

Arthur Capper Public Housing Oral History Project

Oral History #5

Interviewee: Carlana Farrar

Interviewer: Johanna Bockman

Date: November 21, 2012

Location: Interviewer's house

Length: 1 hour, 16 minutes, 42 seconds

Abstract: From 1966 to December 1993, Carlana Farrar lived in Arthur Capper Public Housing. She is one of seven children. Her mother, Lena Farrar, had previously lived in Carrollsburg [which she said was public housing in SW] and then at 3rd and K St., SE in Arthur Capper, where Carlana Farrar was born in 1966. In that year, they moved to a townhouse at 3rd and I St., SE (310 I St., SE) and stayed there until December 1993.

In this oral history, Ms. Farrar spoke a lot about growing up in the 1970s in Arthur Capper, as well as in very interesting detail about the changes that occurred through the 1980s. She moved out in 1993, but has more recently reconnected with the Arthur Capper community through Facebook and the reunions.

Field Notes: At 26 minutes, my house phone rang, so I stopped the recording. At 1 hour and 7 minutes, the recorder ran out of space, so I quickly downloaded the recording made so far and we continued with the recording. We moved her chair at one point to turn away from the sun coming in the window.

Time Index:

00:00 Location Questions: Where did she live in Arthur Capper? Where did she and her family live before? What was it like living in Arthur Capper? Very positive time growing up there.

03:40 When did she move out? Why? She felt like there was nothing left for her. Her mother had passed away in 1986. Carlana Farrar took over the townhouse's lease. The neighborhood had also begun to change due to the influx of drugs. Many of her friends had moved out, and the younger generation living in Arthur Capper didn't hold the same values about the neighborhood. She was concerned about raising her two children, who were 8 and 12 years old at the time. She was also raising her younger brother, who was still in junior high. Also, her older brother stayed with them, after he returned from serving in the military. Once her younger brother was old enough, she decided it was time to leave Arthur Capper.

06:38 What was her townhouse at 3rd & I like? It had two floors, three bedrooms, one bathroom, a big kitchen, front and back yards (backyard had a big tree and a frontyard with a lawn), a front porch. They sat a lot on the porch during the 1970s when "the crime issue wasn't there" and everyone knew everyone. They had a lot of freedom to change the outside and inside of the homes. Her mother built a fence and planted roses. Carlana's sister now says that she never knew at that the time that they lived in the projects; their parents didn't make them feel like they were in the projects, though the media gave a different perception. It was important that they could change their houses, so that they felt like they lived in the same kinds of houses as other people.

11:24 Her fondest memories were the block parties, which took place several times in the summer. They had to get permits and prepare the whole block. Every house would have a cookout. Teenagers would play in bands on a stage in their alley. Other blocks would visit the block parties. Other fond memories were having fun with friends, staying up late, running track in the middle of the street, throwing snowballs. The kids had their own world. Her mother had worked for a while, but then stopped working.

14:44 Her least fond memory was of a car accident on M St, SE. Five members of the Marty family, the baby of the McKethean family (who lived at 3rd & L St, SE), and Carlena Farrar's junior high friend were killed by a drunk driver who pinned them to the Navy Yard brick wall. Also, her friend Vonda Robinson was shot at a club when she was about 19 years old. Everyone knew her family and the McKethean Family. "It still rips through our hearts."

18:24 Why were there changes in Arthur Capper? Some of the kids were left with nothing to do. In the early 1980s, a lot of government-funded programs through the recreation department were stopped, and thus there was nothing for those kids to do after being so involved with, for example, all the sports offered at the rec center. "It was just a matter of time before their spirit was gone." Also, a lot of the community, including Carlena, worked for the Washington Star. Any day of the week, you could go up to the Washington Star trucks and get a job. When the Washington Post took over, there weren't the same number of jobs. Then the changes due to drugs came around 1987 with more people selling drugs and more crime. Also, the majority of the parents were on public assistance. It was always difficult making ends meet at the end of the month but "we relied on neighbors...our neighbor was there for us" or vice versa. It got more difficult. Also, there were very few two-parent households.

24:55 She had relatives in the area. 25:34 Who did she remember most in the Arthur Capper area? She used to spend a lot of time with older residents, such as Ella Gibbs at 308 I St., SE, who was about 60 years old at the time. Ms. Gibbs told her she came to DC in 1942 and always dreamed of going to the Bahamas, but she never need. After Carlena moved away, Ms. Gibbs went downhill and passed away. She had been moved to 3rd & L, SE due to a rodent problem and did not like the move. Another person that she remembers most and keeps in contact with is Alvina Hood.

28:41 Memories of the Arthur Capper Rec Center. She played on the flag football team and competed against Greenleaf (public housing). She remembered their coaches Ms. Cook and Ms. Kelly (for girls sports). Groves and Carl Andrews were the coaches for boys sports. All of them were DC Park and Rec employees. She remembered the go-go bands that would try out their music at concerts at the different public housing projects and play for free. Experience Unlimited (EU) had an apartment on 4th St, SE, where they practiced and they lured other bands to the rec center to play. Her mother didn't like her going to the concerts due to fights, but Carlena said that they knew how to control the fights.

33:38 Schools (Giddings Elementary, Jefferson Junior High in SW, Woodrow Wilson High School, UDC). During elementary school, she remembered Ms. Andrews, the crossing guard. The Results Gym's parking lot was their elementary school playground. She remembered the

walk to Jefferson past the Garbage Yard. She became a young mother at Jefferson. They took a charter bus to Wilson. She was in ROTC. During her time at UDC, she was working in a non-profit. Garfield Park.

41:20 When moved away from Arthur Capper, she became detached from others there, but has reconnected in past four years, especially thanks to Facebook. When she heard about the reunions, she thought, “Oh, no, I can’t let this die. I missed it.”

43:02 Spending time with other public housing projects. There was some fighting when bands from other projects visited, but it was unclear why they were fighting except that they were in our territory. Redds and the Boys band was from Arthur Cappers. Redds passed away some time ago.

45:26 Businesses in the area. Outside Joe’s store, the older guys regularly did doo-wop singing. Joe Reed kept “tabs” for people to buy on credit. He married a woman from Arthur Cappers and had two daughters. Talks about Joe Reed. He sold the store to an Asian man named Joe, who owned it until Arthur Capper closed. All the employees were from Arthur Capper. Little Star (2nd & L). Normandy’s on M St sold Chinese food and donuts.

51:24 Ms. Vivien Williams and Bertha Rich helped people in the neighborhood and asked her to take part in Tenant Councils. After her mother passed away, Ms. Williams and Rich made sure that her family had a nice Thanksgiving. She went to some meetings sometime around 1987 or 1988, where there was a lot of discussion of others taking over the neighborhood. At that time, more people were fighting for the neighborhood, so they could hold off those who wanted to take over the property. Ms. Williams told them that this was prime property and people want to take it over. Many of those older women died, and there was no one else left to fight for the neighborhood. Who was going to take over? Investors, developers, the Marines. They got petitions to stop them, which was successful for a while.

56:16 She had worked at Giddings as a teachers aide. She had participated in PTA-related meetings at Hine Junior High about the closing of Giddings around 1989 or 1990. She was quite passionate about this because she knew that the kids were going to be underserved. The school district was shutting several schools because the buildings were falling apart, but what happened to general maintenance?

59:09 Went to some ANC meetings at Old Naval Hospital. They gave mostly to Salvation Army.

1:00:02 Party fundraisers through car washes and carrying groceries from Safeway. They went out to 8th Street, especially to play arcade games. People went to Top Cat and had basement parties. They rarely went out to dinner because they didn’t have money to do so.

1:03:06 MLK Food Coop, Friendship House. Her godfather James Bill worked there at the Friendship House. Giddings had field trips to Friendship House. They made different friends there.

1:05:30 Vivien Williams lived at 3rd & L in Arthur Capper.

1:06:00 In 1993, she moved to Hyattsville, MD. She had bad memories and didn't go back. Her mother died in the townhouse. When they found out that Arthur Capper was going to close, "it was the worst day of everybody's life." Driving through the area was difficult. We knew that it wasn't a fun place anymore and was plagued by problems. What would have helped? Fixing up the places and giving people jobs. The hope had left. Now, the streets are foreign to me. "You can't explain to friends who are not from there where you grew up. There is no place where you grew up." Making the area more "multicultural" isn't a bad thing.

1:13:12 Final thoughts about Arthur Capper. "It wasn't just a public housing project. It was home... Without the experiences I learned there, I probably wouldn't have made it in my work experience... It would have been a harder struggle to make it as an adult in this world."

1:14:42 Extra piece on St. Paul's Baptist Church (4th & I St) sold dinners for \$3. Remembers Ms. Mills and Ms. Richmond. She ended up at People's Church on 8th St and continues to go there. Many went to Mt. Joy Church.