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Gary Niebur Oral History Interview

Stephen Hansen, Interviewer

January 10, 2018

Steve Hansen (SH): We're going to keep this just as comfortable and light as we possibly can Gary.

Gary Niebur (GN): Yeah ok.

SH: So just start out with I'm Steve Hansen, it's Wednesday January the 10th, 2018. And we're talking with Gary Niebur. And so Gary why don't you tell me a little about yourself, about growing up, where you grew up and.

GN: First of all thank you Steve, I appreciate the opportunity to chat with you and share something about my past and my life here in Edwardsville. I've been very fortunate, I've lived- grown up and lived in Edwardsville all my life. Born actually in Highland, Illinois. My dad worked at Shell, had a career at Shell and they moved here shortly before I was born. So I've a- spent my entire life in Edwardsville. Which I really to this day count my blessings because I feel like I was just very fortunate, had a marvelous family, mom and dad and four brothers and sisters. Grew up down by Dunlap here in Edwardsville which was a marvelous place to grow up as a kid with the fishing and swimming and the ice skating and plenty of activities to keep kids busy. I went to Saint Boniface, all of my brothers and sisters did as well. I consider myself really fortunate in that even at a very young age I had the opportunity to meet some people that at the time were certainly my elders, but people that I looked up to in the community even when I was in the- in my teens and beyond. And one of the things that- that I recall vividly and that I think had something to do with the paths that I would take in the future was when I was very active in little league baseball and all the other things kids were active in. And at a young age I recognized the importance of those people that kind of stepped up and did things as simple as coaching a little league baseball team. I remember having coaches that didn't have any kids on the team, they just kind of wanted to help, they just kind of wanted to play a positive role in the kid's lives. And that kind of stuck with me and that's why as time went on I felt like I needed to do something to kind of pay some people back and try to contribute to the community.

SH: So what was your plan when you were graduating from high school? What were you thinking that you were going to do?

GN: You know I wasn't sure to be honest with you. And I think, I will tell you that, and sometimes they jokingly talked of my friend Mike Webber and Ed Rodney and one time believe it or not when I was young I thought "ya know gosh maybe I'll be mortician". And that thought didn't last long. But ya know I really didn't have anything. I wanted to be, I wanted to be involved in the community. And I think I learned that again from people that were kind of mentors to me. And that I looked up to and I remember that- to give you an example, just a couple names John Hunter Junior was a dear friend of mine, he was certainly much older than I was at the time. But these were people like the Bob Wetzel's of the world and the folks that really were people that kind of constructed the foundations of this community. And I just

kind of always kind of looked up to them and said you know what, I'm going to play a positive role in the development of the community that I really intended all along to be here for the rest of my life. I had no great desire or interest to move away or even go away to college or kind of depart what I thought was a pretty good place, and that was this place. So you know I think I always had an interest in parks and recreation. And so that was actually my first job was with the city of Edwardsville and it was actually very early on when I was between my junior and senior years in high school. And then during the summer for a couple years I worked part time for the city in their Parks Department. And I did the you know the traditional park stuff, cut grass and cleaned the parks and did this and did all that. And low and behold the opportunity came about when I was probably 22 or 23 that the position of Parks and Recreation Director was open. And a gentleman by the name of Ernie Tarvoski, you may know Ernie and Chuck from the home nursery, Ernie was the chairman of the park board at the time. And he came up to me one day and I was nothing but kind of part time grounds supervisor and he said hey, so and so at the time he said he left, he's no longer with us and we just need someone to kind of supervise the crews and keep things going and I said I'd be happy to do what I could. So that eventually lead me to being named the at the time the youngest Parks and Recreation Director in the city. And I was happy, I was very happy. And it gave me a taste of what I really felt was good sound public service.

SH: and when approximately was it, you said you were 22, 23?

GN: Yeah, I think I was 23 when I took the job of Director of Parks.

SH: And what year would that-

GN: That would have been, oh my gosh, 70- maybe back in 78, something like that.

SH: Ok. So that was your first start actually also in politics then?

GN: Yeah, to a certain degree it was. That I remember very well back then a good friend of mine this gentleman I still miss to this day Steve Ellsworth. And Steve somewhere in that time frame Steve was a Statefarm insurance person here in- very well known, very popular gentleman. And Steve ran for Mayor and Steve won. And then I was in that role at the time Steve was mayor, Parks and Recreation Director. So I got an opportunity to kind of- and I was friends with Steve already, but I just had a chance to get to know him better and Steve would not mind me telling this story but because I said it at- when I did one of the eulogies for Steve funeral couple of years ago. I told Ray, his wife, and kids were obviously listening and I said so I'll never forget Steve and he was only about two years after Steve was in his mayor he- I saw him somewhere and he looked at me and kind of waved me to come to him and I walked over there and I said well hi mayor how are you doing. And he said I'm doing ok, he said I got- he said you kind even when you were really young you kind of hung around here for a while. He said I got one question for you. And I saw what's that and he said does this thing have to last four years? [laughter] Steve- Steve was a great guy and contributed immensely to the community. But I think being mayor Steve found out was not really the gig that he thought it was going to be. But I'll never forget that story about Steve. But you know it just kind of gave- me a working in city government just kind of gave me a little taste of what, you know, maybe good public service could be all about. And I guess my take on it was that even after years of being involved and 8 years as a member of the City Council and then ultimately 20 years as mayor, I really never looked upon myself as being quote being in politics or a quote politician. I don't

