Cass corridor Evolution Oral History Project History 7860

Interviewer: Samuel J. Hogsette

Interviewee: Joel Landy

Transcript of Interview conducted on December 17, 2016 with Joel Landy

By: Samuel J. Hogsette

[Preliminary conversation during set-up]

Hogsette: My name is Samuel Hogsette representing the Walter P. Reuther Library Cass Corridor Evolution 2016 Oral History Project.

I am pleased to be interviewing Joel Landy noted Detroiter and Detroit Developer. How are you doing Joel?

Landy: Good

Hogsette: A couple of questions a little background just starting out, Joel just starting out. Where were you born?

Landy: I was born in Detroit Michigan at I think Harper Hospital in 1952. My parents lived on Grand Avenue in Detroit and I was born in 1952. And in two years later my parents moved to Oak Park. My Grandparents remained in Detroit but my parents moved to Oak Park suburb, raised us until we ran away from home.

Hogsette: You ran away from home. Why'd you run away from home? If I could ask

Landy: I didn't mean to say that but, My father had us at Cass tech downtown it was the best school reportedly anywhere.

Hogsette: Yeah.

Landy: And so he owned property in Detroit and since he owned property and payed property taxes, you could send your kids to a Detroit Public School and not have to pay anything.

Hogsette: Oh.

Landy: So he sent my sister who was two years older and myself to Cass. We took a bus from Roseland basically, that was where we lived, they were just building Northland when we moved out there it was farm country and on 9 mile and Greenfield and we would take the bus until we were old enough to havea car and took drivers training. Which at Cass Tech the drivers training course was Plum Street.

Hogsette: Plum Street?

Landy: Plum Street was where all the Hippies first started it was like Haight Asbury was in San Francisco.

Hogsette: Wow.

Landy: That was where *Fifth Estate* the underground newspaper started and there was music, and head shops you know started

Hogsette: Right{interjected}

Landy: There that was it.

[2:50]

Landy: And later on it moved to the Warren [and] Forest area (the hippie area) really when the counterculture started in Detroit coming together from Plum Street... So sent us to Cass, Five Thousand kids at Cass all over and curriculums from refrigeration to philosophy, so and music and the arts was really big they had this internationally famous orchestra right in a High School. And their theater classes.

Hogsette: What did you concentrate on? Not to cut you off....

Landy: They had a curriculum they taught science and arts.

Hogsette: OK

Landy: It was a aww.... {Laughs} tape whatever you want...

Hogsette: {Laughs}....

Landy: Um so I kinda migrated towards people in art and music.

Hogsette: Um Humm...

Landy: And thou I didn't stay in school much I was always quite bored so we usually hung out at o the Detroit Institute of the Arts and we just wandered around all day until the close of school time and that was school. But we were living in Oak Park, which was middle class so was a Ghetto a middle class ghetto. It was a thing an enclosed culture that was not exposed to any diversity.

Hogsette: What is a ...? What do you mean...is a middle class ghetto?

[4:35]

Landy: It was a bunch of ahh... mainly the culture was Jewish people congregated in Oak Park so the effects of their culture that came from Europe and Eastern Europe were instilled in that community. And that city and how they treated the kids and so it was a rubber stamp....The grocery store... and I learned much later after living in the city that is was really the opposite of what you would think. You would think in the suburbs people are going to be closer but you're not you're isolated.

Hogsette: Umph.

Landy: You might have a neighbor on either side that you know.

Hogsette: Right

Landy: In the city, I walk outside and I have a thousand people I know, so it was really closed in. Going down to Cass I met people from all over I mean I don't.....

Hogsette: Do you think that changed you?

Landy: Oh it certainly did, absolutely.

Landy: I ..think that at that time it had to be about fifty percent African American at Cass, I don't really remember actually .

Hogsette: Right

Landy: I can remember we walked out when Martin Luther King was shot.

Hogsette: 1968.

Landy: Yep. And I dropped out shortly after that and... I just never went back.

Hogsette: Ok.

Landy: I faked it for a while but at that point, I started working with the underground newspaper the *Fifth Estate* and I was helping them do all kinds of different things to produce a paper. And there was a room next to the *Fifth Estate* that was a storefront they had rented on Warren and the Lodge; On the Westside of the Lodge freeway where the University market is now.

