

TRANSCRIPT—NANCY BERRY

Interviewee: NANCY BERRY
Interviewer: Dwana Waugh
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START OF CD

DW: Hey, this is Dwana Waugh, today is June 14, 2006 at 12:45 pm and I am interviewing Nancy Berry. We are doing the Long Civil Rights movement, the economic justice portion. Good morning, good afternoon.

NB: Hello, welcome to Charlotte.

DW: Oh, well thank you. It was a great[Laughter] introduction this morning. I think what I'd like to start with is just to get a little of your life history, your growing up experiences.

NB: OK, fine. I grew up in Morganton, NC and was in a high school graduating class of about eighty people. I led a very sheltered life. And I finished high school in 1959. And obviously in Morganton, NC, in those days, we had very separate and very unequal schools. So I went from there to Wake Forest, to college. And that was the fall in Winston Salem when students primarily from Winston Salem State, but from some other, from Salem and from Wake Forest as well, were sitting in at the lunch counters downtown at Woolworths. I can remember thinking to myself, "What in the world are they doing that for, don't they have other things to keep them busy, you know,

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don't they have to study their physics and their chemistry." And about that same length time, I said, "Well, of course that's what they are doing, that's the only thing they can do." And I think that was really a time when my life really turned around, I mean, just completely around. I saw the world in a very different direction then I had never really paid much attention to--. I do remember as a kid asking my mother why I had to walk so far to school because there was another school much closer to my house. She just said, "Well, it's a shame but that's the way it is." You know, it was not a topic of conversation. It was never, you know, the segregation was not an issue that I was aware of growing up. But that one afternoon in Winston Salem really did make me have to reevaluate everything I had ever thought was true in the world. Life has never been the same.

DW: Oh yeah, yeah. Do you remember having conversations with your friends about the sit-ins?

NB: Yes and most everybody had that same kind of approach to it. Why are they there? You know, don't they have classes to get ready for? Then some people just thought they were nuts. Wake Forest at that time was almost completely white. While I was there we had one black student but, he was very exotic. He was an African and, you know, dressed in his dashiki and he seemed, to me, to be really well accepted there. But, I've always suspected it was because he was, he really was exotic to all the rest of us. That it was, if he had lived on the other side of Winston Salem, I think it would have been a very different issue. It was some years after that before the university really accepted black students as a matter of course. A good basketball player and a football player didn't hurt.

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DW: Oh yeah, yeah, wow. Well, since you are talking about the 1960s and a lot changes occurred in the '60s. And a lot of very big setbacks also happened. What I wanted to know is how did you generally feel by the end of the '60s about the direction that Morganton and Charlotte--. When did you move to Charlotte?

NB: Well, I moved from--. From Winston Salem I moved to Los Angeles and lived there for four years and came back to North Carolina just as the riots and Watts were happening. So I saw a very different part of life in Los Angeles. Of course, coming from a really small town and then moving to Los Angeles was an education of another sort.

DW: Oh, I imagine.

NB: You know, that society was, for all outward purposes, very integrated. Then came back to North Carolina in 1966 and I moved to Charlotte. I have never lived in Morganton since I graduated from high school. At least, full time. I do spend a fair amount of time there now. But since I work from Charlotte, I also live in Charlotte. So it's a, it's sort of a back and forth now. And the community there, in the 60s, was not appreciably different then it was when I--. You know, by the end of the 60s it didn't look very much different then it had when I'd lived there. You know, ten years earlier. I think it's very different today. But then, I didn't notice that there was very much difference in terms of the relationships.

DW: Well, I'm curious to get your opinion about how that change happened. I did want to ask, did you notice a huge difference between living in LA versus living in Charlotte?

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NB: Oh very, very different, yes. When I moved to Charlotte, it was, Charlotte was still a very, was that's the wrong tense, is a very racially segregated city. Los Angeles simply was not, even in the 60s, it was not. There were areas of town that were predominantly black or predominantly white or predominantly Hispanic or Asian, but it seemed to me to be much more a matter of choice and economics than race. I think all of those things probably play into it.

DW: Could you discuss that a little more what do you mean by choice and economics?

NB: Well, I think that for people who have very low wealth they have limited opportunities. Their choices are far more limited than people with more access to wealth. Who can, in fact, choose where they go and where they live. If you're poor you really don't have as many choices. A lot of it's also cultural, I'm sure of that as well, that you live with people you are comfortable with and whatever limited choices you can make. I think that race and economics and culture, I think all those things play a factor in where we live. I think that in Los Angeles, though, that the laws and the expectations were not as entrenched as they have been here. I think that, of course, the government always has done its part to maintain segregation. Whether it's the federal government or the local, it doesn't much matter; they all have that in common.

DW: Did you feel by the end of the '60s, were you hopeful for change?

NB: I really was hopeful. I was a little afraid for people who were braver than I was and were putting their lives on the line. By the end of the '60s I had a small child. I was not very brave in terms of stepping out and chaining myself to fences or whatever it

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was. I really was hopeful that it was changing. Looking back, I'm exceedingly disappointed that the change has been so slow and so small.

[Pause]

DW: What changes do you credit or do you see meaningful changes that have happened in Charlotte or in North Carolina that--?

NB: I think the school system in Charlotte. Charlotte/Mecklenburg is a consolidated system. I think that that has made the difference here. I think that it allowed for a lot of things that other cities have not been able to deal with. Because they were not consolidated systems people could move outside the city limits. They could leave the center city and be in another jurisdiction and could maintain segregated schools much easier. Then, of course, with the busing ruling in Charlotte, I think that was the single most important thing that has happened to the city of Charlotte.

DW: What do you think of the case that reopened?

NB: I think they're idiots. Not to put too kind (). [Laughter]

DW: That's one way of putting it.

NB: I think they are short sighted jerks. I really do. I think that they set the city back further and did more damage, long term damage than they had a clue. I understand wanting your children to go to school right down the street. I do understand that. But, I also think that if I don't take care of all the children in this community it doesn't matter that I'm taking care of mine. I think that's where they missed the boat. My children all went through public schools in Charlotte. My oldest one went through the open school program here. He was bussed long distances everyday. He went to Irwin Avenue. He went to Piedmont Middle school. And he went to West Charlotte. My other

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two were not in the open program and they both graduated from Myers Park. I really think they all three got good basic educations. I couldn't have wished for much more than they got. They got a terrific exposure to all kinds of people, from all kinds of places, that would not have happened had they gone just strictly to neighborhood schools. I think that's made them much better people.

DW: What I'd like to ask you . . . I remember talking to you on the phone and you said you were initially pre-med?

NB: That's right.

DW: Then you went to sociology?

NB: I got married and moved to Los Angeles before I graduated, halfway through my junior year. After I'd moved back to North Carolina and been here for several years, after a divorce, I had to find a job. I was having a very hard time without a degree. The day I applied for a job at a quality control lab at a chemical company here in town and was told I knew too much, with all those years of chemistry, I thought this isn't going to work. I decided I had to go back and get a degree. At that point it didn't seem to matter what it was. I got a catalog from UNCC and sat down on the floor, had my transcript from Wake Forest. I figured out the fastest way out of school. So, I have a degree in Sociology with specific work in urban sociology and psychology.

DW: Not too bad an idea. [Laughter] I was curious to find out what influenced you to take up work in neighborhoods? With the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation?

NB: It was one of those things that--. On the front end I thought it just happened. But, the older I get the more I think there really are no accidents. I was asked

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by a minister in my church to volunteer to do some work with families who were applying for HUD loans and needed a little additional work. There was this group that would teach me how to work with these families to do, essentially, pre-purchase counseling. I went to the training sessions and started working, just as a volunteer, with families who were trying to qualify for HUD loans, the 235 subsidized loans. In other words it was mostly financial counseling. Out of that, I was working through a little tiny counseling agency that had just started here. Then when I finished school, the agency had gotten a small grant from the city to do more counseling work. I was hired as a full time counselor. There were three of us in this little office working with families mostly in Charlotte. One day, we were just sitting there minding our own business, we got in the mail a stack of referrals from the HUD office in Greensboro of families that were in default on their HUD loans. The stack was about three inches high. We called the HUD office and said what is this and why are you sending it to us. They said they didn't know what to do with these folks. But they had HUD guaranteed, FHA guaranteed loans and they didn't know what to do with them. They didn't have an idea. If we could think of something they'd be all the help they could be. We started to get in touch with these people and listening to their stories; and looking at how they had gotten into that predicament; and started getting in touch with the mortgage lenders and other creditors. Within just a few months, we had lots more. It was really an eye opener, the number of families who were simply not able to maintain their mortgages, mostly because they had so many other debts. Along with that was almost always a loss of a job or a major illness. We realized we really had to do something. It was becoming more apparent. This was in the early '70s, everyday, that people were getting into really serious trouble.

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We figured out how to do it; how to get in touch with these people; how to set up a plan for them; how to work with their lenders and other creditors. It wasn't long before we had a contract with HUD to do this, to teach the HUD staff and to teach other counselors across the country how to do that kind of intervention. It was one of those pieces of work that I think all of us involved with were very proud to have been part of because we made some major differences in peoples' lives. We also were able to share what we had learned the hard way with people in other parts of the country, specifically with the HUD staff. HUD had a counseling staff, that's what they called it, but they had never met. We went to Washington one day and met with the HUD counseling office staff. They, finally at the end of a couple hour meeting, one of the people said to me, "Why are you here and what makes you think you can do this? You know you're just from Charlotte what do you know?" I said, "Well, I am a housing counselor and I see these people everyday." I was the first housing counselor he had ever met that was actually dealing with families and trying to solve problems. That sort of set the tone for the rest of that consulting contract. By then Congress had given HUD some money for counseling. They didn't know what to do with it. We wrote the request for proposals that went out and helped them figure out which agencies could actually handle it. We were helping set the criteria for distributing the grant fund. We did that for a couple of years. Then I quit and went to Africa for a year.

DW: Wow. What made you decide to do that?

NB: It wasn't really all my decision, it was my husband's work. He's an anthropologist and at that time was teaching at the university here. He was a piece of

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foreign aid, a Fulbright professor. We lived in Swaziland for a year. That's an even bigger shock than moving to LA.

DW: I can imagine. Did that experience shape your worldview when you came back?

NB: It certainly did. I don't think anybody can be paying attention if they leave this country and not be changed. I don't care where you go, even if you go to London for the weekend, if you're really paying attention. Living, as a distinct minority, in a country, like Swaziland that is so dreadfully poor, you really have to look at yourself and your values and your country in a different light. When I left I packed up five sets of dishes. I lived for a year with six plates and six cups. I think we had eight glasses. When I came back I gave away most of my dishes and a lot of other things. Unfortunately, I've accumulated more stuff again than I need. When you really, daily, are faced with people who are doing the best they can do with next to nothing, then--. One of the things that comes out of that is a sense of absolute gratitude for what I have. I don't know another way to express that but to be--. You have to put yourself up against because that's what that kind of experience does. It always puts you up against something and how you come away from that I think is the measure. I guess if we're paying attention to our lives that that's what happens to us all along.

DW: We're going to back up a bit to kind of follow a chronology here. You mentioned about having difficulty finding a job before getting a degree. I was just curious what kind of job opportunities did you see, not just for yourself but for others, in Charlotte in the late '60s, early '70s? What were the job opportunities like?

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NB: Well, for women they were relatively limited. I couldn't type worth diddly. That was a major stumbling block to my employment. Thank god for computers and word processing. I never quite mastered a typewriter. That really did limit what I could do because I had no-- I knew I didn't want to teach. I taught school one day, just as a substitute teacher. I promised god if I ever got out of that classroom of second graders I would do anything else. I think I'm still atoning for that.

DW: They can be a handful, I imagine. Do you know what job opportunities for minorities were looking--?

NB: I think they were far more limited than my opportunities were. In a town as shiny white and buttoned down as Charlotte, I would have had a better shot at most jobs than almost anybody of color.

DW: You were talking about working for HUD. I'm also curious about the housing opportunities in Charlotte. What were they like in the 70s or late 60s? How have they changed?

NB: Fashionable, affluent Myers Park is where I've lived a great deal of my life in Charlotte. I can still walk around the streets here. I don't see anybody that doesn't look about like I look.

Housing opportunities, if you were black in Charlotte in the 60s and 70s and 80s and 90s and early 2000s, look about the same. They are very segregated. Charlotte is as racially segregated a city as just about any place there is in terms of housing patterns. Job opportunities now are very different but housing patterns have not appreciably changed. There are some notable exceptions. We have some basketball and football players that live wherever they want to live. But, for just Aunt Minnie on the corner, Aunt Minnie

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doesn't have very many options. It's still a very segregated city. It's been maintained very well that way, primarily through the lending community and real estate community. Real estate, obviously, the realtors are the gate keepers but the lenders also have a big part to play in that. Part of that is federal with FHA loans years ago. That's not a new phenomenon. FHA lending criteria said, quite out loud, that you only made loans in certain areas. That whole--. The term of red lining that's not just a made up term. I've actually been in lenders' offices and seen maps with red lines around certain neighborhoods. That's truth. That's not some story somebody made up. It happened to them and I have a great suspicion it's still going on. If the loans are made, they're made now at a higher interest rate than other people of other color, specifically white people would have to pay with the very same income and credit rating. A lot of that's not changed. That just really can make me as mad as anything I know these days is to think after all these years we still haven't figured it out. We still haven't gotten any better at it. We're still discriminating.

DW: I was really intrigued with our first phone conversation where you said that you had worked before-- there were a lot of things that you said were intriguing--but, you said that you had a love/hate relationship with the city and that--.

NB: I do, I do. The city of Charlotte--. When I worked with the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation I worked in a number of other cities and I was in contact with people who were working all over the country. At conferences and staff meetings and things like that, we'd always have these conversations. One of the things I learned about Charlotte, early on, was that I didn't have to fight the city like I did when I was working in other places. The city of Charlotte, historically, has kind of gotten the message. The

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problem has come specifically with some of the administration. Lenders in Charlotte, you never had to beat up on them and tell them it was in their own best interest to make contributions to the housing nonprofits. We didn't have to bang the City of Charlotte on its head to get that notice. Then in the fine print there would always be some stumbling block. You get this mixed message. We'd be told over and over, "Yes, the money's available. Yes, you can do this. We'll be glad to see you there and help you." Then at the last minute there would be this, "Well yes, but we can't do that even though we told you last week we could. We've decided we can't do that after all." There was always this kind of back and forth. When it came time to actually put the money on the table, that was not as forthcoming as the agreements that had been made earlier.

DW: Why do you think that was the case? What you were saying about Charlotte being racially segregated still. A lot of the literature I've read about Charlotte seems to argue that Charlotte's this racially moderate city and it's where school integration worked.

NB: Well, I think that in a lot areas of our lives that's really true. Not having children in school, I don't know up close and personal what the schools are like. I see the kids coming and going. I do think that it's a much more integrated system. I think that, certainly in job opportunities, that may be the place where it's easier to see that there are far more opportunities now. Charlotte's a fairly practical city in a lot a ways. If somebody can do the job they're going to get the job. At the end of the day, when they go home, chances are they're going home to a white neighborhood if they're white or a mostly black neighborhood if they're black. Now there are neighborhoods that are fairly well integrated, not very many of them, but there are some. They tend to be fairly middle

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class neighborhoods, which I find interesting. It's the really lower economic neighborhoods are still fairly segregated. Around the edges that's changing. Of course, with the influx of Hispanic residents, I think that's making a big difference in housing patterns in Charlotte. I think it's putting a lot of pressure on historically black neighborhoods. I think that that is changing a lot of racial patterns. It'll be interesting to see what happens over the next ten or fifteen years, to see if that continues. Maybe this whole idea of an uproar about immigration may make us better than we are.

DW: It'll be interesting to see how that all plays out. Could you talk a bit about you work in the Belmont community?

NB: I was hired after the first director had been fired. I didn't really know very much about what had gone on there. I just sort of started work the best I could. There was no office there that was available. There was a closet in one of the churches where things were stored. There was a desk in the closet but there wasn't room to sit at the desk. The board of directors said that if I'd be willing to work from home they wouldn't have to pay the church this astronomical rental fee. It was just horrendous. They were paying the church, as I remember, a couple hundred dollars a month for this closet. I worked off my dining room table for a pretty good while. As I would drive into the neighborhood most days, it was always--. The way I would go in would be going down Seigle Avenue and I always went under the railroad bridge. I can remember every morning, going under that bridge, just thinking I hope I do something today that's going to make things better. It was sort of like a--. That bridge was sort of my signal to put myself into the neighborhood.

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The corporation owned a little house that they had bought. It was a HUD repo. It was obvious we had to have an office in the neighborhood. That's just a critical thing. It has to be. You have to be there. I made arrangements with the community development department of the city to borrow the money to do that rehab. We got a variance in the zoning so it could be an office even though it was zoned residential. We got permission to use it as an office. A model home actually is what it was. We rehabbed that with the intent of selling it at some point in the future. You know, fixed it up like a house would be. It was a five room house. It's on the corner of North Harrill and Seventeenth street. It was a very fine office. It's right in the middle of the neighborhood. There was no way I was going to sneak in and out. Of course, nothing in Belmont you sneak in and out of. Everybody there knows what everybody is doing all the time. I remember saying to one of my board members one day, after I'd been there two or three years, it just felt like some days that nobody knew I was around or what I was doing there or anything of the sort. I was just expressing that to her and she started laughing. She lives in the neighborhood and she started laughing. She says, "Let me tell you, everybody in the neighborhood knows that white woman that stays on Harrill Street." That was sort of confirmation that I really was there.

The neighborhood historically--I'm sure you have a lot of this information about-- Belmont was one of the mill villages. There are a lot of those still around Charlotte that we haven't quite managed to tear down yet. In the '60s it really changed color. It was a very white neighborhood, blue collar workers, the whole bit. Then as some very unethical real estate people got involved they started going into the neighborhood and scaring people to death saying, "If you don't sell me your house some black person is

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going to move in next door to you and ruin your property values.” It’s just classic block busting and it worked. It worked really well. That’s about the time that Charlotte was urban removing a huge downtown neighborhood—Brooklyn neighborhood that was right smack in the middle of what’s now the government center and Marshall Park and a big hotel. They demolished an entire little village there and moved everybody. They moved a lot of those folks, the one’s that didn’t move into public housing. They moved them, among other places into the Belmont neighborhood because property values there were falling. They could financially make it work. A lot of folks that moved into Belmont then are still there. There are a lot of people there that have lived there for thirty or forty years now. But that’s how they got there. It was, in most instances, from the folks I’ve talked to, not necessarily their choice. It was just where they could go.

DW: I thought it was interesting, you said urban removing instead of urban renewal.

NB: I’ve always looked at it that way because that’s what it did. It didn’t renew anything. It didn’t renew anything for goodness sakes. It removed people that were living there. It removed businesses. It removed churches. Families just scattered all over town. Some went to public housing and other housing out West Boulevard direction. Some went into North Charlotte, like Belmont, Villa Heights, Optimist Park. They were just scattered. It did a huge disservice to that community.

DW: Do you see any positives that came out of the urban removing venture?

NB: Well, I guess you could make a good argument for the increased tax base. A lot of the land is still owned by the government. That wouldn’t have increased any tax base. The hotels certainly would have. To me, it wasn’t worth it. I think there were

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other ways to have come at that. If they wanted that land, a better approach, a more honest approach would have been better.

When the interstate highways were built they moved a lot of black residents to make way for Interstate 77. That's where that land came from primarily. Those folks either got sent got downtown to the public housing projects or moved further out to other neighborhoods. There were whole neighborhoods that were just split right down the middle with the highways. But that's what government does.

DW: Working in Belmont did you have any--? It sounds like you were doing a lot of work with public housing. Did you have any dealing with private landlords?

NB: I had far more dealing with private than public housing. Piedmont Courts, the big, old public housing project that's on the way down now, I had very little dealings with. Piedmont Courts was always sort of its own entity there. Very few people from the housing project were involved in anything in the neighborhood. People that lived further into the neighborhood rarely were around public housing. It was almost as though it had a wall around it. It really was not part of the neighborhood in any functioning sense. Geographic, yes, but not anything that actually worked. You might know a couple of people that lived there but there really wasn't a lot of back and forth with people in Piedmont Courts. Belmont neighborhood is a big area. The CDC worked not only in Belmont but in Villa Heights and Optimist Park as well. Optimist Park is just on the other side of North Davidson Street from Belmont. Villa Heights is on the other side of Parkwood Avenue from Belmont. We sort of included both of those other neighborhoods in the scope of things, although we really never did a great deal of work in either place. I think it was always our hope that we would be able to have the resources

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to do that. It just never happened. A lot of the homeowners in Belmont now live in Habitat houses. The city had an arrangement with Habitat whereby they would, under code enforcement, demolish a house and sell Habitat the lot. When I left Belmont, there were about 250 Habitat houses, which is a huge number to put in any one neighborhood. It really did set the whole market for housing in that neighborhood. That was very unfortunate. For the families that lived in the Habitat houses, they were better off because they had a decent place to live that they could afford. For the neighborhood, it was really a disaster. It set the, not only the market, but it set expectations in the neighborhood that that was as good as it was going to get. That was a disservice to the neighborhood. I always looked at the neighborhood as my client. That it wasn't an individual but it was the neighborhood. That was my charge. That while I wasn't working for Aunt Minnie on the corner, if the neighborhood improved so would Aunt Minnie. She'd be better off than she'd been if the neighborhood as a whole were improved when things got better. My definition of a job done would be when people choose that neighborhood to live in when they can go anywhere else they want to live, when they have the choice to make and that's what they choose. Then I think that's a stable neighborhood.

DW: Could you talk a little bit about the day to day activities you did working in Belmont?

NB: Sure. Like any nonprofit that's the size of that one, I was the staff. I had a part-time neighborhood liaison that worked with me for several years. But for the most part I was there by myself. I was not only answering the phone and writing the letters and dealing with that system's maintenance kind of stuff, but I was also the one who had

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to go downtown to the meetings and had to spend time with the planning department and trying to figure out what was coming next and what made sense and dealing with people who would stop by the office who had a problem with something or just stop by the office to say, "Hello, how are you?" There was a fair amount of that too. The neighborhood police officers would stop in. They would always stop in and fuss at me because I didn't keep the doors locked. I told them it was their job to make sure things went well. I never, in the nine years I was there, I never had the first problem with anybody in the neighborhood in terms of being afraid for my physical safety. There were a number of days when I would hear gunshots but they weren't aimed at me. Or, if they were, they were really bad shots. Occasionally people would call and say, "Are you alright? I heard shots up your way." I would say, "Yes, I'm fine."

DW: That's a good thing.

NB: Some just terrific people that would kind of check in. They were really neighbors to me. There were always grants to write and things like that. Chasing the dollars, that's what I spent most of my time doing. I was trying to keep the doors open and the lights on. A lot of days that meant I had to pay the light bill because there wasn't enough money in the bank account. Twenty-twenty hindsight I would say that was a stupid choice on my part, since they still haven't paid me back for that.

A lot of it was being fairly political because there are factions in that neighborhood just like any other neighborhood. One little group wants one thing and one little group wants another thing and somebody's afraid somebody got more than they got. There's always a lot of that going on. I didn't get too caught up in that, I think because I didn't live there all the time. I only lived there in the daylight. I really didn't get too

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caught up in the neighborhood he said she said kinds of stuff. There was one woman in the neighborhood that decided she wanted my job and was going to make sure I got fired or something. It didn't work. She spent a lot of effort and energy sabotaging some things that the CDC was trying to do. It wasn't just me it was a number of other people that were connected, neighborhood residents, board members. I understand she's still at it. She, I guess, hadn't won enough people to her cause yet.

The resources were always the problem. The board members--. It's a volunteer board about half of them were neighborhood residents and half of them came from outside the neighborhood and the greater community. A lot of the neighborhood residents were a bit intimidated by some of the bankers and lawyers on the board. I never did see it more than just a few times where one of the community board members would try to take charge. I could kind of see the subtleties of the deferral to what I guess they perceived as somebody that knew more about it than they did even though they were ones that were living there. Sometimes that was a hard gap to bridge because the neighbors were the ones that were most affected by everything we decided, as the board decided. Yet they were kind of giving away their power sometimes. I was always disturbed by that and would sometimes call them up the next day and say, "Here's what I saw. . . ." "Oh well, okay, next time I'll do better, next time I'll speak up." Because it would be obvious that they would have opinions that they would not always voice if they were not the same as they were hearing from the banker or the lawyer or the who ever. I think that's not unique to the Belmont CDC. I think almost any small neighborhood nonprofit I've ever seen had to deal with that issue. It takes talking through and most of my board members, the whole time I was there, even though there were a lot of people that came

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and went on that board, didn't want to spend time doing that. They wanted to get on with the business and never quite realize that the business was getting on with each other first before they could get down to the business.

DW: Could you talk a little bit more about the woman that was in the community--if you don't want to say names that's fine--but the woman who was in the community that was after your position and why do you think that was? What was she hoping to do that she didn't feel was being done?

NB: I never was really clear. For a number of years she just really--. She was on the board for a while. Then it was like all of sudden one day she decided that rather than be part of the solution she was going to be a problem. She was a huge problem. She was telling things in the neighborhood about the CDC and what we were allegedly doing that had no connection to reality. She had this two or three little group that would go around with her. They literally went in this little pack around the neighborhood. The interesting thing to me was that one day one of those women came to me in the late afternoon and said, "You'd better look out for her she's after you. You'd better watch your back because she wants what you got here." Maybe it was as simple as she wanted the job. She was not employed at that time. She had resigned, as I understood it, from one place and another said she'd been fired from the post office. I don't know which of those, if either, was true. She may have just retired. But in any case, she was not working. She had a small business. I tried to send her as much business as I reasonably could. But it didn't, there was never much there. Maybe she just simply wanted a job without having to go further than three blocks from home which would some days be nice. It almost felt like it was something else. Her son, I had occasion to take him along

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with some other kids on a couple of trips, sort of field trips and things like that. The comments I would hear from him were pretty amazing because I never really heard them from any other kids in the neighborhood. He was very racist. He was very, I mean, if it was white it was bad. I don't know whether--. Obviously that had some bearing on her attitude toward me, I'm sure it did. He had to of been voicing what he had heard. He was home schooled so it wasn't like he was picking this up on the playground. The interesting thing was the child's father was white. That to me was, I've always felt very sorry for that kid to feel that way about himself. It was just one of those things I guess a psychiatrist would have a field day with that whole dynamic of what was going on there. I felt like I had a job I needed to be doing and while I really couldn't get too tied up with what she was doing. I always suspected that she was the one that--, because she had a key to the office for a little while. At one point, kind of late in my tenure there, the entire minutes of the board of directors meetings were erased from the computer. I'm not the greatest thing with the computer but I could not have done that. And she was. She was a real whiz with computers. She would have known exactly how to have done that. I don't know anybody else that had access to that office on a regular basis that could have done that. I've always suspected that she was really seriously trying to sabotage the corporation which was what that was. That was certainly not personal to me. That was really undermining the work of the corporation. Maybe she did that and maybe she didn't. Somehow, those were the only files that were ever deleted from that computer.

DW: You were talking about your predecessor. I think I remember what our phone conversation you were saying that he worked more closely in the neighborhood.

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NB: He lived in the neighborhood for a pretty good while. When he was fired—I've gotten this well after the fact because he'd been gone nine years. No, I mean nine months when I was hired. I didn't meet him for the longest time. I would just hear about him. People would say, "Well, he said this and he said that about you." As it turns out he and I have a mutual friend. He was at her office one day and talking to her and just going on and on about me and what he had heard, or what he had thought. She just called me and asked me if I could come over to her office. I said sure. It wasn't very long and I walked in and she introduced us. I told him I was glad to meet him because I wanted to know what was going on. I had heard some really good things about him in the neighborhood. He said he'd been listening to some good things about me too that he didn't know and didn't want to know. He apologized to me for what he had been saying. It was really a terrific, terrific encounter. We got to be very good friends. He came on to the board of directors after a couple more years. I told him, "You know, you'll make a good director but you won't make a good director right now. It's too soon, but one of these days I'm going to call you and I want you to say yes." He did. He was a very strong supporter. It was just terrific. I just have always been grateful to him for his contribution because he was really important in that neighborhood and important, I think, for personally, for me to actually be able to have some reconciliation there of something I didn't even understand that was going on.

DW: Well, it's a good friend to clear the air.

NB: Yeah, Rogers is a great guy.

DW: Do you know what went on to cause him to be fired from the position?

NB: I think that he had, as best as I could ever figure out, probably a couple of things. I think that the overt thing was that he had authorized a check to be written for something he wanted to do that seemed like probably a good idea in the moment then turned out to be not such a good idea. It ended up losing a little bit of money. He wanted to support a play or a concert or something like that. It ended up losing probably several hundred dollars. I don't think it was a huge amount of money by any stretch of the imagination. He had made that decision and authorized the check and didn't clear it with the board of directors. I think that was--. I kind of always thought it was a lot more about the authority issue than it was about the dollars. Given the fact that with the budget the size of the CDC's, several hundred or a thousand dollars or whatever it was, that was important. But, I don't think that was all there was. I always suspected that the board really wanted to just make their point that they were in charge. That's obviously just my opinion of it. That's always the way I saw it. That it really wasn't so much about what Rogers did but about what he didn't do.

DW: Did you feel that same pressure with you when you were working with the board, definitely?

NB: Well, it was a very strange sense because when I was working for Neighborhood Reinvestment, I had been putting together neighborhood based housing programs in other cities and putting together partnerships of the neighborhood and local lender and the local business community and the city. I knew how to do that. I did a pretty good job of it in several places. Then I was hired to actually run one of these programs in Charlotte. I thought, well it's time to put my mouth where my money's been and see—I can do this, I know how to do this. Whereas all these other cities where I'd

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work, when I'd get off the airplane with me briefcase, I was the expert and they would do anything I suggested that they do. I'd come back a week later and they'd have meetings set up. They'd have all these other plans in place. They had done everything I had asked them to do. It just looked like such a piece of cake. You know what works. You know how to put these things together and you go in and do it. You know where you going to get the money. You get the neighbors involved and get their vision of what they want to see happen and it'll work. It didn't work. This board hired me because they believed I could do that and I believed I could do that. Then, as soon as I had signed on the dotted line, they all of sudden knew what to do instead of paying attention to what I was suggesting.

They would look to me to run the board meetings and to bring them suggestions and ideas. Then they would proceed to demolish them, meeting after meeting. We had an agreement to buy these apartments that would have been a great start for the CDC. The guy that owned them was willing to sell them and we agreed on a price. After hours and hours of negotiating and back and forth and getting them inspected, I knew how long; what it was going to cost to rehab and where I was going to get the money to do it. And went into the board meeting the next night and said we'll get together tomorrow and sign the deal and it's all agreed to and it's going to be great. Two of the board members said, "That's too much money, we've changed our minds. We don't think we ought to have to pay that much money after all." There I was having given my word, as well as the CDC's, for X amount of dollars for these apartments based on the instructions I'd had from the board. Now the board's coming back saying—two board members said, "We've thought this through and we think that's really too much money. Go offer him

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Y.” Well, I called him the next morning and said, “Here’s the deal, here was the decision out of the board last night. I know that’s not what I told you and I apologize for that.” His words to me were, “Tell your board to take their money and go buy doughnuts.” I later told that to another friend of my mine who’s in the business and knows this guy that owned the apartments, knows him real well. He must have thought a lot of you or he would have used some other language. That was a real awakening for me, when I realized I really couldn’t depend on the board to back me up on things that they had instructed me to do. That’s a very strange position to be in. We were able to do a few more projects and get some other things going. But that that was a real awakening for me in terms of my level of trust in some of those board members.

A couple of them came to me later and said they shouldn’t have done that. A deal was a deal, which was my position. We had operated in good faith and so had the owner of the apartments. As a result, we did not get hold of those apartments. He wouldn’t have sold them for twice that much money after that. I didn’t blame him, I really didn’t. He got treated pretty shabbily in that whole deal. It would have been a really good thing for the CDC to have done. It would have given us a very visible project to work on. It would have given a lot of much needed rental, decent rental housing in the neighborhood. Charlotte has a real shortage, and has had for years, of good low income rental housing. It’s very hard to find.

DW: Did you have much dealings--you said you worked more with private than public. Did you have many dealings with landlords who just simply didn’t take of the property at all?

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NB: Mostly, my dealing with the landlords, the slumlords, was to call code enforcement and just keep calling them. There are a lot of landlords who think that paint and carpet is structural. I didn't mind a bit calling. I would get reports from the inspectors. They'd tell who was not following up. When the time was up I would call again and they'd file another report or some of the other neighbors on the board would do the same. It didn't take them long to learn that the more people called and reported a problem property the more likely it was to get action. We had a real committed little group of neighbors who would walk around. The neighborhood association was not very active, let's say, early on. They really were deferring more to the CDC. That happens a lot. They have different interests. I felt like it was in my interest to encourage them to be more active and to support the neighborhood organization because they really have a different perspective. The CDC has a more of a physical interest in the neighborhood, if you will. They are really looking more at the housing and the structures and things like that, whereas the neighborhood organization can spend more time and energy in other areas. They can look at specifically if their neighbor's in trouble that needs something. They can make these reports on the problem properties, the grass that's over grown, things like that. They can worry about kids programs in the summer time, things like that, that are their logical area of interest. I tried to encourage the neighborhood organization to stay together and be strong. They really were a good committed group of people. They worked really hard. They'd go out walking through the neighborhood and come by the next day, somebody would come by and tell me what they'd seen. A lot of times I would make a lot of the phone calls. I just sort of looked at my job there as sort

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of being the staff to the neighborhood organization as well as to the CDC in terms of trying to do some of that kind of liaison work, especially with city government.

Unfortunately, that's a language I also have to speak. Sometimes it was a lot easier for me to do that then it was for them. I had the day time in the office to make those calls and follow up, whereas an awful lot of these other folks were working during the day. That's something a lot of governments don't recognize is that people are working. They schedule their hearings and they schedule their meetings at two in the afternoon or something like that and people can't get there. Then they wonder why nobody from a neighborhood is interested.

DW: Do you have a sense of what people in the neighborhood considered to be the most vital issue?

NB: They wanted to get rid of the drug houses. That was always, always the topic of conversation, was the drug houses and everything that goes along with that of course. In some cases it might have been a liquor house. Because every kid in the neighborhood knew which houses those were. The cops would come by and they'd say they'd gotten a report there was something going on down there. If you don't know go ask the three little eleven year olds on the corner. They're going to know. It's not a mystery. That was always a big problem in the neighborhood because the drug houses also contributed to a lot of the prostitution in the neighborhood. If you'd close down the drug houses the prostitutes tend to go somewhere else. Just concentrating on that can make a big difference in the neighborhood, but that was always of chief concern. Another concern was just something as simple as just picking up the trash in the garbage. When somebody moves out and they'd leave a pile of trash on the curb it takes the city

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months in a neighborhood like Belmont. If somebody left a pile trash on a corner in Myers Park it'd be gone that afternoon. That's one of the things that city government at large never seems to manage. When the garbage trucks make their rounds, all they'd have to do was call in special services. They have to see it. It's sitting right beside the garbage can. Just to make the neighborhood look better makes people feel better about where they live.

Those vacant lots, occasionally that were overgrown. Seriously dilapidated houses, some of them were boarded up. In a neighborhood like Belmont there was no such thing as a vacant house. It might be boarded up, maybe nobody was paying rent. But, I guarantee you it wasn't vacant. I took one of the city inspectors into a house the CDC owned one day. He was going to do a work write up for me on the house. We pulled the plywood off the door to go in. He walked in, in front of me, walked in with his flashlight on and met a guy coming through the living room. He almost knocked me down getting out of that house. I just told the guy he had to leave. We needed to look at his house.

DW: That's amazing.

NB: There's really no such thing as vacant houses. Somebody's found a way into them. Sometimes it's just somebody who needs a place to sleep. Sometimes it's kids. Sometimes it's people looking for a place to do their drugs. That's always a problem.

DW: I guess with the lack of housing that that has to happen.

NB: Sure.

DW: I was curious what you think about what's going on in Belmont now with the Hope Six Initiative and the tearing down of Piedmont Courts. Do you see the initiative as a positive?

NB: I think getting rid of Piedmont Courts is a positive in a lot of ways because it was in such bad shape. They remodeled the whole thing not too many years ago. They didn't make any fundamental changes in anything else. They did the physical rehabilitation but they didn't--. The housing authority is not real good about dealing with people. They deal with housing. They are a housing authority, they are not a people authority. They deal with the houses. If you fit their rules, then that's fine. If you don't you go somewhere else. Sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. Piedmont Courts was a—just the location of it, the shape of it. It slopes down that hill in the back. There's just a lot of opportunity there for nefarious behaviors. I think that to have some of that gone will be really good. I'm really concerned about the people that are being displaced. I just think that's a huge mistake. They've made that mistake once already in First Ward. A few people will be able to move back, most won't. Most of those who won't move back will be relegated to either a long list of, the waiting list for public housing because as they tear down more public housing units they are not replacing them. I'm not sure where these people are going to go. The housing authority is using a lot of its Section 8 allocations for that. That'll be good for the folks that get them but it also limits the opportunities for people who are not part of the Housing Authority system already and who need that kind of help. I see it as really exacerbating the problem of housing in this city. They are not really replacing what they are tearing down. They're building and what they put up will probably look a lot better. It'll be safer. You have a

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hard time arguing with that but it's the people that they are displacing that I'm really concerned about.

DW: Do you see that this will be a benefit for the Belmont residents that they--?

NB: It'll look better. It'll make people feel, I mean, when you look out your window or as my guru used to tell me your neighborhood is what you see from your porch. When you look out from your porch and you see something that looks a lot better than Piedmont Courts then you're going to feel better about where you live. You're going to be more willing to do things to your own property. You're going to be more likely to invest your own dollars. If a neighborhood looks better than you really are more likely to feel safer about your own investment there. That's sort of a snowball effect, if you will. When your neighbor starts painting his house, you're going to feel like, well, he's feeling good enough about things around here, look at him he's working on his house. Maybe I'll replace that furnace that needs it or put on a new roof or plant some azaleas in the front yard, whatever it is. It really is contagious and may this'll be one of those things that will help folks feel like their investment in that neighborhood is a good one.

DW: Property values should increase as well.

NB: Property values will always go up, which is always the good news and the bad news. You know your house is worth more but you also paying more taxes on it. It might catch some, particularly some older residents in the neighborhood who are living on fixed incomes. That's the reality of the world, unfortunately, is that they're going to get caught in that and not be able to do anything with it and may be forced out of where they live. We certainly are seeing some of that in Wilmore right now, as that South Boulevard corridor is expanding and property values are going up so fast over there. The

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Wilmore neighborhood, which for years just kind of sat there and made some small changes, now all of sudden there are these huge changes and houses that were worth \$30,000 fifteen years ago are selling for 200 now. It's just unreal. Some people that live close to those \$200,000 houses are likely to get really serious caught when property evaluations say their taxes are going up--.

DW: Yeah.

NB: I don't foresee them going that high in Belmont soon, but it's so close to downtown that it's a logical, even though it is on the outside of the beltway, the inner loop there. It's so close that if anybody spends a lot of time looking at it—there's huge development going on further out North Davidson. Not in a next door neighborhood over in Plaza Midwood, that neighborhood has just increased in value, just unbelievably, in the last ten years. Belmont, it's really poised. It could go either way. It could kind of stay like it is and make some gradual improvements or it--. If a developer decided to go in there as start buying property, it could make some huge increases in values which will again remove a lot of those folks that live there now, because most folks that live in Belmont can't afford a \$200,000 house--.

When I was doing some--. We had a homebuyers club, folks in the neighborhood that wanted to buy a house. We would do some financial counseling and all sorts of discussions about what they wanted and why they wanted it, what they needed to know to get ready to go look for a house and get a loan. It was always interesting to me to listen to people talk about what kind of a house they wanted. Then I would always ask the question, "Well, where do you want this house?" It was never, ever in that neighborhood. The only people that actually came out of that home buyers club and went

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on to buy houses bought outside of the neighborhood. That's how I knew the job wasn't done.

One of the really important things that I think the CDC did was also, as a distribution point for surplus food through the community food rescue program, and twice a week the CDC had a--. We had a building right behind the office where they'd make the deliveries. Folks in the neighborhood, two or three volunteers, I mean they were so faithful, they would come up there. They'd see the truck coming in to the neighborhood. They would beat the truck up there a lot of times and be there to help unload the food and repackage it if it needed it and distribute it to folks in the neighborhood that needed it. It's a terrific way to enhance one's income when you're getting fifteen or forty dollars worth of food every week. It's that much less you're having to take out of your pocket. I've always thought that was one of the best things that happened there. It didn't have much to do with housing in the overall scheme of things, but it certainly did in the quality of life.

DW: I'm sure it had a big impact.

NB: I think it really did.

DW: Now, the Community Food Rescue program went to different communities in Charlotte?

NB: Right, yeah, they'd do this in neighborhoods all over town. I do some volunteer work now over in the Lakewood neighborhood in northwest Charlotte. They have a food club over there that the neighborhood organization runs. People volunteer time and they don't get food unless they spend some of their time either sorting it out or delivering it or something. They're a little more organized than we were in Belmont. It's

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a great way of helping families that need extra help. In Lakewood they make deliveries to families that don't, maybe not have the transportation to come and pick it up or elderly or handicapped people who need a little extra help. Some of our volunteers in Belmont would bag up food to take to specific elderly people that they knew of, which always created a lot of tension in the neighborhood about so and so got more food today than I got. I would say, "Well, yes, but she was taking three bags down the street to the apartments to give to the little old ladies that live down there." "Oh, okay."

DW: I did want to ask you this, before we conclude, to go back to the Hope Six Initiative, what is your feeling about the mixed income communities that is the goal of the Hope Six programs?

NB: In theory, I think it's wonderful and in a few places it works for a while. There are a lot of places in the country where this has been done and some places it really goes on very well. There have been some places, though, where it simply hasn't worked, where the disparity is just so great that either the upper income people decide they don't want to stay there and they go find somewhere else to live or the lower income families feel like they can't keep up. Hopefully here, they'll be able to maintain it where they--. They don't have a lot of low income people scheduled to go in here either. That may have some bearing on the income distribution in terms of how long people are able to stay and want to stay. In theory I think it's a great idea. I love the idea of living around people who are not just like you are whatever that looks like. I find people who are just like I am boring and so I need some other people that are far more interesting than I am to be around. I do have fond hopes for it maybe that's why they call it Hope Six. Actually, it's another one of HUD's acronyms. I really do hope it works. That neighborhood is, I

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mean, they are just such wonderful people that live there. They deserve it. They deserve it to be better.

DW: I was going to ask you, what are your hopes for the community?

NB: That's it. That they are able, that the folks that are really hard working and want to be there can stay there and have a life that suits them. That they, in fact, do get choose and that that's what they choose.

DW: I wanted to ask you, because I don't want to monopolize all of your time, is there anything, any lessons that you've take from your career that you feel will apply to Belmont or anything that you've learned from Belmont that you apply to your life now?

NB: Umm.

DW: I could have probably asked that better, sorry.

NB: Well, now, I know what you're saying. I suppose that one of the things that I learned in Belmont is that we really are—and I guess this is a lesson I keep having to learn over and over—is that we really are all alike, whatever we look like on the outside, however much money we've got in the bank. We really are all alike underneath it. We'd get along so much better if we'd just recognize that fact and didn't keep beating our heads against the wall trying to prove something to somebody that really doesn't matter.

DW: I guess where I'd like to end is just—do you see your work as a part of an arc of the civil rights movement, first seeing the sit-ins your first year of college in 1960 until the present day. Do you see all of what you've done as part of economic justice or civil rights, as one part of civil rights movement, as your part of--?

NB: I guess I'd never really thought about it in those terms but I think that that whole idea of justice to me is, that's probably the most important thing I can think of. I think that if it is a continuation of those early efforts then whatever it's been it's been worthwhile. I don't think we're through yet, unfortunately. I'm part of a group here in this church that's working on issues of justice and specifically economic justice and a living wage. That's still really important to me, to kind of level the playing field because it's a long way from level now.

DW: For you, do you see that choice is the leveler? Having the choice--?

NB: I do, I do. I think that when we can make our own choices without having those defined for us that we can then do and be whatever. Until we have enough choices in front of us, that there are always people who are at a disadvantage--. Whether or not that will change in our lifetimes I don't know, hopefully in yours. I don't expect it in mine. But, yeah, when we can help somebody to a place of being able to make the choice.

DW: Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you'd like to talk about or you think is important to discuss about your work in Belmont or your life in Charlotte?

NB: I think that the work in Belmont, obviously my piece was just a little part of what went on there and is going on there. I would love to be able to drive back through Belmont in a few years from now and see people comfortably outside, walking up and down the sidewalks and sitting on the front porches, and going out in the evenings and not be scared to come back home at night. When the kids can go three blocks down the street and you're not worrying about them all the time. Knowing so many kids that were in Belmont that didn't even go outside to play because they lived next door to a

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drug house and their parents were terrified for them to see something next door that would cause them harm. That's just, as my kids used to say, that's just not fair--. I want it fixed.

DW: Whatever it takes.

NB: Whatever it takes, yes. I'd like to see the city of Charlotte with enough guts and backbone and stand up as a community and say this isn't right, we're going to fix it. We've got the money here, for all we gripe and complain about it. There's lots of money in this city. We could fix it all.

DW: Do you think that it should be--? Who do you think should be in charge of leading this charge to fix it?

NB: Well, obviously I know how to do it. I could do it. [Laughter]

DW: I'll put your name down here.

NB: Write my name down there. I obviously know how to do it and what ought to be done. No, I think that there are enough good people in this place to do it. I think it really does take some leadership and I don't see very much of that happening. I don't see anybody in this city right now that I feel like is going to stand up and say out loud what the truth is. I think that's a little sad.

DW: I don't want to prolong the--. You've been very gracious to do this interview.

NB: I'm happy to do it. Belmont was a big piece of my life. The neighborhood is a very big piece of the city of Charlotte because of what it represents as much as for its own reality. I think its representational reality is also a tremendous because it really is a lens at looking at the city.

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I'm really impressed with your project. I look forward to the whole thing. I think that's going to be a neat experience for all of you to--.

DW: Yeah, I agree. I think it will be very illuminating. Is there anything else that you would like to say or--?

NB: No, I think that's all I know.

DW: I really appreciate you doing this interview.

NB: You're welcome. You're welcome.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

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