



Interviewee: Evangelyon "Vangie" H. Rainsford

Place of interview: Interviewee's Chapel Street home

Date of interview: July 25, 2019

Interviewer: April Wood (Historic Charleston Foundation)

Videographer: Leigh Moring (Historic Charleston Foundation)

Transcriber: Home Row, Inc.

Length of interview: 54:20

BEGIN INTERVIEW

April Wood: This is April Wood. I am interviewing Vangie Rainsford. Today is July 25th. And we are at 34 Chapel Street in Ms. Rainsford's house. And I think we're ready to start. So, the first questions are about just basic biographical information. Can you please say and spell your full name?

Vangie Rainsford: Yes, it's Evangelyon Holmes Rainsford. E-V-A-N-G-E-L-Y-O-N, Holmes, H-O-L-M-E-S, Rainsford, R-A-I-N-S-F-O-R-D. But everyone calls me Vangie.

AW: And when and where were you born?

VR: I was born in Richland County in Columbia, South Carolina.

AW: And how long have you lived in the Charleston area?

VR: 30-something years.

AW: Did you settle or buy this house when you first moved here or?

VR: No. I didn't, April. I was taking on a whole new life, whole new career when I moved to Charleston. I was a speech language pathologist in a private practice in Columbia. And decided to switch over to the antiques business. So, what better place to settle than Charleston. And I bought a Charleston single house, 16 Savage Street, when I first moved to Charleston.

AW: How long were you at 16 Savage?

VR: Three years.

AW: And then did you move to Mazyck-Wraggborough after that?

VR: Yes, ironically, there's a little story I want to convey which will tie back into things that we will talk about. About two months after moving to 16 Savage, I was working as my own contractor subbing things out to repair and restore. So, early one Saturday morning I'm in my nightgown going downstairs. Open the front door, and my paper is floating by. And you must realize my steps are four steps up and it's within an inch of the top step. So, I'm horrified. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. And all of a sudden, I see who was to be my best friend walking down Savage Street in a pair of duck waders. I say to her, what is going on? She said, high tide. I was completely flabbergasted. Later she told the story on me even at a St. Michael's [church] social that I believed that. That it was high tide. Now, of course, we have issues with water and flooding. But even at 16 Savage during high tide we had those problems.

AW: What year would that have been?

VR: That was in the late 80s.

AW: Before [hurricane] Hugo or?

VR: Yes. Now the story gets more interesting. I was introduced to this house by the same friend, it was getting ready to be put on the market. I didn't know which neighborhood it was in. They were trying to convince me to buy another home. And I had done a treatise on Robert Mills. I have a master's in art history. And I had done a treatise on him. And they said, well this house was originally designed by Robert Mills. You have to see it. And it's going on the market, you need to buy it. I said, no, no, no. I'm quite happy being SOB. South of Broad. They said, oh, but you got to see it. We're going to take you there. So, two days later they drive me. I haven't been in Charleston that long. I had never come to this part of town. Living South of Broad, I never drove in this neighborhood. We drive up, it's dusk. The museum lights are on. And we're in a little car. And I roll the window down and I look up and I go, have you lost your mind? I can't afford this house. I can't even look at this house. Where are we? On The Battery? And they said, no, not quite.

So, they said, "You have to do one thing. Promise us you will not give away anything. The house is getting ready to go on the market in the next couple of weeks. Don't act surprised with anything you see." I said, "I am in complete control. I know how to conduct myself. I can do this." So, I go bounding up the marble steps looking at everything around. And the sunlight is pouring through the middle of the house, the central hallway. And I'm kind of blinded when I walk in the door because a woman opens the door and invites us in. I take two steps in, grab my heart, and go, oh my goodness! Both my friends look at me and go, no, no, no, you shouldn't have done that. Later they said the price went up when I did that because I eventually bought the house. Put a contract on it before it was put on the market. And then had to sell my house to move into this one. But anyway, that's how I was introduced to 34 Chapel.

