



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Sharon Ambrose

Interview Date: July 31, 2013

Interviewer: Harriet Rogers

Transcriber: Betsy Barnett



photo by Lis Wackman

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

ROGERS: This is Harriet Rogers. It is July 31, 2013, and today I am interviewing Sharon Ambrose for the Ruth Ann Overbeck Oral History Project. Welcome, Sharon.

AMBROSE: Thank you for being here, Harriet.

ROGERS: Where to begin with someone of your accomplishments is the question I asked myself when I received this assignment. And I thought it would be best to talk to you first about your life on Capitol Hill with your family in the early stages of its gentrification and restoration, and then discuss your life in public service, as a D.C. Council staff member and later as an elected official.

So, the first three questions that come to mind are the first three questions that come to everyone's mind: why did you come to Washington, from where, and, lastly, but importantly, why Capitol Hill? So, let's just start. Where were you born and, you know, do you want to tell me something about your background and ...

AMBROSE: Sure.

ROGERS: ... and where you were?

AMBROSE: I was born in Chicago, Illinois, on the South Side, raised in Chicago, went to Catholic schools. Chicago is, not so much now, but in the 40s and 50s when I was growing up in Chicago, it was a largely Catholic city. In fact, the Catholic school system was as large, literally, as the public school system.

ROGERS: Wow. That's fascinating.

AMBROSE: So, going to a Catholic school was just what you did, if you were Catholic. So, I went all through Catholic schools, including college.

ROGERS: Hmm.

AMBROSE: I went to what was, at that time, a very small Catholic women's college on the South Side of Chicago. Lived at home. My father dropped me off for school every day. [The college was St. Xavier College for Women; it is now St. Xavier University and is co-ed.]

ROGERS: Was it an old college?

AMBROSE: No. Actually, it was an old school in the city. It, in fact, was built by the Sisters of Mercy shortly after the Chicago fire.

ROGERS: Wow.

AMBROSE: But as the city changed and the needs of the school changed, they moved from the east side of the city, near the lake, out to the farthest reaches of the west side of the city. And, in fact, one of the then mayors of the city gerrymandered the city limits to make sure that they were in the city rather than in the next suburb.

ROGERS: And you understood that.

AMBROSE: Certainly, from an early age [Interviewer laughs] I understood those things.

ROGERS: So, then, you get out of college in Chicago and then what happened?

AMBROSE: Well, no. Actually my husband was also born in Chicago, raised in a Chicago suburb. And I met him while I was in college. I went to a forensic meet—I did a lot of public speaking in high school and college—and I went to a forensic meet to Dubuque, Iowa, which is where my husband was attending a small Catholic men's college, [Interviewer laughs] since most of the colleges at that point were sex segregated. And we started dating. So, we started dating when I was 18 and he was 19. And we married shortly after we both got out of school. He graduated in '60 from college; I graduated in '61. We were married in '62. And he went to work for the Internal Revenue Service in Chicago right after he got out of college and I was teaching school. I was teaching English at a Chicago high school. Got pregnant almost immediately.

ROGERS: Mm-hmm.

AMBROSE: Our first child was born in '63. And, by that time ...

ROGERS: And how many children do you have?

AMBROSE: We have four.

ROGERS: Oh. How does it break out? Boy, girl?

AMBROSE: We have three girls and a boy.

ROGERS: Oh, lovely.

AMBROSE: The boy actually is the second.

ROGERS: So, the marriage worked!

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: Mm-hmm.

AMBROSE: But, at any rate, shortly after our first child was born, we were living in Evanston, Illinois, which is the suburb immediately north of the city on the lakefront. And, because I was from the South Side of the city and my husband essentially was from a western suburb, we chose a corner of the city where we were really starting over. Neither of us knew very many people on the north side of the city. So, it was a whole new experience. And we lived right on the lakefront, which I just loved. And the Chicago lakefront is fabulous. So, we were literally half a block from a beach.

ROGERS: How wonderful.

AMBROSE: So, that was a lovely place to start married life. And shortly after we were married, had our first child, we were living in Evanston, my husband was selected for a program that doesn't exist anymore but it was a management intern program that Internal Revenue Service had. And it was a merit selected program. You tested into it and Mike [Ambrose] was selected for it. And the drill was that you came to Washington. And what they did with that program—it really was a marvelous program—they cycled those interns through almost every agency of government in the year ...

ROGERS: Oh, great. You'd get this great overview.

AMBROSE: So, yeah. They had a fabulous overview. And, so, we moved to this area. Didn't know the city well enough to immediately look for a place to live in the city. We settled in Alexandria, got to know people in Alexandria.

ROGERS: And what year?

AMBROSE: That was in 1964.

ROGERS: '64, okay.

AMBROSE: And it was, in fact, a presidential election year. And we were disenfranchised. We had left Illinois. We had not been in Virginia long enough to be eligible to vote in Virginia. Somehow it didn't occur to us that we could vote absentee or something.

ROGERS: Okay. Refresh at least my memory. '64 election was ...

AMBROSE: Was Lyndon Johnson.

ROGERS: Oh, right, of course.

AMBROSE: Lyndon Johnson's own election.

AMBROSE: As opposed to

ROGERS: the way he got in after Kennedy was shot.

AMBROSE: Correct.

AMBROSE: J.F.K. [John Fitzgerald Kennedy] was shot a week after our first child was born. It was quite memorable. But, at any rate—so, we settled in Alexandria. And I actually immediately signed up with the Alexandria Democrats and I thought, well, I can't vote but I could at least help. And so I knocked on doors in our large apartment complex for what we were calling the Johnson and Johnson ticket. It was Lyndon Johnson and a guy by the name of Gus Johnson, who was running for mayor of Alexandria. So, as soon as I got to the east coast, I immediately transferred my Chicago ward heeler experience. I think the first political experience I ever had was campaigning with my grandfather, door to door, for Adlai Stevenson.

