

THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Duncan Spencer

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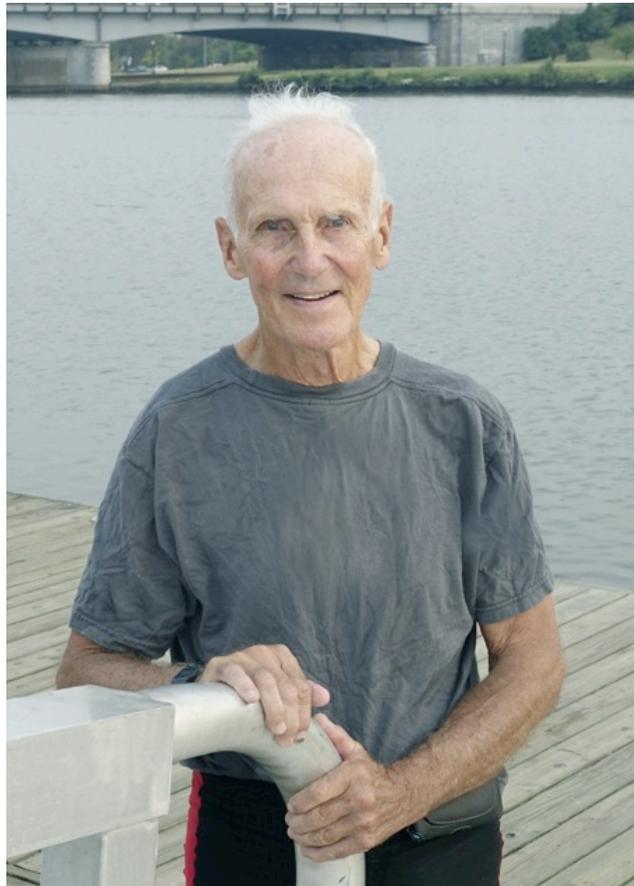


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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

[Note: the beginning of the original tape of this interview inadvertently contains some practice sounds and a discussion recorded during a practice session; in addition, about four minutes of silence occurs before this interview begins.]

[This transcript includes edits made by the interviewee, as well as others made by the editors for clarification and precise addresses. Most of these appear in brackets within the transcript.]

NEWTON: I'm Jennifer Newton. I'm here with Duncan Spencer at his home at 643 East Capitol Street and we're going to talk about his many years on Capitol Hill. Duncan, why don't we start by you telling me where you were born.

SPENCER: I was born in New York City in 1940 and lived in Manhattan, and after the war my father moved our home out to Westchester County. And after I'd finished college and post-graduate, I got a job opportunity in Washington and that was 1965. And it was an October day—I'll never forget it—coming down to see Washington for the first time.

NEWTON: And it was your first time? Seeing ...

SPENCER: It was my first time. And I had rented a house. It's still there, in the 800 block of Independence Avenue SE.

NEWTON: Do you remember the address by any chance?

SPENCER: 819. [819 Independence Avenue SE]

NEWTON: Great.

SPENCER: And it was owned by a man who's now dead, Ralph Hoitsma. And he was a very ...

NEWTON: Do you know how to spell that?

SPENCER: H-O-I-T-S-M-A. And he was a very good landlord and it was a wonderful time. We stayed there for three or four years. But I'll never forget the arrival. We arrived at night in a car, my wife and I, with all our equipment for a stay. And we went into the alley in the back of the house and started unpacking and carrying our suitcases in. And then I noticed that, after we'd almost finished, that there were a good many fewer suitcases than I had remembered packing. And it seemed like our rough introduction to Washington had been that somebody was making off with the suitcases [Interviewer laughs] and the furniture as fast as we were unloading them. And that was [Laughs] a rather rough introduction, but a good one I would say, to Capitol Hill in 1965.

NEWTON: You had rented the house sight unseen then?

SPENCER: Yeah.

NEWTON: Why did you choose Capitol Hill?

SPENCER: I chose Capitol Hill because I had looked at Georgetown and it seemed like it was far too precious. It was too far from the worksite which was The Washington Star building on 225 Virginia Avenue SE, a building which is now a large District of Columbia office building, completely redesigned and remade, that would have been a short bicycle ride from this house on Independence Avenue. So that seemed a match. And I'd also heard good things about Capitol Hill. And I liked the architecture very much. And I liked Ralph Hoitsma.

NEWTON: How did you make contact with him?

SPENCER: I can't remember whether it was a telephone call or notes or whatever, but ...

NEWTON: I'm thinking in the pre-internet days ...

SPENCER: Yeah.

NEWTON: ... how did you know?

SPENCER: But I found to my amazement that we both used the same bank, which was a New York bank.

NEWTON: Convenient.

SPENCER: And, so, that sort of made us colleagues from out of town.

NEWTON: Mm-hmm.

SPENCER: Though he had been a customer of that bank for years. And I don't know anything about Ralph's history, but he was a very nice and kind landlord. Not that I fell behind in the rent, but one time I remember—this is a silly aside—I can't remember what the rent was, but it came to \$3,200 a year, if you can imagine that.

NEWTON: Whoa.

SPENCER: This was for a house which you'd call an 18, 18 feet wide. It was a frame house. It's still there today, but it has a very, very deep yard.

NEWTON: Uh-huh. In the back? Or up front?

SPENCER: In the back ...

NEWTON: Uh-huh.

SPENCER: ... going to a very nice, what I would call, original fabric alley, an alley which is paved with those fantastically huge asphalt paving stones ...

NEWTON: Oh, yeah.

SPENCER: ... which last so well. But, anyway, I said “Ralph, how would you like it if I paid you the whole sum for the year in advance?” And he said, “That would be good. I’ll give you a ten percent discount.” And “Would you like to buy the house?” And I said, “Well, I don’t know. What do you want for it?” And he said, “Well, let’s see. Thirty-two hundred a year, I wanted to make ten percent off the rental. Thirty-two thousand would do.” And I said, “Well, I don’t have that much money on hand, [Interviewer laughs] so I think we’ll wait for a while on that.” Had I done it.

NEWTON: Yeah.

SPENCER: Had I done it. [Interviewer laughs] But, anyway. So many people think that.

NEWTON: Lots of real estate stories.

SPENCER: Anyway, we settled in there and that was my first time in Washington. I had a motorcycle. We had a car. Children were coming. My first wife was from Massachusetts via Connecticut College and we had spent our last year together previous to this at Oxford in England. So, it was another urban setting, quite different than North Oxford, but it was interesting. And she was an architect and completely interested in the restoration idea and the idea of pioneering in this area of beautiful period buildings that were more or less abandoned. And I’m sure many other respondents for this series have told the story of what happened in ’54 after President Eisenhower integrated the schools in Washington as a leader for the whole nation. He decided we’re going to do these schools to show that Washington, DC would obey the law, *Brown v. Board of Education*. And I had heard, though I didn’t experience this, that on the day after he announced that the schools were going to be [de]segregated, these neighborhoods completely cleared out of the white middle class residents that had been here. And big row houses like the one we’re sitting in were sold for \$6,000 or \$7,000, if they could find a buyer, and lesser houses were simply left with the doors open. That was in ’54 or ’55. Then, gradually, somebody discovered the restoration idea. And I know that people at the [Capitol Hill] Restoration Society know a great deal about this and can tell

it much better than I. But, things started going again. And, so, when I got here in '65, the Restoration Society was very, very important, far more important than it seems today.

