

Interview with

# Sue Russell

conducted by IdaRose Sylvester

for the “Understanding the History of Housing in Mountain View: Stories of Racism, Anti-Discrimination, and Movement towards Inclusion” project by the City of Mountain View’s Human Relations Commission,

in collaboration with Senior Lecturer Michael Kahan and team from Stanford University.

Mountain View Historical Association  
Mountain View Public Library

Conducted on July 7, 2022

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of “Understanding the History of Housing in Mountain View: Stories of Racism, Anti-Discrimination, and Movement towards Inclusion” is to document the history of discrimination and efforts to fight discrimination in housing in the city of Mountain View, California. Some of the information collected was shared with the public at an event sponsored by the Mountain View Human Relations Commission, held on July 26, 2022. In order to make the interviews available to researchers and members of the public, they will be added to the historical collection of the Mountain View Historical Association (MVHA) and/or the Mountain View Public Library (MVPL) and made available for public use. They may also be shared with other libraries and collections, including those at Stanford University.

## BIO

IdaRose Sylvester was an interviewer on this project representing the City of Mountain View Human Relations Commission, as Vice Chair, and the nonprofit Mountain View Historical Association, as board member. She has lived in Mountain View for almost 25 years and works as the executive director of a local nonprofit. She lives in the Varsity Park neighborhood of Mountain View, the development of which played an almost forgotten role in exclusionary zoning practices south of El Camino Real.

## ABSTRACT



Susan (Sue) Russell is a long-time Los Altos resident that has worked on issues of affordable housing for more than a decade. She has done this in Los Altos, Mountain View, and Fremont, both as a volunteer and a lawyer, primarily through the Mid-Peninsula Citizens for Fair Housing (Mid-Pen). Sue started off as a checker for Mid-Pen's cases on housing/renter discrimination, and expanded to doing case work as a lawyer, board member, and then as a volunteer for many city housing projects and coalitions. While she has never lived in Mountain View, she has been a major advocate for affordable housing in Mountain View.

Date of Interview: July 7, 2022

Interviewer: IdaRose Sylvester

Interviewee: Susan (Sue) Russell

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 0:00

Great. Hello. My name is Ida Rose Sylvester, and I'm an interviewer working with the City of Mountain View's Human Relations Commission in partnership with the Mountain View Historical Association and Stanford University on a project entitled Understanding the History of Housing in Mountain View: Stories of Racism Anti-Discrimination and the Movement Towards Inclusion. The purpose of this project is to document the history of discrimination and efforts to fight that discrimination in the City of Mountain View, California. Some of the information collected today will be shared with the public and an event sponsored by the Mountain View Human Relations Commission scheduled for July 26th, 2022. Today is July 7th, 2022, and I'm interviewing Sue Russell. Because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we're conducting this interview via zoom recording technology from our own residences. Sue, thank you very much for being here today. I look forward to hearing your story. For the record, can you tell us your name in full?

**Sue Russell:** 1:06

Susan Russell.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 1:08

Where do you currently live?

**Sue Russell:** 1:10

In Los Altos.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 1:12

Great. Have you ever lived in Mountain View?

**Sue Russell:** 1:15

No.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 1:16

But you have worked on behalf of Mountain View housing issues.

**Sue Russell:** 1:20

Right.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 1:21

Do you know approximately how many years?

**Sue Russell:** 1:30

Probably somewhere like 12 or 13 years, but it was through Mid-Peninsula Citizens for Fair Housing<sup>1</sup>. So Mountain View was one of the cities that Mid-Peninsula served. During those years I acted initially as a checker or a tester, whatever you want to say. And I don't know if you want me to explain that or not.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 1:59

Actually, I would love to hear it explained, for the audience listening to us.

