VILLAGE PRESERVATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Carol Greitzer

Conducted and transcribed by John Berman
New York, New York
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General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by Village Preservation. The Village Preservation Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood. Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well- informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record. The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange. The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

THANK YOU

Summary of oral history with Carol Greitzer

Carol Greitzer (January 3, 1925 – April 3, 2026) was a longtime New York City office holder whose involvement with New York City politics dates back to the 1950s. She begins this interview by discussing her early life and education in New York City in the thirties and forties.

She continues the interview by talking about her early involvement with politics in the 1952 Stevenson presidential campaign. After moving to Greenwich Village in the mid-fifties, Greitzer and her husband became increasingly involved in local politics. By the end of the 1950s, Greitzer had helped found the Village Independent Democrats (VID), a reformist organization challenging the local political machine run by Carmine DeSapio. Greitzer discusses some of the early strategies pursued by the VID, as well as the role of women in the movement.

In the next section of the interview Greitzer talks about some of the early preservation battles fought in Greenwich Village. One of the first with which Greitzer was involved was the campaign to save the Jefferson Market Courthouse. In addition, Greitzer was also very involved in the relocation of Joseph Papp's Public Theater to the restored Astor Library. In this section Greitzer also speaks of the fight to close Washington Square Park to traffic and opines on the reasons why this particular effort was so successful. She ends this section by discussing Title 1 and the City's proposal for Verrazano Street.

Greitzer concludes by reflecting upon the lessons she learned from these early battles and opining on the responsibilities of New York City Council representatives and her efforts to meet those responsibilities.

BERMAN: This is John Berman and I'm here with Carol Greitzer on Wednesday, December 8, 1999 for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation….

Let's start at the beginning, can you talk about your evolution, where you were born and grew up?

GREITZER: I was born here.

BERMAN: Here in Manhattan?

GREITZER: Yeah. Born in Stuyvesant Square as a matter of fact in a hospital that's no longer there. Grew up in the Bronx. I went to Hunter High School and then Hunter College.

BERMAN: Were your parents immigrants?

GREITZER: No. When I got married for the first time we moved to Washington [Washington, D.C.] where my husband had a job. I was in Washington and I was working there but I did volunteer work for the first Stevenson campaign.

BERMAN: Which is actually the origins of the VID [Village Independent Democrats], right, came out of that?

GREITZER: Right, yeah. This was in 1952—the first Stevenson campaign. Some of us were involved in putting together some of Adlai's speeches which was very inspiring. I remember on election night sitting around with some Cabinet officials, Truman's Cabinet, at some party watching returns….

BERMAN: So you lived growing up for a short time here in the city but basically you grew up in the Bronx, you said.

GREITZER: I grew up in the Bronx. I happened to be born in Manhattan. I grew up in the Bronx.

BERMAN: Went to public schools?

GREITZER: Went to public, yeah.

BERMAN: How many brothers and sisters?

GREITZER: I didn't have any.

BERMAN: So you were an only child?

GREITZER: Yeah. So when I came back to the Village, I came back in '54—

BERMAN: How long did you live in Washington?

GREITZER: Four years. I lived in Virginia for a year and Washington for about three and a half. Four and half very long years. [Laughs]

BERMAN: This was after you got married?

GREITZER: Yeah.

BERMAN: Did you go to college?

GREITZER: I went to Hunter College and got a graduate degree at NYU. Which was useful [because] every time we had to fight NYU I would always start out my speech by saying that I was a graduate. [Laughs]

BERMAN: I can relate to that.

GREITZER: Well, when we fought the library building. When they were gonna build that huge library [Bobst] in Washington Square I said, "Nobody knows better than I did how badly we need a library because I had to do all my"—I got a degree in English literature so I had to do a lot of reading and I never ever got a book at the NYU library. I would go to Columbia and would go to the public library. And I went up to Harvard…. The thing I did at Harvard I could have gotten sent to me, but I just thought it would be fun to go up to Harvard because there was something in their rare book room to read….

BERMAN: So English literature, growing up in the Bronx, going to Washington. Where did the interest in public affairs come from? Where did your interest in politics—?

GREITZER: I got interested in politics basically through the Stevenson campaign. Almost all of the people that I know who are really active in politics got their start through presidential campaigns: the [Eugene] McCarthy campaign, the Kennedy campaign….

BERMAN: So you view Stevenson as a galvanizing force for you and many of your friends?

GREITZER: We found him extremely inspiring.

BERMAN: How about within your family. Was there any influence there? Was anyone in your family interested in public affairs?

GREITZER: Not really. Slightly. They were Roosevelt admirers—New Deal Democrats. They weren't active in any way. My father was interested in New York City. He used to take me around all over the city. He'd take me to the Statue of Liberty or out to Brooklyn and even to Staten Island. Also, my mother had a really big family from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, so when they came to visit my father would take us all out sightseeing. I went to the Statue of Liberty several times as a child and I know a lot of people from New York who have never been there.

BERMAN: So he got you connected with the idea that you were a citizen of New York City?

GREITZER: Yeah, but he was not active in politics per se. Nobody was in my family. My mother was certainly not. My grandmother had some political friends but that was all.

BERMAN: Any religious influence?

GREITZER: No, we were not observant.

BERMAN: Were you working while you were in graduate school?

GREITZER: Yes, I actually was doing some editorial work and taking classes at night to complete my degree.

BERMAN: What about your economic background growing up?

GREITZER: We struggled a little bit. We weren't starving, but I was very well aware that there was a Depression. We went to camp in the summer. We lived modestly, but we were not poor. My father was always working.

BERMAN: What kind of work?

GREITZER: He did sales. He had a car during the war [World War II] so he was able to get gasoline. He would go out to New Jersey and buy people food that they couldn't get in New York. [Laughs] I remember that, I remember rationing.

BERMAN: Do you think being a child of the Depression helped make you more socially aware?

GREITZER: Oh, I think being a child of the Depression has a lasting impact on people. It makes them continue to be very conscious of money: either they never are sure they have enough or they spend it quickly once they get it, one extreme or the other. But don't ask me which extreme I fall in. [Laughs]

But I do think that if you grew up in that atmosphere you are likely to have a frugal tendency. I watch kids of rich people growing up today where there is no problem, where they can get anything they want and I don't really think it is very good for them. I think it is important to have a sense of the value of things.

BERMAN: And your mother. Did she stay at home?

GREITZER: She did a little interior decorating at home so she did have some income.

BERMAN: You were aware of the Depression. Were you aware of New York City politics as a young person?

GREITZER: No, not really. I was aware of LaGuardia, how could you not be aware of LaGuardia? But I knew very little. I knew we had a borough president because as a Campfire Girl the borough president once spoke to us. So I was slightly aware of government but not much more than that.

BERMAN: How about [Robert] Moses? He was so powerful and got so much publicity. I wondered if you remember being aware of him in those early days?

GREITZER: Oh, yes. Moses was a very big person. He was always doing things. He was a hero back then. He built all those things. People were amazed that he was able to get these roads and bridges built in such a short time, but as [Robert A.] Caro points out he [Moses] was able to get all that help from the WPA.[1]

BERMAN: And then later he had his own independent budget.

GREITZER: Right. But you know that was a time when things were built quickly. I mean the Empire State Building was built in 13 months and Moses had nothing to do with that. I compare

[1] Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).

this, too, for instance, with the people who live up above me now who have been remodeling this apartment upstairs without doing any structural work. They could have built half the Empire State Building in the time they have been involved in this little project! They are really doing nothing up there.

BERMAN: What were your memories of the Bronx as a child?

GREITZER: Well, I grew up on the Concourse, and I remember them building the subway. I don't remember the details, I just remember that there was stuff going on.

BERMAN: What part of the Bronx?

GREITZER: 197th Street on the Concourse.

BERMAN: West Bronx.

GREITZER: Yeah, kind of, although it is similar to calling this the West Village. That was the Central Bronx in the way that this is the central Village or Greenwich Village, not the West Village, which is really another neighborhood entirely.

BERMAN: You mentioned doing editing professionally and getting a graduate degree in English literature. Where did your interest in writing and journalism come from?

GREITZER: I don't know. It was something I liked to do and that I did well.

BERMAN: Were you encouraged?

GREITZER: Yeah, I was encouraged to be interested in things and ideas, but my mother did want me to take education classes so I could be a teacher. I didn't want to be a teacher. Then everyone told me in school that I had to take stenography and typing, that I would have to start as a secretary. I said, "To hell with that."

BERMAN: Hmmm. Would you say you were strong willed and rebellious?

GREITZER: Well, you know I wanted to learn how to type so I could type for myself, but I would never tell anybody. When I was in Washington I worked in an ad agency while my husband worked in the Justice Department.

BERMAN: So you came back to New York in 1954?

GREITZER: Right, we came to the West Village and we both tried to get involved in civic activities in the Village. We started by going to the Greenwich Village Association meetings, which were really run by a small clique of people, so we went to the meetings but we couldn't really get involved. There was no real space for outsiders.

BERMAN: Tammany-influenced?

GREITZER: Yes, I would say that most of the leadership there were involved in DeSapio's club, which was affiliated with Tammany. Then in 1956 I got involved in the Stevenson campaign in New York City with a group that was organizing in the Village—The Greenwich Village Stevenson/Kefauver/Wagner Committee. Wagner was running for Senate at the time I guess. And that committee eventually became VID. So I got involved in that. I was a captain in that district over where I lived.

BERMAN: Can you talk more about what made you so passionate about Stevenson since that was really your impetus for future work?

GREITZER: Well, I was raised as a Democrat in a New Deal home. I had supported Truman. There was something about Stevenson's intellectual approach to politics that was appealing. So I got involved through this campaign more than my husband.

The folks in the Tamawa Club were happy that I was running around ringing door bells and canvassing even though they were more interested in getting their own people elected then

they were in getting people out to vote. I was less interested in the local candidates, but I think we kind of ended up joining forces a bit. I had an arrangement with the Tamawa Captain where I did some things and at the polls I came in with my lists and he came in with his. So he started talking to my husband and found out that he was a lawyer and ended up inviting him to join that club, the local Democratic club. He did that for awhile as part of the DeSapio club. He actually ran against DeSapio for district leader in 1957. After that we formed the VID.

BERMAN: Your husband ran against DeSapio?

GREITZER: Yes. He lost, of course, but this was the beginning of having competing Democratic organizations working in the Village.

BERMAN: Can you talk a little about what the Village was like in those days and what made you move there?

GREITZER: I was interested in the Village for a while and it was also where we were able to get an apartment while we were still living in Washington, which is not easy to do. And, it was a nice apartment in a nice area.

I once had been to Abington Square when I dated someone in college. We had gone to the Jai Alai restaurant on Bank Street (it's no longer there). I walked around that neighborhood and I remember saying, "This is terrific. I would really love to live here." And then I tried to find it again and I couldn't find it.

BERMAN: You mean you were visiting and you just couldn't geographically figure out where it was again?

GREITZER: I couldn't find it because I had forgotten which direction to walk. But then I located it and it turned out this apartment was available in that building right there where I had fond memories of seeing that place before. So we moved there. We did get other apartment offers after we found that one including one in Gramercy Park. But it was on the side of the

building whe. you couldn't get a key to the park. So I said that there is no point in living over there in the back. [Chuckles] So that was how I got started in the Village.

BERMAN: So what was the Village like as far as who lived there?

GREITZER: Well, everybody who was there a long time said, "It isn't what it used to be." It's what I say now. It isn't what it used to be.

BERMAN: You mean it isn't what it used to be and it wasn't then either.

GREITZER: Right. Ruth Wittenberg, who you probably hear of—

BERMAN: Mmmm hmmm.

GREITZER: Alright. Ruth Wittenberg and her husband had this lovely townhouse at 35 West 10th Street, and they did a lot of entertaining for civic groups. They had a lot of meetings there and they also had a lot of pictures from people, from famous artists in the thirties and forties who had done them. There was a picture of her by Peneoshe (sic?), there was a head by William Zorach. Ben Shahn was a friend of theirs, so they not only had these peoples' art on display but a lot of the artwork was of them. [Chuckles] They really had stories about what it [the Village] was like. I know Mary Nichols (Lead Village Voice reporter) was going to start to do a bio of Ruth…. She interviewed her [Ruth] a little bit but nothing ever came of it.

But she [Ruth] had great stories to tell about what it was like in those days, back in the twenties. So that always sounded very glamorous, there were a lot of famous names, a lot of theater people.

BERMAN: So in some ways your interest in the Village was piqued by hearing about what had gone on twenty years previously?

GREITZER: Well, the Village has architectural appeal. The streets are very nice, the atmosphere is nice. We lived over on Abingdon Square before I had a child, and you walked around there,

did a lot of walking around, and you would just see people you knew. And anything west of Greenwich Avenue there was just—tourists really hadn't found that area much. And you walked around it was mostly Village people. There were very few restaurants that appealed to tourists. There were little green grocers there and there were no boutiques, they were just little shops. The A&P on Hudson Street was not a supermarket but an old fashioned little grocery store. That A&P was such a small operation that it used to close for lunch for an hour. [Chuckles] It's hard to believe now that really happened. That's what life was like then in the West Village.

BERMAN: Jane Jacobs lived around there, too?

GREITZER: Yeah, Jane was on Hudson, a couple of blocks away.

BERMAN: So you are there in the Village, this Democratic club that exists didn't really work for you or your husband. Did it allow women?

GREITZER: Yeah. Well, they could come and hang out, but they couldn't become members. I don't even know if they had democratic meetings or if the members had a chance to vote.

BERMAN: Were you a minority with respect to being a woman involved in electoral politics at that time? Was it tough to crack?

GREITZER: No. No, I think the reason the whole reform movement got going is that it had a lot of troops because of the women involved. It had a lot of people. VID was actually like a big dating service at that time.

BERMAN: Really?

GREITZER: First of all it was in a central location on Sheridan Square and people would get out of the subway there. If they saw the lights on at the Club, they would come up to see what was going on. It was a real gathering place for people who were members. People would just drop in if they saw that it was open. It became a real social network as well as a political one. There were

always people there so that if you had to get a mailing done you could get several dozen members to come in and help. A lot of unmarried single people hung out together and went to movies and stuff like that. There were some marriages that came out of it. [Laughs]

I know a helluva lot of people from the Village who go back to those days. I still go to annual parties like the West Village Christmas dinner and I see people some who I don't even remember their names but I know them to say hello.

BERMAN: So there really is some sense of continuity for you?

GREITZER: Yes, although it is a little less so now with some of the new, re-converted housing. You have a huge new population in the West Village so things have definitely changed with the larger building. I don't think that when you walk around the West Village now you are going to see as many people that you know. It is a smaller percentage than it was. There are lots of people there that I probably do not know.

BERMAN: So there was a real sense back then of this not just being about electoral politics? You were in some sense trying to build a community of progressive minded Democrats.

GREITZER: Well, yes, in the West Village at least. Not as much over here [Central Village]. I got to be part of something. Even though there are nice blocks here, it has never had what the West Village has. There is more access here and it's more convenient.

BERMAN: Did you feel any barriers to your political involvement with respect to being a woman involved in government and politics?

GREITZER: No, not really. But then again, I didn't have any real title back then except being an active club member. Then I became president [of VID] in 1960. In 1960 we won our first campaign which was state committee campaign which I was really involved in as president of the club. Then the next year when we put up district leader candidates I was the logical candidate. Adlai Stevenson came to my election night party. I have a picture of him with his arm around me.

BERMAN: Can you talk a little bit about what made VID different from what preceded it?

GREITZER: Well, VID was a real democracy. We were rambunctious and noisy and we allowed our members to fully participate. I mean we had real meetings.

BERMAN: Was it mostly young people at the time?

GREITZER: I would say "yes" for the most part. It went from people in their twenties to around forty, but there were some older people. It was in the Village, there were seven newspapers in those days, several of which were located in Manhattan and some in midtown and there was VID halfway in between. I think we realized that we could use this to our advantage.

We'd have a press conference and reporters would come. There was this guy who did the transportation news for the *World Telegram*. He used to call me up and say, "Do you have anything new about the buses in Greenwich Village or about the subways?" I got very used to having lots of coverage in the papers, which gradually changed when some of the papers went out of business. In fact, the day that the *Herald Tribune* stopped publishing, the *New York Times* stopped covering local news events. Unless they were momentous. But before that the *Times* used to routinely send people to our press conferences. And then they stopped. I mean they might run something on it, if they picked it up from an AP story or if someone called it in to them but they really stopped coverage of local events in the city. The *Tribune* actually had a lot of good investigative reporters on staff.

BERMAN: So it sounds as though VID was filling a void of sorts, that there was energy for it and you knew how to harness the media.

GREITZER: Yeah. It is true that we had opposition. A lot of members of DeSapio's club kept their distance from us. They did not support us and they were very reluctant to give up their turf. People thought we were radicals, revolutionaries or whatever. I think when we started accomplishing some tangible things, we began to be seen as more "regular" and some of those people who opposed us came around. I have to say though that I know a lot of those people who

were part of the Democratic machine down here and I have never become friendly with them. There is always that basic aloofness between us.

BERMAN: Still the resonance of all those years ago?

GREITZER: Yes, there are a number of prominent people who attached their names to issues associated with DeSapio's club. One of those people was on a panel with me recently saying that he was never really that close to DeSapio, but he was just asked to get involved in some issue so he negotiated with him. But I remember his role, and I can't believe that after all these years he wants to be revisionist about it.

BERMAN: Can you talk about some of the players in those early years of VID?

GREITZER: Oh, I thought this was going to be about preserving the Village.

BERMAN: Well, I wanted to get a sense of VID's relationship to the work that was going on in the neighborhood at the time and who you worked with.

GREITZER: I worked with Jane [Jacobs] a lot. I went up with a group to Toronto to see the waterfront and I saw her then. I also worked extensively with the Wittenbergs.

BERMAN: I am curious about the intersection between the electoral work of VID and some of the grassroots neighborhood based organizing that was going on in the Village.

GREITZER: One of the first campaigns that I got involved in big scale was in 1959 with the campaign to save Jefferson Courthouse. I ran a treasure hunt for children at the Jefferson Market Christmas week so that was 40 years ago! I knew someone at *Cue* magazine, the editor who covered the event, which was designed to showcase the treasures of that old market. As part of the event we asked them to write about whether they thought the Jefferson Market Courthouse would make a good library. We loaded the event so that it was pretty much impossible for them

to answer no. We got enormous publicity for this. Every group in the Village began to participate in the campaign after that.

Then I became president [of VID] in January 1960. We all went to the office of the city planning commissioner, James Felt. I remember it was such a huge office, bigger than this room, I think. About 50 people came to the meeting and we all went around and said, "I'm so and so, and I'm president of such and such and we have 600 members."

What I remember most about that meeting was driving home in Tony Dapolito's bakery truck with Ruth Wittenberg and e.e. cummings was with us. He lived in Patchin Place and had come down to that meeting. So we got the library done and that was a major accomplishment because they were going to tear it down.

BERMAN: Wasn't that a time when new was considered better always?

GREITZER: Well, they considered that it would cost a lot to do the restoration and they figured it would cost more in the long run. But the campaign got to be so exciting. One day I was down at the housing agency getting information and I was introduced to Joseph Papp who was looking for space to start his theater. Mollen [NYC Housing Agency Director?] got this idea of maybe the basement of the new library would be a place to put in a theater because they had a history of equity library theaters. In fact, the library over on Hudson Street used to have an equity library theater in their basement. So they asked me what I thought of the space and would it work? I said that it was probably not large enough anyhow and the basement was going to be for the reference room. Then I started looking with him [Papp] for space and at that time we were also trying to save Astor Library. I thought that space would be a little too big for him. I mean if he was interested in the little space in the bottom of Jefferson Market, how could he be interested in the Astor Library? But at the same time I met this Joseph Hirshorn who was looking for a place to build a museum.

And I was with Hirshhorn and we went to look at what is now the Papp [Public] Theater which was just about to be vacated by HIAS, which was a Jewish services organization for undocumented immigrants. In fact, we found cots there where they used to put immigrants to sleep. So we went through with Hirshorn who loved the idea of that location. I was saying to him, "We could close off the street behind there because there are two streets going uptown,

Fourth Avenue and Third Avenue and it's kind of redundant and not necessary." I thought that we could close it off and build an outdoor sculpture court. He [Hirschhorn] loved the location because he had grown up on the Lower East Side and he thought this was the gateway between the Lower East Side and Greenwich Village, which was the home of the arts. I thought this was going to go through until Philip Johnson, the architect, said he wanted to build a new building and wasn't interested in somebody taking over the existing building. Anyway, Johnson, as was described to me started, jumping up and down at the meeting saying, "These floors will never support big sculptures." President Johnson later wooed him to Washington.

Anyway, the upshot of it was that Papp got the Public Theater for his work and the Jefferson Market was saved and became a library. Hirschhorn wanted to take us out to lunch. I remember him saying that the best place to eat was on Astor Place at the cafeteria at the top of District 65 but it was closed so he took us to lunch at a Chinese restaurant on 8th Street. I remember thinking, "Here I am having lunch with one of the richest men in the United States and this is where we are eating." The Public Theater was once in what was the Astor-Tilden Lenox Library. It was those three collections that merged to become the Public Library.

BERMAN: Can you talk a little about the Washington Square Park campaign and your role?

GREITZER: I wasn't as involved in that campaign. It was very grassroots—really mothers groups mainly and I wasn't a mother at the time that campaign began. I did work with Shirley Hayes and Edith Lyons and those people even though I wasn't in on the beginning. I strongly supported them.

BERMAN: Why do you think that campaign was successful?

GREITZER: It was the time then in some ways. People were beginning to write about traffic problems. And pollution problems and the whole idea of building a big road through an urban park was that was small enough to begin with started to seem a lot less attractive than it might have earlier. But then it was still a tough fight. When it began everyone seemed to support the idea of having some road continuing to go through the park. Part of the impetus, I guess, was the development of lower Fifth Avenue. Even though they weren't going to extend the buses that

much further down there was a real thought of creating more Fifth Avenue addresses below the park. And then there was all that Title 1 work going on in the lower Village at the time. I think there began to be a feeling of over-development in the area.

One thing I was involved in was pushing the last bus out. Somewhere there is a picture of Ed Koch and me pushing the last bus out of Washington Square Park….

BERMAN: What was VID's role in that campaign? How did you see yourselves?

GREITZER: We joined in. We lent our support and went to a lot of events in the park and probably ran petition campaigns.

BERMAN: It seems as though the fact that the organizing was framed as a mothers and children's campaign had a lot to do with its success.

GREITZER: I think also there was beginning to be a lot of political factions around the neighborhood and it wasn't a popular idea. It is also important to understand that there were a lot of campaigns going on at the same time. There was the Title 1, Verranzano Street, and West Village fights. So they were all influencing each other and giving one another impetus and encouragement. Community activism was playing a very important role and the success of one campaign catapulted you into another one very easily.

Also another thing that was very important is that the *Village Voice* began publishing at about that time and in those days they might have three front page stories that featured some community thing going on and they would show pictures. It was a Village paper and there was a lot of material that they made use of. Inside they would have cultural stuff but outside it was a lot about the politics of the neighborhood and that made *The Villager*, which had been very, very stodgy, do a little more having to do with community movements. Things just kind of snowballed.

BERMAN: Can you talk a little bit about the struggle to create a historical preservation zone? You wanted it to be bigger than it ended up being, is that correct?

GREITZER: We all wanted it to go to the river on the west and we wanted it to go a lot further south and further north. I mean it ends by my kitchen! [Laughs]

BERMAN: So for instance, when NYU wants to rebuild Loeb, it is not in the historical preservation zone.

GREITZER: I am not sure. I'd have to look on my map. I do know that now you've got all that development to the west so you are destroying some really old buildings over there. This is causing a lot of problems, with construction that is too big for the lots that exist. And one of the reasons for this is because we didn't get landmark protection for the rest of the Village.

BERMAN: Why do you think that is?

GREITZER: The ostensible excuse was that there weren't good enough good buildings there and that it was all warehouses. The real reason was that people saw it as a future development site because the warehouses weren't going to last forever and it is near the waterfront and it could be developed. And then all of the NYU influence affected everything below the square. Maybe if it had gone on today things might have ended differently. But you have to realize that the *Village Voice* started all of this, and it was all relatively new. I think some of us felt that, "Well, we'll get the waterfront later."

BERMAN: When was the historic district actually created?

GREITZER: I am a little hazy on dates. I have trouble remembering which one of these fights came before the other one. A lot of them were going on simultaneously.

BERMAN: It's okay. We can get the chronology later. I am more interested in your impressions.

GREITZER: It was a very exciting time. My day would start with people calling me giving me the latest rumors. It would all kind of escalate from there.

BERMAN: Can you talk about the slum clearance proposal, the Title 1 struggle?

GREITZER: That was against Moses' plan—the fight that Jane Jacobs led. Everybody kind of followed her lead. It had a lot of interesting elements to it because it had the notion of smaller buildings as the appropriate form of development. It also focused on the idea of "mixed use" for the community, so that if you had a few warehouses it didn't necessarily detract from the overall quality of a neighborhood.

I remember speaking in public when I was running for district leader, I think it must have been 1961 because Wagner was running also, and this guy was heckling me when I was trying to talk about the problems with the slum clearance proposal for the Village. I was not a very experienced speaker and I remember saying to him, "You have a louder voice than me and you can shout me, but I think people would like to hear what I have to say." I was so thrilled that I had done this! So I remember that this fight coincided with my political campaign.

The whole Title 1 process involved a tremendous amount of corruption. A lot of people were being paid off. Real estate interests over there thought that they were going to make a killing if the plan was adopted.

BERMAN: I was wondering, given Moses' power—

GREITZER: It was waning by then.

BERMAN: It was waning because of the whole Tavern on the Green fiasco?

GREITZER: You mean with the mothers up there and the playground?

BERMAN: Right.

GREITZER: Yes, that was a key turning point. I knew one of the mothers who was involved in that; she was a friend of mine. That pre-dated the activity in the Village, but I think it had an impact because it showed that a group of people could get together against Moses and do something. I think it was because you had mothers with baby carriages. Their timing was good

also. They got out there early in the morning before the bulldozers came. But that was one of the very few examples of a community coming together to defeat something the government wanted. I think it helped that Moses wasn't the Parks Commissioner anymore by the 1960s.

BERMAN: It seemed as if you were in a good moment in the sense that the media impression of Moses had changed by then, and he was no longer being treated in a positive light.

GREITZER: You also had some people who were traffic theorists who were able to pinpoint what would happen when you built more roads through a community and the impact of bringing more cars into a residential neighborhood.

BERMAN: Can you talk about the Verrazano Street campaign and how that related to the other struggles?

GREITZER: That was fun because it began with a visit to the article by Edith Evans Asbury. She still lives in the Village although she is quite old. I saw her last winter. She wrote this story and it had pictures with a diagram of the proposed Verrazano Street. Which none of us knew anything about. It had been proposed years earlier and the map showed how it would extend Houston Street two ways to the west of Sixth Avenue. So they were going to use some existing streets, Downing Street, I guess, or Bedford and Carmine.

When they initially proposed the idea, Seventh Avenue had not been one way. In the intervening years, Seventh Avenue became one way downtown and Verrazano Street was going to cut into Seventh Avenue at a northern angle so that it would be a very awkward left turn because it was going to feed into an uptown traffic lane, but there was no longer going to be a way to go uptown on Seventh Avenue. So the whole original concept of Verrazano Street would have had to be redesigned. But that was a minor point. We just used this as an example of how ludicrous it was to not be able to make any easy left turn on Seventh Avenue the way the plan was designed.

It turned out that the city owned a lot of the apartments that would have had to have been demolished for Verrazano Street. What she [Asbury] pointed out wasn't so much the road but the

fact that the city was a slumlord and that these people were living in horrible conditions. So we went in and painted an apartment. It was like a Marx Brothers' movie….

BERMAN: I saw the picture of you painting the apartment.

GREITZER: A lot were in there, and I don't know what kind of a job we did but we did get a picture in the *Times* and a picture in the *Voice* and that was good publicity.

BERMAN: I also have a flier for a demonstration you called on the issue.

GREITZER: Yeah, my daughter was very young then about three years old, and I can remember putting a little sign on her opposing the Verrazano project.

So then we began looking at the people in these buildings and these apartments and asking the questions about what would happen to them if this project went through—how stupid the idea was to be getting rid of housing for the sake of accommodating traffic. We got a lot of attention and ultimately we got the mayor to say that he wasn't going to do it. But it took years to get the project de-mapped. And I remember this man from the borough president's office saying to me, "Do you realize if we de-map this, we will be subject to lawsuits from all the people whose buildings we condemned?"

Those buildings were very interesting. I remember going into one woman's apartment on Downing Street and she had a coal burning stove. I guess we asked about it and she took us to the empty apartment across the hall and the whole living room of the apartment was full of coal. She was having her coal delivered into this [neighboring] apartment….. I just wish I had taken pictures of these apartments. I tell these stories about the showers in the bedrooms and the coal in the living room and I begin to wonder if I really saw these things. [Chuckles]

BERMAN: I have an article here about you being extremely angry about being barred from a Board of Estimate meeting. Do you remember what that was about? [Shows article to Greitzer.]

GREITZER: I was angry at a lot of things.

BERMAN: I also have a letter that Jane Jacobs sent you. [Shows letter to Greitzer.]

GREITZER: Yes, I remember that letter. Jane was critical of me—it was to try to prod me into more action, nothing personal.

There were a lot of meetings with the Board of Estimate and a lot of things that made me angry about the process in which decisions took place in terms of the NYU arrangement with the Title 1. The fact that they gave NYU that lower portion after the sponsor defaulted between Bleecker and Houston Street. I remember when John Lindsay came to a meeting of VID when he was a Congressman in 1960 and he attacked NYU, and he stated that the law said that when a sponsor defaulted you had to go back to public bidding. We cited that all over the place but the City wanted to give it to NYU so they didn't have the bidding and just gave it to them.

As a sop to the community they built one building for the public. Then they were supposed to have an experimental school on the site, which is now a gym. It was supposed to be for the kids of the Village and the Lower East Side. Then they changed [the plan] and I was very critical of that change. Apparently they had a secret meeting of the Board of Estimate which they amended the proposal but they never advertised the meeting or, if it was advertised it wasn't advertised in a way that anyone would have known what the agenda item meant.

In those days, you didn't have to bring these issues to the Community Board first. So, in this secret meeting, NYU said, "Well, the situation with educational institutions has changed and this is not the kind of school that anyone would do any more." I said, "That's okay, let's decide what would be in the public interest." That's when they built the gym and as a sop to the public they let a few neighborhood people become public members, to get access to the gym. I am an NYU alum so I don't want to sound totally negative about the institution but...

BERMAN: So you had to deal with NYU, Moses, and private developers?

GREITZER: And government. I had to deal with the Board of Estimate. I remember sitting around for hours at those meetings. A lot of them went on forever—into the middle of the night. I remember there was a cafeteria across the street where we would meet and plan. But you never quite knew when the Board would call your item so we would bring our lunches into the

meetings. They would take items out of order when they wanted to and they would take long breaks. It was horrible.

BERMAN: So you were dealing with a pretty undemocratic structure to get your positions heard?

GREITZER: Sometimes they would go into executive session and vote there and then come out and have their public hearing!

BERMAN: I found this article in which you charge unfair practices at a Board of Estimate meeting about Verrazano plan. [Reads excerpt from the article:] "Mrs. Carol Greitzer, candidate of the Village Independent Democrats for District Leader was one of those excluded from the hearing following the lunch break. Mrs. Greitzer said her being barred from the hearing was a violation of a promise the mayor had made to her to hear those who had not yet spoken yet. She charged that when the anti-Verrazano group returned from lunch, they would take long lunch breaks, were told that nothing was going on in the Estimate chamber. She was stopped by the police from re-entering."

GREITZER: I don't remember them at all. [Laughs]

BERMAN: That was from May 25, 1961. Was Wagner an ally?

GREITZER: He became one because DeSapio put up his own candidate, Arthur Levitt, to run against him. Our club had originally been opposed to Wagner but he began to run as a reformer, sort of, and our club ran ahead of Wagner in the city—or other candidates did better than he did. That was a great election. I remember campaigning in the old indoor square at Balducci's. It was right after Labor Day and we figured everyone would be shopping. I remember people asking me, "Should we vote for Wagner?" I remember that old Balducci's very well. They used to add up by hand on a paper bag. I remember a guy who worked there who used to explain the vegetables to me that I didn't know about, like watercress.

BERMAN: How did you in VID connect to a reform Republican like Lindsay?

GREITZER: We ended up supporting him. He was running against Tammany Democratic machine, which we did not support. It was difficult for a Democratic club endorsing a Republican.

BERMAN: Can you tell me what you think was learned from the work you did? How do you see it now in retrospect?

GREITZER: I look back on it with a great deal of nostalgia because it was really an exciting time. It was good to be a district leader down here. District leaders don't get much respect and people don't really know them but in those days we had a lot of newspaper coverage because we were fighting DeSapio several times. There was a lot of press and we were in the news and there was much going on. We were always in the middle of all that was happening. It was really great. I felt as if I was a city official, practically. So when I ran for the City Council I remember thinking, "I am going to be doing all of the same things, only now I am going to get paid for them!"

BERMAN: So none of what you were doing before paid you anything?

GREITZER: No, I was doing freelance work and then I got a regular job doing advertising. It was not easy. Even the first year I was in the Council I worked part-time. The company I was working for liked having me because I was on the Council, but I was away so much and I was on the phone so much that it was a problem.

BERMAN: Being a Council rep at that time was not considered a full-time job?

GREITZER: No, but it became one later. Theoretically you only were expected to be at Council meetings two days a week but there was always more time involved than that. I later made it a full-time job but it was never a full-time salary. I guess it is now. It is very difficult to be fully conscientious if you are not doing it full-time. It is a difficult job with a lot of expectations from

the public. It's not like being a state legislator. You are there. You are in the city all the time. People expect Council members to always be available—to be present at every meeting and to have opinions about every issue. I would be at Community Board meetings and Roy Goodman would walk in. Heads would turn and people would be so excited to have him there because he was allegedly up in Albany all the time and therefore if he came it was a big deal. If I didn't come, they would be angry at me. And nobody thought it was great that I came. I was just expected to come. So it is just a different attitude toward local officials.

[End of Interview]

Oral History Interview with Carole Greitzer

Narrator(s): Carol Greitzer

Address:

Birth year: 1925

Birthplace: New York, New York

Narrator Age: 74

Interviewer: John Berman

Place of Interview: West Village, NY

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Duration of Interview: 01:21:42

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