NEWTON: Uh-huh.

SPENCER: And they had meetings and they were trying to hold the line on development and they were doing things that we thought were generally pretty good. It wasn't the kind of silly bickering about vinyl windows that we have now. It was like let's save this neighborhood, let's encourage people to buy here, stuff like that.

NEWTON: When you said that there were houses abandoned—literally when you ...

SPENCER: Literally abandoned.

NEWTON: By '65 there were still ...

SPENCER: Yeah.

NEWTON: ... empty houses in a block?

SPENCER: Right across in this block and the next block, in the 500 block, there was a little tavern called Mary's Blue Room and a couple of small little houses where the new, where Stephanie Deutsch lives [500 East Capitol Street NE].

NEWTON: Um-hmm.

SPENCER: And those three beautiful new or newish row houses ...

NEWTON: This is in the 500 block of East Capitol Street.

SPENCER: Yeah, the 500 block of East Capitol. That was a very rundown block. And I remember [laughs] one of my wife's many restoration efforts was to try to save Mary's Blue Room, which she quite righteously and correctly thought was a historic building worth preserving and a commercial enterprise that should be on the street. But, unable to do that, she was the kind of person who would stand in front of bulldozers with signs.

NEWTON: Wow.

SPENCER: She died tragically two years ago in an automobile accident. But, I've always admired her steadfast preservationist work here, which is—and that sort of colored our lives. She was an architect. She worked with Harry Weese who was the architect of the Metro.

NEWTON: Weese is spelled?

SPENCER: W-E-E-S-E.

NEWTON: That's right. Thank you.

SPENCER: He was the overall architect of the Metro and created the, I think, quite beautiful designs in the coffered in the roof, which give it such a distinctive look and gave it that incredibly spacious and very luxurious air that it has. I think it's one of the most luxurious and beautifully appointed subways in the world. But, she worked for Harry and she did a lot of the signage, which I think is terrible, but, anyway, [Interviewer laughs] it was well designed. The signage and she did the little Metro Park. She worked on those projects.

NEWTON: Metro, though, was just a dream in '65 ...

SPENCER: Was just a dream.

NEWTON: ... right, when you ...

SPENCER: I'm leaping ahead because it was just beginning to be built.

NEWTON: I'm just trying to think, put it in context. It was on the drawing boards then? Did you know ...

SPENCER: It was on the drawing board and then when it finally launched it was a hugely disruptive project all over the city, but particularly here on Capitol Hill where we had two stations quite close, Capitol South and Eastern Market. And it was all—every day there was a controversy about the names and where things were going to go and how we were going to get by using Pennsylvania Avenue. Pennsylvania Avenue had to be dug up completely to make the tunnels and blah blah blah. We could go on about the Metro forever. But it was at the time one of the largest civic projects ever undertaken in the world, to put a subway underneath a city which had already been pretty well built out.

NEWTON: Yeah.

SPENCER: So that was an exciting element. I was a junior reporter at The Washington Post. I started out doing obituaries and then ...

NEWTON: The Post or the Star?

SPENCER: At the Star.

NEWTON: Okay.

SPENCER: Excuse me. The Evening Star. If I said the Post, excuse me. And we were, at that point, in a lively newspaper fight with The Washington Post for circulation. It was an impossible situation for The Washington Star for one simple reason. And that was that the Star had chosen to put its new publishing plant right next to the Southwest-Southeast freeway.

NEWTON: And the freeway was built when the Star chose ...

SPENCER: Right.

NEWTON: ... that building site.

SPENCER: And the Star asked for the Sixth Street ramp to be built.

NEWTON: Oh, really.

SPENCER: And it's a ramp which is very unlike any other ramp because of the high speed merge and all that. It's not a very safe ramp, but they got their way. And their thought was that they could—everything was included in that building, production, printing and distribution.

NEWTON: And editorial, I guess.

SPENCER: Yeah.

NEWTON: Oh, wow.

SPENCER: We produced the paper there and edited it there and printed it there and the trucks would go out on the ramp. However, they forgot one thing. And that was the suburbanization of Washington. So, it became the impossible logistical situation of us trying to put out a paper from noon until 4:30 in the afternoon and distribute it against the Post putting their paper to bed at 9:00 at night and having all night to distribute it. Well, it could not work.

NEWTON: Yeah.

SPENCER: Now, I think most people who thought about it would say now in hindsight the Star should have just gone head to head as a morning paper and fought for market share, which they could have survived with. But, anyway, that's another story. A newspaper story.

NEWTON: But it is interesting. I hadn't focused on the fact that the editorial was down there as well. I always thought it was just a printing plant.

SPENCER: I know.

NEWTON: Were there a lot of reporters that lived on the Hill ...

SPENCER: Yes.

NEWTON: ... as a consequence?

SPENCER: There were all sorts of famous addresses on the Hill. [Before moving to Southeast] The Star had a beautiful, luxurious building at 11th and Penn [NW], which is now one of the highest rent buildings in the city, because the Noyeses and the Kauffmanns, the two families that owned it, thought of the Star as the leader in Washington. And their luxurious building, though I never saw this, had a billiard room, [Interviewer laughs] had a lunchroom, had a bar, and all sorts of turn-of-the-century appointments. Of course, when we decided to go modern, the new building was quite industrial in feel. But it was considered to be number one because it had the presses in the bottom, it had the loading dock in the back, it had the trucks waiting in the Star garage, which was a high-rise garage—that was a brand new thing—and then above that on the third floor were the editorial offices where the editor of the newspaper sat, a room filled with smoke [Interviewer laughs], and above that were the executive offices, where the Kauffmanns and the Noyeses held forth. And to one side was the hot type print creation. So, you could smell the smoldering lead, you could smell the cigarettes, you could almost hear the clink of the whiskey bottles [Interviewer laughs] in certain drawers. It was an old-fashioned newsroom and those that knew it certainly loved it and [Laughs] loved it even better after they left it.

NEWTON: And realized what they'd lost perhaps. So, what are the hours for an afternoon paper? You're writing ...

SPENCER: There was an overnight shift to prepare for the next day, which started at about 6:00 pm. And then there was a 6:00 am shift and then there was a 9:00 am shift. It was night side and day side and early morning. So, that was a 24 hour operation.

NEWTON: I see. But for a reporter, then, you just worked a shift, one of those shifts.

SPENCER: Right.

NEWTON: So, what time did the paper go to bed?

SPENCER: The last, final edition, what we used to call "pan of grease burns three," [Interviewer laughs] I think you had to have everything ready by 4:00 pm. And then the trucks would go out into the maelstrom ...

NEWTON: Of the Southeast Freeway.

SPENCER: Of the Southeast Freeway. [Interviewer laughs]

NEWTON: So what was the neighborhood like around that brand new luxurious building? I can't imagine it was very nice. [Laughing]

SPENCER: [Laughs] All the old timers had said ruefully, "We thought everything would be different and better in the new building." Well, the new building was fine and it was very efficient. And the presses were presses that even the Post envied. And so that was all very good. Mechanically it was very good. But it was in a neighborhood that would scare the devil out of you. Every reporter had their car broken into. Several people were mugged. Nobody was killed. But it was right on the edge of a large public housing area. And sociologists have later discovered to their surprise that you put enough poor people together in crowded conditions you might as well draw a compass around that thing and within a half a mile is going to be a lot of crime. Poor people want the things that other people have. So, it wasn't very salubrious from that point of view. And we were advised never to go to lunch up on Pennsylvania Avenue alone ...

NEWTON: Oh, my gosh.

SPENCER: ... because it was too dangerous. And women were, of course, given other advises. However, we still did go to lunch a lot. There was a place called Harrigan's down on M Street [SW on the waterfront]. I can't remember it now. But, we went to the Southwest waterfront and we went to Henry's. That was the lunch spot, which is still there ...

NEWTON: Mr. Henry's on Sixth.

SPENCER: Yeah, Henry's on Sixth.

NEWTON: That was there then.

SPENCER: Yeah, which is another great icon of Capitol Hill. Henry Yaffe came down from Baltimore as a sort of amateur antiques dealer with a desire to get rid of all the junk in his storeroom. [Interviewer laughs] And big ideas of some kind. And he landed on that place. Pennsylvania Avenue [SE], which is now a fairly sophisticated shopping street, was then just a bunch of trucker bars. Henry's was the first sort of civilized—to be a snob—place there. And Henry decorated it with his insane pictures, many of which are still there, and his antiques and his character, which was an extraordinary character. A very genial, a perfect host, and a wildly [bohemian] person. And, of course, all the reporters at the *Star* were attracted to this, and we'd take groups of five or six of the dayside people who would go up at noon and come

staggering back at 3:00 and try to get ready for the last rush of the day. I don't know how some of the old columnists did it. [Interviewer laughs]

NEWTON: Would you walk between ...

SPENCER: Oh, yeah.

NEWTON: Okay.

SPENCER: We'd walk up Third Street, past what was called Heartbreak Hotel, which was a [Laughs] rental house which was used by many of the divorcing, the ever divorcing and separating couples that make up newspaperdom. [Both laugh] So, it was always a joke, who had checked into Heartbreak Hotel this month.

NEWTON: You're talking about assignations in ...

SPENCER: No, no.

NEWTON: ... or moving out.

SPENCER: I'm talking about the guy, they split up and now poor old Joe has to find a place to live because his wife has got the house. Well, there's Heartbreak Hotel. [Later identified as the Norwood at 222 Third Street SE.]

NEWTON: Right. [Laughs] So, there was not a bar right near the Star building at all.

SPENCER: No, there was nothing near the Star building except the Giddings School, which is now Results [the Gym], which is across the Freeway, on the left. Fill me in.

NEWTON: Garfield Park?

SPENCER: Garfield Park, but at that point was a wild wilderness and not a very safe place.

NEWTON: You wouldn't walk through there.

SPENCER: You wouldn't walk through Garfield Park, no. Because the trash transfer station was just on the other side of New Jersey Avenue, a malodorous place, and it had—Mr. Phillips [William Phillips], who deserves a great deal of credit for heading the restoration of that park, had not gotten into action in the late 60s and it was kind of a wilderness. So, we'd walk up four or five blocks to get to South Carolina [SE] and then you were getting more into the civilized Hill. And then we'd take a right and head up to Henry's.

NEWTON: But you wouldn't do this alone is what you're ...

SPENCER: Right.

NEWTON: [Laughs] Just the Star—so you went to the Star in '65.

SPENCER: Right.

NEWTON: It lasted another 15 ...

SPENCER: It lasted 'til the summer of '81.

NEWTON: Okay. Against, as you point out, the difficulties of being an afternoon paper.

SPENCER: Right. Well, the afternoon paper and then it was bought by Joe Albritton ...

NEWTON: Uh-huh.

SPENCER: ... who wasn't really a newspaper man and didn't quite know what he wanted to do with it. And then it was bought by Time Inc., as I saw it, [it was treated] as a place to stash second-rate executives. And that was a disaster because they had no idea how to run a daily newspaper, none whatsoever. I knew we were in terrible trouble when the new Editor-in-Chief, Murray Gart, was introducing himself to people by inviting them into his office, and he had had workmen put up a gigantic map of the world to cover one wall.

NEWTON: His empire? [Laughing]

SPENCER: If there was any hope for us it was as a completely local newspaper which could beat the Post at local stuff. And there I saw, oh, my god, this is—we're doomed.

NEWTON: Aah. So '81.

SPENCER: '81.

NEWTON: By then—Let's go back.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

NEWTON: Well, before the tape ran out I was asking—we were talking about ...

SPENCER: Right.

NEWTON: ... your own personal chronology. You were living at 819 Independence Avenue.

SPENCER: Independence Avenue.

NEWTON: Moved there in '65.

SPENCER: Right.

NEWTON: Then—how long were you there? You were renting from Mr. Hoitsma.

SPENCER: I was renting from Mr. Hoitsma and I think around '69 my ex-wife Mary McNaught Spencer wanted to buy a house. Sixty-nine was a very important year for me. I wanted to leave The Washington Star and do a sailing adventure, which I did with a friend of mine who'd been wounded in Viet Nam. We took a small sailboat and sailed across the Atlantic together. And it was during that time, in the summer of '69, that my ex decided that she needed to move to another house. And we looked at houses—the first one we wanted to buy was at Third and East Capitol by the famous cobblestone alley, one of those beautiful houses near St. Mark's Church.

NEWTON: Yeah.

SPENCER: That seemed too small, if you can believe it. [Interviewer laughs] And then we found this house and we bought it in '70, I think it was, for \$53,000.

NEWTON: Mmh.

SPENCER: I looked up the deed and the plat down in records and the house was built in 1888, I think, and the improvements were listed as \$16,000. In other words, the house was built for \$16,000.

NEWTON: Mmh.

SPENCER: It turned out to have been a huge bargain and it was a beautiful house, but the story I like to remember about it—my father came to this country from Scotland in '21. And he was always amazed by the richness of America, because he had been born in Glasgow and brought up in Paisley near Glasgow, and our family was in the shipping business. And after—he fought in the first war—and after the war times were not good for the shipping business and he sold out his share and moved to this country and moved to New York and went into business and did well.

NEWTON: Shipping or ...?

SPENCER: No, he went into the financial business. He started as a runner on Wall Street.

NEWTON: Oh, yeah.

SPENCER: In the days before electronics, when people wanted to buy a group of shares, they'd hand a slip of paper to a boy and the boy would run them. Of course he wasn't a boy, he was about a 26-year-old man. But he wanted a start and that's how he started. But, when I called him up and said, "Dad, I'm thinking of buying a house in Washington, DC." And he says, "Where is it?" And I said, "It's on East Capitol Street. It's six blocks from the Capitol." And, I'll never forget this, he says, "The capitol of what?" [Interviewer laughs] because he had no great faith in my financial acuity. And I said, "The Capitol of United States." He said, "You mean the whole shebang?", he said. And I said, "Yes, that's right." He said, "Buy it, whatever the price." Because he was living on the east side of Manhattan at East 64th Street and he was a great, a very smart real estate man, and he could not imagine a house six blocks from Gracie Mansion in New York [the home of the mayor of New York City] being sold for \$53,000. So in his mind, it had to be a value.

NEWTON: Very canny.

SPENCER: Very canny. [Interviewer laughs] And, so, we got this house and ...

NEWTON: It wasn't vacant though.

SPENCER: No, it wasn't vacant. But it had been cut up into apartments.

