INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Carole De Saram

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Carole De Saram conducted by Interviewer Jesse Gutierrez on March 24, 2010. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

When Carole De Saram moved to Tribeca in the 1970s the neighborhood was neglected by the city and people were just beginning to convert the lofts to housing. She gives a vivid picture of the neighborhood in those early days; the camaraderie of living without city support, loft living, and the recycling culture. She quickly became involved in Manhattan Community Board 1 and the Tribeca Community Association, helping to fight for the Multiple Dwelling Law, which legalized the loft apartments, and beginning the long battle to landmark the district. The community members did huge amounts of research on the area in the process of landmarking, and led to designation of the four Tribeca Historic Districts. The Tribeca Community Association used much of that research, as well as local photographers, to publish The Texture of Tribeca. Ms. De Saram emphasizes the importance of knowing neighborhood history, sharing a few situations where it helped save historic buildings, as well as knowing local laws and policies, which led to the creation of Canal Park. Canal Park had been paved over in a plan to expand the highway system in Manhattan and was restored as a park after the community discovered its history through researching city archives.

Carole de Saram is a veteran feminist, community activist, and Tribeca preservationist. Noted for her work with NOW NY in the 1970s, during the heat of protests for women's rights, de Saram also became engaged with community activism when she moved to Tribeca in 1974. Taking organizing experience from the women's rights movement, she became chair of Community Board 1 and founded the Tribeca Community Association. The association pushed to designate Tribeca as a historic district and was instrumental in the restoration of Canal Street Park. Her strong convictions of social equality are evident in her decades-long crusade to protect Tribeca from real estate development interests.

Transcriptionist: Unknown | Session: 1

Interviewee: Carole De Saram | Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Jesse Gutierrez | Date: March 24, 2010

Q: Okay, so it's recording now. I'm just going to—I'm Jesse Gutierrez and I'm with Carole De Saram—

De Saram: Yes.

Q: And we will be talking about her role in the preservation of Tribeca, and Tribeca becoming a historic district and also her role with the Landmarks Committee—

De Saram: The [New York City] Landmarks Preservation Commission—

Q: Preservation Committee. So, just to get started, if you just want to tell me where you grew up, kind of your background before Tribeca started or anything.

De Saram: I grew up in New York and went to school in New York and my interest in buildings grew when I had a summer jobs in the city. I remember working down in Wall Street and on Maiden Lane down by the [South Street] Seaport. At that time there were old buildings that were there since the 1700s. At lunchtime I would walk around and see these old buildings—two story buildings, a lot of them with the gabled roofs and such. I remember it was fascinating

wondering who lived there. Now I only wish I had taken pictures of them because they're all gone.

Q: Yeah, that's crazy.

De Saram: A few they saved in the Seaport. The history of New York was first all downtown and so I guess somehow I started appreciating older buildings. In fact, the insurance company I worked for at the time needed some extra space so they took one of those old buildings.

Q: Oh, wow.

De Saram: We worked there and the floors were slanted and it was kind of interesting, so that kind of peaked my interest in old buildings.

Q: So, can you tell me, tell us, a little bit about why you decided to move to the Tribeca area and how that came about?

De Saram: I moved to the Tribeca area because I worked in Wall Street. I was then living in Queens in Kew Gardens and I was tired of this horrendous train ride and also attending school in the evening. One day I was bicycling on the West Side Highway and a friend of mine said, "Oh look! There's a sign there. They're building some buildings down there called Independence Plaza." I said, "Wow, that's great! I can walk to work." So I went over and inquired and it turned out that the income really prevented a lot of people from moving there. I think they used federal

money that had income caps. I qualified, but it turned out, for instance, if a sanitation worker or fireman wanted to work there, his salary wasn't enough. But if he included his wife [they were] over the amount allowed, which was incredible because this is who it should've been for.

Q: Right.

De Saram: Because now we have all our police and fire living outside the city. I moved there in 1974. I was the first one who moved in on that day in 1974. They couldn't fill up the other two buildings, so they were closed for several years. But as far as I was concerned, I was in my glory walking to work. I worked for Chemical Bank at that time—I had to walk on the loading docks because all the trailers parked on the streets to unload the produce and other items during the day—the coffee and the spices. The produce market had moved into Hunts Point, but the butter and cheese and the coffee and the spices were still down there.

Since they thought nobody walked around there, the trucks were parked all over the streets. At the time we had these empty lots because the warehouses and other buildings two blocks in from the Hudson River all the way to the [World] Trade Center, were torn down for development. But walking through those streets, it was exciting because at night there was nothing there except cobblestone streets and feral cats and sounds of the ships in the fog.

Q: Yeah.

De Saram: So that's why I wound up downtown there.

Q: Really, and I read somewhere that it was kind of like people—I don't know if it was the same time—but people were, like, exchanging furniture, like, people would leave stuff out you'd kind of pick it up and make it your own, or kind of new—because everyone was kind of new to the area.

De Saram: Yes and that's interesting because last night I was talking to people about Desbrosses and Greenwich Streets where we left the things we didn't need and I said, well we instituted recycling before it was known—

Q: Right.

De Saram: There was a corner on Desbrosses and Greenwich Streets, so if you had anything left over, that's where you took it. Meanwhile, all the warehouses that were leaving the area—there were a lot of storage warehouses for Wall Street furniture and such—sometimes it wasn't claimed. The city went bankrupt so the storage wasn't being paid so they used to put this stuff out on the loading dock and also putting furniture and files in dumpsters. I would come home from the bank, you know, in my suit, put my attaché case and climb up and look in the dumpsters, and then send out the word and everyone all over the neighborhood, like scavengers, could come. We would get beautiful wood, which I realize now was antique wood and such from these tables—these boardroom tables—so everybody was using the wood, doing walls and desks. And what you didn't need, or sheetrock, you took down and put on Desbrosses and Greenwich, and this went on for years.

[The City of New York Department of] Sanitation didn't come and pick the garbage up down there because they said that everybody that was living down there was illegal, even though we bought the buildings for next to nothing and paid mortgages through the owners, which is a pittance of, like, a couple hundred dollars a month because banks couldn't give you a mortgage on an non-legal building. The city finally decided that we were paying taxes, so they changed the zoning and made it mixed use, where everybody can live happily ever after. But the items still went down there. I was saying to somebody last night, the Sanitation Department came to us in desperation—"Can you please stop using that corner for recycling—they used the word—putting your stuff!" This went on for years until finally the dumpsters disappeared—

Q: Oh, really?

De Saram: But that's what we did. We put sinks there, toilets there, anything, you know, and this was all—you left things on your loading dock. This was just the nature of the place down there—

Q: Yeah, it's like the original sustainability—

De Saram: Yes.

Q: Sustainable neighborhoods and—

De Saram: Oh, it was great!

Q: Yeah, sounds amazing. Sounds like a good time. So do you think that that kind of sharing and things like that brought the residents of the area kind of together? And who were the stakeholders in creating the neighborhood at that point?

De Saram: At that point, it was people—I had moved into a loft then. I met my husband in 1978 and moved over to Laight and Washington Streets. This is also a good study in sociology and urban development—the government stayed out of it more or less because at that time the city was bankrupt and anything that didn't cost time and money was okay. In fact the city had had no idea of how many people were living there. The city was not computerized like it is today. People moved in the area and what we had was a lot of smaller buildings down around Duane and Reade and Jay Streets along Greenwich Street. On Hudson Street we had very large buildings, and then further north we had even larger buildings because they were real warehouses. A lot of jobs were lost on Wall Street, there were a lot of artists from SoHo and around the area, and they found out that these buildings were vacant and the owners of the building would rather have somebody in the building than nobody in the building. They started renting out and sometimes people collectively got together and bought the buildings through the owners and this was the whole area.

First of all, there were very few people in the streets in the daytime and the evening there were even less. In fact, when I was lived there, one of the spooky things was on the weekend when I wanted to go out walking—beautiful day—I would go down to Hudson Street or Church or Broadway and look all the way to Wall Street, there wasn't a single car, not a single person. The

subways were completely empty on the weekends and during the week especially after five o'clock. The few people around there were, of course, the loft dwellers. The loft dwellers were, for the most part, educated—a lot of them from the Vietnam days, so they were activists to begin with. Now they were a little older, and they went to do their thing or they went to work, or a lot of people were self-employed, so it was kind of like a mixture of people just drawn to the area. And they started fixing up their spaces regardless if they owned them or rented. There were no squatters. There was togetherness. And there were a few restaurants open during the day for the few workers in the area or truckers in the evening who brought in items for the butter and cheese companies.

Q: Do you remember names, or—?

De Saram: One was Puffy's Bar [Puffy's Tavern]. One was—there was one over by Canal Street called Ears [Ear Inn]. They took off the letters on the word, Bar, and called it Ears so the [New York State] Liquor Authority wouldn't bother them. River Run [Cafe] later came in on Franklin Street. But to get food and such you had to go to the Village [Greenwich Village] or walk to Chinatown. I took a good old shopping cart and just went over—in those days you were younger so you could walk over there. And even Canal Street wasn't that congested, or if you had a car, you went to Jersey—to Jersey City—and the supermarket there. You almost had a stroke going there. Because if you know anything about Jersey City it, was really bad news then. And the supermarket in Jersey City couldn't believe—where are these people coming from buying so much food? Because you'd stock up for a month—it was staples and such.

It was kind of fun in that way. Between salvaging furniture and such from the streets, it was exciting looking back on it. It kind of brought people together in a village way. In New York City, interestingly enough, the neighborhoods do think of themselves as villages. And you can find this all over the city—in neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens. It becomes very village-like within the community and that's what developed there, so this is what kind of this comradeship together, so when we had the problems, it brought everyone together.

Q: So, can you kind of explain, what are some of the problems that—?

De Saram: Well, the problems started when the fiscal crisis started dissipating and the developers started scouting around for vacant land. And they'd come down there and go, oh, wow, nobody lives here. We started to hear about who wanted to do this and who wanted to do that to a building, and then the worst one that got everybody finally moving was an idea to tear down buildings. We started fighting little battles. I had joined the Community Board [Manhattan Community Board 1] then. The Community Board decided to have residents in 1977 join the Community Board because there were no residents down there, and the Community Board district only covered Wall Street up to Canal Street and over to the court buildings. I got involved, and then the loft dwellers got involved then because they were fighting the Loft Law [Multiple Dwelling Law] because the owners that rented to loft dwellers now wanted to kick them out. So they formed the [New York City] Loft Board that became an official city agency.

Then we found out that a beautiful building at 55 White Street was slated to have, some god-awful number, twenty stories or something, added to the top of it. The synagogue next door was

a very modern synagogue architecturally even though they were orthodox; the architect had done an incredible modernistic design. Then somebody at the synagogue decided that they wanted to tear it down because they didn't have membership they thought they had. They went to the Milstein group [Milstein Properties] and got them involved, so, excuse my expression, all hell broke loose on White Street. People said, what? Destroy our area!

So we called a meeting, a call to arms quite basically at 434 Greenwich Street that evening and it turned into a blizzard. The lofts in those days were real old, they had lights hanging from ropes and wires up and down, and it was really eerie and there were no streetlights. The city didn't care about this, as far as they were concerned the area didn't exist—this area below Canal Street. You can't find a piece of property in New York now that fits that description. So, we called a big meeting, fifty-something people showed up and even our elected officials showed up—Miriam Friedlander, [New York] City Council Member and Bill Passananti *[phonetic]*, State Assemblyman—they braved this blizzard to come to this meeting—

Q: Why do you think they decided to come to the meeting?

De Saram: Well, they knew two things. One, they knew people were living down there. Two, they voted. We had to go about twenty blocks to get a voting machine, but we voted. And also they knew this was the time of the activists. The real, true activists that were still around and so these people were organizers. They came out of a generation of universities, you know, it was like the ex-hippie era and so there was enough still in the air of that kind of thing. How dare they do this to our place? We knew what was going to come, so that night we kind of started thinking

that we couldn't fight individual buildings because we'd already had to fight with the warehouse across the street.

We figured we'd be old and gray if we had to fight for every single building because there are hundreds of them, so we decided, we formed the Tribeca Community Association [TCA], but then we also formed the Committee for the Washington Market Historic District. Hal Bromm was put as chair of the committee, and Carol Nelson was made chair of TCA. I was made vice president because I was already on the Community Board. So now we got these committees, and we went down to the City of New York Landmarks Preservation Commission and we talked to Commissioner Gene Norman and the people that were there. One person's name, I forget his first name, [Charles J.] Hasbrouck, he was in charge of the agency. He has since passed away. They thought it was great, but they said the city has no money, but we'll train you and we'll give you the film and we'll give you the letter to let you into the archives, but in order to make it a historic district you have to research every building.

It took us ten years, but for some of us it became more exciting than working. You would go down there all day from early morning to closing. You would bring a little cheese sandwich that you would cut up into little four pieces because you're not allowed to eat and because if you left you had to sign in again and you wouldn't get your box back. You couldn't leave, so you hid these little things you could eat. It was so exciting to do this. And you met other people doing research on all kinds of exciting things, on former mayors and such down in the archives. The archives is as good as the person who is on duty. Some of them went down in the archives and got you the boxes, others said, "Well there's nothing downstairs." And you had to go through

this big fight. That's when we found out that—we kept coming up with buildings that were missing, and we found out the corner buildings in the records, the ledgers, did not have an address. They were put down the corner, the northeast corner of, say, Seventy-Second Street—

Q: So they had no address?

De Saram: No address. So once you learned that, you found them. Then we started finding out why buildings had multiple addresses. It's because there were originally maybe two buildings that got torn down and they put up one building. They would have in the records say 74 - 76, so these are the quirks we found in the system. But for the research, since the buildings weren't required to be registered before 1864, a majority of the buildings in Tribeca, a lot of them are earlier than that. We found in the records, the engineering reports or city inspector reports, and they would write in there this building was in 1810 or this building was built there, in this building the architect is or was. Then they would put down what the use was—

Q: Oh, that's cool.

De Saram: There would be pages of these beautifully handwritten records by the building inspectors or by building—persons for one reason or another. Because of that we gleaned out of those records the names of the architects, which were thought to be lost. You wouldn't find them any other place, unless it was some famous architect. We also found that the building at 105 Hudson [Street], the architect, I believe, was one of the architects involved with the [New York] Public Library on Forty-Second Street and the opera building—things like that we gleaned out,

fascinating things like that. And the uses were exciting, finding out the things that went on there too.

Q: What are some of the uses that you guys found?

De Saram: Well, there were a lot of tradespeople that worked in the area—we found out that Steinway Piano had a little factory of sorts down on the end of Lispenard Street, I believe, down by Chinatown, over in that area. One person was still working in Tribeca up to the '70s where he made the ledger books on Staple Street for the City of New York. The ledger papers were made with blue and green and red lines—they were made with strings dipped in dyes and they were laid on the papers. They had mechanical systems, and they would create these big ledger pages so they could write in these entries, like in the Building Department [New York City Department of Buildings]. That's gone now because everything is computerized.

We found people that made special dyes, and these were trades that were really great because they were specialized trades that were passed from generation to generation. The quality was such that it would not age and were in the archives for over a hundred years. Oh, I think one was Binheim Glass Company *[phonetic]*—they have since moved out of Tribeca. You would find glass beads or sheets of glass or handmade glass from all over the world. People would come down there to go to these places. The spices from all over the world you would find there. At night they would roast them and you could smell the spices. Also coffee. One time, everyone was complaining about a smell one day and it was getting worse and worse and somebody

though they were dead bodies. It turns out a Chinese company was bringing in sharkskins and dry shark bodies and storing them in one of the warehouses without refrigeration.

Q: Oh, no!

De Saram: I mean there was always something fun going on down there.

Q: Right, right.

De Saram: It was an exciting area. We just took it for granted—this was a way of life. It was only later, when we became under attack. It took us ten years, now we've gathered up all this information. Chair, Oliver Allen formed a photography committee. He was a professional photographer—worked for *Look* magazine, he was retired by then. So, he put together a group of photographers and did most of the photography himself. I headed up the research committee and we had all these volunteers. Then we would sit in the evenings, sorting out all these papers. We had a form, because my training—through IBM—I did a form because if you just had scraps of paper it's meaningless. So we got that together.

Now we have all this information, what are we going to do with it? Okay, we'll give it to the city, they will enter it—the Landmarks Commission, was user-friendly—so they entered it into the computer system. We helped check it to make sure it was correct. The buildings went all the way from Canal [Street] down to Beekman Place, and from the river all the way over to Center Street. We also had found out that there were numerous schools—public schools—in the area at

one time that were torn down. These were tall buildings because there was a huge population down there, once, along Greenwich Street and such, of tenements owned by Trinity Church that were designated slums of the worst order. All the people lived there and they had a high school down there on Greenwich that was torn down.

Q: Oh, wow.

De Saram: They had a school over on Vestry Street that was torn down. The roof was used for gymnastics because the children didn't have places to play.

And just recently, I read where the Board of Education [New York City Department of Education], around the '30s, decided to tear buildings down rather than maintain or sell them, which was stupid because nothing is built as strong as these buildings.

Q: No.

De Saram: The school system was very much into recreation for health reasons back then. So those are the little odds and ends. Oh, and another fascinating thing we found out, which helped us out later with another building on Vestry Street—we found that the building there was owned by the Methodist Church [John Street Church] on St. John's Street. I went down to the Methodist Church on St. John's and Wall Street area and told them. They said, "Oh no, we never owned the building there." I said, "Yes you did because I have the records." I took the records to them. It shocked them to no end that back in the early days there was a small church on Vestry Street. We

found entries on original records there on Laight and West Street that the buildings were still owned by the Queen of England—still.

Q: Wow.

De Saram: They were not dissolved until into the 1900s. They still held on to the property. And there's even still one building that remains—still over on Chambers [Street] by Broadway—a small building. This is the stuff you would find out through the ownership.

Q: That's crazy.

De Saram: But we found those out through the ledger. You see, the ledger had it down, and the ledger would change the owners as time went on. Now the computer only puts down the current owner.

Q: The current—

De Saram: The current owner, which sometimes is a management company or corporation, and that's why it's critical that you go back to the original records.

Q: Yeah, so, you guys became, like, preservationists just out of necessity—

De Saram: Salvation. Survival. So—

Q: But did you guys think of yourselves as preservationists at that point?

De Saram: Yes—the Municipal Art Society got involved with us, also the Historic District Council. We then linked up with all groups all over the five boroughs. If you ever go to their meetings or you go to hearings in the city, the preservation groups are so different. They don't yell. Everything is so polite. It's interesting. Then we decided—great we've got all this information, what are we going to do with it? So we took it to Landmarks to make it a landmark District. That's where it really became hard. We had to put the reports together. We worked with the Landmarks agency to come up with designation reports, and if you look at the front pages, they talked about us doing the research. Then the great wisdom of the city, they decided to have the [New York] City Council have a vote on it now and not the [New York City] Board of Estimate—which was later dissolved. So now we had to convince fifty members of City Council, some of which lived in Staten Island, some in the Bronx, why a Corinthian column was so important.

Q: Oh, my goodness.

De Saram: Some of them said, "These buildings are—who would want to live here? This is terrible! This is like slums! These are warehouses!" You know, little did they know, that we bought these buildings for, like, nothing. For a floor—for three thousand or four thousand dollars, within the co-op, you bought a floor. Now they go for millions of dollars per floor.

Q: That's crazy.

De Saram: That's what we gave to the city! We gave them a tax base they would never have dreamed of—this is a positive thing. We gave them a tax base because [Mario M.] Cuomo, the state governor, decided to raise revenues to what he called the Mansion Tax [New York State Additional Tax], so anybody selling anything over a million dollars was taxed at a special rate. Well, that only applied to New York—Westchester down. And so now, my god, the value of these buildings, I couldn't afford to buy now. At this time, I got involved in real estate. I tried to sell Laight Street to Vestry, on Greenwich. One, two, three, four buildings. You could have them for $500,000, with the owner giving you the mortgage, and no down payment. Couldn't give them away in the '70s. Now, every movie star, [James J.] Gandolfini lives there, Meryl Streep lives around the corner. And I won't even tell you what they bought them for.

Q: Yeah, it's amazing.

De Saram: But one of the interesting things that came out of our research, too, is that we found out at the Landmarks Preservation Commission hearing on designation. There were people in the audience, kind of a grouchy looking group of men in gray hair sitting there. I went over and asked them why they were there because, in those days, people kind of hung together who were in preservation. I went up and I asked them and they said, "Oh, we're here because of Matthew Brady." And I said, "What about him?" They said, "Well, we feel the building on 359 Broadway, by White Street, was where his studio was and he was the one who took the first picture of an American President—Abraham Lincoln—Matthew Brady." Well, I had heard of him—Matthew

Brady—because public television that month was doing a thing on the Civil War. Ken [Kenneth L.] Burns—talking about the Civil War, which was horrendous. In fact, they had to change it to later hours. They didn't think everybody was going to watch it at four, and it turned out people were watching it at four, and were late for meetings—self included.

Q: The next day.

De Saram: I said, "Well, we know this is in a landmarked district, etcetera, and you could win." So these grouchy guys said, "No, no, we're never going to win against the city." We said, "Oh, no! We'll work on it." That was how we got involved in it. We planned to show up at this city hall hearing on this. Because it was Lincoln's birthday, I was looking at a local newspaper and on the back, full page, showed a picture of Abraham Lincoln by Lincoln Savings Bank. I said, "Oh!" So I put the photo on a large poster. I then put sentences saying "The children of New York City petitioned the City of New York to save the building where the first picture of the president of the United States was ever taken by Matthew Brady." Lincoln said he felt that was the reason he had won because it was the first time the American people, for the most part, ever saw an American president's face.

Q: Wow.

De Saram: Therefore we called on Abraham Lincoln's birthday, that the City Council members save this building, etcetera, etcetera. I sent it over to the school, and all the school children at P.S.π 234 [Independence School] wrote all their little signatures on the petition—

Q: Oh, wow.

De Saram: All the little kindergarten and other grades children put down their little signature scratches and we took two children—a boy and a girl—to sign in. When their names were called, they rushed down the aisle of the City Council at City Hall with this poster with all the children signatures, and they handed it to the chair of the committee. Everybody went wild. The little children ran out—they were afraid. The owner of the property was screaming, "I protest!" He started crying. And it went on and on and on. Needless to say, we won. That was one of the things that came out of knowing your history of your buildings.

Q: Right.

De Saram: It was serious. And why was the City Hall open? Because it wasn't a federal holiday. Lincoln—the south would never agree to make it a federal holiday—the president of the United States, Lincoln.

Q: Wow.

De Saram: So this is the history you find. So, this is becoming so overwhelming, with all this history we're learning, you didn't do anything with your life. I mean, everyday you tripped over another thing, and New York City is so rich in this history.

Q: Right.

De Saram: So that's what we did. What happened was we then had to go through the City Council. We did little tours. We took some of the City Council members on little bus tours of the area and inside lofts because they never saw a loft, they didn't know any of the area—anything about it. And you look, back in those days, the façades of these buildings still had to be cleaned, the metal doors downstairs, it's not the new chic look.

Q: Right.

De Saram: You had to bang on the doors, because loft people didn't have doorbells, and they call "Who are you?" We took them in a freight elevator up to the loft. They come off the elevators on to the floors of two thousand square feet or more and they would be shocked—absolutely shocked—and they couldn't believe how we converted so many of them. They thought, that even the most conservative ones considered, "Wow, you people did all this work yourselves, all this hard work." So we took all the research information and we turned it over to Andrew Dolkart, who is a historian and teaches at Columbia University, to put it in a book, because we were at first going to do a pamphlet, and everyone wanted more, so the pamphlet became a book.

Q: Wow.

De Saram: So we took all the photographs, basically, that Oliver Allen did, and the research my committee did and we handed it all to Andrew. Andrew broke it up into four districts because the

North, South, East, and West are different looking because of the need when they were built. The North part, which was later, had really massive warehouses, load-bearing floors. The ones on Duane [Street] and Reade [Street] were narrow—forty feet wide or so—the ones on the avenues were much larger. Then in between we had buildings from 1860, and buildings from 1810 over on Canal Street. We had buildings earlier than 1800 over on Lispenard and West Broadway, or on White [Street] and West Broadway. That's why we called the book *The Texture of Tribeca*, because our opposition later at hearings kept saying, "Oh! It's a hodgepodge! There's nothing here. They're all different. This building's this age." So we called it the texture. The cover of the book we made in gray with a texture to it, when you touched it. The handwriting of the type—we used old type for the words Texture of Tribeca. Then for additional pictures, we went down and started looking through the WPA [Works Process Administration] files, which are rich in photographs.

Q: What's the WPA?

De Saram: Works Process Administration—it was an agency put together under [Franklin D.] Roosevelt to employ writers, artists, and various other people in the arts. In fact, the murals you see in post offices and hospitals were from the WPA project. Well, you see on public television, one of the agencies planted the trees from Canada to Texas to stop the soil from blowing away, called the Dust Bowl. That was one of those projects—the Civilian Conservation Corps, CCC. Anyway, one of the projects was the photographs. I pulled out fascinating pictures of the WPA projects and we incorporated them. We worked at the City Archive Library [New York City

Department of Records]. When they were building the subway, they showed the workers down in the subways—they called them sandhogs—and we found out where the routes went.

We went up to the New York Historical Society, and we asked to see files and such. Their files were a little more difficult because they did it by subject matter, but since we knew some of the fields, we asked to see them by subject matter. You just have to go through your files yourself, because the people behind the desk may not have the sensitivity about it. So here, where history repeats itself, I find a picture of a woman down in a store around the 1950s or '60s saying, "Save the Washington Market!" The merchants got together and were protesting in the neighborhood because the city wanted to come down and closed down the markets and move them to Hunts Point. They wanted to save Washington Market at that time. So here I have a picture of her holding "Save the Washington Market." Hey, we're doing a book on the same problem! Save the area. We incorporated her into the *Texture of Tribeca* book.

Now we are before the City Council. We've got the first district passed on May 7, 1991, Tribeca West [Historic District] was designated a historic district. Then the opposition really went crazy. The Real Estate Board [of New York], in their great wisdom, decided to, declared us the enemy. They sent letters to everyone in the buildings, but to show you how much they knew about the buildings—why this was terrible etc. Who were they sending the letters out to? They were sending them to us! They just didn't get the concept. Now they do but then they didn't. They were just totally out of touch with the reality that co-ops were buildings with residential owners and the residents were the people in the community and the loft-dwellers and everybody. They

would show up and they dragged everybody's who's who to convince the mayor and the City Council.

Q: What were their arguments?

De Saram: Oh, that we were going to devalue the property values. We were going to take away from business the opportunities to grow. Grow? They were dying! To enable them to come in and do big development and we were the evil empire—everything that was wrong. But meanwhile, they forgot we were the only ones who were paying taxes down in Lower Manhattan. The Landmarks Commission and everybody says, "Listen, we can't do this piecemeal." And we said, "We can't do this in parts. We're supposed to be going to work; we've got families." And this was, really, sometimes people would sit there with tears in their eyes at these meetings and this horrendous thing going. It was horrible. It was tedious—it was horrible. I don't think maybe today we could pull it off because we're older. Then, we were more idealistic. You know, hey, it's the '70s. It would be much more difficult. And with e-mail, I don't think we could've done it because with e-mail, we'd all be e-mailing and texting and this and that. We wouldn't have had the hands on—

Q: The cohesiveness.

De Saram: The cohesiveness, the groups. Then they said, "You have to do all three districts together." We didn't want to, but we figured we had to. We couldn't do this because, by the third district, they would've had us, for sure. They would've come and paid off or who knows what

they would've done. To raise money for the *Texture of Tribeca* book, we decided to have a dinner, an art show, and a reception, all for one price. We got all famous artists to contribute art—everybody from Rosenquist to Murray, De Niro and Edward Albee joined in. They all signed the letter and we sent it out. This was the who's-who of the art world, and the who's who of movies, and we sent it out, raised money. And this was a big thing and that's how we pulled everybody together. Because certain people could care less about it, but they saw we were working hard, in organization, you don't want to be too slick. When they saw these loft-dwellers, these people who were really working, "Oh, there's a better way, there's an easier way." They would write out a check—"What do you want? I'll write out a check. Don't get me involved with it; I have no time for it." Fine. We needed the money to pay for the book to be printed. The book cost us $40,000 to have this printed because we had to print out so many copies.

Q: How many copies did you need?

De Saram: Oh god, we needed over a thousand or something. But we sold them, too, for $12.50 each.

Q: How much are they worth now?

De Saram: I don't know. We still sell them for the same price.

Q: Oh, really?

De Saram: Now we're down to a few in a box. In fact, I don't even have one here to show you. So—

Q: Is it available. I think I saw something, like, a PDF or something or online or something.

De Saram: Yes, there's a store called Working Class at 168 Duane Street—you can go there and buy them. We had stores selling them for us, and everybody got involved. Everybody put their battles aside, even if they didn't like their neighbor. It was that kind of good thing. So, then we went to the City Council and we got it passed in December 1992. December second, December eighth, we got the other districts, yes, the other two districts—let's see, East, West, North, South—okay, yes, May 2, 1991, Tribeca West was designated. December 2, 1992, Tribeca East [Historic District] was designed, and December 8, 1992, Tribeca North [Historic District] and South [Tribeca South Historic District] was designated. You can get a designation report on these districts from the Landmarks Preservation Commission. They sell them in the City Bookstore [Citystore], so you can get them there. And it was kind of, we were holding our breath in between December second and December eighth, we had no idea. They just call up the mayor and that would be the end of it—[Edward I.] Koch was no friend of ours.

Q: Oh, really?

De Saram: We had to go through all the other mayors. Every time there was a new one, it was another education just to keep the Real Estate Board away from them—

Q: So in between, like, this whole time that you're waiting or working on this book, what are you guys doing? Is this just like a full-time job?

De Saram: It became a full-time job. What happened, let me see—I was working for Chemical Bank and somebody then convinced me that I should come to the city and work for the City of New York and the Treasurer for the City of New York [Treasury Division]. Now I'm involved in the community, so everything was hunky-dory under Koch. Then they tried to move the [New York State] Parole Board in the building on the corner of Duane and Hudson—a beautiful building, Abraham [J.] Hirschfeld purchased the building. He was known as this eccentric person that tried to run for mayor all the time. Then he wanted to kill his wife and kill his partner. He became extremely eccentric. He worked out a deal with the Parole Board to close the Parole Board offices in the five boroughs for the most part, and bring them all there. That would've been wonderful for him, with the state paying him.

Well this really caused chaos in the area because it would've been the end of Tribeca—we sent the Community Board District Manager out to Jamaica and all these areas—to see what they thought about it, and they said it was terrible. It also was bad for the parolees, and the truth of the matter is, how could a parolee, who has enough problems, you know, not everybody's evil and circumstances, have to get up in the morning, take a bus, take a train, all the way down to the Bronx to Tribeca for a morning appointment that if he misses or is late then he is in violation of his parole. So this is not good for them either; this is terrible. All the way out in Brooklyn and Queens and it was terrible for them and it was terrible for us. What happened is a lot of well, well-known movie people that made movies, lived in the area, by the way—the people who lived

in the area who were well-known—nobody went around and said, “Oh, that’s so-and-so.” No one said anything. They could care less because they thought they were also important. It just was that kind of homogenized community. It didn’t matter if you had money or didn’t have money, or if you were Hollywood. It was all understated. People never dressed any particular way. I left my Brooks Brothers suits at home after that, working for the bank. So, I worked for the city, but then, because I took on the Parole Board issue, I got fired.

Q: Oh, wow.

De Saram: First, they said, “Oh, it’s a conflict of interests. You’re chair of the Community Board. That’s a conflict.” It wasn’t; I checked with the legal department, and they said it wasn’t. It was my job, so I just decided I’ll step down to vice chair. I still was on the Community Board. Then they fired me because of that. So, the truth of the matter, I was happy. Who needs a job if you’re threatened? It’s not worth it. You’re only good as long as the mayor’s there anyway.

Then, now I’m unemployed, so somebody says, “Hey, why don’t you sell real estate?” So that was when, down there, you couldn’t sell lofts, not everyone thought it was cool to live in a loft. So I did that. It also gave me the time to be the community activist. I was the new president of the Tribeca Community Association, so we started taking on all these battles. We fought, we did Bogardus Triangle Park [Bogardus Garden]. The [New York City] Department of Transportation had a little cement island on Chambers and West Broadway and decided that they could care less about it. The homeless were living there, there was garbage always piled up there, and the city didn’t care because, as far as they were concerned, nobody lived down there. That was the best

part of this whole thing, the city wrote us off totally. Once a year, we'd get an inspector walking up the street and they'd knock on the door—this was fun back in 1976, 78—when they'd knock on the door—and they hated it, they'd only come out in the spring when they could walk over from the city government. They'd knock on the door—there's no doorbells—and so we'd say, "You've got to come back tomorrow!" So that night, everyone would take the tubs off the floors and put them down in the basement, in the freezers, left over when it was a produce warehouse, because you didn't hook it up to the plumbing, you just put the pipes in the floor. Because if they saw the tubs, then it was residential. They'd come around and you'd go, "No one lives here." And they'd go away, and so that's the way the neighborhood was for years.

When they decided to tearing up Hudson Street—we'd got involved with an architect and went from one store to the other and they'd let us have it as a park. We called it the Bogardus Triangle Park. In fact, I just came from a meeting this morning about putting the fence up as part of the renovation for Hudson Street. We had planted things, and the community sustains it. In fact, we got in a fight with the Water Department [New York City Water Board]. The Water Department wanted us to pay for water for the plants. We said, "It's the City of New York! Why should we pay the water bill?" Then they sent us this sarcastic letter about the kind of people ripping off the Water Department—stupid thing—this is the kind of thing that gets into the archives, it's precious.

Anyway, we got this beautiful park there now, and the community maintains it. In fact, somebody ran into our beautiful wrought iron, $45,000 worth of damage, I call up the Department of Transportation and they tell me, "It's not ours, why are you calling us?" I say,

"No, it is your property!" "No, it's not!" I figured, okay, and hung up the phone. I told everybody, "They don't think it's their park. Let's keep it." I mean, we're not going to keep it personally, but you know. But they should not be involved because if they thought it was, they'd take it and put cars there or salt or something. So we maintain the park. We take care of all the plantings. We raise money every year. Volunteers maintain it. We do all the maintenance—we put in the sprinkler system; we do the plumbing, the turning it on and off—and we do all the maintenance. We raised the $45,000 in the community, paid for the fences to be fixed. It cost the city nothing, so we leave it the way it is.

The other part of the fallout of our research is this—this is why I wasn't working—is that the city shows up at the Community Board with the State—and now they want to put in a highway, off the West Side Highway, to link to the Holland Tunnel, and they want to put in all these eight lanes with islands and stuff. We don't have a highway through the City of New York, Manhattan, why would we want one now? This is terrible because they were in violation of the Clean Air Act; they want all the traffic off the highway, so it could keep moving. We said we won't be able to cross Canal Street going north or south. "Oh, don't worry about it! We'll have an island in the center." How are we supposed to go through eight lanes of traffic?

Q: Yeah, that's crazy.

De Saram: So, we always wondered why this triangle was there, so we researched it through our archives, our research. We headed down to City Hall to look up St. John's Park. Trinity Church owned most of the land around there. In fact, all the streets named Vestry [Street], Desbrosses

[Street], were all named after the vicars of Trinity Church. That was their names, you know, Vestry was one of them, Desbrosses was one, Watts was another one. These were all names out of Trinity Church originally. We had buildings of 1810 on Canal Street. We always wondered about it, and some people said it was always spooky. People that live in those two-story buildings on Canal, swear there are ghosts there and they're serious about this. I thought they were kidding, but separate people have told me this. So, anyway, so we now find out that it originally was a park.

Q: Oh, really?

De Saram: And it was designed by Calvert Vaux, who did Central Park, and it was torn down by Robert Moses to build the Holland Tunnel. He was supposed to put it back, and he never put it back, knowing darling Robert Moses. So required reading for anybody who wants to know anything about your city is get *The Power Broker [The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York]* by [Robert A.] Caro. You've got to read it. In fact, every ten years you should reread it.

Q: Really?

De Saram: Because some things change and some things never change, and a lot of those plans that are still on the shelves, they take them off, and dust them off every now and then and they try to re-implement them. We always knew that they always wanted to link the West Side Highway to the Holland Tunnel and the Brooklyn Bridge and the Manhattan Bridge, and that's

when they'd try to do Westway. The community won that battle to stop Westway because of the fish—the striped bass—we said may be destroyed—that word. So, that was that battle. Now we've still got this triangle. We knew it was always in the background to incorporate this highway. They never gave up, they came back. So now they can't have the highway, they're going to put the highway underground and take over Canal Street and they're going to start using eminent domain now to start widening it into a real highway system.

So we start fighting with this battle. This one now is in 1990, around 1992, not too long ago. Now we find out it was originally apart from our research that we had done to make Tribeca a historic district—so now we've really got to get into the research. We go, we find this out. We sent everybody down into the archives, the City of New York, to pull out the minutes of the City of New York called the Common Council—it used to be called. They're bound books down there in the basement of City Hall, and they have incredible records. It's almost like, if you had nothing to do, just read these books—they're fascinating. In those days, they could write a paragraph to describe tearing up a street, putting in water mains, in a paragraph or two, and how much money, etcetera, beautifully written. Today, you would have volumes on this subject.

Q: Yeah.

De Saram: We had to stay on topic because everyone was sitting on the floor—they don't give you chairs there—you're sitting on the floor and you're reading this and you go, "Oh, this and this." And now you're off, but no, you need to stick to this thing here. We find out there are budgets—it turned out, it was a market until the 1880s and made it a park designed by Calvert

Vaux from Central Park. And the flower market for the City of New York used to be on the sidewalks there.

Q: Oh, wow.

De Saram: It was fascinating until Robert Moses tore it apart. We had a lawyer, and I said, "Listen, Robert Moses didn't do anything he didn't have to do. He was Commissioner of Parks up in Albany." We got a lawyer who said, "Oh, little girl, you're ridiculous." Not quite those words, but that's what he meant. Well, we got rid of that lawyer. Turns out, I was right. They never de-mapped it—they didn't do anything with it.

Now, the city says, "Oh, you need a deed." We said, "No, we don't need a deed. You don't deed parks." They said, "Oh, you need this record to show it." Well, the records are now in the former B. Altman [Department Store] Building on the corner of Thirty-Fourth Street and Fifth Avenue, at CUNY [City of New York] Graduate Center. Jana Haimson *[phonetic]*, who lives on Canal Street, got on her bike and goes up there to look at the microfiche. When you use microfiche—you know how it spins out of control and stops? There is the thing about the alderman talking about it being a park, and it was still the city—they never de-mapped it or anything. Ha! So now we trek back to the city, and we say, "You have to return it as a park." You're insane—this group is insane. We said no. Alienation of park land, we found out the law of 1880-something, alienation of park land—you touch it, you have to put it back the way it was.

Q: Wow.

De Saram: Now they're really crazy, so now they turn all the animals on us. People show up at the Community Board, this crazy group. We then go to court and Jack [B.] Weinstein, the judge, who is a conservative Republican judge. And so here we have the federal government, the state government, and the city government because all of them are involved because they touched it. The judge says, well, what is this? And they say, we don't know! What is it? This group wants fourteen thousand square feet or so—whatever, the size was, around that—for this park, and they claim it belongs to the people. Sounds like Berkeley.

Now the government representatives were all carrying on and then they got into a fight with the judge because, you see, they said they had to put down an underground chamber to run the water off of Canal Street into the river, and Canal Street was a canal and it took all the rainwater from the sewers and everything and ran it into the river. It was true. This was like fixty feet long and forty or fifty feet wide, about so many feet below ground. These chambers—really serious stuff. They would have to dig up the whole—therefore, we couldn't have a park. We said we could have the park on top. "Oh no, the cables" And all this.

Anyway, they got into an argument with the judge, and the judge said to the state, "If you're lying to me, bring your toothbrush because next week I'll put you in jail if I found out you're lying to me." So the lawyers for the city, state, and federal government stuck together. Three days later they took our case out of State Court and took it over to the Supreme—the Federal Courts. Now we're stuck with the federal government. Our little group!

Q: Oh, my goodness!

De Saram: This is how these people work. How do we get out of this? Now we're down to no money, we can't afford a lawyer. Fighting all three governments, we had to go to the federal building and had to be checked in and all this. And they sat there, and some of the people from the Parks Department are sitting there. They said our area was grubby and with slums and who would want this. I mean, this was nasty, nasty. So, this was not the tone we dealt with in the '70s and the '80s and the early '90s. We did not have this kind of tone before. This was a whole new tone.

The government now is separating itself. I am not into this anti-Obama stuff, but this is where in New York, the separation now of the people. They now separated themselves from the people. I'd rather have a political hack as an elected official or a mayor. You can deal with a political hack, you can sit there and either vote for him and he'll be happy and he'll give you a park—he could care less about a park—or show him how you're going to hurt him in a nice way with the votes or something and maybe he'll decide to ignore it, which is good too, or let you kind of run around and spin your wheels or do something and that's good too. But not the way it is now. You can't get any meetings with any agencies anymore under [Michael R.] Bloomberg. We would never have been able to do this under Bloomberg. He does not communicate with people. They don't care about people.

Q: Wow. It's amazing how times change.

De Saram: Yes and it's not good. So now we decide, pkay, good Jana Haimson, who lives at on Canal Street and the West Side Highway, the first building in. Jana Haimson. She, again, gets on the phone and calls up law firms in New York, all the big, top law firms. They're supposed to do pro bono work, but you know, community groups, it's not their idea of pro bono because it's against the real estate interests, which are really their clients. This is where we run into this problem, like your foundation here, the Kress Foundation, we don't have many foundations anymore that would think to do what we're sitting here doing. There was a little sense of giving back that corporate-types had back in the earlier days that you don't have anymore, although maybe Bill [William H.] Gates and a few. But anyway, so now we're into what we're going to do.

She calls around and she gets this one lawyer on the phone, and he decides, yes. Who is this lawyer? His name in Ken [Kenneth F.] McCallion. He did Valdez *[Exxon Shipping Co. v. Baker]*, Shoreham *[County of Suffolk v. Long Island Lighting Company]*, the case against 3M in India *[Sajida Bano v. Union Carbide Corp.]* with the gassing of the chemicals of the Indian people. He did recovery Holocaust monies in France, where you can win the case, but it doesn't mean you're going to collect. He did all of these things, we said he would take us on. So we trek up to his office there—it's in August, hot day, to 200 Park Avenue, over by Forty-Second Street and Park, go see him. He listens to us and says, "You definitely have a case. There's no way they shouldn't turn this back." We said, "We know that, but—" He said, "Let me call up Governor Eliot [L.] Spitzer." He calls. That's that.

The next day, a Friday morning on a hot day in August. You have to appreciate, this is when all city people, especially elected officials, head out of the city to go to the Hamptons and such. They had to have a late night meeting or an early morning meeting to do this because by twelve o'clock the next day on Friday we got the park!

Q: No way.

De Saram: They called off their dogs.

Q: Wow.

De Saram: But, now, how do you really get it? Just because they agreed to it doesn't mean it's going to happen. We know, the letters go around and everybody signs off. Now what happens is we know enough politically, it can go up to the state and sits on a desk. They just don't move it off the desk. What are you going to do, go up to Albany and knock on a door and run around and find it? What is that going to do for you? It's not moving, this is not moving, that is not moving. Now, we're going nowhere. Next thing we do, and this is where this stuff gets really strange, this is where you really have to stick to your guns—

Q: Yeah.

De Saram: You wouldn't do this through e-mail! I have a friend, Julie Nadel, that was friends with Dick Martino *[phonetic]*, who was Assistant State Commissioner of Transportation, who

was going to the opera last night. This only fits in an opera. She was sitting next to him at the opera, and she says, “Dick! This has been sitting on your desk up there.” “What desk? What thing are you talking about?” And she tells me that he knew nothing about it. Just as we predicted it was going to go nowhere. So, he got it off of his desk the next day and it goes down to the city. So now we’ve got the city and federal government to deal with. So we had get, pro bono, an arbitrator or lawyer—a lawyer—who did this kind of stuff. Did nothing for a full year—fight, fight, fight, fight, fight. Because, internally, the commissioners, one of their stripes if they could torpedo us—a committee—they get to be the big dog in city government and some position with a commissionership.

Q: Yeah.

De Saram: Or get hired by the Real Estate Board if they shot us down. The last holdout was the city. Nasty dogs, I mean ruthless. Our lawyer quit being a lawyer and went to be an arbitrator after this, said, “I couldn’t deal with this kind of stuff anymore.” So, in the end we got the park.

Q: Oh, wow.

De Saram: Well now the Parks Department had to put it together. We had an opening ceremony. *The New York Times* put it on the front page. It runs from the Hudson River all the way in, not past the one block, but to the next block to the point. They restored it to what it looked like in 1880. They—it’s—the workers working on it loved it—were putting in cobblestone and Coney Island style benches, and they thought they were doing something historical instead of just doing

maintenance-type work. And they loved it. All the workers were so thrilled doing it. So we had a big ceremony, and Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson were there. So, the Parks Department liked this, so then the commissioner announced, "So, we're going to have a celebration." They decided to close down Canal Street. They set this up. We sent out invitations—they did the mailings for us!

Q: Wow.

De Saram: We did a beautiful brochure—a little card showing the previous park in 1880 and what it looks like now in 2000-something. And we sent it out to the world. We had all these famous people—musicians, Lou Reed, and all of them came from the community. They all live around there. And they brought in this big van that they opened up as a stage. They brought five hundred chairs. The celebration was where artists had these scores of things that they would release and go up in the air. It was after 9/11 [September 11 Attacks] and we had fireworks, and we had over five hundred people show up—a thousand.

And the rats still don't give up. The day the event was supposed to happen at four o'clock, they say, "Well, you don't have this real permit." I said, "Oh, great. Now what are we going to do?" So, Sam [Samuel I.] Schwartz, who was the former deputy commissioner of transportation, is our ally who helped us with this. Without Sam Schwartz we wouldn't even have this either. He used to work under Koch. He called up Bloomberg's Department of Transportation because you can't penetrate the wall anymore. It's four o'clock in the afternoon. This event's supposed to start in

an hour and a half. He calls up, and he got whatever was holding it up, and so that evening—and they couldn't believe we shut down Canal Street at rush hour on Friday.

Q: Wow, that's crazy.

De Saram: And so we had this event. Then late at night a limo showed up with somebody—a police commissioner got out of the limo with a white shirt and brass hat wanting to see where our permits were. They still kept at it, you know. But what were they going to do, have a near riot with a thousand people watching Lou Reed play the guitar.

Q: Yeah. That's crazy

De Saram: My daughter came up from North Carolina years later with two of my grandchildren and she says, "Oh, why don't you show us the park." And the truth of the matter is, it's so windy over there and we're so busy that we don't have time to go over and sit and enjoy. So I took my two little grandchildren over there and they go, "Oh, Grandma this is great!" And they're running all over this because children outside New York City love the chaos of New York. They love the subways. They love traffic all over of the place and people running all over the place. So, they're running all over the place.

We walk out of the park onto West Street, and I never had walked out on that side of the park, and there was a plaque—two plaques—one saying what it was, and another plaque saying, "By the Parks Department"—it was a green plaque saying that this was a park, that originally in

1622—was the Queen of England at that period of time—and it was common square or something and then later it became a park by Calvert Vaux and then a couple years later it was taken down for the building of the Holland Tunnel, but in 2000—a community group formed called the Canal West Coalition—that was us, you know, we all joined together and gave it that title—rediscovered the park and then sued the Department of Transportation of the State of New York for the park and won! And they put this on a sign!

Q: Wow, that's amazing!

De Saram: The City of New York put this on a sign! I said, "If New York State Department of Transportation ever saw this, they would take it down." But that's why they put it on the west side, facing the highway. They figure nobody ever walks there, let alone they would walk over there. So, that's how we won that.

Q: Wow. That's so cool.

De Saram: Yes, and the history of it, too—the people who came in on this battle against us—was Vomark *[phonetic]*, which was the original company that worked with Robert Moses.

Q: Oh, really? Wow.

De Saram: And one of the men who worked with Robert Moses was there at the hearings against us!

Q: That's crazy!

De Saram: In fact, he got a heart attack after that. This is so wild! We had to go back to our old historical records to find this out. And nobody in the city knew about it—the federal government didn't know about it, the state didn't know, the city didn't know about it, nobody knew about it!

Q: Wow. That's amazing! That's all from having—

De Saram: This all fell out from doing the research at the archives—

Q: For the district—

De Saram: For making the Tribeca Historic District and our setting up this committee for the Washington Market Historic District.

Q: Wow.

De Saram: It's unbelievable.

Q: Yeah, it's amazing.

De Saram: But it goes to show you, I think, in New York City, if you really could get off a plane—no longer a boat—and decided that you wanted to be something in the City of New York, you could do it, literally, it's just, you've got to put the work in.

Q: Yeah, wow.

De Saram: I mean you hear about this on television—this restaurant owner or this politician—it just happens. You just have to get out there and do it. You've just got to put the time in.

Q: The time and then fight, right? There's a lot of fighting.

De Saram: Yeah! Well, I think that it's always been that way.

Q: Yeah.

De Saram: If it's not one battle then it's another.

Q: Fighting like tooth and nail to get what you want, what you feel you deserve.

De Saram: Right, so now we're fighting with Mayor Bloomberg with our latest battle.

Q: Right, and what's that battle?

De Saram: Oh, it never ends. He decided he's going to put the garbage depot on the corner of Spring [Street] and the West Side Highway. Something like a fifteen-story building for garbage trucks that's half a billion dollar's worth. We don't need this. He's claiming they can't put it any other place. The city can't afford half a billion dollars, we're laying off people, he's talking about this horrible budget. Plus, it's going to destroy the neighborhood, and even worse, who in their right mind takes billions of dollars worth of development rights—not that I'm for development, but even this makes sense—and puts it on the Hudson River. It's insane.

So we now have that case in court with Ken McCallion. This time we picked up Jim Gandolfini, Meryl Streep, we picked up all these people are on our side—doesn't matter with Bloomberg, has no effect. Thousands of signatures, no effect. Saatchi and Saatchi took us on for one of their environmental group projects. The mayor called them up and threatened to pull the city agency's work and public relations out of their firm. They still went ahead with the event that night. We had eight hundred people, we had all these movie stars—I don't even know their names, won Oscars—still no effect on Bloomberg.

Q: Wow.

De Saram: He called up elected officials and told them they shouldn't be there. That's how evil this is now. Now, we had some of them that had sense enough to show up, but we had a couple that did not show up. This is bad news. We had elected officials—we knew they were not on our side—but they'd show up and smile and shake hands, but still do what they want to do.

Q: Now they're bowing down to threats.

De Saram: Yes.

Q: So what's the new strategy or how do you deal with—?

De Saram: Well, now we found—they told us we have to find other locations. They didn't know our group. Not only did we find locations, we photographed them. We even got Gary Spindler, who owns the big parking lots up on the Upper West Side along the river, to sell to the city one of his huge parking lots as a site for market price. The city turned that down. They did they—we would do this sort of stuff, I mean, this is how we were. They're like crazed. So, today we sent out a letter to [Edward] Skyler, the deputy mayor, saying, "Look, we found another site. The Community Board says they want it. What are you going to do now?" So, we're on appeal. We're not giving up.

Q: Yeah, of course not.

De Saram: I mean, we've had some of our cases and our projects—times where even the men sometimes would get tears in their eyes and say, "We can't take this. I can't take this. I have a life. My wife's going to divorce me. My children don't know me. We've been doing this for a couple of years. We're losing." I said, "If you feel that way, just think about how they're feeling. Hang in there." And within a week, we got the decision. We've won every battle we've taken on with the City of New York since we formed in 1980. We were talking in 1983, but officially we

formed in 1984. Except one little—one battle—and it wasn't the end of the world, I might add, but it's just because we had a deal with another group and we couldn't, you know, work that way. But we've won every battle.

Q: Wow.

De Saram: Now we have parks, the Bogardus Triangle, we've got the Canal Street Park [Canal Park], and we forgot about the other parks, and we got a call last month from the Parks Department saying, "Look, Carole, you've got to come to this—we're having the opening of a park down, Watts [Street], and Canal by Sixth Avenue." And I said, "Well, that was one of the eight parks that you said was the Triangle's back in 1984!" I had forgotten about it. And they were working on it, and they put it together, and we had a little ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Q: That's cool.

De Saram: So, it's cool, you know. I'm even laughing about it, but let me tell you—

Q: No, yeah. I mean, it's just, I can hear. Obviously this is just—we're talking about the highlights, but, you know, every highlight comes with years and years of courts and federal court or whatever, and dealing with nasty people or nasty threats.

De Saram: But you've got to remember the laws are there in the books—believe it or not—for the people. You just have to do the homework and know it—you have to know your rights. You just can't go into a meeting and scream your head off.

Q: Yeah.

De Saram: You have to really know your rights. And—you have to do your homework. You really have to go back to the original sources, get copies of the original records and deeds and that's how you do it, that's the only way to do it. Again, back to the people we had at that time.

A lot of my organizing skills came out of the women's movement. I was president of the National Organization for Women here in New York, on the national board. I did a lot of the actions, you know. I closed down a stock exchange and Citibank branch to show they discriminated against women. I have the pictures of us marching down Fifth Avenue with a Women of the World Unite banner, we held it up on the side of the Public Library on Forty-First Street. And I can't believe I did that, since I'm afraid of heights. But I climbed up there, on the side, I guess just when the adrenaline's going, you do it.

That's where I had all of this experience. Prior to that I never did anything like that. I mean, there were little things I did, tiny, tiny things, but nothing political. Nothing. And then in 1970, I heard about this march on Fifth Avenue, and I got involved, and I never went back. And my organizing skills with women, who had no skills in organizing back then for the most part, other than the women who took on the right to vote, which was won by one vote, by the way. People don't

realize the whole thing with Obama is the same thing. And only because one of the elected officials was brought in on a stretcher. I was down in Washington, at the women's museum there, and I was looking at these—I just happened to be down there—and I was looking at these index cards where women wrote how they visited their elected officials, which you do kind of now, you write down your impressions. I was just looking at a couple of them, and one of them bragged, in New Jersey, about how he loved firing women who got married who worked for them because he didn't want married women. I mean, it was gross!

Q: Yeah.

De Saram: Women were, *The New York Times* even printed, "creatures" and that the right to vote was not right. They were against them, in fact, the women went after them in 1970. We did a copy of *The New York Times* that looked just like it, except instead of New, we changed the "e" to "o." The Now York Times. We handed it out, and everyone thought it was *The New York Times*, so they started reading it not realizing right away that it contained articles written by women against sexism and the NYT's stand against the Equal Rights Amendment [ERA]. We went to the NYT's building and occupied James [B.] Reston's office. The people in the building let us in, and he almost had a stroke. I said to him, "You were against the right for women to vote back then!" And I said, "This is how you plead your case. What good is it when you turn to the jury and say the term, 'Well, they're just women.'" And the judge will say, "You're out of order." But meanwhile, the jury's already heard it.

Q: Right.

De Saram: *The New York Times*, while we went after them segregated their ads. The ads were printed separate for men and women. The women's part was only for secretaries and file clerks, and words like gal, young, pretty, etc. This is the junk they used to put. All the high paying jobs were under male. And they would not put them together. And this was in 1970, it took them many years to stop referring to women by their married name, even though they were a doctor, even though they were a general or an astronaut, it was Mr. John or Mrs. Mary Smith. And this was going on in the '70s!

Q: That's crazy.

De Saram: So anyway, I learned all these skills and such by working in the women's movement. So when I thought that I was retired from all this stuff, I got involved in landmarking. But it isn't just me, this is the kind of people we had in the community—

Q: Right.

De Saram: That were, even in the art world, the ones doing new types of art—avant-garde art. They were revolutionary in their areas. And music was becoming very revolutionary, and their styles of music—they lived in our community. Even new type of movies—[Martin] Scorsese lived in our neighborhood—and all of these people were in our neighborhood. So, that's why they all came together.

Q: So, it's like a special time even.

De Saram: It was a special time—this was the talent we had. None of us could've done this on our own—no way. I could talk about it, make it fun, tell you how to do it, but it cannot be done unless you have this kind of element of people together.

Q: Right. So, do you think, speaking of, like, looking forward now—obviously you know the challenges now are with Bloomberg, you know, bringing in these developments—but what do you see as the future of Tribeca and challenges, and how do you see other neighborhoods learning from how Tribeca has kind of formed.

De Saram: The challenge is now keeping them from tearing down the landmarked buildings.

Q: Because it's not set in stone that they can't, right?

De Saram: Right. They're not individually landmarked. We have to fight. And then, if they can't tear it down, they want to put on these humongous additional stories. You can go to the corner of West Broadway and Warren Street on the south—or on the northeast corner—and look at an example of the travesty.

Q: Like, lollipop additions or something like that?

De Saram: Oh, what they did is they took a landmarked building where Monet's champagne *[phonetic]* was first made—you know, that was their distribution center and other liquors. Beautiful building. They put this horrible penthouse on top. They put a modern fire escape and removed a beautiful one that was beautiful there. They were so cheap and so crude—instead of even trying to make a replica of it, they put this modern steel one on top of that one going up. This is a perfect example of what was wrong. Landmarks let them do it; that was under [Rudolph] Giuliani.

