

TRANSCRIPT of 12_1_23_oral_history mp3

Sharon Smith: This is the Donna Niemeier interview at her residence. It's Friday, the 1st of December 2023 at approximately 1 p.m. Sharon Smith, I'm the interviewer, and the recording is being done by Dave Kestner and Steven Churchill. Donna, thank you for letting us interview you.

Donna Niemeier: You're welcome.

Sharon Smith: We're hoping to restart the oral history program...there was a hiatus. And as a heads up, we're testing two different kinds of recording devices to see which is going to be the best.

Dave Kesner: Actually, just the one today.

Sharon Smith: Okay. ... we do intend to make a transcript of the interview. So that's going to be a first for me also, and hopefully within two weeks I can get you a draft of it for you to look at. And we'll go from there. Any questions before we start?

Dave Kesner: If we can all silence our cell phones. (there was some other logistical discussion in the background regarding noise(s))

Sharon Smith: Okay. Are we ready? Prior to starting the recording, we talked about your house here. Are you a native to La Mesa?

Donna Niemeier: Not La Mesa, but San Diego County. My father was born in Fallbrook in 1906, and I was born in Escondido, but I was raised in Fallbrook and graduated from Fallbrook High School. When I graduated from high school, I came to San Diego State. It was San Diego State at that time. And, after graduation, I got a teaching job with La Mesa/ Spring Valley School District. I still lived in San Diego, but worked in La Mesa. And then, in 1973, I bought a condo in La Mesa, so I've been a resident since 1973, ...and it was over by Grossmont High School. And, um, then I got married when I was in my 40's, and the house condo was too small. So, we bought this house in 1986, and I've lived here ever since then.

Sharon Smith: What did you teach?

Donna Niemeier: Um. My answer to that usually is children.

Sharon Smith: That's a good answer. What grade?

Donna Niemeier: What grade did I teach? Uh, everything from kindergarten through sixth grade. Um, I taught at Murdoch Elementary, at Casa de Oro, at Highlands. Um, then I went to La Pressa as an assistant principal and was a principal of La Pressa Elementary and Rolondo. I retired after 35 years in the school district from Rolando Elementary School as the principal there. Okay. So I, um, 35 years in the school district and when I retired is when I started doing my volunteer work. I did a lot... I was involved in the city, the park and recreation department. I was on the commission while I was still teaching because they needed a representative from the school district who lived in the in the district, and who lived in La Mesa. So, I was on the park and rec commission. I can't even remember the dates on that. But for about 6 or 7 years I was on that commission for the city.

Sharon Smith: Uh, is the Historic Preservation Commission part of Parks and Rec?

Donna Niemeyer: No, no. Oh, no. Okay. Parks and RECs is different. Parks and rec, I don't know. Is it called that now? I think it's I think they I don't know if they've changed the name. I know they did the, they changed the name of the senior center, which I can never remember. It's still the senior center. Sorry.

Sharon Smith: Adult Enrichment Center.

Donna Niemeier: Yeah. Right.

Sharon Smith: Okay, so I thought I'd jump ...because, um, of your tenure with the La Mesa Historical Society. Now, it's now called La Mesa History Center. I thought I'd start with that so I might bounce around a little bit, but that's okay. And, um. So if we jump to your time when you started with the La Mesa Historical Society, and then follow up with other kinds of memories and experience. So ...you were the first Vice President of the

historical society in 2003 and the President in 2010, in 2011. But when did you first start being active?

Donna Niemeier: And actually, I had I was on the board before that too. Um, in May of 2001. Um, I retired in 1999. So, in 2001 a newsletter came out. I'd been a member of the historical society but not active, and a newsletter came out and said that they needed board members. And so I went to the board meeting in May of that year, and they were having a lot of problems at that time. There were only four people who were sitting on the board at that time. Um,

Sharon Smith: That was 1999?

Donna Niemeier: No, 2001, 2001, um, Karna Webster was president. Uh, Pat Kettler was working in the archives building and doing the pictures. Uh, Carol Lockwood was, um, I think first third Vice President and was doing docents, and Leslie Tolkinson was the Secretary, and that's all that was on the board at that time. And that same meeting, just by happenstance, Gordon Jones also had read the newsletter. And so he came to that meeting and, um, Karna was doing everything she was doing the President, she was doing the Treasury, she was doing the newsletter, she was doing the membership. And there was very little active membership at all in the, in, in the society. And, um, Gordon, and I hit it off really well and we kind of talked to each other about taking roles. Um, Karna wanted us to take a role. So within two months I was treasurer of the organization. And um, in July of that year, they were not getting membership to come to any of the meetings, and they needed a certain percentage for the annual meeting in order to continue. And so she just said, anyone know how to do a tea? Because if I thought if we had an event, then maybe people would come to the meeting. And so I've done a lot of traveling. I'm very interested in English. I said I've done teas before. So in July we did a tea as the refreshments for the annual meeting, and we got about, I think there were about 23, 24 people. So, we got the number of people we wanted. Um, the tea continued for ten years and after ten years I got tired, very tired, and no one else would take over. So, I kind of dropped out. But at the last tea we had, like I sat and did a seated tea for four with card tables with half on the lawn and half inside the house for 65 people. And it became the tea rather than the... it was instead of being the annual meeting, it became the tea. Um, so and that was just one of the things that we did to kind of bring people in. And Gordon and I, at the end of that year, Karna said she

