

095 Isme Benny

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: The date today is the 20th of February. I'm sitting with Isme Benny in her beautiful home. You know, I'd like to start with just saying thank you for giving me this opportunity. And would you just start off by telling us where you lived and what years that you lived in this neighbourhood please?

Respondent: I came to this neighbourhood in 1973, and I lived on Willcocks Street [0:00:30] until 1989. And then because I love this neighbourhood I moved to 268 Major Street, and I've lived there ever since.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. Do you remember what – you said you love it. Do you remember what brought you here?

Respondent: I can tell you exactly what brought me here. The person I was living with, excuse me, at that time was a documentary filmmaker, and he was doing a film on the Group of [0:01:00] Seven, and in the process, he'd met Barker Fairley, who'd been very much involved in promoting the Group of Seven's work, and we got friendly with Barker and with Nan, and loved to visit them on Willcocks Street, and loved the street. And one day, Barker phoned in a big hurry and said, "There's a house for sale now," and we rushed, and that afternoon we bought the house.

Interviewer: [Laughs] Oh my god, [0:01:30] you didn't waste any time.

Respondent: No. That's how it happened.

Interviewer: And when did you know that you loved it?

Respondent: I don't know. I suppose first visiting Barker, and Willcocks is such a beautiful little street, you know, with a very wide sidewalks and, you know, near College Street, near restaurants, and so on, and I think it was just an immediate reaction.

- Interviewer:** So I suppose [0:02:00] that that's why you rushed and bought it, as soon as you learned about it.
- Respondent:** Yeah.
- Interviewer:** Yeah.
- Respondent:** For, I can tell you this, forty-two thousand dollars.
- Interviewer:** What do you think it would sell for today, that place?
- Respondent:** A million. Close to – no, maybe not. Eight, nine hundred thousand?
- Interviewer:** On Willcocks?
- Respondent:** Yeah. Well the big houses sell for over a million, but this was a smaller house. I would put it there.
- Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah. What was that street like at the time? Who lived on Willcocks?
- Respondent:** [0:02:30] At that time, it was quite mixed. There were academics, there were ex- or other – I'm not sure if ex- is the right word, Barker Fairley, an artist, and quite a scholar, and U of T professor. Bud Milnes was head of the German department at U of T, so there was quite a bit of that. Chuck Henley, who was a – I don't know if he was involved [0:03:00] with U of T – a psychiatrist. And then, not faculty. What do you call the houses? The housing, U of T housing?
- Interviewer:** You mean fraternity homes?
- Respondent:** Yes. Not fraternity. I can't think of the word.
- Interviewer:** Residences?
- Respondent:** Nope. There's a word for it. It'll come. But anyway, a lot of student housing, and they were awful. And people like Chuck Henley actually ran these houses like a rooming house too, and so we had a lot [0:03:30] of noise and student problems on the block. There

was still quite a few Eastern European families on the block, both sides.

Interviewer: So those are new immigrants.

Respondent: Well they had been new...

Interviewer: Not so new anymore.

Respondent: Not so new. [Laughter] Very – yeah. And quite a lot of those. So it was quite a mix, but it wasn't very – it wasn't, you know, fashionable, new development mix. It was just [0:04:00] at that point an easy commute – well not commute, an easy walk to U of T. It was a kind of very, a very good mix in those days.

Interviewer: Oh. Yeah, yeah. It was an easy walk to the University of Toronto.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: On the doorstep of the university.

Respondent: That's right.

Interviewer: So let's just digress for a minute.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was it like being a neighbour [0:04:30] of the University of Toronto?

Respondent: Well there were a lot of problems, I would say, of being a neighbour of the university in those days. The first obviously was because of the students who lived in the housing on Willcocks Street, and there were quite a lot of them, and they were very rowdy. I remember at one time, there was some at the corner house in the Chuck Henley house, and there were some further up the block, and they're trying to put their speakers out, you know, to play to each other. [0:05:00] It was very, very bad. It was really bad. So that was one problem.

Interviewer: That's a big one.

Respondent: A big one. And we were constantly going to the place that I can't remember that ran some of the student housing. It'll come to me. And the other problem really became one of the university territorial expansion wanting to use – develop the Robert Street playing field. That was a very big issue [0:05:30] when I came into the neighbourhood.

Interviewer: So what does that mean they wanted to expand?

Respondent: I can't remember the exact details, but there was – I think they wanted to build on it in those days.

Interviewer: Oh, so they wanted to put some structures on that.

Respondent: Yes, I think they were going to develop it in some ways, yes.

Interviewer: And is that something that the community...

Respondent: Community hated. They didn't want to lose the green space and the ability to share, you know, any facilities on that space with the university. It was a very big issue. Pierre Beekmans can probably talk to it better than [0:06:00] I can, but that was the main issue, and always the fear that they would cross Spadina, take over some housing. It was always a fear of the neighbours in those days.

Interviewer: So in that respect, the University of Toronto was not such a good neighbour.

Respondent: No, it wasn't a good neighbour at all. I think they learned a bit in the process, that you have to be more conciliatory with your neighbours, and they had less – then they started having less funds available to do all of this. Right now, I'm not [0:06:30] quite sure what their position is. They seem to be back in development, but I don't know.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: Yeah.

- Interviewer:** Yes. We have some issues with that.
- Respondent:** Yeah. With College Street and so on, yeah.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. So that's kind of an old story – what we're going through now, you're talking about was happening forty years ago.
- Respondent:** It would have happened – yeah – near the mid-'70s, yes. I think Pierre is a better person than me to tell you this because he was – I was president of the Residents' Association at some point in that period, [0:07:00] but I think Pierre was really more involved than I was.
- Interviewer:** Uh-huh. So you were an activist in this neighbourhood.
- Respondent:** At that period, I certainly was.
- Interviewer:** What was the Residents' Association called at that time?
- Respondent:** Sussex-Ulster Residents' Association.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. Uh-huh. And that got changed, I think, about...
- Respondent:** To Harbord Village. Yes.
- Interviewer:** Uh-huh.
- Respondent:** The other big issue in those early days, Rose could have spoken to it, was Doctor's Hospital and their development, which [0:07:30] I think was more ambitious than what we ended up with, with the Kensington Gardens. I think there was a much, much more ambitious development plan, and there was a lot of opposition to that, and that was another political issue of the time.
- Interviewer:** You're saying that this neighbourhood had to fight to keep it from being taken over by the university to preventing big high-rise...
- Respondent:** Big institutions. Yeah.
- Interviewer:** Yes. Yeah.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: And you were [0:08:00] one of the people who really....

Respondent: Well I was...

Interviewer: ...worked for all that.

Respondent: ...one of – you know, a small player in all of that. I'm not a player. Oh, I'm just trying to think of other issues. I don't know what the issues are now. I'd drop in and out. I don't go to the Harbord meetings. They drive me crazy. Some of the participants. You know, but if there's something that I really believe in, [0:08:30] I would jump right in.

Interviewer: Well and before I turned on the tape, you mentioned that you came to the neighbourhood just after the...

Respondent: Spadina Expressway.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: So you came at that – so that was another thing that this community took a very active...

Respondent: Yes. At that time, it was Allan – oh, the late Allan...

Interviewer: Powell?

Respondent: ...Powell who was the big activist behind it, yes.

Interviewer: Well we still have a lot of active people in this neighbourhood.

Respondent: Yes. Oh, absolutely. [0:09:00] Oh, you know, I think of other things that I was involved in in those reasonably early days. I mean and the other was the maze, the traffic maze.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: Which was quite interesting because we'd had accidents, traffic accidents, and there was a strong feeling we needed to protect particularly children on the street, so we put in a traffic maze. And there was a lot of dissention. It was kind of quite interesting, and this is my observation, that people like myself thought that **[0:09:30]** it was a wonderful idea, but a lot of the older immigrant families didn't, and I think it was partly because, you know, the American dream is the car. And if your car accessibility and driving is somehow affected, you know, you take it amiss. You resent it. So there was quite a lot of opposition. But we put the maze, and then it's worked.

Interviewer: Well I interviewed – about **[0:10:00]** six months ago I interviewed somebody who was living on Borden at that time south of Bloor with young children, and she said, "I want to thank Richard Gilbert." [Laughs] She was very grateful because they used to just whiz down her street. Yeah. So you were involved in that.

Respondent: I was very much involved.

Interviewer: Thank you. Thank you.

Respondent: I think President of the Residents' Association at that time. I think. Don't hold me to it, but it was one of the things that I was quite involved in at meetings and the discussions, and...

Interviewer: **[0:10:30]** So I think you may have...

Respondent: For car and against car is what it came down to.

Interviewer: Well it's, you know, some people might think of as against cars for safety and for people.

Respondent: Yes. But it wasn't quite viewed in the safety issue as much. There was certainly opposition. Anyway, we got it, and I don't think anybody complains any longer. Certainly the people who did are no longer in the neighbourhood anyway, you know? There's been a

fair – I would imagine – a fair [0:11:00] exodus. Do you want me to take it?

Interviewer: Whatever you like?

Respondent: Sure. And I was thinking back to those days, I remember going to a Residents' Association meeting and people were very – you know, there was a core group who were very, very active. But it basically was not a [0:11:30] very big organization. It was just really – and it's probably the same now – just a handful of people who were really dedicated to what was happening in the neighbourhood. I remember getting – I can't remember if it was a phone call or a – we didn't have email in those days, or it was either meeting – somebody said to me that they saw me walking around the streets looking in people's windows. And it was hard to explain that I do it because [0:12:00] I love the neighbourhood, and I love looking in people's windows to see, you know, what they're doing.

Interviewer: I feel the same way.

Respondent: Yeah?

Interviewer: I'm very grateful when people have the curtains open and the lights turned on at night.

Respondent: Right.

Interviewer: [Laughs] It's fun to look. Yeah.

Respondent: Yeah. But so I remember that, but...

Interviewer: But it sounds like an accusation.

Respondent: It was an accusation in those days. You know, again I'm sort of waffling a little bit. I'm just – as things come to my mind, I'm just talking. When we bought the house on Willcocks Street, I think we were the [0:12:30] first people in the area to be what was called in those days "white painters." People who did what – you can see in this house – take walls down and open up, and neighbours would walk around and come and peer in my windows to see what was

going on. Of course, you know, renovation has become huge in the area since, but I think we were one of the first.

Interviewer: Was that taken in a positive way? I mean what...

Respondent: Oh, I'm not sure if it was [0:13:00] positive or negative. It was just, "Look what they're doing."

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah. When you moved to this house...

Respondent: Right.

Interviewer: ...you're saying this one had already been done.

Respondent: Mm-hm.

Interviewer: In terms of architecture and changes that people have done to their homes, what do you see? And do you think it was done in a wise way, the kinds of changes that people have made to keep the nature of the [0:13:30] neighbourhood?

Respondent: I think the nature of the neighbourhood has been fairly well kept. You know, people are entitled to their own taste, and I know, you know, if you want to put angelstone or whatever brick on your house, it's your personal taste. But I think in general, people who have renovated or extended have kept the flavour. [0:14:00] I don't think of any examples, none come to my mind, where there's been some horrific change. I mean around the corner on Sussex, a huge, big house was built right next to a smaller house. It looks like a suburban house, but it's not a terrible, terrible, terrible eyesore. It's not right, but it's not an eyesore. So I think it's not bad.

Interviewer: I remember when it was going up, and my feeling [0:14:30] was similar to what you're saying, but they tried to keep it somewhat in the nature of the brick, and to...

Respondent: Yeah, and the shape. Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

- Respondent:** But no, I think, you know, we've done a fairly good job. I think the people who've bought into the neighbourhood do it because they like the neighbourhood and they like the flavour of it, and have the [0:15:00] sensibility to try and maintain what we've got. At least I'm hoping that's true.
- Interviewer:** [Laughs] You talked about liking the neighbourhood and people coming. What do you like about this neighbourhood?
- Respondent:** When I say what do I like about this neighbourhood, you know when you've lived here forty years, it's your neighbourhood. You don't think about liking it or not liking it. I like the location, I like the mix of people, I [0:15:30] like being able to walk to things like the movies, the museums, the selection of restaurants. I've been lucky in the friends I've made...
- Interviewer:** In the neighbourhood?
- Respondent:** ...in the neighbourhood. So yeah, you know, maybe if I was living in Scarborough it would be the same. It's just where you end up and how your life shapes out.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. Yeah. So when you bought the house on [0:16:00] Willcocks very rapidly forty years ago, you've never turned back.
- Respondent:** Oh no, no. And I've had no regrets. I can't image living anywhere else.
- Interviewer:** In terms of the population, you describe Willcocks, academic people, students, rowdy students...
- Respondent:** Yeah.
- Interviewer:** ...some immigrants who would come maybe a few decades earlier. What are the changes that you see in the neighbourhood in the forty years since you've moved here?
- Respondent:** I think in the forty years that I've lived here there's been [0:16:30] I think a lot of the Portuguese and Eastern European immigrants have left. I'm not sure what is left of those groups, but I imagine

very little. And there's been a huge influx of people back when I was forty years ago who are buying and renovating houses, and like to live here for the same reasons I do. So I think there's, you know, a much bigger – [0:17:00] you know, my phrase, "white painter" population now.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Mm-hm. And as you say, a lot of the Portuguese and Italian people have...

Respondent: Have gone. Yeah.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Respondent: And just there were more across the road from me when I moved here, and I think it's maybe one family left. I think there were three or four when I moved here twenty-whatever years ago.

Interviewer: You talked about the cars and making the maze to slow down the traffic. [0:17:30] What else can you say about the roads and transportation in this neighbourhood?

Respondent: I think we're very lucky in this neighbourhood to have very, very good transportation, a lot of opportunities to move around the city because we have the subway, the Bloor, and now we have the Spadina – now what do you call it? The University-Spadina line, so they're two [0:18:00] subway possibilities very close. We have the Spadina streetcar. So I think those are, you know, fantastic. You can't do better than that, and it's all, you know, very close by. And you even have Bathurst Street, which is not very far away, and there you have the Bathurst bus and streetcar. So we're very, very lucky with transportation. We have back lanes. I'm not sure [0:18:30] I'm pro or against. I don't want to get into that one. I certainly think putting a back lane on Bloor Street is the stupidest idea I've ever heard, but nobody's asked me. [Laughter] You know? It's a major east-west thoroughfare. People coming from the west side of the city use it, and they're not much – well many other choices for downtown, so you know, I'm not [0:19:00] anti-car in that respect.

Interviewer: I'm not either. I'm not. I use my bike, but I'm certainly not anti-car.

Respondent: Yeah. I'm not anti-car at all.

Interviewer: Yeah. I'm not.

Respondent: I think there's got to be a balance.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

Respondent: A logical balance.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah. When you lived on Willcocks and now here, what did you have immediately behind your house in terms of garden, patio?

Respondent: When I lived on Willcocks Street, I had a garden going back **[0:19:30]** to the back lane and a garage on it.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. And what did you have in your garden?

Respondent: In my garden I had at that time, there was some big maple trees that were quite – eventually quite rotten and had to come down, which was a pity.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And I had – I tried – I remembered right at the beginning planting some, you know, vegetables, but because of the trees it never worked, so I just had a pretty garden. I had a deck off **[0:20:00]** the back, and a pretty garden with tomatoes, and a dog who dug everything up.

Interviewer: [Laughs] If the squirrels and raccoons didn't get there first.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: [Laughs] And what do you have behind this home?

Respondent: Right now I have off my deck a very, very, very pretty garden, which I love.

Interviewer: Are you a gardener?

Respondent: No, I'm not a gardener. It's established now. I have very little to do. I put things in pots, and then I have a garage, which backs onto – not backs onto – which is on the back lane.

Interviewer: **[0:20:30]** Mm-hm. And your front? Both these homes, Willcocks and Major, are you a front porch user? And how have you seen these being used in your forty years here?

Respondent: I think in the earlier years here, the front porch was important to, again – I think again it was a sort of immigrant thing, or I'm not trying to be biased here, but it was, you know, **[0:21:00]** you sit out on the front and watch the street. I think where people rented out rooms and had nowhere to go, maybe they would use the front porch. I love my front porch. I even put a, you know, bench there that I could sit on it, but I find I don't use it as much as I thought I would. I like my back garden. It's very private and pretty, and I can read out there. So.

Interviewer: **[0:21:30]** But isn't that lovely that you live so – right in the heart. You're so central, and you can sit outside and it's quiet out.

Respondent: I always say to people that on a Saturday night I can sit in my back garden and I'm not aware of Bloor Street.

Interviewer: Isn't that remarkable?

Respondent: Which is remarkable, yes. The other big issue, by the way, that reminds me of is the Brunswick Tavern, which has been a huge issue in this neighbourhood from the day I arrived here, and the noise from the Brunswick Tavern, and the people spilling out. **[0:22:00]** It's still a problem. The patrons come and either walk home along Major Street, or come and get their cars on Major Street, and sometimes between two and three in the morning, there's a lot of rowdiness.

Interviewer: Is that weekends or during the week too?

Respondent: Usually weekends. I would say Friday and Saturday.

Interviewer: And all seasons? Or?

Respondent: Probably you hear it more in the summer because windows are open.

Interviewer: Right, right.

Respondent: I haven't been as aware of it this [0:22:30] winter, but I'm not sure if it's weather-related or what.

Interviewer: So you living on Major south of Bloor, you're affected by the Brunswick House.

Respondent: Totally. Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: Yes. It was terrible in the early days. There was music up in the – what was it? The Albert Hall upstairs and they would open the windows, and the fire escapes, and the noise was horrendous, and I would put a coat over my [0:23:00] nightclothes and go there and say, "Do something." It was really dreadful. And now without that, I think they're more responsible about noise, and I think betting is a nice quiet occupation. I'd be happy if they filled the whole place with off-track betting. But it's certainly better. Now I understand that the current lease is up for the people who are currently running it, so I don't know what's going to happen.

Interviewer: [0:23:30] You know, I don't know. I know that it's been such a big problem and it's quite disgusting and annoying, but I don't know anything about that. But nobody will miss those patrons if they leave our neighbourhood.

Respondent: No. Oh, I think they could make it into a community centre.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well I think just about anything would be better.

Respondent: Yeah. It'll always be a pub, and it'll always attract students.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah. That has certainly been a [0:24:00] thorn in the side of this neighbourhood.

Respondent: Yeah. Big. It has always been a big issue.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. Anything else that is noisy and annoying right here at Major and Bloor?

Respondent: Annoying to me personally, but this is – I'd been shouted down by all my neighbourhood. Sometimes we have musicians on the street corners, you know, with boom-boxes and I just find listening to somebody else's music an imposition. [0:24:30] But you know, it's music. It's better than other things.

Interviewer: Oh sure. And you're close enough to Bloor that you'll get that.

Respondent: Yes. Yeah. I sometimes think I would like to be maybe a half a block or a block further south, but it's not a major problem really.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

Respondent: I think the other thing I wanted to talk about were restaurants.

Interviewer: Yes, please go ahead.

Respondent: If I can. I think in the last, [0:25:00] you know, few years, Harbord Street has developed into restaurant row. It's changing again because there are places for sale, and so on, and it's beginning finally to take as a restaurant row. And we've got some, you know, grown up places to eat. For me, I think the big sadness is we don't have grown-up restaurants on Bloor Street. You know, there's the Country Style is the only Hungarian left. When I came here there were [0:25:30] lots of Hungarian restaurants, and now it's all, you know, student joints for ribs, or it's sushi, and nowhere where you can sit – or I can only think of one really – where you can sit with a white tablecloth and a nice atmosphere and have a grown-up meal. And I think it's because of the University of Toronto.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. So you feel in that respect, Bloor Street has deteriorated in terms of restaurants.

Respondent: Yes. Yeah, sure.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: In terms of restaurants, and in terms [0:26:00] of – and it even – I don't know if you remember, there was one called the Olivetti, which I did try. A nice Italian restaurant, and that didn't make it, you know? I'm not sure is Lakvino or whatever is going to make it either.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's good. Have you eaten there?

Respondent: It's very nice.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's very good. Yeah.

Respondent: But it's a huge space, and it's not quite in the right place for it, I don't think. It's not going to get the Tafel Musik dinner crowd. [0:26:30] It might get the Bloor Cinema crowd eventually, I don't know, but it's...

Interviewer: I know I ate there about a month ago. The food was delicious.

Respondent: It's very good.

Interviewer: And it was people of a certain age who were there. [Laughs]

Respondent: Oh, of course. Well we're looking for that kind of place, you know?

Interviewer: It's a quieter place.

