



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK  
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

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**Interview with Malien Lane**

**Interview Date:** May 21, 2009  
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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Good afternoon. Today we are here with Malien Lane and we'll be talking to her about her experience at Eastern Market. Today is Thursday, May 21. And she'll now introduce herself and tell us a little bit of who she is and how she got to the market.

**LANE:** When I first came to Washington in 1978, we were living on the Hill. Then we left town and went back to foreign country and actually after the third time, we have marriage problems, so I returned to DC for the third time, living on the Hill, and become a vendor by the necessity of my two little children, where vending at the market became my regular thing. I have worked with John Harrod. When we first start out, we have only six vendors. But it is so incredible how the market become so big. Anyway it was always, it was a great experience working in the neighborhood. I live within seven blocks away from Eastern Market. Ever since the fire, it change everything. But it was a lot easier, you know how you're trying your very best, to still struggling on the sidewalk where the construction's going on, but we did our best. And of course, business has dropped. Most of the time people thought the market already burned down. They don't even think the businesses exist. But because of the, you know, television, sometimes, time to time, magazines still have a little bit telling about we are still there. But most of the time people don't know that the market is still operating.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So you think the fire, when the fire happened, the people knew that. But look how the city—what do you think about how the city quickly started to build? So how did you, you don't think by what they were showing that people thought the market would come back? You think they just saw the fire and decided, let's not go there?

**LANE:** No, I think it's because maybe perhaps we didn't really have that much advertisement. It's because they know the place has been burned down; therefore, people just think the place is burned down, it no longer exists anymore.

But sometime it's word of mouth. Their friends tell their friends, oh yes, the market is still, people are still selling, all the vendors are still around the construction site. That's what I've been through.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So your business since the fire has gone because the vendors you had coming before the fire, you don't have the same level of vendors?

**LANE:** No, we still do have vendors, but we don't have enough customers. We have quite a bit of tourists who still come and check out because in the past they know the market is still there. And in my experience, I have some of the old customers who still come back to look for Eastern Market.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Because you have been a saleswoman, when did you begin, 1970?

**LANE:** No, 1970 we left oversea and then we went back oversea and we came back again. In 1983 I came back for very brief six months. And then we left oversea again. And we came back in 1987.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So that's when you went to the Market?

**LANE:** That's how I became full time at the Market. 1987.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** And so most of that time you saw the growth?

**LANE:** Yes.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Every year. So the only time that you've seen it at its worst is since after the fire?

**LANE:** Exactly.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So the fire has impacted the business?

**LANE:** Tremendously.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** And the business is off?

**LANE:** Yes.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Is this the only business you are doing?

**LANE:** Well, when the business is bad, I usually have second jobs that line up. I have little job here and there, you know, to supplement the loss. So I mean, overall ...

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So your business has changed, or you always sold jewelry, that's been your line of business?

**LANE:** Yes.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Do you have customers all over, I'm sure?

**LANE:** Yes, but before I did refugee quilt. I was helping the people with the refugee my first few years, when I first started in 1978. And then it was getting difficult because I can't travel oversea too much. That was part of the Catholic Relief Agency when I first started out, helping the refugee. Then it was getting too difficult to travel, then I switched from quilting to jewelry. But I do participate many times on the food vending for the Friendship House, which we donate some of the money to the Friendship House.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Ok. So what are you doing right now to attract more customers?

**LANE:** Often time talking to people that a lot of times ... and you could do advertising. I really just cannot afford; I just have to rely everything on the city. I basically follow whatever the city does but, no, I didn't really ... . Some of my friends they sell on the internet. They have their own website. But since now I have other jobs, so I don't rely much on, I still do the market, but percentage has dropped so much on the jewelry. And also, there are so many people now selling jewelry, it makes it very difficult.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So the competition is rather stiff?

**LANE:** Yes.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So in the early days, when you were not so many, now you have everybody?

**LANE:** Everybody. All kinds of people now. It's just flooded with jewelry.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Do you make your own jewelry, or ... ?

**LANE:** I make beads work but I cannot do silver work. I take silver work to combine with my beads work in order to mix it, you know, that I have more clientele. I have the silver customer and the beads customer. So I make my own beads plus combine silver that I sell.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Now, Christmas and holidays, I know those are your biggest days. How was the holiday after the fire? Because the fire was April 29, 2007. So since that time, you have Christmases, so how have the holidays been?

**LANE:** Holiday, it's been the worst year because I dropped like nearly 68 to 70 percent of my sales.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Oh!

**LANE:** Yes.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So the holidays were not the holidays, with Christmas being your best time, was no longer?

**LANE:** No longer.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** ... was no good in 2007, 2008, how about 2008?

**LANE:** 2008 was bad too.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** How about 2009? We haven't gotten through that yet. Because 2008 [ed: 2009], we had inauguration. Were you out? Did you come out for inauguration? How did you do?

**LANE:** Not good. Because I think people were, because it was an historical year for Obama, people were not interested in jewelry. They were interested in collectible items for Obama. So people are buying collectible Obama for history rather than buying jewelry. Jewelry has dropped tremendously.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** And then also the weather wasn't good.

**LANE:** Yes.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Now, what do you think the second life of this market, what do you think will happen now? Based on what you've seen and what you've heard and your own insight. What do you think?

**LANE:** I think it's sort of too many, sort of out-of-hand. I think they should have more of a limited ... there's so many new people. So for me, I've been here for so long watching hundreds of new vendors coming in that I think it's finding it very difficult. It's just too many, it's overwhelmed with jewelry. I'm not trying to say that you have to ... I don't know how you are going to do it, because it sound like I am trying to tell you to have control over it. You know, you can't be taking every single body wanting to sell jewelry. In my last 20 years I never experienced anything like this. It is just so overwhelming, the new people coming in. And they should be able to say, we can only take x many jewelry in order to make it fair. All the young people coming in and slum the prices, and it makes it hard for people like me who have been here a long time. You get killed, in other words.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** I know. So you are looking at it and, of course, with customers. Do you think with a new market, I think it's supposed to be opening on the 26th of June, so what do you think? Will customers come back, or do you want the city to do more to attract customers?

**LANE:** Well, I think, before the fire, I remember it well, we did have some publicity, like hotel brochure about Eastern Market. And that helps a lot. It brings a lot of outside guests, tourists. We also have a lot of airlines who write about the Market, which I think really helps a lot. Because generally speaking, Eastern Market is an historical market and many times it is attractive to a lot of tourists who like to check out what the Market's about. So that is, it doesn't, I don't think you need to have television constantly. I think, to have in the magazine, like *Where* the magazine, just give a little information to the tourist, if you want to see the market, check out Eastern Market. And it used to be in 2006, 2005, 2000, we constantly have tourists who come to check out, and business had been pretty good overall.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So but, in your opinion, how did you see the government, were you pleased with what this city did for the vendors at the market?

**LANE:** I am because I find the city is been very fair. I thought Barry [ed: Margeson] is tremendous. He, in fact, takes time to ask everybody's opinion.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** And that was [Mayor] Fenty?

**LANE:** Yes. It come from Fenty to Barry. Barry is just our manager.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Oh, you are talking about the manager.

**LANE:** Yes, the manager, the operation's manager. Fenty tells Barry overall. And Barry, who is our manager now, he always makes people give opinions to meeting and he wants to hear what everybody has to say. And I think the city, the manager Barry did a very good job communicating with the vendors.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So you think the vendors are pleased, most of them are pleased, that they have ...?

**LANE:** Some are not pleased because it's a new rule. They don't like the rule. They want, the farmers especially don't like the new rule, because they feel that they should have their truck parked for their convenience. But in fact they shouldn't because they should be like everybody else, go park their car and leave the street empty, not have those big trucks parking and blocking all of the artists. They want it their way. Then they criticize that the city is not doing a good job. I think that's pretty unfair, and very unfortunate.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Have you all been having vendors' meetings, have the vendors been getting together to voice their opinions as a group?

**LANE:** Yes, as a group. We all have individually ... in fact, last Sunday I heard each vendor has to stand out and tell them what they have to think, what they have to say about, but for me being here 20 years, for the first time I thought I'd been treated very decently.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Ok.

**LANE:** Yes, because, I mean, the other, I mean, I don't want to mention the manager, I find they discriminate because they say, oh she's been here long time, it doesn't matter.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** And they should talk to you, you've been here a long time. That's wonderful to be able to say ...

**LANE:** Well, the people who are the assistants to the manager, wherever that is, they kind of pressing, all the young new people come in and they all kind of, you know ...

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Oh, that's who they are paying attention to, the newer vendors and not the veteran vendors.

**LANE:** No. [ed: meaning they are not paying attention to veteran vendors]

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** But these are the veterans, the ones who have sustained the market. If you hadn't been there, you wouldn't have this market.

**LANE:** Yes. *We* are the ones who build the market, with John Harrod, we are putting left and right. There is a day it's raining, we don't make any money, we collect only \$10. But the thing is now, it seems like Barry, who is the manager who is so, want to make sure that everything is going right, and he communicates. In my 20 years, I don't think communicate that very well with them, the other managers. But I mean John Harrod has been on and off, but he gets sick sometimes, he's not here. But it's not easy. But overall I thought the city doing good job. It's hard to always please everybody, make everybody happy. Of course, some of the vendors say, oh I don't like this, I don't like that.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Yes, people will always complain. So, but for yourself, for your own personal growth in the market, do you see yourself staying or do you see yourself changing?

**LANE:** Well, because of being so many years now, in the past it was all necessity, because I had small children. It was working out with my schedule with my children. But now my children are growing up now, they have their own life. I think eventually I will probably give up the market.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So what do you think, in another five years or so?

**LANE:** Well, I'm sort of still just thinking. I've said that I will do it for a few more years, and I have to think about it because it's been a long time.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** What would you like to see? What would be your dream to see this market that you all started with the vendors, the flea market, the artists. What is your dream for the future for them?

**LANE:** I think the market, if they can be a little bit more organized, you know, and I think they should be a little bit more selective, not take everybody who comes from everywhere. It should be a little bit more selective merchandise, you know, to make the market look more respectable rather than selling just trash.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So the need to look at the products, and the caring?

**LANE:** Yes, don't just have people come in for the sake of ...

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So you have more quality control?

**LANE:** Quality control.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** You need for them to set standards?

**LANE:** Yes, to set standards. So people don't come in and see all this is just trash.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Have you suggested this at your meetings?

**LANE:** Oh, yes.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** How was it met, were people responsive?

**LANE:** Well, I think right now because of the chaotic of the construction, people kind of lose sight of all that. I think once everything is put back in perspective, once everything is back to normal, we should have few vendors with the same merchandise because at this point it's just too much. They should have control, not be over-congested. Naturally everybody wants to come in and sell sell sell. You come in from all over the place. It's just so congested. but last year, but since the business, not last year but before the fire, but now because the business is down you can see ...

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** And this is, almost everybody's experiencing all this?

**LANE:** Oh, yes, everybody is experiencing it. But people who have, this is their main, the only thing that they do, they tend to come no matter what. Even when their percentage of what they sell drops, they still come anyway. You know, you make a little.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So all these years, so this market has been like a home to you. A home away from home where you've made friends and met all kinds of people.

**LANE:** Oh yes. You met a lot of wonderful customers, a lot of wonderful people like you. If I was not at the market I would not have met all these wonderful—you know, it can be people living on the Hill, or tourists, or a friend of a friend of a friend across town. And I met numbers of great people that I truly ...

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** If you had to describe the market, how would you, if somebody met you and said, Malien, what is that market that you work; how would you describe this market?

**LANE:** That Market is to me such a magical place. I am very religious, you know. Sometimes I say, oh, it's everything as God planned.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** (laughter)

**LANE:** And my daughter laughed, my son laughed at me, she say, "Oh, Mother, it's everything in God's plan." And I say, you know, I'm not worried. God has everything planned out for me. I'm going to be living on the Hill. I'm going to be working on the Hill. I'm going to walk to work, five minutes to work. I'm not going anywhere else except Capitol Hill. In fact, I've got invitations to go exhibit in other places. I say, no, I'm just doing the Hill. I'm a Hillbilly. So I'm going to be on the Hill. No, it's just a magical place and I truly ... People still can't understand why I'm still on the Hill, even though there was so many bad experiences that happened. I've been carjacked, I've been held up, I've been mugged, and people are still astonished that I'm still here. And I say, "Did you know, God protected all these bad things that happened to me?" If you have a great belief that bad things happen, then you are going to come out of it ok. That's just always in my ...

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** And you did!

**LANE:** Yes, yes. So I've been here for the last 20 some years. Can you imagine? If Capitol Hill is not a special place for me, I would have moved a long time ago. The guy who held a gun on my head, I would have said, Oh, never ever again. No, I still here. It tells you how deeply I am for Capitol Hill.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Committed.

**LANE:** Yes.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So now for this opening, are you planning to bring some new stuff, what are your plans?

**LANE:** Well, the thing is that I keep planning that I would like to step aside, but my son just graduated from college and this is a bad year for appointments, so I don't know if he wants to carry on. I'm still waiting to see. It has to come from his heart. That if he wants to do this ...

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Oh, you want your son to take over running the business?

**LANE:** Yes.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Until he can get a job?

**LANE:** Yes.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Or you want him to take this as his job?

**LANE:** Not as his job. It would be an experience for him to see how small business and vending is like.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Have you spoken to him about this?

**LANE:** I mentioned it at his graduation. He didn't really know what he wanted yet. (Laughter). He look at me like, "Right, Mother". (Laughter) So we shall see. That would be my dream of new thing for my son, but he doesn't know it either right now. I think he knew it's a tough time for job market.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** This is great. I know you have to run. So Malien, we are really really happy you can take the time. Like I told you, you've always been one of my favorite people and I'm just so grateful that I've met you and known you. And you are one of those pillars of the market, yet you tell me when you and John Harrod started way back, and look what it's grown into today. That must make you so proud that you had something to do with it in the beginning.

**LANE:** Yes, but you know often time you wonder, because when it was tough times, I remember in the early times John having a hard time paying even the electric bills, it was that rough. But anyway we struggling from the beginning but now we see the market has grown so big, and I am so happy to be part of the market from the beginning and see what it is today.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** You miss him not being there?

**LANE:** I do miss him a lot. But I know John, his health has been not ...

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Yes, challenged.

**LANE:** It's been a challenge for him. We all have, we're all getting to the age where we have hurts here and hurts there, and you know the age when we've been through so much together in the market.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** So it is a magical place.

**LANE:** Yes.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Malien, I want to thank you very much for your input.

**LANE:** I'm delighted. Also knowing you. Hi, even on the street for five minutes. We all have ... busy.

**OYE' YAA-ANNA:** Ok, thank you. That was Malien Lane, and she was telling us of her experience all these 20 plus years in the market. So thank you so much for contributing this wonderful story to our exhibit.

END OF INTERVIEW