couldn't she didn't want to be president anymore and nobody else would. And she wanted one of us to take over. And Gordon wanted me to do it, and I wanted Gordon to do it because I really, um, I was in charge for so many years when I was a principal and stuff. I didn't want to be in charge anymore, and I didn't know that much about how the organization ran. I didn't feel like I wanted to be the president. So Gordon said, if you will help, be help me with everything, then we would like to... I'll take the presidency. And I can't remember how many years he was president. I don't remember how long, but between the two of us in the next ten years, um, he did all the public relations and all the stuff. He would walk his dog and talk to people on the boulevard about the historical society. He got people involved. He got people to come. And, um, he kept trying to get people on the board. Every time he met anybody, he would try to get them on the board. He did a lot of work with the with the different businesses. Um, and I did the grunt work. I was the one that did the, the organizational stuff. Um, I am a very organized person. I like to have everything neat and in its place, and it fits. I did the organizational stuff. Um, and together we, we worked together. And by the time by within eight years, we had a full board of 12 people. Um, we were very active in the community. Um, when we came on the board, they had just the group before us had just written the La Mesa Then and Now book that Nori West was involved with. And we did a lot of public relations, a lot of we like the Oktoberfest and all. And, and we would go to the Kiwanis and all the groups and talk about the..... So Gordon and I set that up and we and we were doing a lot of, uh, informational stuff in the community to get people involved and to sell the book because they didn't have anything else going on. So, um, and one of the first half. How much do you want me to go without another question?

Sharon Smith: No. Go ahead. Keep on going.

Donna Niemeier: Um, I became a docent right away, also because they were having problems getting people and that the the main objective of the historical society was the house. I'm pounding on the table. The house was what was important. And we didn't do, uh, any very, very few people came to do research. And the research room was in the house. That bottom bedroom that now has display in it was the research room, and there was one, two file cabinets and one bookcase of information about, um, La Mesa and information that people could come and do research about their houses or their families that were in La Mesa. And it because of the tree that was there, it was a very

dark, um, the table was a library table that was very tall. People would come in and it would be very hard for them to do research, and there was very little there to do anyway. And it was not organized. The pictures were organized and they were in the archives building, and Pat did that, but the rest of it wasn't. So I asked the board if I could move the, um, research out to the room... it's in now in the back part of the property. That building, ...I'm going to get off track. The main money-making people in the original historical society was a quilting group, and they had they quilted every week, and the first they were in the house and one of the bedrooms upstairs. And then they built that building. They got money and built that Palermo building that's in the back. Um, Mrs. Palermo was and they had a she and her husband had a pizza place on La Mesa Boulevard, I think, and she was very active in it. And so with her, she donated a lot of money. And then, um, they got other donations and they built that building and they used it for many, many years. Um, about between mid 1990s, um, they started falling off. People were dying. People weren't involved anymore. And so the only use for that building at the time I came on the board was for board meetings once a month, and it had nothing in it. And if you've been there recently...

Sharon Smith: yeah, it's full of stuff.

Donna Niemeier: I started off, I was the beginning of starting to get the the things there available for people to do research. I moved the bookcase and I moved, um, the file cabinet out and started and got other bookcases in there and started doing some things. And then Gordon Gordon was the one that was getting the information, and I was keeping track of it and keeping it under organizing it. And um, at the beginning, very beginning of the organization, they had, um, started inventorying as things came in and then the collection got came. People were donating things so fast they didn't get the inventory done. So there wasn't even an inventory of what was what, uh, the collection was it wasn't they weren't numbered correctly and they weren't doing any and they did not were not keeping track of it. And it was the stuff was in cardboard boxes and, um, and done by, um, the people who, who donated it rather than being numbered and in the computer. So long story short, I before I left, when I was president, before I left the presidency, I wanted everything numbered and everything catalogued and everything described, and everything in the computer... didn't quite make it. But, uh, the major part of that organizational stuff was done. I did with volunteers. And got it started. So that was one of the things that was important to me. And to have people come in. Gordon

and I would sit in that room sometimes every month. There would be nobody to come in to do research. And now you can see what you know, what happened. And part of that is Jim, too. Jim has done a lot. Um, um, I'm not a historian. I just love history. I don't have any background in, um, I besides taking extracurricular history classes. I've never been a historian. I'm not an archivist. I don't know anything about. I just interested in history and interested in preserving it.

Sharon Smith: So. Um. Were you on or off the board when Jim started?

Donna Niemeier: Um, I was still on the board. Okay, um, I did I didn't want to be president. I didn't want to be president. Gordon got, um. got sick. And so he, um, I, I took the presidency for two years, and the only reason, the only way I would have taken it is to make sure that I had somebody to take my place. I didn't want to get in the situation that Gordon was in or that Jim is in, has been in is go on and on and on and on. Because you're only supposed to do two years is according to the bylaws. But it was very difficult. Um, and I so Aaron Landau said he would follow me and he was he was president during the centennial of the city so that we, you know, he he wanted to take care of that and do that. And so, um, I knew that somebody was going to follow me. So for the two years I took the presidency, because Gordon did. And then by that time they had Jim came in, um, with the home tours. We, um, we did our first home tour. Uh. I can't remember the year I thought I put it down.... 2002.

