



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK  
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

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**Interview with Joan Keenan**

**Interview Date:** September 16, 2005  
**Interviewer:** Pat Taffe Driscoll  
**Transcriber:** Elizabeth Merkle

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

**DRISCOLL:** This is Pat Taffe Driscoll interviewing Joan Swenson Keenan on September 16, 2005, around the block from Joan's home at 115 Sixth Street SE. She is in our living room at 122 Fifth Street SE in Washington, DC. She's a long time Capitol Hill resident and can start to tell us what her experience here has been.

**KEENAN:** I came to Washington in 1951 from my home in Massachusetts. I had just graduated from Smith College and my sister, Eleanor, who was a curator at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, had just been married and vacated her apartment, which was at 17<sup>th</sup> and S NW. So I moved here and my first job was with the DC public library. I had become interested in being a librarian, as an English major, and I interviewed in Philadelphia with the children's department of Philadelphia's free public library. They offered me, in 1951, a salary of \$1800 a year. I came to Washington and the DC public library offered me \$2100. And so with that and an apartment to move into, I decided to live in Washington.

I then lived in a house in Georgetown with a group of other young women, among who were some people who later became famous: Natalie Cornell who married William Rehnquist, who subsequently became Chief Justice of the United States, and a very interesting young woman from Japan who was a graduate student at Georgetown [University]. Her name in those days was Sadako Na Kamura, but she later went on to fame as the head of the United Nations Refugees. Her name in that case was Sadako Ogata. It was a very interesting experience living with a group of young women. We entertained and it was in this house that I met my husband, who also was living in Georgetown at that time with a group of young men. He was working on Capitol Hill at that time for Senator Toby of New Hampshire. In 1954, I decided to go to library school, so I spent a year in Pittsburgh at Carnegie Mellon Library School and came back. And in 1956 I was married to Frank Keenan. And at that point we moved to our first apartment which was on Capitol Hill. This was primarily because of the convenience. Frank worked on Capitol Hill and I was with the DC public library at that moment, at the Northeast Branch Library at Seventh and D NE.

We were married and we moved into our first apartment, which was 618 North Carolina Avenue [SE]. It was a brand new little apartment and across the street at that time—which is now the Natatorium—was a major fire department with a training for rescue. It had the tower that people climbed up, so they learned how to do whatever they needed to do to be firemen. And it was very noisy, and I remember my next door neighbor, who had lived there for many, many years, saying: "Not to worry dear, after a while you don't even hear the sirens." So we lived there ...

**DRISCOLL:** And was that true?

**KEENAN:** And that was definitely true. We got used to it. Then, we moved when we were about to have our first child to 705 North Carolina Avenue. A tiny little house, which has now become commercial—I think it's called The Village. It was next door to a pharmacy—drug store, and the pharmacist there was named Doc Williams. And it was very handy when you had a small child to live next door to a pharmacy. And upstairs was the office of Dr. McCauley, who at that time in 1959 was an elderly man, but at one time had been on the staff of Providence Hospital ...

It might be interesting to go back a little to my experiences as the junior children's librarian at Northeast Branch Library. It was a very, and still is, a very beautiful children's room on the second floor. And we had a regular weekly, I think as I remember, story hour. And it was the way we all had been taught in library school by the earliest level of the children's librarians that a story telling time was a magical time. And so we would line the children up around the charge-out desk and take them back away to a very small room which would be sort of semi-dark and then we lit a candle and the story would be told. And it was kind of a magical place because it was not in bright sun and the voice of the librarian telling a lovely story and the candle flickering was a wonderful experience for these children, probably none of whom had ever heard a story told before.

The librarian was—the children's librarian, whose assistant I was, was a very interesting woman who was particularly fond of baseball. And I have memories of her during the World Series bringing a radio in from home and secluding herself in a back office of an afternoon to listen to the Series, while I handled checking the books in and out.

Also in the Northeast Branch Library were the offices of the DC public library's bookmobile. And I went from Northeast Branch to Chevy Chase Branch, but then back again to be children's librarian on the bookmobile. And this also was a very interesting experience to me, not knowing Washington very well, because the bookmobile went all over town, including the far reaches of Southeast, East Capitol Street extended, and Northeast. And it was a wagon with a driver and generally two librarians. And children came to the library and lined up outside and returned their books and then the librarian had the fun of helping them find new books. The bookmobile has been out of service, I think, for many years, but it was a wonderful thing for neighborhoods which had no branch libraries. Since then, I think libraries have been built, I think, in all these places.

In 1958 and '59 I was children's librarian at the brand new Anacostia Branch of the DC public library, which was up the hill on Good Hope Road. At that time, remembering that this was '57-'58, the changes in the city really had begun. But Anacostia was still very much a white neighborhood, perhaps with some Latinos and then later the great changes came as the white flight proceeded. In 1959 our son, Tom, was

born. And that was when we lived at 705 North Carolina. As I mentioned the drug store was next door—which was very handy. And there was Doc McCauley, who at one time had had privileges at the old Providence Hospital. But it was my understanding that he had lost these privileges because of an alcohol problem. Around the corner from Doc William's drug store was a secondhand store. I can't remember its name, but I know that the woman who ran it was Pearl, Pearl and her brother. And as we were just really setting up a household and needing furniture, we bought a number of articles of furniture there, including a wonderful stroller, which could be converted into a high chair or squished down and made into a stroller.

And I took Tom around the neighborhood in this stroller. We met many interesting people on the street. At that time there were numbers of men who we would call "winos", I guess, who were always very friendly. They were white and we knew them by their first name. There was also a man who I think must have been a "punch drunk fighter". He had, in his decline, he had several cauliflower ears and was always very fond of talking with the baby and would often take out a quarter and put it on the tray of Tom's stroller. Things are very different now at that corner of Seventh Street and North Carolina.

**DRISCOLL:** So you have real memories of all these places that are still there, that have changed.

**KEENAN:** Have changed greatly. There was one of these "winos", for lack of a better term, who liked to direct traffic. And he would get out in the traffic there by Eastern Market and tell people which way to go, as if he were a policeman. Perhaps, he had had more experience of this earlier in his life. In 1962 we moved to the house in which we have now lived for 43 years, at 115 Sixth Street SE. It was a beautiful big house and we were about to have a second child and it was a whole new adventure for us. The house needed much restoration, so while were living at North Carolina Avenue the house was completely refitted with new windows and new electricity and a new kitchen and all—it had been a rooming house, broken up into three or four small sections. So we put it together. And it had a lovely back yard, heavily planted.

When I look at it 43 years later, it's amazing to think of all the things that were in that back yard. There was a sour cherry tree, two magnolias, a grape vine, a lilac, and many roses, iris ... it was extraordinary. Whoever had planted them had never thought that they would grow, so as they grew one by one, we had to take things out. But we had many summers of wonderful sour cherries, as all our neighbors will remember coming to help pick them in cherry time. And we gave the birds the top of the tree.

**DRISCOLL:** I remember those cherries and making cherry pies.

**KEENAN:** Well the problem with that was that I didn't know how to make pie crust and Pat Driscoll, a very old friend, is a wonderful pie crust maker. So she would make the pie crust for two pies and we would all have cherry pies.

**DRISCOLL:** A good time.

**KEENAN:** I guess the next thing to talk about was the early 60s when we now had two children. I, of course, had retired from working at the library, but with time on my hands I became involved in things in the community. One of the things I remember best is collecting directly from the donors for what was called "United Givers Fund". Volunteers would be given a list of former donors and then we would call on them and pick up their donation. And at that time, Alan [our second son] was perhaps two, so I would often take him in the stroller and we would go and call on our neighbors, mostly of who were elderly ladies. And there were several that I remember very clearly for their association with history.

At the corner of Second and C, just past St. Peter's church, was a woman who was then in her 80s who was the granddaughter of Montgomery Meigs and she would talk about him when I would stop, although I would never stop for very long. Another woman of historic family lived on Fifth Street at the corner of Seward Square. And she told me she was the last direct descendant of John Jay. She, again, was in her 80s. And the house across from St. Mark's Church, where, presently, Margot Kelly lives, the low house with the circular driveway, also a very old woman, I think she must have been in her 90s, lived there and made an annual contribution. I don't remember her name, but I know she was a pillar of St. Peter's church.

**DRISCOLL:** St. Peter's, not St. Mark's?

**KEENAN:** No, St. Peter's.

**DRISCOLL:** Hmm.

**KEENAN:** And, as I said, I would take Alan off and in the stroller. We have a photograph that United Givers Fund used in its brochure or something of me standing with Alan in the stroller. It would be fun to try to find that.

**DRISCOLL:** Oh, that would be wonderful.

**KEENAN:** Somewhere it is in my archives. I don't know where.

**DRISCOLL:** If you do find it, we'd be happy to archive it for you with the Kiplinger Collection of Washington ...

**KEENAN:** That would be fun. I'll look. And then later on in the early 60s, we became interested in the Montessori Method and the schools which had been originated by Maria Montessori in Italy. Our neighbors, the Driscolls, had friends who founded the St. Aidan Montessori School and we, for one year, crossed town with them to take our four and five year old sons to St. Aidan. But then a number of families in the neighborhood decided that we would like to have our own Montessori school and so we founded the Capitol Hill Montessori School as a parent cooperative. This school continued for many years after our children were in high school even, and was finally the—what do you call them—the things the children worked with, the rods for counting and the things for zippering and buttoning ...

**DRISCOLL:** Apparatus?

**KEENAN:** Apparatus—that's the right word—were finally absorbed into the DC public school at Watkins. But it was a wonderful experience for us, for our children, and also a wonderful way to get to know neighbors who were like ourselves, in their late 20s, early 30s, and interested in making a school on Capitol Hill and staying here. Our son, Tom, was born in 1959, so in 1966, I guess, '65, he was ready for regular school and Brent School was the school that we were zoned for. So Tom started at Brent and stayed there through the six years.

