

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, DC ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview
with

Robert Warren

By Alison Kootstra

Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library, Washington, DC

November 8, 2012

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY:
WASHINGTON, DC ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

NARRATORW: Robert Warren
DATE: November 9, 2012
INTERVIEWERW: Alison Kootstra
PLACE: Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library, Washington, DC

PERSONAL DATA

Birthdate: February 2, 1961
Spouse: Single
Occupation:

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

This interview with Robert Warren, a native Washingtonian and homeless advocate, includes a discussion of his advocacy efforts, issues DC's homeless residents face in finding employment, the effect of elections on a the homeless population, housing as a human right, the importance of homeless self-advocacy, advocate Mitch Snyder's legacy, and other topics as related to his personal analysis of the causes of homelessness in Washington, DC.

INTERVIEWER'S COMMENTS

Robert Warren was one of the first interviewees for the DC Oral History and Social Justice Project in 2012. Alison Kootstra, a graduate-student interviewer for the project, initially met Robert Warren at a SHARC (Shelter, Housing and Respectful Change) meeting in the fall of 2012 and interviewed him approximately two months later. The interview took place two days after the 2012 presidential election and DC city council election. References to the outcome of both elections are made throughout the interview.

StacieNicole Simmons, another graduate-student interviewer for the project was present during this interview to record the proceedings on video. Both the audio and video of this interview are archived as part of the project. A background journal entry for this interview also is available as part of the materials archived with this interview.

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INDEX TERMS

Affordable Housing; Alcoholism; Anacostia; Bread for the City; Brown, Michael; Burns, David; Coalition of Homeless and Housing Organizations (COHHO); Cocaine; Community for Creative Non-Violence Shelter (CCNV); Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness; Condo Fees; DC Central Kitchen; DC City Council; DC Department of Employment Services; DC Department of Human Services; DC Housing Authority; DC Human Rights Commission; Difficulties Homeless Residents Face in Finding Employment District of Columbia; Drugs; Effects of Drugs on Communities; Elections; Employment Prejudice; Family Re-Housing and Stabilization Program (FRSP); Federal Government Involvement; Fenty, Adrian; Friendship Place; Gentrification; Graham, Jim; Gray, Vincent; Homeless Advocacy Efforts; Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP); Homeless Veterans; Homelessness; Homeownership; Housing Production Trust Fund; Human Rights; Human Rights City; Hurricane Sandy; Job Outsourcing; Job Training; John L. Young Women's Shelter; Kootstra, Alison; Local Rent Supplement Program; Local Rent Voucher Program; Low-Barrier Shelters; Low-Income Housing; Manna; Maryland; Mental Issues; New Hope Ministries; Obama, Barack; One-Third Rent Plan; People for Fairness Coalition; Permanent Supportive Housing Program; Racism; Reagan, Ronald; Relationship Between Church and State; Romney, Mitt; Same-Sex Marriage; Shelter Conditions; Shelter, Housing, and Respectful Change (SHARC); Snyder, Mitch; Spiritual Motivation; Substance Abuse; Supplemental Security Income (SSI); Task Forces on Homelessness; Taxation without Representation; The Coalition for the Homeless; Transportation; Voting Rights; Warren, Robert; Washington, DC; Wells, Tommy

Washington, DC Oral History Project

*Transcription of Interview with Robert Warren on November 9, 2012
at Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library, Washington, DC*

AK: Alison Kootstra, Interviewer

RW: Robert Warren, Interviewee

0:00:00

AK: Can you state your name and where we are for me a minute please so I can test the levels?

RW: Alright, my name is Robert Warren and we're at Martin Luther King Historical Library.

AK: In Washington, DC--

RW: Washington, DC, yes.

AK: --and my name is Alison Kootstra and it's November 8, 2012. Robert, do I have your permission to record this interview?

RW: Yes, you do.

AK: Alright. Thank you. I wanted to start-- Yes. Oh yeah, please start. It's okay. Um, I'm going to as you one more time, do I have your permission to record this interview?¹

RW: Yes.

AK: Okay. Robert, how long have you been living in Washington, DC?

RW: I'm a native Washingtonian, been living here all my life.

AK: Wow. And when where you born so we--

RW: I was born in 1961.

AK: Nineteen sixty-one.

RW: February 2, 1961. Yes.

AK: And how long, or during that period were you ever homeless in DC?

RW: I've been homeless in DC, I would say, three times: once in the late eighties, once in the middle of '96 and then again in 2008.

¹ At this point in the interview StacieNicole Simmons asked if she should begin video recording.

AK: Okay.

RW: Homeless shortly then, yes.

AK: Okay, and as a native Washingtonian and someone whose experienced homelessness here, can you tell me why you think homelessness has become so entrenched in DC?

RW: Well, when I became homeless in 2008 one of the things I noticed was that there were men who I was actually homeless with back in the eighties. I'm seeing these same faces and I guess that's one of the things, one of the reasons why I began. I felt as though the Lord put me there for a reason because I see these same men. My first feeling was, "This is where they've been left to die at." So I just feel like I have to do the best that I could do. For me, I know it's been a process for a lot of those men and women who basically because of alcoholism, maybe substance abuse, mental issues, the lack of having the education in order to better yourself. For whatever reason, these same men were in this position where it kind of made me feel as though they're like-- You have these men that are there at the end of their lives and they've been in Washington all their lives, yet now they don't have a place to live in Washington.