Sharon Smith We just did the.17th.

Donna Niemeier 2002. Gordon was president and the first home tours were in 2006. Okay. And we went Jim was doing home tours in the Rolando area. He was not involved and did not live in La Mesa at that time. And so we went. I can't remember how Gordon and Jim got together, but, um. Gordon and I went to that home tour to learn how and then we had met with Jim to see how to set up a home tour, and Gordon had done a home tour with his wife when he lived in Denver, Colorado. So, um, so we wanted to start the home tours and, um. Then Jim helped us with it for a couple of years, and then he got more and more involved. And then they he moved to La Mesa from the Rolando area. So then he became more and more involved. And so we kind of talked him into being president, um, in a while. But he that started with the home tours.

Sharon Smith: Ok, So are you still a docent?

Donna Niemeier: No, no...I kind of backed out. Totally. Um, my husband is has dementia. Oh, and he is, um. I was taking care of him, and it became very hard the last five years. He's now placed he's placed in a in a facility in National City. Um, but the last five years here at home, taking care of him was very difficult.

Sharon Smith: I understand, I had that with my husband.

Donna Niemeier: Yeah, it takes all your energy and. Yeah he. So I uh, at that time I, I kind of backed out and now it's just I, it was time for me to move on. Actually, it was so I'm not I'm helping a little bit. I help with the home tour and doing a little bit. I'm donating stuff for the raffle. I keep giving them money because like. But, um.

Sharon Smith: Pass the baton.

Donna Niemeier: I felt. Yeah, I felt that, um, with technology, it's going beyond me, and I didn't want to learn it. Uh, I feel like in order for the, the society to continue to grow and continue to go on and to become more viable and stay vital, it needs to have the the social media and it needs to have all that stuff going on. And I, I had a computer on my desk when I retired for three years, I mean, and, and when I retired, I had two children in my school of 500 who had cell phones. That's the level I'm at. And so I can't believe in the last 20 years how much it's how important it is. And we needed new blood. And I just felt like I was, um, and Jim had the, the he has the impetus to go on and do that. So I felt it was time for me just to back out and let them go on because the memories are there and how to do it, how we did it is not how it's it needed to be done in order for the organization to go on. So I just felt it was time, you know, I can be there if they have questions about what what the past and to do this kind of stuff. But I it was time to for the organization to go in a different direction than it was going. To change the name and to do all the things that that that that has happened in the last five years. Yeah. So..

Sharon Smith: Okay, if you had to pick one thing, what legacy would you want to be remembered for with the History Center?

Donna Niemeier: I think just that I wanted to make sure I didn't want to leave the organization. Gordon and I had worked so hard to get it to be part of the community, to be known in the community, to be important, um, for the preservation to that part of it. And, um, and I wanted the organization there so that people could use it and it would and to have the computers and to have all the stuff there. And so it's a living thing to me. And I wanted it to go on. I wanted to make sure I didn't want to leave until I was sure that somebody else was going to continue it, and that it was going to continue to go.

Sharon Smith: And great legacy.

Donna Niemeier: Yeah. And I don't know how long it will go. I think of all the. Organizations that the Kiwanis and the, the all of those organizations and even the churches, um, I think are not getting new members. The youth is not coming in. And, um, I think that we have done that. I think there's enough young blood in there that it's going to continue. And the people who feel the the importance of the history and I think it's, you know, I feel good about where it is now and what I left. So it was I didn't know if you want I didn't talk about the historic preservation part of it. Did you want me to do that?

Sharon Smith: Oh, well. We'll get to that. Okay. Um, I think you talked about your challenges.

Donna Niemeier: Yes. Um...And it just kind of fell together. I don't know why. Gordon and I, we appeared at that same board meeting, and we just hit it off, and he's gone now, and, um, he, as I said, it just it just worked. Um.

Sharon Smith: You both built upon each other, right?.

Donna Niemeier: Yeah. He was very, very good at getting people involved, um, and making it seem like it was their idea.

Sharon Smith: Yeah...that's good. That's a really good thing. I just listened to somebody give a speech about mentorship, and that was one of the things....

Donna Niemeier: Well, one of the other things we did was the intern program, too, that Jim actually got started with San Diego State University with the interns. And I did a lot. He again, he I, I liked doing implement. I like doing that, implementing and doing it. And so taking an idea and getting it done, um, um, getting the contacts is not one of my strengths. And Jim did that. He contacted the university and we got the intern program and started with one intern, and I was the one that worked with her because she needed 150 hours. And so I would go on on Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays and Saturdays and so that she could get 150 hours. And but Jim was the one that started the program and the need for and set up the stuff. But I think now they have like 3 or 4. I don't know how many interns there working now. I met 3 or 4 of them at the home tour.

Sharon Smith: Yeah, at least 2 or 3.

Donna Niemeier:] Yeah. And they're doing the the... historic preservation, the inventory they're getting. Yeah, they're working on that, which was something that needed to be done.

