



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Ernest Antignani

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

NEWTON: There's a long leader on this tape—I think we can start now. OK, it's October 29, 2004. This is Jennifer Newton. I'm here to talk with Ernest Antignani, a long-time neighbor of mine and a longer-time observer of Capitol Hill. We're at Ernie's former office, now home, at 18 Seventh Street NE. We want to talk a little bit about the Capitol Hill real estate business over the years, but first I want to set the context of the discussion. So, Ernie, were you born here in Washington?

ANTIGNANI: No, I was born in Fairfield, Connecticut—well, actually, the Bridgeport, Connecticut, hospital. But I was a resident of Fairfield.

NEWTON: And did you grow up there?

ANTIGNANI: Grew up in Fairfield. The agenda there was I went to Fairfield Prep, which was a Catholic preparatory school close to our home, and then went to Notre Dame University for a couple of years...

NEWTON: In Indiana?

ANTIGNANI: Indiana. Went into the service, went back to Notre Dame, took a degree in English, and then came to Washington in the mid '50s, I guess—I can't remember, I'm not good with years. Went to Georgetown, went to Foreign Service school for two years. And that was when Father Walsh was still alive, and he founded the Foreign Service school at Georgetown. So at that point in time, if you had a degree from another school, you could go two years to the Foreign Service school and get a degree. So I have a B.S. in foreign service, which I never used. To give you more background, my father was rather well-situated in Republican politics in Connecticut. He was like an Italian—well, I hate the word “ward boss,” but he was a factor. He had his office in the Italian community around St. Raphael's Church in Bridgeport. Because he was probably the most literate Italian in the area, we knew Governor Baldwin, I think he came to the house a few times, and John Lodge and Clare Luce also came. So my father—just politically, we weren't socially with them, but I knew them. And the long and short of that is that John Lodge, when he was Congressman or Senator or whatever he was, held a post for me in the Foreign Service open—that was the way politics were played, hand in glove. My father had hoped that I would go into the Foreign Service, and Lodge kept this post open, for me to be some kind of secretary in some embassy, and I didn't bother. I went into the antique and decorating business in Georgetown with a friend of my mother's who was one of the premier decorators here in Washington, named Madeline McCandless. And things just evolved. And the reason I got into real estate, if you want to know the truth—Lily Wilbourne was in Beau Bogan's office. Beau had an office, first on Ninth Street and then he had a place on the corner of Ninth and Penn[sylvania], that building that's now something to do with abortion rights or something. But that's where we had our office. I did curtains and slipcovers and things

for Lily Wilbourne. She had a lovely house on E Street on the alley there, between Sixth and Seventh, and she said, “Ernie, why don’t you come into real estate?” That was furthest from my mind because at that point in time, you didn’t know that such a thing as “Capitol Hill” existed. Everything was Northwest, Georgetown, Chevy Chase, American University, Kalorama... I knew all those parts, because I’d done a lot of it. So I came and did work for her, and she said, “Why don’t you come into real estate?” I talked to Beau and he said, “Try to do it part-time if you like.” And so I went easy, it was part-time, and I made a few sales, and then I gradually—I stayed with Beau maybe a year or two, and then... I’ve always worked for myself, I’ve never worked for other people, so I decided to open my own office.

NEWTON: And this was when, roughly, mid ‘50s, you think?

ANTIGNANI: Oh, I think later than that, it was probably... must have been in the ‘60s, honey, time tricks me. I happen to be 80 years old, which is dreadful. I date back—I get mixed up on time. But I would somehow get into the early ‘70s, maybe earlier. I opened this office with Bruce Leslie. We had two agents at that point in time. We opened at 303 Mass[achusetts] Avenue, and then we knew George Antone who owned this building, and he wanted to sell and move further down on Pennsylvania Avenue. I said to Bruce, “If he’s going to sell the building, I want it.” And I never got into it, but we paid him \$165,000 for the building.

NEWTON: This is the building here, at 18 Seventh Street....

ANTIGNANI: Right, and I sold the building at 303 Massachusetts for the same price. We had three times the space here, and the apartment upstairs. I mean, there’s no comparison. The other building was two-room deep, three-story, very tight, little office-- next to what is now the White Tiger. Nice location but no parking. This was a lot more convenient.

NEWTON: We could probably date this by knowing whether it was before or after the ‘68 riots?

ANTIGNANI: OK, during the ‘68 riots, I was still living in Georgetown, because I had bought my building in Georgetown on M Street. I had a decorating—a little like the Two Lions, a decorating and specialty, whatever you want to call it. The thing about the riots—houses were then selling for \$10-12,000, and I remember I had sold a house to somebody on 11th Street above C Street SE. And I had to come from Georgetown to have the contract signed. So I was on the streetcar or bus, or whatever it was at that point, and they stopped because of the riots. So I had to walk all the way up the Hill from downtown, wherever the bus stopped. I missed all that mess, to get a contract signed for \$15,000, which today we wouldn’t even bother with.

NEWTON: It’d just be a renovation project!

ANTIGNANI: But that's what [Phone rings] Excuse me—

NEWTON: I'll pause the tape here. [Tape pauses]

ANTIGNANI: So anyway, that was a time when you could buy a house—in fact, there was a lovely black family who owned the Whitelaw Hotel, a prominent black family, I've forgotten their name—that's one of my problems, remembering names...

NEWTON: Where was the Whitelaw Hotel?

ANTIGNANI: Whitelaw was *the* black hotel before I came to Washington. In fact, it was where all the well-to-do, upper-class blacks had their social functions.

NEWTON: It was downtown?

ANTIGNANI: Downtown, at 12th or something. It was in disrepair about that time. They had about eight or nine houses in Northeast between Second and Fifth Streets, in that area, and I got to know them. We were selling houses, unrestored, in whatever condition, for \$10-12,000, up to \$15,000. People would put \$15-20,000 into them, we'd sell them for \$50,000 restored. The same house today that would be selling for—it is incredible, how... Even though I do a little real estate now, with Prudential Real Estate, I'm still amazed at our prices today. Even ten years ago, if you had said we're going to have million-dollar houses on the Hill, I would have said you're insane.

NEWTON: Right.

ANTIGNANI: Right at any given point, there's always four or five houses between \$1.1 and \$1.3 [million]. In fact, the house next door, she has on the market for \$2.2 million.

NEWTON: That's a brand new house.

ANTIGNANI: One of the new ones, yes.

NEWTON: We got on the riots because we were trying to date when you moved to this office....

ANTIGNANI: The riot was '68, yes...

NEWTON: Was the Safeway store next door then?

ANTIGNANI: No, the Safeway was closed. I can vaguely remember the Safeway store when I was commuting, but when we moved here and took this over, it was a bit after '68. That had to be into the '70s. Lee—what's his name—had his photography studio next door. He bought it from Safeway for \$25,000 or whatever it was. And he was there for a good 15 years because he was our neighbor that long.

