

SAVING PRESERVATION STORIES:
DIVERSITY AND THE OUTER BOROUGHES

The Reminiscences of
Rene Cheatham Hill, Greg Mays, and Olney Marie Ryland

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Greg Mays, Rene Cheatham Hill, and Olney Marie Ryland conducted by Interviewer Liz Strong on September 16, 2017. This interview is part of the *Saving Preservation Stories: Diversity and the Outer Boroughs* oral history project.

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.

Addisleigh Park is a historically black neighborhood of single-family homes in Queens. In this group interview, Rene Cheatham Hill, Greg Mays, and Olney Marie Ryland speak about how they came to the neighborhood and became aware of the history, particularly its more famous previous residents, Count Basie, James Brown, and Lena Horne. They are all past presidents of the Addisleigh Park Civic Organization, which has been instrumental in landmarking the neighborhood, and previous to that, rezoning the area. The rezoning, from mixed use of multi-family and single-family dwellings to only single-family homes preserved many of the historic homes before the district was landmarked in 2011. The Historic Districts Council was a crucial part of the landmarking effort, conducting a survey and contributing their research to the landmark application. They also speak about the efforts to preserve the Veterans Affairs hospital, St. Albans Community Living Center, which is a historic building that previously been a naval hospital.

Rene Cheatham Hill, Greg Mays, and Olney Marie Ryland are past presidents of the Addisleigh Park Civic Organization. New York natives, they all moved into Addisleigh Park as adults where they became involved in the Civic Organization. Olney Marie Ryland was an early president, and helped to get the area rezoned for single-family homes. Mays and Hill, were the next two presidents and were heavily involved with saving the St. Albans Community Living Center, a historic building that had previously been a naval hospital, and with the efforts to create the Addisleigh Park Historic District.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey	Session: 1
Interviewees: Greg Mays, Rene Cheatham Hill, Olney Marie Ryland	Location: 178th Place, Addisleigh Park, New York
Interviewer: Liz Strong	Date: September 16, 2017

Bellov: Today is Saturday, September 16, 2017. We are here with Liz Strong interviewing three incredibly attractive and intelligent people who are about to introduce themselves. And here's the clap.

Q: So if you guys can just start by saying your full name in any order that you'd like to do, so that we have that for the record.

Hill: Rene Cheatham Hill.

Mays: Greg Mays.

Ryland: Olney Marie Ryland.

Q: Great. And as he already said but I'll say it for my tape as well, it is Saturday the sixteenth. My name is Liz Strong. We are here doing an oral history interview for the New York Preservation Archive Project's oral history project, *Saving Preservation Stories*. So I'll ask each of you just to start out, tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about your life growing up.

Ryland: Well, I was born in Harlem. I'm sixty-seven years old. My life growing up, it actually started in a foundling home. So I was there for four years and then I was adopted. The family that I lived with all my life, my adopted parents, Olney, my mother's first name, gave me her first name. My father Howard, I took over his carpentry skills. I learned those things from him as a child. I use them in my current day life, just for my pleasure.

Mays: Now wait; how old did you say you were?

Ryland: Yes, sir, I'm sixty-seven.

Mays: Okay, that's the craziest thing in the world. Let's just state that for the record *[laughs]*. I don't know how shocking that is to you.

Hill: She looks great.

Mays: My God. Okay, wow, I've learned more in two minutes about Marie that I didn't know since I've known her. So that's pretty amazing. So my name is Greg Mays. I was born here in Jamaica, Queens, at Jamaica Hospital [Medical Center] in 1962. So I am fifty-four years old. From there, I went to St. Albans, which is where my parents owned a home, not far from here. I guess technically Addisleigh Park is St. Albans; it's kind of a carve-out if you will.

So let's see, I was born and raised here, went to school here until, I guess, high school, back when they were bussing folks. So I was bussed across town to Bayside High School. After that, I went to college, Medgar Evers [College] for a year, then I went to college in [Washington] D.C., at Howard [University], I went to business school and then at some point, I came back here.

So I've been back here in this neighborhood for—how many years? Let's say, twenty to twenty-five years. Let's go with that, about twenty years or so. So I wasn't born here but my father actually is from Harlem as well and he moved from Harlem to right around the corner, to 178th Place. So he in his early twenties or so, he became a resident of Addisleigh Park and then when he and my mother got married, they left Addisleigh Park and then they finally just sort of returned here, I want to say, like in 1990. So how long is that now? So almost thirty years, they've been back here in Addisleigh Park.

Hill: I am Rene Cheatham Hill. I was born Rene Cheatham from Flushing, New York, from a very tight-knit community in Flushing. We call it the Ville and I didn't want to move out of Flushing. I have a brother and a sister, Mark and Jill. My mother was a business owner, she had a daycare center, and my father was an engineer for Grumman [Aerospace Corporation].

I went to Parsons Junior High School. I'm a Queens native so I went to P.S. 164, Parsons Junior High School and Jamaica High School. I went to Howard for college for a little

while, had a lot of fun. Didn't finish there, came back and finished at York College.

So most of my life I've been here. When my sister and I bought our house in Flushing, I think I was twenty-four. She was twenty or something. I was dating and stuff and just had a baby out of wedlock but I decided it was too close for all of us and she bought me out. She still has that house and we were looking for a place here in Queens. I didn't want to move to the Jamaica area because I grew up in Flushing and I was spoiled with how the buses are so convenient and I loved my community.

But we were visiting somebody and they're like, "Oh, we've seen this beautiful house in Addisleigh Park." I knew Addisleigh Park because I knew James Brown lived there. So I'm like, "Well, let's look at it." Even though I didn't want to move to the Jamaica area. We rode by and it was actually beautiful. And he had said it had a winding driveway. It really didn't have a winding driveway but it was a nice long driveway.

We bid for it and we kept on losing the bid. It was in foreclosure. It took about a year and a half to finally get the house. People were bidding on it but they couldn't get inside the house because it was in foreclosure and the guy inside didn't want to let anyone in to see it. So I told the bank I'll buy it or we will buy it without going inside. So that's how we bought that house and wound up in Addisleigh Park/St. Albans area, Jamaica area.

Q: I would love to hear your story about coming to Addisleigh Park as well.

Ryland: Okay. This house was actually built by my uncle. He was an architect. My aunt,

Sara, the love of my life, she was an artist. I have some of each of them in me. They're my adopted relatives but they couldn't have been closer than blood. So it's a long story but my uncle passed and my aunt was here alone and some of her family didn't want her here. There were a lot of issues with them trying to get her out of this house and I tried to fight for her to stay here. I went to court to fight for her to stay here.

When I got to the court date, they had asked me—to my aunt, “Does she want someone to take care of her or does she want to take care of herself?” She said, “I want to take care of myself.” And then the judge found her unfit to take care of herself. There was actually someone present in the court with cash to buy this house. We didn't know.

We had two sides to the family, a good side and a bad side. So the good side said to the judge, “That's not right. We should have the right to make the purchase.” They asked if there was anyone present that wanted to buy the house. And they looked at me and I said, “I'll buy it.” My husband wasn't with me and I said, “Uh-oh.” *[Laughter]*.

Ryland: So okay, the judge gave me thirty days to get a mortgage and get back and I called my husband as soon as I walked out the door. I said, “Honey, what do you think of us buying this house, Aunt Sara's house?” He said, “Buy it.”

So that was then. To make a long story short, we bought the house and we've been here twenty years. In the house, I found the blueprint for the house and that's why I created a replica of the house because I had the blueprint. I also had the skills that I learned from

my father as a child, not even knowing that I had the skill until he passed away. He passed away in 1989 and I hadn't picked up a hammer or a saw, anything, until that point. I started building shortly after his death and I've been building and creating things out of wood as an artist since then. That's how I got this house.

Q: Just because you brought it up, I'd love to say a little bit more on the record about this beautiful model that you've made of your house because we all saw it before the interview started but for the record, no one will know what you're talking about. Please elaborate, what inspired you to make it? What was the process like?

Ryland: How my woodwork started, it started in 1989 when my father passed away. I had his tools and I had a collection of miniature furniture that I had for years and years. I just had a passion for these little pieces of furniture. I didn't have a place to put them. I had them in a box. So I was on a mission to find a container to put the furniture in. I was actually looking for an antique curio because I like antiques also. A girlfriend of mine, a very good dear friend of mine who's very, very creative said to me, "Why don't you put them in a dollhouse?" I said, "A dollhouse? I don't want a dollhouse." I don't see me putting that stuff in a dollhouse.

Then that idea was embedded in my brain and I kept thinking about it and thinking about it. I said, "Okay, let me go buy a kit." So I built a kit, put the kit together, looked inside and said, "Oh, no, this isn't going to work. The ceilings are too low. The rooms are too small. The kitchen's too small." So I decided, well, let me go see what I can do to fix this.

So I went to the lumberyard, not even thinking—went to the lumberyard, bought the plywood, did my little draft of what I wanted, made my cuts, added to the house, raised the roof, expanded the house and then it was done.

So then I showed it to my girlfriend that gave me the idea. She said, “Wow, how did you do all that?” And then it dawned on me, I didn’t know how I did it. At that point, I didn’t know that I had the skill that I learned from my father as a child. He taught me when I was five years old, how to use those power tools because he was afraid of me going into the shop, touching those tools, cutting my arms off. So he made me a huge platform for the shop to stand on. He showed me how to use my goggles, my gloves, how to use the power tools and I didn’t realize I had that skill until he had passed away. So that’s where it really started from.

Q: Thank you.

Mays: Wow, that’s incredible.

Q: Yes. Another question for all of you is just how did you come to know about the history of this area? How did you learn about it? What did it mean to you once you began to learn about it?

Mays: Well, I would say, I guess as I shared my father actually when they left Harlem, he moved into a house around the corner from here. So I just knew that it was a lovely home

that my grandmother and my grandfather lived in and it had a rather large backyard. So just coming over here as a young person, you'd just be in that backyard and it had a beautiful garden around the house.

And it's funny because the home is lived in now by my cousin, my uncle's daughter. She still lives in the home and the yard is even more spectacular than it was then because she has this tremendous green thumb and she just loves to present the house beautifully and stuff.