0:03:18

With Washington being a human rights city I just felt-- It seemed like to me, feel like you been here, living here and suffering under taxation without representation that you should be able to live and have someplace to live in Washington, DC. A lot of the people who were involved in making sure that occurred just weren't involved in doing their job. They weren't doing it all that well. I just began to try to engage with folks and find a process where a person who I thought-- I wouldn't say everyone, but a part of society just say, These men and women should die on the streets of Washington, DC in these shelters. And that's what has been occurring over the years.

Lately it's just been getting worse. With DC being a such a transient city we have a lot of people who are homeless in DC who are not from Washington, DC. They're from all over the nation. They come here to see their congressperson or whatever the case-- Whatever may have brought them there, this is where they want to live and they've been here for years too now. They've also been out there on the streets of Washington, DC. That needs to be addressed also. People need to find a way.

Right now, I'm just looking at where they don't have the money. That's always what they're saying; they don't have the money to address the issue. I'm hoping we can look at other concrete ways that folks who feel as though this is an issue that they want to engage in can come together and find creative ways we can start trying to house people because we're putting money into studies and this that and the other and, you know, and so forth and so on. I mean right now we have this task force. We just finished with one task force and all the recommendations of the old task force that was implemented by the mayor. Anything that had to do with the old mayor he's dismantling and some of those things were good things, ways that we could start to address the issues.

0:06:07

AK: What were some of those good things that they're dismantling now?

RW: Well, they're dismantling the Local Rent Supplement Program which, I just recently testified in a hearing in front of our council member, Michael Brown. Who, I'm sorry to say, lost his seat in the District of Columbia. When I testified in front of Michael Brown I relayed to him how we had been coming to him for years talking about how they were taking money out of one trust fund, the Housing Production Trust Fund, which helped people with housing-- (coughs) excuse me --and also the Local Rent Voucher Program was another way that helped people who were experiencing homelessness to get out of homelessness. How they were taking money out of the Housing Production Trust Fund in order to fund the Local Rent Supplement Program because they didn't want to put more money into that program. All they were doing were funding the current recipients. They weren't adding anyone new to the roles and then we have the problem where--

(laughs) Today, I just came from a meeting with COHHO. They had the guy from the Housing Authority. They're getting ready to close the waiting list which is at sixty-six thousand people. They want to close that list. It just goes on and on, the fighting just goes on and on and on. You just try to (sighs). I don't know it just-- I mean with Michael Brown who just lost his seat was trying to introduce legislation where they would address trying to continue to fund part of the FRSP where now it's just, I don't know. We have a new guy coming in. We don't know what his politics are or how he feels about providing affordable housing for long-term District residents. It's just like we're starting all over again on certain avenues.

Hopefully, right now what we're trying to do is to encourage those who are experiencing homelessness. I know I will be testifying at this taskforce hearing that they're having on the thirteenth; I believe it was the thirteenth or the fourteenth. I know it's one day next week coming up pretty soon. So, members of my group will be testifying and hopefully we can come up with some concrete ways that we can start to address people who are experiencing homelessness and joblessness in the District of Columbia. I think it's going to take the will of people to come together and say, This is what we're going to do. This is how we're going to try to bring those numbers down because--

0:09:25

AK: And what group were you meeting with?

RW: Actually, COHHO is the Coalition of Housing and Homeless Organizations and they meet every first Monday, no, every first Thursday of the month. I think COHHO has been around for about eight years now. It's like, they have other groups that we meet with, but basically my main tools are People for Fairness Coalition which I joined when I basically became homeless in 2005. That was a group, it is a group, formed of formerly homeless and homeless individuals. We've been engaged in really trying to get homeless individuals to do self-advocacy and to go out a vote. That's the main thing because-- That's what we've been engaged in lately.

But I also we've been working with another group that was founded through COHHO and People for Fairness Coalition which is SHARC which stands for Shelter, Housing, and Respectful Change, which is a group that you all visited and which meets down at CCNV. We've also been engaged in trying to get residents at CCNV just engaged in more self-advocacy because I think that was the legacy that Mitch Snyder left at CCNV. We've been having some progress.

There's been a lot of rumors about CCNV and things that the business community, the local government, the federal government can come together and try to create with that property down at CCNV because it has a covenant with the federal government through Ronald Reagan. You know, the great Ronald Reagan, which a lot of people in the District of Columbia credit for creating homelessness in the District of Columbia. I wasn't into it but I heard that he was one of the ones that signed into law a lot of people who were experiencing mental problems could actually be let out of facilities and not given the things they needed to actually survive out here in society. That was part of the great Ronald Regan legacy. He's not all that great to me but anyway (laughs), a lot of people like to consider him that way.

0:12:04

So yeah, SHARC is really-- We've really been having some good dialogue and having some success in creating town hall meetings. We've been meeting with city council members and just going down there and talking to folk and trying to get the homeless population involved with going down to city hall and involving themselves with self-advocacy and letting them know that that they're got to be engaged and vote. We had a big event planned for the twenty-ninth but Sandy hit so it kind of locked that out.² We had put a lot of work into that and unfortunately with the storm it didn't happen the way we had planned for it to happen. So on some fronts it kind of was a setback because we had some issues we were hoping the council could address and there was a time limit with some new monies that come in and that was another thing that just past.