NEWTON: Who was the prior owner?

SPENCER: I can't remember the name of the prior owner. They were an Australian couple. They had done what we call a lipstick job, because it had been a rooming house. In fact, there were several houses on East Capitol which sported the green fabric rugs on the front stoop and the neon sign which said "Rooms" ...

NEWTON: Oh.

SPENCER: ... in the front window. And that was what East Capitol Street was. There were some—there were houses like this which were cut up into apartments. There were rooming houses. I don't know if there were any gaps in the teeth. And then, of course, there was the big, the Catholic girls' school, St. Cecilia's, here, which is now the Senate Little Tots, Little Scholars as it's called. [Library of Congress's Little Scholars.]

NEWTON: [Laughing] Right.

SPENCER: But even here at Sixth and East Capitol, we thought we were pretty close to the edge of civilization.

NEWTON: Mm-hmm.

SPENCER: Tenth Street was the pale and then the park, the park.

NEWTON: Lincoln Park you're talking about.

SPENCER: Yeah. It was a place to go running. And the legend was—I don't want to get in all the crime business really—but the legend was that there was once a fence and a hedge around the perimeter of Lincoln Park. And the urban legend among the so-called pioneers was that oh, yeah, the cops took that down so they could have a clear field of fire.

NEWTON: [Laughs] Might be—I guess it would be safer for running if you weren't sort of enclosed in it.

SPENCER: Yeah. Right.

NEWTON: But you ran up that way?

SPENCER: Yeah.

NEWTON: How much—did you go no farther than that?

SPENCER: No, I did my four laps around Lincoln Park, which is about a mile and a quarter, and as a result I've had a knee operation. [Interviewer laughs] But, anyway, that's another subject. So, we loved this house and we loved this—the alley was excellent. In a way it was a better alley than 819 Independence, though that was a wonderful alley of play. It was a wonderful play alley.

NEWTON: Oh, for kids.

SPENCER: Yeah, for kids.

NEWTON: You had at that point how many kids?

SPENCER: Two.

NEWTON: Two.

SPENCER: Right. Yeah.

NEWTON: And how old were they when you moved in here?

SPENCER: Oh, gosh.

NEWTON: Roughly, roughly.

SPENCER: I can't remember. They were little guys. Little guys. And it was—the [Capitol Hill] Day School wasn't really organized. For somebody from New York who'd been brought up in my social class the public schools [of Washington] were simply not a [possibility]. It looked like absolute chaos had reigned. Brent was the only bright light and even that, I don't know why, but we chose the private school route. The Montessori school and later the Day School. But, that's a different subject.

NEWTON: But the children, the first kids, didn't go to the Day School? Or they did?

SPENCER: They did.

NEWTON: Oh, okay.

SPENCER: All of them.

NEWTON: All of them went.

SPENCER: Right. In fact, all five of my children have been to the Day School.

NEWTON: And that's Capitol Hill Day School.

SPENCER: Right. Capitol Hill Day School.

NEWTON: Which at the time was not located on Garfield Park where it is now. It was ...

SPENCER: I can't remember.

NEWTON: ... in a couple of churches, I think, church basements I think I remember hearing.

SPENCER: Right. Well, we did the Montessori school and then the Day School.

NEWTON: And that was private at the time?

SPENCER: Right, it was private.

NEWTON: Mm-hmm. So your kids played out in the alley.

SPENCER: Yeah, right.

NEWTON: Who did they play with?

SPENCER: Well, I can't believe now the habits that are exhibited here with children. I would say that our children had to be called free-range children.

NEWTON: In the new parlance.

SPENCER: Yeah. They played in the alley. They were not supervised. They did not have strollers. They did not have helmets. They just rambled around and they did get to know a good number of people that way who became lifelong friends. We had a day helper, because we were both working, [a black lady] who worked from about 10:00 in the morning to 5:00 in the afternoon. And that was it. And she put a very loose rein—there was no strolling around to Turtle Park. The kids more or less were shoved out the back and that was it. We didn't have the garage then. It was just open, open parking out there.

NEWTON: So were there a lot of other kids around?

SPENCER: There were a lot of other kids.

NEWTON: So they just all went out and played.

SPENCER: Yeah. With the Wilsons, three boys—Darrick, Michael, and Kevin Wilson. [There was the Nordhaus family with two children, Hannah, now a distinguished author and Ted, now one of the top experts on global weather and its effects and causes. Jean, their mother is a poet and Bob Nordhaus is a lawyer. We were lucky to have them all as neighbors who became friends for life.]

The kids all walked to school—and then when they [my children] went to Maret [School and Georgetown Day and Field School], they learned to use the bus system. I can't imagine anyone doing that now.

NEWTON: City bus.

SPENCER: Yeah. 96 [bus] I think it is. But they were definitely free-range and I think benefitted greatly from it. Not only did they play in the alley but they also discovered how to get on the roofs of East Capitol and discovered that you could walk practically entirely around the block on the roofs.

[Interviewer laughs] All sorts of adventures like that.

NEWTON: And how did you ever find that out? You saw them up there? Or they told you?

SPENCER: Well, I found that out by neighbors complaining.

NEWTON: [Laughs] Hearing the steps.

SPENCER: Yeah, right. But I think they all look back with fondness on that childhood. And, now that they're having children of their own, they're amazed at how careful they are because fashions have changed so much. But, we took our chances and I guess we were very lucky.

NEWTON: I think, given your introduction to the Hill with the suitcases being stolen, it was also rather brave. Or were you not, did you not make a connection between crime and children?

SPENCER: I don't know. My experience with crime in this city has not been good. I would say—I mean to—you'll probably want to take this out of the article—but I've been held up by gun, with the gun fired. I've been held up by knife. My wife, my first wife, was raped. My second wife [Megan Rosenfeld] was carjacked. I think we've been burglarized six or seven times. I've had at least two cars stolen. It's, you know, it's not been a peaceful neighborhood. But after a while, if you're a reporter you get totally used to it and you just have to say, well, I've been lucky and I hope I know how to behave, now don't put up a big fuss, give them the money. But certainly crime was something that was on everyone's mind who lived on the Hill in the 60s and 70s. And I certainly am one of those who has got to say that Marion did not help suppress crime in Washington.

NEWTON: Marion Barry, the mayor.

SPENCER: Yeah. I mean I'm not going to diatribe against our lost leader, but a sight I will never forget from the Freeway [due south at the Sixth Street SE ramp] there was a building that some graffiti artist had painted [in large letters], "For a cocaine city, vote Barry."

NEWTON: [Laughs] Oh, dear. Now, I mean, that's quite a litany of crimes.

SPENCER: Yeah.

NEWTON: Do you think of yourself as having been unlucky or was that a ...

SPENCER: I think I was ...

NEWTON: ... pretty common ...

SPENCER: I think I was careless.

NEWTON: What about [gunpoint]?

SPENCER: That happened right out here in the alley. It was five or six years ago. I had dealt with, I had faced crime enough times so that I had a highly developed sense of the danger when I saw another person. When I came back from the gym, I got out of my car having turned into the alley. I saw a guy, who would

fit the category of what I always categorized as what is his business here, on A Street? So that was a little suspicion rising. So I got out of my car. The next thing I hear is “Gimme the money.” And he has a gun in his hand. And I didn’t have any money because I was just in gym clothes. And I thought, well, I’ve got to get my hands on that gun. So I grabbed for the gun. And we were wrestling with the gun and the gun went off.

NEWTON: Mmh.

SPENCER: And the bullet went about an inch from my head, which was very lucky, and then he fled with the gun. The police [searched the alley and] found the spent cartridge and that guy was eventually nailed for armed robbery and I hope is spending a long time in jail. But that was the last major crime that I experienced, but it was [the most telling because of the gun and the senselessness of the whole thing].

NEWTON: ... and the taking of your suitcases when you first moved here was the first.

SPENCER: The first one, right.

NEWTON: So that’s over 40-some years.

SPENCER: Right.

NEWTON: Yeah.

SPENCER: The crime never bothered me that much. I don’t—everybody else was a lot more excited about it than I was.

NEWTON: Because you felt it was part of living in an urban ...

SPENCER: It was part of city life and especially life in a city like this, which is so divided by neighborhood and income, class and race that you’re going to have a lot of friction on the edges. I mean that’s the way I look at it.

NEWTON: And I guess Capitol Hill was an edge ...

SPENCER: Yeah. It was an edge ...

NEWTON: ... for many years.

SPENCER: ... but much less now. As you said, Jen, it’s pushed out further and further and has gentrified further and further. And I don’t hold with those people who say “Oh, give me the good old ghetto where

you could get what you want on the corner.” I think it’s much preferable to have nice, ordinary middle class people. I’m sure I’ll be condemned for that, but so be it.

NEWTON: Oh, I think there’re a lot who would agree with you.

SPENCER: Yeah.

NEWTON: When you say “get what you want[ed] on the corner,” it reminds me of Mary’s Little Blue Room, which I was interested in. Were there other businesses—so you’re thinking that back in the day there were more businesses scattered around.

SPENCER: Yeah, there were more corner stores. There were more corner stores. There was a corner store right on the corner here at Seventh, right across from that apartment building, I think there was a ... Wait a minute. I’m talking about Independence Avenue. There was a corner store at the corner of Ninth and Independence that’s gone. There were regular what they used to call mom-and-pops scattered all over the place, because it was really a very Southern city. Those corner buildings were sort of made to serve their little mini-neighborhoods and most of them have disappeared.

NEWTON: Or been made into houses. People did live above the store?

SPENCER: Yep. Or they came in. Like that one at Ninth and Independence. There was an older white couple and I know that they had fled and they came in every day because you could see their upstairs was a mess. But, [laughs] one story I love to tell about commerce on East Capitol was the Congress Market, which had been a corner store for ages and was still a corner store when a Korean couple, the In Lee [family] bought it 15 or 20 years ago it was. And I remember them working away. They worked from 7:00 in the morning till 11:00 at night. I suppose all family and friends, the mother and father, two sons, you get to know people very well. Well, one time the Torraine, which is now a swanky apartment building but then was [kind of] a flop house ...

NEWTON: Right straight across East Capitol, right [424 East Capitol Street]?

SPENCER: ...[The Torraine] had two famous old male single drunks living there. And they would show up at the Congress Market at 10:00 every morning without fail to get their morning beers. And I remember one New Year’s Day, and it must have been 15 or 20 years ago when the In Lees were still in charge, Mr. In Lee [had made] a sign saying “Half Day New Year’s Day.” So, as I was passing, I suppose I was walking the dog or something, there [the two of them] were, leaning on the Redskins trash can and one was saying to the other, “Those foreigners, we let them in here, we give them everything, and then they take advantage.”

NEWTON: [Laughs] Took a half a day off once in a while.

SPENCER: Yeah, took a half a day off after three or four years of solid [daily labor], and the urban legend was that when Mr. In Lee sold his business he sold it to [another Asian family]—I think the family [name] is Yun,

NEWTON: Not as friendly.

SPENCER: No, not as friendly. But for the In Lee [family, the end of the rainbow. The legend is that when Mr. In Lee finally bought the entire building, he brought cash money to the settlement], and it was something like \$820,000 in bills in a shoebox, and it was a cash transaction. [Laughs]

NEWTON: Oh, my gosh.

SPENCER: That was the urban legend. [Interviewer laughs] But, anyway, I was very glad to see the store continuing but miss the In Lees who were a very delightful family. And their sons went on in business [retail].

NEWTON: Well, their children, the grandchildren must be grown now.

SPENCER: Right.

NEWTON: I remember they were around the store. Yeah. Were they the first Korean owners of the corner store?

SPENCER: You know, I think the Eastern Market [corner store at 400 East Capitol Street] ... it seems like those Koreans came later.

NEWTON: I think so too.

SPENCER: But we had those two semi-permanent businesses. And then the total mystery store: [Morton's Pharmacy still operating today] up here at Eighth Street and East Capitol. [Ed: a confusing discussion that clarifies distinction between Morton's and Grubb's pharmacies was deleted from here.] [Morton's has very little custom but it goes on.] And then there was a bank up there which is now a beautiful restored home [822 East Capitol Street].

NEWTON: I was thinking of some of the odd buildings and wondering if they hadn't been commercial at one point. You can see the ghosts if you think about it along the street.

SPENCER: I know. Like the banking ghosts of that one and the van Sweden [landscape design business in a former] bank down on Eighth, on the left hand side looking south on Eighth Street [800 G Street SE].

NEWTON: Oehme and van Sweden.

SPENCER: Oehme and Jamie van Sweden turned that into a very beautiful office and that was a bank, of course. [They are a famed high end landscape firm, an expert in exotic grasses.] Anybody else can talk about Eighth Street. Eighth Street just exploded [in the restaurant boom of the last 10 years].

NEWTON: Yeah. What was it like—do you remember it? Did you ever go there?

SPENCER: Yeah. There were auto parts there. The only remnant is the paint store. There were auto parts, there were—this is so difficult to remember what was there when something else has come in. But the Oriental restaurant had been there for a great long time and the valet shop down right across from the Marine Barracks gate had been there for a long time and the [two] barber shop[s] right [close to] the Barracks gate had been there for a long time. [One of the shops is Brice's.]

NEWTON: I don't know if it's [Brice's] still there now that I think about it.

SPENCER: Oh, it is, but I think he sold recently.

NEWTON: Ah.

SPENCER: That was a great gathering place. It was a black barber shop but whites could go in and be welcomed.

NEWTON: Did you get your hair cut there?

SPENCER: Yes, I did, many times and I always was amazed by how much social activity was going on there that had nothing to do with hair cutting. There was a phone booth in the corner that I think somebody had arranged so that you could make calls for free or with a slug or something. But everybody was coming in there and making calls and it was like you go to Brice's to catch up with what's going on in the neighborhood, especially if you're there in the daytime and you want to kill some time, it's a great place. So that was—Eighth Street was very, very different. I can't give you the names of—the thing I miss is the auto parts.

NEWTON: Mm-hmm.

SPENCER: I miss the auto parts store and the two choices of hair cutters. You could go to the Marine Corps or you could go to the black barber.

NEWTON: And you went to both ...

SPENCER: Yes.

NEWTON: ... over time?

SPENCER: That's right. You'd always get the same job at the Marine Corps.

NEWTON: [Laughs] The buzz cut.

SPENCER: Yeah, the buzz cut. That was good.

NEWTON: I'm trying to think of what other businesses might have been right on East Capitol Street, which is pretty much—except for the two markets—now a residential street. Can you think of any others?