So that was my first introduction to sort of the neighborhood if you will. Then other than that, I think like Rene said, I knew that James Brown lived in the neighborhood in the very distinct house that's on Murdock Avenue, that's sort of like a stone house if you will. Other than that, I knew they had beautiful houses.

My mother, I guess after we had all just sort of left the house, my four brothers and I—we grew up in a regular house that regular folks grow up in. There was no dining room for example. She was someone who just sort of envisioned herself, just inviting people over for dinner if you will. So she's the one who actually had the interest in moving to this neighborhood. The house that they live in now had been cut up and it was a rooming house at some point and my brother actually came in and did all the renovation work. So it went from this pretty horribly abandoned house to a lovely home for my mother and father because there weren't a whole lot of kids around at that point.

Then after I became the president of the [Addisleigh Park] Civic Organization, that's when I really, really got a sense of just sort of the historic, just sort of value of the neighborhood because the Historic Districts Council [HDC], they came in and they had done some research. So just reading their research and then just meeting some of the neighbors who had lived here for god knows how long. What are the sisters' names, who live over on your block or something?

Ryland: Yes, I don't know.

Mays: They've been here since the beginning of time. So just meeting more of those people and getting a sense of the historic aspects of the neighborhood.

Q: What about you?

Hill: Growing up, a lot of my family lived over here in St. Albans area. Like I said, we'd be riding down Linden Boulevard and I'd get so excited every time I'd pass James Brown's house.

Mays: *[Laughs]*

Hill: He only lived there for a year or two but he had a big fence. You could hardly see it but he had a moat. At one time, you could see the moat and then a big fence—I think someone else brought it—

Mays: Yes, there's a little bridge over it.

Hill: You still thought maybe he's in there. But he didn't live there that long, I don't think. But everyone knew James Brown's house as they rode down Linden Boulevard.

Then I always had a passion to live in a large house. I grew up in a semi-attached house in Flushing and I used to look outside my window in my bedroom in Flushing and there was a church across the street—there is a church across the street—we don't own that house anymore but there is a church across the street. They had beautiful trees surrounding it. So I love trees and I love land and stuff.

So I remember crying one day when the neighbor didn't like cleaning up the leaves and she cut down all the trees. I said, I've got to live in a neighborhood where I can have a backyard and beautiful trees and stuff like that.

So that's when after someone had told us about this house. It took so long to get it. We were fighting to get this and I actually went to the bank and said, "Listen, nobody's bought it yet. What's the problem?" That's how they said, "Well, no one wants to buy it without seeing the insides." I said, "No, I'll take it." Because I saw the land that it came with. I saw all the houses around us have land. They're just beautiful properties.

Mays: And yours is a brick home, which is really unique for the neighborhood.

Hill: It's a Tudor, yes. Yes, you're right—well, there are a lot of Tudors.

Ryland: Not like yours. Yours is the best *[laughter]*.

Hill: Thank you. As I—like Greg—as you live here, you find out, oh, Lena Horne lived over here, or so-and-so bought this house. You see plaques around the neighborhood. You really get to appreciate it.

As soon as I came in, I joined the Civic Organization. At that time, there were other people in charge. They were like, “We need more young people like you to come.” So I used to go regularly and I used to—that's how I met Greg. Then I met Marie there. I don't know, there were probably a few more young ones like us and I'm saying she's young too because everyone used to think we were sisters, like, “Oh, I saw you.” I'm like, “No, that was Marie.” They thought we were related. But we became close then. So when the older people started leaving, then we looked at Greg and I think Marie was vice president at that time or something.

Ryland: I was—

Hill: Yes, for a little while.

Ryland: I was president before—

Mays: Were you the treasurer?

Hill: No, he was the vice president.

Ryland: Oh, okay.

Hill: And I was the treasurer.

Ryland: I don't know what I was.

Hill: But anyway, we all came together and we pushed Marie to do it first. That's how it all started.

Ryland: That's how we met.

Hill: From being around here, you get to learn the history from the elders. They say, "Oh, this is what happened here." That's how we learned it.

Mays: Yes, yes, so it's kind of an oral history.

Ryland: Yes. When I was a child coming to see my aunt, this was the most beautiful place at Christmastime. I don't know if you remember, if you were here then. People

would decorate their homes so beautifully. I mean they had dolls that moved and all kinds of things in the windows. I always felt like the rich people lived over here. You know, when you're a child, that's what it looked like. I also thought my aunt and uncle were well off. They weren't. They were just average people. My aunt was so elegant and my uncle was so proper. I just felt they had to be rich people. No, it was just so beautiful.

Mays: So was this house as beautiful as it was then as it is now?

Ryland: Yes, my uncle built the house and I have pictures in the hallway of the house when it was first built and it looks like this except—windows change, doors change. I changed some things. Of course, my husband and I gutted the whole inside of this house. We gutted it. We did it. I painted every wall in this place. So we tore the house apart completely. My replica that I created is—when I renovate in here, I renovate inside of there too *[laughter]*.

Ryland: If you look in there, you'll see, I gutted there—

Hill: I hope your camera can get inside there. How can you do that?

Mays: Why? Because she is Marie.

Ryland: I made it pink when I first bought the house. Then I said, "I don't like pink. I want gray." So I had to take the whole replica apart, go in there, repaint all the walls,

even upstairs. I had to do all of that. But every time I change anything, I change it. I change a frame on a picture, I have to go inside, change the picture. That's what I do.

Mays: Okay *[laughs]*. So the wall sconces are the same in the house—

Ryland: Pretty much, as much as I can get them.

Hill: It's so impressive.

Mays: It is, it is.

Hill: It's a gift.

Ryland: Thank you.

Mays: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: Did you have projects to rework the house that you moved into once you got there?

You hadn't seen the interior.

Ryland: The interior.

Hill: Yes, because it was a foreclosure, it had lots of people living in there. We found one

person in the basement I mean that's—*[laughter]*. So what happened while we were fixing the house up—which we're still fixing it up and this is twenty-two years later—we're still fixing it up. The guy in the basement, we said, stay there, because we were still living at our other house in Flushing that my sister and I owned. We fixed it up a little because I had just had had a baby.

So we said, stay there. This way, it kind of protects the house. So he stayed there probably for a year. We didn't know him. He had a heavy, heavy Jamaican accent. So we could hardly understand him. But he watched over the house and he kept it fine and we trusted him and he trusted us. Then finally we got to a point where we were going to start moving in, so we had to ask him to leave. And he was fine with that. We're still fixing it up. It's a lot of work. My husband did a lot but because we went through the recession that one time and stuff like that, and I have my own business and he has his own business, we struggle here and there.

Hopefully we'll fix it up before I have grandchildren or something, I don't know. I have a thirty-one year old daughter and my son is twenty-two. What happened was my mom—we moved into this house and everyone was like, "Oh, you moved into this big house. You're all going to do great, you're going to fix it up beautifully." Well, that didn't happen. But the outside, we try to make that look nice.

And my daughter—everyone was like, oh, it's only four of you in this big house?

Unfortunately, my mom had passed away in 2001 but before that, she had adopted two

kids. And they weren't family but she adopted them. She loved kids. When she died, I didn't want to put them back in the system and I had the house. So I said, I will take them. So they each had their own room and everyone was happy.

So it wound up that even though I had a big house, god gave it to me for a reason because I really needed to raise these kids. So we're still fixing it up because we had a family unexpectedly come in. I had to make sure that they go to school so we were running around. We had a lot to do. We kept busy. But that's our goal to fix it up. We're still working on it.

Mays: And Rene's husband is a contractor also. So it helps *[laughs]*.

Hill: Yes, so you know, the shoemakers, *[unclear]* it's the same thing. It's like I'll be the last one to get the house done.

Bellov: Can I interrupt for a second? Since we're going to have an audio document of this, I'm going to suggest that when you ask a question to a specific person, you start with their name, so whoever's transcribing this knows who's talking.

Q: Oh, no, that's fine. We'll figure that out later. I take a look at a transcript too. So I'll be able to—

Ryland: Oh, I just remembered, you said we're supposed to repeat the question.

Mays: I just remembered that as well.

Q: I wouldn't worry about it too much because as he said, we might make something edited out of this later, but for the most part, what we're going to put online is the full video. But again, what he said is still true, if there's something you want to do over, you're more than welcome.

Ryland: Don't forget to ask the question.

Q: If you want to say something differently, don't worry about it.

Bellov: So far, it's been very clear.

Q: Also I love the way you guys have been playing off of each other as well. So I wouldn't worry about it too much *[unclear]* *[laughter]*.

Hill: Are we back on again? The reason why is I'm sweating over here.

Mays: It's all good.

Hill: I was like pouring down.

Mays: You look great.

Hill: It rolled over you.

Ryland: Yeah, I'm glad you asked [*laughter*].

Bellov: We can stop at any time.

Q: We are on. Anytime you need to stop, let us know but don't worry about it.

Q: Well, one of the things that I wanted to ask you guys about was just obviously in addition to coming in and fixing up these homes and making a space, getting engaged with community was something that was important to all of you, but also rare. Otherwise people in the Civic Organization would have been like, "Oh, good, young people."

So what was it about this community that made you want to be engaged? Were you just trying to reach out, make new friends? Was there something in particular that you found here that was unique, that you wanted to be a part of?

Ryland: For me, I moved into the community. I wanted to know what was going on. I knew about the historic—

Mays: What year was it that you moved here?

Ryland: Sixty-seven—sorry, I'm wrong, '97 when my grandson was born, February of '97 because he was born in May. So that's twenty years ago. Just wanted to be involved. I didn't know if I wanted a big role in being involved but I just wanted to see what was going on, what the community had to offer.

So I started coming to the meetings and I met Adrienne Rogers who was the president at the time [*unclear*]. Anyway, her encouragement is why I became the vice president and also with her encouragement, I became the president. That's really why, not because I wanted to make friends or anything, I just wanted to be involved with the community. I just thought it was such a beautiful place. I wanted to do whatever I could to help it stay that way.

Hill: I agree. We bought the house in 1995 and I agree. I wasn't going to make friends. I was going to try to keep the trees and the beauty of it, of the neighborhood. So the same thing that happened over in Flushing doesn't happen here because it's important just like Harlem—we were going to move to Harlem. We own some brownstones in Harlem.

What happened was my daughter, I think it was around 1994 or something like that, we went to Harlem to look at the houses and everything and she heard the sirens going off all the time. She was like, "I don't want to move here, Mom."

So we wound up having to look for something here but we really weren't looking when

we found this—our friend, Bill Jones, he's a realtor. He said, "I really see this beautiful house." Like I told you before, it has a beautiful long winding driveway. "I want the house but I can't get it right now." That's when we looked at it. He wanted it and I looked at it and said, "I want this too." So I got involved not because of friendship but because I wanted to keep the beauty of the place.

Mays: Was Bill living here already?

Hill: No, what happened was Bill—we got the house finally and Bill told my husband, "Oh, I'm looking for a house in Addisleigh Park too." And I happened to hear at one of the Civic meetings that someone was selling a house on the next block. I said, "Bill, I just heard that someone's selling. I know you want to get in the area." So he found me my house and I found him his.

Ryland: You found him his. Oh, great. So he has a nice house also?

Mays: That's right.

Hill: It's a beautiful house.

Mays: And it's a brick house as well. It is interesting. So I'm trying to think how I got involved in the Civic. The thing that I love about these ladies is that they're doers and you got to love a doer. People who just don't talk or just complain, but just sort of jump

in and get the work done. I think when I joined—the first Civic meeting, you were obviously there already, right?

Ryland: Yes.

Mays: Were you the treasurer?

Hill: Yes, I was.

Ryland: You were the treasurer.

Mays: So both of them—so you were the vice president.

Ryland: I was vice president and she was treasurer.

Mays: Rene was the treasurer and look, I just saw how attractive the leadership was, and I said, “You know what? I’d be a fool to not get between these lovely ladies here.”

[Laughter].

Ryland: I used to have long black hair like Rene.

Mays: We all had black hair at that point but it’s all good. That’s why people look and say they’re younger, not young but younger. I don’t know. So the first thing that I did

was I worked on the newsletter.

Ryland: That's right. You did a great job.

Mays: I just said—people talk about oh, everybody doesn't come to the meetings and this and that. And I said, "Everybody can come to the meetings but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be communicating with folks who can't come to the meetings." They have kids, they're at different points in their lives, et cetera, et cetera. So I started to do a—restarted or just started to do a newsletter. I did that newsletter for a couple of years—

Ryland: Then I took it from you.

Mays: Yes, is that when you—

Ryland: Yes, you dropped it on me *[laughs]*.

Mays: Oh, okay, I dropped it on you. That's because I knew that you were so capable and able and I was like okay, here. So nonetheless, this is the really fantastic thing. I just looked at Marie and it was time for the previous person to just sort of give up the position. She was the vice president and she does this little shy thing. That is hilarious because it has absolutely nothing to do with who she really is and stuff *[laughter]*. So maybe with the role or something like that, the vice president is supposed to be seen and not heard or something like that. So she was a very effective vice president but I looked

at her and said, “Well, clearly this woman needs to be the president right here.” I think it was kind of reluctance. She can correct me if I’m wrong.

Ryland: It was, it was.

Mays: All right. But I just said, “She needs to be the president.” I encouraged her.

Apparently, Adraine encouraged you as well. And next thing we know, she was elected and she was the president, and did a very, very fine job of just sort of being the president. She was gracious and she was welcoming, all the things that she is today and it was what the organization needed at that point. So it was fantastic. I forgot the question that you asked but that’s basically—oh, that’s right, how I came to the Civic Organization and it was the beauty of my colleagues right here.

Q: Is that your version of history *[unclear]*?

Ryland: I don’t remember *[laughter]*. I don’t remember when you came but I know when I came. Like I said, in the beginning I was kind of reluctant and then I said, “I’m not going to let anything or anyone stop me from being part of it.” So I just continued to come in and got to know everybody and learned that everyone wasn’t as frightening as they seemed to be.

Mays: *[Laughs]*. Because there was one character who was a little frightening but we’ll leave that alone *[laughter]*.

Ryland: Yes.

Q: And then you nominated him, right?

Ryland: Of course, because he nominated me. There was no way you could get away from me, Mr. Mays.

Mays: That's right, turnabout is indeed fair play. She nominated me and I don't think that I was going to nominate myself.

Ryland: He really does a great job. He's really, really good at doing things, just getting things done very quickly. And always prepared, coming to the meetings, always prepared with so much information. So he did a great job as president.

Mays: Well thank you, thank you.

Ryland: You're welcome.

Mays: It was a labor of love and I will say the only thing that I thought—that I wanted to do, there was to a certain extent the Civic Organization meetings felt at times like high tea. Both of these ladies—they both said, they didn't go to make friends. I guess I kind of felt the same way. I wasn't there to make enemies but I certainly did not think we needed

to have high tea once a month with the people of Addisleigh Park.

So I started to invite a guest speaker to every single meeting, so that it would feel a little less like high tea and a little more what's useful and stuff. What can we do to really encourage a sense of community where people knew each other and valued each other and also just sort of help to maintain the value of our homes?

Hill: But I want to step in here. I'm not sure when we decided—because I know we kind of got disappointed because the elderly stopped walking over to the meetings. The meetings were a few blocks, they were about ten blocks away maybe. I approached St. Albans Congregation [St. Albans Congregational Church]—and I'm not sure who was president.

Ryland: It wasn't me.

Hill: I think it might have been you, Greg. So I asked them, "Can we please start holding our meetings here?" It's in the community and everyone can walk if they need to. And they were so gracious. To allow us—to this day, we're still there. So that helped a lot to maintain our meetings because we started losing people. We were a few blocks away, we started losing people at some point and I asked Greg if it was all right if I go and he said it was fine. So we did that. We did make that change.

Mays: Because I think what it was, I wasn't really quite sure why the meetings were

outside of the neighborhood anyway. We had this beautiful [St. Albans] Family Life Center as part of St. Albans Congregational Church and I think I said to myself, I'm on my way out but I can ask on my way out, if I were to damage a relationship, I wasn't going to be there but I thought it really made sense for us to be over here. And then I think the very first meeting we had over here was when you were the president or something like that?

Ryland: I don't know. I don't remember. I know once we started having our meetings here, the membership multiplied. The attendance multiplied. It was always small. That's what you want to see coming to a Civic Association meeting, the people. It's been great ever since.

Hill: Well, it went down a little when I became president [*laughter*].

Ryland: Oh, Rene.

Mays: Because this woman right here rules with an iron fist—

Hill: I don't follow rules first of all.

Ryland: She's a little pit bull [*laughter*]. That's all.

Mays: Yes.

Hill: I don't follow rules. I don't do these nice newsletters like Greg. I do one pagers. If you don't come out, you're going to miss everything [*crosstalk*].

Mays: I had a little slogan and I don't think it's in one of these earlier newsletters but basically it said, the Addisleigh Park is here for you, or something like that. And immediately, Rene changed it to Addisleigh Park Civic Organization does not work for you. You work for us. Or something like that, or We will work with you. It was the perfect tone change.

Also, at the time, we were fighting—there was about to be, the VA [Veteran's Affairs] hospital [St. Albans Community Living Center] which is across the street, which started out as a golf club way, way back in the day, before the federal government took it over and changed it to it's VA Hospital. But at the time, during the transition, there was a local developer who thought that they were going to redevelop that facility. The plans said that they were going to build a development that was going to be two-thirds the size of Rochdale Village which is a fantastic but huge development about two miles from here. It was like no, no one is going to put two-thirds the size of Rochdale Village over there—

Hill: Without jobs. We don't have jobs.

Mays: Forget all of that.

Hill: Infrastructure.

Mays: The traffic was going to be a nightmare, letting the traffic on Linden Boulevard—

Hill: It's a nightmare now and we don't have it.

Mays: It's a nightmare now without it. It would have just been—it was crazy. At the time, we had been doing this semi-polite-ish kind of thing to fight it. I remember we went down to Washington, D.C. We developed this research.

Hill: I went with Greg. He was the leader.

Mays: That's right. We went down together. So long story short, at the end of my term, it was time for Rene to be the president—

Hill: I had to take it over because I was the closest who knew exactly what was going on. There was no choice. I really didn't want to. I'm not an outgoing person. I've become one. I've become even more of a public speaker because of Greg forcing this on me.

Mays: *[Laughs]*. Now she's on the [Queens] Community Board [12], what are you, treasurer?

Hill: I'm the secretary.

Mays: The secretary of the Community Board. But wait, she—that little issue with the development was getting really, really funky. And we needed somebody who was going to be a little less polite about what was going to happen there—

Hill: He was too nice.

Mays: Enter Rene and it just became really, really clear how she articulated what all of us just sort of felt. But I was too Presbyterian [*laughs*] to say. She said it all and made it quite clear.

Hill: I went to town hall meetings and I was told, “Sit down. Sit down. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Mays: Yes, she was, that’s right.

Hill: “Sit down, you’re disrespecting our elected officials.”

Mays: That’s right.

Hill: I was called everything. I worked my way into everyone loving me, even to the elected officials.

Mays: They had no choice.

Hill: Doing what we asked them to do, doing the right thing.

Mays: It was really just sort of representing our interests. We were picketing out there.

Hill: Every day. I lost weight—I gained it back [*laughter*]—doing those pickets. I was thin by the time we finished walking those streets.

Mays: That's right, because it was really a federal matter and we were trying to fight. It was the Veterans Administration [United States Department of Veteran Affairs]—

Hill: Against us.

Mays: We had petitions, we had picketing, all of that good stuff.

Hill: They were going to lease the land for fifty or more years to a private developer who would just tear it down. And then, not only that, they didn't care about veterans. So the veterans were—we formed UCVCR which is United Community—now I forgot. United Coalition of Veterans and Community Rights.

Mays: That's right.

Hill: Sorry. So the veterans and us formed a bond and this was a little after Greg because Greg worked his butt off trying to stop it. I guess he got so tired. He was there a lot of times picketing.

I guess I became the lead and what happened was when I started convincing the elected officials that they were doing the wrong thing, the first one who came onboard was Assemblyman [William] Scarborough. He came onboard because his wife heard me and she started doing research. She started looking up and saying, “Wait a minute. We don’t have to do what the government says. They have to do what we ask, the right thing for our community.” So with her on and me, and Greg—we still used Greg’s research and everything, it was a big thing. We turned it around where the government backed up.

