

Joyce Williams, Frogtown Square resident and former Rondo resident

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Olivet Congregational Church, St. Paul, January 26, 2012

Q Let's start with your earliest memories of Rondo.

A I was raised at 528 Carroll and I went to kindergarten at McKinley and then my parents sent me to St. Peter Claver, which was about a mile away. I remember going down to the Rondo Stryker, getting on the bus, going down Rondo to Chatsworth or Oxford and getting off the bus and going one block to school. I remember my neighborhood being very friendly. Everybody grew up...if we were poor, we didn't know it, you know? Because we played all the time, outside. And then I remember when nighttime came there was an arc light right in front of my house and one across the street and there was people that had porches. So us kids would play out in the summertime, play tag, hide and go seek, jump rope, everything. And when it got to be about 10:00 we'd come in. That's what I remember. It was a good neighborhood.

Q What cross streets were you near at that Carroll address?

A Kent and Mackubin.

Q OK.

A Where Martin Luther King is now is in my backyard.

Q Oh.

A They took my house from 528 Carroll and they moved it to 439 Dayton. And it's on the corner there and I've often wanted to go knock on the door and tell the people I was raised in that house. But now that I have gray hair maybe they won't be so intimidated.

Q What's the address now?

A It was 439 Dayton. It was 528 Carroll. There were twin houses on 528 Carroll and so they tried to move the one house that was next to me – it was 530 Carroll – and they dropped it on the chimney, so they had to demolish that. Then they moved my house to 439 Dayton, which was just on Arundel and Dayton. And my grandmother had 439 Carroll, which was right down the block on the corner of Arundel and Carroll right before that steep hill. Nobody could drive up it in the 50s because too much snow, so we used to take our cardboard or sleds if we were lucky and go down that hill and slide. So childhood memories.

Q What else do you remember of the Rondo neighborhood?

A Early era. First I have to tell you my grandmother had a house on top of the hill – Arundel and Carroll – and she gardened all the way down to the middle, all her property, going down the hill in the summertime. So I had chores going down there to help her plant, and then I'd go down there and help her weed, and then I'd go down there and help her harvest. So I learned how to garden. So that was my summer. She'd give me a little change – that was my summer job. But I remember walking from my house to the

Hollow in the wintertime and going ice skating and all we had there was a shack where they had a potbelly stove to keep us warm. And we'd walk back. And then I remember walking to the Faust Theater on Dale and University and going to the show and seeing three movies on Sunday for 49 cents. We'd meet everybody; everybody would be there, everybody was friendly. I remember that. And we'd walk back and on the way back we knew everybody because the black community at that time was very small. I don't know if you want to know this, but when they originated, they originated down there where Regions Hospital is now and it was called Rex Court. So the railroad was down there on 4th Street and I think Jackson. So when they would migrate here somebody would say, well where's the black community? And they'd point them down Jackson to where Rex Court was. And then – this was like in the early 20s, before my mother was born, around my grandma's time – and then they migrated going west. I don't remember Rex Court but I remember seeing pictures of it. They had dirt roads and they had...my aunt was in a cart that had a goat. So I remember all that. But anyway, back to my day...I remember, like I said, going to St. Peter Claver and walking home in the summertime and meeting all the neighbors and they all knew my mom and my dad because they had all grown up together. So it was a friendly neighborhood, it was a village. We grew up in a village where if you did something wrong, they'd tan your hide, send you home and call your mother. And by the time you got home again, you got another one. So they were strict disciplinarians, but they cared about the children. There was a lot of love, you know, and a lot of hugs.

Q So what happened after the freeway came in? Were you living at 528 Carroll when the house had to be moved?

A Yeah, I was living at 528 Carroll when they started the freeway down at the Capital. And they dug a hole all the way through and I was living there then. I remember walking from my house at 528 Carroll – and because it was a shorter line between point, straight line – so we'd walk from my house and go to Mechanic Arts High School, which was behind the Capital. So we went straight line all the way through the dirt and whatever because to catch the 16 on University, that wasn't straight line. That was seven blocks away, so you might as well walk seven blocks this way, you know? And I remember how they had to put a walkway at Mackubin, from the south side to the north side. They put another one at Grotto, from the south side to the north side. They had another walkway at Chatsworth, for south side to north side. And then, this was all dirt down there so they had to make a way for people to walk across. Well I remember at one point a little boy got on his bicycle, couple times went from the south side to the north side, and got hit on St. Anthony because he went flying off the walkway. So finally after two children got killed they decided to put a gate there, to slow that bicycle traffic down. So I remember that and it stayed that way from the 50s until the early 70s. And I didn't find out until I got to Northwest Airlines that St. Paul was the only capital city in the United States that didn't have a freeway from the Capital, actual building, to the airport. And that's what they were trying to do. So they were trying to go through Highland because that would put them right at the airport, but there was a big stink about that, so they had to go all the way around to south Minneapolis, through another poor neighborhood and tear that down to make the freeway go that far. Well then that made the freeway go beyond the airport. So then they began to make 35E. So that plot of land, which was about two blocks long, stayed a freeway to go nowhere for about 15 years. Poor planning. I mean, they put it on paper, but they didn't put people in it.

Q Pretty typical in that day I think. A lot of engineers had great plans but they didn't think about people.

A No they didn't; and even today.

Q Talk about your work with Northwest Airlines.

A I started there in 1973. I started as a flight attendant, but my first ride was to Fargo, ND, on Christmas Eve at 32 below zero. So I had a small child. So I had gone to Marshall High School and to Mechanic Arts High School with a young lady and she became a flight attendant teacher at NW. So I went there. She wasn't the one that got me the job but when I went there I found out that was her and we knew from our history. So I told her, I think I'm going to have to quit because I can't do this to my kid – not be there on Christmas when he's opening his presents. So she told me, well there's an opening in the office. She says, it's less money. And I said, I'll take it. So I went into the office and my first day there, of course you had to wear...if you wore a pantsuit it had to be coordinated pantsuit; they had a dress code. And my first day there – it was like 1973 – of course we had bellbottom pantsuits, platform shoes, and I had Afro puffs out to here. So these ladies from Lakeville, Rosemount, and they looked at me like I came out of the circus. So I felt intimidated of course. I went back home – I was living with my grandma – and I told her, Nana I don't know if I can go back. I told her what happened. My grandma said, God's got a plan for you. And so I stayed there for 35 years. Retired. Of course, I was going to try to retire at 55, take my stock – by this time my daughter had gone through esthology classes and I was going to set her up in a shop and be the bookkeeper and the babysitter, because now when I went to NW I'm an accountant now, I'm a bean counter what they call. So anyway, then all of a sudden NW wasn't paying us our stock back. So that made that plan a little bit later. So then I stayed there working until a certain time they were going to merge with Delta. So we had heard the buzz but nobody had said anything special. So anyway, finally they came to us and said they were going to offer us a package and we had to have the papers signed by July 31st. Well at this time I'm 61. But July 31st, fine. I sat down, put all my little ducks in a row, I said I can go. I can go. So I turned 62 on August the 11th, I left NW September 28th and began my retired life. I don't regret a day.

Q So compared to when you were growing up, how would you describe University Avenue in the 1980s?

A I'd first start with when it was when I was growing up. It was a nice place; businesses all over and they had streetcars going down University Avenue. That's what I remember, ok? So then after that along came the buses. The streetcar tracks went away but they still kept the businesses, you know? And they had drugstores down there that had soda fountains on it, and they had grocery stores and everything. We had the Faust show so we would go to the Faust show every Sunday and sit there from noon to 6:00 and see our three movies and then we would go home. Well then after that, as I got older, the Faust show became a porno place and then they had a pornographic shop across the street. Then they had the problem with prostitution. So I remember I was a young teenager and my mother was outraged, as most of the parents in the neighborhood were. So they began to picket University Avenue and take down the license plate numbers of johns and the whole nine yards. So they had a hard time getting that cleaned up, but they eventually did which I have to say it was a neighborhood. Everybody grouped together with a common goal to get that cleaned up

like it had used to be. So after they got it cleaned up then everybody moved somewhere else. They tore the building down and whatever. I remember that.

Q During that time, can you recall what some of the other buildings were on the other three corners?

A On the corner outside the Faust was a drugstore. Right across the street was a restaurant and then there was a record shop next to that. And kitty corner there was a bar. And then on the southeast side I think it was a car dealership.

Q Do you remember if there was a restaurant called Lendways?

A Yes, I remember Lendways.

Q Do you recall what that was all about and where it was?

A It was on University and Dale and it was sitting where my building is now. There was a bar on the corner and then there was Lendways next to it. It was a restaurant. I remember that name. I know where it was. So it had to be about 500 block or 600 block of University somewhere.

Q Talk about the period when you had to move from your home in Rondo.

A Well, they had come through by then and dug the hole for the freeway. My mom worked at the post office. She worked nights and she would...somebody, Control Data was trying to build a building on the ground, which was Rondo to Carroll. And her house kept on being broke in. Now she was one of the last houses on the block and they wouldn't offer her the money she wanted. So she stayed until she could get the money. So the last time that they broke in, she was, I remember her just crying because she had to work and they were breaking in after she went to work in the morning. So somebody told her about Councilwoman Rosalie Butler. She had a talk show. So my mother got on the talk show with Rosalie Butler and Rosalie Butler told her the squeaky wheel gets the oil. And my mother began to talk about her experience being a homeowner and her house being paid for and them not giving her the money that it would have been worth if it had been taken out and put in another area. And so that was her first part...I remember her being so nervous and me being the one that kept egging her on, you know. So once she did that then they gave her the money that that house deserved if it had been put in another area. And then they moved the house and then gave her the money and then she built another house. But in this time, between all of this was going on, she had got the little fire under her and so she decided to go down there and talk to these people about this prostitution thing. So she had some other people in the neighborhood that she knew that were doing the same thing. I think his name was Ron Pauline – he was in the neighborhood and he knew my mom and so he talked to her and so they got an organization going and that's how that happened.

Q There was quite a collection of individuals, along with churches that participated.

A And there was people like from my church, because I went to Camphor Church that was right there on Dale and Fuller, and there were people from that church which my mother attended too, that kind of helped her get the courage to get out there and start picketing.

Q Now, you've been living in Frogtown Square for about a year. Talk about what it feels like to live on University Avenue.

A I feel like I came back home. That's where I was raised, you know? And I'm familiar with the area, the people. I've had several houses but this is the first I've had a new house, so I was glad to get a new house. When you get older, you put your priorities in different place. So I always say, I was the first one to sit on the toilet, ok? So that made me feel real thrilled. So when I finally got accepted, I went in there and I put this little blue tape around where I was going to situate all of my furniture and of course I had to get rid of a lot of pieces because it had downsized. We met the rest of the residents. I like the idea that we're all Asian, black, white and we have one Native American and we all get along. It became, it was nothing strenuous at the first because we were all old enough not to be wanting to deal with a whole lot of petty stuff. But when we got to know each other, the first thing we did was start having a community that would start planning things. So we started planning a potluck. One month the second floor has it and the next month the third floor has it and the next month the fourth floor has it, and we start all over. So everybody on whatever floor cooks their own dishes and brings them down to community room. And what other way to get people together other than over food? So we all got real familiar with each other, especially our faces. Not the language so much, but we know how to say hello, how are you and you know, get along. I like that. Then we had a garden group that we started getting, going to CDC and we started planting a garden. Well now this year, they're going to give us raised beds so the elderly people don't have to get down on the ground. But now we're going to have a meeting about that. Then I joined the Frogtown District 7 council to stay involved with everything. And I have to say my son and my daughter are quite proud of me. My son's a St. Paul policeman and my daughter is a community organizer so they said, well Momma's not sitting down because she's retired. My son tells me, I have a hard time keeping up with you.

Q That's a good thing to hear. So you've got an interesting mix of people.....talk about the shops.

A Well, they have the Subway. They have a dress shop whose owners – Phyllis and Leo – Phyllis's mother used to march with my mother down University Avenue. I didn't know that until I met Phyllis and she showed me a picture of her mother. Then we have the Wireless, we have a barbershop and now they have another grocery store there. And as I heard through the grapevine that they're going to have a coffee shop there on the corner, and that only leaves one more that's open, unoccupied. And next door we have a Mexican restaurant and meat market and so a lot of us go over there because they eat the same kind of spices we cook with. So we got familiar with them. And every summer they put a farmer's market across the street. You can go get fresh vegetables. So that's a good thing. I mean I just love it. I just love it. I feel like I died and went to heaven.

Q Where is the garden you were referring to?

A At one time it was a flower shop and then the CDC took it over and they made a community garden. It's on Dale between Sherburne and Charles, so it's only like out our back door and down the street. We worked in the garden this past summer and we planted some vegetables and had it all – they call themselves master gardeners. I

disagree. But we followed their plan. So now this summer we're going to make our own, since we have raised beds, and we're going to have our own garden and it's going to be over there.

Q So the gardening skills you got from your grandmother are still helping you today?

A Yes. Well I gardened at my house. I had, my grandma came to my house, she helped me plow up one side of my backyard and I had a garden there, too. And I had the best rose garden in the whole neighborhood.

Q A lot of the change in University in the last 20-25 years has been influenced by all the immigrants who have come here. Talk about the cultural mix of that area today.

A I think it adds to the street. I would never, ever say anything about immigrants distracting, you know, because we're all immigrants. Some chose to come and some didn't. So I mean as long as we're all living together, we need to appreciate each other and respect each other. And I think that's what's happening because they have a lot of people that are Asian in our building and they've opened us up to different restaurants to go to. You know what I'm saying? And we have an Asian community center that we had a couple of meetings at, because I joined the Promise Neighborhood, which is built on Jeffrey Canada Harlem School Zone, that's making...they took two schools in St. Paul – Maxfield and Jackson – and that's where they're starting to motivate the children from birth to college and they nurture them that way, all the way through. And the families and keep everybody included. So I joined that Zone because I have grandchildren and they're a little bit too old for the opportunity, but they will have children so they need to know and learn. So we had a meeting down at the Asian Community Center – that's how I found out where that was, on Western and University – and it's just a good mixture.

Q So with the light rail coming, what do you think University will look like five or 10 years from now?

A I'm not sure because right now, me being on the District 7 Council, I'm fighting with the city because we have a senior building right here on the corner. I don't know if 100 years when you design this light rail or not, you knew that you were going to have senior people – did I already say this? – baby boomers getting, 50 million of us a year turning 65? So that means that these people in this place are slower, so if they have to get across that street before the light rail gets there, something has to be done. First of all, I'm fighting for a big old bull's-eye saying, No Right Turn on Red Light, because they go over the walkway and then they turn. Well somebody's trying to get across the street. Well when they're trying to get across the street either they have to go out into oncoming traffic or have to go behind the car and it's not putting people where you made this plan. Second of all, they have the library over there. And as I understand above the library was supposed to be senior apartments. Now I have an auntie that went in there. She was in her 80s when they first built them. I went to visit her and it was really nice. She eventually moved because they turned it over to families. So when we went to a meeting over there I happened to ask them, I said well if you turned it into families, why don't you give these children a playground? They said they ran out of money. Well that just didn't settle right with me. So I'm a people person. I don't believe people should have a dollar amount on them. You need to plan this before. So I didn't agree with that.

So then here in the summertime we have – because of the Internet and everything – we have those, what they have when all the kids get out in the street and they all go different directions? And they do it all, at night in the summertime. They have nothing else to do. The closest playground for them is Minnehaha, which is down – now we're on University – the small children have to go all way to Minnehaha to play? What parent's going to let them do that in this day and age? So they need some green space, they need some places for seniors, they need places for these teenagers to go and all of that would make the neighborhood a whole lot better. And I have a problem with that fire station. They put the light rail right in front of the fire station, so here on Dale and the next block over going west is St. Albans. So the fire station is on the corner of St. Albans and Dale. So when you have the light rail there, are you going to have a place for that fire truck to come out, get across and go east? You know what I'm saying? I mean, this is not planning; poor planning is what it is.

Have you seen the size of the fire trucks? We have a senior building there and some of the people in there have had the ambulance come to the place. You know what I'm saying? So they can come right now down University and Dale and pick up the people. But what's going to happen after they get the light rail?

Q Good question. Anything else that you want to say?

A I'm pretty much satisfied. I just love it, you know. I love the people. I'm a people person. I know a lot of people and of course we embrace and speak. I love my house, where I am. I feel safe. Sometimes I don't want to leave, that's the thing. I'm glad I'm not working anymore. I'm volunteering, so that means on my time. I've worked all my life so its time for me to rest. Basically, I'm a blessed person. That's how I feel. I'm a blessed person and highly favored.