ROGERS: Oh, that's fascinating.

AMBROSE: Probably in about 1956.

ROGERS: So, it does appear—and this always interests me and I hope it interests others—that your activism and your interest in public service started out when you were very young.

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: I mean, even with your forensic ...

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: Right, right.

AMBROSE: Yeah.

ROGERS: So it was always ... So this is fascinating.

AMBROSE: Yeah.

ROGERS: All right. So, then, you're in Alexandria and now we come to Capitol Hill.

AMBROSE: Yeah.

ROGERS: And what year and why here?

AMBROSE: Well, we came to Capitol Hill quite literally to live in an integrated neighborhood. When we moved to Alexandria, Virginia still had a poll tax.

ROGERS: Wow.

AMBROSE: Virginia was still a very segregated place. Now, *Brown v. Board of Education* had been in 1956 [ed: 1954], but the Alexandria school system was still basically a segregated school system, de facto segregation. We wanted our kids' first school experiences to be in an integrated school situation. By that time we had two children. Our second child was born in 1965, our son. So, we had these two little kids who were just about ready for school. Mike had, my husband had a friend who was also in the management intern program at IRS. And he and his wife lived over at the 800 block of G Street SE. And they invited us for dinner one night. And, so, we came to the Hill to have dinner with them and looked around and thought this would be a nice place to live. And, clearly, it was an integrated neighborhood, much more integrated than it is now. And we knew that the kids' school experiences would be integrated if we started then in school in D.C. So, we started looking for apartments on Capitol Hill. And we found one in the 400 block of Sixth Street SE, just a block and a half away from where we are.

ROGERS: Yeah.

AMBROSE: And, so, we rented the apartment and moved in 1967. And, by that time, we were getting more and more involved in city things. My husband actually ran for the State Democratic Committee and we got to know people in city politics. At the time, the city—only shortly after we moved in, we moved here in '67—it was in '69 that the city took the first step toward home rule, that Congress actually allowed the city to take that first step with an elected school board. And, so, I got involved in that right away because, of course, we were just ready to start the kids in school.

ROGERS: All right. So, schools. So, schools in '69 now we're talking about pretty much, right?

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: So, schools in '69. What schools were here in the area you were in and how has the public school system evolved? And, you were on the school board?

AMBROSE: No, I was not.

ROGERS: No? Okay. All right.

AMBROSE: I was not.

ROGERS: So, you're raising your children and they're going to ...

AMBROSE: We're raising our children.

ROGERS: And they're going to a public school.

AMBROSE: Brent.

ROGERS: Brent, okay.

AMBROSE: Which is just two blocks away. And I got very involved in neighborhood controversies about a new Brent being built. Our daughter Moira, who will be 50 years old this year, [Interviewer laughs] started kindergarten in the old eight room school house that was Brent.

ROGERS: Which was located?

AMBROSE: Right where the new school is now, at Third and D SE.

ROGERS: Third and D, okay.

AMBROSE: And, so, Moira started school at Brent. I continued to get involved with things at school. Ended up spending—I said at least ten years of my life I spent at Brent Elementary School. [Interviewer laughs.] We had a wonderful principal, Herb Boyd, who really encouraged people in the community to be part of the school community. And Herb and I worked very well together. And we did a lot of interesting programs at the school. We did a program with CHAW [Capitol Hill Arts Workshop].

ROGERS: Oh, will you talk about CHAW a little.

AMBROSE: Sure.

ROGERS: It's the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop. And when did that begin and ...

AMBROSE: CHAW really got started about, probably about 1969.

ROGERS: So, around the time you were here.

AMBROSE: Right around the time.

ROGERS: When you first got here.

AMBROSE: And there were three women who were the founders of CHAW. A dancer, whose name I'm going to block on right now—Sally, Sally Crowell, who was a dancer. Mariana Gasteyer, who is an artist. Sally is still a dancer, still teaches dance. And Jean Lewton, who was a dramatist and writer. And those three women started the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop. At Christ Church, really. And, so, Mariana's son,

Stephen, and my son, Michael, became fast friends at Brent, and Jean Lewton's son, Victor, was also a friend of theirs. And, so, Mariana and Jean Lewton and I—and Sally—but Mariana and Jean and I especially became good friends because the boys were good friends. And, so, when I became president of the PTA at Brent I talked Herb Boyd into letting us have an arts day on Friday afternoons.

ROGERS: Oh, wonderful. Terrific idea.

AMBROSE: And, so, through CHAW we ran all these arts programs on Friday afternoons because we didn't have an art teacher, we didn't have a music teacher, no drama teacher. I taught writing, Mariana taught art, Sally would come in and do some of the dance stuff. And by that time CHAW had other people working, giving lessons of one sort or another at CHAW, and so they would come in to do some music.

ROGERS: On Fridays, this was after school, for the kids?

AMBROSE: No.

ROGERS: No.

AMBROSE: We brought it into school.

ROGERS: You brought it into the school, so all day Friday CHAW was part of Brent's curriculum?

AMBROSE: It was—as I recall, it was in the afternoons.

ROGERS: Oh, uh-huh.

AMBROSE: Every Friday afternoon.

ROGERS: Wonderful.

AMBROSE: Yes. And it was a good symbiotic relationship because it opened up a whole lot of new things to a number of the kids at Brent.

ROGERS: Sure.

AMBROSE: At that time, we had a lot of kids from the projects at Brent. That is not the case—the projects don't exist anymore ...

ROGERS: Right.

AMBROSE: ...the housing projects that fed into Brent.

ROGERS: Do you want to talk a little bit about the housing projects?

AMBROSE: Yes! Actually. And the relationship to the schools.

ROGERS: Yeah. Go ahead.

AMBROSE: Could you stop just a minute?

ROGERS: Mm-hmm. [Tape pause] Okay. About the projects, then, and the relationship with ...

AMBROSE: Well, at that time ...

ROGERS: And where were they exactly, physically?

AMBROSE: Okay, okay. There were two large projects. One was Ellen Wilson and that was between about Seventh and, more like Eighth, between Eighth and Sixth and Virginia Avenue there at the [Southeast-Southwest] Freeway and E Street. Not E. [I Street SE] Anyway, it was where the new houses are now. On the north side of the freeway. On the south side of the freeway was a huge project that ran from the freeway all the way down to M Street and extended from Eighth Street back all the way to South Capitol. And that was Arthur Capper. And, at the time our kids were at Brent, which is at Third and D, there was a school called Giddings at Third and G [SE], which is now Results The Gym. There was another school called Lenox at Fifth and G [SE], which actually had an annex built on it while in this period, early 70s, because there were so many kids. And, then, there was another school called Van Ness at Fifth and M Street [SE]. Now Van Ness is still there and it was never actually closed, but it may in fact be reopened shortly because of the influx of people into the new housing that has been built on the site of the old Arthur Capper. Arthur Capper was totally demolished, as was Ellen Wilson. And in both those sites there were [coughs]—excuse me—there were mixed income housing developments built. So, at any rate ...

ROGERS: Well, here's a question.

AMBROSE: Yeah.

ROGERS: How did Brent—I mean, could anybody go to any school? Was it open to the whole of Capitol Hill?

AMBROSE: No. There were school zones.

ROGERS: Zones. School zones. So the Brent school zone included some of the projects or no?

AMBROSE: Yes, it did. Brent school zone included much of the Ellen Wilson project and probably about a third of the Arthur Capper project.

ROGERS: Consequently, the classes were very integrated.

AMBROSE: They were very integrated. Brent was.

ROGERS: That's what ...

AMBROSE: The other two schools not.

ROGERS: Right.

AMBROSE: Because Brent was far enough into historic Capitol Hill that it had some white kids in it.

ROGERS: Right.

AMBROSE: The other schools were almost all African American children and they were almost all children who lived in the projects.

ROGERS: Right.

AMBROSE: As those projects just got worse and worse—the crime at Arthur Capper was just unbelievable—and, so, anybody who could move out of those projects was beginning to move out. And what was left were a lot of elderly people, some folks with large families who could not find subsidized housing large enough for their families, and, in the case of Ellen Wilson, it literally was taken over by squatters.

ROGERS: Hmm.

AMBROSE: And it was, it was a very bad situation. The crime rate on the Hill itself was infinitely worse than it is today.

ROGERS: Right. So, now, we're probably up to '70, I mean, time period here?

AMBROSE: Probably late 70s.

ROGERS: Right. So, '69 you move here.

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: The projects get worse ...

AMBROSE: Yeah.

ROGERS: ... it sounds as if.

AMBROSE: Yeah.

ROGERS: And crime is really bad.

AMBROSE: Right.

ROGERS: Really bad ...

AMBROSE: Right.

ROGERS: ... in the late 70s. Okay, let me now, I think, turn the tape over.

AMBROSE: Okay.

ROGERS: Okay.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

ROGERS: All right. We're now in the, like, mid-70s, late 70s on Capitol Hill. Things are not good crime-wise. Your children are still in public schools. What happens after elementary school?

AMBROSE: Well, what happened was that, by the time our oldest child got into about fifth grade, by that time most of the white kids at Brent began to leave. Because Brent only went to sixth grade. And by fifth grade or so people started moving their kids because if they didn't move them then, they ran the risk perhaps of not getting them into a school when it was over, then they really had to be. So, when our oldest daughter got ready to go to fifth grade, we decided to move her, and we moved her to a lovely little Catholic school up at Tenley Circle in Northwest called Dunblane. At that time, there was a big campus, nine acres actually, right at Tenley Circle, which is Wisconsin and Nebraska. And it was owned by the Sisters of Providence. And they had a lovely little grade school that went from Pre-K to eighth grade and a large girls' high school. It was all girls. And, so, our Moira got on the 36 bus every morning. One of us would walk her up to the corner of Sixth and Pennsylvania [SE], plop her on the bus right behind the bus driver, and she would ride that bus all the way across town.

ROGERS: Was this pre-Metro?

AMBROSE: Sure. Yes.

ROGERS: So, Metro came in ...

AMBROSE: In '76, I believe.

ROGERS: In '76.

AMBROSE: Yeah.

ROGERS: So, what's happening—so, all right, staying on the Hill, all right, so your daughter went to a Catholic school. And then other people were taking their children, you know, because their careers or their terms at Brent were ending. And what happens to Brent? I mean, does Brent ever go through a really tough time, or the school itself ...

AMBROSE: Yes. Yes, it did. And it was shortly after that. So, we moved Moira, our oldest, in fifth grade. Our son, Michael, stayed through sixth grade. So, two years after we moved Moira, we moved Michael to St. Anselm's Abbey School, which is up at Rhode Island, and—I can't remember. But, it's the Abbey School. It still operates today. It's all boys. It's a fabulous school. [St. Anselm's Abbey School is at 4501 South Dakota Avenue NE.]

And, by that time, our two younger daughters were ready to start school. Brent did not have preschool. So, our youngest daughter actually went to preschool at Peabody. The kids, actually—I missed a piece here. When we were living over on Sixth Street, our two older children went to the daycare center at what was then Friendship House, which is what The Maples is rising from the ashes of.

ROGERS: Okay. So, The Maples is a new apartment complex ...

AMBROSE: Right.

ROGERS: ... that is going to be opening up. Right.

AMBROSE: And it's rising from where this settlement house, Friendship ...

ROGERS: Right.

AMBROSE: And it was truly a settlement house at that time. They had a daycare center there which we put our kids in as soon as we moved onto Sixth Street. And we didn't need daycare, but we were using it as a preschool. So, our kids only went in the mornings. Well, I ended up—because they also ran a GED [General Educational Development] program there—they needed a GED teacher. And, because I was free in the mornings when my kids were at the daycare center, they hired me to teach GED ...