Mays: The assemblyman actually lived in Addisleigh Park. He and his wife lived here. It made sense for him to kind of be one of the earlier allies. And eventually, the electeds did what they were supposed to do, listen to the folks here.

Hill: We were named in *The [New York] Daily News*, whatever year that was—

Mays: Rabble Rouser of the Year.

Hill: No, we were named like, the best thing to happen in Queens that year.

Mays: Okay, all right, I missed that.

Hill: We actually ended— it's called the EUL, the veterans—you can research it. It's called the VA EUL [Veteran Affairs Enhanced Use Lease] program. That's what they wanted to do over here.

Q: Now was this before or after you guys worked on the rezoning?

Ryland: I was instrumental on the rezoning. That was in my time. That goes further back.

Q: So what led up to that idea and how did you push that through?

Ryland: Well, we found with our infrastructure being as weak as it was, we didn't want multiple units to come into the community. For years and years, we had this map that showed the zoning of the area. But it really wasn't a clear map. And then I got a very clear map of the area and I was able to show the community that the areas that they thought were not multiple zones really were.

So I had to go to our councilman and I showed him. I said, "We're fighting for the infrastructure on the other side of Addisleigh Park, but it's in our area also." I was on that board and I met with the commissioner. I met with quite a few people and we were able to fight and have the areas that were zoned, R3-2, which is the multiple units, to R2. That means you can't put multiple units in our area. But that was under my watch that that happened.

Mays: Actually it spanned the three administrations because you started it.

Ryland: Actually finished.

Hill: No, he's talking about the zoning.

Mays: Oh, sorry, yes, yes, the zoning.

Q: Right around the same time was when HDC reached out to you guys, right—

Ryland: Then at the end of my term—then we reached out to them actually.

Q: Okay.

Ryland: I went to Councilman [Leroy] Comrie's office and he arranged for them to come in. And they came in as I was leaving.

Mays: It's interesting because before Marie did that work, everybody thought that Addisleigh Park actually ended at Linden Boulevard. And as a result, we found out that no—and it made sense because if you look at the architecture, there were a lot of homes that were very similar on the other side. It really made sense because the only thing past this kind of two block wide neighborhood that we previously thought was not Addisleigh

Park, the other side was the golf course.

So it didn't make sense that it wasn't at some point part of Addisleigh Park. It's interesting because if you look down one of the avenues, it actually looks like Rene's house was like the—what do they call it?

Hill: Yes, the anchor—115th Avenue, it looks like it was—that was all one.

Mays: So if you look down 115th Avenue, the golf course would have been right to the right of that, it looks like her home is the clubhouse.

Ryland: It probably was.

Mays: It makes sense because it's a beautiful just sort of the same stature and the rest of that good stuff. So it started we looked at the boundaries of Addisleigh Park with Marie and I guess you saw that. I do remember Comrie—I didn't know if he was responsible for bringing it to the Historic District Council or you had reached out—

Ryland: Yes, I had reached out to him. He helped me bring them in because the community wanted it.

Hill: They wanted it badly.

Mays: That's right. They came in and they started their work—

Ryland: They started their work.

Mays: They did a study and that study, I think it was—ended up being why we ended up being a historic district as quickly as we did because the landmarks folks were able to use the Historic District Council vote and the report that they had prepared to do a grant and all the rest of that good stuff. But still that landmarking process started under you—

Ryland: Right, [*crosstalk*].

Mays: Then through my four years and it didn't happen until Rene was the president.

Ryland: Right.

Mays: So it was probably an eight-year process from start to finish.

Hill: But you became close with the guys that did the research, Simeon—

Mays: Yes, Simeon Bankoff and what was my other guy's name, from the Historic District Council?

Ryland: It's in here, isn't it?

Q: We can also add it in the transcript later.

Mays: Yes, Simeon Bankoff, that's right. So yes, they really came out and really got everybody excited because they applied for a grant and they were able to send some folks in to interview people. They did some great work, photographed homes.

So they were able to really get people totally thrilled about it. It's funny, this was my very first meeting, the January 2006 meeting is when the folks from the Historic District Council came out. Now that wasn't that huge meeting that we had, right? Because remember that huge meeting where they—I think that may have been with the landmarks folks when we were talking about what it meant—

Hill: Yes, that was landmarks.

Mays: What it would mean to make—what a historic district—

Ryland: It was close to it happening at that point.

Mays: That's right. That was a very interesting meeting because I had never seen that many folks at a meeting. It was extraordinary. That's when people were like well, what's going to happen. I remember we just wanted to be crystal clear, okay, well, you need to understand what this means. This is nice and everything but if we become a historic

district and you want to paint your door red, you're going to essentially have to ask permission to paint your door red. So it was very interesting to just sort of hear people respond to that and not get crazy.

Hill: As a matter of fact, there was some negative responses which we didn't really expect.

Mays: What were their concerns?

Hill: That tour buses were going to be riding through.

Ryland: We had that before. We always had that.

Hill: We have. As a matter of fact, I haven't seen as many since we've been landmarked which is surprising.

Mays: Yes, yes. But it's funny because I remember in particular as the president, people used to—and I'm sure you guys heard the same thing, they call you up at one o'clock in the morning and tell you about the parties that were happening. But they'd also call you up at midnight and tell you well, so-and-so is—I don't know—painting their door green or something like that. How can we stop that?

Well, honestly, we can't really legislate taste. So we can't stop that. If they want to put

paint their door green or do something ridiculous, we can't stop it. I had not thought about really the implications of—not the implications, but just sort of the positive effect of being a landmark community because then you could absolutely say well—not that you want to report your neighbors—but you could say—

Hill: Call them and let them do the dirty work.

Mays: Right. That's right, or you could just say, "Are you sure that you know what you're doing because you might make that investment and spend that money and you may be forced to rip it out?"

Ryland: It's happened since we had that designation. They had to change things that they did. I remember the gray and black house that's kind of right behind us—

Mays: Yes, yes.

Ryland: That's why his house looked a mess for so long because—

Mays: He had tried to do something—

Ryland: He had tried to do something. He didn't get proper authority to do it so they kind of stopped him.

Mays: Right. As it turns out, you can legislate taste but you have to be a landmark community. The most beautiful thing about just this designation—and we started as you suggested with the zoning, at some point, there was some discussion—

Q: Do you want to pause?

Ryland: I'm sorry.

[INTERRUPTION]

Bellov: I'm going to do the clap thing again.

Mays: All right, all right.

Bellov: We are rolling.

Mays: What was I saying?

Q: The thing—okay, I know I said I would write down what you were saying—it was legislating taste and you were saying something right after that—

Mays: Yes, yes and I've totally forgotten what that is.

Q: Well, I can tell you it makes a great follow-up question. Several follow-up questions actually is—

Mays: Oh, I know what it is, I'm sorry.

Q: Go for it.

Mays: Okay. So when we started the zoning, all of southeast Queens was going to be— under Mayor [Michael R.] Bloomberg it seems like the whole city was rezoned. There was some discussion about rezoning St. Albans and Addisleigh Park in particular and the mayor was encouraging everyone across the city to up zone, right? At least in neighborhoods something other than the Upper East Side. What that would meant was that single-family homes in this neighborhood, you would be able to tear homes down and put up multi-family dwellings.

It was kind of extraordinary to me because they were encouraging—I remember they come up to our meetings, the zoning folks and they were like this is what we're suggesting. We were like, "Well, why in the world would you suggest that?" In particular when so much—that was when the city was exploding and so much about the rest of southeast Queens were single-family homes going down and four-family homes going up in their place and really destroying neighborhoods, particularly Queens neighborhoods. Because you previously could go on back streets and do shortcuts and it was all a piece of cake. People would park in their driveways, et cetera, et cetera, but when you take down

several single-family homes on a block and put literally four-family homes up, it just got insane.

Hill: Traffic and parking is a nightmare.

Mays: It's that way now. I mean we don't have alternate side street parking but essentially you do because you—the parking is just horrendous. So all that to say, I at least saw what was going on and I'm sure these ladies did and other folks. So okay, we're not going to do that. We're not going to let you destroy this neighborhood. And again, this was well before the landmarking thing—and there were already some single-family homes, at least one or two that were—

Ryland: They were grandfathered in.

Mays: That's right. Remember down the block, right down here, the one-story ranch that was torn down and replaced with four units.

Ryland: Because that side, you could do that.

Mays: That's right, that's right. So the first thing was really just sort of the zoning and changing that. So really that was the first victory that we were able to just sort of make sure that the zoning was going to stay one-family—

Hill: But they tricked us because they didn't do all of Addisleigh Park.

Mays: They did not.

Hill: And I don't think we knew that at the time.

Mays: I think we were still uncertain.

Hill: This back end over here, it's zoned for two-family—which I still want to change—

Ryland: That's on the other side of 112th [Avenue].

Hill: On the other side of this. I think it's unfair that they didn't do all of Addisleigh Park because it is taking away already from the character of Addisleigh Park. It's like where did this building come from? It doesn't fit in here.

Someone came up to me—I'm on the Queens Civic Congress in Queens, I'm vice president and someone from that organization came up to me when I first joined it and said, "You know what? They didn't do your zoning right and it was done intentionally."

So I'm like okay, but it hasn't been changed since then. We really need to—that's the only thing that I regret that we need to do something about that zoning because it is ruining Addisleigh Park and it is ruining the rest of the neighborhoods. A lot of the other

neighborhoods in Queens, St. Albans, were mainly one families. But since that zoning changed, you see people knocking them down and putting up two and three and four families and it's ruining the character of Queens. People move to Queens for the beauty of the land and the—

Mays: For those trees.

Hill: And the houses and the trees. That's all disappearing now. It's all changing and we need to stop it before it gets worse.

Mays: Fortunately, it's only a tiny piece of Addisleigh Park that still has the multi-family dwellings. But the vast majority is the single-family zoning.

Q: And you can see walking around here, what really stood out to me there's these huge front lawns. It's not just that there's lots of trees. The trees are old. You don't see that anywhere else in the city, to have this long boulevard of old trees. You can see it's an old area, even without looking at the beautiful homes.

Hill: But it's important as an African-American person to see—to let our kids see, look, this is what you could have. As I grew up, I'm like oh, I want one of those houses. Even though I didn't care for living in Jamaica or St. Albans, it was something different riding past Linden, oh, wait, this is nice. We do have nice areas in Jamaica and we do have nice areas everywhere in Jamaica except for where they're rezoning it to build multi and now

it's starting to look like projects.

It's ridiculous. I understand that they have apartment buildings. Those are fine. They've been there. It's the buildings that they're tearing down that are tearing up the look of Jamaica, the look of St. Albans, where African-Americans and blacks have had it and they've maintain their houses in good condition and everything. Now it's changing and it's very disappointing. You go and you look, you can't park—not in Addisleigh Park, you can park around here—but in the other places, where they weren't able to preserve their community. You can see—

Mays: It suffers.

Hill: It's suffering.

Q: And the way communities are designed has a lot of effect on how neighbors interact with each other on an individual basis.

Hill: Yes.

Mays: Absolutely.

Q: So what does it mean not just for traffic and parking, but to be in a place that has big front lawns, front doors—

Hill: We all know each other. We love each other. I don't hear many neighborhood arguments or anything.

Ryland: We have the same interests. We want to keep our homes beautiful. You know I love you. Both you two, you have the best houses in the community. The model's in my head, something I want to recreate.

Hill: Thank you.

Ryland: I wish I'd done yours. You know that.

Mays: Yes, yes.

Ryland: We're proud to live here and my family, my grandson's very proud that his grandmother lives here and one day it will be his. I said, you have to work hard, because a lot of times, these children get these homes and they don't take care of them.

Hill: Or they lose them.

Ryland: They lose them because they think it's free. No, it's not free. It costs a lot of money, without a mortgage to run a house. Some of these young people, they just don't get that.

Mays: Well, at least now, if they were to lose them, then there's a restriction about what can be built in this place. So even if you built a new home, it's going to have to be at least an interesting home because it has to go before the Landmarks Commission [New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission] [LPC] to have improvements.

Q: You guys talked a lot about meeting the elders and learning the oral history of this place from the elders. Tell me more in detail about that. Who did you learn from? What did you learn?

Ryland: What is it *[unclear]*?

Hill: The Vaughn—

Mays: The Vaughn *[phonetic]* sisters.

Ryland: They're like twins. They lived here for—

Hill: They know everything.

Ryland: Sixty years, right? They lived with the celebrities when they were here. They would meet in their basements and have jam sessions with the musicians and all of that.

Mays: I think the most famous just sort of house/resident of the community other than James Brown was Count [William James] Basie.

Ryland: Count Basie.

Mays: So he had a home just a little bit up the way, what's that, on Sayers [Avenue] and whatever street that is, he had a home but more importantly he had a pool. So that pool from what I understand became a central point of the community because apparently—

Ryland: He opened it up. My mother would take me to that home and they had parties there. I'd go swimming in the pool.

Mays: Wow. So it really was he opened it up.

Hill: They destroyed that house. It's not there. They put—

Ryland: The pool's gone.

Mays: That's right.

Ryland: They put three houses, four houses in its place.

Mays: No, the house is still there.

Ryland: Where the pool was, there's about three or four houses there.

Mays: Yes, yes. But the house actually, the house is a fairly modest house itself but it was all the land and the fact that he had the pool.

Hill: I didn't realize the house is still there.

Ryland: Yes, the house is still there.

Mays: So where the pool was, there are now Archie [W.] Spigner, the first black councilman from there, lives in one of the houses.

Hill: About four, five houses in.

Mays: Right, where the pool was. So there's no more community pool but there are these homes and at least, they're attractive homes. That's a good thing. I never got to swim in the pool.

Ryland: I did *[laughter]*.

Mays: But I heard about the pool and I never met James Brown.

Ryland: And I did that too *[laughter]* because James Brown used to have concerts in the park. Did you know that? Right in St. Albans Park?

Mays: I didn't know he gave them.

Ryland: Yes, he gave them. He was there, when he lived there. I don't know how long he was there but he definitely lived in the house and had the concert, free concert at the park. And Count Basie, he was there. I got to meet him. As a matter of fact, I was a friend of someone that worked for him, his chauffeur. So I was able to go inside the house—

Mays: Wow. See, I'm like all this, she can pull me out.

Ryland: No, it was fun. It was exciting.

Mays: I can tell you the other thing I do remember about this neighborhood—and it just sort of suggested young people are insane, they were then, they are now—there was a company called the Ideal Toy Company.

Hill: Yes, I worked there.

Mays: That was right on the other side of Sayers which is the boundary for Addisleigh Park. And there was a fire there. There was this fire and insanely the fire was happening and the children, I don't know whether I ran into the building but all of these ridiculous

young people were—everyone knew it was a toy factory. So going into the building as the fire was happening, just a bit of absurd, teenage nonsense. So that's the most history that I know.

Hill: You mean to get toys, right?

Mays: That's right, that's right, the Ideal Toy Company was across the street and they had this fire.

Hill: I hadn't heard that one.

Ryland: I don't know that one either.

Q: Any other of the elders as you called them that you'd like to remember or stories that you would like to pass on while you have this chance?

Ryland: Boston Chance [*phonetic*]?

Mays: I didn't know him well, because he lived here right on 180th, right?

Ryland: Yes. He was at the end of the house—

Mays: And he was an officer of the Civic at some point?

Hill: He was the parliamentarian.

Ryland: Yes, something like that.

Hill: What was his name again?

Ryland: His name was Boston Chance. He was a very proper gentleman, [*unclear*], he always had a lot to say at the meetings, very particular. And lives in what I call one of the anchor houses. There were a few houses that were built with the Spanish tile roof in this community and he had one and they were on corners, right on Murdock—

Mays: On Murdock, yes.

Ryland: Both corners, at four corners, I think they had homes with the Spanish tile roof—

Mays: Right next to Pastor [Henry T.] Simmons' house?

Ryland: That's across the street.

Mays: Okay.

Ryland: No, on the other side. No, not that house. But they're just beautiful homes. He

was very particular about how this community was run, how the Civic Association was run, had a lot to say. He's gone now.

Mays: The thing that I think—very proud people in a very old school way. Just people who took great pride in the neighborhood that they lived in and cared for their houses in that manner. So the Vaughn sisters, Muriel [*phonetic*] and what's my other Vaughn sister's name—

Ryland: Why did you have to go with the first name?

Mays: They're just these two—who were the sisters, the movie that they made on Long Island and they were descendents of Kennedys?

Bellov: *Grey Gardens*.

Mays: *Grey Gardens*, okay. So these are our *Grey Gardens* sisters. They're not as eccentric as they were in the *Grey Gardens* but they are equally just sort of magical if you will—

Hill: They're hilarious too. They argue with each other.

Mays: That's right. They argue with each other—

Hill: You don't remember this, you're just making that up.

Ryland: And they drive their Mercedes like two blocks or a block at a time. Always together.

Hill: Always together.

Mays: That's right. And they're beautiful because they're regal, back when that's what you did. So who else? The Vaughn sisters. Who else has been here for awhile?

Hill: Miss Handy, Joan Handy [*phonetic*].

Mays: Oh, Joan Handy, right? She's still here, right?

Hill: Yes. I haven't been to meetings lately because I've been so busy—

Ryland: Olivia what's her name?

Hill: Banks.

Mays: Olivia [C.] Banks has been here for quite some time. Oh, wow.

Ryland: Miss Cohen has been here for a long time.

Hill: Yes.

Mays: Bernice Cohen has been here for awhile. And who was the woman who used to live diagonally across from Bernice Cohen? I forget her name.

Ryland: Judy.

Mays: Judy, yes. What's her last name? Is she still there?

Ryland: Yes. Judy's still there—but I don't know, Greg. I can't remember that.

Hill: There were people that when we went to the landmarking, we went into the city, to the commission, there were a lot of people that—there was a lady right on this street—

Hill: Yes, 113th [Street].

Ryland: What was the older man with white hair?

Hill: On the corner, right? She's on the corner? She had a whole story and I was thinking about her when I was coming here.

Q: Something she brought to the LPC?

Hill: Yes, and read it. She had been there a long time *[crosstalk]*.

Ryland: —that talked about the *[unclear]* situation that was on this block? The older gentleman? He moved away.

Hill: Oh—

Ryland: You know who I'm talking about, right?

Mays: Oh, yes, I do know who you're talking about.

Ryland: He was very—

Mays: This is what happens when you get older yourself, you just forget everyone's name *[laughs]*.

Ryland: Oh my god, and he's my neighbor. He's lived there forever. Oh, my goodness. Oh, well, anyway, sorry *[laughter]*.

Q: I want to try and stir some of this up because—

Ryland: Yes, it's stirring.

Mays: Yes. It's funny because it's almost like when we became successive presidents or something like that, it was almost like a changing of the guard if you will. So like when Barack [H.] Obama became president, of course, we went back a little bit in terms of age. So the person—who was the president before you? Was Julia Nazaire the president?

Ryland: Julia Nazaire.

Mays: So Julia was older than you for sure.

Ryland: Oh, yes. No, actually she was younger—I'm only joking.

Mays: Right.

Ryland: No, she was older than I.

Mays: It was kind of a changing of the guard if you will.

Hill: She had moved, I think. I think she moved.

Mays: She had moved. Her sister—

Ryland: Julia didn't move.

Hill: Oh, it's her sister that moved.

Mays: Is Alice [*phonetic*] still here?

Ryland: Yes. Alice passed.

Mays: Oh, okay.

Ryland: All her sisters are gone now.

Mays: But she's still here.

Q: Which means like one generation—

Mays: Yes, that's what it kind of seems like. That's what it felt like, whereas those folks, they actually knew even more folks. I had to meet those people.

Ryland: They've been here forever. I didn't really know anybody. The only people I knew was my aunt and uncle. They were both gone by then. So I really didn't know anybody here when I came.

Mays: Actually the oldest person I know from Addisleigh Park is actually my father and

he will tell a story about when they were moving from Harlem—

Ryland: You should have brought him.

Mays: So he bought the house when it was new. And Fred Stark was the developer of many of the homes in the neighborhood and I don't think that the community was a black community at that point. So it was kind of a—not scandalous but kind of a break-the-mold kind of thing, when Fred Stark actually sold this house to my grandmother and grandfather.

My father tells a story about he actually found the house or something and he met with Fred Stark. There was some conversation about how much it cost or something like that and it seems to me that Fred Stark may have made some concession for them to buy the house. And maybe the concession was I'm going to let you black folks buy the house.

But he moved into the house, again right around the corner, when it was a brand new home. He was there until he got married. And he's now, how old is my father, he was born in '29. So he is eighty-eight. He's older.

Ryland: He's only twenty years older than me.

Hill: My kids are excited. They're like, "Mom, when you leave and I have this house—" I'm like—*[laughter]*.

Q: Watch out.

Hill: I'm like only if you're active in the Civic, will you get this house.

Mays: It's a beautiful house. I don't really blame them for bringing that up. They're just trying to let the parents know there will be no reverse mortgages here because this house should stay in the family. I had no idea that this house was owned in your family—

Ryland: Yes, my aunt and uncle. I was very proud of my aunt. I'll have to show you a picture of her. She was a very regal lady, unbelievable. She used to drag me down—not drag me because I really wanted to get dressed up and go with her, go shopping for art supplies. She'd dress me up because I'd come over in my brother's jeans and suspenders and a polo shirt. But by the time I got to Gimbel's, I had a little ruffled dress, ruffled socks and whatever. So I would go with my aunt to go shopping for frames. And we wore gloves. I was very happy.

Mays: Again, it reminds me of just sort of the Vaughn sisters and really this neighborhood back in the day, before the overdevelopment.

Hill: These professionals—

Mays: These were folks who moved from Harlem and Brooklyn and there were a ton of

schoolteachers. That was really all of St. Albans. Really some very fine people, fine in that they just wanted better for themselves and for their children. So it's interesting.

When you say that, my grandmother, I remember she was the same kind of lady that you talk about with your aunt, this was back in the day where downtown Jamaica, Macy's was there, Gertz was there. This was well before the demise if you will. And downtown Jamaica is experiencing a renaissance now but back in the day, it was fantastic.

The rest of the neighborhood, I remember I used to buy my shoes from the Buster Brown's [*phonetic*] that was right on the corner of Linden Boulevard and Farmers Boulevard. It's now a bodega. So really all of this was just lovely. So this is not the last piece of loveliness but certainly one of the last pieces of just sort of loveliness.

Hill: Now when we landmarked this, we were trying to get the hospital, the VA hospital landmarked as well and they wouldn't budge. They said, "It's federal property." But that should be landmarked. We're still going to work towards that because at that time, it wasn't fifty years old, they said. But it's Art Deco and its historic—it's very precious to us. We feel it should be landmarked.

Mays: It's an exquisite building.

Hill: I really think that they didn't landmark it because they thought that they could use the land later on for something else.

Ryland: If you take an aerial shot of the building, it looks like an anchor.

Hill: Yes, it's made as an anchor.

Ryland: It's made as an anchor, an intentional anchor by the Navy.

Mays: Because before it was the VA Center, it was the naval hospital. And it's—literally the building is in the shape of an anchor and it's an exquisite building. There's an auditorium in the building.

Ryland: There's bowling lanes in there.

Hill: I argued with the Landmark Commission because they would not landmark it which I have a problem with. So that's to be continued.

Mays: And I'm sure there must be like a WPA [Works Progress Association] mural or two in there because the auditorium again is exquisite. It's a very light building as in like, in the shape of this anchor, there's windows on both sides of the building so it's flooded with light. It's a beautiful place.

Hill: Yes, beautiful.

Mays: The grounds are beautiful.

Hill: It's right on Linden and 179th [Street].

Mays: That's right. It's funny because my aunt was a WAAC, Women's [Army] Auxiliary Corps and she was in—I grew up going down to D.C. to visit her and we used to go to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. That place to her felt like the White House. It sort of felt like the White House for us as well. So when I went on that campus as a child, when I first got on this campus, it felt that same way. There was just so much—

Hill: History there.

Mays: So much history there. It just had a stature to it. And you felt like you were just turning back the clock to like some—

Ryland: Absolutely.

Hill: Just looking at it, I think, calms drivers down on Linden Boulevard, as you're driving into traffic nowadays, as you're riding past and you look over and you see the green, we need more green. It's beautiful [*crosstalk*].

Ryland: And the cherry trees. They're beautiful.

Mays: The cherry trees, that's right.

Hill: It's important that we try to keep that building.

Mays: It's interesting, when we were doing this whole fight about what was going to happen to that property, I was a proponent of once we make sure that the needs of the veterans were taken care of, that if anything was going to happen, it was going to return to a golf course. If not a golf course, I'd see a park.

Ryland: A community park.

Mays: Because one half of the property, I guess the government only took one half of the property. So the other half is still a park. But to put the things back together, it would just be a spectacular park for a community that deserves a spectacular park and stuff.

Ryland: But the veterans weren't going for that.

Mays: No, no and for good reason because there are not a whole lot of VA hospitals that are close by. There's one way out on Long Island—

Ryland: There's Brooklyn.

Mays: There's Manhattan, way in Brooklyn.

Hill: So most of the community wants to bring a VA hospital back there or a medical center there, so it would bring jobs back to the community because when that community was thriving like they were talking about, it's when that hospital was up and running. So they've taken away most of our hospitals in this area. We just have Jamaica Hospital and that's it.

Mays: Queens Hospital Center—

Hill: We go out to Nassau, you have Long Island Jewish [Medical Center].

Mays: What was the hospital on Jamaica Avenue—Mary Immaculate [Hospital].

Hill: Yes, they closed that down. They put apartments there now.

Ryland: This is an aging community also. The veterans that we have, they're pretty old and they have to go so far away. It would be great if they were able to just use the facilities that are right here.

Q: Bringing it back a little bit, when you approached your council member about—I mean I guess the rezoning plan was already getting worked on but about landmarking specifically, what motivated you to do that? Was it the idea that if you got the neighborhood landmarked it would help preserve it physically or was it mostly because

of the history? What were your thoughts?

Ryland: It was because of the history, to preserve it physically, to keep it from having these huge multiple dwellings in place of the tudors that were here. This was what the community wanted. This is what we wanted here.

Mays: Help refresh my memory. Did the Landmarks Preservation Committee find us as a result of all of the work of the Historic District Council or did we reach out? I can't say—

Ryland: We reached out—

Mays: To Landmarks, okay.

Ryland: To Landmarks and then Landmarks came and then found what—

Hill: We had a duel here.

Ryland: We had a duel here absolutely.

Q: So from the notes I have, HDC got their grant to do all the research you were talking about right around 2007, which was around the same time that you guys were doing this rezoning. So it sounds like it was sort of a colliding—

Ryland: That happened after.

Q: Well, they got the grant first and then they did the research. So the survey was done all the way through 2008-2009—

Ryland: Two thousand and seven, yes. You're right.

Mays: But they had already come in. So the first—January of 2006 meeting was when the Historic Districts Council came out.

Q: They were already thinking about this in 2006.

Mays: They had done some work but I do remember then they applied for a grant to either expand their work or do something more comprehensive.

Hill: Right, Greg had told the Civic, ok they had this book that they did and he held it up and he's like, now they want to come back in, get a grant so they can help us try to get our landmark. So everyone was excited. He got that landmark going after she got the zoning done.

Q: So it sounds like these things really were working together.

Mays: They were.

Ryland: They were integrated.

Hill: It's just like god, for me to take over after him and then stop the VA—because that would have ruined this community as well, only because we're trying to keep the characteristic for our kids and for whoever wants to move in here. There's not many communities like this. They have Cambria Heights over there but their houses are a different type of house.

Mays: Beautiful neighborhood but more modest homes.

Hill: Laurelton has beautiful homes too. But it's a different feeling than what we have here.

Ryland: This was restricted to black people in the '20s. I mean we were not able to move in here. I don't remember when it happened but probably like 1925 or so, the first black entertainer was able to move in here, and only because they were entertainers. It was pretty much the way it is right now except for the newer houses that you see around. But this is the way it was. It really wasn't built for us.

Mays: Where Babe [George Herman] Ruth [Jr.] was, with his home right there on Linden Boulevard, and I guess he was there probably before James Brown but that's above my pay grade.

Ryland: Oh, yes, definitely.

Hill: They said my house was a school. As a matter of fact, I met someone about two weeks ago that went to school there. I went to ask him—

Mays: That's crazy.

Ryland: Did you get a picture of that person? They must be pretty old.

Hill: No, he's like ten years older, he's about your age. He's about sixty-eight or something like that.

Ryland: Oh.

Hill: Yes, yes.

Ryland: It was converted to a school. It wasn't originally a school.

Hill: He's saying it was a school. I don't know if it was originally the school. No, it wasn't originally a school because the first person that owned it, that moved in there was an owner of a tile company. Then he got convicted for bribery. He was in jail. Then he got off. If you Google it, you could find it. It was interesting. I was kind of disappointed

that it wasn't someone famous. But it was a businessman—

Ryland: But he went to jail.

Hill: Yes he went to jail for bribery.

Ryland: A lot of famous people went to jail.

Mays: You want to be famous for something else.

Hill: That why—my whole house is all—the bathrooms are all tiled and mirrors.

Mays: That's so interesting. That's what I thought about when you said that. That makes sense.

Q: It's so great to learn the history of each of these little homes, such projects.

Mays: It is.

Q: I'm curious about, just to spend a little more time learning about what were the conversations like in that first meeting that you referenced in 2006 when the HDC came out. What were people's responses? What did they know about the process already? What did they learn? What did the community think of the whole thing?

Hill: They were excited.

Mays: Yes, I don't remember this meeting so much. I do remember Simeon and the guy who used to work there as well, what is his name? I forget his name. So people were excited. I think people were excited and they were also a little like what's going on here. Because I don't think we had had—well, certainly not recently—so much interest in the community from outsiders.

I don't think anyone ever thought that this was some secret gentrification thing going on but they were a little curious because no one had really, other than the tour buses that used to come through the community that used to look and see who used to live here. But they were both very lovely people and they very clearly just communicated from the beginning, this is what we're trying to do.

And then I was flattered because it seemed like we were one, if not the only black community that was receiving this kind of attention. So it was like wow, somebody's going to come in and really sort of document what was certainly not documented recently.

And I think that's what it turned to really quickly. First it was like, well, who are these people? And then it was like oh, this is wonderful. Then they sent out their researchers. So when people started walking through the neighborhood, taking pictures and knocking

on doors, you didn't think these were real estate speculators. You knew they were people from the Historic Districts Council. Then by the time the landmarks people came in, we were pretty accustomed to the attention if you will. But I do remember that one meeting—

Hill: They made it so much easier for us.

Mays: That's right, that's right. But I do remember that one meeting was just huge because there were all these people because then it was about to be serious. It was a nice to have somebody wrote something about you. But then when they were talking about you're not going to be able to change your roofing, then it became really—

Q: Yes, talk to me about that second meeting. Were there people who hadn't heard about the process yet and were still getting caught up? What kind of questions were you getting?

Ryland: Yes, they didn't understand the process. They knew that it was a start but they didn't know the rest of it. We had permission. You can't change your window. You can't do a lot of things.

Hill: These were people who probably weren't going to the Civic meetings.

Mays: That's right.

Hill: I heard about this meeting and said I better go to this one. We had a lot of new people.

Ryland: Absolutely right.

Mays: That's right. So again, it was just sort of the newsletters were letting people know in a cursory fashion what was going on. Now the hardcore people, they had been to all the meetings. But the people who hadn't been to all the meetings, they just showed up and it was like, oh—

Hill: Where have you been? We've been here, a couple of others.

Mays: It was more just sort of wondering then. There were no up in arms. I don't think we ever went through an up-in-arms kind of thing.

Ryland: I know that Rene decided that she wasn't going to put all the information in the newsletter, because if they wanted to know, they should've come to the meetings
[laughter].

Mays: That's right, that's right, and that was very Rene.

Ryland: If you don't ask, if you don't come, then you're out of luck *[laughter]*. Am I

right?

Mays: But we still had a newsletter.

Ryland: We did but not all the information we used to.

Hill: I was trying to save money at the same time. So I made it one page.

Mays: And I think it was you who was really adamant about across Linden Boulevard—

Hill: Of course, I live right across the street from it. More important, at first it started being a selfish thing where I don't want that across the street from me. I don't want this big development. Then it was like wait a minute, the veterans. The veterans couldn't understand why we were concerned. Because I live here. We had to get on the same page.

That took a little while because they didn't trust us at first. They were like, "Oh, you want that land for yourself." I'm like, "No, we're on the same page as you. We want the land for you and we want it to stay the same as it is. We want it to serve you." So we had to gain their trust and then once we gained their trust, then we were able to go against an elected official because we had the community and the veterans and the federal government. We were all on the same team.

Mays: Well, weren't you—what I was asking specifically about the homes on the other

side of Linden—

Hill: Yes, yes, that was me.

Mays: That's right.

Hill: So at first, the landmarking, the New York City Landmarking Department had a preliminary map.

Mays: They had a preliminary map.

Q: That's right, I was going to ask about that.

Hill: It just had one side, it had the northern side of Linden Boulevard. And I have a friend that lives on the south side whose house is similar to all of ours. Like you said, it was probably built around the same time. So I said to her, "We're getting ready to landmark. I think you need to start coming to our civic meetings." They were never invited. They don't even have a Civic Organization over there. They had one but my aunt, some cousin of mine with the same last name—

Mays: Didn't one of their houses have Addisleigh Park on the deed?

Hill: Yes, Debbie [*phonetic*]. My friend's house had Addisleigh Park on the deed.

Mays: So on the other side of Linden Boulevard.

Hill: So I said, “Okay, Deb, start coming to our meetings. Your area is a small enough area that you all should be part of ours.” Before that, someone with the last name of mine, who is a distant cousin, was running the civic over there. I tried to contact her but I don’t know what happened to her.

In the meantime, I said, “Debbie, forget about that civic because I don’t think it’s going on anymore. Come join us.” It’s a small area between us and the park—Addisleigh Park, there’s a community that looks just like ours. I said, “Come to our meetings.”

So Debbie started coming. And I had to convince some of these people in this neighborhood that that’s okay, that they’re Addisleigh Park too *[laughter]*.

Hill: Because they were mad.

Mays: They were old school people who were like oh, hell no.

Hill: We never considered those people over there Addisleigh Park.

Mays: They have the same exact houses as yours.

Hill: What the heck?

Mays: They were just being protective.

Hill: Anyway—

Ryland: Snobbish.

Hill: Yes, that's what it is. I went to the Landmarks Committee and I said, "Please, you need to go across the street and check out those houses too, because if you mess up those houses—not you, but if developers come in and take those houses and rebuild them and destroy them and make a multi-family, it's going to ruin Addisleigh Park. They are Addisleigh Park." So they went over there and they saw that. I took a breather, I said thank god.

Mays: It's so interesting because if I look at this very first newsletter that I did when I became president in January of 2006, we had the first meeting with the Historic Districts Council where they actually came out. Then the last newsletter that I published in January 2010, was we had a draft of the historic district. So this literally is how long it took to go from Historic Districts to the draft of the landmark district. It includes the area that Rene here—

Hill: I said let me get involved. He was in charge. He was the president. I said let me get

involved in this because I have to.

Mays: That's right, that's right, she didn't trust me.

Hill: Yes, yes.

Mays: But it has the area that—

Hill: Because it took some convincing. People—they weren't used to across the street being—it's like what the heck is this? But finally—

Mays: So this was the draft. Literally, it shows that it sort of started—

Ryland: From the beginning to the end.

Mays: That's right, with Marie and just sort of with Rene and stuff.

Q: So what kind of advice would you guys have for other neighborhoods that discover they have a resource like this and want to preserve it? Any learning experiences? Starting with you if you would do again or—?

Hill: Yes, start with the HDC like we did.

Mays: Yes, start with HDC, if you live in a historic district. To me, it is all about the Civic Organization and the strength of that civic.

Hill: Yes, it is.

Mays: We've always had what seems to me a strong civic. People who just sort of take pride. There's pride in place. So when they were talking about this zoning thing and they were trying to push this upzoning, people were like, well, that doesn't make any sense. But for whatever reason, the people felt empowered here. I've met other folks. They're just—

Hill: That's never going to happen. You're not going to do that here.

Mays: They're complaining. And again, I go back to these are doers. Don't complain. It's your neighborhood. These are your elected officials.

Hill: They work for us.

Mays: So figure out what you want and organize and get it done. It's funny—

Hill: And don't worry about who's doing what. We didn't worry about that. If Greg said, "Rene, do this, do that," I did it. And if I didn't want to do it, I'd say, "Okay, I can't do that but I'll do this for you and then you do that." We never had attitudes or had any

problems with doing extra work. We had a lot of parties.

Mays: We did have parties. My block party and I remember I wanted to do this block party. Even some of the folks in the neighborhood were against it. I remember. I put a note on the doors of everyone along Murdock Avenue. To me, it was just sort of a polite thing to do but it was out of courtesy. I'll never forget this one gentleman, he said—he wrote a note back saying, “No, I don't think this is a good idea.” But he was one of maybe twenty people and the other nineteen didn't mind.

So we went ahead. And it was lovely and I think he came out. I think he envisioned something different than what we actually did and it was beautiful. It was just old folks, young folks and tables and games—

Ryland: Horses.

Mays: Vernon [*phonetic*] brought his grill down. So it was really amazing—

Hill: Face painting. We had fun.

Mays: That's right. I still have those pictures too.

Ryland: So do I. Yes, that was good.

Mays: I think that's it—a strong civic and knowing that with your organization you can control the destiny of your neighborhood. I think so many people just are not convinced that they can control the destiny of their neighborhood. So they just wait for something to happen and a lot of the zoning that took place—rezoning—happened after Addisleigh Park. And I remember telling folks, I said, “Look, don't let that happen to your neighborhood.”

Because they either didn't have an organized civic or they just didn't think that they had the right to say no. A lot of stuff was upzoned and a lot of the madness continues where they're taking down one-family homes and putting up multi-family dwellings and stuff.

Q: Queens overall is a borough that hasn't benefitted as much from landmarking and historic districts as other boroughs in the city have so I'm wondering if, with this as a success story, you've seen attitudes towards historic districts or landmarking in other neighborhoods start to change or have people come to you to ask how you did it? Nothing yet?

Mays: I think the Cambria Heights rezoning happened after ours.

Hill: Yes, it did, it did.

Ryland: The zoning was different.

Mays: Right, and they probably—

Hill: I don't know if they won a landmark.

Mays: It's tricky. The interesting thing to me is that Jamaica Estates is not a landmark neighborhood and I don't even know whether it's a historic district. Now I get it because there's some people—they would not have been able to build those mansions that they've built had that zoning changed.

Hill: But I guess it's one family. I hardly see any two families going up there.

Mays: Although it does seem as if there are multiple families living in these larger homes. I guess culturally for some folks, it's tradition to have several generations in the home.

Ryland: A whole family.

Mays: But they do seem to be one family as opposed to just sort of multiple families. But they're not a landmark.

Ryland: They are old buildings.

Mays: Clearly they're beautiful buildings and beautiful neighborhoods but for some

reason, they've just decided that—

Hill: Even Bayside Hills is not landmarked.

Mays: Right, which is interesting.

Q: Do you think that will start to change in the future?

Hill: I don't think so. I think it's too late. The mega mansions are going up and there's nothing to save anymore.

Mays: Yes, they're turning back. And it's amazing, they're pulling down nice one-family homes that are nice-sized homes and tripling the square footage and building spectacular new homes. I'm sure they're spectacular inside.

Hill: Sometimes I wonder if we didn't landmark—I mean I could knock my house down and put up three houses and make a good amount of money.

Mays: We would no longer be friends. That house is too beautiful.

Hill: It is. But that's the whole thing about landmarking. You can't do that even if you wanted to do that. You can't do it. So that's a good thing in a way. The other bad thing which I'm not sure, we're having a problem now in this community which I haven't

talked to you two about, but there's a beautiful house that's landmarked, where they have subdivided the lot up even prior—

Ryland: You mean *[unclear]*?

Hill: Not that one, another one. That one was wrong too but they did the same thing over there on 179th [Street] and they're going to sell the lot separately.

Mays: So I guess the landmarking doesn't prevent—

Hill: Yes, I called the Landmarks Commission and they said there's nothing they can really do with it. I don't understand that.

Ryland: But it's on a historic district.

Hill: Yes.

Mays: But I guess nothing prevents you from subdividing a lot. It's about the structures.

Hill: You subdivide the lot but that means it's going to be new homes in between these beautiful historic homes.

Mays: But even if it's a new home, it has to fit within the character. I thought you were

going to point out the fact that we've had now—there are at least two empty lots that I know of, that have been empty for the last—

Hill: They knocked the homes down.

Ryland: They got stuck thinking they could put some two-family up there.

Mays: Or even just a cheap one-family. I don't know what landmark says about what a house has to look like as a new home but it must be prohibitive because the lot right next to Bernice's house has been empty since the beginning of time. Then the lot over on— whose block is that?

Hill: One [Hundred] Seventy-Eighth Place [*crosstalk*].

Ryland: One Seventy-Seventh [Street]?

Mays: There's a lovely home right to the left of that.

Ryland: There's a big open lot.

Mays: That's right, that's right. So these are just huge lots that I guess until you have enough money to come in there and build something spectacular, they're going to be empty lots.

Ryland: That was a beautiful house that they knocked down there.

Mays: Okay, I don't recall that house.

Ryland: Because they were going to knock it down and put a multiple unit and then right at that point, the zoning changed. So they couldn't do it.

Mays: They didn't have a foundation then.

Hill: We were rushing for things like that. We saw that go down and we rushed.

Mays: Because if I recall, that house down the block, the multi-family one, the house wasn't built—

Ryland: We didn't get it done yet.

Mays: That's right but the foundation was there.

Ryland: Yes, the foundation was there, right. We didn't get it done in time.

Hill: When you leave this house, if you go straight, you'll see the house we're talking about.

Mays: Yes, its four units and it used to be a nice one-story ranch that used to flood a lot.

Ryland: It'd flood all the time.

Mays: That's the other huge thing that's been accomplished in the past decade.

Hill: What happened was after Andrea—after we won the VA site from being developed and I became close friends with Andrea Scarborough—

Mays: The wife of the assemblyperson.

Hill: The wife of the assemblyperson, we said, “Okay, let's keep on moving with our successes.” So a lot of people in Addisleigh Park decided okay, what's our next problem which is water, flooding. We went to visit homes that had flooding and we spoke to DEP [New York City Department of Environmental Protection] and they had—we didn't even realize it but they had money that was already allocated to stop the flooding. There was a lot more involved because we had money coming from Jamaica [Water] Supply at one time and that stopped.

So our water table underneath our homes is high. It's a high water table because they used to drain it and we used to use it but now, it's sitting there and we get water from the Catskills.

So anyway, Andrea Scarborough became passionate with me on that and then I pushed her as the next president [*laughs*]. So that's the president now. She's doing a great job. I think her term is ending. But she's an absolute doer.

I have to apologize to her and I've apologized many times—and I used to get mad at him because what happens is when you leave the president post, you are so exhausted and worn out and now you have other missions that you don't hardly go to the meetings. So I've kind of missed her meetings, even though we're close and still on topics. We've all done it to each other.

Mays: You did used to get, she's like, “Where are you? You don't come to the meetings.” I'd be like you just don't understand [*laughter*].

Ryland: I don't go because I'm in my choir rehearsals. You know that.

Mays: Oh, the choir rehearsal [*laughter*].

Ryland: No, it's real, it's real. It's the same night.

Mays: But you tend to—

Ryland: I work behind the scenes.

Hill: That's what we all do now. We all work behind the scenes and that's what Andrea will probably do as well. We still are close with each other and we know how to contact each other in case there's some issue in the community.

Mays: Then people tend to just sort of being nostalgic for what was there, it's like you know what, no, nostalgia's over. It's time to move on. They're also nostalgic when they're not doing the work. It's like no, no, come on now. It's time to move on.

Hill: Like our zip code changed. It should have never happened.

Mays: That's right. You were going to talk about also, there's a tremendous amount of work that was done about the flooding because it was major flooding, particular on this street down at the end there.

Ryland: The end, yes.

Mays: So what was it? They dug up—

Hill: They put new—

Mays: New catch basins in—

Hill: And they're still working on it.

Mays: First they had to move the gas lines because the gas lines were in the street. So they did one project, to take the gas lines and put them beneath the sidewalks. And then go in and put in sewers and the like into these new—it wasn't catch basins, it was some other term for whatever. But a lot of that work was DEP funding and again, that came really from the Civic being organized. When I became the—

Hill: Then the elected officials took it over like it was there's. But we know how it started.

Mays: That's right, because when we started to have meetings that featured the sanitation people and DEP, then it was like—they would talk about what they were doing. Well, this fund is a nightmare. So it really sort of made all the difference in the world.

Hill: We don't have that flooding anymore. I just asked someone the other day.

Mays: No, it's tremendous. Now other places in Southeast Queens do, but there have been folks who have worked to remedy that as well. I think something absurd like two-thirds of DEP's budget is going to Southeast Queens, maybe it's their capital budget, to fix a lot of the flooding issues that are all over sort of Southeast Queens.

Q: I wanted to ask about because you guys said about this idea of a changing of the guard

and passing from one generation to another, do you think there's going to be a next generation and how will you pass on these stories of being in the pool of Count Basie? You know, this idea of the history here and what it means—what makes this community unique. How will you pass that history on to the next guard?

Ryland: I know we tried to get interviews. We were doing that of all the seniors that were in the community.

Hill: I remember that you were doing that.

Mays: The Historic Districts Council, they were doing some interviews and wasn't Landmarks doing interviews as well?

Hill: I think so.

Mays: They did some.

Ryland: Did we also?

Mays: I don't know that we have those interviews.

Ryland: I don't know who has those.

Hill: I have some.

Ryland: You have some of them. No, just that, we have to just chronicle the information so it can be passed on. We just don't have the time or the means to have a conversation about that.

Hill: We never even thought of it. We should have.

Ryland: I guess we could possibly do a little book or something.

Mays: Yes, absolutely. And that book that the Historic Districts Council, the consultant woman who was working for them, she handed over a fact book with some fantastic history and stuff.

Ryland: Who has it?

Hill: I think there were copies made. We made copies—

Mays: I had it and there were several copies, yes. Remember I told you I put the newsletters into the Long Island room? I think I put one of those binders in there as well.

Ryland: Okay.

Mays: So even if they don't get the benefit of oral history, if they want to go over to that Long Island room, they will certainly find some documentation.

Hill: I went there. You told me about it and I went there, a very interesting room.

Mays: Yes, a very interesting room. And there wasn't a whole lot about Addisleigh Park. That's the thing. There were a few articles. That was the thing that was like that's crazy.

Ryland: But as far as the seniors that are here with their stories, I don't know where we find that information.

Mays: Yes, we don't.

Ryland: Unless it's in those newsletters.

Mays: Do you know what we need to do? I was not going to suggest you do it or you do it. You know NPR [National Public Radio] has a StoryCorps? That whole thing where they have these StoryCorps booths and they move around the country? You go in and you tell the story with someone else about so-and-so. That would be fascinating to have our own little story corps and Queens Library has the [Queens] Memory Project. So we just need to tap into their efforts—

Ryland: To pass on to the next—

Mays: Bring them over here and do some interviews because they have the Vaughn sisters but they are so—

Hill: Lester's godmother is, I hate to say she's ninety.

Ryland: Who?

Mays: She's here?

Hill: Yes. Lester's godmother.

Ryland: Oh, Lester's godmother.

Mays: That's her husband.

Hill: My husband.

Mays: That would be interesting.

Hill: She used to work—she was a head nurse at the VA hospital.

Ryland: That's even better.

Q: I'm glad you guys are thinking about this. I encouraged more thoughts about this.

Then also just all the records that you guys have from your research, the Historic Districts Council, archives for their research, you put some newsletters over at the library but of just the Civic Organization's papers and the landmark project papers, where are all of those things and do you have any plans for saving them, preserving them?

Mays: What did you do with all of your newsletters?

Hill: I don't throw nothing away.

Mays: That's what I'm saying. We just need to deposit them in the Long Island room.

Hill: We'll go through them. I'll get them together.

Mays: Yes, absolutely. And before I forget, Frampton Tolbert, that was the other Historic Districts Council guy, Frampton and Simeon and stuff.

But yes, we'll make that a project. We will get your newsletters and we will put them into the Long Island room and then we can think about just sort of doing some oral interviews of some of the older folks and work with Queens Library and the Memory Project. So they'll know we were here. They'll be like, Olney Marie Ryland lived in that house on the corner. In her window, there was a model of her own home *[laughter]*.

Hill: Everyone talks about Marie, the house that has a house inside the house.

Mays: That's right because she lights it up at night and it's beautiful. When you decorate your house for Halloween, do you decorate the model as well?

Ryland: I don't decorate the outside. I only decorate the inside.

Mays: Okay, all right.

Ryland: Yes, I decorate that. For Christmas also and you know that *[laughter]*.

Q: This has been amazing. Was there anything that I really should have asked you that we didn't get to talk about today?

Ryland: Not really.

Hill: I think we covered everything.

Ryland: It's a lot of information. It will probably translate to—

Mays: You need to ask these women how they're able to just keep looking as beautiful as they're looking.

Hill: Oh, you're so nice.

Mays: It's like what, they make me proud to be a fifty-four year old. I'm like wait a minute now.

Ryland: You're a baby.

Hill: They say that Queens has some of the prettiest women.

Mays: Oh, is that what they say? *[Laughs]*

Q: Well, thank you. If you think of anything else that you want to add at any point, we can do that in the transcripts or shoot me an email or something, we'll add it in there.

Thank you again so much.

Bellov: I'm just going to ask that each of you state your name again clearly and give your address as well. So let's start with Rene.

Hill: Do I have to give my address?

Mays: They're not coming to get you *[laughs]*.

Q: Just your full name.

Hill: Rene Cheatham Hill, 178th Place.

Mays: All right, Greg Mays, 114-73 178th Street.

Ryland: Olney Marie Ryland, 179-16 112th Avenue, Addisleigh Park.

Mays: All right.

Q: Thank you everyone. That's all there is.

Mays: All right, thank you.

Hill: I hear people knocking at my door.

[END OF INTERVIEW]