



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Beatrice J. Shelton

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

SHELTON: My name is Bea Shelton. My full name is Beatrice J. Shelton.

DRISCOLL: And you have been connected with Church of Reform—the Lutheran Church.

SHELTON: Yes. I've been a member of the Lutheran Church of the Reformation since 1945 [222 East Capitol Street NE]. So, I have been around through quite a few different pastors and so forth.

DRISCOLL: Good. And this is Pat Taffe Driscoll and we are having the interview in the living room at our house at 122 Fifth SE. Ms. Shelton is...

SHELTON: Please call me Bea.

DRISCOLL: Thank you. Everybody that I was contacting before I called you, called you Bea and was very warm about the Bea. The questions that we're supposed to ask... get some biographical information. And, your major connection with The Hill is through the church.

SHELTON: Yes, it is.

DRISCOLL: In various activities?

SHELTON: Although I didn't live far [away] toward the end. Well, I lived Southwest in the near Southwest for some time for almost ... for a long time anyway.

DRISCOLL: Were you born in...

SHELTON: No, I was born in Illinois—Greenville, Illinois. The county seat of the smallest county in the state 50 miles east of St. Louis on Route 40. {Chuckle}. Please visit my delightful little town. It has a lovely courthouse.

DRISCOLL: I'm noticing our lines {on the recording machine} are a little low. They are not going up very high either one of us. So I am going to just quickly stop it. When did you come to the District?

SHELTON: I first lived in Arlington. I came out to—well, that is beside the point. But, I can't remember when I came to the District. Let's see {counting} '52 something like that.

DRISCOLL: But you had been connected with the church well before that.

SHELTON: Oh, yes. I came out during the war and the people that I lived with then belonged to Reformation Church and I wanted to do something musical. So, I started singing in the choir.

DRISCOLL: Great! So, music is a factor in your life then, too.

SHELTON: Well, it was some time. Yes, it has been all along.

DRISCOLL: That's good.

SHELTON: I'm no great talent at all. But, I do miss it when I'm not doing something.

DRISCOLL: The people who suggested that you be interviewed were commenting on the many activities and good works you did through Reformation including the achievement awards—the CHAMPS Achievement Awards and getting the clinic started at Reformation.

SHELTON: Getting what started?

DRISCOLL: The clinic. The health center started.

SHELTON: Yes. Well, I chaired the board that started the health center.

DRISCOLL: Would you tell us a little about it?

SHELTON: Well, it was a holistic health center. Not a w-h-o-l-i-s-t-i-c. The “w” is important. And the concept started in the middle west. And we had this space ... quite a lot of space available and decided that that would be a good thing for Reformation Church to do. And they asked if I would chair the board, which I did for what—eight years I guess. And I got out before it went down the drain, however. {mutual laughter}. But it was going all along. There are just simply...

DRISCOLL: Who were the people that you were serving?

SHELTON: Well, we were serving anyone, you know, who wanted to come. Not anyone in particular. We weren't serving the poor necessarily. Although, of course, they were welcome. But it was ... it was just to be a regular medical facility. And we found, however, at least my conception of why it really didn't go was that the people that walked by our church and saw the sign and so forth were all living elsewhere. And of course their families ... they wanted physicians close to where their family was. But, it went very reasonably well and we did start the Capitol Hill...

DRISCOLL: The CHAMPS [Capitol Hill Association of Merchants and Professionals] group?

SHELTON: Well, no. We didn't start CHAMPS. We started the fundraising dinner.

DRISCOLL: The achievement awards?

SHELTON: I'm so sorry, but words don't come to me.

DRISCOLL: That's no problem.

SHELTON: The Community Achievement Awards. Actually, the idea was brought to us. Jim Didden served on our board and he brought the idea to us.

DRISCOLL: Of the Achievement?

SHELTON: Of having the Achievement Awards as a way of raising money to support the health center.

DRISCOLL: Oh! So, the Achievement Awards came out of the health center?

SHELTON: Yes. Well, they really grew out of Jim Didden's head. That's who. It was his idea. And so we did do that and it was very helpful in raising money. And I know our first three honorees were. Let's see. I have to think about that. Barbara Held was one of them.

DRISCOLL: Ms. Shelton has the programs with her from some of the achievement awards ceremonies. And so, she's checking out...

SHELTON: And Mr. Didden senior. George A. Didden. Well, actually the senior Mr. Didden was a junior, George A. Didden, Jr. and O. B. Hardison from the Folger Shakespeare Library. And as you probably know; the award dinners were held in the Folger Library. They were kind enough to let us do that. And so it was a very enjoyable way to raise a few dollars to support the health center.

Because we didn't turn anyone away from our doors. The unfortunate part was not too many people came to our doors. But the concept was that a pastoral counselor, a nurse and a physician worked and the person seeking help, [all] worked as a team. And the nurse was sure that the client's needs and ideas were included in the work as a team in the conference.

DRISCOLL: That's pretty forward thinking way of doing medicine.

SHELTON: Yes. But, unfortunately, it wasn't the right place. The location was not right for it. But this was a popular concept including the pastor. In the middle west there had been several. Mr. Grainger Westburg [sp?] was the person in the middle west who had sponsored this idea. So, there were several of them out there. I don't know if they are still in existence. But there are some people around who still believe in that concept. And, well, it just simply didn't make it.

DRISCOLL: It just petered out because there weren't enough people?

SHELTON: Well, we had Howard University come down, and we thought we couldn't run something, maybe they could. But, they couldn't make it go. It was the wrong location. And so, then we turned the Capitol Hill Achievement Awards over to the CHAMPS Foundation and they took it over from there.

And they made buckets of bucks, you know—more than we did—which they in turn gave to support things on The Hill.

DRISCOLL: Including this Ruth Ann Overbeck project. Because the CHAMPS people are supporting this. That's sort of full circle.

SHELTON: Yes, isn't it. That's lovely.

DRISCOLL: That's neat.

SHELTON: That's right. So, it was a good experience ... the health center. And we tried, but just didn't make it.

DRISCOLL: Now, what other kinds of activities were you involved with in the church then? And in the neighborhood? And what are your recollections of the neighborhood when you first came and where it is now?

SHELTON: Well, when I first came to Reformation Church, it was quite a large church and Dr. Blackwelder was quite a prominent man. And our church was filled to the brim, with loudspeakers downstairs. Sunday morning and evening services were quite the thing at that time. And so, there were a lot of people who had once lived on The Hill and perhaps had moved out into the suburban area; so we had a clientele that came from all over and, of course you know, lots of kids and all that. But, as you know things change. And so, then we got to the point where we really didn't have many kids at all. And now, however, we have a bucket of kids. I think The Hill has changed some in that there are families now on The Hill with younger children and so anyway they have found their way to Reformation Church. So, it's quite delightful to see, you know, a lot of them—some children around.

We have also for about the last ten years, or twelve years, been working in far Southeast at 311—I believe it is—Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue. We purchased a property down there and have converted it into.... Well, one of the biggest rooms of course is the computer room. But the purpose of our group, the work down there is to... We have three outlets or things to offer. And one of the biggest is for ex-offenders to help them get re-acclimated. Most of them, many of them do not have their GED. We also offer GED to single mothers and also we have a sports program for younger people, 14 and under, to help keep them off the streets since they are usually not eligible for school-supported kind of things. And so that keeps us quite busy because especially recently because many of the other organizations which offer those sort of things are now having funds cut back and they are no longer doing them or they are combining them at some other location. So that keeps us quite busy.

One of our pastors, the Reverend Wanda McNeill {spells}, well this was her enterprise. She went out looking and trying to find out. She explored the neighborhood to find out what was needed and these were the things that were needed. And she conferred with another person who is now on the staff down there who helped her greatly in defining the needs and getting things started. His name is Roger Truehart {spells}. He was quite helpful in defining the needs and approaching the people and getting it going. We also have on our staff an ex-offender. And he has been a great help to us and also has done interviews and that kind of thing in a much wider area. So we feel quite happy to have him and his name is Chester Hart. So, he also works at Reformation Church. So, we have quite a connection there.

DRISCOLL: That's great! So, it's good integration of services with the needs.

SHELTON: That's right.

DRISCOLL: It sounds like Reformation has been active in many ways through the years even with outside groups coming in and speakers and...

SHELTON: Oh, yes. Actually we just offer the church as a resource for people. Many, many outside groups to come in and have their meetings or to visit people on The Hill—their congressmen or whatever. So, it's been a very much an open church for years and years and years. And that's how. You know Washington is a very transient town. And many of our members come to us from some of these meetings that they have had and then they find themselves moving to Washington and so they are familiar with our church.

DRISCOLL: My own recollection of a couple of meetings at Reformation. Once 30 years ago, Cesar Chavez came and spoke. The church was full to overcrowding. I had gotten there early with our three small boys who were probably 7, 8, 9—8, 9, 10 somewhere in there. And we got there early enough to be in the front row. And it was really wonderful for these young boys to be able to see and hear Mr. Chavez. And part way through his speech, it became clear that it was hard for him to remain standing. And somebody from the church went and got a rocking chair and brought it in and he gave the rest of his speech from the rocking chair. I also remember much later on that you guys handled an overflow crowd from the Folger Shakespeare Library when Seamus Heaney came to give a poetry reading.

SHELTON: The Folger has used our church actually to base some of their activities or meetings like that where they would probably need more room than they would have at the library. So, we have a good relationship with the Folger.

DRISCOLL: Which would tie in with O. B. Hardison being one of the first recipients of the...

SHELTON: Yes, that had something to do with it, I presume. But, also because he was a very well known and wonderful citizen of The Hill. This was shortly before he retired and left.

DRISCOLL: He did a lot for the community.

SHELTON: Yes, yes.

DRISCOLL: In many ways. My own connection with Reformation, too, is peripheral. I'm not a member. I'm from St. Peter's, but our children all went to Capitol Hill Montessori school there. And it was lovely to be able to walk a few blocks and take them into this beautiful facility where the learning was very good and the support from the staff was really quite wonderful.

SHELTON: Yes, the Montessori schools. Are they the ones that went...? What is the Capitol Hill...?

DRISCOLL: Day School?

SHELTON: Yes, they started at Reformation.

DRISCOLL: Did they?

SHELTON: Yes, they did.

DRISCOLL: Could you tell me some more about...

SHELTON: I am pretty sure of that.

DRISCOLL: That must have been after the Montessori School because ultimately we needed more space and we moved out. So that would be about...

SHELTON: We do now also have a day care facility there—we don't run it—for people who work on The Hill I guess it is. But we have lots of hobby horses and toys and all that stuff. In fact, we have always offered space for things like that in our parish building.

DRISCOLL: It's certainly been a wonderful resource to know that it's there and that the people staffing it are thoughtful people and caring and will give you a hearing if you have a reason to want to use their facilities.

SHELTON: Yes, well feel we should want to serve our neighborhood as well as the wider because many of our members are from the suburban areas.

DRISCOLL: Now, were you one of the founding people for the Capitol Hill Group Ministry? Were you one of the early members?

SHELTON: Yes. I'm trying to get that fixed in my head. Well, we've always belonged to the group ministry. I think we might have been one of the instigators. But, we have always, you know, been an active member of the Capitol Hill Group Ministry. In fact, they're giving a concert or something this week at our church. Oh, they're celebrating their 125th—not their 125th, but some anniversary. Its 35th anniversary with a concert at Reformation Church.

So, we have always, as I said, been active in that group. In fact many of us would serve the meals to the homeless that was sponsored by the Capitol Hill group. I think it was the group ministry sponsored it and they would serve noon meals, I believe. It was not located in our church but our people helped to serve.

DRISCOLL: At the Church of the Brethren?

SHELTON: Church of the Brethren. I don't know; I presume that's still going on.

DRISCOLL: It's neat the way the churches on the Hill cooperate.

SHELTON: Yes. It is; truly is.

DRISCOLL: There's not the rivalry that there is some places. It seems that the goals are similar.

SHELTON: As long as we are talking about Reformation Church which seems to be the subject.

DRISCOLL: {Chuckle} As much as you.

SHELTON: Well, yes. It's one of my major connections to The Hill. Our extended choir did Richard Bales' recording of "The Revolution" and "The Union" and "The Confederacy." Columbia Masterworks came down and recorded them in three big albums back in the days of 78's. {Mutual laughter} We sang at the National Gallery twice a year under Richard Bales. Poor Mr. Bales is no longer with us. That has not continued, but we did that for many, many years. And, of course, we all enjoyed doing the Columbia Masterworks recording.

DRISCOLL: Mr. Bales was the concertmaster at the National Gallery.

SHELTON: Yes. Yes. He was for many, many, many years. He composed a number of things but this one he put together with songs of the era—of the Confederate songs and so forth.

DRISCOLL: What, speaking of eras, do you see differences in the eras of the kinds of things that are important to the congregation or to the community at large? Or, have your core beliefs stayed pretty much the same? In your church.

SHELTON: Well, we've always been very open in everything. We are—could we turn that [the recorder] off a little?

DRISCOLL: Yes. Okay. Do you want to rewind it to hear what ...?

SHELTON: Right. I should mention that our church is open to everyone. In fact we encourage and seek out people of every persuasion and we have a number of activities meet in our church with the gay and lesbian community. And many of our members are also either gay or lesbian. I wouldn't say many. But they are quite welcome and have served in many offices, not offices, but positions in our church.

And, of course, we are open to people of any color whatsoever—black, yellow, white or pink. And, we do have a number of black members as well.

DRISCOLL: And some of them came once a Lutheran church closed down. And some of those parishioners came?

SHELTON: Yes, that's correct. I am trying to remember the name because this church closed and it was not far. It was over in one of the corners of Lincoln Park, I think. I have forgotten. I don't know who moved in there. Maybe some kind of social work or something.

DRISCOLL: I know there's a tax clinic over there. The Capitol Hill Group Ministry runs their tax clinic out of one of the churches on Lincoln Park. But, I don't know what denomination.

SHELTON: Oh, is that right? And, of course, this occurred a long time ago. I don't know if this comes in connection with whatever I was talking about. But, our building where many of our outside activities and so forth are held is named St. John's Lutheran Church, which closed. And many of their members came to join at Reformation and also, I'm sure, some of their money. And so, we named the building which was new at the time St. John's building.

And also Alcoholics Anonymous meet there regularly and AA and Al-Anon. And also we have the Capitol Hill Co-op Playschool. So, its pre-school also meets there regularly. They have space there. We even have, which I could use very well, Overeaters Anonymous also meet there. In other words, you can see that our space is open. These are some who meet there regularly at regular times and have for many years. But our premises are open to many, many, many groups and especially the outside groups because we are located on The Hill and it's usually convenient to where they're meeting for their activities.

DRISCOLL: And you were saying that your choir has had a strong...

SHELTON: Oh, yes. I mentioned that we did the three Columbia Masterworks recordings and that we sang regularly at the National Gallery. We also sang at other places around town. And at that time during the era of when Jule Zabawa...

DRISCOLL: You want to spell that?

SHELTON: Yes. The first name is Jule {spells it} and the last name is Zabawa {spells it}. And he was a graduate of St. Olaf out in the middle west which of course the St. Olaf choir has often sung at our church also. And I noticed that this year, however, they sang at some Christian church up at Thomas Circle. {Laughter} However, they have often been to our church and he was a graduate under Christianson, the elder Christianson and, of course...

DRISCOLL: That's C-h-r-i-s?

SHELTON: Christianson {spells it}, I think. Anyway he was F. Malius Christianson. And don't ask me to spell that. But, anyway, he and his son were quite famous for their choral...

DRISCOLL: Choir directing. And you sang the Faure Requiem during that period?

SHELTON: Well, one of the times. That was one. But, we did many at our church. Our music program included many major compositions. And, of course, we've had a number... Well, we have always been sort of "known" for music and at one time our Reformation Church offered space to many, many Capitol Hill groups including the Capitol Hill Chorale. And I think I have just mentioned a number of groups, but I have remembered that one now.

DRISCOLL: It should be in there.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

SHELTON: OK. I should go back and mention when the health center when it—what shall I say—went down the drain—didn't make it. That we turned over the money-raising projects through the Capitol Hill Community Achievement Awards they were taken over by CHAMPS.

DRISCOLL: But, you gave it to them?

SHELTON: Well, yes. We turned it over to them and they established an Arnold F. Keller Award which is given out every year. And Dr. Keller was the pastor of our church of course.

DRISCOLL: At that time. At the time it was started.

SHELTON: Yes. That's correct. And was quite active of course. Was on our board. And in fact he was very active in the community in general at that time.

DRISCOLL: I am going to say thank you very much to Ms. Shelton... Bea. And I also want to note that she has given us a copy of the Capitol Hill Achievement Awards Program for 1997 as well as the Lutheran Church of the Reformation volume on their history, "Celebrating Our Past with a Vision for the Future."

SHELTON: Well, it's been a pleasure; you've been very kind. And I hope I haven't rambled on too much.

DRISCOLL: Not at all.

SHELTON: Also, that I haven't forgotten something important.

DRISCOLL: I hope not. We'll get that one day. And we will talk to you later. Thanks. That's all.

END OF INTERVIEW