

GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
WEST VILLAGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview
DAVID ROTHENBERG

By Liza Zapol
New York, NY
April 27, 2016

Oral History Interview with David Rothenberg, April 27, 2016

Narrator(s)	David Rothenberg
Birthdate	8/19/33
Birthplace	New Jersey
Narrator Age	82
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
Place of Interview	175 West 13 th Street, NY, NY 10011
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Addendum:

Drilling/ construction sound for the first half hour or so.



David Rothenberg at his home at 175 W. 13th Street, on April 27, 2016. Photograph by Liza Zapol.

Quotes from Oral History Interview with David Rothenberg

“I always say that Jackie Robinson was my first political hero. I grew up in an ostensibly all-white town, and I was a big sports fan. I played sports and I became a sports writer in high school. I was a Giants fan, which meant that you hated the Brooklyn Dodgers, but when Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson, I don’t know why, it was so important to me for him to make it. In my world, of kids and sports, he was the ultimate outsider, and I watched everything that he did and thought it was so important for him to make it.

I was telling somebody this story the other day. A friend of mine and I—we were about thirteen or fourteen—we went to the Polo Grounds to see the Dodgers play the Giants, and there was a young couple, in their early twenties, bright and interested and very good to us. They bought peanuts for us, and they wanted to know all about us, and they were so great, and we were all Giants fans. And when they announced Jackie Robinson and I applauded, the man turned to me and said, ‘Why are you clapping for the nigger?’ And I was so disillusioned. There’s a Budd Schulberg story about a little girl who slides down and her daddy catches her. The neighbor does it one day, and the girl falls, and it’s—you suddenly realize that the world is not like you want it to be. I knew that there was opposition to Jackie, but not a nice man like this guy that was buying me peanuts, and his girlfriend.”

(Rothenberg pp. 1-2)

“So, a couple of weeks after the play [“Fortune and Men’s Eyes”] opened, I got a call from somebody who was bringing some students, and he said, ‘Can they stay for a discussion after the play?’ That was right up my alley. I asked, and two of the actors said, ‘Yes, yes yes,’ and we invited the entire audience to stay at the Actors’ Playhouse. The interesting thing—this is [19]68—I was always very shy about speaking in public. But with this, I never hesitated, because it wasn’t about me. It went beyond me. You know, I wasn’t worried about what anybody said about me. That’s an interesting thing about fear of speaking that I realized. So the audience was very responsive, and saying the play was wonderful and applauding the actors, and then some man challenged it and said, ‘This play is a lot of crap, and these characters are an exaggeration.’ And from the back of the house, a man stood up and said, ‘Not if my twenty years counts for anything.’ We said, ‘Come on down,’ and a man named Pat McGarry came and mesmerized everybody for an hour. Telling stories of Riker’s Island and Danamore, the Florida chain gang. Afterwards we went across the street to the Limelight, which no longer exists, and we talked ‘till two or three in the morning, and I said, ‘You have to come back next week and do this, the public doesn’t know this.’ And Pat said, ‘Well, I did white time, you gotta get a black guy, too.’ And I said, ‘Why, in New York prisons they’re segregated?’ And he said, ‘Yeah, you do black time, you do white time.’ I said [laughing], ‘Well I don’t know anybody, you’re the only guy I’ve met.’ And he said, ‘Well, I work in a tailor shop, I have a customer, I’m sure he did time, and I’ll ask him.’ The following week he came back with a man named Clarence Cooper who was African-American and had done federal time.

[...] So, I call Seymour Peck at the *New York Times* and I say, ‘This is a great story.’ The reporter down in the headline at the *Times* said, ‘Drama Continues After the Curtain Falls.’ And the following Tuesday night, the place was loaded with guys who had done time who introduced themselves afterwards, and they started coming every Tuesday. We started inviting parole officers, to be on the panel, and elected officials. A group of about eight or ten, twelve guys were coming and getting there after the play and hanging out, and I was getting to know them. A couple of things I was aware of: One, this was obviously very important to them, and they had

nowhere else to go to dump it, and that these were guys that had done time and were staying out, and almost all of them were in AA [Alcoholics Anonymous]. That they had someplace to go to deal with the demons, but their rage about their prison experience had not been touched, because they actually were lying at AA meetings, too, about their time. It was the [19]60s and people were, you know, interested in things. I started getting calls from people at my theater office saying that they had been in the audience, could I come with a couple of the—and a lot of the guys came up on the stage, and, you know, were speaking. So I was getting calls and I was invited to St. John's University, to Judson Church, to, you know, Ethical Culture. High school teachers were calling me. I was on the circuit with a group of men—and I say men because there were no women yet—a group of men who had done time. And after a few months, there was a nucleus, a hardcore bunch of guys that this was clearly something important for them. I said, 'We have the nucleus of an organization. We can educate the public!'"

(Rothenberg pp. 11-12)

"The atmosphere at Fortune is remarkable. I go every Thursday night to the Castle meetings, which are at 140th [Street] in Harlem. At our main office, which is now in Long Island City, we do a hot meal every day, about 150 people are fed. This guy said, 'I was there the other day, watching it,' and he said, 'I saw two guys that I had seen on Riker's Island.' He said, 'Not guys like the ones I had seen on Riker's Island; I saw two guys that I saw on Riker's Island, and on Riker's they were aggressive, and they were dangerous.' I think he said, 'I kept watching them, and they were just like everybody else, and they got their food, and they sat down, and they were playing chess.' So we said, 'What does that say to you?' And he said, 'Well,' he says to me, 'if you create an atmosphere that treats somebody like a person, they might respond.' And one of the other guys said, 'That's only part of it. The other is that on Riker's, or in jail, if they act aggressive and dangerous, that's their way of protecting themselves, that's a way of keeping them not being victimized.' But I thought it was an interesting observation, that he spotted people who he, as an inmate, was nervous about, and when he saw them at Fortune, he said, 'Uh-oh!' Cause we get guys who have very bad reputations, and have done terrible things. And they change. They're hungry for something else. Sometimes the demons are too great."

(Rothenberg p.16)

"I pulled the cadre together, five people: Kenny Jackson, Mel Rivers. Kenny, a former addict, recovering alcoholic, former gang kid. Mel Rivers, an African-American from Bed-Stuy, former gang kid. Fran O'Leary, former prostitute. Jeanette Spencer, a recovering alcoholic, former inmate. And Bobby Davis, former gang kid from Harlem.

I called the five of them together, Fortune is then seven years old, and I said, 'I have three things to tell you. One is that I'm gay. Two is'—boy, this was not easy. 'Two, I'm going on a national television program to talk about it, and three, I have written my letter of resignation.' There. Long pause, and Kenny Jackson says, 'What are you going to wear on television?' Not the question you expected to be asked. And I said, 'What kind of a question is that?' And he said, 'Well, you dress like a slob, try and get something nice so we can be proud of you.' And Melvin Rivers said, 'Why would you resign?' And I said, 'It might hurt the organization if I come out publically,' and he said—this is the political sophistication—'You stood by us for six years telling us to be honest with our lives. Give us the opportunity to stand by you.' He was asking me permission, to stand by me. That's pretty heavy."

(Rothenberg pp. 22-23)

When AIDS happened in the early [19]80s....It was originally called GRID [Gay-Related Immune Deficiency]. I got a call—this is a Village story—to come to 11th Street and University Place on a Thursday morning at six o'clock because a group of doctors and medical people, wanted political activists to talk about this phenomenon, which is the introduction I got. They said there were eighteen cases, all of gay men, and it was the Kaposi's sarcoma. They said that we were called in because they were fearful of an epidemic, and that it would need political activists as well as medical as a partner. We started meeting every Thursday morning, and the numbers were spiraling. We set up a table down on Sheridan Square giving out literature, saying there was this thing going around, whatever it is, it was called GRID. Ginny Apuzzo told the doctors, "You have to change the name, you can't have the name of people in a disease." And when they went to a conference at the, with the CDC in Washington, they put that forward, and it was changed to AIDS, so that it wasn't called Gay-Related Immune Deficiency....

But we set up that table in Sheridan Square and I remember this guy crumbling a paper up and throwing it at me, and saying, "You could ruin any party you go to, Rothenberg." I didn't even know who he was. And of course Larry Kramer was starting to make a lot of noise. City Hall was silent. [Mayor Ed] Koch, with his closeted status, didn't want to be identified with what was called a gay disease. Jenny and myself and a few other people were going to those Thursday meetings, Chris Collins and Ken Dawsen and Peter Vogle, saying that when you're outside the corridors of power, you're begging to be heard. You have to be on the inside, so everybody said, "We have to get somebody to run for office."

So there were these strategy meetings about running for office. Well, it was decided, "Where could a gay person not just run but win?" Obviously the Village....So, then it was decided, "Well, you can't have somebody who's a single issue candidate." And that's when the eyes started pointed at me, because I had done a lot of radio and television in criminal justice, particularly after Attica. I couldn't go to the bathroom without a microphone being stuck in my face. I was all over the place. And highly visible, in criminal justice, so it was decided that I would be the best choice. Because, one, there was a candidate who was an incumbent who nobody felt guilty about challenging; two, I couldn't be called a single-issue candidate. And go! That's how I, that's how it was decided I would run.

(Rothenberg pp. 22-23)

Summary of Oral History Interview with David Rothenberg

David Rothenberg—born in Bergen County, New Jersey in August 1933—is one of Greenwich Village’s most prolific political activists. David grew up in New Jersey but always knew that he would live in New York. He attended the University of Denver, where he first became politicized under the intellectual influence of one professor in particular named Dr. Merrifield. “He made us think, he made us ask questions,” David recalls early in this interview, “about politics, about government, about religion.” Specifically, David remembers, “Race was what politicized me.” In college, David was a member of the Young Democrats of Denver, head of Students for [Adlai] Stevenson on his campus, and worked as a spy for the Anti-Defamation League, infiltrating and reporting on anti-Semitic churches in the Denver area.

David’s first sustained contact with Greenwich Village came during the summer between his sophomore and junior years of college, when he was participating in an enrichment program at Ethical Culture Fieldston School in the Bronx. On Saturday nights, the students would always venture down into the Village, which quickly became for David a symbol of “open choice” that was “very different from restrictive lives everywhere else.”

