

Interviewee: Gus P. Psomadakis

Interviewer: Aidan J. Smith

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AS: This is Aidan Smith and Mr. Gus Psomadakis, June fifteenth, 2006, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Great, thank you again.

GP: Yes, sir.

AS: Mr. Psomadakis, to get started, I was hoping that we could begin if you wouldn't mind telling me a little bit about yourself and family history, just where and when you were born, where you grew up, that sort of thing.

GP: My name is Gus Psomodakis. I was born in Covington, Virginia on May tenth, 1939. My family moved to Clearwater, Florida in 1945 and then we moved up here to Charlotte in 1950. Of course, I've been living here ever since then. I was educated in Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools and graduated from UNC-Charlotte with a degree in political science. I spent most of my working career working for the city of Charlotte in the workforce development area, in job training and placement and youth programs and that sort of thing. That's been what I did for thirty-two years, is all in the area of getting people prepared and into employment. Plus, I did some neighborhood work for the city. I chaired the Belmont Neighborhood Task Force that looked at the issues confronting the Belmont neighborhood and what we could do as a city to revitalize that community.

AS: So how did you get involved in doing community work?

GP: Well, I was just always interested in it. When I was at UNC-C, we started a tutoring program at an elementary school in Villa Heights neighborhood, which is right next door to the Belmont community and this was back in 1964 and '65. So I've always had an interest sort of in dealing with low-income people and seeing how I could help maybe make a difference in people's lives. Then of course, working for the city, so much of my work involved lower-income residents and what we could do to get them back in the mainstream. Then of course, I mentioned work chairing this task force for eighteen months where we just looked at all different aspects of the Belmont community, from the housing needs, the infrastructure needs, the need for job training, police services, all city services, economic development, just the issues that we needed to look at in order to bring Belmont back to where it at least was back in the 40s and 50s when it was a mill village, so to speak. A lot of those residents, who were all white at the time, lived or worked at the Johnston Mills and the mills up in north Charlotte.

AS: Do I understand from the life chronology you shared with me, you said you first started working in Belmont in the 60s, is that correct?

GP: Well, that was my first experience there as a student getting this tutoring program going at Villa Heights Elementary School. Professionally, I started working there in the later 60s when I worked for the Neighborhood Youth Corps, which was a program for high school dropouts and some of the young folk that we worked with lived in Belmont, because that community began to change, meaning race-wise, in the 60s with the redevelopment that occurred in downtown Charlotte that began to push our black citizens further out, in this case, not much further out, but on into previously all-white neighborhoods. So I had a lot of interaction with people in the Neighborhood Youth Corps program.

Then when I went to work for the city in 1974 or '75, I did a lot more work in that community and got to know a lot of the people by way of this task force, but just doing the work and other things that I was involved in, working at the Johnston Y, I served on the board of the Johnston Y, which is in the heart of north Charlotte, and just getting to know the community and many of the people that lived there. It's really a good place.

AS: So tell me about it. What was it like at that time?

GP: Well, at first, as I mentioned, it was a white community. My experience, I went to Central High School, which was where Central Piedmont Community College is now, from 1955 to '58. While I was there, the old Tech High School, which is currently Hawthorne Middle School, or Traditional School, was closed down and all the kids who went there all came over to Central with us. So the entire north Charlotte population was rolled over into the Central High School population, so many of the kids that went there enrolled at Central and I got to know a lot of them. To this day, I still have good friends from my high school class; we get together. As a matter of fact, we plan to get together July first with some of the high school friends. The fellow who's chief of the Charlotte Fire Department, Luther Fincher, grew up in north Charlotte, if I'm not mistaken. So I've just known a lot of people from that area. I had a lot of friends that when I started working for the city and when I worked for the Neighborhood Youth Corps, I met a lot of people who lived and worked in that community.

But I saw a transition with the redevelopment of downtown Charlotte, which began, I think, about 1961 when Stan Brookshire was mayor and everything began to push out. Then the white people who lived there, most of them went further out and then that eventually became almost a black neighborhood during the 60s and the 70s. Of course, it lost its blue-collar nature then. All of those were people that worked mostly at the mills or at other jobs in downtown

Charlotte, but it was a solid blue-collar, working neighborhood, and it just completely changed over when the blacks began to move in and the whites moved out. I remember it real well. You know, I can remember the neighborhood in transition.

AS: So when you first started, you were working in tutoring programs and then what sort of stuff was Neighborhood Youth Corps doing, similar things?

GP: Well that program, I began to work there, I guess it was in the middle of '66, like well, October or November of 1966, and that's when a lot of this transition—the whites were moving out and we served a lot of kids who were high school dropouts from that neighborhood. I remember driving into that neighborhood and picking up some of the students or young folks that I worked with. So I got to know the place pretty well then and it was almost immediately began to run down. The working people moved out. A lot of the lower-income, minimum-wage-type people moved in. A lot of unemployment almost immediately happened there. So I mean, I saw a lot of that and then working at the employment training department for the city, I saw even more of it. We served many, many residents from that neighborhood as well as all of north Charlotte.

AS: You described the transition and the beginning of the community beginning to become rundown. What sorts of changes took place in the nature of the community?

GP: Well, you could easily see the neighborhood in decline, the physical deterioration. The housing, the way the place looked, the trash on the streets, the increase in the crime rate, it just happened right before your eyes; it just happened.

AS: When you first started working professionally in the community, what were the major problems that were trying to be addressed?

GP: One of the big issues there was crime, drug-infested community. As a result, if I'm not mistaken, the first community-based police officers, guys that were assigned just to one neighborhood, started that—what's the term that they use for those police officers? Neighborhood police officers started in the Belmont community to begin to kind of grapple with the crime rate there, getting to know the residents better. Another way, Aidan, you could tell the deterioration, you'd see people hanging out on the streets, drinking beer and wine and all that kind of thing. It was just starting to go down, which was once a solid, solid blue-collar neighborhood.

AS: So police presence changed there and new policing techniques—

GP: Oh, and some of the other issues were the housing. If I'm not mistaken, the statistics and all this is in the report we did. There were only like ten percent of the people there who owned their own homes; the rest of them were renters. One of the things we got into was the amount of money people paid to rent, which in many instances was more than half of their income. So you can imagine what that left them to buy groceries and pay other bills. Just the overall cleanliness of the neighborhood was a big, big issue there, people leaving stuff on the curbs, taking the city forever to get it picked up, because in many instances, people didn't know who to call and as much as I hate to say this, they were probably last on the list for pickup of some of this stuff. But you could just see, there were so many issues here: the lack of good transportation to get people from there to where the jobs were in Mecklenburg County. Of course, that was true with a lot of communities, but it even compounded the problem there.

We even got a program together to get people from there out to Airwood Industrial Park, if I'm not mistaken, back in the '80s, but that was a long distance for those people to go. Particularly if you were a single head of household, you had to have the daycare. How are you

going to get all the way out there where a decent-paying job was, which was what, twelve to fifteen miles from Charlotte, and then get back before the daycare center closed? These folks faced so many problems that helped to keep them down, not of their own making, some to their own making, but not to their own making. I believe the overwhelming majority of people where I worked, they always wanted to better themselves. I never saw many people that were satisfied living in that environment. The overwhelming majority, in my opinion, wanted to do something for their community.

I think one of the other major issues that we had was the lack—and Jim Cook, I don't know if you're going to talk to Jim in this, but Jim, he was in the psychology department and they did a needs assessment of that neighborhood even before our task force began. One of the big issues there was indigenous leadership, how to identify the people who lived there who could make a difference. That's where this Janice Morris and her mom came in; they lived off of Seigle Avenue there. Other people like John Fant and some others, one of whom worked with Bert Green—Linda Woodland, I think was her name—at Habitat for a good number of years. But how do you get those people up to where they can function as strong community leaders, just like you would—like this community association for Dilworth is probably one of the strongest in the state with a lot of influence.

So the question is how do you take that wherewithal to a community like that, where everybody has to work if they're going to live, unless they're on welfare and those aren't the people who are going to come forward in most instances and get involved in something like this. To get them up, it's even much, much more difficult, because they have to work and many times, they have to work ten hours a day. Getting that neighborhood leadership going, getting the community organization, they call it the Belmont Strategy Force, and I served on it for

awhile, getting it going so it can begin to get the city's attention and get things done for that community, from out in that community, getting that community empowered so it could look after itself.

I think that's the most difficult issue that we have to face in revitalizing any of these communities. Because you know, people like me, who are from the outside, who don't live there, can't do this so much. And the city, I think, was more than willing to spend extra money. You couldn't ask for a better laboratory other than here in revitalizing an inner-city neighborhood. We had a program, I can't think of the bigger name, "a city within a city," we called it. We were really pouring more resources into trying to revitalize all of the neighborhoods that were sort of like Belmont. Belmont was one of the worst, without qualification, because you had probably the lowest income public housing unit and Piedmont Courts, most of those people were on welfare.

When I went to old Central High School, it was all white and all those people worked. As a matter of fact, I had friends from there. () was one of them. He was the president of our class at Central, if I'm not mistaken; he lived there. There are other people, but again it was all white and they all worked; then it went completely the other way. But there were so many of those issues, but that indigenous leadership and equipping them with the knowledge and know-how, because see, you got so much peer pressure in there not to do what needs to be done.

I'll tell you something else that I learned, Aidan, is how territorial these people are, because the people who lived up in Belmont off of Parkwood on Pegram, Allen Street, and around in there, those street names don't mean anything to you now, but they didn't really consider Piedmont Courts, which was down on Seigle Avenue almost within a rock-throwing distance, it was a completely different neighborhood. So they're very, very territorial, some of

those communities like that are. I mean, it can be a matter of blocks; it's like a different neighborhood. "I'm from over here in Piedmont Courts, not Belmont." Or, "I'm from Greertown, not Middleville." It was that kind of thing. Those kind of rivalries, I think to some degree, helped complicate what needed to be done.

AS: So what kind of solutions to address all of these issues, and what sort of solutions did the task force come up with?

GP: One of the biggest things we got done was the neighborhood policing. Another was that Bert Green, they eventually built—I don't know. I know when I was still working, they had built over fifty or seventy-five houses. Matter of fact, Bert Green lived in Belmont for awhile. They built fifty to seventy-five houses. The city made a lot of major infrastructure: sidewalks, curbs, gutters, all that type of thing, increased police services, just the more focusing of city and county-type services, because the county was involved with this too.

But you see that when I think in terms of bringing services in from the outside into a community, in a way to me, that's part of the problem that we faced. It's like what we're trying to do in Iraq. We come in from outside and try to democratize this place. Well you know, we come in from the outside and go over into Belmont and try to help bring about solutions. Even though we never really tried to force anything on anybody, we were still outsiders. So the question is how do you get that outside expertise to come from the neighborhood itself and give them the power and the money to do what they need to do. We had a guy that came down here, I can't think of his name now, that had a completely different concept of how welfare should be handled and how do you empower people in communities like that. I went up to Greensboro and heard him speak and then we invited him down here. You've got to have a new way of looking at it.

One of the things I tried to get introduced down there was the notion of a community land trust. You've probably never heard that term before. There used to be one, if I'm not mistaken, in Durham. There's one up in New England in a couple of places. But the whole idea of a community land trust was that you would have a corporation that would buy land and then the homes that were built, like if I went out there, I never owned the land that my home was built on; I just owned the dwelling itself, the physical structure. And the purpose behind that was to keep the price down to where middle and lower income people could afford by stabilizing the cost of the property. The value of the home could go up, but not the property. So you go a long way towards stabilizing moderately-priced housing for people who are going to live there. It's just right here in Dilworth. This house could probably sell—when I came here, it sold for forty-eight thousand dollars in July of 1980. We could probably get close to six hundred thousand for it today. Well, the property is probably well over half of that price.

So the idea of a land trust is you keep the value of the property down; that way you make it affordable. See that's one of the biggest issues that we have in this community even today, is affordable housing for low-income people. As a matter of fact, the city manager recommended something on a bond issue package for this fall to help with building more affordable housing. But that was a concept that I tried to get sold here; I just couldn't do it. It was so new, it just shattered them when they started thinking about it. But things like that, I think you can do to keep things affordable for people who are at or above the minimum wage, you know eight, nine, ten dollars an hour, and there are gobs of them in this community, believe me, gobs of them, many, many, many of them right here. I think that's one of the big issues facing them and that's one of the things that we try to do.

But we did a lot of good out there. The thing I think we didn't do was bring about any real economic development, getting businesses to locate along that north Graham street corridor, which is a main road that goes from downtown Charlotte straight out to the Johnston YMCA, goes right to the heart of the NoDa section, which is an arts section of Charlotte. Are you familiar with it at all?

AS: I was just up there earlier this morning, actually.

GP: Well, you know what I'm talking about. But maybe we looked at how could we get businesses to locate there with semi-skilled jobs that would pay a decent wage, but that's what we couldn't do. They were clearly the better jobs that these people could do, were clearly out there in places like Airwood or places where they would have to get on the bus and maybe transfer, not get one bus and go there, but have to go to the square and then transfer, and it just really complicated. But the bus service here now is really, really good, not what it needs to be, but it is great compared to what it used to be. It was good back then.

As a matter of fact, in 1985 when Harvey Gantt was mayor of Charlotte, '84-'85, the city council gave us the first money, gave our department money to do a couple of special job training programs for inner city residents and to start a bus system or transportation bus from the square out to Airwood Industrial Park and out to Carowinds, where with no transportation, we'd get four or five kids hired a year. With transportation, we went from fifty to a hundred and fifty in two years. That's the difference that transportation made. Now we have great transportation to Airwood. Not only do we have buses going out there, they drop them and other buses take them all over the Airwood. And all of it started from that little grant or this money the city gave us to start transportation out to Airwood and to Carowinds Amusement Park.

It just shows you what can be done if you're willing to take some risks and try some things. We had to subsidize it just like you do all bus service. It's not going to pay for itself. But one time, we got to where we thought we were going to have to cancel service because of ridership and so I started riding it a couple mornings. I just wanted the experience and some of those guys immediately knew who I was at the employment training department and they learned—well, I introduced myself to them, and they said, "Please don't cancel this service." In black terminology, they'd say, "Don't put us down." You understand what that means to them? "Don't take this away from us." We really subsidized it to keep it anyway. It made a big difference in the lives of those people just to have that transportation going out there. It made for a long workday riding that far, but you know, a lot of people did it.

AS: Please, go ahead.

GP: I was going to say, when I was at old Central High School, the first black student to integrate, the guy's name was Gus Roberts, he came there my senior year, '57-'58. I'll never forget, he was the only black kid in the school and boy did he have a rough time. But you know, not too many years ago, I saw in the paper where he died and he lived in Belmont; he lived in Belmont. But we did a lot of good.

I think one of the weaknesses, in spite of the efforts that the city made, at that time, I don't think the city was really structured organizationally to do what needed to be done in that community to make sure the services were delivered. It just was a difficult thing. Because see back then, when I chaired that task force, Aidan, it made my job like twelve hours a day, several days a week. I had one intern from Jim Cook's class, I'm trying to think of her name, and she worked for us full time almost, helping with that task force. She did all of the

paperwork, great writer; Jim remembers her, I'm sure. I just can't think of her name, did a great job, but it was the two of us and the people on that task force, including Jim.

See we didn't have any extra help, so to speak. But then when the mechanism was put in place to make things work out there from a city and county perspective, it was just added to the job duties of people who already had full-time jobs. So what's going to happen? You see what I mean? We didn't have the extra people and I told some folks, I said, "You know, we need to make this somebody's job, hold them accountable for it, for the city's investment there. Hold somebody accountable for it." I just couldn't get the full-time stuff done, but I think that was one of the drawbacks, in spite of everything that was done. But anyway, that was clearly one of the drawbacks.

Then you're always going to run into racial issues. I mean, they're there. I used to try to get special pickups done to get garbage off the street. Ah, Gus, you're wasting your time; they'll have it junked up again. That's what I had to contend with constantly. But see, with a strong neighborhood organization, it begins to police itself. You see what I mean? The neighborhood holds the other people accountable and that's what we were striving for. You know, one other thing I tried to do that I thought was real novel and my boss just turned me down flat on it. I said, "Why don't we fund one position to work for the neighborhood organization and make that position accountable to that community? That would be the community's full-time worker to make sure things got done." Ah, just waste that damn money; that was just the thinking. They were sincere, but in my opinion, they were wrong. You have to be willing to try different things to get from where you are to where you want to go.

I just read a new book on the defining moment. It was about the first hundred days of the Roosevelt administration during the Depression. He didn't have any grand plan of what

they were going to do. They used the term, "We're going to throw things on the wall. A lot's going to fall and some are going to stick." Well you see, we've got to be willing to have that. We need that and we're talking twenty years ago now, or eighteen years ago. We needed to have that risk-taking mentality. I don't think we really, really had it. Even though we were willing to do a lot of things—I can't take anything away from the city of Charlotte, they were fully supportive in so many ways—but I can understand where we didn't get the support we needed.

Another thing, we had a council member, the district council representative, he's currently a senator in the North Carolina Senate; his name is Dan Clodfelter. He's the one that requested that that study be done. He may be somebody you might want to talk to, but he's the one that wanted that study done and you know, we had done another task force that I served on just for Piedmont Courts about a year before this task force was established and I served on both of them. We revitalized Piedmont Courts. The crime rate started to go down. We did some good things there, but we didn't have that stick-to-it-iveness; we just didn't stay after it. It takes work, it takes dedication and hard work, a lot of perseverance.

AS: So what kinds of things did the Piedmont Courts task force do?

GP: Well, one of the things, I think that's when we got the whole place rehabbed, you know, rehabilitated. We had some people from our job training program that were hired and worked there by the contractors, the subcontractors that did the rehab work and they were from Alabama of all places. The housing authority awarded the bid to some company in Alabama. But to show you what we were up against, the guy who was the housing authority executive director, now Aidan, we're talking, I want to say '86, '87, '85, his name was Ray Wheeling. I loved the guy to death; he's dead and gone now. I said, "Ray," I said, "Why don't we put air

conditioning in these buildings?" He started stuttering and stammering, "Gus, they'll leave the windows open and the doors open. We won't be able to pay the electric bill." So the people lived there with no air conditioning in the dead of the summer. You see? So what does all that lead?

You see, it's that thinking, just that old-time thinking, and look what's happening to it now. They're tearing it down and a bunch of white folks are going to take it over. I guess it'll be gentrified, just like Earle Village on the other side of John Belk Freeway. Earle Village was built to accommodate a lot of the people who had their homes torn down here in Brooklyn, which was right in the heart of downtown Charlotte. Well, it was on this side of East Trade Street and on this side of South Tryon Street, right in this section back up here where that John Belk Highway, the inner-city loop, so to speak. A lot of those people were housed over in Earle Village. Well, one thing, they made it way too big and there wasn't any place to play, for the kids to play. So what do they do? They play in the yard, they run all the grass down, windows get broken out. You see there, you can't do anything, you see how they do it? Our mistakes reinforced our prejudices about these guys. It's like a catch-22. And now it's been torn down and I think a certain percentage of those units—you know where I'm talking about?—had to be reserved for low-income residents.

The same thing's going to happen in Belmont. Look at what's happening up in north Charlotte around the Y up there. Look at some of those houses. I went through there just Tuesday. I had to go over there and take a carburetor to get it worked on and I just rode through there. I hadn't been up there in awhile and some of these nice houses are being built. It's being slowly but surely gentrified. As a matter of fact, even some of the white people are not going to be able to live there. The artists who have been dependent on three, four, five-hundred-dollar-a-

month places, they're even going to be pushed out eventually. It just happens, it's the way it happens. It just happens that way. This street right here, where me and my wife won't be here much longer, you've got the houses, they're putting second floors on them. I mean, it's happening everywhere; it's just the way it is.

AS: So what, if anything, could the city do, do you think, or should it do anything about that?

GP: I don't know. We've tried so many things. I'll tell you, Aidan, I've been around here a long time and I think one of the biggest problems our community has—I mean the greater community—is trust between whites and blacks. You see it manifest itself on the school board. Where are we going to put the money? We put a lot of money in inner-city schools. We've rehabbed a lot of them. A big bond issue was here defeated last November because the people in the suburbs didn't feel like enough of the money was going to be spent on them. It just reinforces the black notion that you can't trust white people and I understand it and I've told a couple of my friends, I've told a couple of my friends that. How do you overcome that mistrust that's still there? You have to change people's hearts to do stuff like that. But believe me, in my opinion, that is an issue, just plain old mistrust.

You know, when I was in school, I met some black guys after I started working in the Neighborhood Youth Corps and they used to tell me what they didn't have in their schools and it was unbelievable. That was during segregation. Back then, the 50s was segregation time; it started breaking down. And see, all that carries over and we're still living with it. We still see it; it's there. Jim Crow is alive and well. Do you know what that term means?

AS: Yeah, I do.

GP: Yeah. I hate it, I hate it. It's the way it is, though.

AS: So how do you think Charlotte, living through the breakdown from segregation to desegregation--. I was just over at the Museum of the New South and they've got this display about how well Charlotte handled desegregation and it was smooth and no problem.

GP: Well, better than most southern cities, no question about that. I mentioned this mayor, Stan Brookshire, he did a lot to voluntarily desegregate the restaurants here in the 60s. It was done on a voluntary basis, some things. But that didn't change the minds and the hearts. I never will forget and I wasn't working for the city, this was before, when I worked for the non-profit group that had a workforce program. There was a demonstration uptown and the mayor was standing out there with the police chief, I'll never forget it, in front of the old county courthouse. I heard the police chief refer to those n-people, you know, the police chief. Of course, you know how that was. Well, you don't know how it was back then, but I know how it was. So that's what you had to deal with and unfortunately, some of that exists. But I think the police department's come miles and miles and miles. I mean, they really have done a great job or tried to do a great job, in my opinion, they really have, working with inner-city residents and being responsive. I guess a lot of this just has to do with economics, the money, how do you really integrate the money. You can integrate people to a degree, but how do you integrate the money? That's the question. You understand what I mean?