AW: It's like love at first sight.

VR: Mainly overwhelmed at first site was the word. Overwhelmed. If you really stand outside this house and look at it, it's like the proud, beautiful lady on the street. She has style and circumstance.

AW: What year was that that you bought the house?

VR: The reason we're going to go back in our history. I bought the house six weeks before Hugo hit. I was on a buying trip in Europe. Bringing a container back, which by the way, they couldn't even get my container back in the harbor for a month. And all I had, I brought everything into the house. Everything was in boxes. And so, my French doors blew out. And my kind African American neighbor Mr. Leroy Butler sat at the bottom of my steps. It took three days for me to be let back into the city with an ID. And girls, I can tell you, it was quite an experience after Hugo. This neighborhood was just quietude. There was nothing going on in the city. Mr. Butler had sat at the bottom of my steps with a baseball bat to keep anyone from coming in. And he also had helped two of my friends to prop up all my moving boxes up against the doors that had blown out, so it didn't look like my house had been disturbed. But one important fact. If I had been at 16 Savage, over three and a half feet of water came into that house. I had been out of that house six weeks. This house, high, dry land, water did not even come over the curb.

AW: So, mostly it's wind damage that affected this?

VR: Yes, but no water.

AW: And then were your neighbors the same as they are now? Are you one of the longer-term residents?

VR: You know, April, I've been neighborhood president here so long I can't remember when I wasn't. But I took over in 1999. And I was just looking back at the original roster when you had asked to interview me. I am one of three people still left on the original roster and roll of our neighborhood association. That's how much turnover and death we've had. I'm one of the longer-standing people in the neighborhood now.

AW: That's great. What was the neighborhood like in 1989 when you were buying, was it-- The houses were the same, but did it just seem different character?

VR: That was completely different. Whereas South of Broad had owner-occupied homes. We were more of a rental neighborhood surrounded by commercial. But you have to remember the entities like the Chicco Apartments were vacant. So, our neighborhood - once you crossed Calhoun, which I affectionately call still Boundary Street, there was like a no man's land up here. But it was wonderful. It was picturesque. We had these wide boulevard streets like Paris. And there were lots of trees. And I could actually hear birds singing every morning. But we had a lot of rentals, a lot of students. And a lot of the larger homes had been carved up in apartments. 34 Chapel, guess how many apartments were here?

AW: Five?

VR: Six. Original mantels, original floors, original central hallway staircase. Only because we were, as they like to say in Charleston, you know, too proud to paint, too poor to whitewash. Because our neighborhood in the 50s and 60s fell behind the rest of the city. No one altered

anything. We were like a neighborhood that was like in a vacuum. A time vacuum. Which I was delighted. That was why I moved here. Because I moved to a town, not a city, back then.

AW: Did you feel safe walking around at night?

VR: I came from a farming background where we lived with acreage and African Americans who worked for my father. And so, I never knew, there wasn't fear in my bones for anything. Because I was brought up in the country outside of Aiken.

AW: Did your friends from South of Broad wonder why you bought up here?

VR: Yes, there's one famous story my friends tell on me because they were there when my father announced he had disowned me. "I had lost my mind. I had moved to the frontier. The wild west was" the way he described it. "My daughter was secure in an SOB, and now she's in no man's land." I said, "Daddy, time." And here we are today. Heart of the city. Thriving.

AW: So, you said that this was multiple apartments. So, you've done a lot of work to restore this house?

VR: Yes, when I originally bought the house, the house had been worked on because of the immensity of the project, it's nearly 7,000 square feet on three levels. The immensity to the project had already bankrupt two different entities before I got the house.

AW: And it sounds like you were pleasantly surprised at how much historic fabric remained once you started converting it back into single family?