You were here then. And then I sold that building to a gentleman I'd sold a house to over here, the one here with a swimming pool, what was his name...

NEWTON: And they developed these two new houses...

ANTIGNANI: So, that puts a date on that. That I do remember—I was coming over on the bus for a lousy \$15,000 [Laughter]

NEWTON: It bought a lot more then.

ANTIGNANI: It did. And I was determined—if you start something, you have to complete it. I wasn't going to not come up because there was rioting in the streets. You weren't here then—

NEWTON: No.

ANTIGNANI: And it was interesting, on the Hill, they rioted a little bit on Eighth Street—they did ruin H Street NE, which was all small shopkeepers, and that was to their own detriment because that was where they did their shopping. But that's another whole social discussion. They broke into a few shops on Eighth Street, the commercial shops, and it was like you were in a quasi-dream. You were watching, the police were doing nothing, and these vandals were breaking into the shops and taking things out. A police car would patrol around but they didn't stop and do anything. In fact, we had no law in Washington for 24 hours. They had the federal government buildings surrounded with federal troops and tanks, but the rest of the city, certainly Capitol Hill, there was no one... It could have been much worse. These people were going to march into Georgetown, but they were stopped at K Street, at Virginia Avenue, there. So Georgetown was spared. We didn't have much damage, but...

NEWTON: There were shops along Eighth Street then?

ANTIGNANI: Yes, they were broken into.

NEWTON: Were they mostly corner-store type of things or—?

ANTIGNANI: No, cheap little shoe and clothing stores, whatever, that kind of thing. Maybe a gun shop. Shoe stores I remember, clothing, not expensive clothing. We had no smart shops at all on Eighth Street.

NEWTON: So, using the '68 riots as our benchmark—you were already buying and selling houses in the neighborhood—

ANTIGNANI: But I wasn't living here, yeah.

NEWTON: —and renovating them sometimes?

ANTIGNANI: Sometimes, yes. We had our own office, sometimes we'd renovate for others. We had a small construction crew.

NEWTON: Who was living here then?

ANTIGNANI: You mean in this building?

NEWTON: No, I'm thinking in the neighborhood as a whole.

ANTIGNANI: Oh, it was a great mix—of whites and poorer blacks. I think one of the problems with the Hill was that we never had middle-strata blacks, socially or economically. It was always the whites moving in, and the poorer blacks... In fact, one house across the street—I remember showing it when I was still in Beau Bogan's office—there was a family of about ten or 12... The houses we went into and were showing were deplorable living conditions, it was not very pleasant.

NEWTON: You were showing the houses, and the owners were—

ANTIGNANI: They were mostly absentee landlords.

NEWTON: And you were showing them to be resold and fixed up?

ANTIGNANI: And that of course is how the thing works. When people say, "mixed housing", it's lovely if you can have it, but you have to do it on the same socio-economic level. It's a mistake to put a certain level in with more affluent—I don't care, black or white—it just doesn't work. They tried that in Southwest when they first built one of those big buildings, and they put it in a slum neighborhood and the apartments were broken into consistently. Then they had to put up a big fence. That was when the first projects in Southwest... I think we're finally realizing that it isn't color, it's a matter of socio-economic level. Common sense will dictate that.

NEWTON: So who were buying these houses then? I'm trying to think of income level—were they government employees, or—?

ANTIGNANI: Government people, yes. Lots of people who couldn't afford Georgetown were being steered over here. At that point in time, Millicent Chatel had an office on Pennsylvania Avenue where Formant bought out the rental business... (In fact, she asked me to go ahead and take over her business, not Millicent herself but the manager, who was a lovely person. Gosh, what was her name? Anyway, she wanted us to take it over, and Bruce wasn't interested, I would have had to see what was going to happen.) Anyway, she did a lot of carryover business from Georgetown because they had an office in Georgetown on N Street and sent their people over here. It was people of moderate incomes, whites mostly. I think it's an interesting study that blacks who were on that level would move away. They

couldn't see living on the Hill because it was too close to their immediate background. It's not a negative statement, mostly just conversation. They were middle-income white people, mostly couples. And the interesting thing back then—when I first started financing houses, they would not include a wife's income at all, and then after four or five years of my selling, they would include half of a wife's income. Because the concept was that a woman could be pregnant or whatever and her income— So, financing was relatively easy, but there were those obstacles. A woman could be making as much or more than her husband, but her income wouldn't be included.

NEWTON: Because it wasn't perceived that she would have a whole career—

ANTIGNANI: That's right. It's interesting how much has changed... Even getting mortgages—that building, the pseudo-colonial building, the big one, in the 600 block of Pennsylvania Avenue where the food carryout is—there was a building-and-loan association there... Then, there were three or four small building-and-loans, and you could go in and know in a day or two where you stood, you knew the president and the managers, it was always a personal, lovely thing.... They owned that whole building, they were just lovely people, and that's where we got all our mortgages then.

NEWTON: You didn't do any financing yourself?

ANTIGNANI: No, we never were that big. It was a small community. We didn't have multiple listings and all these systems that we have today. Each office was independent. But we got along well, and in some ways it was easier than it is now, because it's become so competitive. The prices are greater, the income—

NEWTON: The percentages are larger—

ANTIGNANI: And a good many more people are in it. I don't want to get into that, because I could name names. There are people in the business who are just—what do you call it, not vampires, but just avaricious... But anyway, they make lots of money and that's fine.

NEWTON: When you mentioned Beau Bogan, I was recalling some of the names on signs when I first moved to the neighborhood in the late '70s—

ANTIGNANI: Millicent Chatel, Rhea Radin, Barbara Held.

NEWTON: Helen Carey?

ANTIGNANI: Helen Carey, yes.

NEWTON: You were all kind of pioneers...

ANTIGNANI: Well, Barbara Held was one of the pioneers...Rhea Radin pioneered Foggy Bottom years ago. There were just tiny little shacks in Foggy Bottom, and she did a lot of premier selling there and then she moved over here. But Barbara Held was one of the premier movers here, Beau Bogan also was. He had worked for Millicent Chatel in Georgetown, if I remember properly, and he moved over here. He did very well. And then there was Tom Robbins, who was a gentle man. He had an office on C Street, next to Eastern Market. I forget what his company was called. He was a gentleman in the business, and there are few of them. He closed the business many years later, and went down to Lewes, Delaware, and opened a restaurant there. At that point, Lewes was just a lovely little rural area by the water, no houses or nothing. In fact, we went down to his restaurant for dinner and we were looking at an interesting, small kind of hotel or boarding house. Maybe I should have bought it—maybe it would have made my income, my fortune. But I didn't. That's how things change. Now of course, you go down to Lewes, it's totally populated, it's almost frightening. [Dog barks]

NEWTON: We're going to stop here because someone's at the door...

ANTIGNANI: That's probably Louis... [Tape pauses]

NEWTON: We were just talking before we paused about some of the longtime names on the Hill—Beau Bogan, Millicent Chatel, Rhea Radin, Helen Carey, and what I wanted to ask—

ANTIGNANI: Tom Robbins—

NEWTON: Tom Robbins—

ANTIGNANI: They were the offices.

NEWTON: —and I wanted to ask you, how was the interaction between you? Were you competitive?

ANTIGNANI: Well, you're always competitive in this business, but it was an easy relationship and we all got along well. I think there's a lot more competition today because the commissions are so much greater and there are more people in the field. And we're computerized. Then of course, we dealt with Capitol Hill. We didn't sell Northwest and we didn't go into Maryland, we didn't go into Virginia. It was more local.

NEWTON: And most of those people, their business was strictly Capitol Hill?

ANTIGNANI: Yes, because there was a lot going on. Where Georgetown—when I went to Georgetown, it was just sort of building. In fact, I bought my building on M Street for \$19,000—you could have bought any one of a dozen buildings on M Street from 28th to Key Bridge for anywhere from \$18-23,000.

My only regret is that I did not buy two or three buildings. Then I wouldn't be doing this, sitting here today with you. [Laughter]

NEWTON: You'd be in your Italian palazzo!

ANTIGNANI: I would be! But that's how fortunes are made. You know, people were smart enough to buy one, then they bought two houses in a row, and before you know it, they had a block.

NEWTON: When did you sell the building?

ANTIGNANI: I sold it maybe ten, 15 years ago, I don't know, for a million dollars. I paid \$19,000, I sold it for a million.

NEWTON: That's a pretty good mark-up.

ANTIGNANI: And if I'd bought one or two... My father was willing to help me, because the down payment then was \$5000. He said, "If you need more money—" He was always a good man. He never questioned. I'm only sorry I didn't—well, I wasn't interested in real estate then, I was doing decorating and interiors. If I had been a little more keen, or aware, I would've bought a couple more on M Street, and that would have been...

NEWTON: Well, you were smart enough to buy one...

ANTIGNANI: One, yeah. But that was in the early '70s, I guess...

NEWTON: You were saying that a lot of these folks had started out in Georgetown or Foggy Bottom and were selling on Capitol Hill as kind of a new frontier. How did you sell Capitol Hill to a potential buyer? Was it strictly price?

ANTIGNANI: I think so. I think the great attraction was that people could afford houses. It's just like right now, we're selling Brookland, we're selling areas above the Hill, because the Hill's getting pricey. So people looking for \$100,000 houses can't find them on the Hill anymore, and they're looking at Brookland and Wood—whatever the area next to Brookland is, and King's Park. So again—it's not my old age. I never could remember names when I needed them.

NEWTON: And I'm sorry I don't know the names!

ANTIGNANI: Anyway, it's just typical—people buy and the areas go up. The area around Catholic U, where three or four years ago I could find houses for \$250,000 or even less, now they're pushing up to \$400,000, and the same with the immediate areas. Because people can't afford the Hill, young couples

particularly, we're bringing them up to other areas. Hillcrest, right off Pennsylvania Avenue at the top of the hill—

NEWTON: Across the river?

ANTIGNANI: Across the river, out Pennsylvania Avenue, not the other side. Hillcrest Heights, which was a circle of the finest houses in Hillcrest, that was very much a middle-class, white neighborhood—Bruce and I happened to have three or four black clients at that point in time, and we sold three or four houses on Hillcrest Heights, which was the peak of Hillcrest. And that was sort of the beginning of the influx of blacks into Hillcrest. Whites were beginning to move out. That was probably in the '70s again. It's interesting how these things happen. People wonder—but they just do. And now, it's an amalgam of middle-class blacks and whites, Hillcrest, which is a nice mix.

NEWTON: So, were the businesses segregated—in other words, the real estate businesses? There weren't black real estate agents and white real estate agents?

ANTIGNANI: There might have been... When I look back on it, there weren't many black agents selling because blacks were not buying, and of course there was in a sense—I don't like the word segregation because it wasn't an intentional thing, it just happened. It's like most blacks do not move onto Capitol Hill even today, because it's too reminiscent of their immediate background and that's why they think of P[rince] G[eorge's] County first (and all its ensuing problems) and elsewhere, because that to them is movement, and upward mobility. So, you know, we never thought in terms of black or white, the tenants in the houses were mostly black because they were poor tenants. I don't remember any black agents, but it was never intentional.

NEWTON: And no black-owned real estate agencies?

ANTIGNANI: No, not on the Hill.

NEWTON: The people you were selling to were intending to live in the houses, or—?

ANTIGNANI: Oh, they were looking to live in them. They were mostly homeowners. We didn't have great speculators coming onto the Hill. There were builders like Barry Linde, who did these houses built maybe 30 years ago, 25 years ago, the newer ones with the garages in the front. Because then the codes in the District consisted that if you built new houses you had to have parking. So, a lot of those things you'll find three or four in a row in a block with the built-in garages. At that point in time, we considered him a in quotes big-time contractor. Because the houses that were built then by contractors or restorers were mostly just one or two at a time. There were no big developers.

NEWTON: He pulled down things to build those?

ANTIGNANI: He did, but lots of times there were empty lots, too. Then Bill Richards and Henry Yaffe, who was Mr. Henry, got together, and they did that 600 block of C Street NE on the north side, that row. They did over houses, they didn't build new ones. But they must have done ten houses in a row. They did various houses around for speculation. There were a few people who were doing it. We did it originally, then we didn't towards the end.

NEWTON: You and Bruce?

ANTIGNANI: Yeah. But we did for people who bought, we remodeled houses. That was the general thing. It was a small movement, just like the offices. We were all small. The first one that got big was Dale Denton. When he moved onto the Hill, he started out in the 1300 block of Pennsylvania Avenue with just two or three agents, and his wife was well-situated, and a lovely person, by the way. Well, Beau was a fairly big operator. The others weren't so much. Tom Robbins had a small office, I don't know how many agents, but it was small. Rhea had—well, five or six agents was a lot at that point in time. I might be making some mistakes, but this is how I remember things. The one who went off was really Dale Denton, and of course they're still the biggest office on the Hill. But they've changed hands three times since, or whatever, and now they're part of...

NEWTON: Coldwell-Banker?

ANTIGNANI: But also, part of Pardoe? Is it? Coldwell-Banker is better known, but Pardoe bought out Coldwell-Banker, I think is what happened.

NEWTON: Is it? I can't remember the order, but I know there's been a number of signs!

ANTIGNANI: But it's ever increasing, and of course they did the biggest volume on the Hill.

NEWTON: Did you and Bruce ever do commercial real estate at all?

ANTIGNANI: Some properties downtown. Bruce was a hustler and a go-getter more than I, and he would dig up things for people.

NEWTON: So he'd have a buyer who was looking for a store, or—?

ANTIGNANI: Yeah, looking for something, and he'd go find it. But there wasn't that much commercial on the Hill, there never was. In fact, commercial property on the Hill had no more value than residential. Now, of course, that's not true, commercial property is worth more per square foot than residential.

NEWTON: How about corner stores? You hear that there were corner stores on every block—

ANTIGNANI: There were, because years ago, when the Hill was on the decline, the poor people who were living here didn't have mobility to get to... So small corner stores opened in what were homes, they lived upstairs and opened a shop. There were no restrictions, no laws. Now you couldn't do that, of course. There are grandfather clauses where if a building has been used commercially, like one of those corner stores, it can remain at the same level commercially. If it's not used for two or three years—I forget how long—it has to revert back to residential. But that's how corner stores opened—they were convenience stores for people who didn't have the advantage of mobility or access to run downtown or whatever. But conversely—it's interesting, when the Car Barn was empty for years—

NEWTON: This is on East Capitol Street—

ANTIGNANI: Out there on East Capitol. Bruce always had great imagination. He approached the big stores downtown, like Garfinkel's, Woodies, the name stores, to see if they were interested in buying or using the space. And they all—the answer was no, there isn't enough income coming out of the Hill. They did their research, and there wasn't enough income here to warrant their moving to the Hill. And, malls were opening up at that point in time, and people would go to the malls. So the Car Barn stayed vacant for a long time, until they decided to convert to residences. When they first did it, they weren't selling because they were too far out, and they had to rent them. They're nice little residences, and now, of course, they've put them back on the market for sale.

NEWTON: They are all for sale now?

ANTIGNANI: Yes. So it's interesting—I mean, it works both ways. It's nice now for the first time we're getting better stores on the Hill and slightly better restaurants. Things go where there's money. Commercial follows residential, which makes sense.

NEWTON: It's amazing to dream about how the neighborhood would have been different with a big store down there at that end.

ANTIGNANI: Yeah, to anchor... But they all came up with the same answer. And Bruce was good with square feet and all the production. Things were not that expensive at that point, relatively speaking, but none of the big stores at that point in time were interested.

NEWTON: I'm curious—did he have other big ideas that didn't pan out for some reason that might've really changed things?

ANTIGNANI: Yeah, it's hard now for—

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

NEWTON: We were talking about Bruce's big ideas.

ANTIGNANI: I wish I could tell you two or three of them, but he did, he was ahead of our time. Also we weren't structured and large enough to go after things to present them properly. The idea was there, but we didn't have the back-up. We were always a small office. And of course, I get along with people, but Bruce had trouble, he had a strong personality in his way. We had two or three good agents, but they didn't get along with him, and they left. Otherwise, we would've been a bigger office, too.

NEWTON: You would've liked to have grown?

ANTIGNANI: Of course, because you make money when you have six or eight agents. We could have done it.

NEWTON: And the name of your company was Contex Realty, right?

ANTIGNANI: Oh, well, how we started—that's interesting. That's a condensation of Contractors Executive Services.

NEWTON: Oh, for goodness sake!

ANTIGNANI: Yes, at that point, we were at the stage—[Dog barks] Sorry, my dog is getting me tangled up here. Go lay down. The Hill had lots of small contractors—an electrician, a plumber, a carpenter, and they weren't big, they were all out-of-house workers. That was one of Bruce's ideas, to get a large focal-point office where we would service one or two plumbers, one or two electricians, people who were small, just getting beyond the stage of having wives or children answering the telephone at home, and they needed more support or presence. That was the idea—this was just before '68. We had a few people interested, who said they would give us so much a month, and that was the set-up at first. And then the riots came, and everything went flat for awhile. The people who were going to come in with us said they didn't think they could afford it. But that was one of his ideas—it probably would have floated well, had we been able to... I remember they all complained their wives weren't able to answer the telephone well, they were dealing with the children and say he's not home, and the messages didn't get through, and these people wanted a little more professional look.

NEWTON: And conversely, the consumer would come to you for services, and you'd be able to direct—?

ANTIGNANI: We would be the focal point, yeah. It was a good idea.

NEWTON: Still a good idea, actually.

ANTIGNANI: Can we pause a minute here? [Tape pauses]

NEWTON: All right, we're back after our pause.

ANTIGNANI: OK, what's your next question?

NEWTON: Well, actually, I want to follow up on Contex Realty, because I never knew all those years of living across the street from that sign, that that was the genesis...

ANTIGNANI: Well, when we incorporated, that was our main purpose, to be the nerve center for various contractors. But it also included selling real estate. And that went bust, the concept of—they were all afraid, putting in a little money every month and then feeling that the city was falling—with everything happening that did. And we were sort of paralyzed for awhile after the rioting.

NEWTON: Yes, I was going to ask—it was not possible to revive the idea after the riots?

ANTIGNANI: Maybe we lost interest, I don't remember what happened.

NEWTON: What happened to the real estate market? Did it die for awhile?

ANTIGNANI: It went under for a bit, but then revived. In fact, we managed property up on 14th Street, several big apartment buildings, and that's interesting to see what happened. They just closed. The owners were willing to give the properties away. Of course, they'd already over-mortgaged.

NEWTON: This was 14th Street NW?

ANTIGNANI: 14th Street NW. We managed some of those big buildings going up the hill on 14th Street, well-constructed, handsome buildings in their day. Of course, they'd dropped to slum conditions, but they were still handsome buildings. We managed two or three for other people. People were going around with guns; one of the tenants chased Bruce around with a gun and shot at him a couple times. They had such a feeling of power and control at that time that they went wild. So we gave up management. But truly, at that point in time, if you had money and you wanted to take over one of those buildings, they were there for the asking. The owners would have transferred, for little or no money, just to get out. They were like albatrosses around anyone's neck. I can't remember the sequence, but that lasted awhile. Of course, it's only now that 14th Street is building up. That area is booming right now. But still—you're liable to get shot, or there's dope. In fact, George McDonald, who owned that lovely building at the corner of Eighth and East Capitol, who was a close friend of mine, who had the antique shop there? He owned a building up on Fairmont Street, 1300 block of Fairmont Street, which we helped him manage. At that point in

time, there were so many dope peddlers, you couldn't live there, and him trying to keep places rented—it was a recurring nightmare to keep the property rented and in order, you couldn't. And that wasn't so many years ago. But now it's booming.

NEWTON: Sort of Dupont Circle East?

ANTIGNANI: Well, they can call it what they will. I have some property up in Mount Pleasant—property all over the city's jumped. One of them has to worth \$550,000. I sold one or two up there. Property's moving everywhere, if you get back to that—it isn't just the Hill. I mean, it's nationwide.

NEWTON: Did you own any apartments on the Hill that you managed like that?

ANTIGNANI: No.

NEWTON: Or, did you manage any for anyone else?

ANTIGNANI: No, because there aren't that many apartment buildings on the Hill. No, we never managed anything of any size here on the Hill.

NEWTON: Actually, I understand that a lot of the East Capitol Street houses were rooming houses in an earlier day. Did you ever handle any buying or selling of those?

ANTIGNANI: No, they were just before—in fact, they knocked down a whole row of lovely townhouses—some of them were rooming houses. I don't remember so much; we did nothing with them.

NEWTON: And how would that fit into the general rental mix? Would people rent those for long-term, as they would an apartment just smaller, or were they short-term?

ANTIGNANI: A lot of them were short-term, and they were people who worked on the Hill and just wanted a place to call home for the months they were working on the Hill. But I don't remember, I'm a little vague on that.

NEWTON: [Dog barks; laughter] We'll hope that the transcriber can hear over the dog's noise. Actually, when you talk about Congressional staffers, it does remind me: everyone always thinks of Congress when they think of Capitol Hill. Did you ever have any members of Congress as clients, or staff people?

ANTIGNANI: Oh, lots, staff, yes. There were—are—I suppose, thousands of staff people. There are now, I think, 200-and-something members of Congress living on the Hill or having... Yes, surprisingly, this is Congressmen and Senators, it's well over 200, I think.

NEWTON: Living on the Hill? I didn't know that.

ANTIGNANI: Or maybe it's 100-some, I get mixed up. But thousands of the second- and third-echelon people—names don't mean anything to me at this point. But there were always Hill employees who lived here, sure.

NEWTON: So you did sell—

ANTIGNANI: Of course. But mostly at that point in time, there were young people moving in, married. Gay people moved in, because they're never afraid to break frontiers, as it were. And thank God it's so. For a long period of time, we had only that kind of couple coming in. Then retirees came in. And now, we're having lots of families again. We didn't initially have families. In fact, I go to St. Joseph's Church on the Hill, and for years there were no children in the parish. And now we must have 50—I kid you not—between newborn and four-, five-, six-year-olds. I mean, it's a healthy, lovely sign for the Hill that we're having families who are permanent. A lot of the couples who moved in originally, when it was still a rough area, decided because of the school situation and the living conditions—they stayed two or three years until their children were school-age and then moved away. Now, a sign of the times is that they're moving in to stay. And that is very healthy.

NEWTON: There are a lot of school options that there weren't before. Certainly, when people come to the Hill as single people, stay when they're married, stay when they have kids, and kind of move up at each track, it's good for real estate.

ANTIGNANI: But we have never had that. It's only now that I'm seeing people moving in with children, or having them and staying. That is grand. That's why better shops are following where the money is. We had one or two restaurants that were good, and now there are several that are good. And that's encouraging.

NEWTON: That's true, it's nice to see.

ANTIGNANI: Although we still don't have a good men's store, or a good women's store, but that's because—I've always maintained people buy a house on the Hill and they'll pay anything for it, from \$200,000 to \$1,000,000, and then they don't furnish it, they don't do curtains, they don't do window treatments, they don't dress at all. The Hill is such an informal place to live—

NEWTON: Oh, I see what you mean.

ANTIGNANI: I've always criticized it on that score, because I like to see a little better dress and house decorating.

NEWTON: Did you continue the decorating business for many years?

ANTIGNANI: I did, I still do a little.

NEWTON: So even after you came to the Hill, you kept doing it, but didn't find the clients among the informal—

ANTIGNANI: They're not here [laughter]. It was always Northwest.

NEWTON: So you would say there's a neighborhood style—

ANTIGNANI: A lack of style—call it style if you like. I would say a lack of style. I don't like blue jeans, I don't like sloppy shoes, I don't like shirts out. Thank God the trend now is going back towards dressing up a little bit.

NEWTON: But you're saying that was also the case in people's homes.

ANTIGNANI: Yes, yes.

NEWTON: I do think of Georgetown as more antiques, more—

ANTIGNANI: And just having nice furniture. You go into some of these houses even now—I don't know. People have college degrees, are well educated... you'd think you would want something more than a futon, or whatever you call those things that people sleep on in bedrooms, and sloppy clothes all the time, and no dressing up, it's—well, I think that goes into another whole discussion about lack of morals in the country, but that's another whole thing. Morals, standards, values. If we don't recoup somewhere down the line, I think we're heading in the wrong direction. If you study history, the decline and fall of civilizations, they rot from the inside—bread and circuses and all that kind of thing, and that's where we are in this country. People don't know it, and the great liberal democrats who think that's the answer—intentions are always good, it's nice to help the masses, but then it gets to be constant, there's no end to it. You're not just helping the people who need it. Every segment of society thinks they are entitled, and I hate the word "entitlement." It used to be charity. And now it's entitlements. Well, that has nothing to do with the Hill per se—it's a universal—

NEWTON: Well, we were talking about the style being more informal.

ANTIGNANI: Well, even that is a bad sign of the times. We don't respect the law, we don't respect teachers, we don't respect our superiors, we don't respect elders, and it's all part of—it's a generally slow-moving thing, and we aren't aware of it till we hit rock-bottom, and I think that's where we're heading. I'm not a fatalist, but I think we had to regroup somewhere. Look at all these kids running

around the streets in cars, killing each other and shooting at each other—that never happened. All the illegitimate children. You look at some of these programs on television—one woman with six different kids, white or black, and there's no stigma attached to anything anymore. Young teenagers killing people, and they're juveniles so we have to—it's insane—[phone rings] I'll let that ring. So what's the next question?

NEWTON: Let me go to—you had mentioned that you had met Ruth Ann Overbeck, who obviously this oral history project is named for, when you sold her and then husband a house—

ANTIGNANI: Yes, I sold her her house on 12th Street. And the woman that owned it—I forgot who it was, but she had several houses on the Hill, she was an old spinster, a lovely old lady, and she lived on 12th Street across from Ruth Ann's house at that point in time and then she moved down to Dupont Circle, P Street just this side of Dupont Circle. Anyway, yes, I sold them the house, and they were just a struggling young couple at that point in time. She was doing lovely seamstress work, I forget what he did. I saw them occasionally, but not often; we weren't friends. I didn't cultivate them, they didn't cultivate me. I sort of lost track until they divorced and then she was very active in the Kiwanis Club. And Bruce was also.

NEWTON: Tell me about some of the Kiwanis Club activities. I take it you weren't as much as Bruce?

ANTIGNANI: I wasn't in it, no.

NEWTON: What kinds of things did they do?

ANTIGNANI: It's mostly charitable, it's like the Lions Club, Elks, or any of those things. They pick up a cause. At Christmas they rang the bells for the Salvation Army at all the stores. The Salvation Army didn't have people, so they went out and did that. Their contributions would go to the Salvation Army, their collections. In this area, they had younger black people for scholarships and that sort of thing. It was all socially oriented and charitable. And Ruth Ann was very prominent. I think she said both she and her present husband, their fathers were active in the Kiwanis at home, and Bruce's father also was. It's interesting that these people continue on. But they would have a big dinner every year, as all these organizations do. I would go sometimes to the dinner. In fact, the funny thing was, Bruce would dedicate his time not to Contex making money but to things like this, charitable things. He would go to anybody, presidents of organizations, mayors, anyone who was there to be approached, and would get results. And that's where most of his time went. The interesting thing about that was that Kiwanis made me an honorary member—

NEWTON: Congratulations!

ANTIGNANI: Because Bruce was doing their work so much instead of working for Contex. It was kind of a standing joke. Oh—one thing, an example of what Bruce did—of course there's lots of things wrong with all of us, he had his faults, but... Eastern High School had a wonderful choir—

NEWTON: Still do.

ANTIGNANI: —and they needed money to go overseas to some international meet or competition, I forget what it was. Bruce had got to know the music director, a woman who was lovely, and he said, “Why don't we do a fundraiser or something?” They were going to do a thing at the school, and Bruce got two or three people to help him, and the music director did a lot. Other people outside the school did, and then it was held downtown, at the Kennedy Center or something, it became so big, there was a lot of advertising... He was great at things like that. The interesting thing was (and I notice all these things, other people don't) when they're giving out credits the night of the performance, they didn't give Bruce any credit, they didn't give credit to the other two or three who were prime movers in collecting the money and engineering the affair. They picked out black women, I don't know who they were, probably on the boards of something, and they were given this grand—these women had done nothing, nothing. That very often happens in any group.

NEWTON: Was he disappointed?

ANTIGNANI: No. It bothered me, but it didn't bother him. But that shows you how he could do something like that. He would call on anybody, as long as it was under the mantle of a charity or a bigger cause. But for some reason, he didn't get it done for Contex. But that's just an aside. It's not like I'm criticizing—I am, a little bit. He had the intelligence and the ability....

Anyway, the larger projects we had could never work. The Lee family owned that funeral parlor there where the Senate boys' club, the Senate residence is—

NEWTON: On Stanton Park?

ANTIGNANI: Stanton Park. Lee was an old family. At that point in time—this was when we first started—they owned the whole of C Street across from them and Maryland Avenue, a whole block on Maryland Avenue that vee'd into C Street. I don't know how many houses there were, but there were many. And they gave us the sale on it, the two men. And I said, “Do you want to sign a listing?” And they said, “No, we'll shake hands.” In that day, you could do that sort of thing. Today of course you can't do a damned thing without getting a signed agreement. We shook hands. There were eight shares on the Lee estate, one being a young girl, a ward of the court. Anyway, the Lees wanted us to get one prime purchaser, and in those days, that was a great deal of money. Let's say there were 20 houses—there

probably were at least that many. We got a man downtown, an Italian fellow, who was a developer. They said, “We’re not going to sign, but you have our word.” And I took these gentlemen’s word. But they wanted one prime purchaser. Well, the gentleman who I had interested said, “Well, Ernie, that’s a lot for me to do. Do you think you can line up some of the other houses that we can resell?” And I said sure, because at that point we could sell the houses for \$45-50,000 apiece—that whole big lovely block. And they are some of the grander houses on the Hill.

NEWTON: They are, yeah.

ANTIGNANI: So I said to the people, “Don’t mention this to anybody, particularly other real estate people because it can blow up at any time. Well, two gay fellows who were in line to buy one of the houses went and told somebody at Barbara Held’s office that they were buying this wonderful house. And of course the word got out, and Barbara said, “Oh, no, that property isn’t for sale, that’s the Lees’ house.” So they found out and then it got more complicated. The ward of the court, her lawyer, got into this imbroglio of some kind and they held out, and by that time the word had spread at Barbara Held’s office apparently that these houses were up for sale. They dropped this clause where they had to have only one purchaser, and they sold to individuals. So we lost out on what then would’ve been the biggest sale on the Hill. I handled that single-handedly, as much as I did. That would’ve been a good beginning for us, that would have been grand. So, you look at several of these things, by lack of perseverance and speed, you lose out. Even today that’s true of real estate. Now, you’d get signed listings and all that. That was one of the things I didn’t have a signed listing, and I should have. But that still bothers me to this day.

NEWTON: It’s a road not taken—well, not a road not taken but the one that got away.

ANTIGNANI: There were several. In this business, we all say the same—lots of them get away.

NEWTON: There’s a certain amount of luck, I’m sure, and timing involved—

ANTIGNANI: And perseverance.

NEWTON: And perseverance, in all this.

ANTIGNANI: Next question?

NEWTON: Actually, this is partly for myself. There’s several real estate businesses around that I’ve always been curious about, and wondered if you know anything about them. There’s a little building on Eighth Street that says Zagami Real Estate on it—

ANTIGNANI: Zagami was a lovely man who did some little work on the Hill. He did buy lots of property around as investment, but then he has a son—Joe Zagami, I forgot the son’s name. They no

longer work on the Hill. In fact, the older gentleman may be dead at this point, I don't know. I haven't seen him at any of our courses that we have to take to renew the licenses and so on. Every two years we have 18 hours, or 15 hours, or whatever the hell it is, of classes.

NEWTON: And is it a reunion for—

ANTIGNANI: Well, you get to see a lot of people, yes, people you knew or haven't seen for years, and that's fun. But I have not seen him at the last couple—the older gentleman, that was Joe Zagami, real delightful nice people. And they still own the building—that was where his office was. I don't why—I'd have thought by now they'd have sold the building, but it's rented out now, not to a real estate office.

NEWTON: OK. And how about Willoughby on Massachusetts?

ANTIGNANI: Willoughby's an old-line office that specialized mostly in rentals. They never got heavy into sales, until the last few years. And they always handled some of the lesser properties—a lot of properties. And they chose to work by themselves, and they didn't cooperate too well with any of the other offices, if you wanted to sell something or do something. Bu they're nice people, but totally unto and into themselves. They have been here a long time, as long as I can remember. And they still are.

NEWTON: Were you ever in the rental business yourselves, particularly?

ANTIGNANI: Not really, no.

NEWTON: So when you would buy houses on your own, you were buying them to resell—

ANTIGNANI: The only time we could have gotten in was when Michelline Liverman was—Michelline Liverman was Millicent Chatel's manager, a lovely person. I did a lot of interior work for her in Georgetown. When they were ready to close this office [on Capitol Hill], she was the one that called me and said, "Ernie, why don't you take over our office here? We'll work out something." And I was all—I would've moved in a minute, but it didn't work out for us. And Zagami, no—

NEWTON: Liverman?

ANTIGNANI: No, the one who has it—the rental office that took it over—

NEWTON: John Formant?

ANTIGNANI: John Formant, right. John Formant came in, and they were smart enough to see a good thing. And the nice thing about that is they had several rental properties here on the Hill, lots of rental properties. And of course when people decide to sell those, naturally, they went to Formant to sell them.

So they built up a nice business on the sales that Chatel didn't have. They did mostly—some good sales, because they had better property—but it was still mostly rental stuff.

NEWTON: Did all these people in those days live on the Hill as well?

ANTIGNANI: You mean the agents?

NEWTON: Of the old offices.

ANTIGNANI: Well, Helen always lived out in Virginia. But Rhea Radin lived here, Barbara Held had that lovely house on Independence Avenue in the 600 block, a three-story grand house. Tom Robbins, I think he lived here. Beau Bogan had the grand house on E Street. Yeah, it was really small-time, insulated, isolated, insular stuff.

NEWTON: I would think it would be hard to sell here without living here.

ANTIGNANI: Well, even today, we're sort of an enclave unto ourselves. When I go across town, I think what am I doing over here. And a lot of the sales are still here.

NEWTON: And agents and things.

ANTIGNANI: Yeah, they still live here.

NEWTON: Let me shift gears just a second. I've been looking at the checkpoints the Capitol Police have set up, and I wonder if they'll be here with us ten years from now as kind of an accepted part of life on the Hill. Are you aware of other security types of issues that you can remember?

ANTIGNANI: No, not really.

NEWTON: This is new, then.

ANTIGNANI: As I said, the only time was in the '68 riots. The federal government sent troops to patrol their own property, the federal buildings...

NEWTON: And left everything else.

ANTIGNANI: And Mayor Washington did nothing in the city. [Disturbance on the tape] Oh, I'm just reaching to get a cookie. OK, what's next?

NEWTON: Do you want me to pause?

ANTIGNANI: No, it's OK. [Laughter] That's enough.

NEWTON: Are there other established features of this neighborhood that started—I feel like my tenure has been short at 25 years. The [Eastern] Market's been going since—all this time...

ANTIGNANI: I wish I could think of something, but I don't think so, no.

NEWTON: So things seem pretty stable. What would you say is the biggest single change since you arrived in the late '60s?

ANTIGNANI: I think the only real big change is in the last five years, and it's true of the country as a whole, values have escalated and we're getting a totally different crowd, a moneyed crowd. The Hill's becoming more of an affluent neighborhood. Before it was here only because of location, people lived here because of proximity to the Hill and Hill offices. Those were the people that were buying mostly, then later on young couples started coming in to buy because it was cheap. They couldn't afford Georgetown, they couldn't afford Kalorama, so they would come here. But I think that's the only big change. I just hope people dress better and look better.

NEWTON: [Laughter] It would bring up the tone of the neighborhood—

ANTIGNANI: A little bit.

NEWTON: So what's the most constant thing in the time you've been here? Is there a constant?

ANTIGNANI: I'm sure there's something I could say but nothing comes to mind.

NEWTON: OK.

ANTIGNANI: It's always been a pleasant place, a slow place, neighborly. And that's been comfortable—and still is.

NEWTON: Kind of an enclave—

ANTIGNANI: It's a nice place to live. I don't think any other area in Washington offers that. I like the houses in Mount Pleasant, they're a little more elegant, very much upper-middle-class. I love Kalorama, but I don't think there's any area in town that has the feel that we do, the community spirit and friendliness. You know, where people are community-oriented.

NEWTON: Well, I want to thank you a lot for agreeing to take part in this project. I'm really glad we had a chance to do it together.

ANTIGNANI: I'm pleased you asked me. I hope I've contributed something.

NEWTON: I hope I haven't missed a valuable line of inquiry.

ANTIGNANI: The only thing I would add is that when Mr. Henry opened his bar—Mr. Henry's, you know, at Sixth and Penn[sylvania Avenue]—he was smart about the way he did that. It had been a local hangout for the locals, and when he started doing it over, he just started incorporating the newer crowd with the older. You never knew who you were going to stumble over—or into. But that was an interesting, slow transition. He did the place up, but didn't discourage the locals—

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

TAPE 2/SIDE 1

[Gap in recorded conversation with change to new tape. Some material left from tape recorder training.]

[Clocks chiming] ...But my point is, you can't keep them to ring at the same time. That one rings close to right, but it's always slow. The trouble with older clocks is that they have to be on totally level flooring...

NEWTON: You can't get them to do what you want them to!

ANTIGNANI: No, you can't. But I like the sound of the clinking—even the ticking is restful.

NEWTON: I'm glad the transcriber will get to hear the ding-ding-ding.

ANTIGNANI: Oh, that's part of my [inaudible]

NEWTON: We were talking about Mr. Henry's, Henry Yaffe, this is, at Sixth and Pennsylvania.

ANTIGNANI: I think this was his first place, and then he opened one in Georgetown and one around Dupont Circle and I think another one way uptown someplace. And then after years, I think he sold them out. Kept the one here for awhile, but I think he's sold this one, too, now. I'm not sure. He did a bit of construction, repairing and remodeling, with Bill Richards, who died a few years back. They were partners, and did good work. He did—whatever her name was, who were you saying...?

NEWTON: Roberta Flack?

ANTIGNANI: Roberta Flack. She sang there downstairs, then she went upstairs, up there on the second floor. She was lovely, we all liked her. She wanted Henry to be her manager. He said he wasn't interested, it was too much to take on. But like a lot of us—it's the things you turn down very often are the things that could make your fortune. He was clever, nobody's fool. He's still living, he's well into his 80s, I think.

NEWTON: Were there other businesses like that, that were good at combining old-time residents and new?

ANTIGNANI: I can't think of any. I'm sure there were, but nothing comes to mind.

NEWTON: When I think of some of the older-looking eating places on the Hill, I think of Jimmy T's or the Tune Inn—

ANTIGNANI: The Tune Inn was such a greasy spoon, but we all liked it. [Dog barks] I know nothing about them [inaudible] BJ, BJ! Those are dogs going by, ones he doesn't like. He'll go after a dog that has barked at him consistently, or attacked him. He never forgets. So I have to be very careful—go lay down.

NEWTON: He's big enough that it would be hard to control him.

ANTIGNANI: They're strong—it's all in his chest. I've had lots of dogs, I like German shepherds, which are my favorite breed—but he was a rescue dog, like yours. I like whatever dog I get, but the strength in his chest is phenomenal. When I first got him, I was ill and I really couldn't handle him. Anyway, no, I can't think of other places. [Jimmy] T's is this funny little place. I used to go there a lot, but now it's so crowded on the weekends that you can't get in.

NEWTON: It always amazes me that there's a line-up to go in there.

ANTIGNANI: Well, I'm glad for them. It's another—it's not quality food, but it's become an institution. And they're nice people.

NEWTON: They are.

ANTIGNANI: She's lovely. He has a big old Rolls Royce, a lovely Rolls Royce that's in a garage.

NEWTON: And a few nice cars out back...

ANTIGNANI: He always has something. He's into cars. He's quite a character.

NEWTON: But I think it does speak to the kind of person who moves to the Hill—that they like the older atmosphere places.

ANTIGNANI: Yes. You know, you always have to—when I first was in Georgetown, when I first opened my decorating antique shop, M Street had several neighborhood bars, and they were comfortable to go into, you knew everybody. I miss that. I've gotten away from it, but I don't know of a place on the Hill that I would call—I always thought the Tune Inn was sort of a mess, a nice mess, but the food was always sort of greasy, and I couldn't feel comfortable there. Maybe it's me more than the place. But M Street used to have several bars where you'd go in and you saw the same people every night. Sort of a European feel, where you constantly go—and that's a nice feeling.

NEWTON: And were you saying that Mr. Henry's had been that for awhile?

ANTIGNANI: Yeah, when he bought it, it was—well, the ones in Georgetown had, I hate to sound—

NEWTON: Snobby?

ANTIGNANI: Yeah, but they were nice, even though they were just bars, they were nice. Like the Old Ebbitt Grill. When it was old, it was lovely. And you went in there, it wasn't the cleanest, wasn't the nicest, but it was a comfortable neighborhood place. And the ones on M Street were like that. In Mr. Henry's some of the characters were scruffy, kind of a scruffy crowd—

NEWTON: Reflective of the neighborhood, I guess...

ANTIGNANI: Of the time, yes. But still, when you first went in, you felt a little uncomfortable, but as the months went on, you noticed a slight different balance in the—because there weren't many bars, there was no place to go on the Hill. And then gradually, the Hill people took over, I guess, if you want to call them Hill people as opposed to former Neanderthals, or whatever they were. But it was a nice place, and we all went there because it was the only place to go. Of course, my favorite restaurant is the Italian one, Trattoria Alberto, on Eighth Street. The food's not the best, but I've been going there forever and I know them and I'm comfortable there. And what else? When you look at restaurants, it's not like they had any particular clientele, I mean, I can't recall any...

NEWTON: It does seem as if people often leave the Hill for eating—in the days when transportation was more difficult, or maybe people didn't go out as much—

ANTIGNANI: People didn't go out as much, residents here didn't have the money. They ate in the homes. It's such a lovely feeling now to see better restaurants, and they're packed all the time, which is nice.

NEWTON: Yeah.

ANTIGNANI: To me, that's a lovely, healthy sign that people—of course, if people are paying \$800-900,000 for a house that's worth \$400,000, you know damn well they have enough money—

NEWTON: Or they're working for two incomes and can't cook at home, is maybe what it is—

ANTIGNANI: [Laughter] It's nice, that part is nice.

NEWTON: The other thing that I had forgotten to ask you that I did want make sure to cover—where did you live on the Hill before living here in this building?

ANTIGNANI: I lived in Georgetown for a good many years, above my shop. Then when I closed the shop—there had been a food shop across the street, called the Food Mart. A young Greek fellow started out as their produce manager, George Koropolis, and he said he wanted to open a restaurant. So I rented the first floor out to him and stayed living upstairs for several years. That was why I was coming over here to get that contract for the \$15,000 [during the riots], leaving from Georgetown. And then the 30 streetcar or bus or whatever went right down 30th Street and up Pennsylvania Avenue, so you only had to take one bus. It ended up out on River Road, or someplace. So, it was an easy commute. Then, when I moved to the Hill? Oh, I lived in a friend's house—she had two houses on Fifth Street, just below Pennsylvania Avenue, and she kept them rented. She lived up on Quebec Street NW, these were just investment, but she never did anything with them. So I stayed in that for awhile, a few months, and then I bought 1250 D Street.

NEWTON: Southeast?

ANTIGNANI: Southeast. Which is a grand house. I lived there until I came here—how many years since I converted—?

NEWTON: Actually, I don't know...

ANTIGNANI: Isn't it funny how you—I don't keep track by years, I just—

NEWTON: Right.

ANTIGNANI: I've been here maybe three years?

NEWTON: That's what I would have guessed.

ANTIGNANI: So I lived at 1250 for a good many years, 20 years maybe. And I sold that to somebody in real estate. He's done an incredible job with it. It's a grand, big house, lovely rooms, but—I don't know, what's his name? Not important.

NEWTON: We've seen a lot of changes in that neighborhood, too. That's over by the Safeway, right, the Kentucky Avenue Safeway?

ANTIGNANI: I was at the corner of 13th and D, with the schoolyard across from me and the Safeway down on 14th. The 1200 block of D was fairly civilized [laughter]. The 1300 was a little less so.

NEWTON: So you were on the edge?

ANTIGNANI: I was on the edge, the cutting edge. Then they had public housing up further. Now they've done all those magnificent new townhouses—they're just being built. It takes time for things to

change, but they do. They do, because land becomes valuable. People say, “Why do you put out the poor?” I don’t think it’s ever intentional. It’s just that values keep going up, people with limited or lower incomes can’t afford to maintain—it’s just by the nature of the market. You can’t keep valuable property with low-income tenants if you’re an owner. How far does charity go? People can criticize who aren’t in that position. Like a good many liberals criticize everybody, but they themselves don’t put money out of their own pockets, they want the government to put it out. In fact, conservatives always give more out of their own pockets, and liberals, who want the government to do it, are great for handing out all these wonderful things. But when it hits home, they don’t understand it. When you own something like that, property that’s worth x amount of money, and you have someone paying \$75 a month or something, and you’ve been sitting on it, and then the market breaks—you can’t afford to keep people in at \$75 a month when your taxes have jumped up. All these things never come into account when people criticize. I mean, there are lots of slumlords, and they should be—well, that’s something else again. But for a lot of people, their livelihood is property and investment—they don’t have a cushy government job doing nothing and making \$100,000 a year. I’m serious! They’re the ones that criticize and say you have to help the poor. I ask the ones I know, “How much do you give to overseas charities, to blacks in Africa?” There’s no answer. It’s always conservatives who give out of their own pockets. And this has nothing to do with what you’re talking about—how did we get on to that?

NEWTON: We were talking about real estate values—

ANTIGNANI: OK, OK—how they go up. And you have to understand that if you own property and it increases in value, you can’t hold onto it, you sell to somebody else. If a house has gone up from \$75,000 to \$150 or \$200,000 over the years, and you’ve hardly broken even during that time with tenants who—you have to do maintenance, you have to do upkeep—it’s not easy. And you have a chance to—it’s like a long-term investment. And then the people who buy it certainly can’t afford to keep the poor people in. It’s tragic, but that’s the way the thing is.

NEWTON: As you say, taxes go up and reflect those values.

ANTIGNANI: It’s an ever-evolving thing. {To dog} Lay down.

NEWTON: Well, I think maybe we can try to wrap it up for a second time. Unless you start telling me some more good things, some good tidbit that I need to—

ANTIGNANI: I have some gossip we can talk about, but that isn’t—

NEWTON: [Laughter] So, anyway, once again, Ernie, thank you so much. We’ll have plenty to talk about now when we meet on the street!

ANTIGNANI: The pleasure is mine. I hope I've been of some help to your library of information.

NEWTON: I think it will be very useful. Thanks so much.

END OF INTERVIEW [part way through TAPE 2/SIDE 1]