We talked about that today also at the COHHO meeting where the last projection that we can get-- Actually, this 7.5 million dollars that we've been advocating for homeless services. Now just to imagine, this is just to keep the shelters open during non-hyperthermia season. We've been threatened with this for the last two years with this mayor, with actually defunding shelter services during non-hyperthermia season. You have this task force that comes up with ideas, the ICH meeting and all these other people, who say that you need to have places open and centers open in order to engage people year-round in ways that can end their homelessness. And then you have another task force that's coming up and all these recommendations you take it, you say, "Yeah we got these recommendations, but we can't fund all these recommendations." It's kind of like, I don't know-- I just don't know where they're coming from with some of their thinking and how they can have a nine billion dollar budget but there's always a shortfall when it comes to money to help the least of our citizens. That money is always short. We just can't find dollars for that.

² Hurricane Sandy that hit DC and the Eastern Seaboard between October 28th and 30th. Federal and local government offices were closed along with the majority of other business in Washington, DC. This caused the cancelation of the day of advocacy SHARC planned for Monday, October 29, 2012 at the Wilson Building.

AK: If you had to take a guess why that would be, what do you think it would be?

0:15:00

RW: I mean, I would say the District of Columbia for me-- I always had a feeling that in DC there is a certain racism that's involved in black DC residents that's kind of entrenched in certain biases that play out in this city and that has played out for a long time. I think that's because of what African Americans in DC represent as being special people. These special folk that were the majority of the city were denied voting rights whet through a whole lot of-- What we're going through as far as the gentrification of our neighborhoods and so forth and so on and not even being able to live here and the high cost of living here. Not being able to have a say with our government and so much. It just goes on. Some of that is changing, but at the rate that it's changing and what we're losing of our city, it's just lost.

AK: How have you, being a native Washingtonian, how have you seen the city change over your lifetime?

RW: Well, over my life time I guess with being a Washingtonian, being able to see Barack Obama become president not once but twice.³ I mean, that was for yourself. That lets me know that God is great. People plan, and the Lord plans, and the Lord is the best of planners.

You know people can make all the plans they want but at the end of the day I believe there are more good people in America, there are more God-loving people in America, people loving people in America. So, at the end of the day, those few folk who always want to say, We don't have money for this and we don't have money for that. They want to involve themselves, We need more things, more things and bigger and better things that you got to get money to spend on. Those are the folks that will lose in the end. I think that that's what the storms represent.⁴ A lot of those people who never thought about a homeless person are now experiencing it. Now they know what a person goes through on a regular basis. The people who are out there right now on this east coast being hit with these-- And it goes on. The Lord is trying to tell us something but a lot of times we don't want to listen. We just got to keep fighting in the Lord's cause. That's all we can do now.

0:18:05

AK: Now, you mentioned President Obama and a couple of the other people we have interviewed for this project have said how much they're thankful that Barack Obama won this past election instead of Mitt Romney. Can you tell me what you think the difference would have been for the homeless population in DC if the election had gone the other way?

RW: You know what, I really don't think it would have made a difference.

³ Barack Obama's election to a second term as president happened just two days earlier on Tuesday, November 6, 2012.

⁴ Reference to Hurricane Sandy and a storm that followed a week later in hitting the East Coast.

AK: Why?

RW: I don't. Because I think what it represents-- It already represents-- The election already represented to me just how screwed up some people's thinking can be. For me, I don't know how we could even think about electing a president with a (laughs) Swiss bank account. So, I don't even get that part right there. So I don't even know. How could we even go there? How can you have a president who's got money in Swiss-- What's that all about? That's not American right there. How can we have a president that's un-American? You have money in Swiss-- Come on now! How you going to be president of the United States with money in Swiss-- Now does that make sense? So who would vote for a president who has money in Swiss. You got to imagine you got a whole lot of people who actually would vote for-- I don't know. I don't get it, I just don't.

I don't get it, but maybe that's why I say you still have that-- People don't like to say it, but you still have people that are just that racist. They're thinking and their perception of things is just so screwed up. But it's like I said, it's their loss because at the end, just like it proved, it didn't win out. If it would have-- Certain ways it still won out even to go that far where he would be the person that would represent a segment of society as the president. Even though he was the one who created outsourcing jobs. He was a part of that process. How you going? Come on, he was a part of taking jobs from America. Part of the process of taking jobs from America that was created in outsourcing jobs. He benefited from that. That's how he made his money. How could you have that to represent? I mean, it's just like that's how backwards some people's thinking is. It was a great part of society so.

AK: What about mayors of DC? You've seen a lot of mayors come and go. We talked about in one of our past interviews some of the choices Mayor Williams made versus what Fenty made with closing down shelters. Do you think that changes in mayors affect the homeless population in DC?

0:21:22

RW: Well, changes in mayors have affected the homeless population in this city because I don't know if Fenty would have-- Fenty started the Permanent Supportive Housing Program which represented something of a success because it got some men off the streets and out of shelters that had been waiting on housing for a long time. We needed some affordable housing. And there's still a whole lot more of them that need that housing. So here you had a program and the mayor comes in and he defunded the program. He defunded everything that Fenty did. In the same process, he's blaming Fenty for the reason he has to defund everything. It's just like politics. He's just a politician. I guess he would call himself a good politician but, for me, he just represents a lot of what's wrong with politics in DC. I would never vote for him.

AK: For--

RW: For Mayor Gray.

AK: For Mayor Gray.