Sharon Smith: Yeah. And I hope to pull them in and into this program also.

Donna Niemeier: So that program is, is um, another thing that I spent hours doing and was very pleased to get, um, it was fun to see the new the young kids coming in and interested in history and some of the problems of that... couple stories. One of the, um, as a teacher, it goes back, the first gal I had come in, um, uh, I gave her a new collection had come in, and so I gave her a diary to read so that she could, um, I wanted her to do a synopsis, like 2 or 3 paragraphs so that we could put it on the computer so people would know if they wanted to do that. If they wanted that information, they could. Then we could get the diary out for them. And she sat there for about probably about 20 minutes, and she said, I can't do this. And I said, Frances, why can't you do this? And she said, I've never learned cursive and I can't read cursive. And I went, they're not teaching cursive. What do you mean? That's that's a third grade milestone... is to learn cursive. And so I said, well, you're going to have to if you're going to do history and you're going to read, you know, um, diaries and you're going to, you know, be you're going to have to you need to go go back and learn cursive. You need to go learn cursive. It's just it was just interesting. And the other one, we were doing the linens in the house and putting the labels on the linens. So you you do it in ink on a little piece of

scrap of paper, and then you tack it on the linen so that, you know, she didn't know how to thread a needle or how to do it. I'm going. Now, wait a minute. You know, am I that old?

Sharon Smith: Oh, so that's cool. Um, well, we'll move on to the Historic Preservation Commission. Unless the Parks and Rec group that you were with came first, though, right?

Donna Niemeier: I was that was just something I did as I, as a teacher, as actually was when I was a principal. Um, I worked because they needed a representative. A lot of the parks are next to the schools. Rolando is one of them that so the children use the park during their recess and stuff. And so the Parks and Rec Commission wanted somebody involved from the school district to give information, and it had to be somebody who lived in La Mesa. So I did that. Um, and I didn't get involved with the Historic Preservation Commission until 2000..... it was 2004 to 2018. I was on the commission.

Sharon Smith: Okay. That's quite a quite a while.

Donna Niemeier: Yes, it was a four year term and I can't remember how many terms I did. But, um, when you're, you're appointed and I was the representative from the historical society. On the city historic preservation Commission. Um.

Sharon Smith: And what types of projects did you see when you were on that?

Donna Niemeier: Mostly we did, um, landmarking people who wanted to get their house landmarked as a historic house. Um, we did some changes in the regulations and things. So we would look through the inventory, the, ...the as people brought the documents to us, then we would approve for the city council to go on. So, the Landmarking documents to get verification for historic historic designation. And um, in 2000. Um. Seven. Up until the time I left, I felt like I needed.... in order to help people in the archive center... in order to get the landmarking done, I felt that I needed to know how to do a landmarking. So I asked the city and the Palermo know the. Uh, what's the little the little octagonal building at the bottom of the cottage?

Sharon Smith: The Nan Coutts Cottage?

Donna Niemeier: No, it's not the cottage. It's the the Porter Hall. Hall? Porter Hall.. Um, belong to the city. And so it it was in the inventory. So I asked if I could do the land marking on that for the city so that I could learn how to do it and what the process was and what needed to be done so that I could help people, um, as they came in, because I didn't know exactly what needed and where they needed to go to get information. Um, you have to do the history and you have to look up all the deeds, and you have to get all the, go to the city and get all of the, um, permits and stuff to see how the house had been changed. And there's a lot of research that has to be done. And I didn't know how to do that. So I did do the Porter Hall for the city. And then after that, Gordon and I both were doing writing, and we were, um, we decided that we should use it as one of the money making things for the historical society. So, um, if you get a land marking done professionally, it costs between 3 and \$5000. And so I started doing the land marking for the historical society if people would donate \$1,000 to the society. So between 2007 and 2019, I did eight land markings and then presented. And then I had to, of course, excuse myself because I was on the Preservation Commission, but then presented them to the Preservation Commission and presented them to the city, um, for approval for the people to do that. So, um, and then learned how to do and then that's when we started getting all the information and all the documents and everything into that..... The archives building or the research center.

Sharon Smith: Well, it still is a good money maker, and.

Donna Niemeier: I don't know if anyone else I don't know if anyone else has taken it over.

Sharon Smith: Um, Jim.and Veronica and I believe there's a, um, they have a couple of volunteers helping them out, but Jim is still pretty much.

Donna Niemeier: Yeah, he does a lot of the research, but actually writing the documents. Um, do you know what the documents look like?

Sharon Smith: I do.

Donna Niemeier: Yeah, the document that has. Um, and doing the, the all the paperwork and getting all the stuff done and, and what I would do for people is that I would do all the.... I like doing the research better than writing the document. I would do all the research and then I would meet with them and they had to pay \$500 and, well, I shouldn't say that they had to donate. They, we asked them to donate five, \$500. And then I would tell them whether I thought it would meet the criteria for documentation to go to the city. And then and then if they wanted me to actually write the document, then it was another donation was asked for... because I didn't want to do it as a business. I didn't want to get into that. I, you know, in charge people and have to income tax and all that stuff. So I just, I volunteered to do it for the society if they would donate money. So...

Sharon Smith: Okay.

Donna Niemeier: And I think they're doing the inventory, the inventory needed to be redone because there's lots of houses now that fit into the criteria is 100 years. And there were when they did. I can't remember when they did the inventory. I think they did it in the 70s or 80s. And so there were a lot of houses that were available. That's why, uh, Jim wanted to have the interns go and and help do the, you know, walk and find new houses and new developments and stuff that needed to be included in the inventory, because there are lots of places in La Mesa that can now be landmarked. Um, yeah.

Sharon Smith: Hmm.... Did they do a ...when they were walking around doing that, ...did they do a photographic?

Donna Niemeier: They do and there you go with they do they do it all with the little digital cameras and all this stuff and they take pictures. I'm not into that.

Sharon Smith: That's interesting, because I. I did it in Sherman Heights, and one of the things that I had to do was take somebody else's work and compare the photographs. And I was amazed at all the things that had changed on the houses. And the city realized then they had a really bad problem with their inventory.

Donna Niemeier: And one of the things that while I was on the Preservation Commission at keyed in, something that we started doing was monitoring, um, the houses that were already landmarked and making sure that they were being up, kept up because they get a third to a half off on their taxes if it's landmarked. And so we wanted to make sure that if so, that they could use that money to keep the houses up, as is the premise of doing that. So we wanted to make sure that they were actually keeping that. And there were a number of houses that we, that we put into, I don't know, turned into the planning commission and stuff for the planning department.

Sharon Smith: Busted them.

Donna Niemeyer: Yeah. Busted them because they were not keeping them up and they were not using the money to do it. And once they were landmarked, they were supposed to be they were supposed to be keeping up the houses. And they when they you you, um, present your document, you put a list of things that you want to do, the improvements you want to do on the house or things that you plan on doing. And so no one was monitoring that to see if they were actually doing it. You know, you have five years to do this, but no one was taking care of it. So that was one of the things that we started doing, um, as a commission. Um, while I was on the, on the in on the, on the commission.

Sharon Smith: Um. That same question related that, you know, the challenges and successes that you feel like you had specifically to that your time during that on your on the board, if you could embellish on that. Oh.

Donna Niemeier: I think I've kind of done everything. I think I, um. I think making sure the collections, the pictures, we did a lot of work with, the pictures I did the the collection of pictures, um.

Sharon Smith: With the Historic Preservation Commission?.

Donna Niemeier: Oh, the Preservation Commission. As I said, we didn't we kind of just waited for the city to give us. And the city was actually giving us more direction. Uh, we had a president, but it was kind of pseudo president. Allison Kennard is the one that that helped us with this. But I said I think the include in in starting to improve the inventory

and change the inventory was very important. Um, one of the things that we did, we had, I think that was through the Preservation Commission, Collier Park is the first park that was there in the spring House. And, um, we started that, um, the improvements and the money for that. Um. Yvonne was doing that. I think Garrett was at Yvonne Garrett was helping us get the monies and grants to do that. So I think the Preservation Commission was trying to get that park upgraded, and they're doing it's going to be another five years. I went over there the other day and I thought, my goodness, if you changed the road and it's all blocked off and there's a great big apartment building or something that's up there that I had to realize that how how much that area had changed. And there it looks pretty good. It was kind of dumpy. And there were, um, a lot of homeless people that were living in the back corners of that park and the, the, the area, the people who lived there were not really, uh, liked the park being there. And because it wasn't being supervised and it was kind of down the hill or something, and the police couldn't see what was going on. So I think that was one thing. And as I said, and the inventory. Okay.

Sharon Smith: Okay...So now that kind of is a good segue into how you've seen La Mesa change.

Donna Niemeier: La Mesa change. Well, let's see, in 1964, I didn't live in la mesa, but I was living in San Diego by San Diego State, and I was going to I was working at Highlands Elementary School, and I'd go through La Mesa every day. I'd drive through La Mesa. There was no trolley, there was no traffic. I never had to stop. There was no problem getting on the freeway. Um, and then when I moved over to my condo, I did the same thing. I was working, I lived in the condo, and then I would go over the hill and the Mount Helix to.... I was working at Murdoch at that time, so I was driving over the top of helix every day, and there was no traffic and there was no....I think that's the biggest thing, the biggest change. And I the feeling of the city, I don't think has changed that much. I think people take pride and I hope that's partly because of the history of, of the city. I think historic history, if people know their history, they know the history of their community, they know the history of their family. They have a community. It helps with the community feel and it helps people understand and have a of what's going on. I think it's important to have that history, and I still have the feeling that la mesa is that way. I like living in la mesa because of that, because, you know, people, I can walk down the street and I know people, I go to this restaurants, I know people, um, uh, even

though it's, it, it has a big city feel and I think but that's that hasn't changed. But I think just the traffic and the buildings, I mean, the high rises and stuff that are going and a lot of the stuff that's being built now. Um, yeah. I'm not sure what's going on there with the old police department. What they're doing.

Sharon Smith: The old police department...?

Donna Niemeier: It's there by the La Mesa/Spring Valley School District building, the high rise that's there. I mean, it's right. It's across the street from the from City Hall.

Sharon Smith: Oh that's right.

Donna Niemeier: That's where the police department was.

Sharon Smith: It was.

Donna Neimeier: Yes. And what I don't know how big I haven't stopped to see how big that how big I haven't I'm not involved. Jim always used to keep us in track of where the building was, of how big a building they're going to put there.

Sharon Smith: They're going up to three stories in a lot of places, which is going to be very different.

Donna Niemeier: Yeah, yeah.

Sharon Smith: Particularly where the Lambert building, um, the one that burned down during the

Donna Niemeier: Are they going to put a three story building in there? I love that building.

Sharon Smith: I know

Donna Niemeier: **That** was it was one of our historic buildings. So I think that I don't know just a number of people but that's everywhere.

Sharon Smith: Mhm. Some more traffic.

Donna Niemeier: Yeah. More traffic, more people. People in a hurry. People being rude. I'm sorry.

Sharon Smith: That's okay.

Donna Niemeier: The old lady's talking.

Sharon Smith: Oh so I along with that question you know, what changes have you been seeing either through personal or work life. And I think I feel like you've covered what you wanted to..

Donna Niemeier: Yes, I Think I have.

Sharon Smith: Okay. Yeah. So I guess is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to make sure is recorded and documented and.

Donna Niemeier: No, no, no...When I went back through, I went back through some of my stuff just to see. I didn't realize how much I had done, actually. How many things like that. Gordon. How much Gordon. And I did in the time that we worked together. And Jim kind of took over after Gordon, um, passed. And so, um, and I think Jim's done an excellent job of, um, continuing and getting new board members in, you know, and making sure and, and I just, um, the archival stuff, the research center amazes me when I think about what it started out with and with what's happened in the last 20 years. And that isn't all me. I mean, I start I know I started it, but I didn't finish it. I mean, Jim, what he brings in, the information he brings in and the stuff that he brings in, um, for people to do research, it's it's absolutely fantastic. The, the old newspapers and, you know, the old newspapers. I were at the El Cajon library. That was one of the things Gordon got with Bob Dugan, who got the machine to look at the they were on those microfilms and all those microfilms and those we had the original newspapers, but they're falling apart. And so all that microfilm that came was, was somehow and they ran out of machines. They didn't have any machines to run them anymore. And so they weren't being used. So Gordon petitioned somehow to get those back, to get them back

into la mesa. And Bob Dugan bought our first machine so that we could have that as a research tool.

Sharon Smith: Hmm.

Donna Niemeier: I've forgotten that. And they're amazing. The information they have, they're fun.

Sharon Smith: Yeah.

Donna Niemeier: I don't know when we lost that. You know, for people to know who had Thanksgiving dinner, with whom and Who was...Whose relatives came for the weekend. And I mean, it was it's really fun to read them, to read that stuff. I mean, especially when I was doing the research for the houses. Yeah. And the people that lived in the houses, it's really fun to do those. Yeah. So. I don't think there's anything else.

Sharon Smith: No. Well, I appreciate your time. And, uh, it sounds like you have left a tremendous legacy behind. Well, with all your work with the I, the History Center, and.

Donna Niemeier: I enjoyed doing it, I really did. And as I said, when I got to the point where it was, I couldn't do it anymore. It was, it was it was a good break. It was a good time to kind of say. And got a good crew, a good group and had 60, 71 people volunteered for the home tour this year.

Sharon Smith: Mhm.

Donna Niemeier: Yeah. Gordon started those and I did it. I ran those for a couple of years too after Gordon. Gordon was when that started that and we did those together for a number of years. And then when he was sick ...he had his heart surgery that year, I ended up taking over and being in charge of it for a couple of years. And then, um. Uh, Pat Stromberg and Linda Rankin took it over for a couple of years. And then, uh, D'Angelo, when he was president, took over. So, um. It's...And I'm glad to see that it's continuing. Yeah. It's hard to get the houses sometimes. Yeah.

Sharon Smith: Yeah I know it's a highlight for some people...

Donna Niemeier: Right.

Sharon Smith: Yeah, well, I appreciate your time. And we will get a written transcript and let you take a look at it. And if if you find that you've forgotten something that you'd like to add in, we we can we can do that.

Donna Niemeier: And and that's going to be the hard part. See that's where it broke down before ...when we started this was doing the transcripts.

Sharon Smith: Oh yeah. Now we have electronics that can help.

Donna Niemeier: Electronics that can help you. That kind of where it was. Where? Sharon, um. Can't think of her last name. Was doing those. She started doing those when she retired. And she broke ... She did about three and did the interviews. But then could getting the next part done was was where it broke down.

Sharon Smith: I can't imagine doing it without the electronics. Yeah.

Dave Kesner: Could I ask a few things?

Sharon Smith: Sure.

Dave Kesner: Yeah. This doesn't have to be on the final record. No. Um, I wanted to get a sense of looking back at the early days of the collection. What do you feel was the focus of it? Was it on photos, documents, film strips that families would donate sound recordings.