ROGERS: Meaning?

AMBROSE: ... in the mornings.

ROGERS: GED is?

AMBROSE: GED [General Educational Development certificate] is the high school equivalency prep classes for people ...

ROGERS: So, they needed somebody who had that certification.

AMBROSE: Yeah, yeah. Who had taught high school, which I had.

ROGERS: Yes.

AMBROSE: So, I taught GED classes at Friendship House and the kids were in the daycare program. And I had been an officer of the Friendship House Parents' Association. And, so, then, our youngest child ended up going to Peabody for preschool because, when preschool was being phased in in the District, it was not in every single school.

ROGERS: Mm-hmm.

AMBROSE: But it was at Peabody. So, she went to Peabody to preschool. By that time, her older sister was in kindergarten at Brent and, then, she went to kindergarten at Brent as well. By that time, Moira and Michael, the two older children, were both in private schools. I had gotten involved in the school board elections as soon as those elections were possible in the city. And, in fact, I was Marion Barry's precinct coordinator in Ward 6 when he ran for an at-large seat on the school board. And one of my neighbors and friends also ran for an at-large seat on the school board, Betty Ann Kane. And, after Betty Ann was elected and my younger children were in kindergarten and preschool, Betty Ann asked me if I could work part time for her as her research assistant on the Board of Education. So, I worked for Betty Ann two, three days a week as her research assistant at the Board of Education. And, because she was citywide, I got a very good understanding of the whole city's school system. Because I would go all over looking at programs, whatever it was she was particularly working on. Shortly after that, it must have been about '73, maybe, when our youngest child was going into second grade and her older sister was going into fourth grade, there was a teachers' strike in the city.

ROGERS: Hmm.

AMBROSE: And, it was right at that point that Betty Ann Kane had gone from the school board to be elected to the City Council at large and had asked me to come to be her chief of staff at the City Council. And I had agreed to do that and I had started working full time. And, so, there was this strike of the

teachers. Herb Boyd, the wonderful principal, had been gone for two or three years at that point and we'd had a series of other principals. And I thought, no. I can't do this. I can't work full time, still have parent-teacher meetings and responsibilities for these kids in two other schools, and cope with day care for kids during a teachers strike. So, I did not send the two younger girls back to Brent. I sent them to St. Peter's.

ROGERS: All right. So, here's this transition from ...

AMBROSE: Right.

ROGERS: ... full time mother to working—while full time mother still being very involved in the school system—to a full time job.

AMBROSE: Yes, yes.

ROGERS: And, thus starts the career ...

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: Right? Thus starts the career of Sharon Ambrose.

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: All right. Let me just ... [Tape pause] All right, here you are ...

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: ... the professional.

AMBROSE: Working for the first time.

ROGERS: Yes, okay.

AMBROSE: I had been home with kids for 17 years. And that was a big transition. And, also, still having to relate to all these—now having kids in three different schools. But, anyway, so, I went to work for Betty Ann. We had a very small staff at the council at that time, just three of us—me, a secretary, and one other person we hired, a wonderful young man who had worked on Betty Ann's campaign as a volunteer and he was recently graduated from University of Chicago [Edward Rich, now an attorney in the D.C. Attorney General's office]. He had gone through D.C. public schools, had grown up in Northwest, and he came to work for us as the other staff person. And that was it. And, so, I had to very quickly learn the legislative process. I was not an attorney. I had to learn how to read the D.C. Code and

get very quickly up to speed. And, of course, Betty Ann wasn't an attorney either. She was an academic and her field was English, like mine. And, so, we both had a lot of OJT [on the job training].

ROGERS: Trial by—baptism by fire, right? Mm-hmm.

AMBROSE: Yes, we did have baptism by fire. But, we got a lot of very interesting things done. We both learned a lot, I think. Betty Ann ended up running for mayor at one point, which didn't last real long. I mean, she got to the point where she had to decide whether she was going to go forward and really keep at it or drop back into running for her own position, because she was on the cycle where her own seat was up at the same time. I was kind of running her campaign in the background. I had to, at one point finally, leave my council job and go full time on the mayoral campaign. Which financially was not very good for the family. But, it was the only way we could try to salvage things. I and a number of other people finally convinced Betty Ann that this was not her time to be mayor and, so, she dropped back into her own race, which I then ran and she was re-elected.

ROGERS: And the mayor became?

AMBROSE: And Marion Barry ...

ROGERS: Marion Barry, right.

AMBROSE: ... became mayor ...

ROGERS: Right.

AMBROSE: ... again. And, so, Betty Ann was back in her own seat. We started into her second term. Got into a number of interesting things in that committee that Betty Ann had. We got very much into insurance law. We did the first no-fault insurance law in the city. So, she and I both had to learn a whole lot about insurance law. We, in her committee, prior to 1987, the D.C. government employees were part, actually, of the federal civil service. And, in 1987, the feds decided that they did not want to carry the D.C. government anymore. And, so, we were sort of asked to leave the federal service. So, anybody who was hired subsequent to 1987 went into the District of Columbia civil service. I and a number of other people are retired on federal civil service pensions because we were prior '87. But, we had to write, essentially, a new retirement system, legislate a new retirement system for the District of Columbia. And, I say with great pride—I was talking about this with one of my former colleagues recently. When I look at what happened recently in Detroit ...

ROGERS: Oh.

AMBROSE: ... with the city of Detroit having to declare bankruptcy, I think, boy, but for former Congressman Tom Davis and several other people in Congress, who threw us into the Control Board situation when they did and did a number of other things, including relieving us of some of our prior pension burdens for police, fire, teachers, we would have been in the same situation Detroit was. But, we do not have the same ... Because Betty Ann and I, at the time, did help write this new retirement system, we don't have those burdens. And that has made a big difference. We went from a defined benefit program, which is what most of the union programs are, etc. to a defined contribution program and deferred comp options and things of that sort. So, it made a huge difference in our bottom line.