RW: I didn't vote for him and I never would have voted for him. For one thing, I didn't feel as though he did his job when it came to a lot of issues in the District of Columbia.

Like, for me, I'm always going to believe that housing first and foremost is a human right. What that means with housing being a human right, there ought to be a process put in place for a person to acquire some form of housing in order to live. How can you say we live in a human rights city and declare that it's a human right for two people of the same sex to get married in the city, but it's not a human right for a person to have some form of housing in this city who was born and lived here all their life? And so I asked him that question at one of the town hall meetings and he said-- Then I also asked him, I said, "Do you think you did District residents a disservice by not giving the right to vote on same-sex marriage in the District of Columbia?" I feel like they did in Maryland. The people of Maryland came together and they cast a vote and the society said that's what they wanted. You know, that's what you respect. That you can respect. But just to do it for political reasons. And to go to the Human Rights Commission and do it through the Human Rights Commission. Then that gives you a lot of other issues that you need to address with the Human Rights Commission in the District of Columbia.

0:24:06

First and foremost would be housing because housing should be a human right in the District of Columbia. Me, I just personally feel as though government should have no say into whether or not a person, two people-- If two people decide they want to be together, yeah, they should be together and government should respect that and respect whatever contract they want to sign. Government should respect that. But, should government be involving themselves in that? No, I don't think because then you're mixing church and state. There are a lot of people who follow the Bible, who follow the Koran, and in the Bible and the Holy Koran that's what God said, that's his word. That's illegal, in his word. You're going to have some folks that say, Okay, well yeah. It might say it in those books. Those books don't mean nothing. But to a lot of people who have freedom of their religion and the way they believe, it does mean something. So why mix the two? Why even-- Just go by a person having their right to have a contract. To say, look, "If I so pass or get sick, so and so can come to my hospital room. He's my representative. Woo woo woo. Whatever thing that needs to be said under the law." Yeah, you make that contract out then the law can respect that but the law does not have a say that you are married or whatever or charge you a fee for that. And I think that would be what everybody could agree on, for me because, I mean that's just what I believe.

AK: What kind of legal problems do you think people who are homeless in DC face?

RW: I know they've been talking about creating vagrancy laws in DC. I think that's because one of the reasons like I said the mayor is trying-- He's always been talking about defunding shelters during non-hyperthermia season and part of me believes that's not going to happen. That I don't think the federal government wants to see a whole lot of homeless people out on the streets, more than are already out there. I don't think the tourists, the population is going to stand for that. So, I always think it's a ruse for him to always defund other things while our advocacy over the last six months has been focused on this [unintelligible] 7.5 million dollars

for homeless services to prevent these shelters from closing in April. It just like I said goes on and on and on where there's always bait and switch. You know what I'm saying, "I threaten to do this while I do this."

AK: Can you give me an example?

0:27:17

RW: Well, like last year he threatened to defund homeless shelters but at the same time took 18.5 million dollars out of the Housing Production Trust Fund, and took the 18.5 million dollars out of the trust fund because he said he had to fund the Local Rent Voucher Program. Now, the question I as is, (hitting hands on table) "Okay, you took 18.5 million dollars out of the Housing Production Trust Fund to fund the Local Rent Voucher Program and you threatened to defund shelters during non-hyperthermia season. So while you have us focused on you doing the worst of the worst, you then take the money out of the Housing Production Trust Fund and move money around in the budget and fund the Local Rent Voucher Program. What happened to the money that was already supposed to fund the local voucher program? Why was there no more money fund the local voucher program?" Then you're going to say, "Oh, well, we had to do that because of loss of federal dollars." So then it's the federal government. It's always either the federal government's fault, why the nine billion dollar budget ain't got no money to fund those programs or it's the former mayor's fault. So that's where they leave us at.

AK: You had mentioned Mitch Snyder earlier. Can you tell me who he is and a little bit about him?

RW: I stayed at CCNV, like I said, in '96. I guess I really got started with advocacy work in '96, that's the reason I went to CCNV. That was after Mitch Snyder had died and there was a lot of rumors and a lot of stuff going on during that time back in the eighties about Mitch Snyder and CCNV. But my biggest thing now with CCNV and Mitch Snyder I think is just his legacy.

There's a building there in CCNV that has on it "Mitch Snyder's Art and Education Center for the Homeless." This building has a tree growing through it. Yet and still, through all the donations and all the building that's gone on in this city. Of all the things that they've built in this city and here it is, this is part of this individual's legacy. The building is supposed to represent his name, his legacy down at CCNV, and its been left dormant, vacant with a tree growing through it. It took me-- Actually, as much as I've been down at CCNV and I've never-- I mean, I've probably seen it a thousand times, but it just never dawned on me though.

0:30:18

We used to go out and do outreach at night to the homeless in the group I'm involved in, you know, during nontraditional hours and we would drop the rest of the sandwiches and water that we had after right there at this women's shelter that's next to this building, right? Now in this women's shelter. (scoffs) Man, you can't imagine how these women have to live and how they have to-- How they're in this little space that really you can't breathe. It's like you going into a little dungeon. It would be something that would represent something in a prison, if women

were going to prison, back in and out of prison, right? And this is where they had to go and live for the night or whatever. That's kind of like what it represents. It represents like dorms and, you know, a closed area. No windows. And then you've got this vacant building next to it. I'm just looking at it and I'm like-- I just happened to notice it one day and I'm just like, this is when it really became about trying to have some engagement with CCNV and these two women's shelters on both sides and this one women's shelter that needed space. We had SHARC members that met with representative David Burns, the head of the Department of Human Services, Councilmember Jim Graham. So we met with them. We came down there, saw them. We talked about it. You know so, I mean-- I don't know.

AK: When was this?

RW: Like I say, the fight just goes on. People just left out there. Here it is most of these women have a lot of issues. (sighs)

AK: What kind of issues, do they have?

0:32:36

RW: Well, you know, they have the same issues. Most of them have issues, you know, mental issues, lack of training to be able to get out back into the job force. They're at that age. Same like men who are at that age maybe like 45 to 55 and because of some of their alcoholism and suffering from the disease of addiction they're bodies are at the point when they're on a lot of medication and they're not going to be able to get back out there and do nobody's work on nobody's job. All that the mayor saying that, "We're going to create all these learning facilities and retrain people." These are the people, you know what I'm saying, you're not going to retrain this person. If you are going to give this person some type of housing or a better way of dealing with life, help this person, help them with a way up through the system or you're going to leave them to squander in warehouses and these shelters and die on the streets.

AK: So, what do you think needs to be done to get them into places where they can live?

RW: I'm looking right now on the men's side. We're really looking at the concept of this big house that a friend of mine has put together. Then some other creative ways. Then we're talking about really trying to get some more churches involved in taking on projects with people who may be on SSI in shelters where they can try and get housing and units.⁵ Getting construction crews together more and start revamping some of these units and bring some units online that way and hopefully we can get some big enough projects where federal government and the city can come together and create some projects that would be able to service and bring the numbers down that way, you know, some bigger projects. I know they have some things coming online but I still don't think it's going to be enough to address the affordable housing issue in the District of Columbia.

I guess we're really hoping to look for creative ways that we can bring individuals, three and four individuals, who may have small amounts of income and be able to get properties they can

⁵ Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

rent together collectively. And have inclusionary zones created and maybe also have some of these landlords who have a certain amount of units to require them to rent certain amount of units at a certain cost. Where they'll sacrifice a certain cost, the District will throw in a certain cost, then you have the federal government throw in a certain cost. We're trying to hopefully promote a one-third plan where there's one-third of the income coming from an individual. Maybe the District government is paying one-third and maybe the federal government is paying one-third and the renter is taking a one-third cut in the rent. If we can get that through in some kind of fashion or form I think that would help. I'm just trying to think of some other creative ways also where we can say the mayor won't be able to take cover with that, you know, "The reason why we can't do this or that is because there's not enough funds." So, I don't know.

0:36:49

AK: You had mentioned that you'd been homeless three times in DC.

RW: Right.

AK: Once during the eighties, am I correct? And then most recently in 2002, was it?

RW: Two thousand and eight--

AK: In 2008.

RW: --actually I became homeless in 2008 and during that process, like I said, I got involved with People for Fairness Coalition. One of the reasons I got involved with People for Fairness Coalition is because they were promoting self-advocacy and trying to get a seat at the table when it comes to certain meetings that were being held when it was concerning homelessness. So we were really successful at doing that and in that process, by doing that I got involved with the Community Partnership which is a group that had a program that was funded through the Obama stimulus dollars.⁶ It was called HPRP.⁷ It was a program where say an individual like myself who is experiencing homelessness would work out a plan. You would have to be engaged in some type of self-help program and they would give you housing assistance if you could find someone to rent to you. And so I went through a process of finding someone to rent me an apartment.

I got involved with a couple groups, Bread for the City which helped me a lot through helping me with job search. Then I was also involved with Manna which is an organization that does a lot of building of low-income housing in the District of Columbia and who I've been involved with for a long period of time; who my mother and my sister have been associated with. I was working with them doing some marketing on weekends. Through that little job, having that part-time job, and getting involved in a program I was able to get housed. They gave me assistance for-- The program was supposed to run up to anywhere from up to one to three years but actually they ran out of money. Fortunately, I was able to, after they ran out of money, I was

⁶ The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness

⁷ Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program

able to get a job so I started working at GW hospital, almost like a year and a half ago.⁸ So I was able to maintain my apartment.

0:39:23

Now I'm involved in where I'm actually trying to, through Manna, become a first time home-buyer in the District of Columbia. I'm trying to purchase one of the condos they have available which is really going through the process. I believe everybody should be able to be in the process where they can become a home-owner in the District of Columbia, especially those of us who've been here for a while. I'm really grateful through this program that I may be able to be a homeowner after being homeless in the District of Columbia. The condo would be like \$95,000 which is really unheard of for a two-bedroom. I think you have some of them at \$95,000 and some of them are \$140,000. They are going to be placed in historical Anacostia. I'm really excited about that and trying to become a homeowner in the District of Columbia after being homeless. I'm hoping to get other homeless individuals in that process where they believe that they are asking not just not to be homeless in the District of Columbia but also be a homeowner in the District of Columbia because it's possible. Everybody should be able to engage in that process. I think we just need to try to create more of that. Hopefully that's what will happen. Yeah.

AK: You mentioned you work at GW hospital now.

RW: Right

AK: And when you were homeless you were volunteering with doing publicity for Manna, is that--

RW: No, Manna, I actually worked for Manna. Like I said, I've been involved with Manna for many years. It's been really a privilege because that's just one organization around the city that's always tried to provide as long as I've been going so I've been really proud of my involvement with Manna over the years. Right now, my involvement, just like I said, is doing marketing on weekends as far as trying to show units to individuals which is a job that they pay me for. I also, I do some advocacy work with them as far as around trying to keep the condo rates low for individuals. A lot of people who came to these units and got these low-income units, you know, a chance to buy them, the reason why the units are not affordable to them is because of the fees that they're charging. I've been working with Manna and trying to hopefully keep those fees down. I'm doing some advocacy work around that. It's been an issue that's not really be addressed by the city council so we've been trying to keep it up in their face, make them try to-- Make these developers that came in to try keep the fees down.

0:42:48

AK: Can you tell me the story of how you first started becoming involved in advocacy for the homeless community in DC?

⁸ George Washington University Hospital in Washington, DC.

RW: Like I said, I became homeless in 2008, after losing a job and just going through some personal issues. When I came up to 801 East--⁹ Like I said, I saw men who I had seen homeless. Who had been homeless for so long and I just said, "I couldn't believe it." It was kind of heartening to me to see men who I saw homeless years and years ago still homeless in the District of Columbia. I just felt as though, ever since I came up there and I saw that, I knew that that's where I needed to be, that's what I needed to involve myself with. So, that's what I've been engaged in for the last going on six years now so.

AK: And how have you seen your advocacy change over the six years that you've been involved?

RW: For me it's been a transformation because even though going through having some type of voice at the table at some of these meetings that take place-- I guess it goes back to the mayor thing when you change administrations. Because when we change administrations a lot of our advocacy that we did with the previous administration has been lost and a lot of stuff that people had agreed on and was getting paid to formulate and produce has been discounted. It's been kind of heartening to have to go through this process where you think you're coming up with solutions and then you have a new mayor coming in just saying, "All those solutions you came up with, we're not even going to think about those solutions. We're going to bring in a new task force and do some new solutions." I don't know, it just kind of makes you so worried about the whole process but you just keep fighting. You just keep fighting.

0:45:30

AK: Where do you find the motivation to keep fighting?

RW: I guess it's always in the people because homeless people are people. Regardless of what people say, they're good people. They're just good people who are down on their luck. I know for me, I don't mind spending my time because I've been there. There's always going to be--

The motivation of doing something to please the Lord is always good. That's what the motivation is supposed to be, you do something to please the Lord. I think that's what the test of life is for all of us to see how we're going to give to those less fortunate than ourselves. We've always got to have that motivation to give somebody less fortunate than ourselves-- I think that's what it's all about. I try to do that. It says that, "A kind word is better than charity." So if you're just there for a few kind words of whatever that may be then you're giving of yourself so that's the motivation for me.

AK: When you were experiencing Homelessness in the eighties how was it different from when you experienced it later in the nineties and in the 2000s of when you became and activist?

RW: In the eighties-- I don't know. You know the eighties in Washington, DC was a real hard times because in Washington, DC during the eighties we had a lot of people who were experiencing a lot of success at a lot of things and so with that success came a lot of money also. Unfortunately, the great Ronald Reagan was president during the eighties and a lot of things I

⁹ 801 East Men's Shelter

think that he put in-- A lot of things that occurred during the eighties wasn't all that great for a lot of communities, especially with the cocaine that came into the city. That whole scene; the rapid production of a lot of people in the city and how it just stopped all that and brought on a lot of homelessness, the beginning of death and just bringing whole communities down. That why I never really understood how they keep on talking about how great Ronald Reagan was and all the destruction that occurred during the time he was in office. It always felt that he just told North American countries they could export cocaine if they didn't import communists. So during the period of time during when he was president we had a lot of cocaine that came into our communities. It really, really, really, you know--

0:49:11

So being homeless during that time was a lot different because it was really, really crazy time when people were involved with a lot of drug use. I think that was one of the reasons why CCNV failed because you were allowed to be whatever you were. You could come and-- It was like a flop house. It wasn't a place where people were really engaged in ways to change the system and make it better. Even that got screwed up in a lot of ways.

I think it just started a process for a lot of men that-- Like I said, when I became homeless in 2008 to see those same men it just goes to show you how much destruction had occurred and how people's lives were still be effected by those times. Yeah.

AK: How are things at CCNV today?

RW: At CCNV, I actually talked to a man who told me there's a resident that's been at CCNV for forty-five years. I also talked to residents who have been there for a number of years. I actually know residents who have been there for many numbers of years. And I have heard a lot of stories about some of the problems of some of the staff members. Of course you're always going to hear those stories and you're always going to have those problems and so not to get the wrong idea about or bring any disparity upon CCNV as an organization or a group or what it is they stand for, their mission statement, but at the same token, people need to be held accountable. We need to hold each other accountable on a lot of issues. People could do, we all could do more. There are a lot of issues at CCNV that need to be address that's not being addressed. There are a lot of things that people need to be informed of that they're not being informed of.

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I would just hope that, like I said, that what CCNV represents for me is a chance for the business community, federal government, local government and the homeless community to come together and try to put together a project that will represent something that will help people in their homelessness, their joblessness deal with some of the issues that they have down there. It can be bigger and better because you have a lot of entities down there right now. You have the healthcare, you have DC Central Kitchen, you have John L. Young, New Hope Ministries.¹⁰ You have a lot of entities down there right now that need to come together. Hopefully,

¹⁰ John L. Young Women's Shelter

eventually they'll build something down there that can represent the city and community that we all can build on. I know it's going to take a lot of people coming together and a lot of will power to make that happen.

There's some talk but you never know in this city right here. They might buy it off and put a ball park down there, who knows. (laughs) I don't know. I'm just saying, you never know. I know there's been some concern because there's a building being built behind CCNV. I'm not sure. I think it's supposed to be some form of housing, some luxury condos or something. Then there's a lot of talk about the activities around the building and people just-- The eyesore that it is. We've been trying to, SHARC has been trying to go out and talk to those people and engage them and hopefully get them to come in and be part of the discussion of what can actually take place down at CCNV.

AK: How have they been responding to that when you go talk to people?

RW: Well, we've been getting some response and people have been attending our town hall meetings. We've been over the last few months-- Like I said, Sandy kind of disrupted our last town hall meeting that we were planning for down at Freedom Plaza. It was supposed to be a day of people going in and out of the Wilson Building doing self-advocacy. We were going to be feeding people and doing a clothing drive and so forth so on. Having entertainment and everything, but like I said that fell through so we're planning our next event for the twenty-sixth. The events before that we fed two and three hundred homeless individuals and we also had eighty to ninety homeless individuals actually stay for our town hall meeting and engage in conversation and discussion. We've really been building the process. Yeah.

AK: How do those discussions go at your meetings? What do you talk about?

0:55:36

RW: A lot of discussion focuses on the reason why we planned the event for the twenty-ninth. People were talking about having the town hall meeting down there in front of city hall and going in there and doing those engagements so that was planned what we were going to do. Also there was some discussion about how to get residents down at CCNV involved more with doing the advocacy work and following up on some of the legacy of Mitch Snyder and getting back involved a little bit more and advocating around issues -- excuse me -- of homelessness. Well, I think we're slowly but surely making progress. We have a number of residents down there who ask about our advocacy work and how things are going. It's a slow process but I think we're making a lot of headway with it. We hope to keep it going.

AK: What are some of your proudest achievements as an activist?

RW: I guess it must have been with People for Fairness Coalition. When Fairness started we had about five homeless veterans that were actually a part of our group and to have all those veterans housed. To have been doing our outreach and have all the veterans we came in contact with get into housing programs and get them started the process. And some of the families and the individuals, that during those early times with Fenty when he first started the Permanent

Supportive Housing Program, to have gotten some of those people registered, you know, involved with that program. Yeah, that was probably our proudest moments for me. That was really-- Especially just to have all the veterans that were a part of our group actually get housed. Yeah. And to be part of that dialogue concerning homeless veterans not just in the District of Columbia but across the United States. The attention I think we brought to the issue of homeless veterans. Yes.

AK: I'm want to ask you a little bit about your perspective on gentrification in DC being a native Washingtonian and how gentrification affects homelessness. Can you tell me a little about that?

0:58:48

RW: For me, really, I don't know-- Living in Washington, DC right now, I really love the way the city is the way people are moving to the city and the city's growing. It's a good thing to see. The only problem I have with that whole process that's been taking place is that they haven't put in place things for people to be in the process to end their homelessness and to deal with the housing issues that they may have in the District of Columbia. I don't fault people for building buildings that people who can pay for them can pay for them. I don't fault that because, you know, that's free enterprise, you're supposed to be able to do that. But, at the same token, when you're doing it on District land and there's a need I think you have to also be a part of providing that need and I don't think the way they've been doing it has been fair to District residents.

That was one of the reasons I joined People Fairness Coalition because of that word fairness. Just to stand for what's fair. I think it just needs to be a fair process. I don't fault young people for wanting to come to DC and live here and engage in nightlife and enjoy life and so forth so on. I think that's a great thing. But, like I said, when it come to the point when you come into neighborhoods and you changing the whole neighborhood and you're providing stuff but you're not providing nothing for the people who are currently in that neighborhood they can benefit from then that's a problem.

AK: Have you seen examples of that?

1:00:52

RW: You can go all up and down 14th Street and see examples of that where the need has not been addressed where it needs to be addressed. Yeah, you can go all over the District of Columbia and see with every crane you see in the sky. See where they talk about how jobs and percentage of this and that is supposed to be built for low income residents. Then they talk about what represents low income to one individual might not mean to the next individual. So we just have to be fair about it so individuals who are in those areas where you bring in these complexes and you want to build your stuff you have to think, "Okay. Well, make sure people are getting jobs and their getting a percentage that represents that real true medium earned income not--"

Yeah, we need to do something about the rent, the median earned income in the District of Columbia. I think that would help address a lot of people's issues. Like I said, that one-third

rule that we're trying to get enforced not so much on one median earned income but just to say that individuals if you got to job and they are building a hundred new condos over here that might be going for \$30,000 a month all it's going to take you is one-third of your income to live there in a certain percentage of those condos. That's how we need to address it. Once we start to address it in fashion then I think the people who have problem with people moving into the city will decrease. That would be my only problem with people moving here that are not necessarily from here.

1:03:21

AK: For your one-third plan you mentioned people having to have jobs in order to access that one-third of their income--

RW: Right.

AK: What kind of issues do you think the homeless community faces in getting jobs in DC?

