *the* coveted prize if you're an architect, and he's a one-man shop, practicing in Australia. He has always been an inspiration to me, and he's very pragmatic in the way he uses materials, very sensitive to his environment. He was definitely a big influence.

Renzo Piano is one of my heroes. John Lautner is, I think, one of the greatest American architects, and nobody even knows who he is. I didn't know who he was when I was in architectural school. We never studied him, and I kind of discovered him on my own later in life. And just those were good influences.

Barber: What is it, would you say, that draws you to a more modern aesthetic?

Hawkins: Oh, boy. You're torturing me here! [laughs]

Well, modern architecture, to me is more than an aesthetic and it's more than style. Modern architecture, to me, is substantive. I guess a good example of what not to do is you've got this beautiful piece of desert, and I've had clients call and say, "Hey, I want to do an English Tudor house." An English Tudor house was designed to be in England for a very specific climate during a very specific time period, and we don't live in that time period. So, for me, philosophically it's wrong to practice in historic styles.

At the same time, it's America. If you want to live in an English Tudor house, I'm happy for you and I think you have the right to do that. I think you have the right to live in a cabin. You can live in a tipi. I don't care. The problem I have is a lot of people go, "Well, I don't want that modern house next to me. I don't like it." And I don't, frankly, like their house, but I'm willing to say you can live in it. It's America.

In this country, we're really backward in how we think of modern architecture, so for me it's just more of a philosophy. To me, good modern architecture is pragmatic. It's sensitive to its site. There was a period when modern architecture started to fail and it didn't matter whether you were building a building in Hong Kong or Berlin or New York, they all started to look alike. They started to disrespect their culture, their climate, their history, and their topography. Those very important design principles started to become disregarded, and so modern architecture began to fail, and there was a huge backlash towards that.

That was right when I was in school, and I didn't even understand it at the time, and I had professors who were hard Modernists, and they were just absolutely beside themselves. Then we had the Postmodernist faculty who were challenging the establishment. I was caught in the middle and had no idea what the hell they were really talking about, and it took me several years out to understand that both were right, in that the Modernists had failed and the Postmodernists failed miserably trying to go back to historic styles.

But what they did do is the modern architecture that's being practiced now by people who really know what they're doing, is taking the Modernist principles, but also respecting culture, climate, topography, history. When I say "history," it's not trying to recreate what was done in the past, but a sensitivity to a neighborhood. There are ways to do that with scale, proportion, landscaping, rather than just mimicking a style. So I think a lot of good things came out of modern architecture going through a failed period. I think what's been good for architecture is the drive toward being sustainable, which plays into the Modernist aesthetic. If you have a modern building, it's pretty easy to incorporate passive and active solar and sustainable technologies in a sensitive way, in that you can make those integral to the building design. It's hard to put a solar panel on an English Tudor house; it just doesn't work. I think that's played well into why modern architecture has sort of regained its prominence, or maybe not prominence, but it's come back.

Then I think also there's been a huge interest in midcentury modern, which was a classic period with some really great design, and people have rediscovered that. For me, it used to be extremely hard to do an addition to an existing house and practice modern principles. With *Dwell* magazine and some of the other magazines, and the interest in midcentury modern, it's made my life considerably easier from a design standpoint.

Barber: Why don't we get to talking about some of your specific projects that are in the area that's now being defined as Midtown? We're in your office, which is actually technically in Midtown, 1400 South Virginia Street, which is just north of the intersection with Mt. Rose Street. You have a number of them: the Stremmel Gallery development; LuLou's; 8 on Center; 777 Center Street (the old Maytan Music building); Cheney Street Town Home development; Mt. Rose Street building; and the interior of the building that is 538 South Virginia, which is now Truckee River Bagel Company. I'd love to talk about as many of these things as you'd like to. You can take them in any order. I'm interested in knowing how they came about and what the challenges or opportunities were at those sites.

Hawkins: I think the best one to talk about is the Stremmel building and LuLou's because the Stremmels have owned the property that we're on, from the late forties, early fifties, and it used to be the Volkswagen dealership. This was an interesting project because it started out as a gallery expansion. The Stremmels had built a house in 1994, and Mark Mack, who is an internationally known architect,

designed that home, and I think it was on the cover of *Architectural Record* back in '94, '95, and it's still a great house, even twenty-plus years later. I was just in it a couple of weeks ago, and it's fabulous.

Anyway, Pete Stremmel called me one day, and I had gotten to know him, and he said, "Hey, would you be interested in teaming up with Mark Mack to work on the gallery? We want to do a gallery expansion."

I said, "Absolutely." And I was pretty young in my career. I'd only been out on my own maybe three or four years, so I was super excited, because when I first went out on my own, I was just the new kid in town and I was doing whatever anybody would throw at me. I had to just make a living. So I thought, "Well, this could be a cool opportunity."

Mark did a really interesting gallery renovation, but they were only adding maybe a couple thousand square feet of gallery space, and the cost was pretty ridiculously high, and Pete just couldn't justify it. Where we are right now was just parking lot. I said, "Pete, why not build some commercial space, rent it out, and let it offset the cost of the gallery expansion?" He liked the idea, and Mark and I did some preliminary design work.

Mark was fabulous to work with. I was super intimidated by him, and he could not have been nicer. Frankly, he maybe wasn't as interested in this project as he could have been, because by then he was doing some great projects all over the world. So he was doing this more as a favor for Pete, and he was quite happy to let me hang myself and do as much as I could. Mark was just fabulous to work with and really let me have some freedom, and he kind of guided me. So this was a really nice collaboration, and I just assumed I would be the flunky, but he let me have a lot of opportunity, especially with the interiors, not only for the gallery space, but then I got to do two of the three TIs, tenant improvements, in the building—the one we're in here, and then the one next door.

The whole thing was just a great experience, and it was interesting, too, because when Pete decided to do the commercial space, this was probably eighteen years ago. Back then, had we talked to a commercial realtor and said, "Hey, we're thinking about putting some office space in on Virginia Street," they would have laughed us out of the office because everything was going south. South Meadows was booming. Office buildings were going up out there. Ribeiro out on McCarran and Longley, all that was booming. So the thought of doing office space on Virginia Street was not a real popular idea. But what was interesting is because we'd built some unique office space, which there isn't a lot of in Reno, these spaces have never been vacant. And it's been fourteen, fifteen years that there's never been a vacancy, except for about four months where Sheehan VanWoert is now. There was a tenant that was moving out, and there was a dead period for a few months while they were renovating that space.

I think it shows how powerful good architecture can be, because had we built something really poor, from a design standpoint, it probably wouldn't have been successful. And then I think, again, when we were building out in South Meadows, other cities had already long determined that suburban development was not the answer to city planning, good urban planning, and here we were, twenty years behind the time. South Meadows was just booming, and other cities were saying, "No, we've tried that, and it's not the way to go." Anyway, that was a really good first experience.

Then I was lucky enough to talk to Pete to get my office in here, and so I've been in Midtown since long before it became Midtown. So I'm really vested in the area. I love when I have projects in this area, because I feel like it's my 'hood.

Then about eight years ago, nine years ago, the kids had moved out of the house and it was time to do something different. We'd lived in the same house for about seventeen years. We were up near Hunter Lake and Plumb. I took a chance and ended up doing a little development over off of Cheney and

Wells, and it ended up being four townhomes: one for Lyn and I; one for my friend Baron, who is also an architect (he and I did two together); and then I did two townhomes to sell. Also my friend Paolo Cividino, who owns Tutto Ferro, had a house there and has done an awesome job of renovating that.

So that was interesting—and it was right before the bust. Reno was booming. People were building stuff. People were taking chances. Contemporary architecture, modern architecture had this resurgence. People were interested in midcentury. *Dwell* magazine had come out. There were lots of young professionals in Reno, and there was just kind of a buzz that I'd never seen. It was a whole different scene than the atmosphere when I moved here in late '89.

So I was super excited and kind of was riding this wave and did this development, and, thank goodness, I did sell the units. And then shortly after, the crash hit. At the same time, too, that's when 8 on Center was done, which had been a derelict piece of property that had been vacant for fifteen, sixteen years. Kelly Rae and Pam Haberman wanted to do a modern development. They'd been living in Palm Springs, and there's a lot of great modern development down there, and they were really interested in doing a really nice higher-end multi-family development.

In Reno we look at density as a really negative thing, and we have just sprawled and sprawled and sprawled, and so I was really interested in trying to increase density but do it in a sensitive way with both of those projects. And I think we succeeded for sure on 8 on Center, taking a derelict piece of property and putting eight units in there that all have terrific views of Mt. Rose. I think they add to the commercial area that's right across the street. It's a really nice project, and it's nicely landscaped. I don't think it was detrimental by having that higher density. I think you can have both. You can have the higher density and you can have a project that really fits in.

Then even with my little development, when we started, including Paolo's lot, there were basically Baron's house, Paolo's house, and a house that we had purchased next to Paolo. So you had these three little bungalows, and they were all like 140-by-50 lots, but the lots were all derelict at the back, with sagebrush, cars on blocks and tires, just really rundown and derelict, and basically allowed for three families to live in them.

Now in the same amount of area we can have seven families or seven couples or however you want to look at it, seven family units in the same area, but it's all nicely landscaped and I think it's really improved the neighborhood. We've kept the character of the street and upgraded it. Those units have all been renovated at various levels of quality. All the front yards have been re-landscaped, but then at the back you have these four townhomes that are modern and energy-efficient. To me, that was a really successful project in terms of increasing the density but also improving the neighborhood.

We tried to be really sensitive. Again, how can you be sensitive in terms of trying to fit into this older neighborhood? One of the things we did was with the windows. For instance, my unit has no window treatments, in that where the windows are placed, either nobody can look in or I can't look out at them. It's either opaque glass or they're positioned so that there's privacy there. Somebody across the street did a development and it's very traditional, so the windows are all sort of traditional heights, but they all look right into the neighbor's backyard, and that neighbor was really upset. But with our units, she was quite happy with them.

So there are some things—landscaping is super important—to help a more dense project fit into the neighborhood. We use a lot of borrowed landscape; instead of just building a fence, we'd open things up so that the landscaping could flow between the three properties, which I think works really well. We kind of borrow each other's landscaping, so it feels like there's more landscaping than there really is. Those projects were all really important to me personally.

Then 777 has just been a ball because it's Maytan Music. It's very sentimental to a lot of people—my kids actually had music lessons there, so I was in that building all through my kids' growing up. Everybody in town has either had music lessons there or their kids have had music lessons there. It's been there since 1962, I think, or 1960, and it's gone through two or three major renovations. It was built and then had an addition and then two major renovations.

And, without offending the entire town, it is probably one of the ugliest buildings I have ever worked on, and, hands down, just one of the absolutely ugliest buildings in town. So it was challenging from everything from structural retrofit or upgrading for current seismic and wind loading, to utilities, cutting into the street. Everything about it had problems. We had water in the basement. It sits on top of an old spring. Just all kinds of issues. But it was incredibly fun and exciting. The developers, Tom and Linda Johnson, wanted to try something. They wanted to be progressive in terms of the architecture.



Stremmel Gallery. Image courtesy of Jack Hawkins.

Barber: And yet they wanted to use the existing structure as a base?

Hawkins: Well, yes, there was value there. And that's another thing. Just from a sustainability standpoint, anytime you can rehab an existing structure, there's value there. From a sustainability standpoint, you cannot build new, no matter how green you make it, no matter how energy-neutral you make it. It takes a lot of material and energy to create a building, to tear the whole thing down and just start again—and sometimes you just don't have a choice.

But in this case, there was a lot to be gained by trying to rehab what was there, but at the same time, there was a lot of bad square footage, in terms of a lot of very dark areas where you couldn't get good views or easily get light into the building. The coolest thing was talking the developer into actually reducing their square footage. Part of it was that that particular part of the structure couldn't take the new use of a restaurant, so it made sense to tear part of that down, because we literally couldn't rehab it without spending more money than it was worth to rehab that part. So we were able to tear down part of

it and then build back and create a nice little courtyard that faces south. When the landscaping is mature, it'll be a beautiful space to be both summer and winter.

One of the things we're missing in Reno is street trees. I think there was one derelict elm on the property that had kind of sprouted up, and nobody had cut it down, and that was it. There was no landscaping on the entire piece of property. So now we have street trees on Cheney Street that, again, face south, so it'll help shade the building. It'll help shade the sidewalk. It'll help with shading the plaza area. To me, that was a real success of rehabbing an older building.

Barber: Was is always intended for the new tenants to just be restaurants, or were they open?

Hawkins: No, it's a mixed-use facility, and we set it up to have some boutique office spaces on Center Street that would be similar to my office here with kind of a two-story space, and if somebody wanted, they could even take some of the basement space. So you could actually have a three-story space, which could be pretty cool. There's probably about 8,000 square feet of that type of space.

There's some good retail to be had on the corner of Center and Cheney, and then the restaurants were always intended to go on Cheney Street, with the restaurant part facing south and the courtyard and the deck. Then the back of house is back where we really couldn't get any natural light or there aren't any good views. It's at the alley by the parking. It kind of laid itself out in terms of how the mixed uses would go in there. I think currently there's two restaurants and a brewery or a taproom. It's kind of a cool mix already, so I'm hoping it'll be super successful. And hats off to the developers, because they really did go out on a limb both in terms of taking a risk on an old building and then also doing something progressive from an architectural standpoint.

Do you want to hear about any of the others?

Barber: Yes, I'm curious. Going back to the Stremmel property, you were saying that that work you were doing was a renovation or an addition to the gallery. Was the original gallery a modern design?

Hawkins: Yes. That was done by Maurice Nespor. One of the best architects in the area and friends with Pete and a great artist. It was a nice little one-story modern building, and it was, in fact, a renovation. Really, that's still intact. That's the one-story part that you see on the north, and then we built a two-story section that was the gallery addition, and then the three-story office space to the south where the parking lot used to be. Again, from my standpoint, that was a really good thing for Virginia Street in terms of we're the only building right now that has street trees on Virginia Street, and so that was cool to be able to do that.

Then also instead of just a sea of asphalt that you view from Virginia Street, there's now a building, and yet we still have some parking at the back. Then LuLou's works well because there's sort of a symbiotic relationship when all the people leave from the office at night, LuLou's patrons come in and use that parking space and the street parking. There's a nice relationship there.

LuLou's was just a great project. That was, I think, the second or third project I did for Pete Stremmel. We did a renovation of the exterior, and LuLou's at one point took half of the building, and then they ended up taking the entire building. That was a really great project for me at the time and was just fun. I think that was the first restaurant I had ever been involved in. It was a really good project.



LuLou's Restaurant, 2015. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: Talk to me a little bit about color, because you are an architect who is not afraid to use color.

Hawkins: Yes. It's funny, color is one of the hardest things to do, and I struggle with it. I think people think I just pick a color and throw it on the building, but there's actually a lot of thought behind it. I've tried to be a little more judicious with it now, and maybe a building is fairly neutral and then just has a couple of really nice hot colors. It kind of depends on what the facility is and what your goal is, but definitely my residences tend to be much more subtle, much more natural materials. If I'm in an urban environment, I do use color as sort of an attractor, and I guess I do like to use it.

I have an architect friend who has always done very, very neutral work, and yet I love his work. I think he's just an exceptional architect. But he finds it fascinating how I use color, because he paints, too, and he says, "Your buildings remind me of my paintings, but I can't do the kind of color you do in my buildings," which I thought was really interesting. I've never really thought about it, but I've always used color and I'm not afraid of it. You can really screw it up, and I think I've done that before.

Barber: Did you?

Hawkins: Not in this area, but in my early years when I was down in Phoenix, I did some color schemes that I look back on and they were not so great. But you learn. And I think it's where you use it and how you use it, but it's one of the harder things that I wrestle with because it's much more subjective. It's tricky.



Barber: Do you do a lot of testing of colors on the building itself, or do you have it all decided by the time you're going to begin doing exterior paints? Does it vary?

Hawkins: It varies. I think sometimes it happens in the schematic design phase. I'll do a quick rendering and I'll be thinking, "What does this want to be? What are the materials?" The building material of choice in Reno is stucco, and it's an economical material, so when you're doing large commercial projects by a developer and money is king, you really don't have a lot of choices. Stucco is pretty much it. So what I try to do is use stucco as the base, and then try to add some accents of steel and maybe some wood slats or other materials mixed in. But those are expensive materials, so you have to use those judiciously, and color's cheap. You can get a big hit economically, and that's really where it stems from. I use it as a design tool. It's a cheap hit. It doesn't cost you any more to do a bright red stucco than a white stucco. When I first moved to Reno, there were only three colors of stucco. There was beige, beige, and beige, and everything was beige stucco. So I think there's part of me thinking that it's not going to be beige.

Barber: Since we're recording here and we don't have visuals, can you tell us about the colors of some of the buildings that you've mentioned here, these Stremmel buildings and others? Do they have specific names, those colors?

Hawkins: I think the people who name the colors on the color chips, I think they just sit around, they have a glass of wine and they just drink and drink till they come up with all the names, because some of them are silly. But I will say, for 8 on Center, believe it or not, I was out mountain-bike riding and I was picking colors from the desert. If you actually look at 8 on Center, when it first was built, from a color standpoint, it was pretty radical, because it had this intense lime green on it. But that color actually came from lichens on rocks that I found mountain-biking off of Peavine. And then the bulk of the building is gray block, which is just a standard gray block with some black aggregate in it, so it has more of a granite feel or color. It looks like granite, basically, when it was sandblasted. Then the very neutral stucco, which is the bulk of the color, is sage color. All the colors that I use, you can find in nature.

Then I always think it's about proportion. I always try to do more of a neutral base color, a sage green, a gray, and then maybe something that's really bold, just as you would find in nature. The bulk of landscaping is, especially in northern Nevada, a fairly neutral palette, but then if you look closely, there are some really beautiful yellows and greens, and you can find all kinds of exotic colors if you look. So it's not totally random and it's not totally artificial, manmade. But then sometimes I just think red would look really cool in that spot. It's kind of fun. I don't know. It's funny how it happens sometimes.

Barber: And LuLou's is red, isn't it?

Hawkins: It's orange.

Barber: Oh, it's orange.

Hawkins: It was red. When we first did it, it was bright red, and that was really controversial, too. At one point we had looked at doing a really intense green, but green and food, the owner just couldn't get their head around that, so we went with red. Red was very successful. The only problem is reds, purples,

oranges oxidize very quickly here. Actually, almost all colors oxidize pretty quickly, so they've gotten better. They'll hold their color longer.

And then, unfortunately, there's a lot of graffiti in this part of town, and so ultimately buildings just have to be repainted. LuLou's had kind of faded, it had been tagged a bunch of times, and we just said, "Hey, let's do something fun with it." So we went with a hot orange.

And it's the same with the Stremmel building. It's been painted a couple times, and, again, same two reasons: oxidation of the colors and graffiti. Graffiti has really plagued this neighborhood, both Midtown and Wells Avenue, and it really probably hit its peak during the bust, the great bust of 2008. This neighborhood really deteriorated.

I was thinking that Reno would never bounce back, and then a group of us got together and about seventy people showed up. We showed up to City Council to say, "We're turning into a sewer." Every building on Wells was a patchwork. Even if somebody would remove the graffiti or paint over it, you could still see the patchwork quilt effect. And downtown was getting hit. Midtown was getting hit. Several of us were out covering up graffiti on the weekends on our own time. Barry O'Sullivan still does it. I do it occasionally if I see stuff that's right in my own neighborhood. My townhome was tagged three times. The mentality of defacing somebody's personal residence and/or building, I just can't get my head around.

Anyway, the city finally had us come down. After seventy or eighty people showed up to City Council, the city put together a graffiti task force, and that task force was comprised of about twelve of us business owners, people who were interested in a better community. I don't think we were entirely successful, but now there are two trucks, graffiti removal or paint-over trucks. We were down to one guy, one truck running half time. Anyway, it's a serious problem. It's not going away.

Barber: This was a very ignored part of town, really, once it was no longer the highway and it wasn't considered a really desirable place to locate a business. And there's that sense of desolation that can encourage more graffiti, in addition to the tough economic times.

Hawkins: Yes. It was just a hard time for Reno. I think it really was a recession in terms of people actually moving out of the area. The population actually decreased and it left quite a vacuum, and the graffiti increased, just vandalism in general. So it's been good to see it. There's been a turnaround for sure, and yet it's still an ongoing problem.

And I think bad signage breeds graffiti; i.e., places that are very restrictive on signage don't typically get graffiti. You might get the occasional tag from a juvenile, a thirteen-, fourteen-year-old kid that's just trying to be cool. But you don't get the chronic graffiti and tagging that you get where signage is horrific. And we have some pretty horrific signage, billboards, bad signage. I think what happens is in the taggers' minds, they're just competing with all the other crappy signage that's out there.

If you go to other communities that have very restrictive sign ordinances and no billboards, I won't say that they have eliminated the problem, but it's better. I think as Reno matures, it's going to have to come to terms with the fact that we're not a hillbilly town anymore. We have to look holistically at the community. No longer can somebody put up a 400 square foot, 80 foot tall gigantic billboard that then stays there for fifty years. I see that industry as they've made a ton of money at the expense of the rest of the community.

I've affiliated a little bit with Scenic Nevada. Those people do an amazing job. The industry has new LED billboards. Everybody can do LED lighting and signage now. What's really cool now, forty

years from now people might be wondering what in the hell were people thinking back then. Just because you can do something doesn't mean that it's good to do something.

Barber: You see that billboard issue on South Virginia Street specifically, right?

Hawkins: I'd love to know when some of those billboards went up, but I've got to think some of them went up in the forties. When you're coming in from Carson City, you could see the things from miles off. I think what's happened is the world's just completely different. I won't say advertising and signage is completely irrelevant, but when you have an iPhone and you can Google a particular business, you think, what's the relevance of a gigantic billboard? Just because you can do it doesn't mean that it's good for the community. That's something that the Midtown area is going to have to grapple with, and, of course, you know that's how I got involved with Great Streets was the billboard issue. That's a tough, tough issue to deal with.

Barber: The city kind of caught up to your interest in this neighborhood, and the Midtown District emerged relatively recently.

Hawkins: Yes, very organically.

Barber: Right. Can you remember when you first started to become aware that there was something people were calling Midtown? And how have you gotten more involved in trying to shape what its future might be?

Hawkins: Well, it's funny, because I think that with Pete Stremmel doing the gallery expansion and LuLou's, he was definitely ahead of his time, and people were thinking, "Gosh, why are you investing in that area?" But it's been highly successful for him.

And then I remember specifically—and this happened during the recession—Süp opened up and Midtown Eats, two of my favorite places to go, and both of those are owned by people who took their life savings and gambled on trying to do a nice little restaurant. That probably happened in the first part of 2009, 2010, somewhere in there, the first part of the recession. And it was cool to see people going, "You know, yeah, Reno's kind of down and out, but we're going to be our own entrepreneurs and we're going to make something happen here," and they did. And there are some cool bars that took chances, too.

It just sort of happened organically, and some cool retail spaces moved in, and I think part of it was rent was cheap. But those businesses all were successful, so then other people were willing to take chances. Then pretty soon, all of a sudden you have a little bit of a district going on, and you get some big fish moving in, like Tom Johnson buying Maytan Music and capitalizing on that. But at the same time, one of their directives was "We still want to fit into the neighborhood. We want to be modern, but we want to be cool, too." And that was part of the color scheme for that building, frankly, to have some hipness to it and some funky materials and some steel and wood slats.

I'm a huge supporter of all those businesses, and I'm super happy that they've been successful, and Midtown is my favorite place to eat. I really don't get out of a one-mile radius. I go from my house, my townhome, to my office, and we eat in the neighborhood. Now we have Laughing Planet, you have Campo, you have LuLou's. I mean, you've really got an amazing range of good restaurants and good

coffee shops and good little nightclubs and bars. It's just so different than it was twenty years ago. I'm super supportive of that.

What I'm not so supportive of is that the environment is still horrific. Visually, everything about it is highly offensive visually to me. There's nothing attractive about it. That's how I got involved with the Great Streets Coalition, to try to take Virginia Street as a RTC transit corridor project, and see this as an opportunity—that we aren't going to have again for another forty years—to not just fix the street with good transportation—I'm a big supporter of good public transportation—but also to create a good street environment.

That's what I was interested in with the Great Streets Coalition, to take the limited real estate down there and try to create the best environment that we could get to support those businesses, because, frankly, they've done it all on their own. They've had zero help from anybody. Zero help. The city has neglected that area for forty years. The renovation, the stuff that we're talking about RTC doing now, frankly should have been done forty years ago. So I'm super excited just to see RTC develop what is really our district. It's for the citizens of Reno, and hopefully when you have people come to town, you can send them down to that area to shop and say, "Hey, at lunch we'll meet at so-and-so and have a great lunch," and be able to go have a nice drink somewhere. It's the kind of area we've needed for a long time.

Barber: That sounds like a good place to stop. I really appreciate you talking to me today.

Hawkins: Sure.

Barber: Thank you.

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## TIM HEALION

Manager, Laughing Planet Café, 650 Tahoe Street  
and former owner, Deux Gros Nez, 249 California Avenue



Tim Healion at the Laughing Planet Café, 2016. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Tim Healion opened the legendary coffee shop Deux Gros Nez with his partner John Jesse at 249 California Avenue in 1985. The two later opened the Pneumatic Diner, and eventually Healion helmed Deux Gros Nez alone until its closure in 2006. He also founded the popular bike race, the Tour de Nez. In 2014 Healion helped open the Laughing Planet Café at 650 Tahoe Street.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and I'm in Reno, Nevada, with Tim Healion to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Tim, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Healion: Yes.

Barber: Thank you. We have a lot to talk about, but I'd like to start by getting a little bit of background information on you. Can you tell me where and when you were born?

Healion: Yes. I was born in 1959, September, 9/29/59. That's three nines. It means something to somebody. I was born in Evanston Hospital outside of Chicago. My dad was the head trainer and taught physical stuff at Northwestern University at the time.

Barber: And did you grow up in that area?

Healion: No. We were there for my early childhood. Then he got a job in Indiana, so I was in Bloomington from '68 to '72, and then we moved to the Boston area. My dad was the head trainer of the New England Patriots, who lost yesterday. It was pretty sad. That was super fun having your dad be part of the Patriots. I'd go hang out in the locker rooms after the games and had a job up in the press box. I worked as a ball boy on the field a couple of years when I was little, in the early junior-high era, I think. Yeah, it was good. It was pretty fun.

Have you seen the movie, *Spotlight*? It's about the *Boston Globe* uncovering all that bad stuff. My first job in high school was working in a Catholic priory in the Boston area. That was fun because I learned. I washed dishes, was a pot washer, started working with the cook there. He taught me how to cook. I got to help the woman that baked, and learned baking.

There were about twenty-five priests on staff. It was the first year for monks who wanted to become priests, and they were really slimy frickin' characters, super slimy characters. There was one priest who was a cool guy you could kind of relate to, but for the rest of them, we in the kitchen would say, "God, those dudes are weird, man, slimy." You'd talk about them when they weren't around. You kind of knew that shit was going on all along, but when you watch *Spotlight*, you think, man, that priory was the end of the road. Because *Spotlight* highlights how the Catholic Church would move these priests around: "Oh, they're bad here. Let's put them in another precinct and pretend nothing happened." And they'd do it all over again, right? So they uncovered all these moves and how they ended up in other places. But, man, this priory had about twenty-four of these guys that obviously were way on the spectrum, man. This was the end of the line. They had to ship them out there so they were away from stuff.

I went to the University of Massachusetts; didn't graduate. I started my "head west, young man" adventures while at school at the University of Massachusetts, in the summer. The first place was Boulder, Colorado. I had a friend going to CU, so we went out there and partied hard in '78. And I worked for the Forest Service up in the hills, making trails in places that are now mainstream, and we did some beetle control. I went back to UMass and was far more interested in extracurricular activities than being a student, and realized I should get the hell out, so I did.

Then the "head west, young man" thing took me to Phoenix, and I was in Phoenix for three years, and met John Jesse, who became my partner at Deux Gros Nez and the Pneumatic Diner—and before that, actually, Cochon Volant. We met in Phoenix at the Good Earth restaurant, which was started by Bill Galt from Reno. The first one was in Reno, so that was a coincidence. It was healthy food, and the first

one was, I think, in the Midtown area down here. Ironically, I would end up in Reno, which is where Bill Galt's from.

I met John after being in Phoenix for a couple of years. We worked together and became good friends. He had ties with food and beverage in Las Vegas from an old high school buddy who is now a partner in the Boyd Group, one of the VPs. But he offered John a job, so we thought, "What the hell? Let's go."

So I moved with him, and got a job as well. We lived in Las Vegas for six months, at which time our third partner on the Cochon Volant, Deux Gros Nez, and Pneumatic Diner—her name was Annette Cole, at the time—was doing early restaurant computer inventory-type stuff for a guy here in Reno, and she was trying to sell their product to the food and beverage director in Las Vegas, who was our friend. John met her and fell in love. She lived up here and John wanted to be with her, and asked me, "Hey, you want to move to Reno?"

I really didn't even know where Reno was. I had heard of it. All we did was ride bikes and roller-skate during the day and work in restaurants at night, and life was a party, man. So I just said, "Reno. What the hell? Let's go."

So we moved to Reno. I took some business classes at UNR, as did John, a couple of accounting classes, early information classes, early computer stuff. This was '82, '83, and I worked in restaurants. I worked at the Rapsallion and the early Napa Sonoma.

John and Annette and I started a place called the Cochon Volant in '83, I believe. It was across from the Convention Center. I don't like using the word "gourmet," but it was, as far as I know, the first place in Reno that had specialty meats, specialty cheeses, good coffees. I don't think we had an espresso machine there. We were doing good stuff, trying to be affordable and fair. Reno at that time was still the \$1.99 breakfast. The business model for the casinos was still get 'em in the doors, give 'em stuff cheap. The gourmet rooms had more expensive food, but you're competing in the restaurant business in Reno with everything that is next to free in the casino, so, you know, you're crazy.

The Cochon Volant was really artistic and fun—we built everything ourselves, with a lot of exposed everything. Two months after we started it, the investors couldn't understand my partner, John, and so they decided that he should go away. In the early days, we didn't know a lot about business and laws and contracts, and there wasn't anything to say, to partner or anything, so John and Annette got kicked out. They tried to keep me as a manager. I left.

I worked in a bike shop on East 4<sup>th</sup> Street in '83 and '84, and it had just opened earlier that year. It was called Stewart-Hunt Cycles, where the university's boxing gym was. College Cyclery is the oldest bike shop in town and is a high-end bike shop, and at that period of time, in the early eighties, they were starting to do some race stuff. But at Stewart-Hunt Cycles, there were these two guys from southern California who came in, Dean Patterson and Jim Patterson—their middle names were Stewart and Hunt—and they all of a sudden started promoting racing and more high-end stuff. They were bigger wheeler-dealer-type cool guys, so they got all of the "go fast" cyclists to hang out at their shop, buy their stuff, sponsor teams, and put on races.

Barber: That was on the ground floor of the Morris Hotel?

Healion: Yeah, at the other end. There was the Morris Hotel, and then there was a little microwave and appliance shop, and then there was the Stewart-Hunt bike shop, and then there was that bar, which was

the Rumpus Room, and then the Rumpus Room became the Mexican restaurant, the first Bertha's, and Dave-O's was in there later.

Where the boxing gym was the bike shop, Stewart Cycles. It was nice. It was high-end. I worked in there for a year. It was there from '84 or the tail end of '83 for at least ten, fifteen years, I'd say until the mid- to late-nineties. It was a significant bike shop in town. It was the go-to cool-guy pro shop, so to speak. They all did that kind of stuff. Randy's shop did, and there was another shop on 5<sup>th</sup> Street that did, as well. But Stewart-Hunt Cycles was the cool-guy shop.

Barber: And upstairs was a weekly, monthly hotel by that point.

Healion: Yes, because it was the Morris Hotel and whatever was upstairs. Yeah, it was kind of low-rent—man, 4<sup>th</sup> Street was rough. You know, it's still rough.

Barber: Especially at that time. Okay.

Healion: So I worked in a bike shop. John and Annette couldn't do anything. John's brilliant, a creative, fix-it, builder, artist who does everything from weld to design energy-efficient hydronic heating systems to doing beautiful woodwork to having an incredible talent, being really savvy in the restaurant world. And he might have been more the creative force behind a lot of this stuff. I was the energy. I was the loudmouth. I was the "Yeah, let's do it" man.

It was in '84 that we started considering doing another restaurant after Cochon Volant a year before, and I was working in the bike shop. I went back to Massachusetts for a few months, and hung out with my family. My dad was still with the Patriots and he lived in Dover, Mass. And then I lived with some buddies in the city and I was a bike messenger for a while in Boston. I came back when it was time to get it going with this restaurant. It was February '85 when we landed the property where Deux Gros Nez was, and we opened in June of '85.

Barber: So what was in the ground floor of that building at that time? Was it vacant?

Healion: The Deux Gros Nez building?

Barber: Yes, 249 California.

Healion: Yes, it's 247 in the front, right? That's Debbie Branby and her Cheese Board.

Barber: Was that already open?

Healion: Nope. We were the first of the new businesses to open there. I believe Debbie came in and opened in October of that year. We were open in June, and they were building downstairs and they opened up.

Before either of us was there, the most recent project at that location was a place called Norm Berge's La Fonda. It was a Mexican restaurant. I think Norm's gone. And we were in this place up in the back that was actually an apartment. We rented it and decided that's where we wanted to put Deux Gros Nez, and it was all about having something that was not a storefront. It was up in the back, kind of



hidden. People were embracing it as theirs because they had discovered it or heard about it. We didn't do any advertising. It was word-of-mouth only, forever, which added to its community feel. People would say, "Hey, have you heard about—have you seen—?" It was pretty special.

It was Norm Berge's La Fonda before that, and before that, Bill Ramos built it as Ramos Drug, and the front was a drugstore with a soda fountain. There are still guys in town who worked there. Roland Della Santa, the bike frame builder, worked in Ramos Drug at one time. He built Greg LeMond's bikes. Jim Bell, who has a business here, Sierra Adventures, on that same strip as the Century Riverside, is probably about four or five years older than me, and his dad was the pharmacist at Ramos Drug. Jim Bell is one of three or four brothers and sisters, and as far as I know, those are the only living guys that would be tied way back to Ramos Drug, which is what that building in 1952 was built as.

Across the street, where the 1864 Bar is, that was an old drugstore. It was the old Powell's Drug. These were drugstores that were downtown, and they moved out to California Avenue. Where My Favorite Muffin is was the old California Market, which was a meat shop that everybody in the neighborhood walked to, to get their meats and stuff. All those businesses, within a ten-year span, sort of popped up together.

Bill Ramos died right before we opened Deux Gros Nez. I wanted him to be at the grand opening. He built the apartment and he lived up there, and it was a really cool apartment. It had big windows and beautiful red tile, and it was set up where our front door was. The stairs weren't there; that was his bedroom. We cut the hole in it, and put the door there, and so the stairs came up. You'd enter from the back or from the back of the drugstore. It was a beautiful apartment with big rooms, big windows, and it had a sundeck up on the roof that was gone when we had it.

Bill Ramos had sold the building to Sid Robinson, who's still alive, by the way. He's in his late eighties. Sid Robinson leased the first floor to Norm Berge and then leased the second floor to us, and it was when he sold the building to Debbie Branby that my lease all of a sudden had a termination date, and it was time to start planning an exit strategy. After a year or so, we just gave up and said, "We're closing."

Barber: California Avenue today has all sorts of restaurants and bars. That site had been a restaurant, you said, right before. Were there other restaurants in the area, or what was California Avenue like at that point?

Healion: When we moved in, in 1985, '84, it was blank. There was nothing going on there. I don't know why. There was the California Market. There were a couple of different restaurants that came in and out before My Favorite Muffin. There was a place we called Dog Taco. It was one of those taquerias, the dollar-taco thing. But that wasn't there when we moved in. It might have been a convenience store at that moment in history. There were some office buildings, but they were dump offices. It was a dump, man. The neighborhood was kind of a dump.

Barber: So it was the building that really appealed to you? Why did you want to be located in that area?

Healion: John had some vision about how shit was going to happen there, like it was an opportunity. The neighborhoods were good. We had also looked at the building that The Loving Cup and Blue Moon Pizza are in. Upstairs is now a yoga studio. Pete Cladianos, Sr., the old man, owned that building. We talked to him about having it upstairs—again, not a storefront, but a place with really cool big windows.

We couldn't agree to anything there. But we like the old stuff. We like living in that neighborhood, with the old houses. It's close to downtown. It just had a feel like you always hope that areas have, and people realize that there's neat stuff in there.

La Fonda was a pretty successful Mexican restaurant. Right before we scored that spot, he left overnight. Everything's there one day and the next day, where'd he go? Everything down to the walls, like plumbing, electric, everything, he just moved out, and Sid was left with an empty shell of a building, which is when we moved in.

So there was nothing on that street. One would argue that California Avenue's had a hard row to hoe until probably the last four or five years, when stuff seems to stick. Even the Blue Plate, which was that Greek place, that was not there. Before that, there was a coffee shop in there. That Miles Nebeker guy had his coffee shop in there.

But before that, I don't know remember if there was any restaurant food there. We were the first restaurant, besides a lousy Mexican restaurant that pulled out. We kind of got things going there, thinking that something would happen sooner or later. It was a nice street. There were law offices there, a neat old building. Where the Wild Orchid is, was the Ponderosa. That was a hotel, but it was just a hotel. It's always been kind of a dump. The father of the Keshmiris, the brothers that are in there now, had some vision for that place, along with Bob Rusk, who built the building where the Pneumatic Diner was. They had a vision of having a non-smoking gaming facility there, and it just didn't work. I remember that was just a lousy hotel in kind of a lousy neighborhood. The fire station was beside where the Starbucks is now.

Virginia Street has always dabbled with commerce. There was a lot of shit going on there over the years. That building that Ceol and the bagel shop are in now was a really cool old Asian restaurant for years before it was a camera shop. And there was a film that filmed in there. The guy who owns that, Dave Seoane, is a good pal. We did some swap and free food at Deux Gros Nez for my office in the basement. And my office for the Tour de Nez in the basement still looks like it did in the movie, which was an Asian spy film [*Charley Varrick*, 1973]. Walter Matthau was walking down there and came in my office while I was there.

Barber: I've heard about this movie. So you had an office there when you were operating Deux Gros Nez?

Healion: I had a bike-race office. We kept trying to make the bike race go. I put a lot of effort into that over the years, and it was a big deal at one time.

Barber: Oh, yes. And I want to talk about that a lot.

Healion: It was a huge deal from probably '03 through 2007, '08. We just couldn't get enough money to keep it going, so there's more to talk about there, lots, volumes. [laughs]

Barber: Let's get back to Deux Gros Nez first.

Healion: Deux Gros Nez was the first thing in town, man. Well, the Cochon Volant fizzled. But it was the first with people doing real stuff. We were the first guys doing imported beers. We had a seventeen-selection single-malt scotch bar. We were doing espresso before anybody did. I have the history of

espresso machines in town, but none of them worked. They'd buy them and they'd sit there. So none of them had pumps. Nobody knew about grinders, or how they worked. Deux Gros Nez was first for that, too. A lot of stuff.

Barber: Your menu was good.

Healion: It was a joke.

Barber: I wondered how you came up with it. [laughs]

Healion: The whole thing was a joke, man. It was stuff we liked. We were into eating healthy food and being concerned about our diets and how that enabled what we did in life. We wanted super high-quality stuff that was affordable for people. Some places are stupid, right? If you've got good stuff, it's expensive. But the quality here warrants it. If you do the business profile, it makes sense nowadays, but I never made any money at Deux Gros Nez, partly because I was pretty generous and we wanted to be super fair, and it got away from us being super fair.

Barber: Healthy stuff plus frappes. [laughs]

Healion: Yes. And focaccia, which is big white flatbread, but it was all clean, and there was good ice cream, high-quality ice cream, and real fruit, and it was all real. That was part of it, real stuff.



Inside Deux Gros Nez, 2006. Photo by Michael Chr.

Barber: Tell me about coming up with the name and decor, because that was all very legendary, too.

Healion: It was legendary, but it was pictures. When we opened, it was very clean. It was white and gray and pink. And then when we closed, it was just color. Well, we opened with what John Jesse designed, and when we closed, it was what Tim Healion morphed it into. And we were partners all along.

But his vision for the place was cleaner, although we didn't have anything. As it evolved, it was, "Okay, I've got something else to hang on the wall." The stuff on the walls for Deux Gros Nez, compared to the Pneumatic Diner, was less contrived. When we opened the Pneumatic Diner, John's design included the artwork that was in there, and when we opened, it was huge pieces of art that we had a local artist make for us, and they had some ties with people in the community, as well. If you can imagine the Pneumatic Diner, we opened that in April '88, three years after Deux Gros Nez, and we had these huge eight-foot paintings that leaned in, and then the neon was on the ceiling at the same time, which was part of the design. And that went away and became more projects. Somehow we lent that stuff and they disappeared, they got stolen, and they needed to be in a show.

But for the Deux Gros Nez decor, we were bike geeks. We worked in bike shops, we raced bikes, we commuted on bikes, we fixed bikes, we were bike messengers, bike, bike, bike. Bikes and coffee, coffee and bikes. And when we opened Deux Gros Nez, the stuff on the walls included some cool posters that we liked, like a Norman Rockwell of the old café with the white beadboard. Around the bar and the front of the refrigerators was that old beadboard right out of a Rockwell painting, and it was white right out of a Rockwell painting. In that painting where the cop is next to the kid with the stick who ran away from home, if you look carefully, there's a vacuum pot coffee brewer in there, which was how we used to brew coffee at the Pneumatic Diner. That was the look. So something like that would be in there, or a Cinzano poster.

But we were bike geeks, and I had seen pictures of a place in Italy that had all this bike paraphernalia on the wall, framed. I thought, "We've got to do that. There's an idea. Let's start collecting that stuff." It was just stuff we were into. It wasn't an intended plan of "This is how we want to look, so let's start collecting. Let's get some of that shit." It became a place to put stuff, more so me than John, as it evolved.

It was always stuff that we liked. The food was stuff we liked. With the menu that it morphed into, we weren't really trying to do anything except have stuff that we liked and do it really well. And, with the jerseys, man, people that we'd meet who were big shots would sign a cycling jersey, and we'd frame it and hang it on the wall. There's a chapel for the Patron Saint of Cycling—I forgot her name—Madonna Merdona? There's a chapel in Italy—people are so weird, right? [laughs] It's this Catholic chapel that's full of cycling jerseys and bikes and pictures of the greatest cycling champions ever. It was similar to that. We just started hanging up jerseys and being in the cycling world, I'd go work races on motorcycle or be in that theater, and I'd meet these people and get a jersey.

Deux Gros Nez was a weird place in so many ways, but it had this iconic stature for people that lived here as well as people that lived outside of here. My contention over the years was it was probably the most well-known restaurant in Reno for people who didn't live here, partly because of the cycling world. That was one reason. But it was also the only place where you could get espresso back then, before Starbuck's. Imagine that. It's hard to imagine now. It's everywhere.

Those were some of the things about Deux Gros Nez that would make people say, “Hey, they got this place in Reno.” And so people would come there. They’d get off I-80, go to the Deux Gros Nez, get back on, and keep going.

The Coors Classic in the mid-eighties was the bike race that had international stature. The big shots from Europe would come over and race in this race that lasted about five years, from ’83 through late eighties.

Barber: In Reno?

Healion: It came through Reno. It was a stage race. It started in Colorado, so it was a Colorado thing, with stages about a week long, and then they added a couple of California stages. They would start in San Francisco—kind of like the Tour of California does now and the U.S. Pro Challenge does now, these two different races that came to being in the late 2000s.

But it was one race in the eighties, and Greg LeMond would race in it, and Bernard Hinault and all these great champions from Europe would come over. It’s the first time that ever happened since the twenties or so, when racers would come over from Europe to race in the United States, and it came through Reno. I worked it on the motorcycle—we met these guys, just wheelin’ and dealin’, then they’d come into Deux Gros Nez. We had to have these huge parties after the race because the whole world came there, and there wasn’t room inside that little space. So that’s how the parking lot party thing started because they all came in. “Hey, get a jersey,” right? Man, by the time we closed, there were seventy-plus jerseys hanging on the ceiling. We were just jamming crap in there. It was welcome to someone’s nightmare; it was nuts. It morphed over the years.

So we started with the Coors Classic. We’d have bands out in the parking lot. Then that turned into our annual party. Every year on the anniversary of the opening of the place, we’d have this party, and everything was free but the food and beer. There was music and a huge party, as thanks to the community for having us open another year. And it became heralded as the community party, where people you hadn’t seen in a year would come.

The day Deux Gros Nez opened, there was a line out the door. People were thinking, hey, we’ve got something in Reno. People who traveled to other places would come to Deux Gros Nez, as well as just the knuckleheads in the community. We brought in people who went to San Francisco, who would go to the cafés in North Beach, or European cafés. And now we had one in Reno. It was this place where these leftover beatniks or lawyers or the early punk rockers would all be sitting together, and everything was cool. Sitting at the counter there over the years was brilliant, because you’d have all walks of life hanging out. It wasn’t like the lawyers were over there and the dudes with the mohawks were over there, and some old lady was over there or that era of pre-hipster hippies. The whole thing was a melting pot. It was a super cool thing to be a facilitator of, which is how I considered myself—I hated calling myself the owner or being referred to as such. It was more of a facilitation thing. We created this thing for people to be in, and it happened to be a restaurant, too.

Barber: And in the meantime, you opened the Pneumatic Diner. Was there a desire to have a second location? How did that happen?

Healion: You know, growth. Growth is a good thing, right? A business numbers thing, models. You grow and it’s healthy.

Barber: Over at 501 West First Street?

Healion: Yes, in that building. Three years into Deux Gros Nez, thanks to John and Tim's little idiosyncrasies and passion to stick with our beliefs, more so than making money and looking at numbers and stuff, we never made any money.

So the third partner, Annette, who was supposedly our financial bookkeeper person, had a little less faith in the well-being of the business, and worked on some other things. She was teaching aerobics or something, and Bob and Marilyn Rusk were in her class, and a conversation ensued where the Rusks told her, "Hey, we're opening a place. Love to have a restaurant in there, you guys, so let's do a second restaurant." And that as well became a John Jesse art project. It took us a year to build that little thing. It didn't have a deadline, like, "We've got to get this thing open in three months." It took a year to build that little place, a lot of thinking, "This'll fit here and that'll fit." I mean, that place was stupid the way stuff was jammed in there, and you had to step over the sink to crawl up into a room where storage was, or build a walk-in. It was a wrestling match with the city to open it. But that was April 1988. June 1985 was the opening of Deux Gros Nez, so it was three years later. It was pretty quick.

Barber: Was that in the Truckee River Lodge? Is that what it was called?

Healion: Yep. That was a new building, relatively. It was built from day one with no smoking. Remember what I said about Bob Rusk—not even the guys working on it could smoke in this building. No smoking, period. Sterile.

We had the space up in the back to put a restaurant next to where they were doing aerobics. They had a vision of an aerobics area and a little café/ restaurant somehow jammed in that little space. It was ridiculous. I laugh about this thing. This new project on Virginia Street is the first project I've been part of that's location, location, location.

Barber: The upcoming Laughing Planet, you mean.

Healion: Yes. Everything else has been these little hidden places you've got to discover. Even the Laughing Planet on Tahoe Street is not on the main drag. It's kind of "Where in the hell is that place?" The Pneumatic Diner was the same way: "How do you find it? Where is it?" It's upstairs in the back of a building, just like Deux Gros Nez was upstairs in the back of a building.

Barber: And the Pneumatic Diner had similar food to Deux Gros Nez.

Healion: Yes, we used the hub-and-spoke model for our kitchen like we're doing with Laughing Planet. There's a kitchen that preps food. And so we shared some food between Deux Gros Nez and the Pneumatic Diner, the baked goods. Everything else was different. They had similar beers, and the coffee thing was the same, an espresso machine.

Barber: And at some point, the ownership divided, right?

Healion: Right, about ten years into the Pneumatic Diner, so probably in the mid- to late-nineties, we had evolved to where I was Deux Gros Nez and John was the Pneumatic Diner. John was convinced that Deux Gros Nez was sucking the Pneumatic Diner dry because of my business practices compared to his business practices. Right about the ten-year point, we split, although it had morphed that way for probably three or four years.

Barber: And we should add in here that the Deux Gros Nez were the *nez* of you and John. Those were the *nez* that were being referred to in the two big noses of the title. [laughs] Is that right? That's the legend. That's the story we hear.

Healion: That's the legend. That's the lore. That's the story.

Barber: Well, what's your story?

Healion: Cochon Volant was the name of the place we had before that. The idea was to have goofy, fun names. On some level, it was to make fun of people in the restaurant industry trying to do shit. We were going to do stuff that was goofy, that made no sense to anybody. What the hell? We'll call it Flying Pig, and we're going to do it in French, and so that was that. And then Deux Gros Nez came along. I think we talked about different languages and decided to stick with French. It's a long time ago.

I've told this story a lot, but I don't want it to evolve away from what really happened. We were discussing names, and part of the thought was that with good coffee and good wine, there's an essence, a nose. People think about the nose as in the nose in a glass of wine. So there was a little bit of that. There were three partners originally, and Annette was petite. I actually had my nose straightened a few years ago, so it's not as big as it was. I thought it was a big nose, and John's nose isn't a big nose. I don't know. It's just a stupid, goofy name, right? And ironically, Tim and John had larger than average noses, maybe, and then there was this tie-in, making the logo of noses smelling stuff, and it became that coffee cup, which was brilliant, with two pieces of steam, so there's two. The name thing just evolved. It just happened. There was as much thought as there wasn't thought that went into it, and everybody always associated it with John and my noses.

And then the nose thing was ha, ha, ha all along, like Tour De Nez. At our annual party in June, we'd have bands and then we'd have a couple more bands. The last year before the bike race, I think we had twelve bands, and I made them all play "Jambalaya," a Hank Williams tune, because we like that song. I like that song. I gave them all the music. So from a hammered dulcimer to a barbershop quartet to rock and roll bands, there were twelve bands that one year, and the theme was Jambalaya. I think I'd been to New Orleans by then for the Jazz and Heritage Festival. I've been twice before and once since Katrina. Anyway, there was this New Orleans influence that particular year, and then we thought, "What else can we do? We're bike geeks. Let's have a bike race." And we'd just have a bike race in the neighborhood, start and finish and the party.

People would ask, "What are you going to call it?" Well, we're the nose, right? We're going around saying, "Deux Gros Nez." Nez. Everything nez. Nez.

Barber: So it just went around the block first time?

Healion: It started and finished right there at the parking lot. The first year it went around the parking lot. I had worked in bike racing and raced, and John had raced a little bit, too, and John got me into the racing aspect of bikes when we lived in Phoenix before we moved. I had just rebuilt a bike, and John had a real cool Italian race bike, and he actually rode a lot. We met and I was always this loudmouth, headstrong, "I can do anything" guy. And I had this Huffy that I'd rebuilt, and it worked as well as that bike could work, yet it still weighed twice as much as his bike and had less pressure in the tires. So just by design, his bike was a lot faster. He rode bikes. He was fit. I was just, you know, "I'll race ya." And I just died, right? So I got into riding neat bikes.

It just went around, and we added a few bikes, but it was pretty short that first year. Every year it got a little bigger and used more of California Avenue. It finally went down to the river, finally went across the river, we finally used Wingfield Park. But when it started, it was a party for Deux Gros Nez, the annual party.

Barber: And who rode that first year? Just residents?

Healion: No, man. It was a Nor Cal thing. It was more than just guys from Reno. There were a couple of guys I remember. Will Stoeger's still in town. He rode the first race.

Barber: So, some serious cyclists.

Healion: Oh, yeah. Paul McKenzie from Truckee won it that year. And it was different than the normal Nor Cal neighborhood bike races. Being an entertainer or a loudmouth of my level, I had visions of it being cool. My version of cool was a bigger start-finish banner or an actual announcer announcing the race, as opposed to some race in Nor Cal where guys with stopwatches marked the start.

And then we had this big party going on, so when the race was over, yahoo, I bought all the guys in the race beer and food and took care of them. And it quickly became known as a fun race to go to because all this stuff was going on. At a lot of the Nor Cal regional races, no one would put down the expense to have it in town, disrupting busy streets. We did that.

People would come to a race from California or whatever, and, wow, there's all these people cheering. And that wasn't common, except in a few big races. So it became a big race right from the start, because there was a lot of stuff going on, man, people yelling. The other side of it was that people at the party had never seen a bike race before, so it was fresh, new, exciting, colorful. It was pretty cool.

The Coors Classic had come through, so I saw some grandeur with the Coors Classic, and I'd gotten to work in there as a motorcycle guy driving photographers. And then as a racer, as a regional guy, I saw the little races that you go to if you're a northern Nevada, northern California bike racer. So there was vision of having it be big, but we also wondered, "How can we afford to do it?" We'll have masters only, the older guys, because theoretically they've got jobs, right? Younger bike racers can't afford to do shit. So there was some thought put into that, lots to talk about. [laughs]

Barber: Were the fun races, like the clunkers and the kids, added over time, or was that always part of it?

Healion: I think that stuff showed up year two, the kids and the clunkers. Year one was just a bike race, but for years prior to the bike race, just because I was into old bikes and old motorcycles, we'd have a motorcycle show and a bike show. There were guys who collected bikes who showed up with their



bicycles, or guys in town with old motorcycles, and they'd line up in the parking lot of Deux Gros Nez while the party was going on, before the race started. The first year of the race was, I think, '92, and before that, it was, "Let's do a bike show." We'd think, "What else can we do while we're here? We've got to party." And there was art stuff going on, like nose masks with instructions.

Joan Arrizabalaga, who's a very fascinating old Reno character and brilliant artist, is frickin' one of the coolest people in the world. She was one of these cool people that came to Deux Gros Nez. She and her friend Connie, whose daughter, Julie, owns Great Full Gardens, were early Deux Gros Nez-ers. She was an artist, and we made papier-mâché noses—if you came to the party, you could get your nose cast. We'd hang them up at Deux Gros Nez or you'd keep them.

So that was going on, the early parties and great food and great music. It was a party. It would go all night long until the rules changed. The first rule that came upon us was at midnight, or 12:30 one year, the cops showed up and said, "You guys only got a permit for one day."

"What?" You know?

"It's after midnight." That was their way to quiet us down, and then it evolved into you can't make noise after ten o'clock. But we had the restaurant. You could go inside. Back then, Deux Gros Nez was open twenty-four hours. For the first nine years, it was open all the time. The first year, we opened in June. When Christmas came along, we decided to close for Christmas. We'd never been closed. We didn't even have a lock on the front door. We had to put a deadbolt on the front door so we could lock the door. Six months in, we never had locked the door. That was pretty cool.

Barber: Well, in a twenty-four-hour town, you're always going to have somebody come by.

Healion: Yeah.

Barber: So eventually, the race got more and more elaborate, and you'd have to shut down more streets.

Healion: Yes, it became more of a legit bike race, as opposed to this race that was this huge party. As it got bigger, we all of a sudden decided to add more categories. Again, a race that has too much going on is diluted. Another one of the business models for bike races in Nor Cal and northern Nevada is to have all these categories of races. To have a crowd there, people have a limited attention span, and if there's one big race, you can get everybody cheering and having fun at that. If it's a bunch of races with different categories and abilities throughout the day, people think, "What am I watching? When's the good race?"

So it was just the masters. It'd be a one-hour race. Then we added the kids and the clunkers. They'd go before the big race. And that was pretty much all it ever was throughout the nineties. It wasn't until about 2000, 2001 that we added another category. It was professionals and the top-category amateurs, finally the guys who were younger than thirty. And then there were two races, and then it got weird. It got diluted as far as the attention for the masters, because they got bumped for the pros. Then we'd do all the goofy, fun events like kids and clunkers between the masters and pros to make it a bigger deal.

It was also selling it. How do you fund something like that? It becomes a sports marketing machine. And so Reno as a city was involved. You've got to pay rent. How do you get it to be of value to the city? You show off the city, which was part of the move down to Wingfield Park. It looks a lot better there than it does in a parking lot on California Avenue. That's all concrete, and nobody wants to

stand around on concrete all day. Moving there started wrecking the Deux Gros Nez party, but it moved down there and it became more a city thing, and then it became bigger, and pros came, and then it had to grow every year to get bigger sponsors. It's just wheelin' and dealin' and sellin' it and talking people into giving you money to showcase their wares at your event. That's how the sports marketing thing works. And as it got bigger, we'd have to do a better job of promoting through media the few hotshots that came along, and keep trying to get more hotshots, offering them whatever we could, a bigger prize list, hotels, food, all that stuff. It's wheelin' and dealin'. It got away from the grassroots party, man. A lot of people were there in years two and three for the bike race, and, they would think, man, the race is wrecking the party, but to me, it was an added thing. If the party was still going, we'd party up until the bike race and have a one-hour bike race, then party.

It evolved into this and then it became this multi-day thing where it was not only the downtown criterium, but a road race. The first year we did a road race to Virginia City and back, around Dayton. And then we started looking at Truckee and Tahoe. Then it was five days, and then for the RSCVA to be involved, you've got to have frickin' TV to have them give you money, so it's got to be more about heads on beds. How do we get heads on beds? How are we promoting the area? So we did a TV show every year that would be shown on the Outdoor Life Network or the World something sports network, these cable, big outdoor sports networks. It wasn't ever ESPN, it wasn't any of the big three, because the business on TV is huge and it costs money, and how you pay for it is selling ads and sponsorships. It costs money, flat out. So we did these TV shows.

The Tour de Nez got huge. It was the first race in the United States to be broadcast internationally on a web-based, live-stream network from the United States. Tour de Nez was number one internationally. And so I said to the RSCVA and Reno, "Hey, more people are hearing about Reno internationally through my event than anything else you've got: air races, balloon races, Hot August Nights. People in Belgium know about Reno because of the Tour de Nez. You're welcome."

That didn't work. [laughs] I mean, it kind of worked, but it was the truth, man. It was big, man. We sponsored a team from Colombia. Guys would come from all over the place. Lance Armstrong never came. Greg LeMond never came, but his teammates came representing their teams. It was a big deal. My last ditch effort for the Tour de Nez/Vada was the last great idea I had, and I was working with the tourism department for the state, trying to evolve it into a five-day race that would be all in Nevada. It would start on the shore of Tahoe and finish in Heavenly, do a circular race through the Comstock, a criterium downtown in—this has nothing to do with Midtown. [laughs]

Barber: We'll get there.

Healion: A criterium starting and finishing in front of the Capitol, and, again, a big thing with national TV and all the big pros. They had frickin' helicopters. You know what it costs to rent a helicopter to film? Now you can do it with drones, of course, but that's pretty grand when you have a helicopter flying over. It looks cool. [laughs] It looks really cool.

So all that stuff was going, and they were giving me a ton of money, but I needed a lot more money to pay for frickin' NHP, for example. That's unbelievable, how much it costs. I was losing weight. It was killing me. I quit.

I had turned it into a nonprofit tour in the outreach. We were also doing conferences at the university, working on a bike-share. The bike world, through my eyes, was evolving. It was always way more than a bike race. It was the goofballs, the knuckleheads, the kids, every part of it. I'd always tried

to include all that. And this thing, the Bike Summit, we ended up doing at the university three times with every aspect of the bike world coming together, which was really cool.

But Tour de Nez just got too big, and so I set it up as a nonprofit where I wasn't a dictator anymore; I was the executive director. There was a board of directors, and they could fire me or whatever, theoretically. I was still the driving spirit. But I resigned.

There were some new board guys. They hired Bubba Melcher, who has kept the Tour de Nez going as what they saw it was, which was a Reno-specific one-day criterium. The first two years after I took off, there was nobody. It was sad. It feels like it's starting to come back. As a name and event, it certainly isn't what it was, and a lot of people outside of Reno don't think it exists anymore, the people on the upper echelon of cycling, the pros and the media. It was unbelievable. It was a big deal. '06 was like the last [demonstrates], on the shores of Tahoe. It was so frickin' cool. So now I'm not doing that anymore.

Barber: Tell me about the evolution of Deux Gros Nez and what ended up happening to bring that to a close.

Healion: Well, it was twenty-one years of a community performance art project. I don't know what your experience was, but everybody who went in there had a different experience. And I would say for nine out of ten people who went in there, it wasn't about being a great restaurant. You stand back, and being a restaurant guy on different levels, there are restaurant people who can't figure out how that place worked. It was small, it was the way we cooked stuff. The way the food was prepared, it was always a good product, but it took forever.

The menu was like an employee's great idea with a stupid name. A Carol Sandwich or the Cosmic Cowboy. It wasn't like when you go and you read a menu that makes sense. Originally the first menu at Deux Gros Nez was a list of ingredients and our suggestions—some of this, some of that, some of that. We wanted it very much from the start to be about the creativity and the experience of the person coming in the door having felt like they participated, as opposed to walking in the door, getting a number one, paying, and leaving. We wanted to have people feel as if they were acknowledged at every step.

So you were greeted coming in, and you were thanked for being there when you left. And think about it, leaving a restaurant, having someone yell at you, "Thank you!" I still do it. And I preach that to the people who work there. But you know how many places you leave where somebody lets you know that they were aware that you were there? That was a huge part of Deux Gros Nez from the gun. Same with Pneumatic Diner. People have various reasons for going places, like the coffee here is on another level compared to other coffee shops in town.

Barber: Here at the Hub?

Healion: Right, here at the Hub, with Mark Trujillo. Magpie is on a similar level, Old World Coffee is on a similar level. It's referred to as the fourth generation of the whole evolution of coffees and espressos, where it's about sourcing, where you go to a farm in Colombia and it's on a hillside. What day should you pick the berries? What's the right amount of sun or shade? It's really cool. So it tastes more like the coffee bean than the roast.

When I was learning in the early eighties from the old Italian guys in San Francisco, we'd go over there and hang out with those guys, and it was about the roast. There's French roast, Italian roast, these

darker roasts. It was more about the roast and the flavor and good beans to make that, where it's now more about the flavor of the coffee, the cherry, the berry.

Are you following anything? Sometimes I catch myself and realize I'm so far away from the question.

Barber: [laughs] No, it's great because you were talking about quality and the food at Deux Gros Nez.

Healion: The evolution of Deux Gros Nez, right. We were trying to do this thing, and I think most people who went in there had their own interpretation of it—it was a gay bar, it was a punk rock joint, it was a cool-guy bar, it was a lawyers' place, depending on what time you went in there. At three o'clock in the morning, it was all the whack jobs. But back then, Reno was still a vibrant twenty-four-hour town. There were still the big shows like *Hello Hollywood Hello*, and all the *Hello Hollywood* dancers would come over between shows in their makeup, and it was so cool, because they were very worldly people. Deux Gros Nez at two o'clock in the morning had cappuccinos and brilliant liquor and a limited bar menu. It had food that they didn't have anywhere else in town. It's cool shit. And for those guys, it was their own experience.

So it was just this mesh of something that made it very different. You had people going there to get a good coffee, but for a lot of people, it was the experience. People have their favorite places, and a lot of it is how it feels for them. We were, I think, maybe more aware of that than some of the other places.

But it just evolved. The stuff on the wall just kept expanding, and the food just kept evolving as we'd think, "Hey, this is cool. Let's do this." I think a lot of it was trying to have it be a special place for people. You'd get people to come in there as participators, and part of what was going on there was to include the person coming in the door as part of that experience on a conscious level, as opposed to just providing an environment. So there was a lot of that going on there that made it different for people.

Barber: So why did you close your doors?

Healion: Oh. In twenty-one years of that, I never made any money, man, and I've got a family, a kid. You have to pay rent and pay the bills. It was hard. I ran it as a mom-and-pop thing where I had to be there a lot. There are a lot of different ways to run a restaurant. One of them is mom-and-pop, where you have to be there all the time. You have to be part of the labor pool. It was small. It was hard to generate a lot of revenue for what it cost to run that place, and it's not a perfect graph where more people means more revenue. Costs go up, but not on the same level as the money coming in. I was challenged there by the space.

I had thought about doing other stuff or getting out, and a couple of times I tried to sell it. Well, it was a month-to-month lease. There's not a lot to sell there as a business model. A couple of people came in and thought about doing it and moved towards purchasing it, yet it came back to the fact that if I wasn't part of it, it wasn't going to be Deux Gros Nez, which was a problem for me and for someone considering buying it. Although I had a lot of great ideas of what somebody could do, I couldn't do it myself. I was stuck. So I was kind of whooped.

What helped throw it over the edge, making me realize "I've got to do something," was the sale of the building, when Sid sold it to Debbie Branby of the Cheese Board and Wine Seller. Debbie and I were very different people and we were neighbors in the same building, both doing restaurants, but with

very different business approaches. We didn't see eye-to-eye on a lot of stuff. I think what we were doing upstairs was a handful. She was trying to be nice and clean, and we were just "Woohoo!" A lot of the idea was "Woohoo!"

When she bought the building, Sid knew that she would prefer that we weren't part of it, and she bought that building and the building behind it, with the parking lot. Those two buildings were the package, and it happened fast. I didn't get my poop together in time to put together an investment group to get it. She put in the first offer, and by the time people started saying, "Hey, man, we've got to buy this thing," it was too late. Sid had already said, "Sure."

So she bought it, and the deal was that she was either supposed to buy me out for a fair price for a business—you'd work that out, there are a lot of ways to do that—or she was supposed to give me a lease, so I would get to stay there for a while. She didn't want to buy it for ten cents, and the lease that somehow got agreed to was two years with a one-year option after that to stay only one more year. So it had a termination date.

A lot of people would consider another location, to move it. There are a couple of ways that these weird little businesses can operate. Laughing Planet is very different. Laughing Planet is a really successful business model that works. It's a product, it's set, this, that, this, that. It's a machine. The idea here [on North Virginia Street] is to do another Laughing Planet with the same menu, whereas Deux Gros Nez was more of this one thing that we had done, and so was the Pneumatic Diner. Creative, brilliant restaurant guys like Mark Estee don't do the same thing twice, right? Ryan Gold and Justin Owen, those guys, their projects are always different.

So for John and me, it was more of a "What's next?" type of thing. There wasn't any moving Deux Gros Nez. The community wanted it to move. There are a lot of people who liked that place. Obviously we'd talk about it. But it wasn't a "Go do it again somewhere" thing, because it had a lot of ingrained grassroots energy that created it, from the people coming in there as much as from me. And so to pick it up and set it down would be sort of contrived, and that wasn't going to happen.

So we decided to close it. No one's going to buy something with no lease. There wasn't anything to sell. So we closed it. We had a hell of a party. I don't know if you remember that. The closing of Deux Gros Nez was a significant piece of history in Reno. It was a big thing for a lot of people and their various attachments to it.

Barber: That was '06 or '07?

Healion: November 30<sup>th</sup>, '06. A long time ago, man.

So the idea was to put a lot of energy into the bike race, and I did, but it just turned into a fundraiser. All I was doing was raising funds and trying to orchestrate this thing with a staff, offices, and a full-time job, and it just didn't pan out, man. In the off-season, I would have to work on projects, and a lot of it was just fun work for buddies, grunt-labor-type stuff, helping with a landscape thing, I was a maintenance guy for property management. I fixed stuff. I'm good at fixing things.

The Laughing Planet thing came along as an idea sometime in the late eighties and early nineties in Reno. One of the conventions that Reno used to have that was a big deal, which went away like the Safari and these various conventions, was the outdoor retailer convention. It was the convention in the United States where all the people who retail outdoor stuff came to see the new stuff and purchase it for their store to sell. You had the climbing geeks and the paddling geeks and the backpacking geeks and the

hikers, and everything from watchbands to eyeglass-retention devices to all the gear that goes along with any of that, like carabiners. And that was in Reno. It was huge.

In the late eighties and early nineties, there was nothing in Reno beside Deux Gros Nez and the Pneumatic Diner, and so all these healthy people who traveled around, who were concerned about their diet and their coffee and good stuff came to Deux Gros Nez and the Pneumatic Diner, and the business was out of freakin' control. Again, we had to have these events outside all the time, because both places were so small. Less at the diner, but at Deux Gros Nez we had the parking lot, and we had these events.

There was this guy, Richard Satnick, who came to town during the event who had a clothing shop in Atlanta, Georgia—he's originally from New York—and he was sitting in Deux Gros Nez, with people in the stairs, in the parking lot, all this great stuff. It was vibrant, with the energy of all these healthy, alive people, and it was too much. He said, "I'm doing this. Screw this clothing store. I'm going to go do one of these." He had gone to grad school in Bloomington, Indiana, and studied chimpanzees, got stoned with chimpanzees, the whole thing. So that's where he decided to do it. He's a fun guy to talk to.

At the same time that he decided to do that, in Deux Gros Nez we had a cooler in the middle of the room, with a glass door and beer in it. That's where we stocked the beer. You could grab your own beer, and say, "Hey, I got a beer." That place was stupid, man. It was so easy to walk in there, and order stuff and you'd sit down and have it and then pay on your way out. Well, it was such a social environment that it wasn't uncommon, and it wasn't thousands of dollars a day, but, sometimes somebody would say, "Tim, I forgot to pay. I'll come back." And this beer cooler in the middle of the room helped, right? You'd get your own beer, and then when you left, say, "Hey, I had three" whatever.

It was so busy, we'd have two or three people behind the counter and then somebody working the floor. This dude Richard was out here with his friends, and he'd grab a beer and say, "I'm going to pay for it later." The guy working the floor, Franz Spielvogel from Bolivia, saw Richard having more than a couple beers and knew that he hadn't checked in to pay for them, and accused him of stealing them. Richard said, "No, I'm not stealing them. I'm going to pay for them."

"Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah." And they became friends, as we did with a lot of people in the outdoor industry, because they loved the places, so they were our buddies. We'd have different companies sponsor the parties.

Anyway, we developed relationships with a lot of people in the outdoor industry because Deux Gros Nez was the place to go, and they loved it. So this dude Richard and Franz became better friends than some of us, even off-season. Franz was aware that a Deux Gros Nez II, with the same model as Deux Gros Nez, had popped up in Bloomington, Indiana. It was also upstairs in the back of a building. The menu was identical, with focaccia pies and espresso, except he added burritos, because Richard also had a favorite taco/burrito shop. I forget exactly what it was and where it was, but there was another place that, between Deux Gros Nez and this other place, morphed into the first Laughing Planet, which was in Bloomington, Indiana. And for years, I would hear, "Hey, Tim, you know, there's a place that's just like your place in Bloomington. You wouldn't believe it. It's a total rip-off."

I'd say, "Good, man. Pat on the back. Hope it's doing well." So it was in Bloomington, Indiana.

Franz and Richard stayed friends. Another person in the outdoor industry was Mike Taggett, who invented Chums eyeglass-retention devices. He was a Colorado River rafter. He'd flip, fall in the water, and his glasses would float away, so he started using shoestrings to tie them around his head. Well, that evolved into an actual thing that he marketed at the outdoor retailer convention, so he was part of this whole event. He and I were pretty good friends. So many of those people would come into Deux Gros Nez and love that place, that they would say, "You should do this where we live." There was something

about that place that was different than anyplace in the world. I don't know. It was people's experience that was different. Anyway, I always wanted to do that.

Franz ended up working for Mike. When he opened an office in Portland, Oregon, Franz moved to Portland, and was good friends the whole time with Richard, the original Laughing Planet guy. He said, "Hey, man, you should do this in Portland. This town's so cool. There's a lot going on. Do a Laughing Planet here. Bloomington, Indiana, what are you doing there in the middle of nowhere?" And so sure enough, he opened up the second Laughing Planet, which was the first one in Portland. It was Laughing Planet number three, and Franz started working with him. He kept the one in Bloomington, but was living and operating in Portland. They opened four or five in Portland. Then Franz worked his way into a 20 percent partnership. They opened one in Eugene.

As a business model, Laughing Planet worked. It was being replicated. Each one had a different look and feel, but the food was the same, and there were a couple of similar themes. Richard is super creative, and tied in R. Crumb's artwork, the crazy artist guy. There's stuff R. Crumb did that was related to the environment and food—besides the fact that he did Mr. Natural and his soft porn. There's Frank Zappa stuff in Laughing Planet. They're in all of them, probably because Richard decided Frank Zappa was a person who fought the power, who fought regulation and censorship in music, and was a brilliant musician. He liked what Frank Zappa stood for, and thought if someone walked in the door not knowing what was going on and it wasn't communicated, and saw a Frank Zappa poster, they'd think, "Ah, that's cool. He's a cool guy." They'd know these guys must be cool. So it was sharing what he liked and what was cool.

Richard, again, was one of these people who went into Deux Gros Nez and thought it was cool. And periodically, maybe two or three times, after the retailer convention, he would bring people who were involved in this Laughing Planet world to Reno to see it, to tell them, "This is what I want it to be," because of the life there, the acknowledgement of people's existence, the customers and that stuff. That's a valuable thing for anybody, really. He wanted to replicate that. It was a super fun place. How do they fit all this stuff in there? This is magical stuff.

About twenty years ago, Franz had moved to Portland and then got involved with the Laughing Planets. The Chums thing went away and he was a big part of the business development of Laughing Planet. Franz had gone to UNR and is a super smart business guy who had worked in retail, worked in sales. He is a smart guy, man, and was able to start working more with the numbers part of the growth of the business.

His experience at Deux Gros Nez was special. A lot had happened down there. He had also worked for Alberto Gazzola at La Vecchia. There was a period of time when we shared employees, in the early days of La Vecchia when it was still downtown in a little brick building where Beaujolais was before it moved. Anyway, he said he wanted to do stuff in Reno again, and so about eight years ago, he said, "Hey, man, we want to do something in Reno. You've got to be part of it or we can't do it." And we started entertaining the idea of working together. And at that time in history, there were different business models than in the post-buyout business model. There was still equity involved.

I started looking at locations for a Laughing Planet. Franz and Richard would come to town, and we'd look at these places, and Richard didn't really have a feel for Reno. Franz was more the salesman for what he thought was cool in Reno. Richard was looking for a more public transportation-centered, biking community, a more healthy community. He looked around. There was no healthy food in this town. There still wasn't anything. There were some restaurants that were starting to be cool. There were a couple of things that were starting to pop up that were healthier or where people were trying to be on the

edge as opposed to another steak and lobster place or another seafood place or another Starbuck's, stuff that people could relate to. All of sudden, there was 4<sup>th</sup> Street Bistro. The Imperial Bar was probably early in the world of the new cooler bars. And Midtown Eats popped up. There were a couple of things that were starting to pop up in the world of a more progressive food/beverage industry.

But Richard still had a hard time, saying, "People drive everywhere here. It's stupid. You've got to have a place near a bike shop." So we looked at a couple properties. Nothing materialized. I was saying, "Look, I'm spending a lot of time trying to help you guys do something here. I've got to get back to work. I'm not generating any income having these great ideas and taking a couple of days to tool around with you guys." So we backed off.

Then Franz started saying, "You know, I'm going to buy this company. I'm trying to put together a package. Richard's getting grumpy and wants to not be part of this anymore, and do other things. I want to keep doing Laughing Planets. Richard wants to pursue some other business ideas. And I see the value in Laughing Planet as something that we've got to grow."

So about three years ago, the Franz buyout of the Laughing Planet happened, and a day later, he called me and said, "Look. It's done. We're doing it. You've gotta do it. Are you available?"

And I was available. I'd quit the bike race, ironically, a day before or maybe a month before. Timing's always funny in everything. So I was available. I was working as a frickin' maintenance guy for a property management guy, and that was like pulling back into the huddle, thinking, "I've got to do something, and this is not it, but I'm busy and I'm generating some income and I'm good at it."

So it was show time. We thought, "We're going to do this. This is how it's going to work. This is the business model." It didn't involve equity, yet it involved me being the brand-launch man, the face of it, and there's huge value there. Tim Healion'll put something in town, and the whole town is thinking, "Well, what's he doing?" There's a lot of that, man. I don't mean to pat myself on the back, but I just fell into that. I don't know that I understand it.

So we looked around, and a couple of properties popped up. We fell into this place we're in. A lot of stuff came together. The short version of the story is that we wanted the first store to be in the California Avenue, Midtown area, because there was some vibrancy. There was energy. It's not the city saying, "We'd like to develop this area," or the RTC saying, "We'd like to do that." It was guys with a great idea coughing up a business that was cool. It was me and John twenty or thirty years later. Ryan and Justin, those guys doing stuff. I'd worked with Mark Estee up in Truckee when he had Moody's. When I had the bike race up there, he helped promote it, and so I'd known about him when he popped down here and did the Campo thing. I just thought, "Wow, this guy, he's game on."

Granted, that's not Midtown, but with what's happened in Midtown, it's the little stuff—it's kind of gritty and has a homestead feel to it. It doesn't feel like anybody's trying to plan anything. People are saying, "Hey, we've got something cool together. Let's work together," and that's going on big time now. It's really neat.

The thing to be careful about is, with all this activity, everything's becoming cleaner. RTC's new project going through town is going to make the property more valuable, and so some of these people who are paying rent there now might not be able to pay rent there in five years. I'd sit in on a lot of these meetings about what to do with the streets, and I was more of a Jack Hawkins type: "Let's go the extra ten yards. You guys might not be here in five years. Let's look at what it looks like in four years. Look at pictures of Reno from fifty years ago. This is what you want. Our little project can't be just about how it's going to work for your business now. It's got to be about how it's going to be in twenty, thirty years."



I always felt that Deux Gros Nez would be a place that would live forever. I saw myself as an old guy behind the counter. I did. And then it just didn't work. But I point that out at those meetings. You know, Deux Gros Nez was supposed to be a forever-type project. It lasted twenty-one years. Forever. And it's gone. Look at shit that was there fifty years ago. It's gone. There's nothing down there. So people have to have that vision, I think, when doing a big RTC redo project, of thinking not only how you're going to do your business, but how it integrates with the neighborhood.

So Laughing Planet was kind of this weird circle. It started at Deux Gros Nez, then branched out, and now it has come back and I get to be part of it, and it's a really good deal. I got a good deal. [laughs]

Barber: So you ended up at 650 Tahoe Street.

Healion: Yes.

Barber: That space was not a restaurant or bar.

Healion: No.

Barber: How involved were you in turning it into a restaurant?

Healion: One hundred percent, man. We had walked around the neighborhood. I'd see the signs in the window, then Franz tripped over it as well. I knew guys who had offices in there. Prior to that, it was Washoe Legal Services, which was a nonprofit that offered legal services to people in need. So it's got good energy, people trying to help people, which is a good thing to have as bones, I think. There are still guys around town who come in, like John Sasser. He had an office in there. This Neal what's-his-name guy. Paul Elcano had an office in there. There are guys still in town who had offices in there when it was that.

The history of that building before Washoe Legal Services is a little cloudy. A guy named Andy Anderson sold speakers to Harrah's and the likes out of there. It closed up and changed, morphed. 1964 was when they built the building over a little house, and as you face that building, there's a house next to it that's for sale now, and then next to that, kind of behind it is another teeny little brick house. So there's that brick house, this house, and there was a house underneath our building that the building was built over. When we went in there, we thought, "That's a weird ceiling line. This is weird." And you'd get under the sheetrock, and see, "Wow, there's a brick wall here." So there was a house that this building had been built on top of. Our patio is the footprint of the old house. It literally fell over. We tried to save one wall, thinking it'd be cool to have this brick wall as a part of the structure. It just crumbled. It was too bad. It was part of this three-house row.

I've dabbled in asking questions of a few people I know. I haven't worked on it too hard. Neal Cobb says the history behind Virginia Street is hard to dig up. He doesn't have a lot of stuff on that. John Tinkham doesn't really know about our house either, but he would know more about that neighborhood than anybody that's still alive, probably.

When it was built over the old house in '64, it was this concrete block, ugly, stupid building that had an engineering structure for the roll-up doors. We put that big door in. We didn't have to engineer all the stuff we did for the front to put the roll-up door. It was already ready. At one time there had been roll-up doors. So in '64, when it was built over the old house, it might have been a shop of some sort off

the alley, because a lot of people don't know, but the alleys in Reno were main drags for commerce. That old guy Ken Silvers, who used to hang out at Deux Gros Nez, used to have stories about the businesses in those alleys.

Barber: There were a lot of automotive-related businesses in that whole area—mechanics, machinists.

Healion: Yeah, an Indian Motorcycle shop. So there could have been something there that I don't know about before Washoe Legal Services. It had been vacant for a while when we bought it. It was empty.

Barber: It's more spacious when you go inside than you expect from the street, I think.

Healion: Yeah, a lot more. Everybody does. You look at this front and you get in there, and it's like "Woo!" And when we got in there, some of the walls had come down, but it had been all cubicled, divided up into office, office, office, office, office, and it was flat across the front. It had these fake pillars with brick veneer put on it, to make it look grand, maybe. I don't know. It had this fake brick front, and it was the John Gabrielli Building. I don't know if you've got any information on that. John Gabrielli was a judge in town who everybody loved, and his name was on there, even though he had never been in the building. He apparently had contributed to the Washoe Legal Services building, and the guys who moved in there wanted to acknowledge him, like Frank Zappa in Laughing Planet. At the time it was built, it brought in this stipulation of, "Hey, there's a cool guy involved in this thing."

When we approached the Gabrielli family to try to keep his association with the building alive, and ask if the family wanted the letters that said "John G. Gabrielli Building," they didn't. I met with a few of them, and they said, "No, we really never had anything to do with that building," that he had just given it some money, and they put his name on it. So although everybody viewed it as the Gabrielli Building all those years, it really was a funny little piece of history that didn't exist.

Before the Legal Services, I don't know. It was a house, and next to the house was just empty space. John Tinkham might know what was there before the concrete block part of our building next to the house, but those three houses were there behind. Actually, there were four houses. There are three houses left. Behind the house, as you face our building, to the right there's another house, which is a weird house. It's sunken, which means the landscaping had stepped down to Virginia somehow before it got filled in, but in the back corner there's a huge concrete block. We don't know, we made it up, but somebody said it was probably a stage stoop. You'd pull up the horse buggy, and there was a big step from the big wheel down to the ground, so you'd step out on the stoop and then down.

Barber: I'll take a look.

Healion: That's what I want to believe.

Barber: I'm intrigued. [laughs]

Healion: I thought it was fixed. Somebody hit it with a car and it moved. So maybe it's not. I don't know. But it's a big chunk.

Barber: So when did the restaurant open?

Healion: We opened on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014.

Barber: And how was business from the beginning?

Healion: There was a line out the door. It was just nuts. I'm a big mouth with PR, telling people. There were articles in the paper about how "Tim Healion's up to something." There was a little bit of that. And it's a good product, man. People want affordable healthy food. And "affordable" is the key word. We started getting stuff that's mostly organic, non-GMO, locally sourced. Shoot, it cost a lot of money. What we're doing is affordable, and that was super well received. And it's easy to get in and out of. You don't have to sit down—the place is easy. Quality slow food fast is the category. It's casual food fast. Those are a couple of categories we like to associate ourselves with. It was anticipated as a neat thing. For older people in the community who had been part of what I had and experienced it, or for people who came along later who had heard of that lore, there was intrigue. You can have all that stuff, but the trick is the delivery.

We've done a pretty good job. I think it's a good place. It works well. I would prefer to somewhat disassociate myself and what I've done in town as a business, so that as a stand-alone business, it's successful if I get hit by a bus or if I want to go do another project. One of the problems with Deux Gros Nez was if you took me out of the equation, it wasn't there.

Barber: Now, when you were talking to Franz in the beginning, were you thinking about opening more than one location in Reno?

Healion: Yes. The idea was that in Reno as a community, this model of restaurant could support at least three of them. So, for example, where Laughing Planet is, is great. It has been well received, and people want to go there. Yet if you live in South Meadows, Damonte Ranch, it's a twenty-mile round trip to go have a freakin' burrito. People who live out there are challenged by chain land. There's nothing to do out there. The development in the United States model is to contrive communities, as opposed to just encouraging the growth of downtown. It's too bad.

We put stuff out there that pens out as good business. We're on the verge of that. Laughing Planet as a business model is something that is attractive to a developer, like a Starbuck's or a Subway or these big chains that have a track record. They work, their numbers match, they pay their bills, they'll sign long leases. To get a mom-and-pop joint to go in a place and sign a long lease, a developer of a new shopping center or mall doesn't want that guy, just because they've got a great idea.

"Well, I need you to pay rent for five years, and then we need to set it up." Or ten years, right? And if you're doing ten years, man, I definitely want you, because it makes my job easier and it keeps working.

That's a fascinating thing about Laughing Planet. It's not historical, but the idea is that with the growth of the company, with one, two, three stores in Reno, on a bigger picture it's a huge chain, with fourteen of them in the whole world. The idea is that we keep the integrity of what we wanted to do with the first store and have it live in the future projects. It is really hard to be locally sourced and to be super healthy and affordable and participate in the community and contribute to the community. As you get bigger, it's harder to do. It becomes, "I've got to ask corporate. I've got an office somewhere else."

There are other businesses that claim to do similar stuff that really aren't doing what they claim to do, and so we're trying real hard to continue doing what we say. Integrity's a big issue with the company.

Barber: So you're opening a second location now.

Healion: That place right there.

Barber: Across from the university campus. What street is this, 10<sup>th</sup>?

Healion: Tenth and Virginia.

Barber: And it's an old house?

Healion: Yes, it's an old house built in '32, and it was most recently some sort of a counseling center with a couple of apartments upstairs. The plans at one time in the history of that building somehow showed twenty-five bedrooms. It was a flophouse at one time. When it was originally built, it was a grand house with a grand staircase, the evolution of the garage that was behind it.

Barber: The Hub that we're in now?

Healion: Yes, the garage with a loft. This has been bigger, blown out, and the garage was a smaller footprint at one time, the builders found as they were taking it apart. When you take apart a building, you discover interesting stuff, which is why they take longer. It's a lot easier to go into someplace that was a restaurant if you're going to be a restaurant. And so far, we're two-for-two in Reno in repurposing. It's not necessarily the future plan. If we go somewhere south of town, which is our intent, we'll probably be able to get something that might have some of the restaurant infrastructure, which is a head start.

Barber: So the Tahoe Street location and this one, are these being leased, or are they owned by Laughing Planet?

Healion: We ended up buying the Tahoe Street building. This one will be leased. It's part of that whole Paddy Egan, Joe what's-his-name project similar to the Riverside. At the Powning District Hub, those old houses have become this little neighborhood of the Hub, Salon, the tea shop, Beaujolais, offices. The same guys are doing this, and so none of these are for sale. They want to develop it and own the property and have some control over the exterior and the tenants, to a level.

We fell into this. It was so cool, because initially it was supposed to be another Süp, and the Süp guys were going to expand their world here. So it would have been Süp, the Hub, and a bike shop. And at one point a few months ago, the Süp guys, for various reasons I don't know, chose not to move forward with the project, so they pulled. It helps having this machine, Laughing Planet, with fourteen stores, a track record, banks that believe in you. If you have one shop, you've got more of a wrestling match with the bank than if you've got fourteen. Our numbers were killer.

Franz is a smart business guy, so it's easier for us to come in and say, "Hey, that wouldn't even work for a Süp. You guys don't have enough power coming in the building." We shut down the progress

on this because we had to redo the power coming off a pole to get enough power over there. If you take part of a building, you run into stuff you didn't even dream about. So it's costing more.

Anyway, the Süp guys pulled out, and it didn't take an hour for Paddy to call me and say, "Dude, are you guys still looking up by UNR?" Because I had told them, "Keep an eye out. We're looking at the U as one of our targets." Boom, got a slam dunk. That's location, location, location, man. It's unbelievable. You stand on the front porch and look directly at campus. You've got to be kiddin' me. It's beautiful.

Barber: And people have long complained about the fact that there's no university district here, so isn't it kind of amazing that it's being created now to some extent?

Healion: It's so cool to be part of that.

Barber: In an old building.

Healion: Right. When I did my conferences, the bike summits, I always wanted to figure out how to include the university in the bike world, which was my world when I was considering that. Milt Glick was the president that I dealt with a little bit, saying, "Look. How do we connect?" I think he did a lot of work including the community. It's a huge college, but it doesn't feel like a college town. I joked and I told him, "I feel like there's a moat around the university." So it's so cool to be part of something at the university that might be able to involve the university and the community as well.

Did you hear about these deals that the concessioners in the university had squashed? They've got one thing. They've got Archie's. Something before Archie's was there, but that was short-lived before Archie's. There was the Wal, which used to be downtown. Jimmy John's was the Beer Barrel, which was this bar below the university. It was a university bar. People would brag about puking at the Beer Barrel. It was one of those joints.

Everything around here was just junk. There's the Wolf Den. Nobody's doing anything cool up there. It's too bad. It's all about somebody with an idea to make some money, as opposed to how can we contribute to the neighborhood?

Laughing Planet's got a little of that going. And as with Deux Gros Nez, I come from the premise that people somewhere inside will want to contribute as a human being on the planet to the planet. You hope so, right? Our little strip where Laughing Planet is, was the highway between the Ponderosa and Shea's. Shea's is this all-night bar that's a toilet. It used to be the 715 Club, by the way, before Shea's. I remember trying to get the neon sign off the back of that when it was still the 715 Club. 715 or 714? Anyway, there was a neon sign in the alley. Years later, it's just destroyed. It's gone. It would have been a cool neon sign. But I wondered why it had a neon sign out back facing north, or facing west, so that whoever was coming down the hill could see it was historical, and it intrigued me.

So we thought we were going to clean up the neighborhood. Where the Laughing Planet ends up is good for a neighborhood. That's one of the ideas of a Laughing Planet.

Barber: And do you see yourself spending your time in both locations?

Healion: Absolutely. I see myself spending time playing and being on my phone with the other place from a lift at Tahoe: "I can't, man. I'll be down in about an hour." [Barber laughs.] That's a joke.

I think the intent of the business based in Portland with Franz running the business was to have my face at the front door of the one on Tahoe Street when it opened and for a significant amount of time. And Richard Satnik, who's the guy that got bought out, the creator of the business, that was his intent from the get-go: "Look. You're going to have to work a lot and you're going to be at the front door a lot while we get the thing going, and then it'll kind of ease off."

So I look at the business thinking I've got to not be the guy. That was the intent with Deux Gros Nez all those years, having people who worked there when I wasn't there represent me, the owner of the business, to the public. And I think that we've got a good crew. The guy who's running the store, I hired him a month after he moved here from Germany, and he was a guy who worked in the kitchen and became the kitchen manager, and then he became the general manager of the store. He's writing schedules and watching labor costs and food costs for both stores, and I'm kind of a "Hey, how it's going?" type of guy. So I'll be here a lot just to get it launched and figure out how to make it work. When I'm not there, there are still a lot of people coming in and looking for Tim, which I think is fun, but I don't know that it's a good idea for business, the sustainability side of the business, which is too bad. But if the Laughing Planet's introduction to Reno is successful, that will change.

So I'll be up here a lot. I'll be at both joints a lot. Then my role with the business, unless we keep building more stores, becomes questionable. I'm down there fixing stuff this morning before our meeting, for example. Or I'm the marketing guy because I know people in the community.

My current project is to figure out how to get parents of students at the university to buy gift cards to the Laughing Planet to supplement the meal programs there. Having a daughter in college right now, I know that that's an expense for a parent. She's up at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, and I've got to buy her food. If I could buy a gift card to the Laughing Planet, for my kid to eat here, as opposed to three meals a day across the street, I think it'd be cool because it's affordable and super healthy. So that's going to be my wheelin' and dealin' gig, and it's good for business at the same time. As a parent, it's good for parents. Nice tie.

Barber: So your role is really fluid. It's involved with a lot of things. Does it provide the stability that you're looking for?

Healion: No. Once in a while you go through the day and wonder what you're doing in life, and once in a while it's nice to have a label to attach to it. You come up with a title, something you can put on a business card. My definition, my role as a piece of this company, doesn't fall into the prescribed business model. Once in a while, every third month, once a quarter, there's a meeting in Portland, where everybody gets together and high-fives, and I'm part of this company, too. It's all the general managers and managers in retreat. Things are good, and we take a look at the numbers.

The guys in there know what they're doing and they know what their roles are, and I know what I'm doing, but it doesn't fit into a role that you'd write on a piece of paper. My value to the company, being an old restaurant guy and having had skin in the game, to a company that's based out of state, and this is the only thing in the state, is huge, because there's something to fall back on. Day-to-day, if I left for a month, those guys would do a great job and everything would get done. If we keep building new stores, I interact with the contractors and the builders, and tell them, "Hey, we've got to do that," or "Move that over there." That value for the company is huge, and my value in the community is huge.

But as the company becomes more sustained and grows, if we're not building more restaurants, I would question my role in the company. As a person that's how I am. What I have to offer walking in the

door as a live wire has value to the shops in Portland. My contribution to the company as a whole and the growth of the company as a whole could be a role that I morph into. Big companies have chief culture officers, and their job is to make sure that when you walk into a Laughing Planet in Boise, it's the same as the one in Portland. My job could be that. I don't know what I'm doing tomorrow.

Barber: [laughs] It seems like whether it's been deliberate or not, something that you are so good at is helping to create a sense of community. These places that you've created and these events that you created like the Tour de Nez seemed to have community at the heart of it. It really is about that sense of community, and perhaps that's something that is your legacy.

Healion: Well, you know, that was part of it, with the whole coffee house thing. What's available in a coffee house is community. Otherwise, you may as well just take a pill. It's people sitting down talking about stuff. It's getting the guy at the counter to tell us about what it was like to work for Charlie Mapes, with the stuff he saw, playing in the old ditches. People like that knew where they started, where they came out in the Truckee, and, now they're in a tunnel, man. They know stuff like that, where the last Indian Motorcycle shop was. John Tinkham and his dad and his clocks, I love that stuff. Or you talk about people's lives or what they're into, and that can happen at coffee house.

One of the problems with Laughing Planet, for me, is that it doesn't really nurture that part of a business. That's the part of the business that I like a lot, being in, say, Deux Gros Nez, as opposed to Laughing Planet where you come in, order food, get it, and leave. It can work for people to sit and talk for a long time, but by design, it doesn't really lend itself to that. It's like, "Get 'em in and get 'em out. We need that table." We had that experience at Deux Gros Nez because it was so damn small. You'd get four Reno High kids with one cup of coffee at nine o'clock at night, and people would want to sit down and spend money. You had to give them a business lesson.

But coffee is a stimulant, as a beverage. It's a drug. It brings that forth. You drink a couple of these [points to cup of coffee], and you're like, "What do you want to talk about?" Right? It's super cool, and I love that. I love people coming in.

I've got some history on that guy, too, by the way. His dad and I used to ride bikes in the early eighties in the Fat Boy Bike Club, and his dad is one super sweet guy.

Barber: Our barista? [laughs]

Healion: Yes. At a time where there wasn't a barista in town. People didn't even call them baristas back then. We used to call ourselves cappuccino jerks, like a soda jerk.

Barber: Right. [laughs]

Healion: We made that up. I don't know. "Barista" maybe came out of Seattle.

Barber: There is a different spirit to a coffee house versus a restaurant.

Healion: Right, and I kind of like that. My approach to all these businesses is to make it a place people want to go to, and when they leave, want to go back to. And that's what I preach to my employees. Everything you do, from washing dishes to anything, is about making it a great experience for someone

so they want to come back. If it's great food, if it's greeting them or smiling or getting the stuff out of the way when they're done, that's what it takes. Historically, the coffee shop part of it wasn't getting your drink and getting to work. It was a drug. It was hanging out and chatting, which I like to do, and I like to do it with people.

Barber: Well, I want to thank you so much for talking to me today. This has been terrific.

Healion: When I met you at one of these RTC things, in the back of my head, I thought, "I think I've got some stuff that might be of some value to share with some people." I realize that I'm part of that history and part of the morphing of Reno, going from a casino-centric or a bar-centric town to what's going on in Midtown. I've heard it from other people that John and I were associated with that. John might be an interesting guy to talk to, too. He's got a building in Midtown, too, an apartment. It was the old Edco Electric building, which is on the corner of Tahoe Street and Saint Lawrence. As you come up from Virginia, Saint Lawrence goes up the hill. The first street is Tahoe Street, which Laughing Planet is on. The building on the southeast corner which has the really cool stainless awnings with purple is my old partner John's building.

Sid Robinson, our beloved landlord at Deux Gros Nez, bought it, and John sweat-equited his way into it, and did all the work inside. John's brilliance can be seen in that building. He made everything from the window articulators to the toilet paper hangers. It was very Frank Lloyd Wright-ish, as in every piece of it was considered. John Jesse was very much a part of the whole Deux Gros Nez and Pneumatic Diner. We were partners all along. Before Deux Gros Nez closed, in the last ten years of it, so much was associated with me, me, me, Tim, Tim, Tim, but it was very much John, too.

He was more of the visionary as far as location goes, for why California Avenue was the place, as well as Midtown. When he and Sid got that old Edco Electric building, his vision was to do another restaurant there. He's built a beautiful atrium in there. It's rented out to offices now, and there's a yoga studio in there as well. But the intent when they got the building and started building out was to have a restaurant in there, because he was convinced way back when before anything in Midtown that this was the place to be. The corner building was still Del Mar Station, which was before your time. That was a dump. It just became a toilet. And there was Shea's and the 715 Club.

John saw that as the way the town might flow and put his building there, because he said, "It's coming to me." It was the same with California Avenue; he thought, "It's going to happen here. It's going to happen here. I'm going to do that." He never got the funding together to do another restaurant, but he's got his building and it works great. It's a brilliant building. It was the old Edco Electric building forever, and it's right there in what I consider the heart of Midtown. It's right at Saint Lawrence Street, coming down the hill. He'd be an interesting person to talk to.

Barber: I'll have to look into that, for sure. I've been in that building. It's a neat building.

Healion: It's unbelievable. Did you go in the bathroom in that building?

Barber: I don't know. It was years ago.

Healion: Everything, the door closures, everything in that building is so cool.



Barber: He's had it for a while.

Healion: Ask to see the boiler room. *Mosquito Coast*, I think it was called, the Harrison Ford movie, where he ends up in the jungle and has to make a living out of it to move forward, he makes an ice machine out of—the joke was that John Jesse was that guy. He can make an ice machine out of a tree. I'll tell you what, I think you'd find yourself very fascinated with a conversation with that guy. A lot of people have a hard time with him.

Barber: Well, thank you. You're going to link me to a lot of different people here. You have already.

Healion: John Tinkham. John Tinkham's huge. You know what? Randy Collins' building, which was the old Chrysler-Dodge building, right?

Barber: Well, it's connected to that. He's in the old Savage and Son building, and it's connected to the old Osen Dodge building.

Healion: Right. And here's another tie. Savage and Son was still there on Virginia Street when we opened Deux Gros Nez or were building it. They moved at almost the same time, and they'd been there for ninety years. And in the basement was ninety years of shit, and all the light fixtures. At Deux Gros Nez, we tried to tie in pieces of Reno, and we could only afford used stuff. The light fixtures that we had in Deux Gros Nez we got out of the basement at Savage and Son. They had been there forever. They were brand new and beautiful. I've got a couple at my house. I'm going to put them in here, so it'll be a neat tie between Savage and Son, Deux Gros Nez, and Laughing Planet. I like that stuff.

Barber: Were they for sale there or were they installed there?

Healion: They were in a pile in the basement, where they were clearing shit out. They were selling all their crap so they could move. In the basement there was old crap, and we bought all the light fixtures.

I don't know if any of them are alive. Pete Savage was a little kid, who might know some stuff about that. At Reno Paint Mart, there's a dude named Brad. Reno Paint Mart was in Midtown. I forget which frickin' building it was. We bought paint from his dad when we built Deux Gros Nez. Reno Paint Mart was right there where the used furniture store is, across from the 715 Club. That was Reno Paint Mart. And Brad was a little kid there, and he's running Reno Paint Mart now. But he would know some stories about that building. Brad at Reno Paint Mart, a big guy, super sweet. His dad was really cool. His dad had a partner. I think they're both dead. But that's a tie.

Pete Savage, I believe, would have some ties with that, and would know more about the Savage and Son building that Randy Collins might not know. Randy Collins ought to know a lot. He's been there for a long time.

Barber: Yes, he did. He was great.

Healion: John Tinkham's huge, though. That'd be a good one. Everybody's an interesting conversation. Some people offer more conversation than it takes the work to get out of it. John Tinkham might—

whereas I'm a guy who would talk all day if you didn't ask me a question, and I realize I should get back to the subject. John Tinkham will stop.

Barber: [laughs] Well, good. I'll talk to anybody.

Healion: Well, it's your job, man, right?

Barber: I think I'll end here, and then we'll probably keep talking because I want to get some more information.

In a way, it seems like with this whole Midtown culture, the restaurants, independent restaurants, and coffee shops and everything, in some way, I feel like you're the father of it. [laughs] You were doing this kind of thing before these other folks were.

Healion: 1983.

Barber: And what a different place Reno was at that time. It's always in transition, but now there's so much momentum behind that culture, whereas you were a pioneer. It must in some way feel satisfying.

Healion: Well, that's where ego comes in, and ego is the kind of thing that gets in the way, which is why I sometimes put effort into squashing Tim Healion as this guy. I don't know. I did some stuff. My wife would argue it would have been better if it was more profitable. [Barber laughs.] But it's fun being part of anything that has a life. If I go to a town somewhere, if I'm traveling, I want to go downtown and see if there's anything left. Like, where's the old coffee shop, or where are the old people sitting around talking?

In Reno, that part of downtown died. Big casinos came along and wrecked everything. And so there was an opportunity to have that continue. There were a couple of little coffee shops. The restaurants that were downtown died at the same moment when we were building. Even when Deux Gros Nez closed, there was some new stuff starting to happen, so there was a little overlap. We had established a neighborhood that the Cheese Board then grew into, and with the coffee shop across the street, Blue Plate, Newman's Deli, and My Favorite Muffin, it kept rolling. It didn't die, but it got things going.

Like with the bike race, I worked on it forever, and it was a part of me. Even though it's regressed from what I was trying to have it grow into, just to be part of something that lives on is nice. You think, hey, I did something that was worthwhile.

I thought it'd be cool to be the old guy behind the counter at Deux Gros Nez. I thought it'd be cool to be seventy years old, sit there, and tell young people, "I know your grandpa," that kind of guy. That would be fun, like a Norman Rockwell painting, but part of something that is living. It's cool. Once in a while you look around a room like this, and they're all kids, so you don't really know them. But if you're in an environment where there are older guys, you just have no clue about their story.

This dude I have coffee with twice a week, at six a.m., at what used to be the Hub, now the Blue Whale, Bill Dickensheets, was one of the guys who hung out at the counter at Deux Gros Nez. He'd sit in the corner, and he didn't show up until '97, so he missed all the early years. But he was there every morning talking with Kamasi [phonetic], who is the old guy who has even more history than that. He was on a boat at Bikini Atoll when they blew up tests Able and Baker, the first two above-ground tests, and there are more stories that go with that than stories with the guy in Reno. It's really cool. I love that shit.

You look in a room of old guys, and you'd have no idea this dude I have coffee with every morning was one of the guys who helped Ford develop the fuel-injection stuff. He's a smart guy and an engineer, and he was part of something so much bigger than just some guy in the corner having coffee. I thought it'd be fun to be the person who could provide an environment for those guys to come in and share that kind of thing.

Like my dad. My dad's this guy who was a big-shot in athletics. He's in the Pro Football Hall of Fame as a trainer, the guy who taped ankles and picked people up when they fell over. They've got a section for trainers, and he's in there. His plaque's on the wall. There's this thing in a combine in Indianapolis where all the college football athletes go to and all the scouts go, and they get to see 'em all running races and medical checks, and my dad helped start and develop that whole thing. But if you'd see him walk in a room, you wouldn't know, right? And so what value is there to be a guy who pats yourself on the back when you can sit down and talk to somebody with those kinds of experiences? It's kind of cool just to be a guy, I think, and have a conversation and be able to talk to people who come in the door.

Barber: You created some places because they were the kind of places where you wanted to hang out, and now it's nice because there are more places in Reno like that, where you want to go and spend time, places that weren't there before. So now you can be that guy sitting down having conversations.

Healion: That's why I like counters. This place doesn't have a counter. You've got to sit at a table away from each other. Counters are good. Laughing Planet has a little counter, but it's not really a counter. It's hard.

Barber: We'll wrap it up for now, and I know I'm going to be talking to you again.

Healion: We've got to hook you up with John Tinkham. He's a guy you'll fall in love with.

Barber: I think so.

Healion: He's really sweet and he's a wealth of information, and you can find out about his brother and his partner and his dad. His dad was a big part of Reno.

Barber: Thank you.

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## CHRISTINE KELLY

Owner, Sundance Books & Music, 121 California Avenue



*Christine Kelly began to work at Sundance Books at the store's original location at 1155 West 4<sup>th</sup> Street. Eventually she became the store manager and then owner. In 2011 the store, now called Sundance Books & Music, moved to the historic Levy House at 121 California Avenue, where Kelly is also publisher and executive editor of the publishing company she founded, Baobab Press.*

Christine Kelly inside Sundance Books and Music. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and I'm at Sundance Books and Music at 121 California Avenue in Reno, Nevada, with owner Christine Kelly to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Christine, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Kelly: Yes, you do.

Barber: Thank you. Well, I was hoping you could start by telling me just a little bit about yourself. Are you originally from this area?

Kelly: No. I grew up in Las Vegas, and came up here to go to the University of Nevada in 1981.

Barber: At that time, Reno was quite different than it is now.

Kelly: Very different, yes.

Barber: What were your feelings about Reno, coming from Las Vegas? Was it something you were looking forward to?

Kelly: It was, because I was ready to leave home. [laughs] I was ready for the adventure. It's such a different landscape and different climate, with different people and a different pace. And I have to say, in fairness, poor Las Vegas just gets just beat up so bad these days. Quite frankly, it's somewhat deserved, but not in and of its own doing. You just had such a mass influx of growth and development in that giant southern basin.

It's not the same town I grew up in. It was much smaller then, and there was a lot of open desert around us. We used to ride our bicycles forever into the desert. But it's not there any longer; it's gone. Believe it or not, there was more of a sense of community and neighborhoods then, whereas now it's sprawl. When I came up north here, I got that neighborhood feeling again, that sort of township feeling, but in a different way, because the seasons are not the same.

Barber: Had you spent any time up here in the north before coming up to college?

Kelly: I came up one weekend while I was still in high school to stay with my two brothers, who had come before me and were in college. Here I was, a tiny little girl in the new city with her big brothers in college, thinking, "This is crazy cool and you guys are really cool." It all seemed so big.

Barber: So you had a sense of what you were getting into.

Kelly: Just a little bit, yes. It very much had a college town feel.

Barber: Now, I've heard that owning an independent bookstore wasn't your original professional goal. Do you want to talk about your original career aspirations and how they came about?

Kelly: Well, when I came up here, I got a bachelor's degree in nursing, and then I went back and got a master's degree, so I thought I would be in the nursing world. But I've always been sort of a book addict, really, and fascinated by the book form, so on a whim I decided to work one day a week in this very cool little local independent bookstore that had opened up two or three years prior. That was Sundance Books. And what turned out to be one day a week turned into managing it, leaving the nursing profession, and

then ultimately buying and owning the store. That all happened over about a twenty-five-year period of time. So here I am.

Barber: Now, that original location was not the location we're in now. Can you talk a little bit about the earlier location?

Kelly: Sundance was born at 1155 West 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 106, in one wing of the Keystone Square Shopping Center. It was a section that had just been built, so the bookstore was brand new. It was started by Dan Earl and his wife, Sun. At that time, that was a very vibrant, happening shopping center with a lot of diverse shops. There was a great little local restaurant called Cochon Volant, which seemed unique in Reno. There was the CD Store, which was this fantastic music store right next to us, and a flower shop and bead shop and ice cream and yogurt and, of course, a supermarket. Also, the Keystone Theatre—the arts theater—was there. So it was really a hopping, happening place and stayed that way for quite a while. But eventually it started getting older, and as the town started to sprawl to the south and certainly more to the west, and with Sparks growing, too, it became a little more inner-city-ish—not bad, but a little bit.

And then, unfortunately, we experienced two interrelated developments: the great recession and what happened to the book industry. Many of those other independent shops in the area didn't make it. They either moved or most of them closed down, and by the time we decided it was time to go, there was not much left. I guess that would have been 2011.

Barber: And by that point, had the original founders of the store left the business?

Kelly: No. One of the founders had left the business many years prior, but Dan stayed on, even though I was owner, and we worked together.

Barber: I remember going to that address for a lot of readings. There seemed to always be a good relationship with university writers and community writers.

Kelly: Right. We've always been very active in the worlds of readings and local authors, and most certainly the university. Prior to the arrival of internet retail and digital downloads, that was a huge part of our community. It was a hopping and happening place, for sure.

Barber: So did the impact of online book sales seem quite abrupt, or was it gradual?

Kelly: I would say it started slowly for the first year or two, and then it just took off like wildfire. It was pretty shocking, really. Prior to internet retail, people would ask how Barnes & Noble affected us, or how Borders, when they were in business, affected us. We lived through the development and expansion of the chain mega bookstores. When Barnes & Noble first came to town and opened its first "superstore," for about a year we could see an impact in our numbers and our traffic, and then there was a rebound. And that was kind of conventional wisdom through the industry. You'd talk to other stores in the Bay Area or southern California, and in the trades, pretty much it was a common experience. If one of those places opened up nearby, you'd feel it for a while and then you'd rebound.

A few years later, Barnes & Noble decided to expand, and they built the current Barnes & Noble, the two-story, much larger building. And at about that same time, Borders came to town. Within the

book industry, Borders was considered greater competition for independent bookstores than Barnes & Noble, because Borders did a better job within their shops of capturing that bookish feel, that literary atmosphere. They had staff who seemed to be more vested—at least, that was the conventional wisdom. Whether or not that was true across the board, I don't know. But both of them opened within a couple months or two of each other, and we definitely again felt the contraction, and again it came back to where it was business as usual. It took a little bit of the cream off the top, but we still were fine.

Sometime after that, between internet retail and the success of the big box stores, there was a shift in where things started being sold. Traditionally, of course, books were sold in bookstores or through your Book-of-the-Month Club or something like that. You had your publishers and they used bookstores to get their material out.

Then places like Costco started to show up. Places like Kmart had always had mass markets at the registers, but they started expanding and bringing on trade titles that they had never sold before. And they started selling these books at cost or below cost, and publishers were willing to do that kind of sales. So you started to see an erosion of how people could acquire books and an erosion of their perception of the value of a book, a fair price for a book. That kind of book selling is loss leader book selling. It's a way to bring people into your shop. They don't make much money off of those, and they certainly don't carry a breadth and depth of books, nor would they or could they do that, but they take the book and they use it as sort of a marketing tool.

The sad part of that mechanism, though, of doing that to books, is that it's a very destabilizing practice. It impedes the fragile balance between the creative process—the author—the production of a book, and the communication or marketing of that book to try to get it above the level of the sea of many, many books that are out there trying to get an audience. Many hands are involved in that process, and it's not an inexpensive process. So when you take something that's pretty fragile in its fiscal structure—taking art and bringing it to life—and do this to it, it's incredibly destabilizing to the entire mechanism. And when I tell you this, it's not because I believe that the one and only place that books should be sold are independent bookstores. I'm not saying that. I'm saying when you take a book and you commoditize it to the point where it's a marketing tool, that creates a really problematic trajectory for the world of language and literature and art.

Then you bring in internet retail, which followed it. You've already got something kind of weird happening to books, when people come into your shop and they say, "Well, I can get that at Costco for such-and-such," and they look at you like you are actually ripping them off. They think you have jacked the price up on this book, that this is an unreasonable profit margin. This is also happening to other things, not just books. It's happening to tools, it's happening to clothing, it's happening to everything, and it makes small business of all types extremely challenging. I mean, look what happened to the music business.

And then when all the stars aligned to make internet commerce viable, once all the tentacles and outreach and mechanisms were in place, then you had start-ups, great people with creative ideas, wanting to get in the game, and introducing new and different ways to do things. And by that time, books were being loss leadered, and that's, quite frankly, what amazon.com did. That's what barnesandnoble.com did early on. They were grabbing market share, to beat the competition. They had a lot of money invested early on so they could afford to do this, and they were selling stuff for 20, 30, 40 percent off.

Barber: Is that what loss leader means? I wondered if you could explain that term a little bit.

Kelly: It means you choose to give up what would be your profit margin to make an appealing purchase within a shop.

Barber: So you lead with the loss, is that what it comes from?

Kelly: That's right, yes. And you know you're doing that. At Costco, you go back and you buy twelve cans of creamed corn, and you know that they're making their money off that creamed corn. It just makes their buying environment fun. It makes it feel like the customer is getting a deal.

Again, I'm not laying moral judgment. I'm just saying that it has had an impact on a whole industry that probably could have used a shake-up or two. We always can do better. But it's become very challenging for bookstores. Look at what's happening. Borders no longer exists. Barnes & Noble continues to struggle terrifically. You have an extreme consolidation of book internet retail sales to one entity, for better or for worse. Internet retail has definitely changed the American culture. It has changed the way America buys, and it's changed the American economy, without a doubt. I think it's a huge component of the great recession—not the whole thing, by any means—but if you consider the shift of jobs, the local economic structure has been eviscerated by the moving of sales online. That move away from local sales, and tax collection for things like schools and roads and libraries, brought a traumatic shift, a dramatic shift of cash flow away from communities, and no doubt it has proved challenging.

Barber: And even before the recession we saw things like the disappearance of bookstores from shopping malls. That used to be very common; you'd have the bookstore and the record store there.

Kelly: Yes, like B. Dalton's. I grew up going to a B. Dalton's down the road. I thought it was magical. In Las Vegas, it was such an amazing little place to go, for sure.

Barber: So all those shifts have dramatically changed the book industry, and publishing has changed dramatically, too, which is another arm of the industry that we can get into a little bit later, since you have ventured in the world of publishing. I would think that the advent of self-publishing, the fact that self-published books are often only available online, is a whole different dimension that is rapidly transforming.

You were talking about how the Keystone and West 4<sup>th</sup> Street area was changing a little bit as the years passed. Were you actively looking for a new location for the bookstore at some point? I'm wondering if you can tell me how the move happened.

Kelly: The stars were aligned and the angels were smiling upon us. [laughs] At that time we had chosen to do year-to-year leases. We knew that that was not really where we wanted to be, but we didn't know where we would go. Certainly at that time, during the great recession, I knew that the way we did business was never going to be the same. It was always going to be different, and I thought a lot about what would keep an independent bookstore thriving and important to a community. I felt pretty certain that it was not going to be going off into some suburban strip mall. I knew that. But I really didn't know what we would do. At the time, I just thought I would keep looking and something would come along.

Interestingly, even prior to the great recession, on my way home from work, I used to drive down California Avenue every now and then, even though it was really out of my way. I was always fascinated with California Avenue. It's just kind of strange and novel. It's one of the prettiest streets in town, and



it's always been sort of "there" but not quite there. As long as I've lived here, it's always been that way, on the verge of something. It's just a great little street. And I always thought, "Hmm. I kind of like this street, but what an odd little street."

As it happened, I got a call from the Nevada Museum of Art, from David Walker, who said that they had a building that was coming available, and asked if I might be interested. I have a feeling that a dear friend, a mutual, very important person in this town involved in the arts, Mr. Steven Nightingale, was also out there scouting things out for us, too.

I had no idea what building they could possibly have owned besides the museum building. What was this building on California Street that was theirs? I had looked around. I had been queried over the years many times by different commercial developers about places where might we go, and nothing ever felt right. So I thought, "Well, okay, I'll drive down the street and see what this is." I drove down the street after work one day, and I drove in front of this white three-story post-colonial mansion, and I thought, "Oh, my gosh, this is pretty cool. I wonder what it looks like inside." At that moment, I think I had a sense of, "Boy, hmm, maybe."

They allowed me to go in and walk around while the previous tenants were still in it. It was originally a home, so it's divided up like a house, and I thought, "If there was ever a place where an independent bookstore could create an identity and thrive, I think this is it. I think this is it."

I remember going back to the old shop, and everybody was there, and I said, "You guys, I think I know where we need to go." And I'm not one who likes a lot of change, by the way. [laughs] I'm a long ponderer of things, but I surprised myself by thinking, "I think this could do it. I think this could be it." There were a lot of things to answer, like how would you make it function, how would you make this business function? In our old shop, we were in 4,400 square feet of basically open space; it was a shared space, and you always saw each other. You knew where everybody was at all times in that shop. You worked it differently because it was all on one floor. So I thought, how would this business even work on three floors, let alone in all these different rooms? Where would you put your service counter? There were many things, and yet I thought, "No, if there was ever a time to blindly leap, I do think this is the time."

So, it was pure blind faith and an unwillingness to quit. I wasn't done doing this. But I had to think about it. Think about the task of moving a bookstore. We're a mid-size independent bookstore. That's a lot of books and shelves and other things to move. It's a big task. I had to ask myself, "Am I up for this?"

And as much as the thought of it kind of made me sick to my stomach, I also knew I was not done. I was not done doing this, nor was the rest of the Sundance team, and I am to this day ever so grateful for how much loyalty and commitment the team has always had. We literally—I'm not exaggerating—moved the store in two and a half days. I believe we were only closed Saturday and Sunday. We opened back up again on Monday. We had a lot of great volunteers who came and helped us move.

Barber: When was this?

Kelly: We opened in June of 2011. We closed for two days over Memorial Day weekend and then opened. It was crazy. It was crazy.



Sundance Books and Music. Photo courtesy of Sundance Books and Music.

Barber: So prior to the actual move, how much work had you put into the new space? As you say, it is a 1906 house, the Levy house, and even though there had been a number of different tenants through the years—I know there had been lawyers in here, and there was a salon for a while—they really hadn’t done too much modification to most of the rooms. But tell me the process of how you decided where to put things and how you transformed it into a bookstore.

Kelly: I look back at it now, and I don’t know how we did that. But I will say that we started sketching out a plan, so we knew early on. I met with David and the museum in January or February. Then we had a couple months of prepping, and we looked at a calendar and started staging what we needed to do. The company that was here before we came in was very gracious. We had a couple of opportunities to could come in and start doing our best guesstimate of how we would go about it.

Then back at the old shop, we started looking at our old bookcases. They were twenty-five years old, because we were at our old shop that long. I thought, “I don’t want to move these old bookcases, the way they look, into our new space.” That would just feel bad. They needed to be fresh and clean. So we hired some painters and some folks to repair them. In the old shop we were staging and circling through all the cases that needed cleaning and painting, and so the back part of the old shop was cordoned off, and it became sort of a workspace.

Then we started thinking about our categories. I forget how many rooms we have here now, to be honest with you. I think we have eight or nine. What categories could live together? What categories made sense in rooms, and what if we turned rooms loosely into themed spaces? We all worked on it

together. We started playing with who could live with who in what room. [laughs] We also looked at the size of the rooms and which ones could handle the categories that were bigger or smaller. And that's really how we started. We knew that the current service room made sense as the service room because it was attached to a room that could become a shipping and receiving room, which we'd never had before, which was really kind of great.

So we committed some resources to fixing our shelves, and we started making the move, and we built out what is our events room—we call it the Red Room. We knew that that room would be an events room and probably house new releases. We had a carpenter friend build the bookcases in there, and those were looking really good as they were going in. Then when we started bringing over the bookcases that we had invested all this money in painting, we were schlepping them up into the store—most of the books are on the second floor, and there are nineteen steps up that staircase—we're hauling these bookcases up the staircase, and we got them into the rooms, and instantly I looked and I thought, "Oh, my goodness, this is not going to work." They looked so bad in the rooms.

It was the aesthetic. You had this incredible, fantastic old building, with great floors and a great interior, and we had these rather plain, modern—quite frankly, ugly—bookshelves that we had put in here that were painted a very light color. It didn't work. And I thought there's no way we can invest in this place, and make it an exciting place and have this feel. I didn't think about it much at the old shop, because it worked in the old shop. It was what it was. But all of a sudden this space was as much a player as the books on our shelves, and that was a really unexpected awakening for me. I did not anticipate that. I knew it was a really cool building, but I did not understand its relationship to this shop until then.

So we had to hustle up, and we got our carpenter to start building out the rooms. We had to do it a little bit over time. I would say within about six months, all those old cases, for the most part, were gone. The kitchen still has old cases left. At some point we need to build that out.

It had become apparent that this was the same business and not the same business anymore, and that this building is as much a player in that reality as what we do inside it. People started coming to the shop, and as much as they were looking at the shelves, there were a lot of people, especially early on, who were coming to the shop because they never got to be inside the building. So they were walking the building and looking around, and got to see that incredibly inlay on the first floor and all that herringbone work with the wood and the way the banisters and the railings are, and the window casings.

It's been amazing, and I'm very grateful, very grateful. Like I said, I'm not one to make a lot of changes. As I get older, I realize, embrace it, man, because it's the changes that make life a lot better, but when you're younger. For me, they're a little scarier.

But I am very, very fond of and grateful for that original space. You always hear these nightmare relationships about small businesses and landlords. The people who owned that building were from California, and the manager that we worked with lived in California, and I have to say in those twenty-five-and-a-half years we were there, we were treated exceedingly well. They were fantastic to work with. When things were lean, they were accommodating. When things were better, they appreciated that we said, "Hey, things are better." We were extremely fortunate to be there at its height, so I have very fond memories. And I learned a lot and skinned my knees a lot there. So I've been very surprised by the fact that once we moved over here, I don't think about that space anymore. I don't think about that time much anymore. I mean, I carry with me what we've become because of it, but it feels like we've been here our entire existence, and it's the oddest darn thing because we've only been here five years. It's crazy. I feel like we've come home, and I hope it can be our home for a long time.

Barber: It seems really striking to me that when you talk about the business changing and online sales, that, of course, is a completely disembodied, displaced phenomenon. And what has happened, maybe not because of that, but certainly in conjunction with that happening, is that it's like you've doubled down on this notion of place.

Kelly: Yes. I think you couldn't be more correct. And I think maybe in ways, as much as it's been so hard on many independent shops, I think it has helped clarify why our sorts of spaces are so very irreplaceable and you can't create this kind of thing in any other way. If you have people who really value doing it and people who equally value that kind of space, it's going to exist. It can't happen any other way.

Obviously, it's taken some time, with the newness of some things. But it had to be this place in Reno, Nevada, in northern Nevada. I honestly think it couldn't have been in any other spot than this spot, and that's an awfully strong statement to make. But this is the spot.

Barber: And there's something that is inherently very inviting about coming into a building that was a home, that still has that sense of a home. You have additionally made it welcoming in the way that it's been designed and created. And these spaces, I think, encourage people to linger, but you've also welcomed a lot of different events and partnerships with different organizations in here, that have made it a very welcoming space. Can you talk a little bit about how that came to be and some of the different organizations and partnerships you've had, who have done things in this space?

Kelly: It's blossomed here. I wish I had a solid handle on the thread of how that all evolved, but it did evolve here more. We did a lot of work with the community at the old shop, but very differently in different ways. I think because there's something central about this spot, we're obviously literally very close to the Nevada Museum of Art and what they are doing. What an important entity that they are for the arts and conversation. And they do so many different types of things there, that they expand your mind about what art is. We feel very fortunate and like it is a perfect fit to be next to them.

And then not very far from us you've got all this creative food art going on in the restaurants. Down Virginia Street, just around the corner, all of a sudden you had this other stuff start happening. I remember when Süp opened up. My recollection is that Süp was the first bold, creative little shop that opened on Virginia Street that everybody said, "Have you been over there? Have you had—?" And their food was great. Their soup was great. Their chicken tortilla soup to this day is one of my favorite things. But here this very young couple started this place up with great food and a really interesting, simple concept of what they were serving, and the aesthetic that they created inside that building was fantastic. And so here we are, really close to this, and then something else pops up, and something else pops up.

And all of a sudden we're working with Christina Barr and Nevada Humanities. We've always done work with Nevada Humanities, beginning with Judy Winzeler for all those years. By the time we were getting ready to move, Christina was executive director, and we were talking about this move, and she was super excited for us, very supportive of us. Then after we had made the move, I was trying to get the office up here a little bit sorted, and put my desk together, and Christina was up here helping me literally screw some top on the desk or something, and we started talking. And I said to her, "Christina, I want to have a salon." And that's where the Salon idea came from. We started talking about the Salon, what we could do with it, and what a great place this was for the Salon.

Really, things just started emerging from this cool space and the creative grist that was coming from it, and the people who were coming and hanging with us as we were getting ourselves nestled in. The Salon started. Then, when we knew we were coming over here, we had the great opportunity to pick up Katie Louvat, who is this dynamic, kind, amazing, creative, well-connected person with solid people in town and lots of arts and nonprofit experience. She came on and started doing our events and marketing and outreach and was connecting us to new things and new people, and she was really an important part of helping us find these new relationships and linkages. I could go on about how it takes a village to make a bookstore. [laughter]

Barber: I'm really struck, too, by the fact that you have a lot of younger people coming in, like that arrangement that you have with the Holland Project.

Kelly: Oh, the Holland Project, what a cool thing, what a great thing they're doing, and they're just down the street. Yes, we started doing these mutual events called Sunland, which is a combining of our names. The first year we did them, they were all music themed. It's a quarterly kind of a salon-esque sort of thing, and standing-room only, and it was a great convergence of the Holland audience and our audience. You'd come to these events and there were all sorts of age groups and people in those audiences, and they were just absolutely fantastic, and continue to be. So, over five years these various things have been coming together. We started showing movies in the front yard. We had our first summertime at night with Films on Tap, another great local little entity. Just crazy things.

Barber: What has it meant to you to host David Sedaris, something of that prominence?

Kelly: Oh, well, it surely makes you fluff your feathers up just a little bit. [laughs] Only because we realized that we can handle this. We can handle this. We were very honored. He asked to come to our store.

Barber: He asked? Oh, he knew about it?

Kelly: Yes. So we did that event. We worked with Artown, too. I need to acknowledge that Artown was super supportive of us coming over here and very much always inclusive of us in their communiqués about what's going on, and using our space. They were bringing David Sedaris for the first time to town in conjunction with Nevada Humanities, and they asked us to be a part of that. So we sold books at the Pioneer Center with those two entities, and it was a big event.

That was the event when he showed up the night after on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, with what some people would say was trash-talking Reno and our attire for events. But that being said, he was coming back in the fall—he was on tour the next year, and he asked to come to our shop. He asked to come back to Reno, and that was really an honor. It was great. I think he knew that Reno was a pretty good sport. And he's been back again, by the way. But my goodness, it was all hands on deck there. We think we had nearly three hundred people in the front yard. It was fantastic.

Barber: And you've recently re-landscaped out there. Was that to accommodate more people for outdoor events?

Kelly: It was, very much so. It's such a fantastic yard and opportunity. We'd been having outdoor events, but the way the landscaping worked, it really minimized the use of the space. So we created an outdoor room, very smartly designed by Tom Stille and the River School, and it's all very eco- and water-friendly. We had a lot of nice input from the museum as well on that, and the Nightingale Foundation, for sure. So now we have a front yard that's even more of a yard and outdoor space and room. We showed our first movie last year and it was complete. It was great. We showed *Stand By Me*. It was so fun.

Barber: You had popcorn out there.

Kelly: A popcorn machine, some beer.

Barber: Has the store always sold music?

Kelly: No, it hadn't. That was one of the things that I added on some years back, actually, in the old location. One of my favorite all-time places when the CD store next to us closed was Soundwave CDs on Moana, a fantastic shop, with Tim and his team—Troy, Richard Jackson, just an impressive group of people that knew music, loved music. It was my favorite hangout in Reno, so I used to go there a lot and spend a lot of money. Then Tim decided he couldn't do it any longer, and they closed. I'd always been a fan of music, but as long as they were there, that was where music was for me. When they decided to close up, I thought, "You know, boy, I'd love to do a little bit of music. I'm not sure exactly."

We just started testing the waters a little bit on our own, and then I sought out Troy, who worked there for many years. Troy, by that time, had about twenty years of music experience under his belt. So I said, "Hey, Troy, I'd like to do this. I'd like to expand this. I'd like to work on this. Are you interested?"

He thought about it and said yes, and so we started growing and developing and finding our niche with music. So I would say we've been doing music now for around twelve years.

Barber: Were you always selling albums or has that happened more recently as they've come back into popularity?

Kelly: Yes, it's a more recent thing, for sure, and now album production and sales are outselling CD sales, and that's not just a phenomenon of ours; that's a national phenomenon. The technology and creation of albums now is so much better, so you've got this great analog experience of sound, which some people—and I tend to agree—is a very different sound than digital sound. The way that they can do the pressings and the quality of the vinyl and stuff they're using is even better than before, so you're getting a really good product there. I would say probably in the past three years it's really, really taken off, and so most artists now— not all, but a lot of main artist—are releasing in vinyl *and* digital and, of course, it comes with download as well. But it's by far our biggest growth area.

Barber: It's impressive how much music you can pack into that little room downstairs.

Kelly: I know. [laughs] I know. Troy does a fantastic job. We're very lucky to have him.

Barber: What's his last name?

Kelly: Falk. Troy Falk.

Barber: You've talked about Troy and you've talked about Katie a little bit. You have a number of staff members who've been with Sundance for a long time. Do you want to talk about a few more of them?

Kelly: Yes, I'd love to talk about Stephanie Lauer, who is my manager. We're very lucky to get Stephanie. She came on at the old shop, but she came from Ohio and had worked for many years in the book business out there and is a voracious reader of all kinds of things, but I think she's a mystery junkie. So she brings so much to our fiction shelves and to suspense and to the whole store, really. She's just a lover of books and has a lot of layers and history about what good books are, what authors are doing, and that's an acquired thing. You don't just start that and pick it up in six months to a year. Really, it's like anything; you have to build this level of knowledge and acquisition. She is very good, and we could not do what we do without her. She's taking over a lot of the buying, which is an art, and it's a very fundamental part of our business, too, because it's all about how wisely you spend your money. You don't just hand that over to anybody, that's for sure.

And we have Molly Albert, who is our Girl Friday. She loves to organize, she's very smart, fantastic with kids' books, children's books, music. You know, I could go on about every one of these people, and they bring so many different things, and each of their personalities is so very different. I've got Curtis Vickers, who's a wonderful fiction reader. He works in the publishing arm with me, as Molly does. There's Dan Earl, of course, with everything he's always brought to the business all these years; he was a founding businessperson.

Philip Barry is a used-book junkie. Some years ago he was the owner of Shambhala Books in Berkeley and he has actually been in the book business longer than any of us. If you ever want to know anything about Eastern religions, Western religions, meditation, religious practices, metaphysics, New Age titles, he can tell you all about it. He's a fantastic resource, and the guy is a nonstop book person. When he's not working, he walks. He walks everywhere. He's amazing. On his days off, he walks to all the used book stores in town or he goes to the library sales or he goes to yard sales. He is always looking at books. He's amazing. And some newer people have come on staff. We're bringing some new people on.

Barber: It sounds like you really involve everybody in the whole process of examining the inventory and talking about the books and what to move toward. Does everyone have a little bit of a role in that discussion?

Kelly: Yes, we really try to do that. Some days you do better at it than others, but really this is a labor-of-love business. None of us are making huge loads of money, but we're making a living, and I think that the reason people commit their intelligence and their hearts and their souls here is because of what they find here, what we're doing in the mission of language and ideas and openness. And you have to make it interesting. You have to give them something to anchor to. You have to let them fight the fight with you. So yes, I think it makes for a better place, the more we can do that. It's easier to do that when you have people that are with you a long period of time, so they get the bottom line of the mission, the goals, and the framework you have to work within. But, yes, we're very lucky. I'm very lucky.

Barber: Let's talk a little bit about one of the newer directions you've gone into, which is the publishing world. As if the book world wasn't quite volatile enough, you decided to go into a new business venture, Baobab Press. Let's talk about that a little bit. Can you tell me how that came about?

Kelly: I'm not a very reasonable person, I think is the bottom line. [laughter] You know, I've been a book buyer for the shop for many, many years, and you look at books from Random House to Penguin to MacMillan—across the board—Oxford, Stanford, you name it. You look at books after books after books, and you start thinking after a while, “Oh, I like how this is done. I don't like how this is done, da, da, da, da, da,” on a personal aesthetic level. But then you also start to recognize what's happening on your shelves and what's working on your shelves. Or you take an idea, something kind of cool, like, for example, bridges, and see how somebody can take the idea of a bridge or bridge building, even the engineering of the bridge, and distill it into a very interesting text, design it on a certain kind of paper with certain kinds of color plates or black and whites or schematics, and then see how it's bound. And you start realizing that it is really magic when that is done really well, and you can take something like bridges—well, there a lot of people who might listen to this and think bridges are totally cool—but think of a dry topic that's done really well, and then you see it happen on your shelf. You see that somebody came in and they got lit up because you had a book on a bridge. And there's something really incredible about that.

So this had been spinning around in my head and my heart for a while, and then I had a conversation with a dear friend of mine and writer, Guy Clifton. To be honest with you, it's been a while now, so I'm not exactly sure if it was the chicken or the egg that came first here, but Guy Clifton and Jack Bacon and myself thought we would publish Guy's next book. Jack had been doing some publishing, and I'd known Jack over the years. So we decided we would do this together. We would publish a book called *Dempsey in Nevada*, a book Guy had written about Jack Dempsey, who actually lived on California Street down that way in the mansion to the west.

So in the process of doing this book with Jack and Guy, I had so much fun. There was a huge learning curve, and I didn't know what I was doing, but we did it anyway. Jack knew more what he was doing. Guy's a lovely person to work with, and it was very fun, from what Guy had written to the photographs that were being included, to the kind of paper we were going to use, to the way the thing was designed interiorly, to the color of the end papers. To this day I'm so proud of that back cover, because I picked the image for the back cover. I thought it was so perfect.

I thought, “Wow, this is really fun.” So it's being able to participate in the creative side of these books that we've been selling all these years. That started it. Then I knew, “I think I want to do this some more.” So, interestingly, word got out a little bit that I was doing this. Philip Earl was up at Nevada Historical Society for many years—he and Jean, for something like thirty-plus years as their children were growing, would do these little family weekends and they would drive to these various aspen groves in the Sierra Nevadas and take canvas and wax crayons, and they would do rubbings of the Basque carvings in the trees. She came by the shop one day and wanted to tell us about these, and she had some pictures. Stephanie was with me that day at the shop, and I looked at the pictures, and they were these little dark pictures that you really couldn't see, and she said, “Well, I have like 130 of them.”

And I thought, “Well, let's go look at them. What the heck? This is kind of cool.” So we went over to her house, and her house was littered, *littered* with these canvasses of rubbings of these Basque carvings, and it was fantastic. In their living room, quite a few of them they had stretched and framed, and in their guest room, the guest bed was just piles of these canvasses.



So she wanted to do a book. She wanted to know if we would want to do a book, and so I think that was the third book we were going to do, called *Basque Aspen Art of the Sierra Nevadas*. We went in and we photographed them all, and then we started working on layout, and we wanted to create an art book. It's bilingual.

And at the same time, we were very, very fortunate to have Brian Crane, the cartoonist, interested in us, and we did his fifth book.

Barber: He's a local.

Kelly: He's a local cartoonist. He is syndicated in over nine hundred papers worldwide. We've subsequently done two other books for him.

Barber: That's *Pickles*.

Kelly: The *Pickles* strip, right. So far, we've done a book of poetry, William Wilborn, and we've done a Bernie Schopen piece of fiction, and last year we published four books: a local cookbook, two children's books, and another *Pickles* book. And we've got stuff in the hopper, so to speak, for the next few years, actually.

Barber: It's quite an eclectic group of types of books. Is there some mission that pulled it together? At the heart, what are you interested in publishing?

Kelly: Well, when we started publishing, I was asked that question a lot: "What are you publishing? What's your core? What's your mission?" Our first answer was, "Well, we're just looking for stuff we're interested in," and I don't think we could have answered it any other way. But as we've been doing this, it takes a long time to start finding your edges, trying to define the house and figuring out what you can do, how many you can do a year. We are a traditional publishing house, so it's our resources, our funds that acquire and contract and design and develop. We're very fortunate that we have national distribution as well as local. So it takes a while to figure out what you can and can't do, in amidst running and operating a bookstore.

But it seems to me what's happening is that our press is enormously informed by our awareness of what works in an independent bookstore, and what works in an independent bookstore is that you have all these different kinds of books in all these different categories. I think a healthy store is fully aware that you have some categories that, in business terms, turn more than others. You sell more books out of them. You'll sell more copies of one book or by volume. And those sales are so important because they help you also maintain inventory that you may sell only one or two of, but it's important that you represented that one or two because that's what gives depth and breadth. That's what makes your space interesting and shoppable, and you see that that's how this economic model works. If you only carry bestsellers, you may as well be a supermarket shop, and if you carried only super small specialty presses or only literary fiction or only poetry, that probably would not work in this town, and it doesn't really work in many towns, even bigger towns.

It's just a tough business. Whether it's the current time or a hundred years ago, it's always been a challenging thing, so you really need a diverse shelf. The way we've been looking at the press is, is if we produce books that we know are what I call the "meat-and-potato" books— books that you know are in

need—there's a demand for them on a trade level. Everybody needs a board book, especially if it has cute little animals of Nevada and it's bilingual. Everybody needs that book. It didn't exist. We didn't have one. We got this great designer that did this book. It's really beautifully designed, it's very smart, it's very proud, and makes Nevada proud, and so that's a book that will sell and have long-term sales to it.

I only want to do those sorts of books that “add to.” I don't want to junk stuff out. We want to put stuff out there that is needed, is necessary, adds something, and from that then we build a little bit of funding. We've got an imprint that we're developing that's called Red Ochre Books. What Red Ochre does is look for emerging artists, emerging authors, fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry. That's how we make that work, and we've got a couple of authors that are going to show up in that imprint.

When you look at publishing houses, usually they have a couple directions that they go, unless you have the great fortune of being Knopf. [laughs] But Knopf didn't happen overnight, by the way. We're talking, what, 100-plus years. And when I think about this, and I'm thinking about it a lot lately, I think that's how that's been coming together, and it makes sense. It makes business sense.

Barber: How did you decide on these names, Baobab and Red Ochre?

Kelly: Well, Baobab Press is twofold. One is that it's my mother's initials. B. A. B. are my mother's initials. And the other part is that in one of my favorite books, *The Little Prince*, as you remember, the little prince is on his planet and he has to tend to these Baobab trees that keep popping up all around his planet, and if he doesn't keep up with them, they will take over his planet. So he has to keep pulling and culling, right? Well, that's books. If you're not careful, they take over your world, and so here I am, it's taking over my world. So it's just a very personal sort of thing, how I came to that name, and we started publishing under it, so I guess it's going to stay.

The Red Ochre imprint was because I was trying to think of what reflects the beginning of something, starting out. And the early, early writing, early drawings and stuff were out of red ochre, so that's where Red Ochre comes from.

Barber: Now, those ventures, that publishing venture is all based in this room where we are now?

Kelly: On the third floor.

Barber: Can you describe where we are? This is a pretty fascinating space.

Kelly: So this is the third floor, which obviously when the home was originally built, was an attic and was unfinished. It has a light well almost smack dab in the center of it. This is our office. It's a doughnut-shaped office, and we have three desks up here. It's full of books and supplies and galleys and reference books and scraps of paper with very important things that now I don't remember what I'm supposed to do with. [laughs]

Barber: And a really high ceiling.

Kelly: Yes, it's a very high ceiling. It's got track lighting all around it. Everything in here has obviously been built out over the years through the subsequent ownerships of the building. When I walked up here the first time that I saw the building, I swear to you I thought, “Oh, my goodness, this is the coolest room

on the planet, and I cannot believe I could possibly have the business here.” I mean, I’m telling you it’s like getting the coolest tree fort you ever dreamt of. [laughs]

Barber: Are there any strange quirks about being in a 1906 house?

Kelly: Are you asking about ghosts?

Barber: No, actually. [laughs]

Kelly: Oh, okay, good.

Barber: I was thinking more along the lines of architecture, but you could talk about anything. [laughs]

Kelly: Well, probably the strangest quirk is the fact that the floor up here all slopes down into the light well, and so the building started to sink in the center. Sometime, I believe in the seventies, they had to reinforce down in the basement. So if you go down in the basement, there are some I-beams that they put in there to help shore up the structure of the building because of the light well and then the staircase. The second-floor landing is a landing, and it’s open floor space. Up here on the third floor, everything slopes down, not terribly, but if you had a marble on the floor, it would run down to the center. It’s an old building. The floors creak. The windows are very drafty and leaky. In the summertime it gets super hot up here, and in the wintertime it gets super cold up here.

Barber: Part of the charm.

Kelly: Part of the charm. I wouldn’t trade it. It’s an old building. There are some people that think there are permanent residents in this building. It gives them pleasure to think that. That’s good.

Barber: You come across that with any historic house, people who have their stories. They want to know about it. And the building is just a very striking presence on this intersection. You were talking about how people would come in just to look at it. There are a number of these large houses—some call them mansions—along this stretch of California, but they’re not all public, or you can’t go in them.

I just have one last question for you, and this is a broad question. You could answer it any way you want. I’m just curious—

Kelly: Are you going to ask me if you’re a tree, what kind of tree would you be?

Barber: No. No, because we know that one, already, right? [laughter] I guess what I’d love for you to talk about, if you want, is just what would you say books have brought into your life?

Kelly: Wow. Probably the most articulate answer I can give you right now is that it’s brought me community. I think on the personal level, the abstract personal level, I’m not sure I could be particularly articulate about it, but I think most importantly it has brought me family. It has brought me a family of very close people that I work with. It has brought me a family of other businesspeople, a family of customers that have come for years—some that I know well, some that I don’t know, but they know well.

It's given me a place in this world that I believe in. Books have given me a vehicle to, I hope, *add to*—add to, not take from. I hope I've taken advantage of that. They have given me the opportunity, hopefully, to give to, give out, create, and when I'm no longer doing this, I know that hopefully I've left something good. I think that's what books have done for me.

Barber: Well, I want to thank you so much for speaking with me, and thank you for everything you've done for this community and all the people who love this place and love you.

Kelly: Well, you're welcome. It's an honor, and I'm rather abashed that you asked me to do this, but it's an honor. There are a lot of people who have done and continue to do and will always do great things, so thank you for including me in that.

Barber: You're very welcome.

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## RENEE LAUDERBACK AND DUKE MORIN

Owner, Mountain Music Parlor and owner, Morin Construction, 735 S. Center St.



735 South Center Street, home to two generations of family businesses. Photo by Alicia Barber.

*Renee Lauderback and her father, Duke Morin, have both operated businesses in the historic Martha Wingfield House at 735 S. Center Street. Duke was first, using the house as offices for his contracting solar heating, and roofing companies. Later, Renee opened her own company, General Gutter, here, and in 2014 began to convert the entire house into the Mountain Music Parlor.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm in Reno, Nevada, with Renée Lauderback, the owner of Mountain Music Parlor at 735 South Center Street, and her father, Duke Morin, who previously had his own business at this location, to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

So, Ms. Lauderback and Mr. Morin, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Morin: Yes.

Lauderback: Yes.

Barber: Thank you so much. I'm going to start with you, Mr. Morin. How long has your family been in this area?

Morin: How long have we been here, you say?

Barber: Yes. How far back has your family lived in this area?

Morin: In 1965 I moved my family here. Renée, of course, was my youngest daughter. I have another daughter named Lisa; she's still here in town. My brother was a policeman here in Reno. He's retired. He passed away last week—actually, two weeks ago—and he has five sons. So we were quite impregnated here to some degree.

Barber: When you came here, were all your children born?

Morin: Yes, in 1965, Renée was four years old, I believe, and Lisa was about five years old. They're eleven months apart.

Barber: So why did you decide to move here to Reno, of all places?

Morin: It's a quick story. We had a terrible storm in Connecticut and the siding was coming off the house, water running into the basement putting the furnace out, my car was under about three to four feet of icy snow. And I called my brother out here from Connecticut. He was here in Sparks, and I asked him what the weather was like. He said, "We have ten feet of snow."

I said, "Oh, god, that's too much. I was thinking of coming out there."

He said, "Well, there's nothing on the ground. It's in the mountains."

I said, "I'll be right out." Within a month or so, we were on our way out here, 1965.

Barber: So did you already have a business operation back east?

Morin: Yes. I had a small store with my brother prior to him coming out here. We sold building material. I had a construction company there. I was also in construction in the military for a good many years. I was operations officer for a battalion. Just as a little anecdote, I built my mother's house when I was seventeen years old, a two-story house which is still standing. It's a beautiful home back in Connecticut. First house I built.

Barber: How did you gain the skills to do that?

Morin: Well, I was taking drafting and I was learning how to design homes. So with designing homes and making money, I was probably one of the first kids that could pay for his own car when I was in high school.

Barber: So taking drafting for that age, what was available? What kind of school was available to take classes like that?

Morin: I went to trade school. Trade school's, I think, a better education than any high school could possibly be. You come out of there after six thousand hours of educating in a particular division, such as my brother, who was a machinist and I was a draftsman. You come out of there, you can go to work anywhere.

Barber: So how did that go, then, establishing yourself anew here in a new city in a new state?

Morin: In Reno here, you're saying?

Barber: Yes.

Morin: Well, I came out and my brother had the contacts and he helped me get my license. Licenses take several months, and mine was given to me. In less than probably sixty days I had a general contractor's license in Reno. I developed my company here on Center Street, and had approximately between thirty and forty people at a time working here. We had general contracting, we had a solar heating company, and a roofing company all at one time.

Barber: And this wasn't your first location, was it, for your offices?

Morin: No, my first location was on Taylor Street. I owned two buildings over there. When I built the Maytan Music Center, which is right next door, Mr. Maytan thought it would be a good idea if I accepted his old building, this old house, as part payment, which I agreed to. This old house was the original Maytan Music.

Barber: This is interesting. So the sequence would have been that Maytan Music Center was in this house we're in now.

Morin: Correct.

Barber: They wanted more space, I guess.

Morin: That's correct. I built Steve Maytan his new 30,000 square-foot building next door, and I took this old house over. A little later I can give you some history I know of Mr. Wingfield, who was related to one of the earlier residents prior to Maytan Music. A cinder block building was added onto the house by Mr. Maytan, Steve Maytan, in 1956. He put this big addition on the back, and I made it a lot longer. So we have quite a good building here, quite a few square feet. My daughter now operates it.

Barber: What was appealing to you about relocating to Center Street? Did it seem like a good location for business?

Morin: Excellent location. There were lumberyards all around. Traffic was heavy, still is. It's just a good street to work from. It just felt right.

Barber: Did you start modifying the building right away? It had been a music center for decades, really, hadn't it?

Morin: Yes, from probably the forties or somewhere in that time. I'm not sure when Steve was here with his family running it. But like I say, they were here prior to '56, and I've been here as a contractor until about four years ago. So it's got a long history.

Barber: Before we get into what happened in this house and you operating out of it, I'm curious when you were building the new Maytan building for them, did they know exactly what they had in mind? Did you work with an architect?

Morin: I did the design on the building and did all the engineering on it, and I only had to call in one other engineer to design some of the heavy structural beams. Otherwise, I built it from our own plans we developed here. And my company did the same thing around Lake Tahoe. We built buildings up there, a couple of million-dollar buildings, and I drew the plans for them.

Barber: Did you work primarily on commercial buildings or did you do residences?

Morin: Oh, no, no, no, anything. We actually did all of Allstate's work, all the repair work and fire work, without an adjuster in some cases, because we were trusted by Menlo Park. We worked directly for Allstate offices and with adjusters, of course, and we did all their work for over twelve years—almost all of it.

Barber: In just the region here or even beyond?

Morin: Well, we had a little deal. They had a fellow in Minden that worked from Washoe Lake over, and I took Washoe Lake this way. So we worked all over here, all over the state.

Barber: So you started just with yourself, and then it sounds like you ended up with a really large operation.

Morin: Oh, yes.

Barber: How did that growth happen, and in what kind of stages?

Morin: Well, it's by doing good work and keeping contacts. I had adjusters that wouldn't give work to anyone except me, from Hartford Insurance, a lot of independent insurance companies. We had an awful



lot of work. We could work seven days a week. Never advertised more than five dollars since I've been in business.

Barber: That's extraordinary.

Morin: And business cards, that's all.

Barber: What was the name of your company?

Morin: W.F. Morin Construction Company.

Barber: Let's start talking about moving here. It had been a music store. How did you set things up for your offices and for your business? It's an old house. It's a very old house.

Morin: Well, I just scrapped out the building. Steve took everything he wanted, of course. What he didn't want, and I couldn't use, we just gave it away or scrapped it. I had to build all the drafting room, the engineering department. I got a partner and gave him an office, and we designed the rear of the building to suit aluminum work, presses and so forth, and moved the equipment in and just operated out of the back.

Barber: So there was actual manufacturing happening in there.

Morin: Oh, yes, we manufactured some aluminum work and so forth.

Barber: And then was there some kind of a loading area in the back of the house?

Morin: It's still there, yes. We have a large room. I keep my old cars back there now. [laughter]

Barber: But the downstairs is still set up like a house, and did that work for you to have these separate rooms on the ground floor?

Morin: Well, we had to add another restroom for the employees. The building was conducive to what I wanted to do. We had a large construction area room and manufacturing and so forth, and storage of materials. It was suitable, just fine.

Barber: We're sitting in what was the kitchen, I think, originally right now. Where did you have your actual office in this?

Morin: Where my daughter has her little music store right now, right behind you.

Barber: So it's kind of a sitting-room area in the very front.

Morin: In that room Mr. Maytan kept his stock and so forth, violin strings and small items. He sold out of that room. Then in the back, the large room that I took over for manufacturing and running my

company, Iris Maytan had a sheet music department there. Then downstairs in the basement they repaired tubas and horns of all kinds. It was a really busy little place, and they had teachers in almost every square inch that was available here, upstairs and downstairs. Music teachers were teaching all instruments here—guitar and piano and vocal. It was just a noisy place.

Barber: Did you end up using the basement, also?

Morin: We used it for storage, that's all.

Barber: And what about the upstairs rooms?

Morin: My daughter uses that now for her business.

Barber: When you had your business here—

Morin: I rented out the upstairs, of course, to musicians.

Barber: To musicians?

Morin: Different musicians, yes. Different groups came here. I had people here for maybe twenty-five years.

Barber: Just for rehearsal space?

Morin: Just for renting the space, not much rehearsal.

Barber: What did they do in those rooms then?

Morin: Well, some had different types of instruments, mostly stringed instruments, portable piano-type stuff, harpsichords and so forth, and they would go out and play in the clubs and just store their stuff upstairs and talk and have a place to hang around, I guess. They didn't bring any people in to teach or anything, no, just for their own use.

Barber: So it maintained that connection to music throughout the years.

Morin: Yes, yes, that's what it was and still is.

Barber: Had you ever been in here when it was Maytan Music? Did you know the Maytans, or did you ever come in here when it was in operation as a music school?

Morin: Well, only when I was building the building next door. Prior to that, I was on Taylor Street, had two buildings on Taylor and Wells, two buildings over there, and had a construction company there, and I just moved directly into this area from Wells and Taylor. And what was here was here. And remodeling,

we put in new furnaces and everything. I put in two new furnaces and new roof. We had a major fire here, cost about \$66,000 to repair, when one of our employees was up there with a torch and started a fire.

Barber: Oh, no.

Morin: Yes, it put us out of business for a while.

Barber: About when was that?

Morin: Approximately ten years ago, maybe twelve years ago.

Barber: Now, Center Street still has primarily houses in this area, although some of them have businesses in them. Was it primarily residential in the seventies when you first moved in?

Morin: It was primarily residential. What I've seen here is the growth has been tremendous. From Virginia Street up, Center being a one-way street, they have now put in a concrete road out there, which tells you that it's important to the city. It's not going to wear out very quickly. And the RTC is on it. They put in a large area for loading and unloading close to Virginia Street at the beginning of Center Street, and from there on, up to here, the water company has redeveloped. They built the apartments down there. There are new restaurants.

The Maytan building has been completely remodeled. They put over a million dollars into remodeling that, much more than that, I'm sure. It's a beautiful building, which is now available for lease. We've developed here. Next door to the north has developed from a first-class picture type of building where they sold pictures by artists and so forth, and there have been three or four businesses there and two or three restaurants. Across the street has been developed. Up the street toward town has been developed. Old buildings have been taken down. This entire street here has developed beautifully in the last fifteen, twenty years. It's all business now.

Barber: And it's becoming very valuable.

Morin: Very valuable, yes. All property here has increased in value.

Barber: You were saying there's a house across the street. You referred to it as the Cunningham House. Is that especially old?

Morin: Yes. I purchased that house and used it for storage, and then re-sold it back to the man I purchased it from, which was quite nice. He was an attorney, a friend of mine, Fred Nelson. He died from a very minor situation. Dear friend, very dear friend. That building has been remodeled more recently by the gentleman who owns the barbershop right next door to it. I say it's across the street, but he's next door there. His wife remodeled the building. I think she passed away. It's vacant now, for sale. There's another building that has been improved. Just about everything on this street, when you drive through here, has been improved.

Barber: Did you purchase other properties besides that one you were talking about?

Morin: I had just these two. I turned down other properties. I had too much to worry about. I had houses all over the city, so I was okay.

Barber: You said that there were so many people who were working with you. How many people would work in the office on a regular basis?

Morin: At one time when I had a solar heating company, Solar Gold, I had a line of telephone sales girls. We had ten women that worked every day until nine o'clock at night, and there was a supervisor over the women. They were soliciting leads for the solar system that we installed. And we had an office staff there consisting of salesmen, administrative people, and installers and purchasers, and they ran it for me completely, 100 percent. I didn't hardly go in there except just to say hello once in a while. Then when the government took away the rebates, we closed it.

Now, I haven't told you, but there's another space that's attached to this building which we own. Did you see that one yet?

Barber: Well, on the south side of the building?

Morin: Yes. In there is a renter with an art boutique. She owned a store downtown on First Street named Be Abundant, and she's in there now and she's doing real well. But we had a tenant in there for twenty-five years prior to her.

Barber: And who was that?

Morin: It was the Sierra Cabinet Company.

Barber: Oh. They still exist, right, the same company?

Morin: Well, he moved to Colorado. His wife is a computer expert, and she got a good job in Colorado, so of course he had to trail behind her and closed the business. As a matter of fact, he left over \$100,000 worth of cabinets intact in the building and actually wanted to give them to me, but I let him sell them. The man next door in the new buildings over on Center Street right behind us on the other side of the alley, he purchased them, all the cabinets and so forth. So I remodeled it, and we have a new tenant in there.

Barber: So you built that addition?

Morin: No, Steve Maytan built that in 1956 or prior, including the extension to the back.

Barber: So you didn't actually, yourself, have to do any additions to the house.

Morin: No, I just remodeled everything, re-sheetrocked it, put in new ceilings, metal ceilings, new floor, everything.

Barber: And it still retains a lot of this very early twentieth-century charm.

Morin: Yes. You could see by the cabinetry there how we kept this. That was his sales area primarily.

Barber: There are a lot of built-ins.

Morin: Yes. The fireplace they didn't use yet. He had it covered with metal, and it wasn't of any use because we had new furnaces in here, which we still have now.

Barber: I'd love for you to tell me a little bit about what you know and interactions that you've had with the Wingfields. We've learned that Mrs. Martha Wingfield owned the house early on. She was the mother of George Wingfield. And you had some interactions with a Wingfield.

Morin: Well, I don't know any of those people you're speaking about. Mr. Maytan probably did. But I was in the office one evening, it was probably 1980, somewhere in that neighborhood, and somebody came through the front door. He knocked and then came in when I said, "Who's there?" because I actually wasn't open for business at the time.

And this tall, thin gentleman came in and said, "Hello."

I said, "Hello."

He said, "Do you mind if I look around?"

I said, "No, I don't mind."

He said, "My name is George." I didn't know what his last name was at the time. I think I somehow found out during our conversation while he was here that his last name was Wingfield. So in the front room is a fireplace that I had redesigned from what was originally there. He said, "My grandmother used to sit," his grandmother, now, "used to sit in the rocking chair." And I had a rocking chair there, by the way, right at the window. He was looking at it, and he said, "She used to sit in that corner right there and knit. When I came in the door, I was about maybe six years old, and I was sitting, waiting for her until she was done with what she was doing. Then she got up and walked into the kitchen, and then from the kitchen walked into a room"—which was not a bathroom but it is a bathroom now—"where she stored things."

He said, "From a little old lady as small as she was, she'd reach up and take this heavy box down and put it on the floor, open it up, and take out an ax, more like a hatchet. Then she'd take me by the hand and go out the back door," because there was no addition there then, go out the back door, "and she would grab a chicken. She had chickens back there. Then she would chop the chicken's head off and pull the feathers out, then go in the house and forget that I was there and leave me outside." He said, "I would sit there at the door and bang on the door, but she couldn't hear, probably couldn't hear at all. And I would bang on the door and ring the bell and bang on the door and ring the bell and cry. I used to cry because my grandmother wouldn't let me in the house."

I said, "You rang the doorbell?" Because I had something in mind when he said that.

"Yes, I rang the doorbell."

I said, "Just a minute, George. Just stay in the kitchen for a second." So I went back in my office and I dug through my desk and I walked out. I said, "Is this the doorbell?"

He looked at it, and he said, "My god, that's the doorbell." It was an ornate piece with an ivory white button in the middle. He said, "That's the doorbell I used to ring when I was about six years old,"

and he started to cry. It's going to break me up. The man was crying. He really moved me. And he excused himself and left, almost in tears. So that was George Wingfield.

Barber: And you had saved that doorbell.

Morin: I gave it to him. I saved it for a reason, I guess.

Barber: That's extraordinary.

Morin: That doorbell must have been saved from probably close to ninety years by Steve Maytan and then me. It went right back to George.

Barber: Well, I'm going to look into that and try to find out more about him and see if we can find a picture and show you.

Morin: What else can I tell you?

Barber: Was that the only interaction you had with anyone who said they had some connection to the house?

Morin: That's it. That's it, except that I think the spirit of that lady is still in this home.

Barber: You do? Do you want to talk about that at all?

Morin: Do you want me to tell you about the pinging?

Barber: I would.

Morin: Well, first, there was the time when the people next door met me one morning at probably eight o'clock when I came in to start the business. The man and lady next door came running over and they said, "You can't believe what happened last night." And they explained that at about two-thirty in the morning there was some screaming coming from the upstairs room. The window faced their building that they were leasing. They said there was a woman's voice screaming for quite some time, and it upset them so much they didn't go back to bed, but they waited for me to tell me about it.

And I've had a couple of experiences since then in this building which are hard to explain, but I'll try. I'll explain just one of them. I was working on my drafting table, designing eighteen units I was going to build over on Neil Road. I had property waiting and paid for, but I had to get the building design completed. It was quite late at night, and I heard this pinging sound. It was going "ping, ping, ping." And I looked around. I couldn't understand what it was. I got up and looked in the bathroom to see if something was dripping. There was nothing in the bathroom—I wouldn't call it a bathroom. It was a restroom because there was no tub in there. But, anyhow, it was the restroom.

I found nothing in there, so as I came back out of the door, I was standing right next to a picture that was hanging on a wall, which was actually at my back when I was sitting at my drafting table. And the pinging was coming from the picture. I got real close to it and put my hand on the picture, and the

pinging stopped. I took my hand off the picture, and the pinging started again. It was “ping, ping, ping.” And I realized that it was one of the wires. There were two wires, sort of a V-shape when you hang a picture. One of the wires was pinging. So I said at that time, “I know you’re here.” I felt that somebody was actually pinging on a wire. So then the other wire started pinging in a different volume or—

Lauderback: Tone.

Morin: Tone. That’s the word I’m looking for, tone. So it’s going “ping, pong, ping, pong, ping, pong.” So I put my hand back on the picture and I said, “You can stop now. I know you’re here.” And it stopped. I think she’s still here. That’s just one of the stories. The other one, I don’t think I’ll tell you right now.

Barber: Was there anything special about the picture itself?

Morin: I can’t remember what the picture was right now. I didn’t connect at all. Just that there were two wires, one wire bent in a V-shape, holding it up on two screws, and they were actually pinging and I could hear it from ten feet away.

Barber: Now, when you decided to retire, did you close the business or what happened?

Morin: Well, my daughter was running her business out of here. She had her own company at the time, and she still has, it’s called General Gutter, and that’s Renée. Her name is Renée. Basically she made an agreement with me, she’d take part of the building. But, of course, being a lady, she ended up with the whole thing. She’s done an extensive amount of remodeling here.

Lauderback: But as far as your retirement?

Morin: I retired at that time, and that was about four years ago. I’ve had customers call me long after I retired, because they still had my number, and thought I was in business, but I had to just turn them down. We had a good business going here. We could work every day forever without stopping, with no advertisement whatsoever except the business card. We did well. I’m now retired and working harder than I ever did before.

Barber: What are you spending your time working on?

Morin: Well, I got a new boss now; my wife. [laughter]

Lauderback: Honey-do list is huge.

Morin: I got a Honey-do bucket bigger than this room.

Barber: We’ll allow you to keep chiming in because you’re both sitting here, which is wonderful, but I wanted to ask Renée a little bit.

Morin: Go ahead.

Barber: This is now the home of Mountain Music Parlor. You had another business here before. Do you want to tell me about your evolution of getting into the professional work that you did and go back as far as you want to explain what led you to the businesses that you were running in this house?

Lauderback: Okay. Well, very simply, my parents were those kind of wonderful parents that when a kid gets an inkling, “Oh, I want to try this,” or, “I want to try that” they’d say, “Okay, let’s do it.” Two ways my life was influenced: both parents were musicians, singers in the local chorale, and my mother played the organ, the double-row key organ. She still has that thing. She doesn’t play it, thank God, but she still plays the piano. She started my sister and I off on the organ, and I couldn’t stand it. What was I, five, six, when I started the organ?

And my mother said that I was sitting on the floor watching an orchestra play, as a little girl, six or seven, and she said I pointed to the TV and said, “I want to play that.” And it was a violin. I had no clue. Next thing you know, there’s a violin surgically attached to my neck, right?

Off I went and played the violin for many, many years. It just clicked with me, came naturally. Ended up first chair in many orchestras, didn’t have much of a life, no after-school football games, nothing. Just orchestra rehearsals one after the other. Playing that violin was my life. Luckily, boys and making money interrupted all that and I laid the violin aside for many years.

In between the violining, though, in my younger years, my father was a huge influence on me. He worked hard at construction and I saw that. Often, he’d take me out on some of his job sites where I begged him to let me have the hammer. I really wanted to help bang in the nails. I was drawn to the hands-on work. Little did I know his construction work would inspire me down the road.

Years later, in my thirties, I ended up working as an education director for a non-union construction apprenticeship program. There it was! It was during that period, a big turning point actually, when my father suggested I start my own business. I was sitting here in his office, here in this beautiful house, where I hung out with him quite often. He’d be here at his drawing board. “Hi, Dad. What’s going on, Dad?” My young son was here a lot, too, drawing with his Pappa. It was a regular thing. This house has been a big part of our lives.

So here at this particular point in my life, he said, “Start your own business.”

And I said, “Okay, like what?”

He said, “Rain gutter cleaning.”

I said, “Okay, what’s a rain gutter?”

He says, “That thing that carries the water off the roof.”

I said, “Okay, yeah, those.”

It took me only three minutes to realize my dad had a great idea, and I said, “Okay, I can do that.” For some reason, I wasn’t afraid to go for it. Even though I was a single mother, fear of failure never entered my mind.

Dad explained the why and how of business, and I immediately went over to his drawing board and sketched out my first logo. It was a cartoony-looking sketch of a General, saluting, standing on a box. I named my business General Gutter, made a flyer, and got them printed up at Kinkos on yellow paper. The next day I went around town and put them up at the grocery stores. Got my first call within a week!



I borrowed my dad's employee, borrowed my dad's ladder and strapped it to the roof of my Jeep Cherokee. I taped a toilet brush to a broom stick. Dad gave me one small tool to start me off, which was a crimper, and I still have it to this day.

I'll never forget what he told me: "Just go up there, scoop the stuff out, put it in the bucket, get it off the roof, and rinse the gutters out." That was pretty much it. It's been twenty years now. General Gutter has been extremely successful and, of course, my office has been here in my dad's building. I'm doing work for all of the large property management companies, and have good, loyal customers—doctors, lawyers, everyone.

In the house here, General Gutter had an area in the back shop that Dad cleared out for me to use. I filled that space with more gutter parts, supplies, and more stuff than it could hold. General Gutter was successful. We were doing a good job, and Dad was proud of me. It was nice sharing the house and space with my dad. My desk was in an upstairs room, but I usually hung out with Dad in his office. It's really been very special and fun around here. I was able to raise my son as a single mom because of my father's idea, and I am so grateful.

Meanwhile, with my son all grown up and gone, I picked up my violin again to fill the hole. I had no idea where it would lead me. I warned my husband that I jump in with both feet, and he said, "Do it," so I did.

At the time I started playing again, Dad was slowly starting to retire, and I was getting tired of being in the gutter cleaning business. Even though I love being outside working, and it's kept me youthful, a few wrinkles here and there, I knew something else was calling me. So I decided I'm going to phase out my gutter business, and asked Dad if I could do something else with the building. It took some time to convince him and my husband that this crazy idea would work.

One day at Maytan's, a brochure on the counter caught my eye, and it was about playing bluegrass music. I was a classical violinist my whole life, but something about this brochure just put me on fire! I thought, "I love this. I'm going for it." I called the phone number, and met Cindy, the lady in charge of running the bluegrass scene around here. I jumped in with both feet and started fiddling. It's been five years now, and Cindy and I have opened up Mountain Music Parlor here in this house. We're spreading and nurturing the beautiful grassroots music of America. I'm also playing in a couple of bluegrass bands and having a blast. So that's what it's all about.

I'm still doing my rain gutter business, because it's so well established that no one will let me quit. I have so many jobs lined up right now, I can't even tell you. We just finished a twenty-five-building complex yesterday.

Morin: She's got a lot of customers.

Lauderback: I have a lot of customers, so it's well established. It's crazy. So I can't quit. [laughs]

Morin: I'm trying to help her get a manager to run it so she can get out of it and stay here.

Lauderback: It would be nice.

Morin: It'll work out. I'll work it out with her.

Barber: And it's not just the cleaning the gutters, it's construction of them as well?

Morin: No.

Lauderback: No, I'm not doing the installation. That's a whole 'nother animal.

Morin: She used to.

Lauderback: I do a lot of repairs, everything from regular modern rain gutters that you see on houses to historical restorations, drawing it all out and getting them all custom-made. It's been very interesting to work on some of the older historic homes around Reno. I do a lot of work for doctors, lawyers, churches, commercial property, everything.

Morin: Gas stations.

Lauderback: Gas station stuff, too. That's some of the worst work, dealing with pigeons galore up there.

Morin: She forgot to tell you one thing. I don't think you've mentioned the fact that when I first told her she's got to get in the gutter business, she was just, "What are you talking about?" Remember?

Lauderback: Yes.

Morin: I think she thought I was talking about the gutters along a road. And I cleared up that I meant cleaning roofline gutters, because I had done a few gutter jobs myself prior to her knowledge of it. She might not remember this, and she might fight me, but I showed her a job that I was going to do at Idlewild—Riverfront Condos. We did the job and I gave her the check to show her how much money you can make.

Lauderback: Oh, I don't remember that. Oops. [laughs]

Morin: See? See? I bet I could dig that check up, because I've still got records.

Barber: Do you think that was pretty influential in your decision?

Morin: How easy it was to work in that particular business at that particular time. It's difficult now. There's competition now. But it was easy to work here.

Lauderback: But there was nobody doing rain gutter cleaning and repair as a single business.

Morin: Nobody wanted to do it. I developed the business, taught her.

Lauderback: Yes, he developed it, I ran with it, and we created that business in this town.

Barber: Does that still operate out of this building then, too?

Morin: Yes.

Barber: That business?

Lauderback: Yes, pretty much.

Morin: Yes, she has so much material and supplies, she's had to relocate some to a storage unit.

Lauderback: To open up the Music Parlor—we needed the space.

Morin: She had so much stuff. It was just too much stuff, too much to work it out of the building. She had to move it to storage.

Lauderback: Yes, for me to build out the recital hall. I had to move the gutter business out of here. We don't need a lot of stuff here anymore. We're just concentrating on the gutter cleaning aspect and light maintenance nowadays.

Barber: Now, one thing Renée mentioned that you hadn't, because it didn't come up, was that you are a singer, that you've always loved music, too. Was that always a part of your life with you and your wife?



Inside the recital hall, Mountain Music Parlor. Photo courtesy of Mountain Music Parlor.

Morin: Well, I don't really know, because I can't read a note, but I could listen to the soprano, the tenor, the bass, the alto part, and I could remember their parts without music. I did everything through memory. Now, Renée can read music. I don't know what a "Do," as in "Do-Re-Mi," looks like on a piece of paper. I really don't know.

Lauderback: They both sang for the Sierra Nevada Chorale, and they sang beautiful solos at church, beautiful.

Morin: Yes, I sang solo at almost every church in the city on Sunday mornings. The Chorale did seven concerts in Hawaii. We sang for Reagan, we sang at the Grand Ole Opry, and my wife was involved in some of that as well. I sang first tenor for a good many years for Joe Battaglia and now Richard Lee. And before Mr. Battaglia, I think a gentleman named Mr. Young, I think was his name—I'm not quite sure what his name was—he started this Civic Chorus here in town maybe about thirty-some years ago, whatever it was. But I just stopped. I just stopped.

Barber: There was a real legacy of music here. So tell me, Renée, what are the different activities that Mountain Music Parlor does? Can you tell me what it's comprised of? What are all the different things that you do here related to that?

Lauderback: Okay. What we're doing now is trying to nurture the music community, and it seems to be working because there are people that are coming up to this door into this place and they're like, "Oh, my goodness. I've been playing the guitar all by myself, and I've always wanted to play with people, and I didn't know where to go." So we're pulling people out of their little holes. We're nurturing the music in them and establishing the community here with the grassroots music.

Barber: Through performances?

Lauderback: Well, yes, and we have music classes. We also host monthly jams. That's where people all get together, bring whatever instrument they're playing. Usually not horns. We're grassroots. Acoustic—

Morin: Strings.

Lauderback: —stringed fretted instruments, right. We do have some people that come and play the spoons and harmonica, which are awesome. We have an occasional accordion that shows up, but it's mostly banjos, both styles, which is the Earl Scruggs style, and then the claw hammer style, which is getting *really* popular, especially now that Taylor Swift is playing claw hammer, but it's so much fun. And fiddles are showing up, guitars, basses, dobros, which are getting a big resurgence.

We have these classes, we have workshops, and we also have a Native American flute player on our teaching staff. We have twelve teachers. Well, they kind of fluctuate right now. But we have many teachers who are proficient in their instrument who want to teach and help nurture the grassroots music and keep it going. So we're doing that.

We have quarterly student recitals and professional showcase house concerts. They're not just concerts for artists to come and show off. We want them to always have a historical element so that they fit our genre of our mission, which is to continue this type of Americana music.

Morin: You should come to one of the presentations she puts on here. They fill this room up with people. They all want to get up on the stage and play.

Lauderback: Oh, yes. It can be a lot of fun around here.

Barber: Now, Maytan Music just closed very recently, so you were both here at the same time operating musically. Was there a relationship there? You've known the family for a long time.

Morin: No, I think she basically started this new business after Maytans closed. She took the building over, and was in the middle of remodeling the building. She had the Mountain Girls Band. You mentioned that.

Lauderback: My band is called Mountain Girls. It's an all-woman bluegrass band.

Morin: They travel around, they put on shows.

Lauderback: But I've been talking about the dream of having Mountain Music Parlor—actually, I don't even know where that dream came from. It's just more of a divine thing. This has been a lot of work. My husband and I had to renovate this building in a lot of ways, and it was a lot of work. If I knew how much work it was going to be, I'd probably have hightailed it out a long time ago.

But up to the end, Maytans was still going strong. Marianne was still trying to carry on her father's legacy, pretty much by herself. Her mom, who's still alive, was really having a hard time by then, being up in years. Marianne basically got tired of it all after so many years in the business and wanted to get off and do her own thing. Who can blame her?

But it was during that time period that my dream was starting to come alive, and I just kept speaking it and speaking it and speaking it. And pretty much it all started happening between the time the Maytans closed their doors and I opened mine. My husband and I spent almost two years renovating this house in our spare time and in the evenings after our day jobs. So it took probably three times longer than it should have, but what are you going to do? We had to do what we could do.

So there was a little overlap, and I did know Marianne, and, of course, being a violinist, I was in Maytan's quite often. Dad was a friend of Steve and Iris, and our paths were always crossing. Music people always know each other. I told both Marianne and Iris my idea, and they loved it. I just felt that it was the thing to do. Just knew it. And I couldn't stop this train now if I wanted to. It's going.

Barber: Let's talk a little bit about these renovations. You've taken such care with the house, and it's just so interesting that it was a music center and then it was something very different and now you're bringing it back to a music center but on a very different plane, it seems. It probably looks a lot different than it did in that earlier stage of being Maytan Music. Do you want to talk a little bit about what you went through with the house?

Lauderback: When I was a little girl learning to play the violin, Maytan's existed first in the fifties, Maytan Music Store. This building, this house was Maytan Music Store, run by Steve and his brother. Musicians came here like crazy. This place was bursting with music. There were instruments *everywhere*. They sold *everything* you could ever think of it. It was so packed and cluttered in this building. It was nuts. Music and classes upstairs of all different types of music that was going on, the jazz, and the rock and roll of the day. And then the big-hair days and the electric guitars, I mean, it was huge. And the pianos. Didn't they have pianos in the back building?

Morin: They had drums and pianos in the other building.

Lauderback: In the side building.

Morin: Then it went right through that door—

Lauderback: There's a side building over here.

Morin: —where you closed off.

Lauderback: Oh, that's right. And this was Iris' sheet-music room.

Morin: No, she was out there. She was in that room in there.

Barber: In the back room?

Morin: Yes, in the back room, yes.

Barber: That's when sheet music was popular.

Morin: Yes, sheet music. She sold sheet music.

Lauderback: Tons of it. Now everyone gets it online.

Morin: People don't use it anymore.

Lauderback: How sad. But some of them are just very collectible now, the beautiful fronts on them, just gorgeous from the twenties and thirties.

But, anyway, where was I? This was Maytan Music Store, fifties, sixties and seventies, so I was already in here as a little girl, which is really funny how it has come full circle. So the music is back in this house, and we think Mrs. Martha Wingfield is very happy about it. She hasn't bothered me. [laughs]

Morin: She's still here.

Barber: So tell me, when you talk about renovations, tell me what you did.

Lauderback: Well, when Pop had his construction company here, all of his stuff, all the construction things, all the machinery and messes and sawdust and—

Morin: Messes?

Lauderback: Yeah, messy, dusty. [laughs] More screws and fasteners than you could ever imagine, brake machines and saws and vices and cutters, blah, blah, blah. Construction guys in and out all the time. And this was his drawing room and that was his office.

Barber: So the kitchen, you're saying, we're in now, was the drawing room.

Lauderback: Yes, it was his drafting room and his drafting table, and didn't look anything like it is now, completely different. We tore the carpet up and all the layers that were covering this beautiful hundred-year-old floor. Then I painted it and decorated it with the Nevada motif.

Morin: She wanted to leave the old floor in here, so she did.

Lauderback: Yes, and keep the historical elements. This is the only piece of original beadboard that was in the kitchen.

Barber: On the wall in the kitchen. Oh, okay, sure.

Lauderback: So we painstakingly searched all across northern Nevada and California to find historical materials to recreate what we thought was here. This was actually a plenum for the fireplace, I believe, the furnace. Was this the plenum? This is metal back here.

Morin: No. Right there was the chimney.

Lauderback: There was a chimney here.

Morin: I took it out. It went up to the room. I had one of the—Mr. Dankworth, ever hear of him, University of Nevada?

Barber: Sure.

Morin: Dankworth. He's our friend.

Barber: Oh, okay.

Morin: His wife Carla is still our friend. She's in a home now. Now, he came in and took the whole furnace out because he wanted the bricks.

Barber: Oh, this on the east side of the kitchen.

Morin: He wanted them for his house on Dusty Lane in Verdi.

Lauderback: So, getting back to renovation, this used to be a closet here.

Morin: I opened that up originally.

Lauderback: Dad, you put this wall here?

Morin: No, that door was there. I opened all this up. It was all closed. It was a closet and a chimney there.

Lauderback: And then he had made his office because he had added that wall in the front room. The entryway is very different than it was originally. A lot of those original wood moldings, like all this trim, this is all stuff that Dad salvaged and stored down in the basement. We had to modify them to use for around the new window. There used to be a window over here, further down. We repurposed all the old original vintage wood we could find, and it looks great!

Morin: I still have some. You see the big piece of glass in that wall in the other room, the office, that big glass where you come in from?

Barber: That's an interior piece of glass, right.

Morin: Yes, well, she put that in because that used to be the entrance to the dining area, which was part of the living room, and I guess the kitchen was over here. The dining room must have been over there originally, before Maytan remodeled it.

Now, some of that woodwork there, I had to build one of those doors because the door was missing. See that door there? I had to build one of the doors that goes in the office, and I built the room and closed it off, made the office. Half of that wood was missing. I had to replace all that cabinetry. I built what's missing. So it looks nice now. I didn't want to take it out.

Barber: You were really replicating what it had been before.

Morin: Well, I just repaired what was there. You can't tell what was done, but I did it.

Lauderback: What you're going to find wonderful in these old houses is the original glass that is still moving. I replaced the front picture window. But the other windows in the front, those little ones there in the front with the real grids with the divided light, the real divided light, those are still original. There used to be a beautiful stained glass window over on the other side of the fireplace, and some dingdong threw a rock through it. I kept some of the glass pieces, and I will one day get that window recreated. And all the glass on the second floor is all still original and is still moving. It's beautiful.

Morin: We put the ceiling back up after the fire. We did quite a lot of work upstairs. The light fixtures that are out there in the living room, all the yellow ones, I found them here and there, a piece in the attic, a



piece over there. We put it all back together and hung them—that's what you're seeing there. That's the original lighting from the Wingfield people.

Barber: So they were from the house.

Morin: That's all original, yes.

Barber: It's amazing what you can find in the house itself to use.

Morin: Yes, if you go looking. We found a beer can.

Lauderback: Old Reno Royal—Reno Royal.

Morin: A 1911 beer can.

Barber: Did the upstairs need to have a lot of work done to it?

Lauderback: It didn't really, but there was a fire here eight years ago and some—

Morin: Ten years ago or so?

Lauderback: Eight, eight years ago.

Morin: Ten years ago, yes. I told her.

Lauderback: There was a lot of damage, so when the firemen come and they do their thing with the hatchets, you know how they—

Morin: Oh, Jesus.

Lauderback: Oh, my gosh.

Morin: Thirty-two firemen.

Lauderback: We had to replace ceilings. You went up to the big room where it's now the classroom up in the big room, and that ceiling was gone. So Dad had to replace that.

Morin: Do you have a key to the other office where the piano is? Why don't you show her the other office, where we did the remodeling?

Lauderback: I might.

Morin: Where the piano is.

Lauderback: I got you. I'm on it. I lost my train of thought.

Barber: Well, upstairs, the big room.

Lauderback: The fire, yes. Fire, ceilings replaced, walls replaced.

Morin: Oh, right up through the roof, and God was looking in the hole.

Lauderback: And the bathroom upstairs, the floors rotted, so we had to replace the bathroom floor.

Morin: I never said a word to the man that burnt it. He kept working for us. I never said a word to him, not a word.

Lauderback: So there's been some renovation.

Morin: You've got to forgive people.

Lauderback: And a lot of love, blood, sweat, and tears.

Barber: Now, during Maytan's era here, you were saying that they used the basement for fixing instruments and everything.

Morin: Oh, yes.

Barber: You used it for storage. What did you decide to do with the basement, Renée?

Morin: Still storage.

Lauderback: Storage, a lot of funky antiques we want to fix up and restore.

Morin: You're bringing up an evil fight right now. Be careful.

Lauderback: I'm not fighting.

Barber: It's storage. We can leave it at that. [laughs]

Lauderback: It's storage.

Barber: Storage of various types is happening down there.

Morin: I want to get a truck and empty it.

Barber: Talk to me a little bit, Renée, about this idea of Midtown. Of course, the family has had this house long before Midtown was an idea, before it was a concept, and South Virginia Street was a business

district. It suffered a little bit with the development of the highway that took South Virginia away from being a major thoroughfare. But you had said, Mr. Morin, that a lot of traffic was still coming through this area all the time, so it was still a good location. And your business didn't actually rely upon foot traffic anyway.

Morin: Well, I really didn't need any foot traffic for my business. I needed outside businesses contacting each other to know I was here. So I built up a good group of people, and I did all of their work.

Barber: Right. And it was a good central location for a lot of that work.

Morin: Absolutely, it was fine for me.

Barber: And the Midtown idea is really a lot about a neighborhood and a sense of community. What kind of relationship have you had with the Midtown business owners, with the kind of community that's developing here, Renée? Do you feel a part of that?

Lauderback: I absolutely do. I'm very involved with the Midtown District. Many of the business owners take an interest in what's going on. Midtown is, like you said, kind of a new concept. The area did go into some disarray for a little while.

Morin: It did.

Lauderback: And it's getting better all the time. There's some resurgence, getting some great new shops around here. The location of this particular building, the former Maytan building, is absolutely perfect. I saw it happening, and when I was formulating this whole idea of Mountain Music Parlor, I started telling my dad, "Dad, this thing is going to be called Midtown. It's going to be happening. It's going to be good. It's going to be amazing." Sometimes it's hard to believe this kind of stuff. "Yeah, right. Nothing's going to come of it." Well, guess what? It's happening, and it's awesome, and I'm like, "Yes!"

Morin: Another attribute to this street area is the farm up here where the girls had a farm.

Lauderback: Lost City.

Morin: What did they call it?

Lauderback: Lost City Farm.

Morin: Lost City Farm. They took three buildings out there that were really dilapidated.

Lauderback: They were cool.

Barber: Were they houses?

Lauderback: Yes.

Morin: Really bad.

Lauderback: They were neat.

Morin: So that's why the girls had the property, too. They have to leave now. They're getting out of there. That was a bad area. But this whole city, little by little, is cleaning up here more and more.

Lauderback: Yes, it's nice.

Morin: Look at all the new buildings down here, the apartments, the stores, and over on Cheney Street what's developed over there, and they're going to build now on those street lots up here. There's something going in there. There's further development here. So it's going to keep going.

Barber: Yes, that's right here. That's neighboring to you. You really are surrounded by restaurants, in particular. There seem to be a lot of places to eat around here on Center Street.

Morin: Oh, yes, a lot of them.

Barber: And on Virginia Street.

Morin: There's one going in here, a pizzeria and something else.

Lauderback: Pizza and sushi and a brewery. Another brewery, oh, my goodness.

Barber: And that's in the new old Maytan building.

Morin: There's going to be a big spillover from that building into the area. People will be coming in and seeing everything that's here. It's going to bring everything up to another level.

Barber: And it's developing a very interesting mix throughout, really, of more contemporary architecture and the historic architecture, and they're all side by side.

Lauderback: I love it.

Morin: See, the city, this downtown is dilapidated to a big degree. Our mayor is trying to clean it up. She may succeed. She may not. But this area will succeed, Reno will, by itself.

Barber: There's also something to the fact that you're still surrounded by residences. The Midtown area really is between these two neighborhoods and, of course, you're right on Center Street, which is largely residential still, and right to the east of it is a completely residential neighborhood. Do you find, Renée, that there are people who are just walking by the house here all the time and wander in because they wonder what you're doing?

Lauderback: Exactly. It happens all the time.

Morin: That's right.

Lauderback: Daily.

Barber: Are you basically open? Do you have daily hours where you're open all day regardless if there's an event happening in here?

Lauderback: Well, our classes started a year ago August, and it's all published online. We have a great website that our partner Cindy maintains. Our classes are at night, and individual teachers are also teaching their different instruments here in the evenings. We have mostly adult students. I actually teach a lot of younger kids, six years of age, seven, eight, nine. We're not really open during the day yet, because I'm still running my rain gutter company. But I have developed and have been stocking unique folk music instruments and accessories in this front room that used to be the dining room where all the beautiful cabinetry is. And that's going to be our little store, our little folk music shop. I'm excited to get out of the gutter business and to be open with regular store hours and just service the music community. I'm hoping to get to that in the springtime, and then be able to eventually afford to have someone come and sit and keep it open during regular hours and start getting that noticed, and build that. So that's where we are right now.

Barber: Is there a sense of support from the Midtown District, from other business owners, of trying to really nurture this kind of independent business? Because it does seem to be that there are a lot of independent small entrepreneurs around here.

Lauderback: Yes. Everyone is pretty much a small independent entrepreneur. I think the only franchisee-type thing we have around here is Laughing Planet. I think it is somewhat. I'm not quite sure. But, yes, a lot. We're still a little hidden gem over here. Some of the Midtown businesses don't even know we exist, so we're still trying to get the word out to them. I bring around our brochures, and talk to the business owners: "Hi, welcome to the neighborhood, and this is who we are."

And they're like, "Wow!" Everybody loves finding out about this place. We have our sign up, finally. It's a beautiful handmade sign of beautiful old barn wood from the Comstock. The back recital hall here is all lined with Comstock wood. Keeping the historical and vintage aspects alive is always the goal. There is some Amish barn wood, too, there on the walls in the concert hall. But, yes, I think everyone in Midtown tries to support each other. Yes, that's what it's about.

Barber: I'm just so aware, of course, sitting with both of you here, of the importance of the history of the house and how much you really respect and care for it, and the family history that has been invested in these walls for decades.

Morin: Yes, it's been quite a bit. Quite a bit.

Lauderback: Oh, yes. I love this home. I love this home.

Morin: For 100 years.

Lauderback: Yes, this has been around—

Morin: A hundred years.

Lauderback: And you haven't been around 100 yet. [laughs]

Morin: Not quite, but I'm getting there.

Lauderback: Well, yes. So my dad's been here since '79, and me, too, and then when my son came along in '87, he was here learning drafting and drawing little pictures with his grandpa. We've established a nice, loving legacy of doing good things in this place and keeping music alive. And that's what it's all about, just keeping it going, getting that positive energy going, and making things happen. That's what we're doing. He's a builder of buildings. I'm a builder of music enriching people's souls and lives.

Morin: I guess so, yes. I guess so.

Lauderback: We're different types of builders.

Barber: Well, I want to thank you so much for speaking with me today. It's really been a pleasure talking to both of you.

Lauderback: You, too, Alicia.

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## JAN LEGGETT

Grandson of Sid Leggett, who owned Oxbow Motor Lodge, Ho Hum Motel, and Sidney Leggett Building, at 941, 1025, and 1039 S. Virginia Street, respectively



Jan Leggett in front of two of his grandfather's buildings. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Jan Leggett's grandfather, Sidney Leggett, was one of Reno's early advertising men. He ran a billboard business at 1039 S. Virginia Street and three motels: the Oxbow Motor Lodge, Ho Hum Motel, and Sutro Motel. Jan shares his memories of the properties and the neighborhood.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm at Moana Nursery in Reno with Jan Leggett to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Mr. Leggett, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Leggett: Yes, you do.

Barber: Thank you so much. Okay. I have so many questions for you. I'm just delighted to have found you. And I want to start out just with a little bit of biographical information. Can you tell me where and when you were born?

Leggett: Born in Reno, Nevada, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1949 at Washoe Medical Center.

Barber: And who were your parents and where were they from?

Leggett: My father was John Brice Leggett, and he was born and raised in Reno, Nevada. My mom was Alice Ruth Leggett. Her maiden name was Doyle, and she was born in Reno, Nevada.

Barber: Was her family from this area for many generations?

Leggett: Her family was from Susanville, and they got here in the late 1800s, very early 1900s. I'm not sure of the exact date. But she was born in a home over on what is now Arlington Avenue. I believe it was originally Belmont Avenue, right there, one of the homes that's in the Midtown area, across the street from the little mini market there at Liberty and Arlington, there's a house there where she was born. And my father was born, I believe it was over in a small house on Liberty, if I'm not mistaken, back in the twenties.

Barber: So your grandfather, then, on your father's side was the first person from the family to be in this area?

Leggett: To my knowledge, yes, and he's from Hanford, California, and, in fact, that's where he and his second wife were buried, in Hanford, California.

Barber: And what was his name?

Leggett: Sidney Leggett.

Barber: We've become very interested in Mr. Leggett because he owned so much property in the Reno area and seemed to have a lot to do with development of the tourist industry, both in ownership of property but also just in the profession that he had. The earliest I've seen records of Sidney Leggett's business here was the early 1930s. Can you describe for me what you know about why he moved to the Reno area?

Leggett: That's a great question, Alicia. I don't really know the answer to that question. Very few stories had I heard about him in his early life other than he actually made his living at one point playing piano in some of the bars in San Francisco when he was going to college, and that's about all I know about it. He came to Reno. He had enough money to buy quite a few properties to use for his sign business along South Virginia and along 4<sup>th</sup> Street. Those were the two main corridors for tourism and



business. So, again, how he managed to get the monies to do that, I don't recall, never heard that story. But as a result of purchasing those properties for the purposes of his sign business, it evolved into the motel business after he sold the sign business.

Barber: It's really interesting. I had found a reference to him in an oral history by Thomas Cave Wilson who was an advertising man in Reno from the 1930s. And I'll give you a copy of this. There's the full oral history. Sid Leggett is mentioned here as being a very good operator. He had the Leggett Sign Company, they're saying, which was the only posting plant. It was the only business that did the billboards in town, and, of course, in the thirties, it was a much smaller town. One reference that I found after I talked to you was that he talked about Leggett. Wilson said, "Both Leggett and Heywood"—who it seems was Jess Heywood, I think, who maybe bought out his business from him or he may have sold it to him—but he said, "They were old-time Foster & Kleiser men who'd gone into business for themselves." And Foster & Kleiser is an outdoor sign company that went national. It made me wonder if maybe he actually worked for that company earlier. Something we could look into.



Sidney Leggett. Photo provided by Jan Leggett.

Leggett: He may have. I apologize I don't have that information. I think I'm going to be able to learn something from *you* eventually. [laughter]

Barber: I'm wondering—do you remember your grandfather?

Leggett: To some degree. He passed away in 1969. I was somewhere in the neighborhood of nineteen or twenty years old at that time. I remember going on Easter egg hunts as a child in his backyard that had a

little bit of a slope, and we would go look around for the Easter eggs and then roll down the hill.  
[laughter]

Barber: What part of town was that house in?

Leggett: Over in the old Southwest off of Mt. Rose Street.

Barber: So could you describe him at all, I mean physically or personality-wise or share any memories you have of him as a person?

Leggett: This is going to be interesting. He was about 5-foot-10, a fairly sturdy build, kind of gruff in his personality, and I really didn't get the opportunity to know the man very well. That's about all I can say about him. I would see him from time to time. If I was driving by one of the motels, he would be actually out there sweeping the sidewalk or doing whatever kind of maintenance or just purveying or perusing the properties. So he was an active operator. That much I do know.



The building spanning the addresses 1039 to 1045 South Virginia Street. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: I had researched a little earlier and learned of his connection to the Sutro Motel, which I want to get into a little bit, but the building in Midtown that I realized he had quite a lot of affiliation with, today spans the addresses from 1039 to 1045 South Virginia. This is on the block that's just south of Mary Street on South Virginia on the west side of the street. Did you ever go to that building when he was affiliated with that building or do you have any kind of memories about that building?

Leggett: I was in that building lots of different times, but not necessarily when he still owned it. It may have been after he had passed away. The majority of the properties went to both my father and my uncle. One of the three motels went to his second wife, and her name was Freda, and it was the Oxbow Motel. The property that you're speaking of, as you're aware, has an apartment up above, and my father was managing those properties, and vis à me to my father, that apartment was rented to a couple of my friends over the years while they were going to school, and I was in there as a result of visiting my friends.

Barber: That's a good-sized apartment.

Leggett: It's not a bad apartment at all. It's very nicely laid out and very comfortable.

Barber: And large windows.

Leggett: Yeah.



Sidney Leggett's first wife, Helen Leggett. Photo courtesy of Jan Leggett.

Barber: So what we've learned is that Sidney Leggett actually lived there for, it looks like, a couple of decades. So was the family history, then, that he came here, was married to his first wife, who was your grandmother?

Leggett: Helen Leggett. Ferguson was her maiden name.

Barber: And they seem to have divorced in the early 1930s, after which it seems he lived in that apartment.

Leggett: You know, I don't know that. I don't know that history. I couldn't comment on it.

Barber: Okay. I'll give you my records, and we can see if we can figure it out. [laughs]

Leggett: That'd be great.

Barber: It'd be great, because that's sort of how it seemed. It seemed like he lived there. It's a little hard with the addresses, but it's hard to tell whether he might have had a storefront for his ad agency on the ground floor and then lived upstairs or if he actually was just operating the agency out of his home. I don't know with that kind of business, you know, how much—I think there needed to be space, obviously, for signage, so it seems that the downstairs part of that building had a lot of space for warehouses, and that he had actually gotten permits to build more over time. So we're kind of trying to figure that out.

Leggett: My only recollection in terms of the sign business was I was a very small child, I'm really saying somewhere between two and five years old, and remembering my father painting some of the signboards with the primer so that they could go out to the sign and then be painted as the highway signs, and that is my only remembrance of that sign business.

Barber: Did he actually work for him, do you think, your father?

Leggett: Oh, I'm sure my father worked for him a little bit during the sign period when he was doing the signs.

Barber: And your father just had one sibling, his brother?

Leggett: Yes, Les Leggett. He was a local attorney here in town.

Barber: And they both seemed to live here for their whole careers.

Leggett: Yes. Both Les and my father were born and raised in Reno, Nevada.

Barber: It seems to me that Leggett Advertising Agency not only specialized in outdoor signage, but perhaps that's all that it did.

Leggett: To my knowledge, that's all that it did.

Barber: And how it seemed to work—so I'm trying to figure out kind of how it kind of morphed into the motel business. It seemed that—and I don't know this for sure, but it seemed that Sidney Leggett had to actually get the property for the billboards and perhaps actually owned the actual billboards and then

created the signage for them, so actually had to own the property the billboards stood on. Do you have any idea how that worked?

Leggett: Well, I don't know for sure whether or not he leased or rented any properties—I'm sure he did at some point in order to put a billboard up. My recollection is that he constructed the billboards, the signs. The structure that held the sign, I think he had someone build all of those, and obviously he purchased a lot of property so that he would get guaranteed spots for his signs. That's my understanding. Whether or not he leased or rented any other properties, I'm not aware of.

Barber: I think that you're right there, because I've seen his name come up from time to time getting building permits in various spaces, and it looks like it was probably just to erect a sign, just to put a billboard sign up. So it seems, then, that he had that business until it looks like maybe the mid-forties or so and had been purchasing more property at the time. We know that he built a new building next to this building that we're talking about. The address was then 1037. I'm trying to figure out which part of the building. We're looking at some maps here from 1949 and 1955. I'm not sure if it was the building that then became the Safeway later.

On the building that's painted white now, it looks like there are three different storefronts. There's one that's a completely separate building all the way front to back on the north side of the building, but then there's another building north of that. And it seems that if he ended up building the Ho Hum—and we can talk about that a little bit—that he likely owned the whole rest of the block, I guess, in that stretch, but we don't know. We'll try to figure that out.

Leggett: And I don't know either. Something that I'm curious about, you keep mentioning the Safeway. The only Safeway I have a recollection of was at the corner of Mt. Rose and South Virginia, and that was a rather large structure, and that piece of property is owned by a family—I can't recall their name at the moment. Montoya or something of that nature. And not only was the Safeway there, which has now morphed into a number of restaurants, but Sports West was the original Raley's in Reno.

Barber: Oh, is that right?

Leggett: And then you have the strip of stores that run east to west, and that was called the Value Center. I don't recall the stores that were in there, but, again, as I was thinking about all this the other night, that was the original Raley's in Reno, Nevada, which is where Sports West is now.

Barber: So were the Safeway and the Raley's in operation at the same time?

Leggett: Not to my knowledge. I think the Safeway had closed by that time. But Raley's was only a variety drug store back then. They hadn't gotten into the grocery business yet. It might originally have been an Eagle Thrifty.

Barber: There was a period of just a very few years when this storefront right beside the building we're talking about south of Mary Street was Safeway, just briefly, and then it closed and then they opened that brand-new large space.

Leggett: I did not recall that.

Barber: And then it was a bakery, Rauhut's Bakery for a little bit, and then became a number of other things. But that just seems to be the history of this area in Midtown. There's such a changeover of different businesses, and lots of things moved. I just found a couple of photographs from the fifties and sixties of different spots on South Virginia Street, and the Office Bar was located in one place in one of the pictures and in another location in another one. So it seems that there was a lot of moving around.

The chronology is hard to trace exactly, but it did seem that through the course of the 1950s for sure and into the sixties and onward, there was just more purchasing of property happening, and then it sounds like your father and his brother were very active in the properties, too, in the ownership of the properties. Is that something you were aware of growing up?

Leggett: Yes. When my grandfather divorced his first wife, Helen, then my father and my uncle would manage her properties for her, and we can talk about those properties in a few minutes. But up until the time my grandfather passed away, he was actively managing his properties, and I'm sure that my father and uncle were aware of what was going on just simply by watching records and talking with my grandfather, but they did manage it after he passed away, both my grandmother's and my grandfather's properties.

Barber: It seems like in the 1950s for the motels that were along what were then the highways at that point, 4<sup>th</sup> Street and South Virginia Street, you either had a system where the owners lived on the property themselves and actually managed it or they hired managers for the property and then lived elsewhere.

Leggett: Right.

Barber: Which of those patterns did your grandfather follow?

Leggett: Well, my grandfather would have lived adjacent to the Ho Hum Motel and managed that while he was living in the apartment. Then when he moved up off of Mt. Rose Street, obviously he would come visit the Ho Hum, the Oxbow, and the Sutro.

Barber: So let's talk about those. I should know this, but do you know which came first?

Leggett: To my knowledge, the Sutro Motel came first. That was constructed in 1949. Then the Ho Hum and then the Oxbow.

Barber: Let's take these one at a time a little bit, because it sounds like the family had a lot of affiliation with one or more of these even after your grandfather. So what can you tell me about the Sutro? The Sutro is at 1200 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street, at the intersection of East 4<sup>th</sup> and Sutro.

Leggett: Yes.

Barber: What can you tell me about that property?





*Sutro Motel*, 1200 E. 4th St., (U.S. 40-E) Reno, Nevada  
"Probably The Best"

Postcard of the Sutro Motel, 1950s. Image courtesy of Philip Galbraith.

Leggett: Well, I don't know much about it. Obviously, when it was constructed, I was just born, so I don't have very much history or knowledge of it. I do know that when my parents were living on Colonial Way and the house needed to be painted, we moved into the Sutro Motel for about a week, and I think the end units over on the west side is where we stayed for about a week. So I have a vague memory of doing that.

The Sutro Motel was owned by Sidney Leggett until his death, and then my Uncle Les and my father, Brice, inherited that motel. They also inherited the Ho Hum Motel, and the Oxbow went to Sidney Leggett's second wife, Freda. My uncle and my father had onsite managers for those two motels, the Ho Hum and the Sutro, and I can remember discussions by my father how much fun—and I say that. [laughs] They had a lot of fun managing those motels. It wasn't easy. That's a tough business to be in.

Then my uncle and my father split their properties and my father ended up with the Sutro Motel along with some others, but we'll stick with that. And then when my father passed away in 1986, I bought that motel out of his estate from my mom and my two sisters, and I actively managed it up until about two, two and a half years ago, so that would have been about 2012 that I believe I sold that motel to Nav Bajwa. Interesting experience for twenty-five years, and I had the same motel manager for that entire period of time. Made life a little bit simpler, someone that was totally familiar with the property.

I realized after about six or seven years of owning that motel that I really didn't own it; the manager did. [laughs] Because I would go in there and make suggestions, and they were rarely followed unless I really put my foot down, and it was much simpler to manage it in that fashion. Probably didn't make as much money as I could have or should have, but, again, it made it a lot easier. My wife at the

time was the bookkeeper, and after my wife and I got a divorce, she was still the bookkeeper, again, making things a lot simpler.

Barber: Continuity helps. [laughs]

Leggett: Continuity helps. They know where everything's buried and all that sort of thing. So it's an interesting life we live and weave.

Barber: So, 1949, building the Sutro, there had been so many properties that became motels along East 4<sup>th</sup> Street that kind of evolved from being autocamps and cottages and then kind of grew gradually into being more modern motels, but the Sutro was built as a motel, as a modern motel, from the beginning.

Leggett: Absolutely. And I just recalled to the east of the Sutro Motel, further east along 4<sup>th</sup> Street, used to be a place called the Forty Niner Trailer Park, and my grandfather started that, again, back in the forties. My dad would drive to Los Angeles and pick up trailers, little mobile homes, and haul them back to Reno to be put into there, and then others could come along and move in as well. The Forty Niner Trailer Park. You might look into that.

Barber: So that was a trailer park that would have trailers available for long-term residence or it tended to be shorter term?

Leggett: I think it was both, but, again, before my time.

Barber: That's interesting. That was right next door to the Sutro.

Leggett: Actually, it was about three-quarters of a mile east of the Sutro Motel, I believe, on the north side of the street.

Barber: There's a little brick building I think that the mattress company is in now that's right by the Sutro.

Leggett: The Reno Mattress Factory, and they have been there for as long—as long as I've been here, they've been there. And great neighbors, always been very good neighbors, and, obviously, we, from time to time, would buy mattresses from them for the motel.

Barber: So what's your sense of how the Sutro Motel changed over time? I mean, as far as renovations of it, was there sort of a modernization that kind of happened at periodic times? I'm not sure what year that was that you said you actually were living there for a little while.

Leggett: Yeah. That was back in the fifties.

Barber: It was? Okay. So it would have been pretty original.



Leggett: It was very original, I'm sure, back then. The bathrooms in there had gorgeous tile. I mean, that tile has held up unbelievably well. My grandfather constructed that with copper plumbing, state-of-the-art electrical at the time in the fifties. It's a slab-on-grade block building, which is fairly simple to maintain and a sturdy construction, had the Spanish tile roof, which I always found gorgeous. During my period of ownership, the heating system went from oil to gas, and we would renovate the rooms from time to time to keep them a little bit more modern and clean and that sort of thing.

Barber: And so the tile you're talking about in the bathrooms was like a counter tile or was it on the walls?

Leggett: It was on the walls. It was a wainscot all the way around, tile shower stalls and that sort of thing, and occasionally there would be a plumbing break, and we'd have to go in and demo that tile, which sort of broke my heart because then you were replacing it with a not-so-period tile. But that tile held up remarkably well, better than most.

Barber: And then do you have any idea—I mean, it's such an intriguing setup being on both sides of Sutro, which makes a lot of people think that the motel came first and then the street came right down through the middle.

Leggett: We heard that conversation or that comment, I should say, weekly from people: "Oh, I didn't realize that they'd taken that street right through your motel," or something of that nature. No, it was always separated. My grandfather built two L-shaped buildings, one on one corner and one on the other. And then, obviously, when they put the bridge over the Truckee there and extended Sutro through there, it took away a line of trees that we had on both sides of Sutro that offered shade and kind of a little motor court appearance at that point. So it took some of the ambience away, but it also helped to modernize it a little bit more.

Now, the motel business was really good in the fifties and sixties, and then in the seventies and eighties and even in the nineties, it was somewhat in decline. The motel went from being an overnight motel to a weeklies motel. That was the best way to survive at that time.

Barber: And that was because of the interstate construction specifically?

Leggett: Yes, because of the interstate that went through Reno. I believe it was in the sixties. So the majority of traffic went onto the interstate, and the Lincoln Highway, Highway 40, was no longer the main route.

Barber: But the main setup of that motel has remained the same. There haven't been a lot of structural changes to it.

Leggett: It has had some minor structural floor plan changes, very minor, in and around the manager's quarters, but the same rooms that were there in 1949, same numbers on the rooms. Not much has changed.

Barber: So the Ho Hum then, you were saying, came second, you think. Oh, you know what? You said something that made me think. So did your grandfather actually build it himself?

Leggett: No, I'm sure he had contractors build it for him, and I have no idea who those would have been. He wouldn't have been the person out there building it, no.

Barber: It kind of just makes me wonder how one would go about deciding how to design and build a motel and what features to include. I mean, people obviously really liked the West at that point in American culture, so a red-tile roof.

Leggett: And I have no idea about the architectural concepts and how that was initiated. I don't know if it was my grandfather who did that or if he had some architects involved.

Barber: I would imagine that being a really lucrative business in the fifties and sixties; probably that whole property was paid off pretty early on.

Leggett: It had been paid off and inherited and paid off several times. [laughs]

Barber: Now, the Ho Hum is really tucked in there. While the Sutro Motel is kind of sprawling, on those opposite sides of Sutro, the Ho Hum seems to have taken advantage of a very small piece of property to tuck a little motel in there. Have you spent much time around that property?



Postcard of the Ho Hum Motel. Image courtesy of UNR Special Collections.

Leggett: Well, yes. [laughs] As a result of in my younger years going to school, going to college, and needing additional part-time work, I painted every single room in all of those motels. So I've been in every single room of all three of those motels as a result of painting. My dad would come to me and say, "The motel needs to be painted. Here's where you can start." Obviously, you couldn't go one to twenty-five because people were in the rooms. So you'd move around to different rooms.

Barber: Oh, just as one became vacant, then you'd go painting it. [laughs] So, gosh, how is the Ho Hum the same and different than the Sutro?

Leggett: Well, the shape of it was the same, other than the fact that at the Ho Hum they went to two stories, and still had the same number of rooms as, say, the Sutro did, but they just put it on two stories on one side, and they did the same thing with the Oxbow. So I assume there's somewhere between twenty-four—I don't recall exactly—twenty-four and twenty-five rooms in all three of those motels.

Barber: And that one stayed in the family for how long, the Ho Hum?

Leggett: That stayed in the family up until the time when my uncle, Les Leggett, died, and then his three children, Helene, Les, Jr., and Marty, inherited my uncle's properties, and the Ho Hum was one of them. They did not keep the properties for more than about two years. They sold all of the properties and went their separate ways.

Barber: It's just one of my favorite motel names, the Ho Hum. I don't know if you know where it came from. [laughs]

Leggett: There was a television program back in the late fifties, early sixties, that talked about a fellow on a motorcycle going across the United States, sort of the Route 66 deal but not the actual program *Route 66*, and it showed a picture of the Ho Hum billboard as he was going down the street. I recall that we were watching that program, and my dad almost fell out of his chair when he saw the Ho Hum sign. He thought that was pretty cute.

Barber: Like a landmark.

Leggett: Yeah. I mean, you'd never have any idea in the world that your motel's going to be in this television program, and you're watching the program and there it is. You could have missed it by just simply turning your head away at one point.

Barber: And then the Oxbow is just up the street.

Leggett: Just up the street to the north.

Barber: And do you know if he owned just that property that the Oxbow was on or surrounding property too?

Leggett: I don't know, Alicia. I'm sorry.



Postcard of the Oxbow Motor Lodge. Image courtesy of UNR Special Collections.

Barber: No, it's good. It's fine. We're sort of just figuring out bit by bit. So how did the Oxbow compare to the others? I'm not as familiar with that one.

Leggett: Well, again, the Oxbow was the same shape as the Ho Hum, probably the same number of rooms, I'm going to guess because I don't recall exactly, but it was the final project, I think, that my grandfather built. So, again, it was a little bit newer, a little bit more modern-looking and so forth. I know I painted every single room in that building as well at one point.

Barber: There's a famous story called *The Ox-Bow Incident*.

Leggett: Mm-hmm.

Barber: Is that what it's named after?

Leggett: I have no idea what it was named after.

Barber: It has a real western feeling, and it seems that all of these were intended to evoke that a little in their architecture.

Leggett: It may very well have been.

Barber: So the same thing happened on Fourth Street as on South Virginia, where it got bypassed by the construction of the highway, again in the sixties, it seems, which would have changed the nature of the customers and the way the motels were used.

Leggett: Right. Exactly. And, again, same situation. Because of the change in the transportation alignment, those motels also went to weeklies, and that's how they survived.

Barber: They have just incredible signs. I wonder if you ever had to deal with the maintenance of those neon signs of any of these or know anything about them.

Leggett: Well, fortunately, I never did because I don't know anything about the electrical, but I know that YESCO did some work for us. Over there at the Sutro, again, I don't know anything about what happened at the Ho Hum and the Oxbow after my father and my uncle went their separate ways.

Barber: So there are two other things I want to ask you about. One major category is other properties along South Virginia that your family had an affiliation with. We're just trying to figure out how these buildings came to be and what had been in them over time. And then the other is any memories you might have of any of the stores and restaurants and shopping areas along South Virginia. We're just trying to bring them to life a little bit, especially places that are no longer there. First, what other properties are you aware of along that whole stretch of South Virginia that any generations of your family owned?

Leggett: Well, as I mentioned before the interview began, my grandfather, Sidney, divorced his first wife, Helen, and, again, I'm not sure when that was. It may have been in the thirties or very early forties. So they ended up owning separate properties, and one of the properties that my grandmother ended up with was the southeast corner of South Virginia and Mt. Rose Street. It was a vacant parcel, and I don't know how they developed it other than they ended up with a business called British Motors. They constructed a building, and I don't know if it was built for British Motors or if they built the building and then British Motors moved in. I suspect it was for British Motors. It was a showroom of British cars, and they have the adjacent property to the south of that, which was used for additional space for the British cars.

That building has evolved into different car dealerships over the years. My father ended up owning that. That was one of the properties that he owned after my uncle and he split. Then that building was sold to Stremmel, and I don't know if the Stremmel people still own that or not. I think the Stremmels still own it, but I'm not sure. But the current business is Good Deals on Wheels.

Going further south on the same side of the street, on the east side of the street at, I believe it's 1700 South Virginia, is very narrow piece of properties. Again, that was another one of my grandmother's properties, where my father and my uncle built their office building. And because of the narrowness and the smallness of that property, they built that as a two-story building but somewhat on stilts. If you go by and look at it, you can drive underneath the building. There's parking for about four or five cars, at most, in the back. My father and my uncle operated out of there for ten or fifteen years, and 1700 South Virginia, I believe, is the address. A local architect by the name of Jerry Poncia was the architect, a very big businessman here in Reno, Nevada.

Barber: Can I ask just—did your father and your uncle have two separate businesses in there or did they work together?



Leggett: No, they worked separately. My father was a real estate appraiser and my uncle was an attorney. So there were four office spaces in there with a central secretarial area, and each one of them had an associate working for them at the time, ergo the second office on each side. My father's offices were on the north side. My uncle's offices were on the south side.

Barber: How long did they keep their offices in that building?

Leggett: I remember doing the janitorial work when I was in high school and college, and I think after they separated, my uncle kept that building, I believe, for a while, and my father moved to another building. Going further south, where there is the Jelly Donut and a laundry there on that northeast corner of Wells and Virginia, that used to be a Tidewater Flying A service station. That was owned by my grandfather, and I don't know if it was ever owned by my uncle or my dad. Then where Wells Avenue came into South Virginia was my grandfather's property, and I'm sure he sold it to the City of Reno in order to accommodate Wells Avenue coming into it.

Then directly to the south of Wells Avenue, where the International House of Pancakes is, ended up being my grandmother's property, and, again, my father and my uncle negotiated with IHOP, International House of Pancakes, to build that building, and it was constructed solely for that purpose. And that ended up being in my uncle's estate and then going to my three cousins, Les, Helene, and Marty.

As you go further south, going across Plumb Lane but abutting Plumb Lane, the southeast corner of Plumb Lane and South Virginia was owned by my grandmother, which is adjacent to the Klaich Animal Hospital, and then there's one more parcel to the south of the Klaich Animal Hospital that my grandmother owned. So we abutted the Klaich Animal Hospital on both sides, north and south.

We ended up—I say “we” because my two sisters, my mother, and I inherited those two parcels from my father's estate—we ended up selling that to the Klaich family probably just about in 2007, which was pretty good timing for us. I'm not sure if the Klaiches were happy with it after a year or two of that, but I think they're pretty happy with it, in general, now. And I can't tell you how nice the Klaiches were over the years.

We actually initially leased it to the original developers when Park Lane Mall was still there, and that was constructed in 1963 or '64, and my grandmother leased it to the people that had the Park Lane Mall and, ultimately, the Macerich Corporation. That lease was going to expire in—I think it was 2014. Actually, I think it was still under lease until 2014, but we sold the property to the Klaiches.

Barber: So that whole strip on the South Virginia Street side of the whole Park Lane Mall, that was always separately owned rather than being part of the big lot that became the mall?

Leggett: Well, the big lot, I mean, there's probably, as I recall, at least seven or eight different parcels in there owned by separate individual property owners. Then a fellow by the name of A.J. Flagg and his partners were able to consolidate all those parcels, put them under a master lease arrangement, and that's how they were able to construct Park Lane Mall back in about 1963. That was originally a potato field.

Barber: Do you remember that?

Leggett: Barely. My mom and dad lived at 585 Colonial Way, where the addition to Shopper's Square was several years ago, and it was a very small two-bedroom house, about 900 square feet. The

neighborhood kids and I would go up to that area right there. There was a ditch, an irrigation ditch running through there, right down the middle of what is now Plumb Lane, and we would play in there and get lost and have fun.

Barber: So you can remember a time when it seemed that the city kind of ended at Plumb Lane, didn't it, for a long time?

Leggett: Oh, yeah. The last thing out of town would have been the Big Hat Restaurant at Moana. Then there was Uncle Happy's Pancake Parlor, where the small restaurant across the street from the Atlantis has gone through several iterations of different names, but originally it was Uncle Happy's Pancake Parlor.

Barber: Was there an Uncle Happy?

Leggett: I think there was, and, in fact, I think he was the same guy that owned Uncle Happy's Toy Store. Now, don't take me on my word because I'm not certain, but I think it was.

Barber: Which was for a while, anyway, on Prater Way and then elsewhere in Sparks, I think, or there was a branch there.

Leggett: It may have been over in the Northwest at some time. He moved around a bit.

Barber: I mean, there's so much property. Is it your impression that a lot of that property got into the family initially for the purpose of erecting billboards on those sites?

Leggett: That, to my understanding, was the main reason. That was the reason that it was acquired over time.

Barber: There were so many houses along South Virginia, and many of them are still there and some have been converted into businesses, but it seems that your grandfather got in there just at that time when that whole stretch was really becoming commercial and property was available, and it had been open land or farm before that.

Leggett: I don't have any insight at all, but I think gambling was legalized somewhere around 1932 to '34 in Reno, Nevada, and maybe that is one of the things that my grandfather saw as potential, people coming to Reno to gamble. That was a big deal all the way up until the sixties or seventies. Not so much anymore. But I think that's the majority of the potential that my grandfather saw.

In addition to that, it was on the Lincoln Highway, the main east-west corridor to get from the east to San Francisco, so you had to come through Reno. Well, you didn't have to, but that was the best route at the time, I believe.

Barber: Are there places that you recall knowing fairly well from the fifties through the seventies along South Virginia? Were there businesses or restaurants?

Leggett: There are two places that I always found very fun and interesting to go into. One was the hardware store on South Virginia Street now. For the life of me, the name escapes me, but a local businessman and his partners owned that store.

Barber: Carter Brothers.

Leggett: Carter Brothers Hardware. That was originally a Sprouse-Reitz, and that was, for me, heaven as a child to go into because they had more toys and little nickel, dime stuff than you can imagine, and they had an upstairs and a downstairs. And to this day, I love going into that store because of the wood floors that are in there, and you can walk along and hear the creaking of the wood floors, and I think the Carter Brothers have done a fabulous job of remodeling that store. My son, who lives over on La Rue, goes down to that store probably weekly, and oftentimes I will accompany him to go in there just to see the old store and walk on the wood floors.

Barber: Where were the toys? Were they upstairs or downstairs?

Leggett: I think the majority of them were upstairs. Again, it was just a fascinating place to be as a child, as far as I was concerned.

The other store I very much enjoyed going into was the Washoe Market, which is now an antique store, and that was owned by a local family, and it was just a spectacular place because it was an old-time market. You could go in there, and there were the owners—one was working in the meat department, the other one was up at the cash register. Sewell's grocery store was just across the street.

Back then, in the fifties there were only about, I think, 35,000 to 40,000 people in Reno, so you knew almost everybody in town, and if you didn't know the guy across the street, the guy you were walking with knew who that person was. So it was a very fun place to grow up.

Barber: And it seems that markets were just so different, not just in the personal nature, but the fact that they'd have their own meat counters. The meat would be cut for you. [laughs]

Leggett: Yes. I mean, the cow was brought in from the back and came out the front. You know, "What do you need here? You want hamburger or steak?" [laughs]

Barber: I think it was different too. I mean, typically people would be carrying your groceries out for you.

Leggett: Well, back in the fifties and sixties, it was a lot more service-oriented. You don't recall it, but I do, where you went to the service station a couple of guys ran out, "What'll it be?"

"Fill 'er up."

"Okay."

"Check the oil." They wiped the windshield. They checked the oil, the water for you. So, you know, that's what you remember in the fifties and sixties, which you don't do anymore.

Barber: In doing this historical research, we see how many service stations were along South Virginia. It just seemed like a couple per block, even.



Leggett: Well, they were pretty much on all corners. I mentioned earlier that Tidewater station that was on the corner of Wells and South Virginia. Directly across the street from it was a Shell station, and behind that, at one point, there was the Tom Thumb Miniature Golf Course, which my other uncle, Howard Doyle, owned with his partner, Gene McKenna, and they had an advertising agency as well called Doyle-McKenna Advertising. They had that business in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. My uncle, Howard Doyle, sold out, I believe in the late seventies, early eighties.

Barber: Are there continuing businesses that started from that or did their business kind of end when he went—

Leggett: When Gene McKenna sold the business—and I don't know what it was renamed, but that was the end of the Doyle-McKenna era, so to speak.

Barber: Okay. [laughs] So where was that miniature golf course that was right off of Virginia? Which side?

Leggett: That was directly behind the Shell station, which was across the street from the Tidewater station, which was adjacent to my dad's and uncle's office building. Across the street from 1700 South Virginia was the Shell station. Now there are some small offices in there now, kind of a little office park that's in there right now that you can drive all the way through from Virginia Street all the way up to Lakeside.

Barber: Now, did the Oxbow get renamed?

Leggett: It got renamed here recently, about ten years ago, is my understanding. I believe it's now Daytwa that owns that business, and I don't know if he renamed it or whoever did.

Barber: That's the Best Bet, I think. I think that's what it's called. And there had been some—if you go a little further on South Virginia Street, further north, the Kit Carson Hotel used to be there. The Ponderosa Hotel operated as a hotel, a tourist hotel.

Leggett: Yes, and I, unfortunately, don't know anything about those.

Barber: They look significantly different, it seemed like.

Leggett: Oh, yeah, they've gone through some reconfiguration, so to speak.

Barber: Do you recall the Coca-Cola bottling plant? Was that in operation when you were growing up?

Leggett: In the fifties, yes, it was in operation, definitely.

Barber: A lot of people had said they liked to watch through the window and see the operations [laughs]

Leggett: Yeah, I do remember watching that through the window as a very young boy.

Barber: So I think that's kind of covered a lot of things that I was interested in—that street has just changed so much. I mean, it's interesting when you think about billboards and the fact that your grandfather was really involved in billboards. Billboards were so different then. You look at South Virginia Street now, and the billboards there are massive and tower over the buildings.

Leggett: Well, with the availability of structural steel and that sort of thing, billboards became quite a bit more substantial. Lease arrangements with the national sign companies, they would come in and lease the piece of property and then they would put in a permanent sign. I mean, those were truly pretty permanent, as opposed to when my grandfather was doing it and they were simply wooden structures and there was a lot of maintenance involved in those. I remember my grandfather was always concerned when we would have windstorms around here, because he was always afraid that some of his signs would be blown over. So then the maintenance and the cost associated with that would be coming up the next day or two.

Barber: That would be an additional factor in Reno, that would play a role that it might not as much everywhere else with these major winds that we have here.

Well, is there anything else that you want to share about this? I might follow up with you with some more questions.

Leggett: You know, Alicia, I think that's all I've got for right now. If you have any other questions, I would be happy to join you and discuss it, figure it out, give it a shot. And if I can think of anything else, I'll give you a call.

Barber: I would love that, and I'll give you all the material I have, and then hopefully we can maybe arrange a little visit to the property with the owners. I'd love to walk around with you.

Leggett: Only if I can drag any of my kids along that would be willing to do that, and I think that my son Jason would be very interested in doing that.

Barber: Absolutely. I think that would be great. And we just really are happy to name this building The Leggett Building after your grandfather.

Leggett: I do have a picture for you.

Barber: Oh, great.

Leggett: This is a picture of my grandfather and his first wife, Helen.

Barber: We're looking at some pictures that must date from the thirties, maybe, or even earlier?

Leggett: Well, what we can do is we'll take the back off and see if we can find anything. I don't know that we will, but we can give it a shot.

Barber: Oh, this is terrific.

Leggett: It only says "Sidney Leggett" on the back. It doesn't give a date. Let's see if the other one has, by any chance, a date on it. And I'm sure these were taken by a local photographer. They don't have any dates on them at all.

Barber: Well, I think we can probably figure pretty close based on their appearance. It would be great if we could get a copy of that photograph and use it, of both of them. That would just be fabulous.

Leggett: Now, when you say "use them," I could loan you these.

Barber: I could scan it today and get it back to you later this afternoon.

Leggett: That would be great.

Barber: I think we'll end the interview here, and thank you so much for speaking with me.

Leggett: You're very welcome. Thank you for taking an interest.

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## BARRIE LYNN

Realtor, Rental Property Owner, and Preservation Advocate



Barrie Lynn outside her historic home on Wonder Street. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Realtor Barrie Lynn leads historic tours of the Midtown and Wells Avenue neighborhoods for the Historic Reno Preservation Society. Owner of several historic properties including her own home, she has conducted extensive research on the area and its residents. A passionate advocate for preservation, Lynn led the effort to establish the Wells Avenue Conservation District in 2013.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber, the date is October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm in Reno, Nevada, with Barrie Lynn to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Barrie, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Lynn: Yes.

Barber: Thank you. We are focusing today on the area that is being referred to as Midtown, which is loosely defined as the neighborhood surrounding South Virginia Street from approximately California Avenue to Plumb Lane, really, at its southern edge. But before we get into that, I'd like to get a little bit of background information about you. I'm curious, how far back has your family lived in Nevada?

Lynn: Only since 1961.

Barber: Can you tell me where you were born and where you grew up?

Lynn: I was born in Las Vegas, grew up in Las Vegas. After I graduated, I moved ten times in ten years because I was really looking for a place that I wanted to put down roots. I came to Reno ten years after I graduated high school. I didn't come straight from Vegas, and so it was sort of like everything that I'd been looking for in all of my moves, I found here. But I had no idea that Reno was even here when I lived in Vegas, because Vegas people don't really think about Reno at all. [laughs]

So it took me a while to get here, but I was looking for a place that had old buildings, because that's what I love. That's one of the reasons that I didn't like living in Las Vegas, because there just wasn't enough history there. I really loved living in Northern California. I would walk around San Francisco and Berkeley and look at all the old houses, and I was just blown away.

So when I came to Reno, I was kind of surprised at the amount of historic architecture, and, of course, the first thing that really caught my eye was the Mapes, and I was lucky enough to live here while it was still standing. I moved right into this beautiful brick apartment building that was all original that had been in the same family since it was built in 1925, and I just fell in love with the size of Reno, the architectural beauty, the natural beauty. I came here when I was twenty-eight and now I'm forty-five, and it's the place I was looking for all along, and it was right under my nose and I didn't even know it.

Barber: So I was going to ask, what year did that place you coming to Reno?

Lynn: 1998.

Barber: And your profession? Now you're in real estate. Is that what you were working in when you first moved here?

Lynn: No. I have always been in natural foods. I have a very strong interest in healthy eating and environmentally responsible practices, so I've always been working in natural food restaurants. I had managed a natural foods grocery store when I lived in Santa Cruz. When I moved to Reno, I was briefly employed in food service and then I went on to be a manager at Wild Oats Market, and I have many years of background in that.

But I got into real estate by accident; I had no idea that's what I wanted to do. One of the reasons I wanted to move to Reno was the cost of living. It was affordable, and at that age, at twenty-eight, I was really ready to buy a house. So I said, "I need to move somewhere where I can buy a house. I'm not going to be able to do that in Santa Cruz or Berkeley or any of these other places I've lived, even Austin, Texas, where I lived. This is affordable here. I think I could actually buy a house."

Two years after I moved here, I bought my first house, and I had such an amazing and overwhelming experience with that. The Realtor that I worked with completely mentored me. She didn't just sell me a house; she actually gave me valuable life advice that changed the course of my life drastically. It was a really amazing experience. So because of that, I went into real estate and I tried to do the same thing that she did for me for my clients. She taught me how to become more creative, I guess, financially, by looking at real estate a little bit differently than most people.

When we first started looking, I said, "I have to have an old house. I cannot live in a new house. I have to have something with character, old doors, old windows, hardwood floors, cute little built-in things everywhere."

And she's like, "Well, you can't afford that."

And I said, "Darn it."

She said, "Why don't you buy like a four-bedroom house somewhere that's cheap and affordable, get yourself some roommates, and cut your costs, and then sell that in a few years, and then you'll have enough money to buy what you want."

I said, "Okay." So she helped me buy a four-bedroom house, and I got three roommates, and they all paid the mortgage for me, and then three years later I sold it, and I had a chunk of money. And I said, "Okay, now I want to buy my old house." [laughs]

So we started looking, and the house that we're sitting in came up, but it had a duplex behind it, and it was way out of my price range. And I said, "Well, yeah, that sounds great. I'd love to have that, but how am I going to afford that?"

And she said, "Well, here's the situation. What you're allowed to buy right now is \$210,000." That's what I qualified for. And that put my payment at about \$1,300 a month. She said, "This one is \$300,000, but you're getting \$1,400 a month off the duplex in back. They're going to count that as income when you qualify. So you're going to live in your cute little brick house for about \$400 a month."

And I thought, "Oh, wow, that's exciting."

So she helped me get into this situation, and then because my expenses were so low, eight months later when the property next door came up, which has two houses on it, I was easily able to purchase that as well. So by choosing a multi-unit property as my primary residence, I was not only able to fulfill my goal of living in an old house, but also gained a little bit more financial security, because over the years my tenants have been paying my mortgage for me. So I will eventually own these, and I will have paid a little bit into them, but not nearly as much as my tenants have.

She helped me really look at real estate a different way, because I didn't have to sacrifice the home, the type of home I wanted to live in, to do this, and now instead of having one house that's paid off in thirty years, I've got several. And what I'm paying to live here is probably about a quarter of what I'd be paying had I just had this linear vision of "Let's buy myself an old house and let's worry about getting the rentals later."

She really helped me a lot, and it was a kind of a mind-blowing experience. And after that, I thought, "I don't think that that many people have thought of this, and I think I need to help people." So one of my specialties is helping owner/occupants get into duplexes, triplexes, four-plexes in this neighborhood, and people generally end up paying about a quarter of what they were paying before, so it's exciting.

That's how I got into real estate, just by having a really good Realtor. And I'll tell you, there are not a lot of them out there. There's really not, so I try to be a good one. [laughs]

Barber: You've become known as the person who gets people into historic houses, too. I'm familiar with many people for whom you have found beautiful historic houses. How did that come about? Did that just naturally evolve because of your own personal interest in historic homes?

Lynn: Oh, yeah. I mean, I absolutely love old houses, and the nice thing about it, being a Realtor, is that if a beautiful house comes up for sale, even if I don't have a buyer, I can go look at it. I can take pictures of the old tile and document it. So, yes, you tend to attract people who like the same things that you do. I'd say about 90 percent of my clients want an old home, and I sell new homes and commercial buildings as well, but older homes are what I love. When I walk into an old house, I get kind of giddy, and I look at the hardware and the trim. When I walk into a new house, I don't really feel anything and I don't find anything exciting. I'm not impressed by the travertine floors or the pressed particle-board crown moulding. The things that other people get really excited about don't really do much for me on those houses. So I don't know, I think you're going to attract people who like the same things that you do.

Barber: How did you develop so much knowledge about the types of materials that are used, particularly in houses? I find that you have so much knowledge about how houses were built and the construction methods and everything from tile to kinds of wood and brick. How did that come about?

Lynn: I don't have a direct answer for that. I think a lot of it is just that I've looked at enough old houses that I start to see patterns and I start to understand things. I start to understand when the solid brick homes were built versus the wood-frame homes that were then sided with brick. There's a big difference. There's sort of a time period when the solid bricks were built. I can look at it from the outside, and just by the position of the bricks under the windows, I can tell you if it's solid brick or if it's a veneer.

I've seen enough of them. I've read enough about the brick factory. I've just read a lot of stuff, and I've interviewed a lot of old-timers too. That's where I get most of my information, I would say, is just directly. That's how I found out that they used to grind up marble and put it in the grout on the old tiles, which is why some of these old bathrooms and kitchens, they're just bulletproof. The tile, the grout, is still perfect after seventy or eighty years. And how I learned that is just because an old lady was once on one of my walking tours, and she said, "My husband was a tile setter his whole life, and they just don't do things the way they used to. They used to grind up marble and put it in the grout to keep it so clean."

And I thought, "Oh, my gosh, like, that's it. That's it!" And it makes so much sense, because if you've ever tried to demolish one of these things, it's almost impossible if you've got ground-up marble in the grout. And it does, it stays clean. Marble doesn't stain like grout. It doesn't fall apart like grout.

Also I've seen a lot of the tools that were available, so something as simple as getting a 1908 Sears catalog, it has all of the latest homebuilding tools that were available, and really studying that and understanding, okay, this is what they had for a saw, this is what they had for a drill, this is what they had for a sander. And you understand that on these old houses, there were no nail guns, so every nail is hand-driven. There were no electric saws, so if it wasn't milled in a big mill, then it was hand-sawed on site. There weren't electric sanders, so they had planers. If they needed a door to fit and it didn't quite fit, they had to plane the edge and then they had to hand-sand it.

My grandfather was a carpenter. I have all his old tools down there, and they're from the 1920s. My mother gave them to me. And I can see what people had to use, and it impresses me to no end that all of these things were done without any power tools, and the craftsmanship, it's just overwhelming. But

looking in the old Sears catalogs, it gives you an idea of what was available at that time, and it can really give you a sense of awe for how these things were built and how they've lasted so long.

Barber: Your house is here on Wonder Street in-between Holcomb Avenue and Wells, which is a little further down. It's not directly the next street over. But can you talk a little bit about what this neighborhood was like when you first moved into this neighborhood and how you've seen it changing? You've developed a lot of expertise in both the Wells Avenue area and the Midtown area, but I want to take us back to when you first became aware of these neighborhoods, what they were like then.

Lynn: Well, like most of my friends who have been in this neighborhood for a decade or more, I ended up on the east side of Virginia because I was still, after all that time, priced out of the west side of Virginia. And I looked around, and I said, "You know, all these houses over here are just as cute and they're a lot cheaper. It's close enough." I'm, what, 500 feet from Virginia Street, or maybe a little bit more?

But it was funny because at that time there was more of a stigma attached to this neighborhood, and a lot of people said, "Wow. Are you sure about that? You want to move over there? Am I going to be safe if I come to visit you?" And it was just people didn't have a lot of faith in this neighborhood. And at that time, shortly after I bought this house, I was a full-time Realtor, and so when I would meet people who were looking for homes, I would say, "What areas do you want to live in?"

And they would say, "Well, Southwest Reno, you know, the old area up by the university, but nothing over in Wells."

And so ten years later now, when I meet a new home buyer who's looking for an old home and I ask them where they'd like to live: "Midtown, Wells, whatever," and it doesn't faze them. It's not any different to them. So it has been a slow process of change over here, and I think that what has really helped that a lot is that we have right now this really amazing group of people who work so well together over here. We're all committed to this neighborhood, and I think that we were all out there thinking the same thing for a long time, but it wasn't until we actually flyered the neighborhood and decided to all get together, that we met our core group of people who have made most of the things happen over here.

In terms of income level, age, ethnicity, we are so diverse. It is the most diverse group of people, and we are all just great friends. I have friends in this neighborhood who are definitely old enough to be my parents, and I just consider them friends. And it's amazing how just a dedicated group of people coming together can completely change a neighborhood and change the public's perception of the neighborhood as well.

Barber: Can you tell me about the creation of the West of Wells organization, how that came about? And is that the specific group you're talking about? That's a more formal organization, I suppose. Can you tell me about that a little bit?

Lynn: Yes. I want to say it was 2007, and there were a few neighbors who had met each other, mostly by walking our dogs and sitting on our porches. That's how I met most of my neighbors, walking my dog and meeting my neighbors sitting on their porches. I had a few acquaintances, and we got together and we were like, "We really want to get a Neighborhood Watch group together but also a neighborhood advocacy group," not just for crime fighting.



So we got some flyers made and we invited everyone to a meeting, and we decided that we were going to create a group and sort of have the snowball effect and try to get other people to join. We originally called ourselves the Wells Addition Neighborhood Group, which has the most unfortunate acronym of WANG. [laughs] So after we really started gaining momentum, we said, “You know what? We better change this early on, because I don’t think we want to be the WANG forever.” But it was sort of our little inside joke.

Initially we came together to combat absentee landlords, and so we were very direct in our initial meetings, where we sat down and we would write a letter to a landlord and we would say, “We are trying to carve out a decent neighborhood to live in. Your property is a nuisance. Not only the tenants could be nuisance, the appearance of the property could be a nuisance, and you need to take some more responsibility, because you’re affecting the quality of our life.”

So our initial thing was just really directly addressing the landlords, and, boy, did that work fast. People that are keeping these junky rentals, they don’t realize that anyone cares or that anyone’s paying attention. So it was like an immediate, immediate reaction, where these properties were immediately—all the bad tenants were out, good tenants were in, they were cleaned up. It was amazing, the effect that we had. So that was our original thing, was to really make the absentee property owners understand that there are people who have made this neighborhood their home, and that their actions were affecting us.

So after we gained some momentum, we had a larger group. We changed the name of the group to the West of Wells Neighborhood Group, which is WOW, and that sounded a little bit better. The reason that we didn’t take on more territory is that back in the seventies when all of the urban core neighborhoods were rezoned for infill, the zoning ended at Wells. So it was only between Wells and Holcomb that we had these large multi-unit properties that were causing so much trouble. They don’t have those east of Wells. They have a few, but they’re very few and far between. It’s mostly single-family homes or duplexes on that side.

We wanted to take a boundary that was naturally defined by main roads, so we had Ryland, we had Holcomb, we had Wells, and we had Vassar. That is a boundary that’s already created, a very small area, and we wanted to just address the issues in our neighborhood. Once people saw what we were doing east of Wells, and we all knew people east of Wells, too, they wanted to join our efforts, so for a brief time there was the East of Wells group. They weren’t able to remain organized, and so we have now taken on that territory as well. We just didn’t change our name, because it’s been established. But we do interact with people outside of our geographic boundary. We have a lot of members east of Wells that come to our meetings, and we do a lot of our cleanups and graffiti cleanups and trash pickups and tree plantings and all kinds of stuff, we do that east of Wells also. But in the beginning, we really had to focus on our neighborhood because it was much, much more of a problem than east of Wells.

The neighborhood composition is quite different with the types of properties that are over here. They are also old, this is an older area, so we have a lot more historically significant properties—I guess that’s my opinion—than there are east of Wells, too, just the sheer number that we have.

So that’s what our organization is. We originally started as a crime-fighting and a blight-fighting group, but now we’re just kind of a social group. But we get more done at our social gatherings than we do at our Neighborhood Watch meetings. We still have a Neighborhood Watch meeting every other month, but we have porch parties. We all meet with each other. We all talk to each other. We all know what’s going on. We have a very broad email outreach list. Many, many absentee landlords are on that list. City officials, all kinds of people are on that list. There’s an update that goes out every month.

I think what really makes this work is that we maybe have twenty people at our Neighborhood Watch meetings, maybe twenty, twenty-five people at our social gatherings, but there are 150 to 200 people who know what's going on in the neighborhood. And it never ceases to amaze me whenever I send an update out, how many responses I get back, and I'm thinking, "Who is this person?"

He's like, "I'm the landlord of 1205 Wheeler, and I just wanted to let you know we really appreciate what you're doing." So that is how it works, by just gaining the email addresses. And that was a long process of doing that and sending out letters to property owners and letting them know about our group: "Do you want to join our group? Would you like to be on our email list?" It's a neighborhood where most people know what's going on. If there's an issue, a safety issue, we can let everyone know right away just with a simple email. So it works out well. But we do have our core group of about twenty people who are really the ones making everything happen.

Barber: Is it a formalized nonprofit with a board of directors or anything?

Lynn: No, it's just an informal neighborhood group, but I'd say that we've gotten more done than many nonprofits with the formalized structure. As a grassroots organization, we've been able to get a lot of capital improvement projects done. We have been able to improve our relations with the city departments and the police department. I think that as a group we have changed the identity of our neighborhood to a place where people feel safe, and in doing that, we have created another area of town that more people feel safe living in. We have increased our property values. We have created a more friendly neighborhood. It's something we've been doing very slowly, with very small steps that have all built up over the last seven or eight years, so it's a different place now than it was then.

This is the type of neighborhood that it was in the past. People that I've interviewed who grew up in this neighborhood, this is how they describe it—a friendly neighborhood where you would walk around, and everyone knew everyone, and it is that way again, which is great.

Barber: Now, you played a major role in the creation of the Wells Avenue Conservation District. Can you talk a little bit about what that is and why it was important to you for this area to be recognized for its history?

Lynn: I think because of the decline that happened in this neighborhood for about twenty years, people kind of forgot the history over here, except for the people who grew up here, who were sort of sadly sitting at home reminiscing about the good old days, thinking that nobody cared about their neighborhood anymore. But once I really started researching this neighborhood, I was like, "Oh, my gosh. How come nobody knows about this? This is the most fascinating neighborhood. All these cool people lived here, and nobody knew about it."

And then I would look at the architecture, and think, "Oh, my gosh." I knew that we didn't have the support to do a historic district, and I don't know that any of us would have wanted that kind of regulation, anyway. But a conservation district was something that I felt strongly about because it would have been a morale booster for the neighborhood to be recognized, and I thought that we needed that. I also wanted it to serve as the sort of springboard for a lot of other educational projects as well.

So I just went to the HRC [Historical Resources Commission] and said this is what I want to do, and what are the forms that I need, and, of course, they gave me the wrong forms. [laughs] So I spent four years using the wrong forms, but that's okay, we can fix that. And I was able to partner with a land

use and planning class up at UNR, and their students all volunteered to help with the survey. I basically met with the students, got them all lined up, like here's your block that you're going to do, here's exactly what you need to do. And so what came in to me was six fat, fat binders full of data. Then the Historic Reno Preservation Society gave me an intern for two years in a row with the scholarship that's funded by Wanda Casazza. And these students organized all the data into the format that was then finally approved and adopted by the city.

There was a lot involved in it. The signs are just gorgeous. The little bungalow on the sign, the style and everything really represents the style of the neighborhood. And that was designed by Sadie Bonnette, who is also a former neighborhood resident. She started out as my tenant, then I helped her buy a house, and I helped her buy another house and helped her buy all kinds of stuff. But she designed those signs. And, you know, someone from outside the neighborhood could not have captured that. Those signs, we love them. They really are so representative of our neighborhood.

Just to get those done, we had to get the exact right shade of brown. The size of the letters had to be adjusted over and over because the lettering has to be smaller than the lettering on the street sign. There are so many regulations that go up to the federal level that we had to work with the Public Works Department on, and it was a big process. Then getting grants to get the signs printed. It was a four-year process. And it is so amazing, because just having those little signs up on every other stop sign, it reminds people that this is a special neighborhood.

Everyone asked me, "Well, why did you do it? It doesn't do anything. It doesn't make anyone preserve anything."

And I'd say, "You know what? It reminds them. It encourages preservation, and it notifies people that they're in a special historic area." And it is a source of pride for the neighborhood, and that does go east of Wells, also.

I'm still exhausted from the whole process of the Conservation District, but I'm hoping that it will serve as a boundary for other educational opportunities. It's just a great thing. Even though it doesn't actually do anything, it kind of does. [laughs] It's hard to put a value on what it does.

Barber: Now, today you lead walking tours of both the Wells Avenue area and the Midtown area. How did that come about, and when did you start doing that?

Lynn: Well, how I became interested in the history of my neighborhood is after sitting in my house and looking through these old windows that have the wavy glass, and walking on the floors, I thought, "You know, I wonder who lived here before me." It just was gnawing at me. I had to know.

So once I started researching these properties and I found out who built them and who had lived here, I became aware of Tony Pecetti and what an amazing, amazing person he was. Then I started interviewing people that I met through my real estate career: "Oh, if you're interested in that neighborhood, you should go talk to so-and-so. She grew up in this house right here." So it was through my real estate career and through my acquaintance with a lot of older Realtors that I've been able to meet a lot of the people that I've met.

And everyone I would ask about Tony Pecetti said, "Oh, he was so wonderful. When he walked into the room, he was just like a light. He had a light in his eye. He always had a big smile, and he just made everyone smile. The second he walked in the room, everyone started smiling." He didn't have an enemy in this town, and people spoke so fondly of him.

Then I started seeing all the ads in the old papers for the El Patio Ballroom, which is the dance hall that he owned. People would just run an ad in the paper that would say, "Congratulations, Tony. We love you." It was like, wow, everyone loved this guy. And I thought, "I love this guy. Who is this guy?" He died a year before I was born, forty-six years ago this month. And I just started feeling this connection to Tony, and I thought, "I want to know more about Tony," and I just felt so grateful that I had found out about him. Just knowing who he was and how much people loved him really changed my relationship with my properties. It made me feel so special, like, wow, Tony built these places for me, like they're such a good fit for me. And he was an on-site landlord. I'm an on-site landlord. I'm doing exactly what he was doing, like this is what he meant for these to be like.

The house he lived in in the back is amazing. It's like 600 square foot, it is so cute, and that's where he lived from 1924 to 1969. He had these three houses in the front built in 1925. His niece, who's also somebody that I've tracked down, has on her way to me right now a picture of Tony standing in front of these three brick houses right after they were built in 1925. It's going to be really exciting to see that. I can't wait.

So once I realized what a remarkable person Tony Pecetti was and how he was connected to these seemingly insignificant little houses, I thought, "Well, gosh, who are the other people in this neighborhood if these are connected to him?" And I thought, "Well, maybe this is just a fluke. I'm going to find out the rest of them are all boring."

Once I started researching and I learned how to research, then everything started falling into place, and it seemed like every house I researched had the most fascinating person that lived there. And these were not rich people. These were just everyday people who were such characters and really truly contributed so much to Reno. Then as I researched, oh, they had their wedding or they had this funeral or they had this dinner party, in the paper, in the "Society" section, every guest was listed, and I realized these people all knew each other. These people were all hanging out the same way that me and my neighbors are. And I just started to realize this connection between everyone. Everyone was a pallbearer at someone's funeral.

And so it just went on and on, and then when some of the older people that had grown up in the neighborhood got word that there was somebody interested in their stories, these people started contacting me. They'd say, "Oh, hey, I am so-and-so, and I grew up here, and I heard you were looking for information, and I would love to meet with you."

I started having these amazing meetings with people, and they would bring out their entire collection of snapshots and go through them with me, and I learned so much about the neighborhood by having people go through their snapshots with me. Then most of these people were nice enough to actually let me copy them. And I think what's so fascinating is that just by looking at everything in the background of these snapshots, I was able to learn so much about the neighborhood. And just the little stories that people tell, like, "Oh, okay, well, this is me and my brother standing in the front yard of this house here that we were renting because our house was being built. But you see in the background there that car? That belonged to so-and-so, and he was an entomologist up at the university and he had this big bug collection." And it's just these little things: "Oh, that's where Mrs. Brooks used to take us to give us chocolate milk." Pointing out things in the background of pictures has been probably where I got most of my information, and directly from the source. So once I got all that, I really had a sense of what this neighborhood was like.

And at the same time, working on the Conservation District project, I had to become sort of an amateur expert on architecture because I had to review all of these things that were coming in. I worked

with Mella Harmon on that, and she gave me a lot of information. If I had a question, I'd email her a picture and say, "What is this?" So I became a lot more familiar with architecture through that survey. But through my real estate career, going into enough houses that were built between 1925 and 1935, you start to see similarities and you start to realize this is what was going on then. This isn't a forties thing. This isn't a teens thing. I have been able to educate myself so much on architecture and materials just through visiting homes as a Realtor.

So all of that came together, and I just really wanted to share all of that with everyone, and so I started doing my tours, and did a program for HRPS. And the old-timers that grew up in this neighborhood came out of the woodwork and came on the tours and were so excited and then gave me more information, gave me more names of people that I should talk to, so this neighborhood is kind of like my family. And even the people who lived in this neighborhood a long time ago, it's just like a continuous family of people who have always cared about this neighborhood.

I started giving my tours, and every time I do my tour, I have more information, I have another house that I researched. And what is amazing to me is that I see how much it enhances my neighbors' experience living in their house, living in their neighborhood when they know the history. It makes it—the context, understanding the context of I'm sitting right here right now—like, why? Like what came before me? Understanding everything that came before, it has made us love our neighborhood even that much more.

So not only have I been able to share the history of this neighborhood with all of Reno, but my neighbors. I think it's the most important thing, because if I see a new person move in, I'm like, "Hey, here's the history of your house. This is so-and-so, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And even that guy across the street, the landlord who emails me every month, he was out there measuring for vinyl windows, measuring for a chain-link fence, and I sent him a letter and I said, "Look, here's the deal. I know what you're trying to do. You're trying to make it more energy-efficient and all this, but you have the last Edd Lee home that is in its original condition. So do you really want to screw that up?"

And he had no idea what he had. I sent him the ad from his house when it was being sold in 1942, and I just explained the significance of everything. And he called me. He said, "Oh, my gosh, thank you so much. I almost just ruined this house." So he went to town, and he completely restored it, close to original. He didn't use original colors, but paint colors can be changed. But, I mean, he was going to take off the original shutters that had little moons cut into them, and I just had to explain to him, "This is the significance of your property." So now he is a much prouder landlord than he was before, and he has a Conservation District sign right above his little house.

Barber: Can you just explain a little bit who Edd Lee was, what that means?

Lynn: Edd Lee was a real estate developer in Reno and Winnemucca, but mostly in Reno, before and after World War II, and he specialized in these tiny little homes that are between six and seven hundred square feet, no basements, just absolute minimum, two-bedroom, one-bath. During World War II, it was extremely difficult to get building materials. You had to build the absolute minimum of a house. So he took what he had to work with, and he built the cutest houses, I mean so adorable and so darling.

He was a larger-than-life character, kind of like Tony Pecetti, and he was somebody that everyone knew. He had an ad that he ran in the paper every week, and it was a caricature of him drawn by Lew Hymers, and it made him just seem like this big jovial character with this big ten-gallon hat and his cowboy boots. So he also had a very soft side.

One of the people that I interviewed, Joe Bridgman, he actually gave me some of the most valuable information about this neighborhood that I have. But Edd Lee helped Joe and Anna Bridgman build their house, because they could only qualify so much for an FHA loan. Edd Lee let them dig their own foundation out. He let them dig their own sewer line out. He let them dig their own oil tank pit. He let them do all of this stuff to cut the cost that he would have to charge them for the home. So they were out there with shovels digging with all their friends, and it took \$1,000 off the price of the house, and it allowed them to qualify for the mortgage.

That's the thing, is that when you talk to some people, they'd say, "Well, he was a philanderer and a womanizer and he wasn't so great," and then other people said, "He made home ownership possible for me. He helped me." He wasn't perfect, but he definitely understood the struggles that people were facing.

He actually did the additions on the houses that I own, in 1942. These were originally one-bedroom, one-bathroom houses when Tony Pecetti had them built in 1925. And in 1942 there was definitely a housing shortage during World War II, so he had these bedrooms and bathrooms added on to the back of all these houses. And I found the building permit that said that Edd Lee did the work, and everything in it looks just like it does in an Edd Lee home, too, so I'm most certain of that, that he did them.

Edd Lee's son, Bob Lee, is a member of the Historic Reno Preservation Society, and when he saw that I was researching the Wells Avenue neighborhood, he sent me a letter and explained who he was, told me all about his father, and sent me a scan of every photograph that he had of the neighborhood as well. The people that have approached me and have found out that I was researching the neighborhood, they've had all this information that they've just been holding in, and they didn't think anyone cared and they didn't know what to do with it. So I've been the repository for a lot of this stuff, and it's pretty special. It's pretty amazing, because growing up, I never felt a neighborhood sense of belonging like this, nowhere I've ever lived. It's only here, and I think this is the type of neighborhood that I certainly have always dreamed of living in.

And having these voices from the past come back, as I get more information, I never know what's coming. I was just contacted by Sheldon Wells' granddaughter, who said that she's moving to Reno. And I thought, "Wow, this is exciting!"

"Oh, hey, I found out you were researching. Here's my email address. I'm going to be moving to Reno here in a couple years, and I just wanted to let you know I'm here and I'm ready to talk to you." So it's fun.

This, obviously, led over to Midtown because there's a common boundary. The primary reason I developed the Midtown tour was because after we came out of the recession, Midtown was kind of the hot area where all the new businesses were going. I saw a lot of people getting their hands on these old buildings, and I thought, "I think I'd better do some research and I think I'd better target my tours toward the business owners just so they understand what they have so that they don't screw it up," pretty much. [laughs]

I had no idea when I started looking at Midtown where to even begin, because there wasn't anything. With the Wells Avenue neighborhood, it's always been the Wells Avenue neighborhood. Everyone has always identified it as the Wells Avenue neighborhood. That's the identity. That area didn't have anything like that, and I thought, "Hmm. What are we going to rally around here? What am I going for?" And I had no idea.

I just started researching, researching, and then I started realizing, okay, what we have here is a lot of original—not a lot—a few original buildings from the early 1900s. We have several excellent examples of structures that were built in the twenties. The Oldsmobile dealership on Moran and Virginia, the Frohlich Building on St. Lawrence and Virginia. You've got the apartment building—the Giraudo Apartments. And there's another, the Besso Apartments which were at 727. A lot of really, really beautiful buildings from the twenties.

Then you've got the motor lodges, but then what I started to understand is, wow, there were a lot more motor lodges that are gone. There was the Kit Carson Hotel, there was the Caravan Inn, and I think some other ones, too. And I started to realize, okay, I see what's happening here. How did all this get here?

First, I'm looking at this 1908 airship photo, and I'm thinking, okay, the business district is centralized around the railroad. This is all residential, and I can see from the photo that these houses are still here. Okay. So then when do we get another big change? That was the twenties. Well, what happened in the twenties? Everyone had cars, so business districts were decentralizing and moving into this area, so then that's how these got here. But, look, these are on the site of where one of these old houses was, so the old houses were torn down and then these were put here.

And then what comes next? Oh, okay, the old mid-century hotels. Well, what was happening then? People were really traveling by car a lot more across the country on road trips, and you couldn't really jump on a commercial airliner at that point. That was not a viable transportation option, so everyone was doing road trips by car. It was after World War II. So then I saw where, wow, some of the twenties buildings had been torn down to make room for these motor lodges, as well as some of the original homes from the 1900s.

And then what happened? Well, people started flying on airplanes, the interstates were put in, the 395 freeway was put in, and then 4<sup>th</sup> Street and Virginia were bypassed, and then that became the story of how the interstate killed the Main Street on both 4<sup>th</sup> Street and Virginia, and we had the period of decline.

And now we're back to where people want to walk and bike more, and so the scale of this neighborhood makes a lot of sense. So now we're back to 1900 where everyone was walking around. [laughs] And I realize that, wow, I know that transportation has shaped not only Reno but every city in this nation, but this was a study on a small area. Transportation—this is it. This is a neighborhood that's adjacent to downtown. And you can even see the period where suburbanization and the mass exodus from the downtown area has an effect on it, too, because of the type of businesses that came in there, the businesses that you don't want in the suburbs, I guess.

It's just been an interesting study, and it didn't come to me right away. I was really wondering, "What is the thread that I'm going to use to stitch all this together?" And it finally came to me, and I thought, "Oh, okay. This is what we're going to talk about." But I think it really does make sense. And I think there are probably other threads as well, but that one seemed to be the one that had the most to talk about, the most interesting stuff.

Barber: So you said you were initially hoping to target the owners of these properties with your tours of the Midtown area. Have you found them to be receptive?

Lynn: Extremely. I've done the tour for the Midtown merchants a couple times, the Creative Coalition, and I think I've been able to help educate some key people about the need for preservation and the importance of this motel sign, and I think it has helped, because, again, understanding the context of your

neighborhood makes your experience there so much better, and I think that that has improved some people's view.

I did start doing the tour for HRPS, and it was one of the most well-attended tours that we had last year. I had over eighty people on our tour, and people just loved it. They just loved it. Then I have Marty jumping up and down. He's got his photo album with him. He's like, "I grew up right here! I grew up right here!" So the people, they find out about this stuff and they come on the tours, and then they're giving me more information, and it's so exciting.

But really, the reason I developed the Midtown tours is that I can see Midtown from my living room window. It's right there. And I felt like there are some buildings that are in danger, and through that, through my desire to instill a sense of appreciation in the business owners, I educated myself about the area, too, which has been interesting. I don't find it nearly as interesting as the Wells Avenue neighborhood, though. [laughs] That's still my baby, and that's still where there's just so much love in this neighborhood that goes back generations, like the letter I was sent. Jeannie Potere was Tony Pecetti's niece. She still is. She's still alive. I talked to her on the phone for hours, and she used to live in this house, in my house, for ten years, 1959 to 1969. When Tony died and the properties were sold is when she moved out. So we had a lot to talk about. But she grew up at 137 Burns, the castle there. That's where she grew up. So I was telling her about Lee and Ivy, who had bought the house and how they were fixing it up.

So, anyway, Jeannie's daughter emailed me and said, "I just want to let you know how over the moon my mom is with hearing about how the people who are living in these houses want to know the past, want to know the history of the people who built them." And she said, "Because we lived in the house, we lived in those houses, those houses are a part of us," and that it means so much to her to know that people care about them still. This is somebody that I've never even met in person, but it's like her love of this house is just part of my love of this house. We hear stories like that all the time, and it's just the people who grew up here in this neighborhood, they really loved it.

It was really sad, there was a major period of decline in this neighborhood for about twenty years, about 1979 to about 1999. It was not a good neighborhood. It was a neighborhood where there was a lot of crime. There were no owner/occupants. It was a neighborhood where when the police responded to a citizen complaint, the citizen was treated as part of the problem because they chose to live in a bad neighborhood. It was really sad for a lot of people to see that happen, and I'm happy that they get to see now that that time is over and that we're moving on, kind of moving back in the direction where it came from.

Barber: And it's really happening in a way to the Midtown area, to South Virginia Street in a commercial way, too, having mostly, it seems, independent local business owners moving in, at least as tenants, if not the actual owners of those buildings.

Lynn: And it's great to see what's happening in Midtown, and I know a lot of the buildings are being renovated. I know a lot of things have to be changed, but as long as the major architectural elements are preserved and the legacies of the buildings are preserved, I think that's the most important thing. But I really hope some of them aren't too significantly altered. I've seen some renditions, and I'm just thinking, "Oh, no. Please don't do that." [laughs] But I think once people know the history of their building, it does make them appreciate it more, and I think it does make them want to preserve it more and to alter it less.



So I think it's a good thing that you're doing with a lot of these buildings by really, really digging into the history of them, because I've done that to a certain degree, but not as deeply as you have on some of these buildings. I've just tried to figure out what is the story of Midtown, what is the history of Midtown. And it's complicated. It's always been the South Virginia Business District, but it's a neighborhood that has evolved as it responded to the changes in transportation, as it responded to, "Oh, hey, we are the 395 Highway. Oh, we're not anymore." It's kind of like they've just had to grow and change to respond to how people interact with that part of town. And in the eighties and nineties, people interacted with that part of town as the place where the strip clubs are, it's where the adult stores are, and people are wanting to interact with it in a different way now, which is exciting.

Barber: I think it's so important to try to humanize those spaces and tell the stories of the people, and what you do in Wells Avenue and in Midtown also is combine that with an appreciation for the actual structures, for the handcrafted nature of a lot of the ways that they were built. And connecting those two things or having those two things happen simultaneously seems to really be your goal here, because that increases the appreciation, not just of the story but of the structure.

Lynn: Yes, because all of the little parts on a building tell the story not only of the building, but where our country was at that time, what was important to us. Little things that have been preserved, like on the outside of 701 South Virginia they've kept all the little tiles with the little egg-and-dart deco trim tile. Even though they are cracked, there are missing tiles, some of them are broken, it doesn't matter. Having those on there, you can almost see Heric's Café that used to be in that space, you can almost see the people sitting in the window. I think little things like that are important to preserve. That building has had a lot of damage, it's been sandblasted and then it's been painted. I mean, it's impossible to bring it back to what it once looked like, but to save those little features is extremely important, because it shows what was important at the time.

That's one of the reasons that I'm so sad that 600 South Virginia is painted, because I think once the paint is off of that, it's going to look really similar to the Girardo Apartments, in between the Besso Apartments and 701 South Virginia.

Barber: And there's tile on exterior of so many of the buildings in Midtown, which is so unusual to see today, anyway, in Reno, because downtown we got rid of a lot of the buildings of that vintage. There's tile on the Solari Building, that is the adult bookstore now. There is a whole row of commercial buildings a little further south that have beautiful tile that I'm just trying to learn more about, too. You're very good at pointing out these details and having people look more closely at that, at the Osen building. I don't know, do you want to talk about that one a little? You just were talking about it, getting the paint off. That's the one you're talking about at 600 South Virginia?

Lynn: Yes.

Barber: Because there are some details on that building, too, that are just extraordinary.

Lynn: Yes. From the old black-and-white photos of that building, it does look like it's yellow brick with a red-brick accent. It looks like they've used different bricks with different textures and also pulled some of the bricks out so that they actually stick further out than other bricks to create a design. That's a very

similar design to what's on the Shea's Tavern building. But from the old photos, it really looks like a yellow brick building underneath all of that.

Getting the paint off is not an easy process for brick, especially when you have etched brick or combed brick. Getting the paint out of all those little crevices is almost impossible, so if that building were sandblasted, you're going to lose the texture. Different textures of brick helped achieve a specific pattern, like the building on South Virginia that's becoming the distillery now. They've got flat brick and they've got combed brick on it, and just the placement of it, there's a pattern in there.

Barber: There is the old Classic Framing building, most recently [765 South Virginia].



The historic Osen Motor Sales building at 600 South Virginia Street. Alicia Barber photo.

Lynn: Yes. You're going to lose some of that if it's sandblasted, but also sandblasting is really detrimental to mortar and brick, and it can make it age a lot faster, because you're removing the protective coating on the outside of the brick. But there are some—I guess they're terracotta, poured plaster—I'm not really sure what they are, but they're little emblems on the Osen Dodge building. It's the Star of David, and it says DB for Dodge Brothers. It was up on the building, and for the longest time I didn't know, was that a local thing? Were the Dodge dealership owners in Reno of Jewish descent, and this is something they chose to put on their building, or was this a national symbol for Dodge? I had no idea.

Then about six months ago, I was watching TV and a Dodge commercial came on, and it was like a throwback commercial to the forties or wherever, and that emblem popped up on the commercial. So that's how I learned it was a national symbol for Dodge. And it flashed on the screen so fast, but me and my husband were like, "Oh, did you see that? Oh, my gosh!" We were just freaking out because there it was. So that was a national Dodge symbol. Apparently the people who started Dodge cars were Jewish, because you've got that on there, so I'm sure the people here that owned it probably were not Jewish but they had that emblem up there. That's a very important thing. To lose those emblems would be absolutely unacceptable. Whoever gets that building should not do anything with those.

There are other things on that building that are so interesting, but what just bugs me is when I look at the old pictures before everything was painted, everything just looked so much better. It's going to be impossible to get it back to that point. But it's going to have to be a very delicate process with somebody who really cares to do that right, and if you have somebody come in that doesn't understand what they're working with—isn't that also a DeLongchamps?

Barber: Yes, and I think it was expanded. It was added to a little bit, too.

Lynn: Yes. But even just the story that that building has to tell about transportation, if you look at the old photos, there were houses on the site in 1900. In 1908 there were houses there. It was torn down to make way for that building. The way that it was designed with—you can still the little driveway cuts that are there, and that's where they had the big doors and they pulled the cars out so people could see them.

When that building was built, from what I read, in the 1920s, there were twelve car dealerships in Reno, and you could walk into a dealership and buy a car on credit at that time. So it was a time when you started to see a lot of houses that had a very noticeable garage as part of their architecture, too. You've got a lot of homes from 1926, 1928 where they've got the the basement garage where you drive under the house, you put your car in there. Before that, you couldn't do that. The garage wasn't really incorporated into the architecture. It was sort of separate. But so many people had cars then that homes started to be designed with cars in mind.

That's another thing that I talk about a lot, that when you look at the older houses, you see porches on the front. For homes that were built before automobiles were invented or before a lot of people had automobiles, the porch was the primary feature. That was the main design feature of the front façade of the house. Then as people came to rely more and more on cars, the garage became sort of the central focus of the façade of the house. Then porches started to get smaller and smaller and smaller until by the 1950s, you don't really have front porches, but people began to retreat to their backyards where they were more isolated from people.

Cars really changed everything, not only the design of the city, not only how the city developed, but the actual design of our homes. Our very homes were significantly altered by garages, and that's one of the ways you can—if you're looking at residential architecture—you can look for clues. How big is the front porch? Where is the garage? Is there a driveway cut at all? There are just a lot of clues there.

When you understand the advances in technology, when you learn when refrigerators were finally available to everyone, when you learn when the electric clothes dryer actually became something that most people had, you can look at a house and go, "Oh, well, that's why the washing machine is in the kitchen, because it's right by the back door which was right by the clothesline." It was simple. It makes so much sense. Then you walk in and people are like, "Why is there a washing machine in the kitchen? Where does the dryer go?" They didn't have dryers in 1950. You could get a washing machine, but not a dryer. So I find myself constantly explaining to people, when I'm showing them real estate, this is why this is like this, because this hadn't been invented when this house was built, so there was no room for it.

That's another thing that really interested me, the evolution of interior design based on the response to the available technology. This house was built without room for a refrigerator. There were no fridges when this house was built. So it's interesting once you learn that. And learning those kinds of key points, it's a big part of how I learned a lot about just being able to date homes.

Barber: And that connection to the cars, it's interesting looking at Midtown, too, because a lot of the advertisements of a lot of the businesses that went in there, particularly I guess more in the forties and the fifties, the big claim was no parking problems, because downtown was so congested. And there was plenty of parking on South Virginia Street because it had just become so congested due to, I don't know, all the development and shopping and tourism in the downtown area.

Lynn: Yes. It was, I guess, kind of the very first suburban shopping area. [laughs]

Barber: So to just finish up here a little bit, as a Realtor, as someone who has been very attuned to changes in neighborhoods, not just in these particular areas in Reno but in a broader sense also, when you look at this moment, what are your thoughts about where Reno is with respect to appreciating its history? Do you see any trends when it comes to attitudes toward history and historic properties?

Lynn: I think that more people are wanting to move back to the city centers. That's very, very obvious. We are starting to get our first retirees in the Wells Avenue area, people that have grown up, raised their families in these big suburban homes who are saying, "I want to be near walking distance to all my restaurants and the river," and we're starting to get retirees now. So it's great.

And I definitely think people want to be in a walkable community. People are not as afraid of mixed-use zoning as they were in the seventies, eighties, and nineties where they felt, "If there's a commercial building built near my house, my property values are going to plummet." That was sort of the attitude, and I think people are really moving away from that. They want non-automobile-scale neighbors. So that's definitely coming back. You've still got the people that want the suburbs, but I would say that the trend is moving more toward that.

This is the thing that frustrates me the most, is people I meet who like the idea of an old house, they like the look of an old house, but they want to walk in and have it be a modern floor plan. And that's what's frustrating for me, just like I was trying to explain: "Well, let me explain why this kitchen is like this. Let me explain why your washing machine is in the kitchen and your dryer is in the garage."

[laughs]

What I'm finding is most endangered are the interiors, and that's really where you get so much information. People want to come in and gut the interiors, but when they pull up into their driveways, they want to feel like June Cleaver in their beautiful historic-looking home. But they want to walk in and they want it to be modern. So I truly think that people like the idea of old houses, but they don't like the reality of it.

There are a small group of people like me, where I would not get rid of my single-pane windows if you paid me a million dollars. It's just not happening. [laughs] I got rid of granite and I put in ceramic tile. I am cut from a different fabric.

But I try to help people navigate that line when I'm selling them homes, and I try to say, "Well, I understand you want to modernize this, but this is something that you might want to consider keeping," or, "If you tear this out, could you please call me so I can come get it," kind of thing. [laughs]

That's what worries me the most is the loss of the windows and doors. Everyone wants to change out the windows and doors. And then modernizing the interiors, really gutting the kitchens. People like the look of the exterior of the old homes, and that's about it. And that's been going on for a long time. Why the suburbanization was so rampant in the first place is that, well, first of all, we had cars and the suburbs were popping up. But people were like, "Oh, I'm living in this bungalow, and there's one

bathroom and there's two bedrooms, and it's got these rickety little basement stairs. Finishing off the basement is kind of out of the question because it gets wet all the time. It's musty. The garage doesn't fit my Buick anymore." They were functionally obsolete, where people felt like, "This house, I need two tiled baths. I need natural gas heat. I need a two-car garage," and so that's why people started moving away from these neighborhoods in the first place.

But it's still an issue. It's that people want the look but they don't want the experience of living in an old house. So that's where I'm different. [laughs] And there are a lot of people like me, but there's—I don't know what else to say about it. That's what I see, is that we're losing a lot, and a lot of it needs to be documented.

One of the things that I'm able to track is I'll see a house pop up that's been in the same family since it was built in the twenties, and it comes on the market, it has all the original tile, I mean absolutely gorgeous. It sells, and then six months later I see it back on the MLS again, and I look at the pictures, and I'm thinking, "Oh, my god. What have you done? Where is all of this stuff?" So I see that happen so much, and some of the stuff that gets torn out I don't understand. Like, what don't you see in this? What is it that you don't like about this amazing thing that you just tore out of this house?

And moving walls. People are moving a lot of walls, too. All of these old houses had doors on all the bedrooms and offices and everything—just taking off the doors, opening it up. That's a really big thing, is the open floor plan. Even little things that people don't really think of, like in the twenties when this was built, the walls were these nice smooth plaster walls. The original builder would have rolled over in his grave if he knew that you chipped the plaster off to expose the brick wall. No, no, no, you're not supposed to see that. That's the icky side. The nice brick is on the outside. You don't look at all of my mistakes and where I put little pieces of wood in to brace things. And in the brick houses, the solid brick houses, they actually chipped away brick to run the electrical inside the brick, and they literally chiseled it away. So you get these little channels in the wall, and people think, "Yeah, bringing back this rustic style."

If this was an industrial building, that would make sense, but on a bungalow, no, that's not how it's supposed to be. It's supposed to be smooth, pretty plaster walls. There was an art to that plaster. That plasterer didn't bring in a piece of sheetrock and nail it up. That plasterer nailed lathe boards across the framing with just the right amount of gap, and then mixed the plaster just so, and then applied it with such skill that you have this perfectly smooth wall. That's what you should be appreciating. If you want to appreciate the brick, go on the outside of the house or go into an industrial building. You're not supposed to see that. But that's what people do. They come in and they take all the plaster off of the inside of the bungalow, and it's not the right thing to do. And it happens every day. I see it every day. And they think it's so great. And I'm like, "No. Stop doing that!" [laughs]

My favorite one that I saw—this was one where I just got so angry because my clients loved the house, and I thought, "What?" It was a 1940s house, and I'm looking around it, and I'm thinking, "Something is not right." And there was crown moulding on the top of all of the door trim. And the owner was there, because it was for sale by owner. And I asked, "Did you put that on?"

He said, "Yeah, I put that on all the door frames."

And I thought, "Oh." Well, the house was built in 1947, and they weren't putting crown moulding on top of the door frames then. And I picked it out right away, and it irritated me so bad, and I'm just thinking, "You shouldn't have done that. I don't know what else to say. It's horrible." [laughs]

Barber: I think you're right that education can help, but only if people are really sticking it out. But you're making an effort through your tours and through the West of Wells organization and the Conservation District with the signage to try to make people much more aware of these issues in ways both large and small. And I imagine you see those efforts continuing.

Lynn: Yes. There's definitely a small group of people who are very aware of the need to preserve and the need when you're replacing missing architectural elements like my front door, that you replace it with something that looks original, I guess. But I would say most people that I meet, they want to modernize the old house. There are only parts of the old house that they like and parts of the old building that they like. They don't want it to be exactly that way it was. I'm not completely against that, but it does cause us to lose a lot of things. Basically you're denying future people the opportunity to appreciate those things.

I don't know what else to say. I just do my best in my real estate career to try to help people decide what to modernize and what to preserve, and they don't always listen to me. I had one client who bought a home, an original owner home from 1961, a beautiful brick ranch home. It had a fireplace in it that was big enough for a ski lodge, beautiful native sandstone all over. They painted it white with black, and then painted all the mortar joints black, and then posted pictures all over social media about how beautiful it was. It was the most painful thing for me. The sandstone had the rings and everything in it, the beautiful rings. And I just don't—these are things that I don't understand. [laughs] I do not understand. I didn't know I needed to tell you not to paint the fireplace. I just thought you would know not to paint the fireplace. You know what I mean?

I think people do want to move back into the older neighborhoods but they want the modern living experience also.

Barber: And there's still time and some potential since this is an ongoing trend of moving toward these more central urban neighborhoods to continue to try to preserve a lot of that before it goes away.

Lynn: And people also want to live in new construction in old neighborhoods, because they want to see the historic buildings and homes when they're walking around, but they're not opposed to living in a modern building within that neighborhood, either. That's just what I see. I think definitely the suburbs, they still draw people, but I don't see a lot of younger people being drawn to the suburbs as much anymore, and I've seen that change even over the last ten years.

Barber: I guess one last question I have is really from that Realtor perspective. Do you see property values in the central areas in Reno rising pretty rapidly at this point? Are we in this recovery mode where that's happening? I guess in some ways that might not be considered a good thing when you're trying to buy a house, but is that a trend that really is occurring?

Lynn: Oh, absolutely, yes. If you put a house on the market in Midtown, you can get a lot more per square foot than you can just about anywhere else, and that's been the case for a while. Southwest Reno has always had higher property values. But now the area that we're calling Midtown, that was sort of the more rundown area of Southwest, so it wasn't commanding the prices that it's commanding now. It's really the impetus of the business district that's driving that. But even in this West of Wells neighborhood, the values are about the same as Midtown.

Barber: Do you find houses coming up for sale pretty frequently in these areas, both east and west of South Virginia Street and into this area?

Lynn: No, no. It's funny because in the Wells Avenue neighborhood, there's just—I was looking. Somebody specifically wanted to live in West of Wells, between Holcomb and Wells. There was, within a six-month period, one house that came on the market. One. And there are a lot more coming on over there because the prices are a little higher, and there are some people now who have owned properties over there for a long time where they see this as their exit strategy: "This is the time for me to get out, because I'm going to get a lot, probably more for my property than I am in a long time, and I've owned it for forty years, so maybe now's the time to get out."

Barber: On the west side of South Virginia, you mean, in that area?

Lynn: Yes. Over here, it's different, though. Not as many properties come on the market, not nearly as many as west. So things change. Maybe the property values just aren't high enough here yet to inspire people to sell, I don't know. But there's a house up here, a single-family home west of Wells that just sold for \$340,000, and I think that's a record breaker. [laughs] So, yes, it's happening.

I think that basically if we're comparing the Midtown area to the West of Wells area, the Wells Avenue area in general has always just been a little bit more low-key than that area. We're doing great things over here. There are a lot of awesome things happening over here, but we're just not marketing ourselves to the level that they are over there. So we get to enjoy all the benefits of that area but have our peaceful, quiet enjoyment of our very, very stable neighborhood that's been improved over a very long period of time on very solid foundations. It just seems more of a rock solid neighborhood with people historically who have cared about the neighborhood, as well.

I think the history of the identity of this neighborhood is what also gives it strength. It's that people have always identified it as the Wells neighborhood, and it just wasn't that great of a thing for about twenty years, but we're back to it being a great thing. I think there's not as much cohesiveness in the Midtown area. There's not as much historical identity for people to attach to, and that could lead to a lot of the destruction of some of the buildings that are significant because people don't understand what the context is, why is this building important or why is this house important. I think it's harder to establish that identity and that context over there. At least it is for me. Maybe somebody else could do a better job at it. I don't know. [laughs]

Barber: Well, I want to thank you so much for talking with me today.

Lynn: Sure. Thank you.

Barber: I really appreciate it.



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## BARRY O’SULLIVAN

Midtown resident and rental property owner



Barry O’Sullivan in front of his home on Holcomb Avenue. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Born in Reno, Barry O’Sullivan recalls spending time at his grandparents’ house at 706 Holcomb Avenue, where he now lives. His father began to purchase houses in the Midtown area for rentals in the late 1950s and also constructed some new apartments. Barry took over the property management business after his father passed away in 2003. He is an expert on the neighborhood.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and I’m in Reno, Nevada with Barry O’Sullivan to conduct an interview for the RTC’s Midtown History Project.

Barry, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

O’Sullivan: Yes.



Barber: Thank you. I want to go back a little bit with you because you come from a long line of Nevada residents, and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about how long your family has lived in Nevada and what the names are of the different branches of your family.

O'Sullivan: Starting on my father's side, John O'Sullivan is my father. He was born on the top of Sullivan Lane in Sparks on the O'Sullivan Ranch. That was back in 1913. My father's father passed away when he was eighteen months old from lockjaw. I need to check on his first name. I can get back to you on it. They started the O'Sullivan-Kelly Ditch, which brought water from Arlington and First Street across the valley over to Sparks to irrigate the O'Sullivan Ranch. Once they passed away, it was taken over by the Oppio family, and the Oppio family, I believe, still own it today. But that was many years ago.

Barber: Do you ever remember being on that ranch?

O'Sullivan: Never.

Barber: That was before your time?

O'Sullivan: Right. And on my mom's side, it was the Ginocchio Ranch, which is located on Foothill and Virginia. My grandma was the oldest. Her name was Sadie, and she had six brothers and sisters. That ranch is still here today, and there are still a few buildings left on the property. I spent a lot of my childhood out there on weekends, irrigating with my uncle and, I'm sure, driving him crazy. We had a great time. I have lots of good memories from out there. I'm a fourth-generation Reno, Nevadan and proud of it.

Barber: Now, we're in your house, which is on the corner of Thoma and Holcomb Avenue, and this was your grandmother's house. Can you tell me what you know about the history of this house and when your grandmother moved in?

O'Sullivan: My grandma's ranch was over by Reno High School. It later became the first subdivision in Reno, called Westfield Village, but before that, my grandma and grandpa had a dairy there, which was called Silver State Dairy. They owned it from about 1916 or 1917 until 1942, when they sold the ranch for that subdivision, and my grandma and grandpa moved into the house here at Holcomb and Thoma. At that time, the house was already twenty-five years old, maybe a little bit more. My grandma was the second owner, and she lived for ninety-eight years and passed away in 1996. I moved in with her in 1977, and I've been here ever since and probably will stay here until my last breath.

Barber: And where were you born?

O'Sullivan: I was born at St. Mary's Hospital in 1958 and never left the area, only moving one time in my life that I know of. My parents did move when I was five years old, but I don't remember actually moving. When I got my first job, I moved out of the house and moved into my grandma's house, and that's where I've been since.

Barber: What schools did you go to growing up?

O'Sullivan: I went to Echo Loder, I went to Little Flower, and I went to Vaughn Junior High School and Wooster High.

Barber: You were visiting this house from a very early age. Can you describe your memories coming here as a young child and what the neighborhood was like at that time?

O'Sullivan: Well, this area was where a lot of people lived because the further south you went, it started to become a lot of empty lots. I can remember after cutting the grass clippings, my dad would put the grass clippings in his Comet, and we would go over where the Park Lane Mall was later built, and dump our grass clippings there, because there were horses in that lot, and the horses would come on over and eat up the grass that you would drop off. A lot of people did that. It was just a lot of empty lots. The farther you got past Plumb Lane, it certainly started to thin out.

This area is where my parents used to shop, at Washoe Market. There was a little hardware store down by Washoe Market. I'm not remembering the name of it right now. We would go to Hansel and Gretel for our clothes, every time school started. It seems like that's the only time I ever got new clothes—you went down there to get clothes before school started so you looked good.

I was very much always into my family, very, very close with my grandparents and my parents. When I would spend weekends here, my grandma would give me a one-gallon glass jar and I can remember taking that glass jug over to Crystal Springs Water. She would give me a nickel because that's what it cost for a gallon, and I would put the glass jug underneath the spout. They always leaked a little bit, and I'd always tend to keep it underneath there and wait until the thing got full so I could save the nickel for myself. If somebody pulled up, then I would have to pull my bottle out while they got their water.

Barber: And you would haul it back yourself?

O'Sullivan: Yes, I would haul it. You would go about maybe one property, and then you would stop and set it on the sidewalk, take a break, then pick it up and move it down the street a little bit farther. It wasn't too far. It's only a block and a half away, but still, when you're ten years old, it took a little while.

Barber: So this wasn't some kind of glass jar that had handles on it?

O'Sullivan: It had a burlap bag around it. It was a glass jug, and the cap screwed on it, and it had a finger grip. That's what my grandma used to have for her drinking water here.

Barber: So that wasn't something that the company provided?

O'Sullivan: No.

Barber: People would just bring whatever they had?

O'Sullivan: Yes. There was no such thing as plastic bottles or anything like that. This is way before plastic.

Barber: Right. [laughs] And they just had the spigots on the outside of the building?

O'Sullivan: Yes, there were about five different spouts on the outside of the building where you could line up your bottles, and a car would be able to pull right in and fill their bottles. You could fill either one gallon or five gallons. For a gallon jug, you'd flip down the shelf, and set your one gallon jug on there. Or you'd flip up the shelf and put your glass bottle on there, and it would fill five gallons. That was up until ten years ago. It wasn't that long ago that they used to serve water like that.

Barber: Do you think there were other places in town that did that at the time? Or is that the only one you know of?

O'Sullivan: I know my dad used to get ice from a place out on Fourth Street where you would get big cubes of ice.

Barber: That's right. Union Ice, I think, was there.

O'Sullivan: Yes. But I don't know if they did water. This is the only place that I know that did water.

You were able to walk around here. I remember going to the Penguin, which was on Virginia Street and Cheney. I would walk over to see my dad. My dad had a lot of rental properties on Saint Lawrence and Tahoe Street, and he pretty much worked six days a week. Every single day at the same time, he would go to the Penguin for lunch, and either I could go over there from my grandparents' house or my mom and I would go over there and meet my dad for lunch. It was just really different then than it is now.

On the street in front of our house, which is Holcomb, there used to be a lot of dirt on the other side of the pavement, because that's where the train went in front of the house. That was the V&T Railroad, which I think stopped in 1952 or '53, somewhere in that time, and then that property pretty much stayed vacant for a long time.

Barber: So was your father's day job managing those properties, or did he have another job?

O'Sullivan: My dad spent most of his time maintaining the properties and keeping them rented.

Oh, another thing I know I used to enjoy doing is I would go down in front of the Shoshone Coca-Cola plant, and I could sit there for hours and watch those bottles go by. That was always very fascinating to me. They always used to have all their Coca-Cola trucks parked there in the center lane between Holcomb and Cheney. That lot was nothing but old Coca-Cola trucks that they stored there when they weren't delivering Coca-Cola. That was always a good time.

Barber: Would they ever come out and give you a Coke if you were standing there long enough?

O'Sullivan: Never. Not once.

Barber: Some of these places I'd love to ask you to elaborate about more if you have memories of them. We've heard about the Penguin a little bit. Do you have memories of what it was like inside, what you would get there, what they were known for?

O'Sullivan: They could have been open for more meals, but we only had lunch there because my parents always would eat their other meals at home. I know they had ice cream and I know they had milkshakes, and I would usually have some kind of a salad. I can still remember exactly how it was set up in there, how my dad would always sit at the counter, and the counter was on the north side of the building. Then there were more tables to the south, surrounding the front seating area.

Barber: So your dad would always sit at the counter?

O'Sullivan: Yes. My dad had very few places that he used to go, but he went there every single day until he passed away in 2003. For probably his last ten years, he would go to Newman's Deli at California and Virginia, and they all knew my dad. He would walk in and always say hello to everybody and sit at the same spot, and they would bring over his sandwich and his coffee to him. He always had his money out for them, and he would never wait in the line because they always had this spot for my dad.

I remember one time he was sitting there and two gals came in from the high school—Reno High School kids used to like to go there—and they told the gal at the front counter that they wanted to buy that man his lunch today. And that was my dad, and my dad said, “Oh, no, they don't need to do that.”

They said, “Oh, no, we want to buy that for him,” because they must have thought that my dad was having a hard time making ends meet. [laughs] Which was not the truth.

But he would always pick a place and he would always go at the same time. He always went to work the same direction; he always left the house at the same time; he had a pattern and he never changed it. He never went on vacations. My dad had to stay around in case one of the tenants locked themselves out. He wanted to always be available to let the tenants in. My dad was very well known and liked by his tenants.

At his passing, the place was completely packed, and it was standing-room only and it even went outside, which surprised me because my dad was in his nineties. There was not enough room. It surprised me for a man who was very quiet and very kind. He never had a bad word to say about anybody. Most of his era had died away, and he was very well liked, and there were many, many people who had been his tenants for numerous years who came to his service.

Barber: Where was that held?

O'Sullivan: It was at Walton's on Second Street.

Barber: You said he was well known for being a kind and compassionate person.

O'Sullivan: Yes.

Barber: Did he actually have those rental properties built, do you know?

O'Sullivan: My dad had a lot of them built, a few years into it. When he first bought the land, they were all individual houses and there was a large lot there. He would buy up one house and then another, and then another one would come available. He always looked in that one area, and he stayed within one block for all of his purchasing of land. A lot of the houses that were there came from Virginia City, and there's one that still stands over on Tahoe Street that came from Virginia City. It's not owned by us, but we know the owners very well, and my dad remembers when that came down from Virginia City. And my dad's office was also one that came from Virginia City.

Barber: Oh, where was his office?

O'Sullivan: It was on the corner of Saint Lawrence and Tahoe Street.

Barber: Is that still there?

O'Sullivan: No, we put up a seven-unit apartment building there.

Barber: Oh, okay, that's where the apartments are.

O'Sullivan: Right.

Barber: Then where did your parents live?

O'Sullivan: My parents lived over by Little Flower School. They first built up on top of Berkeley, which is at the top of Plumb Lane, and after living there for five years, my dad wanted to buy more places, and he told my mom, "We're just going to move into this other rental temporarily," and they stayed there until his death. [Barber laughs.] Many, many years, we lived in that same house.

Barber: You have some wonderful photographs of you that were taken at the Hansel and Gretel children's clothing store. Do you actually have a memory of that? You were pretty young.

O'Sullivan: I was probably about six or seven years old. You used to get two newspapers if you wanted them, the *Gazette* in the morning and the *Journal* at night. The *Gazette* was doing a special feature for the Easter holiday and they wanted to show Easter clothes. They had picked myself and a gal named Allison Brown, who was a school friend of mine growing up. I didn't even know that we were in the same photos until much later. Both of us were picked to do that photo shoot for the *Gazette*, and there were numerous pictures of us holding clothes and wearing fancy hats and fancy clothing with ties and all that. I remember it took up two or three pages of the newspaper one morning around Easter.

Barber: That's a place you remember being inside and doing quite a bit of shopping?

O'Sullivan: Yes.

Barber: You really do create the impression of Virginia Street as a thriving commercial area in the sixties, just a really busy street.



Barry O'Sullivan and Allison Brown outside Hansel and Gretel clothing store. Photo courtesy of Barry O'Sullivan.

O'Sullivan: Yes. Well, there was nowhere else to go. If you think about the outlying areas now, there are not really a lot of old businesses or buildings. When my family started coming off ranches and started to buy homes, my grandfather had a home on the corner of Virginia and Cheney, and he also had numerous homes that he operated as rentals and also gave to his kids, and they were on Cheney and Sinclair. Holcomb was another one—not this one, but another one that we had. And that's where they lived. You couldn't live over by the airport because that didn't exist, and you couldn't live up in Caughlin Ranch because that didn't exist. That was a ranch itself. This was where the residential area was, and this is where you shopped and this is where you got your clothing, and even if you were buying a car, there were car agencies here really close to downtown Reno where you would buy your Plymouth and Cadillac. They used to be right there, not too far from the Riverside Hotel and Casino, which was then Pick Hobson's and also went by numerous other names.

Barber: You were telling me a little bit about your experience with Lusetti's, the home appliance store.

O'Sullivan: Right. Lusetti's at Virginia and Cheney was the place where you went and bought a TV, and many of the TVs that my grandparents had and my parents had were black-and-white. My grandma even had one that was green-and-white. It seemed like when I was a kid, I had to constantly get up and bang

on the side of the TV or move the rabbit ears or even put tinfoil on them and try to connect them together to get the best picture. Just holding onto the side of the TV many times would give you a good picture. I remember as a kid even laying on the floor and putting my foot up on it to give it that extra bit of reception.

I would say probably around 1970 or so we got our first color TV. We came home from school and I was sitting there waiting, and these guys brought in this TV. My parents were very proud to get a color TV, and we turned it on and thought wow, there were colors. I'm not sure that the color of people's faces was supposed to be that color, but it was a lot different and it didn't seem to roll as much as the other ones. All we had at that time were two channels. They were, I believe, Channel 4 and possibly Channel 8, but there was no Channel 2. Now you can have thousands of channels. So it's a little different.

We mainly spent a lot of time outside. At five o'clock you knew you had to be home for dinner, and the rest of the time you were out playing with your friends and riding your bikes and jumping curbs and just having a good time. There was no such thing as a cell phone or a computer to be on like there is these days.

Barber: Was the Sprouse-Reitz Department Store still operating when you were growing up, or was that earlier? That's where Ace Hardware is now, the Carter Brothers store.

O'Sullivan: I'm sure it was, but I don't really have a lot of memories of that because I didn't go in there that much that I know of.

Barber: There were a couple of little restaurants that people seem to remember in the area, besides the Penguin, that were pretty popular. Do you remember eating out at restaurants in the area besides the Penguin?

O'Sullivan: No, because my parents would usually eat at home. It was really a treat to be able to go out and eat for dinner. So that's probably why I eat out every dinner now, because I never got a chance to eat dinner out when I was a young kid.

Barber: When did you move into this house yourself?

O'Sullivan: In 1977, I got my first job at Washoe Medical Center. On March 28<sup>th</sup> at about five o'clock in the afternoon, I got a phone call from the hospital telling me that they were giving me the job if I wanted it, and I said, "I'd love it." And so I walked from the phone in to my parents, who were sitting at the table, and I told them, "I got the job, but I've got some bad news. I'm moving out." I moved in with my grandmother, and I have lived here ever since. I lived with her from 1977 until her passing in '96 when she was ninety-eight years old, and she was the best roommate you could ever ask for. She was just so very, very kind, never had a bad word to say about anything. Everything was, "Oh, honey, it'll be okay." If something upset you or bothered you, she'd say, "Oh, honey, it'll be okay." If she was mad at you, she spoke in Italian, and she would speak in Italian to my mom if she didn't want us to know what they were talking about. I would never have had it any other way.

Barber: And you never learned Italian yourself?

O'Sullivan: I never learned Italian. [laughter]

Barber: It must be so special to have this house. You have preserved so many things about the house and there are so many memories around this house in the form of objects and photographs. It seems to keep the past very present.

O'Sullivan: Yes, it makes our house not just a house, it's more of a home. The house is full of nothing but images of my grandparents' ranch and things from my grandparents' ranch, like the table I'm looking at right now that's probably at least 130 years old, a big table that used to hold all my aunts and uncles and my great-grandfather and great-grandmother, which was on the ranch that's located at Virginia Street and Foothill, the Ginocchio Ranch. I have a chest in my front room that is completely full of receipts from the early 1900s to 1800s of my grandfather's, of every possible documentation that he would get from buying something. One of these days we'll go through it. It's absolutely amazing. It's got a lot of stuff from many, many years ago. Being a fourth-generation Reno, Nevadan, I take pride in my parents and my grandparents building all this up. I take care of it like they did, and I will keep it moving on to my nephews, and they'll enjoy it one of these days.

Barber: This neighborhood has changed quite a bit. You were showing me a lot of photographs. Across the street, there's an interesting story about a house that was there for a little while. Could you talk about that? It was a beautiful house.

O'Sullivan: Yes. It was probably about 1980, somewhere right around there. There were two big beautiful houses located on Sierra and Liberty, and they were getting ready to tear them down to put up the Porsche Building at that time. It was a big brick building. I'm looking at it now, out my front window. On that property were two gorgeous houses, and I understand at one time one of them was called the Mt. Rose Hospital. I don't know much more than that, but it was a big beautiful house with a wrap-around porch, and it was three stories tall. The one next to it had a great big front porch on it and it was one story tall. They lifted up those houses and they transported them over here and put them on the property right across the street on Holcomb and Thoma.

They were putting foundations under them and were going to make them into two really nice restaurants. This was right up my alley. Then one spring to summer evening, they caught on fire and they burned, and it was extremely hot. It caught them both on fire and they burned to the ground. Apparently somebody didn't want them there.

Barber: Oh, you think it was intentional?

O'Sullivan: Yes, I think they had indicated it was arson. My grandma was trying to find me because she was looking out the window, and it cracked windows on our house and it melted our roof as one big shingle and damaged the siding on the side of our house. It was that hot.

It stood there for many years all half-burned with a fence around it. They cleared off the lot a couple years later and built an apartment building there about three or four years later.



Barber: It seems that the road is much busier than it would have been back when you first remember growing up here. The road's been widened.

O'Sullivan: Right.

Barber: They reconfigured things a little bit.

O'Sullivan: Back in the late sixties, they cut away from the front yards and they made Holcomb even wider. Holcomb was already wide. It had a lot of extra room because the train tracks for the V&T came right down in front of the house and then they crossed the river. On the other side of the river was the turnaround for the train to head back to Virginia City. It would go by twice a day, in the morning and in the evening.

But later they made it really wide, and it's been two lanes for pretty much the whole time I've lived here, up to about two years ago when they made it one lane in each direction. That certainly has slowed down the traffic, and it's made it wonderful around here because it doesn't seem to be a speedway anymore. It tends to slow the traffic down, because people are following each other instead of trying to get in front of each person all the time, constantly trying to be first. So I really like it how it is now.

Barber: I hadn't realized that.

O'Sullivan: But it's certainly a lot busier than it used to be. Things change.

Barber: Did your grandmother ever talk about what it was like when the train was in operation right in front of her house?

O'Sullivan: She would use it for an alarm clock in the morning. You would hear it come, and I think she indicated it went by around about seven-something in the morning, and then at around five o'clock at night it would be returning one way or the other. I'm not sure which way. But that's all it was ever used, twice a day, either coming or going.

Barber: So it hadn't been a constant source of noise.

O'Sullivan: Right. My brother, who was born in 1952, and my sister took the last ride on it. They had told people when the last ride would be. I don't know where they got on the train, but I know it went all the way to Virginia City and it went right through the ranch where my grandma was born on South Virginia and Foothill. Up until not too long ago, you could see the hump in the field where the track was raised over the field, so the train went down through that.

Barber: Since we're on that topic of that ranch, you were saying that the family house is still there and also some of the outbuildings?

O'Sullivan: Yes. The ranch is located on Foothill and Virginia. That's where my grandma was born in 1897, and there was a metal barn that just in the last two months has started pretty much to hit the ground. It's been falling down for the last five years. It was a warehouse. My grandmother had six brothers and

sisters, and I believe it was my grandmother that was actually born in the warehouse because just before her mother had her, the house burned down and they were all living in the warehouse while they built a new house. They had two houses that burned down. You know, back in the early 1900s, their way of heating the house was wood. So they had to live in the warehouse until they could build a new house, which usually took a year or two. The house that's standing there today is probably at least eighty, ninety years old, and it's still used now. I believe it's owned by a crematorium, part of Walton's family of funeral homes.

Barber: You're saying they lived in the warehouse. What was the warehouse for?

O'Sullivan: The warehouse was where they worked on the tractors and trucks, and it was a great big building. It also had a grain room in it. I remember the grain room, because my cousin and I would go in there and climb on the sacks of grain and sometimes cut them open and get in trouble. We got in a lot of trouble out there.

My uncle would pick us on Friday and we'd stay there until Sunday, and my cousin and I were starting to drive. We were about thirteen, fourteen years old. My uncle had two old pickups, and we would back them in and out of the garage and finally got brave enough to drive them up to the haystacks, and then within a few months to over a year, we were just driving those trucks constantly, nonstop. One day we decided that going up to the haystacks wasn't far enough, so we opened up the fence and we went out through the field, and we about got in the middle of the field and the first truck got stuck. So we went and got the second truck and we fastened a chain up to it. We went to pull that, and then we had two trucks that were stuck with a chain that was very, very tight between them. We jacked them up and put boards under them and tried everything. This was a Saturday or Sunday afternoon.

Finally, here comes my uncle up the lane looking for us because he hadn't seen us, and here we were out in the middle of his fields, stuck with two trucks. I know we walked back to the warehouse, and he had this old tractor in there. We never had any idea that it ran, but he went in there and he put the key in the front of it and he turned that thing, and I know the first time he turned it, it blew a can off the exhaust and it hit the ceiling. My cousin and I were so surprised that this thing ran. And he took this tractor out there and put a chain against one truck, and he pulled us all out. We put the trucks in the garage and he took us home, and we probably didn't go out there for about three weeks. [laughter] From the minute he saw us until the minute he dropped us back off at home in Reno, he spoke nothing but Italian, and I don't think it was nice.

So it was a very memorable time, and I'm sure we probably took ten years off my poor uncle's life. But within a month we were back out there and running all over that ranch and having a great time. They had horses out there we used to ride and we used to take apples and throw them at the cows and see how many cows we could hit. We were a total terror around there.

Barber: And your uncle, that was John Ginocchio?

O'Sullivan: Yes.

Barber: So they had several outbuildings. Was that the photograph you were showing me where there was a door that went into where the woodshop was? Was that that ranch?

O'Sullivan: Yes. Right behind the ranch house that currently stands, there's a building that they made cheese in, and in that same building there was another divider that had a door, and that's where they used to stock their wood for winter. They would burn fires in the house to keep the house warm. By the time when I was growing up, I think they had oil, but my aunt and uncle would rather use wood, and I remember them burning a fire all the time.

Barber: So when you were growing up and you would visit out there, did that seem like it was pretty far out of town?

O'Sullivan: Yes, it was seven miles out of town, and one time I rode a bike out there and never did it again. [laughs] You were right beside the highways—it seems like at that time your parents didn't seem to worry about you. [laughs] Here I am on a bike on Virginia Street, my cousin and I, peddling all the way out to the ranch. There was no place for a bike lane. There wasn't even such thing as a bike lane. You watched out for the grates that brought the water in, because if you ran your bike over one of those, they would grab your tire and you'd be on the ground. So I guess you just kind of learned to be a little tougher back then.

Barber: That was the highway.

O'Sullivan: Yes, that was the highway at that time.

Barber: Do you remember it being pretty busy? Was there a lot of traffic?

O'Sullivan: Yes, there was a lot of traffic. Going to Carson City there was nonstop traffic.

Barber: Do you remember anything that was between the city limits, which might have been around Plumb Lane, I guess, at that point, and the ranch? What would you be seeing as you went? Was it really all ranches and farms?

O'Sullivan: No, there were just a lot of vacant lots. At that time, places were starting to pop up. I remember there was a motel, a big large motel right past Plumb Lane on Virginia on the right-hand side. It had numerous rooms and a great big swimming pool. Then I think it was pretty vacant until you got to Scott Motor Company. Scott Motors was probably built in the sixties. I was born in '58, so I was probably around seven, eight years old when they build Scott Motors Company.

Barber: Is that still there? Where's that?

O'Sullivan: Scott Motors Company is right on the corner of Virginia and Cadillac Place, which was right where the Big Bear Diner is. Then you'd go out a little bit farther, and then there was the original Peppermill, which was very small, and it was a coffee shop. But that was built in the early seventies, late sixties. Prior to that, it was just little odds-and-ends places as you went down there. I think there's a place called Clareven's [phonetic] now. It's a place where you can eat. It's a round brick building near the Peppermill. I remember that always being there.

And I remember Miguel's used to be down there on the corner of Grove and Virginia. I believe they sell pianos there now, or something like that. It was a Mexican restaurant, and we used to eat there all the time on Fridays when my dad would take us out. I remember them being in the news one time because they had cans of dog food in the kitchen, and people were saying they were using dog food for a filler. I remember it pretty much closed them down for a while in that location, and then they did start up again.

Barber: So did Park Lane Mall play a role in your youth at all? Do you remember that, growing up?

O'Sullivan: Yes, we used to go there. At first it was open and cold, and then they closed it in, and it started really booming, and then not so much anymore. Now it's back to what it was. All that's missing are the horses like when we used to drop our clippings off there.

Barber: Do you feel like the construction of Highway 395 had an immediate impact on South Virginia Street? Obviously, that had been the highway and suddenly it wasn't.

O'Sullivan: When I was young and growing up and going to Hansel and Gretel and places like that, Virginia Street used to be very cool. I remember when I was a kid, it had big sidewalks and it had trees and it was green, and it felt nice down there. If you look at Virginia Street right now, either you see bricks, cement, or asphalt. You see no green. There are a lot of businesses that have not kept up their buildings and signs. The signs used to be really unique. Lots of times you don't see that anymore. People use paper signs or material that's wrapped around awnings on the outside, which is fine for a temporary sign until your regular sign gets in. I think people back in the sixties and seventies, and even the fifties, took pride in their business, where you would see people washing down the sidewalks and taking care of their property out in front of it. Even though the city owned it, they used to wash their sidewalks.

There is only one business that I see do that right now, and to this day probably about every two or three days, he's out there washing it down, and every day he's out there sweeping it, and that is Shea's Bar. But he does keep up in front of his gutter, his sidewalks, and takes pride. If you look at his sign, it's not paper. It's a very nice neon sign, and it's a neat-looking building. That's right next to where the Penguin used to be, which used to be a really cool sign. I remember that penguin on the outside of that building.

Barber: Oh, really? What was the sign like?

O'Sullivan: It said "The Penguin," and it showed a penguin.

Barber: Oh, I haven't seen any photos of that.

O'Sullivan: It was neat. I remember that one.

Barber: It's interesting because that intersection in particular, where you had the Penguin and then next to it the building that's now Dreamer's Coffee House, had had a little café on the corner and there had been Mount Rose Market, there had been a bunch of different stores in that area.

O'Sullivan: Right.

Barber: But then there was an extensive period of time when there were nightclubs in that building.

O'Sullivan: Right. Back in the sixties, I remember it being the Peppermint Go-Go Lounge, and next to it there were just little odds-and-ends shops. Then when we got into the mid-seventies, close to '80, it became Del Mar Station, and they started to gut out walls and pretty much took over the whole building. And it was that business that did create a lot of problems in the neighborhood, I think. There was a lot of nightlife which was starting to interfere with the people who were living in that area, and I think it led to a little bit of decline at that time for that area. It was starting to be known as the rowdy part of town.

My dad always had the feeling that that part of town would come back one of these days. Today we call it Midtown, but it was never ever called Midtown. Midtown is something that started six, seven, eight years ago when the Carters and some other people who were starting businesses decided that they were going to start to call that area Midtown. I like the name. I think it's saying that it's a certain part of town. People try to say, "Well, we're in Midtown," and I look at Midtown starting at Mt. Rose Street and definitely ending at California Avenue. If you look beyond either of those points, there is nothing old. If you look from Mt. Rose Street south, you have where the Safeway used to be, which is now Sushi Pier, and that shopping center, but that's all new. If you turn around and look the opposite direction and look at a lot of those buildings, you'll see a roof behind the façade, and they used to be houses.

Miguel's is a perfect example. It used to be a house and they built on the front of it. There are accountants in the 800 block whose office used to be a house and they built on the front of it. Hale's Drug Store, which used to be on Virginia right across from the Shoshone bottling plant, that used to be a house, and they built a front on it. There are numerous houses and bars that used to be houses, where just they added a different front. If you look at the area from those two points, the street is much narrower. It's different, and that's what I call truly Midtown.

I know people are now trying to say, "Well, it's in the Midtown area." If you look for a place to rent, they'll say "in the Midtown area," and you do research on it and it's over on Hillcrest. Now, Hillcrest is not in the Midtown area. Or it's over on Plumas or something like that. That's Old Southwest. But people are trying to go off the word "Midtown."

Barber: Right, the cachet.

O'Sullivan: Right. Because there is so much up-and-coming in this area. There are all kinds of new restaurants and places, and there are so many really good people who are working really hard to build it up—from Süp, Christian and his wife [Kasey], who work extremely hard to build their business. Jonathan at Dreamer's Coffee House was a longtime employee of mine, and I think the world of the guy. He's raising a family and worked for me for many, many years at the hospital, and I try to back and support him and send everybody I can his direction. Ivan who started Midtown Eats is a great, great guy, a hard worker who has put so much blood, sweat, and tears in building his business up, and it's really a great business. Public House, that used to be a doctor's office for many, many years. That's on Saint Lawrence Street and it was Dr. Davis' office. When they looked at it to build something there, the place had been vacant for many, many years. Chris really saw a vision there, and he worked hard to build what he has. I'll tell you, it's a nice little neighborhood bar where people go to have a chat with people and not

to get rowdy, and to come back out into the neighborhood and go on their way and not create problems. That's what I think Midtown should be about, and that's what I hope it'll continue being.

At Laughing Planet, now there is a great guy who has his heart in building a wonderful business. Here's Tahoe Street, which has been pretty much been a dead street. It's been a block and a half long. It's not a very big part of Midtown, but it is in Midtown, and he has brought that street alive. I mean, people love that restaurant, and it's a real cool place for people to go to.

Barber: That's Tim?

O'Sullivan: Yes, Tim. He used to have the Deux Gros Nez.

Barber: Tim Healion, yes.

O'Sullivan: What a great guy. You know, we've all started to look out for each other in the area, and there's nothing I would change if I could. I like living here. Many of my friends who used to even work for me, they live up in Caughlin Ranch, or they live here and there and anywhere, and I will never move. I like it right here. I'm sitting here looking out. I can see downtown Reno like it's right next to me, because it is, and if I want a place that's going to be all tucked away and away from people, that's not really who I am. I've been around people my whole life. I've been a manager and director for a local hospital here, Washoe Med, and this is where I belong.

Barber: This is a pretty incredible vantage point that we're at right here, at this intersection. [laughs] You know, when you were talking about that neighborhood, I just wanted to ask you one more question about a business there. Peerless Cleaners has been in that neighborhood for so long. I imagine that your father had interactions with them, too.

O'Sullivan: Yes. Where Peerless Cleaners is, is still a hill, and for a short time after my grandfather passed away, my dad moved to Moran and Virginia Street, and he would go over to where Peerless Cleaners is, which was a soap factory. It wasn't a cleaners. And he would slide down that hill on a sled until they got to the ditch. The ditch is still there. The ditch goes from down by the police station from the Truckee River. It takes in water and it winds its way through Holcomb, and it crosses Virginia Street right at Thoma, and it goes under several houses and then across Tahoe Street and Saint Lawrence. Well, that never had a top on it, so when you came down that hill, you had to stop or you'd go into an empty ditch in the wintertime. And it still takes water to Virginia Lake. That's what that ditch is for, and it's running very well right now. Numerous of our properties over on Tahoe Street are right up against the ditch. The foundations are within two or three inches of the ditch, and it's completely cased in with cement, but it was built in 1932 and it wanders its way through the town. You would think that would be uphill, but it isn't.

Barber: Yes, that's surprising. What is that ditch called, do you know? Is that the Cochran Ditch?

O'Sullivan: It could be.

Barber: I'll look and see. We'll pull it up later.

O'Sullivan: Talking about that ditch, right across the street from our house there is an apartment building, and they have a great big sidewalk there. That's actually the top of the ditch, and there's a manhole cover there. I remember when I was a kid, my brother and I would pop off the manhole cover and we would stick a worm down there on our string and we would pull up crawdads out of that ditch nonstop. This is when we were seven, eight years old, nine, ten years old, and that was always something to remember we did right here.

Barber: And would you eat them?

O'Sullivan: No. We were kids. We would just torture them. [laughter]

Barber: So in your memory, the ditch was covered?

O'Sullivan: The ditch has always been covered, as long as I can remember. They did that back in the thirties.

Barber: I want to ask you a little bit more about some specific places. You talked about some properties your father had managed, and about how he acquired a couple of different ones over time, then had an apartment house constructed. He did that himself?

O'Sullivan: Yes, when my father would purchase properties back in the late fifties and sixties, they were all houses. Some of them came from Virginia City and were moved down here, and he rented them out. And then slowly over the years we have taken down some buildings and put up new buildings to replace them in the Midtown area.

Barber: Oh, a couple of new ones were built?

O'Sullivan: Yes.

Barber: And were those all apartment houses, or were some single-family homes?

O'Sullivan: They're all apartments. The single-family homes we pretty much kept, but there were some that came from Virginia City that were made into three-plexes and duplexes, and it was those that we tore down and rebuilt.

Barber: About when did those new apartment houses go in? I'm wondering what the demand was for apartments at that time. Did a lot of people want to live around here?

O'Sullivan: This area has always had a demand for apartments. I can't remember any time when we've gone two or three days without renting an apartment. There's always a waiting list, and that was even prior to there being a "Midtown." It's always been on the direct line of bus routes. Everything is close, and it's easy for people to get around. So renting has never been a problem.

Barber: Can you describe what some of those apartment houses are and their addresses and what they're called? Have their names changed over time at all?

O'Sullivan: One of them was 49 Saint Lawrence Street. It was on the corner of Tahoe and Saint Lawrence. The next project is 719, 721, and 721-1/2. That was another building that we tore down. And then we put up three more units that had been a vacant lot. I'm not sure anything was ever on it. It was a vacant lot as long as I can remember. That's where we put up three tri-plexes in that area.

Barber: And did you ever help your father with any of the management or taking care of the properties while you were growing up?

O'Sullivan: I probably started 25 to 30 years ago renting the properties and helping him out. He was always excited that I was getting involved and doing that part for him.

Barber: And you said his office was over there. Was it in a house?

O'Sullivan: It was a house, also a place that came from Virginia City. I think I included some pictures of that building.

Barber: So over time, did you end up managing all the properties that your father had managed, after he passed away?

O'Sullivan: Yes. My dad started to get sick in 2003 and within three months he went downhill very fast and passed away, on August 10, 2003.

Barber: And then you took over the business?

O'Sullivan: Yes. When he started to decline, I retired from Washoe Medical Center, where I had been for 25 years, and told him that I was going to come and work with him, which excited him greatly. He had probably three months when he was able to show me "The turnoff for the valve for cold water is here, and the sewer cleanout is here," and all the things that are good to know, especially when something goes wrong, so I wouldn't have to research it. I'd spend every day with him, taking him to lunch, because he got to the point where he wasn't able to drive in his last three months. But he was very committed for most of his life to being there six days a week, from nine o'clock to 4:45. He would take the same route home that he took every single morning. There was nothing that changed. It was a direct route.

Barber: You had said he was such a hands-on manager, he didn't even want to leave town, so he could really be there for the tenants.

O'Sullivan: My parents never traveled. They would always stay around close, so in case somebody locked themselves out, he would be there to let them in, and to pull hoses across yards. That's what they used to do before sprinkler systems, they would pull hoses and hand water certain areas that the hoses couldn't get to. He would do that all summer long, and in the winter he'd be out there anytime it snowed, making paths for people to get to their vehicles, keeping the walks clean, and keeping up the property.



Barber: So was your plan to retain all of those properties?

O'Sullivan: Yes. We kept them up. When we rent a place, we make sure that it's like new. We don't rent anything that has carpet that's starting to wear. We take pride in our properties. That's the way my dad was, so we continue that.

Barber: Have you noticed that the type of people who want to live in this area has changed over time?

O'Sullivan: You know, we've been very lucky. We have wonderful tenants. Right now, at this time, there's not a single one that I wish would move. And it's very rare that we get somebody that isn't a great tenant. We have a lot of longevity in tenants. I have someone who has been here 22 years, and another for 27 years. One of our tenants is just awesome, and I'm sure she'll be there until her last breath. She likes where she lives, and she's a very simple person and her place looks like it did the day when I rented it to her. It's in perfect condition.

Barber: Are all the properties clustered around the Tahoe Street/Saint Lawrence area?

O'Sullivan: Ninety percent of them are clustered there. The others are on the other side of Virginia Street, still in the Midtown area.

Barber: I appreciate you talking about that a little bit. There are a couple of other things I'd like to clarify from our earlier conversation. You talked about moving into your house with your grandmother, but your grandfather did live there for many years, too?

O'Sullivan: Yes. My grandfather lived there from 1942 to his passing in 1963. My grandparents only had one child, which was my mom. When my parents decided to get married, in the early fifties, that's where they were married, in my grandparents' house, in front of the fireplace. That was a long time ago, before me. [laughs]

Barber: And tell me your grandfather's name, who lived in that house.

O'Sullivan: Charles Sorge was my grandfather. And my grandmother's maiden name was Ginocchio, Sadie Ginocchio. She was the oldest of, I believe, six children.

Barber: And the Silver State Dairy, which families owned that?

O'Sullivan: That was my grandpa and grandma on my mom's side. My grandfather was Charles Sorge, and my grandmother, Sadie Sorge.

Barber: I just wanted to make sure I had that documented correctly.

O'Sullivan: That was the piece of property back in 1919, roughly, that was given to them from her grandfather, Nick Ginocchio, who acquired that land due to a debt somebody owed him and was not able to pay back.

Barber: So he would have owned it well back into the nineteenth century?

O'Sullivan: Yes.

Barber: These are pioneering Reno families.

O'Sullivan: Right.

Barber: There are a couple of photographs that you gave me of some of the buildings in this area, and you were talking a little bit about people who you knew who either built or lived in some of these buildings that are now familiar Midtown spots. One of them is the building where Recycled Records is now. It's 822 South Virginia Street. Can you talk a little bit about who built that?



The Western Building, current home to Recycled Records, in 1951. Photo courtesy of Barry O'Sullivan.

O'Sullivan: That was on my father's side. My grandmother's sister's husband built that building. His last name was Segale. Prior to that, it had a house on it. That house was picked up and moved a block and a half to the east, to Cheney Street. It's located in the 100 block of Cheney, and you can just see the side of

the house. It's behind what is now a collection agency. The Bevilacqua had a company that was very busy in those years. They came in and picked up the house and moved it over there, because my dad owned that property. And then after that was moved, they started to build the building that you see now. I gave you those pictures.

Barber: Was the house that was moved a wooden house?

O'Sullivan: It was a wooden house, and it had lap siding on it. They put what I think are asbestos shingles on it. That was a big thing in the fifties and sixties. They put those shingles on everything.

Barber: I wonder about how long that house had been there. South Virginia Street was entirely residential for many years.

O'Sullivan: Right. My grandfather lived at the corner of Cheney and Virginia Street in a brick home, and the brick was different than the red brick. It was more of a gray brick, and the bricks were actually bigger. I believe I've given you some pictures of that, also. The entrance was quite unique, because it came in off both streets. Even today you can walk over there and you can see where the sidewalk went up to the house from the corner. The house's entrance was on the corner instead of in the middle of the house. The door was angled from the side of the house to the front of the house. That's where they entered and had a covered porch. And Virginia Street was lined with grass, parkways, and trees.

That all changed about 1965, when Virginia Street was still the only highway, as 395, going through town. There was a growing amount of traffic, and so to make room for it, they cut back all the sidewalks and parkways and left roughly eighteen inches of the sidewalk there. Then they put a light pole right in the middle of that, and called it good until today, when it still looks like that. I know there was a big battle back in those times where they were trying to get parking off Virginia Street so they wouldn't have to do all of that, and people were battling back and forth over it. So this is the way they took care of the problem, by just cutting out the ability for people to walk. And it was shortly after that that, or somewhere right around that time, when that house was taken down. My grandma made it into a used car lot, and it was called Eddie Chest Motors.

Barber: Is that a name?

O'Sullivan: Yes. And I have some pictures of that, too. I don't know if I've given you those or not. But you look at all these cars that were built in the fifties, and it's kind of cool looking to see them all lined up there.

Barber: What's on that lot today?

O'Sullivan: It's a parking lot. It's just a plain parking lot right on the corner of Cheney and Virginia. And occasionally the hot dog man comes there, two or three times a week, and parks on the corner of the lot, right where my grandfather's house was—my great-grandfather.

Barber: That's the southeast corner?

O'Sullivan: That's the southeast corner, yes.

Barber: And there ended up being a lot of used car lots in the area, from early on. I've seen another picture of one—not that one---but another one that was down a little further. It's interesting that that started early, and still today there are a lot of used car lots here.

O'Sullivan: Well, at that time it started to change from residential to what we see today. And I think I've mentioned this before, if you look at a lot of the places on Virginia Street, you'll see that the front is a façade, and the house sits behind the façade. There's an accounting company that's in the 900 block—I think it's 924—that used to be a house.

Barber: Is that Pangborn?

O'Sullivan: Yes.

Barber: Okay. I noticed that about it.

O'Sullivan: The other one is on the corner of Virginia and Martin. That used to be Hale's Drug, and that also has a house behind the façade. The house on the corner of Virginia and Saint Lawrence—it was a flower shop at that time—had a façade added onto it to make a showroom, and it backs up to a house.

Barber: Oh, Glenn Turner's flower shop?

O'Sullivan: Yes.

Barber: That started as a house?

O'Sullivan: Yes. And today you can take a look at it, and you can still see the front of the roof of the house going right up to where they built on the new part.

Barber: Okay, this is the northwest corner of Saint Lawrence and Virginia, and it has this cool mid-century look at the front, with very big windows and a kind of angled roofline.

O'Sullivan: Right.

Barber: So I guess that would just be an affordable way to turn a residential building into a commercial property, to build on the front of it, and around the original structure.

The former duplex where Death & Taxes is, which is now 26 Cheney Street, you knew something about.

O'Sullivan: 26 Cheney was owned by my aunt, who is also one of the Segales, who built the Western Building, the one we talked about where Recycled Records is now. That was built by my aunt and her husband. He passed away very early, probably in the forties or fifties, and my aunt lived there until her passing, when I accidentally found her outside, when she had passed away. She was going out to pull

hoses, as they used to do all the time, and she made it down the steps, and walking toward the street, had a heart attack and passed away. I just happened to be going to my dad's office on my bike and found her. I was probably about fifteen years old. I would see her and wave to her all the time. That was my grandma's sister, and her name was Jenny Segale.

The Segales are the family who built that duplex. She lived in the front house that faced Cheney Street, and then there were three garages—one garage for her, and one garage for each of the two units where Death & Taxes now is. That was two one-bedroom apartments. They had fireplaces and they were very unique, and very classy.

Barber: So she didn't live in one of those? She lived behind them?

O'Sullivan: She lived in the place that is now Teak & Hardwood Floors.

Barber: Okay. So it's to the left if you're looking at the front of Death & Taxes?

O'Sullivan: Yes. That entrance faces Cheney Street.

Barber: It seems like that would have been a really cute duplex—small, but cute. I wonder if it's a place that might have been rented out to divorce-seekers, or if it was mostly for permanent residents.

O'Sullivan: I imagine in this area there were a lot of people who were coming for divorces, like the Casson Apartments, which is now Midtown Commons. That was built for people who were coming to get their divorces and then move on their way.

Barber: Oh, was it?

O'Sullivan: Yes.

Barber: Do you know about when that would have been built?

O'Sullivan: Those were probably built somewhere around the forties. I do remember that there weren't any other places where you could get divorces when I was a kid. Reno was a place where if you stayed for six weeks, you could. I have a very good friend whose parents moved here from back east to stay in Nevada for their six weeks, so they could get their divorce. She and her mother stayed here with her sister, and the father went back to Pennsylvania, where he continued to live, and just recently passed away.

Barber: I hear a lot of these stories, of people who came here for a divorce. It seems like it was just long enough that some of those people, and the women in particular, would get really attached to Reno, and they would see it as a place to have a fresh start, and stay. It seems like that's the origin story for a lot of families who live here.

O'Sullivan: Yes. She's still alive, here in Carson. I think she might still work for the legislature as a secretary for one of the legislators, part time.

Barber: The building that was for a very long time Ayres Auto Parts, at 761 South Virginia Street, is going to open soon as The Saint, a barrel house and concert venue. What can you tell me about that building?

O'Sullivan: That was owned by the Ayres. One of their sons was Bob Ayres, and Bob married my sister back in the sixties. They ran that until maybe the late seventies or early eighties, when they sold the property and moved to Sparks and opened a business called Ayres Muffler Brake and Alignment Center. Both my sister and her husband have passed away now, and their son and daughter run and own that business over there.



761 South Virginia Street, once Ayres Auto Parts. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: So, there are apartments on the second floor of that building, or at least one?

O'Sullivan: I believe there are two apartments upstairs.

Barber: Do you know what that building was, just in your memory, between that time and the last business I saw in there, which was a frame shop? I think that was one of its most recent tenants.

O'Sullivan: I think after my sister and her husband sold the property, it went to Napa Auto Parts. Napa stayed in there for about three or four years, I believe, and then they moved to their new location, which at that time was at Wells and Mill Street, which was the old post office. And I do have pictures of that. I don't know when it was still a post office. I had an aunt who was very interested in buying that property, and for some reason I got the pictures. I don't know how, but I have a bunch of pictures of the building.

Barber: Great! We love pictures. [laughs]

You had said that the daughter of the Combs family, who had the Reno Pet Food Market, is still alive. That was at 745 South Virginia. Did you ever go in there when it was a pet shop?

O'Sullivan: Yes. It was a pet shop on the left side and Lusetti's TV on the right side, which I believe we talked about.

Barber: Yes, we talked about that, because you got a color TV there.

O'Sullivan: Right. Our first color TV!

Barber: We have a great picture of it from the forties, so it would be before your memory, but it shows how they had a drive-through window, and you could get your pet food through the window. Do you remember if that window was still operational when you saw the place?

O'Sullivan: No, I never saw that. I know the property between what is soon to be The Saint and the pet shop was my aunt's. She owned that property for many, many years, until her passing in '92. Then my father sold it at that time.

Barber: There had been a duplex there long before, and there was a fire, we found out. But I think that was long before that, because it was empty by the fifties.

O'Sullivan: It's been empty as long as I can remember. It's an odd piece of property because it has a piece of property about eight feet by ten feet on the other side of the alley that's part of the same parcel. If you ever drive by that way, you'll see that the fence makes a little jog, which catches trash and weeds and everything. That's actually a part of that property. It always amazed me.

Barber: It's funny, because how would you handle the alley and what would you have on that little piece, across from it?

O'Sullivan: The only thing I can think of is maybe it's a good place to put a garbage can.

Barber: I think the folks who are going to open The Saint bought that whole piece of property for their parking.

O'Sullivan: Right.

Barber: So I guess they would own that little spot across the alley, too. Interesting.

You knew a little bit about those cute little brick houses that are tucked between Holcomb and Center. They're just a little south of Cheney Street at the north end of that 8 on Center development. I always wondered about those. I don't know how many there are, maybe four?

O'Sullivan: I think there are a total of eight or nine of them. They were owned by a very good friend of my mom's. Her father owned it. Avansino was the last name. She passed away, I would say in the last five years, and her daughter now owns them and she manages them.

Barber: They're really tiny, but they're really cute and charming, and they look like little railroad cottages or something.

O'Sullivan: Oh, I'm sorry, I misunderstood which property. I'm taking about the ones on Cheney and Center. They're all brick houses and there's one right after another. You're talking about the small cottages that are owned by Kelly Rae.

Barber: The little ones that are just north of 8 on Center? There's a little cluster there.

O'Sullivan: Yes. Those are all owned by Kelly Rae, and I'm not sure of anything about those properties.

Barber: So the ones you're talking about are on Cheney?

O'Sullivan: Cheney and Center. They are on the northeast corner, and they go pretty much down Cheney Street and then they go down Center Street. There are about four buildings and most of them are duplexes. In fact, I think all of them are duplexes.

Barber: I'll look back and see those, too. They have some similarities in their appearance. They're all little brick houses. When you look at the oldest houses on South Virginia and in this area that dated to around 1900 or a little after that, those are all wood frame, or most of them are, I think. And then there seemed to be a bungalow era, or an era of brick houses, that are a little younger than those.

O'Sullivan: I believe she inherited them from her father. I don't know which Avansino that was, but her name was Marguerite Avansino. Her daughter, who runs them now, is Mary Anne Hicks. Mary Anne is married to the federal judge Larry Hicks.

Barber: That's another very familiar name around here. [laughs]

I wonder if you can talk a little bit about Nick Ginocchio. This is a relative of yours, your great-grandfather, who had a lot of property dealings around this area. Do you want to talk about him a little bit? He's a very intriguing character.

O'Sullivan: Well, he was certainly before my time. My grandmother used to talk about him all the time. He would always go downtown and my grandma would always bring him downtown, because she was the only one who could drive. They had a nine-passenger Mitchell, and they would leave the ranch, which was out at South Virginia and Foothill, and they would take the dirt road all the way in. Then my grandmother would sit downtown in the car as my great-grandfather would go out and make deals, and



loan people money. And when they weren't able to pay him back the money, he would take their properties. There are numerous properties in this area that he acquired, that he gave to his children, including my grandma, at the time of his passing, and they're all located here in Midtown. Some of them he took and developed. One of them was the cleaners on Cheney Street, which is now going to be the new Midtown Eats. That was given to his son, Joe Ginocchio, who's my uncle who passed away probably fifteen years ago. And then there are places on Center Street that were given to other kids, and the lots on Cheney and Virginia were given to my grandmother. There were two lots there that were given to my grandmother. But this was many, many years ago.

Barber: About what decades do you think he was doing most of that?

O'Sullivan: I would say it started at least around 1919, because that's when my grandmother and grandfather got their ranch from him. He gave them the property that he acquired from somebody else who couldn't pay their bill.

Barber: And you said that was a pretty sudden turnaround, or transfer of that property.

O'Sullivan: Yes. It happened very, very quickly, and that's when my grandma and grandpa started their dairy, called Silver State Dairy.

Barber: One other thing I wanted to ask you about was the Ginocchio ranch that's down at Foothill and South Virginia. About when did that go out of your family? Do you know when it was sold?

O'Sullivan: I would say about 1980, the late seventies to early eighties. At that time it was sold to Ben and John Farahi. They own the Atlantis. And they've had it all these years.

Barber: That suggests that it might have been intended to be developed at some point into some sort of tourist destination, maybe.

O'Sullivan: A lot of things changed on Virginia Street when they put the freeway in, and they started to talk about getting the traffic off South Virginia. So I don't know. They still own it today.

Barber: It's one of those places that is now in the middle of a very urban environment, but there are cows in the pastures. I think people who aren't from here are often surprised to suddenly see cows in the middle of the city.

O'Sullivan: Right.

Barber: I think those were most of the questions that I had. Something that I realize is that you know so much about this area, that if I can only ask the right questions, I get all sorts of other stories. [laughs]

I just think it's so striking that being in Midtown now, you can see these different eras in the buildings that are here. And the more you know about them, the richer that history becomes. There are some houses here that seem to be left from a very early time. The house that is the foundation of Silver Peak Brewery, you were saying, was a ranch house?

O'Sullivan: The Holcomb Ranch, from what I understand. There's also another house that was a part of that, from my understanding—and again, this is way before my time. It's located in the 700 block on Holcomb, and my understanding is that it is by far the oldest house on Holcomb, and was just a small house for people who worked on the Holcomb Ranch.

Barber: That's the one that was just a couple of doors down from your house on the corner of Thoma and Holcomb, right?

O'Sullivan: Right, and it's all been completely redone, and it's a beautiful little house. It's very well taken care of today.

Barber: There's a house that's just south of Shea's, where Penguin Café used to be. There are two houses that are just south of that. One of them seems especially old. It looks like it might be an old farmhouse. And the houses that are still along South Virginia are set back further from the street, because you can imagine at one point, they had front lawns and landscaping. There aren't too many of those, but I can see that that's why building around and on the front of some of those houses to create a commercial building, like the ones you talked about, would have worked, because the commercial building then is right up against the sidewalk, whereas the house had had a front lawn. So it left some land for development.

O'Sullivan: Right. And if you think about it, from California Avenue to I don't know where you would stop, there's only one house that is still a house on Virginia Street that people live in every day, and that is on the 800 block of South Virginia. That is the only house that I know of.

Barber: Over on the west side of the street?

O'Sullivan: Yes, it's on the west side. And the address is probably 817 or somewhere right around that.

Barber: It's a little bungalow, I think?

O'Sullivan: It's a brick bungalow house with a big front porch on it. It's always been a house, and I can't even think how far you would have to go down the road to see any houses other than that one. It's the only house that I can think of.

Barber: Wow. You're right, because there are some apartments.

O'Sullivan: They're holding out. They must be holding out for big money. [laughs]

Barber: As a property owner in this area, have you noticed a real shift in property values? Are people interested in buying your properties? Is this something that you see visibly escalating around here right now, as Midtown becomes a hot area?

O'Sullivan: I know there is a lot of interest in buying anything in Midtown. And yes, we've had people interested. But we're not at that point. This is something my dad passed on to us, and we're going to work

it, and I'll pass it on to the next generation in our family. And that's how things are going to be at this time.

Barber: Thank you so much for letting me interview you. I appreciate it.

O'Sullivan: No problem.

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## RADER ROLLINS

Owner, Statewide Lighting & Accents, 1311 S. Virginia Street



Rader Rollins inside Statewide Lighting & Accents. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*In 1974, Rader Rollins moved from Las Vegas to Reno, where his family had opened Statewide Lighting at 1311 S. Virginia Street the previous year. He began working in the store while still a student at UNR, eventually becoming its owner. He discusses the changes to the area and the expansion of the family business into Statewide Lighting & Accents.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm at Statewide Lighting & Accents at 1311 South Virginia Street in Reno with Rader Rollins to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Mr. Rollins, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Rollins: Yes, you do, Alicia.

Barber: Great. Thank you. Well, we're focusing today on your business and on the property here, but before we get into that, I'd like to get just a little bit of background information about you. Can you tell me where and when you were born?

Rollins: I was born in Los Angeles in 1954, but I only lived there for six weeks. Both my parents were from Las Vegas, and my father was going to business college in Los Angeles. It was a two-year associate degree, and he graduated by Labor Day weekend. That's when the three of us, now, moved back to Las Vegas where they had both gone to high school together and where they met and got married. They're still living and married today, I'm happy to say. So I've been in Nevada since I was six weeks old—in Las Vegas until I was nineteen, and then I moved to Reno, and have been here ever since. January 1974 is when I moved here.

Barber: How far back has your family been in Nevada?

Rollins: My mother's parents moved from Los Angeles to Las Vegas in 1940. Her grandfather, who worked for the railroad in Los Angeles, had been transferred to Caliente, Nevada in the late 1930s. My parents graduated from high school in 1951.

Barber: So what brought you to Reno?

Rollins: This lighting business. My father and a partner had bought a lighting business that was for sale in Las Vegas, and that was in 1971. His business partner had an electrical wholesale store in Las Vegas, and he had been awarded the statewide contract to supply light bulbs to the school districts in Nevada. And with Washoe County District having a lot of volume there, not having any location to service it out of was going to mean a lot of transportation cost. He had talked with my father about it, saying, "Let's open a lighting store in Reno."

There was only one, Broili's Nevada Machinery & Electric, which was downtown on Virginia Street near where California crosses, and I think the building is gone now. I think that's just parking lot. But Broili's was there a long time and it moved to Moana Lane, which is Nevada Backyard right now. But they were there for a long time as our competitor before the big box stores came. There was only the Ace Hardware and Sears where you could buy light fixtures. And that's how we came to be here. My father and his partner bought this building in the fall of 1972 and opened our business in early '73, with the grand opening in April 1973.

Barber: And what's your father's name?

Rollins: His name is same as mine, Rader S. Rollins. We have different middle names but the same initials.

Barber: So you came up to Reno upon the opening of the business? Were you coming to work?

Rollins: No. I was going to UNLV. After I graduated high school—I'd worked my senior year in high school at the family business at Statewide Lighting— then I started college at UNLV. So I went a year and a half there, and at the close of the fall '73 semester during the winter break, that's when I moved to Reno to join the family, who had already moved here, for Christmastime, so I could enroll at UNR in the spring of '74.

Barber: Okay. So you transferred, and did you finish up at UNR?

Rollins: Yes, I finished up at UNR as an accounting major.

Barber: So who in your family had already moved up here to Reno?

Rollins: Both my parents. I have a sister. She was a year and a half younger than me, so one year behind in high school, and she stayed behind with a great-aunt and uncle, living in their home, so she could finish high school before she moved here. So we both moved here near the same time.

Barber: And then did the family continue to run a business in Las Vegas?

Rollins: Yes. The fellow who was managing the store that we had bought in Las Vegas in 1971 stayed behind there and managed it, and over the course of the years became a part owner of the store. So the store's still there. He is now retired, but just recently. It's been a year and a half since he retired.

Barber: Is the location of that store in the same place it's always been, the one in Las Vegas?

Rollins: No, it opened in 1971, but we moved it in 1974. It was in an industrial commercial area where the existing business we bought was, and then we bought an empty furniture store building on East Sahara, and it's still there now.

Barber: Did your parents really have an interest in moving to Reno? Is that where they wanted to live for some reason?

Rollins: No. I mean, after growing up and living their whole lives in Las Vegas, I guess it was just "Let's try a change." Reno, we'd only barely visited as a family. We had taken up the family hobby of skiing, which is difficult in Las Vegas. There's a lot of driving. And I don't know if maybe that was the reason. It might have been part of the lure for them to pull up roots and move here. But basically my father was a CPA from the time he got out of business college. He got a certificate a couple years after. And the idea of operating a business seemed to be a path toward a career change. He sold his accounting practice in Las Vegas to move here and be fully involved with the store here and the store in Las Vegas. He did a lot of commuting in the early years. And that's just how we came to be here.

Barber: Was the name Statewide Lighting chosen because there was always the plan to open different stores throughout the state?

Rollins: Well, yes. The business that they bought in Las Vegas wasn't called Statewide Lighting. It was named after the person who had owned it. His last name was Ingram, so it was Ingram Supply, which was an electrical wholesaler with a lighting store. We don't do electrical wholesaling, so we just made the whole building lighting, and we were operating as Ingram Lighting. Then my father partnered with a client of his CPA business who ran an electrical wholesale store which was a competitor of the one that was for sale. When they partnered up to open this business and the one in Las Vegas, they said, "Well, we need a name change. We need to phase out Ingram Lighting." And they decided, "Well, we're in both spots, so let's call it Statewide Lighting," which is kind of unimaginative, but that's what we are.

Barber: It works. [laughter]



Statewide Lighting & Accents, 2015. Alicia Barber photo.

Rollins: Yes.

Barber: I think you said one of the first clients was the school district, or was hoping to be the school district.

Rollins: Well, yes. We've always sold light bulbs, but our Statewide Lighting store served as a warehouse for my father's partner's electrical wholesale business. That was called Pavel Electric Supply. We had the inventory here, and our trucks just filled the contracts, but it was getting billed from Las Vegas by Pavell Electric Supply. Both Jack Pavell and my father were getting a loan to buy this building, so that was useful to him immediately, and for us as we developed the business.

Barber: Were private homeowners a large amount of the clientele at the beginning?

Rollins: Yes, right at the beginning it was private home building, new construction for custom homes, and regular retail business. It takes a while doing outside calls on electricians and home builders to get a contract to supply lighting for the tract homes, but that was always what we were trying to do, and it didn't take too long.

One of our earliest customers was Bailey McGah Homes, which later became Bailey & Dutton Homes. Craig Dutton is a local Reno person, and Bailey McGah was a regional kind of thing, but in Reno it became Bailey & Dutton. For a lot of years we were supplying all the light fixtures for all their homes, and they were building all over the area. And, of course, we worked with a lot of other builders and electricians, to the point where we were doing more of that than custom homes or regular retail.

Barber: So from the beginning, then, was the business model that you would be ordering from some larger suppliers elsewhere, and you would be the conduit to getting certain types of fixtures and lights for your clients?

Rollins: That's always how lighting is. There's nothing that we make here, so we're just a distributor for national brands.

Barber: But you don't have everything that you sell in the showroom.

Rollins: No.

Barber: Was that always the case? You'd always have catalogs?

Rollins: Yes. There's inventory of popular items, and, frankly, that was easier in the old days, to have inventory on hand. You'd see it on display, take it home, out the door. The category of lighting has gotten more expansive and there are so many brands to buy from, it's impossible to know what people want. And it seems like with the Internet and electronic catalogs, everyone's exposed to massive variety, and it's hard to even guess what will be the popular items. So there's a lot more that we order when people come in, and we try our best to keep the popular items on hand, but, like I said, it was easier in the old days.

In the seventies, everybody wanted light fixtures, whether it's bathroom, hallway, or dining room, that had oak and polished brass and maybe smoked or amber globes, and they wanted track lighting to accent their living rooms or whatever. People would come in and ask for track lighting. We had a display by the counter, and we'd walk over to it and go into a pitch many times a day, and people walked out with their eight-foot track and four or five track lights and however many oak light fixtures. There was a long period there in the seventies where that was easy. But there's a huge variety of product now that people are after.

Barber: It's funny, too, because you think about how lighting trends change over time, and now a lot of people are going back to more of a retro look, and they want things that look like they're out of the fifties and sixties. [laughs] So you mentioned before that you only had one competitor in town at that point.



Rollins: Yes.

Barber: At what point did the competition start to diversify and increase, and how did that affect the business?

Rollins: I'm trying to remember when the first one opened. I'm thinking it was Lowe's that opened first in Reno on Oddie, and then a Home Depot right after that. And I don't remember, was that in the eighties, the nineties? I don't remember when, but up until then it was just hardware stores. Further down Virginia there was a hardware store called Orchard Supply. They had lighting. Your little hardware stores would have just a little department, not much to it, and even Sears had a 15-by-15-foot ceiling display of lights hanging down and boxes on the shelf. And then just Broili's and Statewide Lighting. If you wanted anything special, that's where you'd need to go. But Reno was smaller then, and so that was plenty. It worked really well for us at the time when we came in.

Barber: Did you really feel a hit then, when the big box stores started offering lighting? Was it perceptible?

Rollins: It was only a little perceptible. The town was growing and by then we'd established our wholesale business with the builders and electricians, and there really wasn't a dip. Maybe it sort of flattened out for a while, and then we were back to sales slowly growing again as the area kept expanding. Broili's closed, and our competitor shortly thereafter became Cabinet & Lighting Supply. They opened up with an employee who had been a longtime employee at Broili's, so she was known to a lot of people, whether it was builders or decorators. She took a lot of the Broili's business, and so there was kind of a smooth transition to where we still had an important competitor.

Barber: Do you still have that relationship with builders and developers? Is that a big part of your business?

Rollins: Oh, yes. Through the recession, it was scary how little the builders were doing, because by then the loan on the building had been paid off, and our business was paying rent to ourselves, to the family, as rental income from profits of the business. So we just stopped paying ourselves rent, and that got us through the long recession. And by then we were established so long that retail carried us through. Now the building's picked back up the last couple years with a lot of major companies coming into town. It's looking really, really good, so we're back in the swing again.

Barber: How important is your physical location to a business like yours?

Rollins: Oh, this physical location isn't so great. We're far from a freeway exit, so it takes a little doing to get here. From Plumb Lane to where we are, that exit to here, that's another ten minutes after you get off the freeway, depending on how you hit lights. All the major shopping areas, it seems they wisely locate near freeway exits, so we're at a disadvantage for that.

Barber: Do you know why this location was chosen by your parents in the first place?

Rollins: Yes. In 1973, the busiest intersection in this area was Plumb and Virginia. We're six blocks north of what was the busiest intersection, bar none, in the whole city. Park Lane Mall was there. The airport was down the other way. It was ideal. And then, as everybody knows, when Meadowood Mall got built and all the new development kept going south, that made what's now Midtown really slow down. People have always had to seek us out a bit to get here because people don't travel up and down Virginia anymore, not this part.

Barber: So you were still a student at University of Nevada here in Reno when this business opened. Do you recall coming down to this area before? Were there different shops or restaurants or anything that you were aware of as a student in this location?

Rollins: Well, when we started, across the street from us was the Washoe Market, and it was there in business. I think one of their distinctions was that they had a real butcher counter where they cut meat to order and wrapped it in white paper wrappers. Now that's been an antique store for a long time. Washoe Market probably closed in the late seventies, I believe, and then there was a Safeway store where FedEx Office and the wig shop are today, and Sports West was a Raley's location. But at the same time Raley's was operating there, they were operating on Wells, not that far away, with their big grocery store with the upstairs and the downstairs basement, which I always thought was unusual.

And we had across the street, of course, Landrum's, the landmark, seven stools. Four different ladies kept it open 24/7, serving chili-cheese omelets and hamburgers and baskets of fries, with seven stools. No one's ever been able, it seems, to be as successful as they were of keeping a business going.

There was Stremmel Volkswagen where the Stremmel Gallery is now. The building wasn't even there. It was the Volkswagen dealership. People knew where that was, being the only one in the area, that we were just adjacent corners with.

Barber: We can talk about this building itself, because this building, as you know, was constructed and opened as Sewell's Market, and it opened in December 1959. It looks like Sewell's merged with Mayfair in '66, and it closed in '68 or '69. It seemed like there were a couple other businesses that were around. There was a meat company that seems to have been in the back of the building?

Rollins: Right.

Barber: I'm curious if you can describe what you remember about how your family found the building and if it had any evidence of having been a supermarket, and what was it like?

Rollins: When the building was empty, the meat-cutting business was actually called Beef Outlet of Nevada, and they were still operating, using the walk-in freezers from the original grocery store. Keep in mind I was still living in Las Vegas that first year—1973—because by the time I got here in 1974, they'd closed. The Sewell family had owned the building and was leasing to Mayfair, and even though Mayfair left, they were still under lease and making payments. I think it was probably a sub-lease arrangement, that the meat-cutting store was there. And here in the front corner of our building there was a paint store that was renting just the corner of the building.

Barber: Right on the Virginia Street side?

Rollins: Yes, near the front door, and it had the shelves. You walked into what was an empty building with blue tile floors into a little corner that was a paint store with paint on the shelves and mixing equipment. But that was actually empty by the time we got it, too. So that had to be a really short-lived thing.

When my father bought the store, it was just one large building, like a grocery store is. He divided it, and built walls to lease to two other tenants, not counting a little corner barbershop. While he was building, a man who had an old-time barbershop business approached him about getting a little corner of the property, and today's it's a hair and nail salon. He was here, the same fellow who was the barber, with his own hands building his barbershop. He was helping laborers that we had here building our lighting store. So the barbershop and the lighting store opened at the same time.

Barber: Do you remember that barber's name?

Rollins: I can only remember his name was Dan, and I don't remember Dan's last name.

Barber: That makes sense, because Sewell's address was originally listed as 1331 South Virginia. Your address is 1311.

Rollins: We made that up, though.

Barber: You did?

Rollins: Yes. It's not even a real address. My dad just picked it, because 1375 is the real address for the building. The postman can find us, but to the fire department it's still 1375. [laughs]

Barber: So none of the addresses along here are 1331?

Rollins: No, and they didn't even go in the same order, because the shop next to us picked 1313 a long time ago, and they've been calling it that. And the beauty salon uses 1305, which makes sense because the bank, which is now Nevada Fine Arts, is 1301. That's a real address, 1301, and the rest of the building was supposed to be 1375.

Barber: I haven't researched that yet, but was that a bank for a long time while you already had the business here?

Rollins: Yes. It started as Nevada Bank of Commerce, which would have opened at the same time Sewell's did. The building was built together at one time. And by the time we got here, it was called Nevada National Bank. I'm trying to remember how the merger went because behind us was First National Bank, but when First National Bank became First Interstate Bank, they somehow had bought Nevada National Bank as part of the merger of the banks.

Barber: Oh, so you're saying First National was the one just south of you on Virginia Street?

Rollins: Yes, yes. And so then they had two branches within 100 feet of each other, and they closed the one in our building and operated the one that was Heritage Bank until two years ago when they moved further down into a big building. It was First Interstate Bank, then Heritage Bank, and now we're waiting to see who the new tenants will be.

I'm trying to think of our first tenants. There was Washoe Health Foods. They were on the adjacent corner to us where today Timeless Fashions is. They were renting. They needed a little more space, and our space was larger, and they rented that one.

And one of the butchers from across the street at Washoe Market was interested. He knew another butcher who lived in Incline Village. The two of them were somehow friendly. They opened their own business next to us. We've taken that part out and expanded our store into the space. But it was called J & J Meats.

Barber: I saw an ad for that. Was that accessed from the back of the building?

Rollins: No, right from this front door.

Barber: Oh, it was from the front.

Rollins: This was our front door. No, it wasn't J & J Meats at first. It was Trophy Liquor & Delicatessen. That's what it was, Trophy Liquor & Delicatessen, because there was the business in Incline called Trophy Liquors. So it was a deli counter, liquor store, and then when that was struggling after a while, that's when the butchers came together and rented it and it became J & J Meats.

So then it became a furniture store, Wilson & Hadler's Furniture & Flooring, which shared a space with Hedwig & Ludman Interiors. Wilson & Hadler have been out of the furniture business for a long time, but Hedwig & Ludman Interiors are important clients of ours even today, and they've had their own space in different parts of town, John Ludwig and Ron Hedman. So they sort of began there next to us.

Then after Washoe Health Foods left, that's when it became Reno Schwinn, so the Schwinn dealer was there for several years until they outgrew that space and sold the business to the owners, the present-day owners of Reno Schwinn, and they moved. I think they've moved three times. They're still in business, but now it's called Reno Cycling & Fitness over by Rattlesnake Mountain. As a landlord, you see a lot of turnover, but we've been here the whole time. [laughs]

Barber: Well, that would explain why you have two entrance doors on the north face of the building here.

Rollins: Right.

Barber: So, initially, there was just one for the Statewide Lighting business, the one closest to Virginia Street?

Rollins: No, that's the original grocery store double doors.

Barber: Okay, the second entrance door over from Virginia Street, was the original Sewell's entrance?

Rollins: Yes.

Barber: And was that the entrance for these tenants for a long time?

Rollins: Yes, and the door to Washoe Health Food and Reno Schwinn, that was the other door there, but we had to cut the windows and put the doors in because it was all concrete in the front except for where the heaters are. These were the only original windows. I'm not sure about that door. There are rivets from one of those rubber pads, self-opening doors, on the ground there.

Barber: So the supermarket actually did not have this many glass windows at the front?

Rollins: No, no. I found out an interesting thing last winter. The internal hinges had finally worn out since 1960 or whenever, when they were put in, and we called Custom Glass to replace the hinges. And the man who's now the owner, because his father retired—I wish I could remember everybody's names—he came over to bid the work and he told me a story that went back when he was just eighteen or nineteen years old in 1973. His father sent him over to the Statewide Lighting building to measure the glass for the new windows where the walls had been cut. The concrete was cut out, and he had ridden over on his motorcycle. All he had was the motorcycle and a tape measure, and the sidewalk outside is lower than the floor inside, and he was standing on the seat of his motorcycle with the tape measure reached up to try and get the height of the windows, and that's the story that he told me just last year. So he was well familiar with our building forty years later.

Barber: [laughs] That's great. So that was always the intention, then, was to use part of the building for the family business and then rent out more of the spaces?

Rollins: Yes, there was more space than we ever needed.

Barber: At what point did you expand into the space where one of those tenants used to be?

Rollins: 1985.

Barber: Now, do you remember was there any other evidence of this having been a supermarket? You had mentioned the deep freeze or the walk-in refrigerator. Did those have to be removed by your family?

Rollins: Well, no. The storage for the grocery store was in our basement downstairs, and there were three conveyor belts, two at the back door and one right in the middle of the store. Where our sales counter is, we had to seal up the hole in the floor that went down to the basement. One of the conveyor belts was still connected and working in the back corner, and the other two had been removed and were just laying on the floor in the basement, and a salvage company took those.

There were a few old grocery counters that had been moved downstairs, and, of course, the walk-in coolers, walk-in freezers. Those are actually still here, just all the refrigeration equipment we sold to salvage dealers. The machine room was down in the basement with the rows of compressors that drove all those things. So, there was not much. Some markings on some shelving.

There was a room that had a plywood and wire cage in a corner where cigarettes got kept, and there was a door with a little clasp like there was a padlock on, so not every employee had immediate access to the stored cigarettes. I guess that makes sense. They were downstairs. You could tell that's where it was.

And there was an upstairs mezzanine where there was an office with a glass divider and perhaps the payroll office where people went upstairs to pick up their checks through a little hole in a glass window. But that was all that was left by the time Mayfair moved out.

When my father and his partner bought the building, Mayfair was still paying the lease, and so we bought the building from the Sewell family, and there was still about a year and a half of lease for Mayfair to pay. As we were starting a business from scratch, what fully made the payment on the loan to buy the building was the money we were taking on the lease.

Barber: So Mayfair was paying you?

Rollins: Mayfair was paying us as the new owners from Sewell, paying their rent, and we were writing our checks to Sewell's to make the purchase.

Barber: So they had to contractually keep paying rent even though they no longer occupied the building?

Rollins: Yes. You know where a lot of businesses go belly-up now, you can declare bankruptcy or whatever, Mayfair wasn't doing that. They were still operating at that point the downtown store near where Circus Circus is. That was still ongoing. And they were a real concern. They couldn't just not honor a lease agreement, so that was part of the terms of the sale of the building. Anyone could have bought it and got the same deal. It was a really good arrangement when you're trying to get a new business off the ground for that first year and a half.

Barber: And I believe Mayfair had a supermarket in Shoppers Square at that point. I was trying to figure out why they vacated this space, if perhaps it was just that they had other stores in other locations.

Rollins: Oh, Shoppers Square. Wow.

Barber: I can try to figure that out. Oh, here's a question I want to ask you. Can we talk about the sign?

Rollins: Yes.

Barber: This great sign out here. It says Statewide Lighting Center now. Was that the original full name of the business, Statewide Lighting Center?

Rollins: Yes.

Barber: Is that the name of the shopping center?

Rollins: No. Statewide Lighting Center was what we were calling ourselves in Las Vegas and it's how we opened here. Over the years, we just stopped saying "Center." It was always on the stationery, and

the signs on the buildings all say that. If we'd have catalogs imprinted that we were getting, we would have them say Statewide Lighting Center.

It wasn't until two years ago that I sort of informally dropped the "Center" and added "& Accents." At the time, the recession was still lingering on, and we were looking for how to boost our sales here with something that was a companion to lighting and portable lamps. One of the lamp companies we were buying from made accent furniture, mirrors, tabletop accessories, and art, and we started buying their catalog and bringing that in, because it looks nice in the showroom and it's kind of a companion sale when people are thinking about a new home or redecorating. It was a tie-in there. So everyone else said we should be Statewide Lighting & Accessories or "& Décor," something. They said, "What are Accents?" But that was my word and I liked it, I stuck with it. I just kind of outvoted everyone and stood my ground, so that's the word I threw in there.

Barber: The sign itself is just modified from the Sewell sign? We're looking at a picture of it a little bit here. It has a similar framework.



Before Statewide Lighting, the building housed Sewell's Supermarket. Nevada Department of Transportation photo.

Rollins: Right. The lantern that we have on the top was an existing sign from a lighting store in another state that was shipped here, and then the panels were changed to say Statewide Lighting Center. Our principal brand that we sold was Thomas Lighting or Thomas Industries Lighting, which that little yellow sign underneath it still says. And Thomas Lighting had dealers all around the country and they had

designed that lantern. And at one point in the early sixties, you could just pay whatever thousands it was, and a sign company would make another one of those lanterns and ship it to where it needed to be. We bought that one used from a store that was closed, and we have one, the same lantern, in our Las Vegas store. I'm not sure if it's at the Scottsdale one or not. No, it's not. We had it at our store in Phoenix, but that was a leased building in Phoenix, and when the lease ran out and a Party Store moved in there, we left the lantern there and they put their name on the lantern. So we only have two of those original lanterns that are here and in Las Vegas.

Barber: So the top part has remained the same, and then as different tenants go into here, then the bottom changes.

Rollins: Yes. There was a large rectangular sign for the bank, which was removed—it covered that crossbar. It was a big one that stuck out sideways where it said First National Bank, and then it said First Interstate Bank. I guess before that it was Nevada National Bank. They kept remodeling it, but then when a business closes, you're supposed to turn the faces inside out, upside down, or paint them out or whatever, so it's not advertising a closed business. And the bank, rather than do that, just had the sign company remove it from the pole altogether.

Barber: So at some point did your parents retire and you began to run the business, or how did that happen?

Rollins: Yes. Well, it was a slow retirement, and my dad's still not fully retired. Being a CPA, he still to this day does the general ledger accounting, but he just does it from home and with papers I either mail to him or fax to him. He's never taken to email, which would be the easy way, but he's eighty-two now. And that's his retirement thing, to do that general ledger accounting for our three stores. He doesn't travel to those stores like he did every month. My sister runs the Scottsdale location. We both send things to him, and they fax things to him from Las Vegas.

Barber: Was your mother directly involved in the business?

Rollins: Yes, just kind of like his assistant, a secretary. She never worked the sales floor. She was just always an office helper.

Barber: What is her name?

Rollins: Beverly Rollins. And she and my father would be the buyers. They would work together with the salespeople. We have the traveling salesmen, mostly from California, who come in here with their cases of catalogs and take you to lunch or to dinner, and then the next day you sit down and write an order with him out of the books. She would be involved in that. But they stopped doing the buying probably ten years ago altogether, so it's myself and our store manager, who's been here since the mid-eighties, Cindy Johnson. She is well known around town now, by all the people that she's helped with their purchases.

Barber: So what was your job at first? Was this the job you had right out of college?



Rollins: Well, during college I was working here half-time as the bookkeeper. I could jump in whenever my schedule allowed, whether I had morning classes or afternoon classes or some of each. I could just come in three or four hours every day and get the day's sales entered into the journals and kind of prepare for the bill-paying parts of things. So I did that all through college.

When I graduated, I went to full-time. We hired bookkeepers instead, and that's when I started working on the sales floor. Whether it was wise to go into this business with your parents or not...there's friction that can happen a lot of times. Family businesses can be great or they can be difficult or they can kind of waver back and forth. But my folks were wanting my sister and I to carry on, and so it's worked out pretty well.

Barber: You have family working in the store now, too, don't you?

Rollins: Yes, my daughter's here. My son had been here through—let me see. Well, he was working here when he was in high school, part-time, and then after high school, even though he was an excellent student, he wasn't real interested in college. So he was working here basically full-time until he was about twenty-one, and then right before the recession was coming, he joined the army, and that's where he is now, his second enlistment. He's a linguist in the army. He speaks Pashto, but he went to language school in Monterey where all the armed services learn foreign languages.

There was a young woman about three years younger than him, because he's a little older than most people who join, who was also in Pashto class, and they're married today, and they both have their secret language which they speak fluently. She's out of the service now, going to college in Texas, where he is stationed.

And so my daughter, who is actually older than him, has been working here full-time for the last three years after trying different things in her life. She lived in Monterey for part of the time, but that was before my son ended up going in there, because that's where the army training school is. They were never there at the same time. So she wants to carry on. At my sister's end of the store, her daughter, my niece, has a business degree and she's working there, so that's the third generation at that store, too.

Barber: I just want to finish up by talking a little bit about the neighborhood and how it's changed since the business started here and through today with this whole burgeoning idea of a Midtown District. Can you talk a little bit about how the neighborhood seemed when the business first started, when you first arrived, and how it's changed over time, and what involvement you've had with this new Midtown District?

Rollins: Well, as I said earlier, when we first opened, being right near Park Lane Mall and downtown, this part of Reno was still important and active and it was a good shopping area, although, still older. The Peppermill in those days was just a coffee shop with their little fire coming through the water near the entrance. That's all there was there, the coffee shop. The businesses that were up the street that had been there a long time in buildings built in the thirties and forties and fifties.

But as the decades go on, and mostly with the coming of Meadowood Mall, everything went south that direction, and that really brought a decline for businesses in this neighborhood. That's when the turnover in businesses began to happen. But in the last ten years or so there's been a general interest in getting back to some of the old parts of downtown in cities all over America, like doing a little

refurbishing, and that's provided a spark to renovating the Midtown area. So we're happy to be a part of that. We've been here a long time whereas a lot of the businesses have gone in and out, but then there are still some like us—Ponderosa Meats was already here and is still here. And that might be one of the oldest. Boy, as I look up the street, who knows about some of the old motels there. To me that's maybe the worrisome part of Midtown becoming an important stop, but the little restaurants and the bars that have opened, and the eclectic retail stores, that's a good thing, bringing people downtown. It's fun.

And so now I'd say, what about some of these old motels? Nobody's ever renovated any of those. They just get older and older. But then I wonder, what is the future of Midtown? How far can we keep this idea going? But I'd say it looks promising, as a whole, for the district. Since we banded together, it's been a new thing to get the word out. And our new president Paul, from Recycled Records, he's been in business in Reno in some different spots for a long time, and he's really providing a spark for doing some advertising and pooling everybody's money together to get the word out about Midtown. So we're looking forward in 2016 to some of his ideas, getting more exposure on TV or radio for Midtown.

Barber: Were you involved in that Midtown Merchants organization from very early on?

Rollins: No, not from early on. I guess I was being kind of a snob, thinking that we're really established and known, except to the newest people in town. But eventually I did join, and it became more apparent it was a good idea, that pooling our resources a little bit and promoting the whole area was good for everybody.

My daughter was secretary for the Midtown District for a year, and so she was at all the board meetings and the general membership meetings. She's a busy working mom, and so she stepped down from that for this year. But through the course of that, she met all the people that were involved in it, and I've met some too.

Barber: What's your daughter's name?

Rollins: Her name is Sara Rollins.

Barber: Have you participated in any of the events that Midtown has? Do they come this far south, the Art Walks, for instance?

Rollins: Well, the Art Walk is really not a Midtown business owners event. That's organized by Living Stones Church, but this year at the Art Walk they decided to have bands playing in three different venues, and our parking lot was the southernmost one. A parking lot across from Junkee's was the midpoint, and a parking lot next to Living Stones was the first one. We all stayed open till nine o'clock that night, and in our store we were featuring art from some of the local artists, and our doors were open, and people could listen to the music and browse the art. That was a fun event. It wasn't like there was a lot of money to be made there, but it was just fun. There was a good atmosphere. People were all in a good mood. They were out walking the neighborhood that night, and it was fun.

Barber: Does this seem like a good location to stay? Do you feel like the future is good for having the business in this location?



Rader Rollins with his daughter, Sara. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Rollins: Pete Stremmel has a commercial real estate friend, and they approached me a couple years ago and asked would we be interested in selling this building. They had some interests in developing the property a different way, but my father said no. I agreed with him, that it's really hard to move a lighting store. And then to say, "Okay, let's take on debt again," it just didn't seem like a good thing. It's a way you can get in over your head. So we're staying here. We're excited to see the new construction that will be starting in 2016 at 1401 South Virginia at the old bank property. It will be a restaurant and retail with office-type business upstairs and four duplex town homes at the back facing Tonopah Street.

There will be eight townhome units similar to the project on Center Street that's called 8 On Center. There are three stories—a garage on the bottom, and two stories of living, and those worked really well.

Barber: Is there anything else that you would like to see in this area that you think could really be a benefit to the business or just to the district in general?

Rollins: You know, I have never thought about that. I know there's interest and people are wishing there was a Trader Joe's kind of grocery store, but they need a pretty good-sized parking lot and a pretty good-sized building, so it seems unlikely that that could happen. That would be a tough one, but I know that people who now have moved in downtown are liking the Midtown areas as a place to live, and that would be appealing.

Barber: I don't know how much walk-up traffic is a factor in your business, and you have all this parking, but do you feel like improving those sidewalks is going to help or make a difference to you?

Rollins: Well, with the RTC project, I think the idea is to make it fresh and make the traffic move and just freshen the look and make it more inviting for people to go ahead and drive here, because, no, it's not a walking kind of area, but I don't know if any place in Reno really is. Even for some of those riverfront businesses downtown, you maybe park somewhere and walk along. Parking's kind of at a premium, and we're really fortunate to have the big lot here. That's never an issue for our customers. They don't have to worry about that. But I know a lot of businesses struggle with having enough parking for the customers that they're getting, or sharing with a neighbor and each one overwhelming the parking for the other one. But we don't have that.

Barber: I know the size of the parking lot was a big component that Sewell's was advertising in the very beginning, that they had this enormous parking lot, when the market opened in this building in the past. It's interesting, because about the time that you moved here really coincided with some of the biggest changes that were happening in Reno—the construction of the interstate, the construction of the really enormous hotel casinos in the downtown area, and the MGM Grand. So you really have seen some enormous changes.

Rollins: Yes. On the freeway coming in from Fernley, you had to exit at B Street there over by Galletti and whatnot. That's as far as it went, and then drive down Kietzke to get this way, or down 4<sup>th</sup> Street if you were headed downtown. And, of course, there was no north-south freeway going through. But, yes, a lot of changes started happening right about then.

Barber: And your parents ultimately moved away? Are they still in Reno?

Rollins: Well, they bought a home in Southwest Reno when they first came here, but then they bought a lot in Incline Village and built a home in the eighties there, and that's where they live now.

Barber: Is there anything else that I haven't really hit on that you would like to talk about?

Rollins: No. You hit on more things than I thought you might be interested in.

Barber: It certainly seems like a good vantage point to see a lot of change happening around you, and at the same time have that foundation of being a very established business and being able to kind of weather all these changes in the economy and the changes happening around you.

Rollins: Yes, really, it's worked out well. That recession—that was deep. What we do, we really are dependent on new home construction, and it just stopped for several years, except for a few retired people building their dream homes. There were a lot of builders with nothing to do, so they could get a good price on a bid. That was going on, and then regular people were staying home and not selling, just doing some redecorating, remodeling in carpet, furniture, and maybe a light fixture here and there.

Barber: Well, I want to thank you so much for talking to me. I really appreciate it.

Rollins: You're welcome.

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## HILLARY SCHIEVE

Mayor of Reno and owner of Plato's Closet and Clothes Mentor,  
formerly located at 1509 and 1535 S. Virginia Street



Hillary Schieve. Photo courtesy of City of Reno.

*Hillary Schieve opened a Plato's Closet franchise at South Virginia Plaza at the corner of South Virginia and Mt. Rose Streets in 2007, and a Clothes Mentor franchise next door in 2011. She served on Reno City Council from 2012 to 2014, and in 2014 was elected Mayor of Reno. She discusses the early years of Midtown and her experiences as a businessperson and civic leader.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and I'm Reno, Nevada with Mayor Hillary Schieve to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Mayor Schieve, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Schieve: Absolutely.

Barber: Thank you. I want to start by getting a little bit of background on you. Can you tell me where you were born and where you grew up?

Schieve: Yes. I was born and raised right here in Reno, Nevada, and I moved all over the place; I've lived in Colorado, Arizona, Hawaii, San Francisco. I was a competitive figure skater, so I moved around quite a bit, but Reno's always been my home.

Barber: You had a youth and young adulthood that were filled with a lot of highs and lows. You've talked about a lot of it in the past, and I don't want you to feel like you have to repeat everything now, unless you want to. But I am wondering, looking back, how you feel that the experiences you had have contributed to your professional life and some of the choices that you have made in the years since.

Schieve: I think we all make some choices we regret and some we're really happy with. We don't have a crystal ball, so I think sometimes you do things based on your passion and the things that you really care about. I really care about my community. I ran for office, and it's really meant a lot to me to see Reno go through these changes and this momentum that we're experiencing. Obviously, being the mayor can be incredibly difficult, and it can also be incredibly rewarding. Someone was just in my office and said, "Why would you want to run for office? Half the people hate you and half the people love you." [laughs] It's hard to please everyone.

But when it comes to the choices I've made, certainly I hope that even if they aren't the right ones, that I can learn from them and continue to grow. Living in Reno, I'm so blessed with this community and just hope that the choices that I make moving forward only help this community be what it can be, and inspire others. Reno is on an incredible trajectory, and, honestly, it's an exciting time to be a part of it.

Barber: In the past decade, there have been so many changes and transitions with the larger economy, but also in specific neighborhoods and parts of town, and the Midtown District is one of those. It's amazing to think that it's already been almost a decade since there's been something like a Midtown. I want to talk a little bit about your involvement in that, because your businesses in Midtown were some of the earliest of the newer generation to open down there.

Schieve: Right.

Barber: It seems that a lot of things were happening in 2008. Sounds like that's the year Plato's Closet opened.

Schieve: Right. 2007, actually.

Barber: I'm wondering if you could take us back and talk a little bit about what led you to be interested in starting your own business, why there, and why that kind of business. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Schieve: Sure. I've always been an entrepreneur. I own a resale clothing business, and it's kind of like clothing pawn—we pay cash for clothes, and we turn around and resell them. I've always loved that, because I love recycling and being good to the environment. That was one the reasons I was really attracted to that business. Obviously, I like fashion. I collect a lot of vintage fashion from various designers from back in the day. I've done that most of my life, so I have an incredible collection. I will brag about that. [laughs] I started my businesses online with vintage clothing, and I was successful and I took that money and I opened up Plato's Closet. I opened up a franchise because I believe that you shouldn't reinvent the wheel, just make it better.

I didn't have the money to be able to go wherever I wanted to be in the city. We hadn't yet seen what the effects were going to be from the recession, and so rent rates were still really, really high. They ranged anywhere from two dollars to three dollars a square foot, anywhere I was looking across the city. The economy was just starting to decline. There were many other locations that I really wanted to be in, but I couldn't afford them, and someone—one of my mentors—said, "Just remember, Hillary, you're not in business to pay rent."

So I said, "That's very, very wise advice." I looked at the Midtown location, and I was not crazy about it at all, because I knew that that part of town had some serious challenges and had had challenges for many years. It wasn't a main shopping hub or even a place where people really wanted to go, but it was affordable, and that was enticing.

At the same time, there were a couple of other businesses that were starting to look at the area. There was Sushi Pier. This was when we didn't have a lot of sushi restaurants in town, but I knew sushi was very attractive to my age group of customers, who were millennials and teens who liked to be a little more hipster, I guess you could say. I knew Sushi Pier was looking in that area, too, and I thought, "I bet a sushi place would probably create a very good marriage between our businesses." So when I found out that they had signed the lease in that shopping center, I thought, "Well, I think I'm going to, too," because I think we could all feel that something was happening there, but we didn't really know what.

Another one of the reasons that I was attracted to resale clothing, besides the eco impact of a resale business, is that I feel connected to teenagers. I think they have it extremely difficult and they're very branded by what they wear. It was a way for me to give back. I get so many teenagers who come in and say, "I could never afford \$200 jeans, but I could certainly afford them in your store for \$30."

I always identified with teenagers and how they brand themselves, and that's one of the biggest reasons why I wanted to open Plato's Closet. I also wanted to give them a way to be able to sell the clothes they didn't want anymore, so they would have cash in hand, whether they wanted to go eat sushi or go to the mall or whatever. It was a business I was really attracted to, and Reno hadn't really seen a lot of resale concepts, so I just thought it was the right time to do it.

Barber: At that time, did it seem that the business owners in that area knew each other, got together at all, or had any kind of organization, or did that emerge later?

Schieve: All the new businesses coalesced around each other, but the old businesses didn't really want to be a part of it. I think that they were sort of skeptical. The area we now call Midtown hadn't had very much love in a long time. There were a lot of vacant buildings and there wasn't much going on there. It was known as a seedy part of town, and I think these were businesses that were tired, they'd been there for so long. So I don't know if they felt like there was a big possibility that this new district could happen. When we first started the district, a lot of people were not on board. It was very, very challenging. I

remember there were four of us who got together and said, “Hey, let’s create this district,” and we really wanted to do that because we were all new in this area that was struggling. But we knew if we came together and we put together this idea of this district, that we could probably make something really great happen.

And the process was really, really interesting, because it wasn’t successful at all when it started. We could not get anyone to show up to our Midtown meetings. I remember walking into Jessica Schneider’s office. She was one of the originals with myself and a guy from Sushi Pier. His name is Chris. Then there was Kathy from Out of Bounds, and then there was Tammy Borde from the Chocolate Walrus. We all got together, and we were really excited about it. And I remember walking into Jessica’s office, and she was in tears. I said, “Why are you crying?”

She said, “I’m so frustrated—it doesn’t seem like people care or want to be a part of it,” because we kept having these Midtown meetings and no one would show up. It was really frustrating, and she was super frustrated.

I said, “Listen, Rome wasn’t built in a day. I promise you, in five years everyone’s going to want to be like the Midtown District.”

It was at that time that we decided that we would create a commercial to feature the Midtown District. And we had to be really careful about this commercial. We were all new businesses, so we didn’t have a lot of money. We didn’t want to single out anyone, and we didn’t want people to think it was only about us. So we were really, really careful to market the area like an experience, instead of just advertising one or two businesses. We didn’t show any signs for these businesses. You couldn’t really identify any Midtown businesses, but you could identify with the streets that we showed and some of the people that we showed.

When we broadcast that commercial, it may not have changed the perception of Midtown, but it did get the business owners saying, “Oh, this really is happening,” and the next Midtown meeting was packed. I’d say we had about forty people there, and typically we had only been getting one or two people involved. So that’s really what that commercial did for us—not that it branded the District to our entire community, but it certainly sent the message to the business owners that we had arrived and that we were going to do something really great. The commercial was terrible, but it got done. It met the purpose that we needed it to do.

That’s really how it started, and then there was a lot of other movement from going to certain landlords and asking them if they’d be willing to partner up with an entrepreneur or something that was really attractive, like arts and culture. They hadn’t seen any revenue from their buildings in years, so we thought this would be a really great time to be able to connect with some of the landlords of these vacant buildings and say, “Hey, would you like to partner with this business and take a chance?” They didn’t have anything to lose. Their buildings had been vacant for so long that many of them were very receptive. It was very cool to see that sort of momentum take shape. And then other business owners got involved and started to brand the area, whether it was through business cards or starting to put banners outside. It was the small things that generated more momentum.

And I will tell you that Jessica Schneider was such a huge driving force in how momentum picked up in Midtown, because she works public relations and branding like nobody’s business. I’d never seen anyone be so good at something and be such a champion for that District. The funny thing is, she could have just been promoting her business, but she wasn’t. She was promoting other businesses. She was calling all the news stations and saying, “Hey, did you hear about this business? Guess what they’re



doing.” She became this go-to PR person for the media, and that really helped us because we didn’t have a lot of money. That really helped us to launch Midtown in the magnitude that we needed it to.

But I think what people need to remember, which I do whenever I look back at the beginning of Midtown, is that people wanted so badly to believe in something, because we were in a recession and Reno was one of the hardest hit. You have to remember that we were the hardest hit in foreclosures, we were the hardest hit in unemployment, along with Florida. We really were experiencing a downturn. But I believe the silver lining was that Midtown would never, ever have been born in an economy that was flourishing, because we wouldn’t have been able to rent these locations. They would have been astronomically priced. We would have been priced out of the market and we couldn’t have been competitive, and have brought in the arts and culture, this kind of grassroots movement that becomes so attractive in different cities. Every city has that little grassroots movement.

It really was a blessing in disguise to be in a recession, because we were that place that the entire community wanted to see be successful, because they were hearing about bad things happening in a recession. People were really rooting us on, whether it was the mom-and-pop shop or the cool bar that was coming in or the artist that was going to create a mural. We were always doing something, and I think the community rallied around us because we were that little engine that could. That’s really how Midtown flourished.

Barber: I’ve heard about some of these recruitments that were made. Jessica talked about recruiting people.

Schieve: Oh, she was the queen. She was the queen.

Barber: When I talked to Paul Doege of Recycled Records, he would say, “She got me here.”

Schieve: Yes.

Barber: You were talking about the partnerships that filled some of the vacant spaces in the neighborhood. Do you remember what some of the results were of those partnerships?

Schieve: Yes. Bernie Carter was very good to entrepreneurs, very good. And I think some people may not know that about him. They perceive him as this wealthy developer who came in. And he’s been so good to the movement and artists and entrepreneurs. He really has. He has had people in his spaces that he has worked so hard with, just to get them in there. These are businesses that probably would never have been able to go into what we call a “Class A” location because you have to have financials. You have to have a business model. You have to prove all of that. And he was willing to take a chance on so many, and some of them were really struggling, and he really was a big driving force.

Unfortunately, now because the District is so popular—and this is the downside of when you do make something so popular—a lot of those landlords have now sold to other people, and the real estate value in Midtown has gone up dramatically. We’ve seen it also, too, with residential property, and its impact on the millennial movement, where young people want to live close in. People love the walkability factor.

But I also remember—and this is very much one of the reasons why I wanted to run for office—that I was the one that the Midtown businesses chose to represent them. They said, “Hillary, you’re going

to be the one to go to City Hall and ask for sidewalks and street lighting, and you're going to this council meeting." And I'll never forget that I came to the council meeting, and I swear to God, they looked at me like I was crazy. They were like, "What? What's this Midtown District? Never heard of it." They thought, "Who's this person coming in and asking us for the sun, moon, and the stars from this district that no one's even heard of?"

It was a very uncomfortable experience, it was a very intimidating experience, and the only council members I could get to listen to me were Jessica Sferrazza and then Dave Aiazzi, but those were the only two. Other than that, I remember having this very negative experience at a city council meeting. So that was part of the reason why I wanted to run for office. I felt like if that was my experience, and I was just someone from the public walking in for the first time and trying to have my voice heard, then if that was happening to me, I would imagine that was probably happening a lot and all over the city. So that was one of the reasons why I really wanted to run for office, because I really wanted to change that process.

And now the city embraces Midtown with open arms and, obviously, RTC is doing great work, and this project is finally going to be something that we have dreamed of for ten years. We've dreamed of this. So to sit here with you is pretty miraculous. [laughs]

Barber: I think of the boundaries of Midtown extending from California or Liberty all the way south to Plumb Lane, by some definitions.

Schieve: Yes.

Barber: Early on, it sounds like you were talking to business owners that were in the immediate vicinity of where you were, around Mount Rose Street, in the southern part of Midtown. But there also were some things happening in the northern part of Midtown at that time. Was there a sense of connection even early on with some of the things that were happening on the north side?

Schieve: Yes. Because so many businesses were closing and we were opening, a lot of us felt, "Hey, we've got to stick together." There was a kind of brotherhood among a lot of us, and that's how Jessica's idea of the Art Walk took shape. We all wanted to be involved in the Art Walk. When you create a district, there are some people who say, "Hey, what about me and my side of the street?" But you have to really look at everything that encompasses the District and what's going to be the best for each event. One of the things that makes a district is walkability. When we created the Art Walk, some people got really upset because it didn't come down far enough to their part of the street, and so some of the businesses were a little resentful, I think.

I knew it wasn't going to come down to my end, and that we didn't really have the walkability that the other side of Midtown had. But I always promoted it, gave them money, was very involved, because we had that feeling that if it was good for Midtown, it was good for everyone. But sometimes it was really hard for other business owners to embrace that mentality. It was really, really difficult, because they couldn't tell that this was going to help all of us.

I remember at the first Art Walk we had, there were thirty people, I think, who showed up, and now it's about five thousand. It's pretty phenomenal what has happened. But I think you have to be careful, because you don't want to step on other people's toes. We want to be able to share that wealth everywhere when it comes to getting people to Midtown and embracing it. But at the same time, you've

got to support everyone else in the District who is doing great things, because it's all going to make all of us successful.

So that was a little bit of a challenge, but most people did get it. They did. They got that we have to be supportive of the other side of the street, and now we're seeing the Art Walk come all the way down south. And if someone's at the Art Walk and then later on they come down to my business, that's something that clearly was a successful result of the Art Walk.

For the most part, people were very supportive, but there have been times, I think, as with anything, when it can get a little political and people want to establish their territory and say, "This is mine." Certainly we've seen a little bit of disconnect in this project about where parking should be and where the bicycle routes should be. I'm a very big proponent of parking, and I know that the bicyclists kind of get angry and upset with that. I think it's just the result of some differences in what we all envision for Midtown.

Barber: Now, by the time you decided to run for city council, you'd opened a second storefront in Midtown. Was that always your plan, or can you tell me how that came about?

Schieve: Yes. It was funny. We were taking on all these clothes, taking in all these teenager brands, and I just remember so many women my age coming in and saying, "Hey, I need a store like this for me." A store next to Plato's Closet just happened to move out, so I decided to expand. I was very, very blessed that Plato's Closet was very successful, so I thought, "Well, there's this other space. What could I do with that?"

So I opened up another business that was similar but just meant for a different demographic, more of a professional working woman. The kids who work for me like to call it the cougar store. [laughter] So I opened up that concept, and I just thought it was a good marriage between both stores.

Barber: How did business go? Were you concerned initially about that location? Did that seem to be a problem? How has that changed over time?

Schieve: I will tell you, I was so incredibly nervous about the location, because no one had heard of Midtown. It wasn't like people were coming to shop in Midtown. You never heard of people saying, "Let's go shop in Midtown today." That was totally unheard of. People didn't do that.

But it was successful, I think, because, again, people were excited about the new movement that was happening, because places were closing and people were losing their jobs. So the community was very supportive of the people who were trying to open new businesses in a very difficult economic time. Plus, I think, because we pay cash for clothes, people were cleaning out their closets like nobody's business, and people were changing the way that they would spend their money. They really were. And I think that throughout the country, the recession changed how people will spend their money moving forward. I really do. I remember when we were just booming and people were buying boats and cars and homes, and it was crazy.

I've always been of the mindset of doing the opposite of what everyone else is doing. When everyone else was buying big flashy things, I decided, "I'm going to buy a business. I want something for my future." I always do the opposite. If everyone's buying gold stocks, then I'm buying completely the opposite, and that's always seemed to work for me. [laughs]

Barber: Many of the other tenants of that area where your businesses are have changed over time. Does the makeup of the businesses in the surrounding area change the atmosphere very much? There's quite a variety.

Schieve: Yes, there is. Now over there we've got a wine bar and we've got every restaurant possible, all the different kinds of foods, from Thai food to Indian food to Italian food. The one thing Midtown's become known for its food culture, which is very cool. And think that some of those businesses that had been there for so many years, just struggling, felt, "Hey, this is when we should probably get out, let someone else come in and revitalize what's going on here."

Just as with any part of town, there are some businesses that will do very, very well and some that won't do so well, and I think in a way sometimes it can be a good thing to let someone else move in and take over. But, yes, it's changed. Look at it now; it's really changed. If you have a business that's going to be sustainable in the long term, then you'll always have that business because it's got staying power. It's sustainable. But then some just aren't, like in any business climate.

Barber: So as you became a city councilperson and then the mayor, inevitably your relationship toward Midtown took on a different dimension.

Schieve: Oh, totally.

Barber: Were there aspects of that that took you by surprise, or things that perhaps as a business owner you weren't necessarily aware of?

Schieve: Well, that's a balance, too, because being in office with Midtown projects coming in front of me, I think there's this perception that, "Oh, she might be doing that for her business." In actuality, I'm moving out of Midtown. It's a hard to pill to swallow because it's shaped my business and who I am for the last ten years, and so it's bittersweet. But I look at it as providing the opportunity for another entrepreneur to come into that center because my landlord isn't raising the rates, and I love her for that. I'm so grateful, because that will allow another business to be able to come in there and to operate a business affordably.

I've looked in Midtown, and that's part of the challenge. I have looked and looked in Midtown to be able to move my business to another location there. We are expanding because we are successful, and that's a great thing. I really looked, and that's the downside that sort of breaks my heart, that there wasn't anything big enough in Midtown to accommodate my businesses, since most of the real estate has all been bought up or it's now leased.

I'm kind of a victim of our own success, in a sense. But I'm looking forward to this new area where I'm going to move my businesses. I'm actually going to open another business in Midtown with Jessica Schneider that we can't talk about yet. I'm excited that here the two founders are going to open up another business in Midtown that I think will do very well and embrace the culture of Midtown. It's great, but at the same time I'm sad that I'm moving some of my stores out of Midtown.

Barber: So what do you hope to see for that District? What are the things you see on the near horizon and then maybe on the far horizon? I think in addition to that, as the mayor you're thinking about the entire city.

Schieve: Right.

Barber: Do you see Midtown playing a role in something larger?

Schieve: Yes, I do, and what's interesting is that people now keep saying, "Wow, Midtown's had all this love and Midtown's had all this notoriety. You've got to focus on downtown," and I would agree. Midtown has grown organically, and that's what we wanted to see. We wanted to see it grow organically. We didn't want to see big box stores come in. We didn't want to see the commercial side of business take over Midtown. That was what we didn't want to see. Unfortunately, sometimes that can be the case when something becomes popular. Big box starts to notice you, and they want to get in there. So I'm grateful that Midtown will continue to take on its personality, and it will continue to flourish.

I believe there's a lot more work that needs to be done in Midtown, certainly with sidewalks. We need beautiful sidewalks. The walkability is so essential down there. I think we want to see more trees. But we also want to make sure that it's done with personality, because Midtown is all about personality. I don't think that we want just a regular sidewalk. We want something pretty fantastic. If that means a wider sidewalk with trees and color, those are the things that I think that Midtown really deserves. And I think moving forward we're going to see that. I think with this RTC plan, they've been great about being very transparent, having a lot of meetings about what they're trying to accomplish. I'd love to see crosswalks that look like we've seen them in other cities, with painted piano keys, for instance.

Jessica Schneider had a great idea—and I think this makes a lot of sense—about having it color blocked, so you'd have a blue block, a green block, a yellow block. It's very hard to find an address in Midtown, but if you could say, "Hey, I'm on the yellow block," and you could see where they were color blocked, then that would make sense. Maybe being on the sidewalk, you could look down at the color and say, "Oh, that's the blue block." It's an interesting idea, and that's what Midtown's all about, being sort of eclectic and a little bit odd. That's what people like about it.

But now, for me, as the mayor, I'm really starting to focus on downtown. It's been neglected for a very, very long time, and that's the number-one area that the residents of Reno now want to see revitalized. So that's really what I want to focus on. The cool thing about that is, I think that I bring a lot of experience from what we did in Midtown that worked and what we did in Midtown that didn't work. In order to make something successful, it has to be sustainable, and I truly know now that organically it has to be something that the community gets behind and helps you build. Otherwise, it's completely manufactured and I don't think there's sustainability in that.

The other cool thing is now when I come to a city council, I don't get thrown out. [laughs] When I come to a city council meeting now, I can be a voice for all the different neighborhoods that deserve a chance, like Midtown did.

Barber: Well, I want to thank you so much for talking to me today.

Schieve: Well, thank you. Thank you for everything you do.

Barber: You're welcome.

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## JESSICA SCHNEIDER

Owner, Junkee Clothing Exchange, 960 S. Virginia Street



Jessica Schneider inside Junkee Clothing Exchange. Photo by Sarah Petrie.

*Jessica Schneider grew up in Gardnerville where her first business was called the Jitterbug. Once in Reno, she ran an interior design studio called Decorating with Style from 2000 to 2008. She opened Junkee Clothing Exchange at 960 S. Virginia Street in 2008 and was instrumental in the early branding of Reno. She opened Sippee's New and Used Kids Clothes in 2013.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm here at Junkee Clothing Exchange in Reno, actually upstairs from Junkee, with owner Jessica Schneider to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Jessica, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Schneider: Yes, ma'am.

Barber: Great. Thank you. So we're focusing today on your businesses in Midtown, and before we get into that, I thought I could just get a little background information on you. Are you a native of this area?

Schneider: Yes. Topaz, actually. My dad had Topaz Taxidermy outside of Gardnerville. I went to school in Douglas High and grew up in Gardnerville.

Barber: So what brought you to Reno?

Schneider: I had a business in Gardnerville called the Jitterbug when I was twenty-two, and I moved to Reno just to get a job. I told myself I would never own a business again. [laughs] Somebody else would worry about the payroll, I would never do it again, and sixteen years later, fifteen years later, here I am.

Barber: Now, what got you into that first business in the first place? Was that your intention in high school?

Schneider: Yes, I would daydream about opening a business, always. I've really only had two, maybe three W-2s in my whole life. So I started out really well. I started out being an entrepreneur right off the get-go.

Barber: What was the field you were interested in, or what kind of business did you want to have?

Schneider: I don't know. Definitely my family's been in the junk business, so Jitterbug was independent music, vintage clothes, and junk. I've always been around that. But then I had a bar with my ex-husband for a while in Gardnerville with a great profit margin, and then now Junkee.

When I moved to Reno, I opened up Decorating with Style, and it was an interior design studio by Josef's Bakery, from 2000 to about 2008, and I rode that wave, which was great. I made a good living then. I was an interior designer for the working class, because everybody went after Montreux, and I was the only interior designer that went after the working class. When you couldn't build a house fast enough in Double Diamond, I was picking your paint colors for a reasonable price. So there were young couples, and then I had painting crews and tile crews. It was crazy. It was a really good time.

I would be so busy I wouldn't even know where I was going. That's before smartphones. So my assistant would give me a Map Quest, and I would do three or four color palettes a day. At \$125 each, that was good money. And then January 2008 came, and I realized, "Wow, I don't have an appointment till two more weeks?" And I thought, "It's just January. Maybe it's just January." And there was some hearsay about the market crashing and all that, but then one of my favorite contractors went out of business, and I just felt it. I was doing interior design, and I knew it in my gut, because some things were so ridiculous. We were gutting kitchens because they didn't like the color of the granite that the builder put in, and I thought to myself, "You have to pay this back." So I always knew something would give, but I didn't know it was going to be that bad. So that's why, but I'm really glad I'm not in interior design. No one's spending money on their houses right now.

I knew I needed to shift gears, and shift gears fast. I opened Junkee May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008. I just shifted gears into a recession-proof business. I didn't know it was going to be that bad. Some people think that

was genius of me, but I really didn't know it was going to be that bad. So Junkee was kind of heaven-sent, but it wasn't successful right off the bat, and no business is. It takes time. It takes a minute.

Barber: So did the idea of it come from kind of the experience you already had in your family? Was that a kind of business that had appealed to you?

Schneider: Yes, the old J.C. Penney building where Reno Provisions is now, I did that storefront window. My grandma had that junk mall, and I did that storefront window for *years*. For five years I did it every month. So I've just been around the junk business. When I added the Antique Mall to the costumes and the clothes, people were against that, but I knew from her having a junk mall, I learned that business and I knew that it kind of runs itself and it brings in all demographics.

Barber: So you weren't intimidated by that idea of suddenly having something that would require that kind of inventory?

Schneider: Or so big. No, I was scared to death. [laughs]

Barber: Did you do a lot of observing the area around here and thinking there's really more demand for this, too?

Schneider: No. Well, where I came up with the idea of a district is when I was in the window in the old J.C. Penney building. It was called 100 North Sierra Antiques. When I was in that building, I think it was an Antique Mall for about six, seven years, and my grandma ran it. I think it was owned by Bill Beasley and George Karadanis. I think they sold it.

So I did that window and people would knock on the window all the time, tourists. They would say, "Where's the district?" Because I do that, I go and try to find the coolest spot in town. And it really clicked with me. I had it happen all the time, and I wouldn't know where to send them. So I would say, "I don't know. There's no district."

When I looked for a spot for Junkee, I looked downtown, but there wasn't enough real estate to recruit businesses to create a district. There wasn't enough retail space at the university. So I found this spot and I saw the vacancies, or I knew that the businesses would probably change. We had enough real estate to create a district, and it's on the main drag. I didn't have this spot set out. It's just that I needed recruits. I needed to group them together, because like is like. So that was my mission.

Barber: And what year was that?

Schneider: 2008.

Barber: So you knew you had a district in mind, and you were looking specifically for a place that could nurture that. Were there other businesses in this location already that you felt could be kind of compatible with that?



Schneider: Yes. I did not start Midtown District. When I first moved in, I didn't know that there was anything, and it was called SoDo, and then Sam and Tammy just started Midtown District about a month before I even rented the building.

Barber: What are their full names?

Schneider: That's Sam [Sprague] from Micano, and Tammy Borde from Chocolate Walrus. So they were here. Melting Pot was here. Süp had just opened and Chapel Tavern had just opened. So I looked at those businesses and that's why I'm here. I thought, okay, Süp is really, really cool, and it's quaint, and Chapel just opened. So I really held on to a little bit of a cutting-edge business. But that was it. It was not that many. Black Hole has always been here, and Aces Tattoo, some anchors. But still, people thought I was crazy.

Barber: Now, what did you have to do in order to open the business? You needed to have a lot of inventory. Was that a difficult thing?

Schneider: Actually, it wasn't. Everybody has a lot of clothes. Everyone. I started buying clothes at the interior design shop, put an ad that I'm buying clothes, and then people started coming. Then the cool part is, this was a time when everyone took out money on their houses, and I kept getting the letters saying, "You have \$100,000 you can take out on your house," but I never got caught up in that. I never got granite. So when I rented Junkee, I said, "Well, I have that house line credit." Well, they pulled it. They pulled everyone's. So I opened Junkee on nothing, and I'm really glad, because if I did have \$100,000, I would have bought new POS [point of sale] systems and awesome lighting, and you just get caught up in opening a business. But I didn't.

I went to Costco and bought registers. I bought round racks for about 100 bucks from a thrift store that was going out of business. I built a half wall. If I had had the money, I would have bought another eight feet of sheetrock to go all the way up because I wanted the two stores to be separate, the antique side and the costume side. And I would have made probably a better bathroom. But I didn't. Not that you should do that, but I didn't, and so I'm really grateful. I mean, I panicked because I opened with no money, and the day that I opened, I rang up \$120 with that big of a space, and I sat in the middle of the floor and cried my eyes out. I thought, "What am I doing?" My grandma sat at the end of the bed and asked me, begged me not to call it Junkee: "Please don't name it Junkee." [laughs] My mom, everyone: "What are you doing?"

So I got really quiet. I told a couple of people, and then I called some friends and family, and said, "Oh, by the way, I open tomorrow." I got really quiet. My uncle, my ex-husband, we just worked on it slowly, quietly. I didn't tell anyone, because why would you do that? Why would you open a 12,000-square-foot store right in the heart of a really big recession? Your rent's thousands of dollars a month. Why would you do that? I had to get quiet.

Barber: So what did happen? How did business go?

Schneider: It made me really hustle. I knew that we were not going to spend money on handbags anymore. I knew that we weren't going to spend \$300 on jeans. Something had to give, so I really didn't know it was going to be a costume shop. I thought it was going to be more like a Buffalo Exchange. But

I knew it wasn't going to be like Plato's Closet. Plato's opened up and was very successful right off the bat, the same thing, because we're not going to expensive malls. We're learning our lesson. We're cutting back. So I kind of knew that would happen.

I constantly tried to get on the news. I did back-to-school on a budget. I always was working on free publicity and I advertised a lot. I didn't want to wait the five years to get established. I wanted to hurry up. I worked on it all the time, and I worked six days straight for two years, and only had Sunday, and I died on Sunday because Junkee was big. But I got thin. That was a good thing about it. I got thin.

Barber: How many people worked for you at first and then now?

Schneider: I had a cashier at the Antique Mall, and then Megan and I, Megan Helyer [phonetic]. She was my assistant at the Antique Mall. She worked for me for six years, just her and I with that big space. And I remember being in the back. We had to have a beeper in the beginning, on the door, because I would be working in the back and someone would sneak up on me. Now if I had a beeper, I would kill myself. But I remember having to have a beeper so I could hear people walk in the door.

There's no such thing as instant success. There are a lot of stories like that with restaurants, because I think you up your ante because you eat three times a day. Everybody eats three times a day. Some people might shop once a year. So you up your ante for people to talk about, "Oh, my gosh, that restaurant is so good." So the restaurant will start gangbusters from the beginning. But not too much with retail stores. It takes a minute to get established, because not everybody shops, but everybody eats.

Barber: How many people work for you now?

Schneider: Twelve. And I want to create outstanding jobs. That's on my vision board. Actually I'm paying for them, we're going to gather up money, and I'm going to take them to Disneyland in January.

Barber: Have you done something like that before?

Schneider: No, I keep talking about it, and then I just told myself, "You know how to make things happen. Just make it happen." So the hotel is like 1,400 bucks, the tickets'll be like 4,000. We're going to do a little fundraiser bake sale so they can have spending money, and I'm just going to do it. I mean, what small business takes the staff to Disneyland?

Barber: No one ever does.

Schneider: But I want to, and I believe in quality of life. Most of my staff has been with me for a long time. Virginia's been with me five years. Melissa is a college graduate. She graduated last year. She's been with me four years. Heather's been with me all through college. Christina has two college degrees and works for me. I don't know why. It's crazy. But the jobs are not always out there, especially in Reno, especially when you get a journalism degree, and I'm good to them.

Barber: Did you come up with the name easily? Was that a spontaneous thing?

Schneider: No. Well, like the junker, there was a junker back in the day that used to sell aspirin. I would love for you—I read this, and I can't find it again—since you're a historian, look it up. I read it so long ago. He was called the junker. He sold furniture, aspirin, and he would come to town, and when he started selling cocaine in the twenties, he became a junkie. That's where the word comes from, I think. I read it once, and I can't find it again.

So we're all like a clothes junkee or whatever. I don't know. I made the mistake with naming my business Decorating with Style. I wanted to say what I did, because I didn't want to be something—Design by Sunshine. I made a mistake with too long of a name, and that's why I'm business-savvy. I tell people that all the time. It's because, look, I started at twenty-two, and I failed. I've failed a million times. So I've learned. That name was too long. You think about Walmart, Target, two syllables, got to remember it, easy. It just clicked.

And it was kind of edgy, but how I spelled it, it's not like the drug addict. I knew that it would catch on, and I cannot believe that Junkee is like a household name. Sometimes I'll run into somebody that hasn't heard of it, and I'll be like, "Whoa, you haven't heard of it?" And I'm like, "No, get over it, Jessica. Not everyone's heard of Junkee." But just to be in a town where almost everyone knows your name, that's amazing.

Barber: Now, did you always live in the property, too, when you opened?

Schneider: No, I lived on Arlington in this awesome house, in the Woodburn [phonetic] House. Do you know the house? They're lawyers—one owns that gray house. It's for sale. You should buy it. [laughs] The Woodburn House. No, I lived in old Southwest, and then just recently got a divorce. Troy Schneider did help me build this business up. He did all the books and stuff like that, but he's no longer in the business. I always made the joke, he's a guy and he still doesn't know what we do. He's like, "Really?" The night before I opened, he asked me, "People are really going to come and buy used clothes?" Because he doesn't buy used clothes. So, of course, I panicked with him even saying that.

We were selling our house, he moved, and then there was an apartment upstairs. A staff member always lived here, and then when they moved out, it was kind of perfect timing. I really like to be here because I'm really hands-on. Then I could go at night and do display and stuff.

Barber: I want to ask you a little bit about the building and then just about the Midtown organization, how that's developed over time. So with the building, it was vacant when you started looking?

Schneider: Yes, for about five years.

Barber: Do you remember what it was before that?

Schneider: A slot car place or something. I'm not sure. But he went out of business, and I guess my landlord had to auction his stuff off. I'm not sure. I don't know all of that. It was very cold. It was in maybe February or March. It was cold, dark, super dirty, but right when I walked in, I felt it. I looked over to the buying counter where the registers are, and I just instantly got it.

Barber: Was it completely open?



Junkee Clothing Exchange, 2015. Alicia Barber photo.

Schneider: Completely open, no walls, *huge*, and I loved it automatically.

Barber: So can you describe for me where you ended up putting different components?

Schneider: I just knew it. I just knew I was going to cut it in half, because I had to do booths. I knew I was going to cut it in half, and I knew that's where the register was going to be. I knew that's where the buying counter was going to be. I had tons of chandeliers left over from the interior design studio, so I just knew I was going to use decorating skills and spread it out and make it look full, and that's what I did. Now it's really full.

Barber: And there are two main rooms, or three?

Schneider: Two main rooms. Three, I guess.

Barber: Far back.

Schneider: Yeah. It's not fancy. There's literally duct tape on the floor. But that's what makes Junkee, Junkee.

Barber: Now, what was the arrangement at the beginning? Did you have a really long-term lease? Did you want it to be shorter just in case?

Schneider: No, I have a long-term lease.

Barber: From the beginning?

Schneider: Yes, because you can't take blood from a turnip, and if I didn't make it, what's he going to take from me? But if I kicked butt, I just didn't want him to raise my rent every year, and the Oelsners have been very good to me. Paul is in the hospital, but his daughter Julie has been very kind. They know that I love the building so much.

So I pay my rent every month, which is—I don't want to say how much, but it's over ten grand. It's a lot. But it's an old building. They gave it to me at I think eighty cents a square foot, which was good—a dollar is a lot, but that's what it's going right now. But with that price, I have to fix the roof. I'm on my own, and this is an old building and it takes a lot.

Barber: So there are a lot of improvements that you've made?

Schneider: Yeah, it's constant. It's a full-time job sometimes.

Barber: Is there anything that you know you really want to do with it?

Schneider: I'd love to get a roof. It doesn't rain here that often. Thank God for Reno for that, because even though we need it right now, it's a flat roof. Never put a flat roof on a building. The post office has a flat roof. There's really nowhere for the water to go. It doesn't make sense. I guess they were absent that day when they learned about gravity. I don't know. But it is the worst. So, I don't know, flat roof, the roof sucks my soul.



The building's oldest section housed the Shoshone Coca-Cola Bottling Company. Nevada Historical Society photo.

Barber: So tell me, you said when you first got here, there was kind of an emerging idea of a district. They were calling it SoDo. Who developed that? Was there a sense of it being a district? Were these business owners all working together, or was it kind of fragmented?

Schneider: We were all working together, and Tammy and Sam were so excited because I did a cheesy local TV show, so I was on TV. They knew that I do advertising and marketing, so they were so nice and flattering. They were like, "You're here. We're going to just really make this into something."

And then we started meetings, and the meetings were good, and we had a lot of good attendance. Chris from Sushi Pier was the first president. He did a great job. Chris Thompson, he manages Sushi

Pier up at South Lake today. I love Chris. So Chris was over it. It is hard to please everyone, and Chris was over it, and they just kind of said, “You’re doing it.” And I don’t even think we voted.

And I just started branding it. We bought the red and black logo from Sadie. She owns Death and Taxes and Midtown Eats. I forget Sadie’s last name. Then I got the banners. Everyone was against the banners because they thought it would look trashy, but I knew that I needed to brand it and do it quick, and it really did. Those stupid banners, just the black with the red, the cheapest, inexpensive fix to brand something.

Then we made a commercial, not about any business, but just made a scene. We did five-second I.D.’s. And I was president for almost five years.

Barber: What are five-second I.D.’s?

Schneider: Five-second I.D.’s say something like, “This holiday season, shop Midtown District.” Just five seconds—and I always say there’s a reason why the grandma in Double Diamond knows about Midtown District. Because even the Riverwalk District, where they’ve done such a good job and where the Wine Walk is super successful, it is about sixteen years old. It’s old. And people are still like, “Riverwalk? What?” But they do advertise now. They spend a lot of money advertising, but we really just branded Midtown guerilla style.

Barber: Now, how did it go from SoDo to Midtown, or why did that happen?

Schneider: I don’t remember, so I don’t want to act like I do know.

Barber: That’s totally fine. [laughs]

Schneider: I don’t know. I hated SoDo, but I don’t think—maybe I said that. I don’t know. I don’t know. [laughs] I was like SoDo, South of Downtown, no way.

Barber: Now, is that same group still an active group?

Schneider: No, that was the owner of Salon 7, Jenny O. She was here for years, and now she’s in that awesome historical building on Fourth Street. And right when I loved Jenny, she was doing my hair, and I was like, “I’m moving in and trying to recruit businesses,” and she was moving. And Salon 7 was such an anchor in this town and they do so much charity work, that it was really sad to see them go, but they really needed more space. But she was in Midtown for years.

Barber: So she was very pivotal to it. So then did that group kind of disband?

Schneider: Yeah, I guess they just went away after Salon 7, because I think it was a couple of girls. I think it might be that woman that did Deluxe Laundry and those apartments. It seems like she was really good friends with Jenny O, and that’s how they got that building.

Barber: That’s HabeRae.

Schneider: What's her name?

Barber: Pam Haberman and Kelly Rae.

Schneider: Yeah, think so. I think they're the ones that started SoDo.

Barber: So then is there another established business group now that meets regularly for Midtown?

Schneider: There was Creative Coalition, but Creative Coalition is more of an art thing doing different things in Midtown. Midtown was more about branding. But now I think the two are going to be one, because we have a new president. I hope so, because it's very confusing to the public, so I've been very against the two. But I understand where Creative Coalition was coming from, because they felt like they weren't heard. You can't please everyone. It's been a rough road. I don't even go to meetings anymore. I just pay my dues and give my checks. I give my opinion every once in a while, and I put Midtown District in everything I do and advertise. I just got burnt out.

Barber: So the Creative Coalition came later?

Schneider: It came way later. It came, I would say, two years ago, and Midtown District now is seven years old.

Barber: That makes sense, then. So tell me since you opened, can you describe for me from your perspective how the neighborhood has been changing or how the district has changed physically or businesswise?

Schneider: I used to be so on top of it. In the very early stages, if anyone was opening anything, I was the first one to know about it. They would introduce themselves, because Junkee was such an anchor store. Now I can't even keep up. I go for a walk on Center, and I ran into the Mountain Music Parlor. They have banjo lessons. It looks like Branson, Missouri, on the inside. She's so nice. I was like, "What is going on?" I don't even know what's going on. So she told me about her opening, and I shared it on Facebook. The yoga, it's crazy.

So it's definitely rapid, but we still have a long way to go. Not everybody in Midtown is just kicking butt. It really is hard to be a small business. It takes a long time to get established. We still are waiting for the young families to redevelop. The Marmot brothers are renting to younger, hipper people, all of that. We're still very much brand new. It takes a while. But I think it's happened faster from just the guerilla marketing and branding.

Barber: And you started some new business ventures, too, newer than this one. Can you describe that a little bit, how that came about?

Schneider: Well, how I came up with Sippee's is everyone kept asking me about kids' clothes at Junkee, and I didn't have kids' clothes. The building across the street came up, and it was going bankrupt. So the Carters and myself and my ex-husband, we bought it. We all put in, \$50,000, I think it was, and I lost that in the divorce, but whatever. We bought the building, and then I came up with Sippee, because it



hasn't been taken. It actually was going to be called Giggles, but Giggles was very taken. Giggles.com is a kids' clothing store online. But no one has Sippee's. Sippy cup is spelled different. There's the two E's. There's Sippy the Seal. I love San Francisco. So the whole store is built like a pier, and it's kind of my Disneyland [unclear]. I don't know, I heard that had been a five-and-dime, the Sippee's building.

Barber: I haven't looked at it yet enough. It's incredibly meticulously themed in there.



Sippee's New and Used Kids Clothes, 2015. Alicia Barber photo.

Schneider: Well, the thing is, I took a business loan out for that, so it's a little bit more polished, I would say, than Junkee. Junkee is put together with glue sticks and baling wire. I'm not joking. And so Sippee's was more put together and it's so brand new, it's not making money yet. Some days I wish I could just sell it. I'm not such a kid person. I like my own kids, but I'm not just that geeked-out mother. Nothing wrong with that, but—

And it's really premature. In Midtown, Mt. Rose Elementary almost closed, because they didn't have kids, like nine years ago. You didn't raise kids in Midtown. It's still rough. I live upstairs. It's still rough. I don't have three elementaries, like in Double Diamond. So there are not a lot of kids here yet. It's going to take a minute for that to take off.

Barber: What do you really want to see? I mean, what do you think would really help the district thrive?



Schneider: Well, I always have a list. I always have a list. Paul will verify this. As soon as I rented Junkee, I was on Recycled Records to move here, move here, move here. I'd make him uncomfortable, and he'd see me at parties and think, "Oh, here comes Jessica." Recycled Records just needed to be here.

So I had a list. Breakfast, Two Chicks. They were going to do dinner. We talked, and I said, "But we need breakfast." And then they researched it, and they did breakfast. They were absolutely, when signed the lease, going to do dinner. But we needed a breakfast spot. And Crème was more quaint and little, but we needed breakfast.

So I just recruited like that, like a men's store, a barber. We need ice cream still. We need ice cream. So there's a list in my head, and I try to recruit them, not as much as I used to, but still there's a list in my head of what we need. That's how I started. I would just talk to them. When the GourMelt truck said, "We want to get out of this truck," I was like, "We need breakfast in Midtown." Then I gave them Bernie Carter's number. They made a connection. They built out the restaurant.

Paul from Recycled Records told me no, he'll never move, he'll never move, and then he walked in my office and said, "This is the square footage I'll need. This is what I can pay." And then we found him a building the next day. We wrote him a letter of recommendation, called that landlord, and then he's in that spot.

Barber: And he'd been up by the university.

Schneider: That, too. He closed that one down, but he was over there by Aloha Sushi on Moana and Kietzke for years, the only one in that corner by Swenson.

Barber: So he finally decided to move because he saw that it was an up-and-coming area?

Schneider: Well, and the Moana construction almost killed him. But, yes, he saw it, and he's doing the best he ever has. I love Paul. He's like my mentor.

Barber: So these aren't things that are happening through the business organization. This is really through interpersonal, personal conversations.

Schneider: Oh, absolutely. Talk about the Art Walk or the People Project. That's this July with Artown. I'm on the board of Artown. So you have to get in your car and go and talk to these business owners, get them to return emails, get it together so we can all work together, because like is like. I always say there's a reason why the car dealerships are all together. There's a reason why all the grocery stores are together. If I could go to Recycled Records or the girls that go get pierced on their eighteenth birthday at Black Hole then walk over to Junkee, or then the Burners come to my store, then go to Melting Pot, that makes sense.

I'm not really worried about competition too much, because Eighth Street has a whole bunch of vintage stores, and they bring everyone. Bad Apple Vintage opened. She brings more people to me, then I bring more people to her. It's just a win-win. So I try to communicate with all of them, but we're all busy. It's hard, but the Midtown District meetings really do keep you informed.

Barber: So have events always been of a part of it? Do you remember the first events you were involved in in the district?

Schneider: There are two guys. This is a fact for sure. How the Midtown Art Walk started was Mike—oh, why don't I know his last name? Mike is the best guy in the world. He was at Living Stones Church. Mike and another guy walked into my office and talked about this Art Walk that was working in Arizona, and they had some foreign exchange students from UNR. And I said, "All right. Let's do it." So they did it with their own money. I gave them about a hundred bucks, and we did the first Midtown Art Walk seven years ago. We blew up balloons and got some artists, and there were about sixteen, twenty people.

Barber: Was it all outdoors or would you go in and see art?

Schneider: It was always live art. We always try to keep it live art, and keep alcohol out of it, because we felt like we had enough wine walks, we had enough beer crawls. We just wanted to clean up the neighborhood. We didn't need to bring alcohol into it. It was actual live art.

So during the Art Walk, when we started it quarterly, that was too much. Then we broke it down to just a year, and then when Mike—the church took over, I would say, five years ago solid. Craig is the nicest guy. Craig Parrish [phonetic], he took the Art Walk to the next level. I couldn't do it, and Mike Cutler—is it Mike Cutler? I think it's Mike Cutler, he knew that I was busy, and it was pretty much just on us to get this going, get the artists. Just getting the artists to show up and do the live art during the Art Walk, that's a feat in itself. So Craig really took it to the next level because they have a lot of volunteers. They have a lot of manpower. He does it all for free, and now the Art Walk is thousands of people. It's amazing.

Barber: What's the distance that it covers geographically?

Schneider: This year's the first time it's going all the day to Statewide Lighting, so I hope that people go down to that, but it's always stopped at Junkee because I was the first. So it was Junkee to the church, and then more and more. I think we have eighty-eight businesses on the walk.

Barber: And are there other events?

Schneider: Yes. Creative Coalition tried to do an event once a month, and I think our pool from Reno is so small, we forget that we're such a small town, and there's just not enough people to support that. It was just too much, and they learned a lesson. I learned a lesson. I'd learned the same lesson already before that, because we tried to do a quarterly, and it's just too much. So the once a year is perfect.

Creative Coalition is not doing events anymore. So now it's just the one July 23<sup>rd</sup>. We always do it on Thursday. I read in *Martha Stewart* that on Thursday and Sunday you don't have to compete with stuff on Friday, Saturday. So I always have parties Thursday night or Sunday night. They'll stop after work, so it's from four to nine. It's perfect, and it's packed.

Barber: What do you see as some of the remaining obstacles either for your business or for Midtown or for the district? What are some things you think need to be resolved?

Schneider: Well, I think one of the obstacles is definitely going to be when we go in construction because we are so brand new. And RTC, they absolutely listen to me. They've been great. It's just so scary

being in construction for two years, and we really are brand new. I'm more established and I have parking. So for the little newbies, it takes a while to get established, and I just don't want us to go under. We're only at 60 percent occupancy. It sounds like we're kicking butt and taking names, but there are a lot of people not making it.

Barber: You mean 60 percent occupancy in the district?

Schneider: In Midtown. If you really look at it, there are a lot of "For Rent" signs. We're not at full capacity. We're still very brand new.

I would love to do the construction a block at a time at nighttime. I know that they talk about [inconveniencing] the residents and stuff, but, I mean, there are weekly residents. There are not really that many residents. I don't know. They know what they're doing, and I don't. But it scares me to death.

Barber: Have the sidewalks been a problem for you?

Schneider: Yes, they are. They're definitely a problem. You can't walk two people across. When I walk to Süp with somebody, I have to walk where people park. But it's still just so scary ripping it up. I don't know. I have different opinions. I know we need it, and in the end result, it'll be amazing, but it's just during it that worries me, because I feel like I will survive, but I think we'll weed out the soap makers. We'll weed out the person making feather earrings. We'll weed them out. It's sad, but anyway.

Barber: And do you think that parking is an issue for you?

Schneider: It's not really that bad a parking issue in Midtown. It's just training people where to park. I rent the lot across the street. I've had to train staff and customers to park across the street. I paved that for my staff. Reno is—we're behind, but how can we grow if we don't do it? So we need to get with it. We'll walk three blocks in a Walmart parking lot, but we'll say, "Süp is right there. Where is it? I'll just drive." I'll say, "It really is right there." People just don't walk.

Barber: So Midtown really did start to become this combination of bars and restaurants and retail. Is there anything else that you think you'd want to see here, like a type of business? You said things like ice cream, but—

Schneider: Well, what makes the district is we have variety, so you can go and do a lot of things at once. That's why I'm glad there's a barbershop and I'm glad there is a breakfast place. There is a cheese shop that's just so different. So we need a whole bunch of different things to make a district.

The one thing Reno does that drives me crazy is we don't just have one tattoo shop; we have thirty. We don't just have one sushi place; we have so many. And now we're opening a lot of yoga studios. I don't know why we flood our market like that. Many cities do not do that. I don't know why we do that. We did that even in the glory days. How many rich girls playing store opened a wine bar? We had so many wine bars or jean bars. We just really copy each other and do that and flood the market. I don't know why we do that. Just like Picasso and Wine, they opened a wine studio. Now there are so many.

The only reason why I think Junkee hasn't been copied is that they walk in and think, "Holy shit. I can't do this. I don't know if I could do this." I think it's been copied a couple times in Sparks with displays and stuff, but Junkee's an animal and it's a lot of work. It's constant. I'm constantly working on changing the displays, doing events. It's a lot. I think that's maybe why it hasn't been so copied. But I don't know why Reno does that. It's kind of awful.

Barber: How do you describe Junkee? What is your description of it?

Schneider: It's for everyone. It's for all demographics. I work on the playlists, and if you're in there for five songs, you get to hear a song you like, I don't care what age you are. So when an advertiser comes in and says, "What's your demographic?" I say, "I want 'em all." I want you to be an eighty-two-year-old man and just think it's the funnest place, and I want you to be a ten-year-old little girl and think it's great.

Barber: And did you see that from the beginning?

Schneider: Well, I've read a lot of business books, and so Starbucks, you know, they pretty much pitched from the very beginning atmosphere and a feeling, and no one thought, "We're going to pay three, four bucks for coffee." It was low lighting and it's how you felt. It was consistent. I read that in some magazine. I thought, "Well, that's super smart." You're selling a feeling. Because I'm just selling clothes, used clothes, junk. It's the way that we treat you, and it's a feeling and it's fun, and people always are dying laughing in there. I always hear that. They're putting on silly glasses or they're scoring on the antique side for their house to make it better. I don't know, it's just fun.

Barber: You put the label of branding on it, it makes it sound so businesslike and a little cold, but a brand really is that whole feeling and what people associate with a place.

Schneider: It's so true. Anthropologie, my favorite store. Why do I pay \$112 for that sweater? It smells really good. It's got good music. It has good displays. I get caught up in the feeling. You're buying a feeling. That's why I don't go to Walmart, because I don't feel very good in Walmart when I go there. My self-esteem is higher, I guess. [laughs]

Barber: Did you put together your signage and everything yourself? Did you have a team, or where did you look?

Schneider: No, no. Scotty Roller did my logo. Because I did have a skill for decorating, I just used that and you can do a lot with junk and a hot glue gun. I know it sounds easy, and people say it's not. I know people say, "Oh, you make it look easy," and I know display is not easy. A lot of people can't do it. I get it. But just for me, I could, and I like setting up a store. I love the very beginning. I love the startup. I love being in overalls. I love staying up all night. I love when my eyes are bleeding because I've just been hot-gluing stuff and hanging it. I love that stuff.

For Sippee's, I would lie in bed and come down here at three o'clock in the morning and hot-glue moss on the boats. I love that. I would actually love to start stores all across the United States. I would love to franchise Sippee's one day. That's where I came up with such an original thing, and I believe there are no such things as original ideas. I think that you're inspired by something, so get over yourself.

You might think, “I came up with that,” but you were inspired by something. I can be inspired by just a color, so it’ll go and morph into this whole thing. But I still was inspired by something.

Sippee’s definitely was inspired by San Francisco, but no one has done a pier or a seal. [laughs] No one’s done that. So I thought to myself, if I could franchise Sippee’s, teach you how to do it, do used, teach you how to buy, and then set it up, oh, that’d be my dream job, to set up Sippee’s.

I think for Junkee, I thought that in the very beginning, but it’s just such an animal. I’ve talked to a couple of people. I don’t even know to explain it. I really don’t. I can’t put into words how to do it. Between the atmosphere and being a good leader and the staff meetings, it’s just different. I don’t even know if another one would work. It’s the building. It’s the energy. It’s everything about it.

Barber: Do you need to go far afield at all for inventory now?

Schneider: Yes, I’m constantly junking. I’ll go to little hick towns in California like Penn Valley, where they don’t know what they have. I’ll junk a lot, and I go to Mill’s in L.A. that has vintage clothes. Because Reno, we’re not that old, and we’re a small town even now. We were a really small town in the fifties. So I don’t have this abundance of like fifties clothes. I think Nevada probably has the worst vintage out of any other state because we were the least populated state for so long. So it’s not out there. In New York you have millions of people. In L.A. you have millions of people. I don’t have that. And then when you leave here, you have desert. So I don’t have a plethora of vintage.

Barber: So do you have these dedicated trips where you take trucks places?

Schneider: It’s super fun, too, yeah. I love it.

Barber: Just California?

Schneider: Yes, California. I don’t go anywhere else. But I get real quiet. I go to this quiet place, and if I go to an estate sale and I’m in my overalls, and it’s waist-high, even if it’s full of cat pee and, like, rat poop, it’s just the score. And I go through it, I get really quiet, and it’s really fun to me.

And that’s another thing. I shouldn’t bag on rich girls playing store. If I was rich, maybe I’d play store, too. I shouldn’t say that. But I think Junkee hasn’t been copied because it’s not that glamorous, going through cat pee. And someone calls and their dad has just died, and I have to go through all their stuff. And then the brother’s there, and he’s asking, “How much are you getting for Dad’s clothes?” And that creates this tension. And he’s a hoarder, and there’s a whole bunch of Vicks VapoRub and napkins, and it’s not that glamorous.

Sometimes I walk away with nothing, because I’m like, “Hey, I’m not going to give you \$25 for each item of your dad’s clothes, and I don’t know what you were thinking, but you’re not getting that from me.” So it’s really hard, especially with all the junk shows, I think, that are getting so much for something that’s not worth anything—it’s not even old.

So it’s work. I have a Junkee truck, and most of the time I’m in overalls. But I like labor. Like, prime example, this morning at five-thirty, I almost had both of those lots [across the street] weeded, and they’re not even my lots. But the auto title loan place doesn’t clean up the weeds, and so people pull into Junkee and they look over and there’s weeds and trash, and I think, “Oh, welcome to Midtown.” So I don’t care. I just do it. I do it every year. I’m almost done, with big old goatheads. I’m a very good

laborer and I'm strong. I'm not supposed to be in an office all day. I have one office day a week where I do payroll and do all my books, and that's on Wednesday, and I hate it. It's my least favorite day.

Barber: It's sounding to me like there's some kind of philosophy here, and I don't know if it's something just is so innate for you that you don't really think about it, but it has something to do with how your customers are everyone. It's very democratic. And every day the way that you think about your employees and what you want to do for them, your own willingness and passion, for manual labor—is there something there that you think was innate to you that's about respecting working people? Do you know what I'm getting at?

Schneider: Well, one of the most amazing things I ever heard, it was on *Good Morning, America*, and it was a study. They asked so many people in blue collar, so many people in white collar, all these classes of people, what was the most important thing about your job, and I thought to myself, "Well, it's money." Right then I thought, "Oh, of course, it's money." And it wasn't. For each demographic, it was feeling appreciated. And I thought, "That's so true." So I make sure I really appreciate the staff. I tell them thank you, but I'm tough, too. I don't go out with them. We don't have cocktails together. They can't come hung over. So I'm not their friend, either. I have high standards, but yet I'm very good to them. I don't scream. I don't lie. I don't let them talk about each other. That's completely unheard of. So if it's your day off, you feel very safe. I *really* believe that's the success of Junkee employees. Don't bag on the next person. Bring that person in, your story's going to change, and then it helps you get over it. If it really bothers you, then let's talk about it, but don't just create a mountain out of a molehill in talking, gossiping. That is not allowed. So I feel like that's a success with the employees.

With the success, what Tony Robbins always says is the only way to success is hard work. There's no other way. If someone could hand me a million dollars—and how many people have pissed away a business before that's been completely funded, had every financial backer, and failed because they just didn't work hard enough or have the tools to work hard enough? There's no other way to success. Even if someone gave me so much money and I could blow it and just be lazy, with the staff, let them run down, let them start stealing from you because you're never present, you're never there. The only way to success is hard work, and Tony said that a long time ago, and it makes so much sense. There's no other way.

Even that Johnson & Johnson kid, you know, he's doing documentaries and stuff. I don't know. His parents gave him a whole bunch of money, and whatever he was doing he was totally messing up. Think of how many people lose money, just get cocky. And ego. Ego will always make you fall. Get over yourself. It's Reno, first of all. [laughs] Really, just get over yourself because as soon as you think you have it figured out, you're going to fall flat on your face.

I never put my eggs in one basket. I always think of what I'm doing next. Burning Man might go away. Even Halloween, all these dress-up parties, these theme parties, what if everybody starts going back to the mall? What am I going to do? Be ten steps ahead. If Burning Man goes away, I will not go out of business. If Halloween goes away, I will not go out of business. If all the crawls stop, I will not go out of business. Never put all your eggs in one basket. I want to be busy all the time and go after everyone and make them feel good when they come to Junkee.

I don't know. That's all just from trial and error. I've messed up. I've had little niches before with businesses, and now I want to go after the majority, not the minority. I don't want to go after the one percent. I've never believed in that, even when I did interior design. I think a lot of people get caught up

in the one percent, and if you really think about it, it's the one percent. So my mentor, John Larsen, who started Port of Subs, said, "Everyone can afford a Port of Subs sandwich." He said, "Go for the masses and hang with the classes." He used to say that. And I thought, "Wow, that's interesting." Not that I'm hanging with the classes, but it's so true. And a lot of people get caught up in high ends, and I never have.

But I don't know what I'm going to do next. I'm sure I'll do something. But I know one thing, I'll never get in the food business. I take my hat off to restaurant people, because you have to love it. There's about a 15 percent markup, and you've got to love it. It is a hard business.

Barber: And yet they keep opening in town, so many.

Schneider: I know. Thank God for Mark Estee. Well, Mark is—talk about hard work. That guy, he's at all his restaurants all the time. I don't know how he does it.

Barber: [laughs] We've gone through so much of what I was going to ask you. I wonder if there's anything else you feel like you'd like to say. We've talked about the way things developed here and where you see things headed.

Schneider: Recruiting. I haven't been recruiting, though. I just started to recruit.

Barber: For the district?

Schneider: That's exactly how I started, is we recruited. We recruited and I had people think about Midtown. I tried to recruit Ryrice. I tried to recruit Red Chair. She stayed over there, but we need just recruiting. Like is like.

Barber: And do you find now in 2015, is property being snatched up that you're aware of?

Schneider: Yes.

Barber: Are things really escalating?

Schneider: Yes. I feel bad that I didn't buy a piece of property in Midtown. I did, but I lost it. So I feel like even after all this hard work and being this anchor early on, that I won't have a piece of it. I feel a little stupid. But that's okay. I don't have to own my own building, I guess. I would love to. I do try to manifest that. I will lay in bed and close my eyes and think about buying this building. I'm so attached to this building. I love this building. Even the psychic that walked through, said, "They love what you're doing." And I always felt that. So the energy in this building, it's never scary. Like I said, I felt it right when I walked in. So I really hope I get to buy this building one day.

My landlord said, in passing one time, I think he bought it for about \$220,000 in the seventies or something. He said, "A million dollars."

And I said, "Sold! I'll take it." Because I pay over \$100,000 a year in rent. So I said, "I'll take it."

I don't know. His family owns a lot of buildings in town, the Oelsners do. His motto was he collects buildings; he doesn't sell them. But maybe the kids will have a change of heart. I don't know. But all I really have built up his property value. I lie in bed and think about that, too.

Barber: And when does your lease come up?

Schneider: Not for eight more years. And I think where Junkee would be, but it doesn't matter. I'll survive. Even if I have a little trailer by the river and I work for a small business, I'm a waitress, I'll be the best. I won't lie. I won't steal. I'll make sure you have good ring-ups. I'll tell that customer thanks for supporting whatever restaurant I'm at. I'm not too good to take out the trash. I know how to work hard. So no matter what, if it's a trailer by the river, it'll be the cutest damn trailer you've ever seen. [laughs] It'll have chandeliers in it from when I closed down Junkee and put these chandeliers in it. No matter what, I will survive, and that's how I wake up every day. I wake up every day thinking, "How am I going to survive today?"

It's true. Because what is it? What did Rockefeller take with him when he died? Nothing. So what does it all mean? I don't know. I kind of had that, like, five-bedroom house and this little taste of success and bought this awesome vintage house. It doesn't mean anything. All that stuff is minute. Not that I'm unwise with my money. I save it and try to do the right thing, but it doesn't define me. Success doesn't. But creating jobs and being a good leader does. That's what I was put on this Earth to do.

I really am invested in the staff, and it took me a long time. I had to go see Oprah to realize that about myself. I did this workshop, because I want to be very humble. If you want to be a good leader, it makes you sound like you have an ego a little bit, so I never said that. But then that's really what I want to do. I want to see the staff flourish. I want to see them grow. I have letters from so many of them that say that I changed their lives, and their moral code is different. I don't let them get tattoos. They're under twenty-five, and I say, "Don't get tattoos." They do. But I got mine so early and I hate them, so I tell them, "You're going to be a different person at forty." I try to teach. And I'm not some old lady that doesn't have tattoos. I hate my tattoos, so they kind of understand where you're not the same person at twenty-three.

I make them have period trackers. That's the biggest lesson. I buy the period tracker on the phone, ninety-nine cents—fifteen girls, that's hard. They come to me, "What am I doing with my life? I'm going to school full-time, and what am I doing? Maybe I should move."

I'm like, "What does your phone say?" They're about to bleed in two days. I'm not joking. And then I say, "We'll talk about it afterwards."

Christina texted me the other day, "I never knew about this, like, my moods." So now it's not so dramatic. They all have period trackers. It's mandatory. So what a lesson for a young woman. It happens to you every month, and you forget. Then all of a sudden at about twenty-nine years old, I figure it out. You forget every month, and when you're going through it, you're thinking, "He does not love me. What a son-of-a-bitch." It's so real when you're going through it, and now it just makes you accountable.

I'll look, and I'll say, "Okay, don't call her back. No. Give yourself the twenty-four hours. Wait until you bleed."

It's true. And they all thank me for that, just that tool. Or the tool to have social skills or the tool that I always back them up. They're so good that I know in my heart of hearts that they did the right thing by that customer. So the customer comes up to me and says, "Oh, she did not—she's this."



I say, “No, she might be having a bad day. Everyone does. You’ve got to have grace and mercy, but I back Melissa. So were *you* having a bad day? What really happened? Let’s talk to her.” Bring the customer right then. The customer is usually an asshole, and they’ve been an asshole the rest of the whole day. So Melissa’s good. She can have a bad day. But I always back up the staff, and that means so much to them. I don’t go and tear them down in front of their peers, in front of everyone because the customer complains. I do not do that.

We have lost our minds with Yelp. We’ve lost our minds in thinking that it’s our job to judge everyone. We’ve lost our minds, and we’re running rampant with it. It’s actually like my new fight right now. I’m fighting to make sure there’s no big business in Midtown. I’m researching how —because New Orleans has done that. In downtown San Francisco, people have done that. There’s not a Walmart. So I’ve got to learn how to keep big business out of Midtown. I don’t know. I just started this. I have to read. I don’t know how to do this. But you can get it done.

I do not support Yelp. I don’t look at Yelp. Another guy is a Yelp guy here, super nice guy, but it means that instead of going to the person—if I have a complaint about you, I’m going to put it all over Facebook about you instead of going right to you. It’s very chicken-shit. It’s very false. It’s an uneducated guess, because they don’t know what it’s like to make \$12,000 in rent, to make payroll. Just my payroll is \$4,200 a week because I don’t pay minimum wage. I pay well. Just my payroll. Did they know? So if someone’s having a bad day or they’re not buying their crap or the food didn’t come out, maybe the dishwasher got sick, maybe he got sick, maybe three people called in, and that’s your place to judge that restaurant? Even if you had three bad experiences, first of all, quit going there, or go straight to the owner and tell them. It’s just we’ve lost our minds.

And we’re teaching our kids it’s your job to judge me. That’s your job. When was it okay in the biblical sense? When is it okay to judge others? When is there any self-help book, any religion on being a better person, that says you should judge others? “That’s what you should do is judge others. That’s your job.” Nowhere. It’s crazy. It’s acceptable. It’s so weird.

But, anyway, I’ve called a couple friends on Facebook about it, and then they get all weird because they say, “You know, I’m not going there ever again.”

I tell them, “Just go straight to the owner. What are you doing?” If you stop one person from visiting that small business, if they have one bad day just because of you—it’s so weird to me. But that’s what we’re doing right now. I haven’t looked at Yelp in two years. Everyone says I mostly have good reviews, but I just will not give it power. They call me and ask to advertise. I gave them this whole theory on the phone. The guy’s all, “Um, anyways, I guess you’re not advertising with Yelp.” [laughs]

I said, “Yeah, no.” I don’t know.

Barber: Well, that’s a way of you being supportive of other businesses, too, and understanding. There’s a compassion about that.

Schneider: Absolutely. Gosh, you just don’t know. It’s an uneducated guess is Yelp. And with this Facebook, it’s just like we’re just these egomaniacs. Do I really care that your baby rolled over yesterday? Do I really care that you checked into Starbucks? I just feel like we’ve lost our minds a little bit. It’s scary. I feel like what country am I going to move to sometimes? But that’s why I home-school [name of child]. Really. I just keep him in this bubble, and he’s really invested with the Junkee crew and they all love him, and he’s very well mannered. He’s not on Facebook. I don’t know. It’s weird.

Barber: Oh, this is your son.

Schneider: Yes, and Sunshine's awesome. Of course, every mother thinks their kids are great. But she works at Süp and Two Chicks and was a [unclear]. She's working so much. So the small business, Casey [phonetic] loves Süp because Sunshine busts her ass, and then she looks at them and says, "Thank you for supporting Süp," because she grew up in a small business. So she gets it, and she's not too good to take out the trash.

So I'm trying to put out good people. I'm trying to put out good employees, a good husband or a good wife or good friend, like that, not just trying to give them gratification in that moment or give them whatever they want. And no doesn't mean no; no means talk me into it. There's none of that. I had to take him out of school because the kids are out of control. No doesn't mean no, and there's no fear anymore. When we were kids, they'd say, "We're going to call your parent." And we'd think, "Oh, my god, do not do that." Now the kid's like, "Yeah, call her." It's crazy.

So I don't know. Sometimes I get so crazy about that, and then going to the RTC meetings, too, I don't think we have that common sense thing. I know the RTC does, but I think—it's Mike. I love Mike. Mike said, "The early bird gets the worm." And so when the bicyclists go, that's who they have to listen to. So no one's thinking about the fact that if you take out all the parking, you might go under. It's not mean that we're so forward-thinking. You do have the capital to sit there and wait for Reno to be a bike town. They don't think that. It's crazy. So that's why I'll never miss a meeting ever, never again.

One meeting was at the Discovery Museum, and I heard about it. It was almost like they were taking out all the parking and having only bike lanes. And people were posting. Even Sam's like, "We need to be progressive." It's crazy. So we just don't have it anymore. We've lost our minds. Maybe if you don't have a job, maybe you don't get a phone. Maybe that's what you don't get. I don't know. Lost our minds. [laughs] But that's my opinion, of course.

Barber: Thank you so much.

Schneider: No, thank you. It was fun.

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## GEORGE SIRI, JR. AND JEFF SIRI

Co-founder of Ponderosa Meat Company and son, 1264 S. Virginia Street



Jeff Siri with his father, George Siri, Jr. outside their home in Reno. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*In 1954, George Siri, Jr. bought his father's interest in Reno Frozen Food Lockers, the storage and butchering business his father, George Siri, Sr., had founded with Willie Carano at 1264 S. Virginia Street. In 1974, George Jr. partnered with Don O'Day and Bruno Mastelotto to create the Ponderosa Meat Company. His son, Jeff Siri, also worked in the business while growing up.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is October 30, 2015, and I am in Reno, Nevada with Mr. George Siri and Jeff Siri to conduct an interview for the RTC Midtown History Project. Mr. Siri, do I have your permission to record you today?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: Thank you very much. And we might hear from you a little bit, too, Jeff, so could I ask your permission?

J. Siri: Yes.

Barber: Thanks so much. We're talking today about Reno Frozen Food Lockers, which later became Ponderosa Meat Company, which was your business and your family's business for a long time.

G. Siri: Yes. Since 1947.

Barber: And your father founded that with a partner, correct?

G. Siri: Yes, my uncle.

Barber: And what was his name?

G. Siri: Willie Carano. He was also a partner in the Eldorado.



Ponderosa Meat Company, formerly Reno Frozen Food Lockers. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: And before they had the frozen food locker plant, they had a bakery. Did your father and Mr. Carano work at that bakery together, also?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: Was your father always interested in the food business? Was that his profession his whole life?

G. Siri: No, no. My father did a lot of things. He was at the Columbo.

J. Siri: A restaurant and a nightclub.

G. Siri: Yes. A restaurant and a bar. It was on Lake Street, and it was quite a popular place in the thirties. And then my dad was in a place called L'Italia—Italy. He was in another bar with Gene Rovetti, another old-timer. And then, my dad got into the bakery business with a guy named Busbach [phonetic].

Barber: That doesn't sound like an Italian name. [laughs]

G. Siri: No, he bought the bakery from Mr. Busbach [phonetic]. I don't know when they started that bakery.

J. Siri: I have no idea.

Barber: And this was on Virginia Street?

G. Siri: Yes, this was on Virginia Street. It was up across the tracks. And next door was a theater and the Little Waldorf, which was a popular place. There was a market next door, and then next door to that was the drug store. And then on the corner of Virginia and Fourth was a bar.

Barber: Sounds like there were a lot of little shops, several places to eat and drink along there.

G. Siri: Yes. Well, along Commercial Row there were a lot of places to eat and drink.

Barber: Was your father actually the baker at the bakery? Was he preparing the food, or did he just run it?

G. Siri: He was the cookie maker. And I was the pie maker. I worked at the bakery during high school. I made pies. And my dad managed the place. The Little Waldorf was adjacent to the bakery. There was a hardware store, the alley, and then the Little Waldorf, and the Reno Hotel, which was upstairs, and then the bakery. I don't know how my dad got into the bakery business, but my uncle, Willie Carano, was head baker. They made bread and all kinds of confections and pies, and they distributed them around town.

Barber: To restaurants and to private homes?

G. Siri: To restaurants, mostly.

Barber: When you say he made cookies, did he have any kind of specialty type of cookies that he made?

G. Siri: Oh, he made all kinds of cookies. In the afternoon, he'd make cookies—sugar cookies and all kinds of cookies.

Barber: So was that a good job for you as a kid?

G. Siri: Yes, it was a good job. I made forty dollars a week, during the summer. That was quite a wage.

Barber: Was that working full time?

G. Siri: It was full time during the summer.

J. Siri: He was in high school, at that age.

G. Siri: I was a full-time pie maker.

Barber: I bet that made you very popular with your friends.

G. Siri: All of my friends would come in. It was popular for donuts and pastries, cakes and pies. I, of course, was a good guy during high school. I used to go to work at five o'clock in the morning and work until three in the afternoon. This was during high school.

Barber: What year did you graduate from high school?

G. Siri: When did I graduate?

J. Siri: I'm guessing 1943.

Barber: Was the war going on when you were in high school?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: So the early forties.

G. Siri: Then I got an appointment to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. That was in '45.

J. Siri: He actually attended the University of Nevada for a short time. Then went to the University of California—Cal. And then he got the appointment to the Academy.

Barber: And then spent a couple of years in Annapolis?

G. Siri: Four years. I graduated from Annapolis and served on battleships, the U.S.S. Washington. And during the summer, we went on cruises. We went to the Mediterranean. We went to Scotland, England, we went down to Italy, we cruised to North Africa, then came back to Annapolis, where I graduated from, just about the time the Korean War started. We served aboard the U.S.S. Duncan, which was a destroyer. We cruised in the eastern Japanese sea.

And then I came back in 1952 and resigned my commission. About that time, Reno Frozen Food Lockers commenced.

J. Siri: In 1953 you came back, because the war ended on February 27, 1953.

Barber: Do you know why your father decided to sell the bakery?

G. Siri: A fellow named Frank Welsh had a bakery in Chico, and he bought the bakery from my dad.

Barber: Do you think your father was just ready for a change? Did he want to open another kind of business, do you think?

G. Siri: Well, my dad was getting up in age, and my grandfather worked for the railroad.

Barber: So who did you say built Reno Frozen Food Lockers?

G. Siri: My grandfather, my father, and my uncle.

Barber: Oh, your grandfather was part of it, too?

G. Siri: Well, he put up the money.

Barber: Okay. And the name of the contractor?

G. Siri: Panicari. I think his son is still in business. He must be my age. I think Panicari is probably still around.

Barber: Can you explain what frozen food lockers are? Why was there a need for that?

G. Siri: Well, during the war, everybody was hoarding everything. [laughs] They'd have a six cubic-foot locker, and during the war if they got game or anything, or somebody gave them some kind of animal, we had 972 lockers for storage. There are still a few of them left, and people still store in them. Mainly, we sold meat to restaurants.

J. Siri: Not initially though, Dad—didn't you do all retail originally? You didn't start selling to restaurants until 1973, right? When you were first cutting meat, it was all for houses, wasn't it?

G. Siri: Yes. It was for the home.

J. Siri: And I don't think people had freezers then.

G. Siri: Like Jeff said, after the war, of course, people started buying freezers, so then we sold for home freezers.

Barber: Right, that's about when people started getting big freezers at home, around 1950 or so, I guess. You could buy them at Sears. But not commonly before that.

J. Siri: A lot of his business was cutting deer every year.

Barber: And it was a real service for hunters, who would bring it what they hunted?

G. Siri: Yes, and a lot of people raised cattle and lambs, and we'd have them killed in Yerington, and then we would process them into steaks and hamburger and everything.

Barber: So you had a really expert butcher shop?

G. Siri: Yes, we had a butcher shop.

Barber: When I went in there the other day, there was still butchering happening in the front area. Was that always where it happened?

G. Siri: Yes.

J. Siri: That was the retail section of the business.

G. Siri: When I graduated from the Naval Academy, I went to work there and we expanded that little corner of the building.

Barber: Oh, did the building actually expand?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: What was in the newer part?

G. Siri: Well, we just expanded the butchering part.

J. Siri: To be in the wholesale meat business, you had to have a separate area divided from the public's area, because of U.S.D.A. rules. They actually had an inspector there. I don't think he's there quite as often now. And every day, that inspector was there, inspecting what they were doing, to make sure everything was sanitary. So the wholesale piece had to be separated from the public.

Barber: Do you know what kinds of places the meat would go for the wholesale business? A lot of the area restaurants?



G. Siri: A lot of restaurants, yes. There were three other wholesale meat providers. We held our business.

Barber: And was all this meat local? Was it all from the region?

G. Siri: Yes, most of it was local. A guy might have five acres where he'd raise some lambs or cattle or something like that for domestic use. And then, of course, our big business was during the deer season. People would bring their deer in to have them slaughtered. That lasted for about three months a year.

J. Siri: You processed over 3,000 deer during one season, didn't you?

G. Siri: Yes, one year we processed over 3,000 deer.

Barber: You guys must have worked very quickly. What was your job, when you first started working there? Were you a butcher?

G. Siri: I was a butcher and a handyman.

Barber: And then did someone work up front with the customers? Was that a different job?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: Who did that?

G. Siri: Oh, we hired people.

Barber: Butchering can be a dangerous job. Did any accidents happen?

G. Siri: [shows his missing finger]

Barber: Oh, I didn't know that! Oh, dear!

G. Siri: [laughs]

J. Siri: The funny part is he didn't do that butchering.

G. Siri: I wasn't cutting meat. I was cutting a piece of cardboard on a band saw.

J. Siri: It was in the 1990s.

G. Siri: I nicked off a digit.

Barber: So you survived working in the butcher shop just fine.



A view of the side of Reno Frozen Food Lockers in 1965. Nevada Department of Transportation photo.

G. Siri: Oh, yeah.

Barber: It must have been cold in there most of the time. Was that a chilly place to work?

G. Siri: Oh, yeah. It was zero, where the lockers were. And where the processing took place was maybe 32 degrees. So it was cool.

Barber: What would you wear while you were working?

G. Siri: Just regular clothes.

J. Siri: They always had regular aprons that they wore to protect themselves from getting bloody from the meat.

Barber: I was reading about some kind of deep freeze or instant freeze. Was there some section that froze especially quickly?

G. Siri: Yes. It was called a quick freeze. It was about ten-by-ten.

J. Siri: It's still there.

Barber: Is that in the main room? There's a little door.

J. Siri: If you came in the front door and went straight ahead, there's a big door that you open up that goes into a freezer, and as you turn right in that freezer, there's another door that's similar to that, and that's where the quick freeze was.

G. Siri: And when we processed meat, it was usually quick frozen. Then it was put in the lockers and people, as they wanted their food, would come and get it.

Barber: Now, were they allowed to go back to the lockers, or did you get things for them?

G. Siri: They could go back to the lockers.

Barber: So it was just open, and they could go in and get anything out, whenever they wanted?

G. Siri: Yes, they'd have a key for the locker.

Barber: Did people usually rent by the year, a year at a time?

G. Siri: Usually, the term was a year. And as the war ended, we processed for home freezers. Somebody would buy a hind quarter or a front quarter and put it in the locker. And then we also got into the wholesale business.

Barber: So they would sometimes have you butcher things, and you would wrap it up for them, and they would just take it home, and sometimes they would put it straight into one of the lockers?

G. Siri: Yes. Or they would overflow their freezer at home, so they'd rent a locker.

Barber: Did anybody ever stop paying, and so you had to take their food away from them?

G. Siri: Not very often. Usually we'd send out a renewal on a yearly basis. Very few people reneged.

Barber: Was it pretty affordable for most people to do that?

G. Siri: Yes. A lot of deer hunters and game hunters didn't have room at home, so they rented a locker.

Barber: It would have been a big change to go from a bakery to butchering.

G. Siri: I think my dad and my uncle took a trip to California and there were locker plants there, and they decided, "Well, we'll start a locker plant." And there was only one other plant in Reno, the Union Ice Company. It was on the west side of town.

J. Siri: On Fourth Street. It's still there.

Barber: And I know the Sparks Frozen Food Lockers opened around the same time, over in Sparks. Now they're on Prater Way.

G. Siri: Right. Are you from Sparks?

Barber: No, I was just doing some research over there. The Taylor family still operates that. I wondered if they were a big competitor, but I didn't know about this other one. And then there were a lot of other groceries in your area, with Washoe Market and others. Were those your competition at some point? They had their own meat counters.

G. Siri: A lot of them would buy the meat and put it in a locker. If they had something on special, like if they had steaks on special, they'd put them in a freezer.

Barber: Oh, so the markets would use the food lockers, because you had so much space?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: I hadn't realized you had so many lockers. Were they stacked on top of each other?

G. Siri: Yes.

J. Siri: Five or six high, I think.

G. Siri: They were six high.

Barber: How would you get to the higher ones?

G. Siri: We had ladders.

Barber: Oh, okay. And would the customers climb on the ladders themselves?

G. Siri: Oh, yes. They'd climb the ladders.

Barber: There were also apartments upstairs. And you were saying that you lived in one of the apartments. I read there were four up there.

G. Siri: Yes, and when we went wholesale, after the war, we had an inspector's office up there, and also bookkeeping. And upstairs was also where people changed. So then the apartments were kaput.

Barber: About when did that happen, when there were no longer any apartments up there? Would that have been before the 1970s?

J. Siri: It was in the seventies, because they didn't go wholesale until later. When my dad went into the Eldorado, which was around 1971 or 1972, he sold the business to Don O'Day and Bruno Mastelloto. And then when he decided he didn't want to be in the hotel business anymore, he got a hold of Don and Bruno, and that's when they decided to go wholesale. And that was I think in 1973 or 1974.

Barber: And that's when the name changed?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: Do you know why you chose the name Ponderosa at that point?

G. Siri: I don't know. Just a change.

Barber: *Bonanza* had been a pretty popular television show. [laughs] So when you lived in the apartment, that was with your wife?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: What were those apartments like? Were they pretty small? A couple rooms?

G. Siri: There were two rooms about the size of this [gesturing to the living room].

Barber: One bedroom?

G. Siri: Just a regular apartment. They had a kitchen.

J. Siri: Was Dan born there? Did Dan live in the apartment when he was born?

G. Siri: Yes.

J. Siri: My older brother.

Barber: Did you have to pay rent, since your family owned the building?

G. Siri: We didn't. [laughs]

Barber: That's a nice reason to stay for a while! But then you moved out eventually, into a house?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: So you just decided that the Eldorado wasn't for you, and you really wanted to come back?

G. Siri: I came back. The Eldorado wasn't for me.

Barber: It sounds like a lot of regular customers probably came through. So it would be a very personal, family-oriented kind of business.

G. Siri: Yes, it was.

J. Siri: He did a lot of everything, too. He was a butcher, he was their accountant, he set all the prices on all the wholesale food—actually all the prices. He was a salesman—he would go out and sell to the different restaurants around. He did everything.

Barber: Sounds like you really have to like people to do that kind of job.

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: And when did you retire? You worked there for many decades after it became Ponderosa.

J. Siri: Probably, what, 2007?

Barber: Oh, not that long ago, actually.

J. Siri: He worked until he was eighty years old, at least.

Barber: Wow.

J. Siri: He slowed down but he would still go in every day and do the pricing, and work upstairs.

Barber: And did you work there a little bit growing up, Jeff?

J. Siri: Yes, when I was in middle school I used to go to Billinghamurst. Billinghamurst was then on Plumas Street. So when I got out of school, I would walk down and work for him for a couple of hours after school. I was the hamburger stuffer. There were little bags of hamburger. They'd grind the hamburger up and put into the machine and you'd put a bag on it and turn the handle, and it would put the hamburger in the bag. So I stuffed hamburger for him and cleaned up and did a little bit of handyman stuff for him.

Barber: Just during school?

J. Siri: Yes, and then later on I did work in the back end where they did some wholesale stuff, too—just packaging stuff, delivering, stuff like that.

Barber: About how many people at its peak were employed by that place?

J. Siri: 45 or 50?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: Really? That's a lot! How far would they be delivering? Into California at all?

G. Siri: Oh, California, Tahoe, Carson, Yerington....

J. Siri: Virginia City....

G. Siri: We'd kind of make the loop.

J. Siri: They went as far as Elko and Ely, I think, for a period of time.

G. Siri: Yes, we went to Elko. Actually, we covered quite an area.

Barber: Did you provide the meat for a lot of the casinos?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: The Eldorado, I suppose?

J. Siri: Yes. The company still sells to casinos. Cal Neva is buying meat from them today.

G. Siri: We had a room about this size that was a fur storage room. When they first started, they had fur storage. That was where we kept furs during the summer.

Barber: Why would people need to have their furs stored somewhere? Were they kept really cold?

G. Siri: Yes, it was colder. About 32 degrees.

Barber: So that was to prevent insects?

G. Siri: And then when we did away with the furs, we converted that space to storage space.

Barber: So would the furs just be hanging there beside each other? Were they all covered up to protect them?

G. Siri: Yes, they were in sacks.

Barber: I think furs were a little more popular back then.

G. Siri: Yes, around that time. Anybody who had furs would bring their fur in, and we'd give them the receipt.

Barber: It seems like everyone in that neighborhood probably knew each other really well. You were right next to the hardware store for a long time.

J. Siri: The five-and-dime was across the street, where Ace Hardware is now.

Barber: Right, the Sprouse-Reitz. So what would you do for lunch every day, when you were working? Would you go out and eat somewhere?

G. Siri: Most of them brought their lunch.

Barber: Would you bring your lunch in?

G. Siri: Yes.

J. Siri: A lot of times, we used to cut some cold cuts right there and everyone would eat what they had.

Barber: Oh, really? Just eat some meat from the shop?

G. Siri: Yes, we'd make sandwiches.

Barber: And [to George] did your father work there until he died, or when did he stop working there?

J. Siri: Did Grandpa ever work there, Dad? Did he work in the meat plant with you? Did he butcher?

G. Siri: No, he'd take in the deer and do delivering.

Barber: But he was mostly just the owner, really? He wasn't in there butchering every day?

G. Siri: No.

J. Siri: He died in 1959, 1958.

Barber: So just a few years after you came back.

G. Siri: Yes.

J. Siri: I didn't really know him. I was just a baby.

Barber: Well, it seems like a wonderful business, and the building really hasn't changed that much. There was an addition that you were talking about, early on.

G. Siri: Well, and then we made an addition to the back end.

J. Siri: That's where the wholesale was.

Barber: Okay, that was after you started the wholesale side, in the seventies.



G. Siri: It was about 40 or 50 by 30 feet. We weren't set up for wholesale before that.

Barber: So Jeff was talking about stuffing the hamburgers. Were there any other kinds of machinery or tools that they don't use anymore that they used to use when they were working with meat? I'm curious about how things like sausage were made. Was there some kind of hand-cranking machinery?

G. Siri: There were all kinds. Before the war, they made patties by hand. Right after the war, there was equipment.

Barber: Special equipment for making hamburgers?

G. Siri: Yes.

Barber: Any other kinds of interesting equipment? Maybe for the most part, butchering hasn't really changed too much.

G. Siri: No.

Barber: I saw them in there yesterday, and they were just working away with the aprons and knives. Oh, you have some gloves?

J. Siri: Well, during deer season, people would bring deer in, and they hired people to skin the deer, because they weren't skinned, and then they would take the deerskin and tan them and they made different things out of them. My dad actually gave these to me. They were made in 1955, a pair of deerskin gloves.

G. Siri: I didn't know you still had some gloves.

Barber: [reading] "These gloves were made from natural deerskins cured and tanned for the Ponderosa Meat Company about 1955. This date March 24, 2011, George Siri." So that was a gift that you gave Jeff? They're really nice. Do you know who made them?

G. Siri: Oh, we'd send them out to have made.

J. Siri: Very soft leather.

Barber: These are beautiful. Would the hunter give you the skin, or would you have to buy it from them?

J. Siri: Most of them didn't want the skin because it wasn't of any use to them. So they would skin them and they would just take the skins themselves. They also used to process a lot of the deer meat, the scraps, and they would send that out to another company and have salami made of it. So a lot of people got deer salami as part of their deer.

Barber: Oh, and then would you sell that salami after it was made?

J. Siri: He couldn't sell it. It belonged to somebody else, because it was their meat. If you had a deer and you wanted salami, then they would process the deer and make it into salami.

Barber: So the hunters would never sell the meat to the shop.

J. Siri: Right.

G. Siri: They still do a little bit of salami making. They send it out.

Barber: Would you ever butcher poultry, or anything like that?

G. Siri: Not too much. Chickens and ducks and things, we didn't cater to that.

Barber: Were there other places that specialized in that kind of thing?

G. Siri: Not really.

Barber: Maybe everybody knew how to do that. Maybe that was an easier task.

G. Siri: They would do their own.

Barber: It's much harder to think about butchering a deer or a side of beef.

J. Siri: They would get cases of frozen chickens in. They were whole, and they would actually cut those into eight pieces or whatever. But they didn't process them, really. They never did any slaughtering or anything like that. They bought the meat cleaned.

G. Siri: Well, that's about it.

Barber: This has been very helpful. I really appreciate it. Thank you so much for describing this to us today. I'll let you go.

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## SAM SPRAGUE

Owner, Micano Home, 1350 S. Virginia Street



Sam Sprague outside Micano. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Originally from Fernley, Sam Sprague moved to the Reno-Sparks area in 1969 and later entered the U.S. Army. He founded Micano Home and Garden in 2003 at 1350 S. Virginia Street after traveling around Mexico to purchase art and handcrafted goods. He was a participant in the early meetings that led to the formation of the Midtown District.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and I am at Micano Home and Garden at 1350 South Virginia Street in Reno, Nevada, with Sam Sprague to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Sam, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Sprague: Yes, you do, Alicia.

Barber: Thank you. I'd like to start out, as I said, by getting a little bit of background information on you. Can you tell me where you're from?

Sprague: I'm from Fernley.

Barber: That's where you were born and raised?

Sprague: Yes, I was born on a little farm out there and moved to Reno when I was probably seven.

Barber: About what year was that?

Sprague: Gosh, you know, it had to be '69, something like that.

Barber: So what brought your family to Reno?

Sprague: My family's parents lived in Reno, and I don't know why they got tired of farming, but they just did.

Barber: Do you remember anything about the farm?

Sprague: Other than just loving it, I mean, I remember everything about it—the smells, working with the cows and the pigs and everything. My heart's still there, for sure.

Barber: But then you grew up in a city.

Sprague: Grew up in a city. I grew up in Sparks and Sun Valley, and when I got old enough, I went in the army, spent much time in the Middle East, and that kind of awakened me to being connected to people and art and culture, and that's really changed my life.

Barber: And it really started to shape where you thought you wanted to go professionally?

Sprague: When I was in the Middle East, I actually birthed this idea that I would buy art one day. I came back in probably the eighties from the Middle East and opened up a store called Trick-Up Trucks, which evolved into Custom Truck, which I managed for a long, long time and saved all my money, in thoughts of doing something, a nice store in Reno, and I thought it would be a cultural store. So in 2003, one of my friends who was from Mexico City came and showed me a bunch of stuff that he was purchasing in Mexico City and asked me if I wanted to do it with him, and I just said yes. It just sounded great.

About a week earlier, a designer had come into Custom Truck and asked who designed the store, and I said I did, and she said, "You're in the wrong business. You should open up a store or a gallery. You're a designer or an artist."

When my friend said that to me, it just rang this bell, and I thought, "Wow. I've always been good at stuff, putting stuff together. I think this might be my calling." So I quit in three weeks. One of

my customers that used to come to Custom Truck was looking for me, and he told me about this building which I now own. He was later to die, got sick with cancer, and left me the building for what he owed on it. It was amazing.

Barber: Do you want to share his name?

Sprague: His name was Jim Walker. One of the nicest things anyone has ever done. So 2003 is when I opened up my store. I went to Mexico with the same guy who had told me about buying the stuff in Mexico, and we traveled around and purchased all this amazing stuff. We drove through Mexico, and it was one of the best experiences of my life. We traveled for about a month, buying from all these towns. My friend could speak really good Spanish, and it was just so heartwarming because I had experienced stuff like that in the Middle East, and to do it closer to home was really nice. It was really cool.

Barber: Did you take a really big truck?

Sprague: Yes, I had a big giant Ford truck with a big giant trailer and loaded it up with all kinds of stuff, and then we had another one ship out, another big giant trailer. I bought a giant container of stuff and started doing that. That was my first try at trade, buying and selling in another country, and it was really fun. I learned a little bit later that that was hard to do, and I couldn't sustain it, but it led to this.

Barber: It sounds like on first trip, there must have been a lot of very personal conversations. Was it just with families or small shops, or who sold the items?

Sprague: Yes. The small shops are just so interesting there and all the different personalities, and I think that's so heartwarming that you could meet real people and buy art from them, and it would change your life. That's why I'm so kind of emotional right now, just thinking about all that stuff. It was really wild.

Barber: Did you actually meet the people who had made these objects?

Sprague: Oh, gosh, yes. We crossed the border a couple times. We would go really close to the border to these artist towns, and one time my friend said, "Don't stop." And I said, "Let's pull over." We met these kids and they brought us to their family's little factory that was making this stuff. We were just amazed at what they could do with these little tiny archaic tools. They were basically making copper masterpieces with a hammer and a tire. It's just enlightening how these tribal people through the ages have learned this process, how to make art—really special, really special.

Barber: Do you remember what specifically some of these objects were in these first travels?

Sprague: Yes, I was buying a lot of copper in those days. I hadn't seen a lot of copper, and it really caught my imagination, so I was buying giant copper vessels and big giant plant holders and stuff. A lot of them looked like copper teapots, but they were really ornate, and I actually sold them all and did really well with them. They were some of the most beautiful things I'd seen in quite a while. They were elegant, very old-looking, and very artistically done, very beautiful.

Barber: So when you opened the shop, did that make up the majority or all of the inventory, or did you have some things from other places too?

Sprague: No, actually that made up most of the inventory. I was going to some shows in the U.S., but at that time they didn't have a lot of world décor or handmade stuff at most of the shows. You're starting to see a lot more handmade stuff in these shows as the economy comes back in America.

Barber: What is the name of your store refer to?

Sprague: When I was traveling all over the world, people would call me *americano*, and it always stuck in my mind, *americano*. I said if I ever opened a store, I should call it Micano's, *americano*. So I just opened up with Micano's in mind.

Barber: I know that this building that we're in had been a realtor's office for a long time. Do you know what it was immediately before it was your shop?

Sprague: It was an accountant's office. I met the lady whose dad built the building, and she told me about this was his actual office room and then he built that room onto it.

Barber: We're in the back. We're in a back room now, but then there's another room further back.

Sprague: Right. And she said it was built in '48 or something crazy.

Barber: What did you have to do to turn it into a shop, and did you do that yourself?



Micano Home and Garden Décor, 2015. Alicia Barber photo.

Sprague: Oh, Alicia, when I came in here, it was so bad. My friend Jim owned it, and he was renting it out. These drug addicts had turned it into a stage, a recording stage, and there were needles all over the place. There were stages. All the rooms were cut up. There were hallways. The ceiling was purple. My sister came into the building with me and she cried when I told her I was going to rent it.

Barber: It was that bad?

Sprague: She cried, yes. You know, it was just a bunch of weird circumstances. I had quit Custom Truck, was looking for a building. And then my friend Jim had gone to Custom Truck, and they told him what I was doing. He called me and said, "I have your building."

I said, "I need it on a main thoroughfare."

He said, "It's on Virginia."

I said, "I need a yard."

He said, "It's got an alley." And then he ended up doing a huge favor for me, because he had paid a bunch of money on it already and just left me to pay what he owed.

Barber: So it was you cleaning it out, painting the walls, doing all that?

Sprague: Yes, me and one of my friends actually gutted it, did the floors, poured the floors, did everything. It took me probably two months to do.

Barber: And then how was business? I mean, were people coming to this area to shop for that kind of thing?

Sprague: Yes, it did pretty good at the start. It was '03, August, probably, that I actually opened the store, and probably until 2008, I was making some money. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough to keep the doors open, and I knew it was going to get better.

Barber: Did you start meeting some of the surrounding business owners quite early?

Sprague: Yes. When the recession started, from '03 to about '05, I really didn't know any people. I started working at Costco to get through that recession, and I really couldn't socialize with the people from Midtown. But I remember always seeing a guy on his bike and he had a motor on it, and it happened to be Troy from Junkee's, and he was really my first Midtown friend. And lo and behold, who would know that Troy and Jessica would be so important to Midtown, the timeline, my friendships with other people, my connection to Midtown.

Barber: I want to talk about that a little bit, and also as we go along, can you tell me how your own business developed? What made you think that there might actually be potential for a district or a neighborhood here instead of just being the corridor that Virginia Street had always been?

Sprague: You know, early on when I came down here, I remember walking out on the street with my sister, and when she was crying that I was trying to open up a store in this horrible building, I opened my legs really wide and I said, "It's going to happen right here." And what I was talking about was that this

area in here would become a village of cool stores and a bunch of art. I just thought it would. I just really thought it would. I don't know why. I hadn't had a lot of experience in this kind of stuff, but I thought it's going to happen right here. Pretty lucky it did, you know. Gosh.

Barber: And you're in the more southern part of what people think of as Midtown. There are some anchors down here. You're near the Stremmel Gallery, so when you talk about art, that's kind of a longstanding business.

Sprague: Yes, the south hasn't sunlitged yet. I think our day is still coming with the new arrival of that commercial area that was the bank, the Horizon Bank—or what was the name of the bank?

Barber: I think Heritage Bank.

Sprague: Heritage Bank. They're building a little strip mall with individual stores, and I think that'll be probably more of the anchor for Midtown. We are trying to band together, the southerners, if you will, just to get people more aware that there's a lot of great stores down here. The antique stores are down here. Statewide Lighting is an iconic light store in any city. Nevada Fine Arts is a great art venue for anybody and it's well known. So I think we've actually just been out-advertised by the people up there. Junkee's has done a lot of that, she's done a great job, and I think a lot of people are excited about her business. It's kind of the hub, and a lot of people are growing around that. We're hoping to emulate that, for sure.

Barber: Talk to me about how you and some of the other business owners around here started banding together and thinking of yourselves as kind of a community. I hear that you're behind the naming of the district, also.

Sprague: Yes, some of that. Early on, I don't think there was anybody thinking about that, besides this little group that started it. It was actually Tammy Borde that owns the Chocolate Walrus, and Chris Thompson, who worked at Sushi Pier. I don't know, me and Chris had met from Wells Fargo Bank, and we were just talking one day, like, "We should do something." And I don't know how Tammy got involved—maybe because Tammy was my neighbor. She lived next door to me at one time, or her mom did.

So we started talking about it. I was always thinking this will never do anything unless we all get together and advertise. My idea was we need to advertise together. Tammy wanted to have a Wine Walk at the time, but we all were able to get together and come up with this genesis that was called Midtown District Business Group. I remember we had the first couple meetings at Sushi Pier 2, and one day Jessica walked in, and you could feel the electricity that that girl has, and I said to myself, "I'm going to be her friend." Luckily, she was very accepting of that, so that's how I became friends with her. She knew the people at Süp, the people at Melting Pot, and all the other business owners. And through her and her gifts to me, I've really been an anchor in Midtown and have become well known, and she's really helped me with the positioning politically inside of Midtown. I'm a board member for Midtown.

When I won the cover or was co-winner of the cover of *Reno* magazine, a lot of people had wanted them to interview me, and one of the people that said that they should interview me was Jessica. They interviewed me, and I was talking about the timeline, how it all happened, and I think they saw that



it was pretty much the nucleus of what happened from my timeline. It's just been awesome to watch it all grow.

Barber: There've been business owners, obviously, along this corridor for a long time. Statewide Lighting's been here since the seventies. Have the businesses that are more established been receptive to getting involved in the Midtown group? Is it kind of a mix?

Sprague: Some of them more so than others. I think a lot of those businesses that are so vested and doing well thought it doesn't matter anyway to them. And some of them, even the new businesses that came into Midtown that are doing well, they feel like they don't need to belong to the Midtown Business Group. But we're all advertising and we all stick together anyway, and kind of under that umbrella we help everybody, anyway. Some of the bigger businesses that have been here a long time, like Peerless Cleaners, they jumped right on board. Some of the older businesses were just like, "Sure," just to help us. They're not even really there. They're just giving their money in support, which is great.

Statewide came on board when their daughter was getting at the age to run a store, and me and Sara became friends.

Barber: So early on, what kind of advertising did you guys decide to do? Do you remember how that all came about?

Sprague: Well, none of us had a lot of money. I mean, I didn't. I was putting metal stuff out on the frozen snow, giraffes, just so people would see my store, and making weird pieces of art. Like, I made an airplane to stick out and light it during the night, because I couldn't afford it. So it was pretty important for us to get together and advertise, just the name alone, that there was something called Midtown, let alone the stores. And that was something early on that I was always talking about. I think during Jessica and Troy's reign of Midtown, Troy was actually president, and he did such a great job getting involved in advertising, because that's what he's good at. He and Jessica pretty much put us on the map as far as where Midtown is today. They got us there for sure with that advertising.

Barber: There were some early radio spots, weren't there? Have you been doing radio a little bit?

Sprague: We were doing radio early on. I think it was radio, pretty much, and some newspaper ads. We were doing brochures and stuff like that, little stuff. We didn't move on to a little bit better advertising for a while—for the last three or four years, we've done a lot better job.

Barber: Do you remember what year all that started?

Sprague: It was probably eight years ago that we formed Midtown District, and it was probably seven years ago that we started the Facebook page, probably four years ago that we started the website. Now we have the Midtown District Business Group so all the businesspeople can talk to each other on Facebook, and we're planning on doing bigger and better events together.

Barber: Did you participate in the Art Walk recently?

Sprague: Yes. You asked how do the north and south work together, and I think that's a pivotal point for Midtown, that we can integrate as one. If people see in the most important event of the year that it's all one and it's unified and it's not just one end, that'll just open so many people's eyes to see there's so many more stores down here. And not to just support one or two stores. That's really rough on the rest of us as a group. There are so many beautiful stores, and people need to remember that all these stores add up to this beautiful thing called Midtown.

Barber: And that distance-wise it is walkable to go from one end to another. I know there are issues with the sidewalks, but hopefully that's changing soon. [laughs]

Sprague: Yes. I think as Midtown grows and when in 2017 the sidewalks are here, I think we'll all put aside our habits where we couldn't walk. We'll go to San Francisco, and, well, shoot, we don't even talk about walking there. You just jump out of the car and you head out. Midtown is at that tipping point where we're filling in the blanks with art, and I think that'll push people to walk from lunch to art and to continue the conversations and socialize and to become more of a community, instead of just heading in and out of one spot.

Barber: Are you talking about galleries or do you mean art on the street?

Sprague: I'm talking about galleries, actual galleries, furniture, stuff that brings you there and captures your imagination. Instead of just food and drink, something that you think about for a long time.

Barber: Let's talk a little bit more about your shop here and how it's changed and evolved since that first trip to Mexico getting all these handmade crafts. What have you done since then? How have things changed and developed?

Sprague: Well, it's funny you'd ask that. It has changed, and early on I knew I couldn't just do one culture, so I did pretty much all the cultures. The store's been open fifteen years, but a couple years ago I realized that it just wasn't enough. Culture would never take my store to the point where I could take vacations and stuff like that. So, actually, I started making stuff, like fountains, and the more I started making stuff, the more I realized that people liked my store more and they talked more about it. There's not a vein or an ecosystem for art in Reno, and not very much so for handmade furniture, and I think people are kind of excited about my store. The more I made and the more that they knew I bought local art, I could see that the world décor wasn't the calling, and wasn't going to catch the imagination of people from Reno. It was going to be local art and my art that was going to make my store reach that point where people would tell other people about my store and go out of the way to visit it. I think that's been the catalyst to change my mind and my pride, because I've always been a little prideful, that, "Sam, heck with your pride."

In the last couple of years I've been noticing industrial furniture, industrial art, and it's rustic enough that it fits in my passion. And because I'm from Fernley and there's a lot of stuff to up-cycle, I saw that as an opportunity to not fall too far from my original idea, which was to do world rustic and do a lot of industrial and actually face the store with industrial, which this coming next year my store will actually be. Even this front of the store, you'll notice, will have an industrial look to it, and the store

slowly will change to a store with mostly industrial furniture, industrial art, with a cultural twist to it, instead of leading with the culture.

I think it's fitting of the times in Reno. The bars and the restaurants all have industrial furniture, an industrial feel. If you are familiar with the fashion and style décor in the world, like in London, it's very industrial-looking, very monochromatic, even. And my store's always been bright with lots of different colors, and some of that's going to change as well. I'm trying to still do what I want, but bend with the times and take advantage of the opportunities of the vein of art that I can make that fits what's so popular right now.

Barber: I'm really interested in this. So this idea of industrial furniture, can you explain what that is a little bit, and is there a relationship a little bit to steampunk?

Sprague: Yes, steampunk definitely fits into industrial art, because the fittings and stuff are all industrial pieces and the metal is all industrial. It's a vein of industrial, let's say, and the rustic stuff also fits well with the industrial. But the industrial art and furniture, to me, will be a little bit like farm industrial. It won't be so cold as just straight-up industrial. It will actually have barn wood in it and a lot of wood features to it with metal around it. It's definitely going to have more of a warm feeling to it than the cold industrial.

Barber: When you design and construct and build some of these items, do you do that here on site? Do you have a workshop somewhere else?

Sprague: You know, I do a lot of it here. I'm a workaholic, and I've got a little workspace outside. One of my friends, one of my co-artist friends who supports my store is about three blocks away and is a retired guy, and I get to use his space to work in his shop. So I can do some of it there, some of it here, and I like to work on stuff during the day when it's slow, so I can just keep the good energy going.

Barber: It's really interesting because, looking at the history of Midtown, this whole stretch had a whole lot of auto shops and mechanics and machinists and radio shops and a lot of things that really were related to mechanical work.

Sprague: Right. I have an area outside that's a garden area, and it has two big porticos made out of barn wood. At one end there's going to be a workspace, and me and all my artist friends are going to open up a shop where we can do live art. So I think like the old times, you could watch stuff being made, and who would think that there'd be a store in Reno where not only are they making their own stuff, but you can watch them make stuff. I mean, that's the big difference between where we were ten years ago when my friends were begging me to buy some Chinese stuff and put it inside my store before I went broke, and now here I am finding out that the biggest draw to my store is actually the thing that I didn't want to do back then, is have expensive real stuff.

But now I'm going to be building that and showing that we're doing it in house and how affordable that is for Reno people, because this stuff that we're making in the store is actually stuff you'd see in the magazines or in bigger venues than Reno. And to walk down this little tiny alley on Virginia Street in Midtown to see it should be something that everybody would want to see.

Barber: And become even more of a draw for the passersby.

Sprague: Yes. You can sit down and drink coffee and watch one of us make something or sit around and get into a conversation with three or four artists. A lot of times there will be my artist friends in here working on stuff where we're talking about ideas, and it's always fun when someone comes in and they ask, "What are you guys talking about?" And we'll tell them. So it's something you can touch and feel and you can touch us. It's real.

Barber: Now, I've also seen you take your show on the road. You've sold your items, your pieces, elsewhere in town. Have you done that a lot?

Sprague: Yes, I have a lot of art at some of the restaurants in town. Let's see. At Mark Estee's restaurant, Campo. At first, some of the designers that did Campo's bought some stuff from me. That was the first time. And P.F. Chang's, Red Robin—

Barber: Oh, chains are open to local art? Interesting.

Sprague: Some of the chains. Let's see. Red Robin was actually a lady that owns seven restaurants; one of them was in Vegas, some are in California. Some of the Mexican restaurants, a lot of the Mexican restaurants have purchased from me. So, yes, it's nice to see the restaurants paying attention to my business and wanting something unique. A lot of the yoga places have bought some of my lamps and stuff. So, yes, it's good.

Barber: You're selling, I think it was last summer, down there by the Bead Shop. They had a little market going on, and you brought some things down there, too.

Sprague: Yes. I want to try to do the Rib Cook-Off, but I've been doing Cindy's California Avenue street fair for two years. I've done really well down there. I think if more people from Reno could see my store and the stuff in it, I don't think they'd be that scared to come in here.

Barber: It's bigger in here than you might anticipate, because it goes back. [laughs]

Sprague: Yes, it goes back.

Barber: So that redesign is underway? Is that something you're going to be starting pretty soon? You're easing into it?

Sprague: Well, yes, I'm just slowly doing it. Actually, as soon as it warms up, we're going to repaint the front, finish the barn wood. There's going to be some metal in here, and you're starting to see the cultural stuff being replaced. I've been ordering it right now, but it'll be happening. By the summertime, you'll notice it really well.

Barber: So tell me, maybe over the past five or so years, since you've started the Midtown Group, how has it developed? How have things changed? Have people been joining in greater numbers lately? Explain your perspective on how it's developed since the early days.

Sprague: Well, being a board member, I was actually the membership drive person for a very, very long time. So, yes, I've noticed a change. At first we were trying to sell people on the memberships, explain why they should be members. And lately, I don't even think we have the person who does that anymore, because people see that this train is moving, they want to get on it. They realize that Midtown District is an entity and that it is evolving, and they want to be part of it. As far as the new members, yes, it's a pretty steady thing. It's probably always pretty close to sixty people involved in that, and it seems to be growing right now.

Barber: How often do you have regular meetings?

Sprague: We have them once a month.

Barber: And are there discussions about trying out new events, new advertising strategies? Are those the kind of things you talk about all the time? Increasing safety, is that a concern?

Sprague: Yes, we talk about all those things. We have a couple subcommittees, and we're always talking about advertising, safety. The streets are always a big thing that we've been talking about for quite a while. We talk about the Art Walk. We're always trying to share with other people what we're doing, what you can get involved with, what our advertising secrets are, and stuff like that.

Barber: It does seem that this has become such a hot district. I mean, the whole city is interested in it, and there's been national and even international attention given to Midtown. I think people see a lot of potential there. Obviously, part of that is that there's been such an attraction to the property. You own your property, which must at this point feel like quite a relief. There's so much activity happening now. Have you been aware of the property itself all around you becoming more—

Sprague: Valuable? Yes, definitely.

Barber: And appealing.

Sprague: When the Carter brothers started buying all those commercial buildings and some of the residences, as a small player, I was glad that I had already purchased my building. I bought it at \$180,000; it's at \$380,000 now. I know it's going to go through the roof as soon as they do the sidewalks and stuff. A very small crowd of people have the knowledge about what's coming up vacant. Everybody wants to know one of those insiders. It's the most dynamic thing in Reno in quite a while, and we hope we can harness that and not lose it.

Barber: Why do you think people are so drawn to this Midtown area?

Sprague: I know what it is. We've never had anything. We've never had a shopping district. We've never had a culture. When I talk about a culture, I mean something to support, something that's cool, something that grows and it's sustainable and it's fun. We've never had any of that. This is so important to the Reno community. I think they're starting to realize how important it is.

We would have to drive to San Francisco for the rest of our lives if Midtown doesn't make it, put it that way. This is our one chance at something cool. I used to live in San Antonio on the boardwalk. That's nothing compared to what could happen in Midtown as far as a culture. The stores in San Antonio were plastic compared to the people that are in Midtown. These parochial kids grew up and wanted to do something special with their skill set, and they came down here to fight it out in Midtown.

Barber: What would you like to see happen and what would you not like to see happen, as we move forward with Midtown? What are the things you really want to make sure that it holds on to or develops into?

Sprague: I've always been a big proponent of people walking and talking. The sidewalks are such a big value coming in with the benches and the trees. I think that's a big thing, since Reno people have never been that connected to each other. We've never had a community that talks a lot to each other. I've never seen a hundred people on a street talking to each other, like when you're in a big city and there would be thousands of people out talking to each other.

For me, I think a city comes together when they know a lot of people. Not a lot of people outside of a couple of circles know each other, and I think Midtown will change that. I think a lot of people that have moved from Reno who were not connected to or who don't have real working hours will find some kind of commonality in what they do or what we've done for them in Midtown. They'll see that this fiber that we've weaved is theirs, and they're going to grab onto it, like every city does. Right? [laughter] Yeah.

Barber: So in some ways you're trying to get back to that urban core, what it means to be a city. [laughs]

Sprague: Yes. My store is kind of a kept secret, for instance. If we all talk to each other and share all these little stores that have gone under selling handmade stuff for Reno—and I can remember twenty or thirty of them. Ryrie's is one right now who sold her store. But there has to be an ecosystem for stores that are not of the norm, that are—if you want to call them special or whatever—but there has to be a place for them. And if they could all get together into one special place in Midtown, it just is a great support group for artists. Where is the ecosystem for artists' sellable art in Reno? You can't disperse all over through the town. It would be so hard to find. All that stuff, looking forward to food, culture, and friends, communication is so important. We've never had that. I mean, we're trying to build something that's unfathomable unless you've been in San Francisco and met people and maybe had dinner with them later. It's a big world out there.

Barber: That's true. [laughs] Your specific location seems to be really nice. You mentioned Chocolate Walrus, but there's a whole row of very small storefronts just north of you that are suitable for very small businesses that don't have a lot of overhead or a lot of inventory. They're about the same size as yours, I think.

Sprague: Exactly.

Barber: So you get a lot of community in a very small space, it seems. There's been some turnover there lately, and now I know there's a new restaurant going in—

Sprague: Yes, we're hoping that one sticks.

Barber: —in one of them. I don't know that there's really been a café or food along that stretch, or at least in recent memory.

Sprague: There was a Chinese restaurant a long, long time ago. That was it.

Barber: Were you ever down in this area pre-Midtown? Were there any places that were familiar to you at the time?

Sprague: I grew up in this neighborhood, really.

Barber: Did you?

Sprague: Everybody knew the Del Mar, right?

Barber: Right.

Sprague: And, of course, after the Del Mar, we went to that little restaurant right down here. What was it called? The little restaurant, everybody knew it.

Barber: Oh, Landrum's.

Sprague: Landrum's.

Barber: Right, the diner.

Sprague: So, yes, I was familiar with it. And my mom used to take me to the antique places all the time. I always wanted to open up a store because of my mom always showing me those antique stores, and I was always thinking, "I could open something crazier than this."

Barber: So you were really attracted to that kind of store.

Sprague: Yes, I've always been into it. I was looking at stuff, and it was always something I liked. I always liked collecting stuff. I've always been looking for something that was a little bit different, a lot like buying a one-off piece, always looking for that.

Barber: And now it's a store that's full of unique items, objects, art, lamps.

Sprague: Yes. I do a lot of up-cycling, and recently I started getting the willows off the river and making lamps out of them.

Barber: Lamps out of willows? Weaving them?

Sprague: Well, not weaving them. I weave them through this metal frame I make, but it's kind of like something the Indians would do. I thought, okay, I can get the willows off the river free. I can't sell them, but I can weave them in these metal frames, kind of like a modern-day Indian kind of lamp.

Barber: It's really interesting, because from starting out wanting to look at global culture to the industrial pieces that you said might be kind of farm or ranch-related, and probably locally sourced in many ways, and even with those natural fibers, you've come back to a very place-based kind of idea.

Sprague: Yes. Most of the stuff that I have made, even though it's pan-world, it still reflects where I've come from. I lived in Fernley, so I remember looking at their weaving of the willows, and when my friend was showing me his lamps made out of bamboo, right away my mind went to willows. And it's all because of our past. That's why it's so important to travel, to get that in.

Barber: Fantastic. Well, I want to thank you so much for talking to me. It's been a great pleasure.

Sprague: Thank you, Alicia. It was really fun talking to you. Hopefully that has a spot in there.

Barber: Absolutely.

Sprague: There are so many important stories, and all of us kind of fit together in the story.



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## PETER STREMMEL

Executive Director, Stremmel Gallery, 1400 S. Virginia Street



Peter Stremmel inside Stremmel Gallery. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Peter Stremmel moved with his family from California to Reno when he was just a child. His father, Bill Stremmel, was in the horse-booking business and founded Stremmel Motors at 1492 S. Virginia Street in the mid-1950s. Peter founded the Stremmel Gallery at 1466 S. Virginia Street in the early 1970s. He is now the Executive Director of the much-expanded Stremmel Gallery.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm in Reno, Nevada, with Peter Stremmel, who is the Executive Director of Stremmel Gallery at 1400 South Virginia Street, to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project.

Mr. Stremmel, do I have your permission to record this interview and make it available to the public?

Stremmel: Yes, you do.

Barber: Thank you so much. I would love to start by getting a little bit of background about your family, where your parents and your grandparents were from.

Stremmel: Well, my family is originally from California. My father started out as a horse breeder. He had a stud farm in Vallejo, California, which is where I was born. And then in the very early fifties, he moved our family to Reno and we bought the old Lear house down on the river in Verdi. He always had a fascination with Verdi, and we lived down there. That house was then sold to the Harshes, and then the Harshes sold it to the Lears, and it was a very famous house.

Then we moved into Reno, and my father was in the horse-booking business. He handicapped horses in Douglas Alley early on. And one time someone lost a considerable amount of money—I don't know what it was back then—and he couldn't pay him, and he told my father that he had a used car lot way south of town. It was sort of a dirt road, which turned out to be the location where we are now. It was called Farmer Jones Used Cars. So my father kept doing the horse business, handicapping horses, and then was selling used cars.

I think it was about 1954 when a gentleman named Reynold C. Johnson walked into his office and told him that he was becoming a distributor and they were going to import a car from Germany called the Volkswagen. He said that he'd been around to several of the more prominent car dealers in Reno, and they weren't interested and wondered if he'd be interested in taking on this franchise.

Of course, my father really knew nothing about the car business, let alone a Volkswagen, and the idea of a car with the motor in the rear was just so completely foreign to him. But he was the kind of guy that the only time he ever said no was when someone asked him if he'd had enough. So he naturally said yes, and then this location became a Volkswagen dealership, which was all very interesting. So that's how we wound up down on South Virginia Street.

Barber: What was your father's name?

Stremmel: Bill Stremmel.

Barber: Can you tell me what you know about the evolution of that dealership and the buildings on this site? I guess there had been a small one-story brick commercial building with a couple of storefronts around this address.

Stremmel: Well, one of the stores was the hardware store and they had all the inventory in the basement, and that is now where LuLou's restaurant is, and the building is basically still intact. It's been remodeled several times, and it has a basement in it and we have our frame shop in that. Right next to that was a post office, so those were the two brick buildings.

Then just north of that was Farmer Jones Used Cars, which ultimately became our used car lot. When the Volkswagen business started to grow, he built a proper building to showcase the Volkswagen cars. I'm getting away ahead of myself, but then it evolved into a Porsche dealership, then we took on

Audi. For a guy who knew nothing about cars, he actually managed to make some money with those franchises.

Barber: And that became his full-time job after too long, the car business, or did he continue to work somewhere else, too?

Stremmel: No, it was his primary business. I wouldn't say it was his full-time job. I never really knew him to have a full-time job. He did oversee the business, but he was never a car guy in any sense of the word.

Barber: Was there really only one Volkswagen dealership in town for many years?

Stremmel: We were actually the first Volkswagen dealership in what was called the northern region. We were the first Volkswagen dealer, and the northern region consisted of Northern California, which is the whole Bay Area, Sacramento, everything up to the California border. So we became the first Volkswagen dealership in what was our region.



Northward on South Virginia Street past Stremmel Motors, ca. 1955. Nevada Department of Transportation photo.

Barber: Let's get back to you a little bit. How old were you when you moved here from California with the family?

Stremmel: The family moved here when I was about two or three, something like that. So I consider myself a native.

Barber: And you grew up on that ranch property for some time?

Stremmel: Yes. I think we lived for about two years in Verdi. And then as the story goes, I don't recall it, but I think one time I got very ill as a young child and we were snowed in and the doctor couldn't get in, so my mother told my father, "Enough of this. We're moving into town."

Barber: Did you have horses when you were out there?

Stremmel: No, no, no.

Barber: Tell me where you went to school. I'm interested in what ultimately led up to your interest in founding an art gallery.

Stremmel: Well, it's a long story. I don't know how personal you want me to get on all of this.

Barber: As much as you want. [laughs]

Stremmel: Like most kids, my parents got divorced and I was sent away to a boarding school and then went away to college. I really wanted to be an artist for most of my life, but in college I started buying and selling a few works of art, and I realized that by becoming an art dealer you could have the best of all worlds. You could have great works pass through your hands without living the life of an artist. So as soon as I got out of college, I came back to Reno and opened a small art gallery in the building that was formerly the hardware store. It was a little storefront gallery. This is about forty-two years ago.

Then we grew and grew and ultimately we took over the corner lot, which at the time was First Commercial Title, which moved out to Plumb Lane. The building was empty, so we took it over and we remodeled it. We've remodeled this building about three times, and this is where we are today, all very crazy.

Barber: I'm curious about founding an art gallery back then and just what your perceptions were of the art scene in Reno at the time, and if you had any certain philosophy about what kind of gallery you wanted to be.

Stremmel: None whatsoever. I had absolutely no focus, no direction, or anything like that. My father collected wildlife art, and we opened the gallery with works that he was trying to cull from his collection. So it was all very interesting. We had this art gallery, and he was a wildlife art collector, so it was a bunch of B- and C-grade paintings that we opened it with, and lots of prints.

I remember the very first year—because I think I was twenty years old—the very first year in business our total gross sales were \$2,500, and that was gross sales. The next year, we actually doubled our sales volume, and I was pretty excited over that. But things changed pretty rapidly. I realized this just couldn't go on, because at some point I needed to make a living. So we made a pretty drastic change in our point of view as a gallery and started to become what I think was a regional gallery, and through a series of events we expanded into what's now a pretty substantial operation.

Barber: Where did you go to acquire art in those early years once you'd gone through your father's collection a little bit? Where did you look?

Stremmel: Well, we started contacting artists and we would take works on consignment and sell them, and that's really how we started to gain a little more traction as a gallery. But since that time, we really evolved and we started buying and selling some pretty significant works of art. We had a few huge breaks along the way.

At one point, I'd say in the late eighties, the early nineties, we were fortunate enough to be involved in what was then the largest art deal in the world. It was the collection of Pierre Matisse's gallery. Pierre Matisse was the son of the legendary painter Henri Matisse, and he was a dealer in New York and a voracious collector. When he died, a dealer in New York, a very prominent dealer named Bill Acquavella, had this idea of buying out the entire collection. He approached who was then the CEO at Sotheby's to do a joint venture, and it was a \$200 million deal and, again, the largest art deal in the world at that time. By today's standards, when you see that a Modigliani was sold the other day for \$170 million, we're living in an era where we might see a \$200 million within the next year or two.

But, anyway, back then that was a huge deal, and they had this idea of moving the collection to Nevada because Nevada didn't have corporate taxes, they didn't have inventory taxes. And they thought that this might be a five- or ten-year distribution, or it might five or ten years to sell these works. There were 3,500 pieces in the whole collection. So they thought if they moved it to a state like Nevada—it was, I think, between Nevada, Delaware, and Montana or Wyoming—that would fit the model of not having any state taxes or corporate taxes. I think they thought Delaware was a little too close, so they came to Nevada.

I was known to them, so they came to Reno, and we built a huge warehouse to store these works. As a result, we were shipping and receiving works all over the world. It was a fairly exhilarating time for us as a gallery, because when the deal went down, there were about eleven eighty-foot North American Van Line trucks that were staggered going from New York to Reno, to our warehouse, and we were basically unloading the history of modern art, which was all stored in our warehouse.

So that was a lucky break and that, I'd say, raised our profile both nationally and internationally because we were shipping and receiving these great works all over the world to museums and collectors. At that point, the Japanese were buying fairly heavily, and we seemed to be shipping a lot of works to Japan at the time. That was a great moment for us, and we just expanded off that deal as well.

Barber: When did you say that happened? Starting when?

Stremmel: That happened in the late eighties, early nineties.

Barber: Then you've continued to warehouse art, too, as part of the business?

Stremmel: Well, we still have the warehouse. We ran that for fifteen years and, as I say, the whole deal was a \$200 million deal. Bill Acquavella at the time, the first year, sold half of the collection for 400 million. So it was a great deal for both he and Sotheby's, and at the time, that deal kept Sotheby's going because they were having some huge financial problems. Of course, now they and Christie's are the largest art auction houses in the world. Both have annual sales of, I think, over \$10 billion. They're big

companies. But it was an interesting period in the art world and for us and for both Bill Acquavella and Sotheby's.

Barber: I would imagine that there might not have been anyone in the whole state doing anything of that caliber. Las Vegas wouldn't have had anyone.

Stremmel: No. They looked at Las Vegas, and Las Vegas really didn't have a significant art gallery or someone they felt comfortable enough with that they could entrust this collection to.

Barber: At what point did you decide that you needed more space in your gallery?

Stremmel: Well, from selling prints and wildlife art, we evolved into western art, and, finally, just through a series of contacts and Bill Acquavella, we evolved into much more of a contemporary gallery, and that's where we are today. But we're a moderate contemporary gallery. We're not like a cutting-edge gallery in New York, because we have seven people working here and we still have to sell art, and that's how we pay everyone.

The Reno-Tahoe area has been a great market. For us, it's given us a great lifestyle, but we've also realized that we just can't sell \$500 million Rothkos in Reno. So we've had to temper it, but we are very much a contemporary gallery.

Barber: Did you expand the gallery pretty early on? You were in an existing storefront, and then at some point enlarged it?

Stremmel: Yes, we've remodeled this building three times and expanded it, and the last time I think was eleven years ago. We expanded this and we also built four rental units that are like lofts that are attached to the building, and we've got four businesses in there that are compatible with ours. They are all architects or designers and graphic designers, that sort of thing. So there's a nice synergy in this building and in this section of town, and the architects bring good clients around, the kind of clients we like to see in the gallery. We also are able to recommend them. There are two different architects in this building and a designer, and we all use each other's services.

Then we built what I think is the best restaurant in Reno on the corner, so this whole block is a very, very nice block. We've got a great restaurant at one end, anchoring one end, and we're at the other, and three nice businesses have been here for quite a few years in the rental lofts.

Barber: I know you and your wife have been great supporters of architecture and actually employed some architects in the design of these buildings here. Could you talk about that a little bit, the history of working with architects?

Stremmel: When we built this building, we used an architect, a Los Angeles architect named Mark Mack, because I wanted really large minimal spaces that were clean white boxes, and spaces that were fairly dynamic with lots of windows that would be comfortable for people to work in, lots of natural light, nothing too pretentious but still make a bit of an architectural statement. I've got a lot of theories, which I guess I could launch into now. Having traveled around a lot, I've thought about what makes cities great, and I really believe what makes cities great is the diversity. It's the ethnic diversity, first and foremost,



and the storefronts and that sort of thing, but primarily what really makes cities interesting is the architecture. If you go to a place like Chicago, it's really one of the great architectural cities in the world. In New York, now, there are fabulous buildings being built.

I think going into these beautiful modern contemporary spaces really causes the spirit to soar, and I think it's just great to experience contemporary architecture. So we thought by building a fairly contemporary building, to the extent we could financially, without getting too far out there, that it might have a synergistic effect not only on the neighborhood but maybe on the city, and that people in Reno would start thinking about the spaces they live and work in. I think, to a certain extent, it's worked or is happening.



Stremmel Gallery, 2015. Alicia Barber photo.

Barber: And we've seen more contemporary design around the city, I think, in recent years, so it's picking up a little bit.

Stremmel: Right, right. And I know there's a group that wants to hold on to the Reno they knew growing up, and certainly it was a very interesting place growing up, because I grew up here myself. But I think, too, Reno's at the point where it needs to evolve as a city, and as it evolves, it needs to start thinking about what it wants to become, what it wants to look like, and clearly as we go forward and start building more buildings, I think we need to consider a more modern look.

No one's going to build the kind of buildings we did in the seventies where we threw up casinos that were just four walls and covered them with neon and called it a business. I think now people want more. And if you're going to bring your family to Reno for a vacation, you want a place that's alive, that's vibrant, that's exhilarating, and you're not going to find it the way Reno is right now. You're not going to find these moments. Would you bring your family to Reno for a vacation? Probably not. You'd go to the lake.

Barber: And the bright colors and the architecture of your buildings here draw attention, make a statement, and help make these landmarks, too. I think about your location and how its relationship to the

growing city has changed over time. Initially it was family property, so it was the natural place to be. How have you felt about your location near the intersection of South Virginia and Mt. Rose Street?

Stremmel: We've done everything wrong, which is nice to say, starting from the very premise. Trying to create a significant gallery in Reno, Nevada, was kind of a foolish premise to being with, but it was just the only thing we knew, and we wanted to stay in Reno. At one point, we thought, years and years ago, if we really wanted to get serious about the gallery business, we had to relocate, and at the time we were enchanted—that's kind of a funny way of putting it—with New Mexico and Santa Fe, and we thought if we really wanted to get serious in the gallery business, we might want to consider moving there. San Francisco and L.A. weren't really options because at that time they weren't great art centers. But Santa Fe was, New York obviously was, Chicago to a lesser degree, but those were really probably the three major art markets. And, of them, if we wanted to stay in the West, we thought Santa Fe would be the best.

But we went down there and looked at it, and we came back, and my wife and I, we got off the plane, and it was just one of the most beautiful evenings I've ever seen. The sun was setting, the hills were red and everything, and we thought, "Our roots are too deep in this community, and we love living here, and we think we can build, create our own synergy with a gallery here." Maybe we're not going to make the money we would somewhere else, but the quality of life was important to us, and we knew Reno. The beautiful thing about Nevada is if you've lived here long enough, you know just about everyone in the state, and you could pick up the phone and call the governor, and he'll pick it up on the first ring. You can get through to your senators. You can't do that in California. You couldn't do that anywhere else in the country. And that's something nice about this area. So that's how we wound up here. Was it a good decision or wasn't it? We'll never know. But it's given us a great lifestyle.

Barber: Can you talk to me a little bit about some of the other dimensions of the gallery and how they evolved? It's very well known for restoration of works of art, also.

Stremmel: Well, my wife is a restorer by nature and she studied restoration, and that was the profession she wanted to pursue, but she's a very outgoing person and loves to sell. When we did the last remodel of this gallery, I said, "You know, we're going to have to get serious about this business, and I can't have you downstairs restoring when the thing that keeps everything moving forward is sales."

So she has her office downstairs in the gallery, and she does most of the selling and she's got good support staff down there. Even though she enjoyed the restoration, and the restoration studio is downstairs with our framing in our framing shop, it didn't make a lot of sense to have her downstairs working on a painting when the whole business really depends on sales. And that's what she's good at and she knows the artists.

We still have a restoration department. Our framing department is turning into a nice business. We've got, I think, one of the best framers in town, and that's been a great business for us as well. So we're fairly diverse. And the framing has been good, too, because when we mount shows, we can frame the works. We like things to look a certain way so we can frame all our own works for the show, plus we do customer framing.

Barber: Would you say that you have spent a lot of time nurturing local artists? Has that been a focus—local and regional artists?



Stremmel: We do show a fair amount of local artists. Probably our bestselling artist is a local artist. Her name is Phyllis Shafer. She lives up at the lake. Every year we have a Nevada show which is primarily local artists. There are five or six of what we consider to be the top landscape artists in the north, and that's a fairly successful show. But we don't specifically show local artists. We show artists from, I'd say, primarily California, but we have artists from New York, from Minnesota, from all over the country, and I would feel an obligation to show the very best work we can. We vet them very closely and we follow their careers. We don't just take artists on in a haphazard manner. We really think about the artists we're showing and what the focus of the gallery is, and I try to stay within those parameters.

Barber: And it's not just two-dimensional art, is it?

Stremmel: No, no, no. We've got sculptors. We've got artists who will do huge installation projects if, let's say, the airport or someone needs a big installation, a major one. We've done an awful lot of work for Renown Medical Center. I think my wife has put over three thousand works of original art into Renown. When they remodeled the Tahoe Tower, they decided they wanted two original works in every single room. The rooms were beautiful. We used primarily local artists for that purpose. And that is a beautiful project. They've got a sort of a meditation garden outside, out in back, and we did all of the sculptures for that. We did all of the artwork in the public spaces and in the patient rooms.

Barber: I saw that you got in quite early into auctioneering, also. Can you tell me a little bit about that, your work as an auctioneer?

Stremmel: Yes, that's an interesting question. I'd say about the third year in the gallery—I already told you what our gross sales were, so you can get an idea of how grim the times were back then—one day I was just going through the mail and a flyer came through about an auction school up in Montana. And it said it was a two-week, a fourteen days' course on how to be an auctioneer. It said you'll be on your feet selling at least seven hours a day. And I thought, "Boy, I'm not doing much business down here, and it's either I don't know how to sell or something's not going right." So I thought I could take two weeks off and go to auction school and maybe learn how to sell. I never thought of becoming an auctioneer, by any means, I just thought the public speaking and the selling aspects of it would help the business. So I took the course, and it was fantastic and it was a great motivator.

I came back to Reno, and I still never thought about being an auctioneer. But when you lived in Reno back then—that was back in, I'd say, the mid to late seventies—you tend to be on boards. I was on the board of the Audubon Society and things like that. And sooner or later, they all have a need for a fundraiser, and when you start thinking about a fundraiser, people always think about an auction. So I said, "Well, I could definitely muddle through this. I've gone to auction school." And I started doing a lot of these fundraisers and I really enjoyed it, and I was fascinated with auctioneering, the whole practice.

My brother was between his junior and senior year in college, and I sent him to the auction school in Montana and he loved it. He liked it so much, he said, "As soon as I get out of college, I want to go in the auction business." So he and I went in the auction business together.

At the time, our building across the street was vacant—that purple building which is now the charter school, that was our old Volkswagen service department. So we modified that and we opened up

an auction company, he and I together, and every weekend we'd have auctions. It just grew and grew and evolved.

Then I started doing art auctions, and I started doing them all over the country for major museums, major fundraisers. We did them down in Vegas for the Nevada Cancer Institute, I did them for the Minneapolis Art Institute, museums all over the country, because it seemed at the time that there were a lot of people that knew about art and there were people that knew about auctions, but not a lot that did both. I gained some prominence in that regard and started doing lots of art auctions.

Then about twenty-five years ago, some art dealer friends of mine talked about starting an auction, a western art auction in Las Vegas, in conjunction with the National Finals Rodeo. And we thought that would be a good opportunity to do a little western art auction, because during the National Finals Rodeo, everyone that's interested in western art would be down there. We did that for about three years, and I realized that people who go to rodeos really don't care about western art. They're not really collectors.

So we decided to move the auction to Sun Valley, Idaho, and at the time it was the National Finals Art Auction, and we renamed it the Sun Valley Art Auction. We held that for about four or five years in Sun Valley, and we just weren't getting the crowds there. One of my partners lived in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, so we moved the auction up there, and it really started getting traction. We renamed it Coeur d'Alene Art Auction. It got so big that it actually outgrew the town of Coeur d'Alene. They had a great resort there called the Coeur d'Alene Resort, and they would only give us about forty rooms because we had it during the peak season in the summer. All the people were coming up to this auction; it was new, it was exciting, and everything. We just couldn't accommodate them. We held it up there for about eight years, and finally we said, "We've just outgrown the facility. We don't have the rooms. The airport can't accommodate the number of private jets coming in."

And I said, "You know what? We are in the entertainment business. If we were to move it down to Reno and if people wanted a room, we could ask them if they wanted it with two bathrooms or three, and we'd have limos to pick them up, and we'd never outgrow it."

So they liked the idea. But one of my partners said, "Well, we've changed the name on this thing three times. We've got some brand recognition. I'll agree to move it to Reno, but we're going to leave the name the Coeur d'Alene Art Auction." So we've done that here in Reno now for the past eleven years, and it's grown to be the largest western art auction in the country. It's a huge event every year here in Reno. Have you heard about it?

Barber: Oh, absolutely.

Stremmel: Yes. And every year, sales total about \$30 million, and people come from all over the country, and we have bidding on the telephone from all over the country. It's become a huge, huge event, and we still do it. We work all year long and it's an annual event. It's the last week in July. It's been great. We sell works by Charlie Russell and Frederic Remington. We've sold paintings for as much as \$6 million. And it's even evolved beyond the western art world. We've sold pieces like Norman Rockwells and things like that. It's become a pretty big event in the art world. So that's how the whole auction thing evolved.

Barber: So you find that interest in western American art is remaining strong?

Stremmel: It is. It is. It is a bit of a regional market, but it's regional within the western states, like the eleven western states. But we have some really, really significant collectors from back east. The western art market is really a spinoff of the American art market, and the American art market is fairly strong, ergo the western art market is fairly strong. It's not as strong as the world of contemporary art, where you see these huge prices being made, like \$120 million for an Andy Warhol, because the contemporary art market is a global market. There are museums being built. In spite of the recession, there are museums being built all over the world, in Russia, in China. China right now is building about thirty-five major contemporary art museums, just in that country alone. And there are huge museums being built in places like the Mideast in Dubai and Qatar and areas like that. All of these museums need signature pieces, and signature pieces are works by people like Warhol and Jeff Koons and that sort of thing, and so they're willing to pay tens, if not hundreds of millions of dollars for these paintings.

These international museums aren't really collecting American art because a Norman Rockwell or a Grandma Moses or something like that is not a big deal there. So really it's a domestic market, the American and the western market is, but it's very strong. The thing is, a great piece will always bring a great price, and in spite of whether the market's good or bad or anything, there's always plenty of money to pay a record price for a great painting. And a great painting has to have good provenance, it has to be properly estimated, and it has to be fresh to the market, meaning it can't have been shopped around to a lot of collectors and dealers all around the country and then wind up in the Coeur d'Alene auction. It doesn't have the same sex appeal as something that's fresh from a private collection.

Barber: The auction brings a lot of prominence to Reno. I know when the Coeur d'Alene auction came to Reno, it was really a feather in the cap for Reno in trying to develop more of a reputation as an arts and culture destination.

Stremmel: Exactly, and I think that seems to be the path Reno is going down, in terms of being a gambling town is no big deal anymore. In fact, we're trying to shed that image, as we all know, and we're trying to move out of it gracefully. But what has, I think, made this city as dynamic and vibrant as it is has been the art museum. That's the cultural heart and soul of this community, and they do amazing shows. They've got an incredible staff and their programming is fantastic, and it has really raised the bar in this community. I mean, it's as good as any regional museum in the country, our museum, and people are recognizing it. A lot of people around here don't realize what a gem and what an important institution that building is. They just don't show art; they do everything. They've got a theater, they've got the school, they're building an event center on the top, which is going to be fabulous, and they've got the Center for Art and Environment, which no museum in the country has. They're doing amazing things. So this community is very, very supportive of it, and I think that's fantastic, and it really is pushing Reno in a different direction and upgrading its image, and we're being recognized. Because of Artown and a lot of other things, we're being recognized as a cultural center.

Barber: And the Nevada Museum of Art has also made a strong claim for the importance of good contemporary architecture at the same time, with their building alone.

Stremmel: Exactly. Bob Cashell, when he was mayor, used to tell me that the first time a corporation would come to him to talk about the possibility of relocating to Reno, the first thing he would do is put them in the car and take them up to the museum to show them what we have there, because that's

important to the families. If you're relocating families to the area, if you're a corporation and you're going to relocate here, people want to know what's the education like, what are the cultural amenities, that sort of thing, and the museum is it. Granted, we have a great symphony, we do have an opera, we have a lot. The performing arts are terrific here, too, but the visual arts are really leading the way.

Barber: Now, just switching gears a little bit, I wanted to talk just a little about the Midtown District. You predated Midtown by a good many decades, the idea of Midtown. With this effort to try to create a more walkable pedestrian-oriented environment in this part of South Virginia Street, do you see the idea of Midtown having any kind of effect on the Stremmel Gallery?

Stremmel: I do. I think when you look at Reno and you look at the way it's laid out and the way it has grown, the only place within Reno where you can have a walking district is between California and Mt. Rose Street or, let's say, Plumb Lane. You can't do it north of town. You can't have a walking district through the casino area and that sort of thing. And once you get to Plumb Lane, the street becomes wider. It just isn't a walking street. You can't have the same kind of storefront dynamic that you can in this little section. You can do it on Fourth Street as well, and as you can see, Fourth Street is evolving along similar lines.

The way the city has evolved, there are still a lot of the old historic buildings that have been converted, and it's maintained a lot of character. And the interesting thing about Midtown is it's grown organically, not through any part of a planning process. No thanks to the City of Reno, Midtown has taken on its own character, and it's a much nicer character than anything the City of Reno could have planned, because they would probably tear down a lot of these buildings and put up very, very uninteresting structures, all with "For Lease" signs in the windows, and it just wouldn't happen.

So it has been a matter of a lot of local entrepreneurs and developers making anywhere from a small to a significant investment in it, but it has a very nice character. And I think with what the RTC is planning, I think it's going to be a very, very nice section of town, and I think it will evolve into its own district. I like to I think we sort of anchor the south end of it. We were the first to make a major investment in this part of town, and I don't know the extent to which we had an influence on what happened at Midtown, but I do know one of my best friends is Bernie Carter, and he and T.J. Day started buying up a lot of the Midtown property, and that's how it all started happening.

When I was contemplating remodeling this building and putting up a fairly significant investment in it, I asked Bernie about it, and he shook his head and said, "Absolutely no way. No matter what you do, you're still right across the street from an Arco AM/PM, and it'll never have the right character. What you're planning is just not going to work." So two years later, here he is, developing, trying to develop all of Midtown and doing a pretty good job of it. [laughs]

Barber: You probably traditionally haven't relied on walk-up traffic.

Stremmel: No, no, we don't. There is no street traffic. There is no pedestrian traffic right now, but it can happen. There is to a certain extent at Midtown, particularly if you go around lunchtime because there's no parking, so it forces people to have to walk up and down. Then, as they do, there are shops. It's nice that after lunch you can take a walk and go into a few shops. It isn't where it wants to be, but it's a darned good start and it's getting there. I think with what I've seen from the RTC, it's going to make it a lovely section of town when they put some trees in, fix the sidewalks, and remove some of the parking. I

know this is a huge issue with a lot of the merchants there, the whole parking thing, and they feel threatened by the idea of taking away their parking, but they are going to create parking on the side streets, and it looks like a doable plan.

There's even talk of streetcars and that sort of thing. I don't know if that will ever happen, but the idea of being able to walk out in front of our gallery, for example, and get on a streetcar and go five blocks up to Midtown and have a nice lunch and come back or take it all the way up the university would be an absolute dream. I think it would change the character of this community dramatically. It would have a huge, huge impact on it.

Barber: There are some interesting things even happening in your neighborhood. Across the street almost and up just a little bit, there's an older bank that's getting transformed into some kind of a mixed-use retail.

Stremmel: Oh, you mean right across the street?

Barber: Right.

Stremmel: Yes, that's Blake Smith's project. He was just in last week. We've been wondering what he's going to do, and he's had a couple of false starts. He's had some tenants, but because of the buildouts and everything, they've decided that the rental costs were too much for them. But he's now got a concept that sounds fantastic, and that's going.

As you go up Mt. Rose Street, it's starting to develop now, too. That Coffeebar is one of the most popular places in Reno. Any time of day you go in there, you have to stand in line, and there are people sitting around with their laptops, and it's created a sense of community, that little place. It feels like a real little urban kind of coffee shop, and things are starting to happen, and I think we all think it's great. We're all very encouraged by what we're seeing, and we're thrilled to see that the RTC recognizes it, too, and apparently they've got the funds to do this.

You're never going to get everyone to agree on a concept, and I know Jack [Hawkins] has come up with ideas, and they've come up with alternative ideas, but sooner or later on deals like this, sometimes you just have to give birth. Even if it's ugly, you just have to do it and quit analyzing it, because you can analyze this for another ten years and have community meetings and people are going to have opinions this way and that way and everything, but once it happens, everyone will be fine and they'll embrace it. But in the meantime, it's the old story of watching sausage being made. The end result will be fabulous. Everything in the middle is going to be pretty ugly. [laughs]

Barber: So is there any more that you feel like you want to accomplish with the gallery and its associated activities? Do you have any plans to go in new directions, or do you feel pretty good about what you've accomplished? It's certainly diversified and grown since your early expectations. Did you ever expect this is what it would evolve into?

Stremmel: No, never, never. I remember when we first started the gallery, my father had an accountant who, when he said we're going to do an art gallery, he said, "You know you're just throwing your money away. It will never, ever work." And in looking back on it, I can see that my father felt that with a small investment in an art gallery and sustaining a small loss there but getting me out of the way, rather than

bringing me into the car business and sinking the mothership, at least I could be set aside in an art gallery and he didn't have to worry about me. But he never expected it to take off the way it did or to realize what it did.

You know, you can never underestimate people. And I'm not saying this about myself. I'm just saying that there's something called drive and passion and all that, and you can look at all the spreadsheets in the world and you can have a great business plan, and most of them—when I was on a bank board, I looked at a lot of them—most of them failed. Why something like this would work is just because it was what we knew we believed in, and my wife was very driven. We loved this. I say I've never worked a day in my life, which is the truth, because I love this business and love what we're doing and there are times even on Sundays—we work on Saturdays. But even on Sundays we'll be sitting at home saying, "What do you want to do today?"

And I'll say, "I don't know. What do you want to do?"

And we'll say, "Let's go down to the gallery." [laughs]

So it hasn't been a job, it's been a lifestyle for us, and it's been one we thoroughly enjoyed. It's a lot of hard work, an awful lot of hard work. Everyone thinks being in the gallery business is very glamorous, but, man, it's tough. It's tough, because we're in the business of selling people things they don't need. [laughs] We're in the business of taking an all-black canvas and because of something you tell a collector, you cause maybe one of the smartest men in the country or one of the smartest men around to write a check for \$500,000, half a million dollars for a ten-dollar canvas with four dollars worth of paint. It's bizarre, the whole concept. [laughs]

Barber: What do you consider the value of art to a community or even just to an individual?

Stremmel: What do I consider the value of art?

Barber: What do you consider to be the value of art, of purchasing art, of having art around you?

Stremmel: I could go on forever about that one. In the end, art causes us to live a fuller human life. It definitely elevates the spirit. It challenges you intellectually. It's living around it. It's a constant source of inspiration, pride, joy. It just depends on your areas of collecting. You can collect Thomas Kinkade prints, and a lot of people get pleasure out of that. Or you can collect Mark Rothko at the highest level, and never ever tire of looking at it. But once you get it in your system—I mean, we've gone through some tough times, not necessarily with this, but with some other business ventures we've been in—I've always come to the realization that if I didn't have art to think about every day, I could have gone mad. And it's very fulfilling, it's very satisfying. It's challenging. The relationships in art are so great. The relationships with collectors have been one of the great sources of pride in running this business and being able to help build good collections, to have some amazing works go through our hands. I can't imagine anything more satisfying in life.

Barber: Well, I want to thank you so much for talking to me. It's really been a pleasure.

Stremmel: I hope this has helped a little.

Barber: Absolutely.

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## ANGELA WATSON

Owner, Black Hole Body Piercing, 912 S. Virginia Street



Angela Watson inside Black Hole Body Piercing. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

*Originally from southern California, Angela Watson moved to Truckee in 1992 and to Reno in 1994, when she purchased Black Hole Body Piercing. She later moved the business to 675 South Virginia Street from its original location on California Avenue and around 2003 moved to its current location in a renovated house at 912 S. Virginia Street.*

Barber: This is Alicia Barber. The date is June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and I'm at Black Hole Body Piercing at 912 South Virginia Street in Reno, with the owner, Angela Watson, to conduct an interview for the RTC's Midtown History Project. Angela, do I have your permission to record this interview today and make it available to the public?

Watson: Yes, you do.

Barber: Okay, great. Thanks. We're focusing today on your business in Midtown and actually other locations where it was before that, because I want to trace that history. But before we get into that, I wanted to get a little background information about you. Are you a native of the area?

Watson: No, I'm not. I'm from Southern California. I'm a transplant. I moved from Southern California to Fairfield in 1990, and then in 1992, '91, '92, end of it, I moved to Truckee. Then in 1994, I purchased Black Hole when it was located on California Avenue, and then I finally moved after we had the great flood. When was that? 1996?

Barber: 1997.

Watson: Ninety-seven. Because of the flood, I was not able to get down to my business because the freeway had closed. So it was detrimental to my store to be not able to access the area for—it was almost two weeks that we couldn't get in and out in a reasonable amount of time because of the flooding. So I ended up moving to Mogul.

Barber: Oh, to Mogul. Okay.

Watson: Yes. So I kind of inched my way into town. I moved to Mogul, and then I ended up moving into Reno proper a year or two after that.

Barber: So you still had the business. It just didn't have a home in Reno at that point?

Watson: No, I had it. It was in Reno, but I lived in Truckee. So with having to commute back and forth, I had a business here in Reno, and then I also had a screen-printing shop out in Sparks, and both of them became a challenge to access because of the flood on the freeway. So then I just moved into town. It was so much easier to be able to get back. Between the winters, coming up and down the mountain was really hard. So in order that I could have an easier time getting to and from work and to decrease my drive time, I moved into Mogul. Then I moved into Reno proper.

Black Hole was located on California Avenue in 1994, but in 1995 business was booming, and I had outgrown my space. I'm trying to think of the address. I just posted it. It's the Postal Annex building on California Avenue, and I want to say it was 113. I recently posted it as, like, a joke on Facebook, like, "Who can tell us what this is?" And somebody guessed that it was our old address, which was really cool. So we were on California Avenue in 1994, and I purchased it late in that year, and then by 1995, we moved to 675 South Virginia.

Then in 2002, I had a fire in the building and had to move to a different location while they repaired the building, so I moved to Wells right next to Aces Tattoo, which was next to Champion Laundry on the corner of Vassar and Wells. So I just found an anchor to hold onto. I could say, "I'm next to Aces now. That's where I am."

So we were there, and in the meantime, while the building was being repaired, this space became available, and because it had the same floor plan, it looked almost the same, but had ten parking spaces, I



snapped this building up and just forgot about going back to that one. We've been in this location now for twelve, almost thirteen years.

Barber: Okay. So you were in two different locations that were former houses in town.

Watson: Yes.

Barber: What's now in that building where your first location was?

Watson: It is now Penny's Mercantile. It's gone through a few smaller businesses, but Penny's has been the longest running since the fire. The home, after it was repaired, was rented, I don't know to who, but it was squatted in for a while, and so it became kind of uninhabitable, and then somebody cleaned it up and fixed it. I think the woman from Penny's Mercantile bought it, and she ended up rebuilding it to her needs. But, now, she is from—I want to say Winnemucca. She's somewhere far out there, and she is moving back to that area. So she has sold the building to the Spy Shop, and so it's going to become the Spy Shop, I think.



Black Hole Body Piercing. Photo courtesy of Black Hole Body Peircing.

Barber: Oh, interesting. So when you purchased this building that we're in now, which is 912 South Virginia, was it already operating as a business?

Watson: I didn't purchase it. I'm a renter.

Barber: Oh, you lease it.

Watson: Yes, I'm leasing it. And it was not a business at the time that I rented it. It wasn't like somebody moved out, moved in, and I moved in. It had been vacant for a little while. It was an office, some sort of telecommunications place. Before that, it was a vintage clothing store called the Coral Rose, and before that, it was a vintage clothing store called Katy Magoo's. Katy Magoo's was a very popular vintage store here, I think around the eighties, maybe early nineties, and then it switched to the Coral Rose. Then the woman who had the Coral Rose, one of her family members got sick and she moved away. So then in the few months, I think there was maybe less than a year, there was the telecommunications guy. Don't even know what the business was, but there were wires everywhere. That's all I know. [laughs]

So then when we moved in, we slowly but surely have redone a lot in the building, like taken back to the floors and done some nice improvements. I don't know if they repaired or replaced. I'm not really sure. So it's back to hardwood, but I don't know if it was the original. A lot of times when you pull up the floors, you never know what you're going to get underneath, and I was out of town. They did it while I was gone. So that was really nice.

Barber: So the setup is a former house. How does that work with respect to your business? Did you find that that kind of a building was particularly conducive to the kind of business that you wanted to run? Because it's very different than a building that had just been a commercial building or was built to be commercial.

Watson: Absolutely. I think it just depends on what feel you want. I've seen piercing studios operate in several different types of settings. I think one of the most popular is when people build out a commercial setting, like a retail space or something. I chose a house because of the private nature of our business. What I particularly liked about this house was it was exactly the same as the one that we were in at 675 South Virginia, slight of a few improvements that were done after the original construction.

The two homes, the layout, 675 and 912, in my opinion, were done by the same architect. They look so similar in the floor plan that it was really uncanny. So we just decided that this was a really good fit for us because we'd already lived in that space. We'd been using that space. Even our customers got a little confused. If they'd been to the other store and then they came to this store, they were like, "Wait. Something's different." But they couldn't even put their finger on it. But it was because it was on the opposite side of the street, but it was the same layout.

It works well for us because we have customers getting all different types of piercings, and we like to give them that private setting. So whether it's you getting your nose pierced and you're really nervous and you don't want anybody looking at you, or you are, you know, getting a more sensitive piercing like your nipple pierced and don't want anybody to see you, we give you that option. And bedrooms are naturally just nice private spaces, and they're a little larger. I think a lot of businesses that do what I do operate in smaller amounts of space, but by being in this size of a room, we give our clients and their family and friends room to feel comfortable and us all room to move.

At this point in the game, I wish I had three bedrooms instead of two because with the popularity of Midtown and the fact that we've been here twenty years, we're really busy. After twenty years of building a reputation and having this influx of all of these businesses around me, we are right now at what I think is the top of our game. We feel really good about what's happening around us, and it's so nice

because when I decided to move onto Virginia, the only reason that I picked it was because the space that I was in on California Avenue was too small. I needed a bigger space; 912 was available. I was driving down the street and I saw it, and I'm like, "It's on the main drag. If nothing else, it's on the main drag. People will be able to find me."

You can access South Virginia from any direction pretty easily, so as a businessperson thinking how I am going to get the most customers, I knew if I placed myself so that I was highly visible, I would begin to build a higher clientele. So that's why we picked Virginia. It wasn't because there were really great neighbors around me. It wasn't because there were like-minded businesses. Really, all there was were liquor stores, motels, and vacant buildings, and for me, I was just like, "This is it."

I was close enough to California to kind of hook onto a little bit of what they had going on there, but I was alone. Honestly, I can't even remember what was next to me. There were some weird things. I mean, a lot of these were residences. Like, right next to me up there next to Shea's, where Süp was, that was a house that was a residence for *years*, and there was a palm reader in there while I was there. I remember that. I don't remember what was there before the palm reader. I think it was vacant for a long time. So I just thought, "Okay, this is a good place. People will see me." I knew that much about business, twenty years, that you need people to see you. So with a good sign out front, they'll see me.

Barber: So does this growing popularity of what is now Midtown, which we'll go into a little bit more in a minute, does that surprise you?

Watson: Yes. I'm going to say yes, because what surprises me about it is the amount of change that's happened in the twenty years that I've been here. The elements that are still in progress of changing, like reducing the amount of hotel/motel dwellers, reducing the amount of graffiti, things like that, it used to be so much worse than now. I see an improvement just by having the activity and the new things in the neighborhood.

I mean, it used to be that on a daily basis when I was coming or going from work or one of my girls was coming and going from work, there was some encounter with someone who was trespassing, more or less. And these days it's so far and few between. I mean, maybe we might find a Santa on the porch after the Santa Crawl or something, but other than that, I feel much safer letting my girls go home after work by themselves, things like that. So I've seen it change for the positive in that way.

I think we have a long way to go. I think we have a lot of work to do in this area. I see so much more potential, and that's why this new project with the RTC is so exciting to me because I'm going to get to see that come to full fruition. All these businesses are moving in. Now it's time. If you look back at photos of this area in the fifties and sixties, it was a Main Street feel, with wide sidewalks, tree-lined areas—an area where people would walk and shop to different stores.

Somewhere around the time that the highway, 395, was built, we started to lose that, and it became an area that went into disrepair. I don't think that the area has had much done to it as far as repairs, improvements, from the city's aspect yet, and so I'm excited to see those things come along with what is happening organically here.

Barber: So when you first moved to this area, you said that you kind of felt alone as a business, kind of isolated. At what point did there start to be an organization of business owners and operators in this area? Was that before the Midtown movement?

Watson: Yes. Well, no. I think what happened was is, I'll tell you, it's funny because what happened was I was here, and Junkee [Clothing Exchange], seven years ago, she [Jessica Schneider] was looking for a spot. I had moved from over there to here, but I was in this spot, and she was basically my next neighbor. She was looking for a spot, and she's like, "Okay. Black Hole's here. I can anchor onto that. They're here. I can be here." She saw it as a potential for, like, "If I'm next to another person—" And I can't remember who else was here at the same time, but she thought, "They're there, and Black Hole's here, and, okay, I can be here." Then she came and then a few other little businesses came, and then it kind of became the place to come to, and so it built off of that. I was just all alone. I mean, I did have my neighbors at the bars and stuff, but there wasn't any other retail. There weren't really any restaurants.

So in the last seven years is when it's all started to change. Seven years ago, I would say eight years ago, we were still lonely. Seven years ago, Junkee opened and a few other little stores sprinkled in, and at the five-year mark, boom, everybody came. That's when the merchants' group, the Midtown District, started, and it was right around that time, and that's where Süp, Plato's Closet, Junkee, they kind of all got together. Out of Bounds was across the street where the postal place is. Out of Bounds was a skate shop that was over in Park Lane Mall, and they moved over here. That was my only other neighbor. Jessica [of Junkee Clothing Exchange] moved in because we were both here, and then everybody kind of filled in the spaces in between over those next few years.

They started the Midtown District about five, six years ago, and then Creative Coalition crept onto the scene three years ago. The difference between those two merchant groups is the mission. The mission of the Midtown District was to brand this area as a district. This is Midtown District, and that is why it's called Midtown District, because they branded that as what this is.

The Creative Coalition of Midtown is a group of business owners that are within that Midtown District who wanted to create events and avenues for artists and businesses to pair up, whether that be through Art Walks or through having small art shows in your space, selling handmade goods, offering dance or performing arts classes, things like that. Any business that kind of promoted local art was what we were looking for to join us.

So although they are separate entities, I think it's very obvious that they would work together to create an even better district. One gets to handle the marketing of the area, and the other one gets to do the creative part of the area. And I foresee that hopefully in the future that the two will actually kind of merge into one, because there's power in numbers, and we have different memberships, but yet we have many crossover memberships. There are a lot of people that support the Midtown District but also sell handmade goods or create art. Like even Süp shows art on their walls. So that's where we come from with a little bit different group.

Barber: So you're involved in both of them.

Watson: I am. I have my fingers in both. [laughs]

Barber: You've been very involved in those walks and I've been to events that you've had here. Could you describe some of the ways that the business has been involved in some of the events that have happened in the Midtown area?

Watson: Oh, yes. By being a part of the Creative Coalition, I worked with others to create Art Walks. So basically it's the same as the Midtown District Art Walk. And let me tell you, on the record, I had no

idea how much work it was, and thank God for Living Stones Church for starting the Art Walks—well, taking them over. Jessica probably talked a little bit about their history. So they started it, but we had business members saying, “It’d be really cool if we had these monthly. What if we could get everybody to come down to Midtown on the last Friday or the first Thursday or whatever?” So we kind of decided, “Let’s try it.”

Then the next year, it was a lot of work and it was finicky. Reno is finicky. They like something for a minute, and then they decide they don’t know if they like that anymore, and so you have to change it up. So we decreased those the following year, and then we decided the best way for us to do it would be to support the other events that are happening. So this year, we worked with Artown. We paired all the businesses and artists together for the Midtown Art Walk. I worked with Artown to create the People Project with Jessica.

Then we also had a successful first-ever Bike Week event in Midtown. Because of Midtown’s popularity, the Bike Week folks came to us and they said, “How can we create an event here?” And we did the funnest event called Bike Around Bingo, and it was the first of its kind, and it was like a walk through the neighborhood, except for you got to ride your bike and get Bingos, and it was so cool. Families came and did it, whole families, everybody on their bike. Those events are when I really get to realize the improvements that we need. When you invite two hundred people on bikes to your neighborhood for an event and they can’t safely travel from one destination in your event to another, then you really get to see how much we need to go forward. And that’s why with all of these businesses coming in, with every improvement that we do to the area, it’s just going to get better and better, because the people that are owning the businesses, the people that are living in this area, they’ve all embraced it, and they’re trying to make it into what we see in other cities.

Barber: What would you like to see? What’s your vision about how Midtown can change and improve the next couple of years?

Watson: Well, one of my favorite pictures that I have ever seen of Midtown is a picture of up by where College Cyclery is, that old dealership [the Osen Dodge building]. It was a car dealership on the corner where Midtown Community Yoga is. In that picture, you see everyone standing out front; it’s all their employees on this wide sidewalk, and then there are even some trees lining the area. I think that that was the design of the street when it was made, and I think it would be a really wonderful option for it to follow now.

One of the issues that I see with that is that to go that wide in that particular area, you run into the fact that there’s not enough space to actually have everything. We can’t have parking, turning lanes, sidewalks, benches, and bike lanes. So I think that we have to see what historically fits the neighborhood, because history is so important to a neighborhood. When I go to an area, I like to see bits of it. I like to see parts of the history and I like to see the new things that have happened organically.

I’d like to see it go back to that feel of the way that it was, where you and I could stride side by side with our shopping bags and go down and get a cup of coffee—and, of course, they were getting eggs and groceries and were shopping a little differently than we are now.

But I would like to see it where it’s walkable, safe, and addresses all the modes of transportation that we have now. This area’s gone through so many changes with being autocentric and then being even wagoncentric and then autocentric and then made into even faster autocentric, and now we’re kind of

talking about going back. So maybe going back to that point where it was fifty, sixty years ago would be a nice place to go.

There was a lot more space. Even though the buildings were all here, there was just a lot more space available for the people, and I think we've kind of taken that space away from the people, so now they tend to dwell in areas that aren't as open and visible, and we take side streets. When I travel through this neighborhood with my family, I travel on the side streets. I don't actually use Virginia. So it's doing a disservice to the businesses that have opened here by making it more appealing to be off of the street than it is to be on the main street.

Barber: You mean in your car?

Watson: In any way. Walking, in my car, walking, biking. Any way that I travel, I tend not to travel on Virginia, and I think a lot of people in this neighborhood avoid it just because the condition of Virginia. So I think that when they do those improvements, you'll see more people walking. Like, you could go out right now and go, "Well, I don't even see that many people walking around." They're walking. They're just not walking down Virginia. They're walking over on the side streets.

Barber: I wonder if you could walk us through the space in here and kind of explain how you've set up the business, and what's in different rooms and what you still see in those rooms of the original house?

Watson: Okay. One of the things that I love the most about the building is the front porch. I think that as you walk up to the building, having an old cottage style with a white picket fence out front kind of makes it stand out a little bit on my block—not in the neighborhood, because if you drive down, you'll see three or four or more like it that are very similar—but that striking front porch.

You walk in the front door, and on the right you see a beautiful fireplace and it's all in brick. Over the years, it had been painted and painted, and we hope one day to bring that back down. But there are also these pillars on each side, the wooden built-ins.

The lobby I imagine was the living room, and then I imagine that our display room was the dining room because it's attached to the kitchen. We use the living room as a lobby, the dining room as a display room. It's funny, the LLDD pattern. I just caught that.

The kitchen we use as our tool-processing and jewelry-processing area. Because of the access to water, it naturally was the place to put those kinds of things. Then when you make a left to go through the hallway to the bathroom, you can either choose to go right or left. It's a two-bedroom layout, so if you go right, you end up in one of the piercing rooms. If you go left, you end up in the other piercing room. They're both bedrooms. We talked about that feel for privacy. I thought it was naturally the best thing to put in these rooms. Also it's easier for the customer to access.

Somewhere along the line when Coral Rose or Katy Magoo's was here, someone built a walk-through to the building behind me. The building behind me, I'm assuming was built at the same time. It looks very similar, just smaller, but there's actually a hallway between us that is not part of the original architecture. It was added on at some point. And there are clothing rods all the way down the hallway, so I'm guessing one of the two ladies that operated the vintage store used that as extra storage.

The basement, we use it as storage, but at some point, someone had put up fabric coverings over all of the walls, and it was a little apartment of some sort. I don't know at what point that happened, but

you can still see where somebody had a little apartment down there, and they must have used the facilities upstairs.

So it's gone through some transitions, but it's been a business for us now for twelve, like I said, almost thirteen years. It still has all the plate-glass windows. It has those wonderful built-ins. Our cash wrap is a beautiful buffet built-in with all the glass and the wood cabinet and drawers, so that's really nice. The kitchen was redone at some point, maybe the seventies, so there's nothing fabulous about that. That room in there has chair rails. We haven't really changed too much of the structure, but on the inside, obviously the decor is very different.

Barber: I've traced the house, I think, back to the thirties, although sometimes it's not the same address. It could have been a different house, even. It's hard to know. Did you have an idea about how old the house was?

Watson: I think that what I thought matches what you have. I thought it was right around '31, '32, and then over the years, I've had two or three different individuals that have visited the store, and they just popped in to see what it looked like, because they had lived in the house at one point.

We recently had a woman named Heidi Bensley [phonetic] who had stopped by, and her grandmother was Lucille Nannini, and she said that when she was a young girl, her grandmother lived in the house.

I also had a woman visit me that was my age, and she had said that when she was a young girl that she lived in this house with her grandmother. So I think that was mid-1970 to '80. Somewhere in those years from '70 to '80, that woman had lived in this house, as well. So I know it was a residence even up until the seventies off and on, maybe continuously all the way up until then. Then we talked about where it had gone with the vintage clothing stores. There's a little bit of a break in there. I'm not sure.

The people that I rent from are the Shims, and the Shim family has owned properties and buildings and businesses in this area for a long time. In fact, they used to operate Shim's Pants in downtown. What might have been maybe the Woolworth's Building or near the Woolworth's Building, there was a Shim's Pants, so you could go there for all your pants needs. And even up until when I rented twelve years ago—even ten years ago—all of their racks and stuff from Shim's Pants were being stored in the garage.

The garage is really cool. It used to be a drive-through garage somewhere along the way. You could open all the doors and you could drive through. They ended up boarding up between the two, but there is even a pit or well where you would drive. So I wonder if they didn't used to work on cars or—I don't know what the story is with the garage, but it's interesting. I think you could just drive straight through it if the board was removed between the two.

Barber: That's so interesting. I'll see if I can get in touch with that family.

Watson: Yeah. I'm not sure when the house behind me, 912 ½, was built. This has been a residence for years. The back was residential even when I rented it. This front, that was still residential until just a few years ago. They turned it into a salon three or four years ago. He renovated it, rented it to a salon, and now it's Midtown Salon, which is not the original name—the earlier one was Reno Salon or something, and then it became Midtown Salon two years ago. So that was residential until only a few years ago.

Barber: It's a similarly-sized little house?

Watson: It's smaller. It's definitely smaller.

Barber: Does it face the other direction?

Watson: Yes, it faces Brasserie St. James. It has alley access, but it looks like it was built at the same time. We have so many similar characteristics, and they have some of the same built-ins and stuff on the inside. So it looks very similar.

Barber: I definitely have to look at that.

I want to ask you a little bit about body piercing as a business. When you first started it, were you seeing a demand for that in particular? Is that something that you did and were interested in, so you just wanted to see how it would go? It sounds like business is picking up. I wonder is it a common business? Is it becoming more common? Is there more competition than there used to be?

Watson: No, there's less than there used to be, which is really nice. Piercing has evolved so much. I became interested in piercing in 1991, '92. I had gone to get my first few piercings, and struck it off really well with the piercer that I got one of my piercings from. He was in Sacramento and he had invited me to come down and learn to pierce, so that I could help pierce at his store because there weren't any body piercers.

The only place to get a body piercing in 1991, '92 was The Gauntlet in San Francisco. You'd have to drive all the way to San Francisco to get a piercing. So I had decided I wanted to get my navel pierced, and I drove down to San Francisco and got my navel pierced.

A year, eight months later, one of my girlfriends wanted to get her navel pierced, and I wanted to get my septum done, the center of my nose, and so I had called around. We found a place in Sacramento, so we drove down to Sacramento and we got pierced. Within six months of that, I had gone back with another friend from another piercing, and the guy there had offered me a chance to learn how to pierce, and because of my personal interest, I thought, "Oh, this could be cool." And I was just a waitress working at a ski resort. I didn't have any career path right then, and I thought, "Okay, this could be cool."

So I learned how to do it and I worked for him for a little while. Black Hole had started in Truckee before I owned it. So to go back a little bit—in 1992 it opened in Truckee, and then it moved to Reno in 1994, and that's when I purchased it.

When it was in Truckee, the girl who started it was someone that I had learned with in Sacramento, but I was working in Sacramento and she was working up in Truckee, and I moved back to Truckee because we were both living there. And then when she had moved it to town, I had left and I was on tour with bands and piercing on the road, and I was doing rock-star stuff.

And then when I came back, my friend was selling it, and I thought, "Oh, okay, I'll put my feet down." So I purchased it from him, and it was right—I can't even—I mean, it was like pop punk was becoming popular. Aerosmith did the song "Cryin'" with the video on MTV of Alicia Silverstone getting her navel pierced, and that was it. That changed the industry, because at that moment, everybody could see that this was what was happening and it was rock 'n' roll and it was cool, and so you just saw this change.



When I came back in 1994, I went from doing two piercings a day to doing ten a day within six months. And that's when I say that I outgrew that space. I only had one lobby and I had one piercing room and processing room. I needed more rooms. I needed rooms where I could show jewelry. I needed rooms where I could put people while they were waiting. I needed rooms to process my tools. My tiny little space wasn't doing it anymore.

So I moved into 675 South Virginia and rode that wave for about four or five years. And then the economy started to turn a little bit. It slowed down. The momentum just kind of leveled out. But I had a nice staff. I was able to employ a few people. It was really nice. So it kind of leveled out.

Then I would say the second boom was the result of social media and getting a bunch of neighbors. It has boomed for me. But when I talk to my fellow piercing shop owners, it's booming all over the country right now, and I do believe it's social media. I think social media has changed the face of how our clients are expecting to get the quality of the jewelry, what they expect the piercing to look like, and, in turn, they've been able to use that to find good shops, find good jewelry, to not just have to go to the one place that they know about. There's more out there. I can't tell you how many times a day somebody comes in with their phone and says, "I want one of these. I want one of these." So that's been a huge driving force for the popularity of piercing.

In the last three to four years, say since 2010, we have been slowly going [demonstrates] up, up, up just a little bit, and I can't say one or the other, but I would have to say it's a combination of both the Midtown District becoming more popular and also my clientele becoming more aware and seeing more things on the Internet. I'm not just selling piercings anymore. I have piercers all over the country selling a product that my clients in Reno can only get here. So it's like having a business where I don't have to do all of the promotion. *Everybody* out there is promoting a product that I can offer.

It's just like seeing a Coach purse: "Oh, I see a Coach purse. I see a Coach purse." You look in any magazine, you're seeing Coach purses. That piercing becomes so branded that it's just, "I want this." This piercing was actually done at my friend's shop in New Mexico, but somebody just came in and showed me the picture because that's what they want, and they found it on social media. But my friend in New Mexico advertised a product that I get to sell them, so it's cool like that.

And we really work hard to create a network of piercers. The Association of Professional Piercers hosts a conference every year. It also just had its twentieth anniversary, so right along with that I'm having mine. And I've attended so many of those meetings that I have a huge network of friends that are piercers all over, so we refer each other, we call each other if we don't have something. Over the years, we've helped each other out, and now we've created, just like the American Dental Association, the Association of Professional Piercers, and it's really education-based, and we get to go there and do our buying for the next season, which is like fashion. We go and pick out what we want next year, and that's really cool.

But the history of piercing has changed a lot, and it was the focus of the piercing convention this year because of twenty years of the Association. They did a historical presentation at our conference, and so you could go around the room and see the evolution of the group itself. And just right before you got here, one of my friends posted pictures from the 1999 conference when I was just a tiny little baby, and it was so cool to see back—a lot of those faces are still in the industry. So it's been a sustainable industry for us for twenty years.

Barber: It's sort of more Internet-proof, in a way, than a lot of other retailers, because you can't mail order your piercing. I mean, you have to get it done in person.

Watson: Exactly, yes. I mean, we do have to contend with the online jewelry sales, but even then they still have to get it put in. So the service aspect is what makes it such an ideal situation for us that social media is sending us customers. Because if you want your nose pierced, you can buy jewelry anywhere, but you can't necessarily pierce it yourself. So we get them through the door, and once they see our customer service, see our selection, then they come back. It's so much easier to let us perform the piercing—even the change of the jewelry, there's no charge for it. Might as well let us just do it, so that we can put it in for you. So, yeah, I think that we still have a sacred art of being able to provide the piercing. You can't just get that anywhere.

Barber: So how would you describe your customers?

Watson: [laughs] Everyone. Anyone and everyone and all different ages. I mean, our demographic is from five years old to seventy-five years old. Occasionally we get the lady over eighty that wants her ears pierced, maybe who hasn't had them done before, or needs new ones because hers are so different than they were before. But our demographic is so large.

We've pierced everyone in town after twenty years. If we haven't pierced you, we've pierced someone in your family or someone that you know, somebody you work with, and it's judges, cops, nurses, teachers, students, baristas, car mechanics. You know, anyone and everyone—sisters, brothers, children. I would say now more than ever we're doing more children's lobes than we ever have in the past, and I think that's the consciousness of the parent knowing that there's a cleaner alternative than the ear gun at the mall, and also because the parents have been pierced here, they've grown up knowing "I'm making this choice for my body," and then naturally they're going to turn to their child, and we always want to make a better choice for our child, so then they have them professionally done.

Barber: Is there licensing that goes along with piercing or are there any kinds of standards of the Association?

Watson: The Association of Professional Piercers, they set standards to become a member. We're governed by the government, by the health department. The health department does a yearly inspection. They do a good job on the inspection, but our regulations were highly outdated. They had been written in 1975, and then we redid them in 1995, so twenty years later. So now here it is twenty years later, and they are now redoing them again.

I haven't seen the new regulations, but we have a lot of trust in our health department. They've done a good job of trying to raise the bar. It increased testing on our machinery, things like that, but we're not being asked to do anything outside of, say, what a dentist is, as far as equipment testing and stuff like that. We use very similar equipment to a dentist or a doctor's office, and so those standards are a minimum. We're asking that we, as operators, have to wear gloves. We have to use appropriate materials. We have to make sure we have enough light in the room. We have to make sure that we're tracking our packages and that our autoclaves are working properly. But that's it. There is no license.

Some states like Oregon have adopted licensing. They also have adopted—you have to, like a cosmetologist, invest  $x$  amount of hours into your training. What they've also found is that with the increase of business that we have all experienced, they can't keep up and they can't find piercers because they out-regulated themselves. They wanted all these regulations because it felt comfortable at the level

that they were at, but the growth in our industry has been 30 percent over the last five years. Now what do you do? You need another piercer. Well, you have to wait four hundred hours. It's good that we're requiring that, but you can't hire a piercer from out of state. I'm a twenty-year veteran. I have to go and complete four hundred hours in Oregon to pierce there. So I'm comfortable with what our health department has done in regulation.

I would like to see a little bit more stringency on what materials we're actually allowed to put in the body, but that becomes a whole different issue because they can't really govern where we buy. Like telling a dentist you have to buy from this manufacturer, to tell a piercer you have to buy this jewelry, the liability would be too much.

And some trainings. I think that people should be required to do blood-borne pathogens and have CPR training, but then we fall into whose blood-borne pathogens class is acceptable, whose CPR is acceptable. I am required by my insurance company to have those, so it's a matter of whether there are other implements that can help to protect the client, because the client is relying on us to protect them, and that's our job, as well as to protect ourselves and my girls that work here. We need to make sure it's a safe environment. So we spend a lot of time on training, continuing education. Once a year we go for three, four days of classes, just one after the other and get tons of information from other people in the industry at that conference I mentioned. So my industry's come a long way in twenty years, just like my neighborhood has.

Barber: I just want to follow up on that. I just have one last question, really. It's about your staff. When you started, were you just by yourself? Did you have some staff? How has your staff changed, grown, transformed? Can you describe that a little bit?

Watson: Well, gosh. For many years it was just me, and then I had some private contractors, and then slowly over the years I turned them more into employees so that they were covered by benefits from workmen's comp and things like that, because my industry has come a long way over that. You know, as an artist, you're an artist. You aren't really an employee of an art place, you know? So even if you're in an art gallery, you're not an employee of the art gallery. You're an employee of yourself. Body art kind of gets lumped together, but slowly some of us have separated them out, whereas my girls now actually work here. They're employees. It's different than being a private contractor. Or she can go to the tattoo shop up the street and any of these, and I bet many of them are operating on a percentage basis, so they're private contracts.

It's a different setup of how you want to run your business, and then it goes into the laws of what Nevada says is a private contractor. Tattoo artists do a lot more visiting of places, whereas piercers, like my piercers, they work here. Very rarely do they go work somewhere else, but occasionally they do. So that's why we're set up that way.

Barber: So you've had some people consistently for long periods of time.

Watson: Oh, yeah. Most of my girls have been here at least a few years. I mean, we are still a small business, so there is always something that we aren't able to offer. We don't offer health benefits. We do offer a little paid time off, so there are some benefits there. Another benefit is that you get a little more freedom in the way you look, the way you dress.

I'm really flexible on school schedules. School's really important to me. If I am employing a student, I want them to make sure that they're able to get their schoolwork done because it's expensive these days, and you can't not do well because of your work schedule. So I've had many a college student come through here, which is great, because they have a little bit more smarts, but they are on their way, on their path to somewhere else.

It's a good place to find yourself, too. You get to go through a lot of different types of clients and people and work with different people that have all different interests. So through that, I think that people kind of find out who they are and what they are. I think it's a great place to work.

Barber: Well, I want to thank you very much, unless there's anything else you feel like we haven't touched on.

Watson: No. I feel like we covered a lot, right?

Barber: We did. Thank you.