SPENCER: Yeah. There was a Safeway store or a Peoples Drug Store at the corner of East Capitol and [11th], right where it hits the park, on the left hand side.

NEWTON: Oh.

SPENCER: On the left hand side is a large brick building which was a drug store.

NEWTON: Wow.

SPENCER: A Peoples Drug Store. And on Fourth there was a—we all remember the Moscow Safeway on Seventh, which has now been replaced by an Amy Weinstein building, the medical building [228 Seventh Street SE]. But not many remember the Safeway on [Eighth Street NE at C], which had a ramp for parking on the roof and is now a dialysis clinic. That was a little Safeway store. I'm trying to think of others. Coffees. Coffee had not become the fantastic thing it is now.

NEWTON: Where did you get coffee? Did you get coffee?

SPENCER: If you were swanky and snobbish you went downtown and got it at Swing's.

NEWTON: Oh, yeah.

SPENCER: Yeah. Or you got Maxwell House and cooked it up in your percolator ...

NEWTON: Right.

SPENCER: ... which would be considered absolutely beyond the pale now.

NEWTON: And you probably wouldn't buy it out, would you?

SPENCER: No.

NEWTON: Have it at home. [Laughs]

SPENCER: Right. Have it at home. And [laughs] the idea of paying 50 cents for a cup of coffee would have been an outrage, but much less \$2.35.

NEWTON: Yeah, that's been a social change beyond the neighborhood [Laughs] I think.

SPENCER: Right. But the whole of commercial interest just went with the population, I'm sure. As more and more restoration-minded people, people who had solid jobs, people who worked for the government or for lobbyists or—you know, there's a huge tail behind Congress and the Executive, larger every year. It seems more and more people are required to run the government, and more and more people have eschewed the suburbs for urban living. I think that's a trend that's true. And with them all the things that upper middle class people want have come in and arrived.

NEWTON: Including the neighborhood, I think, in some way.

SPENCER: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

NEWTON: Yeah. I know you have four or five children ...

SPENCER: Five.

NEWTON: ... that span a range.

SPENCER: Right.

NEWTON: And I'm kind of curious. Do they ever talk about the difference in the neighborhood that they grew up in, because in a way they grew up in very different neighborhoods, didn't they?

SPENCER: Right. That's very funny you should mention that because the kids, the second lot of kids—my first lot are all in their 40s now ...

NEWTON: Okay. 40s.

SPENCER: And the second lot, who are in their late 20s or early 30s, like Marina is 28 and Joe is 30, they all sort of envy the tales from the old ghetto, the tales from rough and tough Capitol Hill, the tales from cowboy times. [Interviewer laughs] They thought their time was rather tame. In fact, [Laughs] Joe made up this—it was all having to do with his wedding last summer—he made up this history of himself, as he said. He said in a toast he said he was brought up splitting kindling and selling it at Eastern Market.

NEWTON: And is that true?

SPENCER: No. [Interviewer laughs] No, that was another period. After the *Star* folded, there were a couple of very rough years for me. I had a lot of tuition expenses and whatnot. I never made any money in the newspaper business but I had written a book that made some money and I went to work as a house painter and luckily—let's see, by '81 I was divorced but not married again. I was a house painter with Roger Tressolini, a well-known neighborhood figure.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

TAPE 2/ SIDE 1

NEWTON: So, when the tape ran out, yet again, we were talking about the years, the financial years after the *Star* went under and you were working ...

SPENCER: Right.

NEWTON: ... as a house painter. Tell us a little more about that.

SPENCER: When the *Star* went down I was luckily on an assignment covering a murder trial, a famous murder trial, Jean Harris, the Madeira School headmistress. And I was lucky enough to get a book out of it. But it was a disaster financially, not only for me but for most of the reporters there.

NEWTON: The fall of the *Star*.

SPENCER: The fall of the *Star*. And before the money started coming in from this paperback book, which sold pretty well, there was real financial pressure and I took up house painting, which was something I knew how to do, with another beloved neighborhood character, Roger Tressolini, who had been a soccer coach and a good friend of mine all through my time at Capitol Hill. And Roger is now gone. But we worked for another character who lived on Fifth Street called Basilio Ciocci.

NEWTON: And we're going to have to spell that.

SPENCER: C-I-O-C-C-I, C-I-O-C-C-I. Basilio is gone also. But he was one of the many mini-developers who would buy properties, repair them, and sell them again. This was basically a lipstick job type of operation. He'd get a house, he would fix it up, and he would sell it as quickly as possible. And from the house-painting point of view it was a nightmare because we would be bidding with other painters to get these jobs. There was always a problem in these old houses. Either the plaster was falling down, the walls were rough, the whole thing. And Basilio would be just pushing us to get the job finished. So we'd be racing through these jobs and we had [Laughs] another assistant, a Yugoslav named Paul, who always—and I can't remember his surname, it was too complicated. He had a paper hat, which he'd

made out of a sheet of newspaper, an old painter style. You fold it a certain way it becomes a cap to keep the paint out of your hair. And Paul would be laboring away on a floor doing some impossible task, like hand-sanding an entire ancient floor, and he would be muttering “Nehver finish, nehver finish, nehver finish.” [Interviewer laughs] And Basilio would come swinging by with his leather jacket and his shiny shoes and his perfectly accented Italian, he’d say “Hurry up, hurry up. We’ve got to get through this. We’ve got something else to do.” And Roger and I would be looking at one another covered with paint, with our rollers, “Well, how did we ever get into this?” [Interviewer laughs] But, anyway, it worked for a year and we got through that year and things got better. But it was a tough one.

NEWTON: Yeah.

SPENCER: And the end of the Star. Not everybody got hired by the Post though some of them did. It was a real loss for Washington and a big waterfall event for me anyway. Because I started writing books then. And then I came back to newspapering when I started working for the congressional papers a few years later after that.

NEWTON: And by congressional papers you’re talking about?

SPENCER: Roll Call and The Hill. And I never did work for Politico but I worked for both of them. It was another interesting publishing, to me, an interesting publishing story and very Washingtonian. Jim Glassman, a clever Harvard boy, got together with a partner and bought a little two-page, ready printed, sort of a mimeograph rag called Roll Call.

NEWTON: And this would have been when?

SPENCER: This was back in the early 80s, just right after the Star folded. And Jim had the idea that this could be made into a real publication. And he bought it and he used his ideas. Roll Call at that time was the kind of publication that’s handed out to a specific audience, which gave Jim his idea. And its audience was Congress and its staff. And there’d be a pile of Roll Calls in the various halls and strategic spots and people would pick them up. And there were wonderful features like “Prettiest Girl on the Hill” or, you know, a thing like that. Or sort of a Rockette shot. [Interviewer laughs] He always had pretty girls—pretty girls and gossip were the two things. So Jim thought, well, we can do something with this. And he started a newspaper empire which is now a multi-million dollar business. Roll Call is a huge business, owned by a company in London. The Hill came later.

NEWTON: On the same model?

SPENCER: On the same model exactly. And then Politico came, the third one. And they were all vying for this tiny little market of Congress and the staffs, the whole idea being is that the Congressman is never going to read this but the staffers are going to pick out the clips that mention their man and they're going to bring them to his attention so this is going to work. And the dance of legislation is an interesting story and we will follow it and we will distribute this for free so we can tell our advertisers "This is going to be on the desk of every single congressman in the United States." So, issue advertising became a big source. It was a huge financial success for Jim. I remember Jim and his partner, I think they paid \$220,000 for Roll Call and I think they sold it for seven million. It was that kind of a deal.

NEWTON: Along the way, though, they must have had to hire ...

SPENCER: Oh, yes.

NEWTON: ... serious political journalists as opposed to people ...

SPENCER: Oh, they did. Mort Kondracke and other people. And a lot of people who are now big names came through the school of Roll Call and The Hill. Susan Glasser for one. She's been editor of [Foreign Affairs]. [Ed Henry of Fox is another, and Jim Van de Hai] ... I could give you many other names, I just have to think of them. But that was a very interesting publishing thing because once again it was a newspaper war. I loved it, it was a great deal of fun, and I got to write a column about the neighborhood. And I was given a full page in Roll Call and I was able to write whatever I wanted and I was able to write all about the characters and the funny little inside mini-news. And it became quite popular. But Roll Call became more serious and they didn't really want that kind of thing and it sort of faded out and I went over to The Hill. But I used to post that thing on the archway, the blind archway at the Eastern Market. I'd staple it up there and people would read it. It was very gratifying and very interesting and I enjoyed that.

NEWTON: Your column then was meant to let the staff people know what was going on in the physical neighborhood around them.

SPENCER: Jim said "What we need is a link between the marble halls and the neighborhood. And all these kids live here and they want to know why the Safeway store is moving, why it's called the Moscow Safeway, why there are still prostitutes on Eighth Street, etc." Stuff like that.

NEWTON: What was one of your favorite columns?

SPENCER: Gosh, what a question. Go on, I have to think about that, Jennifer.

NEWTON: Okay. [Laughs]

SPENCER: Sorry. I just have to think about it. There were so many columns. I mean ... Oh, I think one of my favorite columns was about RFK [Robert F. Kennedy] Stadium. There was an architect ...

NEWTON: Its history?

SPENCER: No. RFK Stadium has always been at risk ever since the Redskins moved out of town. It's sort of found a home now as a soccer stadium but it's still at risk.

NEWTON: Right.

SPENCER: It's going to be demolished and a new soccer stadium for some ridiculous reason is going to be built. But way back when, when the Redskins were deciding to leave ... The reason they were ...

NEWTON: Which was when?

SPENCER: I can't remember but it was ...

NEWTON: 70s?

SPENCER: Yeah. [The team moved to Maryland in 1997; as of 2015, their stadium is known as FedEx Field.] The Redskins had to leave because they needed a new stadium. There were all sorts of ideas, none of which said that RFK was any good. But RFK was a stadium that players loved to play in, people loved to go to, and it was a very salubrious location. Anyway an architect came up with an idea of simply re-making it by putting another layer around the outside which would hold the super boxes and be another whole layer of seating, but basically using the very good architectural framework that was there. And so I did a good column about that. It attracted very little attention and nobody's mind was changed. But I thought it was fairly important. There were endless columns about the use of the land which is out there by D.C. Jail and the old [D. C. General] hospital. I remember doing a lot of columns about hospitals. And one of the hospitals, a little hospital on Ninth and Mass, saved one of my sons' lives. [The hospital on Massachusetts Avenue NE, between Seventh and Eighth Streets, was known at various times as Casualty, Rogers Memorial, Capitol Hill Hospital, and Medlink.]

NEWTON: Oh, tell me about that.

SPENCER: That was a horrible day in my life. I was making a poster or something on the dining room table and a little tin of turpentine tipped over and he was right there looking at what I was doing, peering over the table.

NEWTON: So he was a toddler.

SPENCER: He was a toddler and the turpentine pooled down to the edge of the table and hit him in the face and he went “Ehhh”, like that.

NEWTON: Oh, gosh.

SPENCER: And breathed in this turpentine and he stopped breathing.

NEWTON: Mmh.

SPENCER: Yeah. It was an unbelievable panic. I mean he stopped breathing. His eyes rolled up in his head and we thought “Oh, my god.” It was a terrible sight. My ex-wife, bless her heart, we jumped into the car and raced up to Ninth Street and they were there in the emergency room and they got the mask on and all was well. By midnight that night all was well. But if they hadn’t been there it might have been very much worse because we’d have to get up to ... where would you go?

NEWTON: Well, I was going to say that was the nearest, that was, what, four blocks away? ...

SPENCER: Yeah.

NEWTON: ... nearest emergency room. Now you’d have to go some distance.

SPENCER: Right, you’d have to go somewhere. But that’s just an aside.

NEWTON: Yeah. Mmh. So your column, getting back to your column at Roll Call, it was more local...

SPENCER: It was called “In the Neighborhood.”

NEWTON: But local issues or local color?

SPENCER: There was a lot about Mrs., I always followed Mrs. Norton [non-voting delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton] very closely.

NEWTON: Mm-hmm.

SPENCER: And I went to every ANC [Advisory Neighborhood Commission] meeting for a while. [Interviewer laughs] All the ANC issues, all the business about FAR, and people— I know right now we need this kind of coverage.

NEWTON: What’s FAR?

SPENCER: It's something to do with how much of your lot can be covered by building. I don't know what FAR stands for anymore, I've just forgotten. But you've got to have—you can only have 60% FAR or something like that. [Ed: FAR stands for floor area ratio.]

NEWTON: Right.

SPENCER: Probably everybody has run into this.

NEWTON: In the Historic District certainly.

SPENCER: Yeah, right. And, of course, I ran into it big time when I built this garage out in back, which was a footprint garage. In other words, it was in the original plat [but it had been torn down. To rebuild it I had to get all the permits—my ex wife the architect told me that she always included a \$50 bill with every set of plans she submitted, which seemed to work pretty well].

NEWTON: [The garage] had fallen down?

SPENCER: It had fallen down. But going to every ANC meeting was a ton of fun, not only because it [the site of the meeting] was the Old Naval Hospital, with its creaking radiators, its wavy floor, and whistling windows, and everything like that [including flaking paint. Yet in a way it was neighborhood democracy at work. It was a hands-on experience with D.C.'s justly famed bureaucrats, and with the Advisory Neighborhood Commissions as well.]

NEWTON: That was where the meetings were held. Yeah.

SPENCER: The meetings were on the first floor of the Naval Hospital and they were either incredibly stuffy or incredibly cold or incredibly something or other. And by 9:00 the crazies took over. And there was community speak-out allowed after the business on the agenda had been taken care of and the nuts would come out of the woodwork and start complaining about trash collection, and start complaining about who was doing what to whom, and why don't we have this and that and the other thing, and crazy schemes. And the commissioners would sit there patiently listening to this stuff. And I guess you learned a lot. I remember particularly when that home for severely damaged children was being built ...

NEWTON: St. Coletta's?

SPENCER: St. Coletta's. When St. Coletta's was being built, it was a project which would have released the District from a huge financial burden of sending these disabled kids to [suburban schools] all over the area, even to Loudon County, to find the schools that the law required them to have because the D.C. public schools couldn't possibly handle [educating them]. And it was costing something like \$50,000 a

student, you know. So there was a whole squadron of lawyers who were attached to this business who were guaranteeing, making sure that these kids got the proper treatment. I'm sure it's all perfectly correct. But St. Coletta's brought out a lot of resistance and a lot of people who were totally in favor of it and people who were totally against it. It was a good local issue.

