



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK  
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

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**Interview with Steve and Nicky Cymrot**

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

**DEUTSCH:** This is Stephanie Deutsch on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010, and I'm with Nicky and Steve, at their house on A Street SE. Why don't we start with you, Nicky, and just tell me a little bit about where you grew up.

**N. CYMROT:** Well, my father was in the Air Force and I grew up all over. I was born in Alexandria, Louisiana, moved to Alexandria, Virginia, and then went to Germany for three years when I was between the ages of two and five and a half, something like that. Went back to Texas where my mother's family was from, also my father's family, but he didn't have any more of his family. Then we went to Japan for several years, came back to Texas. Oh, and lived in Las Vegas, Nevada, somewhere in there. I went to school in Switzerland in the eighth grade, went back to San Angelo, Texas, for high school, and then went to Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, for college. And then after that in 1966 moved to Washington, D.C., where we are now.

**DEUTSCH:** Well, we're obviously going to hear more about that. Steve, how about you? Where did you grow up?

**S. CYMROT:** Mine was a lot easier. I grew up in Brooklyn. And I stayed in Brooklyn and I lived in Brooklyn.

**DEUTSCH:** Which part of Brooklyn?

**S. CYMROT:** First in Bay Ridge and then in Flatbush.

**DEUTSCH:** And, what brought you to Washington?

**S. CYMROT:** Nicky.

**DEUTSCH:** Nicky?

**S. CYMROT:** Yeah, we ... Well, I was in high school, and I was in Washington in high school in 1958 and '59, working as a page in the House of Representatives.

**DEUTSCH:** What representative were you working for?

**S. CYMROT:** New York pooled its patronage, so I was in Abraham Multer's district but Gene Keogh, of Keogh Plan, was in charge of all the New York patronage.

**DEUTSCH:** What does that mean? I mean, were you connected, somehow?

**S. CYMROT:** New York, to take advantage of better jobs, had very few cheaper jobs. They didn't have pages and doorkeepers and policemen and elevator operators, but instead they took their share of the money, and hired more senior people. Of which I was not one. [Laughs]

**DEUTSCH:** Yeah, so you were a page. So you came to DC.

**S. CYMROT:** Came to DC, in '58 when I was 14. No, 15. And after a day or so at the Willard I was dumped on Capitol Hill.

**DEUTSCH:** You had to find your own place to live?

**S. CYMROT:** I think my mother was still here when we found a rooming house at 10 Third Street NE, the home of Dr. and Mrs. Binden, who rented out rooms. And there was a pay phone under the stairs whose number was Lincoln 4-8888. And why I remember that I don't know.

**DEUTSCH:** Did they generally have pages?

**S. CYMROT:** They did, the biggest page home was a boarding house at Fifth and A NE, Mrs. Smith's house, and a lot of people stayed there. This was before the Page School—the page dormitories—and it was before the Page School. Our Page School met on the top floor of the Library of Congress.

**DEUTSCH:** Oh, how fun. Did you have to ...

**S. CYMROT:** The first one [Jefferson Building], yeah the old one. And met at 6:30 in the morning. Not so good. And if—usually it was the Senate—if they went in session earlier, then the Senate pages left. And school was through by 9:30, and we all went to work. I wouldn't say it was the most academically rigorous school, but we had fun.

**DEUTSCH:** And you learned something about government?

**S. CYMROT:** Learned about government in the pre-cynical days. It seemed like a wonderful place to be. And most of them seemed like wonderful people.

**DEUTSCH:** Any important things happen while you were in Congress?

**S. CYMROT:** Probably.[Laughs]

**DEUTSCH:** Any important things that you remember?

**S. CYMROT:** Very little. No, I don't. I remember trying to explain to my younger brother what was going on, and how we had to know all 435 members. He was totally unimpressed by that. So I told him, "We have to know them from behind." [Laughs] That didn't seem to impress him, either.

**DEUTSCH:** You really had to know them all by sight?

**S. CYMROT:** By sight, so that when they said, "Hey you," or "Call my office," you would know which office to call. A House member then was Robert Byrd of West Virginia, and this was pre-Senate days. There are various idiosyncrasies that I don't remember.

**DEUTSCH:** But overall, it sounds like it was fun.

**S. CYMROT:** It was fun. There were four of us who generally had dinner every evening, either at Mike Palm's, I think it was Mike Palm's, over on Pennsylvania Avenue, when it was still one block over. Most of Pennsylvania Avenue, including Trover, started in the 200 block of Independence. And when that was torn down for the next Library of Congress building [ed: Madison Building], they all moved up one block. So that included Peter Wallison who was later my law school roommate, and Bob Bauman [Robert Bauman, R-MD] who after his difficulties leaving the House, went on down to Florida, where he is now.

**DEUTSCH:** So, two years?

**S. CYMROT:** A year and a half. I arrived in middle of my junior year. Congress, I don't think, went back in session until January of the following year, so they allowed senior pages to come down in September to have a complete school year. And I have no idea—oh, yes we did. After that, after school, I worked in the House folding room, wrapping books. Agriculture.

**DEUTSCH:** Folding room?

**S. CYMROT:** That's what it was called, it was wrapping agriculture yearbooks to be sent out by the various members. I don't even know if they still make those, but that was good.

**DEUTSCH:** What did you do for fun?

**S. CYMROT:** No idea. I have no idea what we did.

**DEUTSCH:** Did you go downtown at all? Did you go to the movies? Did you hang out?

**S. CYMROT:** I don't think so. I think there were some social events out at Coolidge High School that we went to. But other than that, I have no recollection. I'm either repressing things or absolutely nothing happened.

**DEUTSCH:** When they come to you, we can always come back to them.

**S. CYMROT:** I mean, that's the things I'm willing to repeat, so ...

**DEUTSCH:** Okay, so you did Page School, you were a page, for a year and a half. I know where you went to college.

**S. CYMROT:** Well, so did you. I went to Brown for four years in the days before it took you five or six years to go through college.

**DEUTSCH:** And before Brown was a cool place to go.

**S. CYMROT:** Yeah. I remember Brown became cool when the U.S. News and World Report annual listed it as the most social college in the country.

**DEUTSCH:** And when all grades and requirements were removed.

**S. CYMROT:** Were they?

**DEUTSCH:** Uh-huh. In 1969; it was the year I graduated.

**S. CYMROT:** Well, I graduated in '63, when we still had requirements.

**DEUTSCH:** Yeah, back when men were men. Okay.

**S. CYMROT:** And before Pembroke and Brown officially merged.

**DEUTSCH:** Right. So how did you meet Nicky; how did the two of you meet?

**S. CYMROT:** Well, I was at law school and Nicky was at Wellesley. And we met on a blind date for Nicky's junior prom. A friend of mine didn't know how to drive, so whenever he needed to get out there he would offer me a blind date if I would drive the car. That worked pretty well, and I think at the time neither one of us was interested in the other one. I won't tell that story. But we got together and spent the remaining years of school more or less together.

**DEUTSCH:** Yes. Nicky, do you want to add anything to that?

**N. CYMROT:** No, that's accurate. Neither one of us wanted to go for this blind date, and we did it just to be nice to our friends, and that was the end of the story.

**DEUTSCH:** And tomorrow is your 43<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary?

**S. CYMROT:** Forty-third? A year after we finished school, we were married. Nicky had come down to Washington to work for Senator Yarborough [Ralph Yarborough, D-TX].

**DEUTSCH:** [to Nicky] So you were the trailblazer to Washington?

**S. CYMROT:** Yep. At the time I was teaching school, and I was teaching in Pearl River, New York, commuting to Washington on the weekends. And we were married that summer and I didn't have any particular reason to be anywhere, so I came down here and taught in Falls Church for a year. And then we were married that summer in San Angelo, in the old family house.

**DEUTSCH:** And, so where were you living when you were working here?

**N. CYMROT:** I lived on Sixth Street NE, right by Constitution Avenue, with a group of college classmates, actually. There were six of us in the house there.

**DEUTSCH:** Everybody working on the Hill?

**N. CYMROT:** Yes, well, no, some were in some agencies, I think. All political science majors, I think. And then after Steve and I were married we rented a house at 411 Constitution Avenue, I think it was, NE.

**S. CYMROT:** 413.

**N. CYMROT:** 413 Constitution Avenue NE.

**DEUTSCH:** Right across the street from the Kellys. [Tom and Marguerite Kelly]

**N. CYMROT:** Yes. Right.

**S. CYMROT:** Whom we did not know at the time.

**N. CYMROT:** No. And then after a year there, we bought the house that we're sitting in right now.

**DEUTSCH:** So you bought this house in ...

**N. CYMROT:** '68. 1968.

**DEUTSCH:** And was there ever any question in your mind that this was the neighborhood that you wanted to live in? Sound like there wasn't.

**S. CYMROT:** Well, there wasn't, except in 1968 we were sitting in our house [on Constitution Avenue] when the riots began. We looked out the window and there were Jeeps with armed soldiers in them. At

the time we had a contract to buy a house on Seward Square, with Wynfield Sealander as the broker. We called him up from Virginia where we were hiding out, and told him that perhaps we would forget the contract. But then ...

**DEUTSCH:** That was before you bought this one.

**S. CYMROT:** Then a few months later we jumped into the extraordinary price of \$49,000, which was a real splurge, because houses at that time were basically selling for 26-5, for the smaller model. And we've been here since then. When we came to Capitol Hill it was obviously a very different place, and in 1968 Margot Kelly, at 300 A Street, invited us to come to an election eve party. We were a block and a half away. So we drove—to her house, because we weren't sure it would be safe to walk. [Chuckles]

**DEUTSCH:** Well, that does tell you something about changes in the neighborhood.

**S. CYMROT:** [Laughs]

**N. CYMROT:** I think we overreacted. I don't think there was that danger. We were just new to the neighborhood and didn't know.

**S. CYMROT:** Well, the Hill basically ended at Seventh Street. What was considered the Hill didn't go much past Seventh Street.

**N. CYMROT:** Well, that was our perception of it.

**DEUTSCH:** So you bought this house. Was it in good condition? A lot of work needed to be done?

**N. CYMROT:** Yes. No, it didn't have a lot that had to be done. We did take the unfinished basement and put an apartment down there, for income. And we took out the radiators and put in central heating and air conditioning system. And that's about all we did at that time. Then later on, gee, that was a long time later, we added a little bit on to the back of the house, enclosed a couple of porches, upstairs and down, and made our kitchen a little bit bigger.

**DEUTSCH:** So what are you doing now, professionally? You're in this house. Are you still working, Nicky?

**N. CYMROT:** Yes. I worked until 1971, I guess. Senator Yarborough was defeated by Lloyd Bentsen, so I left the Senate and we went into, we decided to manufacture clothes. The last several years I had been working in the Senate I had started making big, bright neckties which were all the rage at that time.

**DEUTSCH:** Wide neckties.

**N. CYMROT:** Wide, brightly-patterned neckties. And I sold them, to lots of people in our offices and all around, and then I got a salesman, one of the, someone who worked for Senator Yarborough, a young man, I think he was a page, decided he would sell the neckties, so he'd package them up, and he wandered all over the Capitol and sold the neckties. And the next thing I know, he was operating on one of the elevators in the Senate Office Building and he would hang the neckties on the railing of the elevator and sell them there. [Laughs]

**DEUTSCH:** Did you have a name?

**N. CYMROT:** Nicky Original. And they then—

**S. CYMROT:** Who was it that caught the ties in there?

**N. CYMROT:** Oh, one of the senators, I think, said he thought “Maybe, maybe, that wasn't quite the right thing to do, to be selling the neckties in the elevator.” And then, also we used to have over in the Senate what they called the robo-rooms, down in the basement where they had the automatic typewriters that would spit out letters? And then also the equipment that would simulate the autograph, the signature, of the senator? Basically it was a bunch of machines clattering away. And so my salesman would hang the ties down there, in that room. That became the shop for selling the ties.

**DEUTSCH:** Did you actually make any money on these ties?

**N. CYMROT:** Well, when I left the Senate, we went into this pretty full time, and we started selling to stores and expanded the line to scarves and skirts and dresses. And we operated that for four or five years.

**DEUTSCH:** Really? Are there any Nicky Originals still around?

**S. CYMROT:** Ties.

**N. CYMROT:** Ties and scarves. But I don't have any of the clothes. Some people do. They tell me they still have them.

**S. CYMROT:** Paul [son] was married in a Nicky Original tie.

**DEUTSCH:** Good. I like that.

**S. CYMROT:** The one thing left out about Senator Yarborough who was a real Southern gentleman. And he did everything that was proper. And from time to time the phone would ring about 5:30 or 6, and he would say, “This is Senator Yarborough calling. Would it be okay if Mrs. Cymrot worked a little late tonight?” At me. I never told Nicky about that until many years later.



**N. CYMROT:** [Laughs] I never knew that was happening. I was horrified.

**S. CYMROT:** And I would say, “Yeah, you can have her for a while.” [Laughs]

**N. CYMROT:** Well, the thing that was so funny about that story was that before I married Steve it was just routine that we’d work until 7 or 8 at night, every night. And the senator did the same thing, until 10 or 11, twelve or one o’clock at night. So he thought he was elected for 24 hours a day and so was everyone else. So I had no idea that he was making these phone calls.

**DEUTSCH:** Well, that is a—that does kind of say something about the time. I doubt if that happens any more. So Steve, what were you doing during the Nicky Originals period?

**S. CYMROT:** I was doing some delivering, some selling, all of which was right up my alley. The first year I taught school in Falls Church. But I was mostly hanging out with friends.

**N. CYMROT:** Well, you were pretending you were going to be interviewing to get a job in the legal profession since you had just come out of law school, but you decided you’d go into a real estate office just for a little while, in the meantime. And you went to work for Millicent Chatel real estate office over on Pennsylvania Avenue in the 200 block. And where you worked with Margot Kelly, Jewel Ochiltree,

**S. CYMROT:** From whom we bought our house.

**DEUTSCH:** Will you spell that?

**S. CYMROT:** J-E-W-E-L O-C-H-I-L-T-R-E-E.

**N. CYMROT:** And Phyllis Jane Young was there at the end, and then Steve just kept doing that. And every once in a while the ladies over in the office would say, “What are you doing, Steve? Why aren’t you going out and getting a legal job?” And they would get busy and call their friends and ask them to interview him. I think you had two or three interviews, actually?

**S. CYMROT:** Only two.

**N. CYMROT:** Each time, Steve came home and said “Oh, my gosh, what if they offer me a job? Wouldn’t that be awful?” So that was the end of the legal career.

**DEUTSCH:** So you sort of liked being part of the community? It sounds like.

**S. CYMROT:** I’m not sure how much we were part of it, but the community certainly was better than working.

**DEUTSCH:** So were you selling houses? Were you doing real estate?

**S. CYMROT:** I was selling houses. I think the first, perhaps the only, house I sold was to Mary Treadwell, who was a former wife of Marion Barry. Little house on A Street SE, for \$25,000, or something. And then once I was showing property on Seward Square to a woman who just couldn't make up her mind. It was four apartments for \$51,000 or something. And I said, "Look, this is a really great job [i.e., deal]. If you don't call by noon tomorrow I'm going to buy it myself." And she didn't and I did. Or we did.

**DEUTSCH:** Was that your first?

**S. CYMROT:** That was our first. And generally in those days we were doing it with law school classmates who were partners in the deal, since we didn't have any money. And then that gradually grew to bigger buildings.

**DEUTSCH:** That's so interesting And so your first building was?

**N. CYMROT:** 506 Seward Square.

**DEUTSCH:** Do you still own it?

**S. CYMROT:** No. Our best properties are the ones that we sold.

**DEUTSCH:** So you started buying properties.

**S. CYMROT:** We did.

**DEUTSCH:** And turning them around, or renting them out?

**S. CYMROT:** Well, mostly renting.

**N. CYMROT:** We tried to—well, we did restore a number of them. We did buy them and restore them and sell them. Several, not too many. But we were not successful at that. We learned how to renovate houses. And so for that reason it was a great experience. But in the end we started buying apartments, smaller and then larger apartment buildings. And as time went on, we disposed of all the others, and just kept the apartment buildings and have operated those all these years.

**DEUTSCH:** What do you mean, "not successful"?

**N. CYMROT:** Didn't make any money. Well, it was a lot of work, and it was a huge learning experience, but we were not particularly successful in buying things and renovating them. And we didn't really enjoy

the process. We never bought anything with anybody living in it and get them to leave and then do it. We only bought things that were ...

**DEUTSCH:** vacant?

**N. CYMROT:** Yeah. So we did that two or three times and decided that wasn't what we wanted to do.

**S. CYMROT:** We built two new houses from scratch. That was the time Carter was president and our loan was two points above prime, when prime was seven, and by the time the house was finished, the prime was 19 ½, so we were spending a lot of money just keeping that alive.

**N. CYMROT:** That was precarious. But we did it.

**DEUTSCH:** Where were the two houses that you built?

**N. CYMROT:** The 200 block of E Street NE, next door to the Republican Club, or the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, the building that's at Second Street there.

**S. CYMROT:** When we sold it we took a condo in Alexandria in trade and some other weird things, but it was just a matter of getting out from under the mortgage.

**DEUTSCH:** Uh-huh. So you started buying apartment buildings and managing them.

**N. CYMROT:** Oh yes.

**S. CYMROT:** At one point we owned the corner building that Frager's Paint Store is now in.

**DEUTSCH:** Uh-huh.

**S. CYMROT:** And we owned the warehouse that now houses Cesar Chavez School, on 12<sup>th</sup> Street SE.

**DEUTSCH:** And at what point did you buy your office on East Capitol Street?

**N. CYMROT:** 1970—um, I've forgotten. Paul had a birthday party over there. Paul was born in 1974, so we probably bought that in '75 or '76. And that was part of a big conglomeration—an estate—that had five or six other properties in it. So it was kind of complicated. It went through court and then we purchased the two of those.

**S. CYMROT:** In one of those was a TV repair shop and we hired Mr. Moody, who was a trash collector, whatever, and we asked him to clean out what was a basement full of televisions that had been abandoned, or whatever. And we said, "Be very careful with them. These, you have to be careful." And he said, "Yes, sir!" And he went up and tossed the television into the back of the truck.

**N. CYMROT:** Of course, they explode when you do that.

**S. CYMROT:** Yeah, they exploded. And after they did four or five of them we just left. And when we got back there was glass all over the street. But ...

**N. CYMROT:** And the other building was a, had been a, steam dry cleaner, steam laundry, I'm sorry.

**S. CYMROT:** For 70 years?

**N. CYMROT:** Yes. Long, long time. And I believe that there was a tailor part of it as well. Because someone came to visit us years later and said her father had done business there. So there was a lot of big, heavy equipment that had to come out of that one—had to get hauled out.

**S. CYMROT:** At one point we had three successive pediatricians in there.

**DEUTSCH:** I'm very familiar with that part of the story. Yes. Dr. Mier opened the year I had my first child.

**S. CYMROT:** Rich Mier.

**DEUTSCH:** So I trotted over there to interview him and decided he'd be fine. I think he was younger than I was. [Laughs]

**S. CYMROT:** Yep, I think he still is. [Laughs] And then he was followed by the ever-popular Sno White. And then Ricardo Kleiner who stayed there for a number of years.

**DEUTSCH:** Loved them all. Okay, so now you have baby Paul, and baby Helen.

**S. CYMROT:** Helen came three years later.

**DEUTSCH:** And so when they went to school, did you start to get involved in schools?

**N. CYMROT:** Oh, yes, the usual, the usual. At the time that we had our children, we were in the Brent School district here in this house, and many, many of our neighbors were—well, what small children there were, I would say there were probably not so many—just because of the demographics. By then a lot of older people owned these houses around here. But many children, families sent their children to Brent and it was very popular. And Peabody was just getting a lot of attention, and had a dynamic principal, Veola Jackson, who was encouraging and inviting people in the community to bring their children there, and we had neighbors who were very much in favor of it and had their children there. This was Lori and David Garrison, who still live around the corner. And they told us all about Peabody and said “Oh, you must come here.” So we did that. And then one thing led to another and for many, many

years we were involved with Peabody and then when it became part of the Cluster School we were there at the beginning of that.

**DEUTSCH:** So your children did not go to Brent?

**N. CYMROT:** No, never went to Brent. They went to Peabody instead.

**DEUTSCH:** And so were you on the PTA? Was there a PTA at the time?

**N. CYMROT:** Oh, yes. I was the president of the PTA at the time that all the consideration about forming the cluster started, and when Hobson Middle School was started.

**DEUTSCH:** And what was the thinking behind that—the cluster?

**N. CYMROT:** I think the thinking was that the kind of instruction and kind of involvement that was going on at Peabody, as those kids got older, then those kids were going to—they couldn't accommodate very many classes at Peabody, so, the idea was, "Well let's operate a middle school, too, so that the children can go from Peabody and into a middle school." And they put the middle school at Watkins Elementary School, on the second floor. And at that time, Watkins was operating as a separate school, and had nothing to do with the second floor Hobson. So that went on for a few years. And Paul went over there. I guess he was there in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades. And at seventh grade, he then left and went to the Field School. And so the thinking was that if there could be a continuum for the kids to go in, that more families would take the plunge of putting their kids in the public school, because it was a new idea for lots of people around here.

**DEUTSCH:** Was it somewhat successful, do you think?

**N. CYMROT:** Oh...

**S. CYMROT:** Oh, school member—Bob Boyd was the school [Board] member, and the original plan was for it to be Peabody and what is now Stuart-Hobson, and Peabody would go through fourth grade and Stuart-Hobson would go five through eight. And Veola Jackson's idea was that there would be a great deal of interaction between those two schools. Eighth graders would come and help the younger kids. I would guess that at the eleventh hour that Watkins was included as a third school. And we didn't think that that was a proper thing to do.

**DEUTSCH:** Why?

**S. CYMROT:** Too complicated, too many people, it lost what the original purpose was. The distance was too much. The ability for interaction.

**DEUTSCH:** Well, you also then had two elementary schools.

**S. CYMROT:** Well ... it was. And it did get more complicated in terms of logistics. And then another element came in. Actually, we didn't get involved in the original founding of the middle school. That had started. We were mostly involved when the opportunity arose to use what is now Hobson School. Hobson was a junior high school. No, Stuart. We were Hobson Middle School and then it was Stuart. The Stuart Junior High School. The school system decided to close Stuart Junior High, and to let the Stuart-Hobson Middle School move into there. So we were— our last year there, and I was president of the PTA—was the year that all of the logistical issues of having one program go into a building, supplanting another program, was going through vetting, and hearings, and community meetings, and ...

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

**N. CYMROT:** (continuing) ... those community processes that we've now seen happen a number of times since we've lived here so long. And it was hard to be in the middle of that. But the result was that the Stuart-Hobson program did move over into this big lovely building and the Watkins Elementary School became part of the cluster school. And in the end Peabody became an early childhood center only, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, and for a while first grades were there, and then they moved those over to Watkins. So they've had a pretty long history now of running this cluster.

**DEUTSCH:** And I think you could probably say it's been pretty successful.

**N. CYMROT:** Oh, I would, I would. It has. It has given many families an option that they've been very happy to have.

**S. CYMROT:** Few families at that time would even go to the public schools, and those who did, would last two-three years, and by third grade they were all moving out to Virginia.

**N. CYMROT:** Or at least putting their children into schools outside of public schools. So an awful lot of our time was spent proselytizing, I guess you'd call it, and trying to encourage our friends to leave their kids in the school. And many did, many more did not. But that's been a process and I think now you see a very great demand on the part of the community to go to not only the cluster school but a number of other schools in the community.

**S. CYMROT:** If you were to make a list of the biggest changes on Capitol Hill in the last 40 years, it's possible that the biggest one was measured by the number of strollers that you see on the street right now. And the number that are being pushed by fathers. You never saw that 40 years ago. And you saw fewer

people, and a lot of the mothers who were staying were working full-time or part-time. It was help that was ...

**N. CYMROT:** That's true. We became involved with the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop when our children were little, and at that time, when our children were little, it was the moms who were at home with the children and they'd bring the kids over for various programs. And then there was a long period of time when there were nannies doing this. And all of a sudden the Arts Workshop realized that things had changed. The mothers and fathers were not available to bring their children. So that's when the Arts Workshop started an after-school program that became very attractive to families. Because families that needed day care or something to have the kids do after school.

**DEUTSCH:** Like the van, after school. I don't know if they still do that.

**N. CYMROT:** They do, they do.

**S. CYMROT:** Same van, I think.

**N. CYMROT:** Actually not. They have a fancy new van. Oh, yes, one or two of them. We bought one of those vans. One of the early vans. They needed a van, so Steve and I noticed on the classified ads that there was a silent auction for some vans that had finished being used for van pools at the Department of Transportation or somewhere, and so we bid on them, and John Distad went down and looked at them for us, and he said, "Well, yeah, they run, they'll be OK." Because John Distad always took care of the equipment for the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop. Probably still does. Well, this was a little better than what they had. But as it would happen, we were successful. We bought two vans. We didn't mean to do that.

**DEUTSCH:** You didn't read the fine print?

**N. CYMROT:** Well, we put bids in on both of them and we got them, so then we didn't know what to do with the second one, and decided to sell it. But it didn't have any license plate on it, so I had to show it to people back in an alley. And they could only drive it up and down the alley. Well, it worked. We sold it to someone.

**DEUTSCH:** The babysitting coop? Were you a part of that?

**N. CYMROT:** No, no, we didn't have to do that. My father lived with us. Papa lived here from before the children were born until he died at the age of 96 ½. Papa was the babysitter for Paul and Helen. I had a few other babysitters but only one-time stands. The children didn't like it when anyone else was here with them.

**DEUTSCH:** They were lucky.

**N. CYMROT:** But, no, the babysitting coop was a wonderful institution, but I can't talk about that. We didn't use it.

**DEUTSCH:** Well, I didn't either. I'll have to talk to someone else about that.

**S. CYMROT:** One of the things that happened at that point, with Papa as a baby sitter or maybe even before that, Lois Kauffman's son, was hired by us to clean basements in some of the buildings for which we were paying him \$6 an hour. And then he'd come babysit in the evening, for which we paid him \$2 an hour. And it seemed as though there was something out of balance there, but ...

**DEUTSCH:** Although I remember when that was quite a generous rate, \$2 an hour.

**S. CYMROT:** Oh yeah, big spenders.

**DEUTSCH:** CHAMPS. When did CHAMPS become an idea, or what was the genesis of that?

**S. CYMROT:** There was a meeting at Tunnicliff's to talk about a direction that the businesses on the Hill would take and shortly thereafter ...

**DEUTSCH:** Who were the players at the meeting?

**S. CYMROT:** At that meeting there were 25-30 people.

**DEUTSCH:** Who organized it?

**S. CYMROT:** Keith Fagon, I believe, called the meeting. The city was trying to put together a business organization and we decided that we didn't want to be part of something the city was doing and that we ought to just do it ourselves. I think that people around the table in the early days—although, if you asked people if they were there, the table would have had 40 or 50 people around it. Drew Scallan was there,

**N. CYMROT:** Jean-Keith Fagon ...

**S. CYMROT:** Jack Mahoney, Don Denton, I think George Didden was there. Was he? Maybe not.

**N. CYMROT:** Probably.

**S. CYMROT:** Maybe five or six people. The original name for it was going to be the Capitol Hill Merchants and Professional Association, but we were afraid that acronym would become CHUMPS. And that didn't work very well. So CHAMPS was almost born at that point. We decided that we weren't going to be a volunteer organization. We wouldn't get started until we could hire somebody, and decided that 40



people paying \$200 each, when we reached that, we would open our doors. First check as usual, was written by Barbara Held. We went from ...

**DEUTSCH:** And what year are we now? Late 70s?

**S. CYMROT:** Early 70s, mid-70s? Well, it's about 25 years old now.

**N. CYMROT:** I think probably '85. Something like that.

**S. CYMROT:** Yeah. And now it has grown to ...

**DEUTSCH:** So Barbara Held was your first ...

**S. CYMROT:** Yeah, Barbara Held, whenever anything happened on Capitol Hill, Barbara Held was the first person to write a check. She was just very positive about the Hill, and whatever anyone else was trying to do.

**DEUTSCH:** That's Barbara Held, H-E-L-D.

**S. CYMROT:** It is. She had her office over on Seventh Street across from the Market.

**N. CYMROT:** Barbara Held Real Estate.

**DEUTSCH:** I remember, because my mother bought 700 East Capitol Street.

**S. CYMROT:** Ah. At the time she died, she was living in Georgetown, and I think we went over to look at some books, and they had this absolutely gorgeous fountain in the backyard.

**N. CYMROT:** This was just a couple of years ago.

**S. CYMROT:** A couple of years ago. Katherine Held said, "If you want it you can buy it." We had it taken apart and delivered to the point where it is now, in front of Riverby Books, on East Capitol.

**DEUTSCH:** Delighting your neighbors?

**S. CYMROT:** Delighting the neighbors, probably breeding mosquitoes, breeding algae. But it is quite attractive from across the street.

**DEUTSCH:** Okay, so, CHAMPS. So were you the person who came up with the name that would help them ...

**S. CYMROT:** No. If ever there was a joint effort this was it. Nobody was sitting quietly around the table. The table was Jack Mahoney's mirror-top table in his conference room, where most everything that was happening, at least from our perspective, was happening in Jack's conference room.

**N. CYMROT:** That's located above Mr. Henry's, at Sixth and Pennsylvania Avenue.

**S. CYMROT:** Next door to Mr. Henry's.

**N. CYMROT:** Next door to Mr. Henry's. Right, that's right.

**S. CYMROT:** That was a pretty good activity. No one else wanted to be president so I took it for two years.

**DEUTSCH:** So you were the first president?

**S. CYMROT:** I was the first president. Don was the second president. I guess Jack, and Jimmy Didden, and it followed along those lines. Somewhere in the first year, there was some comment made about the development of Eighth Street, and I was quoted as saying, "I would have trouble telling an owner down there not to rent to McDonald's," suggesting that obviously McDonald's was not anything we'd want on Eighth Street. Don, I guess, was asked to comment about this elitism charge, and said he was very sorry, that I couldn't comment, that we were on a cruise in Monte Carlo.

**DEUTSCH:** [Laughs] Was it true?

**N. CYMROT:** [Laughs]

**S. CYMROT:** Which was true, yes, we were gone for a bit of time, at the time, thereby squelching the elite charge.

**DEUTSCH:** Right, and McDonald's did subsequently come, although not to Eighth Street.

**N. CYMROT:** That's right. It came to Pennsylvania Avenue.

**DEUTSCH:** So we have two now.

**N. CYMROT:** Both on Pennsylvania Avenue.

**S. CYMROT:** I know. Where the mattress store is now?

**S. CYMROT:** Yes, that's right.

**DEUTSCH:** Okay, so, president of CHAMPS. What were the big—so, development of Eighth Street was an ongoing ...

**S. CYMROT:** We were pre- Eighth Street. Margot Kelly was doing most of the Eighth Street work at the time, and as so often happens, the person who gets things going and holds it together, isn't directly in the middle of it when it develops. That's when George [Didden] and Linda Gallagher came along. And it moved very rapidly at that point, lots of government money, lots of support. And that's been passed on to other people now who are running it—Tip Tipton, John Gordon, and others.

**DEUTSCH:** But let's go back to CHAMPS for a minute. You said you wouldn't launch it until you had enough money to have a paid director?

**S. CYMROT:** Right.

**DEUTSCH:** And that happened fairly soon?

**S. CYMROT:** Within a few months, a couple of months. There was a good deal of support for it and a lot of the people who joined at the beginning were the regulars, the same kinds of businesses and individuals who jumped right in regularly.

**DEUTSCH:** How did you see the mission of CHAMPS?

**S. CYMROT:** [Chuckles] Other than amusing ourselves, there was one element of promoting the businesses. We did it very early on, a Capitol Hill Treasure Trek, where if you'd take a little card around and had it stamped by business that you went into, there was a \$5,000 prize, which was way out of line. And Bob Williams was the winner, I believe, who's currently still a real estate agent on Capitol Hill.

**N. CYMROT:** Oh, I remember. We had a drawing at Tunnicliff's, and our son's name was pulled out as the winner, and we had to put it back in. [Laughs]

**DEUTSCH:** And he was only, like, five? And didn't need \$5,000? [Laughs]

**N. CYMROT:** Well, he was little, and—he was 10. So I remember that Steve had to buy a whole bunch of tickets to the Orioles baseball games because he thought that was not fair.

**DEUTSCH:** Well, it sounds like you came to an equitable solution of the problem.

**N. CYMROT:** What happened is, when CHAMPS was born, as a sideline they decided to have quarterly social gatherings. And they had them at the conference room of National Capital Bank, upstairs in the boardroom, and those turned out to be wildly popular. And the truth of the matter was that people in

business didn't know each other. So that folks up and down the street didn't know each other, and people working over here on Pennsylvania Avenue knew no one over on Massachusetts Avenue, and I don't think it ever occurred to them that their own businesses would be increased by getting to know other business people. And that's exactly what happened. So the social and networking aspects of the organization were remarkable, and I think pretty much unexpected. I think you thought you were going to be doing serious lobbying and issue-related work, and instead, and in addition to that, you ended up introducing everyone to everyone else.

**S. CYMROT:** And I think that continues to be the leading focus of CHAMPS, one of the great things that it accomplishes.

**N. CYMROT:** And over the first many, many years those receptions became magnets for all the politicians, and the police officers who patrolled in the area, and the police chief, and everyone wanted to be there. So it felt like a success. It was a successful venture whose time was exactly right.

**S. CYMROT:** The bank where the gatherings were held was the then-new National Capitol Bank which had replaced a 100-year-old building that was where the parking lot is now. And they built the new bank. And when I used to go in—when we first got here and I went into the old bank, there was this young kid sitting at the front table, George Didden, who later became president, and was followed by other brothers and nephews sitting at that same table as time went by.

**DEUTSCH:** Very nice, it's definitely a neighborhood bank. The Foundation—at what point did the Foundation—I know its birth was in CHAMPS.

**S. CYMROT:** It was in CHAMPS, with the idea that the businesses—one way of promoting business was as an organization to be making grants within the community. And there was going to be some percentage of the dues that would go to that foundation.

**DEUTSCH:** Was this your—pretty much your—idea?

**S. CYMROT:** Yeah. One of the few things that involved groups doing it, this one wasn't—I mean, getting it started, getting it going, leading it belonged to a lot of people. But this was a proposal I had made at one of our board meetings. At the same board meeting, I proposed that we start CHAMPS-PAC, which would have gotten involved in politics, and it quickly became at that discussion a matter of choosing between picking good candidates and supporting those who were in office, or who somehow would be in our best interest. And at that point I withdrew my motion, and CHAMPS-PAC never came into being. I think it would have been the wrong thing, had we done it that way. But CHAMPS [Foundation] started early on.

**N. CYMROT:** 1989.

**S. CYMROT:** 1989.

**DEUTSCH:** CHAMPS? The Foundation?

**N. CYMROT:** The Foundation started in 1989.

**DEUTSCH:** And who was ... so it was the two of you?

**S. CYMROT:** No, Nicky was not there. She was busy with the Arts Workshop, or ...

**N. CYMROT:** Running our business!

**S. CYMROT:** Running our business. I never really paid a lot of attention to that.

**DEUTSCH:** So who were your early cohorts in that?

**N. CYMROT:** Linda Barnes.

**S. CYMROT:** Linda Barnes was there, Frank Reed was there, Jack Mahoney, Don [Denton], Rick Halberstein—was he there?—and Steve Daniels came shortly thereafter ...

**N. CYMROT:** No, after a while. We recruited him later.

**DEUTSCH:** Karen Getman.

**N. CYMROT:** Karen Getman definitely was there, and then after a while you invited Lael Stegall who was not in business, but you decided you needed somebody with a little foundation experience to be helping you think about it. And the budget in those days was—your idea was—that you might get about \$5,000 a year to give away, from the surcharge, from the percentage of the dues of the CHAMPS members. So that's how it started.

**S. CYMROT:** And then as we began taking on others who were not business people, just people in the community, the name was switched from the CHAMPS Foundation to the CHAMPS Community Foundation?

**N. CYMROT:** Uh-huh.

**S. CYMROT:** And it stayed that was for another seven or eight years. And at that point, the CHAMPS interest was waning. There were financial issues so they stopped making contributions.

**DEUTSCH:** CHAMPS, the organization, was still making contributions?

**S. CYMROT:** Yes, CHAMPS the organization—up to that point, but then it stopped, and some number of years, not many, after that, there was a separation of the two organizations.

**N. CYMROT:** A renaming. We changed it then to the Capitol Hill Community Foundation which still—always did and still—enjoys large support on the part of business people in the community.

**S. CYMROT:** Absolutely.

**N. CYMROT:** Many, many of the contributors are members of the business community, and many members of our board, of course, have businesses.

**DEUTSCH:** And of course, then, Nicky, you became involved.

**N. CYMROT:** At some point, I don't remember exactly when, a few years in, Steve decided that he didn't really want to be in charge of this anymore, and no one else on the board was interested in doing it. So, I said, OK, I would. So that's how that started. I don't even remember when that was. It's been a long time.

**S. CYMROT:** Four or five years—I had and continue to have a very short attention span.

**DEUTSCH:** So you became president of the foundation when it was still CHAMPS Foundation, now the Capitol Hill Community Foundation?

**N. CYMROT:** Yes.

**S. CYMROT:** And it was nearly 20 years ago.

**DEUTSCH:** Twenty years ago. We could do a whole interview, probably, talking about that. But do you want to say just a few words about the direction the foundation's gone in?

**N. CYMROT:** Well, we continued to expand the board, by bringing on people who were not necessarily businesses, and also people who did have businesses. And our thought was that we wanted to keep this organization supported by businesses and residents of the community. And the concept is that folks make annual contributions to this fund and 100% of what comes in goes back out in the form of grants, or support for organizations and projects that affect the lives of people in the neighborhood.

**DEUTSCH:** And the administrative expenses?

**N. CYMROT:** No administrative expenses come out of any of the donated money. Now all of the administrative expenses are paid by members of the board of directors. That's an unusual arrangement

and I think a powerful part of the story of this organization. Also, it has continued to be a completely voluntary organization. We have no paid staff. So we take care in how we spend people's money.

**DEUTSCH:** And I know that, what, five years ago, maybe more, the Foundation gave away its millionth dollar? More than that?

**N. CYMROT:** Oh, that was—we've now directed over five million dollars into projects. Now that does include over a million dollars that the DC Public Schools contributed to the school libraries project. That was one of our bigger endeavors. That was the complete renovation of eight public school libraries here in the community.

**DEUTSCH:** Can you just say a word or two about how that got started, the school libraries project?

**N. CYMROT:** Yes, I can. The idea was brought to us by Suzanne Wells, and an organization that she had given birth to, which was—she calls—the Capitol Hill Public School Parent Organization. And she has been trying to bring together principals and representatives and parents of all of the public schools on Capitol Hill for a number of years. Her goal was to get them sitting around the table and start talking to see what their common interests were. And early on, they tried to determine what some things were that they all had in common. And they came up with two right away. One was that they all had very, very inadequate libraries, and some none at all. And many of them, no librarians. And the other was that they all wished that their school yards were more beautiful, greener, had gardens, and were more conducive to pleasant time for the children. And since that time they've made progress on both. But early on, Suzanne came to us and said, "You know, this library issue is a big concern. And we know about a project in Manhattan which has been initiated by the," is it the Peter Pan Foundation?

**S. CYMROT:** Robin Hood Foundation. [Laughs]

**N. CYMROT:** [Laughs] Don't transcribe that please! Robin Hood Foundation. And the model there was that the Robin Hood Foundation raised the funds from contributions and went in and worked with New York, Manhattan, school system, or all of New York, I guess, and they did all the renovations. And they made it a competition between architects to have good designs for each of these libraries, and they replaced all of the books, and all of the technology. And so we decided we could do that here. And we set a goal of ... Well, anyway, Suzanne asked us if we could help with this and we said "Well, we'd think about it," and we came back and said, "Yes, we would take that on."

**DEUTSCH:** So it was a partnership with the Foundation? Spearheaded by the Foundation?

**N. CYMROT:** The Foundation took it over as the Foundation's own project. And we—Todd Cymrot, our son-in-law, became the day-to-day manager of the project and Tom Regan of Regan Associates agreed to be the pro bono project manager on the outside. And he has a world of experience. And Turner Construction Company and another one agreed to come in and do the construction. It cost \$2.5 million.

**DEUTSCH:** And which were the schools that got the new libraries?

**N. CYMROT:** Oh, my goodness. You'll have to help. Brent, Tyler, Paine, Watkins, Peabody, [Stuart-] Hobson, Ludlow-Taylor, and Maury. Eight.

**S. CYMROT:** Wasn't there a school north of there that also was done before we ...?

**N. CYMROT:** Yes, J.O. Wilson. That is a school that is located in Northeast in the boundaries that we would consider large Capitol Hill, and that library had been redone under the leadership and guidance of some folks who live in Northwest Washington, Carol Wheeler and her husband. And they had raised money and done very much the same thing there. And so that was another model that we looked at as a possibility. They had done a great job. And what we've discovered is that these libraries have become, really, the centerpiece of many of these schools. This all happened three or four years ago over two summers, and as time has gone on, some of these schools have been completely renovated, but thankfully, the libraries have stayed in place. With the exception of Tyler School. They're going to be moving the library.

**DEUTSCH:** Oh, are they?

**N. CYMROT:** Uh-huh. Their plans for renovations require that they do that.

**DEUTSCH:** Do you want to say a few words about the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop and the Art League?

**N. CYMROT:** Oh.

**DEUTSCH:** Because I think, I don't know if you were both involved in Capitol Hill Arts Workshop. I know you were on the board, and then ...

**N. CYMROT:** I was. I was on the board of the Arts Workshop for some number of years, and then I became president. When I finished with doing that I was very much interested in the idea of forming an art league. And we looked at models around, including the Torpedo Factory in Alexandria, and really modeled what we did here on Capitol Hill after what had happened in Alexandria, in the Torpedo Factory. This simply was an organization, a membership organization of artists. They did not pay to be members—maybe we did have a little bit of membership fee, I can't remember. People were invited to



submit paintings or pieces of art for monthly juried exhibitions, for seven or eight months a year, nine months a year. And then we also started a number of single artists' exhibitions at all sorts of locations. At one point we were organizing 72 single artists' exhibits a year, mostly on Capitol Hill but then in other parts of town as well. And I did that for eight years. And when I stopped, Kristen Hartke took that over.

**DEUTSCH:** And is it still going strong?

**N. CYMROT:** It is, it is. And they're still operating at the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop.

**DEUTSCH:** Now, at what point did the Old Naval Hospital become an interest?

**S. CYMROT:** Nine years ago.

**N. CYMROT:** About in 2001, the city started talking about it. About 2000. An organization called the Friends of the Old Naval Hospital. It was made up of a group of five or six neighbors of the Old Naval Hospital, which is located on 921 Pennsylvania Avenue, between Ninth Street and Tenth Street SE. Between Pennsylvania Avenue and E Street. It's located on three-quarters of an acre. It's a Civil War-era hospital. Construction started in 1864, and completed in 1866. Served as a hospital for some number of years, then became a hospital training facility and then an old soldiers' home.

But the fact is that it had become derelict. In about 1966-67, the District of Columbia had taken it over for administrative jurisdictions. It belonged to the federal government. And in about 2000 the District of Columbia started talking about what would happen with this building, and the neighbors, who had formed the Friends of the Old Naval Hospital, had been urging the District to consider putting out an RFP to find a user for it. And the Friends of the Old Naval Hospital hired the Urban Land Institute to come and do a study of the building, and to recommend to the city and to the neighborhood what should become of this building, what was the best way to handle a property like this. And they came and spent four or five days and interviewed many people in the community.

And we got involved then in advocating that this should be a community-use facility, because there were lots of other ideas about what might happen to it. And so we got involved, Steve and I, just going and testifying and talking to these people, along with many other neighbors, about what should happen there, and urging that it be a nonprofit organization, that it should be a community-use facility. It should not be turned into an office building or a condo or a retail establishment. And at the end of their process they did recommend that that kind of thing should be what happens here. And so the city put out an RFP, asking for proposals to restore the building entirely, do an historic restoration of the building. And renovation of the building and to put it to community use, and by then we started took the initiative and started ...

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

TAPE 2/SIDE 1

**DEUTSCH:** [Unintelligible] 2010.

**N. CYMROT:** The newly formed Old Naval Hospital Foundation determined that it would itself put together a response to a proposal, an RFP, a request for proposals from the District of Columbia. And that is what we did. Our first effort was to include the Southeast Branch of the Library in the building by putting the library in the ground floor and the first floor, and using the top two floors for community activities and enrichment activities, education things, gatherings. After two or three years, the city withdrew that RFP. They had only two responses to it and they decided that neither one would meet their criteria. So they took it off the market and let it sit for a year or more. And then they came out with a new request for proposals, and this time, seven groups responded. What the city asked for was a new use for the building that would benefit the Capitol Hill community. And also it would require that it be restored in a sensitive manner. So this time we responded again, and were successful in November, er, September 2007 the Old Naval Hospital proposal for the Hill Center was selected and we're now—what month are we now?—we're now in August 2010. Construction has just now begun and the plan is to open the new Hill Center next June.

**DEUTSCH:** That seems so quick for all the work that needs to be done.

**N. CYMROT:** It certainly does seem quick. And we have just today put out a job description for the new executive director of the Hill Center.

**DEUTSCH:** And it's your hope to have that person hired well before the building opens?

**N. CYMROT:** Oh, my goodness, yes. We're hoping to hire that person within the next six weeks to two months.

**DEUTSCH:** I'm sort of curious about what gave you this vision of that building as a community center.

**S. CYMROT:** [Chuckles]

**N. CYMROT:** Well, I guess that we, Steve and I, shared the reaction that so many people in the community had always had to that building, which was that this was a magnificent old handsome historic building that was sitting virtually empty right in what was now the center of our community, and this seemed like such a shame. Because there is a crying need for space for doing all sorts of things here in this community, and this seemed like a wasted asset. In addition, we don't have large number of educational and cultural opportunities here on the Hill. Certainly we have access to them because we have Metro and we have cars and we can get to them. But if you stop to think about it, we don't have nearly the

variety of opportunities right here in our own community that many other communities do. Particularly in the suburbs. And I'd say also in Northwest Washington to some extent. And we thought that that did not need to be. And we're also aware of the large number of families in particular who get in the car and go places to take their children to do many things. And we thought, "Wouldn't it be nice if we had an opportunity to expand on the offerings we had right here in the neighborhood?"

**DEUTSCH:** Is personal philanthropy a tradition that either of you grew up with? I mean, you've become, sort of, symbols of generosity for the Capitol Hill community. How did you learn that?

**S. CYMROT:** Well, I don't know. We felt as though we had been fortunate, and were happy to spend our money doing that. I don't think we live at any high level.

**N. CYMROT:** Well, we didn't start off with much money. We didn't have any money. What we have now happened through the work we did, attrition, yes, after time it was generated, so no, I don't think that I ...

No, that's not true. My father always made lots of contributions to things. Not at huge levels because he didn't have it.

**DEUTSCH:** What kinds of things did he give to?

**N. CYMROT:** Oh, Save the Children. I remember, he always was proud that he had seven or eight children that he always had adopted. And politically he would give money to his choices for candidates. And lots of causes that he thought were important—Fort Concho in San Angelo, Texas, and he spent a lot of his time when he lived in San Angelo, Texas, on that board of directors and getting those buildings restored. So I guess, actually, there was some history that I had not thought about that. And Steve's father had a career in real estate in Manhattan, so the idea of taking buildings and doing things with them, and renting them and that kind of thing was nothing ...

**DEUTSCH:** It wasn't entirely foreign.

**N. CYMROT:** No, it wasn't foreign. It was just sort of what you talked about at dinnertime, wasn't it?

**S. CYMROT:** Mostly, yeah.

**N. CYMROT:** And my father was a civil engineer and had spent his career in building and being in charge of projects, and in all the things that we did, he would go over the plans minutely for us and give us critiques. I mention that just because it comes to mind now, that if he were here, he would be poring over that plans for the Old Naval Hospital, which are, I don't know, do they weigh 15, 20 pounds? I think

they do. They're over there in our office. They're about three inches thick and take up a huge conference table, just to look at them.

**S. CYMROT:** It was always kind of annoying when he'd do that, because he was always right.

**N. CYMROT:** He would go through with a yellow pad on all, any of the things that we were doing. But you were asking about philanthropy. I guess we did have some models, both of us.

**DEUTSCH:** How about you, Steve? What were the things that your family was interested in?

**S. CYMROT:** Not that I'm aware of. There, too, at one point my father was the highest paid civil service employee in New York City when they raised his salary to \$10,000. So there wasn't a whole lot of money around.

**N. CYMROT:** But that's not true. You always talked about the synagogue, and ...

**S. CYMROT:** We were supportive of that.

**N. CYMROT:** It's just what you do.

**S. CYMROT:** Yeah, I mean ... The sort of traditional sense of, you support certain institutions get supported. The Hebrew word for charity is the same as the word for justice. And I think there, there's an underlying sense that, the good life includes helping others, giving away money, supporting things in your community. And as I say, we've been fortunate enough to be in a position to do that. We've done a lot of it. It feels good.

**DEUTSCH:** Yeah.

**S. CYMROT:** Now it doesn't rise to the level of the Warren Buffett/Bill Gates, who have just convened a group of people to give away half of their billion dollars. We're not doing that.

**DEUTSCH:** You're not quite as wealthy as Bill Gates.

**N. CYMROT:** But that's wonderful. That's something that's just happened and I think that's a wonderful, wonderful model—exciting to see how that comes out.

**S. CYMROT:** And the people in this community are extraordinarily generous. Through the hospital, through the foundation, through other activities, all of the school auctions and ...

**DEUTSCH:** Well we certainly saw that. We didn't even talk about the Market. We certainly saw that generosity when the Market burned.

**S. CYMROT:** Well, we didn't talk about it much with the Community Foundation either, today, but the fact that the Community Foundation is now able to give out \$250,000 or more a year in grants to the community is just a testament to the generosity of the people who live around here. Because in fact we do depend entirely on annual contributions from folks to keep that fund alive and keep it replenished. It's a remarkable story, really.

**DEUTSCH:** It is.

**S. CYMROT:** The morning after the fire, probably before nine o'clock, Dick Wolf called to say that the [Capitol Hill] Restoration Society was interested in taking action, and would we be the conduit for that money? And we said "Yeah, sure." And without our trying to raise money, unsolicited, about a half a million dollars came in. And that money was primarily used not for the rebuilding of the building, which was a 22 million dollar effort, but for helping the merchants in there, supporting the Market, getting a couple of activities going that would continue to bring people to the Market area. Starting a music program over there.

**N. CYMROT:** We've paid for a lot of things. We've paid for the signage into the Market, for the temporary quarters. We paid for refrigerator trucks so that the merchants could go back into business on the street. If you had to have a fire to destroy the Market, it came at a very good time, April. And so, within a few weeks or even then, people could move outside. Of course they had lost all of their inventory and all of their equipment, so we spent a lot of that money replacing scales and tables and chairs, and the kinds of things people needed just to get back in business. But the result was that all of the merchants who were there in business before the fire are still in business. And I suspect that they would not have been without the encouragement of the community. I think a good number of them would have just packed up and gone somewhere else.

**DEUTSCH:** Well, it was extraordinary to see how moved they were by what happened.

**N. CYMROT:** Yes. They had no idea that people felt so strongly about the Market.

**S. CYMROT:** And the point person on that was Gary Peterson, who, by the end of it, knew every merchant in there, probably anybody who ever walked into the Market. And became the face of the effort, did an extraordinarily good job.

**DEUTSCH:** Yeah, I think that summer he was at the Market every day, sometimes twice a day, talking to people, figuring out things.

**N. CYMROT:** Uh-huh.

**DEUTSCH:** Now there's one thing we haven't talked about, and that's Riverby Books. You have one of the vital businesses on Capitol Hill.

**S. CYMROT:** [Laughs] Well, I wish there were more people in the community who felt that way. After the pediatricians left, we took the building next door to our office and created the bookstore. I believe we had a bookstore in Fredericksburg already. And we opened this up with an intervening door between the office and the bookstore. And it's been there about ten years now, eleven, twelve?

**N. CYMROT:** Not quite.

**DEUTSCH:** Was the original store in Fredericksburg also a second-hand bookstore?

**S. CYMROT:** Used bookstore. Yes. High quality used books.

**DEUTSCH:** And did you just kind of learn by doing? Was that just something you ...

**S. CYMROT:** We started off with a wall in an antique mall, and then we took the second floor of a building we had. And then we invited the people on the first floor to move across the street and took over the whole building. We now have opened a second store down there. Those are working out very well. It's a very interesting thing to do. Paul has become quite an expert in a lot of parts of that.

**DEUTSCH:** Paul Cymrot?

**S. CYMROT:** Paul Cymrot [their son]. He's also a bookbinder. And when he was in college, he used to go to the college librarian every Saturday for four years, to learn bookbinding. And his reason for that is he wanted to be the only member of his class when they graduated who had actually acquired a skill.[Laughs]

**DEUTSCH:** I have to talk to him about bookbinding sometime. I took bookbinding in school in France.

**N. CYMROT:** Oh, you did?

**DEUTSCH:** I can show you the books I've bound.

**S. CYMROT:** Okay.

**N. CYMROT:** Oh, nice.

**DEUTSCH:** So, Riverby Books is a valued part of the community.

**S. CYMROT:** As I said it's been very interesting for us as well. And the Capitol Hill Books that Jim Toole runs over by Eastern Market, because of their location I believe, does substantially more business than we do. He's been there, I guess, a little bit longer than we have.

**N. CYMROT:** A little bit.

**S. CYMROT:** Before that there was totally outstanding used bookstore, I think around the corner on Seventh Street.

**N. CYMROT:** Yes, it was in the old Post Office?

**S. CYMROT:** Sybil Pike and Doris Grumbach, who ran that for a number of years, and they were extraordinarily knowledgeable, they were just really good. And then, they closed it and moved to Maine.

**N. CYMROT:** Moved the store.

**DEUTSCH:** But you have a pretty active program of readings at the bookstore?

**S. CYMROT:** Yes, once a month or so. We do author's readings.

**N. CYMROT:** Monica Jarboe arranges that and organizes it.

**S. CYMROT:** We're looking forward to the Hill Center becoming the new home for that. It's a perfect venue to be doing it.

**N. CYMROT:** Not because we don't want her there, but she'll be able to expand it. She fills it up now. She's grown nicely. She alternates between poetry and prose, one month or the other. Well, the used book business is in an interesting transition now because an awful lot of the sales, the business, happens on the Internet. We, too, participate. We list books on the Internet. And if it weren't for that it would be hard to justify keeping the store open at all.

**DEUTSCH:** And Paul has a real interest in rare books, doesn't he?

**S. CYMROT:** He does. And generally what happens if we buy some good books the better ones go down to him, so then he feels good that he's selling a lot more than we are. He's got a real operation down there and is becoming very, very good at recognizing and finding the better books. Which are more fun, they're the ones that give way to stories and the day to day buying ... and we do buy a lot of books that people in the community just bring in and I think that serves as much of a purpose as selling them.

**DEUTSCH:** Let's talk a little bit about local politics. You've both been active in supporting various candidates over the years.

**S. CYMROT:** Mostly for the ward, Ward 6, but yeah, we've gotten involved with some people. I guess the first one involved re-registering as a Republican because Carol Schwartz was running at-large, for city council?

**N. CYMROT:** No, she was running for mayor at one point, and we were on a trip and so, we are Democrats, but we re-registered so that we could vote in her primary. Wasn't that it?

**S. CYMROT:** I think so. Maybe against Moore (Reverend Douglas Moore)

**N. CYMROT:** Can't remember! And yes we've ...

**DEUTSCH:** So what happened?

**BOTH CYMROTS:** She won!/She lost! [Laughs]

**S. CYMROT:** She lost for mayor but ... But I think at the time she was already an at-large council member.

**N. CYMROT:** Yes, we were voting on the mayoral election for her.

**DEUTSCH:** Did you know Carol?

**N. CYMROT:** We did. We happened to know Carol Schwartz, because she is a very good friend of one of my college good friends. And so we got to know her through that channel, and so we did know her at that time. She's about our age. And we've just known her.

**S. CYMROT:** This campaign must have been the at-large, because after the campaign she called up and asked us if we'd like a low license plate number, which I guess is one of the perks of being a council member. And I told her that I wouldn't take anything that was less than [higher than] 100. And she said Well, the only one she has under 100 was number 25, and Willard Marriott had that and she really didn't think she could take it away from him.

**DEUTSCH:** So you never got your low number?

**S. CYMROT:** Never got my low number.

**DEUTSCH:** Okay, so after Carol, Harold next?

**S. CYMROT:** Harold next? Well, we did work with but not at a very high level with Betty Ann Kane, through all of her efforts.

**DEUTSCH:** Who of course is a neighbor.



**S. CYMROT:** Yes, she's a neighbor. She's a member of the hospital board, Hill Center board, and she ran at-large and also for mayor. We worked with Harold Brazil when he was running for the Ward 6 council member. He was supported very heavily by Jack Mahoney, and we kind of went along with that. And then Sharon Ambrose was running when Harold was elected to an at-large seat. And one evening we met with Sharon at Betty Ann and Noel Kane's house. We were talking about the election. It wound up 12 people were running. And Betty Ann and Noel and I of course were very brilliant about the elections, and we were saying you know, "You're a nice lady, but you can't win. There's no theory under which you can win." And Nicky turned to Sharon and said, "Do you want to run?" Sharon said, "Yeah!" "So run!" We had missed several things that were going to be happening in that campaign, Sharon was the only woman in a field of 12. And she was elected, and then re-elected.

**DEUTSCH:** That was the election where you could not turn around the last three weeks without bumping into someone sticking out their hand and saying, "Hi, I'm running for mayor [Council]." It was quite a fun experience of local politics.

**N. CYMROT:** Then Tommy Wells.

**S. CYMROT:** Tommy came along. We had been working with him when he was on the school board.

**N. CYMROT:** Right. And we supported him for that. And then for his seat in the city council representing our ward. So, you're right. Mostly in local elections, we've been involved. That's the only game in town. That's what we need to do.

**S. CYMROT:** Continuing to be fish in a very small pond. But we've enjoyed it at that level. The remark which is trite but true, of Capitol Hill being a village in the middle of a city, I guess we've worked in the village, and it's been a lot of fun.

END OF INTERVIEW