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Oral History Interview on West Hartford (with video)

Debra Walsh

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Location: at her home on Ledgewood Road, West Hartford

Recording format: digital video

File name: WalshDebra_medium20110721.m4v

Length: 00:23:17

Transcribed by: Katie Campbell

Additional files: n/a

Abstract: Debra Walsh (born 1953) describes moving into the Ledgewood Road neighborhood in West Hartford in 2010, and responds to documents revealing that the High Ledge Homes housing development included a racially restrictive covenant that prohibited non-whites during the 1940s. She also discusses why she moved from Hartford to West Hartford and recent publicity regarding the national ranking of quality of life in the suburb, and the current dynamic of neighbors today.

Additional comments: Submitted as part of the [OnTheLine web-book](http://OnTheLine.trincoll.edu) by Jack Dougherty and colleagues (<http://OnTheLine.trincoll.edu>).

Speaker key:

CS: Candace Simpson

DW: Debra Walsh

JD: Jack Dougherty

[all comments by transcriber in brackets]

JD: Debra Walsh. . .

CS: Okay. So when did you move into this house here?

DW: August... The very end of August, 2010. [00:00:11]

CS: And what do you remember about moving in, like moving day or... ?

DW: It was hotter than today. It was really, really hot and the people who bought my house were having a hard time getting their stuff through so we were supposed to have moved a month before, so it was very frustrating. It was very fraught with the heat and the anxiety, and school had started and I had to miss the first day of school, so it wasn't the greatest day to move in. It really wasn't. I think I was vomiting in the morning, thinking "God, how am I going to like..."

and then the movers were great, but just as they were going around the corner, my nephew walked by a mirror that they were supposed to reattach and it broke and then I looked at my door and they had pulled the wood out from the door, and I had already released it, so I think the insurance company offered me 40 dollars for... ugh, it was awful. That's what I remember. [00:01:14]

CS: And where did you move from?

DW: I moved from Hartford. [00:01:18]

CS: Okay, and how long had you lived in Hartford?

DW: I had lived in Hartford for almost 32 years. I left for three or four years to go to graduate school and my New York thing and then the house I lived in I bought in 1995, and I had lived there for 15 years. [00:01:36]

CS: And so what prompted you to move to this house?

DW: Well, we... my aunt got very sick and couldn't unload her house and needed money and ended up, and still is, in a terrible end of life convalescent home. And we needed a bathroom on the first floor, so a contractor came and looked at the house and said, "You really can't put a bathroom on the first floor here because of the way it is," and he said "No matter how much money you invest in the house, you'll never get it back." And I had had friend who had their house on the market for two years or three years and I thought "Whoa, what if we needed... what if one of us got really sick and we needed money. Our house can't give us that sense of safety." And I know everywhere there's no sense of safety. So we thought that we would maybe move to a ranch in Hartford and our realtor started taking us to Elmwood, and places in West Hartford. And at the same time all these articles were coming out that West Hartford is one of the ten best cities in the country to live in, and so thinking I am being proactive, I thought "Well, if we had to unload the house to get money, our chances would be better..." Now, I thought it was going to take several years to sell my house. Within three weeks, we had a buyer. So I felt bad about leaving Hartford, but I also felt like I have given to that community with my volunteer time and... for 32 years, and if I got older... Like there isn't even a decent bus system to get from one place to the other, like places that I would have to go to, and so I left. [00:03:26]

CS: Did anyone recommend that you look at house is this neighborhood?

DW: No, I found the house, because we had a certain price range, and the people... The markets were really depressed and so the one thing we wanted was a bathroom on the first floor and something that I thought if I was 75 and older, that I could walk to instead of being housebound. And so this house had that, and it was in the price range, it was pretty fairly in our price range. [00:04:00]

CS: Okay, so we've been looking through some public records in the Town Hall and we discovered some property deeds for some housing developments including this one that have race restrictive covenants written into the property deeds. So I'm just going to...

DW: What year was that? [00:04:19]

CS: 1940's.

DW: Wow, because that's when the restrictions lifted for Jews, after World War II, with the G.I. Bill. It's called the reservation was built, and that's when, it's called the "exodus," the leaving of the Jewish population from the North End [of Hartford] into West Hartford. [00:04:39]

CS: So, I can show you...

DW: Even with the G.I. Bill? There was restrictive... Wow. [00:04:48]

CS: Yeah.

DW: That's crazy. [00:04:51]

CS: They are still in the public trail, that's how we found these restrictive covenants. But they are no longer legally enforceable. They were removed... legally unenforceable in 1948. But they are still there.

DW: Right, okay, because this property, I know, was an apple farm until Eileen Sheehan bought it in 1950 and she designed and built this house in 1950. [00:05:16]

JD: What was her name again?

DW: Eileen Sheehan. I'm looking at you instead of the camera. Eileen Sheehan. It was her retirement house. And people on the street still remember her. [00:05:28]

CS: So, for our project, called On The Line, we are showing people a series of digital maps, and so one day we were looking at one of these maps... So this is a screenshot [show screenshot and sample document from "Race Restrictive Covenants in Property Deeds, Hartford area, 1940s," interactive map from UConn MAGIC, http://magic.lib.uconn.edu/otl/doclink_covenant.html] of one of the three maps that we show people, and those flag mark place where we found restrictive covenants in the property deeds.

DW: Okay... [00:05:52]

CS: Now this is... We clicked in the High Ledge Homes development, which includes this neighborhood... [Shows another screenshot from "Race Restrictive Covenants in Property Deeds, Hartford area, 1940s," interactive map from UConn MAGIC, http://magic.lib.uconn.edu/otl/doclink_covenant.html]

DW: Oh this is called High Ledge? [00:06:00]

CS: So this is a sample of the language that was in the property deed. So if you would, would you just read that out loud?

DW: I will. [Reading from the document] "No persons of any race except the white race shall use or occupy any building on any lot except that this covenant shall not prevent occupancy by domestic servants of a different race employed by an owner or tenant. June 10, 1940." [00:06:30]

CS: So do you ever remember hearing about that. I know you moved in August 2010...

DW: Right, no, even when we did the work I did with the HartBeat Ensemble was a play with kids from a synagogue in West Hartford and kids from a Baptist church in Hartford, even when we did that research about the covenants for Jewish people, this did not come up. And it did not come up, you know... Don't you have to do a deed search when you buy a house and a title search and everything? hmm. [00:07:04]

CS: So how are these documents making you feel? What are your initial reactions?

DW: Like, pissed off. Because they day we moved in, Channel... the CBS local station was taking pictures of this house, because it had just sold, because of that study that came out saying that West Hartford was one of the 10 best places to live. And I refrained from blasting the moving company but I did... talked about this. I would have totally talked about this. The covenant and you know, yeah. So... [00:07:53]

CS: And you said that there were similar documents restricting Jews from...

DW: Yes, yes and I thought it covered all of West Hartford and most of Wethersfield until the G.I. Bill. Now there's a woman, her name is Lisa Semetilli and she lives at 7 Greenhurst, and she knew about the covenants and has a friend who did the research for her and knows the deeds and the houses like... Greenhurst is just down there, it might be part of High Ledge, I'm not sure. It's off of Park Road. Because when I told her about this she knew about it, the covenants, and that she had done that with her house, you know, before she bought it. And she said that she would be happy to talk to you. [00:08:39]

CS: Okay.

DW: Yeah. [00:08:41] [sighs]

CS: And so these documents are still in a public record, that's how we found them, we came across them, and they are not legally enforceable. Do you think that we should delete these from the public trail... or keep them?

DW: Oh absolutely not. No. Yes, yes. Are you writing a book or...?[00:09:10]

CS: Oh am I writing a book?

DW: Or making a documentary about... Like were there people who tried to buy homes and weren't allow to? Is there any way to trace that and interview them for the story?[00:09:23]

CS: Oh I wouldn't know.

DW: Yeah. No, I never in erase... in getting rid of any part of history. [00:09:31]

CS: And you said Lisa Semetilli would be a good person for us to talk with about this.

DW: Yes, yes, yes. [00:09:37]

CS: Do you know any other long term residents of this neighborhood that might be willing to speak more?

DW: Well, I think that, like the people who live next door to me have lived here for a long time and there's a woman who lives across the street from them... I don't know their last name, Tom and Brenda... who I know has lived on the street for... forever. And she's housebound right now, but I think she's pretty clear. Borden would know better. He's more connected with people on the street than I am. His neighbor has lived on the street... She taught at Hartford High, Hartford Public High for like 30 some-odd years. So, I would think so. I don't know. I know Dave and Heidi over there probably would. Yeah. Now there's a woman who lived in this house [pointing], her name is Kathleen and she sold it and moved down the street because she was... She bought a smaller house and I think Borden knows her. [00:10:38]

CS: Okay, alright. And if it's okay with you, I'd like to ask some factual questions about yourself...

DW: Sure, I just... One thing too. There's a guy on the corner that organized all of us to make sandwiches for one of the shelters for the homeless once a month. [00:10:53]

CS: Someone on the corner you said?

DW: Yeah, down on the corner, the grey house on Webster Hill, I can't... His first... John Clark. I think his name is. So, like, there's block parties, flags go up at holidays, yeah, it's kind of... They have a good neighborhood sense and they were very welcoming to Carol and I. I think we are the only gay people on the whole street [laughs] [00:11:19]

JD: Show her the deed as well?

CS: Oh, yes. So I showed you a sample of...

DW: [looking at the map again, screenshot from "Race Restrictive Covenants in Property Deeds, Hartford area, 1940s," interactive map from UConn MAGIC, http://magic.lib.uconn.edu/otl/doclink_covenant.html] But these flags are absolute properties where the... or streets? [00:11:36]

CS: Those mark developments. So...

DW: Developments. [00:11:38]

CS: I'll show you what actually...

DW: Okay. [00:11:40]

CS: So this would be High Ledge, the High Ledge Development.

DW: So it was mostly in this area? [00:11:46]

CS: Well we found many in West Hartford. We know that they exist elsewhere, but we found an overwhelming number here. So this would be, this flag here, this Ledgewood, the High Ledge Development. So that's marked by South Main Street, Webster Hill and then these two streets here...

DW: Right, yeah [unclear] Yeah. [00:12:07]

CS: So what we did was we cross referenced this map, which comes from 1937 with a current map with the street numbers and that how we found you, and we found Borden Painter, and we also found Susan Hansen, who is a librarian at Bishop's Corner.

DW: Yes, yes, yes. She's really cool. [00:12:29]

CS: Yeah, so, so we found... That's how we found out where you live. And this is the... you can actually have these.

DW: Okay. [00:12:39]

CS: But this is the original... the original document.

DW: Okay. [00:12:45]

CS: And that flag there is where the language came from.

DW: Wow. It's kind of blurry without my glasses, but... [00:12:55]

JD: So again, so just a... It's not officially your house, as we explained in the email. You got that, Candace?

CS: Yes, the race restrictive covenant didn't exactly apply to your house...

DW: I.. yeah. [00:13:10]

CS: ... but it applied to several others in this neighborhood.

DW: Right, but... yeah. I mean, what do you do if it applied to your house? Sage it? [laughs] [00:13:18]

CS: Well, I mean, it does contribute to the feel of the neighborhood as well, so... but it does... it's not particularly for this home. But I think, actually, we started some here. [marked on map] The race restrictive covenants applied to this house, these here, I think that's Bentwood, and these here, across the street from Bentwood.

DW: Yeah. So you're saying that because of... like this is pretty overt racism. Because I think that... in the North, it's sort of generalized that the racism was more covert, that it... like, West Hartford made a concerted effort to stay white and waspy and that contributes to the feel of the neighborhood. [00:14:09]

CS: Well, what do you think?

DW: I don't... I don't know. Because I think that there's so much racism that I don't understand that's institutionalized. I definitely feel the divide like because of the high school, Conard High School. That the Elmwood neighborhood is different socioeconomic, you know, lower middle class... lower working class or non-working people and people of color, and I don't know if there's like more strain, if people are saying, "I don't want to send my kid to Conard, I'd rather they go to a private school or Hall [High School]," you know, and so I only... I don't know my neighbors that well enough, I just know the Painters, and so if there's this historical feeling... Let me see. So on the one hand, if you were... did... were ignorant of the covenant, you know, and, you know, I don't know. I would think that the people I know would feel kind of indignant, but I also think it's really hard to look really deep within and answer those questions when you're... when you live in the dominant class. Like you don't know how to answer it. Like what is the truth? Is this what I'm supposed to say? You know, it's intimidating because you're a person of color so do I have to say the right thing so I don't offend you? And you're a lot younger than I am. So I wouldn't know. I mean, I wonder why I brought up the point how John Clark gets us to make sandwiches for the homeless. Was that to say, "Oh I'm cool. And we give food to the food bank."? You know, these... we don't talk about these things. We're so afraid of being attacked for having some privilege or guilty and just not knowing how to have a conversation, like what's safe. So, you know. And I know people can talk theory, like Heidi and Dave are pretty lefty, you know, and I like the way that they think and I like the way that we talked about like the union concessions and stuff, so... I don't know. Probably. I teach in a magnet high school that's pretty integrated, you know, and I deal with a lot of parent who are afraid, you know, and I see how that gets passed on to the kids so if the legacy of the piece of land gets passed on to a feeling of a neighborhood, I would have to say probably. [00:16:40]

CS: Okay, so I'd like to ask you some factual questions...

DW: Yes, you do. Sorry. [00:16:45]

CS: Oh no, no, this is good stuff. What year were you born?

DW: 1953.

CS: And who lives in this house with you?

DW: My partner, Carol, and our two cats. [00:16:56]

CS: Oh the ones out...

DW: Yeah, yeah, yeah. [00:17:00]

CS: [to JD] Do you have any other questions?

JD: Well, let's just follow up again about Lisa... and the last name with a "Z"?

DW: Semetilli. S-e-m-e-t-i-l-l-i. And she works at the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness[00:17:14]

JD: Can you do it one more time? Sorry. Ah. Could you spell it again for me please? I missed it.

DW: S-e-m-e-t-i-l-l-i, but I can... I have Candace's email address, so before you go I can just put the two of you on the same email thing. [00:17:32]

JD: That would be perfect.

DW: So, she works for Carol. Carol runs the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness. So what are the goals of your research?[00:17:44]

CS: Well, this is kind of a different project than what I've been doing for the most of the summer, but I've been showing people, like you saw, the screenshots of those maps that we do. I meet with random people throughout the day at public libraries, senior centers, other community partners and I ask them, you know, "What are their reactions to these maps." And I'm just looking to see, you know, how different people respond to them and how they make sense of their history, and how they place themselves in that history.

DW: Right, right. Because when I think about, like, you know, like, taking money from a corporation to do a good project, I think "Well maybe it's like alchemy." Do you know who Dana... Oh I just... She's the pastor at the House of Good Shepard, the church. Dana... I'll remember her name later tonight. Well her vision, and this was sort of for... the money was built... The Church was built on munitions money, right, on aggression and war. So her idea is to have a community center that's built on peace, to like change the energy of, you know, the intent that built that place and what happened. You know, the workers, the church was built for the workers the parish house was built as a library and a bowling alley and just to keep people and their money concentrated in that place. So sometimes, like, I think "If I had known that this house was... had the covenant, would I have just said 'no',," or would I have thought more like, "Well maybe it could... it's an opportunity to change the energy of the house," you know? Like, it's a hard question, you know, work with a struggling school, a struggling theater... two or three struggling theater companies and, you know, when you take money from like Pfizer or something, it's, like, pretty weird. But yet, it's poison money that's being used for something else. You know, it's like that... There's no right answer. It's right and it's wrong all at the same time. And I think that's the answer to your question, like, or the belief... Did the energy of the

neighborhood, it did and it didn't. Of course it did. Well how could it? You know, there's like no... it's very grey for me, right now. Now were I a person of color, I don't know. You know? [00:20:04]

CS: And you said you teach at a school?

DW: Yes, I do.

CS: What school do you teach at?

DW: The Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts.[00:20:10]

CS: Oh, by... In the Learning Corridor?

DW: Yes, but our campus is moved to the Colt Building. We got so big, we have two campuses now. [00:20:17]

CS: Oh wow.

DW: So I teach in... on High [?? [00:20:21]]

CS: And what other... You said you work you work with theater...

DW: Yes, I'm a member of the HartBeat Ensemble. Capitol Classical Theater Company. Art Farm, which is in Middletown. Whoever hires me. [00:20:35]

CS: Okay.

DW: But I'm a member of the Ensemble so I work a lot with HartBeat. [00:20:39]

CS: [to JD] Did you have any other...

JD: I think we are done for camera time here. Debra, this is very helpful, especially other connections you are suggesting for us are great. I can't wait to follow up with Lisa Semetilli and others. Because we've had several people say to us "I've heard of or maybe I thought I saw restrictive covenants in deeds based on religion,"... We can't find any yet, but we keep hearing about them. So...

DW: Julia Rosenblatt might know. Julia or Greg. They would definitely know, because they did the research on it and we met people who actually moved from the North End at... Well, the moved because of the riots in the 1960's too and the whole "exodus" thing. Some people had no choice because on Saturdays, you can't, you have to walk and the synagogue moved to West Hartford and it was too far a walk, so that's how the rabbis got people out of the North End. Yeah, that's a pretty interesting housing thing too. It was like, sell your house before they move in. You can find pictures of the signs that the realtors were putting up. [00:21:50]

JD: Julia and Greg are the best connections for that, you think?

DW: Yes, because they hired me to work on that project. And Carol... Can I tell a story?
[00:22:01]

CS: Yeah.

DW: Her parents bought, in the '60s, a house on a new suburban development in Bloomfield and one day the neighbors came to the door and said that a black family was looking at a house and they were all going to try to put money together to buy the house before this black family could move in. This was in the '60s, like toward the late '60s. And Carol's father said that... And it was a Jewish neighborhood... "They were no better than the Klu Klux Klan, He was going to call the ACLU and the press, get out of his house." They said it was a mother with three children and no father, so... And the family still lives there, the family bought the house. The mother was the Principal at Weaver High School at the time. So that was the only story I ever heard about conscious, you know, "keep those people out of my neighborhood." [00:23:00]

JD: We have more interviews like that for Bloomfield. Do you remember Carol's father's full name?

DW: Herbert Walter, and he is up... He lives in Florida, he's in Connecticut for the summer. Do you want his phone number? [00:23:14]

JD: Put it on our list please, yep.

DW: Okay, let me go get my phone. [00:23:17]