

OAKWOOD ORAL HISTORY PROJECT TRANSCRIPT

Ellen Nightengale moved into Oakwood in 2004

Interviewed by Liisa Ogburn on July 18, 2013 in Liisa Ogburn's home at 506 North Person Street.

Liisa: Okay, just to start, today is July 18th, 2013. We are sitting in Liisa Ogburn's house, at 506 North Pearson Street, Raleigh, North Carolina, with Ellen Nightengale, and this is Liisa Ogburn speaking. So to start, if you could introduce yourself in a full sentence - your name, your address, and when you moved into Oakwood.

Ellen: My name is Ellen Nightengale. We moved to 47 East Jones about nine years ago.

Liisa: And Ellen, you have family.

Ellen: I do.

Liisa: And you have your children here in the neighborhood.

Ellen: Yeah, David and I moved into Oakwood, kind of by accident. We'd been married about nine months; we weren't looking to move - we were very happily in a little townhouse I owned as a single gal, and didn't really have plans to move immediately. I think it was all things meant to be, as a friend just insisted that I look at this house with her. She was a brand new realtor and she's like, "I just really, I just really think you'll like this house." and rather than not hurt her feelings, I agreed. 20 minutes later, we bought it.

Liisa: Why?

Ellen: It's just that our towels match the bathroom. It just seemed like the whole house was exactly what I never knew we wanted. It was exactly what I would've told someone we were looking for, but we weren't looking. It was just too uncannily perfect. And we eventually hoped to have children and would want a bigger house later, so it was, "Well, here's this great thing," and at the time it was just right. I just finished teaching; summer was (unintelligible) now. It was like, "Well, I have time to move." It was just too perfect of a moment. It was five blocks from where David worked; less than a mile from my job. It just felt like the universe kinda put us on the doorstep. We still live there. We hope to never, ever move.

Liisa: Did you know anything about the neighborhood before seeing that house?

Ellen: We really didn't; the only thing that I knew about it, and it's kind of embarrassing that I didn't know anything about it because I love history and spend a lot of time in Raleigh. I've been here for 10 years at that point, but I don't think I've been east of Glenwood. I did not know that a neighborhood like Oakwood existed. So we were really lucky. I did have one student - she had to do a report for me, a biography - an autobiography, and she mentioned with great pride, her neighborhood, historic Oakwood,

historic Oakwood. That was the first time I've heard the words. We're still real close to that family and they babysit for our kids. That's all I knew, that one family that lived here, and that was it.

Liisa: You've been awarded the neighborhood award, because pretty immediately, you got very involved in the neighborhood.

Ellen: Yeah, Naudin knocked on my door, and we'd been there maybe a week, and invited me to come to the garden club. I didn't know things like that still existed, but I loved the idea of it. I went, and got swept into a really neat group of ladies. Definitely was something I was interested in, and as time went on, got more and more involved, and seemed like a really good fit for me.

Liisa: The garden club plays an important role in Oakwood. Tell me some of the things they do.

Ellen: It's kind of funny, the garden club started in the 50s and is the parent organization of the SPHA. The garden club, these feisty ladies in the 50s, realized our neighborhood was gonna get demolished by that freeway, and quickly and promptly organized themselves and threw us on the national historic register, and then said, "Go about your own business, we're gonna go back to garden club." They keep a hand in that, but the garden club is not a non-profit as the SPHA is. They're separate entities, and the garden club has really continued, unchanged, for almost 65 years. It's kind of amazing - we're the first garden club in Whit county; one of the few still in existence, and still play the same role that Valley Henderson, our founder, intended. It's kind of more a community service organization than we're just sitting around drinking tea, talking about gardening tips. So I think the garden club is the welcome wagon, and organization for anything that needs to get done. If a neighbor needs something done, the garden club is the engine that can drive the organization of people and resources to get what needs to be done, done.

Liisa: What do you mean by the welcome wagon?

Ellen: We welcome new neighbors - we bring them a basket or a bag, sometimes it's a plant, sometimes it's food, but it gives them information about the neighborhood. It's kind of like a personal, face to face encounter, or at least a, "Here's my name, phone number, and email address. Come to our next meeting and we hope you'll get involved in your neighborhood." It's kind of an entree, a nice way for people to feel like they're involved, or can be involved. I feel it's intimidating to move into a neighborhood as big and active as ours.

Liisa: Let me get the dog. Max! Max! Come on. Get over here!... So you served as the welcome wagon, and you have an incredibly successful garden tour each spring.

Ellen: Yes, which I think accompanies the Candlelight Tour, which is another way for people to see, and access, and appreciate and hopefully want to love and preserve our neighborhood, and the grounds and plants and our culture and way of life. It's kind of

awing to me this year, and the last couple of years, we renovated our house. The neighborhood had its 60th anniversary, and the garden club literally saved my house. We would've been the northbound lane, so it was pretty neat to be running the organization that preserved the house I was renovating. It was pretty cool.

