Out of the Archives

Ep 23: 'This is still my neighborhood': Memories of Taylor St. and The Village

Release Date: September 6, 2024

[00:00] [*Theme Music: Born in the Blues]*

[00:06] **NPHM Host [Mark Jaeschke]:** Presented and produced by the National Public Housing Museum, this is Out of the Archives, an oral history podcast created from interviews with public housing residents from across the United States. This episode is called "This is still my neighborhood": Memories of Taylor St. and The Village.

[00:28] **Janetta Pegues:** So do you remember the Boys Club? Is the Boys Club where the theater was?

[00:32] **Allen Schwartz:** No, I vaguely remember that. I believe it was on the south side of Taylor — a block or two east.

Janetta: No, the Boys Club, the Boys Club was right there on the [*pause for thinking*] southwest corner.

Allen: Of Taylor and Racine?

Janetta: Yes! Yes... Yeah.

Allen: Okay. Um [*pause*] did not know there was a Boys Club in the neighborhood. I picture it being a block or two further east.

Janetta: No. I wonder if maybe when the theater was torn down, Boys Club was built in that spot?

Allen: No, the theater was on the south side of the street. You said the—

Janetta: No, it was, no it was on the—so right now, it's like a drugstore there?

Allen: Yeah.

Janetta: Okay. So drugstore. Yeah. The Boys Club was on the south*west* corner.

[01:30] **Allen:** Okay. Yes. That's where the Garden Theater was.

Janetta: Wow. Yeah.

Allen Schwarts: Yeah. Yeah.

Janetta: A point of trivia here [*laughter*].

Allen: It's very relevant.

[01:43] **Liú Chen:** Yeah. These moments are beautiful. And this is one of the fun things about doing an interview with two people at once, right—

Allen: Now it's coming to mind.

Liú Chen: Memory is fallible and that's part of..

Allen: Now I'm seeing the Boys Club. It was blonde brick wasn't it?

Janetta: Yeah! Whatchu talking about [*laughter*]? Alright!

Allen: When you put it on the corner, I could see it.

Janetta: Exactly, exactly, mmhmm.

[02:04] **Host Mark:** You just heard a snippet of a conversation between Janetta Pegues and Allen Schwartz, two former residents of the Jane Addams Homes and two of the

museum's oral history narrators. We love this exchange because it illustrates the beautiful imperfections of human memory. Eliciting the variations between different people's recollections of history is a big part of what oral history is all about. These variations create more dynamic understandings of our shared histories—a sky filled with constellations rather than sparsely-scattered, supposedly-authoritative stars. We aim to highlight and celebrate these constellations through *Out of the Archives*, and in turn encourage more people to join our storytelling practices of reclamation and collective healing.

[Born in the Blues]

[02:58] **Host Mark:** I'm your host this episode, Mark Jaeschke. In this episode, we share two residents' insights on the cycles of demolition and development on the Near West Side, and why memory and reverence of the land is such an important practice—for the museum, the public housing community, and our societies at large. Allen and Janetta's stories span from 1943 to the present day.

[03:29] **Host Mark:** The land at the corner of Taylor and Ada, along with the rest of the city that we now call Chicago, once was stewarded by the peoples of several Indigenous nations. This included the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Odawa, Menominee peoples, along with many more. As it did throughout its so-called national borders, the United States violently dispossessed and removed virtually the entire Indigenous population from the area, with the most significant events being The 1830 Federal Indian Removal Act, The Black Hawk War of 1832, and The 1833 Treaty of Chicago. By the 1930s, this neighborhood was dominated by Italian immigrants and considered a "slum." This is where the story of Chicago's first public housing usually picks up. Blocks of homes and businesses were leveled to make space for housing developments—first for the Jane Addams Homes in the late 1930s, then for three additional neighboring developments, built between 1943 and 1961. Together, these four complexes were known as the ABLA Homes, standing for the Addams Homes, Brooks Homes, Loomis Courts, and Abbott Homes. Over the course of the 20th century, the physical, demographic, cultural, and political landscape changed drastically. Allen and Janetta's experiences in the ABLA neighborhood, separated by about 10 years, reflect some of those changes.

[05:06] **Janetta:** I am Janetta Pegues. I was born April 21, 1962. I lived in public housing, first—the first memory is the Jane Addams Homes right off of Grenshaw and Loomis—which I passed coming here. Then, when I was in grammar school, we moved to the ABLA Homes, aka "The Village," 1312 West 13th Street, and I lived there until I was 21 years old.

[05:41] **Allen:** I'm Allen Schwartz, I was born and raised in the Jane Addams Homes. I was born in 1943. And I lived there until October of 1954. So until I was about 11 and a half. I'm a native Chicagoan and I still live in Chicago, and I'm a proud Chicagoan.

When I was younger when I was born in, you know, the earlier part of those years, the projects were largely white. And I'm Jewish. We were not the only Jewish family. There were a fairly large number of Jewish families. But we were certainly in the minority. So it was an Italian neighborhood except for the area that was the projects. And there was a real divide in those years between the people who lived in the projects, and the people who lived in the regular Italian neighborhood - who didn't live in the projects. And you were—I was always aware of that. I felt like this is something, if you went into a store, they pegged you immediately and they were usually right. 'Oh, this is a projects person. No, this is not a projects person.' So that's a very strong memory to me. And I always felt kind of like an outsider. Particularly in later years when, when it changed, we stayed till October, almost the end of 1954, and the neighborhood had become then largely Black.

[07:34] **Janetta:** So mine is vastly different from Allen's. It was always Black. And it was very clear. Now this area is called Little Italy. So, Taylor Street was considered Little Italy. And I lived - at this point, I live in the ABLA Homes across Roosevelt. And so, when I refer to the area, I just refer to it as ABLA, inclusive. So one of the funny things I remember is, they were resurfacing the sidewalk. And you know how before the concrete gets really hard [*laughs*]? I had an opportunity to scroll my nickname in the - [*laughs*] in the concrete. And that stayed for years and years and years and years until Jane Addams was torn down. So, I often returned to the neighborhood. This is still my neighborhood. I still come to the neighborhood. Every year, or thereabout, we have a neighborhood reunion. And that includes everything that includes Jane Addams, the 16 Stories, 15 Stories, the 7 Stories, the Dog Houses, the Village. So all of these—I had friends in all of these developments. I think that ABLA is one of the most diverse in the country in that we have so many. Like I said, the Jane Addams three stories, the Jane

Addams rowhouses, the ABLA Homes, the projects—Brooks, technically, they're where we lived, the Village, the Dog Houses they were called that because they had, you know, the slanted roofs, and then the 7 Stories, right off of Loomis and 14th Street, and the 15 Stories, obviously, and the 16 Stories, and I had family that lived in all of those units. I had a brother, lived in 1111 West Roosevelt, 16 stories. Cousin lived in 1410 West 14th Street. A neighbor that lived in the Dog Houses, another neighbor who lived in the 7 Stories. So I would frequent all of these places on a regular basis. And I just remember when you came down Taylor Street, you would find—every now and again there will be a scuffle. But it was not so much as, 'the Black people couldn't come over here, they weren't welcome over here.' We used to go, and I will go today, and have me a hot dog at The Patio, which is still open, right across the street. So I have memories of the businesses. Some of them are no longer here. Like Vittori's Sandwich Shop. They used to have the best Italian beefs! Oh my god! And I would come over here all the time. So, I remember right when they closed—I mean, I was devastated to come—I'm like 'what's wrong with Vittori's?' I'm pounding on the door there and they closed. So I was very sad about that.

It's not just Taylor Street. It's not just the Village or ABLA—it's the entire area. Like UIC. We used to go swimming at the Flames facility right there on Roosevelt.

[11:13] **Allen:** Did you go to Riis?

[11:16] **Janetta:** No, I went to—Yeah, I went to Riis for one year, then we transferred—then I went to Medill. But my older siblings went to Riis. But by that time we had moved to the rowhouses, you were no longer in Riis's district. So I transferred and went to Medill.

[11:36] **Allen:** I changed schools every year. And I started school at Riis when I was four years old.

[School bells ringing, sounds of children playing in a school playground. Ambient investigative music begins and continues under Mark's narration.]

[11:45] **Host Mark:** Jacob Riis Public School was built in 1915, decades before the Jane Addams Homes. It was also one of the few buildings to evade demolition when the Jane Addams Homes and the rest of ABLA were being built in the 1930s–'50s.

However, [*sound of buildings being demolished*], it too would eventually be knocked down by the city. In 1999, Mayor Richard M. Daley and the Chicago Housing Authority announced their Plan for Transformation, which would demolish over 17,000 public housing units and promised to redevelop, rehab, and rebuild 25,000 units across the city. This continued the government's pattern of involuntary mass displacement—enacted first against Indigenous peoples in the 18th and 19th centuries, then against the Near West Side community in the 1930s–'60s for projects like the ABLA Homes and the Eisenhower Expressway. Though the 1999 Plan for Transformation is primarily known for its demolition of public housing—again, over 17,000 units worth—it also led to over 54 school closures. Riis was one of those schools, closing in 2001. The school building was finally demolished in 2004 as part of an ambitious redevelopment project called "Roosevelt Square" that promises to incorporate new public housing units as a part of its mixed income approach. However, by 2022, less than a third of the promised new units have been built, and negotiations instead began on 23 acres of ABLA land—not for new housing, but for a training facility for the Chicago Fire soccer team.

[13:35] **Shaq from Cabrini Green:** Um, I was just wondering, how do you think we feel about like - the community - the buildings being torn down?

Mayor Richard Daley: Well - I - I think - you know, there's a lot of sentiment for it, that's realistic of - of uh, public high rising. But in the long run, public high rises will be taken down all over the country. They're being taken down and we have to - we're a complete different program - we isolated the poor, we isolated them from your churches and everything else, and now we have to basically not isolate them, they have to become part of a community.

Another young person from Cabrini (unnamed): But take it like this, if you grew up in Cabrini Green would you want them to take your memories?

Mayor Richard Daley: Yeah, but all that memory - memories are always - memories are always stated within the mind. Uh - but uh, everybody changes, every community is changing in Chicago. You can't live in the past. No one lives in the past.

[14:23] **Allen:** Yeah, well, we did live right across the street from Riis, we lived on Lytle, 1035 South Lytle, in a big courtyard. I don't know if you remember that, but you've

probably seen, it was a huge courtyard. Went from Taylor, almost Taylor, down to Roosevelt. And there were projects building all around the courtyard. So we used to play there in the courtyard, the whole neighborhood of the—of those buildings.

[14:50] **Janetta:** One of the things that I do remember is the butter cookies from lunch, those big round, wonderful butter cookies. And it wasn't something that you got every day, but it was like a special thing. So I don't know why that sticks out in my mind, but the butter cookies did. And we had one gym teacher named Miss Archie. And she had a very unusual way of teaching gym. She used to bring a drum. And we used to dance to the drum and she would have us doing all kinds of things to the drum. And if you got sassy with her, she would throw her keys at you [*laughter*]. Yeah, so um, and then you know, you—where I come from, in my age, you made yourself fit in, you know, you didn't really get a choice, what were you going to do, move?

[15:57] **Host Mark:** As federal, state, and local policies shifted throughout the 20th century and continually decreased funding for public housing each year, the ABLA Homes fell into disrepair. This disinvestment culminated at the turn of the millennia with the aforementioned Plan for Transformation. After the Plan was announced, residents from the Jane Addams Homes and the larger ABLA community fought to save a building from demolition, with the goal of housing a memory project. This campaign is what enabled the building to eventually be turned into the permanent location of the National Public Housing Museum. But even as we celebrate the brick-and-mortar home of the Museum, we remember and honor the many public housing residents who were adamantly against the demolition of their homes and fought to keep these spaces alive. These memories live on, with stories of resistance echoing through the streets despite the buildings having been demolished. If you find yourself in the ABLA neighborhood, you can visit the Museum's outdoor audio installation on the Taylor Street side of the building and hear ABLA residents share their memories and histories of this land. These histories continue, as public housing residents are still organizing to this day, claiming their space in the neighborhood.

[17:18] **Janetta:** I'm most proud of and still connected to the history of this community and growing up as a kid. I still have friends over here. It has been extremely gentrified—severely. And I remember this coming. I remember as a kid, my mother, some of my neighbors, were very much involved in trying to preserve our community. And I remember getting notices that the UIC wants this property, they're going to take

this property, the rents are gonna go sky high. And so I remember all the predictions. I remember when the Sears Tower was being built. I'm sorry, I will not call it that other name! [*laughter*] It's the Sears Tower, okay!? But I remember, we lived on Grenshaw then, in the Jane Addams, and seeing them—the floors, going up and up and up and up and up, in the 70s, I believe. So I remember the warnings of what we see as reality today. So there was always a group of people who were very vigilant, and who were fighting to hold on to our homes. This was—it wasn't just the projects. This was our—this is what we called home. And we made the best of it.

[18:49] **Allen:** That again, reminds me of some things—when I was driving over today, I was thinking about, when did they start the effort to put UIC in Little Italy? And I knew it was in the ‘50s. And it was spearheaded actually by the Italian community and by a woman—her last name starts with an S, it wasn't Salerno. I can't think of it at the moment. She's very famous. And she picketed. She got all the people united, they'd go down to City Hall and sit out in front of Mayor Daley's office. And ultimately, they were not successful because almost you know, much the neighborhood was demolished to make room for the UIC campus. But you know, but that effort had almost not even begun until toward the end of when we were still living here. But word was getting around that Mayor Daley wanted to have the campus in this area, and she mobilized the people. She's—I just saw a documentary about her on TV about her efforts.

[20:03] **Janetta:** Was it Florence?

Allen: Yes, Florence.

Janetta: Florence, and she had a restaurant, right on Taylor Street.

Allen: Yeah, yup, that's right.

[20:08] **Florence Scala:** Jane Addams used to say and other people have said it, other people who think about these things have said it: it’s the solidarity of the human race that’s the important thing and if we want good things in life for ourselves, they won’t mean anything, they’ll have no meaning unless we take care of these good things in life for everybody.

[20:30] **Host Mark:** Allen and Janetta are referring to Florence Scala, daughter of Italian immigrants and a lifelong resident of the neighborhood. Her father owned a building at 1030 Taylor St, with his tailor shop on the first floor and their residence on the second. Florence was a product and staple of the neighborhood, learning and volunteering at the Hull-House for over two decades, as well as serving on committees such as the Near West Side Planning Board and the Near West Side Conservation Community Council. As Allen describes, she led the fight against encroaching demolition, displacement, and redevelopment in the 1960s when Mayor Richard J. Daley—the first of the Daley mayors—announced the city's plans for a new University of Illinois campus in the neighborhood. Over 200 businesses and 800 homes were bulldozed to make way for the new university campus, displacing upwards of 5,000 residents. While Florence's campaign did not stop the demolition completely, they were able to preserve the neighborhood's original Hull House as a museum and memorial to its co-founder, Jane Addams. In 1964, Florence ran as a write-in candidate against the neighborhood's Democratic Machine alderman—losing in a landslide, but sending a message nonetheless. Florence continued organizing her community up until her death in 2007.

[22:01] **Janetta:** I remember that too. And she, again, was vigorous in fighting to preserve community. But there's a stark difference, though. So part of Taylor Street and the Italian community is still here. We can't say that for the Jane Addams. *All* of our stuff was knocked down. So, so there's a stark difference in terms of equity, in terms of race. And they were Italians, but they're still white. Okay? And they still had a certain segment of power. So their efforts, yes, didn't preserve the entire neighborhood. But they still have something left. We can't say that. And I say we as in Black people, because we weren't—we weren't owners. We were just renters.

I remember asking my mom, I said, 'How come you didn't march with Dr. King?' You know, he lived in Lawndale—we have connections in Lawndale too—I said, 'How come you never did that?' She said, 'Look, I wasn't into all that. We had to feed you, your father was sick, he couldn't work. So I had to get out there and work.' And so when you're in survival mode, and you're trying to live every day, you don't have time to be, you know, marching. It's not that you're against it, but your reality demands that you do life for your family, as best you can. So you may support it by saying a prayer or signing a petition. But you ain't gonna be out there every day on the streets marching,

challenging the mayor, you just, you just don't have the resources, meaning the time, to do that.

Again, this is an equity piece. When it became Black, they stopped taking care of it as well as they did when it was white.

Allen: Oh yeah.

Janetta: I remember when they would come—and we called it housing. They were outside of our house, the row houses, they dug up the concrete to fix some pipes. But when they put it down, they didn't put the concrete back down. It was just dirt. So again, hopefully today when we talk about the equity piece, that we demand the same services that they give in Streeterville, and that's one of the things that they were saying on NPR is that typically when you get trees trimmed, the city expects you to call 311. And they noticed that all the rich white people know to call 311. Again, if you're in the community, if you're striving day to day, you ain't thinking about 311. So now they decided that they would just do every neighborhood on an as needed basis, no more calling 311. So that's an equity piece that the city has deliberately put in place as a result of studying to see why services are so unequitable. So hopefully today—there's still The Village over here across Roosevelt—that the trees are being maintained the same as they are here on Taylor Street. And I'd like to see that borne out as the years go by.

[25:31] **Liú Chen:** Absolutely. I think, I think I wanna come to one of these final questions now, so, you know, when the museum opens and people are walking by the site, is there anything that you would really want those visitors to know about this history, this community, and this area?

[25:57] **Allen:** Well, I think for me, you know, because it was completely different periods, you know, it would be important for people to understand that projects weren't always just for people of color, that there was a time when white people needed housing that they could afford, and it was the projects. So I think that's an important thing for people to understand. Because it maybe makes them appreciate how this kind of housing is needed, even today, and not just for a certain segment, but for many people.

[26:33] **Janetta:** I want them to hear the authentic stories, not the curated stories from the professionals. I want them to hear stories like mine. Like Allen's. Like my peers, people who I grew up with.

You hear too much of the negative. And we know that. That's not—I'm not denying that any of those negative things happen. However, I want to focus on the good, of the positive, of the way the community thrived in spite of and the good memories that I had—I remember going to the first neighborhood reunion, and seeing my friends for the first time. By the end of the night, and I would later find out but this is the history for everybody, I was hoarse, because I didn't go up to my friends and say 'Hey," I went up to my friends like [*screams twice*] [*laughter*] we were screaming so much and by the end of the night I was like [*squeaky voice*] 'Okay girl I'll see you next year!' [*laughter*] So that's what I want people to come away with. Black joy, Black life, Black thriving, in spite of. In spite of. And so my hope is that those stories will be forefront, and that we will be persistent, insistent, that people see *that* perspective, as opposed to the same old, same old that you, that you hear, when you think of the projects.

[28:15] **[Born in the Blues] // Host Mark:** This episode of *Out of the Archives* was curated, written, and edited by jellystone robinson, me, Mark Jaeschke, and Liú Chen. The episode was mixed and mastered by Seth Engel. The theme song for *Out of the Archives* is "Born in the Blues," written, performed, and recorded by Keith Hudson, a former Stateway Gardens resident. We are saddened to share the news that Keith passed away earlier this month, in August 2024. We are grateful to have known Mr. Hudson, whose music and stories will live on, soothing and inspiring in that special blues way. Our deepest condolences go out to friends and family of Mr. Hudson.

Out of the Archives is made possible through the generous support of the Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Illinois Arts Council Agency, the Kresge Foundation, the Julian Grace Foundation, Good Chaos and the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events.

We'd like to give one last huge thanks to our oral history narrators, Janetta Pegues and Allen Schwartz, as well as our Oral History Manager, Liú Chen, who facilitated and recorded their conversation. To hear the full conversation, visit our Public Oral History Archive at nphm.org/listen. You can also find more episodes of *Out of the Archives* at that same space, nphm.org/listen, or wherever you get your podcasts. For more

information about the displacement, development, and resistance discussed in this episode, check out the sources listed in your episode notes. Thank you so much for listening, and we look forward to sharing more stories with you soon.

[30:14] END OF EPISODE