

Penn South Archive Project

Witness: Margo DePaola

Interviewers: Susan Ortega, Trudy Rudnick

19 October 2022

Trudy: Okay.

Susan: Okay. There you go.

Trudy: Okay.

Susan: Hi, Margo.

Margo: Hi.

Susan: Can we begin by asking . . . Let me ask you your name.

Margo: Sure. My name is Margo de Paola.

Susan: And how long have you been in Penn South?

Margo: I've been here since 1962.

Susan: So that's almost the beginning?

Margo: Yes.

Susan: Really the beginning. What do you remember about your family moving into Penn South? When and why?

Margo: Well, my family, we lived on 15th Street on the east side. And my family, my mother and her mother owned a bridal store and her best friend lived on 15th Street between 2nd and 3rd. And her husband worked for the union. He was a presser. And he told us about Penn South. So they both got together and they put in their application for an apartment. And that's how we came here.

Susan: Oh, okay. Terrific. By a friend recommending it.

Margo: Yes.

Susan: Okay. Good luck. That was good.

[Margo chuckles]

You were lucky. Who came with your family? It was your mom . . .

Margo: My mom, my dad, and my brother. My brother went to St. Columba across the street.

Susan: Oh, okay. Had you . . . had he gone before to Saint Columba?

Margo: No, he went to Immaculate Conception.

Susan: Okay. Great.

Margo: On 14th Street.

Susan: How old were you when you moved in?

Margo: Oh, now everybody will know my age. I was 17.

Susan: Well, we don't know.

Margo: I know.

Susan: We don't . . . We're not . . . Nobody's going to figure it out.

Margo: I don't care.

[Margo laughs]

Susan: Not . . . not to worry. There's grace in getting older.

Margo: That's right.

Susan: We know that. 17 . . . so, what was it like for you in the first years that you were here? You were 17. Does that mean you were still in high school?

Margo: Yes, I just graduated from high school, but I . . . I went to work right away within two weeks when I lived here. So . . . uh . . . I just went to work early in the morning and came home, you know, at night. So I didn't have many friends except my mother's friend that moved in in Building 8 with us and her daughter. And she was two years younger than me.

Susan: Okay. What . . . what building were you in in the beginning?

Margo: I was . . . Building 2.

Susan: You were always in Building 2.

Margo: Always in building 2.

Susan: Okay. So you were 17. You just finished high school and you went to work.

Margo: Exactly.

Susan: Okay. But during your evening hours or did you have . . . did you happen to make any friends that were your age?

Margo: No, nothing on this end, no. And I lost all my friends on the other end. And . . .

Susan: Oh, that's too bad.

Margo: Well, this neighborhood was quite different from where I came from.

Susan: I see.

Margo: It was very quiet here. There wasn't a lot going on, you know, and it was new to me, so I just came home.

Susan: What . . . what was the buildings like? What was it like? It wasn't . . . The buildings weren't finished.

Margo: No, we walked in on boards. The front was all dirt, all boards. And when we got to the lobby, it was completely empty. Nothing. No . . . no plas . . . Just plaster. Just the granite floor was there and the elevators were crated. They looked like coffins. When you got into the elevator, it was all crated in wood. And when we came up to our floor, we were the only ones, my mother was in 4B at the time, We were the only ones on the floor. And I went to observe all the other apartments which were opened and they were empty.

Susan: Wow. So nobody else was in this building?

Margo: No, not that I know of. No. Could have been on another floor, but my floor was empty at the time.

Susan: Well, probably similar, but we don't know, because you didn't observe it, so we can't say.

Margo: No.

Susan: So the building, you say, was . . . the elevators were crates?

Margo: Yeah, they were crated.

Susan: What else about the building . . . Were there any issues with plumbing?

Margo: Yes, at the beginning, I remember . . . I don't know if it was a year or two when we were here that the pipes used to break a lot, the water pipes. And we used to go downstairs to the fire hydrant. Everybody in the building with buckets and get the water and bring it up.

Susan: Who would have thought of that?

Margo: Yeah.

[Margo chuckles]

Susan: So buckets . . . And what were the grounds like? You said they . . .

Margo: The grounds were completely dirt. I mean, it took them a while before the grass went in and the flowers went in.