**Sue Russell:** 2:04

Obviously, I'm a white woman and what happened is, someone would complain that they thought they were discriminated against. In order to prove this, the courts have said that this is a legitimate way to do this. It's the fact that you're misrepresenting who you are, there's nothing wrong with that. What would happen is, a Black tenant would go [and try and rent an apartment and] a Black checker [would go] after the complainant had contacted Mid-Peninsula, so a Black checker would go and try to rent an apartment. Very typically that person was told that it was already rented. Then I would follow maybe 15 minutes later, very closely. You know, not the minute they walked out the door, but very closely. Then I would typically be offered the apartment. So once Mid Peninsula had that information, they were actually able to make a case out of it. So I was going to law school when I first moved here. I was interested in this issue, so I acted as a checker. Then at some point, I joined the Mid-Peninsula board, and then once I passed the bar in 1979, I also acted as a lawyer for Mid-Pen clients. So the typical pattern was to try to mediate something. The objective was not to sue the landlord but try to just get the tenant the apartment. If that didn't work, then I think the next step was usually to contact the Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH). And if that didn't work, then a lawsuit would be filed. I was probably only involved in a few lawsuits. One that I remember being involved in, in particular, but I cannot remember if it was in Mountain View; that jurisdiction included Palo Alto, Stanford area and more. And I just don't remember which place, but I do remember that it was, Korean owners. I think they were small landlords and they had clearly discriminated against this Black couple because we had the checker's information, and their whole defense really was well we're a minority, of course, we would not discriminate against another minority. They held onto this for a long time. We had depositions and we were ready to go to trial before finally their attorney persuaded them that we had them, we had them cold, and they did settle. As a checker, I remember being involved in one of the Tan apartment complexes, but I honestly can't remember if it's the Americana in Mountain View or if it's in Palo Alto. But I remember going in and the manager took a liking to me, I guess. He said at the end of the day I put a little "W" at the bottom of the application if the person's White, and I put a little "B" if the applicant is Black. And he said, guess what happens to the ones with the "B" they go into the circular barrel [referring to the trash]. But that was kind of an interesting confession.

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<sup>1</sup>A fair housing advocacy organization that has since merged with / been taken over by ECHO Housing in Hayward. This was one of 2 main fair-housing organizations in the Mid-Peninsula area in the 70s and 80s, the other being Project Sentinel. Project Sentinel still exists.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 5:34

It sounded like he made it without any guilt or remorse too,

**Sue Russell:** 5:39

Right, right. That was probably my guess was that was the late seventies or the early eighties. People became much more savvy eventually and didn't make comments like that. Perhaps he was not a very smart manager either, you know? And I mean, sometimes people just think you're going to feel like they are so they feel free to tell you things that they might not say to somebody else - don't ask me why. And then starting in 1982, the California courts decided that you couldn't discriminate against families with children. That became much more common for the caseload, both for checking and for mediation and everything else, because of course, everybody had been discriminating against families with children. And I do remember, I don't know if you want me to name a name, but somebody very prominent in Mountain View, the Avery people, I believe that, yeah, it's Acco management<sup>2</sup>. They have a lot of projects in Mountain View still and they are landlords that are trying to remember out of those, you might know, they have some foundation that I forgot the name of that they're active in. They do give some money to the Housing Industry Foundation<sup>3</sup> maybe. They do give some money. Like when I did the Maryce Freelen project<sup>4</sup>, they gave us a small amount of money. Burt Avery was the father of the ones that are in charge now, very grandfatherly, distinguished looking man, and really very well respected, I would say, like in the Chamber of Commerce, that type of person, but they were discriminating against families with children by their bedroom. You know, how many people could be in a bedroom.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 7:30

Can you explain a little bit more?

**Sue Russell:** 7:32

I think that each person had to have their own bedroom, but I might be wrong about that, it might've been that each person had to have their own bedroom, but you can have one extra person. There wasn't any clear case law as to how many people you had to allow in a bedroom. I believe that's one that Mid-Peninsula took to court, but it wasn't me that took it to court. But I think they took them to court on that one. It was eventually resolved that they followed sort of the HUD<sup>5</sup> standard of two persons per bedroom, plus one as sort of a safe harbor. But in the very

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<sup>2</sup> From Sue: "Burt Avery founded Acco Management Company, which manages many apartment complexes in MV. Burt I believe also founded Avery Construction Co., which I think built many of their apartment complexes. His sons are now active in the business."

<sup>3</sup> From <https://www.hifinfo.org/about/>: The Housing Industry Foundation's (HIF) mission is to help individuals and families remain in or return to stable housing through our Homeless Prevention Programs including emergency assistance grants, shelter renovations and affordable housing initiatives.