ROGERS: And who had to approve this? So, you and Betty Ann come up with this new system ...

AMBROSE: We didn't come up with it. No, no. I will not take the credit for that.

ROGERS: Okay. So, ...

AMBROSE: I mean, fortunately a bunch of financial advisors got together with the mayor and the city administrator, who—I can't remember who it was at that time.

ROGERS: And, then, it gets approved by?

AMBROSE: And they began working on the bill and sent it to the council. It came to the committee that Betty Ann was chairing. And, then, so, we had to bring it through. And, as you can imagine, all the unions and the city employees were very unhappy about it. They wanted a system like the feds had.

ROGERS: The federal—sure.

AMBROSE: And who wouldn't? It's the Cadillac.

ROGERS: So, this should give you great satisfaction.

AMBROSE: It does, it does.

ROGERS: Yeah. And, actually, one of the questions I did want to ask you is, you know, what are—well, I was going to break it up. Like, what is your biggest satisfaction on the Hill? You know, back to your school days. Very shortly, though, back to those. But, like, you lived through all these changes and what do you see now, 2013, that makes you most proud of how the Hill has evolved, or maybe you're not happy about some of the things that happen, you know.

AMBROSE: I am very proud of most of the things that have happened on the Hill. And I can talk about a lot of those things in the context of my stint ...

ROGERS: Yes.

AMBROSE: ... on the City Council. I am desperately unhappy right now about the fact that the schools have simply not evolved the way they should have. But, in terms of how the Hill has evolved as a neighborhood, it's fabulous. It is just fabulous. And the things that I was involved in when it was my turn to be the Ward 6 councilmember I am very proud of and I think have contributed to some of that.

So, where are we? I guess, Betty Ann ran against Eleanor Holmes Norton for that seat [non-voting delegate to the U. S. House of Representatives] and lost. And, again, that was up the same time as her own seat. So, she lost her seat on the council. And that was in '90.

ROGERS: And your years were? You were on the council from ...

AMBROSE: I was a council staff person with Betty Ann from '79 to '90. In '91, I did several things while I was looking for another job. And, midway through '91, John Ray asked if I would like to come back to the council as his legislative director. He was also a citywide member, an at-large member. So, I went back to the council in John Ray's office as his legislative director and did a number of interesting things with him. And that lasted until he left the council in '96.

ROGERS: Hmm.

AMBROSE: And, at that point, I decided that I would run for what was an open seat. Harold Brazil had been the Ward 6 councilmember and he—in '96 Harold ran for an open at-large seat, John Ray's seat, actually. John had decided not to run again. And, so, Harold ran for that seat and was elected. And, so, that left a vacant seat in Ward 6. And I decided that I would run for that vacant seat. So, I was elected in April of '97 to the Ward 6 seat. Took office in May. And I was really able to hit the ground running because I had already been working on the council. ...

ROGERS: Well, sure.

AMBROSE: ... for 16 years.

ROGERS: And, what was, like, the biggest issue facing you when you ...

AMBROSE: The biggest issue was Kingman Island.

ROGERS: So, let's talk about Kingman Island.

AMBROSE: Yeah.

ROGERS: Okay.

AMBROSE: The biggest issue ...

ROGERS: Just let everybody know, you know, what it was and what ...

AMBROSE: Kingman Island is this wonderful little island in the Anacostia River, right at about where—right opposite the stadium [RFK Stadium]. Actually between the stadium and where East Capitol Street crosses the river. And it is a little oasis. It's really quite wonderful if anybody has ever been on it. And Marion Barry, who was then mayor—still mayor at that point—decided that he—had some friends who decided, actually, that it would be a great place for an amusement park. And this woman who was a countess—I don't know whoever made her a countess. [Interviewer laughs.] She was Indian, but she was a countess. And she had a lot of money. I don't recall where the money came from or whether I ever knew where the money came from. But, she wanted to finance this wonderful amusement park for children. She envisioned a kind of Tivoli, as Tivoli in Denmark is. And that was her vision. [Voice of third party in background.] So, what should be on Kingman Island. Well, because I knew some of the other people who were friends of Mayor Barry's at the time, still are, who were involved in it—I had never been to Tivoli Island because I've never been to Demark, but I'd certainly seen pictures of it—and it did not strike me that these folks were capable of creating that kind of thing at Kingman Island. There also were all kinds of environmental issues.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

TAPE 2/ SIDE 1

ROGERS: All right, let's go. Kingman Island. She was called a princess. Oh, and you had seen ...

AMBROSE: A countess, a countess.

ROGERS: A countess, okay, and Tivoli Garden, which they would not be able to achieve ...

AMBROSE: No.

ROGERS: ... in your estimation.

AMBROSE: Well.

ROGERS: All right, all right.

AMBROSE: And there were some very solid environmental reasons. But, part of it is that Kingman Island is not a naturally occurring island. It is in fact a whole bunch of landfill. It's land that was thrown there, partly from excavation from RFK [Stadium], from building the bridge over—the East Capitol

Street bridge—and various other things. It is literally landfill. It would never have sustained traffic, cars, equipment, etc. But it is a lovely place to have for people to escape to. And, so, that was my first success, if you will, on the council. That I managed to—with the help of a number of my friends, David Catania being foremost among them. Because by the time it was all coming up David had been elected to the council and he was enormously helpful on it.

ROGERS: Were there any race implications in this or accusations?

AMBROSE: Well, it was moving in that direction. Because, you know, the countess and friends were promoting this as this wonderful place for all these poor little kids who lived around there. But, the people who lived in Kingman Park did not see it that way at all. And, at that time, Ward 6 was much different geographically than it currently is. It included all of Kingman Park. It also—when I was elected, Ward 6 included all of Kingman Park. It did not include Southwest. It did include all the way down to the river in what is now Capitol Quarter. And it included a sizeable chunk of [what is now] Wards 7 and 8. It included all of what is known as the Fairlawn neighborhood of Ward 7—well, it's Ward 8 now—and all of historic Anacostia, the area right around the Frederick Douglass house, etc. So, geographically and demographically, in 1997 when I was elected, Ward 6 was a very, very different place. Anyway, the people who lived in Kingman Park, who were my constituents, were not happy at the prospect of yet another amusement in their back yard. They already had to put up with the Redskins. At that time the Redskins were still using RFK. And constant—after the Redskins left—constant rock concerts and things at RFK. And they certainly did not want an amusement park, some Kings Dominion sort of place ...

ROGERS: Yeah.

AMBROSE: ... which is the vision they had, in their backyard on top of everything else. So, I had a lot of help from the immediate neighbors on both sides of the Anacostia. The people in the River Terrace neighborhood on the other side of the Anacostia, the eastern side, were equally unhappy at the prospect of traffic and noise, etc. So.

ROGERS: So, the vote came.

AMBROSE: The vote came and we were able to defeat it.

ROGERS: Excellent.

AMBROSE: Kingman Park remained what it is today and it makes me feel very, very good when I hear that the Scouts have gone to Kingman Park [Island] on an expedition of one kind ...

ROGERS: Great.

AMBROSE: ... or another. And that people are beginning to talk about a boathouse on Kingman Park [Island] and more activities. And that's exactly the sort of thing that could be done there and that we had always hoped would be done there. So, that was, that was a win.

ROGERS: A great accomplishment and a great satisfaction.

AMBROSE: It was an enormously satisfying thing.

ROGERS: And, then, tell me—you were talking about Ward 6 changing, you know, geographically.

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: When did that happen and how did that affect things?

AMBROSE: Well, it happened the first time in 2000. That was a redistricting year. And I was on the council. I had just been—I was still in my first term.

ROGERS: Mm-hmm.

AMBROSE: See, I was elected in '97 but that was to fill out the end of Harold Brazil's term. So, I had to run again in '98. So, in 2000 I was just actually starting my first full term. I had already been on the council for almost two years, but I was starting my first full term. And I had to face this redistricting problem. And, by that time, the whole city was beginning to change. The Control Board was in place, had been in place for two years by then. Things were stabilizing a little. And, so, we started looking around a little bit and it was clear to me that there were some exciting possibilities that could come up. And, so, I decided that I wanted—[clears throat] excuse me—that I wanted to have the whole sweep of the Anacostia in Ward 6. And, so, in that redistricting process [voice of third party in background] I did some horse trading with Jack Evans. Ward 2 at that point extended all the way down into Southwest, so that Southwest was part of Ward 2. I cut a deal with Jack Evans. I allowed him [Interviewer laughs] to give me the area that included a housing complex called Sursum Corda and several other really troublesome housing complexes up along North Capitol Street, on the—up past Gonzaga [College High School], north of Gonzaga, on North Capitol Street—and Southwest, which I wanted. I relinquished all, everything on the east side of the river. And that was necessary because the population of the whole city was shifting west. And, so, I gave up historic Anacostia and Fairlawn, two neighborhoods that I really, really enjoyed representing, particularly historic Anacostia. And, I also gave up Kingman Park. Again, because the city, the population was ...

ROGERS: Was shifting.

AMBROSE: ... moving. Was shifting. So everything shifted west that year. And, so, that meant that Ward 6 then had the sweep of the Anacostia from, like, literally the middle of RFK [Interviewer laughs] all the way up to the fish wharf. And I was very pleased about that, because then what I did was I created an entity that I called the Anacostia Waterfront Development Corporation. And I modeled it after the old Pennsylvania [Avenue] Development Corporation, which had been instituted by a great guy by the name of Max Berry in response to Jackie Kennedy's saying during JFK's inaugural parade this street looks terrible. "Why is Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the Capitol so ugly? Something's got to be done." And, so, Congress, at JFK's urging, created the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, which had this laser-like focus on that swath of the city and transformed it ...

ROGERS: Sure.

AMBROSE: ... into what we know today. And, so, I decided that, if we had an organization that had the same sort of single focus as that we could do wonderful things with the Anacostia riverfront.

ROGERS: Mm-hmm.

AMBROSE: Which nobody even knew existed at that point. So, we did. And began to get some things moving. We had, at the time—by that time Tony Williams was mayor—and ...

ROGERS: And the Control Board's gone.

AMBROSE: The Control Board is gone. But, the Control Board, actually, never really went away. The Control Board will pop right back up anytime our finances get to a level that puts us precariously near the Detroit tipping point. Then the Control Board pops back up. Now, obviously, it would have to be reconstituted with different people, but it never really goes away until that piece of legislation is redone.

ROGERS: Or until D.C. becomes a state.

AMBROSE: Or until D.C. becomes a state.

ROGERS: Mm-hmm. Right, right.

AMBROSE: So, at any rate, Tony Williams was mayor. We were starting to talk about the—he had hired a fabulous city planner, Andrew Altman—and people were beginning to talk about let's bring baseball back. And let's do a baseball stadium. And, so, Andy came to me one day and he said, "Look," he said. "There are five places where I think the baseball stadium ought to go." All five of those sites were in Ward 6. The one I thought sounded like the best one was the site right behind Union Station where there are now several large apartment complexes going up. Because I said, you know, we've got good

transportation. You bring all the fans in, etc. And Andy said, “No, I don’t like that, Sharon.” He said, “I think this site down on the river is the best one because the area around it is”, there just was essentially nothing going on there. And, he said that any spinoff we get from the baseball stadium, there’s room to do down there. There’s no room for spinoff if we put it up behind Union Station. So, he finally convinced me. So, I became a big supporter of putting the baseball stadium at the site where it is now.

