



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Ida Prosky

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Transcriber: Betsy Barnett

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

WIENER: I'm Rosa Wiener and I'm here on March 28, 2012, to interview Ida Prosky. So, Ida, I'm going to begin to ask you questions.

PROSKY: Okay.

WIENER: About where you were before Capitol Hill and what you've done afterwards. That's going to be a long recording. [Both laugh.]

PROSKY: Oh, well, I grew up in Arlington. I went to school in Baltimore and was living with my mother on the edge of Georgetown in Burleith. And I met Bob [Prosky], introduced by my boss when I was working at Georgetown University. And my boss had been involved in the New York theater and he went to Arena Stage and he went out drinking with some of the actors afterwards. And he came in on Monday morning and said to me, "I met this guy last night you would really like," because he knew I was interested in theater. And, so, they set up a blind date and a year later, Bob and I got married, in 1960. And had our first child in '61. We were living in the basement apartment of my mother's house, but Bob wanted to be close to the theater and they had just opened Arena Stage in the Southwest. So, we went looking at houses in the Southwest waterfront area. And there wasn't really that much there. But there was this line of really tiny new houses and they cost a screaming fortune as far as we were concerned. And so ...

WIENER: Do you recall what the price was then?

PROSKY: Oh, gee. It was probably like \$38,000, \$40,000. And we knew we had to borrow money from his mother. And we knew that my father used to have breakfast with Mr. Walsh, who was a real estate agent in Georgetown, who knew real estate agents who were selling on Capitol Hill. And Bob had just gotten a grant from the Ford Foundation. He was part of a company of 20 actors that would agree to work in the same theater, in the same place, for three years and build a company. And he was one of those actors who got the magnificent sum of \$85 a week, which was a lot then, in 1960. So, on the strength of the Ford Foundation grant and my father's breakfast with the real estate agent, we got the mortgage on this \$20,000 house right next door to the Fifth [Police] Precinct. Tiny little house with a huge garden, and Bob built a brick wall in it.

WIENER: Where is that, the Fifth Precinct?

PROSKY: It's over on E Street, Fifth and E, right across from Marion Park.

WIENER: Oh, yeah.

PROSKY: It was a lovely little, you know, house, but it was very tiny. So we could hear the drunk tank on Saturday nights and Friday nights. And we always had parties and we'd take a pitcher of beer to the policemen next door and they'd say "Don't bring that in here." And then we'd pick it up and they'd say, "Oh, don't take it away." [Interviewer laughs.] But that was the safest house we ever lived in on Capitol Hill. Nobody ever broke into that house. And, then, Bob could—he actually could drive to Arena Stage from that house in about ten minutes. And then he got mad because they started adding stop signs.

WIENER: Yes.

PROSKY: And then it took him 20 minutes. He was really mad about that. So, I really, you know— my life really kind of went along for 22 years there with the life of the theater. You know, with—I was working at the [*Washington*] *Post* or for somebody on Capitol Hill.

WIENER: What did you do there?

PROSKY: I was Sunday secretary. I did the TV highlights and the Sunday features. When I was there, Judith Martin was head copy girl and she was in charge of finding whatever the woman who was the head of the women's section lost. And it was usually somewhere on the woman's desk. But Judith always found it. So, I've known her a long time.

But Capitol Hill then, you didn't really—you knew your next door neighbors but there wasn't as much community organization as there is now. There weren't as many opportunities to meet people. And when you live the life of a theater routine, you don't live the same life everybody else is. It's not nine-to-five at all. He went to rehearsal at ten, they stopped for lunch break at twelve, he came home at five or at four-thirty. I had dinner on the table at five-thirty and he went back to do the show at night, to get there at seven-thirty, for "half hour" [the period that actors must be in the theater before a show]. And then was home at eleven o'clock at night. And that was, when we first started out, that was a seven day week. There was a daylight day off, but no night off. And, then, in about four or five years, suddenly it was Mondays off. So we had a whole daylight day and night off.

WIENER: After two performances on Sunday.

PROSKY: Yes. [Static that continues as interviewee talks.] And he worked through Christmas and he worked through Thanksgiving and all of our holidays were kind of planned around that. So, knowing people other than theater people on Capitol Hill was hard then. But there were a lot of theater people who lived on Capitol Hill. Max Wright, who did a show called *ALF*, he lived right down the street from us. Robert Foxworth lived over right across from Eastern Market.

WIENER: Were they all at Arena?

PROSKY: Yeah. They were all part of Arena's companies. Halo [Wines] and Richard Bauer lived right across from the theater, so they were kind of uppity. [Interviewer laughs.] They had these new fancy apartments. But all the rest of us were kind of—and then there was a whole group of people who lived in what was called Arena Acres, which was the, hah, these little brick tenements over in, you know, right next to Ft. McNair. And actors would rent them out and paint the whole place and make curtains and gentrify the neighborhood. That was funny.

So, I did meet Marguerite Kelly when I lived over there. Marguerite was kind of collecting people who were moving into Capitol Hill.

And then my children went to Friendship House nursery school for a while, which we couldn't really afford. And it was very hard to get into the Friendship House nursery school. There was a very good teacher and you had to know somebody on the board because all the places were taken. That was funny. But, then, we had the second child living in that house, then we had ...

WIENER: When did you have the first child?

PROSKY: The first we had when we, you know, right before we moved into that house.

WIENER: I see.

PROSKY: In '61. Then in '62 we had the second child. And then in about '65 we had the third baby and, at that point, we found a larger house, at 645 Constitution Avenue NE. And that was the back of beyond. That was the edge of a kind of frontier. Beyond that was basically slums.

WIENER: Mm-hmm.

PROSKY: A lot of Massachusetts Avenue then was slum housing, you know. Big old apartment houses that were crumbling. They hadn't been rehabbed at all. But Christ Child House was over there and that's where the rest of my children went to nursery school, when Christ Child House had a nursery school. And that was very nice, it really was.

WIENER: Were you working during all this time?