Donna Niemeier: Objects and photographs? Okay, so and all those objects that were in there were we put we got the archival boxes. That was the other thing with the archives that I did get the archival boxes to get them stored correctly, but that is not the emphasis now. The emphasis now is paper. Um, it's to get information. So people have the have the paper. And that's what Jim has done. But originally it was the they turned

in a lot of photographs and they turned in material, some materials, some books, some things. Um, not I don't think. No, it was it was just. And then the objects.

Dave Kesner: So were the photos annotated at all? So you could say this was this person the vice mayor at the time.

Donna Niemeier: Yes they are or they were. Yes. Pat. Pat Kettler did the photographs from the beginning and she had them all. She got information about them. So the families that would donate, she would get information about the photographs of where they were taken and so on. The photographs it has, they are listed as to where they were taken and who who donated them and who were in a lot of time, who's in them. Um, the problem was that she would just put it in an envelope, I mean, in a folder with that person's, the person who donated it. And so if you wanted a picture, she did do, um, uh, notebooks so that she did Xerox copies and you could go through and you say, okay, I want this picture. Well, then you'd have to go in, okay. Who? And you'd have to go through every one of the ones in order to find it in the file. So what I did, I mean, when I did it, I then I numbered them and put numbers on them and put numbers so that you could you could okay, I want this and you can go find it in the file cabinet.

Dave Kesner: The question I had after that was this... was pre database? Pre spreadsheet?

Donna Niemeier: Yes.

Dave Kesner: Curious what your early cataloging methods were.

Donna Neimeier: It was it's in a file cabinet. And the person said I want it. And you say okay I'll, I'll look for it in the next week and come back tomorrow or come back next week and I'll have it for you.

Dave Kesner: So because you ascension by date or ...

Donna Niemeier: It was by date and yes. Okay. Right. So you would like if it came in today, it would be and it was the end of the year. So it would be 2023. And this is the 15th collection of pictures, 15th collection of pictures we had for that year. So it would

be 2000. And so you would have to go through the whole file to find them. It took forever to find pictures, and that was one of the first things. It took probably six months with a dose with a volunteer who came in, a young man who worked, who was in high school at that time, sat there and and put them in order and numbered them and put them in so that we could we could find them with that easily.

Dave Kesner: Very kind.

Donna Niemeier: And that was before computer, before we did the computers.

Dave Kesner: Okay. Then another little tangent going the other way. I think you mentioned that you came to La Mesa around 64.

Donna Niemeier: I graduated from college in 1964 and was working for the La Mesa/Spring Valley School District. I did not buy property here until the 70s.

Dave Kesner: Yeah, but you were familiar with.

Donna Niemeier: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dave Kesner: So I'm just wondering if you could sort of paint us a little visual picture, walk us down La Mesa Boulevard. And I remember there was still Rexall Drugs way back when La Mesa furniture was on the corner. The spring.....

Donna Niemeier: Right. They had a there was a yardage shop there on the boulevard. There was a Palermo's Pizza Parlor. There was the drugstore there forever. Forever. And it was still there. Not too many restaurants, I think, have a lot more restaurants now.

Dave Kesner: Um, still a lot of antique stores back then?

Donna Niemeier: No, no. No, that came later. Yeah. Not too many. It was. It was, um, just like an old Midwest town that had, you know, two drugstores and a and a, um, I, I service stations. There were like, three service stations.

Dave Kesner: Sure.

Donna Niemeier: One down by where the well, Sheldon's is. And they had this a restaurant now, and there was one on the corner, um. Across from those (Note: could not make out wording)

Dave Kesner: Yeah, yeah, there.

Donna Niemeier: Was one next to, uh, standard. Standard brand paint store was right down here. There was a Mexican restaurant over there instead of the mortuary.

Dave Kesner: Right? Yes. Do you remember ... maybe taking your classes on any field trips in La Mesa or go to the train depot?

Donna Niemeier: . **No.** We did. I developed educational stuff. And we did field trips when I was a docent. We'd have the kids come from La Mesa and Lemon Avenue and come over and walk down the boulevard. And Gordon did a downtown Then and Now book tour that we used for stuff. But no, I didn't we we'd do the zoo and, and uh, sure went further afield than La Mesa

Dave Kesner: And Art Madrid came in as mayor. What I think in the oh, God, late 70s, early 80s. I know he was here a long time.

Donna Niemeier: I wasn't I wasn't really political at that time. I didn't I was just trying to make a living. Sure. But I remember seeing there people don't believe this. I was so excited to get my first paycheck. First year I worked for la mesa Spring Valley School District \$5,400 a year. I got I got \$50, 500, I mean five, I got \$500 a month. I was so excited. I had so much money. And I looked now and think, and if I, if I had, uh, \$5, I could get fill my tank gas, fill my car, take me \$5.

Steven Churchill: Yeah, sure. Following up on, um, you know, back where the current La Mesa Spring shopping center is, it used to be the Helix Theater.

Donna Niemeier: Yes.

Steven Churchill: Tell us your experience there. Maybe things you enjoyed about that. Any movies you remember from that time?

Donna Niemeier: I never went, I went, I didn't we didn't do theater stuff, didn't do movies, you know? You know, it was still there.

Dave Kesner: But you were here before Grossmont Center was built, I assume. Okay.

Donna Niemeier: Yes.

Dave Kesner: Do you remember what was on that plot of land back then or.

Donna Niemeier: I don't remember. Yeah, I'm sure we could find out. No. Um, I when I was in college. College Grove was was built the first shopping center, right? Yeah. That was exciting.

Dave Kesner: Grossmont hospital was just a small regional hospital, right? Yes.

Donna Niemeier: Yeah, yeah.

Dave Kesner: Interesting. And fewer traffic lights and stop signs and people.

Donna Niemeier: Yes, yes, I see, that's what I remember. I remember driving through. I don't know that I ever did that much in la mesa.

Dave Kesner: And there was still, I understand some homes had horses even that they were places that people had, like small stables.

Donna Niemeier: There was a in El Cajon Boulevard not too far from here. There was a like a, um, park for people. Kids had rides and stuff in it too. Yes. And the horses I don't I don't remember the horses too much in La Mesa, but but Lemon Grove had still had horses in, in. Yeah. And I don't know that I was ...I wasn't that interested in what the school district is, what I. Yeah.

Sharon Smith: Murdoch the, the that elementary school must not have had as many houses around it. No.

Donna Niemeier: No, it was built in the 70s. I was I was a teacher there when it opened. I was one of the teachers that when it was open space at that time didn't have walls between the building, between the classes. They built up the walls now. So they stopped that. But it was a new innovative open space school. Very good team teaching.

Steven Churchill: Do you have follow up questions? I think I think Grossmont Center was built in the early 60s. I think it was the second modern mall. You were you lived closer there in the 70s. Did you. Was that something you'd hang out in?

Donna Niemeier: Grossmont was built in 61, 61? No, it was kind of a. Yeah.

Steven Churchill: And one of the things that I noticed is that it was built along with the Civic Center in that period, like the sort of mid-century modern style architecture. Did that interest you at all, or do you notice that? No thoughts about it?.

Donna Niemeier: I never you know, I at that point I was doing family history rather than history of and, um, didn't really get into, uh, the La Mesa history until I became active as a member of the. I just it was.

David Kesner: Okay. Thank you for your contributions. You've done amazing work over the years and as Sharon said... had quite a legacy.

Donna Niemeier: Well, it's important. I'm. I was glad to do it, I really was, and I didn't do it because I wanted accolades. I just did it because it was something I got interested in and wanted to do. I've done my family. See those notebooks over there above my TV? Yeah, that's family history. Wow. That's my ancestry and my family history that my mother and I have done for years. And nobody wants them.

Dave Kesner: Oh, you know....It's hard.

Donna Niemeier: I don't have children of my own, and nieces and nephews aren't quite there yet as to.

Sharon Smith: Well...they might be..

Donna Niemeier: Eventually I'm donating them or they're they're in my will to go to one of the nephews, whether he wants them.

Dave Kesner: If you scan them, they may say, fine.

Donna Niemeier: Well, and I am...I am putting the basics into Ancestry.com. That's that's what I've been doing since COVID.. And when I was here at home with my husband, um, and not doing much else, um, I was doing the computer. So I'm getting the basics in so that people will have it so that it's, it's on it's in ancestry. They've got about 200 and whatever people in already.

Steven Churchill: So that's maybe a final question. Did you have somebody that inspired you to be interested in history? What got you interested in history?

Donna Niemeier: I'm the one in the family who probably, I would say my grandparents, my grand, my maternal grandparents are from Oregon, and we would spend summers with them in a cabin in a house that had no plumbing and no electricity. And, um, my grandmother had, um, a trunk with pictures. And in the evenings she would sit and tell me, this is your uncle. So and so and this is the annual the picnic that we had at such and such. And this is where, you know, and this is the trip we took to and this is these are your. And I would sit there and at the end when she died, that trunk was still with her. And everyone said, well, we don't even know who these pictures who. This is my whole family. And I said, so I know this is so and so. And I said, how do you know? Well, grandma and I would sit there in the evenings with the burning, the lamp burning, because, you know, we had nothing else to do. And, and after we played our games and we she would sit there and tell me what all this stuff is. So I got the trunk and everything else. If it's old, my family gives it to me and I don't know if that's where it started or whether it's just I've had an interest in and they all call, you know, when they have school projects to do, we need to know we're doing this project and we need to know what color eyes uncle So-and-so,,,Had, whatever....and let me go back to his records from his military. And I can, you know, it's there. It's so, uh, it's just something. And there's probably no one else in my family. Just something that would interested me.

Yeah. And I think it's. I really do believe it's important. Yeah. If more people knew history, if more people knew where they came from, they would have more. There'd be more people who were community based who would understand, who would have pride in what they're doing and pride in their family. And we wouldn't have all a lot of the stuff that goes on, the anger and all the the stuff. I had children at La Pressa Elementary School who didn't even know who their grandparents were, and their aunts and uncles. No, uncle so-and-so was not uncle so-and-so. He was the guy that was, you know, sleeping with his mother. You know, that kind of stuff that they don't they didn't have and nobody to help them. If there was a problem, you know, I could still I could there's, you know, four people that I could go live with if I had, if I, if I needed to. And I don't think we have that anymore. Now, you got me off on my tangents.

Sharon Smith: That's okay. That's good.

Dave Kesner: All right.

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