Hogsette: Ok.

[6:20]

Landy: And Dr. Baker owned the storefronts, and the Fifth Estate office, there was an Urban Renewal office, and Wayne State was renting houses, and getting land for their University, and Carl Lindbergh's house was around the corner.

Hogsette: Wow.

Landy: So there was a [unintelligible], committee against the war in Vietnam, urban renewal and an empty office that used to be a practice room for a band that was called the MC 5.

Hogsette: I'm familiar with the MC 5, you said the fist estate what is that?

Landy: The *Fifth Estate* was the underground newspaper.

Hogsette: The *Fifth Estate*, the *Fifth Estate*, right.

Landy: After the Fourth Estate is the Fifth Estate.

Hogsette: Yeah. So you mentioned them several times, so they are pretty influential to you the *Fifth Estate?*

Landy: They really were kind of the center of political discussion in the city. There was a lot of stuff that grew out of and around that from other types of diverse ahh...you know there were the ahh.. other organizations that were older were around that the *Socialist Workers Party* and the *Socialist* and the *Communist Party* and *The Black Panthers* and the other black groups throughout the unions like that *DRUM Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement;* and so the *Fifth Estate* was reporting all of that , they

were the movement newspaper in Detroit they were part of the LNS which was the *Liberation News Service,* the Reuters for underground newspapers (that came out of New York)But reported from all around the country so they were the ..ah..Newspaper of what was called The Movement. But it was just really a different political thought.

[8:19]

Hogsette: Let me ask you a question, when you said your Father was in real estate so..{interrupted}

Landy: No, he owned an Auto Parts store.

Hogsette: So he owned an Auto Parts store, Ahh.

Landy: On the Eastside of Detroit, 6 Mile and Gratiot area.

Hogsette: Oh ok.

Landy, So I lived on the Westside did business on the Eastside and I was never subject to that issue in Detroit where The Eastside and the Westside and never the twain shall meet.

Hogsette: Right.

Landy: In 1946 I have a picture in *The Addison* of a massive celebration parade in the city it was called the umm... I can't remember the name it will come to me. But, it was a celebration of the conversion from the wartime to the peacetime economy.

Hogsette: Ok.

Landy: It was on Woodward, millions of people it was right near the Addison and my other buildings, there people on the roofs of every building there's so many people but you can see on the Westside their people are all White and on the Eastside they're all Black.

Hogsette: So you would literally say a line of demarcation.

Landy: Piney hill first it changed to a fairly upper and middle class African American population in Brush Park by 1946.

Hogsette: Right.

Landy: Some Black families have lived there sixty years.

Phone Rings!!!

Landy: That's you calling me. Talk to you?

Hogsette: No.

Landy: Oh I know, I called you.

Hogsette: Yeah that is me calling you but I'm sitting here, so my phone decided to do its own thing, right!!!

Landy: Really bizarre got to be careful.

Hogsette: Well I think that earpiece was probably on.

Hogsette: {continues}- So ...

Landy: So where were we, so he sold me the store (storefront where MC 5 had practiced), they were all ten years older than me and they were in College or had dropped out of College and I was dropped out of High School. So they knew I had a printing press at my parents' house in Oak Park so he got it in his head I should bring the printing press and rent this storefront and open a print shop because we ended a print shop.

[11:14]

Hogsette: The Movement needed a print shop.

Landy: The Movement needed a print shop. There was no way to get the word out, couldn't pay commercial print shops couldn't afford them. So I did that I rented the storefront for Fifty Dollars a month from Dr. Baker and brought that press and {unitelligibe} I was always into the equipment side of it as well as what it could do.

Hogsette: Right.

Landy: The first job was Moncrieff Journal, the head of Moncrieff

College was something to help the print shop get started and that was a commercial job.

Hogsette. Ok

Landy: Got paid something like a Hundred Dollars for it so then I could have that money firs to live but also....

Hogsette: Right....

Landy: To print leaflets for a demonstration..

Hogsette: A Hundred Dollars was a lot of money wasn't it?

Landy: It was a lot of money I printed underground newspapers for High Schools in the suburbs of Detroit, probably five, six, eight of different schools. I would go out to and meet these kids; it was really great and printed music stuff and the music stuff paid money we could use for political printing. The Grandee Ballroom, every time I printed a postcard for a concert at the Grande; that was a hundred bucks.

Hogsette: So you had fun, you made money, and you used it for movement causes.

Landy: Right.

Hogsette: Perfect

Landy: It was a much more cooperative economy, I wouldn't say it was totally Socialist we live in the United States. People wanted different things then.

Hogsette: Right.

Landy: It is really hard to get out of that culture that we have concerning money and actual physical things because it is almost power like human nature art this point.

Hogsette: Could I say materialism?

Landy: Pardon?

Hogsette: Could I say materialism?

Landy: Yeah absolutely, cause I watch Socialist countries try generation after generation to force that to go away and it doesn't. Russia, Israel, Israel is really a good example, you go to the Kibbutz and they were th socialistic experiment and all the kids grew up together in one place and there was a total social experiment much more refined in Russia or anything else and the kids wanted a bigger TV set and another House and...

[13:28]

Hogsette: Right

Landy: It didn't go away even if it was six, four or five generations removed. So that's why I have a hard time with those issues. But anyways, we survived and the economy it was much more... umm communal. Absolutely because we had goals that were really in common.

Hogsette: So, would you say your first business was the print shop?

Landy: No. Actually, when I was ten or eleven {laughs},

Hogsette: {laughs}

Landy: My neighbor bought some auto parts from my father who was in the auto parts business and we went around ...my neighbor was a few years older so he had a car, we went around selling auto parts to gas stations on Saturday.

Hogsette: Did your Father know?

Landy: Oh yeah he gave us the parts and we paid him a price, he probably gave it to us at half price or whatever and we made some money and that was our business. It was called *Suburban Auto Parts*.

Hogsette: Wow... wow.

Landy: So that was the first business.

Hogsette: that was the first business.

Landy: Right

Hogsette: And it was successful?

Landy: Right, It was. I didn't have any business that failed thorough the years, I just got bored with them so I moved on to something else. Or do several at the same time of course. A lot of jobs that is definitely my life.

Hogsette: right

Landy: At all times, I use to as a young kid I always had this problem that I would whine to my mother, "Mom I'm bored". Well I don't get bored anymore.

Hogsette: Because you always have something going on.

Landy I have many things to do; there is another reason for that too. I have been chronically ill for Fifty – eight years or more, I have Crohns disease. So I seen this written its not a unique thing but, Crohns sufferers and other chronically ill people become overachievers because you don't know if you can do anything tomorrow you're going to be sick.

Hogsette: Ok

[15:57]

Landy: If you want to do something do it right now.

Hogsette: Ok

Landy: That's how everything is done in your life.

Hogsette: Period?

Landy: Yeah!! Forever every day that keeps you going but, then the other side of it is pile all of these responsibilities on yourself you can't get sick weekends or holidays it really can keep you well.

Hogsette: So it keeps you going.

Landy: Keeps you going or else.. a doctor a long time ago related to me that when you're really ...your clinically depressed is when you can't get up and go to work.

Hogsette: Ok

Landy: If you forced all of these responsibilities and you're always going to work and you're not actually depressed. {Laughs} No matter how depressed you are.

Hogsette: {Laughs}

Landy: So you tell yourself these ways to rationalize.

Hogsette: Right

Landy: What's going on in your life. If someone asks me if I'm depressed... some doctor, I say yes but I have many things to be depressed about it is a natural turn of events.

Hogsette: Wow.

Landy: I have a lot of responsibility, you know a hundred people I brought to live here. Build home for them and it's kind of my responsibility to make sure they ...things go well.

Hogsette: Did you say you brought a hundred people to live here?

[17:24]

Landy: I ... blocks in midtown at one time, I brought thousands of people over the years but at any one time probably have a hundred people living in my buildings. Another hundred working in the buildings.

Hogsette: Ok, how many buildings do you have?

Landy: Pardon?

Hogsette: How many buildings do you have?

Landy: That's a hard question. Don't really know but operating about fifteen buildings, like a four unit apartment building, a six unit Victorian house that was converted to six apartments and thirty two lofts in a converted school building of which I only own six of them now. So six units at the Leland lofts on Lafayette park and standard sites like that and commercial I own all of the old public schools in this neighborhood.

Detroit as wise as we are, we spent 1.5 million to fix up a bunch of buildings and granted at that time we were buying Catholic schools we were so crowded. But no one could have guessed that six years later we would lose 80,000 students. So we spent 800 million dollars most of our tax money, property tax revenue on buildings that are vacant now.

Hogsette: Now that brings me to one of the questions I had for you. Because I read something that you said That you could take an empty school convert it to a housing development and that would save hundreds in building safety. What did...?

Landy: [interjects] Actually, I had some good help with that. Not alone... the city came forward and I think we may have passed a zoning ordinance so it is easier to reuse school buildings, don't know if there was anything else. When I first started working with old schools through, it was a while ago, 1990 it was a vacant school that was used as a warehouse; we still needed schools we weren't as decimated as we are now with population and other issues. But everyone would tell me it is a school just one use, leave the door open and walk away. Many of our educator's didn't know what a Philips screwdriver was.

Landy: (continued), It is a subject to get into, every kid does not learn the same way.

Hogsette: That's right.

Landy: That's one of our education problems. But then the best schools had a leader like the owner of a small business. Most principal school leader whatever you call them, these days it is a principal, and they have to have three things down pat and that is finance, education, they got to be the best, and the physical plant. They have got to know what a Philipps screwdriver is, if they have all those three areas of expertise then it will be a great school.

Hogsette: Why do they need the physical plant? I never...I would not have thought that.

Landy: It is a major part of what they do, what. .. kids are not going to learn without a building.

Hogsette: Okay.

Landy: The building is very expensive it is 20% of the money, spend it on education spend it on the building. So and it affects you so much. The one great thing about schools that were built in Detroit started in the late teens early twenties 167 schools were built from five different plans; just change the roofline and the façade. There are some other scattered buildings designed by these architects Matthews and Higginbotham they studied in England, in fact one of the fireplaces in one of my buildings is a copy from Oxford University in England.

So they designed this school, all the schools were burning down they were wood. They were fireproof and soundproof. They did not want to hear kids running on top of other kids... {Unintelligible} ...And fireproof. So our buildings and the way they heated them they heated this concrete heated so the building is like a battery. When they turn the heart off in one of my school buildings, it stays warm for a week; because the heat is stored in the mass of the building.

[22:05]

Hogsette: The building itself is like a heater core?

Landy: Yeah, like a heat battery. It's like a heat well.

Hogsette: That's amazing.

Landy: Oh it's so great. It makes it so toasty warm that no matter how badly someone did in school, they never hated the school.

Hogsette: They never hated the physical plant.

Landy: Yeah they always liked It. It was warm always made you feel at home. And the wood and the cabinetry and floors so all of the made them very special buildings.

Track 004, time 00:32 Machine failure, Batteries replaced some lost data?

Landy: Is the Machine working?

Hogsette: Yes it is working.

Hogsette: What does it take to meet the challenges of restoration?

Landy: Historic preservation has become one of the driving forces that has led at times to other things.

Hogsette: Like what?

Landy: Like everything else in my life being in a movie theater and preserving the use of 34-millimeter film. And umm...like over and over my support of the arts and artists in the area....{unintelligible}... Preservation and appreciation of the arts from that.

Hogsette: What...?

Landy: What happened was one of the best things, My Father used to say if you don't have anything nice to say don say it.

Hogsette: Right.

Landy: So I did not speak to him for the last 25 years. [Landy's Father], he's dead now.

Hogsette: ummm.

Landy: But ahh the best thing he did was he exposed us to everything.

Hogsette: Okay.

Landy: We went to music camp and art camp and computer camp in 1964, and all over, and went to this music camp and when they brought us back after camp we were dropped off at a house in Indian Village big Mansion and swords on the wall, muskets and the only thing my Mother could comment on was the dust. Living in an Victorian home I learned why they have suburban homes with eight foot ceilings. Because they don't create all the dust we had cobwebs in that decorative molding at the top of the twelve foot ceiling in a day. I'm not sure why.

[2:11]

No air circulation, But I made this plaster molding it was destroyed by water.

Hogsette: Oh, Okay.

Landy: I had an artist Cestock clean it up for me.

Hogsette: Wow.

Landy: Cestock drew that picture right there on the top of that persons face

Hogsette: The top one, multicolored?

Landy: The top one yeah.

Landy: He is a sculptor and if you go down the Lodge Freeway near Willis, you will see his sculpture garden. It's a whole big 64 foot lot with metal sculptures on it.

Hogsette: Okay.

Landy: It's very cool

Landy: I'm sure Kim is going to interview him he's lived here forty years. So historic preservation when ,I currently... I own my neighborhood. They sometimes call it Landy Land from my last name Landy.

Hogsette: You own your neighborhood.

Landy: I own my neighborhood. And I own it at first Piney Forest was not the vision everyone thinks I have but it was... I Learned a friend of mine moved to Miami and I take over his house and drive back to Oak park where I was living. I wasn't doing much in my life woke up in the morning and saw this garage, carriage house and said oh can I live there and hooked up a garden hose and an extension cord started living there. But he had three house that he owned all together on Peterboro and all the backyards fenced in connected tighter and I saw what it was like to not have any neighbors.

Hogsette: And you liked it?

[3:58]

Landy: It's the best, no one tells you what to do.

Hogsette: Okay.

Landy: Unfortunately, that's become one of the big things in my life. People can't tell me.. That's the freedom we got during the sixties, the freedom that we fought for. What's that TV program that was on just a few years ago that's similar thought that you can't tell me what to do. Umm so

Hogsette: So you are a bit of an Anarchist.

Landy: So they would die and there were all old people who owned these buildings that hadn't been fixed in eighty years and a transient welfare population that paid the lowest rents so nothing got maintained.

Crack was moving in and you used to see Heroin and Winos and Prostitutes, they hurt each other but they were harmless but you knew they were there. So, I just bought every property. I had a land contract and it was Five thousand dollars of three thousand down and fifty dollars a month. But I bought a 50,000 square foot property from the city for Ten thousand dollars. Thirty thousand down , one hundred and twenty five dollars a month on a land contract from the city of Detroit cause they didn't have enough money to tear it down it's still here of course.

Hogsette: Umm.

Landy: That's where the Saxon Motor car was sold. So I eventually ended up owning three blocks of property, almost everything. I don't own one house, and that's where my ex-wife married my only neighbor lives. They're divorced now. Cowboy Bob, Bob Ray. He moved from Birmingham and didn't realize he bought across the street from the city's largest homeless shelter, next door to the out-patient treatment center for schizophrenics, and directly next door there were two burned out houses full of Heroin addicts. He didn't realize that when he paid \$200.00 dollars for this house in the Cass Corridor, about fifteen years ago.

[6:05]

Landy: He likes me now he really has menopause, male menopause, today he likes me and he does cause I spent 50 million dollars improving his property values.

Hogsette: Okay.

Landy: On the properties around him, I spent Fifteen million renovating. Now his house is worth something. When it was next to a burned out crack houses it was not worth much.

Hogsette: How did you? Here's the thing that fascinates me. How did you learn how to restore?

Landy: Everything. Well I always did projects like putting up a wall, some drywall, so I had basic skills and understanding and the one thing I learned in school was how to learn. In Oak Park they didn't know about the Detroit Public Library, I had to do a report I would plagiarize it, I would go down to the Detroit Public Library and find the most obscure book on the subject and just copy all of the different facts and no one knew that about the projects. I learned how to learn how to find the facts that I needed. So I could do anything.

Landy: So what was that you just asked?

Hogsette: How did you learn how to restore?

Landy: So everything I have done has kind of been a flow of a hobby becoming a business. And I do things a while for free until I become expert at it then if I want I can charge for it. So sometimes there's some things in between there. So I worked for quite a while with a Non Profit development corporation, CCDNC that came from a Concerned Citizens of The Cass Corridor.

Hogsette: Okay

Landy: It was an activist group in the neighborhood to deal with slumlords really. One of the really bad slumlords Costa ran for Mayor a couple of times and wrote a book about himself. In the 70's he was the guy who invented vendor rent. He convinced the State to pay him directly for the welfare rent and not give it to the tenet who might blow it on wine. So the tenet no longer had control over the condition of the apartment.

Hogsette: Wow

Landy: So lots of buildings closed because if you actually had to pay rent it wasn't worth it.

[8:34]

The governments paying for everything live for free but....So it was dealing with the slumlords. Then we got into building low-income housing, and then we got into the real crux of the problem why we weren't able to fulfill our dream of fixing everything in Five years. And that wasn't happening because the city thought and the do gooders that it was a great idea to bring all the people in need in one place then you won't have to transport them anywhere.

Hogsette: Okay.

Landy: And they should build every building for low-income housing. The problem is with one hundred percent low-income housing then you are rebuilding a ghetto. Nobody has any money to spend. The way we fixed Mid-Town was two things, first we cleaned it up and worked on the crime, but two things; it was really the safest precinct in Detroit, it had the worst reputation, it was the perception.

Hogsette: The perception?

Landy: Paris, France and wear a Cass Corridor tee shirt and people would run away from you. It was in 1989 Financial World Magazine had and article on Peterboro and showed Detroit as the worst managed city in the world. The way they let those beautiful Victorian Buildings to rot. So Umm They umm...so where was I?

Hogsette: That's Okay, that's Okay.

Hogsette: If the perception?

Landy: So (because of) the perception we changed the name to Mid-Town. All of a sudden it is okay, it was Archer who made it okay.

Hogsette: That's Mayor Archer.

Landy: Mayor Archer, convinced banks to lend money in Detroit, we got mortgages which we never had and for people to live and work in Detroit was then acceptable.

[10:28]

There are so many misconceptions about Coleman Young before; the biggest one is that all of the city is destroyed because of racial and white flight reasons.. It is really much simpler than that, it is so simple, I was talking to my partner{ unintelligible} once I heard this and I have been spreading it ever since. Since the early 1900's. the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Detroit more than anywhere in the world we been tied to cars and so we want new, to prove it in about 1977 or something.

Hogsette: Okay.

Coleman Young tore down Chene House it was the oldest house in Detroit built in the 1700's so Anita Baker could build a records store. In the newspaper the article quoted him as saying "I'd rather have a record shop than an old house any day." I have the article

Hogsette: Wow

Landy: What that meant I didn't understand then, what that meant is it's just an old house to him it had nothing to do with white oppression or anything it says old I wanted new. It's that simple.

Hogsette: That Simple.

Landy: He didn't fix anything.

Hogsette: Tear it down put something new.

Landy: Right, when Archer first came in they were going to clear-cut all of lower Woodward where all the dimes stores and jewelry stores and all those beautiful buildings. Until we... it was ten of us we were called the Forum; got this group together to convince government the value of historic preservation. Part of it was to show them the money.

Hogsette: Okay.

Landy: In Tax credits, we sent Archer to go visit his friend the Mayor of Boston and he showed him the money in historic preservation. And he came back and he hired someone to create an historic district in that same area where the original Downtown partnership was gonna cut it all down.

Hogsette: But he didn't hire you.

[12:26]

Landy: No, I wasn't in that field at that time. I was at times touting at windmills; I didn't have any money to actually do anything... without any real reality.

Hogsette: Okay.

Landy: Then I started actually doing the job and it was a whole different life, plus my work meant a lot more than what I was talking about, (when) I was doing the job.

Hogsette: Why'd you select the Cass Corridor? Because it sounds...

Landy: {interrupts} Because the drugs, the sex, and the freedom.

Hogsette: Laughs; now you sound like the 1960's Drugs, sex and rock and roll.

Landy: [Points to a picture on his wall of a White Panther with wings] See there is a picture of a white Panther it was never printed but the artist.....

Landy: The perception and the biggest was Duggan but our Mayor was in {unintelligible} working for the county. And spreading it to the other places like Livinois, and what it is; is you need people with spendable income. The fold from the 100% subsidizing set says I'm not subsidizing rich people.

Hogsette. OKay.

Landy: That's what made the difference, Subsidizing rich people? I brought um ..here I gave them a place that was affordable that was quality living and now they can spend their money in a store here. So I can have a store. When we got a drug store it was the biggest deal of our lives for thirty years we had to drive 20 miles to get anything. So it was umm those two things.

The Perception and the spendable income. So when I was working with this nonprofit that became a real fight because of block grant dollars that came from the city and they wanted us to go 100% low income. In 1991I helped write a shelter zoning. I woke up one day and there were 11 homeless shelters within three blocks of my house.

Hogsette: Okay.

Landy; It was a concentration camp.

[14:07]