VR: April, this was why I feel in love with the house. It was all original. It was as if time had not stopped. It just - it was in a time capsule. And I wanted to be in that time capsule. Being an art history major, I couldn't ask for anything better. You know, when you look at this house from the outside, a double-style home. Walking up the steps, it just says, "you know, I'm here. And I'm always going to be here." It has a magnificent entrance hallway. As I told you before, it's the only picture of Mazyck-Wraggborough that appears in Alice J. Smith's Dwelling Houses of Charleston [book]. They did a black and white photo of my central hallway. But the most unusual aspects of the house fall to the outside. Where you've got these - you've got a symmetrical house with two curved bays. But what makes the bays so interesting, it's the only example in the City of Charleston of indented paneling. Sort of like an askew to board and batten. Like they reversed it. It's still original to the house. And if you look at the front entrance to the house, it's neoclassical, Greek Revival. You come into the house, and there's Gothic entities from the paneling, with the spired paneling, in the hallway to these wonderful Gothic niches that soar up to the heavens in the entrance hallway. And Robert Mills was known to be the first native-born architect to combine those two styles.

AW: Were there any surprises when you were rehabilitating the house?

VR: Yes. I found out that they had attached - which was quite common in Charleston - PVC'd cast iron. We're now dealing with the cast iron drain lines that run throughout our city. They

give way. Well, I thought I had bought a house that'd be updated. Wrong, it was just attached to all of the cast iron. So, I had to hire a plumber and spend a small king's ransom having all the plumbing replaced. And there was one panel box that was actually in the middle of the backyard. And that was the panel box for the house. So, between the electrical and the plumbing, it was like rebuilding the house.

AW: I think that none of those things are very glamorous.

VR: No, they're not. Doesn't show up as a new kitchen or a new bathroom.

AW: No, those are the most expensive, but the most important.

VR: Yes.

AW: Was the house always the same color do you think? Or have you had paint analysis or anything like that?

VR: You know, I wanted to share in your archives - I have a picture from your archives. Back in the 70s, this house had no paint on it. It's all cypress boards. My father used to say I don't know why you painted all the time. You know, it didn't have any paint on it in the 70s. And it has survived because the house is a survivor. There was a brown color on the house when I bought it. And I've pretty much kept to the same palette.

AW: Can you define this neighborhood, and the boundaries, and have they changed over the years that you've been involved with the neighborhood?

VR: Well, we can start off with Calhoun is one boundary, which was Boundary Street originally in its history. And originally our neighborhood only went up to Meeting Street. In the late 80s, there was a change and they extended our neighborhood to King Street. So, our boundaries were extended. Then we came back down on one side with Mary. And then we end up again at East Bay. Originally our charter said we would go all the way to Washington Street. So, we were carved out in sort of an odd way.

AW: When does the charter date to?

VR: This neighborhood was formed back in 1986.

AW: That's pretty recent?

VR: Yes.

AW: How would you describe this neighborhood to somebody who's never been here?

VR: Heart of the city. I think that it's important for everyone to realize, we're the last bastion in the City of Charleston. We're the last historic district neighborhood with African Americans owning their own homes. And a neighborhood where dollar prices have exceeded five million

dollars. And I think that goes back to Charleston's history. We are the true Charleston. This was the way Charleston was - was wealthy plantation owners, you know, across the street from free African Americans who owned their own homes. We're still this way in our neighborhood. And we're very proud of it.

AW: Does the neighborhood get along pretty well? Pretty good consensus?

VR: The best friends I had in this neighborhood were African American the first two years I moved in. They were wonderful to me. They were educators. Lucille Nelson was a schoolteacher. Mr. Leroy Butler, who protected my house with Hugo, was an assistant principal to, I think it was Memminger. And then around the corner, the second person I met was Susie Jackson of the Emmanuel [A.M.E. Church] Nine [victims].

AW: Are they still around?

VR: They are still there. Mr. Butler's house sold a couple of years ago. The daughters decided to sell it. And Ms. Nelson died, and her family decided to sell as well. That goes back to heirs' property. There were lots of multiple owners.

AW: Do they clear the heirs' property up?

VR: Yes, I was - I got engaged in that process to help them with that.

AW: That's a big deal. That's a lot of work.

VR: Yes, yes.

AW: Since you've been here, how has this neighborhood changed?

VR: Well, as I mentioned before, we had a lot of rental properties and a lot of students. Now with the college [College of Charleston] taking on the private dorm ownership, students have moved out. We don't have near the rentals that we used to have. And our properties are now being refurbished as single-family homes. Just on Chapel Street alone, I have four young families with children. And we're hoping that trend continues.

AW: So, when you moved here, there really weren't very many families with children?

VR: One or two. Robert Behre, who is a newspaper person here with the Post and Courier, he and his wife Holly lived down the street with their two children. And I had an interesting conversation with him about how much the neighborhood had changed at a B A R [Board of Architectural Review] meeting not long ago.

AW: Do you feel like it's better or about even?

VR: I think that our neighborhood is better. I think that what we've been able to do successfully-- You have to realize, April, our neighborhood's only three square blocks of

residential. That's it. We're the smallest historic neighborhood on the peninsula with residential. So, when I became neighborhood president, the goal was to protect our boundaries. To not allow that commercial intrusion into our neighborhood. It was important for us to be able to live and work in the same place, which is what we're talking about now. But when I took over 20-something years ago, that was the most important thing.

AW: What kind of tourist industries were around when you first moved to Mazyck-Wraggborough?

VR: Well, there were no children's museums. There was none of what we have now. There were no events at Marion Square. In fact, the [Charleston] Museum sold to Historic Charleston Foundation in 1975, the Aiken-Rhett Mansion, because they were losing money on it. They couldn't get enough attendance at a very important museum home. The Joseph Manigault House, another tourist attraction, was not attracting very much. Because most of the tourism, you have to understand, was toward The Battery. It wasn't focused upon our neighborhood. And as I told you earlier, with Michael Bennett's new convention hotel going in on the perimeter of our neighborhood, we're going to have more walking tours, carriage tours. We will be the first historic district neighborhood they will touch base with. So, we're excited about that.

AW: Is the neighborhood generally excited to have more tourists in the neighborhood or are they a little worried that it might become like some of the neighborhoods south of here?

VR: Well, tourism has been the beast in the picture. When I moved here, tourism wasn't an industry. Tourism is our only industry right now. And that is sad. But I'd like to see more walking tours. I'd like to see the history of our neighborhood told. I think we're an important neighborhood to the city.

AW: What kind of community organizations existed-- Were there any community organizations in this neighborhood? Like women's clubs or-- ?

VR: You have to understand, we were a community that was pretty much cut off from the rest of the peninsula. And if you look at the number of churches in our neighborhood, everything was church-related. It was going to church. Being a part of a group there. Even our meetings were held at Fourth Tabernacle Fourth Baptist Church.

AW: So, it was mostly church-centric? Which is really nice. And then you had mentioned Hurricane Hugo. Were you impacted at all by any of the flooding from [Hurricane] Mathew or some of the more recent storms?

VR: We had a lot of wind damage up here so we lost a lot of trees. That was the emphasis, was the tree damage up here. It wasn't water. It was tree. And when the new survey comes out, they're going to put a lot of our neighborhood in the no-flood zone. With the new flood maps. So, we're excited about that.

AW: Right, well and your house is particular, it's especially high.

VR: Yes, I had never had my house surveyed with elevation. Which I did. And I'm 13 and a half feet above sea level with my bottom floor. And over 24 feet to the next floor. So, I won't be required to have flood insurance.

AW: How about, is Alexander [Street] having, are some of the streets in the neighborhood having some issues? Or is it generally pretty high up everywhere?

VR: No, the side of Alexander toward East Bay will be in a flood zone. And you have to realize in its history, we had water that came up - like five fingers of water that came up - and there's been debate about whether the back of my house was actually the front of my house the way they've debated the Joseph Manigault House that they entered by boat a lot of times here. But you have to realize, East Bay was a wharf and a marsh at one time. And that's only a block and a half away from me. And the house is angled to catch the sea breezes. That's why it's not perpendicular to the street. A lot of people have asked me that.

AW: That's great. So, there's been a lot of things happening in your neighborhood. Before I started working at the Foundation, there was a lot of discussion about the adaptive reuse of the Fourth New Tabernacle - Fourth Baptist Church - as a music venue. And I think that obviously didn't happen. Is there-- But we do hear people complain or express concern about the condition of that church. Is that something that people still talk about in meetings?

VR: Yes. I think that the true story about that needs to be told. When I first became a neighborhood president as I said, it was commercial intrusion that was going to be our enemy to the residential quality of life here. And the first thing that happened was the mayor and Hugh Lane, who was on the board at the Charleston Museum, decided they wanted to bring the Hunley [submarine] and build a football stadium addition to the Museum, which would bring in one million visitors. At that point, our neighborhood would've been overwhelmed. And I probably wouldn't be living here right now. So, that was one of the first battles we fought. When we go back to the church. And we had involvement with the church. As I told you, we met there for neighborhood meetings. But the story that has to be told is the church needed help. We were willing to go out and help them, you know, get the property sold. Reverend Covington put a price on it. We didn't know about the sale of the church. Everything was kind of kept quiet. There were meetings held between Mayor Riley and the Patricks and Glenn Keyes. They later came to me.

But we first read about it in the city paper that it was going to become-- We didn't consider it the theater; it was an events venue. That was the way we looked at it. Because as you remember, the Patricks had redone the William Aiken House at that point. And so, there was overflow with weddings. So, it could be an events venue. Once you open it up for theater and you change from a church, which has its own standing within the city with zoning, and you become limited business or general business, then you open the floodgates up. And we were very sympathetic to the church. I knew Adele Mackenzie, who lived on Judith Street. And she implored me to meet with the older members of that church, who, April, did not want to leave the church. They wanted to say. Reverend Covington wanted to sell it, convinced the newer members of the church that that was the best. And they were going to move to West Ashley. So, what happened was that you had the Patricks asking, and they're great philanthropic people,

don't get me wrong. But they were asking to have a nonconforming use become an extension of a nonconforming use in the middle of a residential area with no parking. I went back through, because I took the time to have the minutes of that BZA [Board of Zoning Appeals] meeting typed for me. And it was astounding the information that was presented.

Number one, it was presented that night that there would be a parking garage built just for that venue. Guess where the parking garage was going to be? On the property of the Federal Building. Which by the way, that came up for auction four months later. So, how could we obtain a parking garage site when the federal government owned it and they were getting ready to auction the entire piece of property? The only other possible parking was over at the Gaillard. The Gaillard Center was a dream of Mayor Riley's. That was going to come up at some point. So, I looked at, let's do a traffic survey. We hired our own independent traffic man to come in and what we presented to that BZA meeting was the number of trips circling the building looking for parking, coming back for pickup. We looked at the number of events. Okay, 108 theatrical performances doesn't sound like much. That's just the tip of the iceberg. We had every school bus coming in with children for children's plays. We had weddings. We had the Dock Street Theater at night. And this was backing up into a residential area with the Houston House next door. Noise, littler, parking, traffic, the whole dynamics of our neighborhood were going to be changed.

To say that you're going to provide more enforcement for an area? Good luck. Because I was just at a consortium meeting and that was what we were complaining about as neighborhood presidents, the lack of parking enforcement. So, there's another story to be told. The other side of that was that in my study, Robert Mitchell, Reverend Covington, and the person who was going to buy that church, Jane Phillips, who was a radiologist, was going to put a half million dollars down. Reverend Covington met us over here, along with Robert Mitchell, took the document, slashed through the 1.5 million that had been agreed upon for the church. Wrote in 1.9 million. He could not go back to Bank of America. He could not go back and ask for more money. We wanted to keep the church as a church. Gene Phillips was willing to let the original congregation stay, bring his Presbyterian Church in that was at that time was renting space in a gymnasium West Ashley. And then possibly add more. We even talked to Sea Coast [church]. So, there was more to that story than really needed to be told. And the members there wanted to preserve the church and keep it as a church. And we're still hoping that's going to happen.

AW: And do they still use that church?

VR: Every Sunday. Every Sunday it's still a church.

AW: Is Reverend Covington still there?

VR: Yes.

AW: Interesting. And then how about-- Can we talk about the Chapel Street Triangle Park.

VR: What a story. Soon after I took over from Harold Koon, who suddenly died on a run through our neighborhood, I was asked to be president. And we had had a meeting six months

after he died, 12 people came to me, you've got to run for neighborhood president. I said, I'm not going to follow Harold Koon. Not going to happen. Eventually, I gave in and I realized it was a tremendous rebuilding that had to take place with this neighborhood. We had lost a leader. He was no longer there. And there was a lot of change going on in the city after Hugo. Because our city took ten years to really get over Hugo, it took a long time. So, at that point, I realized that we had to jump start the neighborhood. And so, I began to look at maps of the neighborhood. And I came up with an idea. And I took it to Mayor Riley. And I remember him sitting in his office with Laurie Thompson on one side of him. And he wears hearing aids. And he said, leans up, he said, "Now, Vangie, tell me that again." He turned up his hearing aid. I said "Mayor Riley, let me come around and show you." I had made a topographical map, coloring in the areas of our neighborhood, there was green space.

I said, "Mayor Riley, let us be the Garden District." He said, "The what?" I said, "The Garden District." He said, "But there's one down in New Orleans." I said, "But sir, we're older than New Orleans. So, I think we can have a second one and it can be in Charleston." I said, "Look at all the green space." And he began to look, and he said, "You're right." Because at that point, he had announced renovation of Marion Square that was in our neighborhood. So, we had this gigantic green space that was going to be renovated, rejuvenated, put back into use. He said, "Vangie, would this help you?" I said, "Indeed it would, Mayor." I said, "It would give us a second start and a second chance." I said, "But I got one more little issue." I was over by the Parks Department, which was at that time, Hampton Park. And I walked around the back of the building because I was late for a meeting. And I saw this rusted fountain. And the iron basin next to it. It was broken in pieces. Used to be down at the Market Grill down on Market Street. They used to throw pennies into it for good luck. So, I said, "That's our good luck." I went to the mayor that day with a picture of the fountain. And I said, "But we need a signature. If we're going to be the Garden District, we have to have a signature."

He said, "Such as?" I said, "This fountain. And this is rusting over at the Parks Department. And our neighborhood is willing to buy this." He said, "You're going to buy this, Vangie?" I said, "Yes, the neighborhood is." I had a \$10,000 check written out. April, we didn't have \$10,000 in the bank. What happened was I passed the check to him, but I didn't let go of it. He starts pulling on the check and I'm pulling back. And finally, he said, "Okay, well we'll just say this is a done deal. But you've got to get the design and review committee to approve this." We didn't have the 10,000 in the bank. So, I go back, we organized through the help of the Visitors Center a tour of our neighborhood. We set up, unfortunately two weeks before Historic Charleston Foundation, with our little hats on. And everyone thought it was a tour near the Battery. We sold it out, 425 tickets at \$25 a ticket. I had everybody to rally around us. The tour sold out. And we collected over \$8,000. And the rest of it I got through donations. Which three months later, I was able to make the payment to the mayor. But what happened, the Design Review Board turned us down not one, not twice, but three times. I never quit, April.

AW: Why--

VR: 18 months. They said it was too big for the space. In the end, I was walking down the sidewalk one day and I looked over at the Chapel Street, it was called just the Chapel Street Triangle Park. And I thought to myself, wait a minute. You don't see this from inside the park,

you see this walking by or riding by. I contacted Matt Compton's assistant. This young man took the fountain from Hampton Park with a tow truck and crane, lifted it up, and put it on concrete blocks in the middle of this park. And then we invited the Design Review Board to come by. It won by a 5-4 vote. That was how close we came to losing it. But I never gave up the fight. That was our signature. That was what made us who we are. You won't believe the number of people-- There was an article in the paper about four or five years ago. A man from the symphony said. "If I could live anywhere in the city, I would want to live across from the Chapel Street Fountain Park." To me this is bliss.

AW: What year would that have been that you finally ended up getting it approved?

VR: 2001.

AW: You brought up Harold Koon. He's a really important figure in our history. Can you just say a few words about him?

VR: Well, if you knew Harold-- The first time I ever met Harold was he had on a green fatigue shirt, military fatigue pants, and highly polished boots. And he was always strutting. He never did anything but a strut. And everything was him. He was before the Nike commercials. Just do it, check. That was Harold. Harold was going around picking up trash off the streets. He was a vibrant leader. And, you know, since we had a mixed neighborhood, it was important that we all stayed together as neighbors. So, that was an important ingredient for the success of our neighborhood. They now have a Harold Koon award, which is awarded for volunteer excellence. And they kind of broke a rule. They gave it to me in 2009. It was Harold's award, but they handed it back to us in 2009.

AW: That's great. Was it for a single project or like a body of work?

VR: I think it was a body of work I had done at that point. In 2004, I went to the Committee to Save the City. Jack Simmons, Peg and Truman Moore. And we had this issue with the Federal Building coming up. It was an abandoned building, had been since Hugo, because of the asbestos. And I realized that some point that was going to change. And we needed a vision. Because here we are with Marion Square being the gateway coming into the city. Our neighborhood is the first historic district neighborhood that you bump into. This was going to be our focal point, Marion Square. So, we needed some sort of something to surround that square to give it a presence. And when I went to Jack and Truman and Peg, they thought it was an idea that needed to be brought forth. And so, we launched, I came up with the Rally Around the Square. We had over 400 people that showed up. We had eight architects to do renderings of buildings around the square.

I have downstairs in watercolor all eight of the buildings that were designed by people like Ralph Muldrow, Gary Goff, you know, just very, very talented local people. And Fairfax and Sammons came in from New York to coordinate that program. And we were embraced by the mayor with this is a wonderful idea. We were the launch to Urbanism. We just didn't know it at that time. But we launched it by the vision for Marion Square. I remember getting a letter from the head of First Citizen's in North Carolina, the bank that was on the corner there that they had

taken the little bank building down one story and we put up a taller building there. We wanted to anchor the corners to the park. And he said, "How dare you insinuate that our bank needs to change anything that we have been doing for the last 28 years." I still have that letter, April. Because now Ben Gramling and brothers have bought the property. There will be a five-story building continuing to see the vision from Marion Square, it's continuing to evolve. Hotel Bennett was one of those key cogs. And now that's in place.

AW: So, the neighborhood generally is in support of like Hotel Bennett and that new office building?

VR: Hotel Bennett, you have to realize we got to turn the clock back ten years. Mike's hotel would've been built ten years ago. Ten years ago, we had the beginning of the revitalization of Upper King. We had abandoned buildings up there. We had a lot of crime. We had a lot of vagrants in our neighborhood. And we needed something to anchor, to give us support. That upper King Street revitalization did it for us. And at that point, when the hotel came to us versus the library, because we have a library in our neighborhood, it was a good choice. It was on the outside parameters included within our neighborhood but it was on a corner and it didn't back up into a neighborhood.

AW: We're kind of running low on time and I know that you had things that you wanted specifically to share. Do you want to go ahead and maybe talk about some of those?

VR: Yes. One of the most important things, and we have a new hotel ordinance that's I think pretty much like a third reading is going to be passed. And unfortunately, our neighborhood served as an impetus for part of the tenets to that ordinance, that there would be no rooftop bars. And there would be, if a developer decided to change plans either with BAR after getting BAR approval, or BZA approval, if he went awry to those plans, he would lose his business license. And I'm referring to the Dewberry Hotel. And that's been a big issue for our neighborhood. Unfortunately, we've had to serve as a guinea pig for that to happen. We have had noise and things to have to deal with, with that. We're continuing to work on it. And it's still at a conversation with Mayor Tecklenburg. That's an ongoing legal suit between the Dewberry and the City. But we were told with BAR approval that we could have a spa. And he wanted a spa on the top floor, which he changed without any authority. And his comment to us was, "I made a mistake." Well, that's not enough for an entire neighborhood to hear.

After that, it was a rally around the city with an awareness with neighborhoods to rooftop bars and developers who come in and tell you one thing and do something else. I'm going to go back to the zoning. This is an important issue. Maybe 50 years from now when somebody watches this tape, Mazyck-Wraggborough has a distinct character. We have large lots. And what's happening is that as our city is going toward verticality and density, our large lots are being bought by people who want to put as many housing projects on them as they can possibly do. Our neighborhood should've been protected with zoning years ago. It's not too late. I don't want people to watch this tape 50 years from now and they say, "Where are the large lots in Mazyck-Wraggborough Garden District? What happened to them?" So, I'm going to challenge everybody, and everyone, and the preservation groups to take this on as a challenge. To look upon this as an important part of saving the essence of our city.

And I think one other thing we didn't talk about was the Emmanuel Nine. That has been a big issue with our neighborhood. And I will tell you that I spoke at the launch of the last park that will be put in our neighborhood. By the way, we're the first in many things. We were the first to install speed humps with traffic calming. We were the first to have bike lanes installed in the historic district. We will be the first to have eight parks in our neighborhood as public open space. And the Susie Jackson Freedom Memorial Garden will be opened probably simultaneously with the African American International Museum. But that was a very sad day, not only in the city's history, but in our history. Because it was our neighborhood. It was our church. It was our people.

AW: Where is the Susie Jackson Park going to be?

VR: I was able to work with Dudley Gregorie on securing a 99-year lease with the County Library. I think that at this point in my life, I'm running out of steam. Because it takes months and months and months to get things achieved. So, I'm telling all of you listening, don't give up. Just keep at it and keep trying. But Dudley and I finally got approval from County Council to transfer a 99-year lease to the City. And so, the City is going to build, with our help and the Jackson Family and Mazyck-Wraggborough Garden District, we're going to build the Susie Jackson Freedom Memorial Park. Which will be a part of the Emmanuel Way Walk from the church to the Susie Jackson Park to the International African American Museum. What a wonderful thing, April. What a wonderful part of our history. And we're part of it.

AW: That connectivity is amazing.

VR: It is, truly.

AW: Is there anything else that you want to talk about?

VR: Let me see, I can probably talk all day and night. But I will tell you a funny story to kind of end everything. Back when I was living in Columbia, a pair of sisters owned the Aiken-Rhett Mansion. And William Belser was an antique appraiser in Columbia. And I was collecting everything you see around me today. Part of history. And he invited me on a trip to Charleston. And he took me to the Aiken-Rhett Mansion because they were doing appraisal. Because the sisters were getting ready to sell. Which they sold to the museum. And that day I was offered the house if I wanted to buy it. And I said, "Heavens, I'm never going to leave Columbia. I'm never going to be in Charleston." And here I am today at 34 Chapel Street right around the corner from the Aiken-Rhett Mansion.

AW: I love that.

VR: True story.

AW: When would that have been?

VR: That was back in the 70s. Yeah, it's an amazing story. And I did-- That day I was offered by the sisters the empire chandelier in the entrance hallway. I almost bought it. But you know

what? I would've had to have given it back [laughter] because I couldn't have kept it. It was part of the house's history. So, if I'd moved here, so I would've had to have given it back as my gift back to the house.

AW: I'm glad you weren't ready yet. Well, thank you so much. This was wonderful.

VR: April, thank you for coming and being an important part of Historic Charleston Foundation. We couldn't do it without the preservation groups.

AW: Well, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW