

## **Andy Mickel & Cheryl Vollhaber**

Interviewed by Laurie Stern at Tower Hill, Prospect Park, June 3, 2011

Q Start with your names...

A1 My name's Andy Mickel.

A2 My name is Cheryl Vollhaber.

Q Why do they call you the power couple?

A1 This was Karen Murdock, right? She's the historian geographer in the neighborhood. She knows history all the way back to those eras, you know, where the rocks are laid down. And she's the PPERR secretary so she's the gadfly that's tracking everyone these days. She's in the perfect job.

Q Yeah, but she called you, this is about you....

A1 Well we're both involved with IT so in her mind we're both involved and we're a power couple because in her mind it's a power couple.

A2 Andy's the Webmaster for the Prospect Park East River Road web page and then I've done the database for the membership, for the PPERR membership in the neighborhood.

Q Does that pay a lot?

A2 Oh, tons! Absolutely, yes!

A1 Yeah, when our salary gets doubled, two times zero is zero.

Q So what is it about the neighborhood that makes it so community minded, volunteer, people really stick up for this place.

A1 Well that...you took the word out of my mouth for the answers. There is community here, meaning there is connections between people. You don't build community, you build connections and then the beneficial side effect is community, right? So what we see here are multi-generations of people – the children of people who grew up in Prospect Park often choose to live in Prospect Park. Now I'm an interloper. I came here 40 years ago from Austin, Texas, to go to grad school and after two years at the U, started working at the U for ten years. That's where I met Cheryl and then we got married ten years after that.

A2 And I came from Shoreview, so I tell people I came kicking and screaming into the inner city from Shoreview. I actually really like the suburbs, so I was a bit hesitant about coming here. But the one thing that I noticed right away was that people come out of their houses and they walk around on the sidewalks and they talk to each other. And you get to know neighbors that way, because they're out of their houses. In the suburbs, they don't generally. They're pretty much in their houses or in their backyards, and you don't get to know people as well as you do here. And I think that's the key – people are

out walking around, they're walking their dogs, they're doing gardening in their front yard and that's how you get to know neighbors and that's how people come out to meetings.

A1 And there's not a lot of sidewalks in Shoreview.

A2 There were none. No sidewalks.

Q Speaking of sidewalks, Peter probably told you this is about University Avenue.

A1 Yes. I have a trivia tidbit about University Avenue. About five or six years ago was walking down Arthur Avenue toward University, taking a picture every so many steps, just to document it. This was on a very warm December 1<sup>st</sup>, an unseasonably warm Dec 1<sup>st</sup> – it must have been in the 60s, degrees, right? So I was out there walking. And I came to the curb at Arthur Avenue and University and stenciled into the concrete – and it's there; you can go see it right now – is a thing that says "University Avenue," which is where the trolley car stop was on the south side of University. It's very easy to see the trolley car stop on the north side – it's that little narrow sidewalk still along the curb. It's all going to get ripped up now in the next year for the light rail, but appropriately that's where the light rail station's going in, is right at the foot of Arthur Avenue and University. So you can still see that stencil there from historically. If you go and video it, you'll be the only people to capture it. I did take a picture of it – I could have put it up on the website but I never did.

Q That is not a bad idea. Maybe we'll do that.

A1 We have a very large website and it's...we started our website in 1994 before the Internet became commercial, which was April 1, 1995. I was working at MR Net which is the original Internet service provider for all of Minnesota back in those days and the Center for Urban whatever it is at the University – CURA – started all these neighborhood websites and we got in on the ground floor. So our website [www.pperrr.org](http://www.pperrr.org) has been up since 1994. That's a long time. That's 17 years.

Q Have you been running it all that time?

A1 Yeah, I'm the Webmaster.

Q So how has the neighborhood changed?

A1 It evolves at the edges, that's for sure. The core part of the neighborhood most people are maintaining their houses, there's very rarely a house that would come down and get rebuilt. But at the edges there's a lot of change and there's been a lot of change recently with all this massive student housing.

A2 One thing I think has changed is that there are younger families now in the neighborhood. When I moved in 20 years ago, there were no kids at all on Arthur Avenue, on our street. No kids at all. Everybody was retired or in their pre-retirement age. And now those people have moved on and are either in assisted living or something so the houses are being bought by young families now. So there's a lot more kids in the neighborhood and there's kids everywhere, which is really a change, running up and down the street.

A1 And that may be a result of the school being reopened. The school was reopened...

A2 I think it's more people...the older people are moving on....

A1 The school was reopened as a K through 5 school because of the NRP project. That's another thing that got a lot of involvement from 1994....

A2 ...but the school was here, though....

A1 ...but it was only as a community center from '82 to like 2002, and now we've had it open as an elementary school and that supports young families with kids because there's a local elementary school.

A2 But I see that throughout the neighborhood, too, there's a lot more children.

Q So back to University Avenue...do you spend a lot of time up there and what good is it to you? What use do you make of it?

A1 University Avenue? I don't spend a lot of time there. I've caught the bus and come back on the bus many, many times on University. I don't bicycle on University Avenue. I try to bicycle back routes.

A2 I bicycle on University. I have.

Q Up the hill?

A2 Up the hill, yes. It's a little trickier now with the construction. The LRT construction's making it very challenging to go back and forth. And that's another thing I notice – the traffic in the neighborhood has really changed with the LRT. The traffic coming down University Avenue is really a challenge.

Q How else do you think light rail will impact the neighborhood?

A1 Light rail's already affected us because there have been investors that have built high-density housing along University Avenue. Just at the foot of Arthur Avenue there's a place called M-flats, at 26<sup>th</sup> and University is U-flats, where these private dorms for students that were built – University Village at 25<sup>th</sup> and University, and there's a bunch of other development. And then up in this direction there's development just across the border into St. Paul. So the density is increasing in that corridor. Some people have bought commercial property and have started a lot of retail.

A2 And I have my own thoughts about that. I think the light rail has had a negative impact, drastic negative impact on the University businesses along the construction and I think there are more and more shops that are closing up now. And I think the whole light rail project is going to have a very negative impact on University Avenue and possibly the neighborhood. I think more people are going to be parking in our neighborhood to catch the light rail and I think that's going to be a problem. I just think traffic is going to increase. So I'm not in favor of it. I'm really not.

A1 I am because we'll be able to get rid of one of our cars...

A2 His!

A1 ...with the light rail station.

A2 His – I'm not getting rid of my car.

A1 That's probably true. It'll probably be my car that we get rid of.

Q I think we'll have to come back in 3 years....

A2 I definitely think it's not a good idea.

A1 But you like taking the light rail to the airport.

A2 I like taking the light rail to the airport from Franklin. I think the current light rail system should have been expanded out to the suburbs, rather than going back and forth between Minneapolis and St. Paul. That's my thought. I think this is mistake.

Q But lets just say that train's left the station and so really, 5 years from now, what's it going to look like here?

A1 Well, in the center part of the neighborhood, according to Cheryl, there'll be more people parking.

A2 Yes.

A1 But it will be essentially the same neighborhood. We'll probably have more neighborhood services – there'll be more retail, there'll be a lot more people living and catching the light rail going to downtown Minneapolis and to the University.

A2 I think businesses are going to be affected, so again, I think it's going to have a negative impact on getting in and out of the neighborhood because I think traffic is going to be more challenging to get in and out of the neighborhood here so....

A1 I've already started bicycling more.

A2 laughs

Q You're very good together. I'm glad I could talk to you together. Is there anything else you want to say....

A1 Well, I'm here for the long haul. I've lived in the neighborhood for what? 35 years, 36 years – in about three weeks it'll be 36 years. Cheryl's lived here for 20 years – we've been married for 20 years. And I'm looking forward to retiring here.

A2 One thing I have noticed about the neighborhood is people really do not move in and out. They stay for a long time. So even if I'm here 20 years, I'm still not really a newcomer, but it's an average.

A1 You're not considered a veteran or an old timer.

A2 No, no. You have to live here a long time. So people tend to stay for a long time. And that's unusual, I think. You don't see that in a lot of places. But they really stay here until they retire, or until they move someplace else...

A1 We're known as the oldest neighborhood association in Minneapolis. There's 81 neighborhoods, right? It was founded in 1901. The Tower dates from 1913. We have a 40-person council, board of directors. So you go to a neighborhood meeting once a month, it's like a town hall meeting. There's like 40, 50 people there. You go to other neighborhoods – even adjacent neighborhoods – and there's six people or twelve people – at Como or Marcy Holmes or Seward or whatever. So we really have involvement and people care enough to give back and steward the resources, foster creativity – all that kind of good stuff. Right?

A2 And I think that's because people are committed. They really are committed to staying here, to living here.

A1 So the quality's improved over time. And getting back to the NRP project that was citywide and affected our neighborhood beginning in 1994 – that involved a lot of people's energy and time, including my own. I was coasting along, not being very involved. I got very involved in the NRP process and what that does is it is investing in the neighborhood – my energy and time and so on. Ergo, I'm involved with the website on a permanent basis. That kind of thing.

A2 And I'm involved in the garden club. The garden club, the garden walk – things like that, that bring people out to look around at others endeavors in improving their households and improving their livability.

Q So does everybody live in this neighborhood – is everybody who lives in this neighborhood involved in something community oriented?

A1 No, no. There's private people. Freeloaders. They have a right to freeload. No they're contributing in their own way, whatever that is, right?

Q Taxes?

A1 Yeah, all kinds of ways.

A2 There's a lot of people that are involved in different things, different art things of the neighborhood.

Q Isn't there ever controversy within the neighborhood or are you all always battling the city or the developer or whoever...

A1 Well because this is the oldest neighborhood association, there's been more opportunity for defending this residential area, which used to be surrounded totally by industry, right? It's got the biggest state employer to the west, which is the University – the 800-pound gorilla. The freeway, Interstate 94, was built in 1964. That was the first big controversy that organized the neighborhood in a big way in the last 50 years. And subsequently, the efforts to save Pratt School in 1982. That was a big controversy. The paving project in 1979. The street lighting project in 1999.

A2 I wanted to say something about the street project, the lighting project because you said was there anything that was within the neighborhood – the lighting, the street lighting really divided the neighborhood, when that came through. There were people either for the lights or against the lights.

Q The historic lights?

A2 Yes. Because there was an assessment done. So that really divided the neighborhood into two camps – the dark side and the light side.

A1 Which side were you on?

A2 I was on the light side. I wanted the lights. We agreed on that one. But that was one thing that, even to this day people still talk about how contentious that was because of the way it was handled, because of what happened....

A1 It wasn't presented to neighbors very well. It could have been done a lot better.

A2 Yeah and so it divided people and really caused a lot of problems. But they're in now.

A1 And now if you took a vote, 80% of the people would like them. And back then maybe a third didn't like them. But we outvoted them two to one.

A2 More than a third I think.

A1 No, it was clearly 2 to 1.