RW: You know, one-third of an individual's income, I mean, if you don't have any income but your number comes up you should be-- It could be just like you have [unintelligible] program where they have back to work programs-- Any program you get involved with right now. If you're getting food stamps, right now if you're getting food stamps they require you to do job searches. It should be the same way for housing assistance. It should be that you can't get housing assistance. They should only just have qualifications that you have to abide by in order to continue with that housing assistance. But when you say you can't get any housing assistance that's when you create affordable housing problems.

AK: How do job searches go for the homeless community in DC? What kind of difficulties do they face?

RW: I mean, for me, I wasn't able to find a job. I know I have skills where I can get a job. I worked as a sheet metal worker for eight years in Local 100. I know I am good enough with iron and sheet metal that I can go get a job if I really want to work on construction site. I have that much confidence in myself. But I know I'm also at an age that that's not really what I want to do. I really don't want to do that any longer.

1:05:16

But I know it would have been a very hard process for me to get a job being homeless because number one you have issues with trying to interview. And with being homeless with transportation so forth so on. Trying to interview and being homeless is one of the hardest things you have to deal with because it's just almost impossible. You have so many other things you have to deal with. And the way low-barrier shelters are set up they don't really give you support to do that. It makes it even harder. That's one of the things we're try to advocate for is to put in a process where a person can have that ability to be in these low-barrier shelters and have the services that they need to be able to interview because that's the most important thing. If you're not able to interview then how are you going to get a job?

AK: What kind of services do you need to be able to interview?

RW: I think it's more that they have to have Department of Employment Services do more outreach in low-barrier shelters when it comes to homeless individuals, number one. Also you have to have more in the process in order to make different service providers available to homeless individuals at low-barrier shelters. Access to where you can get certain jobs or certain services to help you get around town. And also, one thing is just that being able access storage. Which is really hard. It's really hard to--

I think through Bread for the City and working with Friendship Place up on Wisconsin Avenue, they had a job program where they actually help you with, you know, your clothing. Giving you clothes you can interview with, clean outfits, helping you with giving you job listings and stuff like that. There's just not enough of it going where you can actually get the clothing you need to interview and then they give you help-- I know with Bread for the City I was getting help with doing interviews, filling out applications online. Just being able to give you computer access and being able to go online and do applications. So it's just a lot things that you know you can help people with.

1:08:26

Then they might say well, We have all this stuff at one-stops. But then comes the problem with transportation when you have to think about getting something to eat. If you go to one-stop in the morning then you're going to be hungry. How you going to focus when you're hungry? So your first thought is to go somewhere and get something to eat. Then it's your transportation issue, you've got to have money for transportation. If a bus comes to get you from the shelter and it drop you somewhere downtown and the one-stop is all the way over on Minnesota Avenue you have to figure out how you're going to get to Minnesota Avenue then you got to figure out where you're going to eat lunch. It's just a whole lot of things that impede you from trying to get into that process where you get a job. Hopefully we can get more types of day programs set up in low-barrier shelters and more engagement. Hopefully more help with transportation and more help with just trying to get into the interview process.

AK: Do you think that homeless applicants for jobs face prejudice from employers?

RW: Well, I heard it been said that if you put on an application that you are homeless or you don't really have a fixed address that's a problem for any applicant. I'm almost sure you have people who are looking at an application and say, Well this individual he has a certain address listed on there, this individual is homeless. That application is maybe not going to be looked over another application. Someone who maybe doesn't have that issue would probably be more acceptable to that employer than someone who has that issue.

AK: Why do you think that is?

1:10:34

RW: Because if you are an individual that's homeless and trying to work a job sometimes there can be issues with that. You might have to work at night or in the evenings when you might not get back to the shelter in time enough to get a bed. Or we have some shelters that have work detail programs and some people don't want to be in work detail programs. They want maybe to be able to say that I do have a job and have access to a bed but I don't want to necessarily have to be in some kind of program.

That's what I say it would probably be better if you were housing people and then giving them the job assistance that they need. Just requiring them to be engaged in order to maintain that assistance then that would help facilitate that process, that I think anyway. Like for me, if I didn't get housed through that program I don't think I would ever have had the time to be able to go through a process where I could actually get a job, interview, have a home base to work from, change clothes, shower, you know, all those things that are so important that help you in that process. Even to be able to go out to the different places that will give you the help that you need. Being able to come home and have a hot meal and shower. Come and go as I please and not have to worry about getting up at 7 o'clock in the morning and being there at 7 o'clock in the evening to get into line. Or get into line and get on the bus in the morning. It just goes on and on and on.

Hopefully we're supposed to be meeting, actually we're supposed to be meeting with Tommy Wells next week with our group People for Fairness Coalition and he's the head of transportation, chairman of the Transportation Committee. We're going to be discussing with him over some creative ways we can provide some of the transportation assistance to homeless individuals that they're currently not getting when it comes to trying to do job searches and positive things, maybe go to school or whatever the case may be. (coughs) So, yeah.

1:13:10

AK: So we're coming to the end of our tape here. I was wondering if there were any other topics that you wanted to address that I haven't asked about yet?

RW: No, I think we covered everything just about. I can't think of anything just besides-- The only thing I can think of right now, like I said, we're really focusing this task force because I think the mayor is trying to use it for cover. We want to hopefully get people to come out in the homeless community and testify and give their testimonies so we can make sure that our voice is heard and how they can provide housing for individuals. Yeah. (coughs)

AK: Okay. Thank you so much this has been a great interview--

End of interview.