Liisa: And there's a lovely park dedicated to Valley Henderson, right?

Ellen: There is. The garden club worked several years ago to put a gazebo up there and we partner with the city to do the maintenance and landscaping there. It's a nice spot.

Liisa: And you say you're a for-profit.

Ellen: We are considered a fraternal organization, but I feel like we're an exaggerated lemonade stand. We really don't - it's hard to describe what we are, what we are is so old, there just aren't a lot of organizations around like that. It's difficult to explain, but we are not a non-profit for sure. We run with very little money, because our mission is to protect and beautify Oakwood. So anything we make or earn, goes back into the neighborhood immediately. Last year, we started a grant program. Our tea was particularly successful last year, and we were written up in Southern Living, and so people came knocking, and we sold out. We made a good bit of money, so we put it back into a grant system for the neighborhood. We were able to award ten 500 dollar grants to homeowners who improved their curb appeal, which was really awesome. A lot of the people who were grant winners were older, and that money was helpful to them. It spruces up things that have gotten a little foregone, and then a lot of new folks who had moved in the neighborhood and wanted to take care of their yard, their house, it's the last thing you have money for as you're trying to work on a house as old as ours are. That was a really neat thing, I was glad to get to do that, the new program. I think the main thing is continuing the traditions that we already have going on that are so well-served.

Liisa: And one last thing - so my son came to a service project that the garden club had initiated. About how many of those, and what do those consist of during the typical year?

Ellen: We usually do one or two of those a year. That particular one, that was great, I loved how that came together. We had a neighbor who had applied for the grant and didn't get the grant. She was one of the people who was not selected for the grant. We just felt like the need was so strong, and the project was so worthy, that we took her on as a service project. And what we needed more than anything was hands, just labor. We needed people to move mulch, dirt, plants and to rake. So we got a local school involved - the kids from Explorers came, and it was amazing what they could get done in a very short amount of time with that many eager, willing, young hands. It was awesome, they were really good.

Liisa: And how many people belong to the garden club now?

Ellen: Our members range, probably from their 20s - we have active members from their 20s to their 80s. We probably have between 30-40 people on our rolls right now. We

have men and women, and a few people who live just outside the neighborhood too, so that's nice.

Liisa: So several people I've interviewed recently said they were among the first to have children, and that during their generation, many times families, as soon as they had children, left the neighborhood because they weren't comfortable with their children going to school downtown. But these families continued, and now they look around, and there's hundreds of children. And you're kind of one of those families with the children population. Tell me about what it's like now, with children in Oakwood.

Ellen: I'm certainly grateful to those families that stayed, because they laid the ground work for us. I think downtown and Oakwood in general is a wonderful place to have a family. We have such a strong sense of community, I feel like my kids really have a huge network of an extended family that really benefits them, and we can just walk everywhere. Today, we walked to Fable Street, picked up a baguette and some tomatoes from the farmer's market, we went in a museum, we walked town - it's a nice, small town in a big city. Having a dinosaur museum three blocks from our house is pretty appealing when you got kids that are five and seven. So I think we got a lot of good living, a lot of walking time, and interacting with people and seasons and we see our neighbors because we're on foot a lot. We have really neat relationships - we walk to church, we walk to school, we walk past the governor's mansion so many times a day that they know all of our names and they'll stop and cut my daughter a flower. She'll come home from preschool with a stalk of asparagus, because they know her. I just don't think that they don't even realize, as young as they are, how amazing that is. And growing up in a small town in the mountains, I certainly do realize how cool that is. I think it's the right place to raise a family.

Liisa: Earlier, you interviewed Mary-lee Wooton, and I recall you mentioning the kind of brigade of inter generational help that came your way when you had a baby.

Ellen: When Vaughn was born, our oldest, he'll be 7 next week, I didn't cook for a solid month. I just did not expect that - I wonder if it was part of the novelty, kind of like a new trend maybe, that people were not running for the hills when they had a newborn. It hadn't occurred to us, Oakwood was home, and these friends were now family to us, and we were so quickly ingrained and loved the tradition and novelty of everything. What a fantastic environment for a kid. Breakfast, lunch and dinner, I didn't pick up a pot or pan for a solid month. It was amazing, and people just loved him. We had one neighbor who literally sent him a Tiffany Rattton that said "Prince of Oakwood". It's just so sweet to have people love my children, like they really are family. That's amazing.

Liisa: So, if someone listens to these tapes a hundred years from now, and doesn't know any of these characters, what do you hope that they continue to foster in this neighborhood? What message would you have for them?

Ellen: I hope that people still stay involved with their neighbors. Our architecture and closeness of our homes fosters relationships and that's really powerful and important. I'm

glad we don't have a garage and a driveway. I'm glad we're forced onto the street everyday, and we see our neighbors and we know their routines and know when they're gonna walk their dogs, and we recognize each other because we're pushing strollers. I think that builds community and that's really important - to keep the culture that we enjoy. I love all our kooky parties, and parades, and the wooden cow, and the jazz band. Every time we go to one of those little events, I kind of gaze around in wonder, that nowhere else on Earth, am I gonna have a cocktail with my (unintelligible) band leads us down the street! With the cow following, it's just... it's nuts. And it works, and I think it forces people out of their homes and gives people a reason to come out and share a meal and meet each other, and take care of each other in that way. I think the athletic clubs are important, and all those little Easter egg hunts, they really keep the community vibrant and unique.

Liisa: That's beautiful. Anything else I haven't asked you that you want to add?

Ellen: Oh no. These things always get so teary. Has anybody ever not messed up? Everybody does.

Liisa: It's an opportunity to reflect on home and what home means.

Ellen: Yeah, what it means. You're terrible.

-Laughter-

Liisa: Well, thank you.

Ellen: Thank you very much.

Liisa: Okay, so you have um...The Garden Club has been in existence for over 60 years and you just mentioned that one of the founding members recently died or the oldest member recently passed away.

Ellen: Yes, our last living member was Addie Lee (unintelligible) and she passed away in the last year. And several of our neighbors wrote checks in her memory to The Garden Club because they knew The Garden Club was something so important to her and they wanted to continue the work that she had started which was really touching.

Liisa: Now you mentioned that you wrote her family.

Ellen: The funny thing's like when I became president of The Garden Club I got these boxes delivered to my door that I didn't expect and it's just stuff that gets passed from

president to president and I honestly ought to show you some of the stuff in there. I don't know that anybody had really sifted through it in some time but one of the things I found in there was a photo album of (unintelligible) Henderson's, it's her personal pictures, her photographs, her baby pictures, her wedding album, it's really sweet. I think the Garden Club was her family so that has been kept in the club. And then we had some Garden Club stationary which some little symbol and seal has been kind of protected and there was one piece of stationary left so I used that to write to her family which was really sweet. Kind of poignant that it was our last piece. I thought that was, the coincidence was touching to me.

Liisa: What did you write to them?

Ellen: I took a picture of it somewhere. Just to let them know that several members had written checks in her honor to continue the work that she had done and for them to know how much we still continue the work those ladies set out and they should be very proud that their mother continued, her memory was alive and well and the work she started was still in existence. I think that's what a legacy, it's really cool.

Liisa: You mentioned that you have another older member right now, Elainor, who doesn't have internet access which is one of the ways we all communicate.

Ellen: I think the clubs really meet in a lot of ways but Elainor, she's in her 80's, we just celebrated her 80th birthday a few years back. Her son lives in the neighborhood, her daughter-in-law. But other members of the community make sure they come and pick her up. She's spry, like that (unintelligible) she's really a valued member but our sidewalks are uneven but we come home and night after a glass of wine and people make sure they pick her up and walk her home because there's no reason for her not to be at every meeting. She's still such a valuable asset to us and she really gets in there and does the hard work. It just seems like the Garden Club is one of those neat organizations that you can kind of evolve as a person with and continue to serve your community in the ways that are interesting to you and something that you don't outgrow so I'm proud to be a part of it.

Liisa: So recently you were really involved in some school board issues.

Ellen: Drama. I'm a public school teacher by trade. I've stayed home since my son was born, I'm planning to go back once both my kids are in school which will happen this year. So last year Vaughn was poised to enter public school kindergarten and the rules kind of changed and a new leadership in the superintendents office who had a new idea and tried something that left our community short-handed and we wound up with about 10 kids in our neighborhood, all rising kindergartners, all first born in their family with no school assignment at all. So they kind of let everybody like "hey pick your school. where would you like to go?" and everybody as a result the Oakwood kindergartners who just finished this school year are represented by 10 different public schools. But I don't think it was anyone's intention but that happened but before that was solved we kind of had an uphill and really emotional battle and the neighborhood played a strong part in that. I didn't know what to do. We got an email that said "we are unable to place your child in any public school" and lots of other people got that, too. We started calling each other and texting and email and freaking out and we gathered in my home and that was like, on a Friday afternoon so like really there was no discourse so we had the whole weekend to kind of figure out what we're supposed to do. It was kind of an unprecedented situation, it had never happened before, it was an unintended consequence. But I feel like the neighborhood, there's so many resources, the people, the energy, the time and I didn't know what to do and somebody would. So I have learned reaching out on our list service it can be a really powerful thing so I wrote a letter and I wrote it to the school board asking for help and clarification and posted it to my community in Oakwood and the moms (unintelligible) downtown and just people really stepped up for us and for all of these kids. But I just really didn't feel as alone in it. People I knew were writing letters on my behalf, you know, like "fix this" and "help these kids" and "shame on you" because they were copying me on it, too, and it was really like "Oh, something's gonna happen.". People would stop me in the grocery store and inquire about it like "my friend passed it to me" and I realized me sending out the first email had gone all over (unintelligible) county which is fine, anything you put online is public property in some way. But you know, without intending to be, I kind of became the point person.

Liisa: Can you back up just a little bit to give a context in your voice to what preceded this mishap.

Ellen: The school board decided that people have complained in the past about "I don't like my big school" or "I want a different school" or "I want a different calendar" or "My neighborhood has always been assigned here but I think it should be assigned here" and

we had a new superintendent from out of state and, it wasn't even a terrible concept, as an outsider but I knew when they announced it there's no way. There's so many different micro-cultures in (unintelligible) county it's just apples and oranges. He's like "okay, everybody complains about school assignments so pick your schools. pick a school 1 through 5 that you want to go to". I knew immediately because we talked about earlier that Oakwood didn't have tons of kids generations ago but we are busting at the seams with toddlers and 5 and 6 year olds and we haven't had a huge demand on public schools in our downtown community. No one lived here 20 years ago, certainly not people with 3 kids and now there's lots of young families downtown so they were just grossly underprepared for the volume of children that were coming from these nodes that have been mostly businesses and not residence. ANd because when our schools were depleted and people moved to the suburbs in the 70's and 80's they turned our schools into other things, which are great things, so the buildings are still there that used to serve this neighborhood and surrounding areas when they were full of children and families maybe in the 50's and 60's. Now one's a theater, one's a community center and several have been torn down, one got turned into offices. Now these communities are vibrant again and our schools have disappeared so the surrounding schools, there's just not enough capacity for the existing families and the resurgence of downtown. So we've kinda invited people to live where you work and dine where you shop and all that sort of awesome things that have happened downtown. But I think somebody sort of missed the point that there were going to be kids involved and the like parks and school part was gonna come so that unfortunately happened to us and a lot of other kids in Oakwood. So, again, the neighborhood, at some point David and I were on vacation. We were at the beach and just being removed enough from it physically and reading the papers we just got so disappointed and just like frustrated and angry and didn't know what to do and I just kinda felt like everybody just didn't know. LIke if you got a school, maybe it wasn't the school you hoped for but you got a school. We were so anonymous. I couldn't understand why it wasn't on the news every night and in the papers and they weren't willing to fix it they weren't like "oops, we're sorry but here this is your school now and we're so sorry". They were just very comfortable to "you just need to wait" but it was kind of an indefinite waiting period. You know kindergarten registration and open house nights had come and gone and our kids are still sitting on the sidelines like we have no idea where he's going to go to school. I was really considering the possibility of homeschooling these 10 children in my basement. I was like at least i'm a teacher, I can still teach them, they can learn. It won't be what we planned on, any of us. Private school registration deadlines were long gone. None of us had planned on that so there was funding that would have been necessary. So I don't know, David and I were like we have to find a path through this and people need to know and the other thing they had tried to do was change our base high school away from Brotton(sp?) which, you know, (unintelligible) Brotton(sp?) lived in our neighborhood just a few houses down from this

home and this was kind of the last straw. So I sent an invite to everyone I knew, anybody that had a kid or any kind of connection to downtown and asked people to meet over by Krispy Kreme and we were just gonna literally walk to the school board meeting which was going to be at Brotton that night. I didn't have any expectations and I really didn't know what was going to be the result of that but that was kind of the match point where everybody sat up and paid attention to schools when they hadn't in a long time and really kind of had our back and it was very quiet but we had 200 people show up with strollers and signs...and a helicopter! We had helicopters that followed us as a quiet neighborhood 2 by 2 mob into the meeting and as soon as we walked in they were like "okay, we get it" and they fixed it immediately. So that part was done at least. So we had some good results there and we had really good discord with the board at the time and the superintendent, although we obviously had some concerns. I was like "rather than meeting with individually or responding to thousands of emails, would you come to our neighborhood?" and we had 2 different community meetings at a church, on (unintelligible) Trinity Methodist. They were gracious hosts, they came and answered our questions. It was really, it wasn't an easy fix but it was definitely something that the community, hundreds of people came. People who don't have kids and who've never had kids in the public school system and really just cared about having that amenity for families downtown were really just supporting us as a group. So eventually it did get sorted out. We didn't all wind up where we should have been but everybody got into a school and with the results, we're happy. I think again the whole process was just such a testament to our community and we're kind of our own little tribe. You know, we meet the needs of neighbors so it's very encouraging and helpful to know that when something bad happens to you: a health concern or I lost my dog, whatever it is, the neighborhood will fix it. We will really meet you where you need to be so I joked with some neighbors, I called it the "Oakwood army". We have an army.