

Gary Tischler Interview, May 2015

Betsy: Let me get us officially started because I'd like to capture everything. I'm Betsy Cooley and I'm here with Gary Tischler on July 9, 2014. We're sitting at the conference table in the CAG office, starting an oral history interview. Cathy Farrell is also sitting in with us.

We were just talking about what other interviews Gary has read and seen. He knows practically everybody we've interviewed already.

Gary: Pretty much, I won't say everybody, but I've written a lot about many of the people here, like Ev Shorey, Chris Murray and a number of other people, saw their profiles, kept track of them or have been in meetings where they voiced their opinions or random meetings, whatever the case may be.

I do feel every time I come to Georgetown now, even though I don't live here anymore...I live in Adams Morgan, a very different kind of place.

Betsy: Let me ask you how you came to Georgetown. What first brought you to Georgetown?

Gary: It's a little hazy.

[laughter]

Gary: I'd have to talk a little bit about how I came to Washington. I've been in Washington since '75, somewhere around there.

I came with a friend, hoping to land a job with the "Washington Post," because I thought very highly of myself at the time. They weren't hiring people from small sized papers like mine but that's neither here nor there.

Betsy: Where were you from?

Gary: Hayward, California is where I was working at the time. I quit my job to come out here. Then I tried freelancing. Eventually, I wound up through a friend meeting Dave Roffman. I can't remember who it was exactly. Somehow we got to meet and he said, "You're a freelancer. Why don't you do a story about Ted Kennedy's campaign"? Just like that -- which is Dave's way of doing things.

I had some clips but I'd lost most of them during the course of things. He didn't know what he was getting.

Betsy: Just for clarification, who is Dave Roffman?

Gary: Dave Roffman is the second publisher of "The Georgetowner." Amy Stewart was the first. Sonya Bernhardt carries on now. For more than 10 years now. I would like to talk a little bit about each one of them. I didn't know Amy, but I worked for Dave and Sonya.

Betsy: When you met Dave, he was at the helm. So that was important.

Gary: Amy Stewart had just passed away a few years back and had ceded the paper. Basically, David inherited the paper from her and he continued on and I'm not exact about dates and numbers. Each one of them brought something very different to the paper. If you look at the old papers from Amy Stewart's time, you see what Georgetown was like then.

During David's time, you get a pretty good idea of Georgetown during his tenure. The same goes for the last ten years. It's always changing. That's kind of interesting because...I don't think you get that flavor in many other papers.

Betsy: I have to go back and look at some.

Gary: You should.

Betsy: So this was about 1976.

Gary: I came to Washington then. When I met David...

Betsy: And he was new.

Gary: ...was about 1980 because Teddy Kennedy was running for President against Jimmy Carter the second time. It was in that election year. Kennedy was having all kinds of problems. It was a mess. I remember he was on 60 Minutes and somebody asked him why you want to run for President. He said, "I don't really know" or something like that. [laughs] It was not a good...He didn't do well.

To me, it was a story about the ongoing saga of the Kennedys and that kind of thing. I've never met Teddy. I did meet him once, but that's neither here nor there. I thought it was a great story. It's basically written from my own readings and observations around town, on television. He put it on the front page. It was a cover story, which was fun because I hadn't done one in a long time. [laughs]

Betsy: So that established you at The Georgetowner?

Gary: I wouldn't say that. It felt like that to me in the sense of, OK I'm doing what I like to do and what I can do. I'm pretty good at that kind of thing. Eventually that evolved into a regular kind of situation. It's still freelancing, but being a regular member of the paper. I started covering things like CAG meetings, ANC meetings, as well as local politics which I did a lot of as well as cultural things that suited **my experience and knowledge** as well as features about so called regular folks. I don't like to use that term, but those people that aren't famous [laughs] or in politics or in arts or anything like that, just really regular folks.

Betsy: When you started with The Georgetowner, were you actually living in Georgetown?

Gary: I don't remember. I may have been. I was living on Capitol Hill, come to think of it.

Betsy: You've lived in many neighborhoods.

Gary: Yes. Not all of them, but a number. I wouldn't recommend freelancing to everybody on that level as far as security. But then, that was the life I led elsewhere, too. I worked for daily newspapers in California for 10 years before I came here, and won a few prizes.

Betsy: Back to you when met Dave Roffman, and you did the article on the Kennedy campaign for him, and that started you off with The Georgetowner.

Gary: It did. I took on other things covering performing arts theatre primarily. Later on, I got into museums for a number of years. Cultural things, which were such a treat to be able to do that, believe me. This town is incredible that way, and it's gotten more so over time. At that time, it wasn't that much. There was the National Theatre which had touring plays, the Kennedy Center; and a few small theatres that were just starting -- except for Arena Stage, which was a gem, and it continues to be.

There was some others starting out, and it was fun looking back on it, to be at their conception. The Studio Theatre, which was in a really horrible neighborhood on 14th Street, Woolly Mammoth, which was all over the place and now has a pretty expensive theater downtown.

Studio basically started that renaissance on 14th and P They got a bigger space, and it looks like a Broadway theater now. But it was really fun to be in on that. I got to know those people when they were struggling and starting out and wrote about them then, and there were amazing, talented people here. Still are.

Woolly Mammoth always was a cutting edge theater -- new plays, new stuff, things you never saw before. He's been doing it for 35 years.

Betsy: His name?

