



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK  
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

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**Interview with Margaret Missiaen**

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**Interviewer:** Stephanie Deutsch  
**Transcriber:** Colleen Cruikshank

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

**DEUTSCH:** This is Stephanie Deutsch. I'm with Margaret Missiaen in my house on Capitol Hill and it is January 19, 2010. And Margaret, I thought maybe we could start off with you telling me where you grew up.

**MISSIAEN:** I was born in southeastern Indiana. People often say, well what town exactly? There are, you know, no large towns in southeastern Indiana. The only distinction the area had—it was Jennings County—was that it was equidistant from Louisville, Kentucky, Cincinnati, Ohio and Indianapolis.

**DEUTSCH:** What was the name of the county?

**MISSIAEN:** The county is Jennings County, Indiana. The town is North Vernon. Well I was born in Indianapolis. I just read through all the letters that my parents wrote to each other just before and after my birth. My father was drafted shortly before I was born and it was really an enlightening experience to read through all those letters that my parents wrote to each other. Anyway, I had 600 letters and I donated them all to the Library of Congress, but I was born in Indianapolis and grew up my whole life in the same house in North Vernon, Indiana, and went to school there and then went to Indiana University.

**DEUTSCH:** And, so what did your parents do? Your mother, I think, was a teacher.

**MISSIAEN:** My mother was a first grade teacher. She started teaching in the 1920s. She was older when I was born. She started teaching in the 1920s, taught for several years and then stopped teaching when I was born and my sister was born but then she went back to teaching. She had a total of 35 years in the public schools in Jennings County. My father—we lived on a small farm—my father had grown up as a farmer. He could not imagine not having a little bit of land, so we had a small farm where we had a few cows and raised a few crops but there was no money to be made in that and he worked at a gas station in town for many years. Then in 1960 in the Kennedy Sweep he was elected county recorder. He'd always been a very strong Democrat in a largely Republican state, county, whatever.

**DEUTSCH:** It was called county recorder?

**MISSIAEN:** County, yes. He was the county recorder, recorder of deeds. So he kept that and he was elected there in 1960, the year I graduated from high school and it was, I think, a transformative experience for him. He was not well-educated, he'd never done anything with books or numbers or anything except manual labor and he got in there and he found he had a gift for organizing. It was an elected position, there was no requirement that you be able to keep books or records and he was so good at it. He hired a competent person, too. He was allowed to hire one person in his office and he hired a

competent person, usually, the wife of the recorder was the one staff person in the office which, we knew it didn't make them necessarily incompetent but it didn't always turn out to be a particularly successful match and so he hired a particularly competent person and he held that office for eight years, I think. He was re-elected and then he was elected county treasurer which was even more important that he kept track of the county funds. Those were wonderful experiences for him and I'm very glad he had that experience at the end of his life.

**DEUTSCH:** And this isn't really relevant to our interview but you donated the letters to the Library of Congress?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes! I had these 600—they wrote letters over a period of 15 months. My father was drafted and in the Army. He was drafted when he was 36, he was way in the upper end of the draftees and from the time he was drafted—my mother just learned she was pregnant after many years of not becoming pregnant so, from the very beginning, he was trying to get out of the Army. So for 15 months they exchanged almost daily letters and I had both sides. He'd saved all of my mother's letters and my mother had saved all of his letters and I did not read them until about two years ago. Well, when my mother passed away, my father said she saved those letters. He didn't say anything about he had saved the letters, but he said she saved all those letters, "I want them burned. I can't find them."

**DEUTSCH:** He said he wanted them burned?

**MISSIAEN:** They were very emotion—passionate. Hard to imagine one's parents being passionate.

**DEUTSCH:** Especially at the advanced age of 35.

**MISSIAEN:** Especially my parents being passionate! It was just—and so I found them but I brought them back to my house. My mother died in 1985 and I didn't read them until Thanksgiving two years ago. My sister was here and I knew I had them and I said let's read the letters.

**DEUTSCH:** Did you ever consider burning them?

**MISSIAEN:** No. Well, I might have considered burning them at the time he said to burn them, if I'd read them at that time I might have considered burning them because, you know, it was obvious to me why he didn't want anyone else to read them. It was a side of him that I—

**DEUTSCH:** Because of the passion?

**MISSIAEN:** Because of the emotion that he expressed and also he wasn't well-schooled so it was full of grammatical errors and misspellings and lots of things like that but then when I read them so much later I

had so much better idea of the value or that they had increased in value over time. So then the question was how do you preserve them? And people said you scan them and digitize them. Well, I had 800 letters [pages] what can I do?

**DEUTSCH:** That's a lot of scanning.

**MISSIAEN:** You can't just Xerox. So someone said try the Veteran's Project at the Library of Congress and I did and they took them.

**DEUTSCH:** Oh that's wonderful. That's great. So you were in college—you went to college in Indiana?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes, I have an AB degree in political science. During my college years, Kennedy was assassinated. Peace Corps started and then Kennedy was assassinated and I joined—

**DEUTSCH:** Where did you go to college?

**MISSIAEN:** Indiana University.

**DEUTSCH:** Indiana.

**MISSIAEN:** In Bloomington, Indiana.

**DEUTSCH:** Kennedy was assassinated.

**MISSIAEN:** Well, the Peace Corps started first so I had the Peace Corps sort of, I really wanted to get out of North Vernon, Indiana, or wanted to get out of Indiana. In the fifth grade I signed up for a program to go spend a school year in England and my mother was horrified. She said what? You're ten years old, you can't go off to England.

**DEUTSCH:** So you didn't go?

**MISSIAEN:** I don't know how far the process went but I remember discussing that this was a great idea for me to go and live in England when I—you know, we didn't know anybody in England—but I was just ten years old. So the Peace Corps appealed to me and then Kennedy was assassinated and that was my senior year.

**DEUTSCH:** Mm hmm. Memorable.

**MISSIAEN:** That's when I filled out the application for the Peace Corps. Shortly, within months, if not weeks after he was assassinated I was accepted and went to West Africa, to Senegal.

**DEUTSCH:** Had you ever been out of the country before?

**MISSIAEN:** I think we went to Niagara Falls once. [laughs] My mother thought it was much more adventuresome. In theory, she had the two daughters and she didn't want her daughters to be limited as she had been limited. My mother went to Berkeley for summer school in 1934!

**DEUTSCH:** Wow.

**MISSIAEN:** The year before she was married. What? You drove across country during the Depression to go to school in Berkeley?

**DEUTSCH:** What did she study?

**MISSIAEN:** She was in education so I think a lot of it was literature and I think one was public speaking and, you know, theater. A wide range of classes that she took that summer.

**DEUTSCH:** So you're 21 and you're in West Africa?

**MISSIAEN:** Senegal, yes.

**DEUTSCH:** And how was that?

**MISSIAEN:** Well, that was certainly an eye-opening experience. You know, I think I felt from very early on that I was getting much more out of the experience than the Senegalese were, and I think that's rather typical for Peace Corps volunteers and certainly we've seen the benefits of that as the former Peace Corps volunteers have taken leadership roles in the U.S. government and economy and whatever. I didn't find it particularly difficult. Nothing was the same, I was way out in the Sahara Desert. There was no road to the places that we went but, you know, it didn't seem to faze me. The real problem was language. I had taken, I had studied French a lot but not very many of the Senegalese I dealt with spoke French and they had a very French attitude toward my somewhat imperfect language skills.