Respondent: And then we have – we do have a couple of good Indian restaurants, which is a plus.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And we do have a good food select – a good buy-your-own food selection, if I can speak English again. You know, [0:27:00] the Metros – not the greatest supermarket, but it's there. Bloor Supersave across the road is terrific. They run a very good

business. We have Cobb's Bread, we have the Harbord Bakery. I think if you ask why I like the neighbourhood, those are – you know, that I could buy, you know, ten or twenty different kinds of bread within a ten-minute walk, it's a plus.

Interviewer: And you can walk to every one of those places.

Respondent: And I can walk to everywhere. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, yeah. When you came, you said there were different kind of [0:27:30] restaurants on Bloor. What about any kind of theatres?

Respondent: I'm not a theatre-goer. In terms of live theatre...

Interviewer: Or movies.

Respondent: Movies did change. There was a wonderful theatre on College Street when I lived on Willcocks Street running art movies, and sometimes double bills. It was fantastic, and I think that's now a paint shop or a computer shop. That was – that really was a terrific place. [0:28:00] Live theatre, you know, there is the Annex, whatever it's called, on Brunswick. I really don't pay attention to theatre, so that's not a good question for me. I love the Bloor Cinema. I miss the movie part of it, but I go quite often to the documentaries.

Interviewer: Yeah, I like it too.

Respondent: And I think they're doing very well.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Respondent: They told me they're doing very well, you know? Beyond their [0:28:30] expectation. Break-even expectation.

Interviewer: I'm delighted to hear.

Respondent: Yeah.

- Interviewer:** I also go to Doc Soup.
- Respondent:** I did the last one, and I just got a personal invitation to the current one for March the 7th, but I don't think I will go.
- Interviewer:** Mm-hm. Well I appreciate that Bloor Cinema very much too.
- Respondent:** Yeah. Yeah.
- Interviewer:** In the years since you've been here, in terms of heating the homes, have there been any interesting changes?
- Respondent:** I don't know. I've always had a furnace and heated my home.
- Interviewer:** Right.
- Respondent:** **[0:29:00]** I can't – I don't have a comment on that. I do know that there are people in the neighbourhood who are – what's it – frog power. You know, the soda-power, you know, people who are advocates in putting that into their houses, but I haven't gone that route.
- Interviewer:** The ethnic mix, I think you're saying, was quite different when you came here.
- Respondent:** Yes. I think the ethnic mix has changed. I think, as I said, there were **[0:29:30]** a lot more Eastern Europeans, Hungarians, Czechs, Portuguese, and Italians from Western Europe in the neighbourhood. I do think that's changed. What's interesting, I don't think there's been a huge Asian influx into this part of the neighbourhood. I can't speak, because I'm not a demograph person, but you know, that I don't see. And I imagine that that **[0:30:00]** is really a population group that's going north Toronto rather than downtown, but I don't know. I really can't speak to it.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. There were some people that I've interviewed, but I think that has probably diminished. Yeah. Yeah. You talked about Harbord Street, and all the – I think you called **[0:30:30]** adult restaurants?
- Respondent:** Adult. Grown-up. [Laughter] Grown-up restaurants.

Interviewer: Grown-up restaurants.

Respondent: Grown-up restaurants.

Interviewer: Anything else about Harbord that has interested you or caught your attention?

Respondent: Well Harbord sort of catches my attention because it's tried to be different things through the years. There was a time there were a few antique dealers tried to get going, and it never happened. Then there were restaurants that never happened, so it's really never had an identity, I think. It's just been, you know, **[0:31:00]** Harbord Street, you know? But as I say, within the last, you know, five or ten years, five probably, the restaurants seem to be taking hold – though Messis is changing hands.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: Momo is for sale.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: Tati is for sale.

Interviewer: Oh, I didn't know that.

Respondent: I'm told. Yes.

Interviewer: Oh.

Respondent: So there will be more **[0:31:30]** changes, and I'm not sure – and what I'm – don't know this for sure, but what I've heard is that both Tati and Momo's have a hard time making a go of it, but I don't know that for sure.

Interviewer: Well I spoke to Mohammad and he was saying that he's tired. You know, he renovated the building, and he made the business into what it...

- Respondent:** And a beautiful patio and all of that. Yeah.
- Interviewer:** ...and wonderful food. So my impression is he's doing okay, but I haven't discussed...
- Respondent:** **[0:32:00]** Well I've heard...
- Interviewer:** ...the business part.
- Respondent:** It was my – you know, people I've talked to said that he's having a hard time making a go of it with that restaurant.
- Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.
- Respondent:** And I heard this similarly about Tati, but I don't know. Yeah. This is gossip.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. [Laughs] I'm very sensitive to sound, so I have found Tati too noisy, so...
- Respondent:** Oh, I won't go to Tati if I can't sit up on the beautiful...
- Interviewer:** Yeah. It's a lovely patio.
- Respondent:** ...patio. But Chabichou, which is also owned by the Tati people but **[0:32:30]** in some sort of different combination apparently...
- Interviewer:** I think it's the girlfriend.
- Respondent:** ...will survive. Yes.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. That's right at the corner. I live just south of the Chabichou.
- Respondent:** Yeah. No, I go and shop there every now and then.
- Interviewer:** It's a lovely little place.
- Respondent:** The Harbord Bakery, of course, is the old lady or old gentleman, or whatever, grandfather of Harbord Street. It'll be interesting if Rafi and Susan ever move on, you know, what's going to happen to it.

- Interviewer:** Well it's not going to happen soon.
- Respondent:** No, for sure.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. Yeah. They're comfortable there. **[0:33:00]** The JCC, has that been a part of your life?
- Respondent:** I hate the JCC personally because I hate exercise [laughter], and I just don't like going there. I just don't like, you know, the Pilipino nannies picking up the little brats.
- Interviewer:** Oh.
- Respondent:** I just don't like the atmosphere there. This, I really maybe should be doing it off – I would not quote me on this. I would talk about the JCC separately, but I would prefer my...
- Interviewer:** Okay. So we can talk about it after.
- Respondent:** We can talk about it **[0:33:30]** after. If you want me to go back on the JCC, I think it's been great for the neighbourhood. I think I see all these people, friends, neighbours, going off there to exercise, to use the pool. I don't know to what extent they use it culturally. I really don't know.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. There are a few cultural programs.
- Respondent:** Yeah. I don't know how the neighbourhood uses, whether we use them as neighbours, or whether people come in.
- Interviewer:** Well there's certainly welcomes – I mean you don't have to be Jewish **[0:34:00]** to use it.
- Respondent:** No, I know that. Yeah.
- Interviewer:** Yeah.
- Respondent:** But no, I think it's been a – the rejuvenation has been good for the neighbourhood. It really has. I mean we could have had a worse

corner, you know? There are other, you know, things that were supposed to have happened around there that haven't happened like the Metro's going, that site is going to be redeveloped. But you know, with the sort of financial problems of the [0:34:30] last few years, development has slowed down, so I don't know if that's ever going to happen.

Interviewer: I don't know about that. Yeah. How about Kensington Market in relation to our neighbourhood?

Respondent: When I've – even before I came to live in this neighbourhood I would go to the Kensington Market, but it was the Jewish market...

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: ...when I came here. Then it's become – I don't know when – how many other markets it's become. Greek, and Portuguese, and I Don't know what it is now. It seems to be more [0:35:00] Latino now. And I love the market. I like walking down there. I like – you know, when I go for a walk, go and eat at El Trompo, and have some tacos, or I go and buy cheese or whatever, so I love the Kensington Market, but it's also changing. It is. It's like a more gentrified – and it'll be interesting again to see what the next transmogrification of it will be, but I think it is changing.

Interviewer: I'm grateful that it's not [0:35:30] changing drastically and quickly because when I first came to Toronto that's what happened to Yorkville.

Respondent: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Yorkville, I came from California and it was just like an extension of California, and then all of a sudden it was today's Yorkville. But it seemed to me I blinked and that changed. But Kensington is changing, but gradually.

Respondent: I agree that Kensington is changing, and the change is gradual, and it seems to be [0:36:00] in waves of ethnicity, if that's a way of expressing it. It was Jewish, it was Greek, it was Portuguese, it's whatever it is now. I think it's more Latino than anything else.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. And you still like to wander.

Respondent: Yeah. I'm big on Latino food. Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah. [Laughs] In terms of the livability and the security of this neighbourhood, I'd like you to talk about it today, but also [0:36:30] talk about what it's been like for the last four decades since you've been here.

Respondent: I don't think the livability issue has changed in forty years. It's a nice neighbourhood. It's made its changes, but the changes have not been for the worse; they've been probably for the best. I think we're reasonably secure. We've had slight waves of crime where cars have been broken into. [0:37:00] I think – I know in the forty years I've lived here, I was broken into once on Willcocks Street, and twice in this house.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Respondent: I think it's small drug-related break-ins, just looking for a quick – something to pick up to exchange for drugs. That seems to have improved in the last few years. The police did – we've had meetings with the police that Major Street did, and it [0:37:30] seems to be better. I don't have any great security fears, though I do have an alarm system.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. And you use it whenever you go out.

Respondent: And I use it. Yes.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. Animals, pets in the neighbourhood or in your home?

Respondent: When I first lived on Willcocks Street, I remember we went for a walk one night on Robert Street, and there was a kid giving away puppies. "Miss, Miss, Miss, do you want a puppy?" So I took a puppy home. [Laughter] [0:38:00] A really bad puppy. And she was my Jenny, and I had her for a long, long time until she died. She was about sixteen when she died.

Interviewer: Oh, she lived a long life. And she was naughty the whole time? Or did...

Respondent: Oh, she was a very bad dog. [Laughter] You know, she had, you know, other dogs she was friendly with in the neighbourhood, but others she would have killed.

Interviewer: What kind of dog was she?

Respondent: She was what I call a salad. Very mixed.

Interviewer: Oh. Uh-huh.

Respondent: We have [0:38:30] here on this block on Major Street, I know of at least three or four dogs. They're not problem dogs. I do know that in the past, I've had neighbours, Brunswick Street neighbours in particular, with dogs in the backyard who've left the dogs bark all day, you know? And that's really, really distressing. I mean that is – it hasn't happened recently, but it has happened.

Interviewer: Well very inconsiderate for everybody else.

Respondent: Yeah. Just throw the dog out [0:39:00] for the day and leave it.

Interviewer: And the dog is miserable, and...

Respondent: And it's not just miserable. Anytime somebody walks by it's a threat and they bark.

Interviewer: Yeah. Right. Yeah.

Respondent: Occasionally people leave dogs in their cars while they go shopping on Bloor Street. It's not a big problem really.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. So Jenny was your one naughty [laughs]...

Respondent: Yeah. No, I wouldn't do it again. When she died I was too upset. I would never do it again. It's too upsetting, yeah.

Interviewer: You became attached to her.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. [0:39:30] We do love our animals. When you and I spoke and you said, "Yes, I could come and meet you"...

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: ...is there anything that I didn't touch on that you had thought about that maybe we should talk about?

Respondent: No, not really because I wasn't quite sure what direction you were going to take with this, so I'm just blue-skying as we go.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And I just – I think what I didn't touch on, again, which is why I like the neighbourhood was the Chinese [0:40:00] restaurants going down Spadina.

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Respondent: And I love that as well. I think that's a great asset that we can go and have a, you know, nice Chinese meal along Spadina, and that's changed too, but it's...

Interviewer: In what way?

Respondent: Well what way it changed? The restaurants, some of them have come and gone. That's what I mean by change. But it still seems to be a Chinese row.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: And I hope that stays.

Interviewer: Me too. Me too. Well I think we've [0:40:30] pretty well covered the main topics that I was hoping to cover, and I've enjoyed listening to your stories, and I admire the activism that you...

Respondent: Well it was early activism. It hasn't stayed.

Interviewer: But it was at an important time.

Respondent: Yes. I think so. I think so. And I think Pierre Beekmans is the person you should be talking to about all of that.

Interviewer: Well you gave me his name and number...

Respondent: Yeah. For sure.

Interviewer: ...and he will hear from me.

Respondent: Yeah. And [0:41:00] Terry Filgate, who I gave you his number too, he moved here with me in '73, so he will have different observations to mine, I would imagine. And he's back. And he's back on Willcocks Street, so...

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: ...he can talk about pre-Willcocks and post-Willcocks because he's living there now.

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Respondent: And has dogs. And if you need help, if your group can't help you, I think he could help you record a phone call to Nan Culley, [0:41:30] if you don't have anybody else.

Interviewer: I'll ask around. Yeah.

Respondent: It would be a suggestion. Yeah.

Interviewer: Well Isme, thank you very, very much.

Respondent: Oh, it's nice meeting you finally.

[00:41:40]

[End of recording]

