

**Jill Henricksen, Greater Frogtown Community Development Corp.**

Interviewed by Peter Myers at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul,  
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Q When did you begin working at the Greater Frogtown CDC?

A Well I began working at Greater Frogtown Community Development Corporation about 15-1/2 years ago. Coming from South Dakota and this mid-sized town where we didn't have vacant houses and we didn't have dis-investments to that extent. That was the first thing that shocked me coming here, was coming in and seeing so many beautiful homes completely vacant and just abandoned. So that was my learning curve – to realize that this does happen in the inner city and that communities, especially low income and very diverse communities do go through these cycles. And University Avenue kind of, at least at the east end of the Avenue in the Frogtown neighborhood area, kind of always exemplifies what's going on with the residential area around it. So any time that the residential neighborhood is kind of suffering, you will also see vacancies of commercial properties. And when the economy is good and people are employed and they've got disposable income, then the small businesses on University Avenue also thrive. So they do very much go hand in hand. Through my job at Greater Frogtown CDC we've gotten into so many homes and have met so many families. The interesting thing, I think, about Frogtown in that it's different from so many other communities is that it was always lived in by immigrants, by low-income communities. So the housing stock is very modest. A lot of it was railroad housing and so we've got skinny houses, 15-foot houses on 20-foot lots. And that's very common in Frogtown. And I think that's unique because when you go to the south side of University Avenue you get into where St. Anthony, which used to be the Rondo neighborhood, and you've got larger homes and homes – I wouldn't say with more historic value because certainly Frogtown is a historic neighborhood and it's all about historic value – but the housing stock is different there. And I think that's what makes Frogtown really special and that end of the Avenue really special because it was built by immigrants. And early on at the time, especially University Avenue, north of University Avenue, they were northern European. So there were Italian and Polish and German and all kinds of different European ethnicities and those communities were very much kind of segregated and they had their own churches and their own newspapers and that sort of thing. And that's very similar to what you see today in Frogtown. Lots of different immigrant groups, lots of different ethnicities. The newest population that's moving into that end of the Avenue is Somali. We've got the Latino population is growing. We've got lots of Hmong and Vietnamese and Cambodian families.

Q When was Frogtown settled initially?

A I think the initial wave was in the late 1800s. There are several houses in Frogtown that were built in 1880, 1882, 1884. So those houses, particularly, are closer to University Avenue so the further north you go, then they start having been built in the early 1900s. But the closer you go to University Avenue those houses were built in the 1800s.

Q Describe University Avenue to somebody who has never been here.

A You know, I think what I would do is describe the people, describe the business owners, describe the folks that live in Frogtown. To me that's where images are really brought to mind of the homes and the families and the dogs and the gardens and that kind of thing. For several years, University Avenue was pretty dis-invested. And it was originally built with a streetcar line running down the middle and since then it's auto-oriented and it's a very wide street and the sidewalks are very narrow. It's not...the University Avenue as it is now is not pedestrian friendly and so I often hear comments – and I completely agree – that University Avenue is pretty ugly, pretty desolate. So I'm looking forward to the light rail train coming to kind of bring back, in my mind, what would have been there originally with the streetcar line and lots of people out and about and moving around and going in and out of the storefronts. So I'm anxious because I think University Avenue can come back to life when that happens. And right now if somebody asks me about University Avenue, my mind goes to the neighborhoods and not necessarily to the street itself, the Avenue itself.

Q What role do you think University Avenue plays in the economic & civic life of the east metro?

A I think that it has been underutilized and that's also again why I'm really anxious to see the light rail come, because I think originally it was a connector route that connected St. Paul to Minneapolis and it was this main thoroughfare. And I think when interstate 94 was built, that's also what contributed to the...kind of the life moving out of University Avenue and some disinvestment because I think businesses may have gone where they would see more traffic because again, everything was more auto-oriented recently. So I think University Avenue just really got away from what it was originally and I think now, with light rail, I think that that could be brought back so that University Avenue is that major connector route for the east metro and for downtown St. Paul and certainly the neighborhoods along University Avenue to get over to Minneapolis and then from there be able to further take mass transit to get all over the metro area.

Q Talk about the Frogtown CDC.

A Greater Frogtown CDC is a nonprofit housing organization and we help small businesses with façade improvements and hooking them up with resources so that they can sustain themselves and kind of change with the times. Specifically we have been trying to build some transit-oriented developments so taller, more dense developments that are up to the street to help create that very pedestrian friendly, safe, vibrant street, to get eyes on the street again. So we just a few years ago recently created or finished the development of the Dale Street town homes and that was in partnership with Habitat for Humanity. Those were 16 three-story town home units right up to Dale Street, just north of University Avenue. The most recent project we completed was in partnership with some other community groups and that's Frogtown Square. It's a four-story, mixed-use development with senior housing above first floor retail and restaurant space. So again, the development that we're trying to promote is affordable, high quality housing, with retail space that's very close to the street and has a close interaction with the street and the pedestrians on the street. So folks are welcomed in to commercial space and people on the inside of the building look out and there's some connectivity there.

Q The Dale-University intersection was a troubled area for a long time in the 1980s. How did the community work to bring about a revival?

A I think plans for the redevelopment of that intersection and that corner, specifically, do go back 20 years and its before my time in the neighborhood. And it goes back to this very passionate fight to get the community back from the business owners who ran the pornographic theaters and the pornographic dance studios and the pornographic bookstores. So there was a lot of passion to drive that element out but then also to reclaim the land and the buildings for the community members. And the organizations that we are partnering with now – which is Neighborhood Development Center, Model Cities, St. Anthony NDC and Greater Frogtown CDC – we are all neighborhood-based organizations that worked together to come up with a really signature development there that the city can be proud of and community members can be proud of. So it really is kind of reclaiming that land. And it took a really long time. What the city did originally when they got out the dance studio – the Belmont I believe it was – they moved a police office into there, so it was a western district substation of the police station. The building was very ugly – there weren't any windows, the doors were locked all the time for security reasons, and in the back it was just a big parking lot where police cars were parked. But there was very little activity there. But the neighborhood got very used to that and even though it was not an open building that they could walk up to and walk into, just seeing the police cars in the parking lot made them feel better. So when we specifically started talking about redeveloping that area there was some push-back from the neighborhood because they were not ready to see the police station go, they were not ready to see the Lendway's restaurant go – even though the owner of Lendway's was ready to retire and was very eager to sell the business and to sell the building. So it wasn't necessarily a slam-dunk and I think it wasn't a slam-dunk because so much time had lagged. The fact that it did take 20 years. There was a lot of really positive energy early on and then people kind of got settled in and felt comfortable with what was there in the interim, even though that was never the plan. The plan was always...at the city level the plan was always to redevelop that intersection. So then when we did get our funding and we were able to secure the land and work out an agreement with the city, people in the neighborhood had gotten used to what was there and so it was not terribly easy to get the project going. But now that it's done I think people are extremely proud of it and it's something that everyone feels is an asset to the community.

Q Talk about the significance of the Rondo Community Library.

A The library building is five stories and there is a parking level and then the library. So there's three stories of housing above that. There's also some town homes that they built on St. Anthony, or Aurora Avenue. The library building was also a little controversial in the neighborhood because original renderings that were shown to the community is not really what the building looks like today. So there was some disappointment. The rendering that was done kind of at the beginning had the front door at the corner of University and Dale and it was very welcoming and it was pushed back a little bit so that the sidewalks were wider. So what ended up getting built, I think, was a little disappointing to people. But in any case, the community really embraces the library. I think they open at 10:00 and every morning when I drive by or when I'm around there's a line out the door waiting for the library to open. When I'm in the library it's packed with people. It's such a positive, fun, vibrant place to be. So I think folks are really excited about the community activity and engagement that's going on at the library, even though the design of the library changed a little bit.

When we were first created, Greater Frogtown CDC rented office space at a couple different locations. At one point, probably four or five years ago, the owner of the Dale Street Greenhouse approached us saying that she was looking for a buyer. The business had been on the market for several years, and she could not find a buyer; she couldn't find anyone who was interested in continuing to operate and own the greenhouse. She asked us if we would be interested in the land or the buildings to do something with. So we went through a creative process to see what we could do with the building and now we're officed there and it's kind of fun to tell the story because we've got black and white original pictures of the property when it was a house and then the greenhouse is next to it and the business goes back to the 1880s. And when we renovated the building, we found great artifacts and old newspapers and even a wedding invitation to come to a wedding that was held at the house and the date on that was 1884, I believe. So that was really fun. And we had a neighborhood resident who's an artist paint a mural on the garage wall that looks out into our community garden area and it's of the original house and kind of a street scene that has the greenhouses there.

Q What would you like to see in 5 or 10 years?

A I would love to see University Avenue and the surrounding neighborhoods be very vibrant again. I would love to see more people out on the street walking up and down, going into the various shops and restaurants. When you walk through the neighborhood I would love to see no more vacancies, vacant houses. I would love to see the housing stock fixed up. Right now a lot of it is in disrepair and there's a lot of disinvestment and that largely is in part to the economy. There's a lot of unemployment in the neighborhood now and a lot of people are hurting. But when I look into the future I would hope that the same people who live there in the neighborhood today, that they're still there, that they are able to stay in their homes. But I would hope that their homes would be improved, their job prospects would improve, the businesses in the neighborhood would improve, the safety in the area would improve. I really think that Frogtown can again be a very vibrant, very safe, kind of fun place to visit and to live in.