NEWTON: They were against it because of where it was, the development—which is out by the Armory, right?

SPENCER: It was also—it's out by the Armory. There was also a suspicion that it was basically a very cleverly designed business that was going to charge \$50,000 a year tuition per student. And the District chose that because the tuition wasn't the only expense. It was bussing, it was the lawsuits, it was this and that and the other thing. And they thought—they probably did get a bargain in the end. But it was disguised as a saintly outreach effort to the very severely disabled. But in fact it was pretty good business. And when the financials came out some people were shocked about how much the administrators were getting paid and, you know, this and that and the other thing. It was a good local issue you could write a lot about.

NEWTON: And you retired from Roll Call then?

SPENCER: No. Then I went on to The Hill.

NEWTON: That's right.

SPENCER: The Hill was another lucky thing for me. They'd just brought a British editor in from [The London] Daily Telegraph via the Toronto Globe. And I always liked the Telegraph. It seemed like it was one of the best broadsheet newspapers I'd ever read in England. And now this guy was in charge and he knew all the Fleet Street tricks. And so they were able to put up a very good battle against Roll Call, with a more lively, slightly smaller sheet. They used color ahead of Roll Call, they did a lot of things, and it was a very interesting newspaper experience working for them. And I liked the small, agile feel of it. But now it's become another publishing giant and ...

NEWTON: And sold to someone else?

SPENCER: Yeah. I bet it's been sold.

NEWTON: Does it surprise you that the business supports three big ...

SPENCER: It blew me away, Jennifer, because there we were with an excellent newspaper [The *Star*] and we could not make a living. And then these guys come in with a newspaper they give away and have minor distribution problems. And they're making a fortune.

NEWTON: Hmm.

SPENCER: And it was just a different, completely different idea of publishing. Give the product away but have this advertising advantage of the audience. We couldn't guarantee that our audience was on every congressman's desk and they could. It was a big difference. We never got any issue advertising in the *Star*. We may have gotten a Northrup Grumman or something like that. But, it's a style that has proved to be successful in many, many papers. I mean you look—I mean everybody talks about how the electronic media have taken over. You wouldn't think it if you look at the number of boxes that are outside the subway at Seventh Street, would you?

NEWTON: Mm-hmm. All those free newspapers.

SPENCER: Dozens. Twelve or 15 of them. All those free periodicals. Now somebody's making money off those things. Or they'll die pretty soon.

NEWTON: [Laughs] Well, right.

SPENCER: Right. But for some reason a second [successful] newspaper in Washington cannot work. Go figure.

NEWTON: [after an interruption by the phone] We're going to bring it back to the 70s just to clean up a few questions I had before we finish here. Your children—were there things like Soccer on the Hill, Boy Scout troops, for your older children?

SPENCER: There were. They did the Scouts, but soccer was the main thing. Coach Bob Conly, who still lives on the Hill, was a great leader in those days and he got together a team for which all my three oldest children—Duncan, Ian, and Corinna—they all played. Luckily they were all pretty good athletes. And the Soccer on the Hill was like a perfect distillation of what I really loved about Capitol Hill because we had to play the suburban kids. And the suburban kids were very much better and they were better equipped and they were better trained. And, of course, they weren't anywhere near as diverse as our group. So it was always a bit of gritty city sports against the smooth and competent suburbanites. So the triumphs were a lot greater and the losses were a lot less. [Interviewer laughs] But it was a great deal of fun to travel out to some of the well-groomed stadiums, soccer grounds I should say. But then to bring the guest teams in to our ...

NEWTON: Where did your teams play? What was your home field?

SPENCER: It was on the edge of the Anacostia in Southeast, a place that horrified, I think, many of the parents of those kids that came in. Remember in those days the idea of Washington was always in quotes. “You live in Washington?” with a question. “You live on Capitol Hill?” It’s like how crazy can you be? But it made a great deal of difference to these kids to be kind of the underdogs. I think it made them work harder, they felt prouder, they certainly felt more of a team, beside the fact they all lived close together. Because Soccer on the Hill depended on kids being able to get to practice, perhaps at X Park, perhaps at Garfield Park, perhaps somewhere else nearby, with a minimum of car transport. And everybody had bicycles, everybody could get there. And it worked out pretty well. I’ll never forget the Panthers proudly winning some trophy or other and everybody getting uniforms and then going off for pizza on Massachusetts Avenue. They always went to that place on Massachusetts Avenue at Third Street. What is it?

NEWTON: Armand’s.

SPENCER: Armand’s. Yeah. Terrible pizza, [Interviewer laughs] but that didn’t diminish the enthusiasm at all. No. It was great experience. And then of course for the second set, both played Soccer on the Hill, and then my son Joe got [into rowing]—rowing was going on. I’d rowed all my life and I continued to row at Capitol Rowing Club on the Anacostia next to the Navy Yard. And my son Joe, who took to it, very much like a duck to water, and went on to a great deal of glory, he won a gold in the Pan American games in the U.S. [Eight Oared boat in 2013]. And he’s going for his second Olympic U.S. squad this year. And he’s been a national champion two times in various [rowing categories]. It all started here on the Anacostia with the Capitol Rowing Club, which is all made up completely of local people.

NEWTON: You’ve rowed there since you moved to the neighborhood?

SPENCER: Yeah.

NEWTON: It was going on?

SPENCER: It didn’t exist in ’65.

NEWTON: Okay.

SPENCER: In ’65 and ’67, ’69 and ’70, I rowed for Potomac Boat Club across the way in Georgetown. But then when Capitol got going in the late 80s—’89, ’90—then I joined up again and took it up again because I’d done a lot of it when I was a kid.

NEWTON: Is it a diverse group of people?

SPENCER: Yeah, it is.

NEWTON: It must be, compared to Georgetown, say.

SPENCER: Oh, it is. Yeah. It's a very diverse—right now in the competitive group there's about 40 people in all, more women than men. And we've had a lot of success over the years. And thanks to—one story I love to tell and I'll end it with this. The girls at Capitol Rowing Club are a very determined bunch. And when the 11th Street bridge was moved it disrupted our rowing venue completely.

NEWTON: This is just recently.

SPENCER: Just recently. Just in the last four years. And we rowed from underneath the bridge and then the bridge was torn down and there was no place to row so we were completely displaced. Well, luckily, in the contract it says that every entity that is displaced must have an equal facility provided. Well, these girls went to every single meeting and they read those words over and over. And it made a huge difference because at one point, according to urban legend, one of the bureaucrats said, "It's very well what you say, but you will be gone and we will still be here and we'll decide." Well, the girls answered, "Well, we will be here and you will be gone." [Interviewer laughs] And they were right. So, the city built us a beautiful [temporary] new facility further up the Anacostia, past the Navy Yard, and they're going to replace in bricks and mortar. It's the best rowing facility in Washington, no doubt. And it's thanks to them and their persistence in going to meetings.

NEWTON: Wow.

SPENCER: So that's a good story.

NEWTON: It is. And it's a good story of urban grit ...

SPENCER: Yeah.

NEWTON: ... to end our discussion. I feel like we could go on forever, but I don't want to wear you out. So, thank you so much, Duncan. I appreciate it.

SPENCER: Thank you. You made it so easy. [Interviewer laughs]

END OF INTERVIEW