

Penn South Archive Project

Witness: Bernie & Paulette Esrig

Interviewers: Abby Tannenbaum John Harris

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John: We are rolling.

Abby: OK. Well, thank you so much for meeting with us. Can you both individually tell us your full names, please?

Paulette: I'm Paulette Esrig. I was born . . . uh . . . Deborah Ante. And somehow along the line, I've changed to Paulette, and I changed my name to Esrig.

Bernie: And I'm Bernard Esrig.

Abby: Great. Well, we're really thrilled to have you talking with us. When did you move to Penn South?

Paulette: We moved almost 60 years ago to this day. In August . . . August, I believe. August 17th. Um . . . we waited a long time to get in. And we've been here ever since.

Abby: So that was August of 1962?

Bernie: Yes. And I believe we put in a deposit in 1957. That's what I recall.

Abby: Mm hmm. How did you hear about Penn South?

Paulette: I heard about . . . I didn't hear about it . . . I think I read about it and there was a blurb in The Times, I think it was about this big. And I read about and I think I read . . . and it struck something. 'Cause my family, my father no longer, but my aunt and uncle were part of the ILGWU. And somehow I realized that that might be an answer to what I wanted to do with the next phase in our lives. And . . . um . . . and I asked my aunt and uncle to find out about it, and somehow they must have because my aunt and uncle were living in, I believe, Building Nine. And then my aunt was sitting here, right here in the foyer with me on the day we moved in, very pregnant in my case, and she was keeping me company.

Abby: And were your aunt and uncle members of ILGWU?

Paulette: I believe my uncle was. My aunt was like my mother initially. They were hatters.

Abby: Hatters and the Milliners.

Paulette: Yeah, they learned that in Europe. They learned that craft in Europe.

Abby: So . . . so can you talk a little bit about that phase of your life? You were moving from one to another?

Paulette: Well, my phase of my life goes back to my youth and my childhood I grew up in a suburban area, and it was wonderful as a child. Safe. It was lovely. It was beautiful.

Abby: Where was that?

Paulette: Seagate, which is a gated . . . was a gated community. And interestingly enough, it gated out the Jews at one time. And then the Jews moved in and later on with some guilt, I realized, too, they were gating out. And . . . um . . . so When my mother became an artist and I was very interested in the arts, it was getting to a point where Seagate might not have been for me. The young people were living different kinds of lifestyle. I was more interested in the arts. So when my parents moved to Manhattan, of course, I was with them, and I realized Bernie and I, when we got married, we lived in Manhattan, and our first son was born Where? Where was he born?

Bernie: Misericordia Hospital.

Paulette: Yeah but that . . .

Bernie: Which no longer exists.

Paulette: But he was born and we lived in Washington Heights. And then I heard about this and it was like, I can realize some of my dreams someday. I can pursue the arts. I can go to galleries, I can go to museums. I don't have to ride the subway for hours. I can have this and as you know, we did it. My dream came true.

Abby: Well, that's wonderful. We want to hear more about that. So you grew up in Seagate in Brooklyn. Near Coney Island. Where did you grow up, Bernie?

Bernie: East New York, which eventually burned down. Uh . . . there is a working class area everybody in my family were landlords, so we had our own six family house. Some was familiar with that. And I actually lived there all of the time and went into the army for two years, got out of the army, met this lady at Teachers College at Columbia, and we got married. We ended up in a . . . an apartment because it was a compromise. I worked in Brooklyn, and she worked in the Bronx at that time. Uh . . . so we ended up in Washington Heights at about 190th street, and it was a one bedroom apartment. A horrible place because it was at the bottom of a hill where trucks would put on their brakes. If you could picture a trailer truck putting on its brake, it was really a bad scene. But anyway, it was right next door to Fort Tryon

Park, so we would go there. We decided we needed a larger apartment.

Paulette: One of the downsides of that apartment was related to a nightmare that I had lived through as a younger person. I had seen a child . . . uh . . . the aftermath of a child being hit by a truck, and our son would go out of the building and run straight near the curb. And I was really looking for a much safer place to bring about family and that's probably one of the reasons we chose this building.

Abby: So you mentioned you put a deposit in in 1957.

Bernie: I believe that's when it was.

[Bernie and Abby talk at same time]

Abby: And then they had to build —

Bernie: That's right.

Abby: — The buildings.

Bernie: I think it was four or \$7,000. We're not . . . we don't — which we borrowed. We didn't have the money.

Paulette: Definitely.

Bernie: The uh . . .

Abby: And —

Bernie: We paid from her parents.

Abby: OK, so family helped.

Bernie: And we paid it back.

Paulette: We had to pay them back.

Bernie: Because there was a strike. It was supposed to be up here earlier but there was a strike and that lasted for a long time. I don't know why for some reason that ended up costing \$2 million more, the co-op. I don't know why that number remains in my head.

Abby: Do you know any more details about what kind of strike?

Bernie: I'm not too sure, but it stopped all . . . all the building stopped and nothing was happening as far as we were concerned. You know, we didn't keep track of it all the time. We were just waiting. And then we received the notice that, all right, come to select an apartment.

Abby: Well, there was some neighborhood opposition to the project since there were people living in different types of buildings on these streets. Did you . . . were you aware of that?

Bernie: I was always . . . any time you build anything in New York, there's going to be some opposition people have. And this was a neighborhood that was ongoing. It was, I believe, Greek, Armenian, whatever, it was an ethnic neighborhood. But there must have been a large number of commercial places which lost their businesses. Um . . . this is what happens whenever you put up a large place. It was . . . I'm not too sure whether it was the era of Robert Moses or before. And basically he said, you know, you got to go.

Abby: Right. It was called, quote unquote, "slum clearance".

Paulette: Yes, but I was here actually in this neighborhood. Excuse me, Bernie, I did student teaching for a short period of time at P.S. 33. So before the co-op went up, before Bernie was even on the horizon or under my arms, so to speak, Um . . . I saw this neighborhood, and I was um . . . I wouldn't call it a slum neighborhood at all. It would be insulting to people who lived there. I think it was just a working class, poor neighborhood. And I never spent much time, I would just go directly to P.S. 33. And it was so ironic that we moved when we moved that that would be the school that . . .

Bernie: And that was supposed to be a model school. And not too many people remember with the Ford Foundation to put in \$2 million and created a closed circuit television system within the school, and it was the only one in New York City. So it had many things going for it. And it was also very different from most schools. If you look at it, it is not flush with the sidewalk. It's at an angle which was rare, also. It's a completely different arrangement. So it was supposed to be a model school may not have turned out that way, but that's the way it was supposed to be.

Abby: OK, well, we can come back to that. So let's . . . let's just go back to . . . Paulette, you . . . You talked about being able to pick the building that you wanted to live in. Can you tell us more about that?

Paulette: Well, because I was so anxious about my son and also this, you're in an enclosed . . . it's such a closed area. You're not really . . . you're in the city, but not in the city in a way. And I just felt that this was a good spot. And also we were near the playground.

Abby: Right, we're in Building Seven . . .

Bernie: So it's two playgrounds actually.

Abby: Right. It's a little farther from . . . from any street with any cars or traffic.

Paulette: You know, when I think of the way we mother . . . we were mothering our children in those days, we were far less scared and worried about the safety of our children. When I think of my little boy, Mark, who's going to be 60 soon, the child I was pregnant on, would say to me, "I'm going to put on my daddy's shirt." He was all of three or four. I'm going to cry and get on the elevator and go visit a friend. I would be arrested today for child neglect.

Bernie: A three year old riding the elevator.

Paulette: Riding the elevator and as sure as he could reach the numbers, he was riding the elevator. There's no such thing. He would go down to the playground I would go out on the terrace and watch to see. The trees, of course, were not as full grown. Hardly full grown. I could see him running out there. Nobody would do that now. Nobody. And I don't know whether it was stupidity on our part, or we just felt this was safe for the children.

Abby: Well -

Paulette: And it turned out, I think it was.

Abby: You must have felt it was safe.

Bernie: Yeah. There was also a supermarket which was right here. The co-ops it would be it was a co-op supermarket, which struck me as very unusual because we talk about our cruise to England everywhere we went we saw co-op markets and I always . . . I forget why the co-op market over here closed down.

Abby: Well, I think some other people spoke about that.

John: Could you slide your whole chair over about as close as you can to the camera? That's good. Actually, you need to get up because that's stuck. Right there. That's good.

Abby: I . . . I . . . someone else spoke about the co-op market and I think that there was some kind of malfeasance that led to its demise. But what did you . . . did you like having the co-op market here?

Bernie: It was wonderful.

Paulette: I loved it. Oh, we loved it. It was wonderful. And I'll tell you, when we saw it in small towns, in Scotland, the co-op market . . . I really it made me feel very sad. For some reason, it brought back these feelings of . . . And when my children were

growing, I had . . . I had . . . We had three boys. They were enormous eaters. I would have to buy a lot of food and drag it home. I was . . . it was part of our life and it was a loss for me personally when that closed. And I really . . . never could . . . I feel badly that people may have lost their jobs or having been moved when this current market closed, but I never developed the feeling for it. And I will say that prices were . . . I don't want to go.

Bernie: We also had the parking area here. There was another reason. Because we . . . I always drove to work, I think for a long time anyway. So we had the parking right outside the door, which I still use at an enormous cost. [Bernie and Abby chuckle]

Abby: So . . . so do you remember how long the co-op market was there? Was . . . was it already open when you moved in?

Bernie: I don't remember.

Paulette: No. You know we moved in at the birth of the co-op. So things . . . weren't all ready.

Abby: Can you talk more about?

Paulette: I don't think the stores were ready yet. I may be wrong, and I know there was a corner store. I don't know where it was. There was someone that had a corner store. A man. I got friendly with him. And that went out of business, and . . . You know, any kind of neighborhood, there's movement. There's . . . I still from day one, use the dry cleaner and there's been a change in who runs there and the population. And I'm sorry, I'm sure they were affected by COVID because there used to be a Hispanic man that would deliver my dry cleaning. And I got sort of friendly with him and he's gone now. And I really . . . I hesitate to even ask because, you know, he's not there anymore. Conversely, I want this man to stay in business. I know there's going to be a change.

Bernie: This was a construction site. There were . . . I mean, as I may have mentioned, the children loved it because they would play all kinds of games. There was no playground, yet. There was stuff all over the place. The pipes were exposed and the kids were running . . . were having a lot of fun with it.

Abby: So do you remember, was it that . . . Was it another one of the buildings that they were constructing?

Bernie: Well there was the area right outside the building. They were outside the building.

Abby: The landscaping?

