

Interview with Nancy Canafax (Oral History #102)
Time as Village President/Wilmette politics
December 14, 2021

Interviewee: Nancy Canafax
Interviewer: Patience Kramer

PK: Today is December 14th, 2021, and my name is Patience Kramer. I am volunteering with the Wilmette Historical Museum as part of their oral history project, and today we're interviewing

Nancy Canafax. Nancy served as village board trustee from 1985 to 1993 and as president from 1997 to 2005. Nancy was the first woman to be elected president of the Village Board. Nancy, I wondered if we could start by you telling me a little bit about your background, maybe where you grew up? If you weren't in Wilmette, what brought you to Wilmette?

NC: Well, I grew up actually in central Illinois- Olney, Illinois, and we came to the Chicago area- moved to Barrington, when I was in about third, fourth, grade. I graduated from Barrington High School and went to the University of Oklahoma, where I had a major in Chemistry, and I graduated from there in, let's see, '55. And then I traveled, and met Tom, and we married and lived in, originally in L.A., and we lived there for several years. We moved to the district, not the district, to the East Coast. We lived in Maryland, and I started law school at Georgetown, where I graduated in '68 with a law degree. Then we moved to Chicago and now live in Wilmette, Illinois, where I practiced law for a while. Actually, I practiced in Chicago. And then retired while I was on the board. I can't even remember, I guess, 10 or 12 years. During that time, I got interested in Wilmette politics, as one can hardly help but do if you live there and become involved with issues. Things come up and you get - have to have a word in - your own word in, and that's how I got involved with politics in Wilmette.

PK: Was there anything specific that brought you to your involvement in local politics and local government?

NC: Well, I was asked... I wasn't specifically involved until I was asked to be on the Housing Commission, which was set up in '78, 1978, and - in which, I was one of the original people on the commission. Jean Cleland was chair, and everybody knows Jean, 'cause now we have a wonderful facility named after her, and she was an exceptional person. I was proud to have worked with her, and she really was the one who listened to my interest in housing. That was my first interest, and I was on the housing commission for about six years, until I ran for the board as a trustee, and then, of course, that broadens your scope quite a bit when you're on the board.

PK: Alright, absolutely.

NC: But I would say housing was my initial interest, and remains a very strong, central interest.

PK: You know that is one of the questions I was going to get to, was the issues facing residents at the time that you first ran, and did you feel that there was anything in your background that specifically prepared you to address those issues as a trustee? Was it your interest in the housing issues or-?

NC: I would say Jean Cleland was my spark for housing, but when I was running there was a very, one of these emotional cases in Wilmette, where the Park District had sued the Village, and I took that as an issue, because I'm a lawyer, and that kind of thing does interest me, and I do become involved with. Can one public body sue another? A very basic question, fascinating. It was also very emotional, and raised a lot of ire in the village on both sides. It was decided, it was over zoning issue - whether the park board could have lights right over there, and, of course, it was decided, as a result of that case, it went to the Illinois Supreme Court, that the Village can impose it's zoning laws and regulations on other public districts, as long as they're reasonable about it. That was a result I thought was very sensible, and that's the kind of thing I like to do. Solve problems that are basically soluble.

PK: Oh, that's-that's great. Was there, when you were first campaigning in the 1980s, the mid-eighties, what was campaigning like then? I mean, I don't think we had much social media then...

NC: Totally different.

PK: How?

NC: I'm amazed at what these young people do now. They all use their technological devices and they don't require a lot of money to do that. They do it on their own. We started out by raising money. We'd have a campaign committee and reach out and raise money so that you can have ads and mailings and rent places for speeches, I mean, it was all- outreach was all dollar oriented, and it was not easy. Because you had to do a lot of writing and speaking and with the- nowadays none of that is necessary. But you do have to be technologically savvy or have someone with you who is, but committees, and large outreaches are just totally, totally, different.

PK: Do you think maybe you had more of a personal involvement with residents as you were running at that time that maybe technology gets in the way of today?

NC: I think that's probably a very valid observation, because I made so many friends running and probably some enemies too, but, you know, not enemies, but people in the community whose views I learned and had discourse with and on a personal level - oh coffees. We used to have coffees, and I think they still do. There are some, but not like there were. I mean might have had for one campaign 10 or 12 coffees where you went to the neighborhoods.

PK: Oh my gosh.

NC: And met

people. PK: Okay.

NC: And now, there were- I was invited to one or two where candidates wanted me to come, because I supported them, and not on the level like they used to be. They'd have one big one, I think.

PK: Yeah.

NC: Maybe. Some of them. I offered- I had offered to give them money, because that was what we did in the days before. They didn't want money. They didn't need it.

PK: Oh my gosh. You know there's a gap between the time that you served as trustee and the time that you became president, about a four-year gap, what made you- what happened during that four year gap that made you decide to run for president of the village board?

NC: Well, I was- I was encouraged. I didn't- certainly didn't leave the village board with the idea that I was going to run for president. At the time I left, John Jacoby was president, and John encouraged me and other people did to, and I sort of gradually got used to the idea. It wasn't something I was aiming for, targeted, in my plan for- I was practicing law. I was quite happy. I've always been very happy as a private citizen- to be involved in issues in politics, just as a private citizen, but by the time those four years went by, it was me. I was supported and encouraged so I did. And I was unopposed-

PK: Okay.

NC: Which kinda surprised me. I expected - at least one person I can think of was going to run, but I ended up being unopposed, and so the campaigning was nothing like it had been as a trustee, which it was fierce as a trustee. There were a lot of people running, and you didn't- in local politics, you don't know - you don't do polls. You don't know how you're doing. It's sort of an unknown. Those campaigns were difficult, but the presidential one-

PK: Did it- how did you think about being the first woman to be elected president of the village board, or did you think about it?

NC: I didn't think much about it. I knew I was- Thelma Simon, who had been a trustee- not the first- second woman trustee was a very intense, energetic person. I'm more laid back than she is, and I don't even remember consciously thinking 'Oh gosh, I might be the first village president, female president'. If it occurred to me, it wasn't a big thing - to me, because I practiced law in a situation and a setting where I was a woman among mostly men. Not all, by any means,

but mostly- and I just sorta went with it. I didn't have any trouble. Was I discriminated- people often ask me 'do you feel like you were discriminated against as a lawyer?' And, you know, I suppose I was on occasion, but if I ran into any kind of barrier, I just went a new way. I didn't ever get really intense about it, and I was the same way, I guess, about running for president. I was a little leery, that I remember. I hoped I could do it.

PK: Let's turn to your tenure as a trustee, what were the challenges facing the village during that period, during '85-'93? Anything stick in your mind?

NC: Oh yeah, yes there were, definitely. Gun control, that was a big thing. Illinois - Wilmette had passed an ordinance, a gun control ordinance, but it was never smooth. I mean, the opponents of gun control are very present all the time and vocal and intense and it remains on - the gun control thing was one, the teardowns in housing was at a height then and people were very aroused and emotional about that. 'How can we stop the teardowns?'. Which is really hard to do. But other than that, pretty much the usual things. The odd thing always comes up, but mostly zoning is always your contentious- more contentious area, and the gun control was after an incident in Wilmette when I was president. Someone was shot, a home invader was shot by a person who should not have had a gun in his house, and that was a really wild time in Wilmette, and ultimately, our board didn't do it, but the next board just got rid of the ordinance. So we don't have it anymore.

PK: You mentioned something that happened during your tenure as president. Was there anything else during the '97 to 2005 term that sticks in your mind as a particular challenge for the village?

NC: Well, I think housing was the big one. I remember several special meetings where people came and objected to these teardowns of old houses and what really rancored I think was the new ones that were replacing the old ones. They were so big. But it's an issue that you can't really- you can tinker with it, but you can't say 'you can't have a house that big' if it fits into the zoning ordinance. Just can't be done. And to change the zoning ordinance, you make every house in town non-conforming and that raises a whole new set of issues. So, it's a hard issue, but it was underlined, I would say, and the most pervasive issue that we faced. There were certainly a lot of other blow ups and things, but that was- and zoning, zoning is always gonna be the [undecipherable]

PK: I was looking at the accomplishments of the Village Board as a whole during your time as president, and I did a little research over here, and I believe that the streetlights were modernized. Was that- did that happen at that time?

NC: That happened a little earlier-

PK: A little earlier-

NC: Yeah, they modernized them downtown, on the east side. Now, one of the things, one of the issues, on the west side was 'why don't we have streetlights?' And so I was a west sider and a lot of people said 'you gotta get streetlights in there'. Well, it never happened- they still don't have street lights on the west side for the most part, maybe the bigger streets do, but, it's ferociously expensive. There's never a time when you have enough money, because there are always sewers, I mean they've taken up all the money since I've been on the board, and since I left the board they've taken up even more money.

PK: The sewers?

NC: Sewers. They have really sopped up all the extra resources that you may have.

PK: Did you experience any disappointments, anything that you hoped to accomplish either during- as a trustee or as president that the board as a whole couldn't get done?

NC: You know I can't think of any- One of the things that I- as I go back to housing - I was always a supporter of group housing and housing for the elderly or the infirm. Those are very emotional issues within a neighborhood and I, trying to think, some of those battles seemed so unlikely to succeed, but because of people who supported those needs in the community, they've happened. And I'm so happy to say that now we have housing in those special areas. There's never a problem that I've been aware of, certainly not a big problem. The big problem was getting them and after that it seems to just become a part of the community. It is a very happy occurrence, and to think of something that I was disappointed about- I guess, I wasn't on the board when it happened, they took away the gun law. I was disappointed about that, but by that time I was out of it.

PK: Was there anything, when you're comparing being a president of the board to a trustee, was there anything as a president that you couldn't do that you could do as a trustee or vice versa? Is there a difference in the roles?

NC: There's a difference- it's a different relationship with the staff.

PK: Okay.

NC: You're very involved with the staff as president, and as a trustee your connection is not nearly as strong. So, that if you wanted staff to do something you could be more direct in having it done. Garbage pickups were changing about that time. And we tried to- I wanted a certain - I wanted trash separation of trash and recyclables, and it was easy for me to get that done, 'cause it needed to be done and it would be done anyway. Rather than as a trustee, as a president I was more effective to accomplish that, but that was my relationship with staff- it's much more personal, and direct, and frequent than as a trustee.

PK: When you think about serving on the board, in the 80s and then through the late 90s to mid-2005, compared to now, do you think serving on the board has changed from those times that you served?

NC: I think it's very much the same. I was trying to think if the community has changed, our population is about the same, we're still basically family-oriented. We're a built-out community, so you're not going to have big fluctuations one way or the other, it's fairly steady. The only change I can think of is change in automobiles. And from- I don't get involved in campaigns anymore- village business, unless I have my own issue to talk about something, but I do get involved in the campaigns, because various people will ask me to support them, and the people running are very much, to me, like the people on my board and I was as president. Every president since me has been- not like me, but basically centrist people who are very interested in doing what is good for the community. And that's not always easy.

PK: Leads me to my next question then. What advice do you offer- would you offer to somebody who's preparing to run for an elected office, the board or president? A trustee or a president in Wilmette.

NC: I get asked that question, of course, by people like Senta [Plunkett] and Bob [Bielinski] when he ran. And I tell them that what people want to hear in Wilmette, and this isn't just to get elected, is to be honest and to project yourself as someone who will deliver on what you promise, and I tell them to be very straightforward, don't make any phony promises. They all are very- I think it's a good idea to have been a trustee, because you are much more aware of the breadth, which nobody is until you have sat on that board. It's not like a usual company or organization, it's a multifaceted machine, the village. I mean you've got public safety, you've got building, community development, everybody has finance that's not that different, but you don't have many corporations that have that many, different, activities to address. So, I think- I always advise people running, especially for president, that they should have some awareness, having been on a board or commission to see the kinds of variety of activities that the village is interested in, because once you get elected, and you get those packets for a meeting, you see all- the volume of issues that you have to address.

PK: It sounds like a lot of work

NC: It is. Especially at first. You do learn, of course, if you work at it and read your packets and participate regularly. You know that it's a lot of work, but it gets easier. It does get easier as time goes on.

PK: Okay, so what have you been doing since you don't have that huge responsibility.

NC: Well, I'm a very happy retiree from the board. I don't need that activity to keep myself interested and involved. First of all, I practiced law for a while and that's, in itself, is plenty. Of course, we have children, and raised out a family and that all the family is raised and gone. Even the grandchildren are grown, and I have retired from law, but I'm on three boards.

PK: What are those?

NC: I'm on the museum board- and by the way that was an accomplishment of the board that I remember well and am proud of. Not because of me, it was a lot of other people. But this board- this property was a dump. It was an old Gross Point village hall. It was collapsing. It had to go. So a developer bought it, as everyone expected, and planned to put condos or apartments or something and that was just a done deal. What else could you do with this building? And John Jacoby came to the special meeting one night and he said 'why don't we have the village buy it and make it into a museum?'. Personally, I was astonished, I was a trustee then, and I think the others were too. 'How can we buy it?' Well, he had ideas. There were funds, there were state funds, we had loans, we could buy the building, and the historical society could run it on their own funds. He sold it, and I was sort of astonished when it all happened. I couldn't believe it.

PK: It's an amazing story.

NC: It's an amazing story and here it is, it works so beautifully. It was restored by architects who cared. There were several architects who thought the building could be restored. It wasn't inexpensive, but there were funds available for it in the state and also locally. We raised- a lot of people contributed to it, we raised money locally. It wasn't me, by any means, I was astonished, because I was only a trustee then. But to see what the village can do if it puts its mind to it is just wonderful. I think it's one of the best accomplishments of my time- my time- on the board.

PK: Something to be proud of.

NC: It is.

PK: You know we're approaching the 150th anniversary of the village and what do you see lying ahead for Wilmette in the near-term or the further-term, further out ten years or so?

NC: You know it's hard, the pandemic has sort of put a haze over everything. I would have thought that as we develop more- and technology is such a strong factor now and something I'm not that conversant with, not all that comfortable with it. I do it. I've learned. But, I would have thought Wilmette would have become a center for that kind of thing, more technological activity here. Companies that do it, and would spread out. I don't know now. We have so many empty buildings- our restaurant business is great. I mean it's just flourishing and vibrant, but other businesses aren't. Until those come back, I think maybe they'll come back as smaller businesses. Whether they'll be technologically oriented like I had originally thought, I don't know. I don't know what kind of businesses- who opens businesses right now? I don't know and I think wherever - if it is happening, it's small. Something very unique, kind of a niche kind of type of business. Maybe that's what will happen. Taxes are so important and we've lost so many big taxpayers like the auto place on Green Bay Road, Carson's- two of our biggest taxpayers in the business area are gone. I can't see anything that big occupying those places. So, I don't think for a minute that Wilmette will shrink, just because of its location and it's past.

It's just too vibrant. I'm sure that something will develop commercially that will take the place of what those large companies provided. I don't- I'm kind of mystified. I've got this mist of the pandemic ahead of me and I can't- I can't visualize as well. I can hope. I hope-

PK: Hope is a great thing right now.

NC: Hope springs eternal.

PK: Nancy, this has just been terrific. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you would like to bring up? This is your opportunity.

NC: Oh well, this isn't a crucial issue, but another nice thing that happened. I seem to think of all the nice things, there probably were bad things, and I've buried them. But- on our last meeting, my last meeting as president, scheduled before Chris Cannon took over, we had a large audience against cutting the trees down at Mallinckrodt. I don't know if you were here for that, or remember, it was so emotional. People cried, they were so unhappy. The village didn't really have anything to do with it because it was Park District property, which I mentioned a couple times during the meeting, but it didn't make a dent. It was really a difficult meeting. But, look what's happened. Look what has happened over at Mallinckrodt. That park is just beautiful. To think, and I was surprised at how well it worked, because that was done by referendum, not by the Park District didn't go in and say 'We want it', there was a referendum that said that the village wanted it. They didn't want the building torn down, just like here.' We want to keep that building' and so the government listened, they kept the building and we have a beautiful park and a very good, historically significant building still sitting there. That was something, like the museum, that the community took hold of and made into a wonderful thing, a wonderful asset to Wilmette.

PK: Nancy, this has been terrific.

NC: Well, thank you.

PK: Thank you so much.

NC: I enjoyed it as well, Patience.