

Interviewee: Tim Barry

Interviewer: David Cline

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DC: This is David Cline on June the eighth in Louisville, Kentucky for the Southern Oral History Program's Long Civil Rights Movement project. If you could just introduce yourself for the tape.

TB: Hi, my name is Tim Barry. I'm the Director of the Louisville Metro Housing Authority.

DC: I've been here talking with people about the Park Duvalle neighborhood and basically social issues and social justice issues over time; clearly housing is one of those. If you could just tell me a little bit about how you came to learn about that area and the approaches that you've taken with public housing in the Park Duvalle neighborhood.

TB: Yeah, I'll probably start with, and this is not a revelation to you, but as a backdrop, Louisville has been a highly segregated town and still is to this day. I mean, when people in Louisville refer to the south end, west end, and east end, with that comes certain perceptions, connotations, none of which are accurate, but nonetheless it's a highly segregated town. I came to know about Park Duvalle because when I became Director of the Housing Authority .. well, actually, it precedes that. I worked for city government—and this is still kind of, sort of part of city government—for close to thirty years, worked for this mayor [Jerry Abramson] in the mayor's office for thirteen years and I was working on a project to expand our airport and

move a bunch of people. That was winding down and the mayor was very much involved when Clinton was president in getting a Hope VI grant, one of the first ones in the country, to redevelop a public housing site that was called Cotter and Lang [Homes]. He asked me to kind of oversee that from his office, to make sure that it got done. So that's how I got involved with the Housing Authority. Then when Jerry Abramson left as mayor of the old city, the new fellow that came in, David Armstrong, who's a grand guy too, asked me to stay. So I stayed in the mayor's office for a couple of years, but then when the former director here retired, Mayor Armstrong asked if I wanted to do the job and the reason was because I already had some connections over here, but only from a Park Duvalle perspective. So that's how I ended up at the Housing Authority.

But talking about Park Duvalle, I think the opportunity that things like Hope VI have given us, and it's certainly not perfect, but it's a vehicle to deal with some of the concentration of poverty that these large public housing complexes represent and also create just plain old better housing for people who don't make a lot of money. That's the beauty of Hope VI, because for the first time, the federal government through the Department of Housing and Urban Development allowed us to take public housing money and create something other than just public housing units and to use that money to leverage private funds, which we have done very well, to create a mixed-income, mixed-use neighborhood. That's the lynch pin of Park Duvalle. That's the lynch pin of any successful Hope VI project, the fact that what you are doing is replacing a large outdated public housing facility where you warehouse people.

In our case and I'm sure this holds true in many other places in the country, you've got an aging facility that's six decades old where things are just wearing out and it needs to be replaced, has nothing to do with the residents, has everything to do with the age of the

structure. You know, it's a sixty year-old house. If you don't make major changes in sixty years, your house is going to fall apart at the seams. I've also come to believe and I think we have learned that that's no way to house people. I think that kind of housing is a form of segregated housing, not necessarily by design, maybe so, but by default it's segregated housing. I think it stigmatizes people in a horrible way and I think it disenfranchises them and makes them feel like second-class citizens.

DC: Excludes them.

TB: Absolutely, from one thing and one thing only: money. It's all about money. And it's about race too, but it's also about money. If they made more money, they wouldn't be there. So the object of Hope VI is to recreate the neighborhood so that it is mixed-use, mixed-income while still giving many of the former residents of that site the opportunity to live in that neighborhood. Not everybody could come back. Not everybody wanted to come back. But the fact that in Park Duvalle, we have created a mixed-income community where a third of the apartments are earmarked for low-income families, most of whom are public housing residents, is a good thing, because then--. And they're not units that are situated in one place, so they float.

DC: Oh, okay.

TB: Yeah, it's an interesting concept. So you don't have, "Well, all the public housing units are over here." They float. We have a percentage that we try to adhere to. So a third of the units are set aside for low-income families, very low income, people that would qualify for public housing. A third are generally for middle-income families. Some of that's just supported with tax credits. And a third are for market rate. There's nothing magic about the formula. Other cities have used different percentages, but if it ain't broke--. So in order to stay on those

percentages, units will float. The unit over here today may be a public housing unit, but tomorrow, it could very well be occupied by a market rate person, but the unit over here could switch as well. So we always have that percentage, but it's all--.

DC: I hadn't realized that. That's very interesting.

TB: Yeah, and all of it's beautiful, because you never know if the tenants of the public housing unit are paying eight hundred dollars a month in rent. I don't know, nor should I. It's none of my damn business.

DC: And there are private homes that have been developed in the area as well, right?

TB: Uh huh. In others, we've had homes where the families living in those homes' income may range from thirty thousand to thirty-five thousand a year all the way to three hundred thousand dollars. And they all fit very nicely. And again, the homes that are built are not segregated by income. There's some segregation just by size, because some people have bigger houses than others. And we don't have any problems. Some of the problems that existed at Cotter and Lang, the public housing site, just aren't there anymore.

DC: And what problems were those?

TB: Well, drugs and guns, drugs and guns. We still have some, especially of late, the last couple of days, we've had some problems with the whole gun thing. But like large public housing complexes, it attracts the predators who come in to buy and sell drugs. That doesn't mean to say that everybody in public housing is--. I mean, there are people in public housing, obviously, who are doing things they ought not be doing. But our biggest problem bar none are the people that come in who don't live there, not on the lease, have no business being there, buying and selling drugs. They're attracted by the concentration of poverty and other things. If you scatter that a little bit, the market's not there.

So we just don't have, but for the recent shooting in that area, we just don't have any problems, which I think speaks to the issue of the type of housing that creates the problem and the environment and not the residents, because we still have over two hundred and fifty families at Park Duvalle today who are former Cotter and Lang residents or public housing residents. We don't have any problems. We don't have any of the crime we used to have. That tells me and rightfully so 'cause it's true: it's not the residents; it's the type of housing. You send a clear message when you warehouse people that they are second-class citizens. By changing that environment, we have given people an opportunity to have good, safe, quality, affordable housing in a safe neighborhood, which then means at least that issue's addressed so that they can go on and do other things, including get the training and education they need and find jobs and all that. For the most part, it's working pretty well.

DC: So what makes a neighborhood? This is one thing that we were talking about was various programs that sort of really fill out a community such as Boy Scouts. You were talking about the new choir. Can you tell me about these programs?

TB: Yeah, the little things like that. We have a number of programs that have been offered to public housing residents, from getting their high school equivalency, GED, to computer training. We have an escrow account that we've set up for residents that for every dollar they put in—it's a savings account—we match it with two dollars. People have accumulated some wealth.

DC: So that they can achieve their own home ownership at some point?

TB: You got it, and that's what they do. And they've been sitting there very quietly stashing money away and they'll roll out of here with some bucks. With the one we just did, we had a gentleman had thirty thousand bucks. He walked out and said, "I don't need you. See

you. I can buy a house.” Good for him. So we’ve offered a whole array of programs to help residents get where they want to go. Not everybody needs help. Not everybody needs help. The thing you have to remember, and I can only speak for our public housing, but I think it holds true for most cities, is that number one, our biggest problem bar none is people that come in from the outside, don’t belong in there. If they would go away, I wouldn’t have some of the problems I have now. And we have a twenty-five percent turnover rate a year. In four years, every unit has turned. So this misconception about people living in public housing forever is wrong. Yeah, we have some people who have been there for thirty years. It’s terribly wrong, because most people in public housing stay about two, two and a half years.

DC: Was that true for Cotter and Lang as well?

TB: Uh huh, oh yeah.

DC: So this is just a misconception?

TB: Oh, a horrible misconception that people just stay in there and never leave. That’s bull. I mean, they do leave. They only need public housing for a bit to get back on their feet, which it was designed for that purpose. So to suggest that it has failed completely is wrong. It hasn’t. I mean, people have taken advantage of it. A lot of what we see are single women with small children whose relationship or marriage didn’t work out, so it’s no longer a two-income family. They need some assistance for awhile. They get back on their feet and they’re gone in two years. They’re out, got a better job, paying market rate someplace, see you later. That’s the way it’s supposed to work. Yes, we do have some people that stay for awhile, but most of them now are senior citizens who have been there a long time and are very accustomed to the neighborhood and that’s where they want to live and fine, they should be able to do that.

DC: And there is senior housing as part of that?

TB: Yeah, absolutely.

DC: I was in that the other day.

TB: Park Duvalle has a senior-only building, which as the population, as us boomers age, you're going to see more and more need for that. But Park Duvalle has been a good experiment that has panned out well for us. It hasn't done well in every city. I happen to think it's because it's the cities' fault.

DC: The Hope VI projects?

TB: Yeah, I mean they haven't done a very good job getting them off the ground. Just having the diversity of use, both rental and home ownership, and the diversity of incomes, it's not rocket science. If you look around and see, and I can only speak for little old Louisville, Kentucky, and you look at the neighborhoods that have thrived, but also are still with us, still here, still doing their thing, are neighborhoods like Old Louisville, like Beachmont, like the Highlands, they are mixed-use, mixed-income, and have been from the get-go. There's businesses there. There's all different incomes. There's apartments. There's homes. And they continue just right along. We're not inventing things here. We're just kind of looking around thinking, "Well, you know this kind of works." And there's a lot of little subtle things we do, particularly from a design standpoint, that's very important.

DC: Can you tell me about that?

TB: Yeah, Park Duvalle is a "new urbanist" project as is the new one in Liberty Green. Basically, the new urbanist approach tries to capture things that were created a hundred years ago in other neighborhoods that seemed to have worked well, not the least of which was just, you know, something that it's like a big d'uh when you hear it, but it didn't dawn on me until I heard it that there's a huge emphasis on the front of the house. In suburbia, everybody goes to

their backyard and does their thing and there's very little interaction. Not in places like Park Duvalle and other urban neighborhoods, where the emphasis is on the front of the house. You have sidewalks, which encourages people to walk, which doesn't bring in crime. What it does is give you a set of eyes watching at what's going on. Front porches, you go to Park Duvalle, big time, people sitting on their front porch, which means they're watching things, which means they're talking to the neighbors, getting to know one another, and that's one of the failings, I think, of suburbia, where everybody goes to their backyard and hides on their deck. That's a design thing that's very, very important.

DC: That's very interesting.

TB: That's a new urbanist principle and you'll see some magnificent porches, because if you think about it, that's what people used to do was sit on their porch and commiserate with their neighbors. And therefore, anybody who wanted to come into the neighborhood and do bad things got a whole bunch of eyes watching you. But I think that a mixed-income, mixed-use approach, although not perfect, nothing is, works pretty well. We've put it to good use. And it's sad, I'm just really, really disappointed, it's sad to see that the money has been cut for this program. I'll leave politics out of it.

DC: Have there been parts of the Park Duvalle experiment/experience that didn't maybe work out quite as well that you can learn as lessons for Liberty Green?

TB: Mmm hmm. The first thing is to get the grocery store. We're struggling to get a grocery store, trying to get a grocery store in there. If we got a grocery store in there, that would cinch the deal. But it's hard, because for a couple of reasons. The grocery business in Louisville's not real competitive. It's a Kroger town. Kroger runs everybody else off. So eventually, they may build in Park Duvalle one day, but there's no pressure to build and I can't

do any leverage with them. The other thing is the perception of a predominately African-American inner-city neighborhood, that we're not going to do business. You know all the crap, none of it true. But if we could just get somebody to go in there, I think they would do a bang-up business because of the loyalty issue. People in Park Duvalle are now, when they want to go to the grocery store, jump the bridge and go to southern Indiana or have to travel miles to get groceries. That's the one thing. It's not for lack of effort, because the mayor has just worked diligently to try to get somebody to build a decent grocery store too. That won't be a problem at Liberty Green, I don't think, because it's a different environment. Park Duvalle's almost a suburb, whereas Liberty Green is smack dab in the middle of downtown. It may not be, you know, we're not going to have a Super Kroger or a big old Wal-Mart box thing in the middle of downtown, but we'll have some kind of food service that'll pop up.

DC: Other lessons learned?

TB: Other than that, the one thing the Housing Authority didn't do that we are now doing with Liberty Green -- and I'm not blaming anybody, you live and learn -- is a thing called one-for-one replacement. There were thirteen hundred units at Cotter and Lang, all of which were demolished. What came out of the ground at Park Duvalle is roughly eleven hundred units all told, including the home ownership, but there's only two hundred and fifty or so units set aside for low-income families. So there's been a net loss of affordable housing. I happen to think as the Housing Authority, that's probably not a good thing for the Housing Authority to be doing, to be responsible for a net loss of affordable housing. We are in the business of providing affordable housing. So we took a different approach with our new Hope VI and have committed to doing one-for-one replacement of every unit lost, hard units, not going to count Section 8 vouchers or any of that stuff, I mean the actual hard units, so that we

won't be responsible for a net loss of affordable housing. And I don't know anybody else in the country who's doing it. It used to be required by HUD, it's not anymore. We chose to. It's very expensive, but we're going to do it. We're almost on a mission to replace every one of our large public housing complexes in concert with the mayor. This is one of the mayor's initiatives is to replace all of these complexes, because there's still some left, and replace them with scattered sites.

DC: So I guess that leads me right to my next question, which is what's the future?

TB: The future is to get rid of all these complexes. Again, let me emphasize, underscore, it has nothing to do with the residents, absolutely nothing to do with the residents. It's a housing type that's outlived its usefulness. It doesn't provide for any kind of quality of life for families, green space for kids, all the things I've mentioned. It's segregated housing. It really, really, I think, stigmatizes people and makes them feel like second-class citizens. Scattered site on the other hand, same family—and it's all about money. It's only because of money. Scattered means that we have an individual unit someplace in a neighborhood all over town, or units, scattered hither and thither very quietly that people move in, will get assistance from us, a subsidy. We own the units, but it's not a concentration. So they've just become part of the fabric of the neighborhood. And people may know that it's a public housing unit, they may not.

What we have made an effort to do and are very strident about is that our scattered site units will be at least as good as everything else on that block and most of the time better kept, much better kept. Because the first time they're not, you know how that goes, "Oh, it's a public housing unit. All hell's--. The world is coming to an end." We're on a mission and just personally, I hate those places, those large public housing complexes because of what they do

to people. Get them out of that environment and do a scattered site or they get a voucher to go wherever they want. It levels the playing surface. It gets rid of that stigma associated with where they live, which keeps them in many cases, and I know for a fact it does, from getting jobs, because if a potential employer finds out they live in a public housing complex, they're really leery, because they assume they're into drugs -- drugs and guns -- and they're not. Then you get them out of that environment and put them someplace else, then that issue's addressed in terms of housing. So we're moving very quickly, like a lot of cities.

DC: In that direction. How will that be funded?

TB: Well, we'll have to pay for it with our normal stream of federal funding, which is going down, down, down. And we're going to do one-for-one replacement, every one of those units. So it's expensive and it's hard and we're not always well-received when we go into a neighborhood if they find out we're buying units. I'm also not going to reconcentrate the poverty that exists. We're very, very judicious about what we do in terms of buying a few units at a time. One of the things we've been able to do is buy into developments. Let's say there's an apartment complex where you've got two hundred and fifty units that are undergoing a rehab, new owners, that kind of stuff. We'll buy ten units, which is, ten units, give me a break.

DC: Otherwise the political difficulty of buying into existing neighborhoods?

TB: Yeah, it'll throw you. Just when I think the worst and that people are just stupid, I'll get a neighborhood that'll say, "It's okay, no problem." And a neighborhood that I wouldn't think would say that, would say, "You know, we need to provide more affordable housing. We need to open up our arms and welcome people of even different races, but also lower income." I thought, "Oh my." My belief in the goodness of human beings basically is re-energized

because of things like that. Then you'll run into a situation where you expect better of people and then all their fears will come up.

DC: This idea of scattered site housing and not concentrating poverty and moving it out into different communities, it seems like a lesson hard-earned and it took a long time to learn in this country.

TB: Yeah, and it's a race issue more than anything, because most public housing is dominated by African-Americans, so it's clearly a race issue. It's also an economics issue. But I really believe, firmly believe that these large public housing complexes are a breeding ground for crime and predators and also a real impediment to people succeeding, because not only do they oftentimes have to live in fear of what's going on around them, but it makes them feel like second-class citizens. Get them out of that environment and they don't live in a place where there's gun play and drugs and all that stuff, then they can go on and do some other stuff that they've been trying to do. I don't like the way it's been set up. Don't get me wrong -- it served a very useful purpose for many, many years, but it's outlived its usefulness. It's time to chuck it and do something better. And I think scattered site is a much better approach. That's my two cents worth.

DC: Great. Anything that you want to add or maybe a question I didn't ask that would have been a useful question to ask?

TB: No, the only thing is I get discouraged sometimes, because the patterns of segregation in this community that are two hundred years old are still there and really, really hard to right the ship, to turn it. But it's like turning a battleship, it takes awhile. But ever so slowly, I see more and more census tracts in what was predominately lily white areas becoming much more diverse. That's very good. Now what we can't leave behind are the

people that, for whatever reason, don't have the income to support that kind of stuff. That's why I think it's important that we also diversify those neighborhoods with some affordable housing. That is real hard to do, to make it a requirement. We've tried in Louisville and it hasn't worked so far to require developers to create a certain number of affordable housing units. But oh man, it's a red flag for people, because what they think is: poor people, public housing, predominately African-American, you know the drill. And that's not the case and very few cities in this country have been able to do it, but for one place in Maryland. They have required every—

DC: Where it's actually on the books?

TB: Yeah, they ran out of land. And it's on the books that they have to create a certain amount of affordable housing units, which I think is a stroke of genius. I have to believe this or there's no point to keep doing this, is that it's moving the right way. People are getting some wealth and they're able to live in other parts of the community. We just can't leave the very poor behind. That's it.

DC: Thank you very much.

TB: Glad to do it, David.

DC: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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