Bernie: The buildings were . . . I believe it was the landscaping. So everything was up in the air.

Paulette: No plantings then. Nothing. And . . . I remember a friend coming to see me after my son was born. And I remember her saying to me, "You're a pioneer living here." And it was . . . it struck me as . . . because . . . first of all, that was said so many years ago, first of all. And in a way, we were pioneers living here, finding our way. We were so young. And first generation Americans have a lot to learn. A lot to learn. With the two of us, grew up here.

Bernie: When we chose the apartment, the question was asked, can you afford it? And there's question about it which so happens I moved into another job. A higher level job, a supervisory job in the school system. Just at that time when we moved in in '62. But there was a big issue. Can we afford it?

Abby: Sure. I think that was an issue for a lot of people. And did you . . . did you bring a lot of furnishings from your previous apartment? Or did you . . . how did you furnish the new apartment? It was a smaller apartment. This is a three bedroom apartment.

Bernie: Yeah.

Paulette: We had this.

Bernie: The piano.

Paulette: Yeah. And we had a bedroom set. This is our kitchen table from the other apartment. That's all it is.

Bernie: That's pretty much it.

Paulette: This chair I think we had in the other apartment. I haven't bought that much. I mean, this is from the Museum of Modern Art Those two were for company. We have folding chairs in a closet when we have company because it's a lot, you know, when we have company, people sit there, they sit out there, we sit here, we don't . . . And of course, at this age entertaining and since COVID, it's pretty much . . .

Bernie: We had something interesting happening when we had three children. We had two children in one bedroom, two boys, big boys. And I think I mentioned when it came to the playground the parents got together, contributed because the co-op wasn't doing very much. In fact, very frankly, it was anti child. It was . . . it was. We were told by many of the people, "why don't you live in the suburbs? That's where children belong."

Abby: What people said that?

Bernie: The older people who were moved here.

Bernie: Oh, absolutely.

Abby: Other residents.

Bernie: Yeah, absolutely. And the . . . so a whole bunch of parents got together and they each contributed . . . you may have mentioned, \$50 each. And we had this guy who was an architect and also a carpenter. So he built something for . . . for the playground which was used for many, many years.

Paulette: I'm sure the . . .

Bernie: Well . . . and it ended up we used that same guy to build a structure in that room which is now a dining room. Do it and he designed it so that each child had a half of the room with a bed and everything else.

Paulette: That was interesting. That was the good . . . I'm sorry.

Bernie: He lived here, by the way.

Paulette: He . . . they lived here and for the life of me . . . I worked with her. I feel terrible. I can't remember their name. I'm really blocked, and I don't think a structure like that would pass code. You know, there's such a different standard of how life goes on in a city and life goes on with the co-op where they have to adhere to certain legal standards. That didn't occur then when we so freely built this very liberal and exciting play thing. Then the co-op eventually took over. And now we have . . .

Bernie: It's like the third one now.

Abby: So you're talk about the the playground that's near Building Seven. Near Building Eight, the sandbox playground.

Bernie: Yeah.

Paulette: It's wonderful. I'm on my . . . you know, we did have grandchildren that lived here a very brief time. And one of my joys was when I came home from wherever I was, I believe I was still working. I may have been. I would look out on the playground and see them. And when they moved away, I still would do that almost automatically and then have to remind myself they're not there now.

Bernie: What was interesting about the co-op here, in contrast to many other large developments, was that it was open to outside. There are many developments . . . because I was familiar . . . I used to work and my uncle's luncheonette there down on 14th Street and Avenue B in Manhattan when Stuyvesant Town was being built.

And if you know Stuyvesant Town, there're limited access roads and literally almost a wall around it. This place was open. So there are . . . many of the children, their families actually used the playgrounds and the facilities over here. And that's why I happen to believe that there is really and my view hasn't changed, that very little from what I see, vandalism in the co-op.

Abby: So children from the neighborhood. And children who live in the co-op.

Bernie: That's right. I mean—

Paulette: Nobody ever, at least in the years when I sat there and we never said anything, we never complained as long as children be.

Bernie: Yeah. And we know that people from the other neighbors . . . other neighborhoods some of the private developers, some from the Elliott and the other housing, I forget the . . .

Abby: Right. The public housing.

Bernie: Public housing, which was a different type of housing a lot of people were not aware of that housing. It's different from the other city housing or it used to be because it was limited after the Second World War to veterans, which is not what they do now.

Abby: And you mentioned P.S. 33, which is across 9th Avenue and the . . . the public housing complex is right there as well.

Bernie: So children can come here and they still come here now. And as I said, from what I gather there is very little vandalism.

Paulette: I always get some cheer because P.S. 33 has such lovely wall paintings done. I don't know if it's done by the children. I have a sus and it's not graffitied. And for me, I don't care what artists say, I personally find graffitied buildings an insult and they're never touched. And that to me it's such a blessing [Paulette coughs] Excuse me.

Abby: So you mentioned there were not . . . some people were not happy to see families with children moving in but you did find out some other families to coordinate to . . . to build the playground. Can you talk more about raising fam. . . a family here and other children in the co-op?

Bernie: Not only to do the playground, but later on our daughter-in-law was instrumental in creating a . . . a room which they sort of took over. And I forget which building. What the building was.

Abby: Are you talking about the toddler room?

Bernie: The toddler room. They literally created it and got a whole bunch of toys there and so forth. And that was . . . that worked out very well. There were a lot of parent and family get togethers. There were also a . . . I don't know what you would call it a food co-op in a way you could describe it.

Paulette: Yeah, we had a . . . I didn't mention that a lot of us got together and we had a food co-op and several parents would go to . . . Where'd they go?

Bernie: To the Bronx market. I forget what it's called. Hunt's Point?

Abby: Hunt's Point. Right.

Paulette: I believe I remember her name. Charlene Trank was one of them. She still lives here and they would go and we would they would divide up the food and it was a wonderful thing. I think it introduced me personally to vegetables and . . . and a lot of very good fresh food that wasn't part of my whole life at that time. There were very few children when we moved in in the co-op, very few, and I think that was the issue. A lot of older people moved in. Union people. And a lot of them weren't . . . I don't know whether they were married or single. And I always got the feeling that they felt that if their children moved, if they were married, if their children moved to the suburbs, why are these young people living here? You can look at it two ways. First of all, the first way I mentioned, and secondly, because their children are living in the suburbs, maybe they're upset that their children are living in the suburbs. You know, and I would say, why don't you go where my children are? What are you doing here blocking my way?

Bernie: That's what we were told.

Paulette: So you can look at it and think about it both ways.

Bernie: There's a pitcher of water in there.

Paulette: Yes.

Abby: I got that.

Paulette: Oh, thank you. Thank you.

Abby: So you mentioned that your son and daughter-in-law did live in Penn South for a short time, you could see your grandchild in the playground. But they don't live here now?

Paulette: No.

Bernie: They moved to New Rochelle. They had a second child.

Paulette: No, they had the second child while they were still here.

Bernie: Yeah. Well, they had a second child.

Paulette: They had the third child in New Rochelle.

Bernie: Actually one of them, my other sons did and I checked with him this morning where he had an apartment for a year and a half. And then I don't . . . I don't remember the sequence. He got married to —

Paulette: No, no, no. I think he went to grad school at the . . .

Bernie: University of Pennsylvania.

Paulette: And ___ met his future wife.

Bernie: So they were the women. The two daughters-in-law came from the suburbs

Abby: I see.

Bernie: and they went along with them. So one of them, one lives in New Rochelle and one in West Orange.

Abby: And you had a third son in . . . a few years after you moved in.

Paulette: He didn't marry and now—

Bernie: He was the oldest who lives in Pennsylvania.

Paulette: He was the one who was five when we moved in.

Abby: And where did your children go to school?

Paulette: They went to P.S. 33, P.S. 41, P.S. 59 junior high, local junior high schools. They went to the specialized high schools.

Bernie: To Brooklyn Tech in Stuyvesant.

Paulette: And then they went off to college. Our oldest son had a series of colleges. And finally got himself through Queens College and the another one went to Tulane and graduated. I think he got a master's from . . .

Bernie: New Pace.

Paulette: Yes, and then the third, Dave, went to the University of Virginia and got his master's from University of Pennsylvania. And Dave is a University of Virginia dad because our grandson, Eli, just got a master's for computer science from UVA. And this week, our second grandchild one of our grandchildren, just started medical school at UVA. And when I asked my son, did you give them any extra money for all of this, he said, absolutely not. So that's . . .

Abby: Well, that's . . . those are great accomplishment.

Bernie: They did it on their own.

Abby: So . . .

Paulette: And we have other children . . . grand children that have done that I'm . . . they don't like me to show off. But they've done the top Ivy's.

Bernie: They've done well.

Paulette: They've done very well. Very well. We've been blessed. I just wish them good health and good luck.

Abby: When you were raising your sons here and there . . . there . . . there did, I think, become more families with children in the co-op. Do you think most people sent their children to public schools.

Paulette: There was the great divide here. And I think . . . I was thinking about the teachers. Remember I mentioned that teacher strike that divided the co-op and the parents that went into the into the public school and then they came out and decided to send their children to private schools. But I took it as very strange. But there was a divide here even initially. A lot of . . . there were parents who sent their children to private school. Frankly, I was so naive and inexperienced in the ways of . . . city life. My father was just here for six years when I was born. I didn't even know enough to go to get somebody to help my children get into the specialized high school. They just went in cold and took the test. Finally, I got someone for our youngest child because a neighbor mentioned, oh, well, we're all doing that. I didn't know!

Bernie: What happened here is the the co-op was split, I believe it's 26th street. The children who were above 26th Street went to P.S. 33.

Abby: Right.

Bernie: The ones, I believe, below went to . . .

Abby: I think it's P.S. 21.

Paulette: P.S. 11.

Abby: 11. Sorry.

Bernie: P.S. 11 And all together and I'm not sure of this whether there was 60 children in this for 33 or 60 children altogether that went to the elementary school in the whole co-op

Paulette: I'm sorry

Bernie: It was a very small number. Very small.

Paulette: I think there were so many children in the entire co-op.

Bernie: Of elementary school age. The people who moved here, many of them had older children, high school or college. That's how they end up in two and three bedroom apartments because they didn't allow. There was no reason for a a husband and wife to come here and get a three bedroom apartment. They had teenagers or college students and all of these over the years, they've all moved out. This is why you have so many apartments here occupied by one or two people.

Paulette: Like us.

Abby: Right. But . . .but you have stayed over all these years. Even as your . . . as some of your sons have left.

Bernie: For a short time we thought about the moving to some some other place, but it turns out this has worked out very, very well.

Paulette: Well, what happened was our children were after us to live in a doorman building and we were searching for an apartment. Just at that time. I was approaching my seventies and I had some very serious health issue. And then on top of it, I developed very serious problems with my spine. And I lived many years with a tremendous amount of pain and only really in the last maybe — when was it? — less than the last decade. I had major surgery on my spine. It was the third surgery, and it was the first time in many years in the last decade that I've lived a pain-free life. And I couldn't . . . we couldn't move. We were actually looking at apartments. We couldn't. I was not in physical . . .

Bernie: But they asked, why do you want to move? You have such a good deal here.

Paulette: Yeah, also, and I began to realize I had a good deal here and I didn't have to move anywhere else.

Bernie: So the idea in New York and Manhattan for the people who have the money is to live in a co-op or condo with a doorman 24

hours a day, and to have parking underneath the building then you can go right up to your apartment. And actually we knew somebody who had that, but he happened to be the deputy chair of the school system, with whom we were friends. And he lived in such a building across the town on 24th Street. But you have to be very well-to-do to have that. In this co-op, as I said, the parking, the hundred feet away, to me that was wonderful.

Paulette: No, this . . . this turn, and no matter what apartment I saw, it was . . . It didn't measure.

Bernie: It was ridiculous.

Paulette: It didn't measure up and I didn't have I mean, look, what I see out the window.

Abby: You see beautiful green and treetops.

Paulette: You know, I . . . I see the leaves dancing. To me, this is almost like a ballet to look at those leaves moving and the different colors and the shades. And there's no matter. I mean, my vision is limited, but when it comes to out-of-doors, I can still see pretty well. And for me, this is so extraordinary and it's so it's so wonderful and I feel so fortunate.

Bernie: This comedy, this comedy associated with our beginning, I think we told you about hearing the noises when we moved in. It was during the summer. And we . . . and when we would hear this melody [Bernie sings] and we went out on the terrace, we couldn't figure it out. And then we finally figured out that it was all the belly dance places that were . . . there were at least three of them. One of them I remember: Egyptian Gardens on the corner of 29th Street and on the second floor.

Abby: On 8th Avenue?

Bernie: On 8th Avenue. There were . . .

Paulette: I feel very badly I think it was in a very graffiti building now and I take it almost as a personal insult. They did —

Bernie: So we had belly dancing there. And then the . . . as I said earlier, there were . . . it wasn't that wonderfully pro-young children and the gardener who was here at that moment supposedly was the gardener for some kingdom somewhere. And he had a personal I'd say reaction when any two year-old would go on the grass and there was nothing like a gardener running after a two year-old on the grass. [Bernie and Abby chuckle] But, I mean, I think the garden here, gardening here is absolutely magnificent and most people don't realize that there are about seven or eight different types of shrubbery here. They don't know one from the other and they're just missing all of it.

Paulette: It's extraordinary. It's extraordinary and I did express and I have expressed a wish and a hope for when they're young children here that they do allow them to run on the grass and . . . and . . . and they're not going to destroy anything. Believe me, little children very rarely pull, I speak from experience of my own grandchildren and . . .

Bernie: They don't pull grass out.

Paulette: They don't pull up bushes they don't destroy they can . . . and it's just glorious and I like that when I . . . during COVID people were outside having parties and . . . and it's a little freer and looser.

Abby: Right. There's the open recreation area and children are running and . . . and playing some sports there What else besides the belly dancing places do you remember? You mentioned a small store, but can you talk a little more about the neighborhood over the years? I know it's many decades, but you've watched changes in Chelsea.

Bernie: Well, it became a put as my economist son says, one of the priciest areas not only in New York but in the country it has become a very . . . and everything is changed to that and the restaurants have changed, obviously. There used to be . . . actually until very, very recently, frankly, more diners which I happen to like more than Paulette does.

Paulette: No, I loved the diners.

Bernie: The diners were very . . . you know for breakfast they were great. But there were changes in the buildings. For example, on 29th Street, there was a hospital, French hospital.

Abby: French Hospital, right.

Bernie: Where I think one of our children, they got hurt, you know, they played around.

Paulette: Got hit by a stone or something.

Bernie: And went to French hospital and obviously that's not there anymore. The neighborhoods have become, as people would call "yuppified" or whatever. We weren't even aware very recently, I mean . . . I mean, I feel rather stupid about it about two blocks away, a huge building had become a private school. This is why . . .

Abby: Avenues School. Avenues which I had never heard of. And all of a sudden I see a lot of children over there. I said, you know, how did this happen that? I should mention one thing which we

haven't spoken. Paulette inherited Woodstock property. My mother-in-law was an artist. They had a property in Woodstock. Which they had . . . they got about 60 years ago, also. We sold it a few years ago. But we would go up there for weekends when her parents passed away. So a lot of the things . . . uh . . . interestingly that have changed in the last maybe five years or ten years, um . . . we weren't even aware of. Uh . . . we didn't see it. And then we sold that place, it was right at the beginning of COVID. So we certainly weren't going to go looking around. So a lot of it is sort of new riding on the West Side Highway or riding around the whole area. The whole West Side obviously had changed. The . . . I mean when we moved here, there were no galleries.

Abby: Right.

Bernie: I mean, incredible thing when you think that there are more than 200 art galleries within three or four blocks. So that was a very significant change from garages. I remember bringing my car around to the garages that are galleries right now.

Paulette: Yeah, and that area was also, I hate to use this term, hookers. Hook up area.

Bernie: Hookers' delight.

Paulette: It was, you know . . . we knew about that.

Abby: In the West Twenties, west of 10th Avenue?

Bernie: 11th Avenue and 28th Street, 29th Street. But you do because Her parents, a lot of the art we had to store and we used that storage area so there was a hooker on every corner.

Paulette: Now, but also I was concerned we, the younger parents and mothers, had hoped that once F.I.T. was going there would have a more open street life, on 8th Avenue. and I think I have expressed my pain. When I think F.I.T. turned, physically, I felt its back to us and it's almost as if I saw a back side and a lot of us, the mothers and young people at that time, and it only increased. Why did they open their doors and their window to 7th Avenue when ILGWU houses were here and David Dubinsky is the name of one of their buildings and yet they turned their back on us. And I would like to point out something. I mentioned that it's called ILGWU Houses. And I really feel that none of us were thrilled about that name. And over the years we started just informally calling this place, Penn South, and eventually it became a reality. And now it's known as Penn South. But when we first moved in, it was ILGWU Housing. And even though I as a teacher was a member of a very young Teachers Union then. It wasn't as powerful. It was forgotten. I still didn't feel like I wanted to be known as that. Whatever it is, it's what I . . . I really wasn't thrilled about the name ILGWU Housing. And I feel that a lot of people didn't . . . felt the same way.

Bernie: There was also something different about the . . . I believe when we were here, we could still see trains on the elevated track.

Paulette: Yeah, before . . .

Bernie: Going into the buildings. And that stopped. And that, of course, gave our kids, including one or two of ours, opportunity to climb up there. And they did. They would climb up, which was of course, they would tell us after the fact they would climb up on to the railroad tracks. That was so . . . so . . . not only was that it was sort of a decrepit area over there when you have an abandoned railroad track and I know that all the businesses wanted to tear it down, really, they really wanted to get rid of it. But I guess I forgot her name, Anne Furstenberg

Paulette: No. Diane von Furstenberg and Barry Diller . . .

Bernie: Put up the money to change it.

Abby: Right.

Paulette: And I mean, they gave a great gift. I mean, that's a lesson for people that are super wealthy to give to others. And they certainly have contributed to the Chelsea . . .

Bernie: I was . . . that . . . that's been the impetus for . . . to me from what I see a huge change in the area, that whole area.

Abby: The High Line has gotten very popular. And with the High Line in the Gallery has come restaurants and condos and all of Hudson yards. And it's . . . huge change.

Paulette: Now you go on the High Line, and you hear languages from all over. I remember once there was an eclipse and I went to see it and it was during the day and and there was . . . and there was a young couple there. They weren't speaking English, and they made room for me to sit so I could try to see this eclipse and this I . . . I hope that the young people in this area realize what not . . . what resources we now have that are free that we can make use of to . . . to enrich our lives, because for us, it's very enriching.

Bernie: Now, we may have mentioned that we were really not involved in the Board of Directors, the others, it was kind of informal families. And I was busy going to school and so forth. And be . . . and also being in the central headquarters in the school system and teaching as an adjunct at five different universities. New York. And so when you do that, it's very hard to participate in a voluntary Board of Directors or Trustees because it is, you know, Ayan, all those people did it because . . . and it is an immense amount of time.

Abby: It's a lot of work.

Paulette: It's a tremendous sacrifice.

Bernie: I was very active on the Executive Committee of the Anti-Defamation League and also the president at one point of Brotherhood Synagogue, which is across town. And when you're doing . . . and you do that, it's very . . . you just can't.

Abby: Can't do everything.

Bernie: Can't do everything.

Paulette: He had also mentioned that he, Bernie, was one of the people that implemented Excelsior University. That's the free University for New York State. I took advantage of it. And that's how I got my master's in not only reading but on learning disabilities. I took one course that I needed. And I was so resentful that I would have to pay tuition. And I went and took the test and it's thanks to people . . . And so Bernie was busy. He didn't spend his time politically in the co-op.

Bernie: We had friends who did and, you know, but . . . they would have their different views and arguments. And were from the Left and the Right.

Paulette: Yeah, but it was the great divide. That strike really divided that . . . parent groups for a while. People were worried about talking to each other. It was a painful time in the co-op at that time.

Abby: Well, you have this long view. Can you talk a little more about what it's been like as you've lived here six decades? As you said, you were fairly young when you moved in. You had one child, another on the way. You had a third and now as you've aged through your life, Paulette, I think you said you have been active and . . . and taken advantage of some of the resources in the senior center.

Bernie: She has a lot.

Paulette: I . . . I . . . the Senior Center has been supportive of me in more than one way. I . . . I do take the film course I don't think I mentioned. And I follow up . . . I . . . we used to have a coffee schmooze in-person but they've also . . . They've had a program that was very important for me one time, because I have limited vision and it opened. A woman was on it who was an optometrist. She demonstrated many tools that were helpful for people in my situation and that I was totally unaware of and I was able to then . . . I'm still sort of computer savvy. I was still able to go online and look up stuff. I've ordered stuff for myself

and . . . and . . . uh that opened a very important door for me. I'm sure I also have a hearing loss that is very isolating. Now, I have really a very updated hearing aids that extends my life and . . . there've been programs also. I haven't always followed them so and they're very supportive. If I call up and say, "Oh, I didn't get something," they'll send me material that will help me I feel like it's a helping hand for me.

