

NAME

Doug Strawinski interview

DATE

October 13, 2026

DURATION

31m 1s

5 SPEAKERS

Speaker 1

Claudine Klose

Doug Strawinski

Speaker 4

Speaker 5

START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:00] Speaker 1**

All right.

[00:00:02] Claudine Klose

Good afternoon. This is Claudine Klose from historic Red hook. It's March 6th, 2026, and I'm interviewing Doug Stawinski at the Story Studio in Red hook. So Doug, welcome. Would you mind introducing yourself and telling us where and when you were born and when you came to Red hook?

[00:00:24] Doug Strawinski

Sure. So I was born in Dearborn, Michigan, which is just outside of Detroit. I grew up in Detroit and went to school there, high school and college at Ferris State College and kind of the center east part of of Michigan. In 1975, I was working as a surveyor. In the winter we were. Laid off because it was cold and couldn't do surveying, and I was laid off, and so were 300,000 auto workers. So I ended up heading to Texas. I got to Texas in January of 1975 and lived there for 23 years. I started my construction business in Texas in 1977 and built it from there till I left in 1998.

[00:01:47] Claudine Klose

And what brought you to Red hook? Why Red hook?

[00:01:51] Doug Strawinski

Well, the story is this. I met my wife, who is from Hyde Park in Texas. We got married. We bought a house. We had our children there. I have a son and a daughter. Andrew and Jacqueline. And the way the story goes is my wife didn't like Texas much, so she was trying to convince me that we should raise our children in the northeast. She's a very persistent lady, and it took her eight years to convince me to essentially start my or try to start my business up here in Red hook. So for the first two years now, mind you, my kids went to school in Texas. My son was in sixth grade when we moved here. My daughter was in fourth grade or they were going into those. So I had to find a way to make a living. So what I was doing for two years is commuting. I would go to Texas where all my business was, take care of that and come back. I would stay there for 2 or 3 weeks because we had a house there and I would just go to our house. I had employees there and I had a lot of customers. So for two years I would commute back and forth. And I was coming up to the northeast to try to find customers and try to establish my business here. Finally, in 1998, I was able to move up here. I was still had business in Texas. I had superintendents that would do the work there, and back then it wasn't so digital. We had a Fedex so I could handle all the the payments and everything from here. When I was here or back there when I was back there.

[00:04:22] Claudine Klose

Interesting. So we invited you to do an interview because you've been a long time volunteer here in Red hook, involved with our Elmendorf in the 18th century in that was restored in the 80s. 90s. You know it well. How would you describe the role, the meaning of the elmendorf in for the town and village of Red hook?

[00:04:51] Doug Strawinski

Well, when I came to Red hook and took a little while to get established, of course, I was very interested in the building. Of course, being in the construction business to watch or look at these buildings, how they were constructed and how they've been able to stand after 100 years. And then I met a couple people that were part of the friends of the Elmendorf, a great group of people fun. We, you know, they were always trying to do things at the Elmendorf to raise money and just to bring in the community. So it really intrigued me first for the building part and always the building part. But secondly, because of this group of people that I met that really took a great interest and had a lot of fun trying to bring people in to enjoy the building, but also socially enjoy each other.

[00:06:00] Claudine Klose

So how did you did they ask you to be involved or did you offer to become a volunteer?

[00:06:08] Doug Strawinski

I actually offered to become a volunteer. I had to write a, a little reference or to just tell them why I was interested. And I don't even think I had to do that. They were happy to have me on board because I took such an interest in the building and and it needed a little bit of help. It was in really pretty good shape. Just needed a little bit of help, just some upgrading. So.

[00:06:41] Claudine Klose

So you got involved then in, in

[00:06:44] Doug Strawinski

2010, 2010, right.

[00:06:46] Claudine Klose

Okay.

[00:06:47] Doug Strawinski

All right. I got on the board in March of 2010.

[00:06:50] Speaker 4

Okay.

[00:06:52] Claudine Klose

Had you been had you worked on old buildings before?

[00:06:56] Doug Strawinski

Well, living in Texas, I was in the commercial end. I did a lot of industrial work, and I did a lot of restaurant work. So not a lot. There were a couple buildings, a residence that I renovated in the early days there, but I really got involved with with restaurant work. So in Texas isn't near as old as where we live here. Right?

[00:07:28] Claudine Klose

For sure. So can you describe the work that you first started to do when you got involved as a volunteer for a Friends of Elmendorf?

[00:07:39] Doug Strawinski

The first project that I worked on is to remodel the small bathroom in the hallway to the Elmendorf. It was dated, and we wanted to spruce it up. So I thought it was a great opportunity to show my talents and just do it. My son and I actually did it. It's a very small bathroom, so it didn't take us long, but it's still there, and we have not we've not remodeled it since.

[00:08:23] Claudine Klose

And then what other parts of the inn were you involved in, construction wise?

[00:08:28] Doug Strawinski

So after that, the inn was in dire need of heating and air conditioning and upgrade. So my business is to oversee the whole thing. So we got some Pricing on what it would cost to put air conditioning and heating in the building. And we picked a contractor and we it, it was it's a gas fired LP fired system furnace and just regular condensers. And we have one unit upstairs in the attic, and we have one unit in the basement. And that happened in 2011. So pretty quickly when I got involved, because you got to remember, I'm still trying to work to make a living. But it was just fun. It was just something I enjoyed doing.

[00:09:27] Claudine Klose

One of our other interviewees, actually, it was Larry Thetford stressed how important it was to be a volunteer and to stay a volunteer. And you have you are still volunteering when needed. Is that something that you think is specific to this community, or is that something that do you think special about this? The people involved with this project, the building, the Elmendorf Inn?

[00:09:58] Doug Strawinski

Oh, I think it goes right across the board here. Not only am I involved with the Elmendorf, but there are there are other boards and commissions that I've been on that I've really enjoyed. So I think in general, I've met a lot of volunteers in a lot of different places. I'm real involved with the rec park, Red hook rec park and the trails committee and had been for a long time. And I found another old building to do a little work on and that Saint Margaret's. And I've been at that for probably about 10 or 12 years, I think 2008 is when we originally started it and have chipped away at that building that was donated to the town from Hannaford's.

[00:10:54] Claudine Klose

So how do you feel? What do you think the Elmendorf Inn means to the community today? Now that it's been restored and fixed up and is used now? How how do you think people feel today about the Elmendorf Inn?

[00:11:14] Doug Strawinski

Well, it's really it's really grown in popularity. When I first got involved with it, there were many things that we did that we still do. Soup night, chili night. Those are things that have gone on for a long time. But over the years with other volunteers The Elmendorf has just expanded. Moved from friends of the Elmendorf to historic Red hook. So. And everybody's a volunteer, essentially. I think we have one person that's the director, and she gets paid a lot less than what she's worth. But does a really good job. But I've seen it grow in popularity. I've seen it grow in more and more things happening. Not only with people renting it or, or using it, but for programs that historic Red hook has put together.

[00:12:26] Claudine Klose

So do you think that because you knew the Friends of Elmendorf then before a lot of other current volunteers, do you think that that the board when you went on. It was a very energized board. And, and they wanted the tradition to be carried on before it merged with the Egbert Benson Historical Society. There still was a lot of energy. And they had been in business for since 75.

[00:12:55] Doug Strawinski

The friends were.

[00:12:55] Claudine Klose

The friends of Elmendorf. Yeah.

[00:12:58] Doug Strawinski

Oh, energy was everything. It just there was just such a great group. And not only to provide some help with expenses to keep the, the Elmendorf running but just the social fun that that group brought. And it hasn't really changed. I mean, it's gotten more popular, but there's still a great group of people that, that volunteer And these social events that we have today have expanded, gotten a little bigger and but still a lot of fun.

[00:13:42] Claudine Klose

So that answers a question about how the in connects people to each other. And do you sense that they also, buildings like this connect us to our history in a way that's important to the volunteers?

[00:13:59] Doug Strawinski

Absolutely. For instance, we try to expand the idea of history and what's happened in Red hook. And one of the programs is the fourth graders come and they look at the building. And there at all about, first of all, how old it is, how it was built, and just a little glimpse of the history of it. Also, my son is a teacher in Red hook and he teaches history, so he's he's loved the building and and the history behind it, but it just goes to show it just the fingers have reached out into a lot of different parts of the, of the community.

[00:14:54] Claudine Klose

So from the perspective of somebody who has worked on and built houses, what are, what's quirky about the Elmendorf Inn? This is a it's been renovated over the years. It's changed from the original 1760s farmhouse to a Stagecoach inn, to a rental facility, to a country store. What what do you find interesting about the building as opposed to other buildings?

[00:15:23] Doug Strawinski

Well, I've worked on certainly it's aged quite well. I mean, it's a solid built building and it always needs maintenance, but that's part of a wood structured building. But we as a group have been able to maintain it. And it's you can ride by it. It's a beautiful building. You go by it at Christmas time and it's decorated and, and festive. It's just a fun to fun to be around this, this whole organization and the building. And you think back 1760 and then you, and then you think back the additions they put on it and you you find an old door downstairs that Emily Major said was a little before 1760. So what do they do? Do they build the the basement first and lived in it? Always those questions. And I think we all continue to find some unique things about it.

[00:16:38] Claudine Klose

So when you came, the carriage house that's on the same property had already been built. Right. But you were also involved with an expansion project to turn the parking lot into a lawn and acquire the building that we're sitting in now. Can you tell us what you remember about that whole process?

[00:17:02] Doug Strawinski

It was a great move. The the parking lot was originally right next to or right behind the Elmendorf. And once the storage studio was donated it was just a perfect opportunity. To put some, put some green behind it. And it was just once again, a bunch of volunteers, a bunch of volunteers that said, this seems like a good idea. J Trapp, who God rest his soul, was was great in volunteering to draw the drawings go down to the village, get it permitted, and turn a parking lot into a green space. Now, I can remember a load of sod coming in, and a group of us once again volunteers. A good sized group of volunteers taking rolls of of grass to immediately turn it into a green space. Just before that, we did put a Yeah, a bluestone sidewalk in to, to to improve movement to, to the carriage house and and also make it easier for handicap and all to get into the Elmendorf. But that day when we laid that sod, I'll never forget it. It was just you know, it was a fun day and everybody just full of dirt because we're, we're carrying this, this sod around. And it turned out to be really a nice addition. And then the where there was a, there was a storage building and kind of a driveway that all got removed. And we, we put in a new parking lot as well. But once again, we got a lot of help from contractors and volunteers. It was fun.

[00:19:32] Claudine Klose

It's a theme. The volunteers. Yeah. So what are your hopes for the Elmendorf for the future?

[00:19:39] Doug Strawinski

Well, as I watch it continue to reach out to more and more people. I see that it's got some great direction with, you know, with board members, with volunteers, with the director. It's really, really expanded. We were just a group of the Friends of Elmendorf. We were just a group trying to keep the building warm in, in the summer and open the windows in the winter. I mean, vice versa. Excuse me. With warm in the winter and Nice in the summer and just try to raise some funds to pay the bills.

[00:20:29] Claudine Klose

That brings up a question. Were the windows openable when you.

[00:20:32] Doug Strawinski

They were.

[00:20:33] Claudine Klose

And so they did open the windows because they haven't.

[00:20:38] Doug Strawinski

There's just a few of them, but we opened them.

[00:20:40] Claudine Klose

But you did. Interesting.

[00:20:41] Doug Strawinski

Yeah. And there's still one that's openable and that's in the kitchen. You can still open that window.

[00:20:48] Claudine Klose

That's right. Right. Okay. All right. So I think unless there are other questions that relate to Doug's, I have Sam Phelan is here too as a backup recording. Sam, do you have any other questions?

[00:21:06] Speaker 5

Did you have any involvement with the barn, the Casey area?

[00:21:13] Doug Strawinski

I did not. When I came, it was already there. That was. I think that was ramrod mostly by Larry Thedford, right? Because it was like a swap shop or basically A few years before I came, I'm not even sure when it was built.

[00:21:37] Claudine Klose

He has that in his oral history.

[00:21:41] Doug Strawinski

Yeah.

[00:21:42] Claudine Klose

Chronology. He he told us about. Yeah.

[00:21:45] Speaker 5

So what about the little shed to.

[00:21:48] Doug Strawinski

The shed was always there.

[00:21:51] Speaker 5

It was always.

[00:21:52] Doug Strawinski

There. Yeah. We turned it to where it's position now because it was facing what's now CVS and we just moved and turned it. And then as you know, you and I recited it, there was siding that was left over sitting, sitting down on the ground. And we decided two sides because that's all we had. And then of course, we replaced the roof and just a just maintenance. General maintenance.

[00:22:30] Claudine Klose

And since we're sitting in the story studio, we should probably ask you what your involvement was in restoring this little building so that we could use it when historic Red hook was able to acquire it.

[00:22:42] Doug Strawinski

So when I first saw the building it needed a few things. One of it was it needed upgraded heating and air conditioning. So we put in a heat pump split system on the first floor. Then we also put new wide plank flooring. Just covered some very old flooring. That was awful looking. Ended up painting the building once and then I think it later came back and painted it again. Upgraded the bathroom a little bit. And then there's some things that I did when Sam and Ellen owned it. We put a porch on the side so that the, the tenant didn't have to walk on rickety stairs. Remember? It was pretty treacherous. And then built that little overhang because it was pretty wide open before. So we've had a lot of time making it what it is today. And then once again, with all the volunteers, all, most all the archives, almost all the archives got moved over here. So we made it workable. And I think in both cases, all three buildings for that matter, we've made them workable. And just the improvements Have just helped. To make it safer and in this case, with the storage studio all on one level.

[00:24:25] Claudine Klose

So we're we're so lucky to have had you as a volunteer. And I know that still when things go wrong, people say, oh, we have to call Doug, even though you. You don't have to come. But you do. It's amazing. So.

[00:24:41] Doug Strawinski

Well, I think you get to know the building. So it just helps that if someone needs to figure out something, if I can answer the question, I will. I haven't always been able to, but we've always found a way to, to make it work.

[00:25:01] Speaker 5

So you say you put in the air conditioning over there in large building. How how much of a challenge was that in an old building to put ductwork in and all that.

[00:25:14] Doug Strawinski

Yeah. The nice thing about we put two systems. Two, two different units in is in the, in the attic. We could duct down to the, to the rooms there in the basement. We could duct up in the floor. The return air was a challenge because we really needed to get it in a wall. And we did. But it just, that's part of it. And you really want to do it without disturbing the look of the building.

[00:25:54] Speaker 5

So you were able to put the ductwork all below the floor on the first floor. And where did you run up to the second floor.

[00:26:02] Doug Strawinski

That was a whole different system. So that was its own ductwork with its own return air and everything there. They have ceiling vents, supply lines. So all the ductwork is up in the attic. And we were able to get something in each room.

[00:26:21] Speaker 5

Minimal disruption to the.

[00:26:22] Doug Strawinski

Minimal minimal.

[00:26:24] Speaker 5

Of the building.

[00:26:25] Doug Strawinski

Yep.

[00:26:26] Speaker 5

That's cool. Yeah.

[00:26:27] Claudine Klose

So I know the staircase is a challenge for people who have difficulty with staircases, especially a narrow one like that without handrails. First of all, was there ever a discussion of trying to put an elevator in the, in?

[00:26:43] Doug Strawinski

I don't recall. We had a, another circumstance, like I told you earlier, that I've been involved with Saint Margaret's, which was built in the early 1850, and we were trying to find a way to put it in the building. But it took away from the beauty of the building. So we're not doing it there either. But I think that was part of the problem here. You would have to give up too much historically to put it in.

[00:27:19] Claudine Klose

But you apparently made some improvements so that the volunteers who had a hard time going up and down the stairs could go up more easily.

[00:27:27] Doug Strawinski

And really, it makes a lot of difference. It didn't take much, but it made a few people very happy. And even today. It makes it a lot easier to climb those stairs because they are there. They're a little treacherous and not unusual either. Most old buildings are like that.

[00:27:49] Speaker 4

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:27:52] Claudine Klose

So is there anything about your role with the Friends of Elmendorf and the Elmendorf in that? Maybe. We haven't talked about that you'd like to tell us?

[00:28:03] Doug Strawinski

Oh, I think we hit on. In general, everything that they that that organization did. And it just continues to blossom from that. I think it was a great start. There were some just a number of great people that were involved. So I can't but reiterate over and over again that that's what made it. That's what made it happen.

[00:28:30] Speaker 4

Yeah. Well, you were.

[00:28:31] Claudine Klose

Definitely one of those. So I think Red hook has a lot to be thankful for.

[00:28:35] Doug Strawinski

I think there's a couple other ones in this room that had a lot to do with it, because I remember you, Claudine, when we were laying sod, you were pulling right off that trailer just like the rest of us.

[00:28:49] Claudine Klose

It's fun. I think a really strong theme that comes through is those volunteers that jump in and.

[00:28:56] Doug Strawinski

And made the place nicer. And it was reasonable to do. It was affordable. And and we did laugh. We did laugh.

[00:29:10] Speaker 5

Do you remember who your first contact was here at? How you.

[00:29:17] Doug Strawinski

That's.

[00:29:17] Claudine Klose

Yeah. Who was the first person you met in the Friends of Elm?

[00:29:20] Speaker 5

How did you initially get involved? I met him put an air conditioner.

[00:29:23] Doug Strawinski

Yeah, it's got to be Karen Cipperly.

[00:29:26] Claudine Klose

Karen separately. Interesting. Yeah, yeah. She was an active member of the board.

[00:29:31] Doug Strawinski

She was an active member of the friends of the Elmendorf. And we became friends. And she was the one. I don't remember anybody else specifically except for her, because we would we would have she loved to have board games. So she'd have a board game night. Yeah. What a great opportunity for people to come in and just socially have a little bit of fun. Yeah. And I've always remembered that besides other things, she's involved, even to this day, she's still a great volunteer. But she always stands out. Then I got the opportunity to meet Larry Thetford.

[00:30:21] Claudine Klose

Right. He was president of the Friends of Elmendorf then. Or was it Beth Jones?

[00:30:25] Doug Strawinski

Beth Jones? Jones.

[00:30:26] Claudine Klose

Yeah. Okay. So it was after Larry. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:30:28] Doug Strawinski

Yeah. But he was still involved and and him and I, because he he had such a great love for old buildings and had a lot of building experience. And we became friends. To this.

[00:30:43] Claudine Klose

Day. Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. Okay. Well, I think we've covered the bases. Okay. Thank you so much for spending time with us. We'll let you listen to it later when it's all up and stored away. And thank you so much.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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