In the early years, perhaps even before he started, I became involved in setting up the school library at Brent. At that time it was in the old Victorian building, the library was in the basement and I was really pretty much starting from scratch. We had book sales, and I cataloged the books and we had parent volunteers who helped to circulate the books. We were then involved, at least in the advisory level, of the building of the new Brent School, which now, in 2005, doesn't look as new as it did then. We were, none of us, really delighted with the design of the school. I remember being told by people in the DC public school, official people, that they build it in this shape because they expected the neighborhood to expand so and so many children clamoring to get into Brent that they might even add a third story—which, as we know now, didn't happen.

**DRISCOLL:** Not hardly.

**KEENAN:** I was concerned at that time about the location of the library, which is on the first floor facing North Carolina Avenue with windows on three sides, which, for a library, when you consider book stacks and so on, is not really very practical. But in the 60s there were dreams of community use of a school building and I think that was one of things that determined the location of the library, with the idea that it had an outdoor entrance—straight to the street—which would make it available for people to come in and use it at night and so on.

**DRISCOLL:** I don't think I ever realized that.

**KEENAN:** But it really was not a smart design if you're thinking about books.

**DRISCOLL:** Bookshelves.

**KEENAN:** But they did have a professional librarian in there, and so I functioned as a volunteer and helped to raise money for books and so on. In the spring of 1974, the librarian went on maternity leave and I filled in for her, while Alan at that point was in fourth grade. Tom had graduated from Brent and had gone on to St. Anselm's Abbey School. At that time, parents from St. Peter's school came over and talked to me because they had never had a professional librarian and they were considering doing so.

And so in the fall of 1974, I began at St. Peter's school as the librarian and stayed there for 25 years, retiring in 1999. And that was a wonderful experience. I am not a Catholic and I had really never had any experience with a Catholic school at all. When I started in 1974, almost all the faculty was nuns, the Sisters of the Holy Cross, who had been there since the school was founded. Slowly, they retired or left so that now we look at St. Peter's—it is entirely a lay faculty with a lay principal.

It was a wonderful experience for me and I built that library from very little. One of the things I was able to do because of my experience with the DC public library when they closed what was then called the School's Division, which was located at the old Southwest branch library where monthly boxes of books were sent to all the public schools. The School's Division closed and those books were available and I was able, through old friends in the DC library system, to get several thousand boxes of books. [Laughs] Boxes—not thousands of boxes—several boxes and thousands of books—which were then able to catalog for the St. Peter's library.

**DRISCOLL:** I didn't realize that. I knew that you had gotten books for the library, but I didn't know how.

**KEENAN:** Yeah. Well that was how. And then over the years, I was also able to increase the books collection because I was a reviewer for a children's—childhood education magazine and I was among the book reviewers and was able to keep the books which I had reviewed which I then cataloged and put on the shelves at St. Peter's. So by the time I left we had a collection of between eight and nine thousand books—which is very, very good for a school of 250 kids.

**DRISCOLL:** Yeah, that's quite an accomplishment.

**KEENAN:** Well, it was fun.

**DRISCOLL:** And I know you had book sales.

**KEENAN:** We did have book sales; we had several kinds of book sales. One of our—the parents devised—what became a very successful annual event, when I bought a whole lot of books for St. Peter’s—which I knew we needed and then parents would come in, we would have a sort of a party and parents would choose a book or two which they would purchase and donate to the library and we had a calligrapher there who would inscribe a book plate with the child’s name. And this was very successful for a number of years.

**DRISCOLL:** That sounds like, like library work has infused your work with children in the neighborhood.

**KEENAN:** Well, I guess so. I didn’t do anywhere near as much story telling as I had done in the DC public library, but I did an enormous amount of reading aloud to children and helping children select books. Now that things have changed so much in the world of what is called “information sciences”, I think perhaps librarians have much less time for individual advising—working with a child to help them find books and then find more books of the same kind and so on. Now, of course, we have computers which are wonderful and which help children access all sorts of information, but the one-on-one librarian with child and book—I’m afraid is perhaps a thing of the past.

**DRISCOLL:** I think that’s a real loss. I know computers are great and do wonderful things, but I don’t think there’s anything quite as great, for my taste, as a book—an open book and a child engaged in reading and—whether it’s learning or just having the fun of a story and letting their fantasy take wing. That’s a loss right there ...

**KEENAN:** I developed a club, which we call the Newberry Medal Book Club ...

**DRISCOLL:** Ah

**KEENAN:** Where the children read books which had won the annual Newberry Medal, which is given every year for the best children’s book by an American author. And children read these books and then had what we called a “story conference” with me and there were questions that I would ask them about the content of the story, but also to get them thinking a little more beyond the text. And this was a lot of fun for me and the kids really loved it. And the Newberry Medal Book Club each year would go on a trip as a reward for the end of the year and we went to hear story tellers, we went to the Kennedy Center, we did various things which were fun. And I think sometimes now I meet a former student, a student from many years ago, perhaps on the subway, perhaps at Eastern Market and they would say, “Oh, Mrs.