PROSKY: Yeah. I went back and forth to the *Post*. Whenever anybody was on vacation at the *Post*, they called me up and I would come back. I'd work for them. I liked doing that, I really did. And I had—my mother lived in Georgetown. I had an aunt who would come and stay with the children. So I really had a really easy time of it as far as childcare was concerned. And my kids, actually, when they got into high

school, became sort of the premier babysitters of Capitol Hill. I mean, all three boys worked as babysitters and were in great demand. They made a lot of money that way.

WIENER: So you have one son here?

PROSKY: Yeah, I have one son, my oldest [Stefan Prosky] lives on G Street here, right down from Results [the Gym II]. And he has a little daughter who's four who is just a delight, Violet. And my second son, John, lives in L.A. [Los Angeles, California] with his wife. They are both actors. And he's made a very good living in movies and television. And she is also an actress. And they have a little boy. And then my third son, Andy, is an actor working out of New York. And he has an 18 year old who is in college. And all three of them went to Gonzaga [College High School]. And that was, oh, my, that was a godsend because by that time, by the time they were in high school, Bob was working in movies. So he wasn't often home. So, the male discipline that they had was coming from Gonzaga. And then they had me and I just kept myself in a bright red rage all the time with the money and the car keys. And that was the only way I got them to do what I asked them to do. [Both laugh.] I just thought that God never meant a 40 year old woman to live with three teenage sons. It's not natural. It just isn't.

But, by the time we moved to Constitution Avenue, there was much more of an interaction in the neighborhood.

WIENER: And what year was that?

PROSKY: That was in '65, I guess. '66, maybe. There were a lot of community organizations. Marguerite was—she always had some project going on. She always had something she would call you up and ask you to do. She was organizing for elections when we had no elections. I mean, we were finally voting for the school board members. And she had us all out giving—poll watching and giving out, you know, voter information and going door to door. And then she had this rat poison project where she ordered these enormous boxes of rat poison to get rid of the rats in the neighborhood. And she had us going door to door and giving this rat poison, handing it to whoever came to the door. [Interviewer laughs.] It just was insane, you know. I thought why am I doing this? But ...

WIENER: Did it poison anything other than rats?

PROSKY: I don't know, I don't know. I always worried they would poison Nell Kelly who was about four years old, you know, walking past this enormous box of poison every day. But it never did.

And the nice thing about Capitol Hill in 1965 is that it still had all of its corner stores. There was a little corner store between Sixth and Seventh, right in the middle of the block, where there was a lovely older woman who sold—she would sell you a half a pound of liverwurst for 25 cents.

WIENER: Wow.

PROSKY: And she sold milk and bread and all these deli meats and ice cream and candy. It was just a wonderful little store. And there was the High's [Dairy Store] on the corner.

WIENER: Of what?

PROSKY: The corner of Seventh and Constitution. There was an awful looking Chinese carryout on the opposite corner of Seventh and Constitution, right across from the hospital.

WIENER: Mm-hmm.

PROSKY: The old Rogers Hospital. We never went there [the Chinese carryout]. It looked roach ridden. Oh, it was awful looking. But we would see interns from the hospital going there all the time, you know. All I could think was I'm glad they work at a hospital. [Both laugh.]

What else was there? There was always a cleaners, there was always a laundromat. There was another corner store at Sixth and A [NE]. There were a lot of Safeways. There was a Safeway between Constitution and A Street NE.

WIENER: On Eighth Street, I think.

PROSKY: Seventh.

WIENER: Seventh?

PROSKY: Yeah, it was on Seventh.

WIENER: You're probably right. Yes.

PROSKY: And ...

WIENER: There was another one on Seventh across from the [Eastern] Market.

PROSKY: Yeah. And then there was another one that was in Southeast. Some kind of boys' club is there now, I think.

But there were all these stores here then that one by one just disappeared, you know. They were robbed or, you know, the people got older and just gave up on it. And they've all turned into houses or dentist's office.

And there was a lot of community work going on with the churches, too. Not only Christ Child House but there were whole—you know, every Christmas and every Thanksgiving there was all kinds of collection of food for people going out of St. Joseph's and St. Peter's. And, since I'm Catholic, I would go to St. Peter's for a while and then I would get fed up with them there. So I'd move to St. Joseph's. And then I would get fed up with them there and I'd move back to St. Peter's. And, oh. For about two years my children went to St. Peter's School, which now is a very good school. I know that it's—I just went to their school auction and it was—I saw people there who were so elegant looking I couldn't believe it. Because when my kids went there, we were all just kind of struggling and we were very working class, middle class people. And the school was going through what most schools around here were going through in the 60s. There was a lot of, you know, changing the way they did things. There was no discipline in any of the schools. It was hard for kids to learn. And it was chaotic. St. Peter's was very chaotic. And I realized at the time—I was walking my kids to school—but I realized—and I actually hired Michael Kelly to walk them back again. Michael was in the seventh or eighth grade, I guess.

WIENER: Hmm.

PROSKY: So I hired him to walk John home, I guess. And, you know, there was a story that finally got to my ears that John had seen Stefan, who was in the first grade while John was in kindergarten, pushed up against one of the fences and there were kids poking at him with knives.

WIENER: Mmm.

PROSKY: And he said something to the nun and the nun said "You just mind your own business. His teacher will take care of that." And he, John, has never forgotten that. He just—he would never send his child to a Catholic school. [Interviewee laughs.] That just finished him with Catholicism forever.

So I got them out of there and we went to Burgundy [Farm Country Day School] for a while. And Burgundy was almost as chaotic. I'm sure that it's fine now, but that was just a terrible time for schools. And, so, finally, when Stefan was in the third grade and John was in the second—you can tell that we just moved every year. It was—how they were learning anything I'll never know. But we finally ended up at Capitol Hill Day School, which was in Christ Church, you know, in the little community center behind Christ Church. And that, was, oh, my goodness, it was safe. They were in nice classes. The teachers were good. Oh, it was such a relief to get them into a situation where they weren't scared to death and they

were learning, you know. It seemed like a very hard time for schools. It really did. And Andy Prosky started there in kindergarten and he had, you know, he just had all the benefit of what his brothers had not had.

And I guess that's when I—I guess Stefan was in the fourth grade and John was in the third when I presented Capitol Hill Day School with this program that I thought I could run called Using the City as a Classroom. It was a field education program. And I had realized that all the museums in Washington were free and there was a very rich collection of historical and government and theater all over the city. And so I invented this program where I worked with the classroom teachers from preschool through sixth grade, and finally through the eighth grade when they added those, to support whatever was going on in the classroom in art and science and history and math. And it's still the field education program at the Capitol Hill Day School. But I really enjoyed doing that. And they got me a bus and this wonderful black man, Mr. Lindsay, was the driver of the bus. He was never sick, he was never late. He was just a jewel, he really was. So he was the bus driver and we just went everywhere with that program. That was fun. I worked with a lot of very good art teachers—so, you know, going to art galleries and using the art galleries in a kind of anthropological sense, I guess.

WIENER: You have a background in anthropology—

PROSKY: Well, that's where it came from. George Washington University and the Smithsonian—I also did a lot of work with the Smithsonian. They offered this program to teachers using anthropology in the classroom. So I took that year long course and I realized that I had been doing this all along. That's one of the things I'd been doing with the field education program. And that's when, finally, I decided to go back and get a Masters' in anthropology. So ...

WIENER: Where did you get that?

PROSKY: At GW [George Washington University]. And Colin Trumbull had been the anthropologist who was working with theater people. Well, when I arrived, he had cancer and he was just dying. [Interviewee laughs.] That just didn't work out. But I got interested in—you know you had to take all the fields of anthropology in that program, which I enjoyed doing. And I did two or three field schools. Part of the time I had the summer off so I worked at the Page Museum, which is out in L. A., when Bob was doing *Hill Street [Blues]*.

WIENER: Well, that worked ...

PROSKY: That was fun. You know, I was, you know, cleaning off bones of saber-tooth cats and dire wolves and sloths. Giant sloths is what they had. The man, Mr. Page, who donated the money for that museum, always thought there would be dinosaurs. But dinosaurs were much earlier.

WIENER: Mmm.

PROSKY: There were no dinosaurs in the, you know, the Page pits. These are the [La Brea] tar pits which are right in the middle of Los Angeles. And they still had an ongoing dig there, which was about 12 feet down in the ground and you got there through rope ladders. And, finally, since I was the senior one working there, they sent me down to the pit, where you had to wear your oldest clothes and your oldest pair of boots and there you were working away in the melting creosote with a tarp overhead. That was fun. I didn't find anything that I considered worth finding but it was fun to do. So I did that one of the summers when Bob was doing *Hill Street*.

I also did a field school in Annapolis, one of the Carroll gardens. It was fun to do.

WIENER: So you lived in the house on ...

PROSKY: On Constitution Avenue.

WIENER: ... Constitution Avenue until when?

PROSKY: Well, until Bob got the job on *Hill Street*. Actually he got the job on *Hill Street*—he was doing David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* on Broadway and he got a call offering him this—they knew that the guy who was playing the roll call sergeant on *Hill Street* was dying of cancer and they wanted somebody to replace him. So they came and looked at Bob in that play and then they offered him this incredible, you know, semi—he was one of the five leading cast members so the salary was just absolutely astronomical. And that was wonderful for him to, you know, leave that Broadway show and go out there and do that *Hill Street* show.

WIENER: How much time did he have to be away from Washington to do that?

PROSKY: He had to be there from September to May. They had what they call hiatus. But he would try and work during that period. He did a couple of films during that time. So luckily that happened when my sons were—the two older ones were already in college and working in the summer and Andy Prosky—we have another house in Cape May, New Jersey. So they were in Cape May in the summer and they were in charge of Andy, who was going to be a senior at Gonzaga, I guess. So they were kind of in charge of their younger brother for that summer. And, again, you know, Bob had to live right on top of the studio. So we

lived in Studio City, about a 15 minute walk from the Mary Tyler Moore studios. I just found L. A. to be just kind of horrifying after Capitol Hill. Capitol Hill was a real neighborhood, you know.

WIENER: Mm-hmm.

PROSKY: Even for an actor's wife, you know. You knew your neighbors. You took care of each other. You minded each other's children. You belonged to the same organizations. You know, you had dinners together. In L. A. everybody just got in the car and sailed off. You know, there was no opportunity to meet anyone. Both Bob and I got jaywalking tickets. [Both laugh.] Nobody ever got any, you know, traffic tickets, but you got jaywalking tickets out there. It was really funny. And when he got the *Hill Street* job, that's when we had the money to buy this house. Which was, at the time we bought it, in 1987, this was one of the most expensive houses on Capitol Hill. And that just made him mad, you know. He didn't want to have the reputation of having bought the most expensive house on Capitol Hill.

[Interviewee laughs.]

WIENER: So the house was already here.

PROSKY: Yes, this house had been built ...

WIENER: I was wondering if you had designed it or ...

PROSKY: No, mm-mmm. In fact, this mural in the dining room was done—I think it was done by Kitty Kaupp and Tati [Kaupp, Interviewee's daughter-in-law]. They were involved in helping to decorate this house and planning it, I think. This house is, you know—I guess we lived here until he died about three years ago, four years ago—and it's just been a wonderful house to entertain in, you know. We've just enjoyed it so much. It has a pool in the backyard and the first year we had it and the first summer my sons were here I think they spent until four in the morning in that pool.

And there was a wonderful black family who lived on this side —those two houses that have since been redone were the Harris houses. And the Harrises had lived here when there was—from the early part of the 1900s that family had been here and there had been—the grandmother told me that this house was the roadway from the stables that were on the street behind us and this was the roadway for the wagons to go out to this street. And she said it was lined with crepe myrtle trees. And so some of them, you know— There was one in the back yard, there's one out front. Some of them may have persisted. I don't know. But, then, you know, this was another really nice neighborhood. This street is a nice street. People do know each other.

[ed: removed several statements about the tape recorder]

And it's wonderful to have Kris Swanson at the end with The Corner Store. And the other people up and down the street that I know. One of the problems with Capitol Hill is that people come and go, you know. It's a place where people move. You feel you've created a little circle of friends and then all of a sudden it begins to separate and people leave for another job elsewhere. But, I don't think that I would ever want to spend the rest of my life anyplace else but here. I know I have a lot of friends who have moved to be closer to their children, but I would never do that. It just seems silly to me to separate yourself from the organizations you've belonged to and the friends that you've made. So I would, you know—when I get ready to stop taking care of this house, I'm going to move to someplace that has an elevator and is much smaller but I don't want to leave the Hill.

WIENER: When was this house built?

PROSKY: This house was built probably '67, I guess. 1967, 1970. Between those years.

WIENER: Because that's very new by Capitol Hill standards.

PROSKY: It is. Yeah, yeah. It was the first new house we had. The one on Constitution Avenue had, you know, had been built for one of the guys who worked at the Navy Yard, I'm sure, in the early 1900s. I'm sure that you hear that from everybody you interview that the neighborhood on Capitol Hill went as far out as the streetcar tracks went. When the streetcar tracks stopped, then the houses stopped for a long time there. Oh, gee.

WIENER: So, you've been involved in many community activities, right?

PROSKY: Yeah, yeah.

WIENER: Could you tell me about some of them in addition to Capitol Hill Day School?

PROSKY: Well, one of the big things, when I got a degree in anthropology, I started working for Horizons [Theatre].

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

WIENER: You were talking to me about some of the additional activities ...

PROSKY: Mm-hmm.

WIENER: ... you've done, about working with Horizons.

PROSKY: Yeah. Well, I guess you know when you—that was a much smaller theater operation than Theater J. And when you work for a small theater it is harrowing. There is never enough money to pay the bills. It just—you are always working on some way to, you know, raise money for people. I enjoyed doing that. I liked working with, you know, with Leslie Jacobson who was the director of it. I loved doing things for the theater. But it just was exhausting, just really exhausting. And I think now Horizons just goes into the schools in Arlington. I don't think they do performances outside of schools anymore.

WIENER: I remember the first time I saw them and it was at the north end of Eastern Market.

PROSKY: Oh, it was.

WIENER: Yes.

PROSKY: Oh. Goodness. Where was I then? Maybe I don't remember that.

WIENER: Maybe in L. A. [Interviewer laughs.]

PROSKY: Yeah, I might have been. Yeah. My boys were in the scout troop at St. Peter's so I did a lot of—that was a wonderful scout troop. I mean they took them rappelling and canoeing and taking these incredible bike rides all the way up the Skyline Drive and—oh. So there was a lot of driving and cooking and, you know, other stuff that had to go on. If you were a Boy Scout's mother you were really working hard, but they were very grateful for whatever you did. So that was fun.

Currently I work for, you know, the Capitol Hill Village, driving people hither and yon. Part of the Qigong class that is done at the Presbyterian Church. My first experience of that Presbyterian Church is that they had a nursery school there and there were other married actors who were sending their children to that nursery school who lived on Capitol Hill. But, my God, that was early. That was really early.

I'm trying to think of other things that were so different about Capitol Hill. We were here when the riots, when the Martin Luther King riots came along. And we just talked about—Marguerite and Pat Driscoll, who's lived here as long as I have, Marguerite probably longer—we just talked about those riots and what they meant to people who lived in the city. And I can remember collecting all the bits of brick and stones behind the house on Constitution Avenue. The boys and I did that and then we hid them around the yard so nobody would throw them through our windows. [Interviewee laughs.] Because you didn't know what was going to happen next. Bob and I were—we went out on the street and we saw these guys take this enormous cash register from the High's store on the corner and run down the street with it. It was a scary time really. There was the smell of smoke in the air and you could see the smoke billowing up behind the Capitol. But, actually, it was—everybody was really worried but it was quiet, you know. There wasn't

anything dangerous that ever happened to us. But we would get these calls from people who were out in the suburbs, people we knew, who said “Well, don’t you want to come out here? Don’t you want to leave the city?” And it occurred to me that I had a lot of elderly neighbors who couldn’t leave the city. They had no way to get out. And if all of the sane people left the city, that would be—you know, what would happen? We would just turn it over to the vandals. So it seemed important to me to stay. And we did, we did. When the kids wanted to play, we sneaked into the Navy Yard and played on their playgrounds. That seemed the safest place to be. But all of that quieted down.

When I was—we lived here when Martin Luther King made his speech on the Mall and Bob was, for some reason, he wasn’t in a show then. So he was at home with the boys and I went to work at the *Post*. And the day before the march, the editor of the Sunday section called me in and said, “You know what’s going on downtown and you might want to stay home. You know I would understand if you wanted to stay home because we don’t know what the city is going to be like and it could be dangerous. So you don’t—If you don’t want to come in, then you don’t have to.” But I came in. It was very quiet. I mean nothing awful happened anywhere in the city. So all those people who came in to go to that march were, you know, were all on their best behavior. It was very inspiring actually. But it was the quietest bus ride I’ve ever had, I think. [Interviewee laughs.] Ah. But it was interesting that the, you know, the *Washington Post* was warning people that they could stay home if they felt threatened. So, it was a different time, it really was.

WIENER: Was the march on a Sunday? I thought it was on a weekday.

PROSKY: It was on a weekday. Yeah, yeah. And I think Bob was not in a show. That’s why he was home.

There was a lot of theater around. You know, the Folger in those early days when they—for years and years they had decided that that little, beautiful little stage at the Folger was too apt to burn down to have it used as a theater. You know, it couldn’t be used as a theater. Because I was growing up and going to school in Arlington when we were taken there, you know, to show us what it looked like. But we were told that no one ever used it as a stage, of course, or as a theater because that was dangerous. So, suddenly—when did this happen? It might have been somewhere in the 70s. They finally got fire insurance and started using the Folger as a theater. We just saw some wonderful things there. Oh, they were just great. There’s a whole bunch of actors—Michael Tolaydo, Ed Gero, Floyd King ...

WIENER: Right.

PROSKY: ... all of them started there. They just did wonderful things. And I really think—and this has not much to do with Capitol Hill—but I really think that American actors doing Shakespeare know something that British actors don't. They know that you cannot speak too rapidly because American audiences listen slowly.

WIENER: Oh, that's interesting.

PROSKY: And a lot of those actors—it was almost that you could see what they were thinking as they crossed the stage. They were so used to doing it and they were so good at it. They really were just great. And a lot of them lived here. I think Floyd still lives somewhere on Capitol ...

WIENER: So does Michael Tolaydo.

PROSKY: Yeah. Emery Batts, who just died, lived here. And Andy Prosky, that was his first—when he got out of theater school at Rutgers [University], he got an M.F.A. And that was his first year of work, was when Michael Kahn took it over. And he was [Interviewee laughs.], he was in a production of *Macbeth* where he was one of the sons of the king who was killed. And they gave him this wonderful suit of white armor. So, he had done this at Gonzaga in shows he was in there. He would always get himself to the important place on the stage, so, whatever was the important action that was going on, he was in the place where you looked at him. He had a knack for that. So, there is in the beginning of that play, you know, there is all this fighting going back and forth. And King Duncan comes in and says, "What bloody man is that?" And there is Andy Prosky in the middle of this flight of steps going up into God knows where in his bright white suit of armor standing there. And the poor guy, the bloody man that they are supposed to be directed to, is somewhere off on stage left in the smoke. So. And Michael let him do it. [Interviewer laughs.] I never knew why he did. But that was a wonderful season for Andy. He did *Antony and Cleopatra*. It was a good start. *Merchant of Venice*. It was, you know, it was a good ...

WIENER: Do you still go to the Folger?

PROSKY: I do. Yeah. They only do three plays a year, but Aaron Posner is a wonderful director. They do just great stuff. And it's such a joy to have it in the neighborhood, you know and have it a working theater.

Oh, gee, what else can I say? There was really a working relationship between Marguerite and a whole collection of people who lived in that section of Constitution Avenue.

WIENER: You're talking about Marguerite Kelly.

PROSKY: Kelly.

WIENER: Yes.

PROSKY: Yeah. The Hacketts lived across the street. Constance Burr and Tim lived across the street. Timmy Jensen. These are all people that I raised my kids with, you know. Most of them sent kids to Capitol Hill Day School. And I had lunch with a collection of those women about two weeks ago and they were sitting there talking about their memories of the riots and the way the neighborhood grew. And it was such a joy. I mean we were all people who had exciting lives, you know. It was fun to be part of that. And they are still interesting women, you know. And we're all in our 70s and 80s by this time. That was an 80th birthday party for someone.

WIENER: Mm.

PROSKY: Who I thought was ten years younger. [Interviewee laughs.]

WIENER: So, did you continue, after the boys were in Gonzaga, with this field project for Capitol Hill Day School?

PROSKY: Yeah, I did. I worked with that for a long time. And when I finally left, Bob was still doing *Hill Street* and, you know, he was making piles of money. So I thought, well, I'll just go and get a degree. He can afford it. So I think of it as the, you know, the degree that *Hill Street* paid for. [Interviewee laughs.]

WIENER: Okay. But you've done some other volunteer work ...

PROSKY: Yeah.

WIENER: ... if I recall.

PROSKY: Yeah. I just thought of something.

WIENER: Weren't you doing some tutoring or—

PROSKY: Yeah, I did tutor at Christ Child House. All the Kelly plays—Tom [Kelly] would write these crazy plays for children and I did the costumes and another woman was a director. And we would do them in the living room of Marguerite's house where the play always started by Tom walking to the center of the living room and turning on the gas fixture. It still hangs and still works. In the middle of that living room. And Marguerite was good friends with Tom Donnelly who was the critic, the drama critic for the old *News* in town. She took him to buy his groceries. And so she finagled him into coming to these plays for three years in a row and reviewing them in the paper. It was just crazy, but it was fun. We did a murder mystery, *The Three Little Suspects*, and a version of d'Artagnan [*The Three Musketeers*]. And

then we did another, *The Two Cinderellas*, or some crazy thing like that. But it was just fun to do. And Tom and I had always talked about writing a Christmas play for St. Joseph's and we never got around to it.

One of the other things I did was there were no—there was a recreation department when my kids were growing up on Capitol Hill but you never saw it doing anything, certainly not with children. So I had these three boys sitting in front of the television set and I thought there has got to be something better than this. So I had a friend whose husband was organizing a soccer league in Alexandria. So I asked if I could bring my kids over there. And the next thing I knew, parents were calling me up from all over Capitol Hill asking if I could take some more kids over. So, finally, I had a carload of kids taking them over to the Alexandria Soccer League. And, you know, Andy was five. So they had this teeny-weeny soccer thing. But some of those kids were four and had to be turned around to face the ball. I mean they didn't know what was going on. But they were in the middle of the field, you know. There was air and light and they were running up and down. They just didn't know the point of the game. But, finally—I think we did that for maybe three or four years—and finally there were so many Capitol Hill people on those teams that the Alexandria people said, “Listen, you all need to organize your own league, you know.” But by that time my kids were too old to play. But John was—I guess he was in his first year at Gonzaga when I was still taking him with this crazy team that was—I think there two white kids on it and the rest of them were black. And they were all in my station wagon, all fighting with each other, [Interviewer laughs.] tooth and nail. They lost every single game that year. It was just horrifying. So, I was a soccer mom, I guess, before the term came up.

WIENER: Did you ever partake in the soccer moms' team?

PROSKY: Well, I didn't play on the team. But I played a lot of soccer just informally with my kids. I really liked it. It was one of those sort of non-threatening sports where you had to really work at it to get hurt, you know. Kids occasionally got kicked, but it wasn't like football or baseball, where you got hit in the head or, you know, really damaged. So that was fun. You didn't need anything but a ball to do it. And then for a long time, we would get together with other families for Thanksgiving and we would have a Thanksgiving soccer game in Lincoln Park. That was fun, with all the hors d'oeuvres that we would carry out there and sit on the grass and eat. And then get up and play soccer. [Interviewee laughs.]

Gee, what else can I tell you about Capitol Hill?

WIENER: Does your block have any block activities?

PROSKY: We do. We have a block yard sale, which I always love. I like selling books.

WIENER: I got some from you, didn't I?

PROSKY: Yes. Way too many books in this house and I'm always working to get rid of some of them. I'm always happy when I can make five dollars on a bunch of books. And we also have a block party, which I help set up. I am the one who arranges for the bouncy house for the last several years. And I pay for half of it and everybody chips in for the other half. And the first year I did it ...

WIENER: Do you have the street blocked off?

PROSKY: Yeah, we do. We get it—the guy across the street for years has taken care of getting the permits for that and doing a lot of the setting up. He's a really nice guy. The first year that I rented that bouncy house, Violet was two and she was fine with it. The second year I rented it, she would not go near it. It made too much noise.

WIENER: Violet is your granddaughter?

PROSKY: Yes. She was three. Well, this year, we had it set up and she came over. And I see her take this man that I have never seen before by the hand. So I'm standing there watching her carefully and she had him by the hand and she had him walk her around so that she could look at the big machine that makes the terrible noise that keeps it blown up. And they stood there looking at it. And she thanked him and then let go of his hand and came back to use it. But I thought, not only are you not afraid of the bouncy house, you're not afraid of strange men either. [Both laugh.] Have to do something about that. That's always fun. They also have a block dinner, which I just missed because of a kind of wake that I went to for Tati's father, my daughter-in-law's father. That's the other thing that happens when you get to be my age here. A lot of the people that you raised your children with begin to die. And that's, you know, it's always a sadness. It's a bit of a harrowing thing to wake up in the morning and look at the crossword puzzle and "Cul de Sac" [comic strip] because Alice is in it and reminds me of Violet, but, then, to spend the last part of the morning looking at the Obituary page. But it's a, you know, it's part of growing older.

WIENER: Have many young people moved onto your block?

PROSKY: Yeah. I do notice that it's a, you know, it's a two-salary family up here for so many people. You know you can't afford these houses without both parents working. And a lot of the young children are on nannies. You know you just see the nannies all over the place. The North Hall of Eastern Market is full of them. I like little kids and children crying have never bothered me, so, you know, it's fine with me. But they don't have much time. That's one of the problems. The family that lives in one of the Harris houses right next door I finally invited for a Saturday morning breakfast with some of the other people in

the neighborhood. But, you know, that was a year ago and I haven't really seen them since except to come and go out of the house.

WIENER: So, I know the house next to you was vacant for a long time.

PROSKY: It was. That was ten years.

WIENER: Ten years it was vacant?

PROSKY: Yeah. It was falling apart. That double house owned by various members of the Harris family who had lived here for so long—finally when the matriarch was very sick and moved to one of her daughter's out in Temple Hills, the house stood empty. And, you know, it was just falling apart. The whole back end was falling off. So when they—finally some branch of the family wrested it away from the other relatives and managed to sell it. And the first plans for re-doing that house just drove everybody in the neighborhood crazy. They were sent around to all of us. And it was to be 30 feet longer than it is. It would have been just outside of the people behind them's bathroom. [Interviewer laughs.] I mean it was just way too big. And the ANC [Advisory Neighborhood Commission] did their job and called us all to a neighborhood meeting and the builder did reduce it to just slightly larger than it had been. And did, I think, you know, a nice job of re-doing it. And it's wonderful to have people living there again really.

But I remember when that house—when we moved here and the house next door had—the first floor had a dirt floor and that was where Anna Harris lived. I think there was a bedroom down there for her and a kitchen and, you know, a table and chairs and everything. And so she lived there and her daughter and her daughter's daughter, who was also grown, lived upstairs. And another bunch of Harrises lived next door. But the backyard had pigeons in it. These were homing pigeons, which an uncle who lived out in Temple Hills was raising there. And it was very clean. I mean he kept those birds beautifully because he would race them from here to North Carolina where they had relatives. Every black person I know has relatives in North Carolina. But, he would show us the birds and demonstrate them for us and that went on for five or six years while we were here. And I liked him. Mr. Ford, his name was. But he could be nasty with his family. And he got into a fight with Anna or somebody in the house and then neighborhood petitions started circulating. And people behind complained about the smell and the flies. And I was right next door and we never had any smell or flies. So I thought, you know, it's just a kind of vendetta to get rid of this guy. And I was glad he was there, because he was there and if there were kids climbing over the fence, they were scared to death of him. I was scared of him frankly. [Both laugh.] So he really kept the place safe. And then everybody in that Harris family—there was a retired policeman, there was a retired mailman, there was—one of Anna's daughters had been a housekeeper in the Capitol. Her daughter was a secretary in the Capitol. They just had all these—there was one daughter who was a nurse. They had all

these, you know, working class professions covered. And they spent a lot of time sitting on benches outside. So they were stoop sitters.

And then there was another family, the Goffinets, on the other side of me. He was not allowed to smoke in the house, so he was always sitting on his steps. And it was, you know, it was the safest street I had ever lived on on Capitol Hill because there were these people, you know, these men especially, who were outside, you know, looking up and down, saying hello to everybody. And there weren't any troubles here, you know, because of that. And I have to say that Mr. Goffinet left and went out to Idaho to live and the Harrises all moved away and I kind of miss that.

WIENER: Mm-hmm.

PROSKY: And there is a woman down the street, Ann Goodwin and Terry Goodwin—she sits outside on her steps and drinks coffee. And a lot of neighbors will stop and sit and talk and that's very pleasant. I like that.

WIENER: You mentioned The Corner Store briefly.

PROSKY: Mm-hmm.

WIENER: Has that changed the neighborhood? When did that begin?

PROSKY: That was a corner store when we lived on Constitution Avenue, a running corner store. And the Harrises, a lot of them would tell me stories about taking a market basket over their arm and going down there and buying the groceries and signing the tab. So it was one of those stores, you know, that ran a tab for people in the neighborhood. And sometime—when did this happen? Sometime in the late 60s or early 70s there was a robbery there and one of the brothers who ran the store was killed in the robbery. He was shot. And the other brother and sister just closed up the store. And it wasn't run as a corner store for maybe ten years. And then when Kris [Swanson] bought it she kept that name. And she just had a show there, a photography show, with the daughter of a friend who lives on Tenth Street who had found a photograph of those two brothers working in the store. You know, they were young men and they were smiling and they were happy. And the store was—you could see the part of it that Kris had kept. And she had it blown up and mounted in that photography show. It was nice to see, you know.

WIENER: What else was in the photography? Was it all local—

PROSKY: It was I guess several artists. The one I was really interested in was Nina. Her name is Nina. Oh, what is Nina's last name? [Memolo] Her mother's name is Hilt. But Nina's father had a different name and I forget what her last name is. But she's done a series of pictures of corner stores ...

WIENER: Oh.

PROSKY: ... in Southwest and here. And they are wonderful looking pictures, especially the older ones that were still down in Southwest before they—some of them are still running, I guess. But a lot of them were moved when they did the Nationals' stadium. Actually we lived on Constitution Avenue when they tore down Southwest.

WIENER: Mm-hmm.

PROSKY: Because I worked briefly—one of the other things I did, I worked for Manpower. I worked as a temporary typist for a lot of, you know, places in town. I worked for the Chamber of Commerce as a typist and an office worker. And I worked for this other, what was it? It was some kind of social service agency that was trying to relocate people who had had to move from Southwest. So, you know, I got first hand all these horrible tales of going in there and leaving a note under a door for people who were working two or three jobs and would just step over it. And didn't know that they were going to come home and find their house demolished. It was just—Oh! It was horrendous.

WIENER: Some people call that urban removal.

PROSKY: Yes. Yeah. I think that was going on in New York, too. And luckily it's largely stopped. People tend to gentrify, which isn't quite so bad as just smashing everything to pieces. I did an interview with a black man [Lloyd Thompson] who moved from there. He grew up there. And his mother had bought a house out on East Capitol Street and the family moved to East Capitol Street. And he said that when he lived in the Southwest growing up nobody locked their door. Everybody knew everybody else. It was a very friendly neighborhood, although it looked poor. And he said "I had to go to another part of the city before I knew I was poor."

WIENER: Mm-hmm.

PROSKY: I thought that was, you know, that was interesting. And he said something else I've never forgotten and I try to practice it. He said he liked living on Capitol Hill because by and large when you pass people on the street they look at you and they smile or they say hello. And that's still to some degree true, you know. We didn't—when my kids were younger and before Bob made a lot of money, I wasn't doing a lot of shopping at Eastern Market because the prices there were a little higher. But I do remember when there were live chickens there in crates. And I would take the boys over to look at the live chickens.

[ed: removed some conversation about tape recorder issues]

But I do a lot of shopping at Eastern Market now. I mean I feel like I'm living like a woman in Europe would live. You know, I go out and buy my piece of fish and my bunch of vegetables and fruit every day. I have a friend who's ...

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

TAPE 2/ SIDE 1

WIENER: Okay, this is Tape 2, Side 1, and this is Rosa Weiner interviewing Ida Prosky. And what were we talking about ...?

PROSKY: Well, I think we were going to talk about Tyler School.

WIENER: Okay.

PROSKY: I got to know Lois Kauffman, I guess through St. Peter's. She's not going to church anymore but she was going to church then. And I knew her when she was doing the computer program at Eastern High School. I mean she really built that computer program, kept it running, badgered the city into fixing things. She would get donations from everybody she knew. She got donations from Bob, she got donations from all kinds of people. But I knew that she knew a bunch of people connected to the schools and connected to the City Council. So I really got fed up with looking at the state of Tyler School. Every window in the place was broken. They had boards up at the windows. And I thought it is just disgraceful that kids should have to go to school like that. So I finally called her up and I said, "Listen, I have got a thousand dollars which I will start as a fund if we can get somebody to fix the windows at Tyler School." And she said, "Wait. Don't do that. That's seed money. I'll call Tommy Wells." [DC Council member from Ward Six]. So she arranged a meeting with Tommy Wells and he had just managed to get the congresswoman from Louisiana [Senator Mary Landrieu]—Isn't this awful what you had to do then? The congresswoman from Louisiana had attached money to some other bill in Congress to fix up Tyler School. That is how that had to get done. It just drove me nuts that the city was run that way really. You know, all those years when Marion Barry was running around the globe, you know, spending city money, he was spending all that money that should have been spent on schools and kids. It just drove me nuts. I have a tendency to rant from time to time. I guess you should stop me.

WIENER: That's fine. [Both laugh.] That's what's good about an oral history, that you get the sense of emotion.

PROSKY: Yeah, yeah. Well, Bob said I had too much of a rant in me. And that was one of the things that we did a lot when Marguerite was getting us all organized to vote. We did a lot of, you know,

politicking, talking at meetings, handing out flyers, you know, going to school meetings. There was a whole bunch of stuff that she would get people doing. It was fun to do, it really was. I enjoyed that. That was a real problem here when my children were in grade school. Your children could—there were, you know, preschools and kindergartens around but then you got to a certain point where you couldn't afford to or you couldn't get in to Capitol Hill Day School or the Montessori school. And you just had to move. You know, lots of people moved to the suburbs at that point. That's no longer true, I don't think, you know. My own granddaughter was ninth on a waiting list for the preschool at Brent. So that's why she's going to Capitol Hill Day School, where her father complains continually about the tuition. [Interviewee laughs.]

WIENER: But, is she in the Brent district?

PROSKY: No—well, she's in the Brent district. They live about two blocks from Brent.

WIENER: So, she could begin there ...

PROSKY: She could, yeah, she could.

WIENER: Yeah.

PROSKY: She really loves Capitol Hill Day School. She likes the program a lot. And I don't know—I know that there are a lot of good things about Brent in those early grades. I don't know what it's like as you get further up in the grades.

WIENER: It only goes to the fourth grade, I think.

PROSKY: Really. I didn't know that.

WIENER: Yeah. To the fourth.

PROSKY: And Tati and Stefan both graduated from Capitol Hill Day School. That's the funny thing. And Violet's going there. But, Tati, when her mother first moved back to the city, went to Brent [correction: Peabody] for a year and had such a horrible experience. She had a similar experience to what Stefan had at St. Peter's.

WIENER: Mm.

PROSKY: And she would never even consider sending Violet there. Although when I look at Peabody, it looks fine now. I haven't seen the classrooms. But the kids coming and going look like they're doing fine. I did follow around Tommy Wells, you know, when he was giving talks on what was happening to the

schools on Capitol Hill. And I went to a—oh, darn. What is the little school that is right over here between me and the Safeway? I can't think of the name of it.

WIENER: I can't either.

PROSKY: Darn it. The name is not coming.

WIENER: The Safeway on 14th.

PROSKY: Yeah.

WIENER: Watkins?

PROSKY: Watkins, yeah. I was into Watkins because I was asked to judge some kind of speaking contest there with another couple of actors from Arena. And just going into the school and going to the principal's office and then being assigned two little girls who were very polite and led me to the auditorium and watching the kids coming into the auditorium and seeing how they were handled and how they behaved, it looked like a good school. There was a nice feeling about it. They were all asked to be respectful of each other and they were. And the first thing—you know, from my own experience sending my kids to these schools, the first thing I really look for is not rigorous, you know, teaching, it's safety of the kids. Because mine were not. And in a way that's sad. You know, my standards are pretty elementary when it comes to that. And I think my middle son, he has a child who's small. His mother is Japanese-Jewish and his grandmother was Okinawan and they're some of the smallest people in the world. So he's very tiny. And John is always concerned about Joe, whether or not he's safe in school.

WIENER: John is in L. A.?

PROSKY: Yeah. So, that's something that has carried on from his childhood on Capitol Hill. Mine had a hard time walking to school. They really did. All three of them were robbed, you know. Sometimes beaten, in the parks or in schools. Stefan ended up with a concussion in Rogers Memorial Hospital. And then Rogers Memorial Hospital was such a strange situation. He was in a room with a bunch of grown black men who were playing cards and drinking over in the corner. [Interviewee laughs.] And I thought I have to get him out of here. A woman who just died, Mary Ann Beatley, was a nurse there then. I don't know whether you knew the Beatleys. I don't know whether you knew the Beatleys.

WIENER: No.

PROSKY: She had just been interviewed. There were—oh, how many Beatleys were there? Seven or eight children. But she was a nurse at Rogers Memorial at that time and she helped me get him out of

there, you know. I knew I didn't need a doctor's permission. I knew I could do it. But she encouraged me and she made it easier for me to get him out of there. That was—oh, my God.

WIENER: If you could make changes in Capitol Hill now, what would you want to do, if anything?

PROSKY: Oh, you know, I think that I would—I know that it takes two incomes to float one of these—it's a small corporation. That's what a family is in a neighborhood like this. You know, there are so many bills to pay and everything is so expensive. So you need that. But what grew out of the era when I—I worked off and on and everybody worked off and on. But a lot of the time I was available to be home. Or I was home when they were home. And a lot of the community organization came out of that, I think. There was just more time, you know. Time to sit around, sit on your front steps, talk to the neighbors, garden, you know. All those things where you're outside and you see people and you get to know people. And that's a little harder now I think.

WIENER: Mm-hmm.

PROSKY: I don't know how I would make that easier. I don't know how you do that. It doesn't seem possible to go back to those times. I wouldn't change very much about Capitol Hill. I really like the neighborhood and the spirit of the community. I just—you know, off and on, whenever Bob did a play in New York, I would go and live wherever he was, whatever apartment he was living in in New York. And, you know, we lived in SoHo and Chelsea and Greenwich Village and up in Hell's Kitchen, which is being gentrified slowly, and that was fun. You know, I saw everything I could in New York. But there isn't—it's an exciting city and I liked it and I realized it exhausted me and that Washington has a kind of slower pace to it. And I like that. It's still that much of a Southern place. I've taken the Bolt bus. I love the Bolt bus.

WIENER: Yeah.

PROSKY: Oh, it seems like such a great bargain. I don't know how they can make a business out of it. But, it's great. The last play that Bob did was in Philadelphia at the Walnut Street Theater, *The Price*.

WIENER: *The Price*.

PROSKY: And I was taking the train back from Philadelphia. But the train was getting so erratic. I mean, I would try and get on it to get home to pay bills, pick up the mail. And, you know, they would suddenly—suddenly the train was just, you know, it just didn't come. And I would just have to stay another day and then try and catch it the next day. And I thought what is going on. You know, is there a

schedule or isn't there a schedule? And that was just from Philadelphia to Washington. So I got kind of mad at taking the train. [Interviewee laughs.]

So I don't think there's much I would change about Capitol Hill.

WIENER: Well, I think we should close on that note.

PROSKY: Yeah.

WIENER: And I thank you so much.

PROSKY: Oh, you're welcome. It was fun. It's fun to talk.

WIENER: We'll see how it turns out.

PROSKY: Okay.

WIENER: I think I have some forms for you to sign.

PROSKY: Okay. Permission.

WIENER: Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW