

Interview with Yvonne Tucker of 258 Ashley Avenue
Interviewed by Katherine Pemberton, Historic Charleston Foundation
Richard Almes, videographer
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Moderator: We will just get started; I want... you said you were born in Charleston?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: And you grew up in downtown?

Interviewee: I grew up downtown on the east side of Charleston. That is where I grew up, that's pretty much my home town. So I'm a Charlestonian.

Interviewer: Great. So you said before that you had lived in some other places, but what pulled you back to Elliotborough?

Interviewee: Initially [00:00:30] I lived in the suburbs. I pretty much lived on James Island, and I always wanted to be downtown because I grew up downtown, and I always wanted to be downtown because this was where I was most familiar. I found myself as a single parent, raising two daughters and all my resources was pretty much downtown. My [00:01:00] childcare was downtown, my daughter's school was downtown, and so I wanted to relocate to be downtown.

Interviewer: So you were telling me before about you had a hearing about the neighborhood impact program starting at the house on thirty-three Bogart. How did you hear, how did you get [00:01:30] to know or hear about the program?

Interviewee: Actually, I think I heard about the program through the Charleston bank consortium program. The Charleston Bank Consortium program came to Charleston in 1994 and it was a program to help first time homebuyers... well, it is a program to assist first time homebuyers like myself with financing. [00:02:00] And so, back in ninety-four, I initially pursued trying to buy a house there at thirty-three Bogart Street. But I was really not financially prepared, and there was not a whole lot of funding at that particular time. So, I pretty much threw in the towel as [00:02:30] becoming a home buyer, because like I said, I was a single parent and I was trying to focus on my daughter's education.

And so, in 1998 out of the clear blue, I got a letter from the historic foundation asking me if I was interested in the property at two-fifty-eight Ashleigh Avenue, [00:03:00] so I tell everybody the story. I said I did not go look at the house, the house came looking for me. And so I was... I felt really grateful and really blessed, and the funding that the foundation granted to put in this house to renovate it, to [00:03:30] totally renovate it, because when I came here to initially look at the house, it was boarded up, the doors and the windows was all boarded up. There was holes in the floor, pigeons been pretty much living in the house, there was no roof. _____ [00:03:56] was coming [00:04:00] down the steps and I was like man, I must be really wanting to buy a house. I must be really wanting a house.

And then my daughters were really anxious to have their own space, because we were living in a rental house right around the corner. It was a two family house, and so my older daughter, who was actually more accustomed [00:04:30] to having her own space, she was really kind of pushing me

and was really motivating me. She said mama; you need to buy a house. I said you just do not go buy a house like you buy a dress. I said there is a lot involved, [00:05:00] and so fortunately, the foundation made it possible to be able to live here. the neighborhood was very dismal and kind of discouraging, and I remember telling Nancy Fabian [PH] who was the executive director of the bank consortium, I said I don't think I can [00:05:30] move my children... I do not think I can live on Bogart Street with my daughters. And she said, you're going to see that neighborhood change right before your eyes.

Interviewer: So when you run into Elliotborough and especially with Bogart Street and here at the corner of Ashleigh Avenue, what was the impression of the house and the neighborhood, not just by you, but were your daughters... Could they see the potential [00:06:00] of the house, or were they just like oh, mom.

Interviewee: I think that they actually could... there was still a lot of illegal activities that was going on in the neighborhood, which was really a concern for me being a single parent. But the neighborhood... we still had some... the neighborhood was still somewhat intact, [00:06:30] it was just the illegal activities. It was pretty much... it seemed like it was pretty much people that came from elsewhere. I do not think it was people that actually lived in the neighborhood. It was like people who pretty much came from elsewhere, and brought that kind of element to the neighborhood. So I think that's one of the reasons why I felt a little bit more comfortable. It was not actually like my neighbors, [00:07:00] because right across the street, I had two elderly neighbors, and they almost kind of became like a parent and a grandparent to my children. It was kind of like another social support. And so I felt that it was going to be okay.

Interviewer: Right, now when you were saying about the pigeons and everything, you were telling me earlier these beautiful doors [00:07:30] behind were not in a house.

Interviewee: Now, actually, when I initially saw the house, I actually did not know what was there. I do not think that they... They did not actually restore, or put the doors in until I think the day before... the day that I was closing, so I never knew what was there. But I was pretty confident that something was going to be there. But it was a really good experience because fortunately, they gave me... The foundation gave me a chance to have some input into what I wanted, [00:08:30] and I think somewhere along the line, along the process, I got to realize that there were things that the foundation had to do to pretty much preserve, or to restore the house to its original structure. Because there were things that I was questioning, like why can't this be done, and why can't that be done. Then I realized [00:09:00] that they were trying to preserve the original structure of the house.

Interviewer: Do you find that those are the things now, looking back, that make the place special?

Interviewee: Yeah, so now I really appreciate that now, because I think I was told that the house was built in 1900. And even [00:09:30] after we moved here, the contractors had to come back and do... you know, there were things that would not be right, or things that were falling apart, or would go wrong, and my children would be like, Mama, something's always wrong with this house. I said, this house was built in 1900, I said and we never going to get the kinks out. I said there is always [00:10:00] going to be something. So, yeah, so now I think they and myself, we really appreciate... although we really appreciated it back then, but we are even more appreciative and more grateful now to be afforded this opportunity to live here.

Interviewer: We mentioned [00:10:30] before, who do you remember working with from the foundation?

Interviewee: I remember Sean Hoolihan [PH], I think my contacts with him seemed like almost daily. I think my contacts with him was pretty much almost daily, and I think I told you I remember Miss Amy Fanback [PH] because I initially tried to pursue getting a house at thirty-three [00:11:00] Bogart Street. But there was not enough funding and I think I just had too much stuff going on at the time, and I really wasn't ready to be a homebuyer at that time. I had other things was more of a priority, like educating my children, trying to think futuristically, like how am I going to educate these two girls [00:11:30] by myself.

Interviewer: About the neighborhood, because it seems like it really has changed quite a lot since... this would have been... when you bought the house in ninety...

Interviewee: Ninety-eight.

Interviewer: So what do you think? How have the changes... just what kind of changes do you think have happened to the neighborhood.

Interviewee: Well, I feel safer here, I feel that the criminal element that might [00:12:00] have been here before is kind of non-existent. I feel safe, I feel more relaxed, at peace. I can walk places at night. There is a local business that is in the area that you can patronize now, and so I think that is... [00:12:30] that is really a plus that you can actually walk places in the neighborhood and actually feel safe. Because I have a neighbor that lived right around the corner and I did not feel safe walking right around the corner to Rutledge Avenue to where I used to live. Now, [00:13:00] I walk around the corner or walk several blocks in the neighborhood and feel really relaxed with no problem.

Interviewer: So are there any... Do you think that with the kind of change in the neighborhood, obviously probably property values have gone up and taxes... do you think that there is any kind of down side to a neighborhood that changes like this?

Interviewee: Well [00:13:30] yeah, because it could price some people out of the neighborhood in terms of the property value, the property taxes, trying to maintain the cost to maintain the property. Sometimes I find myself in situations where I am kind of struggling to try [00:14:00] to maintain the property, because I know that is important. It is important to me as a homeowner, but it is also important to the foundation to try to maintain the property and do the necessary repairs like major stuff like roofing work and stuff like that. Roofing and exterior painting, and so I think [00:14:30] I said... I always call April every now and then; I say any grant money for home repairs, because that is important for future initiative programs.

I think that something should be built in for maintenance and home repairs, because those kind of things get to be pretty pricey to maintain [00:15:00] any house, but especially a historic house. Because sometimes you run into problems... I should not say problems, but obstacles that they are very few, or limited number of contractors. So people who really know about repairing or restoring old structures and houses. Fortunately, I have had [00:15:30] encounters with contractors, and they will be like no, I am sorry, but I do not have any experience in that. I do not know, and I really respect them for telling me that I do not know anything about a tin roof. I do not know anything about... so I really respect them for being honest and saying that I do not know. Or I don't have the

experience or the expertise, rather than them trying to do it [00:16:00] and it turns out to be a total disaster.

Interviewer: How do your girls see the house now?

Interviewee: I think now that they are... I think that now they can kind of reflect and really appreciate. I think they actually appreciated it then, but now that they are older and [00:16:30]... I think now that they are older; they really see the value of... Matter of fact, my youngest always like... this is the house I grew up in, because she probably was about seven or eight, so she was pretty young at the time. So, she kind of remembers a little bit about us being in a rental [00:17:00] house right around the corner, but I think this is what she mainly remembers as being home. This is actually home for her and so, it's really been a great experience, and like I said, I'm really grateful to the foundation for the funding that they put in. because I got to be... I was able to be involved with the [00:17:30] restoring of the house, the construction and restoring of the house, and being able to have contact with the contractors and ask them questions. Because we lived right around the corner, I probably came around here almost every day.

Interviewer: They probably loved that.

Interviewee: I do not know, maybe at times.

Interviewer: The [00:18:00] things that you had impact on, I know that you were telling me about the kitchen and maybe just the general layout of the house.

Interviewee: Well, the kitchen really only had one window and I think I pretty much begged them to put another window in the house. I said I am claustrophobic; I need another window in here. Then there was only one... In an old structure like this, there was [00:18:30] only one bathroom, and so I asked if they could at least put a powder room or a guest bathroom. And so they were able to do that, so I was really grateful for that. Then upstairs, the bathroom had the old claw foot tub, and I was asking [00:19:00] for a modern, or another tub. And they were like no, this tub stays with the house, so I'm like okay. At that point, this is probably toward the end; I was just ready to get in here. They are like this tub stays with the house, and so I am like okay, whatever you say.

Interviewer: Whatever you say, just finish it.

Interviewee: Yeah, but I was happy [00:19:30] that they were able to salvage the floors because one of the contractors didn't think that was possible, and he wanted to... he was suggesting to put in carpet, and I'm like uh uh, I'm like no, even if I have to pay the difference, I'm like... Because as it got toward the end, like you [00:20:00] said, I see the significance of trying to preserve the history of the house, and to try to keep it as historic. I did not see carpet as being historic. So they were able to hire a flooring company to come in and to preserve the floors. So I was really happy about that.

Interviewer: Anything else you want to say about the house?

Interviewee: I love being here. [00:20:30] I am happy that I got to raise my daughters in the neighborhood, and the neighborhood actually changed a lot through the years while they were coming up. The neighborhood actually changed a lot while they were coming up, so that was a plus, because we all felt [00:21:00] safer. We all felt safe through the years. Actually, my younger daughter, she was an athlete, she ran track, so later she was... I guess she felt a little bit more

comfortable to go running in the neighborhood. And even now, when she comes home she feels safe. If she said [00:21:30] I'm going on a run, I'm going for a walk, I don't panic. I am like okay. And back then, I don't know if I would have felt... I do not think that I would have felt... I think I would have been panicking until I hear that door open.

Interviewer: Well thank you so much, April do you have any questions that come to mind?

Unidentified Female: I think you have answered... or asked everything. I guess, I do not know if it is relevant, [00:22:00] I think it is kind of neat that you can walk to work.

Interviewee: Oh yeah... yeah... I can... initially I did not... Well, I work for the City of Charleston Housing Authority for a while, and then I went to work for the VA Medical Center in 2007, and so yeah, I was like... you know, I'm like I'm in close proximity to work, I can actually walk. And I see all these other people walking [00:22:30] a farther distance from me, probably beyond the park, probably beyond Hampton Park, and they're like walking, so I'm like walking with other people to work every day. So that's... I do not even have to move the car.

Interviewer: Well thank you so much, I know when April comes to do inspections; this is one of her favorite stops. You are such an easy going, nice homeowner [00:23:00] that just...

Interviewee: I Know, I call April all the time, I am like you sure you ain't got no money?

Unidentified Female: I wish I had money...

Interviewee: I'm like I need roofing repairs, I'm like... I did do some... not last year, but the year before, I did do some... I did have to do some work to the house. I was fortunate, it was the contractor who was pretty much familiar with older structures. [00:23:30] I had some siding boards that needed to be replaced, it was like a lot of little minor stuff, just to try to do some basic maintenance to the house to try to keep it up. So I was glad that he came highly recommended from a friend of mine who also lives in an older house. So I felt pretty confident [00:24:00] using him, and he was really good.

Unidentified Female: You know, after this whole journey, you probably know more about historic buildings than some of the people on our staff.

Interviewee: Not really.

Unidentified Female: I know. You probably know more than you think you do.

Comment [CM1]:

Interviewee: Not really, I am like... but like I said, it has been a [00:24:30] good experience, and I really don't know how else I would have been able to purchase a house, or to be a homeowner, or a first time home buyer. Because I felt like I had all of the odds stacked against me. You know, being divorced, being low income, being a single parent, [00:25:00]. I worked for Crisis Ministry, which was a nonprofit, and then from there I went on to work for the City of Charleston Housing Authority. So I really felt like I had all the odds stacked against me in terms of trying to own a house. I always tell people the story, I said, I did not go looking for a house; I say the house came looking for me. Because that day... and if I dig hard [00:25:30] enough, I'm sure I still have the letter that I got from the historic foundation that they sent me a letter... and ya'll probably still got it in your files somewhere too. And the letter said we have a house at 258 Ashleigh Avenue, and we

want to know if you're interested. I contacted Nancy Fabian and asked her if they would be able to help me with the funding.

Interviewer: That's great.