Keenan, how I remember the Newberry Medal Book Club.” So it was a great satisfaction for me and obviously it meant something to the kids.

**DRISCOLL:** What a legacy.

**KEENAN:** Well, it was fun.

**DRISCOLL:** I think you also, at one point, introduced a group of children to the Scandinavian St. Lucia’s ...

**KEENAN:** Oh yes, that was one of the things we did very late at the years I was there. Barbara Ochmanek became the new librarian and she and I worked together for several years—which was fun for me and, I think, helpful for her. And the first year—first year and a half—we fully computerized the library. And Barbara was always very interested in sort of special events and doing special things for the kids. And at Christmas, it turns both Barbara and I have Norwegian heritage and Swedish, for me, and the 13<sup>th</sup> of December is the saint’s day of St. Lucy or, as she’s called in Sweden, St. Lucia. And the Swedes have a very beautiful ceremony, the morning—early, early morning of Lucia Day, the oldest daughter of the family dons a long white gown and a red sash and wears a crown of candles and delivers a special sweet biscuit or bun to all the members of the family.

So, twice, I think, at St. Peter’s, Barbara and I put together a Lucia ceremony for the rest of the school and we had—it just happened there was a girl who was tall and blonde and possibly had a little Scandinavian background and Barbara borrowed the Lucia crown from a Lutheran church and we had Lucia and I think four other—an eighth grader was Lucia and four seventh graders dressed in long white gowns with a red sash and sprigs of holly and Lucia wore the crown and we had all the children assembled in the meeting room in the first floor of St. Peter’s school and it was dark and we played the Lucia song, the Santa Lucia, the Neapolitan boatman song and Lucia and her four helpers came in and it was very, very beautiful in the darkness with the lighted crown, of course, no longer real candles—electric candles, but very beautiful and that was fun.

**DRISCOLL:** I remember hearing kids talk about it as it being a special treat.

**KEENAN:** Lucia had several African-American attendants, so it was a rather different one than that would be in Sweden. It was a black and white Lucia. It was very, very nice and the kids loved it.

**DRISCOLL:** What have you noticed in all these years of working with kids and books in terms of racial interests and helping kids learn to read and to enjoy literature?

**KEENAN:** I didn't really find any difference in black and white kids—everybody loved books. I think as they get older, perhaps when they get in seventh and eighth grade—seventh and eighth grade [thoughtfully], kids are no longer as enthusiastic about reading as they were when they were little because there are so many other things to do. There's choir, various sports teams and I think maybe black and white kids, at this point, start taking slightly different paths, but in the early years everybody loves books and everybody loves stories.

**DRISCOLL:** That's good to hear.

**KEENAN:** One thing we haven't really talked about is changes in our little neighborhood, just on Sixth Street. When we moved in, in 1962, we were the youngest people on the block. Now at 76 and 81, we are very definitely the oldest. But when we came, most of the houses were still owned by people who had either worked at the Navy Yard or still did or were widows of firemen, policemen, so on. I think of maybe, oh I don't know how many houses are on the block, maybe 20 houses on the block, more than half were elderly women living in the houses they had lived in for all the years at least of their marriage. And now, of course, that's changed greatly. There was also the corner store on the southeast corner of Sixth and A, which was known as the Sanitary Market [Laughs], which of course was pretty funny because it was really not very sanitary. And it was among really the only place in our neighborhood, which was looted at the time of the riots because I think a lot of African-Americans remembered not being treated properly by the elderly man who was the owner of the store.

**DRISCOLL:** That's really interesting. I don't know whether you remember for half a year we had Professor John Crow living with us from Oxford or Cambridge, came through a friend at the Shakespeare library and stayed with us for a year. And he used to go over to the "Sanitary," the Sanitary as you would call it, to pick up milk or whatever he wanted. But there was never really anything positive about it, it was convenient, but a useful—a very utilitarian kind of thing. And that's so in contrast with the "Bill's store" which we really used. I don't think I ever went to the Sanitary Market, we went up Fifth Street to what the ...

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

**DRISCOLL:** ... I was just saying that we never went to the Sanitary Market, but we went to the "Bill's Store". It wasn't really a Bill Store, but that was where the black family across the street could run up their bill and pay it at the beginning of the month when the checks came in. And so the children across the

way—that was a comfortable store for them to be in and they weren't damaged at all at the time of the riots.

**KEENAN:** What we remember about the Bill's Store especially is that that's where all the little boys, the three Driscoll boys and the two Keenan boys, would go to buy baseball cards—bubblegum and the cards that came with them. Perhaps this would be a time to talk about our memories of the awful riots after the death of Martin Luther King. At that point our older son, Tom, and several of the Driscoll boys were at Brent school. For those who might remember, it was a Friday and things were happening downtown; Hecht's was—the windows were being broken and so on as the African-American community just rose up. And our children were at Brent school which was south of Pennsylvania [Avenue SE].

**DRISCOLL:** Steve [her son] at this point had gone on to St. Peter's—he had transferred to St. Peter's.

**KEENAN:** So it was three little boys at Brent. They were on the opposite side of Pennsylvania Ave, which, by early afternoon, was a stream of cars all leaving the city going out—going home to Maryland. And the street lights were not being paid attention to, so the traffic never stopped. And we, mothers—a number of mothers, probably me with Alan in a stroller, went down to our side of Pennsylvania—the north, to try to bring our children home safely. And we remember that there was an aide at Brent whose last name was Beattie, Mrs. Beattie, and she showed utmost concern for the white children who needed to get across the street and she sent some black children with them, sort of as escorts. And I really can't remember how we stopped the traffic, but somehow we got the children across to the north side of Pennsylvania so that we could bring them home.

And we have other memories—memories of that time, living as we did on Sixth Street; we lived on a direct route for everyone going to H Street, which was at that time the big commercial avenue for Capitol Hill and for the black people who lived here. And there were enormous numbers of cars—it was a nonstop stream of cars all afternoon and evening on the way to H Street. Many of those buildings, I'm sure most of those stores probably, had white ownership, and the black community erupted they went to H Street to vent their anger. And we were really very frightened. I remember that Frank came home from his job at the House of Representatives and we sat on the floor with the little boys and played Monopoly. And they of course were not very old, but old enough to enjoy a game and it took all our minds off what was going on outside. At that point we could see the smoke and we could smell the fire coming from H Street. And Frank stayed up all night in the living room watching and being prepared in case anything should happen to our house. Fortunately, nothing did. None of the residences in our neighborhood were damaged.

**DRISCOLL:** And I remember driving up, it was a month after my mother had died, and we went to early Mass at St. Peter's—the Month's Mind Mass [ed: a Catholic Mass of remembrance a month after a death]. And then the next Saturday morning, drove up to see how our friends, the Schulders, had fared, who had moved from North Carolina Avenue near Garfield Park up to Ninth Street off Constitution NE. And when we got in front of their house, we saw a lot of the bricks in the sidewalk going out directly—not the sidewalk going past the house, but the one, the little one, going out to the street—the bricks were all moved and topsy-turvy. And we thought “Oh my!” and were quite worried. We rang the bell and they said no, they were perfectly fine; their next door neighbors, who were black, had invited them to come and stay with them and they had written a little sign saying these were good people. And they put it on the front of Schulner's door and the Schulders stayed home and were perfectly safe and the loose bricks out front were because their kids had been playing with little matchbox toys and building roads and things. So it was a time of a lot of worry and great kindness on the part of many black people for their white neighbors and vice versa. Just like that Mrs. Beattie stopping Stephen on the way home. Because she remembered him from when he had been at Brent and knew he would be a responsible kid for helping take kids home. She had him come back and forth several times.

**KEENAN:** Well it was an interesting time. Our children, of course, being particularly little boys, were very interested in all sorts of machinery and anything that had to do with something on wheels that moved. And very shortly, perhaps by Saturday, there were troops all over Capitol Hill and there were tanks and there were all sorts of scary things that were meant, of course, to protect us. But the little boys thought they were wonderful, so that was—we walked down and examined all these tanks and things.

**DRISCOLL:** Yeah, and the bivouac—the Marines, I guess, were bivouacked in Garfield Park and the tents and all were there. But, you know—I know it was supposed to make us feel safer, but I remember walking them over to a music class at the Presbyterian Church at Fourth and Pennsylvania and there were little soldiers, young soldiers, with their bayonets out—standing four to a block at intervals, protecting us as we went by and it really didn't make us feel safer, it was pretty scary to see soldiers on the street in Washington.

**KEENAN:** It was, it was.

**DRISCOLL:** But, I think they handled things as well as they could, I think. And not shooting the looters I think was a good idea, but was it Walter Washington ...?

**KEENAN:** Probably, yes.

**DRISCOLL:** ... who gave, who was the mayor then, who gave that order. And I think that helped. I think people were selective about which stores they broke into. Certainly on Pennsylvania Avenue. Apart from the Bike Shop, which was, I guess, fair game. But there were hardware stores that weren't bothered and there were hardware stores that were, and from my recollection, the hardware store that was hardest hit was the one where the black men working there were the more knowledgeable people if you needed to ask for how to fix this, or what to do. But they were not allowed to ring up your purchase. Thank God that's past.

**KEENAN:** Indeed, indeed. Perhaps, we should talk more also about the Montessori School, because it was really, a rather unusual thing. As we remember there were about ten families who, as I mentioned, some of whom had gone to St. Aidan and we decided we would like to have a school here for our children. It required a great deal of organizing. We—and, of course, expense. We had to find location, and over the first five or six or seven years, we had classes in different churches on Capitol Hill. There were several at the Lutheran Church, there was—not at St. Peter's, but at Christ Church on G Street and also, I remember, the big church, the big white church on Massachusetts Avenue [NE] at Ninth or Tenth. What I remember about that church was not so much the Montessori school was the fact that it had a bowling alley, I think. Maybe I just made that up, but I don't think so.

**DRISCOLL:** Ha ha, I don't remember.

**KEENAN:** At any rate, we had to find locations, we had to find teachers, and we had to order the very specific Montessori teaching apparatus. And it came from Holland. This was—we were affiliated with the American Montessori Society and it was very strict—you had to have all these particular things and you had to use them in a particular way for teaching small children learning how to learn—as Montessori said. So, we actually ran the school, we had a head mistress, there was a committee which hired teachers and it was rather an extraordinary undertaking for a group of people who were parents, but not professional educators. And for our children and for many of the children of other families, I think it was a wonderful success, a beginning ... an approach to learning which was a wonderful way to begin and which has carried over in their lives as enthusiastic students, award-winning students and a number of whom who have gone on to be college professors. And also, I think we've got some doctors, we have a number of graduates of the Capitol Hill Montessori School who have done really, really good things with their lives and I think, in my mind, a great deal has to do with their preparation in Montessori and its whole approach to learning how to learn. For our children, the Montessori pre-school was very, very successful.

**DRISCOLL:** And I think it was successful for at least some of the scholarship kids that we made a part of the school from the beginning.

**KEENAN:** This was a very unusual thing really for us to do. We, with the advice of, I guess what, Friendship House? Pastors of churches, so on, we were able to locate several families with children of preschool age who would have been unable to have any such learning.

**DRISCOLL:** And this was before Head Start?

**KEENAN:** This was before Head Start, and most of these children were black and they were integrated into the school and into the school family, which is something that I think those of us who were involved in this are very proud. The bad thing, or the unfortunate thing, is that we have lost these children, so that we have no idea how they grew up beyond the age of five, which would have been the last time that we saw them.

**DRISCOLL:** I think the only one I know of is the Henriquez little girl who I think did well.

**KEENAN:** Oh yes, I think so.

**DRISCOLL:** And went to college and has done well. But I haven't heard of most of the other, of any of the families, other than ours. You might want to say something, a bit about what it was like, what it seemed to be like for kids growing up on the Hill. My recollection is that there wasn't an awful lot; there weren't a lot of kids on the Hill at that point. There would never have been enough to have Soccer on the Hill because there weren't enough kids. We would load up kids, your two sons and our three and Carlton Biggs and a couple of the other kids, and I'd take the kids down to—in the back of the station wagon and I'd—before seatbelts—and we'd go down and play baseball at the Tidal Basin because there were a couple of fields down there and there weren't good places to play here and there weren't enough kids ...

**KEENAN:** There were all kinds of pick-up soccer games, including, I remember, ones which ended not so happily on the lawn of St. Mark's Church when someone broke a window and that was a misfortune. And I can't remember how it all came out, whether the boys had to collect money to pay for the window or what. But, you know, it was an unwise thing to do, to play ball next to all those stained glass windows. But there wasn't that much open space. In the early days, what's now called Providence Park, was not an open space, they still hadn't cleared it. So there weren't many places for kids to play ball or soccer or anything. They played on the Library of Congress lawn, but again they would play just so long and then they would be thrown out. We could take on our sleds and go down Capitol Hill, that was wonderful and that's a very sad thing now when you look at the Capitol surrounded by bollards and soldiers with AK-47s and everything else. Imagine the days when we could walk freely and collect cones from the trees and the kids could take their sleds down the hill.

**DRISCOLL:** Even in those days, I remember, the kids knew which—they got to know—which day a particular cop was on which side of the Capitol—the good sledding side. Because he would never let them slide down; all the other cops were fine, but this one wasn't ...

**KEENAN:** So they learned to avoid him.

**DRISCOLL:** They avoided him, but every other day they could go and sled there, which was an important thing to learn about the city.

**KEENAN:** Well I think as our children look back, our sons particularly, have thanked us for the opportunity to grow up in the heart of a city. They, at Brent, were in a very small white minority. They had black friends, they had black friends who came to our birthday parties, and it was a very comfortable arrangement. I don't think anyone was ever frightened and then when they went on to St. Anselm's, which is at 14<sup>th</sup> and South Dakota NE, they encountered, for the first time, boys from the suburbs. And one of our sons said to me that he was so glad at that time that he felt comfortable in the city because these boys did not. They were afraid to stand at the bus stop and they were not particularly complimentary about people who lived in the city. And our sons have thanked us specifically for the experience of growing up here.

**DRISCOLL:** Ours have done the same. I remember Stephen when he was a student at St. Anselm's being asked to give money when he transferred buses near Union Station, near the old Post Office. And his response was "No, I worked to earn that money, that's my money." And then went on to talk with the kids who were asking for the money about what kind of jobs they did to earn money and got into a conversation and there were kids who were transferring at the same bus stop that were coming in from Virginia and those kids just turned over their money easily and didn't engage or weren't able to engage the kids in conversation. So he realizes and has commented on a number of times how valuable it was to grow up in what we call now a multi-cultural society where people were respected for who they were and the color didn't matter all that much. And as adults they now have friends from a variety of races and work with people from across many cultures.

**KEENAN:** So it was a good beginning.

**DRISCOLL:** A good beginning. They learned how to learn not only academically, but with people. It was a good thing.

**KEENAN:** Perhaps I should say a little bit also about the various families who were our friends on the Hill. Many people, of course, worked at Capitol Hill. My husband, Frank Keenan, worked for many years on the House side; he was an administrative assistant for 15 years to Congresswoman Florence Dwyer

from New Jersey. He worked very long hours, he set his own hours, which was nice, and went in at about 11 and worked till eight or nine. So we had late dinners, the little boys ate first and then we ate later. His employer was—depended a great deal on him and was very demanding, and often would call us late in the evening—call him—to discuss something. He wrote all her newsletters, all her speeches and managed the office and found it a very satisfying experience. He had started out, as I mentioned at the beginning of this interview, with Senator Toby of New Hampshire, then he was with Senator John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky, and then went to the House side where he stayed until he retired. But it was—we saw other couples informally. We spent a lot of time having late dinners at one another's houses. And one thing we haven't mentioned at all was the babysitting co-op, which was ...

**DRISCOLL:** But also about Frank, wasn't he involved somehow in getting television ...

**KEENAN:** Yeah, he was very active with a particular committee to televise the proceedings of the House of Representatives. And that was interesting for him. Just to put in a little plug, Washingtonian Magazine at one point in the 1960s, I don't remember exactly, had a feature on what was called the Five Best Men in Congress and his photograph was on the front page of the Washingtonian as one of the five—the Five Best Men were actually administrative assistants, not the Congress people themselves, and it was five best men I think and one woman. So this was a tribute to all the work he did and was—caused a great deal of excitement and pleasure at the house.

**DRISCOLL:** And we were very proud to know him.

**KEENAN:** But there were a lot of important people around.

**DRISCOLL:** I think the social connections were strong then and I think part of that was due to the babysitting co-op because it got people with children of similar years or at least some of their children of similar years, to know each other better. I know we were the 24<sup>th</sup> couple to join way back when. And by the time we left, there were 200 members and it was splitting into two divisions ...

**KEENAN:** It was a very good arrangement because no money was exchanged. I got ...

**DRISCOLL:** Monopoly money [Laughs]

**KEENAN:** Scrip or whatever, so there would be someone who takes turns being secretary for the month and if you needed a babysitter on Tuesday night, you would call and then they would look on the list for people who were available and that person would come to your house and stay with your children while you went out, and then she or whoever it was, she or he, had earned a certain amount of scrip so that someone else, not necessarily you, someone else in the babysitting co-op could come and stay with her

children. So it was a very good arrangement for people who didn't have very much money. And also, there weren't teenagers in the neighborhood, there weren't people who were available to baby-sit as a commercial arrangement. So it worked out very well, I don't know if it just got too unwieldy, I don't think it still operates. But in those days it was a great help.

**DRISCOLL:** And it was a really good way to get to know other people. When you're home fairly isolated with small children, apart from walking or before kids were in school it was even more important I think.

**KEENAN:** I don't remember very much of taking children to play in the park, which is what people do now. You look at any of the parks—they're full of moms and kids—which is wonderful, but I don't remember that we did that.

**DRISCOLL:** I don't either.

**KEENAN:** I don't know why, I guess because they were in preschool, I guess because they started at Montessori at young ages, so they just weren't out.

**DRISCOLL:** That's interesting.

**KEENAN:** They did have bikes, of course, as they grew older and went everywhere on their bikes.

**DRISCOLL:** I remember all of our kids and us going up to pick glass out of a place that Marguerite Kelly was trying to organize on Fourth Street and an adjacent part of Peabody playground, somebody's back yard which abutted and which I noticed the other day has all sorts of fancy play ground equipment in it. I remember a number of people that Marguerite had gathered to pick out glass, so that kids could have a safe small contained place to play. So neighborhood people were doing things themselves.

**KEENAN:** Yes. Something I just remember, we were talking about this, we used to take large groups of kids to do things like pick strawberries and people had station wagons, and again you would just load all the kids and we went out, I remember, to Glenn Dale where there were wonderful strawberries and we went somewhere else. And I remember also, once these large numbers of kids in the back, we got back to Capitol Hill and discovered we had left a child at Glenn Dale and went out and there he was still playing happily in the sandbox. That was Michael Swaim as I remember.

**DRISCOLL:** Oh wow! [Laughs]

**KEENAN:** So these were the sorts of things we did with our kids for fun. When we were—at the point all of us—many of us with professional degrees, but all of us at that point, stay-at-home mothers.

**DRISCOLL:** That's a good way to put it.

**KEENAN:** Perhaps we should talk a little bit about our memories of city politics? When we began, of course, it was the three commissioner system and then in the 60s, well I guess early 70s perhaps after Martin Luther King's death, when a lot of people were galvanized politically. And I remember when Marion Barry came to town and he spoke—he was invited to several Capitol Hill homes and we got together and met him and were very impressed by his vision for the city and his sort of spurring people on to become more involved in local politics. He was very different in the 1970s than he is now in 2005. And I guess, power corrupts, but in those days it was very refreshing to see someone black and well spoken with a dream for the city.

**DRISCOLL:** Yes, he got started on achieving.

**KEENAN:** And we were also involved with the beginnings of the City Council and the School Board. One thing I hadn't thought of in years until this minute was that I had been recommended by someone to be on the School Board. And the person who made the decisions, and I think perhaps it was a judge, said "No" because I should be a mother and stay home with my children.

**DRISCOLL:** Ugh! Oh that's outrageous!

**KEENAN:** Well, that's the way things were.

**DRISCOLL:** That's the way things were, but what a loss.

**KEENAN:** So you know, it saved me a lot of headaches, but it is kind of funny. I also helped organize a group of League Women Voters on the Hill. That was in the 1970s, I think, or the end of the 60s. We had a very active Capitol Hill unit of the League, which then I think slowly fell apart because people like myself did go back to work professionally and didn't have the time we had as stay-at-home mothers. But that also was a very interesting experience.

**DRISCOLL:** I remember we took photographs of different places on the Hill, I think maybe to document housing or something?

**KEENAN:** I don't remember. I remember picketing the Penn Theater when it was on its way down and was showing porn and we got out there with our children and pushed our strollers up and down in front of the Penn. I think all we did was hasten its demise. But I think we might even have some photographs of that somewhere.

**DRISCOLL:** Oh, that would be wonderful! That would be great if you do.

**KEENAN:** Yeah, so that was political life on Capitol Hill among those of us who lived here.

**DRISCOLL:** And then the big political things. The presidents and the parades and the ...

**KEENAN:** And the, all the marches we remember when our husbands went and marched with Martin Luther King.

**DRISCOLL:** And I stayed home with nine million kids in my backyard, so everybody else could go because I had just had a baby recently.

**KEENAN:** Well I remember I stayed home too. I don't think mothers were particularly encouraged to go.

**DRISCOLL:** Were you home?

**KEENAN:** I was here in your back yard with all of our children ...

**DRISCOLL:** With all those kids.

**KEENAN:** ... while our husbands went and marched.

**DRISCOLL:** And while the man several doors down—it was a hot a day and I got out a galvanized wash tub and there were black kids and white kids splashing in the water and he got on his back porch and yelled at us. Do you remember that?

**KEENAN:** Yes, I do, I do.

**DRISCOLL:** It was just ...

**KEENAN:** Thank goodness times have changed.

**DRISCOLL:** Indeed, indeed.

**KEENAN:** And then there were all the demonstrations against the Vietnam War. And I remember that demonstrators sort of gathered at St. Mark's and our boys at that time were old enough to have bikes and they put red, white and blue crepe paper around the spokes of their bikes or whatever and we went up and encouraged the marchers and then, of course, we've forgotten to talk about the Poor People's Campaign.

**DRISCOLL:** Oh, yes, which was important.

**KEENAN:** Which was very important and that was at the time of Martin Luther King's death, it was 1968, when he organized many, many poor people, primarily I think from the South to come and there

was a tent encampment on the Mall. But a number of those families also stayed with our families on Capitol Hill in our house.

**DRISCOLL:** In a pre-planning meeting about a month or six weeks before the big Poor People's March, there was a planning session and that's when people stayed in everybody's houses.

**KEENAN:** We had two ladies from South Carolina, one of whom I think had possibly never been out of her home place before, and what I remember about her is that she was elderly and she smoked a corn cob pipe. But all along we were involved in trying to do good things I think. Of course, the Poor People's Campaign ended in disaster, poor ...

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

TAPE 2/SIDE 1

**DRISCOLL:** The thing is ready to go again.

**KEENAN:** Well, we've got done a lot of talking about Capitol Hill as we remember it from the 1950s. It is has been for us and our families a wonderful place to live. Not only an incredibly convenient location with my husband working on the Hill and me at St. Peter's School and before that at local libraries, but friendships and the mixture of kinds of people, we—in a way—are sad to see that there are no longer children on our block, but we also look to see how far to the East people have restored houses and how many children there are there and we hope that those families will be inspired, if that's the right word, to do what we did, to put their children into public schools and be involved in life of the neighborhood. It's been a wonderful life and I'm glad that it was here.

**DRISCOLL:** I agree ... wholeheartedly. Thank you Joan.

**KEENAN:** You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW