

My name is Jim Urban, that's U-R-B-A-N, and I've been volunteering here seriously, that is after tier one training 27 years, but I began volunteering here in 19, I think 1983, at a Madrigal Dinner.

[Katrina: What encouraged you to start volunteering here?]

I was asked by one of the committee chairs of that madrigal dinner in 1983 if I would be interested in being a waiter at the madrigal dinner, and I said sure. So I did that, and after that I came to every madrigal dinner, but by this time I was the official beef eater, and the beef eaters dressed in costume and carried in the boar's head, the figgy pudding, etc., and we had fun.

[Katrina: How long did the do the madrigal dinners for?]

I think the madrigal dinners ended about 2003-2004 in that area.

[Katrina: Was that the big Christmas...?]

It was the two weeks before Thanksgiving.

[Katrina: What was your knowledge and opinion of Stan Hywet prior to volunteering?]

I moved to Akron in 1962.

Employment brought me here, B.F. Goodrich, the other company, and one of my first tour-type visits was to Stan Hywet's, so this was in late 62, and then I came back several times after, brought family members, so my first visit was in 62.

[Katrina: And what about the place made you want to volunteer?]

Well, it was a very interesting house, a beautiful home, and of course I was in the rubber industry, and this was part of the rubber industry. I sort of had a connection, and I love history, and there's a lot of history, especially if you delve into the architecture, Tudor architecture.

[Katrina: Yes, there's such interesting art history here.]

And speaking of art history, I wish you would resurrect the decorative arts tour. That was my favorite tour. It was like studying for a college course.

[Katrina: A fun one. Maybe as a one-off portal, maybe members' appreciation week or something.]

[Erica: Who used to do that?]

Volunteers, yes.

It was three years, decorative arts one. Each year was a different segment of the art. I like to call it sculpture and wall art.

It was art of architecture, and then fabrics and textiles, the third. And it was going to be in 07, a combined, because that was going to be our anniversary year here at Stan Hywet, never came into being. So it was just those three years, four, five, and six.

[Erica: That sounds fascinating]

[Katrina: What sorts of roles have you held at Stan Hywet over the years you've volunteered, and what was your favorite role or responsibility?]

Well, as I mentioned, I was a beefeater. That was fun. Also, many years ago, we had a decorative art, a decorative egg show.

And I chaired the show for 10 years. It may not be my favorite, but my overall favorite role was in history firsthand, playing Chef James.

[Katrina: History firsthand?]

Yes, history firsthand.

That was fun. And delving into the history of the character. Of course, we were all fictitious characters, but we were surrounded with facts.

So I studied all of 1920. I read the entire Beacon Journal for 1920, and then even before that. So give me some background.

[Katrina: That's dedication. That's impressive. How long did you play Chef James? When did you start playing Chef? I know you still do.]

Well, I sort of retired, although Linda...Linda Lohr brought me out of retirement two weeks ago for that nooks and crannies. I don't remember when I started in history firsthand, but it was fun.

[Katrina: Do you remember about when history firsthand started in general?]

It was organized before I joined it, maybe by a couple of years.

I'm trying to think, 06, 07, someplace in that area.

[Katrina: What was a typical...oh sorry. What did a typical day of volunteering look like when you first started volunteering here? How is it different from today?]

Well, I also changed.

I started here after we're talking about the interpretive after Tier 1. I was a Monday guide. We were open on Mondays. Initially, I only worked half a day.

When we closed on Mondays, I transferred to Tuesday, and then I took on all day Tuesday, and then since then, all day Friday. I probably changed more than the program changed.

[Katrina: What is your favorite reason for volunteering at Stan Hywet?]

Again, the location, the grounds, the house—very important.

And then the volunteers that you work with. The staff. I've met some very, very interesting volunteers and staff, and some became personal friends.

[Katrina: This is a fun question. What's your favorite place on property, and what's your favorite room in the house?]

I know the English Garden is wonderful, but I think I prefer the Dell. It's just peaceful.

[Katrina: I agree]

The English Garden, I have all kinds of imagination going on there.

There'd be a fairyland at Deck the Hall. For safety purposes, I would not recommend it, but that could be transformed into a fairyland. And in the house... The music room, obviously, is spectacular.

There's no question about it, but my favorite room is the library. It's comfortable, and I like books. My second favorite room is the breakfast room.

I would love to have a meal there.

[Katrina: I agree. It's very cozy in there, too. It's a good place to have breakfast. Do you have any fun advice or tips for visitors? Things that you've learned over the years that you would recommend people do when they come visit?]

Normally, when I tell visitors before or after or during a tour, make sure after they see the house, make sure you see all of the gardens and the lagoons. Many people ignore that or just walk around.

There's so much to see on the grounds. Looking back at our history, the two years that we had the treehouses, this gave the guests an opportunity to walk down Pleasure Drive to see all the treehouses.

[Katrina: Can you tell me more about the treehouses?]

The treehouses, they were scattered throughout the property, and they were up in the trees.

We had one at the front door, but each one had a different theme. And they were fascinating.

[Katrina: That's pretty cool. How long did we have them?]

I don't remember the years, but I think we had two years. The one in front of the house had wind chimes or some kind of chimes. A little bit irritating to the hostess who was at the front door.

The treehouse closest to the Gate Lodge was interesting also. That was just a fun event.

[Erica: That does sound fun. I'm sad we missed it.]

It got our guests to walk the grounds.

[Erica: Speaking of memories, what are some of your favorite memories here?]

Well, just meeting Irene Seiberling.

She was a character. I met with her several times and in fact got to know her children. I was fortunate in that.

Of course, Sally lived here in the Gate Lodge for a while while her mother was still alive. I did get to know Irene and her three children. Bob lived in Seattle, so I did see him just a couple of times.

He liked to talk. I think the family liked to talk.

[Katrina: This might be a question later, but we're kind of on the subject. Did you have a favorite event that you helped for or a favorite program that you did over the years volunteering here?]

Again, probably history firsthand. That was fun. Well...I'm trying to think now because we had so many events over the years.

I've always enjoyed being the butler at the front door for gala. And over the years, I got to know several of the guests.

[Katrina: So we're going to move into some early Stan Hywet history here. What did early fundraising look like at Stan Hywet? Do you remember the earliest fundraiser you were helping with or what it looked like?]

Well, some of our events are all fundraisers. I was volunteering here at Ohio Mart in the early years. Yes, that is a fundraiser, and it's a fun fundraiser.

[Katrina: It is a fun fundraiser. What was your involvement with Ohio Mart in the early days and even now?]

There was an entertainment committee, and they dressed me as the beef eater, and I greeted guests. Basically, I was a traffic cop telling people where to go or what are they looking for and greeting them.

And the opening, we had an official ribbon-cutting opening of Ohio Mart in the archway. So I would stand there, and Sally Cochran would cut the ribbon, and the guests would come into the estate. That has changed completely because of just logistics.

[Katrina: Do you think any of that might have to do with the numbers of people who come?]

The numbers, absolutely. Today, we have a lot more people coming in. When I chaired Food and Beverage for Ohio Mart—I think I did that for almost twenty years—I would tell our vendors that on good weather weekend, we could expect up to 16,000 people.

That's how I sold our vendors to coming to us.

[Katrina: How many do we usually get a year now?]

It's getting close to that, yes?

And speaking of Ohio Mart, and this is off the record, did you get a chance to go to Hardesty Park this weekend?

[Interviewers talking]

That is a fun and very nice art show. Of course, many of the artists there come to Ohio Mart.

[Katrina: Some good Akron history in there, right?]

Yes.

[Katrina: What were your feelings regarding the separation of Stan Hywet Incorporated from the Foundation in 1990? Do you have any memories about that?]

I remember that, and maybe my mind is a little foggy. It probably could have been better explained to me, but from what I understand, I saw the advantages of the separation. The number of trustees were enormous.

I also was very involved with the Akron Symphony at the same time. In fact, I was president of the Symphony Guild. At one time, the Akron Symphony had a huge board of directors.

And were they involved? No.

[Katrina: So you felt like a similar thing was happening here?]

Yes. I think it was a good move, but like I said, it may have...my mind is foggy.

It could have been maybe better explained to me, but from what I understand, I thought it was a good move.

[Katrina: Did you feel like it was a big change suddenly, or was it a pretty seamless transition?]

From where I was at, it was a seamless transition. No, I suppose if you were very much involved with the staff, etc., you may have seen changes, but from where I was, no.

[Katrina: Were there any, not necessarily changes in leadership, but just changes in general that impacted your job or other volunteers around you, whether they be good or bad?]

The changes, I don't think, affected me personally or some of my co-volunteers here.

The current change is the terminology. When I first started in the rubber industry, I signed my papers at the personnel office, and that changed to human resources. Now it's called something entirely different, which I do not understand.

It's a director of external events. Why not development? I grew up with that term. Don't change.

Some of us don't like changes. No, that's a minor bit.

[Katrina: It's still your feelings on it and that's relevant. Were there any interpretation or education initiatives that you really enjoyed participating in? I know you mentioned history first hand...]

History first hand and the decorative arts.

[Erica: Those are your two big ones.]

Yes. Those two, because it's a little bit different. They were very interesting.

Especially interacting with other history first hand characters. I'll give you an example. Ed Searle, who was our butler, C.B. White, we had a little routine with tongue sandwiches because Gertrude Seiberling requested one evening tongue and tongue sandwiches.

We would tell guests about the tongue. Most guests, especially children, would turn up their nose, you know, tongue. Also, Ed and I had a routine with the Cleveland Indians going to an Indians game in 1920 to see that new baseball player, Babe Ruth.

No baseball player is worth \$125,000. That's what the Yankees paid for to get Babe Ruth. So, the interaction between the characters was fun and also engaged our guests in that process.

[Katrina: Very cool. I guess I know another thing that you do is just give tours in general. What do you like about giving tours? What's your favorite part about giving tours?]

I enjoy giving the tours because you meet some interesting people.

You can tell people who are not all that interested, but generally they are interested. And giving tours to children, you have to give a different type of tour. I enjoy talking with the children.

I had a couple come through the house recently and they looked at me and said, we remember you from 17 years ago. I said, what outrageous thing did I do then? And they said, they were bringing their seven-year-old son and the son did not want to come. Well, who wants to see a 100-year-old home? Well, I have a little routine when I see a youngster and I would say, how old are you? They would say, seven years old.

I said, I hope you realize that when the Seiberling family moved in here, their youngest boy, Franklin, was seven years old. Well, his youngster remembered that and he still talks about it and he's 24 years old.

But yes, that's where this couple remembered me from 17 years. But I also like the self-guided. Now I know a lot of people objected when we went to self-guided.

I get a chance to talk to guests more on a self-guided tour. And for instance, I encountered a family in the West Porch. I talked to them, found out that he's a lawyer up in Willoughby, and his office is in a Penfield house, Gertrude's cousin.

And I arranged a trip to Willoughby for the guild, a busload of people. And I called him up, and he gave us a tour of his law office, which was the former home of the mayor of Willoughby. So the guests that you meet are interesting.

And I noticed a couple of times a guest with a big clunky ring. And I said, what's the significance of the ring? Well, this one gentleman and his son, he was a pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals. And that's a World Series ring.

So I meet some interesting people.

[Katrina: That's awesome. Okay, so how do you think Stan Hywet has and continues to build a sense of community here, amongst staff and with the city of Akron? These are the harder questions, so take your time.]

We have to be outgoing and looking forward, and include the community.

And some of our education programs, I think, are going in the right direction. And with the school groups visiting, especially the specialized school group.

[Katrina: Are you referring to ACO?]

Yes, ACO.

And then because you get these people interested. And I'll give you a good example. Barberton Schools came here on visit.

And a couple weeks later, a mother came in with two children. And so I was talking to them, self-guiders. And mom was saying that their boys, her boys came to the tour, Stan Hywet, with the classroom.

And they said, mom, you have to see this house. So they dragged them. So the school tours do something.

They encourage, they light up some of the young minds. Old Trail School, that program is excellent.

[Katrina: Have you ever been a judge for the Old Trail?]

No, I have not.

[Katrina: What are your thoughts on the Old Trail presentations?]

The Old Trail, those children really know their subject matter. I'm impressed with all of them.

[Katrina: What does it mean to you for Stan Hywet to be a community asset?]

It is a community asset because we are no longer the rubber capital of the world.

But this is where the rubber industry basically started. I know the east coast people would argue with me. But we are so much of the history of Akron and the rubber industry.

And so many communities throughout the area don't have some historic homes remaining. For instance, the homes on Millionaire's Row in Cleveland. How many are left? Maybe two or three.

So we should appreciate what we have and expose the community to it through the various events. One, of course, is Ohio Mart that brings in a lot of people.

[Katrina: What do you think makes Stan Hywet relatable? What do you think can be done to help improve relatability?]

It is relatable.

We have to educate some of the community. And I don't know how you could get some of these people involved or interested. My neighbors across the street, they've lived in Akron 35 years.

And last Mother's Day was the first time they've ever been to Stan Hywet. So we have to get these people somehow interested. Now, when I lived in Milwaukee, my very first weekend I was there, I visited the Pabst Mansion.

Because I'm interested in 100-year-old homes.

[Katrina: I am too. Okay, and then one more big question and then maybe we'll have a couple of little questions. What do you hope to see Stan Hywet be in the next 20 years?]

Through the various programs.

Also, in 20 years, if we could get ourselves exposed to more of the area, the state, even the nation. Antiques Roadshow, I think, did a wonderful job in doing that. So we've had people from all over the country.

They did not know anything about Stan Hywet until they saw it. Also, if you remember a few years back when the U.S. Postal Service came out with their series of commemorative stamps, Gardens of America...our Birch Tree Alley was one.

And there was one couple that came in from Pittsburgh. They are making a tour of all the gardens from those postage stamps.

[Katrina: Whoa, how neat!]

Now, that's different.

[Erica: That is cool!]

Again, I met them through the self-guided tour. You get a chance to talk to people more on the self-guided tour than on a guided tour.

[Katrina: You mentioned Antiques Roadshow. What were your memories of Antiques Roadshow? Was it exciting? What do you feel like the vibe at the time was as we were getting ready for that?]

Well, I participated because I brought two items of unimportance. But it was well-organized, well-managed, and they knew what they were doing. You know, we knew what time to get on the bus.

But it was fun just to see the operation and what other people were bringing.

[Katrina: Uh-huh, really cool. Do you have a question?]

[Erica: Oh, I can't remember if you asked. But what keeps you coming back, Jim?]

You can't get rid of me.

[Katrina: We don't want to get rid of you!]

No, because, you know, I've given up some of my duties here because of age. And with McKenzie on the third floor, I'm not going to visit him very often there. I don't want to climb these stairs.

But I still have an interest. I don't want to divorce myself completely. So I came back for the members' night.

I was here for Father's Day.

[Erica: And you think it's the people that you've worked with?]

Well, there's an important thing. My fellow volunteers.

I'll give you a good example. We are a close-knit Tuesday group. And to me, it's almost like a family.

Because we know when they're sick, when their husbands or wives are sick. And they are closer to me than my personal family, because I don't see my personal family that often. But, you know, I see them every Tuesday.

And this is true for the Friday group, but especially on the Tuesday group.

[Katrina: What do you think it is about this place that allows for that sense of community and family amongst volunteers and staff?]

Because I think most of us have a general interest in the house, the estate. And this brings us here.

Occasionally, people drift out to other places. But we stick it together and stick it out. We have become quite close.

As I mentioned earlier, when we closed on Mondays, and I was shopping around for another day, I almost had to be interviewed by that Tuesday group. You know, they were very protective. They didn't want these outsiders coming in.

Well, I became one of the Tuesday group.

[Erica: And then...I know that you talked about meeting Irene as one of your top memories. But do you have any memories of the events that you'd say is like your top memory?]

Of events? Oh, it's because there's so many interesting events that we've had.

And they've changed over the years. Like I mentioned, the madrigal dinners, we don't have them. I don't recommend that we resurrect that.

And that took a lot of time, a lot of effort. And it was primarily volunteer organized.

But what event? Maybe it is about a madrigal dinner.

[Katrina: It's your favorite?]

Yeah, because it was so different. Because the participants, not the guests, we were all in costume. It was a medieval atmosphere. Musicians, etc. And including jugglers and the musicians.

And the guests loved it. In fact, I was working in the rubber industry. And I, as an entertainment for some of my customers, I gave them tickets to the magical dinners.

Unbeknownst to them that I was going to be one of the participants. So when they were seated at the dinner, I came in costume. And they were surprised.

I did that a couple of years. And it was good company entertainment. And it served a purpose. I introduced them to Stan Hywet.

[Katrina: You mentioned how you don't think we should bring the madrigal dinners back. Any events that you wish we still did? Or that you have a lot of fond memories of?]

Some of those that were in the past? We've had so many little ones. I mentioned that I chaired the egg show. That was a free event.

And you can't do too many free events here. I have to be truthful. And the guests that came here free, they would pay an additional fee to come into the Manor House. So it wasn't completely free.

I'm trying to think of some events that we had. We had antique shows years ago. And not Antiques Roadshow. A miniatures show. I never realized how many people were into miniatures.

There's nothing that really should be brought back in. There's always an opportunity to have another event. I would love to see us...now there's an event, a musical arts series.

After we dedicated the organ, what was that, 12 years ago? We had a musical arts series here. And after two seasons, I think it just fizzled. We're looking for a sponsor.

I know one year, Billow's Funeral Directors sponsored the season. We had a Valentine concert here. It was love songs.

Jim Mismas, who at that time was on the faculty at Kent State. Also music director at Westminster Presbyterian. He organized. And it was love songs. But the musical arts series. And now your job is to get the organ updated. Because I know it needs some repair work or voicing. That is, yes, the organ people call it.

But yes, musical arts series. That's one that should be revived.

[Katrina: Speaking of restoring, I failed to ask a question about it. Do you remember, over the years volunteering in the house, were there any big conservation or restoration projects that you remember happening that you thought were really cool or were neat to see the transition from what it looked like before to what it looks like now in recent years or in the far, far years?]

Well, not so much restoration.

But opening the maids' quarters up. Because those are offices when I first started here. The curator had the office on the second floor.

And they looked like offices. So also my very first tour here, that guest wing was closed off. So we couldn't see the William and Mary room and the Adam room.

In fact, well, Irene lived in the Adam room for a little bit. And then there was a sort of a conference room. In our early records, I think AB, well the WAB at that time, had a little members meeting of some kind with a luncheon in the Adam room.

But as far as restoration of the house, we've had so many projects here. And simple ones like cleaning the rugs. Because we sent the rugs out to Hamid Rug. Those are the guest rooms.

And Virginia's room, the rug just popped out in color. Because it was a little grayish over the years.

It's a simple restoration, but it was noticeable. And the lampshades in the library, on the floor lamps, when those were restored, because they do not look what they originally looked like when I first started here. Because they look good with the beaded work.

Now I understand, because I know I met the person who did the bead work. One of the lampshades have original beads. The other one is replacement beads.

And which is which, I do not know. I don't think we know.

[Katrina: It's probably in CatalogIt...] [Interviewers talking]

[Katrina: You mentioned the opening of the FDQ wing. Do you remember about when that happened, the FDQ and the guest wing?]

I don't remember when that happened. Because I think Margaret Tromantine, who was the curator, her office was in the second floor in one of the maids' rooms.

[Katrina: And she was a curator?]

Yes.

[Erica: I know that you like to find things about Stan Hywet out in the community and sometimes bring them back. Can you tell us more about how you find these things?]

Well, sometimes it's just going to estate sales, tag sales. For instance, one of the volunteer awards that we get is this Pewabic tile. The one that I received, I have it framed. It's hanging in my family room.

But I went to an estate sale and picked up another tile. And I also picked up a second tile.

So I have three Stan Hywet Pewabic tiles. But it's amazing what's out there. And friends know that I'm involved with Stan Hywet and say, oh, I found this. Would you be interested? Yes.

[Katrina: What motivates you to do that? Other than your love of history. Is there something deep down that makes you want to do it?]

It's something that I would want to do because I could easily just pass it off. Oh, that's nice. But, that has a meaning to me.

And of course, I'm involved with Stan Hywet. So there's a connection.

[Erica: Jim, do you feel like Stan Hywet is going in a really good direction to be more part of the community?]

Right now, I think we're going in the right direction.

Again, with the encouragement of education programs. And we think education with children. But there's a lot more education available.

And adults.

[Erica: Definitely.]

[Katrina: Thank you so much.]

[Erica: Thank you.]

[Katrina: This was so great.]

Well, that wasn't all that bad. I don't know if I made any sense.

[Erica: No, you did! Definitely.]

[Katrina: Did you have anything else you wanted to say before we close out?]

But you know, I had mentioned the decorative arts. And there's so many little details.

My favorite artist is Teslof, who painted F.A.'s portrait that's hanging. Because he, I really dug into his biography. Because he is a renaissance man.

He was a musician, a painter. And he married an opera singer. And he paddled around with opera singers.

Just an interesting man. In fact, his son was a professional skater. Skated with Sonia Henie.

Now, speaking of Sonia Henie. One of our Tuesday volunteers. And she was a short woman.

Esta Erickson. In her younger days, she skated with Sonia Henie in her ice show.

[Interviewers: That's so cool.]

And when, she never appeared in the movies with Sonia Hennie. But she was in the ice show. And when the skaters would do this sort of whip going around.

She was always the last one. Yeah. And another volunteer.

And you know, so we get to know each other.

[Interviewers: Yeah, that's awesome. That's so cool.]

[Katrina: All of our volunteers are so fascinating.]

[Erica: I know, it's not just the guests, it's the volunteers too. It's pretty interesting here.]

[Katrina: Awesome, well thank you again.]

Well okay.