ROGERS: Where it is now, yeah.

AMBROSE: I will say candidly I could care less [Interviewer laughs] whether baseball came back to D.C. or not. But, I did see it as a potential economic development engine.

ROGERS: Which it’s proven to be. No?

AMBROSE: It has proven to be that.

ROGERS: And now with the new soccer stadium.

AMBROSE: And with the new—I think the new soccer—I think it’s brilliant to put that down at Buzzard’s Point.

ROGERS: Mm-hmm.

AMBROSE: [Short laugh] At one point the National Capital Planning Commission had thought—they periodically do these visioning documents—and they thought that would be a good place for the Supreme Court. And the idea of having the Supremes at Buzzard Point always amused me. [Interviewer laughs] But, I think putting a soccer stadium down there is brilliant. And, anyway—especially if somebody else is going to build it. The cost of the baseball stadium was a real jaw-dropper and it was hard to—you know, that was one of those where you hold your breath and hope it works.

ROGERS: Mm-hmm, yeah.

AMBROSE: And fortunately it has. They are retiring the bonds right on time. [Interrupted by telephone.]

ROGERS: Go ahead. Baseball.

AMBROSE: So, we went forward with the baseball stadium. It has been a great success. And they are paying the bonds off on time. We did ...

ROGERS: Great.

AMBROSE: ... bonds for that and they are being paid back. [Third voice heard in background through this part of tape.] It has indeed spawned a lot of development. It's, at least for the moment, the gift that keeps on giving. [Interviewer laughs.] I'm not totally thrilled with the look of all the development that has gone on. Architecturally, I think most of it leaves a lot to be desired. But, while we can impose restrictions on height and setbacks and various other things, you can't legislate taste, obviously. And, you know, we're fortunate on Capitol Hill, because it is a historic district, and, so, there are some architectural amenities that we enjoy and that are protected. But we can't do that with a brand new place.

ROGERS: Were you also very much involved with the—speaking of the beauty of Capitol Hill, parts of it—the Capitol Hill Restoration Society?

AMBROSE: I have been off and on involved with the Restoration Society. And I am a member, I have always been a member.

ROGERS: Mm-hmm.

AMBROSE: But I certainly have been involved a lot with historic preservation issues and I often, while I was a councilmember, testified at both Historic Preservation Review Board hearings and zoning hearings on projects on Capitol Hill. I got very involved in a lot of projects on Capitol Hill and I got involved at the front end to make sure that some of the problems that developed in the neighborhood did not fester to a point where the development just didn't go forward. And we've had some problems recently with that, I think.

One of the other things, to circle back a little bit on schools, is ... a good friend of mine, Sharon Raimo, came to me while I was on the council and she was at that point—[Clears throat] excuse me. She had lived on the Hill with her husband for years and she had taught at Watkins. She was a special ed teacher and she had left Watkins and gone to work for a private special ed program called St. Coletta's that was located in Alexandria. And it was a program for severely disabled kids.

ROGERS: Mm.

AMBROSE: Most of them being both intellectually disadvantaged and, in many cases, physically as well. Things like cerebral palsy and cystic fibrosis, etc., which along with other kinds of developmental problems can be gestational. And a lot of D.C. kids were in the program in Alexandria, being paid for by the District of Columbia, because they were D.C. kids. And she said to me "I would really like to have a St. Coletta's in D.C." She said there are clearly so many kids in the D.C. school system—over half the kids that she had in Alexandria were from D.C. And, I said, "Let's do it. Let's find a place." So, we went

round and round, and there were some highly specific needs that she had in terms of transportation, since all those kids are transported by special buses to school.

ROGERS: Right.

AMBROSE: So, you had to have space for the buses to turn around and drop the kids off and all that. So, at any rate, we had looked at several spots that just didn't work out for one reason or another. And I finally said, "There is one spot and I'm not sure you're going to even want to look at it. But, I'm going to show it to you." And it was where St. Coletta's is now. It was what ...

ROGERS: Name me the street name and the address.

AMBROSE: It was at 19th and Independence [SE]. And that is the site of what used to be the old D.C. Jail. In fact, there was a wrought iron fence around it that still had a wrought sign at the top that said D.C. Jail. [Interviewer laughs] Well, when the big corrections facility was built on that site farther south ... On that site you had the corrections facility, the old D.C. General Hospital, and this vacant parcel that had been the old D.C. Jail. Well, the corrections facility was getting more and more crowded. And, in fact, it was grossly overcrowded. And that was causing a lot of problems in the neighborhood. They were letting people out at night.

ROGERS: Mm.

AMBROSE: I think people who had served their time and they would let them out and they would be roaming through the neighborhood. All kinds of problems. And it was so overcrowded that the potential for real problems developing within the population, the jail population were becoming worrisome to me. And, so, I wanted to ... The mayor was beginning to talk about expanding the jail and I thought no way do I want that jail expanded on the banks of the river right next to a residential community that has a lot of small kids in it. So, I said to Sharon, "How about putting St. Coletta's on this site?" So, I took her out to look at it and she's going "Ohhh, [Interviewer laughs] I don't know how my board's going to feel about this." And, I said, "Well, I tell you what." I said, "I think I can get you a good deal on the property." So, I talked to Tony Williams and I said, "Tony, you have to go out and see her school in Alexandria." I said, "If I had a child who had these kinds of problems I would think they had died and gone to heaven if I could get them in Sharon's school." Because it is so unlike most schools for kids with those levels of ...

ROGERS: Problems.

AMBROSE: ... of problems. And, so, Tony Williams went out, took a look at the school, got some other people involved, notably Jerry Golden, who gets involved in a lot of school things and is very well

connected financially and otherwise. And they decided, yeah, we need to have this school in the District. So, Tony was able to tell Sharon that she could lease the property for a dollar a year.

ROGERS: Isn't that wonderful.

AMBROSE: And that's how St. Coletta's got started. And then she went out and raised—she's dynamite—and she went out and raised the money to build the building. So, the city does not own the building. It owns the property and Sharon leases it. And the school now is also a private charter school as well. Well, it's a private school and it's a city charter school. So, it continues to get city funding along with private dollars from Alexandria and Maryland because they send kids who are within their programs.

ROGERS: So, look how much you have to be proud of.

AMBROSE: I'm very, very excited about St. Coletta's.

ROGERS: So, we've got Kingman, we've got St. Coletta's.

AMBROSE: St. Coletta's and the baseball stadium.

ROGERS: And the baseball stadium. That's wonderful. It's a great satisfaction.

AMBROSE: Now, the Anacostia Development Authority Adrian Fenty disbanded when he became mayor.

ROGERS: Hmm.

AMBROSE: For reasons I was not privy to. I think it was a mistake. I think some of what I'm unhappy about in terms of density and the look of it might have been avoided had we kept a single purpose corporation involved in it. And I think we might have had more cohesion with the southwest part of it, which is not yet started, of course. But, I'm very pleased with all those things.

I rewrote the Alcoholic Beverage Control [ABC] laws and the process we now have that involves voluntary agreements. That is, if a restaurateur or barkeep wants to open a place, they have to go through a whole process with the ANCs [Advisory Neighborhood Commissions] and the community associations, etc. And they have to enter into voluntary agreements before they're allowed to go forward with the license, which puts some controls on proliferation of ABC licenses.

ROGERS: Yeah.

AMBROSE: I rewrote the insurance laws of the city, which is not very sexy [Interviewer laughs] but is hugely important. And we created something called a captive insurance program, which I am not even going to begin ...

ROGERS: Yeah. [Laughs]

AMBROSE: ... to try to explain. Suffice to say that it allows large re-insurers to domicile in the District at a very favorable tax rate, which is similar to the kinds of laws they have in Delaware that make corporations want to domicile in Delaware.

ROGERS: Right.

AMBROSE: And it has been a very nice moneymaker for the District. And it continues to expand. So that's a solid financial ...

ROGERS: Thank you.

AMBROSE: ... contribution, I think, that I'm pleased about.

ROGERS: I'm curious. Did any of your children go into politics or into more than neighborhood work?

AMBROSE: Not yet. [Interviewer laughs] And I don't see any of them doing it.

ROGERS: And your parents? Were they ...

AMBROSE: My parents were not involved.

ROGERS: Were not. So, there you are.

AMBROSE: My grandfather was always politically involved. In Chicago, the whole ward system was very important. And my grandfather was a city employee and, so, he was involved. And I went to school with one of the Daley girls. I just always knew a lot of people who were politically involved.

ROGERS: So, Chicago genes ...

AMBROSE: It is Chicago genes.

ROGERS: ... that create all of these politicians. Really interesting.

So, now, we're getting near the end of your time on the council ...

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: ... which was, like, 2007 and ...

AMBROSE: Yes, I was first elected in a special election in '97. I was elected for my first full term again in '98 and then I was re-elected in 2002 for my second term. By the end of my second term, my health was failing and, so, it was clear to me that I really could not go through another campaign.

END OF TAPE 2/SIDE 1

TAPE 2/SIDE 2

ROGERS: You ran your last term ... Okay.

AMBROSE: So, I decided I couldn't run again because my health just wouldn't allow it. But, I have really enjoyed watching some of the things that I started come to fruition. One of the things in particular that I did get started was the process that has culminated in the Hill Center. While I was on the council, the Old Naval Hospital was just falling apart something awful and it had become a neighborhood nuisance. The grounds were something of an open air brothel.

ROGERS: Huh.

AMBROSE: The ANC met there but that's all that was going on. And I worked with folks in the community and we got a process going to put out an RFP, a Request for Proposals for something else to happen in that wonderful old building. And Tony Williams was very supportive of that. He was a wonderful mayor and he was wonderful to work with. And, so, the Old Naval Hospital Foundation was founded and I put the first six million dollars worth of funding for restoration of the building in one of the last budgets that I worked on while I was on the council. So, I was very happy to get that started. And I'm now on the board of the Hill Center and I just ...

ROGERS: Which is a mass success, don't you think?

AMBROSE: It has exceeded all expectations.

ROGERS: Mm-hmm.

AMBROSE: It is just fabulous, with the hard work of Nicky Cymrot in particular and lots of other people. But, it's a wonderful success.

ROGERS: One of the proposals—I remember this. One of the proposals for the building was to be a mayor's residence.

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: Do you remember that? [Laughs]

AMBROSE: Yes.

ROGERS: So this is a great ...

AMBROSE: So, I'm very happy about that. I am thrilled about St. Coletta's, which is serving so many children so well, and is a wonderful architectural addition to the city, actually.

ROGERS: Mm-hmm.

AMBROSE: Michael Graves, the architect, is extremely well known. So, I had a wonderful time. I was very involved in things. Two years ago I encouraged a young man who had been on my council staff, David Grasso, to run for an at-large seat. I chaired his campaign. And he won handily and is, I think, doing very, very well as an at-large councilmember now. I will probably almost surely be involved in the mayoral campaign that's coming up. If I were 15 years younger and healthier, [Interviewer laughs] there is nothing that I would like to do more than to be mayor ...

AMBROSE: ... of the District of Columbia. It really must take its place as a very special world capital. I don't think we're there yet, but I think we're on the cusp.

ROGERS: Well, Sharon, D. C. is very lucky to have you. Thank you so much for the interview. Thank you for all the contributions you've made to the city and I'm very happy that you allowed this interview and we need more people like you in the world.

AMBROSE: Thank you, Harriet.

ROGERS: So, thank you so much.

AMBROSE: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW