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Denise Foderingham, oral history interview conducted by Katie Burke, August 8, 2019, for "Sweet Souls, Voices from the Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House in Cambridge" oral history project; Cambridge Historical Society.



Sweet Souls, Voices from the Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House in Cambridge

Oral History Project

Interview with Denise Foderingham, August 8, 2019

This interview is part of “Sweet Souls, Voices from the Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House in Cambridge,” an oral history project of the Cambridge Historical Society, in partnership with the Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House and The Loop Lab. This project was funded in part by Mass Humanities, which receives support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and is an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Interviewee: Denise Foderingham

Interviewer: Katie Burke

Interview Date: August 8, 2019

Interview Location: Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House, Cambridge, MA

Length of Interview: 70 minutes

Transcription: by Katie Burke, October 30, 2020, 10,754 words

Note: The Loop Lab audio engineer Jeff Solomon recorded this interview. Jeff makes a brief comment toward the end of the interview.

Denise Foderingham lived in the Port with her mother and sisters, and attended many Margaret Fuller House programs in her youth. She moved to Somerville in her 20's and spent the majority of her career working in child care. She returned to the Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House in December 2018, when she was hired as the front desk receptionist.



Start of Interview

Katie Burke [00:00:06] This is Katie Burke from the Cambridge Historical Society. I am here with Denise Foderingham at the Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on August 8th, 2019. This interview is part of a joint Cambridge Historical Society-Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House oral history project to explore Margaret Fuller House's history and role in the Port. Denise, do you agree to have this interview recorded?

Denise Foderingham [00:00:30] Yes, I do.

KB [00:00:32] Okay, great. So, I'm just going to ask you a little bit of your background information. Can you tell me your date of birth?

DF [00:00:39] My date of birth is April 11th, 1959.

KB [00:00:43] Okay, and where did you grow up?

DF [00:00:45] I grew up in the Washington Elms, also known as the Port.

KB [00:00:49] Okay. Do you have any siblings?

DF [00:00:53] I have -- I had two sisters. One is alive and one passed away a month ago.

KB [00:01:04] I'm so sorry.

DF [00:01:06] Not your fault. You didn't know.

KB [00:01:12] Where did you go to school?



DF [00:01:14] I went to school -- it was called the Roberts School on the corner of Washington and Harvard and -- Windsor and Harvard, and now it's called the Fletcher Maynard School.

KB [00:01:29] What did you do after you graduated?

DF [00:01:32] From grammar school?

KB [00:01:34] From high school. Oh, and where did you go to high school?

DF [00:01:37] I went to Cambridge High and Latin, before they changed it to Cambridge Rindge and Latin, and I graduated and went to Boston State College for three years, and after that, I moved with my girlfriend to the Virgin Islands in St. Thomas. She had three brothers that lived there, so we had a choice of where to live. We stayed as long as we could, as long as we cooked for them [laughs] and I lasted three years and then I had to come back. The island got too small for me.

KB [00:02:17] How did your family feel about you moving?

DF [00:02:19] My mother was beside herself because she couldn't visit because she doesn't fly and she doesn't like boats. But we wrote -- I wrote to her every week. We kept in contact with each other and she would keep me up on the soap operas because they were two weeks behind on the islands. So, she would write me a five-page letter which would keep me interested for a while reading. I loved waiting for her letters to come in too.

KB [00:02:49] That sounds like a really good experience.

DF [00:02:52] Yeah, it was, it really was. You know, I always tell people to travel. If you can do it, do it.

KB [00:03:00] Do you ever go back there?



DF [00:03:02] Once I've been back, but I plan on going back again. Only one of her brothers still lives there now.

KB [00:03:12] Can you tell me some of the jobs that you've had?

DF [00:03:17] When I first started working, I was a camp counselor and I did that for a few years, and then I got into computers and then I started working as a database specialist. And then when my eyes started to go and I needed glasses I decided to stop working on computers and I worked for the MBTA and I drove a bus for six years until I found out I was pregnant and I had to stop because I had some women issues with fibroids so I had to stop driving and I stayed home until my daughter, Cheyanne, was born. After she was born, I stayed home from work with her till she was five and into kindergarten, and then I went back to work teaching.

KB [00:04:13] Where did you teach?

DF [00:04:15] All over. One place was on Rindge Ave. They have the preschool over there by Jefferson Park. I worked at Bright Horizons in Davis Square, and I worked -- oh, the Schrafft's Building, over in Charlestown, they had a Bright Horizons over there too. So, I mean, it was around the Cambridge/Somerville area that I did childcare and that lasted almost 20 years because each place that I stayed was over five years, so I got about 20 years into working with kids. And then after that, when the ailments started [laughs] and I had to get a knee replacement and a hip replacement, so I had been out of work for a while until I started working here.

KB [00:05:17] Nice [laughter]. Okay, so it sounds like you're married. Can you tell me how you met your husband?

DF [00:05:24] [Laughs] I met my husband 30 years ago, we were working together at Draper Laboratory here, across the street from the Washington Elms now, and I used to work in the mailroom and he worked on the second floor with computers, and that's where I first met him. He was married at the time on his way of getting a divorce, and we'd seen each other for about a year and then he left, and I didn't see him anymore until the day I got out of the hospital after



having my hip surgery replacement. I wanted Chinese food so bad. I asked my girlfriend to take me to Kowloon's out in Quincy. We took the ride up to Kowloon's and I was talking with the waiter -- the cashier at the front and he said something funny and I laughed and I heard someone say, "That's Denise." and I turned around and I said "Ron?" [laughs] and he was like, "Denise?!" and I -- and that's how we met, after 30 years and haven't left each other's side since.

KB [00:06:36] Wow, that's a great story.

DF [00:06:37] Yeah. I can't believe it. You know, I haven't seen this man in 30 years and all of a sudden, there he was. He told me how he was looking for me, but he was down the Port where I used to live, but I moved to Somerville, so he never found me so -- until that night at the Chinese restaurant.

KB [00:06:57] How long have you been married?

DF [00:06:59] Five years. And we were together for three -- when we met each other, so we went out for three years and then we got married.

KB [00:07:08] Mm hmm.

DF [00:07:10] Yeah, so it was nice.

KB [00:07:11] Yeah.

DF [00:07:12] He's a great guy, too. Takes good care of me.

KB [00:07:17] Can you tell me about your kids?

DF [00:07:20] I only have one.

KB [00:07:21] Okay.



DF [00:07:21] My daughter Cheyenne is my precious. She -- when she was five I said, "Do you want a brother or sister?" and she said, "No, Mommy, I want a dog," [laughs] so I went out and bought her a puppy and she was happy, you know, been happy since. She said she didn't want to share me with a brother or sister, so we got the dog and she's been happy ever since. Now she's 28. She -- oh, she graduated from college, Salem State University, and she's working two jobs now and she's 28 and she just moved out, so she's on her own now and doing her thing and so far, so good.

KB [00:08:09] Good. And where do you live now?

DF [00:08:11] I'm still in Somerville.

KB [00:08:12] Okay. Where in Somerville?

DF [00:08:16] Off of Beacon Street, in between Porter Square and Inman Square.

KB [00:08:20] Nice.

DF [00:08:20] So I'm still really close to Cambridge.

KB [00:08:23] Yeah. Okay. So can you tell me a bit about where you're from?

DF [00:08:32] I was born and raised in Boston. My mother was a single parent to us three girls. We moved to Cambridge and that's where we've been all my life until I moved out and moved into -- went to travel and then moved to Somerville. But my mother passed away and she was -- we moved from the Washington Elms. I moved her from there to the elderly building on Essex Street, you know, because it was getting kind of rough over in the projects at the time and she liked coming in late at night.

KB [00:09:17] What time period was this?

DF [00:09:19] How long ago you mean?



KB [00:09:20] Yeah, like when did you move her out?

DF [00:09:23] My mother's been dead about eight years now, so I'd say about ten years ago. But we moved her out, moved her there and she was kind of happy. She still liked her own way of doing things and she felt like she was, I guess, stifled in her own ways, but she made it all right living there. She gave us a hard time at first, but they got -- you know, she got used to it.

KB [00:09:57] What was your mom like when you were growing up?

DF [00:09:59] She was a strict woman [laughs]. She was very strict. I remember one day I -- it was the first day of school. She had everything laid out for me and I was so excited, I got dressed, put my coat on, I went to school, took my coat -- opened my coat up and I just had my slip on, I forgot to put the dress on [laughter]. So, I was so embarrassed, you know, the teacher said, "Denise, sit down and take your coat off," and I'm like, "no," [laughter]. and she says, "You have to sit down or I'm going to call your mother," and I was like, "Call my mother, please," [laughs] so my mother had to come up and they told her what had happened, so when I was in the bathroom with her getting dressed at school, she was like, "What made you forget your dress?" I said, "I was so excited and so anxious, I just thought I was fully dressed. When you said, 'Let's go,' I just threw my coat on and--." you know, but yeah, she was strict. When we went to school, after school, we used to have to come home and go to my grandmother -- not my grandmother, my *great* grandmother's house to take care of her, to make sure she had something to eat and she was bathed, so we had to do that before we came home and did our home -- we would do our homework there and then leave there and go home, have dinner, and then start the next day over and do the same thing so that eventually we all did that growing up. When Donna was -- my oldest sister, she started, and then when I got old enough, then I started, and when Debbie got old enough, she started to do it too. So then we all started taking turns who had certain days of going and whatnot but -- I loved it because my grandmother, she's so ancient, she told us so many stories, you know, growing up and about the sugar canes in Barbados where she lived, about the stores she ran and the numbers that she ran [laughs]. It was -- she was a very exciting lady. But, yeah, she was my *great* grandmother. My grandmothers I never met. They died young. So, I had two great grandmothers in my life



growing up and they were wonderful. They were the ones that taught me how to cook and -- because my mother wasn't that much of a cook -- I'm sorry, mom -- but my grandmothers were the ones that showed me how to cook, especially island dishes and I think I'm pretty good now, you know, making coconut bread and making rice and peas and frying up some chicken, I'm pretty good at it, but that was part of my growing up. My father lived down the street from us -- he and my mother were divorced. I have two stepbrothers, Ivan and Vincent, and they they're good. We talk, we communicate. Ivan is still in Barbados where my brother Vincent is in Florida, in Tampa, and I go down there and visit him every once in a while. That's for my siblings and family members, too. It's, you know, the families are getting smaller as time goes by but I'm just glad to be here.

KB [00:13:49] Do you know the immigration story of your grandparents or great grandparents? Like why they came here from Barbados and when, and why they came to Cambridge?

DF [00:13:58] No, not really, I don't know that story. I just know when my grandmother got here, she had her sons. They were in the service. One was in the Army and the other one was in the Navy. One was called Uncle Stanley and the other one was Uncle David. My mother had a brother, too, that was in the service. His name was Uncle Dudley. So, I did have three uncles and they -- my Uncle David lived in Boston, and my Uncle Stanley lived with my grandmother. So when we used to go help her, that was when he was at work, so to make sure that she had dinner ready because he -- by time he got out, it was late, so we would wash her up and get her ready for bed. That would be the time when he would come in and relieve us and then we would go home. But that was Uncle Stanley, Uncle David had his family in Boston. I have a lot of cousins and aunts through him, and we also have my cousins. I have a lot of cousins, you know, we all try to get together and make a family date or fun date or a game night because, like I said, everyone is passing and the only time we all get together is at funerals and we get tired of that, so we try to make time with the family to get out there and see each other on happier occasions. Yeah. And I have a dog. His name is Romeo. I grew up with dogs. I had two poodles; one was Coke and the other one's name was Louis, and then I got this Chihuahua plus Dachshund, they call them a "chiweenie." His name is Romeo and, I'm telling you, he's just like my son. I mean, I can't leave home without him and he'll let me know. He'll destroy the house if I go out and leave him, if he hasn't been out long enough, he'll let me know by making a mess of



the house, but he's just like a little kid. And I also think that, I don't know, I got to neuter him or something because he just goes crazy around other dogs too so --

KB [00:16:49] He seems like an energetic guy [laughs].

DF [00:16:52] Too energetic, too energetic. He likes messing with bigger dogs too, that are bigger than him, and get tangled up between the leashes.

KB [00:17:05] Can you tell me more about your house growing up, like what -- do you remember what it looked like and what it felt like to walk in?

DF [00:17:13] In the projects?

KB [00:17:15] Mmhmm.

DF [00:17:15] In the Washington Elms, we had three bedrooms. There was my mom's room, my older sister had her own room, and I shared with my youngest sister, Debbie. It was cozy. There's one thing about the projects, we always had heat. Like I said, my mother was strict. When we came home, if we have friends with us, she would say, "Uh uh, nobody's allowed in the house till they do their homework, dishes, whatever." She'd run down the list. So, our friends will also be like, "Dang Denise, your mother will never let us in the house!" and I'm like, you know, "What can I say? It's her house [laughter]." But it was it was cozy. My mother didn't graduate from high school, so I remember her going to high school and getting her G.E.D. while we were at home waiting for her, you know, and she showed us how she'd learned shorthand, with the squiggly lines and stuff, and she was so proud when she graduated. I'll never forget that either. We were young, I mean, I was -- I don't even think I was in high school yet when she did that. I know Donna was, but I think I was in grammar school. But when she used to go to night school, all hell used to break out with my oldest sister and my younger sister. They didn't get along [laughs]. Every time my mother went to night school, somebody -- one of them would act up. One day, Donna says something to Debbie and Debbie got so mad she went in the kitchen and came back. My mother, she plants -- in the yard in the projects, they had a little fenced-in yard where she would go in and she cleaned it out and she would grow her own stuff.



Well, Debbie went into the cabinet and got one of the tools that was in there and was chasing my sister around with it and they're screaming all around me, running around the house, and Debbie captures Donna in the corner and she raises the tool up to strike her with it and I walk behind it and snatch it out of her hand. She was livid. She fell to the floor screaming, I'll never forget that, but them two were hilarious when my mom was out. I used to always say, "Mommy, please take me with you when you leave so I don't have to deal with these two," but that's what it was like growing up. We were like the Three Stooges sometimes, or we could be the three Supremes, you know, one time we were at my aunt's house for Thanksgiving and my aunt played all of Diana Ross's music, and we would get the spoons and stand up there and perform for everybody that was there for Thanksgiving and act like we were the three Supremes. I remember that vivid, like it was yesterday. But yeah, we had some good times together, me and my sisters. My mother would take us to Charlestown, at the time, way back when it was -- Blacks and whites did not get along -- and take us to the dentist, just all the way out to Charlestown. We would get on the train to get out there and then ride the bus to get to the dentist's office. We were called all kinds of names going there, but she didn't mind. Every time we had to go, she took us, and she was determined to make sure we got what we needed done, and that's one thing I can say about my mother. She cared, and took real good care of us. She would take my friends with us to the movies. If we went to the movies or if we were going -- Nantasket, at the time, when they had the rides, she would bring my friends with us. We were all getting on the train and we'd ride all the way into Quincy and then get on the bus, a crowded bus to get to Revere Beach or to Nantasket Beach and we'd be out there all day. And my friends used to think my mother was the coolest thing [laughs] because every time -- because their parents wanted to go nowhere. My mother was always taking us out of the projects just to do something. When Channel 56 aired, she took us over there when we were little where we saw Yogi Bear in the costume and Boo Boo the Bear, you know, all the characters from way back when, we got autographs. She put us on the show Boomtown, I don't know if you remember that, that was a show, Bozo, too. There was Bozo the Clown, I was on that show, too. So, my mother got us out of the projects and into a lot of stuff. We would say, "Where are we going now?" But when we got there it was so exciting. But she, like I said, she took us out. She made sure we got to know what it was like to travel. That's probably why I like to travel now and get away. My mother was always trying to get us somewhere other than in the projects and away from destruction, somewhere that was happy. The Christian Science Center



with the sprinklers, she took us down there, you know, anywhere that got us there by a bus or train, she found a way. And camp, she sent us to camp and camp was out in Waltham? Or Watertown, but you can only take the bus so far and then after that you had a walk. Well, this walk to a child seemed like ten miles, when it probably was just a half an hour walk, but she would, you know, if we missed the bus, she'd take us right to Harvard Square, we got on the Watertown bus and it took us to that last stop and walk us right to that campsite. We didn't miss a beat with her [laughs]. If we had an appointment, she made sure we were there and that we kept it, you know, she was very organized that way, so we did a lot through her and that's what I tried to do with my daughter growing up. We always went places and, like I tell her now, always find time for yourself. Get out there and travel. She just came back from Canada. I didn't even know she left till she came back and she said, "Mommy, I went to Canada." "Did you have a good time?" "Yeah, it was fun," you know, so she's still doing her thing and I'm glad that she likes traveling.

KB [00:24:02] How do you feel like it changed you to get out of Washington Elms when you were a kid and do all these other things?

DF [00:24:08] It feels great. Like I said, if it wasn't for my mother, I probably would be stagnant, because I see a lot of my friends that didn't do a lot of the stuff that we did growing up and they're either on drugs or they're just not going anywhere. So, like I said, I appreciate my mother for doing the things that she did, and getting us to know how to talk to people and being around other people than the people that lived in the projects, and how to act, you know, she taught us that. We were very well mannered. She kept us well-dressed, except for I was a tomboy and she used to make me go last to get out the house, because one time she sent me out and I came back dirty, my clothes were ripped because I used to climb fences and all that good stuff. So, she used to keep the last one in the house so [laughs]. But yeah, those were some good times. You really made me think [laughter].

KB [00:25:17] You have great stories. Can you tell me what the Port was like when you were a kid growing up?



DF [00:25:24] The Port was fun. We had a lot of ladies that lived there that organized trips to Lincoln Park, Canobie Lake, Whalom Park. We had Polaroid right across the street, on Main Street, and they used to have buses, and it would take us kids to Lincoln Park or one of the amusement parks and we would be gone all day. Everything was free. All the rides were free. The only thing you had to pay for was your arcades and for food, you know, but we came back all the time on the bus with everybody singing. They got their teddy bears and stuff from the amusement park, and that was a good thing, we all did that. It was bringing the neighborhood together so we did that a lot and now when I got older, I see these kids now don't have that. There are no trips, you know, excursions, that's what we used to call them, excursions. We're going on an excursion to Lincoln Park, or Whalom Park or Canobie Lake and that was great. It was something to do, but we had fun. We also had a pool that was built on Harvard Street and we had another teen center called the Neighborhood House. It got burnt down, but it used to have a pool table. We used to go in there and listen to TV, watch TV and stuff, but it was a hangout joint for the teenagers. Nobody under fourteen could get inside. I couldn't wait to get in there when I was young because all the big kids hung out there and once I got old enough, of course, my mom was like, "You're not going in there!" but, you know, she had to check it out for us. All the things that we attended to, she made sure she saw it through or made sure it was okay for us to do, except for the time when I got old enough to go to parties. They had parties here at the Margaret Fuller House and it was in the basement, and a couple of times my mother would come looking for me and my friends would say, "Denise, your mother's upstairs," and I'd be like, "Oh, dang," She would come down the stairs and she would look in the open door into where the party was. She said, when I got home, "I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. How could you all be down there dancing?" [laughs] so when she got home and she asked me if I was there, "No, I was probably around the corner somewhere," you know, but she would tell me about it, she said, "All the loud music, and I couldn't hear myself think," [laughs], but that was the hangout spot at the time. There or the Neighborhood House, we used to get parties, and I wasn't far but then I got to the point where I told my mother, "I'm gonna be alright. You don't have to keep looking for me," until I started going to parties down on Western Ave. She thought -- she came down there once looking for me and she said, "Never again because the walk is too long," [laughs] but I would call her. After I decided to settle her nerves, I'd just call her and say, "Mom, I'm at such and such place," and she was fine with it. She would wait up until I got home sometimes but she was fine that I gave her a call and let her know. I guess it



made her more at ease with herself that I would call and let her know where I'm at, I'm all right. So I made a point of doing that as I grew up and she used to tell my sister, "Deedee does it, but how come you can't call me and tell me where you're at?" So that was a thing that my mother and I had, you know, letting each other know where I'm at, checking in, and I did that with my daughter too, so it works [laughs].

KB [00:29:33] What were your first interactions with Margaret Fuller House?

DF [00:29:38] As a child?

KB [00:29:39] Yeah.

DF [00:29:41] You really want to go back there. I really don't remember. I just remember running around this place. I just used to think this was a big old house and, you know, big old houses have that smell. And there was a smell to Margaret Fuller that is still here to this day that I smell. You know, as soon as I came in here, I was like, "Wow, this place hasn't changed." I was in my environment, you know, it was nice. But there were stories, too, of the Margaret Fuller House about the lady, that Margaret Fuller died in the house, and that they would see a light on the top floor in the windows at night, you know, so we had stories. We made up all kinds of stuff about this place because it was so old and creepy back then, you know, but now that you're older and you look -- and I walk around, I'm like, "Dang, I don't remember that being there," but then they did -- they knocked down walls in here and they really changed it, so other than the smell and the stairwell going out, everything is still the same. Even the windows [laughs], they're still the same. They haven't been changed. But yeah, it really -- it's nice to know that this place is still here and the things that it's doing now for everybody, helping the community out with the food pantry, with the kids, with the elderly coming on Tuesdays and it's a great place now. You got Russell helping people from 17 to 35 year olds looking for jobs. You have Pierre here that is a director of the program for the kids downstairs. We also have Clarky that runs the food pantry. You know, everybody does their little bit of chores here in their work and it gets it done. We try to help out a lot of people, too, that live in the area with food, you know, we tell them when to come and what to bring and how they can get service. It's a great thing in the community. Everybody should have one.



KB [00:32:01] Did you go to any programs or things like that when you were younger?

DF [00:32:05] Here? Yeah. My mother, we -- she sent us here. We had classes, afterschool school programs. I remember that, coming here after school. But, like I said, that was when I was very young before I got old enough to go to my grandmother's house to start taking care of her. So, there wasn't so much of my time here as there was, like, being a Brownie and a Girl Scout. We did that too, over in Newtowne Court. They had a center there for just that, for being a Brownie or Girl Scout. We also had the Art Center that was in Newtowne Court where we would go and draw and anything we want. And then on -- right where you used to live, the Tutoring Plus it was called, it was a place where if you needed help, they have people there that will help you with your homework. They had photography classes, I mean, you learn how to develop. I remember this like it was yesterday. It was nice, I love this class. You take your film, you put it into the solution and then all of a sudden, your picture appears. That was great back in -- you know, being a kid, you're seeing in that -- you see a white paper and then all of a sudden, your picture is there. It was like magic. So we did stuff like that with them and I think that also helped with my growing up, just being able to do a lot of things that you dream of doing, and getting to do it, you know, because I'm sure a lot of people dream of doing things and they don't get to do it. So I experienced a lot growing up from, like I said, my mother kept us at a Brownie class, she kept us at Girl Scouts, she make sure we went to camp, she also made sure we were very structured, you know, our homework was done at a certain time, that we were in bed at a certain time, all that stuff. We were grounded, but we still had fun. It wasn't as big as, you know, my mother didn't have a car or anything like that. She rode a bicycle, she made sure we all had bikes where we knew how to ride and that was our outing, riding somewhere or, like I said, getting on the train and going to the swan boats, you know, just keeping us busy and off the street. That was her.

KB [00:34:41] It's interesting to hear you talk about when you were, like, a young kid coming here to go to after school programs and things like that, and then you're a teenager and going and parties here [laughs]. So, I'm just curious, like, how was that change, and was it something that was going on at Margaret Fuller House that allowed for there to be parties or was that always happening?



DF [00:35:00] No, actually, it wasn't an ongoing thing. It was, when it finally started that somebody did open up and had a party, it was so nice to have something close to home because we used to go to M.I.T., you know, and Harvard parties, or over at Tufts as, you know, but when there was a party here, it was so close, you know, plus my mother didn't worry as much too and -- when she got used to me hanging out, that is. But, like I said, we didn't have to get on the bus, we didn't have to travel, you know, cause usually parties get over at two o'clock and the buses stop, so you end up walking home and walking from Medford was a hike when you missed that last bus. I remember running down the street just to catch the last bus on Mass Ave just to get back to Harvard Square from Medford. But, yeah, we did some wild stuff. We rode our bikes into Boston just to go to games or to see other friends. There'd be a group of us, like five or six of us on a bike over the bridge, you know, riding over Mass Ave Bridge going into Boston just to see other friends. Those were good times. Safe times, too, we didn't have problems like there are now. It was quieter, and more settled.

KB [00:36:30] What were the parties here like?

DF [00:36:32] At the Margaret Fuller?

KB [00:36:33] Yeah.

DF [00:36:37] I used to have an afro, go in with an afro and come back out and it was shrunk to my head or it was laying flat down. You come out soaking wet. The parties, you danced all night. There was no stopping unless you had to go outside and get some air. Those were the good times. The music was always great. The guy that did the parties, his name was Harold Welch, and he lived down the Port too, he lived on Washington Street. And I don't know how he did it, but he got the permission to give the parties down there and when he gave the parties, everybody came. We had people from Boston. We had people from down the Coast, North Cambridge, you know, East Cambridge. Everybody would come and the place would get totally packed down there, but they were good parties. It would never -- not that I can remember was there ever a fight down there. It might have broken out in Central Square, but didn't it break out at the party. Everybody was cool.



KB [00:37:39] So this is kind of mid to late 70's?

DF [00:37:41] Yup, yup.

KB [00:37:43] Okay.

DF [00:37:43] Yup, mid to late 70's, after I got out of high school and while I was in high school. Yeah. So I graduated in '77 so I went in at '73, so between, yeah, the 70's and 80's.

KB [00:37:58] Do you have a good story from a party that you can tell us?

DF [00:38:02] A good story from a party other than my mother coming looking for me [laughter]? No, other than we had a great time. We would meet all our friends, instead of being in school seeing them, it was nice to see them at a different environment at night too, you know, they're outside their box from at school because when you're in school you got to act right and behave yourself, but at night you're out, you're doing your own thing. You see a lot of people in a different light. So it was a learning process I guess, and it was good, like I said, we got to see our friends and hang out with them, show -- everybody got to show you new dances, new dance steps. Or you talked about, when's the next party? Stuff like that, or who is cute down here? Or who you're going to dance with next. Those kinds of things, but that's what it was like back then.

KB [00:39:09] That sounds fun.

DF [00:39:10] It was. It really was. That's why you say, "Those were the good old days" [laughter].

KB [00:39:19] Can you tell me, are there any characters or people like that from the neighborhood that were memorable to you from when you were a kid or teenager?



DF [00:39:28] I remember the bully, Phillip Yard [laughs]. He was a bully. I mean, he was a bully as far as, when we had parties and people came from different parts of the neighborhood, that wasn't in the neighborhood, he would, like, his chest stuck out and like, "What are you doing here?" You know, one of those. Or girls trying to outdo each other's dressing with what they had on. Stuff like that, but we still had a really good time. Everybody seemed to get along back then. We didn't have a problem, you know, issues with guns. We went to a party -- if there was a fight, we fought with our fists and after that, we'd be friends next weekend, when we're back out the next week. So, it was a nice environment. We didn't have to worry about being scared to walk the streets. It's nothing. We walked in groups, there would be five of us. My girlfriend lived in East Cambridge, we walked her halfway home just to make sure she got home safe. Stuff like that. We always stood together as one, you know, we didn't leave one behind. If one wanted to stay at a party, "No, you're either coming now or you're not coming with us ever again." That kind of stuff. We said we're going to stay together, we stay together. So that's how it was growing up here, you know, it was nice. Everybody had respect for each other, and we did a lot together. And it's hard now trying to keep up with everybody that was in the past because everybody has moved on and lives in different places, but every once in a while, on Facebook, I get somebody saying hi that I haven't seen in a long time. There's a girl that lived on Broadway Street, or off of Harvard Street, near the projects. Her name was Gloria. She was one of my best friends -- we went to school, grammar school and into high school, and to this day, she still writes to me on Facebook. She's in New Hampshire and I keep saying, "One day we got to get together," but everybody's busy and trying to get that time together isn't right, but at least we still communicate, you know, and I think that's great. She tells me about what's going on on her end and I tell her what's going on on my end. So, I guess Facebook is good for something [laughter].

KB [00:42:20] How do you feel the Port was different from other neighborhoods in Cambridge?

DF [00:42:26] Well, we used to call the Port the concrete jungle because of the bricks and the buildings together. Other neighborhoods like North Cambridge, there was Corcoran Park and they didn't have brick, they had row houses -- townhouses, which was nice. But every project was different. Our project had a front back door, which was cool, you know, to get in your backyard instead of having to walk all the way around. We could cut through into the next -- to



the hallway to get to the back. Walden Square, there was only one way in and one way out. Once you go in the door, you had to come back out that door unless you go in someone's house and go out their back door. We didn't have a back door in our apartments and a lot of apartments that were called projects had back doors that you can go out the back door to go out your back. We just had the back door in our hallway, you know, as you walk in the hallway there's a back door to go out. As to the people that lived in Walden Square, Corcoran Park, they had two doors, two accesses to get out. You got a front way and you had a back way. So, there were differences, you know, those kind of differences in the way the buildings were built. Some look sharper than the others, you know, some looked like projects and some looked more like, like I said, townhouses. So those were the differences, but, I don't know, everybody had their own way of growing up and the projects were somewhere where -- one thing about the projects too is everybody knew what yard to go down to hang out with somebody because there was always a bunch of kids there, you know, so in the Washington Elms, my mother used to put down on the ground, her and this lady, Teresa, hopscotch, what's that other game? It was this game, it was a circle, and you made lines and you had to step into each one to go all the way around. It was shaped like a snail and you go all the way to the middle and then you got to come all the way back out, or we were jump roping, or we were playing kickball, so there was something always happening in a yard. And in that yard, that's where every one of the kids from each section of the projects would come down to until it was time for them to go home, and we knew what time it was to go home because there was -- at night, there was a horn that blew at 10 o'clock and everyone knew that that was the time to go in. Or that TV commercial that said, "Do you know your kids are?" That's when parents would yell out the window and tell you to come in the house. So, we had little things like that that we knew, and when you see Johnny go home, you'd better be right behind him, you know? So that kind of thing we had back then, and if there were one or two kids hanging out then they were either considered the bad kids because they had nothing else to do [laughter]. But yeah, it was an experience.

KB [00:45:58] How did you end up moving to Somerville?

DF [00:46:05] I was on a waiting list for a real long time. Back then, though, when I was looking for an apartment, I filled out an application for Section 8. So, Section 8 is where you get a voucher and you can move anywhere, back then, so I filled that out and a couple of years went



by and then they called me. But my voucher was for the Cape. I had to find something down the Cape. I had 30 days to find something or they were going to take the voucher away. Well, I was going down the Cape every weekend looking and stuff. It was pretty, but I'm like, "Oh, this drive," you know, my family, everybody's down here. So, the last week that I went down the Cape looking, I got a letter in the mail saying that your Section 8 is -- what is it? Instead of the Cape, it was viral. I can go anywhere. I can move anywhere. I was so happy, and they gave me another 30 days. So that's when I found the apartment in Somerville, and it was nice. It was a two-family home, had a big back, front yard, had a driveway, you know, it was beautiful. The guy in the back, he grew vegetables, and he would -- every time he'd harvest, he'd send a basket over. It was a really nice place. That's when my daughter was two years old when we moved in there, and that was our first place we moved, when we moved into Somerville.

KB [00:47:48] Before that, were you living here?

DF [00:47:50] I was living in Cambridge -- I was living with my mother -- actually with my baby's father. He was in South End. I was in South End or I would be at my mother's house -- excuse me -- waiting for that, you know, to find out whether or not I got an apartment because I had had the vouchers, so I was just looking, and hoping, and praying that somebody would just say, "We have an opening for you," and that's when I found out about the apartment in Somerville. So, I moved from Steve's house to Somerville, and that's where Cheyanne and I stayed for five years and then we found another place in Somerville. We moved three times, in Somerville, and then the last place we moved in Somerville we were there for seventeen years. So, it was, yeah, I guess I like Somerville. Cambridge has gotten a little bit expensive as far as looking for a place to live. The prices aren't like they used to be so, I mean, if I had the choice to move back to Cambridge I don't think I would. It's getting crowded now. Everybody's building on top each other. Kendall Square used to be a ghost town. Now look at it. I mean, it's beautiful, mind you, but what about the people that live around there? What are they doing for them? That kind of stuff, you know? Everybody's building and taking up people's properties that -- we had a store that was on the corner called Paul's Variety and that was the store. I mean, everybody went to Paul's. He sold everything from toilet paper, to sandwiches, cold sandwiches, hot sandwiches, soups. He sold everything, and he was there for -- I'm telling you,



since I was a little kid and he just left, I think, two years maybe now? Two years ago, he just -- they moved. He was there over 40 years.

KB [00:49:56] Where exactly was this?

DF [00:49:57] On the corner of Washington Street. No, not Washington Street. Windsor Street and School Street. No, that's -- yes, School Street. Yeah. Windsor Street and School Street. The mother and father started that store and then the sons took over after the father passed away -- no, the mother passed away. You know, the father did, but they kept the store running. So, it was beautiful. Everybody that went into Paul's, even though I lived in Somerville and I came to the store, somebody knew you. You go in there and it was like, "Hey, Deedee, how you doing?" I'm like, "Oh, I haven't seen you in a long time," you know, it was the meeting spot, like, you go in there, you get a good sandwich, you get good conversation and you meet good people, so that was a nice thing that I miss now, you know? And now we got these new stores [laughs]. Nothing like Paul's [laughs].

KB [00:50:58] Does it still feel like home when you come back to this neighborhood?

DF [00:51:03] Yes and no. Sometimes it's sad because the area is so close to home, and to my relatives. My great grandmother lived right behind me on Pine Street here, which is the street right here. She lived right in that corner house. And then we lived in the projects and my uncle lived in Newtowne Court, so it was -- it does bring back a lot of memories if I sit long enough and think about it, but it was a great place growing up. I can tell you that much. I met a lot of good people and I have a lot of friends. And, I mean, it's not like I miss Cambridge, like I said, to live in, but it was a great place growing up.

KB [00:51:59] Did you keep a connection to the Margaret Fuller House as you were an adult and getting older?

DF [00:52:07] No, I didn't until I found out that my sister told me that there was an opening here and I'm like, "An opening?" I said, "Margaret Fuller is open?" You know, I didn't know what was going on because, like I said, I'd been living in Somerville and I didn't keep up much with a



lot of things that were happening in Cambridge, and she was telling me that they had a food pantry going on and they help teens in looking for jobs. They got the elderly coming over for breakfast and talking, and I was like, "Really?" So she said, "Yeah, the girl at the front desk is leaving. Why don't you try out for a position?" And I was like, "Okay," so I went to talk to the guy, they brought me in, and then the rest is history. I've been here since December.

KB [00:52:59] Oh!

DF [00:53:04] Yeah, so it's like, everything is really nice here. I've met a lot of good people here. Alex showed me how to use Word and Excel, you know, I was rusty on my computer skills and he's just bringing it all back to me. We have a lot of nice people that work in here, too. So, yeah, meeting up with Margaret Fuller House again has been an experience and a nice one at that.

KB [00:53:36] Did you know Selvin or anyone else who works here from when you were younger?

DF [00:53:42] You don't want me to go there [laughter].

KB [00:53:46] You don't have to say anything.

DF [00:53:46] Yes, I knew Selvin. I knew Selvin when he was a little, bitty bitty thing [laughter]. Yes, I did. Selvin and his family, I knew them well. His mother and my mother knew each other. I knew his sisters. I knew him and his brother. Yes, I know their family very well, you know, we go back a long way. As a matter of fact, I used to babysit Selvin, so [laughter] that's a long time ago. But, yes, we do have a lot of connections and I knew Russell too. Russell, I know his family.

KB [00:54:30] Is that Russell Harding?

DF [00:54:31] Yup. I believe they're related to us some way, but that's another story [laughs]. And I think -- and Clarky, Clarky, I know Clarky that works down in the food pantry from school, and just knowing the rest of them. I'm learning to know Scott and Alex and Pierre and



Kante, all of them here, they're very nice people. They're nice people to work for. It's a laid-back job and I like it, you know, it's not strenuous and I'm here part time, so -- and I like my hours, 9-1.

KB [00:55:13] That's nice.

DF [00:55:13] It's great. You know, I swim every morning. I get up and I'm out of the house by six in the morning. I'm in the pool by 6:20 and I swim up until 7:30 and I get out, take my shower, and come to work. So, I'm very much alive by the time I get here [laughter].

KB [00:55:37] What do you usually do after work?

DF [00:55:39] I have, like I say, I have Romeo. I got to go home, walk him, take him out, and usually then I just relax after work. I'm getting over my surgeries, my knee replacement. It has been a year this year -- this month, I made it a year. I went for my physical and they said everything looks good, but I have stenosis in my back and I have to go in two weeks to get a shot in my back so, other than that, I'm pretty well maintaining myself [laughter].

KB [00:56:17] What does a typical day at work like for you?

DF [00:56:22] Oh, it depends. My Mondays and Tuesdays are very strenuous. It's working on the computer mostly the whole time here because I do the payroll and I do the students' attendance from downstairs. So that takes me Monday and Tuesday to finish that up. Then after that, it's laid-back for whatever. I help out the other people that work here. If they need anything done I can look it up and research, or make copies, or when the elderly come in, I put their tea on for them, you know, make sure it's nice and hot for them. I do a lot, just helping out, putting up signs and making sure everything's cleaned up at the end of the day. I have a replacement, and her name is Joanne, that comes in at 1 o'clock to replace me. She is really nice too. She lives around here too, but that's it.

KB [00:57:24] So, I'm thinking you probably see a lot since you're, like, right at the door. You're kind of the first point of contact for people coming in. So, who are you seeing walk in?



DF [00:57:35] There's the directors that come in when they come in for their meetings. I have people that come in that have donations for the Margaret Fuller, and they have boxes of canned food for the food pantry. I see people with -- they come in looking for applications for their kids to apply for the after-school program or the summer program. I see people that come in, they want to use the bathroom [laughs]. But I do see a lot. I -- now that it's summertime, I have the door open so I can see people walking by. I see people in their cars and then some people that know that I work here always speak and wave. But yeah, it's nice. It's very nice. I can't complain about my job, it's really -- it's very nice. I get to meet people, greet people, you know, I get to work and do my four hours and then I leave.

KB [00:58:47] How does it feel to be here as an adult versus when you're younger, a kid and a teenager?

DF [00:58:54] It's not as scary because when I was younger, the place was so big it, you know, I just was scared of it and the stories that they told. Now that I'm older, I don't believe in it, you know, unless I see a light on [laughs]. But yeah, it's a lot better now. I mean, when I go downstairs to see where we used to dance and stuff, I still can't believe it was down in what my mother would call a "hole in the wall" [laughs], but they put up a lot of new walls down there to separate classrooms, so it looks a lot different. I have to literally close my eyes and picture what it looked like down there and then open my eyes and then see where everything has changed, you know, what they added. They added a kitchenette in there downstairs and a couple of more bathrooms down there. So, yeah, a lot has changed.

KB [00:59:59] What do you feel like Margaret Fuller House brings to the Port and the wider community?

DF [01:00:06] Oh, it brings the openness for communication. We try to get out as much information as we can. We have a bulletin board out there. We have a couple inside with functions that are going on or events. We have a list for when the food pantry opens, you know, people call asking about the time. We offer people 17 to 35 [years old] jobs. So, the place has a lot of good qualities and good places to start out with as far as from the kids, up until to the 17



to 35 year old's, and up until the seniors. So, we work with all groups of -- all age groups of people here, which is nice, and we have a lot of -- what is it? Auctions they do, sometimes, for nonprofit stuff they organize. We go to a lot of functions at least once a month. We get catered to by La -- oh, what's the name of that restaurant? Oh, they're going to kill me. The restaurant in Central Square, la something, la --.

KB [01:01:45] Fabrica?

DF [01:01:48] Fabrica. That's the one. There's a guy there that comes, he helps cook for the children. Sometimes he makes a dish for them, which is nice, so it's, like I said, it's like a melting pot. Everybody's got their hands in there and trying to do something for each other, so -- which is a great thing. So far, I have seen no bad qualities or anything negative to talk about the [Margaret Fuller] Neighborhood House since I was a little till now.

KB [01:02:27] The people who get services here, are they still mainly from the Port?

DF [01:02:33] No, it doesn't have to be just from the Port. As long as everybody brings in an I.D. showing you where they live, they can get services there. As far as the food pantry, they're asking for an I.D. so that when you come, they want to know that you have a place to stay before they give you food. You can't be homeless unless you have a letter from somebody, but we will give it to you as long as you have some place of -- a form of I.D., or letter, or a piece of mail having your name and address on it. That's all they're looking for.

KB [01:03:17] I think it's interesting it's Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House. You've talked about how the neighborhood has changed a lot already and it's still changing. Where do you see Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House fitting in in the future?

DF [01:03:30] I hope it's still able to put out to the community and that they stay in business because a lot of things can change overnight. We never know. But as far as I can see, they're going to be here for a pretty long time and still give back to the community, which is a good thing, and I think the people, too, look forward to the Margaret Fuller for the things that they do and the things that they offer. If it wasn't for the Margaret Fuller House, I guess some of these



people would be on the street without looking -- I mean, without food, without a place of employment, so we help out in those two areas, or even with the kids for school -- after school programs if parents need them, if they're working and they need their place for their child to be up until a certain time, this is a good place for them to be. So we do give out, like I said, we give out as much as we can and we try to get as much feedback, too, from the people on the outside, which is a good thing, you know, their likes and dislikes, we take everything under consideration.

KB [01:04:51] Thank you so much. We got through most of my questions. I just want to go back a little bit, because when we were doing research for the project, there are a few things that came up in the 70's that were kind of interesting, and since you were around then, I'm just curious of what your memories are. So, one was when the Black Panther Party was running a breakfast program here. Do you have any memories of that?

DF [01:05:14] I remember it, but I didn't come to any of those. I remember it being a big thing back then, and I think at that time, I was probably just being a teenager myself. I was young. Because you were talking about the 70's, right? I was in grammar school still, so my thing with -- as far as what was going on here -- was not what I was into yet, because, like I said, that timing -- I was with my great grandmother and making sure that she was okay, so I wasn't hanging out as much until I got a little bit older, so I couldn't tell you too much about the Black Panthers, but I do remember them being here and that it was a big thing back then and there were a lot of people that didn't like it and there were a lot of people that did like it, you know, but it didn't last that long, but it was great to see that it was an effort that was put into effect. It helped a lot of people, I guess, but, like I said, this place has always been about the community and helping out, so I'm still grateful that they're still doing that to this day. You don't find too many places that do that, you know, or people get tired of doing something after a while, but it doesn't seem like the Margaret Fuller is getting tired of it because they've been here for so long and they're still doing the same thing, trying to reach out to the people. So as far as the Margaret Fuller changing, they've just gotten, I think, a little bit better as time has gone on, you know?

KB [01:07:14] Do you remember anything about the radio station that was here?



DF [01:07:18] Vaguely [laughs]. Vaguely, I remember that, but, like I said, I wasn't -- I can't even remember the name of the station. WMFH? I can't remember what the name of the station was, but it would -- that was on for a minute, that radio station, it was on for a minute. But I didn't listen back then, like I said, was little -- I wasn't into radios then [laughter].

KB [01:07:57] Okay. Thank you so much. Jeff, do you have any questions?

Jeff Solomon [01:08:03] No, just to bring up Paul's, they had the best subs there.

DF [01:08:08] Oh yes, they did. Mmhmm. And the Windsor Street Clinic here too, this has been here for a long time. Before the Windsor Street Clinic it was something else, but since they put the clinic in there, they get those psych, you know, for people that need help. They have the Cambridge Art Center now in there. There's a lot going on and they're all, you know, they all coincide, too, with the Margaret Fuller House. Everybody works for each other, which is nice. Cambridge Art Center, the kids go over there if they're having a program, you know, something going on, they get to go over there. There's a cook over there that -- she's marvelous and she makes some great lunches [laughs], but everybody here seems to be working with each other and not against each other, which is a nice thing, and I just hope it keeps going.

KB [01:09:12] Yeah.

DF [01:09:14] Yeah.

KB [01:09:16] Is there anything else you want to say before we wrap up?

DF [01:09:20] No [laughter].

KB [01:09:21] Okay [laughter].

DF [01:09:24] I think I said a lot.

KB [01:09:24] That was great. Thank you so much, we really appreciate it.



DF [01:09:29] You're welcome. Thank you for having me. Especially this hot room.

KB [01:09:32] Yeah, I know [laughs].

DF [01:09:32] Can I open the window now?

KB [01:09:33] I think we're good, yeah [laughter].

End of Interview

This interview is part of “Sweet Souls, Voices from the Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House in Cambridge,” an oral history project of the Cambridge Historical Society, in partnership with the Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House and The Loop Lab. This project was funded in part by Mass Humanities, which receives support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and is an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.