

An Oral History of Ann Harrington and Bob Nielsen

4th Street | Prater Way History Project

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Interviewer: Laura Wilhelm

Ann Harrington and Bob Nielsen partner in developing affordable housing projects throughout the Reno-Sparks area. In 2002, they completed a project with Cloyd Phillips of the Community Services Agency Development Corporation, consisting of commercial space along East 4th Street with apartments above and additional apartments extending to the north.

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ANN HARRINGTON AND BOB NIELSEN

Interviewed on April 9, 2012
Laura Wilhelm, Interviewer



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Photo by Patrick Cummings

Wilhelm: So just to begin, I'm sitting here on 380 Linden Street with Bob Nielsen and Ann Harrington on April 9, 2012, to conduct the oral history as another portion of the Fourth Street and Prater Way Oral History Project.

So, why don't we start with you, Bob.

Nielsen: Okay.

Wilhelm: Tell me a little bit about how you got here.

Nielsen: Sure, just briefly, I grew up in southern California, and came up to Reno to go to the University of Nevada in 1964. At that time, as a student at the University of Nevada, I was kind of aware of Fourth Street because I had friends from the university who were working down there at the El Rancho Motel, which is not far from where our property is. It's actually just right on the other side of Wells, and so we got to know the area fairly well. It certainly had fallen on tough times at that point because people were using other ways to get through Reno than the old Highway 40 corridor, so the motels had fallen on fairly hard times, but not as bad as they got later. There was still some activity in them at the time.

I went through the University of Nevada, and through a series of events became a housing developer in this community, and have been an affordable multifamily housing developer for the last twenty-five or twenty-seven years.

At one point in the process, we came together with the Affordable Housing Resource Council, which was an organization that was designed to help developers find affordable workforce housing, and Ann Harrington had been hired. I was on the Board of Directors and Ann was hired by the board to help us in that effort, and then how many

years was it, Ann, before you went on your own?

Harrington: It was four years, Bob, from '93 to '97.

Nielsen: Okay, so in '97, Ann went on her own as a consultant and we became partners on a number of deals. Ann came to me, I believe, with a proposal to do a project on what was then an old wood lot, which was between Wells and Morrill on Fourth Street or Highway 40, that corridor. I, of course, reacted as a developer. I said, "Who's going to want to live under the Wells overpass?" Because that's basically what we would be doing.

Ann said, "No, I think this is going to be a great deal." Our other partner is Cloyd Phillips from Community Services Agency Development Corporation. Both Ann and Cloyd said, "No, that's something that needs to go down there," so we devised a property that consisted of two- and three-bedroom apartments behind, basically, retail space, which consisted of storefront retail with one-bedroom apartments above it. That was the concept, and much to my surprise, Ann and Cloyd were right about it. It leased up right away and continues to be a very good family affordable housing project in that area.

Unfortunately, the retail continues to suffer. We were in great shape until the recession, and with the recession we lost good tenants in that project and have been unable to get new tenants to occupy those spaces, so that becomes pretty difficult. Part of the reason why we did the project in that area is the city had funds, redevelopment funds. Were they redevelopment, Section 108 funds?

Harrington: Yes, Section 108. I'll talk about that part.

Nielsen: Okay, why don't you do that for a while.

Harrington: Okay. Part of the reason why I was interested in this area of town was that in 1998, Pam Behr [phonetic], who worked for the Community Development Department, was trying to put something together to provide improvement façade loans and other kinds of financing to business owners both along Wells Avenue and Fourth Street, and that money was going to be grant money from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, HUD, called Section 108 funds. It made me think that this might be a good area to look at if we were going to try to do a mixed-use project, which is what we call that kind of development with both retail and residential in it.

I helped them write the grant to HUD and it was approved, so that was probably '99 at that point. Then we went and got the rest of our financing through the residential stuff, and we used some of that Section 108 loan money to build the commercial side of it. That project was completed in September of 2002 and, as Bob said, it pretty much has stayed full on the residential side ever since, for the last almost ten years.

Nielsen: So that's why we are where we are.

Wilhelm: Tell me a little bit about your impressions of the area. When you were younger, you said you were going to the university. Did you spend time downtown at all?

Nielsen: Sure. I was living in the dorms, and in those days, you walked down to Hales #5 if you needed to cash a check, or on Sundays when the dining commons were not open, you would walk down there for dinner and we would do that every Sunday. So, yes, we hung out downtown a little bit, not so much on Fourth Street, but certainly downtown.

The reason we hung out on Fourth Street is because our friend was one of the guys at El Rancho, and if we had people staying in town for one reason or another, we would hook up with him and put them at the El Rancho, which wasn't a bad motel at the time. Obviously, all of that corridor has become tougher.

How far do you guys go in terms of your study to the east?

Wilhelm: All the way past the Prater Way corridor.

Harrington: Right, I think we determined that. We have another property that's right on the corner of Prater and Pyramid, so I think that's part of your study area. That was the very next property that we did, Bob.

Nielsen: That's right.

Harrington: Yes, that was the next one, so we were already in the mode of working with local government, figuring out the kinds of things that they wanted to see.

As a matter of fact, that project that we built there came about as a result of the City of Sparks putting out a request for proposals because they wanted affordable housing in Sparks. They got three responses from three developers, and ours was one of them, and the City of Sparks went and purchased that property for us and leases it back to us. They used redevelopment money to do that because the property at the time that they purchased it had been vacant for a number of years. It was an old Valley Bank Building, B of A Building, and hadn't been used for a long time. There was a lot of graffiti on it and a lot of weeds growing, and it wasn't very attractive.

We were one of the three developers that sort of won that contest and then we got them to buy that piece of property. That was back in 2003 and we completed that project, which is seventy-two units for apartments for low-income seniors, and they're one- and two-bedroom apartments. We completed that—I think that was in 2004, Bob. Does that sound right, spring of 2004?

Nielsen: Yes, it does.

Harrington: I think that's when it was, so that was really [unclear] the City of Sparks and we worked very closely with them to get that done. Between the City of Sparks there and the City of Reno over in our other project on Fourth Street, they were kind of the main reasons that we were doing something in that corridor.

Nielsen: Yes, and I think we also made the decision that we wanted to do infill because properties were getting smaller and smaller, and so we thought, well, let's look for infill sites to make that work.

I wanted to mention tangentially that there was another reason why I would spend time down on Fourth Street, and that is Casale's Halfway Club and the Coney Island Bar.

When I was a teacher, even prior to becoming a developer, I remember all the referees, and we had a whole bunch of guys who were teachers, friends of mine, and coaches, who would always meet at the Coney Island Bar. They would go off to referee games, we would coach games, and then we would meet there afterwards and tell stories about the games that we had coached and/or refereed. So there was that, and then, of course, Casale's Halfway Club.

Harrington: It's been a favorite of yours for years.

Nielsen: It's an eclectic place, but somewhere that is very, very interesting and has been highlighted in the AAA magazine and a number of other publications, plus they have great ravioli.

Harrington: I remember Robert Nielsen having his fiftieth birthday party at Casale's.

Nielsen: That's right.

Harrington: And a lot of people came. There was dancing. It was great fun and it lives on in the oral history of our social circle because it's still talked about.

Nielsen: Yes.

Wilhelm: Where did you teach?

Nielsen: I taught at Sparks and Reed High Schools. I loved teaching, but you couldn't in those days feed your family, so I had to figure out something else to do. I decided, I ought to build apartments. What the heck? It's a natural move.

Wilhelm: Was it an out-of-the-blue decision?

Nielsen: I had a friend who was involved in a property down in Las Vegas that was the first senior bond-financed deal in the state. That was Jeff Lewis.

Harrington: Right.

Nielsen: So we got started. We decided there was a way we could build things. Neither one of us had any money, and we decided we could do this and we did. We didn't make a lot of money—

Harrington: And didn't spend a lot either.

Nielsen: No, and we built a lot of apartments.

Harrington: That's right, that's right.

Nielsen: It was kind of fun. And creative.

Harrington: And, you know, those two properties that we're talking about, the Plaza at Fourth Street is the official name of the one over there on Fourth between Wells and Morrill and then the one on Prater and Pyramid is called Sierra Crest Senior Apartments or something like that.

Nielsen: Right.

Harrington: Those two were the start for me of being a developer. Before then I worked for nonprofits and was a consultant, and those were my first two projects that I was actually willing to put my own money in.

Nielsen: I would say also that Cloyd Phillips and I, and also Ann, to the extent that Ann was involved with most of our properties, tried to break new ground, tried to figure out ways to do things that hadn't been done before so that people could replicate them and continue to build affordable housing for people in this community.

Wilhelm: And were you born here, Ann, in Reno?

Harrington: No, I was born in western Massachusetts, Westfield, Massachusetts, and lived in a whole bunch of little towns out there and moved to California in 1980. I worked in affordable housing there until '93, when I came up here to Reno to work for that Affordable Housing Resource Council that Bob mentioned. Bob was on my board then and hired me to come up here and work. But I've been here almost nineteen years.

Nielsen: So you came out here as a very young girl.

Harrington: Absolutely. I was only three when I came out to work, right? No, I came out right after college to work in California.

Wilhelm: And how do you guys think that transportation improvements will help improve the image of Fourth Street?

Nielsen: Well, there have been a lot of improvements already, with the lighting.

Harrington: The lighting helps a lot.

Nielsen: Yes, and a number of other things have happened down there. Our property and a few others have, I think, helped things. I think it helped a whole lot to move the homeless shelter away from where it was to where it is now. Fourth Street still has a tough reputation and, frankly, you can go down there any given time and you could find some tough activity going on, whether it's drug deals or prostitution. That's happening down there, so it's got a ways to go.

The other Fourth Street institution which I became very fond of was Louis' Basque Corner, too, the Basque restaurant.

Harrington: Yes, we get a lot of investors and lenders over there. They wanted to experience authentic Basque cuisine, which is not something you can get everywhere else in the country.

Nielsen: Well, it's unique and interesting to people, and I think they've done a great job of upgrading that restaurant and still keeping the menu the same, so that's good news.

Harrington: And the other property that seems to do really well on Fourth Street is the furniture store, Forever Yours.

Nielsen: Yes.

Harrington: They've been there a long time.

Nielsen: I've bought stuff from him.

Harrington: Me too. We buy almost all our furniture over there and it's one of the main reasons to go to Fourth Street for us, to go to the furniture store.

Wilhelm: Do you think there are any areas of Fourth Street that are underutilized?

Nielsen: Well, it's probably all underutilized to a certain extent.

Harrington: Yes, exactly. [laughs]

Nielsen: I would love to see that brewery have something done with it. I don't know what the heck it would be. We certainly looked at that property, and the guy's [Spencer Hobson] pretty proud of it and has kept a pretty high price on it. I guess the entire Burning Man from last year's Burning Man was built in that facility. I don't know that enough people know that, and it's something that people should know.

There are other places on Fourth Street that I've certainly frequented. Certainly Ed's—we used to call Ed's Alley Inn. Now what's it called, the restaurant there?

Harrington: I think it's still called Ed's. I think they got rid of the rest of the name.

Nielsen: And then the Western wear store [D Bar M] that was right there. It still is. I've certainly purchased stuff from them. And then there used to be an art store between the two of them. I don't know if it's still there or not.

Harrington: I don't either. Yes, I haven't been on that particular block in a while.

Nielsen: I've purchased stuff from them, too. Was there a mattress factory that was on Fourth Street?

Harrington: Yes, there was.

Nielsen: Reno Mattress.

Harrington: Yes, but many years ago. I think it moved out around the first year I lived here, so it's been gone a long time.

Nielsen: I know I bought mattresses from those guys.

Harrington: Yes, I think that that's right, almost all of Fourth Street is underutilized when you really look at the value of land and vacant or unused buildings. The Barengo Building is still sitting there vacant.

Nielsen: Just amazing, yes.

Harrington: It's a beautiful old historic building which should be used for something. There's so much opportunity there that it's incredible, but given where we are with the economy now, there aren't going to be a lot of people willing to step up, take some risks, and put some money there.

Nielsen: You know, it's kind of too bad that that newer area which has Midtown Eats went out that direction instead of out Fourth Street, because I think it could have gone either way.

Harrington: Yes, I think that's true, but maybe when the economy gets a little better, people will be looking for places to invest that will represent some good bargains.

Nielsen: And when you think about it, with the exception being the Barengo Building, which doesn't probably have appropriate parking for that size of building—

Harrington: Yes, it doesn't have any parking. It has two parking places in front and that's it.

Nielsen: Midtown Eats doesn't have any parking and maybe they would have done better had they located where they would have parking, and there are certainly areas that have parking along there.

I also bought a transmission at Landa, the transmission place across the street, so I've done a lot of business on Fourth Street.

Harrington: Yes, you have.

Nielsen: You go down Fourth Street on the way to Beto's, which is on Fifth Street.

Wilhelm: Have your impressions of Fourth Street changed over the years or do you think it's always been in the kind of the state that it is now?

Nielsen: No, it was better when I was here in school. It's gone downhill from there. I think we kind of caused somewhat of a resurrection when we built our property there. I

think things leveled off. The mayor or the City Council put in the lighting, and I think that helped. Moving the homeless shelter helped. I think those businesses and those condos that are now in the old fire station certainly helped, so there's been a lot of help. There's just, as Ann points out, an economic problem with any commercial situation in the City of Reno or Sparks or northern Nevada.

Harrington: Yes, at this point that's the reality.

Nielsen: And we're suffering from that.

Wilhelm: When you do a new development project, like a couple of the ones you're working on now, how do you gain community support or get people interested in that?

Nielsen: Well, interestingly enough, we always begin this process without community support because we do multi-story properties and people are initially always afraid of that. They're afraid of it for a number of reasons. First, they think it's going to deteriorate their property value. That absolutely is not the case, but that's what they believe. If they're younger and have kids, they think you're going to overcrowd the schools. They sometimes use as an excuse, "Oh, my gosh, we can't handle any more traffic, and you're going to bring in crime and all kinds of those things." The reality is usually just the opposite.

In fact, not particularly here, but in other areas where we've been doing properties and we had a lot of community backlash to them, we have asked people and provided transportation for people to go talk to neighbors in other areas that we had developed, and that was always a positive thing. So we never start out with the community behind us, but by the time we've built the property and operated it, we typically have the community behind us.

Harrington: Right.

Nielsen: So it's a series of meetings that we go through. We go talk to the advisory boards. That typically is where things begin. In the last one that we started, which is over near Virginia Lake, we had tremendous neighborhood opposition to it. Fortunately for us, the property was properly zoned and was in an area where the city encouraged development.

Harrington: Which has been typical of all of our properties. One of the ways that we move around that issue is that we're always looking for land that's zoned. So what do we want to do? We're not going in asking for changes.

Nielsen: Right. So that's what happens. Everybody starts out against us, but then we convince them, and it's because Ann is a very persuasive person.

Harrington: No, that's not the reason. It's because the properties look good.

Nielsen: That too.

Harrington: And they don't cause problems.

Nielsen: That's true.

Wilhelm: So could any of those strategies, do you think, be employed by the RTC for some of their urban renewal plans for the area?

Nielsen: I don't know what their plan is. If they had a plan, I would certainly be willing to look at it and comment on it if it were detailed enough as to what they proposed. Are they proposing taking out things like some of the old motels and replacing them with other activities?