know why, but it just to me was it really all come about because I just had a sense of public service. You know, being someone and then there are 100s and 1000s of people that do this throughout this country, it was necessarily- it wasn't partisan politics, it was just remembering back when I was back in little league baseball and having all these older people at the time, you know, just trying to help me and steer me in the right direction. And I don't know, I just I don't think there's any magical thing about it. It was

just- it just kind of felt like I love this community and you know if I can get gainful employment here I have no interest in leaving here. And so

SH: So you say you got elected to the City Council?

GN: Yeah, what happened...

SH: Was that your first elected office?

GN: Exactly. So after I was Director of Parks and Recreation for, gosh, maybe four or five years this position at the YMCA came open. And an interesting connection to somebody you probably remember the name of Buzz and Maryann Shaw. Well Maryann Shaw was the President of the YMCA Board of Directors. And their CEO had left, they were in need of a new Executive Director today the title is CEO. And it kind of sparked my interest even though I had not up until that time I really had not been active in the YMCA. But there was a lady that to this day I love and respect Nina Beard who was, as you know, she was City Clerk for many years. So when I was with the Parks and Recreation Department obviously I interacted with Nina. And Nina one day said to me you know Gary you know I don't want you to think about leaving the city but what about the YMCA job, that's something you'd be really good at and they need somebody that's - that can really kind of move that organization forward. And I thought about it and Nina said well I've already talked to Maryann Shaw and said you'd be a great candidate. And I smiled when I said because I couldn't believe she would do that for me. So I went through the process and eventually was hired here. So after- after I was named the CEO at the YMCA the Aldermanic on the City Council came open and it was in an area where I lived in town on Ruskcan Avenue. And I said what the heck, I'll run for City Council. I did, served as a member of the City Council for 8 years, elected in I guess it was 1985, served two terms. And then toward the end of my second term a gentleman who you- Dennis Datoy was mayor at the time. And Dennis was kind of almost like Steve Ellsworths, four years for Dennis was enough. He didn't - [chuckles] Dennis did a good job and he cared immensely about the community but Dennis decided I'm not going run again. And since I was on the City Council I started giving some thought and Dennis was very encouraging. And so I guess it was the, gosh what was it the spring of 90- spring of 93, I guess, I decided to run for mayor. And ran, was elected and ran five more times. And so my record of public office was 7 and 0. 7 wins, no loses. And I felt that that time that you know what, maybe I shouldn't risk the next one. And I decided pretty much long before my last term that would be my last term. It was just I loved what I did with the city and loved the community and loved the contributions that we kind of collectively made. So...

SH: Gary, who- what did you have in terms of opposition when you ran for mayor?

GN: When I ran for mayor the first time there was a gentleman who was a retired police officer in Edwardsville by the name of Roy Boyce. Roy today still lives here, Roy was a good friend then, he

continues to be a good friend. And Roy was on the City Council as well. So when Dennis Detoy decided not to run again it just happened that me and Roy kind of both decided we both we're going to give it a shot. And it was a very- you know, it was something that made me feel good about campaigning. Today when I look at campaigns I sometimes don't feel good about it. But back then it was in essence kind of two friends that decided to kind of look at that same office and put their best foot forward and who wins and who doesn't. And you know I was very fortunate, I won. And Roy was very supportive, to this day we're friends. But it was kind of the- what I guess today I would say was kind of the good old days of campaigning. You know, you didn't have to be arch enemies or rivals, you didn't have to bad mouth the competition, you just kind of put your best foot forward and with, in essence saying I trust the judgment of the people.

SH: And how did you campaign, I mean did you buy signs or? [talking over each other]

GN: I got a great story I want to share with you about that. But yeah that was kind of the time when you walked door to door and you had these little hangers that you put on the door and, you know, vote for me and whatever it may be. And at the time, I mean, we lived on Ruskcan and oh my gosh we would have had two kids out of the four at that time. But, you know, you just walk the streets and knock on doors and you get some friends and one would go on one side of the street and you'd just go up and down the street. It was just- the old fashioned way of doing it, you didn't spend much money on advertising. You know, you just put your best foot forward. But I did something that I felt was really important, that was to share what my vision was of a community that I love dearly, that I grew up in, that was already a really great place but I felt it could be better. So what would have to happen in order for this to be better for the future. So I put together what at the time was called white papers. I had like 12 different topics and I still have that by the way, it's very interesting to look at, and there were maybe 12 or 14 different topics just one paragraph- two paragraphs saying here's what I think we should do or here's some thoughts about these topics. And my goodness Steve it goes back to- one of the topics by the way was the old N.O. Nelson Complex...

SH: Yes, right.

GN: That SUI had had. So it was really just kind of the good old fashion stuff. And the story that I'll never forget is that was always kind of traditionally you'd say- you'd put something and say if you need a ride to the polls, I don't know if you ever remember the-

SH: Yes, right.

GN: You know, call this number for a free ride to the polls. Ok, so election day I'm kind of sitting around waiting for the phones to ring and they don't ring and they don't ring. And all a sudden late morning I get a phone call and it's somebody in general says something like hey, somebody told me that I could call you and you'd give me a ride to the polls so I could vote today. I said sure I'd be happy to, he gave me his address. And I was excited, so by the way cleaned the car up just to kind of make sure I was ready for all the calls I would get- I got one ok. Well the one call that I got was from an elderly gentleman who lived in an area that is referred to as Issuewood, it's down by Richard's Brick Company. And I drove down there and kind of got to the end of the street and low and behold here was this gentleman sitting in a couch at the end of the street. This is true, ok. You know, I helped him, he got in the car and I took him

up to vote and took- helped him get in- older gentleman, nice man. And when he's done voting he came out and hopped in the car and he said hey I just wanted to tell you something, I really really appreciate the ride and Roy I wish you the best. [laughter] So I gave him a ride to the polls and he voted against me. He called the wrong guy ok.

SH: Where any of the elections that you ran in hotly contested or closely?

GN: No, I think the first one where Roy and I ran for mayor and really was a real close race per say but. And then I ran for alderman again, unopposed. And then I ran for mayor- I'm sorry then I ran for- I get this backwards, ran against Roy for mayor and then I ran the next four times unopposed. So I had one race in my quote "career" and that was when a gentleman ran against me, I guess the third time I was running for mayor. So I ran unopposed most of the time and

I kind of credited that to nobody else really wanted the job. But, you know, I really enjoyed- I enjoyed what I did.

SH: What were some of the difficult issues you had to deal with?

GN: I tell you what, back- the issues back then were primarily infrastructure, highways. This was back when 157 was two lanes, Troy Road was a disaster. Traffic around here was awful because that was also a time when the growth and development of the community really started.

SH: And the railroads were still running.

GN: Exactly. So you had the rail roads going across Troy Road. Traffic was a mess but you had community that basically had- was intersected by three state highways. You had 157, you had 159, you had 143, which were responsibilities of course of State of Illinois. The state never really recognized that necessarily in this area. So the biggest challenge I think was the traffic and the infrastructure, you know the community was really growing for I think a lot of good reasons. So I spent a great deal of my time in Springfield and lobbying for funds for these highways. And

SH: How did you do that? How do you lobby?

GN: You know what

SH: In Springfield.

GN: I guess the lesson that I learned through that was if you're not persistent and if you're not aggressive you may not get anywhere. So I almost had to be the biggest pest around to talk to. I'll give you an example of this, Dick Derbin served as one of the senators for Illinois. Dick at the time was a congressman and his area was Springfield. And I remember when I was shortly after I was elected mayor, if not about the same time, the district boundaries for congressional districts had changed. And all of a sudden Dick Derbin now went to- came up in- Edwardsville was included in his new congressional district. And I remember him coming to Edwardsville one day shortly after that and we were sitting in the office at John Hunter's Insurance. And I met then congressman Derbin there and he said hey this is a new part of my district, I want to get involved, I want to, you know, show my support. And he said so what

can I do to help. And I said if you really want to help the people of this area you've got to help us get some federal funds for some highway improvements, even though these are state highways. And he said what do you think the number one need is. And I said well, I said if I'm reading right or understanding this correctly it would be difficult to get federal money solely for a state highway improvement. So I remember coming up with the plan that basically said that we need to extend South Main Street all the way out to go- to Center Grove Road where the theatre is today. And I said that will be a new road and I think it'll be eligible for federal funds. And it's a project I'll always be very proud of because that extension of South Main Street is now a major thoroughfare that helped solve a lot of our traffic problems. In six months he was able to obtain a half million dollar allocation for- to start some engineering and design. So I think to a large degree being aggressive and not giving up and being persistent in fighting for the needs of our community was something that I was more than happy to take on.

SH: Did you find, was Jay Hoffman our state legislator rep at that time?

GN: Yes, Jay was extremely helpful and I had a marvelous relationship with Jay. And Jay did a lot for this area, including his role at the SIU, the N.O. Nelson Place. Yeah, so it was the local- Bill Hayne, you know, over Bill's tenure, even when Bill was back in the State's Attorney's Office I was very fortunate to have good relationships with him. So I think that- and again being mayor is a non-partisan position. So I wasn't a big party person per say on either side. I was committed to doing what I felt was best to hopefully continue to build and improve this community.

SH: Did you find that being mayor that you had some big interest that were pressing you for different things and different economic, you know, whether it be developers or contractors or bankers or?

GN: Absolutely. And I think part of it, and again I really don't have any complaints about being mayor but, you know, back in the prime of development here in Edwardsville, this was the same time we were having these challenges of infrastructure, our capacity for our water and sewer plants- not something you think about a lot but it better be there and it better be right. And then when you start seeing the growth in large part I think to SIU and its tremendous impact on this area, the proximity to St. Louis, there were just a lot of good things that set Edwardsville as a good place to invest in. Well the problem was- is that at the growth time of the boom of development it kind of seemed to be that anybody that had a pickup truck and a hammer was all the sudden a developer.

SH: Right.

GN: And so we knew the growth was going to happen just because of the many attributes of the area. And we said you know we got to slow down here and we got to- we have got to make sure that growth is not simply for the sake of getting bigger. Whatever growth we have here, whether it's residential or commercial, we need to make sure that that growth is a long term asset for this community, not a short term asset for the guy that's got a pickup truck that wants to build a house and then move on and build another house in some other community or whatever it may be. So we developed some very strict development codes. And that was tough because we just felt like it had to be done- if we were going to do it, we had to do it right. And we were very lucky, we've have some excellent residential developers in this community, thank goodness. But we just felt like we need to set the standard for what- what is our

standard here development. You know, do we just want development just because we want to get a little bigger, do we want development simply because if we let this business in town it will produce a couple dollars in sales tax- no that wasn't it. It was what is best for the community long term. So that was a big challenge, a big challenge was to set the standards that they're reasonable but there's expectations that come with investing in this community and I think in general I think we did a good job. And that if you look at Edwardsville's today.

SH: Yeah I think so too.

GN: So yeah.

SH: So you talked about the growth in this area, the population grew, income grew, value grew. And you mentioned SIU Edwardsville as one factor, our geographic location as another factor, what else in involved and what did you see as the city's role in helping to promote this phenomenal growth that occurred?

GN: Yeah, I think

SH: Excuse, and as you said it's very positive kind of growth. Although I'm sure there's some who'd critique it

GN: Of course. Well I think you mentioned some of the attributes that kind of made our jobs much easier. So maybe start with education in general, ok. So you just look at Edwardsville at the time, population what's, maybe 16,000 or whatever it may have been back then. But you had SIU which was a tremendous economic boom for the region, not just this community. You had a- you've always had a strong public school system here. And again a town of 17,000 or whatever thousand- you had parochial school opportunities for people, ok. You had the impact that Lewis and Clark was beginning to make in terms of the area. So you couldn't of- I'm sure you could have found an area that had more strong attributes for education. That was a big plus and as you said the geographic things. So what I think city had to do was to try to guide the development in the area of high quality, long term asset being very welcoming for residential growth but at the same time holding standards that were best for the community. Another challenge at that point was as you see the growth happening, and this was one of my major issues when I ran for mayor, ok we're going to see growth for all those reasons that I mention but we don't want to have a new Edwardsville and an old Edwardsville. We want one Edwardsville. So therefore we have got to old in the highest priority investing in our older established neighborhoods, that was kind of a theme. And that was downtown back in the early late 70s early 80s- was declining. So when you saw some of the growth the growth was happening where? It was happening on the outskirts. So as that growth is happening on the outskirts, as a sudden we're kind of recognizing that our core Edwardsville, whether it's downtown or whether it's our older established residential neighborhoods was not advancing. It was declining. I remember and have pictures of downtown Edwardsville with weeds that were 8 to 12 inches high coming out of some of the sidewalks, I'm talking about Main Street. I'm talking about the old wood utility poles that if you looked down the street one would be leaning this way, one would be leaning that way, and then one would be straight. And vacant buildings and it was to a point where we can't forget about where we've come from as a community. That was the base of this community for many years and we cannot allow that to deteriorate anymore. So we started an investment

in downtown Edwardsville and the older established neighborhoods and it was marvelous thing- you look at our downtown today and I don't think there's too many of a community this size that are that nice.

SH: I agree with you with. How did you- what was the rule of the city in trying to attract money, development, and particularly renovation of downtown?

GN: Well I tell you what, there was a gentlemen that I have said kind of came to our rescue in downtown Edwardsville many years ago, his name was Ralph Korte. You know Ralph well. And we had a section of the at the corner of Main Street and Main, I guess it was St. Louis Street, dilapidated buildings which were referred to as Edwardsville center. Now I wish I had some pictures to show, it was absolutely, it looked like it was in the middle of Baghdad it was just a disaster. Vacant buildings, going- it was awful. And of course we were fortunate that what held downtown together for years was being the county seat. Those people had to show up there, they didn't have much of a choice. You know, if they work for the county the chance are they had to come to Edwardsville and that's where they worked. And it also came to be that if people had to travel from Alton or Granite or wherever it was to the county seat, guess what, they had to come to Edwardsville whether they liked it or not. So we had that core base there. So we built around that and Ralph Korte and guy named Gary Bulkee, this was right about the time I was mayor, little before actually. And they decided to invest in an office building which is now today Mark Twain, used to be Mark Twain Plaza, the new buildings. And that's spurred things. And then all a sudden you had people like Bob Wetzel, the Bank of Edwardsville, always been a fixture in downtown Edwardsville. Listen, when they expanded their complex they didn't have to do there. And I knew it and we talked about it. They could have gone anywhere in the outskirts to the quote new part of Edwardsville, the new development but they decided they were going to with downtown. And then all a sudden you had people like businesses like Walgreens is a good example that said you know what, we believe in downtown Edwardsville. So a lot of it was that we did offer some significant incentives to draw people there but- and part of that was we could not expect the Bank of Edwardsville to add on to their complex and then have all kinds of issues with water supply. You know, so that's where the city invested. We basically reconstructed the infrastructure to make sure when people, even as simple as a Walgreens or the Bank of Edwardsville or whoever it may be, you know, you can't expect them to invest in something that's considered a bad investment. It's got to be a positive thing for them, so we built the infrastructure so they didn't have to worry about that. We improved the streets, we improved the sidewalks, we said if you- I guess my kind of take on this was this that, and I remember saying this in city government, if we're not willing to invest in downtown Edwardsville then why in the world would somebody from the private sector come in here and invest. This has got to be a true partnership of the city building the infrastructure, fixing up the utilities, making all the things available for success for private sector investment. And sometimes I shook my head but- this worked, it did. And then all a sudden it was it tired, sick and tired of seeing wood telephones falling all over the place this looked awful. So then we started the infrastructure program for the streetscape. And all of those kinds of things but a lot of it was that you couldn't be afraid to ask people. It didn't bother me in the least to go to the Bob Wetzel's, and people were very good to me by the way, and say Bob what can we do to insure the Bank of Edwardsville is going to stay in downtown Edwardsville and be a core part of our downtown. And you know it's a little thing but I think they appreciate the fact that we wanted them to stay. Our position wasn't you know, well do what you want to do, our position was we respect whatever your decision is in the end, but we want you to know that this is where we want you and this is why. And maybe in a small way those kinds of things kind of helped in the end.

SH: Who besides Bob Wetzel was instrumental in guiding or promoting the growth of this area?

GN: John Fruit.

SH: John Fruit?

GN: John Fruit played a big role. And there was an economic development commission that Gordon Broom, you know a lot of these players I think. But Gordy was on, so we appointed an economic development commission and they helped kind of promote. And a lot of that just having people like that to rely upon to be good will ambassadors for the city. But the Ralph Korte, Ralph coming in and making that investment. You know Ralph was major player in the St. Louis area, one of the most respected business people that I have ever met over the years. But I think that, oh man, then you got to look at like- you may refer to these as kind of the littler guys, Embersmens Wear. You remember that?

SH: Yes.

GN: It was small, it was kind of the small business. Bob Schwartz. Bob Schwartz, you name it. It was really astounding how player of all sizes of all different areas came together and basically with that thing that basically says this downtown is worth saving. This downtown being the county seat, as mayor when somebody came into Edwardsville maybe once every three years from let's say Alton or you name it, and they're coming here not necessarily because they kind of want to be here but because they have to be here to do business with the county. I want them to come in to Edwardsville and say wow this is nice, this is a nice place. And it sounds like a miniscule thing but I think it was important that we make those kinds of investments in our older established neighborhoods, number one downtown and number two so of these older residential areas. A good example, Coventry Street. Coventry Street back in the mid-80s was probably 80 percent rental properties, nice homes but just kind of converted to rental property. And it was deteriorating quite frankly. But it wasn't just the homes that were deteriorating it was the sewer system and the water system that couldn't support much more than what was there. So we invested in those neighborhoods. We said you know, you know, we need new sidewalks, we need nicer streets, we need infrastructure that supports somebody's willingness to invest and that happened at a pretty rapid pace. Rich Walker a gentlemen I think you know Rich well. Rich was an iatrical part of the City Council back in those days. Rich was kind of, he was the guy that really helped spearhead the kind of restoration of downtown. You now Rich was the guy that was willing to take the lead on taking the Wildey Theatre which was a negative for our downtown and turn it into a positive. And if you look at the impact of that place today its been a tremendous asset to the community. But there were risks taken in order to get there and Rich was the guy that was willing to help. He and I and a lot of others say you know, our downtown is worth this investment.

SH: Well Gary you had two names you didn't mention are Bob Plummer and Cassens?

GN: Yeah, I should have.

SH: Well I was going to ask you, don't feel like you have to say that [laughter]. But it was notable that those names were not mentioned. So I didn't know whether or not they were just- if they were- and this is no criticism, were they intimately involved in kind of thinking of the future?

GN: I think, I think first of all I would say with the Cassens the answer is absolutely. And the same with Bob, ok. So Cassens and that's one that if you look at it- I talk about the Bank of Edwardsville, well you know who was that? It was Albert Cassen, it was Cassens family giving support to the players at the bank, the Bob Wetzels and all those. So certainly Cassens. Let me give you another example of the asset of Cassens. Cassens Transport, that's a massive company. They don't have to be in downtown Edwardsville today, they could be anywhere in the county doing their business but they stuck with us downtown. So I commend them. From a standpoint of residential development Bob Plummer saw, I believe Bob saw the value of investing in Edwardsville. He was there- Bob was not the guy that I refer to with the pickup truck and a hammer, ok. Bob was a true developer, true businessman, self-made, very much so. And Bob, we all knew this, one of the ways to get new business investment much of that business was driven by rooftops, ok. So it doesn't matter that we want a whatever restaurant chain restaurant. It doesn't matter if the numbers aren't there for them, they're not going to come here. They don't care who the mayor is, they could care less. So rooftops played a major role in driving the business side of the investment. And Bob played a major role in doing that.

SH: And Gary was there kind of a, I don't even know if I can ask the question correctly. Was there an overarching vision that you guys came up with or even not- that guided this remarkable growth?

GN: I guess a lot of that happened so fast because it was rather rapid, that as I said earlier that we kind of had to say at one point let's slow down. Let's just slow down for a minute and let's make sure that we all are on the same page about what that vision can and should be for the future of the community. So I think that that's when we did take some steps back and said listen, we need to do a much better job of developing a comprehensive plan. And we did. We stopped for awhile and said we need to update our comprehensive plan, we need to develop development codes and not restrictions, but guidelines. And I think the vision was whatever we do let's make sure that's it's good for the long-term benefit of the community.

SH: And you know I would think that the we in that sentence, at least in reference to the city, was you and your allies in the City Council and city government watching out for the issues like infrastructure, sewer, roads, and safety.

GN: Exactly, planned commissions, zoning boards those kinds of things.

SH: Exactly, right. And setting the codes and schools. Who, what other areas of the we are there and did you like get together for a coffee and say hey this is- this is where I think we ought to go next and

GN: Yeah, you know, the one thing that whether it was a role that I was so fortunate to play as mayor, or even here at the YMCA was, you know, I learned from many years ago from many of the mentors that I kind of mentioned earlier that sometimes it's a lot more important to listen than to talk. And one example of listening was there's much more to the success of a community than a handful of people that are elected, ok. It's the citizenry, the everybody. So to give you an example when I went into office as mayor there were probably around 40 people that served on various boards and commissions whether it's a park board or a plan commission or zoning board or I mentioned the economic development commission area. When I left the city had about 110 because we expanded that and that was one way for us to get more input and sometimes it may not make you feel real good at the time but sometimes you also have to look

at the other perspective of development. A lot of people really weren't as wild about development. It was like gosh, we're ok the way we are or why do we have to do it. So you know I always kind of felt like I want to hear from the nay sayers too because I want that to be a balance of decision that we kind of make. So growing up here I mean there wasn't, and I love this by the way, you know if I go to the grocery store chances are there was somebody that would bump into me and say nice things and there were some that would say some not so nice things. But I think listening helped us, I really do. And I think that a couple examples of development that you see today and you see down in what they call the American bottoms, all the distribution centers well that was rather controversial when it started because it was good quality farmland and it was, you know, there was nothing wrong with it obviously. But there were others that had that vision of development and we annexed that area down there because we wanted to have some say in what that development would be. That's why we annexed it and if you look at it today it produces thousands and thousands of jobs and I think it's turned out to be you know good for the community and the region as, you know, a whole.

SH: Well let's talk about some of the resistance to change and to the growth. You mentioned there were those that just wanted to keep Edwardsville a quaint city the kind of small town that they liked, loved and were use to. I've heard people suggest that they don't like the change because it's the suburbanization of this area we're in. And I guess that must mean that it becomes kind of homogenized.

GN: Exactly.

SH: And there are probably- were those- do people complain about their property taxes going up to build for the infrastructure?

GN: Well, not really. I mean nobody is happy with property taxes, ok. One thing I'm really proud of is that in the 20 years I was mayor our tax rate actually decreased, ok. Now that doesn't necessarily mean your tax bill went down but it meant that it didn't go up proportionally as it could have based upon the property values, ok. So I think that this kind of ties back into the issue of downtown and the older established neighborhoods. And here was the balance that I felt like we had to have that it- if we weren't willing to invest in our older neighborhoods then why would anybody even think about doing that ok. So what we wanted to do was as best we could retain what I think you were talking about here and that's the charm and character of the nice, quaint, small, friendly town. And that's not as easy to do when people are wanting to be here, you know, they want to invest here. They know it's a good investment whether it's their own personal homes or whether it's their businesses. So it was like ok we're growing and we know we're growing and you know what whether we- we can't put a gate up you know. I had a lot of people after they moved here after they moved here a couple years earlier from who knows where and say you got to stop this growth. Well and I said well you're lucky we didn't it two years ago or you wouldn't be here, you know. But it really just comes to a balance, it's like ok well we're going to have new growth that's not a bad thing, but let's make sure it's good quality number one. Let's make sure it's a long lasting asset, maybe number two. Let's make sure that we don't forget about who we are and where we came from with our nice little quaint downtown which was no longer charming. But how could we kind of bring all those things together. And there were- there were sure people that said you know- and people say it today, you know. I hear people today that say the growth is kind of bit much today can we just kind of slow down and of course it's not my role anymore. But you got to have balance. And I think an example that I'll never forget was back in I guess it was 2002, I has been on the Illinois Municipal Board

of Director for at that point like 10 years. And the Illinois Municipal League is the league of cities in the state, ok. Illinois has like 11 hundred municipalities from towns of 10 people to Chicago. And I was selected president of the Illinois Board of Municipal Board of Directors. So it gave me an opportunity to basically to go north, south, east, and west to smaller towns to bigger towns, to you know it. From Paris, Illinois on the east to Galesburg to Cairo to you name it just as representative of the municipal league. And the one thing, I just told somebody this the other day, the one thing that I will never forget is that no matter where I was in the state as I was driving back home to good ole Edwardsville I would say I'm glad of the challenges that we have versus others. And by that, and it's very true in my opinion, I would go to a city in eastern central Illinois, nice little town there challenges were as follows people couldn't wait to get out of there, businesses were leaving as quickly as they could, nobody wanted to invest any money in the community, kids were growing up couldn't wait to get out their little home town. And this was happening all over the state. And I'd come back to Edwardsville, and here's my challenges too much growth, parking problems downtown, need to refurbish the infrastructure to prepare for new investment, businesses that wanted to be here, families that wanted to move here. And I- every time I'd come home I'd say you know what, makes me feel better about my challenges.

SH: Your problems?

GN: Yeah.

SH: Did the presence of the university create any special tensions or challenges?

GN: You know that- I've heard that. That would have been well before my time I think. You know kind of one of the first

SH: The land acquisition

GN: Yeah all that kind of stuff how many years ago. But I got to tell you something I think this university unquestionably is not only one of the greatest asset of this community, it's a great asset of this entire region and this state. So you think about it, how many people, maybe looking at one, ended up coming here to this place to this community to this area because of that. A lot. And these are people were certainly highly educated. They were willing to invest in their homes and their property. These, the people that came to this area because of the university have had an immense positive impact on this community. No doubt about it. I have always felt strongly and very positively about SIUE. And to pay back that, let me just say this, I remember saying this to Vaughn Vandergrift before his departure. I said Vaughn, matter of fact this was at Vaughn's- had a little party for him at Birdies I remember, going away kind of thing, very nice thing. And I spoke and I said you know I've been working on, I worked on David Warner and that just didn't quite work with David. Now I've been working on Vaughn and I said this is a relatively simple thing but if, I said if my son Andrew he better graduate in four years, which he hasn't by the way he's on his fifth year at Carbondale. I said if Andrew graduates in four years that means that Debbie and I will have had 20 years of our kids in SIU, either Edwardsville or Carbondale. Isn't that neat? And I said there's nobody in this room that can't tell me that ain't worth having a sidewalk named after me. [laughter] I said Vaughn I never ask you for a building, I just want a sidewalk, I want a bench, I want something for those 20 years of investment. But you know what I mean, I look at my kids and Ashley went here for four years, went on to law school at Carbondale, has a tremendous career. Amanda four

years here, great job. Abby, four years in Carbondale great job. Andrew is we're trying to wind him through, matter of fact I may to call on you for some help. But SIU has been marvelous for this area and I, you know, I mean I think we're you know I personally feel like I'm very blessed to have grown up in a really nice town that in my view keeps getting better.

SH: Well I think it was- it gave Warner credit for really beginning to emphasis the Edwardsville.

GN: Absolutely.

SH: And that over, maybe over the SIU part. And he said after all people talk about Berkley, they don't talk about University of California at Berkley, just say Berkley. Well we should just say Edwardsville so that logo [talking over each other] and that evolved into the E. And it's just absolutely really I think important that they symbiotic relationship between the city and the...

GN: I think there's a true connection because of those kinds of things. Not that there wasn't ever a true connection but that really it kind of solidified that togetherness, you know. And I mean I have people that come in from out of town and I love to drive them around this campus, you know what I mean. I think we just really fortunate and I think on the education part when Lewis and Clark, I have to tell you a story that about the Nelson property. And you probably remember some of the history of this, but SIU had that for many years. And it was declining and SIU finally said this ain't worth investing, you know, money in to keep it kind of going. So it was kind of abandoned, right. Well I remember my white papers talked about that when I first ran for mayor what can be done there. And I kind of said back then it's probably- in order for this to succeed whether we like it or not it's probably going to require some type of support from taxing entities. I don't think the private sectors going to go in there and clean it up and fix it up, I just don't think that's going to happen. So low and behold Dale Chapman, who as you know Dale, he's a pretty aggressive guy he's a do-er I think. So I'll never forgot it was in conversations with SIU and with Lewis and Clark and Jay Hoffman played a big role in this, I will never forget the day and it was actually that day- it was at city hall and my secretary said Dale Chapman. And I said ok, so I Dale how you doing, have our little conversation. Gary guess what, I said, he said we got a deal with SIU on the Nelson place. I said really, he said yup. He said we got a deal, we're going to take this project on and you're going to be proud of what we do and all that good stuff. So Dale then, I said can you kind of share with me what kind of deal did you get. And Dale said we're getting that whole place for a dollar. Now Steve you're going to love this. And I said Dale I think you got a big problem. He said what's that, what do you mean a big problem. I said well, I said state statue it requires- you cannot pay more than the appraised value and the appraised value ain't a dollar Dale. [laughter] It was a joke of course, I said Dale you're kind of over paying at a dollar. But if you look at that, that's a good example you know of turning something in that's like the city's old sewer plant. It's now the watershed nature center, now that and the N.O. Nelson thing is kind of turning something that's a negative into a positive, you know. But so SIU has played a marvelous role not just for the community but for me personally. And that's a value to me.

SH: Was there any particular challenge that you felt that you just wished you could do it over again and address differently?

GN: Well, I'm sure that there are some that- I'm a pretty positive in general person, so that kind of stuff I forget I guess [laughing]. But no, I think that there were some real tough decisions that had to be made in

order to have the end product what it is or was. One that I won't forget is the city of Edwardsville back twenty- fifteen years ago was one of the few cities that didn't have a utility tax. So, but what we did have was- we had to buy city stickers for your car and had to buy dog license and all this little nickel and dime stuff. So I said in order for us to achieve our goal of improving our infrastructure- streets, water, sewer, sidewalks, all those kinds of things. You know whether you like it or not you have to have money for it. So I proposed that we impose a three percent utility tax, which is very standard, and nothing- but it's a new tax. And people don't like that. But what I said was if we impose that tax then I propose we do away with all the nickel and dime stuff that we bug people with. We make people drive to city hall to buy a city sticker so we can get ten bucks, that's crazy. So we put a package together that basically said if this three percent utility tax goes into effect as approved by majority of city council here's what we will do, we will delete all these other pittily nickel and dime things, but we will also commit to 75 percent of every penny that comes through utility tax can only be spent on streets and sidewalks. And to this day that happens and that's why our residential streets have had a lot of improvements and how those today get that nice resource available them. But I think in terms of regrets, you know, certainly I think you know sometimes you wish things could happen faster. But I guess that's just government, you know. I'm just trying to think if there's anything that kind of really jumps out at me. And there's really not, you know. I'm content, and we certainly- I'm sure we made mistakes along the way but, you know, I think the goal when I went into office was to hopefully play a little role in making it a better place when I left office. And I feel pretty good about that.

SH: I think you should, I think you did a marvelous job. Is there anything else that we should cover or talk about that you can think about right now? We can always pick up again.

GN: I'm kind of thinking we covered a lot of things. I think that one of the things that I think really kind of may be reemphasizing this but again when you have people that want to be a part of a community that's a good thing. And I think that says a lot about the community, that people want to be here. They're not necessarily coming here because they don't have to pay taxes, they're not necessarily coming here because groceries are cheaper. They're coming here because I think that they believe it's a good investment for them, their business, their family. Or it's a good invest in the lives of their kids. That- to me those are really important things so when I would see people couldn't wait to get out of their home towns, you know, I'm thinking I'm glad we don't have that. And I'm kind of- I'm really glad that people if they're going to move to the metro east area that they're going to look at Edwardsville. And there's a lot of different things that make that happen. And it's the education component, I think it's a safe community, I think it's fiscally sound community. It's a place where if you're investing your money you're going to most likely invest it in something that gives you the highest rate of return that you can get. So in my view if you're going to invest in land or property or a new home, chances are you wanna make that invest based upon what you think is best for your future and your quote return. But maybe your return in different ways than just money. And I think that's why there's just an awful lot of people that come here. And the Y's a good example of that. I mean, I see- I served in those dual capacities for a long time and, you know, I just think this is a good place and you've played a role in that- the people. This isn't- this wasn't an achievement by an administration, this wasn't achievement by a handful of people, this was an achievement I believe, and by the way we got a long way to go we're not there yet we're getting better I think every day. But I think it's an achievement of a true collective effort by all the partners and players and that's what kind of makes me feel good that for awhile there I was a captain of that.

SH: Very good. Thanks Gary.

GN: Thank you.