Gary: Howard Schalwitz. But, anyway, it was wonderful to be in on when this stuff was starting.

There was a theater company in Georgetown down at Grace Church -- the one down near K Street. It was called Horizons Theatre. Women's theater, theater from a woman's perspective. Which, unfortunately is no longer around; and they basically did plays by women, about women. They were really, really, really good...incredible group of talented people again. They got caught in a squeeze that happens to theaters sometimes.

They were renting that space in a church, and they used it beautifully and creatively, but then they had an opportunity to get a space where Studio Theatre had left, except the deal fell through, and they were stuck without a theater for a whole season, and by that time they couldn't recuperate, which is unfortunate, because the people there...

The director was a woman named Leslie Jacobsen, a drama professor at George Washington University.who They were really good. There are lots of theaters like that.

Betsy: That's really fascinating, because I've been here since the mid'60s, and I don't remember them.

Gary: They were right down there.

Betsy: About what time?

Gary: I'd say mid '80s, somewhere around there, for about five years at least. I've got all the clips. That's one good thing. I kept all my clips that I basically did for the Georgetown, so I have this stack of paper at home.

Betsy: You have hard copies?

Gary: Yes. Printed everything. It's fun going through it sometimes. They were there. There some local Georgetown theater group, which was an amateur group, and there was a woman who wrote a column for us about fitness and exercise. Sheri Blair. I don't know if any of you remember her or not. She also ran the Georgetown Theatre Club, and she used to...

Betsy: Where was that?

Gary: It was vagabondish. Sometimes they were in GU Theater, or a church -- usually churches. There were a number of people that did that. Georgetown, heading towards Georgetown University.

Betsy: St. John's?

Gary: No. Maybe it's not a church. Can't have been Catholic. They don't do that.

Betsy: It wasn't Visitation then?

Gary: I can't remember. It was in that general area somewhere.

Betsy: Oh, now I remember. There is a theater group, or was, attached to Visitation, come to think of it.

Gary: That may have been it.

Betsy: Yeah, and I do remember that. That had a very active program for all ages.

Gary: Some of that was going on here, but the theater thing just exploded here. They have as many theaters now almost as Chicago or...and quality wise right in that range now. Arena Stage won our regional theater award, a Tony award, same at the Shakespeare Theater with Michael Kahn. It's reputable, more than reputable now.

Betsy: Anything else you can remember about that in Georgetown?

Gary: I think that was generally it, pretty much. The other ones were more amateurish groups, or the college. The college obviously did some very good work. Unfortunately, we didn't cover it as much as we should, and it's really come of age now with their new space there.

Betsy: Yes, the Davis Center for the Performing Arts is amazing.

Gary: They do excellent work. Something has started to happen in the last few years where the

theaters like Arena, and Shakespeare Theater, and what not, they're doing cooperative projects with the universities, especially Georgetown and Arena have an arrangement now.

They did some Eugene O'Neill festival they had, and it was...Georgetown was part of it also. I like to see that, because the university, Catholic University, is pretty well known for that. They had some exceptional stuff going on there. That was before my time, but I know about it. Some of the directors there worked in the Arena and Broadway.

Betsy: What about the Duke Ellington School?

Gary: I've written about it a few times, mainly for the jazz thing, but also some of the people that taught there, an exceptional thing. It should be encouraged. I hope nothing ever happens to it. It has a national reputation. A lot of people that have gone there have gone on to other things. We're a pretty rich cultural community, and what people sometimes forget is that most of the people that subscribe to, let's say, the Kennedy Center, the symphony, opera, and things like that, live here. They're the bread and butter for this thing, for the more expensive theaters -- if you want season subscriptions.

Even the smaller institutions survive on subscription. I've known this guy, Jerome Barry, for a long time. He runs the Embassy Series, which is a program, basically, where he gathers and produces programs with top ranked classical musicians in embassies or at the residences of ambassadors, with a reception afterwards so that way...he calls it "musical diplomacy."

But it works. I went to a couple things this year, and one of them was at the Russian embassy right at the time that the Ukrainian thing was going on. It got a little tricky. That very day, Putin had called Obama about something or another.

The program had a Chinese pianist and Russian cello player, and we had a lot of younger and older people. The ambassador got up and said, "Well, this is an interesting evening. Our relationship these days are perhaps not so good, but they have been worse," he said. So I guess everybody remembered the Cuban missile crisis. [laughs]

But he said, "I think perhaps we should listen to the music and the musicians and how they make us feel, and maybe us diplomats should conduct our diplomacy that way." It was a really interesting evening. It went beyond the mingling and the music and all of that. It became an event, where Russians and Americans got together and nobody yelled at anybody. [laughs]

Betsy: Remarkable. I hadn't heard about that. Does that group meet at...Do they ever perform at any of the other embassies in Georgetown?

Gary: They've done over 170 over the years. He and his wife basically run it with the help of donations and things like that. They charge for performances.

Betsy: Any other Georgetown embassies involved, embassies in Georgetown?

Gary: I don't know. I can't say for certain. There's not that many...

Cathy Farrell: The Austrian Embassy had some...

Gary: Yeah, they do it all the time. Initially, they worked with the Austrian Embassy Initially, it was European, the Germans and the Czechs.

Cathy: My husband and I have been subscribers for a long time.

Gary: [inaudible 18:56] I'll tell him about that. [laughs] I've known him for a long time and we've gotten to be friends. It's such a really good thing, one of those unique...No other city has anything like this.

Betsy: You were saying a minute ago, you were asking about Chris Murray, which reminds me for some reason, of The Bayou. Do you remember The Bayou?

Gary: Yes. [laughs]

Betsy: Tell us about The Bayou.

Gary: I didn't know it that well. I went there a few times and wrote about some acts there once. It was what you might call a rock-and-roll cathedral of sorts, loud and funky. Given the '80s, the kind of music there was more punkish.

In fact, I interviewed with some British group, members of which were very popular at the time called The Cure. They wore hairpin in the nose, that kind of stuff, [laughs] the tattoos and all that, but they were very popular.

Gary: I asked one of them, they were very Liverpool British types, kind of hardcore, I said, "What do you think of American music? Are you influenced by anybody?" He says, "I don't think so, you mean like The Iggles?" That's how they pronounced it, The Iggles. The Eagles. I said, "No, I meant more like Janis Joplin." "Oh, we like her." [laughs]

They were like that because they were what you call cutting edge at the time, very much so.

Betsy: The Bayou was down...

Gary: By the waterfront at K Street.

Betsy: What was the building like, what was the place like physically?

Gary: Dark. [laughs] This is very emblematic of Georgetown in the '80s. There were a lot of places like that then. I can't think of them all, Cellar Door, some of them were really hard core rock and roll places, the names escape me.

There were a couple specializing in more folkish country. You had The Blues Alley all along. Friday nights and Saturday nights, Georgetown could get pretty hairy, because audiences are kids, younger people and all kinds of stuff was going on back then.

It was interesting to me, because I like rock and roll. I'm of that generation. I worked in the Bay Area in the '60s and '70s. Those were my neighbors, those people. [laughs] The Filmore was there and all that sort of thing. I liked that.

But I saw something, too. Georgetown, no matter what you do with it, it's always going to have that aspect to it which is the university, the gentility, that high-class image. I wouldn't go along with the Post columnist who keeps wanting to use the word "elitist," about every other column when he's mad at somebody. [laughs]

That used to come up a lot but I think if you go to the side streets and the residential areas, you see a whole different world. Then you go into the commercial areas. This was true in the '80s, especially the contrast was really strong. It was lively down there.

Some of it involved, I'm pretty sure, drugs and booze and what not, but it was also musically lively, restaurant lively, all kinds of noise. It was exciting and that took some getting used to for some people. When the Redskins won the Super Bowl, were any of you around then?

Betsy: Mmhmm.

Gary: That was crazy down there. [laughs] People were climbing light poles and jumping up and down on cars. The Halloween parties, that started around that time, too.

Betsy: Is that when the Halloween hoopla started?

Gary: Yeah. To my taste, that was a little over the top, but back then I didn't complain much. [laughs]

Cathy: I remember live music in the late '60s, when Clyde's opened, when it was just the bar and the room behind.

Gary: They had music?

Cathy: On Friday nights, they had live music.

Gary: Wow, and you couldn't actually sit down and drink back then.

Cathy: You were packed in and it was so loud, I still have to this day the ringing in my ears... [laughter]

Gary: Could be.

Cathy: ...hanging out at Clyde's.

Gary: I saw something one night. Do you remember Livingston Biddle and his wife, the artist, I think her name was Gretchen or something. I interviewed him once, when he was head of the NEA, National Endowment for the Arts. He comes from a very...high class family, the Biddles of Philadelphia, but he's very mannered, down-to-earth and elegant, all at the same time.

One night, I was at one of those Halloween massive kind of things, all the streets were choked, and somehow, Livingston and his wife wandered there by accident. They saw all this total madness. They actually hugged each other and hovered against the mad crowd.

[laughter]

Gary: I (thought?), "Oh, my God, that's a classic Georgetown scene."

[laughter]

Gary: It really was. I felt sorry for them. I didn't go up and talk to them. [laughs] They might have hit me or something. No, they would never do that, but that was going on. It's calmed down quite a bit since then, [laughs] but it's the two kinds of things, the real live Georgetown but the historic one, which I really appreciate in so many ways.

Somebody always said, "When the phone rings in Georgetown at three o'clock in the morning, there's some crisis going on somewhere," because somebody's going to pick it up that's in the Administration and has to deal with it.

There was that all the time. Those people were always around and a part of the whole...We still have people living here that remember all of that -- the "Post" people Ben Bradlee (who passed away last year) and his wife, Sally Quinn, and Katherine Graham.

I've never saw such a scene when she died, the funeral and...

Betsy: Tell us about that. Was it here?

Gary: Yeah, the funeral was in the National Cathedral. Somebody said, "Somebody important must have died, Bill Gates is an usher."

[laughter]

Gary: He was, and the Clintons were...all of that. I managed to write about it in the sense that, "She still knows how to throw a party." If she asked you, they came. Bill Clinton and his wife were there, Ted Kennedy, all those kind of people.

It was very funny, but there was a wake, a private thing at her mansion back then. I really wanted to get in there, but I didn't have an invitation. I saw Ken Burns, whom I did recognize, the great documentary film guy. He was heading there.

I sidled up to him and started talking to him, and said, "What are you working on, Ken?"

[laughs] He nods to me and walked right by the gates.

Betsy: And you walked right in, you mean?

Gary: Yeah.

Betsy: What was it like? This is her house at R and 30th.

Gary: Donald was the head of the receiving line. He said the most gracious thing, because we had done a story about her a while back. I expressed my condolences to him. He says, "You did such a nice thing about Mom. I remember that story. Thank you so much." I was just standing there, him thanking me. It was very gracious.

You also get a little carried away with this. I was telling my son about it on the phone. He lived out at Las Vegas at the time. I was babbling a little like this. He says, "Dad, whoa, whoa. You know what you're doing, don't you?" I said, "What?" "You were hobnobbing."

[laughter]

Gary: It's true. It was. No question about it.

Betsy: You've got to be good at that, to be good at what you do.

Gary: Especially nowadays, too, there's more and more of that. There are things where you can get a little bit overexcited all the time, because there's something going on. Sometimes you just want to sit down and read a book [laughs] and not have to...

I was, but that was a great moment. We did a good job with it, too. It's something worth remembering and I'm glad they're in my memories.

Ken Burns was very gracious, and ended up doing something on his next project which was one of the better things he ever did, a biography of Mark Twain.

It's a smallish, not a big epic "Civil War," or "Baseball," or any of the other stuff he did. It was beautiful. It really was. I didn't know that he was working on it.

Cathy: The music was extraordinary, wasn't it?

Gary: Yeah, I agree, the world of PBS and Ken Burns. [laughs]

Betsy: Who else in Georgetown have you visited with and written about that comes to your mind?

Gary: We talked about Ev Shorey.

Betsy: Tell everyone about Ev.

Gary: I met him a lot of times. I remember when he ran CAG, as a matter of fact, and he ran it with all the grace in the world. People didn't get into...Don Shannon actually stayed quiet at one of his meetings.

[laughter]

Betsy: Don was a previous president?

Gary: Yes, among other things.

Betsy: ...and a writer for the "LA Times."

Gary: Yes, he was. I actually got along with him, but we always disagreed about...You probably may remember this. There was a bit of a cultural war going on in Georgetown at one point, on the CAG and ANC kind of level.

Betsy: Talk about that. Explain that a little bit because I know about it somewhat, but not everybody...

Gary: I'm not sure, you can correct me on any of this, but in a general way, it would seem to be about relations between residents in the business community to start with, and also the university and the students primarily.

The factions got very heated because...It reminds me a little bit of the Tea Party. [laughs] I'm sorry, it does, when you talk about Westy Bird, Don Shannon, Myrna Firestone and people like that. They got very nasty, the rhetoric got really nasty and the tactics.

Betsy: Were they the anti-business people?

Gary: Yeah, pretty much. They got a little ugly. I remember Grace Bateman, Bill Cochran and a few of the others were on the other side, much more civilized in a lot of ways. The paper, David in this case, basically supported working with the business people and the University and the more reasonable...

I believe one of the members, I'm not even going to say who it was, but they ran around. One time, we had a very negative editorial about their tactics in there. They proceeded to go into every shop and dumped the papers out that were in there. [laughs] That part's a true story.

Betsy: How interesting, because the paper had supported the people who were more pro-business, and at that time CAG was anti-business.

Gary: I wouldn't say that. There were some members of it were, and they were threatening. My memory isn't all that good on all of it, but I wouldn't say CAG was, per se, anti because there were reasonable people there.

Betsy: This was about the time that Ev came in as president?

Gary: Yeah, the tide sort of turned there. He was a gentleman, but he was also very firm, and you couldn't help but respect him. There are a lot of people like that in Georgetown. It goes further back. I don't know. You probably remember a guy named Lou Traxel. You ever heard of him?

Betsy: I haven't. Who was Lou Traxel?

Gary: He was a former journalist. He and his wife lived I don't know where exactly. Been there long time. He attended every CAG meeting. He always wore these hunting boots spurs or whatever you call them.

Betsy: Riding boots?

Gary: Yes. [laughs] Old guy. Very elegant. Again, you would think almost a character except, again, he was somebody who had a lot of authority about him. He had these two wonderful dogs. They're hunting dogs, sort of like that. He was killed in a hit and run along with one of his dogs.

Betsy: In Georgetown?

Gary: Yeah, walking the dogs one night. Somebody hit him.

Betsy: Where was it?

Gary: I can't remember the street, but it was late at night on a Saturday night I'm pretty sure. I got to know him pretty well because he was an ex-newspaper guy, too. There was that tie. If you want to think of people like that, Bill Cochran was a very formidable kind. You'll remember him. He was an architect, and he was CAG president, also.

Betsy: Talk a little bit about Bill Cochran if you will, because I didn't know him, but I moved to Georgetown probably a year before he tragically died. Suddenly.

Gary: He had an aneurism I think. I know, I went to his funeral. He was another, I think, really super, very funny, almost caustic kind of guy. He did not suffer fools gladly, and he let people know it. He was a well known architect in town. He was CAG president at some point.

He ran for council when Jack Evans actually won his first race. There were at least a dozen people in the race, but three major contender. It was Jack. Bill was a major runner there, and a guy named Jim Zais..God,

Anyway, he was the first openly gay candidate in the city for an office, also. I actually thought he was the smartest guy in the bunch.

Betsy: You mean those three people were running against each other?

Gary: Zais, that's his name. There were 15 people on the ballot.

Cathy: How do you spell it?

Gary: ZAIS. Jim Zais, yeah.

Betsy: There were 15 people running for the Ward two seat?

Gary: Roughly, yeah, because John Wilson had retired to become chairman of the Council. He was the ward two Councilman. That was another interesting guy. High drama.

Betsy: That was when Jack Evans won?

Gary: Yeah, Jack was an ANC commissioner from Dupont Circle at the time. Very brash and young.

Gary: More than that. He hadn't even been married yet, too. Jack ended up winning. It was pretty close. Bill, who's a Georgetown resident, finished third. I don't know what was wrong there. Jim Zais was second. Zais died of AIDs several years later.

I knew Bill really well. I would've voted for Bill just because he's smart and funny and cared, and he knew Georgetown.

Betsy: I am so sorry that I missed knowing him...

Gary: You would've liked him.

Betsy: ...because everybody I've talked to said that he was just the most remarkable person.

Gary: He was, indeed. His wife is still living in Georgetown. Judy Cochran.

Betsy: She's on our membership committee, as a matter of fact.

Gary: That's right.

Betsy: She's a dynamo, too.

Gary: It was so odd. Driving rain at the funeral. He's buried on a side step at Oak Hill so he's with all the good guys.

Betsy: That's nice. What was the funeral like?

Gary: Wet and rainy and stormy. It was strange. You know how these things get. In fact, that week Stuart Davidson had also died. It was back-to-back funerals on a Thursday and a Friday, as I recall it. I'm not entirely sure. It gets intense. Funerals are like Halloween parties. They're really intense. No, I'm serious about that. Halloween parties can be intense, too.

It's just too much for the people. It's hard to do.

Betsy: So fitting that he was buried at Oak Hill, right at the top of Georgetown. Must have been quite a scene.

Gary: Absolutely. They're not from Georgetown, if I'm not mistaken, but he became a real Georgetown person in the best sense of the word. In most senses of the word. Maybe not living here you sometimes appreciate all the different parts of it. Sometimes, yeah, there is elitism, but it's nothing that...Georgetown is the oldest entity around here. You've got to respect that.

It's rich in history, and all the people that do make the decisions live here a lot of times. They have in the past. I've never met some of these people. Evangeline Bruce and her husband, the ambassador. I've read about them and heard about them. I may have met them somewhere. I knew the Bruce's son, David. He passed away, too.

Getting to be part of that, for me, was a privilege. That doesn't mean you can't be critical, by any means, about things. It's got a special quality, and I believe in celebrating special qualities.

Betsy: You really have been at the center because you have continued, if I'm correct, writing for the Georgetowner for years and years, right up to and including now.

Gary: It sort of crept up on me. [laughs] We're talking about people we know and things you've written about. You wake up one day and it's not the Washington Post and all of that sort of thing. All of a sudden, I realized I know a lot of people, mostly on good terms. Not all of them.

I've written a lot of stories, gone to a lot of plays, so forth and so on. It's accumulative. Yeah, I like to think of it as some kind of legacy that's going to be around when I'm gone.

Betsy: The Georgetowner, how do you see that as it's evolved from when you first met Dave Rothman and Amy...?

Gary: You need to go back a little because Amy is what I would call classic Georgetown. I never met her. She was gone by the time I got there, Amy Stewart.

Betsy: She was the first publisher?

Gary: Yes. She was the kind of person...I hear this from David mostly and other people that

would go around to the old stores, do the accounting by pencil, that kind of stuff. What's that store? I can't think of it now. It was next to the Christ Opportunity shop. It was pretty famous.

Cathy: Little Caledonia.

Gary: Thank you. Those kind of people. That's one of a kind. That's an unfortunate thing with Georgetown now. A lot of those kind of businesses can't really afford to be here anymore. The old thrift shops, the old antique stores up on 600 block.

Betsy: All the more remarkable that The Georgetowner, as a business, has been here, thrived, and evolved.

Gary: It's remarkable, that's true. [laughs]

Betsy: Just to even think...

Gary: In different styles.

Betsy: ...we were just talking about where the offices are. Were they always...

Gary: No. You can probably pretty much cover most of Georgetown in territory, in the places that The Georgetowner has been. This is not to say that it's somehow unstable or anything like that. No, it's remarkable that we are there. David brought a whole fresh spirit to it in the sense that he's a very iconoclastic kind of guy.

He really loved Georgetown in the sense of being a part of it. He took that very much to heart. Got involved in parades and all kinds of community activities. Senior Center. We've all been involved in that. There's another Georgetown original: Virginia Allen, who used to run the Senior Center.

Betsy: Yes. We tried to interview her, but we didn't get to her in time, unfortunately. Did you know her?

Gary: Yeah, I did. I don't know. I'd never met anybody quite like her. She found a mission in life to do this. She pretty much ran it by herself. She had a lot of help in terms of the community.

Betsy: This is...

Gary: The Georgetown Senior Center.

Betsy: ... the Georgetown Senior Center that has been meeting for years? Has it always been at St. John's?

Gary: I think so, pretty much, but I couldn't be sure. I got involved with it. I wrote about it a lot and went there periodically. Now that I am a senior I could probably go there.

Betsy: [laughs] You're welcome for lunch.

Gary: Right, exactly. [laughs]

Gary: It did something. Being a senior now and I've seen my mother go through this thing in Arizona. We've all had elderly parents. One of the things that isn't there that Virginia provided is a place for them to get together and do things with each other and not be shut-ins and things like that. Activities. She would bring entertainment. Restaurants donated food and whatnot.

It became a real passion with her. It consumed her, almost, in a way. She was not a quitter. She fought all the time to get it going...

Part 2

Betsy Cooley: This is Betsy Cooley on July 29, 2014 here at the Citizens Association office and I'm again sitting down with Gary Tischler to continue his oral history interview. Where shall we begin?

Gary: We were talking at one point about some friction on the ANC and CAG among different factions of residents, university and business communities and how they seemed to always be at

odds. We didn't talk about a guy who helped alleviate that quite a bit. There's a guy named Art Schultz. He was part of the Business Association. But he went beyond that.. He was instrumental in originating the business improvement districts (BID) and getting the community residents to work with businesses. He did something similar on 14th street when he lived there. But he helped clean up that area when it was kind of very seedy area as we all know, bars and strip joints and that kind of thing. Art was one of those guys who could get people together because he had one of those personalities.

Betsy: Did he have an official role?

Gary: Yeah, in the sense of working with the City Council for the business improvement district.

Betsy: Oh, he worked for the Business Improvement District?

Gary: He helped originate the legislation. He was in the business association and then later he was on the ANC. I think he had that kind of personality that got people to work together as opposed to always fighting and just being opposed to everything that the other side...

He was very instrumental in terms of bringing that about. We have a very different atmosphere political, social or cultural among the various factions. They're not factions anymore, I don't think. Maybe small businesses as opposed to big, but I don't think so.

Betsy: Was Art a business owner himself?

Gary: I don't remember that. I got to know him, but not that well. I just liked the guy and everybody did. He died, quite shockingly. His funeral service was at Holy Trinity filled to the brim. Most of the politicians in town came.

Betsy: A real reunion and celebration?

Gary: Yeah, exactly that. It was a celebration and I think it reflected his personality. He was one of those glass half-full guys. I think the community misses him. If you would ask anybody that's involved in business, they would remember him. He died pretty young too. He was like 50 -- something like that.

Betsy: How long ago...? I've heard about him.

Gary: I'm trying to remember. It's at least 10 years I think. But I do remember somebody told afterwards [laughs] the worst kind of funny joke. It was a sick joke in some ways. He had just passed away a couple of days before, and they had a roast for Mark Plotkin, the political commentator. Tom Sherwood was sort of the host and he can be very sardonic but...

Betsy: To put it mildly.

Gary: He said a lot of people would try and go figure out a way not to come to the roast but Art went a little too far [laughs]. It was funny. I laughed too. But he was a good guy. That's basically what I want to say about him, and he should be remembered.

Betsy: What other people and personalities in Georgetown do you think have been very influential?

Gary: Well, I don't know about the influential part. I'm pretty sure that the Levy family belongs in that category. The father, Sam, and his sons Richard, Philip and David who runs a book store.

Betsy: Bridge Street Books.

Gary: David, being a movie buff...This guy started out and did The Biograph, went on to the Key Theatre. He knows so much about movies and put on these wonderful movies you would never see anywhere else.

Betsy: I remember the Biograph, it was wonderful.

Gary: It was a version, I think partnered with another guy, and I think he dropped out to start the Key and got involved in film festivals all over the world. But he's also one of the nicest, kindest guys I remember.

Gary: I like Sam but, he had that remarkable friendship with John Snyder, he couldn't...

Betsy: What's that? I don't know about that.

Gary: They were basically two businessmen who owned a lot of business commercial property and he got to be close friends. John Snyder was a guy from West Virginia, and always wore something like a cowboy hat and sometimes he would go out and pretend to be a street person... His daughter is Karen Snyder. Together they made a remarkable pair, Sam and John, and they are both gone, obviously but very original guys, unique friendship.

Betsy: So you actually remember Sam?

Gary: Yeah, I knew him.

Gary: . He had a classy men's clothing store, a really smart popular successful clothing store, men's clothing store, and I can't remember what the name of it was...

Betsy: We had an interview with Phil and Richard together, so I can't wait to read it and you will be interested in it too.

Gary: Oh yeah, I don't know if anybody remembers, and maybe we shouldn't include it, but David would get some of the best foreign movies, again things you wouldn't see, but also, I would say avant-garde and movies.

Betsy: I remember.

Gary: And the star of those movies, directed by John Waters, he is from Baltimore, one of the greatest original characters ever, who would play female roles. His name was Divine, and I interviewed him and Waters once.

When they were getting ready to do "Polyester" at the Key Theatre -- he was this nice big heavy set bald man in t-shirts -- he is the sweetest guy, and then he showed up at an opening like a Mae West type, and they would then put on a Hollywood sale opening with spotlights and everything. And she came up like... that kind of... just sparkling and it was wonderful, it was a lot of fun.

Betsy: That fun, was that right here at the Key?

Gary: Yeah, and they also had that innovative thing, those midnight show and screenings.

David loved movies and he knew more than anybody about them I think. A good guy.

But that's part of what... there was an ambiance here. It's not... a little raffish, obviously in the sense that it wasn't this old fashioned village when you have something like that going on, you know an opening like that or a midnight screening, so there would be all these people lining around the block, dressed like characters in the movie, it gets kind of wild. I went once, and I remember somebody just throwing confetti at my back and shooting at me with water pistols. So I said, "Well this is different."

Betsy: That was for the Rocky Horror Show.

Gary: Georgetown had a lot of shops and businesses like that that were personalized, and we don't have too much of that anymore, like I said Georgetown Tobacco is a good example; there is not a shop like that in the city. The book stores that were here once are here no longer. Francis Scott Key Bookshop. The Second Story Used Bookshop was here, but they still have Bryn Mawr. That's still here.

Betsy: The Lantern.

Gary: Yeah, the Lantern. I've followed that store across six different locations in Georgetown [chuckles] I think. I love used bookshops and the antique shops up in 1600 block. I can't

remember the name of the woman. I got to know her sort of because I always went to get something for my partner, Carole.

Wonderful things at a reasonable price -- necklaces and things like that. I have pretty good taste. Part of it was hanging out with the owner.

Gary: ...There were a lot of shops like that. I don't know how many of them are left anymore, which is a shame too. Larry McMurtry had a used antique, rare bookshop. He was a major author of western fiction and an Oscar winner. Quite an unusual man. He's actually had a book come out this year.

I went out and got it. It was about Wild Bill Hickock in his inimitable fashion. You've heard of Lonesome Dove -- I'm sure -- or The Last Picture Show, which was made into a huge movie.

Betsy: I was surprised when somebody told me that he had had a bookstore here because I knew him from his writing or the movies that had been made. Where was the bookstore?

Gary: It's on 28th Street, right by the post office. I'm sorry just not...

Betsy: ...31st Street.

Gary: That's another thing I'm bad on -- streets and numbers...it was 31st. Almost right across the street. I think there still might be some historical shop there. I'm not sure.

Betsy: Across from the post office?

Gary: Yeah. That was a unique shop.

Betsy: Did he live here? Was he a Georgetown resident? About how long was this store there and what was it called?

Gary: I don't know. I don't remember. If you ever get Dave Roffman, he'll remember this stuff better than I. He should know it even better. Also, Scotty's Liquor is still here. The Feldmans. I think the son is still running on the corner on 31st...

[crosstalk]

Betsy: ...What are they?

Gary: It's a liquor store, essentially.

Betsy: Where?

Gary: It's on the 31st M Street.

Betsy: Oh, is that the Potomac Wine Liquor? I always talk to Steve there. Is that the son?

Gary: That's the son. His father was Scotty...

[crosstalk]

Betsy: ...Tell me about that one.

Gary: His name was Scotty Feldman. We just got to know them. Steve for a time had a, I think, Latin band. He was interested in Latin music. I'm not sure exactly but he used to play at the old Au Pied de Cochon.

Betsy: Really, Steve did?

Gary: Yes, he did.

Betsy: Or Scotty?

Gary: Steve, not Scotty. You can ask him about that. I don't know if he still does any of that. I doubt it.

Betsy: ...Tell me about that. That's where Five Guys is now, right?

Gary: Yeah. Kind of a come down. [laughs] The gentleman, I think his name was Ives, the owner, had another restaurant next door, "La Fruit de la Mere". They were the two somewhat mid-quality French restaurants [chuckles], I'd say. They did have some good soups though that I really liked. The onion soup was really good there. It was reasonable.

He mixed in heavy doses of French fries and things like that. The refried vegetables -- what do you call that? They put a French name on it and it sounded really good. Actually, it was basically refried vegetables from the night before, I think. [chuckles] I am not sure about this.

I'm German and I get to make fun of French people sometimes. The French language is this wonderful thing that can make anything sound beautiful no matter what it is. Cuss words too. Cuss words are things usually I don't feel offended by. [chuckles] That word "merde." That sounds like a nice jacket. [laughs] I love French food anyway.

Betsy: I do remember that restaurant mainly because of the CIA incident.

Gary: That's right. With the drink. There's somebody who made a special drink about it that was named after something involving that spy drink.

Betsy: What was the French restaurant on M Street, Le Steak?

Gary: No. There was one famous one. That was pretty high-end.

Betsy: I remember that one for sure. I was thinking of Le Steak that just served steak and French fries.

Gary: I do sort of remember that. The restaurants were another thing. They were highly unique. Mr. Smith's is still here. That's one of the last of the piano bars before the other versions of singing along came along.

Betsy: Does it still have a piano bar?

Gary: I don't think so. I'm not sure. I haven't been in there in a long time. I remember singing in there one time. You have to have a few beers to do that, I think. [laughs] It's fun. I think I know all the Broadway show time. Somebody always say something, "Play 'If I Loved You' from Carousel." [laughs]

Betsy: And can't resist.

Gary: Now, it's Neil Diamond's "Crackling' Rose." The last time that I was in there, they were doing Neil Diamond Night. His songs were pretty easy to remember.

Betsy: They're like soundtracks in our brain.

Gary: That's it.

Betsy: I didn't know that it was a piano bar.

Gary: I don't know if it still is. Actually, I don't go out that much anymore a little later at night, but I used to. I would say that. We have some of the things at Adams Morgan. I stop at 7 o'clock there. If you ever going to have dinner, you don't want to do it at 10 o'clock at night. I stop by Peacock Café; we covered ever since they were there. When they started out in this little, small, almost one-room restaurant above Morton's I think. There was a Second Story there...

Betsy: That's where Peacock Café started?

Gary: Two brothers. Shahab and Maziar Farivar—

Betsy: Which one is the cook and which is the host?

Gary: Maziar is the chef. Shahab is the general manager. I saw them yesterday. They're one of those great immigrant success stories, to me. They're from Iran. Shahab told me once that "when we first started it was very difficult, because part of it, we have to make people think that people are coming in. So, we put our dad and had him sit by the window there." They are a class act. They don't get the kind of credit that, let's say, Cafe Milano does with the celebrity thing, but I think their food is just as good.

Betsy: You can hardly get a seat there. They certainly are popular and running full-tilt.

Gary: They've kept it going; it's been a long time now, at least 15, 20 years. It's funny, if you don't see them for a while. They were just, I think, one of those welcoming-mat kind of restaurant

owners. The restaurant scene in Georgetown, I don't know what it's like now. I don't get out much, I'm not going to say anything about it.

At one point, David Roffman had me do restaurant reviews.. He says, "We're invited to this sort of run-through of a new Vietnamese restaurant, and I want you to write a piece, restaurant critique." I said, "I don't do restaurant critique." [laughs] He said, "Fake it." [laughs] It was one of those sit down dinners. The food was good, but I couldn't tell you what was what. There were a lot of interesting people there. There were some ex-CIA guys there, and policeman, and a congressman...

Betsy: Recently?

Gary: No, it was quite a while ago. It was back in the 80s. I said, "OK, you asked for it." It sort of reminded me of that place in a Humphrey Bogart movie, so I wrote it like I was the character in it, Rick Casablanca [laughs] . That kind of thing. It kind of worked, but I would never say I'm a food critic, or a foodie even, because I just don't know what I'm talking about.

Betsy: When we were talking the last time you had mentioned, in passing, Jack Evans. Tell me more about Jack Evans.

Gary: For one thing, and it's almost part of his campaign slogan [laughs], but he's the longest serving member of the Council, and he's accomplished an enormous amount in terms of having a hand, and more than a hand, and influencing the economic landscape of the city itself. He supported the convention center. He's much more interesting, I think, than people sometimes give him credit for. He's a complicated guy, he's got vision, and I think he's aware of the kind of city he lives in, and I think he's made it better. That's not bad for a guy that comes from a small town in Pennsylvania, Nanticoke. He finally talked about it this year [laughs].

My partner comes from that same area, near Scranton. She was born in Honesdale. That's near Carbondale , and all that sort of stuff. I kind of liked going up there, but both her parents are gone. We buried her father last year.

Betsy: Back to Jack Evans, tell me a little bit more about him, why you think he's been so good.

Gary: He provides a kind of, in terms of Georgetown, a solidarity, a steadiness of representation that you can count on him, and I think he's become a Georgetowner. He may represent a huge ward with all kind of constituencies, and that's one of the interesting things about him, is that when he ran for Mayor the first time, he didn't carry Georgetown. He carried exactly one precinct, Shaw, and at that time, it was mostly black.

Ward Two is about as reflective of everything in this city that you can get. He's represented it well. Nobody's ever really been able to challenge him. I'm sure he's got some enemies here and there. Political enemies, let's put it that way. It's never seem to have affected him any time he runs for office, except for the next step up, the two Mayoral runs.

He knows how to work with people, and again, that requires a lot more vision and latitude in being able to see other people's viewpoint. He may be a Georgetowner, but he is a city person, too, a citywide person.

He's a smart guy. He's gone through a lot with losing his wife, , but he's rebounded well. We've talked a number of times in stories, but I think he can walk around this city and say, "OK, that's because of me." Not with an ego thing, but you've made a difference, and they're physical things, they're programmatic things, they're policy things.

Betsy: The stadium...

Gary: Yes. He's not alone in that, but part of that...

Betsy: The Verizon Center.

Gary: ...Is working with other people.

Betsy: I think the whole transformation of 14th Street.

Gary: Yes, that's Ward Two, in Dupont. Actually, Dupont is sort of resistant. I still like [inaudible 26:02] running around Connecticut Avenue in Dupont, and it still looks like, not in a bad way, it's just a mixture of not the kind of thing you see downtown now. Diverse shops, some of them have kind of been there forever, and others are new and trendy, you name it, they've got it there. It's interesting. I think that hasn't hit that 14th Street area, where 14th and P, and Q, that area has just been transformative, and I don't know exactly how that happened [laughs] , but it did. It was one of the first areas that happened to.

I like to give a little bit of that credit to the Studio Theatre and Joy Zinoman because she went there first, and that's a big place. She bought that with the help of I think Jaylee Mead, who was a real giver in terms of the cultural community. That place they bought was a used car thing, I forgot who ran it. The Whole Foods thing came afterwards, and the two things combined caused the explosion there, I think.

Betsy: Absolutely. This has been fascinating, hearing your recollections of people and places in Georgetown. Anything else you want to touch on?

Gary: A couple things, if I may. It's been a privilege to be able to do that, for me, not just to be a part of Georgetown, but to be a part of that paper, and to do what I do. I really enjoy it, and so in that sense of the word, I'm not rich or something like that, but in that sense, I'm a happy guy that gets to do what he likes to do. I don't mean that in a sentimental way at all. It's one of those things you get to have a room at the table, and it's a big table. It's a banquet, as far as I'm concerned.

The other thing, I wouldn't be able to do this without my partner -- I do want to mention her, that's Carole Muller, who enabled me, literally in many ways, but really encourages me. She is a school teacher, which I think is one of the worst jobs in the world to have in some ways [laughs] . It's challenging, and it takes everything you have to do it. They never get enough credit, and I think she never gets enough credit, either.

Betsy: Where does she teach?

Gary: She teaches in Montgomery County. She teaches ESL, English as a Second Language, in Silver Spring International middle school. It's a tough job.

Betsy: Terrific. Thank you, Gary.

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