AS: I think I do, yeah.

GP: How do you get the money spread around a little better? We've had the same minimum wage in this country for what, since 1996 or '97, something like that, and we've just passed an increase right here in North Carolina, I believe the General Assembly. Can you imagine living on five dollars and fifteen cents an hour?

AS: No.

GP: Can you imagine a mom with two kids, a single head of household living on that? We had a group here, this was not long before I retired back in the 90s, that looked at what a person with four children, the amount of money they would have to make in order to have anywhere near close to a middle income or standard of living. It was like eighteen or nineteen dollars an hour, with fringe benefits. How many people today don't have that? How do you get people up to where they can make that much money? I'll tell you, when it came to buying homes and Bert'll probably tell you this, I think one of the things we found was the biggest reason people cannot qualify is because they owe a doctor or hospital bill. Medical bills keep a lot of people from qualifying for home ownership. That was one of our big goals out there in Belmont was to increase the number of home owners and do away with absentee landowners under the theory that if you own your own property, you're going to take much better care of it, which is true. So we did a lot of that. We did build a lot of homes that people owned in there. That was one of the big things we tried to do, was to increase the number of home owners from like ten percent up to fifty or sixty over a period of years. It's just tough; it really is, it really is.

AS: I wanted to go back to something you mentioned in describing the task force and how it didn't have its own full-time staff.

GP: They had me and Danette Webb, that was that girl's name, Danette Webb. Are you going to talk to Jim?

AS: Yeah, we've spoken with him. I'd like to speak to him again, but we've been working with him. I think he actually gave us your name as someone to speak with. So who was on the task force? Not names, I mean what types of community leaders—

GP: Community leaders. We had to have so many neighborhood residents. We had four or five neighborhood residents; Janice Morris was one. We had business people, Al Alison, we

had—I'll get you a list of them. I think I found it, I still have that report upstairs. But we wanted to identify the people that would have a vested interest in seeing the neighborhood improve. I think we had a pastor from there. We had someone from the city's community development department at the time, because they would be so instrumental in it. We had a police officer.

We had a preacher from, what's the name of that church out there, big black church? They got a new building, it's on Allen Street. When I was growing up, it was the Allen Street Baptist Church and this black congregation bought it, Saint Paul's Baptist Church. Dr. Drummond, Paul Drummond, he was a member of the task force. But you see, the thing was that not many people from that neighborhood went to that church. Most of the people that went there came from Rock Hill and all around Charlotte and other parts of Charlotte. But now, he did, that church made a real effort to provide like an after-school program for the community kids there and get those people more involved. So they did do a lot, more so than any other church organization. But he was really committed to it, Dr. Paul Drummond. But I can get you the complete list of everybody. I mean, I've got a manual up there that thick with everything in it, if you're interested in any of it.

AS: Sure, yeah, that'd be great.

GP: It was a great experience. It was a great learning experience just learning how the city operated. I learned more about how responsive the city could be and it could be real responsive and it could be unresponsive. Unfortunately, like on the trash pickup, I was dealing with a woman over there and I knew her, but she was hard as nails, but we still got things done. They would let us have a truck on Saturday and a driver to do a neighborhood cleanup that the neighborhood residents put everything up on the truck. We did a lot of things like that to really

try to make it, but Bert Green and having Habitat come in there I think was the biggest as far as housing, and then getting the city to put in the curbs and the gutters and the sidewalks made it, I mean, the physical appearance really looked better. I don't know how it looks now. That's what I mean by not having a strong organization. That's how you're going to keep that going. It's just like we would do around here. If somebody started really letting their house get run down, we're going to take action. Well you see, that's what you need over there.

AS: What do you think the most important changes or even if not the most important, what were the most significant changes that you saw take place from when you first started working in the community to the last time you really were there?

GP: Well, I think the biggest things was like what I just said, the number of new houses that Habitat built in there; Bert can tell you exactly how many. I want to say it got to be close to a hundred and I saw that happen while I was still working. The police involvement, having police officers, community policing or whatever they call that, and the infrastructure improvements that the city made, the curbs, the gutters, and the sidewalks, and probably just more responsive services overall.

AS: You talked before about Piedmont Courts. What effect do you think that will have on the community in terms of a positive or negative effect?

GP: Well, a lot of people have been displaced. I don't know where they moved those people to, but to me, the biggest impact will be the gentrification that takes place. You're going to have a lot of—and who am I to say it's not a good thing? I wish there were some way that we could have the same results of gentrification with moderate to low-income residents. The question would be how do you do that. One of the ways I think is with that strong neighborhood organization. I can't put enough emphasis on that. I think that's critical, and

giving them some power, even if it means giving some money so they'll have some power. I used to think if we could combine Belmont and Villa Heights, which is right next door there, and Piedmont Courts and that immediate section, and let them have their own city council that would make decisions about that community with people just from that community, with the power to spend money, what difference it would make. You see, that's the kind of thing we're not willing to do or try, I don't think. You think we would ever do that?

AS: It certainly doesn't sound like it.

GP: Huh?

AS: It doesn't sound like it, based on the history that you've described.

GP: But with the proper support, empowering those people would be—and I hate to use the term “those people,” but empowering those people, I think if we could do that and get them to where they could fend for themselves not only as individuals, but as a community, and build a strong sense of community. Like here, we just had a big block party last Saturday. Everybody was on the street from around here. Now how you build that up—and a lot of that exists in some of those communities. They can be close-knit, but when you get the rogue elements coming in--. You know, when I was a counselor in the Neighborhood Youth Corps and even when I was in the administration with the employment training and I worked a lot, we stationed people in Piedmont Courts. We had an office in the quadruplex that faces Seigle Avenue.

I never will forget talking to a couple of young women that were in our program—they were in training and they worked at the same time—talking about bullets being fired into the house. That's the kind of thing they had to contend with and how do we make that a real safe zone? At one time, the crime rate in Piedmont Courts started going down, at one time. I remember the chief or somebody telling me that. We had a great guy that worked at the housing

authority at the time, John Hayes, and he was into that criminal statistics and that kind of thing. He left several years ago, but he's the one that told me that the crime rate started going down some.

AS: So you've said that the task force worked with groups like Habitat for Humanity. Who were the other allies or what other groups or organizations worked in the community or that the task force would partner with?

GP: Well, the departments of the city and the county government. Some of the business community, like Al Alison. Boy, he'll tell you like it is. I don't know if you're talking to him or whether somebody else is.

AS: I talked to him, yeah.

GP: You did?

AS: Yeah.

GP: He'll be up front with you on it. He served on this last task group. I remember watching that, when they were making a report to city council, he was there and he mentioned my name as chairing the old task force that he served on. I don't know what the outcome of that was. It'll probably get more attention. I think probably another one of the drawbacks that we had was there wasn't enough pressure from the elected officials. Do you need to change the tape?

AS: No, I was just checking to make sure.

GP: There probably wasn't enough pressure from the elected officials. I think Dan Clodfelter left the council, I don't know how long after that. But see, it's the type of thing where you would have to have constant pressure from above to keep the attention of the bureaucrats, so to speak, or the staff to make sure things got done there, and I'm not sure if we

really had that; we probably didn't. In the city within the city program, which came right after that, we had more of that attention, but it just really takes a lot of work. You have to pay attention to it. I always thought if we put as much emphasis on revitalizing a neighborhood like Belmont as we did to building the convention center, the new Bobcats arena, or bringing the NASCAR thing here to Charlotte, you know they're going to have a museum or something, but you see, these things never get that kind of attention, in my opinion. I think Charlotte was probably one of the first cities to have a bond referendum to create money to build low-income housing. I mean, how many cities do you know that do that? I mean, really. I think the manager has it on this new bond issue. It was in her budget that they're debating right now, but it takes that kind of attention.

AS: Related to the Piedmont Courts demolition, what promise do you think the Hope VI program might hold for revitalizing Belmont, for example?

GP: Well, it'll probably be the same outcome as Earle Village right across the beltway there; it'll probably be the same sort of mixture. It'll definitely be better. Now they've done a great job of maintaining that place, but you see, I don't think you have anywhere near the density there as the old Earle Village had. I mean, that was a big, big complex, but this place now that they put in there is not nearly as big as the old Earle Village was. John Hayes wrote the Hope VI grant that got the money to revitalize Earle Village.

AS: I was wondering where—

GP: And Fairview Homes, they did Fairview Homes, and it's looking better. They're doing a good job of maintaining. I think the physical appearance makes so much difference, the physical appearance of a place and the safety, just being safe. It just makes the biggest difference. The city manager is having to fight to get fifty-five new police officers right now

for Charlotte. Our police force hasn't grown with the increase in population, because it might require a tax increase. So? Everything else is going up, isn't it? But probably, it'll turn out a lot like that. From an aesthetic position, if you look at it, how it looks, it'll be a lot better, no question about it. But you'll have a different group of people there. They're not going to let it run down. But see, what happens to those people that, regardless of whether they're on welfare or how low-income they are, what happens to those people? Where do they go? They just go somewhere and recreate an Earle Village. It may be duplexes or single-family homes, it may be another Belmont or something else.

I remember one of the other things that we came up with. The planning commission did a small area plan for Belmont right after or at the same time we were doing our task force. The woman who's the director of planning now, Deborah Campbell, I don't know if she had anything to do with that one, she may have, but there was another woman there, Nakeda Wright, she's gone now. She may have been on our task force. They were big in trying to get some things done, the planning commission, I really believe—or planning department, the department of city government. They tried to do some good things in those neighborhoods, they really have. Once you can get the plan done and get it approved, but getting it implemented and keeping it in a certain condition, that's the key.

But what I was getting ready to tell you was I can take you around parts of Charlotte today, we could go right here, right now and I can show you communities that the planning commission identified as fragile. They have three groups: stable, fragile, and then deteriorating, or whatever it was. One of the things I used to think about was, and this is just the thought process I started going through as a result of my Belmont experience, what kind of wherewithal would the city and the county have when these communities start going in transition? What can

we do to stop it? You know what I mean? How do you stop it? Do you have like a SWAT team that the police has or the special forces in the military? Do you have a special group of people that really focus on that community to keep it from going? It's happening right south of here right now.

I remember when this community started going down. It's only been back, Dilworth's only been back—I lived here in the 50s, it was okay, and it started going down in the 60s, 70s, started to come back in the 80s. That was another thing. What kind of organization would we have to have in the city that did nothing but focus on these neighborhoods in transition? They may have something like that now. See, I've been gone over six years. You see what I mean? Doesn't that make sense that you would have some group who would focus on these neighborhoods that are in transition? And how can we slow that process down and reverse it?

AS: I'm curious. You described Dilworth as sort of like a stable, going down, coming back up. To what do you attribute that change, the going down and then the coming back up?

GP: Well, in this case, I guess people, the city (). The first place that started to get revitalized in downtown Charlotte was fourth ward and this was back in the 70s. Then it just started coming out from there. You ought to see downtown Charlotte now. I mean, it's unbelievable what's going on down there and the number of condos that are being built. People just are starting to want to live back close to the city. It's convenient. I could be at work from right here in five minutes. You can walk to a lot of places. It's good and the new light rail line, I think, is going to add a lot more. They're trying to increase the population density all in here, up and down where that light rail line is going to go. There's always been, if you look at the commuting pattern, sixty or seventy thousand people that came into downtown Charlotte to work.

I heard when we built the new coliseum out on Tyvola Road, when Harvey Gantt was the mayor, he begged them to built it downtown and the powers that be put it out on Tyvola. I never will forget, a friend of mine in the engineering department told me that the square in downtown Charlotte is the most accessible point in Charlotte. You can get in and out of downtown Charlotte really pretty easy, where there's more roads going in and out and there's more parking space downtown.

But the point I was making is that the number of people that come from the suburbs and surrounding counties that go downtown to work everyday, but see, now a lot of those people live downtown. Why drive way out there when you can live downtown in a nice place? You see, and not fight all that traffic. And see you can be closer and you can be, it's just nice, if you've got the money and you can afford it. I could never buy this house now on what I made working for the city of Charlotte; there wasn't no way. It appreciated in value just, gosh, overnight. If I'd have tried to buy this house in 1985 instead of 1980, I probably couldn't have afforded it. That's how fast it started going up.

AS: How about that.

GP: Yeah. But I just think a lot of people just want to be closer to downtown and there's been a lot happening. Again, I think Gantt had a lot to do with revitalizing just downtown Charlotte and making it a nicer place. People quit being scared to be downtown. There's a night life down there now that was never there, even when I was younger. There's everything down there and some great eating places. Have you ever spent any time here?

AS: Not much time downtown, yeah.

GP: It's really nice.

AS: I hear that.

GP: It really is, it's unbelievable, really. The Johnson and Wales University, I mean, they made the biggest difference down on West Trade Street. And there's something else that happened here. It's Hugh McColl who was the man at Bank of America. He made all of the difference in the world, in my opinion. He really helped recreate on North Tryon, from there all the way up, well up to the old Sears building, up to that church that burned down and they made it an arts community. People go there to train to be artists. It was an old burned-out Associate Reform Presbyterian Church and Hugh McColl got that done as well as a lot of other things, paid for half of the new bus garage to put it where it is off of the square. Of course, I'm sure a lot of the people wanted to get all the black folks off the square, because most of the people that rode the bus, I guess, still are black. But now, you see, you got many more white people on the express routes.

You know, when I started working for the Neighborhood Youth Corps and this was in the 60s now, Aidan, I had two or three things that I saw with my own eyes that really, really made an impression on me. It made me realize how difficult it was going to be for us to make middle-income people out of low-income people. A lot of the civil rights laws were passed, the Voting Rights Act, the housing laws, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, great things. They broke down a lot of legal stuff, but the place where it was still easy to get by with discrimination was in employment. I remember a lot of the kids that we had. In Neighborhood Youth Corps, our main task was to get a high school dropout either to go back in school or come in our program and work in a subsidized job part-time and get their GED, work on their GED at least one day a week, with the idea if we couldn't get them to go back to school, we'd get them their GED and get them in the workforce.

Well, I never will forget one class that I personally worked with on interviewing skills. We had about twelve, thirteen young women in that class and we were like in the twelfth or thirteenth week of training and we were doing the part where we were doing mock interviews, learning how to fill out applications, how to conduct yourself on an interview, what are the do's and don'ts of conducting an interview, and that kind of thing. I remember, I think it was in the last week of the class, a couple of the people in there asked me, there were two of us, "Is this really going to make a difference? If we do everything we can do, are we still going to be able to get a job?" You see the point I'm making? It was the psychological barrier they were dealing with, psychological barrier. It's what we used to call in the 60s and the 70s the poverty—come in, honey. Aidan, this is my wife, Teresa. I bet you want to get the car out, don't you?

TP: Yeah, but that's okay. Y'all got much longer to go?

GP: I don't know.

AS: I'm happy to move it real quick.

GP: Yeah, just let him move it.

TP: I'm going to head on to the grocery store.

GP: Did you turn the machine off?

AS: Yeah, it's on pause.

[break in conversation]

GP: It was that psychological thing, the barrier to get over, whether if we really improved ourselves, are we going to get a shot at having a decent job, and I'll give you an example of what we ran into. At All-State Insurance Company, which was located out here on Park Road, they would not hire a woman that had a child out of wedlock. Well, a lot of these girls had children out of wedlock. So they would use that as an excuse, because of the impact it

might make on the other workers. Well, how do I deal with that? How do these people deal with that, who love their children just as much as you love yours, or that those people at All-State out there love theirs? It's just a cultural difference there existed. You can't get into the right or wrong of it, but you see what I mean? We dealt with those kind of things, some of the little tests they would give, like the Wonderly, that didn't have a hill of beans to do with what the job meant. They're all little tricks of the trade, so to speak, that we would run into and of course, I think most of that's gone now.

But I never will forget, one of the reasons it took me six years to get through school at UNC, I worked part-time my first two years, my freshman and sophomore year, plus being in the Marine Corps Reserve on active duty for six months. But I had to work and I worked at a trucking company that had a predominately minority workforce. I met a lot of black guys and we're talking in the 60s now. I got to be good friends with them and they would talk to me. I guess they figured to be white, I was okay. They could talk to me. After I graduated, I married a girl at UNC-C that was just a freshman. I met her during my senior year and I promised her folks, if they would let us get married, that I'd put her through school. Well, the only way that we could do that and get a house was for me to work part-time.

So I went back out to the trucking company. This is in 1968 now, January, February, March, April, because I was out there working the night Martin Luther King was shot to death in April of 1968. I got to know some of those guys and Aidan, you wouldn't believe the number of them that were college graduates. I worked with a guy out there, they called him "Blue," I think that was his last name. He graduated from Johnson C. Smith and had a business administration degree from Temple University in Philadelphia and he was working at that

trucking company for something less than two dollars an hour. No matter what he did, you see? I'm sure some of that exists today. As a matter of fact, I take a weekly edition—

[break in conversation]

GP: Black man in America and this is a survey that was done and some of these issues, race issues and being a black male as opposed to be a female, are really, they go through great in this thing; it's really good. I'll make a copy of it and send it to you, because it might be worth just reading, because some of the same issues, I think, exist today that existed forty years ago.

AS: With that said, maybe some things haven't changed that much in some ways. Are you hopeful for the future?

GP: Yes, yes.

AS: How come?

GP: Well, I'm naturally optimistic. I don't know how much better it'll ever get. Did you see recently where Mel Watt is a congressman from North Carolina, a great guy, and there was an article in the paper not long ago about lending institutions turning down a far greater number of blacks than whites that apply for loans in this day and time. It was just recent, I just saw it. You see? We're just dealing with that. This stuff going on in the school system, people see that as racism out and out; I can tell you that. I know some of those guys and they'll tell me that. It's the same old thing that we dealt with back in the 60s. Here, it's alive and well in 2000. So how do you change that? How do you really change that?

I think the biggest thing is that equality issue in the school system, whether the whites are going to put as much money into the inner-city schools and they will the suburb schools in the suburbs. I think there's three blacks on the school board now and they want to make sure

that it's going to be equal. Even if it goes back to being segregated, dammit, we're going to make it equal. You see? That was the big issue in that bond issue last time, is making sure that some of the money was going to be spent to upgrade inner-city schools even though a lot of money's already been spent. We're not going to spend all the money on the suburbs. There's a task force that was appointed and former governor Jim Martin is chairing it. They're having a hell of a time coming up with recommendations to make about the next bond issue. A lot of it has to do with this, in my opinion, very issue.

See, I'm just one of these people, I'm very sensitive to that, because being Greek, I can remember a little bit of discrimination that I suffered and my daddy did. When I was going through recruit training at Paris Island, South Carolina, you ever heard of that place?

AS: Sure.

GP: It was thirteen weeks of hell, but it made me a better person. I never will forget, in the middle of training, we changed drill instructors. At the time, I had one of the positions of, so to speak, honor. I was the drill instructor's house mouse. That meant I maintained the drill instructor's living quarters. That position and the squad leader and the guy who carried the flag all made private first class off the island and that was an honor. When this guy took over as senior drill instructor, he got up in front of the whole platoon and said, "The first thing I'm going to do is get rid of that g-d Greek."

AS: Really?

GP: Yes, sir. He didn't say g-d; he said goddamned. And there was a Jewish kid from New York City; how that boy made it through that training, I will never know. But he said that, "I'm going to get rid of that g-d Greek." I'll never forget it and it had an impact on my attitude the rest of the way, because I really wanted to make that straight off the island. But anyway, I

witnessed a little bit of that and I had a little trouble with my high school sweetheart. Her dad didn't like me because I was Greek. But anyway, I experienced it, so it helped to sensitize me. But I think working with those high school dropouts did more to wake me up and really see how bad discrimination was. I mean, it wasn't something somebody told me something, but I experienced it; I saw it firsthand. () we got a job on our hands. No law's going to cure this.

Then being around some of the staff people, one of my very best friends, a guy by the name of Calvin Harris, he was another counselor, he died not too long ago, but he used to tell me the way things were and we used to get in big arguments, because I wouldn't believe him. But the longer I was there, he was right and I was wrong, because he was coming from the black perspective and I was coming from a white perspective, two completely—well, not completely different cultures, but different cultures. It's just a miniature version of what's going on in Iraq between the Sunnis and the Kurds and the Shiites, only on a much lesser degree. That helps, you know, just the mistrust.

AS: So of all the things that you've done and all the things you've described to me, are there—

GP: Can you speak up, please?

AS: Yeah, sure. Of all the things you've done and all the things that you've described being involved in, what stands out in your mind that you're most proud of having done?

GP: I think my work with the youth, with the city in our youth programs that we had. One year, we got a thousand inner-city residents placed in unsubsidized jobs, meaning in the private sector, inner-city youth in one summer. The number of weeks that they worked, we knew where they worked, how much they made, how many hours they worked, and they generated a payroll of I don't know how much money, and that money came back to their

community and I think that's the key. You see, these were young people that we were able to get into a job and it made a difference in their lives. That, my work with that Belmont community, because I just fell in love with the place; I clearly identify with it. And Janice Morris, you know, that lady I was telling you about, she and her mom and some of those other people, because they so desperately wanted to make it better and that's what we're here for, to help each other and make it just a tad better.

When the time comes for you to leave and it's going to happen to all of us, when you look back on it, what can you say that made just a tiny difference in the lives of some people? And I think now I can do that, because I've done some other things. I've been involved in the prison ministry at the jail and I do volunteer work, crisis ministry, getting low-income people furniture, and just a lot of different things like that. But a lot of my time has been with that community. That's where my emphasis has been because they needed the help the most. So I feel good about that. I mean, I really feel good about it and I feel good that the Lord gave me the wherewithal to be that kind of person. I'm not the smartest person by any means, but I think I do have some combination of heart and a little bit of common sense to help get some things done. You know what I mean? So I feel good about it.

AS: Thank you so much. This has really been wonderful.

END OF INTERVIEW

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