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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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DATE:                              24 MAY 2006

SIDE ONE

Q: To get started, can you let us know  
where and when you were born?

A: I was born in Evanston, Illinois, in  
1941 -- February 10 -- and my father belonged to the  
Chrysler Corporation, and part of his job description was  
setting up plants around the country, so we traveled a  
great deal. I saw a lot of the South, the Midwest, and  
the East Coast in my growing up and going to school. I  
went to many schools and lived in many places.

Q: Your mother was a homemaker?

A: She was a registered nurse, and she worked quite a bit of my growing up years.

Q: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

A: I have one sister. Her name is Beth, and she's eleven years younger than I.

Q: How did you end up in Hoboken?

A: Well, I belonged to a Community of Franciscan Sisters, and our headquarters is in Syracuse, New York. I went through the whole process of joining the community and getting an education, and I was a teacher for nineteen years. One of my stations was here in Hoboken. In fact, we had two schools -- St. Joseph School (it was on Jackson Street) and St. Francis School, which was on Jefferson Street. So I got assigned first to St. Joseph's, and fell in love. Well, I didn't fall in love with Hoboken right away, but I did through the children I was teaching.

Q: What year did you come to Hoboken?



A: I would say it was probably 1966. The summer I came here was the summer of the riots. I don't know if you've come across that just yet. But that was my first experience living in the inner city, and also having the trauma, or excitement, however you want to look at it, of having riots in the streets, buildings burning and things like that.

Q: Can you talk a little bit more about that? Why there were the riots?

A: If my memory serves me correctly, St. Francis -- First of all, many of the parishes, or the neighborhoods, were very ethnically centered. I was at St. Joe's, and at that time it was comprised of Spanish people, Spanish-speaking people, mostly Cubans and Puerto Ricans. Then the Roman Catholic Church right up the street from that was St. Francis Church, and that was all Italian. I believe they were from an area in Italy of Malfeta, which is on the border of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Italy, right there on the water.

Well, anyway, the story goes that a Puerto Rican person, or Spanish person, bought a TV on time --

meaning he was supposed to be making monthly payments. Apparently, he fell back in making the payments. So the guy whose TV it was wanted either the money or the TV. When he went to the house to get it, he wouldn't answer the door so he broke in and took the TV. That led to a loud confrontation between one Hispanic person and one Italian person. At least that's how the story goes. At the same time there was an Italian festival going on, and that's usually down on Jefferson and Third Streets. They have these decorations where they're on wooden poles, and they go across, and they have lights on them. Apparently, a young child set fire to one of the poles, so there was that fire. Along with this heated argument and the fire, one group went after another. It seemed pretty difficult for the police to get control of it. Every night there was something different going on. A building right next to St. Joseph's Convent burned one night. It was my first experience with inner-city fires, and I was very afraid that our building was also going to catch on fire.

That was even before school started, and once school started the police came to encourage the children to not be part of the fighting back and forth. As I remember it, after quite a while -- I'm not sure whether it was a week or two weeks, without too much

progress -- at that time the shipyards were still active, so they were shipping. I'm trying to remember -- it's a senior moment -- The dock workers put their hardhats on, and they had big sticks, and they went marching down the streets of the places that had been looted, destroyed, or fires, and it calmed everything down. The dock workers got things quieted down.

Q: Were they of a certain ethnic group, most of them?

A: Pretty much they were Italian, Irish, German, and there were a lot of conflicts with the emerging Hispanic population that was moving in en masse into Hoboken, at that time.

Q: So the dock workers put an end to all the riots. If they were more Italian, was there this feeling in town that the Italian faction had won?

A: I don't recall that feeling, but there definitely was a lot of agitation between different ethnic groups. That continued for a lot of years. Actually, it probably has just calmed down now that we

have so many newcomers into the city. You had your Italian neighborhoods, you had your Irish, German, Hispanic neighborhoods, and people pretty much stayed in their own neighborhood.

Q: So you were at St. Joe's, and then St. Francis?

A: I was at St. Joe's, then got missioned to South America. When I came back I came back to the Italian school -- St. Francis School -- then eventually moved back to St. Joseph's. By that time things were beginning to happen in Hoboken, so I moved on to doing other things besides teaching.

Q: So St. Joe's was located on Jackson between Newark and First?

A: Yes.

Q: What was that neighborhood like at that time?

A: There were a few hanger-oners of Irish and Italian, but the vast majority were Hispanic, and a lot of vacant buildings, abandoned buildings. The neighborhood was pretty broken down; not dangerous, but broken down.

Q: You taught?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: What did you teach?

A: I taught eighth grade, then for a year or so I was principal.

Q: You lived there, as well?

A: Yes, I did. When I came back, after spending time in South America, I wanted to get involved with what was happening in the community, because at that time people were having a very hard time with the rents, there were a lot of abandoned buildings in the city, and the parents of the children I taught the first time around were working in this group called Por La Gente,

and what we were trying to do was get a building and do sweat equity in it, then have it as affordable housing. That never quite transpired, but that's how I got involved in doing something outside of the teaching. At that point I needed some way to make money, so I worked in the cafeteria as the coordinator, in St. Joseph's School.

Q: That was when you came back.

A: Right. Yes.

Q: You started at St. Joe's around '66, then you went to St. Francis, or you went to South America first?

A: South America. Then when I came back, to St. Francis for a couple of years. Then went into St. Joe's, working in the cafeteria.

Q: And where was St. Francis located?

A: That's on Third and Madison.

Q: And what was that neighborhood like?

A: A lot of Italians were living in the area, but there was, right in front of where I lived, which was on Madison Street, a whole line of Hispanic families that had moved in. So it was mostly Italian, but encroaching Hispanics.

Q: And it was tense.

A: It wasn't overtly tense when I was at St. Francis, but there was always the undercurrent. One group always felt they were superior to the other group, so there was tension in that way.

Q: I know you are very known for being very involved in housing issues. When exactly did you start that, in Hoboken?

A: It probably was -- don't quote me on exact dates -- but it probably was about 1978, when I moved back to Hoboken. I was teaching eighth grade at St. Francis School, and that was the time of the fires. It might have been '78 to '80, somewhere right in there. I

was also working with Por La Gente, the group that was trying to hang onto the tenants' rights in town. When the fires started, I felt we should be doing something. Our little group was trying to figure out how best to address the issue. At one of the fires we managed to get all the clergy to come and stand in front of the building and pray and sing, as kind of a witness to what had happened.

Q: Where was that fire?

A: Fires. The first was around First and Park. It might have been between Newark and First. Prior to that (there were a number of them), on Bloomfield between Observer Highway and Newark. Then the American Hotel and the De Pinto Hotel, 12<sup>th</sup> and Washington -- there were a lot of fires. Each time there was a fire the clergy would gather and pray, and try to figure out how we could address the people's needs. Then the Hoboken Clergy Coalition was formed, and that was made up of the synagogue and many mainline churches in town. They were a voice for people who were very frightened. It was a very scary time. I think fifty-seven people lost their lives during this time, and the majority of them were children.



So it was resettling; trying to get some things for them; find them a place to live, and being pretty ill-equipped to handle all of this. I could go on and on about this.

Q: I want to back up just for a moment. You were in South America from when to when?

A: I was there for two years, and I was there from, probably -- I'm supposed to get these dates together -- I remember I was back in this country in '76, so it probably was maybe '71 through '73, in South America.

Q: So you came in '66, went to St. Joe's --

A: -- was there for four years; then went to South America for two, two and a half years; then came back; spent some time in Camden, New Jersey; then came back up to Hoboken and worked at St. Francis; then moved on to St. Joe's.

Q: You came to St. Francis in approximately 1978?

A: I would say somewhere around there -- '77 or '78.

Q: So you were gone for about four or five years?

A: Five to six years.

Q: Okay. You left and came back five or six years later. When you came back, how had Hoboken changed?

A: As I recall, not a whole lot. The area downtown -- which was the St. Joe's-Jackson-Monroe-Madison, all the way up to Willow Ave., was pretty inner-city, pretty rundown. As I recall not dangerous, but just very poor. A couple of things happened, though, coming back. It was during Reagan's time, and Reagan stopped the building of public housing, and was also encouraging people to go back to the cities and resettle. So they were giving gentrification kind of money, and at that

time we had what was called a Model Cities program in Hoboken (and I also belonged to that), where you tried to figure out how to best plan for the city, rejuvenate it, and get it up and running.

So a couple things were happening. One, through government monies, they were encouraging developers to come in, rehab, and get the buildings up. That had several consequences. One, the property became much more valuable; and two, what was a railroad apartment that raised maybe three, four, or five children at a time, with the family, and maybe even have a boarder on top of it, now was rehabbed, and because of the regulations with the federal government, it was only enough space for, say, three people or two people. So, automatically, one group of people were moved out and another group was invited in. There was a lot of displacement going on at that time.

Q: And this was happening while you were away, and when you came back you were starting to notice it?

A: I don't think there was a whole lot happening while I was away, but it seemed to escalate pretty quickly after I came back.

Q: So you came back, and immediately started to get involved with Por la Gente. Which means what in English?

A: For the people.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about that group, how you became involved, and what you did?

A: Well, they were parents of former students of mine at St. Joe's, when I was there the first time around. They were mostly if not all Hispanics, but as the displacement was building it began to include a whole lot of different people, mostly poor people, people who were in blue-collar-worker kinds of positions, and either their building was getting condemned and they had to leave, or it was being bought and they had to leave. Because there were so many abandoned buildings the group, prior to my coming, had decided they wanted to try to get

a building that perhaps the city owned, and through sweat equity rehab it, and have it as affordable housing.

Q: Sounds a little like a precursor to Habitat for Humanity, in some ways.

A: Yes. Well, New York City, at that time, was very engaged in sweat-equity programs, and people could either get a building from the city, or purchase it for a very, very small price, in an area that was largely abandoned and rundown. Once they put their money into it, then they had the right to own it, rent it, or whatever.

Q: I see. So the group was trying to do that. How receptive was the city?

A: The city always talked a good game, but they never honored any of their promises. Por la Gente was a new group, pretty inexperienced, and tried to be trusting. But I think the city may have been afraid of beginning something like this.

Q: Why?

A: Well, it's Hudson County politics. It's Hoboken politics, and maybe somebody knew what was coming down the road in the future. I don't know. At any rate, they always put one more stumbling block in front of us; every time we achieved the things they'd asked us to do there was one more problem, and another problem.

Por la Gente was pretty involved. In fact, we were doing a lot of organizing tenants because in the beginning, when the buildings were much more valuable when they were delivered vacant -- thus the movie "Delivered Vacant" -- I don't know if you've seen that but it's a good movie to watch. It gives a history of the displacement that went on in Hoboken. So the landlords would either demand that people get thrown out, or leave immediately; or they would scare them out; or, in last resort, would buy them out. The fires helped to increase the fear among people.

At that point, Por la Gente was trying to educate people of their rights; that they had the right to stay in the building; that they had the right to receive compensation if they were made to move out of the building -- I think a combination of events, but then the fires occurred, and it was very hard to encourage people

to hang in there, because they were so afraid of the fires.

Q: What did you do specifically, you personally, with Por la Gente, to try to further their efforts?

A: To further the efforts of people staying put? Well, we had a volunteer lawyer, and maybe a group of us would go to -- well, the people who were part of Por la Gente were much more visible and known to the community -- the Hispanic community -- than I. So Tom Olivieri and Angel "Epevier" were two of the people, and Nellie "Nicone," were among the three people I originally met up with and worked with. So a tenant would go to one of them, or we would hear that there was a problem in the building and we would go and try to get as many of the tenants from that building together as possible, and tell them the rights that they had so the landlords couldn't just walk all over them.

We did things like that. So, organizing; we did voter registration; we went to city council meetings and talked about the problems in the city and

what was going on. We really kind of stood with the people, picketed at times.

Q: Did you ever actually get a building you could rehab through sweat equity?

A: No. Never once.

Q: Never once. That must have been so frustrating.

A: It was difficult. But, you know, when we were in the midst of things, it seemed like we were being more reactionary than proactive, because things happened very, very fast -- the displacement, then the fires, trying to stay on top of it all -- and all of us were also working at other jobs, had family and so on.

Q: Why were the landlords so anxious to push all these people out?

A: Because they could make a lot of money with the buildings. Unfortunately, maybe just a year before this whole gentrification process started, people



who had brownstones thought they were going to be the absolutely wealthiest people in the world, when they got \$25,000 for their house. Three years later it was six-fold, that price, then hundred-fold, that price. The property values just went sky-high, because people with a little bit of money could apply to the government and get money to rehab these buildings. Then they could rent them out or sell them as condos. The first wave was renters; after that it was the condo.

Q: Was there a certain area of town that was being targeted first for gentrification?

A: Well, Model Cities seemed to use the stats from Willow down to the western side of the city, to get money to rehab buildings that were east of Willow.

Q: Willow to the river?

A: Yes. I can't confirm that, but that's the impression I had. So there was already activity going on, where people with an eye for buildings knew that some of these buildings were good, and could be rehabbed and developed into fine buildings. So I think, in the

beginning, it centered around Washington Street and a few blocks one way or the other.

Q: Sure. The fires were from about 1978 to '80-'81?

A: Yes.

Q: What was the feeling among the communities that were being pushed out? How did these fires start?

A: Well, if not every one of them, almost every one of them were arson. The police and the firemen worked very hard to get to the bottom of who was setting them, and at that time it seemed as though an unscrupulous person could hire somebody for as little as \$25.00, to spread some kerosene on the stairwells, and set fire to the building. I think that's pretty much what happened with the fires. You'd have a fire down the street, then the next week your landlord would say, "Look, I'm selling the building, I want you out." Well, not too many people asked a lot of questions after that.

Q: Were you the organizer with the other clergy in town, to go -- you said there would be the --

A: -- the [ ? ] -- I was one of them. I don't think I was exactly the leader, but I was one of them. To the credit of the churches in town, and the synagogue, people were very responsive. The Clergy Coalition was a very strong and vocal critic of the policies that were going on at the time. I think they had their share of successes, although, probably, you wouldn't see an absolute, out-and-out that they'd won this point or that point. We did have rent "leveling" and stabilization. There is a fragment of it left, I guess, in town. At one of the council meetings I was at -- I don't know what was being argued about, but at that time Steve Cappiello was the mayor of the town, and he said something during the city council meeting -- "Well, if you think you can do such a good job, then get on the 'leveling' and stabilization board," so I did.

Q: When was that?

A: I think it was probably shortly after the fire -- somewhere after the fires.

Q: Early '80s.

A: Yes. So I was on it for maybe five years. There were a lot of steps taken to try to weaken the rent "leveling" and stabilization laws that were on the books, and a lot of activity statewide, too, because part of the whole thing was that they began enforcing the SRO codes -- the single-room occupancy -- because many families, if they needed to make ends meet, would bring on a boarder that would help them pay the rent. But they never enforced the codes; or, maybe the codes weren't existent. But once they started putting the codes in place, most families couldn't afford to make the changes that they had to, in order to keep a room for a renter. Shipping was active at that time, so there were a lot of seamen who used to rent a room when they were in town, from these families, and along with the fires, we began to see people sleeping on benches in the park. So that's when the clergy, who were already banded together because of the fires, began to speak about the issue of homelessness.

Q: I will get back to that, but I'm wondering -- when you were on the rent stabilization board, did you have a lot of opposition within the other board members?

A: Oh, yes. Yes. It was a very interesting time. You tried to make friends with the other members of the board. Most of them were property owners, and it was difficult for them to rule in favor of a tenant. So it was very interesting. The most notable -- and it's part of the "delivered vacant" (movie)-- was the Park Avenue Indian group. I want to say 8<sup>th</sup> and Park but I'm not positive of that. It's a whole string of buildings right near the school. Most of the people living in those buildings were very educated Indian people, whose primary purpose in their life, they felt, was to bring more of their family over from India. So they would live in very poor conditions, having engineering jobs -- well-educated jobs -- and keep bringing their family over; but, in the meantime, living in horrible conditions.

Q: Renting, not owning.

A: Renting. At that time, it was not uncommon for owners not to pay their water bill, their taxes -- it all went by-the-by, so -- I don't remember the sequence of ownership, but the guy who sold this group of buildings, probably five buildings, owed outlandish amounts of money for water, sewage, and taxes. So when the unsuspecting guy bought it, he was then slapped with all these charges. I don't know, but he decided he was going to do what most everybody else was doing, and that was to turn everything into condos. But he hadn't reckoned with the idea that he had a well-educated Indian population, who then went before the rent "leveling" and stabilization board. I was on the board at that time, and the hearings went on for at least a year and a half. It was just incredible, but in the end the Indians won. They, in turn, then, bought the building. The landlord was very anxious to give it up at that point.

Q: Right. Just sick of it.

A: Yes. It was kind of a success story.

Q: That's great. You don't see that population in town very much now. [Interruption]

Well, that was a great story. I want to ask a lot of questions about starting the homeless shelter, but before I do that, I thought we could keep it a little bit lighter, and I'm hoping you can tell me what some of your favorite things to do were in Hoboken, when you first arrived, when you were here in the early '70s and '80s -- just give a little flavor of what the community was like.

A: The community was very tumble-down. Our convent was pretty tumble-down. And when there was a fire, one of the other young Sisters and I went outside. I said, "Well, we could wet our building down. We could take the hose and hose it down, so it wouldn't burn," and she looked at me and said, "What are we saving it for?" It really was just kind of tumbled-down.

Q: And where was it exactly?

A: Jackson Street -- 71 Jackson Street. It's now condos.

Q: Yes. I used to live on Monroe, between First and Newark, so I know the building very well.

A: Right. Structurally, it was a good building, but it had been allowed to decay because the parish was very poor. We had poor children going to the school, because the public housing was just up the street and a good number of the kids came from that area.

At any rate -- things I liked to do when I first came -- I had a bike, and I would ride the bike. I loved to go down to the water. We didn't have the park at that time, but there were some old rocks and what not you could sit on, and watch the boat traffic. I was involved with the kids a lot. Because they came from very poor homes, they had nothing to do and nowhere to go, so a couple of the teachers and I would take them, on the weekends, over to New York to the zoo or a museum or something like that, to do.

I got introduced to wonderful new cultures -- the Chilean, the Puerto Rican, the Cuban -- enjoyed all their food, and enjoyed visiting with their families and trying to learn the language. So those kinds of things.



Q: Were you fluent in Spanish when you first came to Hoboken?

A: No, not at all The funny thing was -- I got stationed in South America because the community, our religious community, thought that, because I lived in Hoboken and I was teaching Hispanic children, that I, of course, knew the language. I didn't. But once I moved to South America I learned a lot. I'm still not that great, but I can get by

Q: Which country were you in?

A: Peru.

Q: Was there a favorite place you liked to go out to eat in Hoboken?

A: There were probably, at the most, three restaurants. Schaeffer's was down by the bus terminal. That was kind of a greasy-spoon kind of restaurant. It had great breakfasts. Then there was the Colonial Restaurant, which was on the Avenue and Washington Street. That was pretty awful, but we

sometimes had our organizing meetings there. There was Michael's, and that's pretty much where we as the Sisters would eat. It was considered -- it's now the Gaslight -- it was considered a truckers' place, and you could get these fantastic meals really cheap. So we would do that. Then there was an Oriental restaurant on Jackson Street. The place has been torn down now, making room for more condos, I'm sure. But we used to order from there. Biggie's Clam Bar --

Q: -- which is still there.

A: -- "Fiore's" --

Q: Leo's Grandevous?

A: Leo's Grandevous. We didn't go out to eat much, but we would order like a lunch from Leo's, and on our lunch break at school we would eat there. They had personal pizzas. They were little pizzas, like this, and you could order them for next to nothing, for lunchtime, and that was great -- or Biggie's.

Q: What did the waterfront area look like?

A: Well, when I first came there was still the shipping, and you had the dock workers and the ships. You couldn't see a whole lot, because there were buildings in front of it, then the docks themselves were out there. But you know where it curves, right after Sinatra Park, there? That was (and still is, I guess) Stevens' property. They had a boat, actually, that was used as a dorm, on the water -- this big white boat -- so you could go around that area, and sit and watch the traffic.

Q: That's great. And you felt it was a good place to bike around?

A: Well, parking was never a problem in those days, because most people didn't have cars. So I could pretty much bike anywhere. The traffic wasn't bad. Yes. I would enjoy riding around.

Q: That's great. So, to get back to some of the more serious issues -- what was the homeless issue

in Hoboken like when you first arrived in the '70s, prior to the fires?

A: I was unaware of it. People tell me that there were always homeless in Hoboken, and that it was kind of an unwritten rule that people would sleep in the hallways, who were without a place to sleep; or, maybe family members would let somebody come in for the night, then shoo them out first thing in the morning.

Q: Hallways where?

A: In the apartment houses. Yes. Anywhere they could. That still goes on to some degree; although, as most of the old-time buildings are rehabbed and so on, that becomes less and less of a possibility.

Q: I want to back up, and also ask -- what did most people do for a living in Hoboken at that time?

A: When I was on the Model Cities program, the mean income here -- and this is probably the middle '70s, right when I came back -- was \$4,500 a year.

Q: Even if you add a zero, that's not what it is now.

A: Right. It was at that time that *Mash* was on, and there were a lot of jokes in *Mash* at the time about Hoboken being the "armpit of the United States," because it was just a grubby town where first-generation immigrants came and settled, and as soon as they could, they moved on. The Cuban population moved up into For Lee and Weehawken and places like that.

Q: Where did the Cuban population live in Hoboken?

A: Down near Jackson Street and the west side. And prior to my coming there, St. Joe's parish was Lithuanian, and they moved on. So it's been interesting.

Q: So what did most people do for work?

A: Most people were day laborers -- blue collar. The dock workers were probably the best paid in town -- municipal -- teachers, policemen. We had a lot of

fabric factories here, that made anything from coats to underwear and belts. So we had a lot of immigrant labor in these buildings all around town.

Q: Most people who lived in Hoboken also worked in Hoboken?

A: Yes, I would say so, probably 90% of the people. Very few would ever move out.

Q: So to get back to what we were beginning to talk about, with the homeless situation -- when you were here the first time, in the early to mid-'70s, you were really unaware of the homeless problem. Then you came back and the fires started. What did the homeless situation become?

A: Well, the whole gentrification process was in full swing at that time, so there were no affordable units being built because Reagan had effectively stopped public-housing funds. That ended.

Q: Was it also prior to Reagan? Because I know he wasn't president until 1980. So in the '70s, was a lot of that starting, in the late '70s?

A: Yes. And there was a lot of advertisement going on for artists to come and move into the area. There were grants that were available for them to move into -- I'm sorry. I forgot your question.

Q: No. Actually, I want to just follow up. Where were the artists moving?

A: The artists were encouraged to move into what is applied housing now, in the beginning anyway.

Q: Which is where?

A: Well, applied housing has housing units all over. Twelfth and Washington and, on the other side of that, Hudson Street. You know where the Tootsie Roll factory was? Bloomfield and Washington Street, downtown. At one point they had about 1,200 units, and they were all affordable housing, so you had to pay about

a third of your income to applied housing, and the government would subsidize. That's how they were gentrifying the city. The problem became -- what I alluded to before -- they took these tenement houses, where big families were residing, and when they rehabbed them they were one-bedroom or two-bedroom, maybe one or two three-bedroom, in each complex. So one group was pushed out, and they were not able to come back.

Q: Right. So what I had asked was -- the homeless population --

A: Okay. The homeless population -- I became aware of it during the fires. Because there was so much displacement going on, the churches were more and more cognizant of the fact that the people were sleeping in the park. In the beginning, the Clergy Coalition asked the city to work -- that we could work together, and if they would provide a space we would run the shelter. The city wasn't too eager to do that, so the pastor of the church where we are now -- St. John's Lutheran Church -- agreed for a year to let the coalition use the basement of the church as a shelter.



During this time (if this gets too involved, just tell me to stop) one of the members of the coalition was a Bishop Joseph, who was an "Old Roman rite" bishop. I don't know everything about the "Old Roman Rite," except that they didn't believe in the infallibility of the pope, and they said their masses in Latin. He had been a dock worker prior to becoming a priest or bishop.

Q: What parish was he with?

A: He wasn't with a parish. He lived on Madison and First, somewhere around there, and he would invite all sorts of people to come and live with him -- mainly poor people -- so he was part of the coalition. I remember we were at the Baptist church on Washington Street, in their daycare area. We had been trying with the city, and the city was dragging its feet, to get started with the shelter. He said, "I challenge you. If you're going to do the shelter, you do it. Don't wait for the city." So it was at that time that Pastor "Felsky" spoke up and said, "Well, you could use the basement of the church."

We really began it on a wing and a prayer. We had just this old, old lower level of the church, with a four-burner stove and nothing. But the people of the town, and all of the parishes where the pastors were from, they were so supportive. So that went on from, I would say, from January, in the cold part of the winter months, until about May --

Q: -- of what year?

A: Nineteen-eighty-four. Each church took a night. We had enough churches. Monday night was St. Matthew Trinity, Tuesday night was -- and it went on and on.

Q: And you were with which church at that time?

A: St. Joe's -- and we had Friday night. What happened was, each church would take that night, the pastor would stay overnight with the guests, and the parishioners would provide the food. Each night they trouped in and did their thing. At the end of May the pastors knew they couldn't keep up working at night as

well as during the day, but they decided that it was a needed thing, because we had so many people coming to sleep at night, that we would continue it. So we opened up again in September, when it started getting cold, and the city wasn't happy at all. They tried to close us down, and we ended up --

Q: Why?

A: Well, their reasoning was that it wasn't zoned to be a shelter. But it was in a church, so -- I think they were just trying really hard to make sure it didn't happen. It was during a time when most of the people in the United States thought we could get rid of this homeless problem in a year or two, because there was homelessness all around, in all the different states and cities, because the same things were happening. So we got a lot of publicity when the city wanted to close us down. We had a Sister Peggy Welsh, who was a Sister of Charity, representing the clergy, and Legal Services had some kind of legal services representing the homeless, and we went to court. Judge Burl Ives Humphreys --

Q: Burl Ives. Oh, that's funny.

A: Yes. We heard all the testimony and everything, then he wrote his decision and quoted the Bible right and left, about how churches were sanctuaries and there was no zoning of sanctuaries, etc. It was wonderful that it was written, because then all across the state people could use that written decision to open shelters, and they actually did use it in Atlantic City, as a basis for being able to open a shelter.

Q: That must have been such a wonderful feeling, that victory.

A: It was. It was very good. Over the years we were able to get grants or donations from people, to keep improving the space. Of course, the homeless population never went away, and we've continued to use the lower level of the church. Now we use the upper level too.

Q: How many beds did you have initially?

A: Well, initially there were no limits. You have to understand that we did not know how to run

shelters. None of us had been educated for anything like this, or had any experience. How I got hooked -- Jersey City had started one. I think it was called St. Paul's Episcopal Church, and they had a big room on the side of the church where they would have sandwiches, then people could bed down for the night. Two of us went that night, to see what it was like and how they did it, and I was put to work making peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. They said, "Now you have to hand them out." I was pretty scared. I didn't know what to expect from homeless people, like any other person, I guess, who'd never encountered homelessness. So I wasn't sure. I gave the sandwich out and the guy said, "Oh, thank you so much," and my heart melted. At that point I realized that, really, the homeless are no different than the rest of us. They're just on hard times.

Q: The homeless population that was going to the shelter initially -- who were they?

A: Initially, the vast majority were elderly men who were seamen or day laborers, and as they got older they couldn't do the work they were accustomed to doing. The SROs closed up. They had two hotels where

the seamen used to live, and the fires took both of those. Those were the people who initially came. Over the years, the population has changed. For many, many years we had like three to five women; now we have twenty, and turn away people every day. We have twenty women, and we turn away. We went as high as thirty-six a night down in the lower level, but it's very, very crowded. We always fed anybody who came to the door.

Q: So the initial population were men who were long-time Hoboken residents.

A: Yes.

Q: Mostly white?

A: It was a good mix, even at that point. There were Hispanics, there were blacks, there were whites, but a lot of whites, I think. I don't remember now, it's so many years ago, but they were definitely an older population.

Q: Where were they sleeping prior to the shelter? Although I know you spoke about that a little bit -- in hallways and things.

A: Hallways and parks. And the SROs, that were closing rapidly.

Q: When you first opened the shelter, how did you get -- You said the parishioners would take turns at the different churches every night. Then when that stopped, how did you initially get the food to feed them dinner every night?

A: They brought the food. The parishioners brought the food. And almost all the churches continued, to this day.

Q: Oh, that's still how you get --

A: -- a good part of our food, although now many times we cook it, and the parishioners will serve it. But there are all different combinations. Some people donate the food, other people cook it. Some people

bring in the food already cooked, others just come in and serve food.

Q: How is and was that organized? Is it that a church still has a certain night?

A: Yes. The member churches still have a night each. Sometimes, once a week -- or, depending on the size of the church, once a month -- but then as more and more people wanted to be part of this, we asked the churches to limit their time; to cut back from every Tuesday night, say, to three Tuesdays, then down to two Tuesdays, down to one Tuesdays.

Q: That's a good problem.

A: Yes. It continues to be a wonderful problem. The next wave of people, interestingly enough, were people who were in the arts. I remember this one woman, she's a beautiful cello player, and she was just beginning. She had graduated from Julliard, but she hadn't yet made her mark. She came, and we had people who were part of a Shakespearean group, who moved on to doing



much bigger and better works, but they were here in Hoboken at that time.

Q: They would volunteer to distribute meals?

A: Yes. They would come and they would help. I always joked with them, because they were the most efficient people you could want. They laughingly told me it was because most of them were earning their money by being waiters or waitresses, so they knew just how to work a kitchen.

Q: So how did you end up becoming executive director?

A: Well, the first half of the year was all volunteer work, then the next -- I don't know if it was a year but it was a little while. We had hired somebody but the person didn't work out. So I said to the coalition that I would take it for a year and get it organized, and it would be on its way. So I always joked that either I was a very poor organizer or something went awry, because I was there for the next so-many years.

Q: And what had you been doing prior?

A: I was working in the school cafeteria, as the coordinator for the breakfast and lunch program.

Q: Those are certainly related skills.

A: Yes. The food.

Q: Wow. So it was in 1984-'85 that you started?

A: Eighty-four. Well, I was part of the volunteer group that first half a year, and then the next year. But then in September of the following year, I came on as -- we didn't call it executive director, just coordinator or whatever. Then we did a bunch of things. We had a co-director, Marvin "Creeger," who was a Methodist minister. He was there for I don't know how many years, maybe five or six. A gentleman came aboard who isn't part of a sponsoring congregation, but is from Jersey City. He became the co-director, and he's still

there, as co-director. His name is James Shipman. Of course, I've stepped down, and Jacqueline --

SIDE TWO

Q: How did you get the initial supplies for the shelter, like the beds and towels and things?

A: We just said to the parishioners, "We're going to have these people." I remember we had -- somebody brought in -- I don't know whether it was one of the homeless or what. We had this yellow shag rug. It was an awful thing, but I remember people being very insistent on trying to sleep on that yellow shag rug. But parishioners brought in towels; and, as I said, we had a lot of publicity, so we had people dropping by, bringing blankets and towels. It was my job to wash the towels, so I would lug them back to the convent every day, and do the sheets and towels. People slept on the floor in the beginning, then we got cots. It built up, but, really, we had very little of anything. It wasn't planned that way, but it probably was the best thing in the world that happened, because the community of Hoboken saw that it wasn't any high-powered group that was coming in, with

money and things like that. It was just ordinary citizens, who were trying to meet a need. To this day, people who have parties -- they bring their leftovers. Biggies Clam Broth House, the clam broth house, supplied us for maybe twelve years with Monday night supper, every Monday night. So the community has always been extremely supportive. We've not bought towels or blankets or sheets; people just give them to us.

Q: How did you spread the word within the homeless community that the shelter had opened?

A: Yes, we were trying to figure out how we were going to do that. I remember one of our members went around to places where we knew the homes were congregating, and said, "Hey, if you want a meal and a place to sleep, you can go there." I think we did that for maybe a week, and we never had to do any more advertising.

Q: Some of the people who had either been burned out of their homes, or just felt scared and left, or just couldn't afford the rent anymore -- did any of those people end up in the shelter?

A: Well, we never were able to take families, but we did, on a couple of occasions, if there was a fire and it was the middle of the night, we would take the families in. But it was just one huge room, so we would have the mother and the child sleeping in the kitchen, but it was pretty bad. The people who couldn't afford the rent, in the beginning, were mostly these single males. Sometimes, once in a while, a woman, but hardly at all. Also what contributed to this -- not right away but within the next three or four years -- they closed a lot of the mental institutions, and many people who had been in mental-health situations, institutions, for twenty or thirty years, were just let go, out in the streets. They didn't know how to budget money, they didn't know how to take their medicine, and that was really very tragic. So we had a good number of people who came from mental institutions.

Q: Did some of those people come from institutions in Hoboken?

A: We have a clinic and we have a mental-health floor at the hospital, but no. Mostly it was the state-run hospitals.

Q: You didn't have services for the homeless like you do now, correct? In terms of -- when did that start?

A: Let's see. We always offered breakfast, supper, and sleeping overnight. We ran that with myself and two overnight staff people, and that was it. Then one year a friend of mine, who was a college professor, had some students who wanted to try to do some writing with homeless people. So they asked if they could come and I said, "Sure. You can talk with the people, with the guests, and see if anybody's interested," and there were people interested. We noticed after a while that people who were pretty consistent, going to these workshops for writing and drama things -- putting on their writings and performing -- were getting jobs and keeping jobs. The light bulb went on: This is something that's enjoyable, but also very helpful.

So for a lot of years we kept the creative writing. Then we applied for a grant and got some more

money, and opened it up to a variety of things. We had art, which was sketching and painting. We added on to that drama, drumming, and dancing. So we've gone through a good number of programs. Some fade away, then they come back. Presently, we have the chess club, and we started a little computer lab, so now we have computer programs twice a week, movies on Sunday -- just a variety of things.

Q: You also have job training?

A: Yes. One of the programs we got funded for was a job-training and life-skill program. That has been going on for at least ten, maybe, twelve years. We continue to work on that, and would like to see that grow even more. But, you know, that's where it's at.

Q: So what were the rules for the shelter, and have they changed at all, now?

A: The basic rules haven't changed. The basic rule is how we accept people, the most vulnerable people -- the elderly, the women, or whoever's most vulnerable to the streets gets first choice in the beds.

They're allowed to stay for at least a month, unless they choose to leave; or, if they can't keep the rules. One of the rules is to be free of alcohol and drugs, and that's a biggie. And mental health care. If they have mental health issues, they have to seek mental health care. In other words, they have to be working on their issues, to move back into mainstream society. That's pretty much it. Help to keep the shelter clean, live non-violently. We don't tolerate fighting, or using aggressive words. We try to make it a place of safe haven.

Q: So the pastor of the church where you are now said, "A year, I'll let you have my basement for a year." How did he end up giving you that space permanently?

A: Well, I think it probably ebbed and waned. At times he was very happy that we were there, other times not too happy. But their congregation is very small, so at one point they really needed us for the rent that we paid.

Q: Who paid the rent?



A: We would go through any number of programs. FEMA has always supported the shelter, and county grants, state grants, private donations -- anywhere we could get money.

Q: Gotcha. All right. And you expect to be there for a lot longer?

A: This probably sounds corny, but I'm waiting on God. I feel this is the right place for me. A couple of years ago I was in a position where it seemed good to take on two foster children, a brother and sister, so they're with me now. I don't plan on moving until they're kind of settled in their life.

Q: How old are they?

A: Eighteen and sixteen, a boy and a girl.

Q: How wonderful. That's wonderful.

A: They're great kids.

Q: I was hoping you could tell me a little bit more about the Hoboken Clergy Association. When did that group form?

A: It formed around the fires.

Q: That's what I thought.

A: It was extremely strong for at least ten years, during the crisis times. Then I think they faltered a bit over the years, when there were no longer the fires and the crises and so on. But it continues, and they meet monthly, but it's much more geared now to supporting one another and doing things together, honoring certain days like Thanksgiving, or the Holocaust, some of the holidays or holy days that could be celebrated together -- Good Friday. So they continue to meet on a monthly basis.

Q: Are you still part of the group?

A: I don't go to meetings anymore, but Jacqueline, the executive director does go. We have another group now. It's called Communities of Faith for

Housing, and some of the clergy coalition members are also Communities of Faith members. But the coalition really is more interested or more centered in the religious celebrations and working together in a religious sense, whereas Communities of Faith is much more involved in rent leveling, the shelter, what's happening with people's rights, and so on.

Q: What were some of the first things the clergy association did to sort of celebrate together?

A: Well, as I said, religiously, we met at the fires and prayed there and sang, then worked together to try to collect clothes, or money, or food, or whatever was needed for the families. Then, because it was all very devastating and, I think, very stressful, we opted to get together. I don't remember how frequently. It seems to me it was once a week (that sounds like an awful lot of meetings), but at least monthly. We would do a lot of praying together and supporting one another, talking about the different things that were happening in town and how we could be a voice for people who were either afraid to speak out, or weren't able to speak out.

Q: When did you start getting together for Thanksgiving, and what did you do?

A: I don't really remember exactly when, but it's now sponsored by the clergy coalition, and usually any church that's able to, they come together, have a common service, and usually take up a collection for something common, like the Food Pantry in Jesus' Name, or the shelter. I'm sorry. I don't really remember.

Q: Oh, that's okay. How has the homeless population changed over the years?

A: Well, we started, as I said, with the displaced, older gentlemen, who were in the seamen or hard-labor kinds of things, then very quickly moved into a pretty large population of people recently released from mental institutions, or had mental health issues and weren't able to cope with what was going on in society. Then we saw a wave of young adults whose parents-- they lived in very cramped situations, and they said, "Look, you're eighteen, it's time to move on," or, "You're twenty-one, it's time for you to move on," and they were ill-equipped to go out into the work world. Education

hasn't always been the very best in Hoboken or Jersey City, in the inner cities, so they weren't prepared for the work world. Many had fallen into the horrible addictions, or maybe they weren't even work-able already, because of whatever in their life. Then we had a good number of people in their twenties and early thirties who were there. Now I would say we have a grand mixture of people. Some illegals, who don't qualify for any benefits, and if they get sick there's no way to get health services, unless the clinic or the hospital is willing to do it for free. So generally, if they once get sick, their health does not improve, because they cannot get adequate access to health. So we have a good portion of people who are illegal, who move in and out of the shelter. If they're able to get a job, they move out. We have some elderly who, because the rents are what they are -- they're on Social Security benefits, but they still can't afford a place to live. Sometimes it takes more than a year to find affordable housing for them. The others are working, sometimes, two or three jobs in order to try to make enough money to afford a rent.

Q: From all different ethnic backgrounds?

A: Yes. We persist. Every time we take a look at the roster, and try to divvy it up according to nationality or races, it comes out just about a third black, a third white, and a third Hispanic.

Q: You have really seen the gentrification of Hoboken over the years. What are your thoughts about that? Do you think it's been a good thing?

A: I think it's a mixed bag. For many years I was pretty angry with the young people who were moving in -- which was irrational, to say the least, because it certainly wasn't their fault. But many of the seniors who were living their apartments, their landlords, if they weren't very upright, would shove them out by increase of rents that may have been illegal, but weren't snagged. So they got away with it -- to being very impressed with the young people who come to live in town. Many young professionals give of their time to the shelter, either as volunteers in the food-service area, or as tutors, or teachers of the computer, or art. They're really the mainstay of that.

I guess at this point I kind of worry about the young twenty-somethings, because I see them

here for a very short time, then they move on, so we have a very transient part of the population. Also, when I first moved to Hoboken, the older Sisters would say, "You know, there's a bar on every corner." That certainly was true when I moved here, but it hasn't changed that much. I get very discouraged on weekends, when I see a whole lot of people who are just drinking too much, just using their life to spend in bars, hanging out. I'm hoping that it will find itself -- in that there will be a strong segment of the population that will become stable, and put roots here. I think there are some. But once your child gets to be school age, that's one hard time. Then once they become teenagers, that's another hard time.

Q: What I see a lot of is people will stay, they'll have a child, then when the child is about three or four, they vacate.

A: Right. They want a backyard, they want a good school system.

Q: How do you think that can happen?

A: Well, I think people who want to stay invested here have to take some stands on what they want in the city, and I think they have done that in some ways. Like there are programs for children. There aren't nearly enough parks and open spaces, especially in the downtown section, so that's something that should be considered. I think that the quality of life issues have to continually be addressed, levels of noise, the kinds of goings-on, on the weekends, that become rather obnoxious.

Q: People who are blue-collar and living here in Hoboken -- do you feel that they are treated appropriately? I don't know if that's the right way to phrase it, but you know what I mean?

A: I don't even think that the young professionals who live in town are terribly cognizant of them, even. I think the twenty-some crowd are probably so busy living their own life that they don't notice them, and perhaps don't appreciate what they bring to the town, except for -- People love to go to Fiore's, or Grandevous, or some of the old-time places. So they say, "Oh, this is quaint. This is cute." I think that's the



extent of their appreciation of it. If people live here long enough, then they start taking an interest in the education in town and the services that are offered for a wide gamut of people, not only the twenty-some crowd but the infants, school-age children, to the seniors, and what are provided. I think the mean age right now is something like twenty-eight or twenty-nine, in Hoboken. So it's not a town of senior citizens anymore.

Q: The one thing I noticed -- and I certainly fall into the twenty-something, young professional category -- but my husband and I always talk about that Hoboken seems a little bit segregated now. The young professionals are kind of where we are now, then back Monroe, Jackson, Harrison, there is this completely other population. I sometimes feel sorry that people aren't mixing; that it is like that. Do you have any thoughts about that?

A: Well, I think that that's rapidly changing, because more and more condos are being constructed down there. Now that the light rail is down there, it's a draw. You still have the public housing down there, and though it's not big by other city

standards, it's big for us. So in that sense, it's very definitely segregated. But if you ride down in that area, you'll see that condos are going up all around them, all around the public housing, and they haven't quite finished developing back by Ninth, on to 16<sup>th</sup> Street. They're still doing a lot of building there. So I see that the middle class, or lower-middle class, is going to be edged out for the most part. The applied housing that was affordable housing, through some finagling, they can now offer those apartments at market rate, so they don't have to remain affordable. So when an affordable apartment becomes vacant, if they're not diligent, they can take it off the market for affordable, and put it for market rate. So you're moving, now, that segment of the population out.

Q: I guess one thing it sounds like I'm hearing is that there might be a concern that the long-time residents are being pushed out, and the newer ones that are coming in aren't planning to be here for the long haul, so they're not really investing themselves in the community. So where does that leave us in five or ten years? Is that something you're concerned about?

A: Well, sure. Because if you look at the end of the month and the beginning of the month, the number of moving trucks that are in town is just extraordinary. So you know there's a lot of movement going on. And the political scene -- is the twenty-something crowd making any kind of commitment toward the political scene, to be well-informed about people who are running and what they want out of the political people.

An interesting bumper effect to all of this is that FEMA, where we get a good part of our money, for running the shelter, is based on the per-capita income of an area, and because we have so many wealthy people moving in, our allocation of money keeps going down every year. It goes down by, sometimes, \$15 or \$20,000, so it's hurting us, for sure.

Q: How do you enjoy living at Eighth and Washington?

A: Well, I like living in Hoboken. Where I was living, at the convent on Jackson Street, we were trying to make that into transitional housing. Through a combination of things, we weren't able to do it, so I ended up, myself, not having a place to live. So I moved

to Jersey City for a while, until a vacancy became open in the St. Matthew Trinity housing. So I'm grateful to be living in Hoboken. I like Hoboken. It's a small town in a lot of ways. I know a lot of people, and it's good to be able to walk down the street and say hi to your neighbors. I think, actually, young people like that, too.

Q: I certainly do. What do you think about the fact that where you used to live, the convent, is now fairly high in condos?

A: Well, I'm personally affronted by the condo that was the convent, because they call it "The Convent," so I'm offended by that. They still have the cross at the top of the building lit up at night. And the whole way that that was done, was just not good.

Q: When were you kind of pushed out?

A: Maybe six years ago. We had the grant to do the whole project and everything, and at the last minute we weren't able to get the okay from the city to do it. They knew what was coming -- the light rail --

they knew where it was going and so on, so it was going to be valuable property. But, at the time we were going to do it, nobody lived down there who was worth too much.

Q: So all the Sisters you live with -- are you all part of the same Order?

A: Yes. We were.

Q: -- which is --

A: -- St. Francis. The Sisters of St. Francis. Once the schools closed, they moved on to getting jobs in other schools.

Q: If this question is too personal, I apologize, but I wonder -- when did you get the calling to know that you wanted to become -- I say the word "nun," but I've sometimes heard that there are differentiations between "nun" and "Sister."

A: There are, but it's nothing terribly important.

When I was in high school, I just decided I wanted to do something that would matter in the world. Some people say nothing happens by chance, but at that time my family was moving yet again, it was my third or fourth high school, and I was going between the East Coast and the Midwest and losing credits. So I asked my family if I couldn't just stay and go to boarding school, and it happened to be run by our Sisters. So one thing led to another.

Q: When did you take your vows?

A: In 1961.

Q: And where were you?

A: In Syracuse, New York.

Q: So when you came to Hoboken, did you think you would be here this long?

A: No, and I hated it. It was only from September until January. I couldn't wait to go back to Syracuse. I hated every minute of it.

Q: Why?

A: The city. Hoboken was poor, it was looking pretty shabby, but I fell in love with the kids. For lots of years, the only reason to stay in Hoboken was the people who lived here.

Q: Wow. And you see yourself here for quite a while longer.

A: I do, yes. At least a few more years. I love the work I'm doing. I love working with the homeless guests. I enjoy having the children.

Q: That's wonderful.

Well, I feel we've come to an end, unless there's something else you'd like to say.

A: No, you've been most patient. Thank you.

Q: Thank you.