After college, David went into the Army, and upon returning, his first few New York apartments were located in neighborhoods other than the Village. David was inspired to finally move into the neighborhood after spending the summer of 1964 in Rome. “I loved the openness of the people in Rome, and the Village personified that for me here.” David remembers seeing interracial and same-sex couples walking openly throughout the Village, which gave him a sense of the neighborhood as a space marked by “the absence of judgment.”

David recalls a neighborhood bar in the Village that would become a gay bar in the evenings, called Julius’. Over time at Julius’ David became friends with Charlie Cochrane, who in 1981 would become the first NYPD officer to come out of the closet as a homosexual. As told in this interview, David was instrumental in helping Charlie “choreograph” that coming-out.

After returning from the Army, David wanted to work in the world of theater. He first got a job stuffing envelopes, which he then parlayed into a job working for Broadway producer Alexander Cohen. He became quite successful in PR on Broadway and Off-Broadway. A watershed moment for David was when he learned of John Herbert’s “Fortune and Men’s Eyes,” a play about life in American prisons that no one would produce because it was too brutal. David went to meet Herbert and decided to produce the play himself, which he had never done before. The play premiered at the Actors’ Playhouse in the Village. Former inmates began attending performances of the play and offering impromptu discussions afterwards about their experiences. The community of inmates surrounding “Fortune and Men’s Eyes” eventually led David to form the Fortune Society, a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating the public about prisons, and to helping formerly incarcerated people find their footing in society after being released. Today, David remains involved with the Fortune Society as its official Founder.

David came out of the closet himself in 1973, and notes in this interview how, to his great surprise, he was entirely supported by his colleagues and friends in the Fortune Society. David

refers to this moment, and the outpouring of public support that followed, as “the Act Two curtain of my life.”

“Act Three,” says David, is “just hard work.” David became an early AIDS activist in the 1980s, which soon led to his decision to run for City Council. David did not win, but explains that he, unlike former Mayor Ed Koch, never liked “the schmoozing” aspect of running for office. This comparison leads David in this interview to reflect on his own process of becoming disillusioned with Mayor Koch, and he discusses the way in which he became a confidant to Koch’s secret romantic partner, Richard Nathan.

David ends the interview by fondly remembering The Bagel and Jefferson Market as bygone neighborhood institutions and meeting places in the Village. He recalls the Village as a place of many mom-and-pop stores, where young people used to move “to get started.” But now, he says, “the real estate people are the new oil tycoons,” which is rapidly changing the face of the neighborhood and making it much more corporately commercialized. That said, David says that he still goes regularly to Gene’s restaurant on 11th Street, where he can expect to catch up with old Villagers.

General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an Oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

The GVSHP West Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing South Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

Oral History Interview Transcript

Zapol: This is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. This is Liza Zapol. It's April 27, 2016, and I'm on West 13th Street, at Seventh Avenue. If I can ask you to introduce yourself, please.

Rothenberg: I'm David Rothenberg, and I'm living on 13th Street.

Zapol: Thank you.

So, David, if you can start by just telling me where and when you were born.

Rothenberg: Born in Hackensack Hospital, Bergen County, New Jersey, August 1933. Grew up in Richfield Park and Teaneck and graduated from Teaneck High School. Family legend has it that at the age of about four, my family brought me and my sister into the city, I think to go to Radio City Music Hall. I don't know if I actually said it, but in my mind I thought, "Thank god there's something else." And I always knew that I would live in New York.

Zapol: Tell me, I'm interested in stories of where you think the seeds of social justice, morality, activism as a child might lie.

Rothenberg: It's tough to know the roots. I always say that Jackie Robinson was my first political hero. I grew up in an ostensibly all-white town, and I was a big sports fan. I played sports and I became a sports writer in high school. I was a Giants fan, which meant that you hated the Brooklyn Dodgers, but when Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson, I don't know why, it was so important to me for him to make it. In my world, of kids and sports, he was the ultimate outsider, and I watched everything that he did and thought it was so important for him to make it.

I was telling somebody this story the other day. A friend of mine and I—we were about thirteen or fourteen—we went to the Polo Grounds to see the Dodgers play the Giants, and there was a young couple, in their early twenties, bright and interested and very good to us. They bought peanuts for us, and they wanted to know all about us, and they were so great, and we were all Giants fans. And when they announced Jackie Robinson and I applauded, the man turned to me and said, "Why are you clapping for the nigger?" And I was so disillusioned.

There's a Budd Schulberg story about a little girl who slides down and her daddy catches her. The neighbor does it one day, and the girl falls, and it's—you suddenly realize that the world is not like you want it to be. I knew that there was opposition to Jackie, but not a nice man like this guy that was buying me peanuts, and his girlfriend.

Years later, I got to know Jackie a little bit, when I was a press agent. He had a radio program on WNBC and I always booked guests to be on his show. So many, that he once said to me, "Gee, David, we get a lot of sports people and a lot of political people. You're the only one that brings us theater people, why are we so lucky?" And I said, "Cause you're Jackie Robinson!" You know, he certainly knew the impact he had on the world, but maybe he didn't. One-on-one was tough to realize the impact that he had on my life.

And because of him, in high school I started paying attention to—the big issue then was FEPC, Fair Employment Practices Commission, about job opportunities for African-Americans. I always attributed that to Jackie Robinson, that he sensitized me about lynching and what was happening in the South, and I would read things. Race was what politicized me, I think, and then as you get more sophisticated you realize that slavery was free labor, and then you get into the economics of it.

Zapol: So who would you have discussions about this with, when you were in high school?

Rothenberg: Nobody in high school. It wasn't 'till I went to college. I had a freshman teacher in college named Dr. Merrifield and he opened up a thousand doors for me. Cause it was all there waiting to come out.

I remember in high school, asking Miss Tepper, in social studies. We were talking about the Civil War and the slavery period, and we had learned that many slaves had been born to slave masters. I said, "If they were very light, how would they know that they were black?" And she said, "Fingernails!" [00:05:04]

And I remember in college, I had a friend, what was his name? Isn't that funny? Jimmy, Jimmy Parker! And one day I'm looking at his fingers, and I said, "Where are your fingernails different from mine?" And he said, "Oh, that myth?" And I said, "Oh, you've heard it too, I had a teacher tell me that," and he said, "Oh please."

But Dr. Merrifield—I don't even know what he thought. He made us think, he made us ask questions. About politics, about government, about religion. We could take whatever position we wanted, he just wanted us to defend it.

Zapol: Do you remember any of the stories, or any of the arguments that you might have had at that time?

Rothenberg: Well, I got very political on campus, and I was chairman of Students for Stevenson. I was just saying to somebody: Can you imagine my first political presidential candidate was Stevenson, and now I'm in the era of Trump for President? How, [laughs] the decline of Western civilization.

I did a couple of very political things: I joined the Young Democrats of Denver, in the city; I was head of Students for Stevenson on campus; and my friend Nancy Koehler and I, a girl I dated, we became spies for the Anti-Defamation League for a six-month period. You couldn't do it for much longer, because you'd be discovered. We would go into—there were two churches in, outside of Denver, where they had anti-Semitic racists. One was a minister named Harvey Springer, and the other was Kenneth Goff. We would go in and then come back and report about what was being said. And that's when—you know about Hannah Arendt and the banality of evil and all that? There's a documentary of her playing now, and I always understood what she was talking about, because we'd go as a young couple, and these other couples were so nice to us. Like the guy at the ballpark. They're having coffee and cupcakes at the church and talking about school and the ballgames, and then suddenly they would talk about the niggers and the kikes. And they weren't snorting fire, and speaking evil. These were people that you could talk to, except there was an evil component. You know, when you see the documentaries of Hitler, you see that. Go see that documentary at the Film Forum.

So, that was part of my education. You could see where the lanes were divided. The irony is that I'm not religious at all. I'm more agnostic, and I went to a lot of different churches, I went to synagogues. I have a grandmother who's Christian Science, and I went to the Unitarians and I went to the Quakers, and I end up being rather agnostic. But bothered by religious people who were racist and anti-Semitic. What did they lose along the way with their Bibles?

Zapol: And in terms of your own family, was there a sense of morality that you feel like, in terms of your mother—

Rothenberg: I don't think of them as political, but their instincts were good. They weren't old school. They were pretty modern. They played golf and tennis and went to ball games and the theater. I do remember in eleventh grade, there were people visiting, and one of the men said "nigger," and my mother said, "That is not acceptable in this house." And I had never heard her be so confrontational, but I guess along the way it was very clear to me that they had a sense of right and wrong. But they weren't political, they weren't active. But they were good people. [laughs] The banality of goodness.

Zapol: So we were talking about college, and then you left college and—

Rothenberg: Went into the Army.

Zapol: Went into the Army.

Rothenberg: Yeah.

Yeah, and then came—well, I spent a summer at [Ethical Culture] Fieldston [School], the Encampment for Citizenship, between my sophomore and junior year. I got a scholarship. They have a wonderful program, still exists, goes to different cities, but that summer was at Fieldston. We did a lot of field trips to New York. And on Saturday night we'd always come to the Village, and I knew that this is what I wanted. I always remember the wicker baskets on 8th Street, and that just seemed so far out to me, the stores that had wicker baskets. I always remember seeing a young man, with his coat jacket. He was carrying it, and he stopped and he picked up some flowers. And I thought, "That's what I want to do someday: I want to be able to come home from work and pick up some flowers with my jacket over my shoulder." I don't know why that—it just seemed like freedom to me. Open choice. Very different from restrictive lives everywhere else. And the Village, of course, was the symbol of that. [00:11:01]

My first apartments, though, of course, were not in the Village. My first three apartments were sharing. Five in an apartment, four in an apartment, wherever you could find them. But, in the summer of [19]64, when I was working in the theater, I spent the summer in Italy. I had worked with Richard Burton, "Hamlet," with Elizabeth Taylor. It was gala and crowds and

hysteria, and exciting, and frightening. When the show closed, I said, “I’m outta here.” I had worked on an Italian musical, and they kept inviting me to Rome, so I figured, what a great way to see Rome, with all my theater friends there. It was a great summer, and what I said when I came back to New York, I wanted to have a piazza where I lived. And when I saw Sheridan Square, I said, “That’s my piazza.” And I called it Piazza de Sheridanano. [Zapol laughs]

Have you been to Rome?

Zapol: I have been to Rome!

Rothenberg: Well, you know what it’s like. To see Rome and have well-known artists taking you to the restaurants, and to the *contegeros* [phonetic] [00:12:14] and to the—what’s the outdoor opera? And to the baths of Caracalla. You know, and to be with people and all the citizens, “Oh, there’s Alfredo and Josephine!” or, “There’s Pietro!” It was a very exciting summer for me.

Zapol: So, you wanted to bring a sense of that. What was it that you were trying to create, then, in the Village?

Rothenberg: Well, I loved Rome, I loved the openness of the people in Rome, and the Village personified that for me here.

Zapol: So tell me—

Rothenberg: Coming to the Village was not an accident or economic. It was a very clear choice that this was where I was to live.

Zapol: Can you describe for me more what it was about the Village that you felt like you belonged here?

Rothenberg: The absence of judgment. Even in the [19]60s, you saw integrated mixed couples, black and white. You saw gay people being—well, not like now, but there were gay bars, and people weren’t bothered by it. I mean, the first time I saw gay people with straight people together. Because gayness was a shame, you know, but not as bad here. Not that great, but better.

Zapol: Can you talk to me about some of the places? You said there were gay bars?

Rothenberg: Well, Julius', yeah. And Julius' was a straight neighborhood bar during the day and a gay bar at night. And people, to get in, would line up outside. They have a back door—you know Julius'? There's a backside door. And you could only—when somebody exited, then they would let somebody in. I would never stand on line because I didn't want to be seen waiting to go into Julius', because at midnight my mother's friend from Patterson might be riding by and see me. It was so irrational! The pathology of the oppressed.

Zapol: Tell me about maybe a particular night at Julius' that comes to mind, then, in the [19]60s.

Rothenberg: Well, that would be much later. The most memorable night for me there was—well, it must have been the early [19]80s, or mid-[19]70s. Julius' became a place where we'd just go to hang out in the neighborhood. I mean, it was right around the corner from me. And I became very friendly with a guy named Charlie Cochrane, who was a neighbor. We would just sit there and talk and talk about politics and whatnot. And one day, some guy came in the back door, running, and three cops came in running after him. I said, "What are those cops doing?" He said, "Sit down." And Charlie went running out. Do you know who Charlie Cochrane is? He came back, and everything was settled, and I said, "You're a cop, aren't you, Charlie?" And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "Must be tough." And he said, "It's alright." [00:15:36]

So, as we got to know each other, he said, "I think I want to come out." There'd never been a cop that came out. And I said, "Then, rather than being discovered, you should choreograph it," and he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, when I was Director at the Fortune Society, I was afraid that if it was discovered that I was gay it would undo everything that I believed in at Fortune, so I made a choice. I chose to come out publicly and choreograph it as a positive experience." I don't know about the word positive, but an honest experience. So Charlie said, "How do we do it?" And I said, "Why don't I get six or seven activists to come? People who have come out publicly, come over to my house one night, and we'll all talk about the good and the bad." And Charlie came over, and everybody told him the good things that happened and the bad things that happened as they went public, and he said, "I can handle all of this." I said, "Well, you been a cop for twelve years, you should be able to handle it."

So, we decided, how was he to do it? At that point, every year they had the Gay Rights Bill, and it was always defeated, because the church, and the Orthodox Jews and the police

department and the PBA [Policemen's Benevolent Association] would testify against it. Do you know the background of the hearings?

Zapol: A little bit, but please.

Rothenberg: They were mobbed. It was always the big news story for the city. At the hearings they always had one for the bill and one against the bill; one for the bill, one against the bill. And the bill was really about: people couldn't be discriminated. It's what going on in North Carolina now, but even more simple. Couldn't be discriminated, can't get kicked out of a restaurant, can't get kicked out of your apartment, and can't get fired because it's discovered what your sexual orientation is. So we said, "What Charlie should do, after the PBA speaks, we'd have Charlie speak."

So, the drama that day was: all the gay people are out—they weren't all gay—the families and the pro-gay people were one side, and the philistines were on the other. It was real theater. And the PBA guy got up and did it, and then they said, "The next speaker is Sergeant Charles Cochrane from the New York Police Department." And from the gay side: "That's wrong, they had two in a row! Two in a row!" Ginny Apozzo and I were saying, "Ssh. Ssh, sit down." And Charlie got up—he lived on Cornelia Street, I think, right around the corner from me. He said, "I'm Charlie Cochrane, Sergeant, thirteen years in the police department, medal, blah blah blah blah, and I'm proud of being a New York policeman, and I'm equally proud of being a gay man." Total [laughing] silence, and then an eruption from the gay side. And I was standing in the back with Ginny Apozzo, and I said, "I don't know if we have the vote this year, but that just changed the game." Front page *Daily News*, *New York Times*, *New York Post*. I think there were even other newspapers in those days. Lead story on all the local news channels. They all went to Charlie's precinct to interview cops, and all the cops said, "It's Charlie, what difference does it make?" Because they knew him, he wasn't an unknown factor. It didn't pass. So, it must have been [19]85, cause [19]86 it did pass.

Charlie then started GOAL [Gay Officers Action League], which is now one of the biggest gay organizations: Gay Officers Association—whatever it is, GOAL. And I talked to some of the people at GOAL, and they don't even know who Charlie is now. He died of cancer about five years ago. He was retired in Florida. But a courageous story, and a good story.

And one of my favorite stories that came out of that: there was—oh, some transvestite was beaten up at a bar on 43rd Street. So there were protests and whatnot, and I got a call, would I be a marshal? Which meant you go and you make sure that the protesters are behaving. So we get there, there's about two hundred people, and we're all there at 43rd. We look across, and there's about fifty cops with batons, and they said, "Uh-oh, trouble!" And I look across [laughs] and who's leading them? Charlie Cochrane. So I walk across the street and I said, "Charlie, are we going to have trouble?" And he looked at me and said, "You keep your folks quiet, I'll keep my folks in order." So I said, "We're just going to be fine. We will protest quietly, and make a difference, and they'll leave us alone." And that's what happened. So that's good politics, and good social action. [00:20:40]

Zapol: During this time, did you have a leadership position in terms of gay organizations?

Rothenberg: I was on the Board of Directors of the National Gay Taskforce, which had just started. I was on the board of the Center, the original board of the Center. And, god, I was—Koch had appointed me to the Human Rights Commission, which gave me a high visibility.

Zapol: Right.

Rothenberg: At least within the gay community.

Zapol: Right, right. So maybe if you can talk to me about—I guess this was around when you came out publically, was when you joined up—

Rothenberg: I came out in [19]73.

Zapol: Uh-huh.

Rothenberg: On the *David Susskind Show*.

Zapol: And then you chose to become a part of the leadership of those organizations?

Rothenberg: Well I didn't choose, you know—they come to you.

I don't remember if it's in the book. The most dramatic thing in my life was coming out at Fortune, though. That's in the book, isn't it?

Zapol: I think so, but feel free.

Rothenberg: Fortune was my life. I had found something that I believed in, something that I can make a difference in. Because there was no voice for people coming out of prison, and I met guys accidentally as a result of doing a play. My theater work was—

Zapol: So maybe we should talk about that history before we come, so we can kind of go more chronologically? So, please, I know “Fortune and Men’s Eyes” was first produced in the Village, right?

Rothenberg: Yeah, at the Actors’ Playhouse.

Zapol: So, if you can tell me about some of the history around that play, and then how it evolved into the Fortune Society.

Rothenberg: Well, when I got out of the Army, I wanted to work in the theater and I got a job stuffing envelopes. My aunt told me once, “Make yourself indispensable.” I was hired for the summer and they couldn’t get rid of me because I knew where everything was. You know, in the theater, especially in those days when it was such a small community and there weren’t all those buildings, your work was your resume. You didn’t have to have resumes. I was being offered jobs, just from stuffing, because you meet people. I got a job for the summer at Bucks County Playhouse, and Mike Ellis, the producer there, said Alexander Cohen is—who’s one of the most prolific Broadway producers; most press people are freelancers and are hired—he said, “Alex wants somebody in his office to do everything there, but all the established people aren’t going to give up their business, so he’s interviewing all the young people. And I told him about you.” So he arranged for me to go from Bucks County that summer to see Alex Cohn, and in the middle of the interview, he said, “I want you.” And I turned him down! I said, “I’m not ready, I’ve only been in the business two years, and if I’m going to be handling all your shows, I need another year.” I thought I lost the job, but that intrigued him more, and he and his wife courted me that whole year.

Anyway, he was also representing the O’Keefe Center in Toronto, and did a lot of plays there, and I met a drama critic named Nathan Cohen. He was the George G. Nathan of Canadian critics; extremely opinionated, very bright, and very politically hip. What I came to realize, at

least in hindsight, was that he took a great liking to me, because I guess he met press people who were plugging away for shows, and I was talking about political things and social things. When he was going to come to New York for the theater, he'd call me and say, "Can you help me arrange—?" I was very flattered that he asked me to be his catalyst.

One day he stayed at the Plaza—he was, you know, he had a cane and an ascot, and he was very, not full of himself, he was a character. And a wonderful man, and extremely bright. We had lunch at the Plaza, and he said he had read a play that was done at the Stratford Festival as a reading. He said the Canadian actor Bruno Gerussi directed the reading, but can't raise money, and he said, "This play will never be done in Canada. It's too powerful, too political, too startling." And I said, "I want to read it." I said, "I never saw you so excited by a play." So he sent me the script of "Fortune and Men's Eyes," and I remember sitting up reading it, in bed, and I said, "Oh my god," I had to read it again. And I hate reading scripts, I always realize it's taking me away from reading novels, from good fiction. I read it again, and the playwright's name and address was on it, and I wrote him a letter, and I said, "I just finished reading your play and I feel I was locked in a room with four cobras." Because the play is about a kid that comes into a juvenile facility and is raped his first night. Now, I knew nothing about prison other than old movies, and they were either rioting or escaping. But this was startling! [00:26:14]

So I took the script and I gave it to a few producers, and they all said, "What are you, out of your mind? Nobody's gonna come to this." I went to Canada and I met John [Herbert] and I said, "I can't get anybody to produce it, and I've never produced, but I would like to try and get it on." And he said, "Ok." He had [laughing] nobody else was interested. I raised the money to do an off-Broadway show. And the actors, when we were in rehearsal, wanted to go to a jail to validate—well, the most actors do that, they want to validate their performance and they want to visit a prison. So someone told me to call the Correction Association, and I did, and they arranged for me and the four actors to go out there, and the director. I say now, I never changed my mind after fifty years of visiting prisons, that it was an exercise in futility. I saw young kids being herded around, and my first reaction is, "They're here because they've done something bad, wrong or unlawful. How will they be any better after this?"

Then they put us all in a cell while the inmates were out. They locked us each in a single cell for an hour. That's scary. The guy whose cell I was in, had a picture of a woman and a baby,

and I said, “He’s a felon, but he’s a husband and a father, too. It’s a little more complicated.” I remember looking at the picture saying, “You don’t think you’re going to see a man—you think you’re going to see some tough guy that you’re scared of, and here’s a—” So I came out of there, and I said, “Boy, this is wrong, it just doesn’t make sense. Whatever they’ve done there, they can’t be any better.

So, when the play was done—this was the [19]60s, I was in the Civil Rights Movement, I had been in demonstrations and sit-ins and whatnot, and had been in anti-war protests. So, I had a political sense of social awareness, and when the play opened to dramatically diverse reviews—I mean, the reviews, Jerry Tallmer in the *Post* compared it to the great Italian movies like *Bicycle Thief*. And Norman Nadel in the *World Telegram* said that unless you’re obsessed with watching sodomy, there’s no reason to see such filth. So—but the play lasted longer than Norman Nadel.

So, a couple of weeks after the play opened, I got a call from somebody who was bringing some students, and he said, “Can they stay for a discussion after the play?” That was right up my alley. I asked, and two of the actors said, “Yes, yes yes,” and we invited the entire audience to stay at the Actors’ Playhouse. The interesting thing, this is [19]68, I was always very shy about speaking in public. But with this, I never hesitated, because it wasn’t about me. It went beyond me. You know, I wasn’t worried about what anybody said about me. That’s an interesting thing about fear of speaking that I realized. So the audience was very responsive, and saying the play was wonderful and applauding the actors, and then some man challenged it and said, “This play is a lot of crap, and these characters are an exaggeration.” And from the back of the house, a man stood up and said, “Not if my twenty years counts for anything.” We said, “Come on down,” and a man named Pat McGarry came and mesmerized everybody for an hour. Telling stories of Riker’s Island and Danamore, the Florida chain gang. Afterwards we went across the street to the Limelight, which no longer exists, and we talked ‘till two or three in the morning, and I said, “You have to come back next week and do this, the public doesn’t know this.” And Pat said, “Well, I did white time, you gotta get a black guy, too.” And I said, “Why, in New York prisons they’re segregated?” And he said, “Yeah, you do black time, you do white time.” I said [laughing] “Well I don’t know anybody, you’re the only guy I’ve met.” And he said, “Well, I work in a tailor shop, I have a customer, I’m sure he did time, and I’ll ask him.”

The following week he came back with a man named Clarence Cooper who was African-American and had done federal time. [00:31:02]

Because I was a good press person—and the audience was really charged up, I mean this was an unheard voice, nobody heard formerly incarcerated people, because they had to lie if they wanted to get jobs or housing or make it. So, I call Seymour Peck at the *New York Times* and I say, “This is a great story.” The reporter down in the headline at the *Times* said, “Drama Continues After the Curtain Falls.” And the following Tuesday night, the place was loaded with guys who had done time who introduced themselves afterwards, and they started coming every Tuesday. We started inviting parole officers, to be on the panel, and elected officials. A group of about eight or ten, twelve guys were coming and getting there after the play and hanging out, and I was getting to know them. A couple of things I was aware of: One, this was obviously very important to them, and they had nowhere else to go to dump it, and that these were guys that had done time and were staying out, and almost all of them were in AA [Alcoholics Anonymous]. That they had someplace to go to deal with the demons, but their rage about their prison experience had not been touched, because they actually were lying at AA meetings, too, about their time. It was the [19]60s and people were, you know, interested in things. I started getting calls from people at my theater office saying that they had been in the audience, could I come with a couple of the—and a lot of the guys came up on the stage, and, you know, were speaking. So I was getting calls and I was invited to St. John’s University, to Judson Church, to, you know, Ethical Culture. High school teachers were calling me. I was on the circuit with a group of men—and I say men because there were no women yet—a group of men who had done time. And after a few months, there was a nucleus, a hardcore bunch of guys that this was clearly something important for them. I said, “We have the nucleus of an organization. We can educate the public!”

There was no great vision, I just thought, “Your voice has not been heard. You’ll put a face on an issue that has all these—” I always thought of tough, mean guys in prison, and I was meeting people who were funny and charming and had wives and children, and wanted something, and it just seemed so clear. So one night at the theater, I said, “We’re starting an organization, I talked to some of the guys, and we’re gonna call it Fortune, from the play’s title, and my office on 46th Street will be the headquarters, and we’ll mimeograph—” You know what

a mimeograph machine is? Before Xeroxing, before emails. The ink, and you put a big stencil on it, and you roll it, and I said we would mimeograph a newspaper and send it to you.

Sixteen people gave me two dollars and we opened a bank account at Chemical, which no longer exists. We opened a bank account for thirty-two dollars. We were doing that for a couple of months, and some of the guys were going on the radio using fake names. Jean Bach had some guys on the radio. They would give their first names or an initial because if their real name was used, they would be known as ex-cons. In the neighborhood that would be a problem, where they were working it would be a problem. [00:35:12]

So, I called Jean Kennedy, who was the producer of *The David Susskind Show*. Are you old enough to remember David Susskind? Well, in those days there were only five channels. There was channels 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13, seven channels. And Susskind was on channel 5 at eleven o'clock at night. It was like Oprah, only more restricted. He'd have six people on for two hours, or five people: recovering alcoholics, gamblers, women who had had abortions. So I called and I said, "Would you be interested in a program with some people who have been in prison?" She said, "Yeah, we've never been able to get anybody that would agree to go on." I said, "I can bring in a dozen people, and you can interview them and pick four or five," and that's what she did. It was March of [19]68, I think. And at the end of the program they gave my name, and the Fortune Society and my address, and the next day there were 250 guys waiting in the stairwell, looking for exactly what people are looking for now, jobs, housing, and I'm sitting there with my theater posters. And didn't know what to do with them.

And one of the guys, Kenny Jackson—am I allowed to swear into this microphone? Kenny Jackson, a big tall white guy with a toothpick in his mouth walked over to me and said, "You don't know what the fuck you're doing, do you?" He said, "Move over, I'm in a fellowship. We keep each other sober by talking to each other." He literally became the first counselor there, started talking to people. And that's how we started.

I was living at 3 Sheridan Square and that became—and, because there was no housing, Kenny and eventually Fran O'Leary, a woman, and Mel Rivers, before we had The Castle, we always had somebody sleeping on our couches, because the single room occupancy and the welfare hotels were so terrible that guys were saying, "I'm gonna go back if I have to stay there.

I'm either gonna get in a fight, or I'm gonna get killed." And so my apartment, 3 Sheridan Square, must have had forty or fifty different guys that stayed there over the time.

Zapol: So even that story of when you had the 250 people in the stairwell and, I forget the name of the gentleman who said—

Rothenberg: Kenny Jackson.

Zapol: Kenny Jackson said, "Move over," and extended through to opening your home and your life to these ex-cons. It sounds like you completely shifted your life, and your journey—

Rothenberg: Well, suddenly I had two careers going on simultaneously. I was an extremely successful publicist: I was working on "Hair," and "The Boys in the Band," and "Fortune and Men's Eyes," and a Harold Pinter play on Broadway called "The Birthday Party," and a Tennessee Williams play and an Edward Albee play—and this. I, within a year, had to make choices. And by then we had a hardcore group of guys from Fortune. It was so funny, I got a call from a man who said, "An anonymous person wants to give you a 5,000 dollar grant, what's your 501c3?" And I said, "What is that?" And he said, "Oh, you really are grassroots," and he said, "you have to get a non-profit status." He said, "We'll help you get that," and he processed us for the Attorney General so we could—he said, "If you want to raise money!"

And my one-room office was exploding. Somebody moved out down the hall and so we moved into three rooms, which after Attica became the media center of the universe because every television camera in the world was—we were the only game in town, you know. We started thinking we had to move, and the great irony was, we were turned down—you know the triangle building at 4th Street and Sixth Avenue? We were turned down because of who we were. We couldn't move, because of who we were. In the meantime, the people at 1545 Broadway, at 46th Street, were petitioning to keep us, because it was the safest building in Times Square. They were hiring a lot of guys. If they needed somebody, they would hire one of our guys to move something, to lift something, to watch the baby while the mother who's the producer was going. Our guys were getting part-time jobs all the building, and we had coffee and clothes so guys in Times Square knew to come in there to get things. We had a lot of strange people coming in and out, but the word on the street was, "Whatever you're doing, you don't mess with 1545." Some of the theater people from those days for years were our great champions. And they always asked

how was Charlie, how was Kenny, how was Melvin, you know, people they got to know and care about. [00:40:43]

Zapol: So the discrimination in terms of finding a place is just a microcosm of the type of discrimination that people were facing coming out of—

Rothenberg: Yes.

Zapol: Can you talk a little bit about that? How you were told that you were not wanted.

Rothenberg: Well, one of us would go in, a real estate person, and everything was fine. We'd say, "It's a non-profit group," blah blah blah blah. And then suddenly, the space was not available. They never said it directly. We finally got a loft on 22nd Street, which was an area that was very depleted at that time, so they would take anybody. The same thing happened, and that neighborhood built up, as you know, along Sixth Avenue in the 20's, while we were there, and it became the safest building in the neighborhood. The other tenants loved us, and used our guys, and hired them. It's happened wherever we've gone.

Zapol: The other thing is that it sounds like you also placed an enormous trust in the people who you were encountering. Before we recorded, you were talking also about the kind of trust that people placed in you; it sort of went both ways. And perhaps you have a particular story, maybe about one of the people who you opened up your house to, in terms of allowing people into your life.

Rothenberg: On my radio program, during the fundraising drive, we would raise money, I'd hire four or five people from Fortune to answer the phones and they'd get paid. One day, we were coming back on the subway, and I'm with four of the guys, and they were tall and wide and black. We're talking, we're standing on the train cause it's crowded, and the four of them are facing me, and I had my backpack, and one of them said, "Jesus, we can't take you anywhere, your backpack's off." As he started to fix it, he looked up, and he said, "There are about six cell phones about to go off." People were calling, and I turned around to see, and people were panicked. They thought the little old white man was being—one of the guys said, "He's the safest one in the car." [Zapol laughs] Does that sort of—it's never been a question, in my mind, about being in danger.

I say now, if I go to WBAI or a theater office, there's so much tension, I have to go running back to Fortune and find six ex-cons so I can get hugged. [Zapol laughs]

The atmosphere at Fortune is remarkable. I go every Thursday night to the Castle meetings, which are at 140th [Street] in Harlem. At our main office, which is now in Long Island City, we do a hot meal every day, about 150 people are fed. This guy said, "I was there the other day, watching it," and he said, "I saw two guys that I had seen on Riker's Island." He said, "Not guys like the ones I had seen on Riker's Island; I saw two guys that I saw on Riker's Island, and on Riker's they were aggressive, and they were dangerous." I think he said, "I kept watching them, and they were just like everybody else, and they got their food, and they sat down, and they were playing chess." So we said, "What does that say to you?" And he said, "Well," he says to me, "if you create an atmosphere that treats somebody like a person, they might respond." And one of the other guys said, "That's only part of it. The other is that on Riker's, or in jail, if they act aggressive and dangerous, that's their way of protecting themselves, that's a way of keeping them not being victimized." But I thought it was an interesting observation, that he spotted people who he, as an inmate, was nervous about, and when he saw them at Fortune, he said, "Uh-oh!" Cause we get guys who have very bad reputations, and have done terrible things. And they change. They're hungry for something else. Sometimes the demons are too great. [00:45:23]

We have a very low recidivism rate at the Castle, and this one guy got re-arrested. He sent me a picture of me and him and JoAnne Page, and it says, "The nicest summer of my life." It was in the backyard at the Castle. That's kind of sad, isn't it? That he was in a residence like that and it was the nicest summer of his life.

Zapol: But, as you said, it's also a moment where something else can open up for him. A place where he is heard, where he might be recognized for his own potential?

Rothenberg: He recruits for us now from Attica. He'll send me a letter, saying, "This guy is ready, talk to him when he comes out."

Zapol: So—

Rothenberg: Is this connected to the Village?

Zapol: Well, it is because it's through you. But I'm interested in—

Rothenberg: And I was living in the Village the whole time, I want to make that clear. [Zapol laughs]

Zapol: Yeah, tell me more, then—

Rothenberg: We had a store in the Village, you know. You know where the Riviera Bar is, on Sheridan Square?

Zapol: Uh-huh.

Rothenberg: Well, when you go, there's a little stairway; you go down there, for about two years we had a store, the Fortune store.

Zapol: What was that?

Rothenberg: We thought we would open a business and just hire formerly incarcerated people. Of course *The New York Times* and local television, that was all my PR mind working. And we were going to sell inmate goods, but then the prison stopped us from doing it. So then we were selling t-shirts and whatnot, and like any other store, but the support in the community was overwhelming, and the guys that worked there made friends for life.

Zapol: Talk to me about what you consider the community, when you say the support from the community. What do you consider the community in the Village? What are sort of the boundaries of your Village?

Rothenberg: Well, first let me say, that store, we wouldn't have opened it in any other part of the city. It would have to be in the Village. Because the neighbors would not complain, and the public going by would be curious. I don't know, I guess there's sort of a—it's not as strong now, but the Village Independent Democrats sort of gave the political tone for the Village. These were the people that were always giving out flyers about issues, and they were always on the side of the angels. And so I guess that's the Village that I like.

The Judson Church people—you know, Judson was protecting people who were protesting the war before anybody else was. They had abortion clinic counseling before anybody

else was. So I started going to Judson a lot on Sunday mornings, to hear Howard Moody and Al Carmines, because that's the spirit of the Village that I loved.

Zapol: Do you have a memory of a particular Sunday at—

Rothenberg: I certainly do. I did several—they asked me to give sermons, and I did one celebration of children. We invited everybody to bring their kids, and I talked about children, the kids that I had met that had been in trouble, and whatnot, and what the alternatives were. The Big Apple Circus was just starting, and we invited them to be a part of it, and they—I can't remember his name, he was one of the founders of it, and he was dressed as a clown, and he had several clowns there, and they led the children out to Washington Square and they all let out balloons. And we had music—I don't know, some Broadway shows celebrating children. I don't know if Sondheim's "Children [Will Listen]" had been written then, but that was the kind of thing that we would—but, the whole congregation went out into the park. And that was the Village.

Zapol: And, other stories, maybe around Washington Square Park. I know it was a center of protest, as well. Any stories that you might have around Washington Square Park?

Rothenberg: Well, the moving of the arch was so stupid. We all said they had to line it up, remember that? You know, the big arch. They were closing the park for a year because they wanted to move it, because it wasn't lined up. I said, "Nobody ever knew that it wasn't lined up." It was fine just the way it was. You know, people get busy with things, and they spend money that's just pointless. [00:50:21]

I'll tell you, over the Village Gate was the Greenwich Hotel for years, which was a nightmare—do you know about that?

Zapol: No.

Rothenberg: That was a single room occupancy hotel where a lot of guys coming out of prison were stuck. And, to the chagrin of everybody at Fortune, I, on my own, checked myself in there for a night because I was going to do a story for the *Voice*, but the *Voice* didn't print it. The *Villager* printed it, and it was a front-page story. Because I was offered drugs, I was offered guns. They give you little rooms with chicken wire, and people tried to break into it. It was

terrifying. But it made me think of that as the guys in that would pour out into the park, and that's when Washington Square Park was scary, because these guys had nothing going for them. That now was made into an expensive apartment building and whatnot. So then they moved people into shelters, like Ward's Island. Away, so people don't have to see it. But that was a shameful part of our past in the Village. And the park picked up a lot of that. I also know that Mrs. Roosevelt lived on the side of the park.

Zapol: Uh—

Rothenberg: She had an apartment on the west of Washington Square. She was one of my— there's a picture of me with her in my bedroom, if you want to see it.

Zapol: And what's the story there? Had you ever been to visit her there, at the place?

Rothenberg: I had two experiences with Mrs. Roosevelt. When I was at the Encampment, at Fieldston, we did a field trip to Hyde Park. She had just come back from the Soviet Union, at a time when nobody was going to the Soviet Union. So that was a well-photographed event, because we were the first group she met, and the picture of me, I'm standing next to her. There were lots of students; the picture that I got was one with me.

But when I was in college, and I was on the National Board of the Students for Democratic Action, SDA, which was the student affinity of the ADA [Americans for Democratic Action], do you know that? ADA is a liberal political organization. I think because I was at the University of Denver they put me on the national board because everybody was either from Berkeley or Harvard or Brooklyn College. They were so excited to have somebody from the Rocky Mountains, that they put me on the board with no qualifications.

And then I was made national Vice President, which meant I was one of the five students on the national board of the ADA. And the first board meeting, they flew me from Denver to Chicago during Christmas vacation. That was big stuff! And you walked into a room and there's Mrs. Roosevelt and Hubert Humphrey and Walter Reuther, the head of the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations]. Do you know who Reuther was? He was the President of the United Auto Workers. Arthur Schlesinger, all these gods of liberal politics. At the lunch break, each student was put at a table, and I was at the table with Mrs. Roosevelt. And I didn't realize it till

years later, what she was doing. She invited me to share about where I'm going to school, and she asked me questions about things I'd be comfortable: what I'm studying, what are my classes, and she made me feel comfortable. It was like your grandmother, you know? It was a very special gift that she had. She didn't ask me political questions, even though this was a political board meeting. Where do you go to school, what's your major, what's your curriculum, what are you studying, what books are they reading now. She asked me about what I knew. That's quite a gift.

Zapol: Uh-huh. Relating to you on a human level, sort of like—

Rothenberg: Well it's something I stole from her, because I find now that sometimes when you're with people who are not quite comfortable in the arena, if you ask them about what they're doing, that's what they know [Zapol laughs]. That's what they're doing.

Zapol: So she had the Village connection as well.

Rothenberg: Did you know she had an apartment there?

Zapol: I don't think I did.

So, tell me then, about some of the other—and I know that we sort of re-routed to talk about the Fortune Society, when you were about to talk about your work, both on the board of the Center and other organizations after you came out publicly. So, maybe it would be good to re-direct to that before we talk about other Village personalities, and so on. So yeah, if you want to— [00:55:24]

Rothenberg: The Center is twenty-five years old. This is 2016. When would that be, then?

Zapol: That would be—

Rothenberg: [19]91, no, it must have been much—

Zapol: No, I think it was earlier than that. Wasn't it in the [19]80s?

Rothenberg: Yes.

Zapol: —or even before the [19]80s.

Rothenberg: It was in the [19]80s.

Zapol: Yeah.

Rothenberg: It's more than twenty-five years old.

Zapol: I think so too.

Rothenberg: Because I was still living in 3 Sheridan Square, because I remember the walk-up. But the building is right there, and we had to be careful, because there were loose wires. That first summer, when the board met there five nights a week, to get that thing off the ground. We were restricted where we could go because it was not only in bad shape, it was dangerous. Electric wires and things that might fall. And that was very intense. I mean, we talked about making it like the 92nd Street Y as a center for—that was what was kicked around, that as a role model. And this was a reaction against AIDS, because many people had only bars to go to. And we were a community much more varied than drinkers. And a lot of people weren't drinkers, like me! So why go to a bar? So the Center became very important.

Zapol: And, then maybe even before that, you became involved with the National Gay and—

Rothenberg: Task Force.

Zapol: —Lesbian Task Force, right?

Rothenberg: Well that was [19]73, because that was about the same time I went on the Susskind program. Greg Dawson, who owned the Ballroom—you know the Ballroom? It was a nightclub in Chelsea. Before that it was a nightclub in the Village—came to me, and said they're sitting up a board, and they're trying to get people on the board from different fields, and they wanted somebody from criminal justice, and they couldn't get any lawyers, and they couldn't get any judges, you're the closest thing to anybody in criminal justice.

But I wasn't out yet, and I said, "Well, that's part of the condition." I told them that I was going to do this television show, and they said, "Please be on the board." And so I was.

Zapol: What led to your decision to come out publicly?

Rothenberg: I was tired of lying. It's that simple. First of all, I'm working with guys coming to Fortune, telling them to be honest about your life, and I'm lying to everybody, including my own family. It's draining. It's not good for you to lie all the time. Especially, I realized, I thought of myself as an honest person. One day I said to myself, "You've lied all your life. You've lived a duplicitous life. You're lying. How can you say you're an honest person?" So I choreographed it.

Zapol: And what was that decision, to choreograph it? Why?

Rothenberg: Tired of lying! Well, first of all, I never allowed myself to have a relationship, because a relationship meant being out. How do you explain another man with you wherever you go? I had met Greg Norris, and it looked like it was going to be a relationship, and I didn't want to lie about that.

But I didn't want to lie at Fortune. You remember what I said in the book, about what happened at Fortune? That's one of the most political things that ever happened in my life.

Zapol: Uh-huh. Please share.

Rothenberg: I pulled the cadre together, five people: Kenny Jackson, Mel Rivers. Kenny, a former addict, recovering alcoholic, former gang kid. Mel Rivers, an African-American from Bed-Stuy, former gang kid. Fran O'Leary, former prostitute. Jeanette Spencer, a recovering alcoholic, former inmate. And Bobby Davis, former gang kid from Harlem.

I called the five of them together, Fortune is then seven years old, and I said, "I have three things to tell you. One is that I'm gay. Two is"—boy, this was not easy. "Two, I'm going on a national television program to talk about it, and three, I have written my letter of resignation." There. Long pause, and Kenny Jackson says, "What are you going to wear on television?" Not the question you expected to be asked. And I said, "What kind of a question is that?" And he said, "Well, you dress like a slob, try and get something nice so we can be proud of you." And Melvin Rivers said, "Why would you resign?" And I said, "It might hurt the organization if I come out publically," and he said—this is the political sophistication—"You stood by us for six years telling us to be honest with our lives. Give us the opportunity to stand by you." He was asking me permission, to stand by me. That's pretty heavy. [01:00:44]

That's probably one of the—that's the act two curtain of my life. That was the most dramatic thing, that moment. Because Fortune had become my world, and it was to continue. Then there was a long pause, and Kenny said, "Is that it?" And I said, "Yeah," and he said, "Can we all get back to work now? We have things to take care of." And nothing changed.

After the Susskind program, I think—the *New York Times* used to have a people column, and I was between Hubert Humphrey's gall bladder operation and Marshal Tito's eightieth birthday. You know who Tito was? He was the dictator in Yugoslavia. And the *Post* had a headline, says, "Prison Exec Says 'I'm Homo.'"

And the day after the Susskind show, I got almost 1,000 letters, the following week, but hundreds of phone calls. And it's overwhelming! Because when you've prepared for rejection, and you've lied all your life, and suddenly you're getting all this love. And Jeanette Spencer—

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE 'Rothenberg_DavidGVSHPOralHistory1.mp3';

BEGINNING OF SECOND AUDIO FILE 'Rothenberg_DavidGVSHPOralHistory2mp3']

Rothenberg: —came into my office, and she said, "Why don't you go home?" She said, "Being accepted is a lot of work. It's tough to get a lot of love at once. Why don't you go home and just relax, because you're not going to be good to anybody here today." The phones were ringing like crazy! A lot of it was from guys who had come through Fortune, to tell me that if I needed anything—a couple guys said that if I needed bodyguards [laughs] and I said, "No, you're the only one I'd ever need a bodyguard against."

So that was very dramatic. Very heavy. When you're going through it, you don't know what's dramatic, you just try and get through it, but when you look back on it it's pretty incredible. Those were remarkable human beings, that first crew at Fortune.

See, Kenny Jackson and Mel Rivers were both out of prison a few years and holding jobs that they were lying. Kenny was a trucker with a fake license, and Melvin was a gypsy taxi driver. But when they came to that office after the Susskind program, Kenny came and Melvin came later that day, and they both instinctively knew, Melvin being black and Kenny being white, they both knew instinctively that it was essential, if the organization was going to work, that it had to be biracial. That they had to be accepting and that they would set the tone. So, it

never was an issue. And the three of us were going all over the country then, after the Susskind thing. Clement Stone flew us to Chicago and we met with Dr. Karl Menninger, the head of the Menninger Clinic, do you know what that is? The three of us talked about, “This is what we want to do with our lives.” We want to—this is it. We’ve been looking for something, this is it.

Zapol: So if that’s the act two curtain, then what happens next, in act three?

Rothenberg: Hard work [laughter], just hard work. And funny, I think, AIDS is what motivated me to run for office, because—how old are you, if I may?

Zapol: I’m—

Rothenberg: You don’t have to give me a number. When AIDS happened in the early [19]80s, you were not around.

Zapol: I was around, yeah.

Rothenberg: Well it was—

Zapol: I—yeah.

Rothenberg: It was originally called GRID [Gay-Related Immune Deficiency]. I got a call—this is a Village story—to come to 11th Street and University Place on a Thursday morning at six o’clock because a group of doctors and medical people, wanted political activists to talk about this phenomenon, which is the introduction I got. They said there were eighteen cases, all of gay men, and it was the Kaposi’s sarcoma. They said that we were called in because they were fearful of an epidemic, and that it would need political activists as well as medical as a partner. We started meeting every Thursday morning, and the numbers were spiraling. We set up a table down on Sheridan Square giving out literature, saying there was this thing going around, whatever it is, it was called GRID. Ginny Apuzzo told the doctors, “You have to change the name, you can’t have the name of people in a disease.” And when they went to a conference at the, with the CDC in Washington, they put that forward, and it was changed to AIDS, so that it wasn’t called Gay-Related Immune Deficiency.

We also started hearing that there were addicts, who were not with a community, being buried in Potter’s Field who had been silently just dumped. Then they started making

connections: There were addicts who were not gay that were early diagnosed. But, they weren't diagnosed, they just died and were dumped, because they had no people.

But we set up that table in Sheridan Square and I remember this guy crumbling a paper up and throwing it at me, and saying, "You could ruin any party you go to, Rothenberg." I didn't even know who he was. And of course Larry Kramer was starting to make a lot of noise. City Hall was silent. [Mayor Ed] Koch, with his closeted status, didn't want to be identified with what was called a gay disease. Jenny and myself and a few other people were going to those Thursday meetings, Chris Collins and Ken Dawson and Peter Vogle, saying that when you're outside the corridors of power, you're begging to be heard. You have to be on the inside, so everybody said, "We have to get somebody to run for office." [00:05:05]

So there were these strategy meetings about running for office. Well, it was decided, "Where could a gay person not just run but win?" Obviously the Village. You know, Miriam Friedlander was an untouchable, but everybody thought Carol Greitzer's day had passed, so that she could be challenged. Everybody thought, "She's not a bad person, but she's not doing anything about AIDS." So, then it was decided, "Well, you can't have somebody who's a single issue candidate." And that's when the eyes started pointed at me, because I had done a lot of radio and television in criminal justice, particularly after Attica. I couldn't go to the bathroom without a microphone being stuck in my face. I was all over the place. And highly visible, in criminal justice, so it was decided that I would be the best choice. Because, one, there was a candidate who was an incumbent who nobody felt guilty about challenging; two, I couldn't be called a single-issue candidate. And go! That's how I, that's how it was decided I would run.

Zapol: So then what happened?

Rothenberg: I started doing house parties, hired a campaign manager. You've never seen a city council race so highly publicized. Sunday magazine, *Daily News* picture, *New York* magazine. "The Gay White Hope." I have all these clips somewhere, if you want to look at them. But it was very, very visual. I was going for eighteen months, and the last six months I took a leave of absence from Fortune. In those days, the district was Chelsea, the Village, and a long strip up the Upper East Side. And Koch and Greitzer worked at—I won Chelsea and the Village, and lost big in the Upper East Side, and she won it. Then everybody said, "If you run again, you'll win." But

I hated the, I hated the—Bill Kunstler, do you know who Bill Kunstler was, the attorney who said, “I had to register because of you.” He said, “I didn’t have a vote,” he said, “but they’ll kill you if you win.” He said, “You’re a heel nipper. You have to stay outside and nip at their heels. They’ll kill you on the inside, you’ll have to compromise yourself for survival.”

And he’s right, that’s what politics is. When I campaigned with Ed Koch—when I still was enchanted by him, before I was disenchanted—he stood at a subway stop, he loved it! He got off on it. That’s part of it. I like the work. I didn’t like the schmoozing.

My phone—let me—

Zapol: Hang on one second.

Yeah, so you were saying, with Koch, he enjoyed it.

Rothenberg: He loved it. He really loved it. He loved campaigning. I wrote something about it last week. I do editorials on WBAI and I said that I wasn’t crazy about it because I didn’t like the fact that people were—it’s what I see in the campaign stuff. I was reflecting on it, that the Trump people and the Bernie people particularly are pouring their hearts and souls into it, and some of them are very ugly about anybody that disagrees with them. I’m disappointed in some of the Sanders people, because I had suggested on the radio that I didn’t think he could win a national election, and that Hillary could. All the messages sent to me were not “why Bernie could,” but insulting me. Which is what comes out of the fanaticism, and in the Hannah Arendt movie, when you see the people clutching and the women grabbing at him, it’s almost orgiastic, because they are so excited. That’s frightening in politics. I didn’t want anybody to put their dreams and hopes on me. I wanted to represent people on legislative issues. But I wasn’t just going to be dealing with AIDS. I’d be dealing with land reform and abortion clinics, and bike runs and all the things that a city council person would deal with. Not the dreams—we should want people to represent us about the things we believe in, not to get some sort of visceral excitement about their persona. I love Obama, but I’m critical of him on things that I disagree with. But I think he gives a style and substance to the presidency that I hadn’t seen. And so I’m proud that he’s our President, and if I disagree with him on an issue, he’ll get a letter saying “I’m not crazy about this.” But he’s as good as you’ll get in the political arena. I have a lot of problems with Hillary, but the options, you know, I would have loved the candidate, or I would have liked Elizabeth Warren. [00:10:51]

Zapol: Hm. Can you talk—

Rothenberg: That's getting away from the Village.

Zapol: You said you were enchanted with Koch, and then you were disenchanting.

Rothenberg: Disenchanted.

Zapol: Do you have a sense of—I mean, obviously Koch also lived in the Village. Can you tell a little bit about that journey, and maybe what the effect of the Koch era was on this area?

Rothenberg: When Fortune started, he was the person in Congress that became our point person. His office was well run, and responsive. It's really a model of how it would run. You know, he had an aborted campaign in [19]73 and in [19]77 he was going to run. Was that it? Was it [19]77? Yeah.

Zapol: I think so.

Rothenberg: And he started having these Sunday night suppers at his apartment on Washington Square. Do you know where that is? I was one of the people that would go there, and meet all the people that eventually surfaced in his administration. There were these Sunday night potlucks just talking about politics, and he was my candidate. And some of the others were very good. I loved Bella, and I became, much later on, extremely fond of Mario Cuomo, who I got to know and really admire. And there was, who else was there? Oh, Mario Biaggi I didn't like, but there were about seven people running. Koch was my candidate. Did you read the whole book? Well, that's when I met Richard Nathan. At all the political things, Richard Nathan was a Deputy Commissioner of Health, so we'd find ourselves talking and whatnot. And that was the night that Richard and I were in the kitchen cleaning up, just by chance, and I said, "Sounds like everybody's leaving, Richard, I'm getting out of here," and he said, "I have to go, too, I'll walk you home." So, as we're leaving, Ed turns to Richard and says, "Oh, Richard, please stay," with me standing right there as the only other person in the room, and Richard, "No, Ed, I have to go, and I'll call you later." So as we're walking across the park—Washington Square Park, for history's sake—I said, "What was that all about?" He said, "What?" And I said, "Please stay, Richard." I said, "Ed has better manners than that, you don't say to one person 'Please stay' while ignoring the other person." So Richard said, "Well, I'm having a relationship with Ed."

“With the congressman who’s running for mayor in 1977?” flashes through my mind. I mean, no judgments on what he’s doing, but how do you run for mayor in 1977, and have a gay rights bill and have a relationship?

So, I became Richard’s confidant through all of this. You weren’t around then; you know who Bess Myerson was? She was the former Miss America. First Jewish Miss America, the only Jewish Miss America. She started showing up holding pinkies with Ed everywhere. After the inaugural big bash, there was the private little party at somebody’s house. Herb Rickman boyfriend, whose name was—he was the food editor at the *Daily News*. It was for the inner circle of Ed’s supporters, of which I was one, I gathered. I was on his transition team, he appointed me to the Human Rights Commission, and then, you know, invited me to Gracie Mansion, all that stuff. At that party, after the inaugural, Richard said to me, “The gauntlet has been drawn, I am out of here.” And I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “It’s been made clear to me, by people close to the mayor, that I’m not going to be the Commissioner of Health”—he would have been a very good, a not likely candidate—“and that I would be well-advised to get out of New York.” And he said, “I’m moving to LA, and I’m setting up my own consulting business.” And I said, “Really! It’s that big a deal.” “Yeah, that big a deal.” [00:15:16]

Ed moved to the right. He appointed me to the Human Rights Commission and then when he was running for re-election I got a call from Herb Rickman saying that they wanted me to be Chairman Citywide of Gays for Koch. And I said, “Well, there’s a problem.” I was making up the problem. I didn’t want to support him for re-election, but the problem was that there was a prison bond issue. I was one of the chosen spokespeople, and Ed was for the prison bond issue. And I said, “As one of the very few visible people fighting this prison bond issue, it would be a contradiction for me to be visible as a city-wide head.” Herb Rickman said, “We will be very, very, very, very disappointed.” And I remember saying, “I’ve never had so many ‘verys’ said to me.” And then—well then I was debating Mario. Mario was Lieutenant Governor at the time, and was supporting the prison bond issue. We did a series all over the state on debating it, which is when I really got to like Mario, because I said to him, “You don’t really believe this,” and he said, “Yes I do, because until you change the Rockefeller drug law, we’re going to need prisons to put people in.” But I had so much respect for Mario.

Anyway, when I was on the Human Rights Commission, I heard that there were immigrants in a city location, federal prisoners being held, husbands and wives being separated, just like they are now, publicized. I wanted to go visit them as a Human Rights Commissioner. The Commission had twelve people; only one other Commissioner was interested in going. And the Koch administration turned us down. They said, “They’re federal prisoners, not city.” I argued, “But they’re on city ground, and therefore, even if we can’t do anything about it we have a responsibility to comment on the conditions.”

So they granted us to go in, but to put a—what do they call it, when you’re not allowed to speak about it? A—

Zapol: Oh, a gag rule, or—

Rothenberg: A gag rule! That’s a good—

Zapol: —or a muffled—

Rothenberg: We couldn’t talk about it, so I went in with this other Commissioner. And it was horrible. When we were there, the women were asking, “Could you give a note to my husband who’s over there?” They had thirty or forty people in one space, with one toilet. It was horrible. All waiting for deportation, and some of the people there had sixty days, ninety days, so I said, to the other Commissioner, “I don’t know about you, but they’re not going to gag me on this,” and I called Jean Bach and went on the Arlene Francis show. Between that and not supporting Ed for re-election, suddenly they announced I was not going to be appointed to the Human Rights Commission because of poor attendance. And Jack Newfield, remember Jack Newfield of the *Village Voice*? He was at the *Voice* and then the *News*, did his homework, and said “David Rothenberg is the only Commissioner with perfect attendance at the Human Rights Commission, and has been released for poor attendance.” [laughter]

And at the same time, Ed was very reticent on the AIDS issue. I was constantly getting calls from people who knew I was friendly with Richard saying “Out Ed.” And I wouldn’t. I said, “He’ll have to be defeated on issues, other than his furtive sexual inclinations.”

Do you want the end of that story? Calendar pages flip by, it’s years and years later. Ed’s running for a fourth term, against David Dinkins, in a primary. There’s a national health

conference in California, which Larry Kramer attends. And he spots this guy and says, “I know you from New York,” and he says, “Yes, I’m from New York, I’m Richard Nathan.” And they have lunch. I used to say to Richard, “Of all people in the world, why you would tell Larry Kramer that you’re the big secreted—” Because there were always rumors about, you know. Larry wrote a play, “The Normal Heart,” that came out while Ed was in, about a closeted gay mayor in a large city, unnamed. Richard decides to tell Larry. Now, Larry has a different interpretation on this than I do, but Richard tells Larry that he is the much secreted former lover of Ed Koch. Larry Kramer comes back to New York and calls the *Post*, the *News*, the *Voice*, *New York* magazine, channel 2, channel da da da, and says, “I can give you the name of Ed Koch’s secret lover, and the person who was witness to it is David Rothenberg, he can call.” [00:20:48]

So I arrive at my office, and there’s fifteen newspaper people waiting for me. And I said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I go in my office, I lock the door, and I call Richard in California. I said, “What are you, out of your mind, telling Larry Kramer? You might as, should have called Winchell.¹” And he said, “Well, I didn’t think he’d say anything.” Now, that’s where Larry disagrees. Larry says Richard wanted—but I remember Richard saying to me, “My mother will probably kill herself if this gets out.” And I stonewalled. Jack Newfield used to say, “If you want to know what stonewalling is, bring people out.” So I stonewall forever.

Now here’s an interesting little switch, is that Giuliani thought he was going to be running against Koch, for re-election. And subpoenaed Richard Nathan. He was the southern district prosecutor at the time. Richard called me and said, “I’ve been subpoenaed by Rudolph Giuliani, and he wants to know about my relationship with Koch and did I ever get money as a consultant.” I said, “Did you?” And he said, “Yeah, one, but it was miniscule.” He said, “I don’t even know if Ed knows about it.” He did some work for New York City. So I met Richard for dinner that night and he said he was grilled for eight hours by the Giuliani people, a man named Lombardi. And they were going to use that against Ed, but then Ed was upset by Dinkins, and so Giuliani lost to Dinkins the first time. That’s a little bit of New York history. [Zapol laughs]

Then, I got a call, years later, that they’re making a movie called *Outrage*, after Larry Craig, the Idaho senator, got busted for tapping his foot in a men’s room. And they’re doing a

¹ On 8/20/2016, D.R. clarified that he is referring to David Winchell, a gossip columnist.

series of political people who lied, and blah blah blah. And they have it on good authority that I could tell the Ed Koch story, and I said, “Well, I’m not about to tell it now.” Then the next day, the *Daily News* had an op-ed by Ed Koch calling for johns to be arrested along with prostitutes. And I thought, “You hypocrite, that’s—I’m not for the prostitutes being arrested, I’m for decriminalizing prostitution.” I knew that Ed had given the names of nine johns and had destroyed some lives previous, on a program on NYC.

So, when the people from the movie *Outrage* called back, I said yes. They came into this room. I thought they were making *Ben-Hur*, I never saw so many cameras, and I’m in the movie. For all intents and purposes, Ed denied it, and said, “Nobody is interested now.” But, you know, it’s—I don’t like the idea of sharing somebody else’s personal life, that’s their business. But the fact was, he got me so angry. But I stonewalled for a generation.

Zapol: [laughing] Yeah, you did!

So—

Rothenberg: That’s not Village-y, but it’s New York.

Zapol: It is New York. It’s absolutely New York.

Rothenberg: And everybody’s from the Village! Richard lived in the Village, Larry lived in the Village, Ed lived in the Village, and I live in the Village.

Zapol: So tell me about where you live in the Village now.

Rothenberg: 13th Street.

Zapol: You moved from Sheridan Square.

Rothenberg: Yes, uptown!

Zapol: [laughing] That’s right! Tell me about what you see in the Village now. Some of the changes that you’ve noticed.

Rothenberg: Well you may have noticed that St. Vincent’s has been replaced by a large building, and Ed Koch supported that. What’s the name of the family that built it? With an “R.”

The real estate people. Oh, god, I'm having a senior moment. The Rudins! The Rudins built it, and when Ed first ran for office, in [19]77, he had campaign headquarters in the basement of this great building, and I remember then saying, "Boy, how can we afford this?" They said, "It's a gift from the Rudins." And I said, "Well, thirty years later, there's some quid pro quo." Isn't it? That's what going up there, and the rents around here have gone out of control, and the mom-and-pop stores are going. We lost the Food Emporium, which is now shared by Wells Fargo and CVS, and we're losing Associated Markets there. We have five drug stores in the neighborhood, and you can't find anything to eat! Or to buy. You can find restaurants, but nothing. I want Jefferson Market back, and I want The Bagel back, on 4th Street. You know, every time something closes, they say it's the end of an era. But The Bagel, when Ellen Barkin—do you know who Ellen Barkin is? She was a waitress there before she became a movie actress. I like to say that she made more eggs for me than my mother did. That was where I had breakfast every day for twenty years. And they were rented out, a nice Italian family from Little Italy, in the Village, and they had—do you remember The Bagel? They had six tables there, and you sit at the counter, and people say, "Where do you find famous people in New York?" And I say, "Well, you can find Lauren Hutton there, you can find Julia Roberts there, and you can find [Robert] De Niro there. And Harvey Keitel there. And me! And Blossom Dearie." They just cooked a great breakfast, and great coffee, and that's where you went. [00:26:41]

Zapol: So, what you—

Rothenberg: I miss The Bagel! [Zapol laughs]

Zapol: So there are these changes, mom-and-pop shops. What do you think is still retained of the spirit of the Village that you talked about? That you knew you wanted to move here, it was a deliberate choice.

Rothenberg: You knew in 2012 that the Village was going to go overwhelming for Obama. That's a given. That's why we're living here. And the people that aren't are some crazy right-wingers, that we tolerate, too. I mean, I, there are a couple of people that I know whose right-wing politics are so offensive that, but they [laughing] only get away with it in the Village. You put them on the pay-you-no-mind list.

Zapol: So—

Rothenberg: The real estate, that's the issue. Will the spirit be destroyed? Will this be what we know in fifty years? When I moved in, in [19]64, and the older people said, "Oh, the old Village, the old Village," but I learned to understand that things are better when you're twenty than they are when you're fifty, because you were twenty then! But there is a danger of the real estate and the economy. I remember when Sixth Avenue had the el, and there were tenements along Sixth Avenue. I don't want to romanticize poverty, but there is a factor about—this is where youngsters would come and share apartments, to get started.

You know, my first apartment on 3 Sheridan Square was a studio apartment for 145 a month. And then I was doing better, and I got a one-bedroom in the same building with a little terrace for 169 a month. And then the building went co-op. I didn't know about mortgages [laughs] and somebody had to explain that I could get a mortgage, and I bought an apartment, for 90,000, which now would go for 1,750,000. I keep saying, "Where do young people who want to—?" You know, New York is filled with young actors and dancers and singers and artists and writers that don't want to live anywhere, this is where they come to get started. How do they afford it now? I don't know. Do they live in Hoboken? Which is also getting expensive? The real estate people have become the oil tycoons.

And Jefferson Market, which now is shielded with curtains. I walked in and said, "What is this going to be?" "You have to make an appointment," I was told. And I said, "Make an appointment to find out what's here?" So of course I did my investigation, and I found out it's the people that are selling the apartments for St. Vincent's. That's the real estate people, but they won't tell you. I think they're afraid of being stoned or something. But Jefferson Market, I hope—the Jefferson Market family left us high and dry, and it was heartbreaking. [00:30:09]

Zapol: Uh-huh.

Rothenberg: Do you know about Jefferson?

Zapol: Tell me more.

Rothenberg: Well, it was the market. They had a kitchen there, and you would get hot chickens just cooked. They had a prepared—Citarella has it, but it's not the same, they don't have a kitchen there, so they bring in the food—but the ossobuco on Thursdays, and chicken potpies on

Fridays, and always the cooked chickens there. And the vegetables were fresh. It's where you ran into everybody. You met people and you'd argue and you'd talk. That's where you met people, at Jefferson Market.

Zapol: I mean, it's interesting, real estate moguls are the new oil tycoons.

Rothenberg: Yes.

Zapol: And that that is sort of the question about the future of the Village, really, right there.

Rothenberg: And of New York!

Zapol: And of New York.

Rothenberg: And of Manhattan. How much do they need? How much money do they need? But there's always a new one coming in that sees himself as the next Trump. With no scruples and no morals.

Zapol: Yeah, so this is the question. What are your hopes, then, for the future of the Village here?

Rothenberg: I won't be around to see it.

I'm afraid that if we don't do something about climate change, we'll all be under water. You want a beach apartment in Kansas. I don't know. I don't know how you change the real estate phenomenon. You know, I remember walking along 14th Street when I first came to the city, and there were boarding houses, and you could get a room for fourteen dollars a week and there was a shared kitchen in the basement. That was very attractive, for a twenty-one year old hitting the city.

Zapol: A place to start.

Rothenberg: Yeah. A room, you know. You put a hot plate in the room, and you have a shared kitchen. I had come out of the Army, I learned how to sleep sitting up in an Army truck, so give me a cot and a lamp. [Zapol laughs] I'd be happy.

Zapol: I think it's interesting because you have focused a lot on a place where people can start or restart. You know, where in the city can people really—opening up your own home—

Rothenberg: Or hang out.

The library, they have nice programs there, you know. I'm at the point now where I'm not looking to meet new people, but there was something about The Bagel and Jefferson Market where you would run into people, and if there was an issue of the day, it would be—we were all town criers. And I'm sure young people have their places now. I'm not familiar with them.

Zapol: And you also, we spoke earlier on about Julius', and of course now is an anniversary of the sip-in at Julius'.

Rothenberg: Yeah.

Zapol: Can you tell me about any changes, even in and around Julius', that you feel.

Rothenberg: Around Julius'? Well, the Three Lives Bookstore is across the street. That's a great place. Have you been in there, that bookstore?

Zapol: Yes, yeah.

Rothenberg: Uh—

Zapol: But, I guess my question is more around Julius' itself, like how that place has changed. Or if it has at all, what's the sort of feel in there?

Rothenberg: I don't think I've been in there in years.

Zapol: I see. Ok. Uh-huh.

So, yes, then, what we were talking about then—around the places where you go now. What are your favorite places here?

Rothenberg: When you're eighty-three, you know—I don't go out nights much anymore. If I go to theater I go to matinées. Things I do at Fortune are during the day. If I'm out in the evening, it's at somebody's house, or here, or I go to Gene's restaurant on 11th Street. Which is where I run into—do you know Gene's? It's next to The New School. Walk over there, walk in, you'll

think somebody's going to run in saying Hitler just invaded Poland. It feels like you've been there, and I run into old Villagers there. You see no tourists there. The food is good, it's reasonably priced. I think the family owns the building, which is how they're able to stay there. I may have been in there at least three or four times a month, and I've never been there that I didn't run into a couple of old Villagers. We go talk at each other's tables and, "How's everything going." [00:35:11]

Zapol: I think this will be my last question, and then if you have anything else that you want to share that I haven't asked you about. But, you know, you talk about the political heart of the Village is really the thing that makes it feel like home to you. So, I'm interested now also around that, like what your hopes are around the future of New York politics, around local politics.

Rothenberg: Well I think the Center is a great thing that's happened in the Village. That's very hopeful. Hundreds and hundreds of young people who would have otherwise been in the bars are going to constructive programs there. They're looking to meet somebody, you know, they want dates, but it's a healthier atmosphere. More things like the Center. And the Greenwich House is a beehive of activity. I had reason to go there for different occasions. As well as the plays that they do there. It's no accident that the Center is in the Village, that Greenwich House is in the Village. Those are things that are in the tradition and the spirit of the Village.

Zapol: So—

Rothenberg: And late in life, the Greenwich Village Historic Society has become important to me, because I suddenly realize that change is not always progress, and that there's reasons for new things, but there's reasons to hold on to rich things of the past, like the old courthouse which is now the library. You know, they tore down the Woman's House of Detention, I wish they didn't. They may have, shoulda coulda converted it into something else. But it's important to hold onto things like that.

Zapol: I know there are many other stories we haven't touched today, but if [laughs] was there another story, anything else that you wanted to share today, around Greenwich Village, around particular stories that you have around the Village that we haven't talked about.

Rothenberg: No, I think it's a sense about—when I walk along 13th Street, there are people who I don't know their name, but I talk to them all the time, as I did around Sheridan Square, and I don't think that's true in other parts of New York City. I think that is much freer in talking to people, because they're in the Village. I mean, people start conversations in the middle of nowhere. Talk to waiters like they're friends, rather than servants, which is nice. And waiters talk to you like you're not customers but pains in the asses. [laughter]

My favorite: going into Jefferson Market, they had a little ramp, and there was a woman, she must have been eighty-five years old, and she's walking it up this ramp, looked like a stereotype, little frail old lady, and she said, "I need this ramp like I need a hard-on!" And I thought that the workers there—they looked, and they got hysterical, they fell out, and I said, "Where would you get that except in the Village?"

Zapol: Perfect.

So thank you for your time today.

Rothenberg: That's a closer.

Zapol: That's a good [laughing] closer!

Rothenberg: You can't make those things up though. [laughter] That's the nice thing, the ability to still be shocked. Once you stop being shocked, then it's all over. [Zapol laughs]

Zapol: Alright, thank you.

Rothenberg: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Additional Photographs



David Rothenberg at his home at 175 W. 13th Street, on April 27, 2016. Photograph by Liza Zapol.



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