



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Melissa Ashabranner

Interview Date: March 6, 2014
Interviewer: Stephanie Deutsch
Transcriber: Nancy Lazear
Editor: Elizabeth Lewis



photo by Elizabeth Dranitzke

This interview transcript is the property of the Ruth Ann Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project.
Not to be reproduced without permission.

TAPE 1/SIDE 1

DEUTSCH: This is Stephanie. Yes, there we go. Melissa, will you just say something?

ASHABRANNER: Yes. Hello Stephanie.

DEUTSCH: Hi. I am at Melissa's apartment at First Street SE and it is March 6. Melissa, why don't you start by telling me where you grew up?

ASHABRANNER: All right. I grew up in Ethiopia, Libya, Nigeria and India. My father [Brent Ashabranner] was a professor at Oklahoma State University teaching English, writing and Shakespeare. There was an exchange program where several Ethiopian professors came to Oklahoma State, and he volunteered to be part of a group of professors going to Ethiopia.

DEUTSCH: Pretty adventurous.

ASHABRANNER: It was very adventurous! To do curriculum development for elementary schools. And so my sister, who was three, and I, [who] was five, my mother and my father headed off to Ethiopia.

DEUTSCH: You're five, you must remember that.

ASHABRANNER: Yes, I remember our nannies—Jennifer had a nanny and I had a nanny—and our pets. We had a monkey and a goat, two cats. I remember that we went to a school that was taught by mothers, and ...

DEUTSCH: An expat [expatriate] school?

ASHABRANNER: It was an elementary school, I think, from kindergarten to fourth grade. The teachers were actually just people's mothers. This is in the [1950s]. And the school was right next to Haile Selassie's palace, so we could hear ... He had lions roaming around his grounds. He was the "Lion of Judah," so he had lions that roamed around. We could hear it from our classrooms. And once there was a big set of footprints in the playground, so we surmised that a lion had gotten across. We would see Haile Selassie come out in his car throwing out coins to people. We traveled a lot with my father, [who] was collecting folktales and going out and taping people. We would go out with him.

DEUTSCH: How could he do that? I mean, did they speak English or did he take translators?

ASHABRANNER: He had a translator with him, but he taped them as well.

DEUTSCH: Probably sort of like [unintelligible].

ASHABRANNER: Probably, yes. [Laughs] So then he went with what became AID [Agency for International Development] and we went to Libya, and we were there for two years. Then we went to Nigeria for three years, and then he started the first Peace Corps program in 1960. He was asked to start the first Peace Corps program, and ...

DEUTSCH: Wow. What year, in 1960?

ASHABRANNER: It was 1960. We were there during Nigeria's independence from England, which was very peaceful, and we were also there during the whole Patrice Lumumba uprising in the Congo, which was spilling over into Nigeria. Several times when we were overseas we had to stay inside because of some kind of political unrest . Couldn't go to school, couldn't go out. But then we went to India for four years. He was head of the Peace Corps there. And then I came back here.

DEUTSCH: Where did you live in India?

ASHABRANNER: In New Delhi.

DEUTSCH: Uh huh.

ASHABRANNER: I loved India, loved New Delhi.

DEUTSCH: And did you go to an American school there?

ASHABRANNER: Yes. I went to the American International School there.

DEUTSCH: And that was high school?

ASHABRANNER: That was high school. And I came back for my last year of high school here in Bethesda.

DEUTSCH: And was that culture shock?

ASHABRANNER: It was total culture shock [laughs], and I was probably pretty insufferable because India and Pakistan were at war and when we left, we were under blackout conditions. Every night, we had to put up blackout curtains because the Pakistanis were bombing. I was totally involved in this, and I got to Walter Johnson High School and nobody [laughs] could care about this. I'd come in and say, "My God, did you hear that Pakistan has bombed three miles out of New Delhi?" and they go, "What are you talking about?"

DEUTSCH: It was a different world. Smaller.

ASHABRANNER: Right. And the only person that cared was the daughter of the Indian ambassador, also at that school, so she and I bonded. So that was sort of an introduction back into the United States. Then I went to Temple University in Philadelphia and got a degree in cultural anthropology and ...

DEUTSCH: Were you specializing in African-type things?

ASHABRANNER: No, I really took that degree because it was a very broad degree and I really didn't have a path. But with anthropology, you could take law, philosophy, religion, urban studies. A lot of things would go into that as a major, so that's what I did. Actually I spent my last year in Italy.

DEUTSCH: How was it? That was a change.

ASHABRANNER: It was. It would have been a junior year, but it was a senior year abroad. And Olivia [her daughter] was in the same program, just a couple of years ago. I went over while she was there. Same building, obviously different.

DEUTSCH: What city?

ASHABRANNER: In Rome.

DEUTSCH: Ah. How lovely.

ASHABRANNER: It was. She had a wonderful time and I had a wonderful time. But it was just funny [laughs] that we ended up in the same program.

DEUTSCH: Did you get back to Africa at all during that time that you were in school?

ASHABRANNER: No. After I graduated, I actually went to the Philippines because my parents were in the Philippines at that point. I stayed there for six months and then came back to the States and got a job with the American Medical Association's AMCAS [American Medical College Application Service]. It's the part of it that does the MCAT [Medical College Admission Test] test. So my first job out of school was as a customer service rep.

DEUTSCH: And where was that?

ASHABRANNER: That was at Dupont Circle. I was living with an ex-classmate. 1978. I graduated in 1972, so six years later I applied to graduate school and I went to Yale and got an MBA.

DEUTSCH: Oh, that was enterprising. Did you have some specific goal in mind?

ASHABRANNER: Well, at the time I thought I was going to go into international work, and I had worked my way up at AMCAS. I was now managing two divisions, the division that dealt with communications with the schools and the division that dealt with the students. So in that six years I had become a manager, and I liked it, and so I thought, you know, I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do, but I thought that this [was] a good time to go to graduate school. And that was a great experience, a lot of smart people were there, and it was fun to be back in school. I was much more invested in learning than I had been in undergraduate [school].

DEUTSCH: Yes.

ASHABRANNER: Now when I was paying for it. So I graduated and I started working for a small consulting firm that was doing consulting to nonprofits, doing board development. The program at Yale was very entrepreneurial. They were encouraging people to not just go into traditional corporate life but to do interesting things. It was fun working but not very remunerative. So [they take a break in the interview].

DEUTSCH: Okay, let's pick up. You've graduated from Yale with an MBA ...

ASHABRANNER: Uh huh. So I was here in Washington and Jean-Keith [Fagon, her husband and owner of the *Hill Rag*] was a friend of ... One of my roommates from college was dating a friend of his. That's how I met him. He had started the *Hill Rag* in October 1976 and this was '82, '81, I guess.

DEUTSCH: October 1976, right?

ASHABRANNER: ...is when the paper started. As a one-page flyer. He had started it with a woman named Tawny Harding.

DEUTSCH: Can you spell that?

ASHABRANNER: Yeah, it's T-A-W-N-Y, and Harding is H-A-R-D-I-N-G. She was a graphic designer, a freelance designer, and she was working on the *Smithsonian Magazine*. When Jean-Keith started the paper, when he got the idea of starting it, he went to her and asked, "How do you actually make a printed thing?"

DEUTSCH: This is [another whole] story, but just in one sentence, why did he want to do that?

ASHABRANNER: He was a friend of Jules Gordon, who owned Congressional Liquor. His family owned it. A Jewish family that had owned that liquor store forever.

DEUTSCH: Congressional Liquor?

ASHABRANNER: Congressional Liquor. It was at 404 First Street [SE]. He owned it for years afterwards, too, and he sold it to Korean people. Jean-Keith was in there learning about wine and Julie was helping, teaching him about the different kinds of wine and German wines. Jean-Keith was in there one day and Julie had printed, Xeroxed up, some flyers that were advertising a sale on wines, and he commented to Jean-Keith, “I wish there was some way of me getting these flyers to people in the neighborhood. There is no place for me to advertise. There’s no point in advertising in the *Post* or the *Star* because nobody is going to come from Bethesda to my wine sale. If I could just get these flyers out of my store and into the surrounding neighborhood!”

For some reason that just sparked Jean-Keith’s interest and he got the idea of creating this flyer. It was called the *Hill Discount Rag*, and [on] it was a set of business-card sized boxes [spaces]. He went around and for \$25.00 he sold the boxes to people. He figured that the business card was good because everyone had a business card and you could just use that as the base art and then put on something like “ten percent off on photo processing.”

DEUTSCH: And the word, “rag.” Was Jean-Keith the one who wanted to call it the *Rag*?

ASHABRANNER: I don’t know where that came from. Probably from Tawny, because I don’t think that Jean-Keith would have known that word necessarily. I think Tawny probably came up with it.

She did the first issue with press type, actually. They printed, and Julie paid for the first press run. I think it was like 2000 copies, front and back, on a yellow piece of paper. And Jean-Keith went around and dropped them off through people’s mail slots actually, which wasn’t legal but he didn’t realize that then. He just went all over Capitol Hill dropping these things into mail slots, and then the next month they did another one, and about six months later somebody said to Jean-Keith, “You know, I would really like to put in a notice for my church.” And then somebody else said, “You know, we could put Soccer on the Hill scores in there.”

So suddenly, he had a little group of people that were giving him copy. About six months after this started, it was four pages. People were writing. You know, there’s no internet, there’s no way of communicating local news at all except for this little paper that was going around. That’s how it felt. People volunteered. Somebody wanted to do a dining review. We had somebody covering Congress from a sort of a personal level, “Interesting Congress People who Live on Capitol Hill,” that kind of ...

DEUTSCH: It slowly grew [unintelligible] basically?

ASHABRANNER: Right. So when I got there it was a monthly paper. It was 28 pages.

DEUTSCH: So this now, what year are we now?

ASHABRANNER: We're '81 and Tawny had decided that she ...

DEUTSCH: In '81 it was how big?

ASHABRANNER: 28 pages. Monthly. And there were lots of people, volunteer writers, but Tawny had two children and she decided that she just was not making enough money. She was doing her freelance work, but she was also working a lot for the paper and they weren't able to take hardly any money out of it. It was being produced in Jean-Keith's house and ... So she decided to leave, and she had handled all of the business side of the paper.

So for some reason—I was looking around for something to do—I said I would come and do it, I would come and take over what she was doing. And I said I would use my new MBA to sort of make it into more of a business because what was happening was that people were volunteering to sell ads, then they wouldn't sell ads. They'd volunteer to write something and then they wouldn't write it. Or they'd write something that they felt like writing. So there was no way to ...

DEUTSCH: There was no quality control.

ASHABRANNER: Exactly. And there weren't any hours. You can't ask volunteers to open the office. So it really needed structure, and I said, "If you'll let me do this, then I'll come and ..."

DEUTSCH: And you and Jean Keith weren't married at that point ...

ASHABRANNER: No.

DEUTSCH: No, okay.

ASHABRANNER: So, that's what we did.

DEUTSCH: Did you move to the Hill at that point?

ASHABRANNER: Where was I living? No, I was in Dupont Circle. I can't remember exactly when I moved to the Hill, but within the first couple of years, I'm sure I was moved. I lived over on Fifth Street SE. So, after about a year ... I mean, it was very difficult because people really resented what I was trying to do. You know, this had been fun, this is a place to get published. I hired a salesperson, a real salesperson, that had a quota, that actually had to sell, that was one big thing. And then I started learning how to ... My first job in production was actually cutting out little ... At that time, we had to send out

copy to be typeset. So it would go to a typesetter and come back in these long rolls of type and we had to trim it and then wax it and put it down on flats.

DEUTSCH: You mean actually to print it?

ASHABRANNER: Right. You had big boards and then you designed the page with columns, waxed it down. At the end of that, we'd have a set of flats and they'd be transported to the printer. My first job was actually taking an Exacto knife and cutting out letters to make corrections. Because once it was typeset, there wasn't any way of changing it. If you noticed that there was a typo, you had to move the letters apart manually and then cut out like an "e" and stick the "e" in to make sure it was lined up. So that was my first production job. I was a proofreader, I was working with money, I was paying the bills, doing the taxes. And after about a year ...

DEUTSCH: And you were doing that full time, I mean that was your ...

ASHABRANNER: I was doing it full time. And we had a couple of very good salespeople. Within a year, we were up to 80 pages, and we were making money. And that was really the basis for everything that's here—that push at that period of time to actually turn it into a business.

The thing about it was that a lot of people had started papers, or tried to start newspapers, on Capitol Hill, but they were very focused on good writers. So they would have people like Nicholas Von Hoffman or someone. You know, someone really well known that was going to write a column for their newspaper.

[Interview is interrupted]

... focused on the money which was the advertising. And Jean-Keith always focused on the money. And we had one newspaper that wanted to merge with us.

DEUTSCH: Which one was that?

ASHABRANNER: I can't remember what it was called. They wanted to merge with us because we had advertising and they didn't. They had good writers. And they were pretty pushy about it because they said, "You know you're not going to be able to survive." And a year later they were completely gone because they thought people would keep picking up the paper for these good writers. They never focused on the money, they thought the money would just sort of come. And, you know, we didn't do that. We were always really focused on how much money we were actually making.

And then we made a very bad decision, which was the *City Paper* started in the late 80s, and they came out as a weekly. And Jean-Keith decided that we should go weekly. It was just a disaster. We were home-

delivered at that point, so that was suddenly four times the delivery costs, four times the printing costs, and people didn't advertise four times.

DEUTSCH: Once a month is a good rhythm to advertising rather than once a week.

ASHABRANNER: Right. They weren't trained that way. If you had started out as a weekly, that'd be different. Your whole rate structure would have been different. So we had many difficult years just from that one decision, trying to keep things going. We backed out of the weekly and went to a bi-weekly format. And we were bi-weekly until about 1993, and then we went back to monthly.

DEUTSCH: When did you go back to monthly?

ASHABRANNER: I think it was 1993, pretty sure. Maybe '92, because I had Olivia [daughter] at that point. She was a baby and it was just too much work, so we've been monthly ever since.

DEUTSCH: What about the paper that I remember, the *Voice of the Hill*?

ASHABRANNER: The *Voice*.

DEUTSCH: When did that happen? I can't quite remember.

ASHABRANNER: OK, the *Voice*, we were where we are now, in terms of the office [224 Seventh Street SE]. That happened probably around the year 2000.

DEUTSCH: I'm sure you knew Bruce and Adele [Robey, owners of the *Voice*].

ASHABRANNER: Oh sure, in fact Bruce and Adele had actually helped Jean-Keith with the paper, with the *Hill Rag*.

DEUTSCH: And that's what gave them the idea that they wanted to have their own paper ...

ASHABRANNER: Before I came, Bruce and Adele—she was a graphic designer—helped Jean Keith. Also, Stephanie Cavanaugh worked for us for quite some time selling ads and writing.

Actually, the *Voice* turned out to be a very good thing for us. We were still doing home delivery, and there wasn't any other competition around. The paper was often late, there were problems with delivery—there's always problems with delivery, that's nothing. You can never have a perfect delivery. But I think we were sort of coasting at that point, and when the *Voice* started, it was a real wake-up call because suddenly ... The thing was, we didn't lose any ads because the economy at that time was very good, so people just put ads into the *Voice* as well. They just doubled up their ads. And when the *Voice* started, they started out in the middle of the month. We came out at the beginning of the month, they came out

once a month in the middle of the month, and people could justify advertising in both. But they copied everything. They copied our rate card, our rates, our layout, everything. And they had this website. Bruce was really into the website.

DEUTSCH: That was just the beginning probably of ...

ASHABRANNER: Of just the beginning of it, right. And so it really put us on notice. And the thing is that people couldn't say no to the Robeys just like they wouldn't say no to us, because they are starting a new venture and everybody's friends.

DEUTSCH: Well that is part of the neighborhood ...

ASHABRANNER: Right. So we could hardly blame them. Anyway, it was very good for us because we worked harder on our relationships with advertisers. We really focused on the quality of the writing more, making sure that we were covering every possible thing that was going on. This is before any listservs [electronic mailing lists] or any of that stuff. So still, in terms of getting news out, we just became so much more professional than we were.

DEUTSCH: How long did the *Voice* last?

ASHABRANNER: I would [say] six or seven years, and then they sold it to Davis Kennedy and it went down completely because people didn't have any ...

DEUTSCH: Investment.

ASHABRANNER: ... investment in Davis Kennedy. And we were not home delivering anymore.

DEUTSCH: When did that stop, the home delivery?

ASHABRANNER: Our home delivery service was Hal Gordon at Community Action [Group]. And we had trained his guys to do the home delivery. Jean-Keith had gone out in the truck and bought them pizza and trained them to go up and down the streets.

DEUTSCH: And so you paid ...

ASHABRANNER: Paid Hal. And when the *Voice* started, Jean-Keith said to Hal, "Look, you know, this newspaper is starting and I just wanted to make sure that there is no question if they come to you about delivering the paper, you will not ..."

DEUTSCH: "You work for us."

ASHABRANNER: “You work for us.” And next thing we know, we saw Hal’s people out delivering the *Voice*. We went and talked to Hal and Jean-Keith was just irate. He said, “What kind of thing is this?” He even used his “black card.” You know, “We’re brothers together.”

DEUTSCH: With Hal, that was fair. [Laughter]

ASHABRANNER: Hal was just like, “Well, it’s business.” [Statements deleted.] He [broke his promise] as far as his commitment and promise to Jean-Keith. So we got another delivery person is what we did, and we trained that person. But then in a couple of years we decided we would just ... You know, *City Paper* wasn’t home delivered. So we just decided that we would take that expense out and it’s been fine. People get used to the fact that it’s not home delivered.

DEUTSCH: But widely available.

ASHABRANNER: Right.

DEUTSCH: What’s your function now? Well, your title now, first of all.

ASHABRANNER: My title is Executive Editor and I do actually some editing, copy-editing.

DEUTSCH: Do you like that? You must, otherwise you probably wouldn’t do it.

ASHABRANNER: I don’t know that I would say I like it. I’m very good at it. I like actually rewriting things. So mostly what I do is have meetings with people. I have a sales meeting once a week. I talk to Andrew [Lightman, Managing Editor] every morning, sort of set out what are the priorities of the day. Carolina handles our finance.

DEUTSCH: Carolina?

ASHABRANNER: Lopez. She’s been with us about 10 years. She’s from Colombia. She started as a calendar editor, just typing in calendar. But she has an MBA [in Public Policy from Columbia University SIPA]. As her English has gotten better, she has really worked her way [up], she’s our third leg. Andrew, me and Carolina. [We] are the sort of management team.

DEUTSCH: And Andrew’s got some longevity in the job.

ASHABRANNER: [In mid-1993] I had a part-time salesperson ad in the paper and he applied for it. He was in the middle of doing his [PhD] dissertation which was on 18th century [politics in India].

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

DEUTSCH: Perfect background to become the editor of the Rag, to do sales!

ASHABRANNER: [Laughs] Right! I threw it [his resume] in the trash and then he came back the next day and he actually sold himself. I thought, "Well my goodness, if he can be so persistent then maybe he'll actually make a good salesperson." What he was looking for was a way to interact with people because he was spending all day poring through old manuscripts and things and he wanted contact with people. So he started and he worked with us for several years, then he got a job with the *Washington Post*. They were just starting their website, and he was selling people the website. And then he went on to another big company called Global Crossing selling also web kind of stuff. But then he came back to us. This is his, I guess, third time with us and he is not going to go anywhere now, I don't think. He really likes what he does ...

DEUTSCH: ... and he's good at it.

ASHABRANNER: And he's good at it, right. So really what I do is have meetings and plan. That's sort of what I do. And I normally hire people. I'm involved in hiring.

DEUTSCH: Is Jean-Keith involved at all anymore?

ASHABRANNER: Yeah, he's definitely involved, but not on a regular basis. I mean, he still does his jazz column, and then he just has opinions about things. Like we have a new design for the paper that just started in January, and so we're refining that and he's very interested in the way the paper looks. He's always been really interested in that. So definitely in the sense that ...

DEUTSCH: Does he write the jazz column every month?

ASHABRANNER: Yes. And he's been doing that for about probably 15 years.

DEUTSCH: Does he play? Is he a musician?

ASHABRANNER: No.

DEUTSCH: An appreciator?

ASHABRANNER: He's an appreciator. Right.

DEUTSCH: So what do you see as the challenges ahead? What's the next thing? I mean, obviously the whole technology change was a huge thing.

ASHABRANNER: Yes, it was. Right.

DEUTSCH: From a thing that you're cutting out ...

ASHABRANNER: From a situation, cutting out. Exactly. And to where we are now, which is everything is done on desktop publishing and it goes over the internet to the printer. It's still trucked back to us, but everything else is changed. And we've gone through that whole ... In fact, in the late 90s, we bought a \$50,000 typesetting machine which was the latest and greatest thing. You could actually do typesetting in your own place, and ...

DEUTSCH: And it immediately became obsolete!

ASHABRANNER: In a year! We had to hire someone to come and carry it away. We couldn't even give it to Eastern Europe. [Laughter] There was some organization that was sending technology to Eastern Europe. They totally rejected our \$50,000 machine because now suddenly desktop publishing was it. I mean, *that* quickly. A whole industry just got wiped out. Unfortunately, we were a year too early in having the money to buy it. Of course, we are conscious that newspapers, print newspapers, are going through transition.

DEUTSCH: To say the least.

ASHABRANNER: But fortunately, community newspapers seem to be a very strong. The strongest niche of all the newspapers ...

DEUTSCH: That's so interesting.

ASHABRANNER: ... are the community papers. They still are holding on: *Uptown Citizen*, the *Georgetowner*, they're all sort of there.

DEUTSCH: Why do you think that is?

ASHABRANNER: I'm not really sure why, because people can get information on listservs. You know if you're really interested ...

DEUTSCH: And there are certainly wonderful listservs. I mean, I'm thinking of the MOTH [Mothers on the Hill] listserv, which just has a huge amount of ...

ASHABRANNER: Right. It has a huge amount of [information]. But really when you look at it, most of what is on the MOTH are things to do with children. There's "I'm selling a size 2 pair of shoes," that kind

of thing. And then there's advice that people get from the MOTH: "My kid is crying at night," and everybody weighs in.

DEUTSCH: Yes.

ASHABRANNER: But more it's like the new Hill East. The new Hill East is a listserv that is really focused more on news kinds of things in the new Hill East area [an area bounded by 14th and 19th Streets SE, Independence Avenue to the north and the Southeast Freeway to the south]. So if there's somebody who is going door to door trying to scam people, that would be there. If somebody sees somebody building something and doesn't see a permit, it will go on there and people will investigate.

Actually the listservs are very important to us because we can see when there's something that a lot of people seem to be interested in. We don't have to live on H Street or around there to know that people are really happy or not happy about the streetcar.

DEUTSCH: Right.

ASHABRANNER: You can see it and you can know whether to write something about it, whether is it important enough to a large number of people for us to actually ...

DEUTSCH: Right. So you follow all those listservs.

ASHABRANNER: We follow all of them and we've upgraded our website so that we're selling web ads now. There are categories of advertisers that we've lost over the years, like summer camps used to be a big. We used to have a lot of summer camp ads and they all went to the web. But now we're getting people coming back because they realize that they need to somehow get people to go to their website. You have maybe smaller ads that are driving people to the website. And we just noticed in the last couple of years these categories. The other one was continuing education. That sort of went to the web and now it's coming back again. But we're always having to stay ahead, trying to think about where different categories of ads are going. We had a huge boost with the charter schools. Because the charter schools are required to advertise to ...

DEUTSCH: To make their process known.

ASHABRANNER: They are required to recruit from the city. They cannot just recruit from a neighborhood. And we are an inexpensive way with our three newspapers.

DEUTSCH: We need to talk about that.

ASHABRANNER: We have *East of the River*. We have *Mid-City DC*, which is Logan Circle, Shaw, Bloomingdale.

DEUTSCH: Did they all come out of the office over here?

ASHABRANNER: Yes.

DEUTSCH: So *East of the River*, *Mid-City DC*.

ASHABRANNER: *Mid-City DC*. That's Logan, Shaw, 14th and U Street. And then the *Hill Rag*. So we get every part of DC except for Ward 3.

DEUTSCH: Uh huh.

ASHABRANNER: There's no other place east of the river to advertise.

DEUTSCH: Now I assume they have different editors, these two.

ASHABRANNER: They have. Yes, they have. Well, they have different writers. They don't have different editors. We have a copy editor that does those two papers. A separate copy editor.

DEUTSCH: But that's a huge thing to suddenly take on. A whole new neighborhood.

ASHABRANNER: Yeah, it is. [Laughs] It is. But *East of the River* is, I guess, 10 years old at least. The way we make our money on them is that we sell all three papers to the government, to the DC government, and that's really where most of the income comes from, in those two papers. So we'll sell an ad for unemployment compensation and we'll publish it in all three papers and you get a discount for like 10 percent off for two papers, 20 percent off for three papers.

DEUTSCH: I see.

ASHABRANNER: So in that sense we make a profit on them. Not a lot of a profit, but they are profitable. There are not very many businesses east of the river, so we really depend on school advertising and the government advertising for *East of the River*. And then *Mid-City DC*, we really need to hire a salesperson for that paper.

DEUTSCH: There are a lot of businesses around there.

ASHABRANNER: A lot of businesses. And we don't ... It's hard when you hire a salesperson and they're here [Capitol Hill]. They start, we may hire somebody and say we really want you to focus over in mid-city DC, but it's so easy, there's so much business here that we don't even get to. And they

eventually just start moving, and the next thing you know they're selling Capitol Hill. But *East of the River* I'm sure is 12 years old at least, and *Mid-City DC* is probably 10. It's hard to remember. But they have their own sets of writers, so they are dealing with their own community kinds of issues, and their own restaurant reviews.

DEUTSCH: Are they are big as the *Hill Rag*?

ASHABRANNER: No, no. They are about between 60 and 70 pages each time, and the *Hill Rag* is 160. I don't know how it gets [to be that size]. It's just so huge.

DEUTSCH: It is so huge. I was just looking at the latest one yesterday and thinking, "This is huge!"

ASHABRANNER: Yeah.

DEUTSCH: Ok, let's talk a little bit about CHAMPS [Capitol Hill Association of Merchants and Professionals] because that will lead us to the [Capitol Hill Community] Foundation.

ASHABRANNER: Well, CHAMPS, I don't know what year it started, but Jean-Keith and Don Denton were the ones that decided that we needed to have a business association, and they went around talking to Jack Mahoney and Drew Scallan to get this thing going.

DEUTSCH: This would be in the 80s?

ASHABRANNER: Uh huh. Probably around mid-80s. And we all met at Tunnickliff's one evening to vote on the name, CHAMPS. Everybody was committing \$250 to hire somebody, because it was very clear that nobody had time. We were all small business people. Nobody had time to be an administrator of this thing, and so we decided we would hire somebody part-time.

DEUTSCH: Who came up with the name CHAMPS?

ASHABRANNER: You know, I don't know. But we all loved it because it makes such sense. I'm not sure if Don [Denton] or Steve [Cymrot] was the first President of CHAMPS. You know they would know. And I don't remember actually the Foundation starting. What I remember is that at some point Steve called me up and said he wanted to start the Foundation and was looking for people to be on the first Foundation board. And I said, "Sure, I'll be on it."

DEUTSCH: Why not!

ASHABRANNER: Why not. I know that in the beginning, of course, CHAMPS was the CHAMPS Foundation. [Clarification: the organization now known as the Capitol Hill Community Foundation was

originally the CHAMPS Foundation. For more discussion about this, see Stephanie Deutsch's 2010 Overbeck Project interview with Steve and Nicky Cymrot, http://www.capitolhillhistory.org/interviews/2010/Cymrot_Steve_Nicky.pdf.]

DEUTSCH: Right, it was part of CHAMPS.

ASHABRANNER: We were gathering money from business people to give it away, and it was very small amounts of money. We weren't thinking of it at that time as anything except for a business foundation.

And it was a way, when people come from schools to get money, the CHAMPS Foundation would give them money, instead of individual people having to fork out ...

DEUTSCH: ... to save the individual, to save the business owners from ...

ASHABRANNER: ... from that kind of ... So, honestly, I don't remember anything about those early days of the Foundation.

DEUTSCH: You were on the Hill Preschool Board.

ASHABRANNER: I was on the Hill Preschool Board, which was Wee Care then. And I had been on that board since Damian [son] started, so for four or five years. I was hosting the board meeting and I woke up the next morning feeling tingly in my hands and around my face. I went into get Giancarlo [son] ready for school, because they were now at the International School, and I fell down. And I said to Giancarlo, "Go get your father." I got up, and we took the kids to school, and I was feeling terrible on the way back and I said, "You've got stop at the hospital." So we went up to GW [George Washington University Hospital] and this young internist said to me, "Can you walk in a straight line.?" And I said, "Of course, what do you mean? I'm not drunk!"

DEUTSCH: I just feel bad.

ASHABRANNER: Well, I couldn't walk in a straight line. And she said, "Can you touch your finger to your nose?" And I couldn't. So she said, "You need to go home and get ready to come back into the hospital, and I'm going to have a neurologist look at you." And so I went home and started feeling terrible again, went back in, and the neurologist took one look and said, "You've got Guillain Barré Syndrome."

DEUTSCH: Really?

ASHABRANNER: Yes.

DEUTSCH: How do you spell that?

ASHABRANNER: G-u-i-l-l-a -i-n and Barré is B-a-r-r-é with an accent and Syndrome.

DEUTSCH: What was the symptom that told him?

ASHABRANNER: Well, at that point I was just completely falling to pieces. I was throwing up, I couldn't control my movements at all. And he fortunately was an expert in this, and I was really lucky because a lot of times it's not ...

DEUTSCH: You might think it was a stroke or something like that.

ASHABRANNER: It could be a stroke, it could be just a terrible stomach virus, because you're throwing up and things. The problem is that if you don't catch it ... In most people what happens is your neurons, your antibodies, start turning on your nerves. So most people have a flu or a cold before they [get it] and I had had a cold. And the antibodies, instead of attacking the cold germs, start attacking the myelin sheath on the nerves. And you become paralyzed. [In] most people, a lot of people, it just starts in their legs and it might get up to their knees. But for other people—and they don't know why—it goes all the way up your body and you can't breathe.

DEUTSCH: Oh God.

ASHABRANNER: So, if you're paralyzed, you don't breathe. But a lot of times people are sent home, and then they die.

DEUTSCH: So you were admitted.

ASHABRANNER: I was admitted, and the next day it had reached my lungs and they had to do a tracheotomy to keep me going. And so I was completely paralyzed for three months in ICU. So there are my kids—I dropped them off at school, and then I'm gone. My parents came and moved from Williamsburg to take care of the kids, and Jean-Keith had the paper to get out. It all had to keep going.

DEUTSCH: And how old were the kids at this point?

ASHABRANNER: Giancarlo was five, Damian was six, and Olivia was a year and a half. She didn't know anything. She was okay because she ...

DEUTSCH: In some ways little ones ...

ASHABRANNER: She would just say, "My mommy can't walk anymore." But Giancarlo went completely off the deep end. He just had a couple of years of real abandonment fears. I recovered with no

problem, but basically I had to relearn to walk again. All of your muscles atrophy in that period of time. I had to relearn walking.

DEUTSCH: Lots of physical therapy.

ASHABRANNER: Lots of physical therapy. And it took me a year to really be back to where I was really functioning well. And Andrew always remembers this, he had just started that August ...

DEUTSCH: Oh he had?

ASHABRANNER: And all of a sudden I was in the hospital, and he was pressed into babysitting duty, because Jean-Keith was racing to the hospital and I was in crisis after crisis of pneumonia, and all kinds of things like that were happening all the time. And Andrew remembers trying to put the VCR [video cassette recorder] on for her, and he had no idea how to do this, and she's looking at him like, "What a stupid adult!" You know, she's like a year and a half. But everybody was sort of pressed into service to try to support the family and the paper so it could keep going.

But the Foundation ... I remember I actually had been at a Foundation meeting a couple of days before this happened because I remember Nicky saying to me after I came home how she thought I had looked really great for some reason at this meeting. [Laughter] [That] I looked so healthy and pretty, and all of a sudden I was just in the hospital and they were getting all these dire reports. But I don't remember what we were doing with the Foundation at that point. It's all just a blur.

DEUTSCH: Well, in my time on the Foundation, you've been active on the grants committee.

ASHABRANNER: Right, I was the grants committee for several years.

DEUTSCH: And you've certainly also been active with getting the Foundation's story out there.

ASHABRANNER: Right. And I know that I was helpful when we were looking for organizations to give money to, because we had the *Fagon Community Guide* which had this whole set of community resources that we did every year.

DEUTSCH: When did you start that, the *Fagon Community Guide*?

ASHABRANNER: I think ... let me just look.

DEUTSCH: The *Fagon Community Guide* started in 1992.

ASHABRANNER: Yes, and actually the [Capitol Hill] Restoration Society started the *Guide*. They had published a guide a couple of years before, but nothing like this. It was more just a paper, a kind of paper

guide. And they wanted to do it again but they didn't have the means to do it. They didn't have the sales people, they didn't have the graphic art people, and so they came to us and asked us if we would do it because they couldn't do it. And we said, "Sure, we'll take it over." So it was really their idea.

DEUTSCH: And it's done yearly.

ASHABRANNER: It's done yearly. It hasn't been done yearly all the way through, but probably for the last ten years easily. We'd miss a year here and there. And now we devote a lot of the front section of the *Guide* to pictures of the different festivals the previous year, people who died. So we have a passages section, the winners of the [Capitol Hill Community Foundation] Achievement Awards. So we've turned it into kind of a yearbook.

DEUTSCH: Nice.

ASHABRANNER: And then we have articles on, for example, garden resources in the area or the style of our Capitol Hill homes. We have the six major styles, that kind of thing. So, if you want to have a block party, how you go about doing it. We've taken a lot of the information that's now available online, especially government services. There used to be no place to get that information, and we had pages and pages of it in the *Guide*. But now there is.

DEUTSCH: What do you do if you have a tree that ...

ASHABRANNER: Right. So we have de-emphasized that and have put in what we hope are more useful articles to surround the ads. We always have a piece on all the new restaurants that have opened up. There's tons of them.

DEUTSCH: Yeah.

ASHABRANNER: The new restaurants that have opened up, new schools. We still do our community resources section, which is listing all the nonprofit organizations that work on Capitol Hill, and there is a section for volunteering. It's still a useful book, but we have to think about it more in terms of making it a readable book.

So I guess the Foundation is my major volunteer effort. I was on the Capitol Hill Group Ministry Board for about four years. I can't remember when exactly. But I think it was in the early part of this century. School boards, and that sort of thing.

DEUTSCH: Which schools? You said Wee Care.

ASHABRANNER: Washington International School and Wee Care.

DEUTSCH: Okay, Washington International.

ASHABRANNER: And I was on the Board of Wee Care for at least three years after my kids were out of that school. You get so invested in these organizations.

DEUTSCH: I'm jumping ahead a little bit, but tell me about your kids. I want to make sure I get the names right. So it's Giancarlo. G-i-a-n ...

ASHABRANNER: ... c-a-r-l-o.

DEUTSCH: That's one word.

ASHABRANNER: Uh huh.

DEUTSCH: Okay, and Damian.

ASHABRANNER: D-a-m-i-a-n.

DEUTSCH: And Damian's the one who's married.

ASHABRANNER: No, Giancarlo's married.

DEUTSCH: Okay.

ASHABRANNER: Giancarlo's married, his wife is English and her name is Lucy. And their son is named Neo, N-e-o.

DEUTSCH: Neo. What does that mean?

ASHABRANNER: Giancarlo's favorite movie is *The Matrix* and that's the main character from *The Matrix*. [Laughter]

DEUTSCH: And how old is Neo?

ASHABRANNER: A year and a half.

DEUTSCH: That's so cute. And Damian and Olivia?

ASHABRANNER: And Olivia-Jenè.

DEUTSCH: And Olivia's in New York. Do you think any of them will be at the [Capitol Hill Community Achievement Awards] dinner?

ASHABRANNER: They will all be at the dinner.

DEUTSCH: Wonderful. And Jean-Keith is from Jamaica, I know. And you and he go there often?

ASHABRANNER: No, I haven't been in probably five years. He goes every year.

DEUTSCH: This isn't primarily about him, but is he working on the paper still besides writing his jazz column?

ASHABRANNER: No, but in the sense that we both own the paper, he certainly is interested, he often thinks about articles that we should be covering. You know it is our family livelihood, so ...

DEUTSCH: So it's important in that way.

ASHABRANNER: It's important. The thing is that, if it wasn't for him ... I may have turned the business into a business. But if it wasn't for him, we wouldn't have this business. Because in the years when we were having financial problems and just barely hanging on, it was his drive that kept us going. Even when he was running around with a one-page flyer, he always said that this was going to be one of the best community newspapers in the United States, if not the world.

DEUTSCH: What gave him that?

ASHABRANNER: I don't know. He'd always loved *The New Yorker*, and he liked the way the writing was, and he liked the fact that it had art on its cover. He said early on that it was going to be better than *The New Yorker*. [Laughter]

DEUTSCH: Well, as someone who has written for the *Hill Rag*, that makes me feel very proud.

ASHABRANNER: And he knew how crazy it was. Here he was, this crazy Jamaican running around ...

DEUTSCH: It's a bit improbable.

ASHABRANNER: [Laughter] Running around Capitol Hill, persuading Ron Sachs that he definitely had to advertise. He remembers going into National Capital Bank and somebody sort of pushing him out the door like, "Who is this crazed person trying to leave flyers all over the bank?"

DEUTSCH: Right.

ASHABRANNER: But he persevered. He made friends with Dale Morton, who owned Morton's Pharmacy, and Ron Sachs, who owned Congressional Photo. Julie Gordon.

DEUTSCH: Julie Gordon?

ASHABRANNER: Julie Gordon. Jules Gordon.

DEUTSCH: Jules. So that's a man?

ASHABRANNER: That's the man who owned the Congressional Liquor Store. And Don and Dale Denton were sort of starting their business, and Jean Keith was always a really good friend of theirs. And they were advertising. And we had a board at that time, an advisory board. Jack Mahoney, Don Denton, Dale Morton were all part of our advisory board.

DEUTSCH: Really solid sort of local people.

ASHABRANNER: And that helped because we ran their names on the masthead and they were respectable members of the ...

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

TAPE 2/SIDE 1

DEUTSCH: [We are talking about Jean-Keith Fagon and] how without him Melissa would have given up.

ASHABRANNER: I would have given up. Our accountant was saying, "You know you're going bankrupt. There's just no way that you can continue like this." It took us years to recover from that one bad decision of going weekly and then trying to stabilize it biweekly. And Don Denton was such an important person. While other people were leaving the paper during that time—it was very thin, we couldn't keep it going on a timely basis—Don just stuck with us. He [his ad for Dale Denton Real Estate] was on the back cover ...

DEUTSCH: Always.

ASHABRANNER: He was very well respected. It really helped us to get other real estate companies because he maintained that—really as an act of charity, I really feel.

DEUTSCH: He would probably say it's an investment in the community.

ASHABRANNER: He would have said that, yes. It's funny because, for a time there, Don was so important to the community. There wasn't anything that went on that he wasn't funding or helping to organize. There was just that period of time. And it's interesting now because times change. But at that time, he really did support us and we turned the corner and ratcheted up and went on to a very profitable and substantial business. But it could have gone either way.

DEUTSCH: What are the big issues that you see ahead for the Hill?

ASHABRANNER: Well, I think that the Hill will maintain what we like about it, which is that it still seems to be a small village in the middle of a city. People do know each other. I think that people for some reason are interested in knowing each other. I mean, that's why something like the Literary [Feast, a Capitol Hill Community Foundation fundraiser] is so successful. People are interested, and I don't think that's the case everywhere. I mean, we do run into people, for example, that have not read the *Hill Rag*, and I'm always really surprised that it'll be somebody who lives out by RFK [Robert F. Kennedy] Stadium and just has not picked it up. I think, "My God, you've been here four years, why wouldn't you?" And they'll say, "We didn't realize it was a local paper," or something like that.

DEUTSCH: They thought it was just advertising.

ASHABRANNER: Right. And in fact we have started doing home delivery. We divided the Hill up into quadrants. Have you gotten the paper at your house?

DEUTSCH: Not recently, I don't feel like.

ASHABRANNER: Well you should have. We divided the Hill up into quadrants, and so a quarter of our press run is being home delivered every month. Within four months, the whole Hill will be covered.

And we've done one round of it.

DEUTSCH: Oh, so a quarter of the Hill gets the home delivery each month. It's a different quarter.

ASHABRANNER: It's a different quarter. And we're doing it for marketing, just for those people who have not wandered out.

DEUTSCH: It's a good idea.

ASHABRANNER: And what it's delivered with—we're selling inserts to the bag so that menus and things like that ... The politicians have been putting in things in the last couple of months. So we're delivering it to one quarter, basically as a marketing tool. And there's a flyer in there that says "This is where the boxes are located near your house so if you like this paper you can pick it up." And so we'll probably do that for the rest of this year and then we'll see whether we want to continue it or not. But it's just for people who somehow missed it.

DEUTSCH: Olivia is in New York.

ASHABRANNER: Olivia is in New York. That's Giancarlo [in the background].

DEUTSCH: Where's Damian?

ASHABRANNER: Damian is working for the Department of Justice.

DEUTSCH: Right. So he's in DC.

ASHABRANNER: He's in DC. He lives up above H Street [NE].

DEUTSCH: Very hip.

ASHABRANNER: He loves it over there.

DEUTSCH: Yeah, yeah. And Giancarlo, they're moving to England?

ASHABRANNER: Probably, yes.

DEUTSCH: You mentioned that Jean-Keith loves the *New Yorker*. Cover art is one of the things that makes the *Hill Rag* somewhat distinctive.

ASHABRANNER: Right. Jean-Keith really for several years actually had artists that were creating covers for us, and then at some point it just became too difficult to be thinking of a subject for the piece of art. And we started using art from the Smithsonian or from local galleries, or an artist would just wander in with slides. He always wanted to maintain the integrity of the art. So many people advised us to put words on the cover saying what was inside—home and garden, spring special, whatever. He insisted that we not do that, and now it's just become a trademark that we just have a piece of art with a logo. They come from all over the place.

DEUTSCH: That was his vision?

ASHABRANNER: That was his vision. And it is like the *New Yorker* ...

DEUTSCH: You always look forward to seeing what it's going to be.

ASHABRANNER: Right. And people are always asking us, "Where do you get these? Where do you find all these pieces of art?" Of course, there are hundreds of artists, but almost all of the art that we use is local art. Now sometimes we use a Smithsonian piece or, like when [Richard] Diebenkorn was here [a 2012 exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery of Art], we put a Diebenkorn on the cover.

DEUTSCH: I assume you had to get permission.

ASHABRANNER: Oh yes. They're always happy to have us do that because we're publicizing usually a show, and they send us the high resolution images to put on the cover.

DEUTSCH: Well that must be fun.

ASHABRANNER: It is fun. The art director picks out a selection every month and I get to make the final choice. He'll give me ten different ones to choose from.

DEUTSCH: That's nice.

ASHABRANNER: Uh huh.

DEUTSCH: Any plans to retire?

ASHABRANNER: No, I talk about it all the time. I think there will probably be a natural time because my parents are 92, and at some point one of them is going to need more help than they have. Andrew and I talk about this quite a bit—if I suddenly had to go down to Williamsburg and stay for an indefinite time, is everything set up so that it can just go on? And it pretty much is. By phone, I can make sure what we need to have emphasized at any point is happening, and the staff is such a good staff. We've really worked on all of the procedures of getting the paper out on time and not having to stay late.

[When] the kids were little, we would be in the office with them in sleeping bags under the drawing table, and it would be [Jean-Keith] and me working until 4:00 in the morning. Then a courier would come and take this big box of flats and drive it to Philadelphia, and one of us would take half an hour nap and get up and take the kids to school. And the other one would take a nap and go and open the office. I mean, that went on for years. We missed Thanksgiving—my sister would be taking my kids down to Williamsburg for Thanksgiving because we hadn't finished the paper. And we were just working like dogs to get the paper out. But now there's a schedule. The paper goes out at 5:00 on a Thursday. You know, it's like a well-oiled machine now. The writers get their copy in on time. A copy editor. It just moves.

DEUTSCH: Did any of the kids ever have any interest in writing for the paper? After all that sleeping under the table ...

ASHABRANNER: [Laughter] They have all written for the paper at different times. Olivia did some music reviews. Damian is expressing a lot more interest in the business now. He's the only one. I think he suddenly realizes that there's actually a value to this. His boss at the Department of Justice lives on Capitol Hill, and so when he was introduced to her, she actually asked him if he was the Fagon of the *Fagon Guide*. And she was thrilled, so now he sees it as a more important thing than he did.

DEUTSCH: That background noise from his childhood.

ASHABRANNER: And also when he goes to bars and meets young women who want to write, he can say, "Well my ... "

DEUTSCH: " I have a connection."

ASHABRANNER: Right. "We're always looking for people to write for our website, if you'd like to do it."

END OF INTERVIEW