Interviewee: Bert Green

Interviewer: Aidan J. Smith

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START OF DISC 1, TRACK 1

AS: This is Aidan Smith with Mr. Bert Green, June fifteenth, 2006 in Charlotte, North Carolina. Mr. Green, to get started, I was hoping we could begin, if you wouldn't mind telling me a little bit briefly about yourself, when you were born, where you were born, the title which you'd like to be referred to by, that sort of thing.

BG: Okay. My name is Bert Green. I'm the executive director here at Habitat for Humanity of Charlotte, have been since 1993. I was born in Lexington, Kentucky, the bluegrass state, and lived here; the family moved a couple times. I have lived in Charlotte for fifty-five years—no, fifty-four years, excuse me.

AS: Great. So how old were you when you came to Charlotte?

BG: About three—four years old, excuse me.

AS: So maybe you could tell me a little bit about what was Charlotte like growing up here and what if any memories you have of the city itself.

BG: Well, my family moved to a neighborhood in south Charlotte, which is now just south of Park Road Shopping Center, south of Woodlawn Road. One memory I have of that neighborhood is we were probably less than a mile from Billy Graham's family's farm on Park Road and I always enjoy sharing with people that I can remember when there were cattle

grazing on Park Road at his family farm and that's a memory that's stuck with me through the years. At that time, it was pretty much the southernmost end of the community, Park Road and Tyvola Road, everything else. Beyond that was fairly undeveloped, but beginning to start developing and South Park was not there then. I think Park Road Shopping Center was the second, I think, next Cameron Village in Raleigh, the second shopping center in the state and still survives to this day and is kind of a landmark for that part of the community. It's interesting that there have been a lot of commercial developments come and go, but that one has stayed and thrived and prospered. It's been a real landmark, like I say, for the community.

AS: And have you stayed in Charlotte since?

BG: Yeah, I actually left to go to—I went to Hargrave Military Academy as a post-graduate after I graduated from high school, stayed there one year and then went to North Carolina State University and graduated in four years in mechanical engineering and then came back to Charlotte and started working with my dad's company and worked there for twenty-two years and then felt a calling to come to Habitat, to work here, had been volunteering for a number of years, and really loved this ministry and what we do and the opportunities that we have to work with different folks in different communities and really have enjoyed tremendously the opportunities that I've been given here. So I've been here since April of '93.

AS: What sort of work is Habitat doing in Charlotte now?

BG: We are still building primarily in fill housing within the city limits. We are one of three affiliates in Mecklenburg County. Of course, we build within the Charlotte city limits. We have a sister affiliate in the Davidson, Cornelius, Huntersville, Morrisville area in the north country and then we have a sister affiliate in Matthews who builds there. So there are three of us in this county and then we're surrounded. Every county around us has a Habitat affiliate. So

Habitat is well-known not only in this county, but throughout the state, I think we're the third or fourth in the number of affiliates statewide. I think Michigan and Florida may have a few more affiliates than we do. Habitat is very well-known here, I think primarily because of the Jimmy Carter build here in 1987 and the publicity that the affiliate, that the organization got really spiked interest in the work we do and the ministry. So there were quite a number of folks who started affiliates shortly thereafter and since then.

AS: Where is Habitat working in Charlotte now?

BG: We're working still building some homes in one of the original three neighborhoods we started in. We started in Optimist Park. We then moved to Belmont and then to Villa Heights and then to Lakewood, which on the west side. In fact, we met with the folks from Lakewood yesterday to review a development plan that they've put together to guide them over the next ten to fifteen years. It's a very encouraging, incredibly encouraging process that was developed and a wonderful vision that they have for the future development of the Lakewood community. So we started building in north Charlotte. We are still building some homes. We've just finished up about the third of four houses that we've started recently in the Belmont/Villa Heights area, haven't built anything in the Optimist Park area in a number of years, though the private sector has just completed a very nice couple of complexes in that neighborhood. We're building primarily in the west side of town and the northwest side of town, in the Druid Hills neighborhood, Lincoln Heights neighborhood, Lakewood community, Oakview Terrace, Thomasboro-Hoskins, those areas of west Charlotte, Westerly Hills. Those are primarily where we're building right now.

AS: And how does Habitat select the areas in which it's building?

BG: It's based on a number of things. One, availability of land or structures to work on, willingness of the neighborhood to partner with us, whether or not we feel like there's some sustainable activity that we can conduct there and just any one of those criteria.

AS: Do you know how Habitat got involved working in the Belmont neighborhood?

BG: Yeah, actually we started work, as I mentioned earlier, in the Optimist Park community. The Carter project was in '87 and I believe our first house in Belmont was in, I think, '89, if I'm not mistaken, '88 or '89. Well, no, let's see, I know it was in '88. We've built close to two hundred homes there, around a hundred and ninety, really, homes in the Belmont community. We worked then in partnership with the Belmont CDC and basically built on property that was either donated to us or that we purchased from the owners or, in some cases, we bought some land from the city that they had acquired through code enforcement and where they had demolished homes that didn't meet code enforcement. Those are pretty much the three ways we got land in that area.

AS: I want to ask you more about the Habitat projects in Belmont, but I want to first go back a little bit and ask you, growing up in Charlotte, do you have any memories about the Belmont neighborhood or community?

BG: No, I really don't. You know, it's interesting, I was talking to somebody yesterday and we were talking about the Thanksgiving Day parade, of all things, and I was reflecting on the fact that it was a big event here; it still is. Growing up here in Charlotte, it started at the Sears Building, then the Sears Building on North Tryon Street, which is now the Hall Marshall Center, at the corner of Tenth and North Tryon, and it ran all the way to the corner of East and South Boulevards. Every Thanksgiving, it was something we all looked forward to and went down, I guess it was before you had your big meal.

One of the things that really drew us to that event was the participation of the high school bands from Second Ward High School and from West Charlotte High School and from Sterling High School. They were all primarily blacks, they were all black schools at that time. You have to realize this was in the late 50s and 60s and we used to always really appreciate the uniqueness that each of those bands brought to their participation in the parade. It's interesting because basically Second Ward School was destroyed, I mean as part of urban renewal. Sterling High School was basically—all the students at Sterling were pretty much shipped off to other schools and I think that's now an elementary; I think that school is closed and it's now an elementary. And so West Charlotte's really the only surviving school from that era until day.

But my knowledge of black Charlotte, if you want to call it that, was very limited really until I came back here, settled back in Charlotte, and started working for some folks who were campaigning for public office and then I became more aware of low-income neighborhoods and their place in this community and their contributions to this community and the neglect that this community had for them. Obviously, when I began working with Habitat, that became much more prevalent and I got to see a lot more and was really struck by how much people in these neighborhoods cared for what they did, but how few resources they had to affect any major change. I think that was one of the things that drew me to this ministry, and the friendliness of folks and their encouragement along the way.

AS: So could you tell me a little bit more about what the neighborhood was like at that time?

BG: Actually I became, I guess, aware; I started working in the Optimist Park community in 1986, the fall of '86. Then the next summer, actually the next spring, we started prepping for the Jimmy Carter project in '87, or that summer. So I was probably coming to the

Optimist Park community once a month pretty regularly through my church; I got involved through my church at St. John the Baptist Church. We would come down and work all morning on a Saturday and then have an opportunity at lunchtime to go have lunch at the chapel of Christ the King Center in Optimist Park. Then we would have fellowship there with all the other volunteers and homeowners and neighborhood residents who were hosting us for lunch. So we kept that up until we moved across the street. We still had those opportunities for fellowship even when we moved our office out of the chapel's facilities.

Then as we moved into Belmont in '88, I think the first house that I remember working on at Belmont, though it wasn't the first house Habitat worked on, was one that we built with the youth from St. John the Baptist Church in the summer, I believe, of '88 or '89; I think it was '88. Our youth minister knew that I was very attached to Habitat and proposed the idea of our youth building a home there as part of their summer mission project. So it had never been done before. I don't at that time any youth groups had built a house for Habitat, or if they did, we weren't aware of it. We put together an opportunity for this youth group to participate. It was basically fourteen-year-old kids and older and they wound up staying up at Davidson College at that time just so they could have the experience of being away. We'd get up every morning and drive them to Charlotte and then in a week, they built this house.

It was quite an experience. In fact, there is a picture of some of the kids at the dedication in our lobby out here. It was just a wonderful event for all of us. We built the home in partnership with Linda and Henry Sturtevant over in the Belmont community and their children. As a result of that, I got to know—and working on several other houses after that with other homeowners, but that's really how I got my first memory of the Belmont community. It was a wonderful event. We had committed to raise the money to build the house and went to

the church to get support and we basically started the house without full funding, just in the knowledge that once the parents saw what the kids were doing, it would move them and in fact, on Sunday after we got started—we started on a Saturday—the next day, the *Observer* ran a full page, above the fold—not a full page, but above the fold—article on the kids' activity there and our fundraising was done. When the parents saw that and saw how excited the kids were, and they were hearing because the kids would call home at night and tell everybody how everything was going, our fundraising was pretty easy after that and so we were able to complete that successfully.

I mean, that's just an example of building on faith. In fact, we do a build every year, Habitat does, around the world called "Building on Faith," which is a celebration of our partnerships with our faith community in cities around the country and around the world as well. So that's my first memory of starting there and in fact, that was one of our first sponsored homes in that neighborhood. A group of Christian churches, Eastway Christian, South Park Christian, and one other Christian church came together and built a house there and that was another sponsored house in that area. Then we started getting more and more groups interested.

Then the city about that time was doing some planning in that area and started realizing that there needed to be some infrastructure changes taking place and so they started planning then for the addition of curbs and gutters, storm drains, water and sewer where there was not, basically all these services where they didn't exist before, and basically started on that really in, I think, '90. It took them two and three years, I think, to finish it. It was a major, major infrastructure improvement in the community: sidewalks, curb and gutters, storm drains, paving. And it was one of the first things I remember, one of the commitments that I think I remember from the city toward that community to improve, to make major improvements in

addition to the work they were doing with community policing at that time. They were just starting, as I recall, community policing about then, in that neighborhood.

AS: So what were some of the challenges facing residents in the community?

BG: Well, there were a number of challenges then. The destrification was not one of them, but I think crime was a significant challenge in that community and that has ameliorated somewhat since then, but it was a major challenge. I mean, it was interesting. I moved—let's see, I bought a house in that community in, it was either 1991 or '92, and renovated it and moved there in 1992 and lived on Allen Street, the corner of Allen and Twentieth Street—or Nineteenth Street, excuse me. I'm just trying to think. I remember one Saturday morning I woke up and I heard this shotgun go off and I didn't know it was a shotgun at the time until you could hear the pellets falling down through the leaves of the tree over my house. You would hear gunshots regularly in that community, some of them directed at someone, some of them just directed in frustration, not directed at anybody.

So that was something folks in that neighborhood had to live with pretty regularly and so that was one of the main focuses of the neighborhood association and the CDC. The CDC didn't really get—well, that's not true. There was a CDC then, but the neighborhood association and the CDC both were focused on neighborhood safety. I remember we did a neighborhood plan, I think it was in 1995. There were two issues, as I recall, that were key issues in that plan. One was neighborhood safety and the second was the presence of corner convenience stores that were basically just magnets for drug trade and illegal sale of alcoholic beverages to minors. I remember in that plan, one of our goals was to try to find a way to buy those businesses out and replace them with development more conducive to a safer neighborhood. They're still there to this day. I mean, they're just unfortunately a symbol to our

failure to do anything about that and I know other neighborhoods struggle with the same presence in their communities. But those were the two primary issues that we were working on and we were also working on increasing the amount of home ownership in the community and also, at the same time, trying to find a way to enable folks who own homes to stay there, folks who are living on retirement incomes. So those were the issues that we were focusing on then.

AS: Could you tell me a little bit about, in Belmont for example, how Habitat works? So how does it, for example, empower people to own their own homes?

BG: Well essentially, we conducted what we call orientation sessions in the community to encourage folks that were interested in home ownership to attend these sessions, learn about how to become a homeowner, apply if they were interested, tell them about the program. There are three basic requirements that are pretty common pretty much for any Habitat affiliate around the world, and that is one, you have to demonstrate the need for housing. Here in Charlotte, that need can be met by any one of three different criteria: one is that you live in substandard conditions, you live in overcrowded conditions, or you pay more than thirty percent of your income for housing. So if you meet any of those three conditions, you would meet the need criteria.

The second is that you demonstrate the ability to pay for the house after you buy it. And the third is that you are willing to partner with us in the process. A lot of folks don't realize that our homeowners pay for their homes and so we do a lot of the same qualification, develop a lot of the same qualification criteria that banks use, the only difference being that we charge zero percent interest for our houses. As you know, we're a Christian ministry and one of the founding tenets of this ministry is that when you lend money to those in need, you don't charge interest. But we still do a lot of the same background checks, credit checks on folks, that banks

do when anybody goes to borrow money. So there's a reasonable expectation that they'll pay the mortgage back, because everybody realizes that when that they're part of the income stream that helps us build; their mortgage payments help us build more houses for other houses.

Then our sweat equity component, which is the third criteria, is that folks put in hours on other folks' homes before their house is started and they complete at least two hundred and fifty hours of sweat equity before they can move into their house. And if they don't, then we'll lease to own until they do and upon completion of those hours, we will convert it from a lease to a mortgage. Most folks wind up getting their hours filled, completed before they moved in, but occasionally that is not the case and we wind up leasing the property to them.

AS: I think you said there were two hundred houses in Belmont, so it sounds like the response was fairly positive.

BG: Yeah. I think we doubled the instance of home ownership there in about, well, from '88 to the early 90s. Then one of the plans that the Belmont CDC did, the '95 plan, I believe called for an attempt to try to develop an economic strata of housing in the community so that you had mixed economic groups within the community. We, basically being entry-level home builders, we were looking for Habitat there, the CDC was looking for Habitat to fill the entry-level need and the CDC was going to try to find other builders, for-profit builders who would try to meet the other two levels of housing in the community, because there really, other than entry-level low-income housing, that was pretty much it. Moderate income or even upper moderate income was not even present at that time, though that's changed significantly in the last three to five years.

So one of the goals of the community was to have a third entry-level, a third middle-income homes, and a third upper-income homes. So that pretty much capped, as we started

looking at the amount of homes that might get developed there with the available land that was there, that might replace existing homes that wouldn't meet code enforcement, we thought that two hundred would pretty much be the limit on the number of entry-level homes that the community would want. And so we pretty much set a goal to cap out at that and we're pretty close to there right now.

In the last, I'd say three to five years, as the city has announced efforts to replace the Piedmont Courts area with a Hope XI redevelopment project, and because of the community's proximity to downtown, and because it's a nice neighborhood, I mean it is a nice neighborhood, outside interests have gotten very interested in—non-government, non-non-profit, the for-profit industry has gotten interested in the land there and so there's the price of land, you can't buy a lot there now for less than twenty-five grand. The nature of the neighborhood is changing and I think one of the biggest concerns, not the biggest concern, but one of the biggest concerns for the community right now is gentrification: are they going to be able to keep ( )? Are folks who have grown up there and still have homes there, who are living on fixed incomes, are they going to be able to stay there? That's one of the biggest concerns.

AS: What do you think needs to be done to address that concern, or who has an interest in it?

BG: Well, I think the CDC has petitioned the council, I think, to look at ways, at some property tax abatements or forgiveness, not necessarily forgiveness but postponement, having a way so that—I think some of the items that are under consideration are having property taxes abated until the property is sold or paid off at a lower level and accrued on the back end, so that if the property is sold and the city recovers any back taxes that are due as a result of any abatement program they develop. And there may be some other ways they're considering doing

this, which may even include forgiveness. I just don't know what's under serious consideration right now, but I know, I mean that's not just an issue for Belmont. It's an issue for Wilmore and the south side of Charlotte next to the Dilworth community. Any of the inner-city communities that are now really attractive because of their proximity to the center city are faced—Wesley Heights is another prime example—with this challenge.

AS: What other groups, if any, has Habitat worked with in Belmont? You mentioned the city got involved.

BG: We've been involved with the city, the neighborhood association, the CDC. At the time, we got involved with Christmas in April to do some work there; they're now called Rebuilding Together, I believe is the name of their organization now. Of course, many of our sponsors have done special projects there, churches and city groups and what-not have done work there, but those are primarily the groups that we worked with in that community.

AS: You've described some, I think your first memory of working in Belmont. Are there any other memories that stand out for you of working in the neighborhood, building homes, people you've worked with, that sort of thing?

BG: Well, I think my most vivid memories are those that occurred leading up to and including the time I lived there. The decision to move there, quite frankly, I guess I was serving on the Board of Directors and was also volunteering on the weekends to lead crews not only from my church, but from other groups that would come out and build. I was in the community one day and I don't know how to describe it. Basically, everybody had gone home and I was going back up to lock up the trailer and head home and just had an experience there which I've come to identify as just a feeling of God's presence right then and there. I mean, no burning bush, no voice from above, but just a feeling that I was where I was supposed to be and I later

interpreted that to mean that I should be living there. So basically, I was kind of obedient to that experience and purchased a house there and chose to move there.

My experiences there were some of the richest in my life. I had a wonderful next-door neighbor who really, Dee McCray, she and her husband were just great neighbors. I had some not-so-wonderful neighbors, but I mean that's true, I don't care what neighborhood you live in, but just had a really wonderful experience with Dee and her family. She had quite a large family and a lot of grandchildren and really, really enjoyed my time there. Dee actually still lives there. I'm not sure if she—she's not in good health and she had a fire in her house recently and her family was trying to get the house fixed up so she can move back in. But my experiences with them and also my experiences with special events that we had in the community were just very rich and especially the dedications that we have.

That's one of the things that drives me as a member of this organization, whether it's on staff or board member or volunteer or whatever, is the opportunity to participate in the celebrations that occur, that surround the many dedications and completions of the homes that we have. Those are rich. I mean, they're incredibly sensitive and full of joy and really invigorating, encouraging, empowering, not only for homeowners, but for the folks who have the opportunity and the blessing to share with those homeowners at that particular moment.

That's the one thing that I love about this ministry is it gives—you know, we spoke earlier about the fact that growing up, I was pretty much ignorant of the conditions of neighborhoods in which our black brothers and sisters lived and this ministry gave me the opportunity to have more exposure to that and to really have a relationship with folks through the process of building this house. We get recognized as a home builder and indeed, we are a home builder; we're a good home builder. But the house building is just a conduit for what we

do or try to do, and that is encourage and empower relationships with those that we get the blessing and the opportunity to build with, and with folks that come out and work together as part of the process. That's really what this ministry is about and the home building is just icing on the cake, quite frankly.

AS: Could you describe the dedication ceremonies or one of the experiences you've had like that, that is an example of what you just told me?

BG: Well, I mean almost all of them, really all of them are an opportunity for volunteers and staff, board members to really stop and reflect up on the many blessings and privileges that we've been afforded growing up. In every dedication, homeowners are just incredibly emotional and thankful and feeling blessed and sharing that thankfulness with all those who are present. I haven't been to a dedication where there's that isn't really a dynamic that's involved, whether it's at one house, or whether it's a dedication where we do multiple dedications at a church in the neighborhood. It's always a dynamic that's present.

I think for me, I won't speak for everybody else, but for me, every one of them is a time to stop and really reflect upon the many blessings in my own life, reflect on how important my home was growing up, as a young adult and as an older adult. I think about the fact that every really important decision in my life was made around the dinner table, didn't matter where I lived, and in discussion with family or friends or both. You know, when you stop to think about that, it just really reminds you of how important home is and how much I think for granted I have taken that over the years and how critical, I don't think we stop to think about how fundamental having a safe place to lay your head down every night is, how important it is to have a warm place to sleep in the winter and a comfortable place to sleep in the summertime is, how important it is to have a place for your child to do their homework at night that's quiet and

enables them to do their best, what a financial tool home ownership is for folks and really how that tool is probably the largest—not probably, is the largest financial instrument that most folks have in their lives for developing a nest egg that they can rely on in retirement or rely on to help their children should they want to go to college and use the equity in the home to be able to provide that or to buy a car with. It's a tremendous, tremendous economic tool and to be able to provide that to more folks is a real blessing; it's an incredible blessing.

When I think of a dedication, when I think of my participation in dedications, it always comes with just time to stop and be so appreciative and so reflective on how privileged my life has been, and just what a wonderful opportunity home ownership has provided me through my life, and to be able to realize that this homeowner has that same opportunity. Like I say, I think just about every dedication that I go to, that reminder comes back. For me, that's one of the reasons this ministry has been so important in my life. It really allows me more opportunities to stay connected with what's important to me through my faith, through the expression of that with the folks that I get to work with here, or through the expression of that with the homeowners that I get to work with, or volunteers that I get to work with. That is something you can stop and reflect upon every day, which wasn't the case prior to my work here and that's one of the things that I love about working here. It keeps me in touch daily with what's important to me.

AS: Do you still live in the Belmont community?

BG: No actually, I married in 1995 and I kept that house—I moved out of there in late '95—and couldn't get my wife and children interested in living there. At that time, it was still a tough neighborhood. It's interesting, I can remember my wife and I having discussions about it and she was very uncomfortable about moving there and she asked me, she said, "Do you ever

feel that?" And I said, "You know, I have never, ever felt that." That was one of the reasons that I chose to move there was because I never did feel uncomfortable there, ever when I was ever there, despite things that occurred around you, despite the knowledge that there were activities going on there that were unsafe.

But I never felt unsafe there and that was one of the reasons I felt called to be there, to explore that and understand that better. She said, "Well you know, it really helps when you're 6'5 and you weigh two hundred and fifty pounds. You can feel safe about anywhere." I'm sure there's some truth to that, but I just never could encourage my family to join me there and so we bought a house, not far really, just in an adjoining neighborhood and live there. I kept the house and rented it for really until just a few years ago and then sold it.

AS: How has Belmont changed since Habitat first got involved there, or has it?

BG: The incidence of home ownership has increased significantly. There's been a lot of infrastructure changes that have occurred there. Belmont seems to be kind of the proving ground for different, or one of the proving grounds, I guess, for different types of policing systems that seem to be in vogue at the time. We were early involved with community policing or some variation or derivative of community policing to try to address community safety issues. I think the CDC is much stronger now, probably as strong, or it's stronger now than it ever has been. That's one of the tremendous improvements in the community over the years. I don't know, I think the neighborhood association is also much stronger than it has been over the years. I think part of that is due in part to the potential for gentrification there and folks realize that there's something there to save and they want to be a part of that process. And for those who have home ownership there, they've got a vested interest in the community and they want to see things change and be a part of the decisions surrounding that change.

The Hope VI revitalization of Belmont Courts will bring a lot more home ownership opportunities there, coupled with the proximity to the downtown. You're going to probably now see and you are seeing much more middle-income folks moving into that community and you'll probably see some other development that'll start to surface, that'll attract even higher incomes. Downtown property is very valuable and very sought after. I think that will continue to drive the decisions that are before neighborhood leaders and community development leaders there. So those are the big changes.

One of the great things about that community is it's an established community. Physically, you've got a lot of old trees in the community, so it looks as nice from that standpoint as any neighborhood in Charlotte. There's mature trees, nice sidewalks in the community. It has the potential to be as nice as any community in this city and we've encouraged families through the years just to hang in there, that we knew there were challenges, but better times were coming and we've worked closely with the police department to address community safety issues through the years. I think families are now being rewarded for their patience and steadfastness. A lot of good things, I think, are going to happen there.

AS: What do you think needs to be done to make sure those good changes do happen?

BG: I think some of it is really out of the hands of—I think that's part of what comes with gentrification. For a long time, changes within the community were really a result of a lot of the work done by the CDC and the neighborhood associations in partnerships with different organizations that were doing work there. Now as the private sector has gotten more interested in the community, a lot of things are going to happen there in that community that are really outside the direction of those organizations. But I think those two organizations, in partnership

with the city, are really going to be instrumental in accomplishing the latest development plans, neighborhood action plans that are in place.

That's one of the things I think the city has done through the years that has been really helpful, not just in Belmont, but throughout the city. Belmont is one of the ten targeted neighborhood in Charlotte for community improvement. In every one of those neighborhoods, the city's tried to institute planning processes that basically are resident-led and that include a tremendous amount of resident input, and those are very challenging to pull off, just because of the availability of folks. To try to continue to update those plans, to try to continue to get resident input so that the plans that are executed are reflective of neighborhood input and neighborhood desire, are critical, I think very critical.

I'll give you an example in another neighborhood. We work in the Druid Hills community and in working there, the county had gone in there and established the location for a park in that community and had acquired land to be able to go ahead and build that park, and the neighborhood association basically said, "You know, this is great, but we've talked to residents and we'd really like this park located in a different part of the community." To the county's credit, they sat down and listened and decided, "Alright, let's do this." So they essentially halted any acquisition of land that they had begun and listened to the neighborhood, came up with a new plan, and started acquiring new land. We wound up buying the old land, or a portion of it anyway from them, so we could build houses on it.

So it was kind of a win-win situation; not kind of, it *was* a win-win situation, I think. That was really all part of a planning process that the neighborhood was going through to look at and envision how they would like the community to be, which included the addition and renovation of a new school, this park, again infrastructure improvements, and a vision for more

ownership in the community and the renovation of existing housing as well. That's an example and I think the Belmont community will have many more opportunities to participate in and change plans that have been developed.

I know one of the things that you talk about when you do planning is when you get through with a plan, one of the things that you can count on is that not everything in that plan is going to come out like you planned it. There's definitely going to be changes involved in it, because development is a dynamic sport. Things change, things happen, and so the residents need to be flexible. There have been great things happening and one of them was the CDC was involved in building an elderly apartment complex, some really attractive rental housing so that they have a track record, along with the housing that they're building right now, of really working hard to make the vision of the community a reality.

AS: Do you think the changes that are currently underway in Belmont and I'm thinking you mentioned the replacement of Piedmont Courts, do you think that will have the sort of effect that you've described, this opening of possibility?

BG: I think there's two sides to the effects of that development. We're going to lose the character of the neighborhood that has been a vital component of that community for years. It's going to be, while the housing authority will keep a certain number of units in that redesigned complex available for low-income families, we will basically lose overall a number of affordable housing units. Now you can make the case that a number of those units were boarded up, because they couldn't maintain them with the resources they had and so they were really offline anyway. But overall, we will have fewer affordable units in that community as a result of that renovation.

But on the second hand, you're going to have a facility that's built back there, that should be able to sustain itself from a standpoint of maintenance. That's one of the problems that locally the housing authority has had, is they don't get enough funding from HUD to maintain the properties that they have in this market. It's an expensive market, from a standpoint of labor and materials, to operate in. So that's one of the reasons that the Hope VI development projects, with the mixed-income features that are in there, enables them to develop a project that can sustain all the levels of income housing that are in there, because the upper-income housing can subsidize the maintenance required on the lower rents that can't meet maintenance needs.

So that's one of the advantages of Hope VI. The other is, one of the disadvantages is that you get fewer units of affordable housing. But it's a market, it's just part of the reality of being able to build something that you have reasonable expectations of being able to maintain itself. Like I said before, we will lose some of the advantages of having those families there, but we will replace it with a facility that can maintain better conditions for the families that do get the opportunity to be there. The housing authority really looks to develop, in all its projects, to develop a conduit for families who can enter at a subsidized level, who have limited resources and skills, and through their different programs try to enhance their skills and resources so they can move through the different opportunities that are there and eventually reach market-rate housing, whether it's rental or home ownership.

AS: Is there anyone that you would recommend or think that we should speak with?

BG: Well, I would certainly speak to, try to get folks in all of the—try to attract the attention of anybody in the Belmont community, CDC, Reggie, or any of his board members, and then certainly with the neighborhood association; they're two different entities. Any of the

folks in the leadership of the neighborhood association, I'm not familiar with who the leadership is right now, but I'm sure Reg can put you in touch with the folks there that are currently taking on leadership roles. I can give you the names of some of our homeowners who've lived there for awhile and who've been there for probably fifteen years or so. One that comes to mind is O.J. and Mary Hood. Let's see, I think they're on Sixteenth Street, one house off of Seigle. And then anyone of our homeowners who have been there for a number of years, I can get you their names and addresses and contacts that I'm sure would help you in what you're trying to develop here.

AS: That would be wonderful. I guess I just have really one last question—well, I guess two questions. Of all the work you've done in Charlotte, what are you most proud of, if you can think of one thing, or even just in general?

BG: Well, we've had the opportunity to work in so many different neighborhoods. I'm proud of the work we've done in all our neighborhoods, quite frankly, and the opportunities that we've had to build relationships. We spent a lot of time in helping develop the different plans, specifically the plans that got developed early on in the Belmont community. In the Lakewood community for instance, in the 90s, we had the opportunity to partnership with First Presbyterian Church and the Lakewood Community Development Corporation and build a preschool there, in partnership with those organizations and the neighborhood. One of the things we liked about that particular opportunity was that that preschool operated on the basis that if neighborhood residents were active in the operation of the school, maintenance of the school, or had a hands-on participation in the school, their children could attend there at a reduced rate. So it really developed a sense of ownership, if you will, with the community

residents and the school. We were really proud to be a part of that piece of the development of the Lakewood community.

As you can see by this latest plan that they've developed, Lakewood, as I was mentioning yesterday when we were talking about it, is going to be kind of an oasis along Rozzelles Ferry Road, a development oasis, because their vision includes the inclusion of some development opportunities for retail that aren't along that corridor. As Dave Nichols said there, it's kind of the forgotten corridor and so if they're successful in pulling off this vision, it will really become an oasis from a development standpoint, retail and residential housing as well. It's been a real pleasure to work with that community, as with other communities around Charlotte.

We've had a great relationship with the folks in Westerly Hills and Thomasboro-Hoskins and Druid Hills and Lincoln Heights. All of these neighborhoods have strong, have involved residents through their neighborhood associations who have been involved in developing neighborhood action plans and who get together regularly to hold themselves accountable. I think that's one of the most encouraging things that I see, is the city providing resources to help neighborhoods stay accountable with the plans that they develop. That has been wonderful to participate in and be a part of.

We've had other opportunities to work outside the box in other communities. In partnership with Elon Homes, we've built a couple of homes in partnership with them to build or to provide housing for kids coming out of their program that are eighteen years old, that have nowhere to go. They have no siblings or no family that they can rely on. State funding provides for them up to age eighteen. After that, they're on their own and so they wanted the opportunity to be able to minister to these kids and to help move them along. Some of them were doing well

in school and were looking at different opportunities and this gave them an opportunity to stay involved in their lives and help them move on to the next steps in their own personal development. So we did a couple of houses with them on their facility down in south Charlotte. That was a wonderful experience; it was terrific. I'm proud of what we had the opportunity to do there.

It's just been great to see communities rise up and demand more. I mean, I remember Linda Williams, who's a Habitat homeowner and who was very involved with her neighborhood, who just constantly demanded more from the city, more from the police, more from us as a partner in that community, more from the church in that community. While it was very demanding, for me, it was one of the signs that a community is growing and healing, is when leadership can stand up and be more demanding and demand more accountability from public officials. I can remember communicating with our staff and board about that and just saying, "This is a sign that the community is growing." The community is returning to a more healthy community when you have indigenous leadership that is standing up and saying, "This is what we need and this is what we expect and this is what we see, these services being provided in other neighborhoods, and we want no less." It's terrific to see that kind of leadership surface and that kind of leadership empower the communities that it serves. That's been wonderful to see and wonderful to witness, not just in Belmont or Optimist Park, but in other neighborhoods that we

serve in as well.

AS: Is there anything that you think would be important for an historian to know about Belmont or the work that Habitat has done there, that I haven't asked you?

BG: No, I think, like any organization, we've had successes and failures there, but I think in looking back on it, our goal has always been to empower those that we serve there, whether they be our homeowners, or any opportunities that we were given or opportunities that we take advantage of to serve the community. Our eye has been on that prize since we started and it still is, and I think that's one of the reasons that we're still here, because we see that as our primary goal, to serve those who we're partnering with. We don't build houses *for* anybody; we build houses *with* folks.

When our homeowners advise us of things that need to happen in the community based on their observation, we try to respond to it as quickly as we can, because we know they're our ambassadors there, not only ambassadors for that community, but they're ambassadors for Habitat as well. I think that has fueled us and encouraged us through the good times and the not-so-good times. Actually, we had a homeowner who was—not in that neighborhood, though—we had a homeowner who was shot in an adjacent neighborhood, actually when we were living right across the street from her. She wasn't shot in the community, but I mean, it was just a reminder of just how tense things were. So when we get notification of things that need to change there, we take it seriously and we work with the appropriate parties to try to make the appropriate changes happen.

We started working there in '88, so it's been almost twenty years since we've been working there and there's lots of changes that occurred and I think we're starting to see—and I don't care if you're Habitat-Charlotte, or the smallest Habitat or the largest Habitat in the country, we've always known that this is not a ministry that can do it all by ourselves. We know that we can advocate for those in need; we can advocate for communities who are trying to rebuild themselves, but we can't do it by ourselves. And so we've got to find ways to

encourage others to join us and to encourage leadership within communities to stand up and plan and demand the same services that other neighborhoods get as well.

I see our position as an advocate strengthening over the years so that we can empower more, the neighborhoods that we do continue to work in or have worked in and are not currently building in, to continue to strengthen their communities. Lakewood's a prime example. You see a neighborhood that's been working since, I think '94 was when we first started working there, who are sitting down now developing another ten to fifteen year plan; it never stops. You stop, look back, use that as fuel for what your vision is in the future, and set new goals and keep going. It's been great to be a part of that and to encourage our homeowners to do likewise.

I think that's one of the things that I was probably very naive about and still am, I think probably to this day, and that is I've always felt like once folks got a new house and they got in there, they would immediately become involved in their communities and be stepping out there to make a difference. In reality, I look at my own neighborhood association and it just reminds me that people have jobs, they have families, some of them have multiple jobs, and so their ability to get engaged and stay engaged in a neighborhood association is very limited. And yet, some of them do it and it just amazes me and encourages me, quite frankly, when that happens, when people stand up and take leadership roles.

I know I spoke of Linda Williams before and I just was so admiring of her work in partnership with other organizations who focused on community safety, who developed community watches, who did vigils, who performed vigils within the community to encourage the community to endorse more community safety standards and activities. So whenever I see residents who stand up and really get involved, that is inspiring to me and encouraging to me.

And I think that's the biggest challenge is to find ways to engage more families in their neighborhoods as they grow and mature, and as the neighborhoods grow and mature.

AS: Well, thank you very much.

BG: Well, you're welcome.

AS: This has been wonderful.

BG: You're quite welcome. It's been my pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. December, 2006.