INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Richard George

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Richard George conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on February 8, 2021. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

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

Richard George grew up in Corona, Queens across the street from his grandparents, who were immigrants from Italy. Following his mother's influences, he pursued an artistic career, and became a restorer of antique porcelain. Through this profession, he gained knowledge of many types of antiquities and cultivated an appreciation for many historic places and objects.

He bought his first bungalow in Far Rockaway in 1982. Though the area was dangerous, and most of the bungalows, including his, were in a deteriorated condition, George began planning to fix up his bungalow with an artist's optimism—and need for studio space. Within a few years, he began recruiting others to buy there, including his parents. In 1984, neighbors Betzie Park White, Roger White, and Carole Ann Lewis started Beachside Bungalow Preservation Association to focus on restoration of the bungalows, and George joined the board of the organization in 1985. With grant funding that he was able to secure over the ensuing years, Beachside Bungalow Preservation created educational and training programs for youth, organized house tours with the Queens Historical Society, and engaged in innovative habitat restoration.

As developers turned their attention to luxury waterfront development in the mid-2000s, George learned the ins and outs of numerous laws and policies—especially the Coastal Zone Management Act and the Waterfront Revitalization of Coastal Areas and Inland Waterways Act––that he instrumentalized to preserve the ecological, architectural, and social character of the neighborhood. As another route to protect the area from high density development, and because of the bungalows' cultural and historical relationship to the waterfront, George and his mother, Carmela, coordinated an application for the National Register of Historic Places. In 2013, the Far Rockaway Beach Bungalow Historic District was listed on the National Register, and since then, George has been endeavoring to gain designation by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

In this interview, George describes the transformation of the Rockaway Bungalows from the early 1980s to the present, and shares his perspective as the neighborhood's primary watchdog, a necessary role given overlapping city, state, and federal jurisdictions of the area combined with the ongoing desirability of waterfront development.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey | Session: 1

Interviewee: Richard George | Location: remote via video call

Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic | Date: February 8, 2021

Q: Today is February 8, 2021 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Richard George for the New York Preservation Archive Project and we're doing this interview remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic via video conference. Can you start by saying your name and giving a brief introduction?

George: Yes, my name is Richard A. George. I am the president of the Beachside Bungalow Preservation Association since 1985. On the board.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

George: Well, I grew up—first, my last name is George but it used to be Giudice, which was Italian. It was translated over. Instead of "judge," they made it George. But I grew up in Corona with my parents, and my grandparents across the street, who were immigrants from Bari, Italy. From then on, I also was taken to art classes with my mother. She was good at painting. She went to the Flushing Art League Academy, and me and my sister had to go with her so I got extensive art training, which, from there, when I got out of college, I was hired by the Center Art Studio, his name was Fritz [Pohl], to do antique porcelain restoration on Chinese, English, French, faience porcelain and then they extended it to lacquer, Chinese lacquered screens.

So there was my introduction into historic preservation but it was more with antiquities. And I

started to work with him 1978-79. I was—I forget my age [laughs]. I was twenty-eight, twenty-nine. And I had an extensive background in art and coloration, and I was able to match the colors and do the service preparation. And my first client, he said—this blue and white delft plate, 18th century—I couldn't restore it because of the blue and white. But I was able to work it out with daylight and indoor light. That was my first client at twenty-eight, whatever I was. It was David Rockefeller. So I was in charge of their collections for many years.

From there, I went on my own. I bought my grandparents' house in Corona in 1981. I was twenty-nine years old. And I made my art studio there. Then between the Reagan era and whatever, a lot of the antiques were being collected because of high inflation, and I made a lot of money. And I bought my first bungalow in 1982 in Far Rockaway. The reason I went to Far Rockaway, my mother's friend—her name was Terri Giordano, her husband delivered for Macy's—and she said, "Why don't you go to the beach?" My mother loved the beach because where they came from in Bari, it's right on the Adriatic Sea. It's in their genes or something. She used to go to Beach 32nd Street. There was lifeguards. There was a bathroom. She used to go to the beach there. She said, "Why don't you look in Far Rockaway?" I said, "You're crazy."

I was looking in Long Island but it was too far, too expensive. You couldn't get anything. So that's when I came to Far Rockaway in 1982. I bought my first bungalow on 1308 New Haven Avenue for $11,000. But the area was so bad. I renovated it. I paid people. I did stuff. And then I was going to use it. But then, the market went down with the antiques, so I decided to rent it. But to give you an idea of how bad it was, I listed it to rent in the papers or wherever, and I'd go there and I'd wait for the people to come to look at the bungalow, and they never showed. "What

happened?" "Oh, we passed by real fast." They wouldn't even stop, okay? Because there was drugs, there was murder. There was everything.

So then I just proceeded because I'm an artist. I just see what I want to see. Vision is what you think it's going to be. Then me and my parents bought on Beach 25th, two bungalows for $25,000. Then from there, they bought me out in the back and I bought two more, and the one I'm in now, 170-A Beach 24th Street, at around the same side. In 1985, it was 178 in February, around this time—with this weather—and then the other two were after that in the summer. So that was my beginnings of bungalow preservation. I could just feel a presence. The bungalows, they were so unique. They were so well-built. I had this feeling.

The people who started the Beachside Bungalow Preservation was Betzie Parker White, her ex-husband, Roger White, and Carole Ann Lewis that came from Manhattan, and they formed the association in 1984, which then subsequently became incorporated in 1988. 1985, they put me on the board and I was very active. And then in '86-'87, I had my first Art and Culture Street Fair, and did it for five years. Then from being on the board, I became the president, and around '91, my first grant was from the Vincent Astor Foundation. They were familiar with me through my antique porcelain restoration because I did the work for Parish-Hadley, Mrs. Astor's decorators, which, when I saw her on *The Today Show*, I was like, oh, I didn't know there were foundations! I was in my studio. I said, really, let me write them a letter! But I did work for her decorators, so they sort of knew me. And then they started with the funding, five years, $2,500. And I'm archived in the New York Public Library, 42nd Street—not me, Beachside Bungalow Preservation.

Then I did get $30,000 for three years from the New York Foundation. Madeline Lee was very nice to us. And then I got $15,000 from the J.M. Kaplan Fund, and subsequent, from New York State Department, which, as an artist, you don't think as normal people think: I created these dunes along the beach, on the north side of the boardwalk, black pine trees, beach grass, beach plum, bayberry, rosa rugosa. Then I did the beach side. I did all beach grass. That saved us from Hurricane Sandy. That's when I became a little more well-known, not that I wanted to be.

But before I get on with that, in 1989, we had a Queens Historical Society bungalow tour with Jack Eisenstein. He was the historian and then we had the Astor Foundation money. I didn't want to leave him out.

With the dune plantings, '92-'95, Beach 24th to Beach 27th, Hurricane Sandy came and we didn't get flooded, no water. It came from the [Seagirt] Boulevard at the end. So from then, I got well-known, and there were tours from all these universities and stuff. Oh, the Dutch Consulate, NYU, University of Massachusetts. [Phone rings] I laughed—they came to see the dunes, which have split a little bit and they said, "How much did it cost you to plant all that beach grass?" These universities taught ecology, ocean ecology, dune planting, salt-tolerant plantings, and they were asking me? "How much did it cost you to do these dunes?" With the grass—not the trees, they're expensive—I said, "Twenty-five dollars." "Twenty-five dollars?" "Yes, I got a little rubber band full of roots and put them in. They grow fifty feet in each direction, and I kept transplanting all of them." So they were impressed with all of that. But the back of my mind, I said why are they asking me?

So after all of that, the writer, Tim Folger, he was going to put me in *National Geographic*. I didn't know it at the time. He was on one of the tours. And I didn't know. First, he did Europe and by the time he came back, this other young lady from *Orion Magazine*—I can't pronounce her name [Meera Subramanian], it's a big long Indian name—she did the article, "The City and the Sea." I forgot what year it was [2014]. So that killed *National Geographic*, which may happen later on. Who knows?

So from then with the dunes, I kept on buying bungalows. Nobody wanted to come here. It was so dangerous. My parents helped me too. I have to say, my mother came out—I think she was in her sixties or seventies—and stayed in my bungalow. But it was so bad I kept—it was from HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development]. I had all the windows boarded up with the plywood and the galvanized steel on top. We kept it on [laughs] all year. I was afraid to take it off. My mother, Carmella, and my father, Alfred, bought in front of me, 170, in 1990.

If you go back again to 2005, I started my first federal lawsuit, and they continued; I had several lawsuits. I drove all the developers out of here, and the last one is in 2009 with the Department of Commerce over the Coastal Zone Management Act. So in that, the law says, you may not get it in court, you may get it outside of court. And the Department of Commerce—I was complaining we didn't have money, funding for the boardwalk. So in the [Mayor] Michael Bloomberg era, in the five boroughs, he gave one area like millions of dollars—$40 million—and they created all these parks, on like Beach 13th—9th Street to 13th, 15th Street, and the one on 29th Street, which came from my lawsuit. I also was able to get rezoning of the bungalows

from R5—it was like fourteen stories, R7—but they didn't do it right. They didn't do bungalow preservation. I'm working on that now.

Right before the lawsuits—I'm sorry I'm going back and forth—in the summer of 2004, *A Walk Through Queens* with David Hartman and Barry Lewis was a ninety-minute show, and the bungalows were at the end of the show.

Then in between, I was very involved. We had the office from '91-'95. Someone donated us space after I ran out of money, and I was involved with all the kids here. We did gardening projects, cleanup projects, with Mayor David Dinkins's money, the Stop the Violence Fund. I must have had thirty, forty kids in the neighborhood, underprivileged, low-income. And I fed them all. I always feed people. Italians feed people. Before they worked—they worked in the morning. I said go get lunch, get a sandwich, get a drink, and then you come back. I used to give them a stipend. And I left them in the office. I didn't have help that day and I had to leave. I said, "By the time I come back, what is this office going to look like?" There was some unruly kids. They were nice kids—don't get me wrong—but they were not disciplined or anything. They didn't touch or steal a paperclip. They didn't touch anything. I was like oh, my God. And the neighbors said well, they respect you. I was very impressed. So I was involved with them. I cared about them. I <u>care</u>. So I guess they can sense that. I wouldn't mistreat anybody.

Years later, of course, I got them back. They're adults. They said, "Richard, do you remember that time when we were kids, we had nothing to do, and you got us involved?" So it was a good memory for them. I have all the photographs. What happened is, now, my Astor Foundation

grant is for five years from 1991. They're archived in the vault with the Astor Foundation. "My grant" is a Beachside Bungalows Preservation grant. And the rest of my files, which I still have here—tons of files I'm working—are going to the New York [Queens] Public Library, the Central Library in Jamaica, in the archives department, which I'm happy they're taking my files. They're going to scan them or whatever they're going to do. So that's about it.

Now, I'm working on several other things with the Coastal Zone Management Act, and with trying to get the correct zoning, which is required under the federal law. Then there's a state law, Waterfront Revitalization [of Coastal Areas and] Inland Waterways Act. But under all of this, everything has to be consistent with the policies of federal law. Of course, [the Department of] City Planning doesn't know this. I'm trying to make them know it, teach them, but it takes a long time. But I'm very persistent. So I'm giving a little leeway.

And then, I also have to say a special thanks to Anthony C. Wood, who has been a supporter since 1988 when he came out. And then Brad Vogel has been very instrumental in helping me get a pro bono attorney to do the Beachside Bungalow Preservatory because Beachside Bungalow Preservation was more to improve the deteriorating conditions of the neighborhood of the bungalows. Now that we've accomplished most of that, we have new people coming in, we have more preservationists coming in, people that love the bungalows. So I'm moving on to the Beachside Bungalow Preservatory. So I'm hoping to do some work in that area with the great help of Tony Wood, Anthony C. Wood, and then Brad Vogel. [Phone rings] Is that you?

Q: That's you.

George: Okay, I'm sorry with that noise!

Q: That's okay. Obviously, you're a busy guy.

George: I'm an artist, plus I paint. I came out here, started painting. I didn't even finish the work and it was sold. I have to tell you: Martin Scorsese used the bungalows in the HBO production of *Boardwalk Empire*. I helped him. I just like to help people, and he was so appreciative. He used my bungalows for the extras, for makeup. And one of his producers, I forget her name, her last name was Ferguson, Amy Ferguson. "I want that painting." It was a kitchen painting. I was just finishing it. I said fine. I took her card, I said I'm going to call her. I just finished it and put it into the computer and this woman from some place called and she said, "I want it. Let me see your artwork." She bought it. I thought it was a young girl, Caroline. She lived right next to my client. This was Mrs. Katherine Dewey. Her father owned Kresge's, which is Kmart. She lived at 425 and this woman lived at 420. I said, "Oh, I'm going back to my old neighborhood." So she bought it and the other lady, she didn't get it. And I did a couple more kitchen paintings and I hung it up. I had my birthday party, which was in May, and it sold. I didn't even hang it up one day and it was gone, which is a compliment. And Martin Scorsese loved the bungalows. His nephew loved the bungalows. And my mother wrote a letter—I have a copy of it—to Martin, a simple letter: to get on the National Register, we need $10,500. And he sent us through Bootleg Productions $10,000. Very generous of him, so that helped us with that.

Now, I'm still working on—forever—to get the landmarking, which, if I think positive, I will get

it. Because City Planning just adores me. [Speaking sarcastically, laughing] They just love me, the whole city, all the agencies. It was funny because William [L.] Hamilton wrote an article in the [*New York*] *Times* on me. So every agency he went to—he didn't mention my name—the developers, and the first words out of their mouth were, [imitating exasperation] "That Richard George!" So I take that as a compliment. I take it as a compliment. They love me.

Q: That's pretty great. So I have a lot of follow-up questions after what you laid out there. Thank you for doing that. I'm just going to go way back and then we'll kind of make our way through. Can you tell me a little bit more about what Corona was like when you were growing up?

George: Okay, when I grew up in Corona, it was predominantly Italian. There was some Polish. My mother grew up there. My grandmother's [unclear] family, they were Jewish. They owned the butcher down the block. They were on 97th Place. And Corona Avenue, the husband owned the butcher. They got along beautiful. And what happened is, my mother told me at the time they moved there—my mother was born in December '28, and they changed her birthdate to January 2, 1929. When she got a little older, in the '40s, they did not like the Italians—the Polish and the Irish and the Germans—so she knew what it was like to be not very discriminated but it was just like [conveys disgust].

When I got there, it was much different. It was basically a white neighborhood. Like I told you, it had Irish. Some Jewish were left, with the stores. There was one named Lapel. And, I can't remember her name now, but she married [Joseph Lauter] Lauder, Estée Lauder. She was born in Corona. My neighbor who's dead now, when she was younger, she said, "I knew her when she

was a young kid and her name was Esther Plauke [Josephine Esther Mentzer]. But they couldn't say Esther and it was "Estee." And then she married Lauder. But Estée Lauder's uncle, his name was Rosenberg or something [John Schotz], he was a foot doctor or a skin doctor [chemist] and that's how she got into her cosmetics and stuff. So that was a part of history there. Also Madonna stayed there. There was a synagogue off of Corona Avenue and she used to live there for some time, and she went to the Italian-American Street Fair, a cultural thing, and she was onstage singing and they booed her off. They said she can't sing. She can't. But she did good.

But growing up in Corona was good. My grandparents were across the street. They were from Italy. Food, food, food. And then her brothers came, her cousins came. So I was predominantly associating with more Italians, like when I was in my teens. I wasn't used to too many Americans. I was more quiet; I stayed to myself. So it was very interesting. But on the other hand, my mother understood being prejudiced against being Italian—with the German and Irish and stuff, Polish—so she said, "That's what happened with the Spanish." So she had more depth of that. I did not have a knowledge or understanding of all the minorities, the Blacks, the immigrants, West Indians or whatever.

Then when I came to Rockaway, it was like all mixed, Blacks, Spanish, whites. And I have to tell you, I thoroughly enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it. The West Indian food, the people. People are people, and I found that immigrants, and the people who have it the hardest, have more of a heart. They have more compassion. Maybe not all of them but there's such a depth to them and their personality. I really benefitted from it, from staying in Far Rockaway. And I appreciated it.

In fact, when I had this bungalow, 170-A, one of my tenants, they were Puerto Rican-American, and—I used to do my restoration work in Corona and came out on the weekends. So he's working—I was a dummy, saying, oh, he's working so fast. Oh, that's great. He'd be up late at night. I didn't know what he was doing. So I used to go, like the dumbhead I was at the time—he'd be working. It's eleven, twelve, one, two. I was still up. "Oh, can you go to the corner store, get me a beer? Get me a beer." I'm going there eleven, twelve, one in the morning. All Blacks on the corner, and people hanging out that late at night, it's more like party, drugs. I didn't know! I just used to talk to them, say hello. I got along with all of them. Come back. And I realized later what I was doing. But what I found out from my tenant, his name was Sammy, and he was working so fast—he was snorting cocaine! I didn't know it. He'd go in the bathroom and snort. Oh, he's working so fast. I'm like so dumb with this. So one day, the plumber came, and my sewer line was clogged with all these wax papers. It comes in—I don't know what it comes in. So that's how I found that out and then when he did it in front of me, he said, "Would you like some?" I said, "No, thank you. I just get high on life. I don't need that stuff." But that was one issue that I had with him. I have a number of things but it was fine.

But I had a food pantry, we had the office. I did police safety—lectures on safety for the children. My mother taught fine art classes. We had Christmas parties. We had donations of food. We had donations of Christmas gifts. So it was a very good time. And most of these people were very poor, working-class people. Some of them were even mental. I used to help them all. This one, she used to come in. She was mental, completely mental. She used to wash her clothes in the street, in the muddy water. I'd give her the food, I'd give her whatever she wanted. To me, she's a human being. She hugged and kissed me, "Oh, I love you so much." I took it as a

compliment and then she told me—here, she's a mental person—the people hanging out with the drugs on the corner, in this alleyway, they said something about me. I'm weird because I don't hang out with them. So she said, "No, Ritchie, no, you're not weird." She goes, "You're strong and they're weak." And here she's mental. I had to put her in her place, you know what I mean? So that impressed me. Look at this lady, she's smarter than me! So things like that happened.

One of the last things—[laughs] I can't even tell you. It was maybe five years ago. There were still gangs on the corner. It's gone, thank God. There was a big laundromat. It was open all night. I don't know what went on over there. I was up. I had a cup of coffee at twelve or 12:30 and then I try to go to sleep. Don't ask me why. So I did that. I went in the bed. All a sudden, I hear this bang at the door. I said what the, 12:31am, "Help!" So I'm saying, "Who is that?" "Open the door, I got shot!" I'm saying, "I ain't opening no door." So I looked, he was laying down on my porch with his head back. So I called the cops and everything. He was fighting with the gangs and beating somebody up, and then when he was running away, someone shot him in the back of the head. It didn't go in. It was near the bone on the back of the head. So he was laying there and then I said, "Oh, God, I've got to have this now?" Then they came and opened the door. I saved his life, went to the hospital. And the detectives came at three, four, five, they're asking me. I said, "I don't know anything." "Why is he going to your house? He is a drug dealer." I said, "I don't know. I have my porch light on." There's a ramp that people use to the apartment complex. "What do I know? When you see him, ask him. I don't know. I don't even know what he looks like. I didn't see his face." They didn't believe me. They're like, come on. So then when they came again, they said, "Oh, the man wants to thank you for saving his life." I said, "Good. And tell him don't come back. Stay away." [Laughs] That was one of the other stories.

Q: The challenges of your good reputation, I guess.

George: Yeah, but I didn't mind. It's sort of broadens your living horizons and stuff, these crazy things. I enjoy that because it's not all dull and boring. My sister is in Massachusetts, it's all white, it's all this, it's all that, it's all bland, it's all boring. I don't need that. I like here, especially the beach and the ocean and stuff.

Q: Yes, can you tell me a little bit more about, you said when you first came to the bungalows, to the neighborhood, there was something that drew you there. I just wonder if you could explain a little bit more about the—zoom out and explain what that draw was for you.

George: Yes, when I first saw the bungalows—prior, when I had the antique porcelain history and antiques, I got seasoned to these wealthy people that preserve these rare equities. Then when I saw the bungalows, I had the same feeling. It translated from that into the bungalow. I said, "Oh, they're so unique." These in Far Rockaway were really well-built, like a house. They weren't like a cheap fabricated bungalow. You just feel the presence. You could feel everything, the history. That's what I enjoyed about it.

There was even one woman—I think a couple of people—she lives on Park Avenue. I can't remember her name. She said, "Ritchie, can I come?" So she came later on. Now I know what she meant, because I'm older. When she walked into my bungalow—she used to stay here in the summer, and her uncle was a tailor. They used to take the A train out. As soon as she walked in,

she said, “Oh, Ritchie, you don’t know what this does for me.” Just the feeling, I was here as a kid with my parents, my grandparents. It rushes back, all those memories. So I know that, in other things, with me now. But it was just the feeling I had, the unique development of vernacular architecture. It was like a community-type feeling. You had your walkways. I have my garden. And what I also liked, it wasn’t an apartment. You weren’t stuck in an elevator and stairwells with all these people that you don’t know. You have your own private house. You want to be private? You go in your house and that’s it. You want to associate, you go out and talk to people. You go to the beach.

What I also liked is it’s an urban waterfront environment. I’m right on the beach. I’ve got all the amenities of South Hampton, Long Beach, all Nassau—beautiful ocean and beach—and yet I go across the Boulevard and it’s like you’d be in the middle of Brooklyn or Queens. You have your stores. I have the A train. I have the Long Island Railroad. I have the buses. So it’s the best of both worlds.

Q: Now where did your family—did your family vacation to the beach when you were young?

George: Yes, it’s true. What happened is my mother’s friend, a Greek lady in Astoria—I don’t know how she knew her or met her. My mother, we went to Bayville, Oyster Bay area. There was a bay and a group of bungalows and we used to rent the bungalow every summer. They didn’t have a lot of money. She used to share it with her sister. They had one house, a bungalow. That’s what I remember. It was one separate house up a hill. So they’d split it in half, whatever, they’d share that. Because of the Long Island Sound, they didn’t worry about the ocean. But later

on, she found out about this. She said, “Ritchie, I didn’t even know it was here! I would have came here instead of Bayville.” We didn’t think. We’d take Woodhaven Boulevard, go over to 95th Street, go to the beach, and go home. Our thinking wasn’t Rockaway Peninsula and bungalows and everything. So that’s where we went, in Bayville.

Then it was sold, and it was Steve’s Pier One, Steve’s Pier Two, became a restaurant. They took all the group of bungalows and built it into a restaurant. And then I heard it was sold ten, fifteen years ago, and now they built condominiums there because it’s right on the bay. But it wasn’t sand. It was all pebbles, big pebbles and rocks. But she did it for us kids. It wasn’t rough, the water. That’s where we used to go, to Bayville. And then we used to go to Shirley. My grandmother bought a place in Shirley, Long Island. It was near the bay and then the beach was over the bridge, very rough water. So we used to go there too.

Q: As you mentioned, even if you go to the Rockaways, you might not see the bungalows. I’m wondering if it was typical of you as a young adult, to explore different edges of the city.

George: [Laughs] The only thing I was into, which I never took advantage of as an intern, was the fine arts. So I used to explore the museums, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, all the museums over there. And I was also interested in but I never took advantage of more commercialized art, like when they did the fabric design, fabric coloring, all paper design and stuff like that. I just didn’t have the head or the wherewithal. I didn’t have that vision. I didn’t see all of that at the time, because I would have taken advantage of that. My mother too was very good with anything. Her grandmother knitted. Her father’s mother knitted—they could do anything. She

was very good at decorating, sewing. She made dresses, curtains, covers. She could strip furniture. She could renovate a house. She thrived on all of that. So when mine became available, I said, “Listen, I have to work. Come out here. I don’t care what you do.” Her and her brother were like that.

I could do a lot of things too if I put my mind to it. I wish I was smart enough to explore other areas and I wish I was smart enough to buy in deteriorated areas. I just didn’t have that thinking in my twenties. I did when I bought my—the only reason I bought my grandparents’ house is because my mother wanted me to buy it. I’m not thinking. So I bought it. She goes, “Buy it!” That was ’81. She goes, “It’s going to be worth a fortune,” and now it is. But I don’t know how she sees all this. I can’t see that. She steered me there and she steered me here. She was right, because the bungalows, they were $2,000 and $4,000. When we came, they were $7,000. The two were $25,000. And now, my sister inherited, she could have sold them—she went with the wrong people. But they’re valued at maybe over $400,000, two little bungalows. But she went with the wrong people and they got her into contract at $410,000 but they wouldn’t close until she came down to like $375,000. And I told her, go with the realtors I know. They’re reputable. They have people who want to buy. Then after she did it, she was sorry because we don’t get along all the time. When am I going to steer her wrong? So now she regrets that.

But even this one, Linda Williams, she’s here. She’s a realtor. She goes, “Carol, hold on to them. I can get you $445,000. If you wait until next year, I can get you closer to $500,000.” She didn’t want to listen. She had to sell. So that’s her decision. But yes, they went up. I don’t care about the value. I don’t even care about the money because, like I said, my parents passed. My mother

passed in September. When you leave here, you're not taking anything with you.

So I'd rather be a good person. I have good tenants. I have several bungalows. People think you're interested in the money. No. When I grew up, I couldn't get a job with a college degree. There was a recession. I had to make ninety-seven dollars a week. My sister was a CBS executive, from high school making $700, and they all made fun of me. They said, "Ritchie, nobody is going to pay your way. Nobody's going to pay your bills." And that instilled in me this fear that I had to earn a living, to support myself. So that was more motivation as opposed to real estate investors or speculators looking to make a buck, looking to get a lot of money. I wasn't into that. But God has his way of blessing us in areas.

Q: First and foremost, you need a roof over your head.

George: Yes, no one's going to help me, right. Because, when I made ninety-seven, I had to pay a third, board. I had to pay my health insurance, which was another third. No, before the ninety-seven, I was working with my father. So it was forty-five dollars a week. That's all I had. I had to give fifteen to the house, fifteen, whatever I had left. And the other was ninety-seven dollars. And everybody was making a joke out of me, "Oh, look at you. You can't get a job. You're so lazy." And I wasn't lazy. I worked. I worked at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art], ninety-seven dollars a week in the publishing. From there, I used to go to the restoration job I had. Then on the weekends, I worked in the theater, painting sets and doing stuff like that. I was always working. But because I look laid back, they want to portray you in another way. They don't know me. Now that I did better than them, nobody's talking. But I wasn't looking to do better

[laughs] than anybody. I just had to do what I had to do. So that's the way I think.

Q: Yes. Can you talk about when you first bought a bungalow, what condition it was in? And then how you went about restoring it, making it livable?

George: [Laughs] The first one I bought was so horrible. I shouldn't tell you what my father said but it was a little, little bungalow. I still have it. It's my good luck bungalow. And they widened the streets. So it's like two feet off of the street. So my father came to supposedly "help me," which he didn't want to. His first comment was, "Get a gallon of gasoline and a match." [Laughs] He sat there and I had to do the work! I did a lot of work I could do, but certain things, carpentry, I'm not good at, so I had to hire people. But I still have it. That was in 1982 and I still have it. It's a good luck thing and I get good tenants there, for years. So that was his comment, a gallon of gasoline and a match. He solved the whole problem. [Laughs]

And then from there, we got the two on 25th and then my sister sold the—the back was a disaster. They were summer bungalows. They were like cabanas. They were worthless, five hundred dollars. So the back, I cleaned it up and I rented it. Later on, me and my parents split it up. They bought me out and I bought the two behind them. I still have them today. So they needed work but the thing is, they were smaller. They were manageable. And after you do the work on it, you know what has to be done. The only key is getting the right contractor or the person to do it. Sometimes you do and sometimes they fool you—you have to be there watching. And then my mother bought one across the street, which I inherited, but I couldn't be there. And of course, when you're not there, they skimp. They don't do all the beams on the flooring. In

fact, they're doing it, but then my mother had to get a thyroid operation, this and that, I couldn't be here watching. That was in February. So of course, later on down the road, from '09 to now, when we did work, we could see where they didn't do it properly. So you have to meet the right people that you can trust, and sometimes you can't.

Q: Yes, that goes a long way. How did you end up learning about the history of the bungalows?

George: Oh, that's another lengthy story. But when, next door to me, they built on the easement. Wavecrest Gardens, Goldfarb Properties Oceanview owns it. So they had to survey. The owner before, Wrightman [phonetic], loved the bungalows. He surveyed the easement and the bungalows but it was their property. So when he got this low-income housing tax credit from the state, the Division of Housing and Community Renewal, $9.8 million, he got that up because he had a lot of political connections and clout and donations. And I fought him the first time and they stopped it and the second time, they circumvented us. So I had to go—I lived in the [Office of the] City Register. Then had a dungeon downstairs with all the books. I went through all the books. But it was after he started the lawsuit that I found the easement. Edward [N.] Dickerson owned the estate. He bought it from the [John Joseph] Mott family; they owned everything. The easement recording was in his last will and testament, which you wouldn't think. I was looking through all the books in the dirt—a dusty old dungeon down there. I got all the deeds, I recorded them. I have them here, copied them, and tried to translate, because they were handwritten deeds.

So that's when I got started with the history, from the Dickerson estate. It was New Beach Road, which went in the middle here. Then when they were mapping out the streets, they made it

Beach 24th. But since they put the bungalows, they made an easement, and they put the street out where it is now. So we went to court. The judge says, "Oh, well, the street was remapped. You don't have any more easement," which is not the case. But then I found the easement recording after the court. But then I went to federal court. The judges were not happy with me. They did not like me. They were nasty with me. Eliot Spitzer, he was the Attorney General. I forget the name, Gordon, something like that was the last name. He said, "Ritchie, I've never seen how they mistreated you. They yell at you, scream at you, shut you up." Even the last one, and she was Italian. He says, "Look at this. They're not supposed to do that." What do I know?

But I knew I was right. They were not there doing their duties as a judge where they were insulated from the politics. They were there protecting the developers and the city. Then when I looked at their financial disclosures, which just popped up online, they had all these investments with developers, the [Empire] State [Economic] Development Fund, the city muni [municipal] bonds, this bank, that bank, this thing. So therefore, when there's a conflict of interest like that, they're supposed to recuse themselves. *Sua sponte*, that means they have to automatically get off the case, which they didn't. So I'm working on that too.

And then, the bankruptcy judge astounded me. There's a Metroplex on the Atlantic [Apartments], which is built on my easement to the beach. Meanwhile, it's on state jurisdiction. It's a Coastal Erosion Hazard Area, which is under the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation [DEC]. Meanwhile, they didn't get permits from the state. Meanwhile, they couldn't get permits because of the flood area. The city gave them the permits. So does that make the building legal? No. I didn't go to all the bankruptcy proceedings. The

attorneys said I just had to come to the last one. Okay, I'm sitting there in the audience and the judge, Carla [E.] Craig, she's the chief judge. I'm sitting there, and all the attorneys go up there, and the first words out of her mouth—I'm saying, "Oh, my god!" She says, "I don't care"—I'm paraphrasing it—"if that Richard George has to go with his bathing suit and towel and crawl under the boardwalk to get to the beach." I said, what kind of comment is that?!

So I did all my testimony. I sent her the letters that it's under state jurisdiction. I sent her the laws. I sent her everything. She kept it out of the decision. She convoluted it with twenty-two pages of easement rights. No, it's not. It's a public access. Meanwhile—now, I don't know if this is really true—the attorney I had, Mr. Fox, I forgot his first name. He worked for a big law firm. He did it pro bono. I sent her these letters, which she had to file on the docket, which I have to get. He said, the judge, Carla Craig, told him, "Tell him if he sends me another letter, I'm going to put him in jail." That's what he told me! I don't know if that's true or if they were just scaring me. I said, "Wait, I'm not finished with her." Because what bothered me more was, you're writing a decision on the law. Why are you attacking me in the decision? Why are you saying I have unclean hands? How do I have unclean hands? I have an easement there. I was trying to protect my easement. But I'm not finished because I pursue things. I don't know what happened with the judges but I have the goods on them. I get rid of a congressman. And I didn't do it with malice or anything. I just wrote dumb letters of inquiry. I don't understand this, I don't understand that. And then it brought it to light.

Then there was a senator, [Carl] Kruger in Brooklyn, my friend caught onto him. He was taking money from the waterfront. He had the Queens Public Access and we all stood there with the

signs in front of his office, and he got locked up. He got arrested after they put it out. But I didn't know anything about that case. He was selling the waterfront in Brooklyn somewhere. So things like that happened. But once I have the right documents and have all the stuff, I just try to pursue it in a certain way because when I pursued it originally, they said no, don't use those words, don't use this word. So you have to pursue it like being dumb as a fox. Being dumb about it, like I can't really attack their character. You have to do it with the facts and the law. Because I see these other people who get upset—[shouting] "That George!" He's this, he's that! They give it back screaming and yelling, so that it makes them look worse. So that's what I try to do. I'm working on a few of those things.

I'm getting City Planning to change a few things. It takes forever but it's getting there slowly. I do it and I do it, and I don't get no answers. And then when I incorporate it into a letter, I don't accuse anybody, I just say, you know, we have to question your credibility, or your credentials to be in this position at City Planning when you don't even know the law and how to proceed. And you're passing stuff and approving stuff that's not legal. I don't say not legal, I say "not within the law." When I hit them more on a personal level, it seems to me to get a better reaction. Not even hit them, more like questioning. I'm not going to attack them.

Q: Pointing out the incongruities basically.

George: Right, incongruities. Or like I'm so dumb and saying I don't understand, blah, blah, blah. You're getting paid a salary. I said, you're supposed to do this job here. I'm pointing it out that you're doing the opposite. I said, isn't this a fraud, waste, and mismanagement of public

funds, your salary? It's a question. I'm not threatening.

Q: What kind of connection do you see between the research that you did doing antique restoration and the research that you do to basically figure out what are all the different policies that have to happen in order for things to be within the laws?

George: Okay, what happens is some of it comes my way. The Coastal Zone Management came my way and you just read up on it. With Metroplex, I got the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation $15,000 tree planting. So what happened is, how I found out, they called me because I had the grants. They said didn't you get the—I said yes. And I found the book. I had everything. I have it somewhere here. And then they stopped the building, and it was up to the boardwalk, and the Coastal Erosion Hazard Area is one hundred feet in. So they made them take down one hundred feet of the building. They're only three stories high. Twice they made them take it down. Because they took it down, and then they measured it from the handrail, and it should have been from the end of the boardwalk, which was another foot or two. So after they started building it a second time, they made them take it down two and a half feet or something.

So I got the order, the consent order and the decision, from New York State DEC here in Long Island City. So I read all the laws in there. Look at this, how interesting? Oh, it's a Coastal Erosion Hazard Area and we looked up the DEC report. Right on the front page, it had Tidal Wetlands Act. So I went through the regulations, and you need permits for single units, multiple dwellings. And then it said, within the regulations—there were two things—we had Far

Rockaway Bay, so we're former tidal wetlands of the Far Rockaway Bay. So that theoretically includes the whole bungalow area because underneath is the bay. That's state jurisdiction. I didn't get into that because that can be real sticky.

So it said, from the Coastal Erosion Hazard Area on the Tidal Wetlands Act, where they took one hundred feet down, it goes back—state jurisdiction—one hundred and fifty feet landward, in the city. Three hundred feet outside the city. So the building was taken down one hundred feet, then there was another one hundred and twenty-five feet landward. It goes back one hundred fifty feet. So I made appointments with the DEC. I wrote letters. They were dying. They didn't know what to do. Vanisha Landon [phonetic] was there. I got rid of her. She moved on to Governor [Andrew] Cuomo, and when I found out, I wrote there. And then she was gone. She went somewhere else. I didn't attack her. I just said "Listen, this is the law. This is what's going on. I'm a layperson. Why doesn't she know it? Why did you hire her?" She's working with one of his developer friends.

So this is what they did, the state. They're wonderful [speaking sarcastically]. When I wrote them several letters, I went to see the attorney twice. He was shaking. Well, that isn't the thing. This is on state land. Did they have the permits? No. So what they did, they were so wonderful. When I opened up New York State DEC website, they took off the Tidal Wetlands Act. [Laughs] Now, I didn't want you to take off the Wetlands Act. I wanted you to take the building down! So that's what they did. Wasn't that nice of them? To find it, it was impossible. I did find it. I said, "These people are unbelievable." So now I found out, with the state, they have the attorneys—I can't remember the name, with the environment, [Office of] Environmental Justice. So I wrote to

them recently, and I emailed everybody—did an email blitz—because they're going to build by the boardwalk. I notified the city, "I want you to know that is state jurisdiction. One hundred feet plus one hundred fifty feet. Now they need permits from the state, not from the city." I told City Planning, I told the mayor. So I have to tell them because who knows what they would do? I wrote the letter, and there were two people: in Long Island City, the new regional director, and there's one up in Albany, the environmental justice attorney, whatever he is. So I had everybody email them. So I hope that will work. Just get the right permits because I'm sure with that Coastal Erosion Area, they won't be able to get permits to build high-density buildings and stuff, which, I'll be happy.

So that, and then the next thing is the preservation zoning, which I'm working on now. Because what happened is, when they do any zoning changes, it has to be approved by the state, Department of State. It has it in the regulations. It has to be consistent with the Coastal Zone Management program policies, which have historic preservationists, also under the [New York] City Waterfront Revitalization [Program] Policy 10, they list the Landmarks Preservation [Commission, LPC], where they have to preserve properties in the federal coastal zone. And under the federal law, they have to have a listing and designation of historic properties under LPC. But they have to go through the designation process. That's part of the federal law, when they want to preserve coastal communities. Do they do it? No. I'm writing to the attorney there for like four or five years. I'm going to get there. I'm going to get there. I'm thinking positive.

What happens with these people, I've done a lot of stuff and I've accomplished a lot. Sometimes after, I just say oh no, and it happens. With this building next to me, they're at $9.8 million. So

from the state, I told the state attorney general—she's a judge now. It tells you. She ripped me off. She didn't do nothing. They were going to investigate. So I wrote to the Department of Justice, "Listen, here is the law. They have to build according to the neighborhood character, bungalows. They built this six-story thing." So they sued them and they had to pay back the $9.8 million. And they were investigated all the way back because Congressman Floyd Flake was in Wavecrest Gardens. He had an office across the Boulevard. On the other side, he got Wavecrest Gardens $56 million in 1996 to do security and terraces and stuff. I said where's the money? I wrote to the federal government. It was in the paper. "Oh, we don't know." They said, "We don't have an accounting of the money." I said, "Oh, thank you. Could you send me $56 million? Please? I could use it."

That opened up another can of worms. I wrote to them, "I don't know. I'm very dumb." Wavecrest wanted me to have an office in the new building. I said, "Are you crazy?" And they offered me $150,000. I wouldn't take it. "Oh, no. It's a donation to the [Beachside Bungalow Preservation] Association." Okay, I didn't take nothing. They want me in there. I said, wait a minute. The congressman's in there. The council member's in there. The senator's in there. The assemblywoman's in there. Wait a minute. So I wrote to them again, the Department of Justice. I said, "I don't understand. Congressman Flake is in the office. He gave Goldfarb [Properties] a grant of $56 million. Isn't that a conflict of interest? I don't know." Now, Congressman Flake is also the pastor of this Church of God or something in Jamaica, which he gives money to, to pay the employees and salaries and running expenses. Isn't that a conflict of interest? I don't know. I'm dumb.

So they called me—somebody called me, [laughs] I don't know who it was, an attorney. I was so tired. "Oh, Mr. George, no, there's no conflict. Everything is fine." I said, oh, God, now I'm going to have another fight on my hands. So after that was over, they got rid of him here as congressman. They told him either you're a congressman or a pastor. Make up your mind. And he resigned.

The other politicians moved out quietly. They just moved out. So I did it. But again, [laughs] they're not going to tell me anything. So things like that happened.

Q: Yes, I think what's really interesting, hearing what you're sharing, is that the laws are always in your favor, but the first thing that happens with those laws is that people are violating them. And so you, paying attention to what all these different policies are and these different regulations are, just the person who's kind of going around and bringing it up. Bringing it in front of them and saying, like you said, I don't know, I'm the layperson, but doesn't this seem to be in violation? I just want to commend you for that work because it does seem exhausting. You're making enemies in high places, let's say, but friends in your community, I assume.

George: And I don't care because I'm right. See, City Planning—it took years—they did the consistency review procedures over. They're supposed to be under the regulations for the city too, the state, they have to do all approvals of funding and other actions for permits. They have to be consistent with these policies—federal, state and city. So what the city did, and the state did, they switched it and said no, it has to be a discretionary action. That means after an environmental review, if it's discretionary—listed, which means a special action. Then you do a

consistency. I said, “Excuse me? If you read the regulation, it says you have to do a consistency for all funding, all approvals prior to an environmental review.” So what are these environmental reviews the state and city are doing, with the consistency? They don’t belong there. I said, if you look on the state thing, the list, they are separate reviews. The consistency is first, and then the environmental. I’m doing this from 2016, before they changed it.

So now, I have to switch gears and question their credibility and their credentials to be an employee, and get paid a salary that they don’t know their own job! So that I think hits a little bit more of a raw nerve. So I looked online. They’re sneaky. They change the stuff. They took the environmental reviews off the main list. They took it off in the body of the explanation, but in the middle, they left it. That’s like a loophole. I’m going to get rid of it because I couldn’t take it any more [laughs]. But I’ve got to go through everything, underline it. And they change the wording. It was “all discretionary.” Now it’s “local, state and federal discretionary.” They took it off of local and state. No, it’s all. So I’m working on that now too. And the zoning. It’s a lengthy letter. I like to make them short, but sometimes you have to make them long. So I’m going to make it long. I make a cover page now with this one, and I’m going to do a checklist at the end. Check them all off when you get it done.

Q: Well, I want to go back again and ask another question that’s sort of in the more distant past, which is about becoming chair of the Beachside Bungalow Preservation Association. I want to ask you to go into a little bit more detail about the funding that you got for planting the dunes. You said that you kind of approached it like an artist, in a kind of a non-traditional way. So I’m wondering if you could expand on that.

George: Okay, like I said, with the Astor Foundation, I wrote a letter and they gave me $2,500 for neighborhood improvement. Gardening, I did murals, I worked with all the kids in the neighborhood. When you're sincere with them and care about them, it comes back, especially with these underprivileged people, even the lower class. I hate to say lower class Blacks, or the really poor. They knew I wasn't a phony. I wouldn't put them down or anything. But then with the J.M. Kaplan Fund, that was through the help of Tony Wood, in 1992, because when he worked there—I'm giving him the credit—he had discretion on where he wanted to give some money. So he was so kind enough—and he never told me—I got a check for $15,000. So it was through his help. I found out later on. I don't know how I found out. I don't think he said anything.

Then, I said what am I going to do with $15,000? Where am I going to plant trees? Because they're little sidewalks. That sand is so soft. I said oh, God. So we had a walkway that we did with the kids and then I called the [New York City Department of] Parks [& Recreation] and they recommended a nursery, Country Gardens Nursery, and I ordered all the salt-tolerant plants, and I ordered twenty-five dollars worth of beach grass. I didn't know anything. I'm thinking plats of grass, like the regular grass, like the sod grass. What do I know? So they brought all these beach—I got the black pine trees, I got all this stuff, bayberry, rosa rugosa, beach plum. I said where is my beach grass? He has one hundred stems—roots, that's it—in a little plastic ziplock bag. I said, "That's the grass? Are you kidding me?"

So I gave it to the kids. I said just plant it in the corner. But it's aggressive. It grows fifty feet,

and the soil was very fertile because it was never developed. It probably had all shells, whatever it had in there, and it just grew. It just took over. I said oh, wow! I found out later from the tour, one stem grows fifty feet in each direction and forms like a net. It holds the sand, and I found out from the tour, or afterwards, it's Mother Nature. Beach grass grows up, but when the wind blows this way, it bends this way, and it catches the sand and it drops down, and it builds it up. I had all these beautiful dunes. I had all these trees on 24th and 25th.

I had that, and I got the matching grant from the State DEC. So I planted more trees. Oh, then I decided to do the ocean side, the beach side. Can I do part? Yes, you can do it. They bounded up the sand. I got this one Central American and I paid him. He dug up some of the beach grass and he transplanted it. It had these gorgeous dunes, beautiful. Everybody here thought I was nuts and people were trying to pull out all the grass. They didn't want it. So when we had the hurricane [Superstorm Sandy]—oh, this is another story—we didn't get any flood. One wave came in at the end of 27th, came up, but the water came from the Boulevard. It flooded in the 40s and had to come down and made a U-turn up the block for a short period of time.

Meanwhile, when I was dealing with Metroplex, all the tours came, all these people. I'm going to write to the U.S.—I can't find the letter—Department of Environmental Protection on Metroplex. Maybe they have some jurisdiction, and it's federal, because I looked at the laws. So the chief of—Richard Bowler [phonetic] was his name. He was in New York. He sent me a lengthy two-page letter. You know, when you are wrong, you get a letter, believe me. They're going to let you know. When you're right, you don't hear from them. So I got a lengthy letter but the flaw was—it wasn't a flaw. It was a plus to me. He said, "No, we don't have jurisdiction.

That's the state. We do this. The Army Corps does the beach. We need environmental reviews. We need permits. We need this, this, and this before we commence the work." Okay, that was in 2013. Then they're doing the boardwalk, 2015. I'm saying, the [speaking sarcastically] beautiful, beautiful Army Corps of Engineers, with all their wonderful bulldozers came in and bulldozed all my dunes and tore down the trees on the beachside. I'm like, look at what they're doing. I was tired. I had my father, this and that.

So I took photographs. This was the quickest response I ever got. [Laughs] I didn't get it though, no. So I wrote them a letter, "Mr. Bowler [phonetic]," blah, blah, blah. I got to find the letter. I put it somewhere. "I don't understand now. I would like to know—here are the photographs." I had emailed him the photographs. "The Army Corps of Engineers, like you said, do you have the environmental reviews? Do you have the permits to bulldoze my dunes?" I didn't get an answer.

But listen to this. I wrote that summer. So the parks were putting up our ramps, which we had to fight for, on the boardwalk. So I went there and met the woman who organized it. She worked at that part, I don't know what they call it, like a manager, "Oh, Richard. The U.S. DEP, they called the Parks, they're going to put back the dunes." I said, wow. I just wrote them that summer, and that fall—I said, God, one letter. I was so disgusted because I thought now I'm going to be at this for twenty years. And now they started—they said they're going to put back your dunes. They're going to put all boulders first, medium-sized boulders, like five or six feet and then fill it up with sand, and then put it all the trees, the plants, the beach grass. I said, I don't believe it. One letter.

So meanwhile, they started this year. I have the photographs. They had jetties going out with big

boulders. For some reason, I guess, the storm washed it away. So they're doing that first, and then, after, subsequently, a year or two later, they're going to—she said they're going to put back your dunes but they're going to do the whole Rockaway Peninsula, which is good. So I wrote to Tim Folger, who works for *National Geographic*. He said that's a tribute to you because they're putting back what you had there. They're following your example, which, at the time, I just did it. So that was a good plus. So that will be next. I just have my zoning.

Q: Yes, wow, what an ordeal. Well, I wanted to ask about the National Register designation. You mentioned the role that the *Boardwalk Empire* filming played in that but I just wanted to hear a little bit about how that process unfolded of getting that application submitted and getting added to the list.

George: Right, what happened is, in the summer—I have the letter here—I'm thinking it could have been around 2009. I don't know the exact date. I have the letter. I wrote to the New York State Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation. So I got a response from this Kathy Howe, who's a representative, and she came one summer, and she came for lunch and she saw the bungalows. And then she wrote up her paperwork saying they should be on the National Register. They have a cultural and historical relationship to the waterfront. So that was the first part. Then I hired Nancy Solomon, who works for Long Island Traditions, who I knew over the years, and they recommended that I have to have each bungalow documented the way they want it, in writing, whatever they wanted, in detail, and it has to be through an expert. I couldn't do it.

So Nancy Solomon saw it and she said it was going to cost $10,400-$10,500. I'm like, where am

I going to get that money? Because I don't have that. I don't have a lot of funds. I just found the letter in this book right here. My mother wrote to Martin Scorsese, [1] then he sent us the check. But he loved he bungalows. His nephew loved them. Oh, here are the pictures. I don't know where it is. It might be in something. It's somewhere. It's not here. He loved the bungalows and his nephew loved them. His nephew wanted to do the documentary. I have it in a book somewhere. It's somewhere. The nephew wanted to do a documentary, his nephew.

But anyway, we got the check, and we paid Nancy Solomon and she did the write-ups, whatever she needed to do. And then we got voted in December 2013. That's how that all progressed. [phone rings] So God is on our side so far, so far. You're still there, right?

Q: Yes, yes. I'm still here. What's been the impact of having that National Register listing?

George: I don't know because—it's a plus. It's good. Landmark Preservation said oh, we can't put you on landmarking because it's a lot of work, documenting. We don't have the time. I don't have the letter with the woman there—Mary Beth Betts—but if you get on the National Register, then we'll landmark you. They never did it. So I can't tell. I don't know what effect it had or did not have, because the only thing the National Register is, it doesn't protect us. People can still buy the house and demolish it. So I don't know. It seems like more a register listing of historic properties, and then there might be funding availability for renovations and stuff, which I didn't take advantage of. But I think the most important thing would be the Landmark Preservation. So

---

[1] Carmela George's letter to Martin Scorsese was included in the National Register of Historic Places registration form.

I'm working on it. I just have to get them to budge and do it. [Laughs]

Q: Yes. That's the story, isn't it? So when people are going to sell their bungalows, what sort of role do you have or does the Preservation Association have with introducing people into the homeowners' association, or what it means to be part of this community? How do you kind of greet people, bring people into the neighborhood, and kind of keep preserving through the buy-in of the homeowners?

George: Right. What happened is, I did most of it. In the beginning, I sold a lot of bungalows. I got people interested, even to the point where if they saw it empty, I'd take them to my house to see the furniture layout, so they have an idea. But then it took on a life of its own because I got all these other new people in who brought their friends in, and they wanted to buy. So this Linda Williams, she's a realtor, a broker, she then took over and she got a lot of people coming in. And have another realtor that I know, Fitzroy Brown, he helps us. But then you have the two sides. You have the one side with Linda and Fitzroy, they want a bungalow for themselves to live in, and then you got the other entity who are there for speculative reasons, either it's just to rent it, to make money. It's more of a money proposition than a bungalow preservation proposition. So we have the two things.

That's why, my sister, she wouldn't listen to me. She's sorry she sold to these people. I wasn't going to steer her wrong but sometimes you have siblings and stuff, they look at you in a negative light or something. I don't know what it is. After the fact, she said she should have listened to me. It's too late. [Laughs] But that's what's happening. If I had to buy several, I'd try

to make sure I got decent tenants that would rent. That's good for the community. I sold—in the my next door neighbor, I sold another bungalow to her mother, Karen. I got this Pablo a bungalow. Then he was more social. He's got a lot of friends. He'd bring them out and there were barbecues, this and that, and some people got interested and bought. It happened more natural. It took on its own thing.

But occasionally, I'll get calls, "You know a bungalow? Do you know this?" I said, "No. I don't know anything." One came up on the market on 25th and it sold for $325,000. One. And it needs work on the outside. But it was a couple of people who wanted a bungalow. It wasn't a speculator. But then they—I didn't know at the time—they would come out, and they had friends on my block. They were all social and stuff, and that's how, through them, they got the bungalow. They found out about it.

Q: And how has the ownership changed since the '80s, when you were first getting started, to now. I know it's changed quite a lot but if you can talk about the trends that you've seen, that would be helpful.

George: In the beginning, nobody wanted to come in. Nobody normal, except me, wanted to come here; I wasn't normal. It was all speculative, all investment, all money-oriented. Then it shifted to bungalow people, more like regular working-class people, artists, surfers, this and that, which was nice, earthy people. And now we have a transition into, let's say, Park Slope—I have neighbors from Park Slope—but they're just a different type of person than I am. And then you get them—not all—sophisticated in a way that it's not like the people I dealt with, which is good

because they're preserving the bungalow. They want the bungalow. Sometimes I get the impression—there's one couple—now they're like bungalow snobs. They won't talk to me because I know more than them, but I hear them talk with other people, with their nose up in the air, like they know everything. Okay, you can know everything you want but there's no connection with them, with me. It's just not there.

So that's what happened to some degree—not all, because there were some people with money who bought and renovated and are very down-to-earth, just regular. But they come in with money, which is good. They're very nice people. They're decent people. They're bringing people. They renovate and they put in a lot of money. I'm not against what they do. I keep the regular—they built it a certain way with the attic, with maintaining the original structure. There was a reason for it. Well, they'll come in, open the attic and make it, whatever they call it with the ceiling, cathedral ceiling, they do this, they do that. You know what? It's so hot. I told some of them, "Don't do it." One of them did. He just opened the kitchen and then the rest he left closed. He said, "Ritchie, you're so right. The heat comes in. The cold comes in." "Why would I steer you wrong?" But some people like it. If he got another bungalow, he'd probably reinsulate. He did a beautiful job, gorgeous.

They come in with their ideas, which I don't say they're wrong ideas. To me, I'm not against it, whatever they want, fine, if it makes them happy. I want to maintain the original character. When you walk in, you know it's the bungalow from the '20s, and it has the same feeling and stuff like that. I don't want to alter the structure inside. Like I said, to each his own, if it makes them happy. And it looks beautiful; I'm not going to say it doesn't. That's what it's changing into,

which is okay.

Q: Yes, like you were saying a little bit, it's losing its working-class—that cultural element maybe isn't the same as it used to be.

George: Well, the only working-class that are left, some like Indians from Guyana here and there, and they live in there. I never saw their houses. But the only working-class people that are left are the renters, the ones who rent. And the other ones coming in have the money and they buy. One couple though, they're my age from—I don't know where they came from, Brooklyn—but what a beautiful job. But they maintained the original structure. They did the wood floors, gorgeous. She was an artist too. She did her bathroom, magnificent. She spent a fortune. She said it cost me a pretty penny. And they're nice—people like that are good. The other ones, it's not that they're not good, it's just a different vision. She maintained the character, amazing. And it had old cabinets. They made them look like new. They lived in a brownstone somewhere in Park Slope. But I was amazed how beautiful it came out. And it was simple, and it was the same structure. It's like they appreciated the original construction and stuff.

My other neighbors, they have the idea of opening up—I didn't say nothing. Look, he's an architect, she's a horticulturist, whatever they are. They're snobby with me. They don't like I go back and forth to the house. They don't like this, they don't like that. She don't like I feed the cats. She don't like I feed the birds. What do you want me to do? She don't like I go in my side door, it bothers her. Well, I'm sorry. I'm here thirty-four years. My parents lived here from 1990. All the people that lived there, Blacks, minorities, Spanish, whites, I got along with. They come

in and it's a different ballgame: complain about everything. But I just told them off, "Listen, I can't put up with this. I can't even do work." She complains. I have to do the stoop. "Oh, it's making too much noise," this, that. "Well, you did work on your house. I didn't say one word! I didn't bother you." And she's Italian-American. Can you believe this? [laughs] That's okay. I'm used to that with my family. All the same, par for the course.

Q: I also wanted to ask about zoning. You mentioned it briefly, but to ask about the involvement of City Planning and the rezoning and what impact that's had.

George: Well, it's funny. They're contradictory because their press release said, from Amanda Burden, they're going to preserve the built character. They're going to preserve the bungalow. After it was done—the zoning wasn't online—around 2010, I called Brendan Pillar, who worked in Queens City Planning. Now he's in Manhattan. "Oh, yes, the zoning preserves the exact height and scale." This is what he told me. Meanwhile, I look at the zoning, R3A, it's a two-story, thirty-five foot high, one or two family. It's not a sixteen foot high bungalow. So that's what I'm writing them on now.

And then, when I looked further, the Coastal Zone Management Act, the federal—it's a waterfront management program. On their congressional policies, one is sensitive preservation of coastal communities. That's broad. Then at the state, it's a little more detailed for the state. Then with the city, it gets more detailed with Landmark Preservation. It's in the approval of New York State Coastal Management Program and New York City's Waterfront Revitalization Program. All of their stuff is supposed to concur with the federal law, but then at their level, the state level

and then the municipality.

So they are really supposed to do a consistency of all actions, and it has to conform to the policies—especially if you're in a historic area—and then there's certain requirements. And under the requirements, even though we're not landmarked, our bungalow community, or any community, is supposed to be treated as if we were listed as a Landmark, which they don't do. I wrote to Mark Silverman there. He sent me a letter. He doesn't know what he is talking about. They don't know. They're supposed to have workshops to train the people. They don't know anything. I don't fault them in a way, but now you should know, because I've been writing you for five years, and now I saw on the state, it's the New York State Department of the State Coastal Management Program, they have all workshops. I'm going to print it out. "I think you should take this workshop. You need it." [Laughs] I did already, I told them. I said, "We have to question your credibility, your credentials, your employment. You're getting paid a salary. I'm not. I shouldn't have to be telling you. You should take these workshops because, really, it's a fraud, waste, and mismanagement of funds."

So that's what I was doing lately. So I saw some changes, a glimmer. I didn't get a letter back. [Laughs] Someone told me here that knows all of them, that they're all nervous now. She said, "Give it to them!" She said, "If you were wrong, they would do that to you." I said yes, maybe she's right. But you have to word it in a way. I'm not going to accuse a person. I'm not going to attack a person. Like I said, you have to be dumb as a fox.

Q: Yes, I think that's good advice. How has the overall opinion of preservation changed since

you started doing this work? It sounds like you said, within the bungalow community, people are actually invested in that. I know you're talking about a lot of ongoing battles with people in the city, but how has the approach shifted, do you think, since you started doing this, thirty-odd years ago?

George: Okay, the approach shifted because in the beginning, the politicians—they don't answer me now. And the other ones, it was a deteriorated neighborhood. It was a bad neighborhood, drug dealers, drug addicts, this and that—which I got along with. So what they would do is translate that into the bungalow. I said, no, no, no. The people that inhabit it have nothing to do with the bungalow. It's the landlords who rent to them, or the owners. They want to lump it together: get rid of the bungalows because of this reason. No, you get rid of the bad people, the people that you don't want here. And they moved naturally.

Now, it's shifted to where they don't answer me, they don't attack me. With the lawsuit with Metroplex, I got somebody. I'm going to write my own article in *The Wave*. So now it's just they don't want to answer me on the preservation stuff. Now, they can't say the neighborhood is bad. It's not deteriorating. We don't have drug addicts and drug dealers and crazy people. But it seasoned me in a way because, when I dealt with these people—and I had the food pantry and I saw them on the street corner—they're still human beings. Just because they have bad habits or because of this and that—I have somebody working for me now, you would think he is a street thug, but he's really not. He's the total opposite. But I didn't look at them in a negative light when they came to the food pantry. I just saw them as a person and that was it. I didn't go beyond that.

But no, it has shifted because now they cannot say that the bungalows are decrepit and they should be torn down. They can't say that anymore. Now we got a group of people. When I do these letters, I'm going to do an email blitz to everybody. So they don't have no excuse to say, well, we have to get rid of them because all those drug dealers and all this and that. No. It's not the bungalow. It's the drug dealer you got to get rid of, not the bungalow. They didn't want to know that.

This is so funny. So now, they're developing Averne East near me and, what are they going to build? Bungalows. Ecology-safe. But this is what happened. I forgot the name L&M Development [Partners, Triangle Equity, and the Bluestone Organization]. So one of them there, she must be related to one of those big developers. I don't know what the name is. She emailed me and then we called each other. "Oh, I'm so happy. I'll give you a tour of the bungalows." I'll do this, that, everything, so you have a better idea. So thrilled, she couldn't wait—and I never heard from her again. She must have called the mayor's office or somebody and they said, "Stay away from him! Don't go near him!" I haven't heard a word. Sara Levenson [Mayer], something like that. I said, okay. I just dropped it. But isn't it interesting? They want to get rid of us but they're going to build new bungalows. Does that make sense? I'm just sure someone happened along the way. L&M Developers working on Averne East.

I forgot how we got shifted but, no, the thing is this: what they build now, even the newer construction, and I've heard it from people, it's not the same quality. It might be new material, but it's not the same quality. What we have here, it's all aged wood. I mean, some of these

bungalows, they tore down the stucco, the wood did not rot. It didn't even deteriorate. I have wood mouldings in my other place, it's like kiln-dried wood or something. It's like a rock. It's so strong.

So through the years, I would prefer, even if I bought something else, something that's of older construction because today, with the new materials, and then they use stuff, you don't know if it's chemically-treated. You don't know what they do and how they do it. And some people have told me, they've bought new construction houses and they just feel like they're glued together or something. You hear all these different stories. I lost track of the thought. But the construction, the older construction, the older wood and stuff, it seems more solid. It seems better. The new construction could be good too. I don't want to say all of it is bad.

So I hope it becomes more of a trend and a shift because I'd rather be in a bungalow than in an apartment building, or in a three-family house or in whatever. I like what I have. I don't have anybody in the same building with me, and if you want to stay by yourself, you can. If you want to deal with your neighbors, you can.

Q: I wanted to ask, you mentioned that your mother had passed away this past fall, so I'm really sorry to hear that. I wondered if you could talk about the role that she played over the years in the bungalow community.

George: Yes, she was the treasurer, number one, Carmella George. She started in Corona. She started seventeen block associations. She made the front page of *The Daily News* with all her

neighbors. She did cleanups every year.[2] She was a powerhouse into her eighties. I don't have as much energy as her. Her mother and her brother, who was going to come here, they work on nervous energy, nerves. They can go and go and go and go, and their minds are going. So she told me to come here. I bought, and then she bought a bungalow right next to mine. It's New Haven [Avenue] and [Beach] 13th, which we still own. She was a powerhouse in her own right. She was very active and she enjoyed the beach. She loved the beach. My father didn't too much. His town in Italy, his grandparents were from the mountains and stuff, in the country.

So she was very active, she painted. She taught the art classes. And she was very involved with renovation. See, we're different. She would thrive on it. She had fifteen men in her house working and she loved to be the boss and tell them what to do. Where, me, I'm more creative. She was creative too. She painted and sold a lot of works. But she thrived on it. It like fed her, where me, it depletes my energy. That's the difference. Because I'm dealing with workmen and then I get tired. Sometimes you have workmen and they don't listen to you. They have their own way of doing things or they do it sneaky. But she used to thrive on all of that because her grandmother in Italy was like that, and she is like that. She's good-hearted in everything, and she could work like a horse and do everything. But she liked to dictate, which I wouldn't take.

She would cook in the morning, do the laundry. My father had a hot dog truck. She'd make fifty pounds of onions a week, take all his change and stuff to the bank every day, because it was a penny business, ice cream, and work and work and work. And I'd be tired, and she would stay

[2] Carmela George was the first recipient of the Citizens Committee of New York Award for her work in Corona, Queens; and was profiled in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2013 ("In Far Rockaway, Recognition for Bungalows," by Kaya Laterman).

with me, and I'm tired already. We're doing a renovation or something and I'm like oh, God—she hit the ground and she's ready to go. She's talking and I said, "Please don't talk to me right now. I can't. I can't take it." That's the way she was. Her brother is the same way.

She was very inspirational. She was very upbeat, positive. And she took on the treasurer's position.[3] She took on a lot of things. The problem is, with her, she could do an awful lot and they just did it with ease, like it was taken for granted until she got older and older. But I said, listen, she took care of me and everything. I don't care if people have negative comments. I said, listen, it's my mother. She's sick and she needs me, and put a period on it. I don't want to hear nothing. But oh, you have no life, eight years. I said I really don't care. She needed me. I did the shopping, I did the cooking. I cooked what she wanted.

At the end, I couldn't do all of it, and I hired three home aides because she wanted to stay home. I said I don't care what it takes, I'll go through my savings, if I have to put a loan on my house. I think, at the end, she was getting infections, and she got a sepsis infection with the E. coli. So she went in the hospital and the doctor told me it was over. I said, "Just do me a favor. She wants to be home." So after they got rid of the infection, they sent her home with hospice, and I took care of her for the last week. And slowly—God wanted her. And it was funny—it was an infection, yes. But also I noticed her mind was going, and if your mind goes, it controls your body.

And then I noticed it, my father died in 2013. I noticed it with her right after that. He died in

[3] Carmella George served as the Treasurer of the Beachside Bungalow Preservation Association from 1984–2014. She was awarded the 30th Anniversary Beachside Bungalow Preservation Association Best Treasure Award in 2014.

August and when I took pictures of her, I didn't see it in person. But when I have the photographs, I can see it in her eyes. She changed. I said, oh, my God. I don't care because—all her family screamed, high-pitched. But out of the blue, a switch went on in her brain, and she just started screaming at me. But then I realized what it was, the dementia, the senility. So I just let her go. I wouldn't do anything. And she doesn't want to be told—like my sister—anything. She said my father was that way. She was just as bad. [Laughs] "Your father, I can't tell him nothing!" She did what I did. When she first got married, she goes, well, I played dumb. "Oh, Alfred, what do you think?" Instead of telling him.

I don't care what she did but she was full of energy. She could—oh, God, until just the end. Like I said, I'm glad I took care of her. I wouldn't have done it. It slaughtered me a lot but I didn't mind.

Q: Yes, I understand that obligation. And I wanted to ask about your artwork and what that has been over the years, the role that's played in your life.

George: Yes, well, it's funny because my mother painted plates when she was thirty-five—I was probably nine or whatever—and her friend lived in Flushing, and she'd go to this teacher at the Flushing Art League. She was Irish. Because she painted these plates with flowers, whatever she did on them, people wanted to buy them. And then, it was a lot of money—twenty-five dollars or whatever. She said, "You should go there." And she went and her Irish teacher, May O'Mara, learned from this Italian from Italy all the Old Master techniques: drawing, composition, and color in all the mediums, from black and white charcoal, watercolor, painting, glaze, palette

knife. So in the summer, she couldn't leave us home—and they didn't have a lot of money. Sometimes they'd put the art listings on credit and my father would pay it off. So she had to take me and my sister. You had to be nine, so she was nine, ten or eleven, I don't know what.

So I didn't think of it—some people go to college and they want to be artists. It wasn't a matter of wanting it or not. I just had to go. So I went to the classes, learned how to mix colors, and draw, and composition. I don't look at myself—I feel like I'm an artist or a creative person but I don't identify myself with that. And then, what was interesting, when I learned, she said, you take a warm color. If you wanted to be cooler, you add a cool color. So like the pinks were hot. You'd add a very touch of blue. The oranges, you'd add a touch of green. She taught us all the color techniques.

So I sold work, I was in shows, blah, blah, blah. I had stuff on consignment. I sold it. So when he hired me to do the porcelain, the artist there could not match the orange English pottery cups because they would mix red and yellow, red and yellow, all these colors, or brown. But the problem was, it wasn't that. It was orange and green. And you translate that into a tree when you have a green leaf and then it turns orange. That kind of color is not that orange. It's subdued. So they couldn't match the color. The Chinese pinks they couldn't match because the pink florals in the vases had a touch of blue in it, a cerulean blue. Not a lot, just a dot or two. And then the blue cooled the pink where it matched the vase, and all the colors.

The problem was with these other artists that he got—he was an insane person—if you don't match the color, you cannot finish the piece. It's not going to match. And the design. And then

the other part was you have to do the concept or the feeling of that artist who did—if it's a French artist, he did these doves or something. It was driving me crazy. And then I had to figure out—it had the breast of the dove or whatever but they were staggered, these brush strokes. I was doing across straight. I said, "No, no, it don't look right." I wouldn't give it to them if it didn't look right. And then I realized, oh, no, they're up and down, up and down. Or other big pieces, I did, core and mantel screens for Mrs. Catherine Dewey. She had a triplex penthouse on Sutton Place, and she loved it. I did all her furniture. I didn't know what I was doing but I did it and she liked it. And I got paid.

But when I worked for restoration, I worked at the Met. He would hound me. He was German and an alcoholic, drove me crazy. I didn't want to go there. He hounded me and badgered me to come in. So I went, like the dope that I was. And then I'd finish all the pieces. I'd be at work. I wasn't there. The people paid for it and took it. But he was said, "Well, it was all right. It wasn't that good." Meanwhile, when he did stuff, they didn't like it. They wouldn't pay for it. So something that stupid—if they didn't like it, they weren't going to pay for it. They had to like it. So I did all the work.

Oh, what happened was—this is a riot—he went on vacation for three weeks and the Annenbergs, who donated their collection to the Metropolitan, their sister was named Enid Haupt. She had a show, she had this. He didn't like her—they were both German—and he didn't want to go to her place, which you would die for. So he was mad at her. So he got the pieces. It was a—I forgot the name of it. It was *Lily of the Valley*, *Rockwood*, and some other pieces. He took off, he went to Europe for three weeks. So I was there. I said, I could do it. I called her up

and I did the *Lily of the Valley*. She said let me see the samples. So I went there and oh, God, the place was huge. They had all the Impressionist paintings in there, Cezanne. I look up the staircase and they have all these flowers. They were from a nursery in Jersey. They were for the season, summer or fall. So she brought it up to her. She was upstairs. They go, she wants to talk to you. So I was going to go up the stairs. She said no, this way. So I had to go past the stairs, through this huge long kitchen, a double kitchen, kosher and non-kosher, to the phone. She goes yes, how much? I told her how much. She goes fine, do it. So I did it and then she paid me.

And he got mad. I made him, in three weeks, over $3,000—in the ‘80s—because I did all the work. He was nasty. He would fight with people. He got so jealous that I made all that money, he threw me out of the studio. He said, “Get out of here!” I said, “Where am I going to go?” I never had anything easy. So now I’ve got to have compassion for people. I said, “Where am I going to go?” I call my parents up. They said bring the stuff here. I had vases, they big jobs and stuff. So I went to Corona. I put it in their basement. I called my uncle, who worked in the city as a super in a building, so he knew a studio on 55th. It was cheap. It was an older building. So I rented that out for like six hundred a month. He was so—I get people like that, I don’t know why. Why are you throwing me out? I’m working for you. You’re getting fifty percent of the money. I got you $3,000 worth of business. A normal person would be happy. Not him! [Laughs] I don’t know.

Even with the Rockefeller, “You can’t do the blue and white—you can’t do it!” I just wanted to do the best I could do. Because the blue, if you touch it up in daylight, it reflects purple in the outdoor light. If you’re doing outdoor, then vice versa. So what I did, I said let me do this. Because I learned all my glazing techniques—I glaze blue, blue and black, blue and violet, blue

and this, and I made several glazes. So I went indoor, I went outdoor, and it reflected the same. Then he put a glaze on top. He did his way and then I did my own way. So when the curator came, she said, "Oh! I'm going to use you all the time." I said okay. That was from '79 to '91. I went to this place and one time, I had to send a photograph of my car. I had to call in advance when I was going there, and I did all the work for them.

So then one day, I told them I'm going. They had an armed guard at the door. I didn't know it was an armed guard. So I said I'm coming because I'm used to going there. It's a big door, and I had the porcelains in my hand, and the door was slightly ajar so I just kicked it open. He said, "Don't ever do that again. We have orders to shoot to kill." [Laughs] I said, "Well, thanks, why didn't you tell me that?" And then they sent me in the house but I got lost because they have an elevator. It's like four stories. I got off on the wrong floor. [Laughs] I was supposed to go up to the curator on the third floor and I ended up on the fourth floor. I said where the hell am I? So I went back down and then after I wounded down, they paid me. And the curator, she gave me so much work. I had these four blue and white porcelains, which are worth a fortune. I had to fix them for David Rockefeller's daughter, who was coming for Christmas, and was going to take them home. Okay, first, she didn't tell me that because it was never a rush. She called me like four days before, "Where are the plates? She wants those plates." I said, "You never told me." So I had to stay there and do it and bring them there, and they invited me to a Christmas party, which I didn't go to because I had other plans. But I brought them there. She didn't take them then. She shipped them.

So I sent the bill. It was around eight hundred and something dollars. So the curator called me up

and said—these plates were like $15,000, $20,000, $100,000, not cheap—she said, “You know, they only paid thirty-five dollars for that plate.” They have everything cataloged. I said, “When? In 1929?” I didn’t get a response. So I was right because it’s probably worth $35,000 now. I don’t care. I didn’t even like the work. I didn’t want to do the work.

I did Bergdorf Goodman’s penthouse when they [Andrew Goodman and Nena Manach Goodman] lived there above the store, magnificent. I did all her work. She loved it so much—this is where my mother came in—she had all these petit point cushions in the dining area. And they were older—they were in their eighties at the time. And the husband, when he used to drink his coffee, he used to spill on the cushions. She used to switch them. “Can you do this for me?” I said this is a job for Carmella. So she gave them to me, either on the chair or not, I don’t remember. I said, “Ma, here. This is for you. Do it.” You can’t wash, you can’t bleach it, because they are all petit point and they’re all wool, like a fine wool. She did it. She went out to the craft supply place. She got the fabric paint, and she painted over the stains and matched the color perfectly. She loved it so much, she sent her a thank you note.

Then I had a client in the River House, which is a wealthy place. She had one big apartment—gorgeous—like those old movies, like they have the mansions. And then she bought out her neighbor. All antiques, all porcelain. She had a stack this high of these linen hats. So she asked me—I did some work for her. She was kind of eccentric at the time. She was going like this with the hat, “I want you to paint it. Get house paints and paint it.” Okay. “Carmella! Come on over!” My mother got the hat, painted it. I said you’re bringing it back to her. Very wealthy, Mrs. [Boventura] Devine. She said she didn’t like it. She said, “No, I don’t like it.” So mother took it

back. My mother had gall. She took off all the house paint. I don't know how the hell she did it. She wouldn't tell me. She scrubbed it all off. She got fabric paint, blue, sprayed it all. She put a ribbon on with some flowers and she brought it back, and she loved it and she gave my mother a one hundred dollar tip. That's Carmella. She does anything. Anything I didn't want to do, I said you do it, please. So she used to do stuff like that.

And then I had another lady—I forgot her name—she lived in the Carlyle Hotel. She had a castle in Spain. She used to stay with Alistair Stare [phonetic]. They were on 57th and she had come up. She had the limo waiting downstairs. I can't remember her name. She would come in. My mother was there. And she was upset. Her husband was gone, I guess. And she was telling my mother her problems. We have all these rich people, they've got problems too. We all do, we're human. "Oh, the French maid did this, and the other maid didn't hang the curtains, and the other maid broke something," whatever. My mom said, "Oh, I see. Well, I have to go home and cook. I have to go home and hang my curtains and I've got to clean my furniture." So she laughed. She liked that. My mother bought slippers at Alexander's with the rhinestones on them—not rhinestones, stones. She liked them. She wanted to go buy a pair.

But I went to her house—exquisite taste, not Tiffany taste, prior—a beautiful apartment. And then she sold the castle. She bought a desk or something from Alistair Stare [phonetic]—see, that's how the rich invested money. She paid, let's say—and we're in the '80s—so she said, "In the '60s, I paid $65,000 for this piece," a French something. And now she sold it for like $265,000. That's how they make money too with these investments. But she was upset, which I don't blame her, because she had all her ivory—all her aunt's special ivories and antiques and

whatever—stored in the basement in her locker or whatever they have down there for storage. And they broke in and stole everything on her. So that got her upset. Then when I went there, she got upset because, in her contract at the Carlyle, they're supposed to paint the whole apartment. They were only doing the hallway, which was from here to God's country, and it was twenty feet high. So when she called me, she went into the bedroom and was telling me her problems. She had all these workmen there. They probably thought I was a grandson or something. I said, "See, I have to call my lawyer. I have to show the contract. They have to paint my apartment."

So I learned a lot from that. People are people too. You can't escape being human, no matter how much money you have, right?

Q: Yes, absolutely. Well, coming up on the end of my questions for you, and I just kind of wanted to ask you to reflect on how this has impacted your life, being around so much preservation and putting forth so much effort into preserving this community?

George: I don't know, first of all, where it came from. It did impact my life. I'm happy if I can get things accomplished, and I'm very persistent. But it just changed me. What really, really changed me—the depth of me, from now and then going back it changed—because when I had to take care of my parents, and then to take care of my mother where that was forced on me. And every day was stress, every day was that. That sort of seasoned me and developed me in a way that I changed—I don't want to say for the worst, for the better. So in that instance from now, taking care of my mother for seven years, and all I had to go through, and my sister wouldn't do anything for me—that changed me in a way, when I look back on things then, I'm not an

egotistical type. I'm not impressed with anything I do. I did work for Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, all these people. I didn't even care because I didn't like it. It's changed you when I've accomplished all this stuff, and then I look back on it. And then if I get to the point where I want to get with the preservation, and I don't have to do as much, which I don't now, maybe it will move a little bit forward with the Beachside Bungalow Preservatory.

But I don't put much stock in what I do. I don't know. I'm just not that type of person. I just like to do it. But when I look back, and I read stuff, then we'll see. I really don't know. I don't know what to say. I just get motivated by something and I want to accomplish it. But I don't dwell on that. I don't say I did restoration, I did this, I did that. I never liked it. I wouldn't tell the clients that at the time. They were impressed with me. I'm looking at them like, I don't even want to be here. Now I have people, like my dentist, other people, where I do a lot of cooking. "Oh, you can't improve on that. It's so good." I went to my dentist because—they were always busy with people. Now with the COVID, they're not. So the daughter said, she was trying to make me feel good, she goes, "Your cooking is spectacular." I said, "Really? Thank you."

I don't care but it makes me feel good. I have other friends who will say something. I don't even do it for that. I do it because I enjoy it, and I want you, or whoever is coming over, to enjoy it. And if they enjoy it, it makes me happy. Even with all these accomplishments, I don't maximize what I do—in myself, I mean. I just minimize it all. I'm not motivated for getting attention or for being patted on the back or winning an award. That isn't what I'm about.

Q: Yes, well, I think it's impressive hearing you relay it all and what I came across in my

research. I can relate to being motivated by just the tasks at hand and not necessarily the awards that are coming up. And thank you, just as a New York City/Queens resident, thank you for what you've done! I'm looking forward to the time when we can all travel again so that I can see the bungalows with my own eyes and not just images online. So thanks for that and thank you for so much that you've shared today about all the details of the history.

George: And thank you for having me in your oral history. Thanks so much.

Q: You're very welcome. So I'll be in touch in a couple weeks with the next steps, I guess.

George: Okay, fine.

Q: Okay, great. Good luck to you, Richard, and thanks again.

George: And thank you too. Nice meeting you.

Q: Nice to meet you too. Bye-bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]