Wilhelm: Well, I think it's in the study phase right now.

Nielsen: So what should be there?

Wilhelm: Yeah.

Nielsen: Boy, that's tough. I mean, unless you can get the number of businesses, whether they be restaurants or some kind of a club or something, to go down there, you need a critical mass to keep that going, and I just don't see the critical mass today economically as being there. We're struggling with our downtown. We're struggling now with some other areas, the Wells corridor and the Midtown area. That needs to evolve into something and I don't know what the something is. Do you know what it is, Ann?

Harrington: I'm not sure either, Bob, because I think the main problem is, at least on the Reno side of Fourth Street, that a lot of the buildings are more than functionally obsolete. Many of them are downright dangerous. The problem is that if you take all those out, where are the hundreds of people who are living there going to go live? I think that's a big issue with anything that gets done on the Fourth Street corridor. You take out businesses like that, and those families and individuals living there don't have a hundred other choices, and I think that's step one.

Nielsen: And they're probably one step away from homelessness, right?

Harrington: Exactly. If you take away their motel option, there probably aren't enough motel rooms left in the city that they can afford to accommodate them, and so you're just going to increase the homeless count, and that makes no sense to anybody. So I think that it's a systemic problem that's got to be attacked from the very bottom ground-floor level, which is that you've got people living there who don't have other choices.

Wilhelm: Are you glad that you stayed in Reno this whole time? Are you ever thinking of relocating?

Nielsen: Oh, no, it's a great place to live.

Harrington: Yes, we love it here. We made that choice a long time ago to stay.

Nielsen: I love the outdoor life, and it certainly sits on the edge of a vast outdoor recreation area. Actually, not on the edge; in the middle.

Harrington: In the middle of it, yes.

Nielsen: I'm thinking east of here, you talk about hunting and fishing and camping and hiking and gliding and paraskiing and all kinds of stuff, it's just fabulous, and of course, to the west of us is Lake Tahoe, which is fabulous, so it's a great spot and that's why we're here.

Wilhelm: Did you meet your wife here? Is she from here?

Nielsen: I met my wife in seventh grade in California. I didn't like her, but I married her.

Harrington: Bob!

Nielsen: I got to like her.

Harrington: Yes, you did. She learned how to tolerate you, too, so you got lucky there.

Nielsen: Are you speaking about our relationship now?

Harrington: No, we're not going there. [laughs] We're not going there.

Wilhelm: Any other suggestions for the RTC, something specifically that you would like to see?

Harrington: I think that clearly the entire success of public transportation on Fourth Street or anywhere in the city is having frequent bus service so that people can really use it, and make it so that it's convenient and easy as possible. I think that a lot of people in our project on Fourth Street, the Plaza on Fourth Street, do use the bus. I don't think as many do who live over in Sparks on the Sierra Crest project, partially because some of them are seniors. I don't know. Bob, don't you get the impression that there are more of them using a bus at the Plaza than there are at Sierra Crest?

Nielsen: Yes, I would think so. Now, we buy bus passes at Sierra Crest, don't we?

Harrington: Yes, we do. Part of the deal with the City of Sparks is that we could put in fewer parking places if we bought bus passes and made them available to our residents, which we do every year. That's kind of cool, I think.

Nielsen: Yes, maybe I should have called her and found out how much they're utilized, but I know that we continue to do that. So I guess what Ann is saying is improved

transportation.

I think an effort like you all are doing to try to redefine what folks want there is very important. I was a little bit involved because I was on the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce when Wells was redefined, and I think Wells continues to get a little better.

Harrington: Yes, I think so, too.

Nielsen: I would like to see Fourth Street in the same mode, continuing to get a little better. I don't know how to do that. I guess encouraging additional jobs and additional activity is a good thing.

Wilhelm: Great. Thank you very much.

Nielsen: You're very welcome.