The person who bought the building, their name escapes me, she tried to run for City Council. Her father owned a big pharmaceutical company that went under—they were doing something they shouldn't have about four years ago. And they were arrested for it. A very famous pharmaceutical company, not Pfizer or anything, but something on that level. And she wanted to be an elected official. They are the ones who did that. Not only did they make a deal with Giuliani for his campaign, but when we went to show that the sprinkler systems weren't hooked up and that they couldn't be hooked up because of the way the water configuration from the street was, but that it would have to be redesigned, they didn't want to do it. And their answer to it, "Well, let them run hoses, if the building's on fire, from the Hudson River."

Q: Crazy.

De Saram: This is the people you're dealing with; this is the kind of situation. So, now we have to fight. As Martin Luther King said, you've got to fight to get it and you've got to fight to keep it.

Q: Right.

De Saram: We had to be on our toes. For the most part, now, we have a Landmark Committee on the Community Board, but they're only advisory. Most respectable, decent architects or developers don't go there. They really don't. It's the Neanderthals you have to worry about. The big companies, they'll come in, they'll try, they'll go for it. But if we say no, then they know for some reason—or, if they're going to put in a penthouse up there, they'll come back with a decent design. They'll take what we suggest and they'll do it. And nine times out of ten, we're saving them time and money. In fact, a couple came and said, "If we had not listened to you, it would have looked really bad. And we're so glad we listened to you because now it looks great." That translates into money to them because now they charge another million dollars a floor or something.

We have this, in fact, a lot—or a couple of top law firms in the city come to us with their developer who has come to them because they're looking for variances or changes in the law, which they have every legal right to do. They come and they sit down with us and they say, "Look, we want to put a ten story building on top of this other building." And we work with them. Sometimes we ask them for setbacks, we get the building reduced from eight stories—this is on top of an existing landmark. So in the landmarked district. We work with them. And nine out of ten come around. It's only a couple of the ones that are not in the system and don't care.

We looked out our window, and they're putting balconies out! Who's putting balconies out on the front of a building in Tribeca? You don't. It was a section that was left out of the landmark district—just a sliver—that faced all of the landmarked buildings. So we got out our little trusty calculators and calculated square footage and found out he couldn't put them out there within the building line—extending over the building line. Also, to use it was like making double height, twenty-foot ceilings and putting balconies inside—you can't do that. I sent it to the Building Department. Nothing. Sent another letter. Nothing. We did all the calculations and sent them to the DOB. Nothing. Then we really did the calculations and put it in baby steps, and then we took it all the way up to the commissioners and the elected officials. And we won it. They had to get a crane and chip them off.

Q: Oh, wow.

De Saram: Take every one of the balconies off the top, off the building.

Q: Oh, that's crazy.

De Saram: And the reason why? He was a pig about it.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

De Saram: That's why. I'll tell you what would've been smarter. This is where they don't know what they're doing. New Yorkers know balconies, off the side of the West Side Highway, you

don't get any light, all you're going to do is get from the Holland Tunnel exit, is all the soot. He wasn't giving them anything. He would've been better off as including that as square footage on the floor, made two floors within those places. He would've doubled his money—put the building diagonally—and made views of the Hudson and doubled—almost tripled—his value on each floor.

Q: Yeah. That's about being smart and thinking rather than just—

De Saram: Yeah, but some architect off in some country, "Oh, you've got to put a balcony out." So you put a balcony out and have to take it off. Now he's got a weird building that's sandwiched in between two buildings with no light. They're tombs. And he didn't have to do any of this at all.

Q: Right.

De Saram: We would've even allowed him a couple of extra stories on the top, had he had a design that fitted into the community.

Q: Wow.

De Saram: This was so ghastly looking to begin with. I mean, so, that is what you deal with.

Q: Yeah.

De Saram: So, in answer to your question, you have to be on your toes.

Q: Yeah, to keep it.

De Saram: Well, the community does. They see something coming down the street and wonder, "Hey, what's going on there?"

Q: Do you see younger generations of people fighting for those areas or those types of—

De Saram: Well, now we have—it's like, be careful what you wish for. We've created such a desirable area now the biggest battles are going on in schools. So many families moved in with children. Our generation, the ones a little younger than myself, decided to have children when they were pushing forty. So we got P.S. 234, and they add another school, I.S 89. Prior to that, we had an early childhood center there, and the Department of Education decided to close it down. They said there is very few children, "We have two hundred children." "What two hundred children?" They didn't even know there were two hundred children in kindergarten over there, and they were going to close the center. Then, they did some surveying, and they were totally hysterical that there were no schools down on Wall Street, there were no schools in Tribeca. Now, we're from the tip of Manhattan all the way up to Canal Street, there are no schools. And on the west side, there are no schools until Houston. There are no schools all the way up to almost Fourteenth Street on the west side of Manhattan.

They were actually freaked out that they had to find some way of creating new schools. They could bus children to already crowded schools uptown. They had to then build PS 234, and it filled up instantly. Then, they had to do I.S. 89—that's filled up. Now, they had to come up with another school, they had to rent what was call the Boss Tweed landmark building [Tweed Courthouse] on Chambers Street. The city just renovated it and did a beautiful job on it. They had to move a school inside there. Then they had to take over on Broad Street—and make that a school. Now, they have to have a committee to divide up the districts to send children out of the neighborhood.

And how do you get out of that neighborhood? Transportation is the pits, unless you're getting on the train going all the way uptown, but it doesn't take you crosstown. They were going to send the children out of the district. Parents formed committees—and everybody said, "Why should we be penalized because we live in North Tribeca." So then they decide to do a lottery system and now they have to build two more schools. I don't know where they're going to build them, but they're going to have to build two more schools. And that's not even going to be enough. So, our neighborhood is filled with children. They're all young people, from thirty or younger. They are now Tribeca.

Q: Wow.

De Saram: We're, you know, the ancient people.

Q: Yeah, hopefully they remember their history—their recent history, even.

De Saram: The real estate company discovered us. They were all opening offices all over the area. And they make landmarking their advertisement—it's a historic district. Tribeca is a protected historic—these were their words—district of buildings built at the turn of the century.

Oh, another thing we did with our records. One time a building caught on fire, and they thought they could go in and hose it out. Well, it ran from North Moore Street all the way over through, to Ericson Place, facing the south part of the Holland Tunnel. We used to have a lot of buildings that use to run through to another street, and the ceilings were low, and the walls were thick, they used to be for storage—food and such. It kept burning because the firemen couldn't go into the center of the building because the center of the building was the center of a block. They broke through the roof. That didn't help. So then they tried to open the walls from other buildings next to the building that were on certain floors—the walls were five feet deep of brick. The fifth day of smoldering—now it was just puffing out black smoke—they couldn't get the fire out because the walls had, like, corking and such from the old warehouses.

They couldn't have the probability of the loss of lives going in and pulling out all this stuff in the walls. I went home, went down to my basement, dragged out my files, and the records on the building, which showed how thick the walls were, where there was openings between buildings that was built in the structure. I took them to the fire captain on the job there, gave them to him, and he said, "Thank you because we were hitting bricks from the other sides of the buildings. We kept hitting bricks and bricks!" They were planning to tear it down. I called up the Landmarks Commission and said, "They're threatening to bring in a boom or something tomorrow and

whack this building down." So Landmarks went and worked out a method to enter the building on the floors with the least bricks and put the fire out. I hate to tell you what this building costs now, each floor, millions of dollars per floor. So that's what our files did.

Q: Preserving?

De Saram: Yes. So, now your group is going to maintain records and such on this.

Q: Yeah, I think it's the New York Preservation Archive Project.

De Saram: Yes, okay, what I'd like to do with you. I want to take all my files and catalogue them first and make a copy for myself, and then give the originals to the archives.

Q: Yeah, that'd be great, but you have to talk to Laura.

De Saram: I want to do that because these, I want, especially the letters going back and forth with the city. Some of them are precious.

Q: Yeah, it's very much about preserving the history of preservation, which is all the stuff you guys did.

De Saram: Yes, you have to.

Q: So, yes, I guess that's pretty much it. Unless there's more stuff you want to share. It was great, thank you. I was a little nervous at first, after reading up on all those fights you guys did. But it was great, it was great listening.

De Saram: Well, it was my pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]