**DEUTSCH:** I know what you're talking about.

**MISSIAEN:** So the language most widely-spoken in Senegal is Wolof.

**DEUTSCH:** How do you spell that?

**MISSIAEN:** W-O-L-O-F in English. The French, of course, spell it with an O-U. People were just delighted. They had a Wolof class during Peace Corps training at Southern Illinois University and the woman who taught the class was British and her mother had married a man—her mother apparently had been divorced—and had married a man from the Gambia. So her stepfather was Gambian. So she had gone to live in Gambia, which is that little English-speaking country in the middle of Senegal. So she'd

gone off to Gambia and at that time was a student in the U.S. I don't know how the Peace Corps found her but they brought her in to teach Wolof. So I had had some introduction to Wolof at the time so any Wolof word I knew, people just thought that was wonderful that I could speak some few words of Wolof.

**DEUTSCH:** So what were you doing with your few words of Wolof?

**MISSIAEN:** I was sent as a social worker. The request from the Senegal government was for social workers, rather than English language teachers. Earlier, most Peace Corps volunteers were teachers but I was a social worker. But no one in the Peace Corps found out that French social workers are registered nurses with a master's degree in social work. So here we are at Southern Illinois and they're trying to teach us how to be social workers. Nobody has a clue as to what social work is like in Senegal. They would send us out to the welfare office, to the welfare clients in southern Illinois so we were dealing with women and aid-to-dependent children. Well, there was no social program—

**DEUTSCH:** There was no equivalent in Senegal.

**MISSIAEN:** Absolutely not. When we arrived they assumed that we were nurses and we were put in the *sage femme* house, which is the mid-wife—

DEUTCH: *Sage femme* means what?

**MISSIAEN:** Means the wise woman's house. So there were two of us there and we were put in the wise woman's house and we were expected to deliver babies. Well we very clearly pointed out that this was not, that we could not possibly do that. Even a well-trained person under those circumstances would have had a [hard] time. So we worked in the—there was a mother and child clinic—and we worked in that. It was a medical clinic and sick children came in every day and we had no clue what we were doing. There were Senegalese nurses and they knew and they were very—they were so tolerant—they taught us how to do things. They were trying to teach me how to give injections and I said I can't do that. But they would teach us how to give medications so I learned very [early] on, how to say *ben chi gong* [ed: Wolof for “[take] one in the morning”]. I can't remember but you take one in the morning, you take one at noon and you take one in the evening so we were handing out these tablets to the mothers as the children came in and then we eventually started what we called a social center where the women could come and the original plan was to teach them French, to read and write. Wolof is not a written language and, at least at that time, very few of the girls went to school. But my partner and I knew enough French that we could teach them some words in French but they had never held a pencil. So here we are with mature women, adult women, trying to teach them French and they can't hold a pencil. So we gave that up pretty quickly and started teaching sewing. That was the one thing they really wanted.

**DEUTSCH:** Did you know how to sew?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes. Both my partner and I were good. We knew a lot about sewing except that we had no sewing machine, which was a bit of a problem. All the sewing they did very elaborate robes with all kinds of fancy embroidery, machine done embroidery but beautiful, beautiful robes and the tailors were paid very well. So the women had this idea that if they could sew they might make some of their own clothing. I remember my partner, there was a plaque somewhere in Linguère, the town where I lived, that said something about being a sister city of Woodbridge. So my friend was from Manhattan and she says, must be Woodbridge, Connecticut, so we wrote a letter off to Woodbridge, Connecticut. So we wrote a letter off to Woodbridge saying we need a sewing machine but one that was manual, we had no electricity, so it had to be run manually. I don't know what happened, anyway, we never heard from them. Finally we found out it was Woodbridge, New Jersey, and I'm not sure I have the states right but we had the wrong one. So after a while, a sewing machine appeared. It was absolutely amazing! With a hand crank and we taught the women how to sew and we'd been taught how to knit in training and the women were actually quite interested in learning to knit so we taught various kinds of handicrafts at the social center but the thing we ended up doing at the clinic, at the mother and child clinic, was keeping records. They had all these little cards, *fiches*, they'd picked up this [from the] French. Everybody needed some sort of a little form or a card to get any kind of treatment but they had no filing system. So every time the mother and child came in they gave them a new card. Of course the mother wanted a card, she needed a card but she didn't bring the card back. So that's what we could do. We set up a record-keeping system. We impressed upon the mothers—I don't know if we were very successful—that they needed to bring the card in each time they brought in the child so we'd know if the child had been vaccinated, so we'd have some record of the child's health.

**DEUTSCH:** And were you able to travel around Africa a bit?

**MISSIAEN:** Oh yes. We made very little money but we spent none, we didn't have to pay rent. We had to buy our food but really we had to spend very little money. My partner was several years older than I was and she had had a lot of experience traveling so she planned this absolutely wonderful trip and we went down the West—we went to Dakar and got on a freighter and went down the west coast of Africa stopping at every port along the coast and we were to go to—

**DEUTSCH:** What kind of ship was it? A tanker?

**MISSIAEN:** A *paquebot* they called it in French, I think it was a freighter. They were carrying mostly deck passengers. There were very few passengers in cabins, there were mostly deck passengers and freight. And they stopped in every port along West Africa as we moved along. Then I can't remember.

We got to—and we didn't have all the necessary visas so at every place we would go into town and try to get the visa for the next town. We got—I don't know whether it was—I think it was Benin. I don't think we went into the port of Nigeria, I don't think we went into Lagos and we couldn't get a visa for Cameroon so we had to fly to Brazzaville in the Congo. I guess we flew to Brazzaville because we had to skip Cameroon and then we got, we had a plane ticket anyway and then we went to Zimbabwe, Harare, before Zimbabwe was independent when it was still Southern Rhodesia and from there to Dar Es Salaam and then to Kenya and then to Addis Ababa and then back.

**DEUTSCH:** Wow.

**MISSIAEN:** That was quite a trip.

**DEUTSCH:** And then back home?

**MISSIAEN:** Then I came back home and I was absolutely determined I was not going to stay in North Vernon—by this time even my mother was sorry that I had become so adventuresome.

**DEUTSCH:** She wanted you to get some experience but enough already.

**MISSIAEN:** Right, right. So [my] parents were devastated that I said I wasn't going to stay there. So the Peace Corps office here said that they had job listings—

**DEUTSCH:** In D.C.?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes, if I could come to Washington I could look through the job listings, which I did, and I remember going down to the—North Vernon was a major railroad intersection—and going down to the train station and buying my ticket to come to Washington. And a friend of—my parents knew everyone in town. So a friend of my father's was a station master or whatever and he was helping put the luggage on the train and he says to my father, "You know, she bought a one-way ticket." And my thought was that I would fly, that I was trying to conserve money and it was cheaper to go on the train and so then I went after that I would fly.

**DEUTSCH:** But in another sense, there probably was some truth that you didn't view this as temporary.

**MISSIAEN:** Right. So I came here, I got a job at the Library of Congress in the Congressional Research Service. And it was very interesting at that time but not a long-term kind of job. And then there was an opening to help a researcher at the Department of Agriculture. And she was doing work on Africa, she had a temporary contract and the work was to try to identify food preferences—I can't remember what her field was—I think it was sociology. The Department of Agriculture was concerned, well, probably the

Department of Agriculture didn't care because they could ship food out as PL 480, as food aid, they didn't care whether it was acceptable or not. But there had been some political pressure I think that the U.S. was shipping commodities that were not acceptable to the locals. But the corn, of course, is a classic example. Africans eat a lot of corn but only white corn, only animals eat yellow corn. So this example had come up so she was an academic, so she and I were off in this little cubbyhole somewhere and she was just going through every academic study that had ever been done on food preferences in every country and her specialty was carcinogenic foods. Many populations got tobacco—so not necessarily a food, but products that are ingested—and it was very interesting research because [as] the populations lived longer [it] became obvious that some items were carcinogenic. So that was her field. I think she produced this very academic paper and no one in the Department of Agriculture had a clue what to do with it. But then I found out which people in the Department of Agriculture were working on Africa so I moved over to a job in the Africa office.

**DEUTSCH:** Of the Department of Agriculture?

**MISSIAEN:** Of the Department of Agriculture. And that's where I met Ed. So it all—

**DEUTSCH:** That was important.

**MISSIAEN:** Yes.

**DEUTSCH:** So you were working on, sort of, African aid?

**MISSIAEN:** Well the main issue, I mean, Department of Agriculture is always promoting agricultural exports and keeping track of competing agricultural exports, competition in trade. That worked well in Europe when you were selling a lot of agriculture commodities and the Europeans of course were competing with their exports, our exports and all that, but when it came down to Africa no one really cared that much about that so it was largely a food aid. We were not in the program office—all of us were not food aid—we were in the economic analysis office and so we kept track of what [was happening in] developing countries, trying to make some estimate of economic conditions and anticipate when requests for food aid might come in.

**DEUTSCH:** So then you met your husband.

**MISSIAEN:** Yes.

**DEUTSCH:** Tell me about him.

**MISSIAEN:** He was also a Peace Corps volunteer.

**DEUTSCH:** Of course. Where had he been?

**MISSIAEN:** He had been in Colombia at approximately the same time that I had. So he was interested in international work just as I was. But he was interested in Latin America and they assigned him to the Africa office temporarily. That, in the end, worked out well.

**DEUTSCH:** So you got married.

**MISSIAEN:** Yes, we were married and I was living in—Ed came right to Capitol Hill.

**DEUTSCH:** Where was he from?

**MISSIAEN:** He was from Milwaukee. He was [a] Midwesterner also. But he had no agricultural background.

**DEUTSCH:** City boy.

**MISSIAEN:** City. He'd been a city boy his whole life.

**DEUTSCH:** But he came right to Capitol Hill?

**MISSIAEN:** He came right to Capitol Hill after graduate school. He had the problem of the draft. So I think he would have joined Peace Corps no matter what, but then young men were not drafted if they were in Peace Corps and then if you got into graduate school you could also not be drafted. So he went to graduate school after Peace Corps training and managed to stretch out his master's degree over a couple of years so he made it past 26 so he could not be drafted. Then he came here for a job and we met and we were married and we lived in Foggy Bottom where I was living at the time. But as soon as he came to Washington he was living on Capitol Hill. He lived on the 300 block of East Capitol in an apartment house. So he gave up his apartment and we lived in my apartment. So we were married in '69. I think by the end of '69 we had moved to an apartment on Second Street right behind the Supreme Court. We had a bay window and it looked right out—the whole window was filled with the Supreme Court building which is just wonderful.

**DEUTSCH:** Yes, beautiful. You couldn't forget where you were.

**MISSIAEN:** No, no we couldn't forget where we were. And then we bought a house on Sixth Street, the unit block of Sixth Street next to St. Cecilia's in 1971 before our older son was born.

**DEUTSCH:** And then you had two boys.

**MISSIAEN:** I had two boys, yes. Michael was born in 1972 and Chris was born 18 months later. Then Ed moved around to various jobs in the Department of Agriculture. He finally moved into Foreign Agriculture—he'd been in the Economic Research Service where I was when he started and then he had moved—they needed someone to go to Brazil and the man in charge of the office in Brazil was notorious. Nobody wanted to work for him so they asked Ed. They knew Ed, since he'd already studied Portuguese, had interest in Brazil. So they asked him would you consider taking a job in Brazil so he moved over to the Foreign Agriculture Service and we went to the embassy in Brasilia the first two years he was assistant agricultural attaché. So our—

**DEUTSCH:** What year was that?

**MISSIAEN:** That was 1975 so our children were three and one and a half and we went off to Brazil. So we had two years in Brasilia and then he moved to the consulate, which is the normal progression, to the consulate in Sao Paulo and he was agricultural officer in Sao Paulo for two more years. So the boys spent four years in Brazil when they were very young.

**DEUTSCH:** They learned—did you all learn Portuguese?

**MISSIAEN:** All of us learned Portuguese except for Chris, who was the younger son, and Chris had a mind of his own from day one. For some reason he decided he didn't really want to speak Portuguese, so he didn't.

**DEUTSCH:** That's unusual.

**MISSIAEN:** It is very unusual. He was one stubborn kid.

**DEUTSCH:** Probably still is, would be my guess?

**MISSIAEN:** Oh, they went to the American school in Sao Paulo. In Brasilia they were too young but in Sao Paulo they went to American school.

**DEUTSCH:** And what did you do down there?

**MISSIAEN:** I did some volunteer work at the American school but mostly I just took care of the boys.

**DEUTSCH:** But you must have enjoyed living in a different—

**MISSIAEN:** Oh yes, well I mean, this was again—you know for a 12 year period I spent six years living out of the country. Yes, this was what I wanted to do with my life. We were really excited to go to Brazil and we traveled a lot while we were there.

**DEUTSCH:** Probably went to Colombia.

**MISSIAEN:** We went to Colombia shortly after we were married. We went back to Ed's Peace Corps site in Colombia. I never went back to my Peace Corps site. As part of my work I went back to Senegal once and I said something about, I asked somebody about how things were in Linguère and I said, "Well, can you still take the train out to Linguère?" "Train," he says, "I don't think so. Those tracks have been under sand for decades."

**DEUTSCH:** What was the name of the place you had been? Linguère?

**MISSIAEN:** Linguère, L-I-N-G-U-E-R-E

**DEUTSCH:** OK. So you come back from Brazil.

**MISSIAEN:** We came back from Brazil and I had worked, you know, I went back to my—not exactly my job—but I went back to my old office at the Department of Agriculture and asked if they would take me if I worked part time. At that time, the man in charge wanted [supported] women's rights and this whole thing that they were making every effort to encourage women to come back to professional positions. So I came back and said I would work half time and they said that was fine. So I worked half time for a few years, I don't remember exactly. But the thing was I did just as much work—and they found that out across the board—that if they would allow women to work part time, they were just as productive.

**DEUTSCH:** Get a lot of work out of them for half the pay.

**MISSIAEN:** Because, you know, you didn't get tired. The only problem was that meetings would be scheduled and they had to schedule meetings around my times and every now and then someone would say well, we can't have a meeting then because Margaret won't be here.

**DEUTSCH:** So, were you getting involved with things on Capitol Hill?

**MISSIAEN:** Well, as long as my children were living at home and then eventually I started to work full time, we've always been parishioners at St. Peter's and participated in activities there. And St. Peter's school did not work out well for my children, so they were in school at Annunciation which is up on Mass[achusetts] Avenue [NW] near Wisconsin, near the National Cathedral. So they went there for grade school and then my older son went to Edmund Burke for high school and the younger one went to Gonzaga for high school so between the schools and the church and whatever I didn't do much community activity. And then when my younger son graduated from high school in 1991 that's when I thought if I don't make an effort to get involved in some volunteer activities I'll end up just wasting my

time. So in 1991 there were a series of articles—I think there may have even been one in the Post—about these tree groups that were being formed. The Agriculture and Conservation Act of 1990 or something like that. Anyway, it ended up being called the America the Beautiful Act, gave money to state departments of forestry for urban forestry. It was the first time there had been money set aside for urban forestry. So each state was encouraged to set aside trees for the city. The District was recognized as a state.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

**DEUTSCH:** What did you call it, the urban forestry?

**MISSIAEN:** It was an urban forest council that was established but I think the federal money actually went to DPW, the Department of Public Works, because that's where the tree division was at that time. But then there was an organization called Trees for the City and there was a staff member who was paid and then we were encouraged to set up little neighborhood tree groups.

**DEUTSCH:** So you read about this and you thought, that's what I want to plug into?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes. They really did a good job of putting out a lot of publicity and there was actually an article in The Rag or something so I knew that there was an opportunity for me to connect with the Trees for Capitol Hill group that had just been founded.

**DEUTSCH:** Now had you been a gardener before? I remember you saying that, to your mother, gardening was a chore that she did to raise food.

**MISSIAEN:** Right. I gardened as a child. It was very important because we raised a lot of our food but for my mother it was just something that she did. She'd done it, she'd gardened as a child, as had my father of course, and so everyone just raised a garden, you grew your food and that's just what you did. So I helped with gardening and I had a certain idea that maybe I had a green thumb, that I had a gift for dealing with plants but it never was fun. And then as I mentioned previously that when I went to Senegal, I grew mint. The Senegalese drank a lot of mint tea and I thought I should grow something. So I grew—mint was by far the easiest thing to grow. [laughing]

**DEUTSCH:** It's hard not to grow mint! [laughing]

**MISSIAEN:** Especially in a desert. So I grew mint. And when we went to Brazil, in Brasilia we had a little bit of a garden plot behind and I started growing papaya trees. There was no luck in Sao Paulo. It's a

very dense urban area and we didn't have any plot of land even though I just kept—there were landscaping shrubs around the house and I just kept moving them around. And the most interesting thing is I pulled up one shrub—the Brazilians were always weird—here you would always—if you had to renew a plant, you would cut off the top and leave the roots. In Brazil on the other hand, they pull the whole plant up, cut off the roots and stuck the top back in. I guess [that works] in a tropical country. So I remember once pulling up a plant and thinking I'll chop off the roots and put this back, turned out it was ginger root! When I pulled it up, there was the ginger root. I've never grown any ginger root since then.

So I had this interest in trees, and the idea of taking care of trees or helping plant trees on Capitol Hill really, really appealed to me. The group had a lot of influential Capitol Hill residents involved and I think there was some money for a very few years. So the idea was that you would go out and you would plant trees in public space and it just happened that that was a time of such budget crisis for the U.S., for the District government, that the city was not planting. Very few, if any trees. The best they could do was take down the dead trees. So that's what—Becky Fredriksson was very influential to getting the group founded. And so we planted our first trees in 1992. Becky figured out how to do everything. You had to get a permit, so she figured out how to get all the permits that we would need so that the individuals didn't have to do it. We could buy the trees wholesale from Merrifield Garden Center so we could get them much cheaper and then you taught the homeowner how to dig the hole and plant the tree and usually I think we—

**DEUTSCH:** Of course, teaching the homeowner how to dig the hole probably involved digging it with him.

**MISSIAEN:** Yeah, well I had careful instructions but, you know, what happened was you give the instructions to the homeowner and said—well because the way it worked was that Merrifield would come with the trees on the truck and we just moved from spot to spot so we had to have a hole dug before the truck arrived so that we could move very quickly. You'd give instructions to the homeowner and you'd arrive at the hole. Nice diagram, everything. But the hole seldom had any relationship to the diagrams but, you know, we had volunteers and after a short time we learned how to do this. And we could take care of it. The only real problem would be if there was a stump in the hole and sometimes the city contractors were, they were supposed to dig out the stump but they would only dig out a few inches so you'd dig down a little ways and you'd find the old stump was there so you couldn't plant a tree. So in the mid-90s we were the only people planting trees on Capitol Hill.

**DEUTSCH:** Now was there a city grant? You were using city money?

**MISSIAEN:** No. We never got our hands directly on any of that money. Some of that money went directly to the Urban Forest Council and I think that was federal money. We could ask them to plant trees in certain locations or we'd ask them to plant so many trees on Capitol Hill. But no, we never got any city money. All our money came from CHAMPS [Capitol Hill Association of Merchants and Professionals] and then the Community Foundation and from homeowners. Because they were getting a good deal. I can't remember in the beginning if we asked them to pay the full cost of the tree. There were always places where we were planting trees where there were schools—

**DEUTSCH:** You planted this tree out here?

**MISSIAEN:** Right. And I don't remember, did you pay for it?

**DEUTSCH:** I think I paid something.

**MISSIAEN:** What we do now is we ask for half.

**DEUTSCH:** Yeah, I think that's what I did. Paid half.

**MISSIAEN:** OK and so eventually that's the system that we worked out, that the homeowner would pay for half and we'd pay for half. But there were other things. We'd plant trees at the fire station, we'd plant trees at schools, we'd plant trees at libraries, any place like that we didn't ask for any money. So there was a certain amount of complete gift of the trees.

**DEUTSCH:** And so was fundraising part of what you did? Did you look for donations or only—

**MISSIAEN:** Yeah, well we have a newsletter and we've always asked for donations from the newsletter so I get a certain amount of money from individuals on the basis of the newsletter. But most of it's come from the Community Foundation and North Lincoln Park [Neighborhood Association]. And I think at one time both of the—at that time there were only two ANC's, there was ANC 6A and 6B—and I think for a couple of years the ANC had extra, had money to give grants to community organizations and we got small amounts from them.

**DEUTSCH:** So your fall and spring were really busy. Were or are.

**MISSIAEN:** Yes, they were. I retired in 1996 and so I started with Trees for Capitol Hill in 1991 and then '92 was when we did our first tree planting and then, yes, we would do maybe two, three plantings a year and that got to be way too much so we scaled back. Over time we scaled back to do just one planting a year in the fall, in November.

**DEUTSCH:** Now when you say one planting do you mean one day of planting?

**MISSIAEN:** It's one day, yeah. Well usually we'd try to finish up by noon. So the man who comes from Merrifield, the same landscaper who's bought our trees from '92 on, wants to start at eight o'clock. That's the way landscapers do, they start at eight o'clock. So from very early on he set the schedule so he would show up at eight o'clock and we'd better have our holes dug and our people out there and we could just then move from spot to spot around the Hill and usually plant 15 to 20 trees.

**DEUTSCH:** And then you also pruned the trees?

**MISSIAEN:** Then I prune the trees. Yeah, the lifesaver for Trees for Capitol Hill to be a really competent organization was Jim Adams, who was—

**DEUTSCH:** Jim Adams, the rector of—

**MISSIAEN:** No, he is a horticulturist and arborist and he was working—he found us planting trees one day. He lives on G Street SE, the 600 block of G Street SE and came upon us planting trees very early on, maybe '93, '94 and he says, “Do you need a little help with that?” We said sure, we could use some help. Well, it turns out he knew exactly what he was doing! He'd planted hundreds of trees. So he taught us all how to step up from our little drawing of how a tree should be planted to actually have a hands-on teacher helping us plant the trees. And then after we'd plant a few trees he says, “You know, you're going to have to prune those trees. The city's not going to get around to pruning those trees for a long time and if you want me to teach a pruning workshop, we'll do that.” So I think the pruning workshops must have started in '96.

So every winter he taught a pruning workshop and the people who came most enthusiastically were the members of the garden club. Every year very few tree volunteers would show up but the members of the garden club would show up every year for these tree pruning workshops and they were always hands-on on the street in various places around the Hill. So once I'd taken that workshop, it became obvious to me—and then I was on the verge of retiring—that this was something that I would really enjoy doing. So I started doing this in a systematic way, I mean I started small, trying just to work on the trees that Trees for Capitol Hill had planted, but in no time at all it was just so obvious that the city trees were in big trouble. The new trees were in big trouble because they just weren't being pruned and you plant a little tree, it was low branches and they'd stick out over the street, they'd stick out over the sidewalk, the cars hit them, the people break the branches and all this. If you didn't get those trees limbed up as they grew they would never turn into a healthy specimen.

**DEUTSCH:** So you started limbing them up?

**MISSIAEN:** Yeah, I started, you know there were a lot of interesting things you can do with tree pruning. Your ideal specimen of a tree has one main trunk and then the lateral branches coming off, but often those specimens they plant—many of the specimens they plant are not perfect. They didn't have that strong central leader, they may have two leaders, they may have three leaders, there's just the branch structure is not good. And that was the wonderful thing about Jim, that every time I took a pruning workshop I'd learn something new and I went to about a dozen or 14 pruning workshops. I'd learn something new. So I developed all those really advanced skills, so I was able to see the problems in a really young tree and correct them, where if you just let the tree grow, you can't correct them later.

**DEUTSCH:** And that's true for all varieties of trees?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes, that's true for all—

**DEUTSCH:** That one strong trunk?

**MISSIAEN:** Your elms don't. You can see that. Your elms will never have a strong central leader and probably other—cherry trees, for example, don't have a strong single leader—but most of your shade trees will have a strong central leader. Your oaks are your best example of a tree that naturally develops a strong central leader. Maples are a real mix, so that's, you have to do a lot of pruning on a maple to develop a good branch structure when the tree is young.

**DEUTSCH:** So now how many trees do you prune?

**MISSIAEN:** My goal is to prune 400 trees a year. The pruning season lasts about ten weeks and, with my husband's help I can prune about 40 trees a week. I developed this method over many years.

**DEUTSCH:** Describe your method.

**MISSIAEN:** Well, I'm trying to do it geographically so that I don't—because I have to walk to do this—I don't want to spend a lot of time walking here and there trying to find things. The city really started planting a lot of trees in 2000, which made pruning much more important, and so eventually I developed a way of following the streets, the numbered streets. I would usually start near my house, near Seventh and Pennsylvania and then go up as far into Northeast as I could go and then turn around and come back. On some of the major east west streets I would try—like Independence and Constitution I would try but I couldn't do every street so I would concentrate on the numbered streets. One year I'd start on Second Street and worked to 13th—I only went as far as 13th—and then the next year I'd try to start on 13th and work my way back. When there were a lot of new trees that worked very well but now because the city has been so good about planting trees, the little trees are not all so close together so I have to go out and

plan. But I enjoy walking, I walk around the neighborhood all the time, so I go out and scout a route so that when Ed and I go out to prune trees we don't waste a lot of time just walking, trying to find the trees.

**DEUTSCH:** Is your husband retired now, too?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes.

**DEUTSCH:** So he's got the tree bug also?

**MISSIAEN:** Umm, not exactly. He didn't do anything with trees until Casey Trees came along in 2001 and he helped with the tree inventory and he loved that.

**DEUTSCH:** And what was that?

**MISSIAEN:** In 2001, Mrs. Casey gave all this money to the District in order to improve the tree canopy in the District of Columbia, and in 2001 they did it. They were founded in 2001, I think they actually did the inventory in 2002. The tree division, which is now the Urban Forestry Administration, was in disarray. It had not been funded, they didn't have an arborist in charge, all kinds of issues. So when the Casey Trees said well, how are we going to do this? How are we going to grow more trees in the District and it was obvious to start with public space but the tree division had no clue as to how many trees there were, how many they needed or anything. So Casey Trees did a complete inventory of public trees—

**DEUTSCH:** With volunteers?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes, using volunteers in 2002 and that's when—

**DEUTSCH:** Did you both work on that?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes, Ed and I both worked on the tree inventory in 2002.

**DEUTSCH:** And how did that work? I mean, how do you do a tree inventory?

**MISSIAEN:** Well they hired college students as interns and they trained the college students and they had the first handheld little computers where they had a mapping program in there and they trained the college students in the use of these handheld computers to record the status of every street tree in the District of Columbia. And they trained the citizen—there were citizen foresters, there were all these volunteers who were trained in basic tree identification skills—and then the tech, the GIS people at Casey laid out the map and assigned the college students the areas to cover. And you'd meet at a certain location, the team leader and the volunteers would meet at a certain location at a certain time and you'd

spend a few hours, not a lot of time, inventorying systematically, going down every street and recording every tree, its condition and then missing trees.

**DEUTSCH:** It's a huge job.

**MISSIAEN:** It was a huge job. I think they found 110,000 trees in the District on streets and in public spaces. And they'll be with us forever because it was an endowment. The money Mrs. Casey gave to the District is an endowment so they spend only the income.

**DEUTSCH:** So is that still providing trees for us?

**MISSIAEN:** Casey Trees, their focus has—the Urban Forestry Administration now, which is the tree planting group in the District government, is very well funded. They [the Urban Forestry Administration] have eight, no, can it be? I think they have two arborists per ward now. Where for many years it was one arborist, so the city is doing a much better job of planting in public spaces. But Casey has been focusing on elm trees, planting elm trees and that's why all the trees on Barracks Row—the new trees on Barracks Row—were elms. And then Casey Trees have planted a lot of elms on East Capitol. They've actually put elms on Constitution and Independence, too but I think they're moving their mission more away from planting street trees because the city is doing such a good job of that. They feel they can be more productive in focusing on other areas, parks—not always private land—but other public spaces away from the street trees.

**DEUTSCH:** But you still see, there's still a niche for you?

**MISSIAEN:** Oh there's always a niche. The Ward Six arborist says, "Just let me know where you [Trees for Capitol Hill] can plant. You know, I [the arborist] can plant 400 trees a year." I must, you know, he gets many more requests than—

**DEUTSCH:** Many more requests than he can fill?

**MISSIAEN:** Yeah. I mean, if he just takes down the dead trees that probably gets close to meeting their 300 or 400 trees per ward just removing the dead and replanting trees.

**DEUTSCH:** There also is a need for sort of pruning beyond what you can do, the big branches—

**MISSIAEN:** Oh yes, yes. And I think I've heard arborists say ideally you would prune the mature street trees once every five years but I don't think they even get around to that.

**DEUTSCH:** So have you started your spring prunings?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes! I usually try to start between Christmas and New Year's but it's been so cold. And then my sons were here with me so I didn't get started. So I just started last week.

**DEUTSCH:** So how many do you do a week?

**MISSIAEN:** I have to do 40 a week to get to my—

**DEUTSCH:** OK, 40 a week for how many weeks?

**MISSIAEN:** Ten weeks. From the first of January to the middle of March is when the trees are completely dormant.

**DEUTSCH:** That's rather chastening for those of us who have to keep reminding ourselves to cut down the two rose things. [laughing]

**MISSIAEN:** [laughing] Well I don't do so well in my own garden! Oh no no no. I'm just sort of driven to do this because I've seen what happens if the trees are not—I mean, it breaks my heart. These poor little street trees are so abused and I can make such a difference that it's really very satisfying.

**DEUTSCH:** Do you have a favorite tree?

**MISSIAEN:** Well, I have a favorite individual tree, as opposed to a tree species. My favorite individual tree is the water oak that's on the south side of Friendship House, across the street from my house. Friendship House is at 619 D Street.

**DEUTSCH:** South side of Friendship House.

**MISSIAEN:** Right. So the Friendship House property goes all the way from D Street over to South Carolina so on the South Carolina side there's this huge water oak.

**DEUTSCH:** What is a water oak?

**MISSIAEN:** It's a southern species, so it's semi-evergreen. I think it's probably closely related to a live oak.

**DEUTSCH:** Mm hmm.

**MISSIAEN:** And there are a few around the city but there aren't very many.

**DEUTSCH:** I'll have to go look for them.

**MISSIAEN:** Oh it's such a magnificent tree. I can look out my window and see it all the time. Another tree I like—oh another species I like are yellowwoods. Yellowwoods are also a native tree but a little bit south of here and you're beginning to see them planted more frequently around here, beginning to be available in the nurseries, you can find all kinds of wonderful trees, but if no nursery sells them it doesn't do you any good. But I first discovered the yellowwoods in Folger Park. Folger Park has some very interesting trees, it also has some very old hackberries. I just did a tree walk for Casey Trees last fall—

**DEUTSCH:** It has some very old what?

**MISSIAEN:** Hackberries.

**DEUTSCH:** Hackberries.

**MISSIAEN:** Yes, that's another—I think it's a native tree—it's a weed tree. If you have a hackberry, you have numerous hackberries, it reseeds very easily. But these old ones in Folger Park are I think a different species than the common one you see and they have absolutely beautiful knobby bark. They're very, very old trees and there are also then yellowwoods in Folger Park and they're beautiful trees. They have panicles of white flowers in the spring, in June, and they're just absolutely beautiful.

**DEUTSCH:** Are they yellow? Is there anything yellow about them?

**MISSIAEN:** I think the flowers are white, I think the wood itself might be yellow. I don't know and then Trees for Capitol Hill planted a couple of those in Marion Park.

**DEUTSCH:** Any other favorite trees?

**MISSIAEN:** Well, another little tree that I'm taking special care of is a winter-flowering cherry. It's not the *prunus mume*, it's not the ever—it's a Higgin cherry, which is a winter-flowering. It's supposed to flower in winter. There are some on the Capitol grounds, there are some in Garfield Park.

**DEUTSCH:** I think that's what mine is.

**MISSIAEN:** Is yours a Higgin cherry?

**DEUTSCH:** I think it is a Higgin cherry.

**MISSIAEN:** OK, and the flowers open over rather a long period but they start—because it's been so cold this winter I haven't seen any yet but sometimes they start flowering in December. And the city planted one—I don't know why—on E Street next to St. Peter's School, in the 300 block of E Street, next to St. Peter's school. Well any tree that's planted next to a school has got a tough road ahead of it and this poor

little thing was so misshapen. It was just struggling from the very beginning, you know cherry trees have all these branches that are supposed to grow out from sort of a single point, well these branches grew this way and that way and they rubbed against each other and everything. They were very, very low, so I decided to take special care of that little tree and I just pruned it yesterday and it's actually turning into a nice tree and I love it because there are very few winter-flowering cherries. I don't know of another winter-flowering cherry [along the street].

**DEUTSCH:** It's such a nice surprise to see flowers on something in the middle of winter.

**MISSIAEN:** Yes!

**DEUTSCH:** Now when you go out on your pruning expeditions, what do you do with all the branches?

**MISSIAEN:** I have to carry them to a trashcan. That's a bit of a problem. Some trashcans are better than others. I know every trashcan on Capitol Hill.

**DEUTSCH:** That's like a dog walker, you have to know where the trashcans are.

**MISSIAEN:** [laughing] So yesterday as I was pruning—I was pruning on the south side of Marion Park—I filled up my wheelbarrow in no time. I was working alone and I had my ladder there so I had to put in the limbs, put in the ladder, put in my bucket of tools and I filled up the wheelbarrow very early and there's this really great trashcan next to—public trashcan—next to the Capitol Supreme Market at Fourth and E and once I put my limbs there and the man came out and told me to take them away. So I can't put my limbs next to the Capitol Supreme Market anymore. So I go over—there's a trashcan by Brent School but I'm lugging this wheelbarrow full of limbs over to D Street, Third and D as opposed to Fourth and E, which would be much more convenient. But that's something I've learned to handle.

**DEUTSCH:** Have your children got the gardening bug or the tree-planting bug?

**MISSIAEN:** They know a lot about gardening, they didn't show any interest in gardening with me but they both have pruned with me because they were often here at Christmastime.

**DEUTSCH:** So they've both been part of the pruning?

**MISSIAEN:** They both have learned how to prune and they've also, they won't let me climb up in the tree or do foolish things that I would do otherwise.

**DEUTSCH:** You said something that I thought was interesting, that the Peace Corps—you were aware that you were getting more than the Peace Corps was and that's sort of evident in the way Peace Corps

volunteers have come back and contributed in this country. I mean, in your own life that's certainly true but were you thinking of other people you know?

**MISSIAEN:** No, well I'm just saying that so often when someone's running for Congress they say that this person was a Peace Corps volunteer and then as people take Cabinet offices or whatever I'm always surprised at how many of them have had Peace Corps—the leaders in public life—have had Peace Corps experience.

**DEUTSCH:** And actually quite a few of the people I've interviewed for this award have had Peace Corps experience. It is interesting. What about the neighborhood? Observations of the neighborhood? What attracted you to Capitol Hill? It was convenient for your work, obviously.

**MISSIAEN:** Right, right. My husband just liked the neighborhood. When I had worked at the Library of Congress I lived in Foggy Bottom so I had taken the bus back and forth and I didn't find that to be a problem but my husband had come here to do the research for his master's thesis at the Library of Congress and had stayed with a friend who lived on Capitol Hill and at that time was really taken with the neighborhood. So then he came back for the job and wanted to live—looked for a place on Capitol Hill. And then when we were looking for an apartment we just looked on Capitol Hill. That's where he wanted to live and when we wanted to buy a house, we just looked—I think when we were buying a house we actually looked in Glover Park and we looked in Cleveland Park and none of that worked out. And we've said many times over the years that we sure were lucky deciding to buy our first house on Capitol Hill.

**DEUTSCH:** Do you see yourself staying here?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes! I'm a member of the Capitol Hill Village and I think the Village is going to make it possible to stay here. I can't see living in the house I live in now forever. Houses require a lot of maintenance. If I have to give up gardening—I'm waiting for the Hine condos.

**DEUTSCH:** Mm hmm.

**MISSIAEN:** I mean, you know, I look around, I tried to find places where it will be easier to live if I have limited mobility issues come up in my life—my husband says I worry too much about these things.

**DEUTSCH:** They don't seem to have come up yet.

**MISSIAEN:** No! And I'm determined that they are not going to come up and so I keep looking at houses and thinking well maybe there's one where you could live on one floor, even if you have to live on one floor temporarily and there just aren't—there are very few places like that and I like my house that I have

now. And I don't want to be more than half a block from the Metro. I'm not going to ever live anyplace that's more than half a block from the Metro, so that cuts down on my options.

**DEUTSCH:** Where do you live now?

**MISSIAEN:** At 647 South Carolina.

**DEUTSCH:** Right, so very close to the Metro.

**MISSIAEN:** So that's why the Hine condos will be perfect.

**DEUTSCH:** They would. What do your sons do?

**MISSIAEN:** My older son teaches English as a foreign language in San Francisco in a private school and my younger son is a public defender in Medford, Oregon which is just an hour north of the California state line.

**DEUTSCH:** But they're both so far away.

**MISSIAEN:** I know. When we were visiting schools with my older son, there were all these guides on choosing colleges with questions you ask the child—so I said, well do you think it's important that you be close enough to come home on weekends?

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

TAPE 2/SIDE 1

**DEUTSCH:** Testing. OK. This is tape two with Margaret. Tell me about how gardens on Capitol Hill have changed over the years.

**MISSIAEN:** I didn't pay a lot of attention when we first moved to the Hill in 1969 but I certainly have the very strong impression that the only thing that grew in front yards was English ivy. That was definitely the dominant way of taking care of your front yard, was to grow English ivy and then you notice—gradually over the years you've noticed, especially now that I'm interested in gardening and I got a certificate in horticulture from the US Department of Agriculture in 1999, took me like seven years—so I started noticing things. And people just have wonderful collections of plants in their front yards. And so now I actually do walks for people, especially for the Capitol Hill Village, to look at gardens. I've actually done a tree walk for the Capitol Hill Village and then I did a walk through Capitol Hill Townhomes that had very nice plantings at Capitol Hill Townhomes. I've done a walk for the Village in Bartholdi Park, I'm a volunteer at the U.S. Botanic Garden and I work at Bartholdi Park and then I did a

walk for the Village through the conservatory terrace show, which was a sculpture and plant show at the Botanic Garden last summer. So, you know, I pay attention to what's happening. I did a walk for the Village along East Capitol last fall or maybe a year ago, just to look at the wonderful selection of plants that you can find in front yards in Capitol Hill.

**DEUTSCH:** What do you particularly see?

**MISSIAEN:** Well there's a very interesting selection of plants. There are a wide variety, especially of flowering plants. It adds a nice component to the shade trees which are on the street—there are very few flowering trees, we have all these shade trees—and then in the front yard you have all these different types of flowering shrubs and there are some very interesting designs. Landscape design is not something that I'll ever be able to do well but I'm always thinking about it and then you can see how people have used the plants to create a certain overall picture or certain design for their landscape. I always find that very interesting.

**DEUTSCH:** So what other garden activities have you been involved in on the Hill?

**MISSIAEN:** Well one of my most—well, let's start with St. Peter's Church. I started working there just before I retired in fact, in 1995, it was some sort of an anniversary and the north side of the church just had this weedy, grassy plot there and of course anyone on Capitol Hill who likes [to] garden sees a bit of underused land as a wonderful opportunity and I remember Bernadette McMahon who was getting interested in landscape design said "Let's improve this garden for the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary" or whatever. So she and I did a garden on the north side of St. Peter's Church which was a real challenge because that church is huge so you have almost all shade, except in the middle of June when you have all sun. And the wonderful thing about working there is it's a major route to Capitol South Metro so people walked by all the time and they watch the garden. This is, I think, a brand new phenomenon as I start to watch gardens on Capitol Hill as they change and develop individually and as a whole, I've been able to pick up that people walk by St. Peter's and watch the garden. Whenever I'm working there people will say oh you did this or you did that or I like the way this [is], or I love this flower. Whatever, just make very nice comments about the garden. I continued to work on that one and then I started on the Friendship House slope that faces South Carolina Avenue.

**DEUTSCH:** Where that tree—

**MISSIAEN:** Where the tree is in the yard. So there is a fence around the playground so the space between the fence at the top of the slope and the sidewalk was awful. Oh, when we bought our house—the house where we live now—in 1980 it was just completely overgrown with weed trees and there was a

chain link fence at the bottom so all the trash from the passersby went in. And I can't remember—it was before I retired and I didn't pay much attention—but some group came along and stripped everything off the hillside and took down the fence. It must have been the time they put in the handicapped ramp from South Carolina up to the house so I think that was '79 or '80, I'm not sure when that was built. But in any case, they cleared off the hillside and someone came along and put down some landscape fabric and some junipers and never came back. So over time the soil eroded. Now over [by] the sidewalk there's no retaining wall there and gradually it [the soil] was covering most of the sidewalk. So there was a neighborhood cleanup, I think this was probably '95, everyone in the neighborhood got out and we picked up all the soil and we threw it back up on the hillside. I thought this will never do! You know, all we need is one hard rain and the soil will all be back on the sidewalk. So I started planting things on the sidewalk [hillside] at Friendship House and then in 1997 there was a federal grant for landscaping projects or—I can't remember if it specified which landscaping project but Mary Procter and I, Mary Procter was working at Friendship House, applied for this grant to do landscaping at Friendship House and we got the money so then we were able to start buying plants and put in a temporary retaining wall at the bottom of the slope. So, over the years as I—working at the Botanic Garden was a real plus—because I—

**DEUTSCH:** The Botanic Garden down here?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes, at the base by the Capitol.

**DEUTSCH:** Do you do that one day a week?

**MISSIAEN:** I do that one day a week when the weather's nice. So I'd often get surplus plants. It's really a heartbreaker for a gardener to have a plant and have no place to put it. So I started putting in things at Friendship House but the best thing I ever did was to start planting daffodils. And it's amazing how many daffodil bulbs one can find if one just keeps one's ears and eyes open!

**DEUTSCH:** Really?

**MISSIAEN:** Because daffodils tend to multiply, they tend to naturalize. So I got daffodils from the Botanic Garden, I think the garden club gave away daffodils, I took daffodils from my own yard that had been there—the woman was a very serious gardener who had owned our house for decades before we bought it and her daffodils never bloomed. Or her daffodils never bloomed for me in my backyard. So I decided I'd dig them up and thought well, maybe they'll bloom but anyway, I had all these surplus daffodils. I took them over to Friendship House, planted them on the hillside and they are beautiful. They are just absolutely wonderful so the whole slope there, it's well over 100 feet, maybe it's 120 feet and just overflowing with daffodils in the spring. I keep other things growing there but now that the property's

going to be sold I don't know what the long-term prospects are going to be at Friendship House. And then I started gardening at the [Eastern Market] Metro Plaza and that was not particularly successful.

**DEUTSCH:** There's a thankless task!

**MISSIAEN:** [laughing] It has just too many pedestrians, you just can't keep things growing there. And then there's been a lot of talk about redoing the landscaping at the Metro Plaza, so I helped. I haven't done much there recently. Then there was this little plot of land, it was a tree space on Sixth Street between E and South Carolina, so just less than a block from my house and it was wonderful because it was not paved. It was a continuous grassy, weedy strip and in 2002 the city planted three trees in that space but no tree in that space had ever survived. So I thought, OK these are going to be my trees.

**DEUTSCH:** What year did the city plant these trees?

**MISSIAEN:** 2002. So I started clearing out the weeds. The problem with weeds around a tree is that someone will come with a weed whacker or a mower and when they take out the weeds, they take the bark off the tree. I've seen so many trees destroyed by weed whackers that I was determined that I would keep the weeds away from the tree, so I cleared a nice little circle around each of the three trees and put down some mulch. And it looked so nice and I thought well we need a little bigger circle and I made a little bigger circle and last year I finished the whole plot, it's all planted with flowers now. That's the problem—you don't want to put a lot of flowers right next to a tree because they compete with the tree—

**DEUTSCH:** For the resources.

**MISSIAEN:** Yes. You see so many tree boxes that are overplanted that will take the water and nutrients from the tree so I try not to, I don't plant close to the tree. I just plant whatever surplus things I have and so I planted that whole strip and that was also a very satisfying one because whenever I'm working out there people come by and tell me how much they enjoy the plants I've put in there.

**DEUTSCH:** I'm surprised how often people I don't even know will say to me oh, I love your garden. I'm aware that people just really enjoy the garden.

**MISSIAEN:** Yeah, they do. Well and the most recent one I did was at the Capitol Hill Village office, which is on the 400 block of Seventh Street. So again, it's just around—all my gardens are within a five minute walk of my house, except for St. Peter's Church, which is a ten minute walk. So when I have a few minutes I can go do something and also it's very therapeutic, so when I'm having a bad day I can go out. I don't have nearly as many bad days as I did when I was working. Now that I'm retired I pretty much do whatever I want and I enjoy what I do. But the Village—the man who owns the house where the

Capitol Hill Village office is out of town most of the time and he had planted a Japanese maple tree in his front yard that was in memory of his wife who had died a few years ago. So when the Village office moved in there he said, "I'm going to be away for weeks and months at a time, would you take care of the little maple tree?" And I said OK, sure, and then he put down all this—he covered his whole front yard except for the maple tree with some sort of composted leaves or something he got from the city. It was not the best of soil but it had a lot of nutrients in it so I thought, well this poor little maple tree is here all alone, it obviously could use something else. Then I noticed that next door—well, Robert, the owner of the house, said that the magnolia tree next door to him had died so the homeowners had taken it out. Well, it's actually a lobbying group that owns two houses just north of Robert's. So they'd taken down a southern magnolia tree that had died and he kept saying well we need to put a little tree in there but he and I could never—I could never get him to focus on what type of a tree. He wanted a big tree and I said, it's a small space, we can't put a big tree in there. Once while he was gone a neighbor further down the block rented his house while he was away and after Christmas she said we have this Christmas tree in a pot, what are we going to do with it? And I said I know the space for it so the little Christmas tree in the pot went into the yard next door to Robert's and then that poor little tree looked sort of lonely so I came across a little Japanese maple so I put that one in there. And I like nandina because it has red berries, so I stuck in a few nandina and then I had a few bulbs so I stuck in a few bulbs. And then I moved to the next house, which is part of the same operation. There was already, there were several things planted there—you know it was covered with this awful landscape fabric. So I ripped up the landscape fabric and stuck bulbs in there so now I have these three houses on Seventh Street that now have wonderful spring flowering bulbs and, little by little, I'm going to get other kinds of plants, too.

**DEUTSCH:** Is spring your favorite season?

**MISSIAEN:** Spring is just so much work! [laughing] I find it to be a little stressful, no I think I like fall better.

**DEUTSCH:** Because you don't prune in the fall? And you get to sort of enjoy the—

**MISSIAEN:** Yes, fall is such a good time for plants. The plants put down a lot of new growth. You don't have to worry, you can put a plant—almost all plants—if you're going to do a lot of dividing and transplanting you should do it in the fall, starting in September. Most of the time you have rain, it's not hot, you can put your plants in and forget about them as opposed to plants you put in in the spring and then you've got to start worrying. Is it going to be hot? Will it be dry? And they require intensive care. If you transplant things in the fall you can just put them in and forget about it and then enjoy them in the spring. I worry too much about plants, I shouldn't. I have become much less emotional about trees than I

used to be. It used to just break my heart every time something bad would happen to a street tree. It happens all the time to street trees. One can't waste one's emotional energy about every little street tree.

**DEUTSCH:** Any other gardening activities? Do you have a—you don't have a community garden?

**MISSIAEN:** No I have a vegetable garden in my backyard.

**DEUTSCH:** Oh, do you?

**MISSIAEN:** Yes. That's one of the reasons we bought the house.

**DEUTSCH:** And what do you raise?

**MISSIAEN:** Well I always raise tomatoes and usually peppers. Now I have a lot of herbs because there were a lot of herbs in the terrace show at the Botanic Garden this year, so as we planted herbs you know, they paid us in herbs. So I have a lot of—some of them are annuals but I tried to select ones that are perennials so I have perennials growing there. But it's turning into more and more of a nursery. Whenever I find a plant that needs to grow before it can be used in a public space, I stick it in there. I've had very good green bean crops the past few years, and lettuce. But disease has just overtaken my tomatoes. If you're a serious gardener you have to rotate your crops and I don't have the space to rotate my crops so I think I may focus more on my nursery crops and my herbs. And it's getting shadier and shadier, I keep planting trees at the back of my lot. Of course the backyard is south, on the south side of the house so as the trees grow up they shade my sunny spot, so my sunny spots are turning into shady spots. But that's OK.

**DEUTSCH:** Anything else?

**MISSIAEN:** Nothing comes to mind right away.

END OF INTERVIEW