Abby: And what about other people in the co-op? Do you have a sense that other people take advantage of the services and the resources?

Paulette: Well, when you go to the . . . I mean, before COVID, if you went to the Senior Center, that . . . the film class that I love was very filled. It was like 50 people and it was wonderful. And now there's just like a group of us. And Zoom is very helpful for people who don't hear well. And because my hearing aids go to my iPhone and I'm an equal member of that group, whereas if I sit in a normal classroom, I may not always hear what is said. It's . . . that's not a problem in the senior center. They have a special wiring. I forgot there's an updated name.

Bernie: The T-Coil,

Paulette: It's called T-Coil and it is a super thing. That Senior Center is such a plus and people should be taking advantage of it because I think it's super. Even though I spend plenty of time in Greenwich House, this is a support foundation for me at this point. I have to say that I'm living my dream, living in the co-op. Today, Bernie brought up a mail for me, and in the mail it was from Carnegie Hall, and I took apart tickets for concerts

Abby: That's wonderful.

Paulette: that when I was a new woman mother moving into the co-op, that was one of my dreams that someday I'll be able to go to concerts in Carnegie Hall and not have to ride the subways or figure out how to get home, and it'll take me hours. So even at this age, fortunately, fortunately, I can still do that and I can still go to concerts.

Bernie: I think a lot of people –

Paulette: It took a long time. We had to educate our children, then they got married, then we help them here and there. They don't need our help. So we . . . whatever we have now, and hopefully we're still in good health.

Bernie: Most people who are here don't realize

Paulette: We can take . . . How wonderful this city is and we're grateful to this city because one of the few people around that

remembered that college education was free for people like us, children of refugees, new people to this country, they educated me. And if I love art and I love music, it's because of my education in New York.

Bernie: I think we missed out a little . . . is that there are some people who got to be very well known who moved out and I still remember some deputy mayors. When we went to Building Six, we moved out and they had a Liberal Party, the political arm of the Koch administration because I would meet the Mayor, Koch, riding the elevator here sometime because he lived in this building, not Koch, but the other guy.

Abby: Do you think it would have been better for the co-op if . . . if some of those people involved in the city government had stayed?

Bernie: Absolutely. It's political clout. Very very simply. Now, there are a lot of benefits here that people aren't aware of. We had something, I don't know whether I mentioned it to you the . . . the other day. It was very strange. It was about 9:00 in the morning and they heard dripping down. Did I mention? I don't know if I mentioned. And there was . . . and I felt my mattress was wet. And what happened? There was water dripping down from the ceiling. And I called the co-op and I say there's water dripping from the ceiling. The guy was here in about 10 minutes and he's . . . he started checking all the apartments above and what he was concerned is if this convector gets clogged up, you start getting a flood. But it turns out that after a long story I'll make it very brief, that the person above us thought that there would be a shutdown of the F-line and she filled up the bathtub or whatever, and it overflowed. So the water was coming down. But the important point is that you can get service very quickly here a lot of people who may be accustomed to a private home or a an apartment house, they're lucky if anybody shows up right now. We saw this when we had

Paulette: That's the point of service. I have to interrupt because . . . It's the story of when I was sitting here the day he was at our old apartment and when we were expecting the furniture to come in, I was sitting with my aunt who was already there. And she goes into the kitchen and she turns on the sink. Here I am like this. She turns on the sink and the water gets all over the floor. And I don't know, she had a number. I don't know what happened, but very shortly later, somebody came over and told us all that they didn't put in a piece . . .

Bernie: They forgot to connect it on . . . [Bernie laughs]

Paulette: And immediately fixed it. And, you know, you get spoiled living with this. You get . . . this story that he's telling us, this is a good 60 years later and we still have that support where, you know, you're not going to sit for weeks or months until

the building finally decides . . . Either that or you have to go out on your own. And how . . . there was that . . . And I wish I knew his name. A gentleman from . . . who came to double check what happened and he reassured me that he would have . . . If I wanted I could, you know . . .

Bernie: How to handle it. The inspector came right away.

Paulette: And you don't have that in a lot of places. It's wonderful. It's just wonderful.

Abby: So you've mentioned all the wonderful benefits of living in Manhattan and being close to things and some issues of affordability. Can you think about . . . how living in a limited equity co-op for all these years, what has that allowed you to do in your life? You've talked about it a little bit. Can you expand on that?

Bernie: Well, one of the things is because after I retired, I got another job for the past 30 years in my retirement. So we've been able to spend money on cruises. The . . . I mean, the prices are very reasonable. It's not market rate here. Without, I'll be very frank, we pay a very high surcharge simply because, if you have . . . I was a supervisor and Paulette was a teacher and we have Social Security. When you add all that up, it adds up to a surcharge which I don't mind. You know, this is . . . this is what I'm doing. I know what the . . . what it makes possible and New York has become unaffordable for many people we have—

Paulette: including us. I don't know if we could afford anything.

Bernie: I mean, we have one son who has a very good job with a high powered firm who has an apartment with a friend down on . . . downtown near Greenwich Village.

Abby: A son or a grandson?

Paulette: Grandson. Grandson. Not a son.

Bernie: A grandson. And, you know, he went to the right college and he does very well, but is . . . they're paying fantastic rates. You can't do it. Although, to be frank, we wanted . . . I actually voted to privatize. There was a vote, the initial vote. We felt basically or maybe we're selfish, so we would like to leave something to our children or grandchildren, but fortunately, they don't need anything. I don't worry about that. And I'm not concerned about . . . For many people, it may be very important that we live here for 30 or 40 years. They've invested all their money all these years. They might want to leave something to the children. It's irrelevant to us now, fortunately.

Paulette: So the whole idea, you know, now is that it doesn't make any difference. And I see the rhythm of life in the co-op. It's . . . it's wonderful. And I don't have . . . the only thing I would hope for the future of this co-op is that it goes on on this level, that it continues. But one thing I do hope, I would hope in the future that the floors ring with voices of children.

Bernie: Oh there was something else I forgot to mention before there were security guards who walk around here, the . . . I don't even know who organized it. In every building, the people from every apartment would volunteer to sit downstairs from about 7:00 o'clock to about 11:00 o'clock every night. So you did a whole patrol. So I would go down with one or two other people and we would be there for like an hour or an hour and a half. And that went on for many, many years. So you got to know everybody who came into the building and actually all your neighbors That went on.

Abby: Was that the sixties, the seventies, was it into the eighties?

Paulette: Maybe even later than that.

Bernie: It went on for a long time and we would just sit there and welcome people coming in. There was only one way, as I recall, there was only one way you could come in at that point.

Paulette: No, no no.

Bernie: I'm not too sure you could come in through the side.

Paulette: I don't remember.

Bernie: But anyway, everybody was told for your own safety because the area around here was it was not a place you wanted to walk around at night in the seventies and eighties and people didn't. And so they said, well, walk in through the main entrance and there would be people there who would . . . who are your neighbors. And then at one point, they hired a whole bunch of security gaurds because before that, there weren't any.

Paulette: I don't know if that's the case.

Bernie: As far as I know, there weren't any security guards. So . . . but . . . for some reason that ended.

Abby: The Hall Patrol ended.

Paulette: But it brings me back to the point where that's the issue on 8th avenue where . . . despite the fact that we have beautiful entrances of the buildings on 8th Avenue there are . . . there's no street life. And . . . and . . . and F.I.T. effectively

cut it off for about a block and a block and a half. And we had more street life like from 14th to 23rd Street. I don't know if it'll be safer that that's the only way you could find out is looking at statistics but somehow I wish there were more street life.

Bernie: Well according to my son, it's very safe

Paulette: And now with the closing of the market and eventually all of the other stores, we're going to have a whole period. I don't know if we'll be around till we see the new buildings come in with new supermarket, et cetera, et cetera. But this whole 8th Avenue does need street life. And the co-op, as I said before, we need children. We need the promise of tomorrow. I want to see babies running around in the grass. I really do. It gives me great pleasure.

Abby: That is . . . That is a good inspiration. Well, we should wrap it up now. You've talked about so many different things, not everything. We don't have time for everything. But I just want to give you a chance. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you think is important that you would want to add?

Bernie: Well, I think more people ought to take advantage of what is offered here. I mean, the best example I can think of is the gym that's right in this building, There are never more than maybe two or three people in it. Now, they may be going at different times. There may be the 6:00 o'clock group or the 10:00 o'clock at night. But there really are very, very few people. And, you know, for health reasons, there are more people who should be going. And it's extremely reasonable, right? When you . . . you talk about belonging to a gym and it's very, very well taken care of and cleaned and upgraded all the time. So it's really great.

Paulette: The one thing I would hope is . . . I get a sense and of course it's been terribly aggravated by COVID is there is, even though I belong to the senior center and there is sort of some kind of community there, the co-op seems like it's a city of individuals. They go, they do their jobs, they go with their families. They do like what we do, go to the arts because that's our interest but somehow there's really no . . . we all have one thing in common. We live in Penn South. And somehow there's this whole vast group of people really have very little contact with each other. Only when there's an uproar or a disagreement about something the Board does or promise of something going wrong for tomorrow. Is there any sense of community? And I don't have any idea in the world how to do this. So what I'm asking, it may be well nigh impossible but my . . . if there could be a tomorrow, I would hope that this whole community has something in common would get some kind of a sense of commonality of a community, a town, a city, and not just a Board that sends us messages once a month. We are a group of people. We share a lot. We have different

backgrounds, but we do share and . . . stuff at the senior center. I don't know.

Abby: Thank you. I think those are good questions. Yeah. What . . . how can we all know each other better and help each other and support each other? And those are good questions.

Paulette: We have so much in common when you think about it. So many of our stories are similar. We may come from different ethnic backgrounds, but so many of us started out with so little and in our case, we're very fortunate, very, very fortunate, and we know it.

Abby: Well, thank you so much for sharing your stories. We hope that this project will . . . will help to connect people and educate people. And we're trying to get more people of different generations involved in this project. But we're only a small piece, so there's much more to do.

Paulette: I'm used to talking a lot.

Abby: You're saying very interesting things. So to be continued.

Bernie: All right.

Abby: OK, thank you so much.

Bernie: You're very welcome.

Paulette: Okay. Thank you.

Bernie: It's a changed World. And evolving. OK.

Bernie: See, we were lucky. No fire engine went by. No ambulance went by.

Paulette: The telephone didn't ring. The landline didn't go off. And you could turn it back on.