Susan: Mm hmm. Wow. So you had mentioned something about a well, what was the well about?

Margo: The well? Oh, no, there's . . . there's water between buildings 7 and 8. There's . . . and underground, there's water between Building 7 and 8.

Susan: Oh. Okay.

Margo: Yeah.

Susan: So did people use that.

Margo: No, no, that you would have to excavate now.

Susan: You just knew there was water there. So the building was in really not such great condition.

Margo: No.

Susan: Nothing like the . . . what it is—

Margo: No. Every time I used to come home from work, something else was done. Like the tile in the lobby . . . we used to have tile in the lobby where the elevators were. You know, now it's wallpaper, but it was tile. It looked like a public swimming pool. We didn't care for it that much, but that's . . . that's what it looked like. And there was tile in the lobby and then you'd come home one day from work, and then the floor would be down in the hall. You know, that's how . . . And then another day they would paint and that's how it was happening as the year went on.

Susan: So when . . . when was it that it looked okay, everything?

Margo: Gee, I can't remember.

Susan: You can't even remember.

Margo: I can't remember it. To me, you know, it never bothered me because I knew I, you know, the improvement was coming. So it always looked . . . any improvement was okay for us. We loved living here.

Susan: Yes, I'm sure. All your family loved—

Margo: Oh, yeah.

Susan: So you're . . . you're not in the same apartment. Is this the apartment you lived in?

Margo: No, this . . . this is my apartment. But it's the same layout. Only my mother had an extra bedroom. She had two bedrooms.

Susan: Okay. All right. So that was for you.

Margo: And my brother. Well, my brother and I stayed in the same room. He was very young, and my mother and father stayed in the second bedroom. We were in the A . . . the B apartment. 4B

Susan: Oh, that's next door.

Margo: Yeah, 4B.

Susan: Okay. Well, that . . . was it easy then to change apartments if you wanted another apartment?

Margo: No. Well, my mother, we looked at the six-and-a-half rooms at the time and I talked her out of it. I said, Mom, Al is going to get married. I'm gonna get out. What do you need six and a half rooms now? It doesn't make sense.

Susan: Right.

Margo: So she stayed. And then eventually my brother got an apartment in Building 6 – a studio. And then he got married and he lived in 2B with his wife.

Susan: Well, those were the days

Margo: Yeah.

Susan: you could just pick up and move when you wanted to.

Margo: Yeah. And then when it was my turn, I went to Building 8 and I had a studio in eight. And then my mother told me, you better get a bigger apartment because they're not going to be available. I guess she had insight, so I got this one by her in the same building.

Susan: So when was it that you got this one?

Margo: Oh, this is about, I think, 1989 . . . 1990.

Susan: Okay. All right. Well . . . And that was really good. So it was very easy for your family members—

Margo: Oh, yeah.

Susan: —to get apartments. That was terrific.

Margo: Yeah.

Susan: That's wonderful.

Margo: Yeah, well, that's a long time ago. Now, it's tough, yeah.

Susan: It's very tough. Yeah. What was the neighborhood like?

Margo: It was a mom-and-pop neighborhood. It really . . . I mean, there was . . . on 9th Avenue, there were two great antique stores and there was a doll house store. I used to love to go in there and they used to make doll houses. Oh, I loved it. And then across on 23rd Street between 7th and 8th, where the cart store used to be, but now there's a restaurant. Used to go two steps down, there used to be a toy store. And he had all imports from Europe. I loved it. I loved it. In fact, I have a doll inside from his store and I just loved it. And then the neighborhood today is completely different.

Susan: But what . . . what . . . what . . . besides that no stores, What else was there? Among 23rd . . . or

Margo: Well, the diner opened up after a couple of years that we were here because there wasn't much over here. But that was wonderful because at dinner time, you'd see you go over at 5:30/6:00 o'clock, the whole co-op was in there.

Susan: Oh, wow.

Margo: It was like a big family. And, you know, the waiters and everybody, they knew everybody's name. It's completely different now than . . . There is no neighborhood anymore. There's . . . you go out in the street, you go to a restaurant, you don't see anybody you know. They're all from other areas, from Hudson Yards. So the neighborhood is gone. There's no more mom-and-pop stores.

Susan: Yeah, I understand. So you had mentioned something about the restaurant and what it was like. The person you . . . what Can you describe a little more about what the restaurant was like? The diner.

Margo: Oh, the diner. Oh, yeah. Well, we used to go in about 5:30/6:30 and it was like it was like Grossingers, rang a bell and the whole neighborhood was there. It was wonderful. My mother would go to every table. Hello, Mary. Hello, Helen. Hello. It was just wonderful. And we'd all talk, you know, the waiters were great. We loved it. We loved it.

Susan: Oh, that's terrific. And what about the food market? Were there any food markets around?

Margo: You know, I think I don't remember that much. I know there was an A&P at one time. And I think where Gristedes was on 26th Street, there was a co-op market there.

Susan: Do you remember—

Margo: I don't remember that much because I don't think that lasted much . . . long.

Susan: Oh, and then Gristedes came in?

Margo: No, it was . . . I don't remember what came in after that.

Susan: Okay. Well, that's really interesting that they changed so much.

Margo: Oh, yeah.

Susan: What . . . what would you . . . How would you describe the cultural backgrounds of the people who you knew in that time when you moved in and as it changed? What was that like?

Margo: Well, the cultural background was I mean, you had . . . A majority of the people in the co-op, way at the beginning, were Jewish, Italian and Greek. Those were the three main, main ethnic groups, I think, that were here. There could have been more, but to me those were the three main groups. And on the outside you had the city projects, you know, on the left and on the right to . . . and they were all Spanish and we got along. It was just wonderful. You had a very rich, very poor. And it was more of a neighborhood. Everybody knew each other. Everybody said hello to each other. Now it's completely different. If . . . we can't even get in a restaurant, I mean Penn South, I mean, let's take the restaurant on the CORNISH market. It took me two months to get in there. You know, now it's . . . and then when you're in there, you look around, you don't . . . you don't see anybody you know. It's . . . it's amazing how it's changed.

Susan: Yeah, I understand. Understand exactly what you're talking about. So did people get along, like, Jewish people?

Margo: Oh, it was wonderful. Everybody got along.

Susan: Were there any African-American people, there?

Margo: When we, my mother and I, moved in, there was one gentleman upstairs. I think he was African-American. He was a businessman. And that's the only one I remember in this building at that time in 1962.

Susan: So would you say that the different cultural groups just stayed within their cultural group, or was there a mix?

Margo: I think as the years went on, as people moved or passed on, the newer groups that are coming in, we have a lot of Chinese now, more than we ever did before in the last three years, I'd say. And yeah, we have a lot of Black Americans and we have a lot of Spanish Americans.

Susan: Okay, well, that's . . . that's . . . So . . . so how . . . how has your experience in Penn South changed over the years that you've been here? Could you . . .

Margo: It hasn't. I . . . I think it's just wonderful. I always felt that this was my home even before I . . . it was just wonderful. Nothing bothered me here. The people are great. The neighbors are wonderful. The neighbors are wonderful on my floor. It's like one big family.

Susan: Wonderful. Do you socialize together at all?

Margo: Yes, we do socialize. Sometimes I have dinners. Sometimes they have dinners in their home. Sometimes we go for breakfast out together to the diner.

Susan: So the diner is still a popular place.

Margo: Diner is still a popular place.

Susan: Good. Well that's good. And . . . was there a way that people got involved with Penn South activities? Were there . . .

Margo: Well when I retired, I became a Co-op Council Member and I've been there about 16 years and my neighbor is President of the P.S.S.S. And yeah, that's the the involvement I got really, because during when I was working, I couldn't do anything because I would work . . . leave here 7:30 and then sometimes I'd come home 11:30 at night because I had to go to court for the company. But when I retired, that's when I got involved. Also, I do help the senior citizens that are homebound with notary.

Susan: So you do work for . . . You work with the Senior Center.

Margo: When they call me and they need help for someone to notarize a paper that's homebound, yes.

Susan: Oh, well, that's very good of you. Besides the co-op activities, were there any what . . . the neighborhood was . . . Was that a pretty safe neighborhood when you moved?

Margo: Yes. Very safe. Yes, it was very safe. The only class I took, I think, was yoga at one time. I took a yoga class here for a couple of years.

Susan: Oh, well, that's good. Did . . . did the lobby patrols that you had mentioned, does that . . . was that a way of having friendships with other people, meeting people?

Margo: Well, the lobby patrol happened. You know, in those days, the doors were not locked, the doors were completely opened. And the lobby patrol was there really to sit in the lobby. The women, mostly women, I'd say 95% were women, they'd sit in the lobby, like after dinner, like starting at 7:00 til about 10:00/11:00 o'clock at night. And they'd take shifts. Or they'd come downstairs and they'd knit together or talk together and that's what they used to do. Now we don't have lobby patrol. We have our own guards that walk around and we have the intercom if there's a problem.

Susan: What kind of activities did you do in the Co-op Council? We're talking in . . . What year are we talking about that you started being involved?

Margo: Oh, well, 16 years ago, I started being involved. I was on the Election Committee. I was on the Grievance Committee, and now I'm on the Grounds Committee.

Susan: Uh huh. Good.

Margo: Those are the activities.

Susan: What types of issues did you come up with that you were dealing with?

Margo: Well, on the Grievance Committee that was just complaints about neighbors, noise, television, which we solved. It was very simple. And the Grounds Committee . . . problems . . . I really . . . people come up to me, they don't know . . . you know, people assume that when you're on the Co-op Council, they don't want to be there because they think they're gonna be a landlord. People gonna knock on their door every day. They don't. You could walk out and somebody'll talk to you about a problem and you could answer it, how to solve it. And . . . and if you can't solve it, you get back to them. But . . . this . . . it could be anything. It could be somebody is unhappy with the way . . . I had a woman come to me saying, oh, the children are not wearing clothes,

they're only wearing diapers. They should be wearing clothes by the . . . You know, you get little things like that. You know, and you say, oh, don't worry, everything is fine, you know, oh, we'll look into it. It's not huge problems. It really isn't huge problem.

Susan: How . . . Did the people know that you were on the Co-op Council? Is that how they . . .

Margo: Yeah. They . . . they . . . they know. Yeah, they know. And then also once a month, we . . . we take a look at the building and we have . . . there's three of us that inspect the building from 21 all the way down to the ground floor and outside. And we write a report. And people . . . you know, people think, oh, well, what does that mean? We have maintenance. No, when we write a report, we get a report the following month, when we go to the next meeting that everything is done.

Susan: Can you give me an example?

Margo: Oh, a door needs to be painted. It's all scratched up because the individual maybe has a wheelchair or have kids with bikes going in and out. So we report that. We report if the back halls where the steps are dirty or anybody dirties them, or there are cigarettes. We report . . . uh . . . when cable people come in, they rip the cable off the ceiling and put the new cable in. But they never put the covers back on. We have to report that.

Susan: So how does that get resolved then?

Margo: We send it to Maintenance and Maintenance resolves it and sends us a memo stating that they did everything. And then the next month we do another inspection.

Susan: Well, that's very important then.

Margo: Yeah. So we help. We . . . you know, Maintenance also does it, but we help Maintenance.

Susan: Yes. Oh, that's very, very good.

Trudy: That's great. I didn't know that.

Susan: And you said that you weren't had little friends when you were . . . moved in because you were working.

Margo: I was working all the time.

Susan: So until that time, were there any people that you were sort of friendly with?

Margo: Not really, no. Just my neighbors on my mother's floor that we were very friendly with.

Susan: Oh, I see. Okay.

Margo: That's about it.

Susan: Okay. So this all changed when you retired?

Margo: Yes, it all changed.

Susan: So you had . . . And so that was 16 years ago.

Margo: That's right.

Susan: And are your friends still friends from sixteen years ago?

Margo: Yeah.

Susan: Oh, that's wonderful. That's really very good. So it's really a different ballgame for you now, right?

Margo: Yeah.

Susan: You really have a social life now?

Margo: Well, yes, not as much as I'd like to, but yes.

[Margo chuckles]

Susan: Well that's terrific. That's terrific. I think that's great. I think it's wonderful that you were able to be in charge and be . . . take responsibility with the Co-op Council for how build . . . your building and neighbors were,

Margo: Yeah.

Susan: relating to each other. That's fantastic. What I'm wondering is also, have things changed a lot here since, you know, in the last 16 years when you started working? When you started . . . stoped working. Excuse me.

Margo: You mean regarding the . . . ?

Susan: Regarding the buildings, regarding the people . . .

Margo: Well, yeah, it has changed a lot. I mean, the improvement and the construction of the new lobbies and the modernization of the buildings are fabulous. And the elevators, you know, compared to what we had, you know, we had an odd and even elevator that if you had to go to work, you better wait 10, 15 minutes, you know, in the hall before you.

Susan: Can you explain that a little bit because some people don't know.

Margo: It was an odd and even . . . it was an elevator that . . . it was it used to go odd and even, odd and even, I really don't remember. But all I know is it took me 10 minutes to get out of the building . . . to 15 because the the elevator was always being used by somebody else and you had to wait your turn for it to come down and I . . . when these two elevators came, that was a blessing. Of course, they're small the big mistake in the co-op is they should have had a freight elevator built into every building to bring up the furniture, but they didn't. And these elevators are small. They're in fact, they're smaller than the original.

Susan: Oh, really?

Margo: Yes, they're a little smaller than the original. So people have a hard time with the couches and . . . and measuring. But if they want to buy a couch, you have to go to the office and they give you a sheet of paper and tell you the measurements of the elevator, and they hand you the drawing and you bring it when you buy a couch. This way, you're guaranteed it's going to be in the elevator.

Susan: Well, that's a very good idea. You know, some people may have . . . get stuck.

Margo: Yeah.

Susan: Let me ask you another thing. The Senior Center is a very important element in this co-op. Are you involved or have been involved with the Senior Center?

Margo: No, I'm only involved with helping the seniors who . . . that are homebound.

Susan: Okay. Okay. But the Senior Center comes to you or you just know . . .

Margo: No, they call me.

Susan: Oh, good.

Margo: They call me. And some of the seniors know me already, that are homebound and they'll . . . they'll give me a call.

Susan: Well, that's very good. I'm glad to hear that. Um . . . what about the . . . Your brother's still live—

Margo: No, my brother's in Jersey now.

Susan: Oh, in Jersey. How do they feel when they come back here and see . . .

Margo: My brother loves this. He feels like he's at home because this apartment mimics my mother's, and he . . . he . . . he loves it. He likes to come back. It brings . . . my brother loves the past. He's a boy that's always in the past.

Susan: Really?

Margo: Yes.

Susan: Well, okay. So does he see the improvements?

Margo: Oh, yes. Yes, he makes the comments. He always tells me you're so lucky. Like . . . like for the plumbing. Oh, God. He says it cost me a fortune to get a plumber in Jersey, you know, and you just have to call up, you know, that's . . . that's what he loves.

Susan: That's terrific. What do you think about what's going on with the fact that the co-op voted to have Penn South Limited equity? Were you aware of all that voting?

Margo: What do you mean, limited?

Susan: In other words, not . . . we . . . In other words, for . . . until . . . I think it's 2050 now. They voted . . .

Margo: Oh as far as the . . . Oh yeah I . . . I approve of that. Yes.

Susan: Okay.

Margo: 20 . . . it's 2052 I think.

Susan: 2052. So what is it that you feel is good about that?

Margo: Oh, listen, you cannot live in the city unless you live in Penn South. Let's be honest. There's . . . there's no . . . And I . . . I think a majority of the people that live here, that have lived here for many, many, many years don't realize how lucky they are and what's going on out there.

Susan: Oh, that's interesting. I didn't realize that.

Margo: Oh, yes. Well, this is like a little community. This is like a world in its own.

Susan: Yes.

Margo: You know, some people that I know won't even venture out of the co-op. They go up the block, they go shopping, and they come back again. This is their world.

Susan: I see. Yes, you're right. But people do use the Senior Center.

Margo: Oh, yeah.

Susan: Do your friends use the Senior Center?

Margo: No.

Susan: No, none of your friends do. But other people do.

Margo: Yes.

Susan: I see.

Trudy: What do you do . . . What do you do with your friends, like socially?

Margo: Well, we play mahjong on Mondays. We play backgammon. We go to the theater sometimes. and we socialize, with this pandemic, we socialize in each other's homes. We give dinner parties or barbecues. And each one, you know, whoever has a balcony, they have a barbecue. Like I will only cook in the winter. So I have people in the winter, you know, for dinner.

Susan: Wow.

Margo: Or, we'll meet at the diner or we'll meet at Shukette.

Susan: Have you gone to that restaurant?

Margo: Yes. Yes, it's quite interesting. I've gone to that one and The Mermaid Inn which is very nice, also on 10th Avenue.

Susan: What would you like new cooperators to know about the history of this place?

Margo: Well, I don't know. I know they do an orientation when new cooperators come in, but the history I don't . . . You know, I see walking groups outside that stand in front of the co-op and talk about it that Kennedy is the one that put this up. President Kennedy. I've seen . . . I've seen them. It's it's very interesting. And I don't know if they realize that the Ladies Garment Center Union was pushed by President Kennedy and Eleanor Roosevelt was here, it sounds like 100 million years ago. And there's a lot of history here. We had a great gardener here. That was, I think, way at the beginning that he was a gardener for the head of Russia, one of the whatever you call it, in Russia. He was

a fabulous gardener. And we were noted in The New York Times at one time as being the closest thing to Central Park with our grounds and also maintenance. You know, I don't know if they realized how much they could do in maintenance. Maintenance is a . . . is a . . . is a wonderful thing here. I mean, you could get new faucets, new countertops at cost and the maintenance of that . . . How could I put it? I'm trying to look for a word. It doesn't cost you extra to put the . . . you don't need a plumber and pay a plumber to put it in you don't need somebody else to come and put it in. It's all included in the price, one price. And they have everything for you and me.

Susan: When you say one price, what do you mean?

Margo: Well, in other words, if you wanted a new faucet, I don't know what the price is. Let's say it's \$150. So you pay \$150 on your rent and they put it right in for you. They're not going to charge you for the labor. You want a new countertop, they'll charge you whatever it is. They're not going to charge you for the . . . You need new screens, people don't realize your screen is broke, it's \$10 a screen. They come up, they get it, they bring it right back to you. There's so many things Maintenance could do for you.

Susan: Well, that's a very important thing to tell new cooperators.

Margo: Yes.

Susan: Is there anything else you would think would be important to tell them?

Margo: Well, you could tell them about all the associations that we have. You have the pottery, you have the . . . you have the woodworking, you have the Senior Center, you have yoga. Oh, there's so much but that I believe is done with an orientation that they have or they walk you around the ground, I believe. I haven't gone on one, but . . .

Susan: Oh you mean . . .

Margo: Yeah. When new cooperators come in.

Susan: Is there anything you would like to see improved or in maintenance of Penn South?

Margo: Improved . . . Dialog should be improved. More understanding of what the co-op does should be improved.

Susan: Can you give an example.

Margo: Like the Co-op Council. A lot of new people don't know about the Co-op Council. Uh . . . we try to tell them, but a lot of them, they're young people, they work, they're not that interested in doing it or they think it's a really hard job. Or like I said before, they knock on your door and the tenants come and complain and it's not like that.

Susan: So what might you say to them to in . . . have them understand this value?

Margo: Well, I think it should be in orientation. That they should explain that to them, that after two years of residing in Penn South, you could be on these committees, you could be on the Co-op Council. You could . . . you could go from . . . from the Co-op Council to the board if you're interested in making huge changes here.

Susan: So is there anything else you might want to share with people about this place that you love and call home?

Margo: I don't know. I think I've pretty . . . covered everything. I think.

Susan: Well, I must say, your furniture here is just spectacular.

Margo: Oh, thank you.

Susan: Might you share a little bit about it?

Margo: Oh, I don't know what to say. A lot of it is my style. And when my mother passed on, a lot of it . . . she had lovely antiques and I inherited some of those antiques and I placed it with my furniture, which kind of . . . kind of blends very much so.

Susan: Mm. Okay. Well because we will probably want to take some photographs to share with the people who see these videos.

Margo: Okay.

Susan: Okay. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Margo: No, that's it, I think.

Susan: Uh huh. All right, well, that sounds wonderful. I appreciate your . . . your talking with us, and thank you very much for your time.

Margo: Thank you.