<sup>4</sup> From Sue: Maryce Freelen Place is an all-affordable rehab project developed by Midpeninsula Housing Coalition. It's named for a Councilmember who died shortly after she voted to approve funding for the project. I was the project developer for Midpen.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

beginning there was no clear standard, it wasn't clear what it was, but anyway, that became a lot of the cases because it was so prevalent as no one practically had been renting to families with children.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 8:20

What, why the bias? I think a lot of us now, it's very familiar to us. Why would, why would landlords be so opposed to renting to children, to people with children?

**Sue Russell:** 8:31

I suppose they thought they were noisy. They might do more damage if they were older children. I don't think there were a lot of drugs around them, but maybe they thought they might be drinking beer or hanging out with their friends. They brought up other issues like pool safety. This was going to be a liability issue. You know, my recollection is hazy, but I think a few of them even closed their pools down because they were not allowed to let only adults go in the pool; they couldn't have a rule like that. They didn't have facilities for children, which I don't believe were required, but they did not have playgrounds and stuff like that. Because the places weren't built for, I mean, there were some places that were, but there were many, many places that did not allow children. That became a very, very common kind of discrimination.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 9:29

How long did that discrimination against families with kids continue after 1982, that you know about?

**Sue Russell:** 9:37

I honestly can't remember. I ended up [not working with Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing] in about 1990. I left and went to Mid-Peninsula Housing Coalition<sup>6</sup>; stuck on the Mid-Peninsula name. I had found, in a lot of the legal work that I was doing, I found that the landlords would hire an insurance defense attorney and they get paid by the hour. So you could show them that you had these checker testimonies that were totally clear that their client had discriminated, but they got paid by the hour. They would drag it [the case] out with depositions. Then I would send them what's called interrogatories to answer. They wouldn't really answer them. Then the burden is on me to take them to court and show how they hadn't answered them. I was a sole practitioner. It was very frustrating. They were usually working for large [law] firms and I became very frustrated with what I thought was justice, which is why I had gone to law school. To try to do some justice. At that point, I began to think that affordable housing for my clients was more important - that they could find affordable housing - than to maybe get a settlement that might be helpful for them for short amount of time, but it wasn't an enormous amount of money and it would help more people to do affordable housing. You know, I believe that the discrimination against children was still happening when I left, but you know, in 1990, but I don't know how much longer than that it continued. Anyway, I left and I decided to work to

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<sup>6</sup> Nonprofit Housing Developer that Sue went to work for in the 1990s.

try and build affordable housing, 'cause it seemed like it, seemed like there was a big need for the type of clients that I was representing.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 11:38

Sue, tell me how you see affordable housing supporting the type of diversity that we're talking about. How does affordable housing prevent the discrimination that we're talking about?

**Sue Russell:** 11:57

Well, first of all, I mean at that time in particular, it was basically nonprofits that were doing all the affordable housing. Now a lot of the for-profits have gotten into it also, but at that time it was nonprofits. And I would say they were all mission driven and did not discriminate. I mean they all wanted the diversity. There was no question of any discrimination. Very soon we found we had to do lotteries, in the very beginning, people would line up and we decided actually that was a form of discrimination in and of itself, because some people were not able to line up early in the morning or wherever, whenever it would be. It seemed fairer to do the lottery. And so when you do a lottery, there's no discrimination. Then the other thing that I found that I liked, one of my projects in Mountain View was Maryce Freelen Place. The way we managed that project was we did one building at a time. We basically were able to persuade people who were above the income where they could take advantage of the affordable housing that they would have to pay high rents in other words, because they would not qualify [for the lower rents]. We were able to pay them a small amount and persuade them that they might rather not be there doing the construction. What that allowed us to do was to empty out one building at a time and keep the same tenants. Basically, it was almost 100%, a Latino project when we took it over. It continued to be almost a 100% Latino project.

And the other projects that I worked a lot in Santa Clara County, Santa Cruz County, and on a few projects that were farm worker projects. Those were 100% Latinos, also. Then even a project I worked on in Soquel, probably just because of, you know, you had to be lower income to apply. We got mostly Latinos there also because it was a heavily Latino area. So, on the lower-income scale, there would be more people who were lower, who were Latino. So I felt it was diverse both by being non-discriminatory, and a lot of times where we were doing our work. And then I also worked on some HUD projects, like for developmentally disabled and chronically mentally ill. So those projects are diverse in that sense, you know.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 14:45

Actually I would love to hear more about the projects for the, I believe you said mentally and physically disabled, or did I mishear?

**Sue Russell:** 14:53

No, mine were developmentally and chronically mentally ill.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 14:59

Oh, I would love to hear more about those projects. I've had nobody else bring those types of



projects up. So I'm very, very curious. How did they come about who inspired the projects? What kind of pushback or support did you get? Who else did you work with? I would love to hear more about those.

**Sue Russell:** 15:19

Okay. Well, the chronically mentally ill one was interesting because we were approached by someone on the Board of Supervisors in San Mateo County. This was actually a project in Colma. It was interesting. That was the time actually when Anna Eshoo<sup>7</sup> was on the Board of Supervisors; the Board of Supervisors was totally unanimously and supportive of this project, which was in unincorporated San Mateo County. So they urged us not to do a lot of public outreach, which is what we normally did. We usually did a lot of community meetings to try to persuade people that this project is going to be fine and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera; they basically opted for us not to do this, whether that was the right decision or not, that was their direction. We were working with the San Mateo County Health Department, which had a very good mental health division, I think still does maybe better than Santa Clara, and they were going to do the services. Well, it turns out that our location was directly across the street from a Catholic school. The nun decided that - the principal, who was a nun, decided that she was totally opposed to the project. When we went to the Board of Supervisors hearing, when they were to approve the project, she took the entire student body out of class and they sat in the audience and they objected to the project. I don't know if, you probably haven't heard of Mike Nevin<sup>8</sup>, but he was the chair. I think he was the chair, but he was also from that area. We had talked to him about it before, and he basically just dressed her down and said how unsympathetic et cetera. We tried to talk to her. She built a higher fence around her property around the school. Eventually one of our staff was able to talk to her and found out that she had a chronically, mentally ill brother, if I remember right, who actually was somewhat violent. We had committed to the fact that these people who were chronically mentally ill were able to live on their own with some help with a staff person at the site and getting some services and that there weren't going to be people [who were violent]. We actually even committed that they weren't going, if I remember right, they were not going to be a dual diagnosis, meaning alcoholism or something else. To some extent, it was like the cream of the crop of the chronically mentally ill, but they needed a home also. It worked out fine in the end, but it was, that was probably the ugliest situation I was in because I've been involved in several developmentally disabled projects where, typically with developmentally disabled, the community says there, but for the grace of God go, I, or one of my children, and you typically don't have issues of, some of the main issues you have with other affordable housing are parking and schools. You don't have those issues with developmentally disabled because you can have a minimum amount of parking and they accept that that's going to work, and they're mostly not going they've mostly gone through school and they're not having children who are going to school, you know? So you get rid of those issues

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. representative from California's 18th congressional district

<sup>8</sup> Was on the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors and represented the Colma Area.

and there's typically a lot of sympathy for those problems I'd say. The one I did, the one I worked on in Palo Alto, actually, was where I got to know Joe Simitian. So that one was actually initiated by a group of parents in Palo Alto who had also gotten to know Joe back when he was on the school board. He, if I remember, he was just going onto the Board of Supervisors, but he was able to work with us to get a site that the county owned, near the corner of Oregon and Ash [streets] in Palo Alto. It was very helpful, but he lent his support and worked with us, and the parents were wonderful. They knew that it was going to be a lottery. And, typically, with these lotteries first, if you live or work in the community you go to the top of the list, but a couple of the parents who were the hardest working out of maybe six parents, there were groups of parents that their kids didn't get in. That was it. But they were, they understood from the beginning, and they worked really hard for it. That was a really good feeling project, I guess.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 20:15

Oh, wow. Oh my gosh. I feel you could tell me about a lot more projects too.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 20:23

And I actually, if you do have other projects, especially Santa Clara County and especially Mountain View, I would love to hear about them. Or otherwise, broader.

**Sue Russell:** 20:36

You know, the only other project I was tangentially involved in that I can think of right off the bat in Mountain View was Ginzton Terrace<sup>9</sup>. I think at that point, but this might be wrong. I think at that point, there already had been a lot of Russians getting into Mid-Pen projects. You may have heard about some of this in the past, and it's this issue. I forget the person who owns the Ginzton.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 21:03

Oh, right. Right.

**Sue Russell:** 21:05

He was very outspoken about this. I think he wanted his parents in the senior project if I remember right. It was an issue of how long you've lived in Mountain View. At that point, I think maybe it was six months or something, but what happened is the Jewish Community Center was very organized with these people, in terms of getting them to do the applications. Basically they, swarm probably isn't the right word, but they had a lot of people in the lottery. So they won a lot of the lottery and then it became a difficult issue because they used to like to watch TV fairly loudly in the middle of the night, because that's when they could watch the Russian TV. It also became a tipping point issue, which could, if you have so many Russians and they're speaking Russian all the time, then some other people maybe didn't want to live there. It was nothing we could do anything about, except, I mean, actually what we did do after that, in some other projects, when we felt that something like that was happening is we went like

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<sup>9</sup>Ginzton Terrace is a complex with affordable housing for seniors on Oaktree Drive, Mountain View

to other church communities and stuff and tried to get applications from other groups so that the lottery would be made up of a very diverse group rather than one particular group getting all of their people onto the list, if you follow.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 22:33

Yeah, I do. It's interesting because we talk about diversity on the surface you say, well Russian immigrants are obviously part of the diversity of our area. but I see what you're saying, right. If, if projects become exclusively one group or another who regardless, who's being excluded. Right.

**Sue Russell:** 22:56

Yeah.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 22:57

Actually maybe you have some thoughts about senior housing and accessibility, especially in the city of Mountain View. I know, well, a little bit before you, before your time, there were so many condo conversions in Mountain View that wound up erasing a lot of housing where seniors lived. Do you have any thoughts about inclusion of seniors in Mountain View housing in general as a subgroup, because it's a group that doesn't get talked about, I think nearly enough.

**Sue Russell:** 23:32

Well, I mean, I haven't looked at the numbers lately and you probably have, but a few years ago, Mountain View had an awful lot of senior housing compared to other affordable housing. It was kind of overweighted I thought was senior housing. That doesn't mean there's not a big need for senior housing,

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 23:51

A growing one!

**Sue Russell:** 23:53

What?

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 23:53

A growing one, for sure. Right?

**Sue Russell:** 23:55

Yeah. But at the time I thought that there was more of a need and I thought they've said that lately too, for some larger family units, and I know that when we did Maryce Freelen Place, that was actually in a response to the city doing an RFP [Request for Proposals]; in particular, they wanted to find an existing complex that could be rehabbed. There was a man who worked for the city then that had a job that I don't think anyone has anymore. His name was Jim Lynch<sup>10</sup>. He

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<sup>10</sup> From Joan: "Staff person for the City of Mountain View and had a title related to neighborhood services, but I don't remember the title and he retired long ago."

was wonderful. His job was to sort of help people like [Midpen Housing] us. I don't know what was the title of his job. But he looked around to the different apartment complexes to see which ones maybe needed rehab. This particular one that we took over, it had a name. I can't remember. I think it was called "The Cut". Three apartment complexes came together and they felt that that was where a lot of the drug deals were going down in Mountain View. It was also extremely overcrowded, like there might be 17, 18 people living in a three-bedroom unit, but the reason he selected it was because it had a lot of three-bedroom units and they also wanted us to choose one in that sort of Latham, California Avenue, Rengstorff area, maybe, in sort of a band where there were a lot of apartment complexes. He felt that by upgrading the city, felt that by upgrading one [complex], it might encourage people to do some others. Actually, the one that was behind us, I think it's still maybe called The Palms on California, someone bought that and upgraded it also. But, anyway, yeah, it was a pretty disgusting complex when we took it over, to be honest, there were maybe three refrigerators in one apartment, each one with a lock on it and children were sleeping in closets. Meanwhile, the person who was the managing general partner, whose name I won't say, who lives in Los Altos, was making bundles of money.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 25:56

This is really interesting to me. We sort of discrimination that I get, I'm trying to figure out how to categorize. Maybe people wouldn't think of as necessarily it's discrimination, but landlords who let their properties run down, who don't have, oh gosh, that's worse than rundown right now. Do you have more examples that you could talk about? I'm very curious, because something we talked about in Mountain View is some, especially in the area you're talking about, there is significant overcrowding. What can you tell me about that today? What do you think is happening today?

**Sue Russell:** 26:33

You probably know more about it than I do today. I mean, I'm sure that it's overcrowded. I have some mentees through the MTC<sup>11</sup> and through AVID<sup>12</sup> and a number of my mentees talk about families doubling up and that sort of thing, especially during COVID when people lost jobs and stuff. I think it's just an ongoing problem, and then when rents went up, even before COVID and before rent control, when rents went up and people had jobs or had kids in school here, they either moved into RVs or moved away or doubled up. I think it's a real problem.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 27:17

Interesting. I'm trying to think of a way to frame a question about that sort of evolution of people

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<sup>11</sup> Mentor Tutor Connection

<sup>12</sup> From California Department of Education Website: "Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is an in-school academic support program for grades seven through twelve. The purpose of the program is to prepare students for college eligibility and success. AVID places academically average students in advanced classes; levels the playing field for minority, rural, low-income, and other students without a college-going tradition in their families; and targets students in the academic middle--B, C, and even D students--who have the desire to go to college and the willingness to work hard".

when rents go up, what happens to them in Mountain View? You know, they start doubling up, they move away or they move into a vehicle. Seems like what you're saying. If people want to stay here for jobs or other reasons, school, family, they need to make some pretty drastic choices.

**Sue Russell:** 27:41

Right.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 27:42

Interesting. Well, if you have other stories about other developments you've worked on, that'd be great. If not, I have some questions about what you think Mountain View should be doing now too. I think you're giving some hints about what Mountain View should do now to improve inclusion, diversity, and stop discrimination against families and discrimination defined very broadly.

**Sue Russell:** 28:08

Well, I can tell you one other story. I would only say that when I was working at Mid-Peninsula, we did a lot of projects in Mountain View, but a lot of them were seniors and people don't usually object to senior housing very much. Okay. But at the same time, Mountain View was generally welcoming as a city council. You know, the neighbors, it was generally very positive, but I worked a little bit on a project in Fremont. And Carol Lamont might mention it because she was working for the city of Fremont at the time. So, we were getting the property from a group of sisters (nuns) and they stuck with us for, I think, four or five years because we had to sue the city. I think that's when Carol left the city, as a result of that. But I remember going to the old Mission church<sup>13</sup> and people standing up in that church and saying, if you can't afford the prices in the mission district in Fremont, then you don't belong here. It was just very, very blatant economic, but also racist comments that people felt free to make. That was one of the worst meetings I was ever at. Nothing like that ever happened in Mountain View. [laughs]

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 29:26

I guess we'll call that a good thing.

**Sue Russell:** 29:29

Yeah. Yeah.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 29:30

You know, it goes back to the question of what does discrimination look like in the city of Mountain View today and how has that changed? Are things better and what can Mountain View do better going forward?

**Sue Russell:** 29:46

Well, I mean, I know from talking to some mentees that they still think that there is discrimination against them because they're Latino, but it's hard to tell and you see what's

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<sup>13</sup> Mission San Jose in Fremont, CA

happened is people don't openly say anything anymore. So, I mean, I can't give you concrete examples to prove anything like that. I mean, I know one telling me that her family felt that the rent was raised on them, and it wasn't raised on someone else, but, it's hard to prove that because they're not organized usually to talk to other tenants. I don't know. I mean, I think it's great that I think the HRC is great and it's a great resource and they have great staff and so, I mean, I find if I have someone that has a complaint, I tell them to contact the or to contact someone like Micaela<sup>14</sup>, because I think she's wonderful and responsive. I think one of the things that could be improved that I think they've been talking about, but one of those that I think has always been bad is that for the actual affordable housing developments, you have to apply at each project when they have an opening instead of having one universal application and the applications aren't necessarily that simple. I think that that's a real, you know, you wouldn't call it discriminatory necessarily, but if English is your second language, it's a real barrier, for that. So I wish that process would be made simpler. I know we've talked to [Mountain View City Staffer] Wayne Chen a little bit about the DAHLIA<sup>15</sup> system that they have in San Francisco, but I guess it's expensive to do it. But I feel like that system could be improved and it would help a lot.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 31:42

Hmm.

**Sue Russell:** 31:46

I don't know what else, because I feel like Mountain View, there's a lot of resources. The problem is a lot of these people don't know them, but they're still our resources. I think they find through their churches and Cafecito and you know, more resources than in some other communities. I don't really know. I feel like the city tries to do a lot.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 32:12

I see your point. I'm going to ask you a question that may not be very fair, so you could start to answer it. I know you live in Los Altos. How is Los Altos different? I'll try not to pack judgment into that question, but I think there's this understanding that Los Altos is very, very different. We share significant portions of our borders and even some schools. Tell me more.

**Sue Russell:** 32:46

If I were doing it over again, I would probably not choose to live in Los Altos, but when we moved here, my children were in school and I was going to law school at Stanford and my husband was working nearby and it was important to me... Sounds weird I think, but it was important to me that my kids could ride downtown to go to the dentist on their own and be somewhat independent on their own because they were in the second and fourth grade and they were like latchkey children actually, which was perfectly acceptable in those days.

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<sup>14</sup> From Joan: "Micaela Hellman-Tincher, Housing and Neighborhood Services Manager, City of MV"

<sup>15</sup> DAHLIA is a San Francisco Housing Portal that provides a current listing of affordable housing available in San Francisco; accessible through [housing.sfgov.org](https://housing.sfgov.org).

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 33:24

It certainly was.

**Sue Russell:** 33:26

I wanted to be close to the school and then once we moved here and settled in, I much preferred Mountain View in terms of its downtown and its access to the train and its diversity. But eventually we did enough work on the house and decided that living in Los Altos, there's a place for people who can be outspoken about some of these things. I've just decided to sort of stay here and isn't, I mean, I'm not saying that I'm that effective, but I'm on the steering committee of Los Altos Affordable Housing Advocates<sup>16</sup>. We are speaking up a lot about stuff in Los Altos and I work hard to get the better people elected in Los Altos. Right now we actually have a council that's three-two, pretty good. I think we actually might get a pretty good housing element, fingers crossed. So it's from that perspective that I decided, all right, it's better to stay here. There's not as many kindred spirits in Los Altos, but there are some. So, anyway, it's been....

I wouldn't want to say Los Altos is getting any better, but we are building more apartments finally on El Camino and we have our first affordable housing development, at Distel Circle [street], all affordable. And we're talking in the housing element about having at least one downtown parking plaza be dedicated to affordable housing projects. It's very slow. You know, through my work in the League of Women Voters<sup>17</sup>, because when I retired, in the early 2000, I became the chair of the League of Women Voters' affordable housing committee, and started being active. Most of our stuff and activities have been around Mountain View because there's a lot going on, but we've tried to be diligent about pressuring Los Altos. We also cover Los Altos Hills, and we really haven't done much of anything in Los Altos Hills since we don't have anyone on our committee in Los Altos Hills. We haven't found much receptivity to anything like that, but anyway, I'm here and I feel like maybe the diversity in Los Altos is minimal. We have a lot of Southeast Asian population and Chinese, but it's mostly it's not socioeconomic diversity,

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 36:26

A very good point. A few people I've interviewed have talked about, especially Mountain - well, the Bay Area, but maybe Mountain View, especially as the racial or ethnic diversity changing. It is more Southeast Asian and more Chinese and other Asian families, but the socioeconomic diversity is shrinking dramatically, along with diversity in types of careers people have, in a variety of other ways. When we talk about the need for diversity, I think it's really interesting to

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<sup>16</sup> LAAHA is Los Altos Affordable Housing Alliance. From website About Us page: "We are a group of residents committed to advocating for land use policies that encourage strategic housing growth. We believe in the power of local engagement, ideas and responsibility. We encourage the Council to adopt policies that expand the options for housing in Los Altos, particularly affordable housing, and we collaborate with local organizations to educate residents about housing issues. We will support County and State intervention in the absence of local response and accountability."

<sup>17</sup> Referring to the League of Women Voters, Los Altos-Mountain View Area; they are an organization "working to expand and protect voting rights" and "influence public policy through education and advocacy."

take it apart.

**Sue Russell:** 37:03

Yeah.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 37:04

You know, what does it mean to us and what does it mean to the, to the future? We only look at history because it informs the future, right? Not just because it's interesting, although from my perspective, I'm a history dork, and it is very interesting to discuss the past. With that said, we haven't talked very much about your work with the League and that's been going on for a long time. Can you tell me more about the work you do with the League and what the League does in terms of affordability, about housing, about diversity? Tell me more about that work.

**Sue Russell:** 37:39

I don't think we really do - I think you asked me that earlier. When we talked before, I don't think we do that much with diversity. What we do is -

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 37:51

I've heard that from others in the League, but -

**Sue Russell:** 37:53

Yeah.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 37:54

-housing discrimination and diversity is not the focus.

**Sue Russell:** 37:59

Right. Because as I said, it's, I mean, I don't even think the Project Sentinel<sup>18</sup> or other groups get that many cases anymore, of people claiming discrimination. I think it's much more of an economic thing. Just me not being able to afford housing really more than the discrimination type of thing; discrimination economically, but not, you know, racial or whatever. So what we do in the League is basically support anything that we think is related to affordable housing, whether it's zoning changes that would help affordable housing or particular projects that are affordable housing or finding more funds for affordable housing; whether it's looking at the below market rate program to make sure that we think it's being handled in the best way, that sort of thing.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 39:04

I think all of that work is very important [laughs]. I'm tangentially aware of what the League, what that what the housing group does in the League. I've been meaning to be a little less

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<sup>18</sup> From City of Santa Clara website: "Project Sentinel, a non-profit agency, provides information and dispute resolution services to tenants, landlords, and roommates... answers questions and helps to resolve disputes involving deposits, rent increases, nonpayment of rent, and other rental housing issues."



tangential as you know. You try to find a few extra hours a day.

**Sue Russell:** 39:23

Nope. We write a lot of letters. I mean, lately, I would say we also, in the last few years, since the League has become stronger, we try to be somewhat in sync with what the YIMBY is supporting; and that's the same with Los Altos Affordable Housing Advocates. We also try sometimes to be in sync with Mountain View Coalition for Sustainable Planning<sup>19</sup> is speaking about because I think it's better if the city council thinks that everybody feels strongly, whether it's something related to BMR program<sup>20</sup>, or how Google is proposing to do their affordable housing or whatever, it's better. If we all try and attack the same issues and compliment the same

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**IdaRose Sylvester:** 40:14

You know, I didn't have this as a line of questioning, but I'm actually, I'm personally very interested in how you feel advocates and like all the groups you just mentioned consider themselves advocates, how you feel you are all aligned these days and how you're not. How do you work better together with other groups when you may have different perspectives or values, or just even frames because of where you live or what work you've done in the past?

**Sue Russell:** 40:50

Well, I mean, for example, Mountain View Coalition for Sustainable Planning, it looks at things which we could, but we don't, like bike and pedestrian access more. We don't look at that type of issue as much. And so if they write a letter and there's a lot of emphasis on that, we might leave it out, right. We could do something with climate because we have, but you know, the way the League is we have another climate committee and they're not very active. I mean, it's not really a new side that arose. It's kind of like a bandwidth issue, so we focus on housing. Our committee is actually called housing and transportation and they don't do with transportation really, because we don't have the bandwidth or people who are as interested in that. Then with the YIMBY group, you know, they basically support building housing, I mean I'm a YIMBY also, I'm a member, but I'm not, maybe you are, but I'm not like I'm not as supportive of just the whole - they're a little bit more of the trickle-down theory than I am. I agree that more supply is better, but my emphasis is definitely on the affordability component and if that's not strong enough, then I'm not as interested in what there is. We also try to be somewhat in sync with SV at home

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<sup>19</sup> From <http://www.mvcsp.org/>: "We are a group of local volunteers dedicated to making Mountain View as beautiful, economically healthy, transit, bicycle, and pedestrian accessible, and affordable as possible. MVCSP member interest and expertise covers areas such as housing, transportation, the environment, the economy, and beyond!"

<sup>20</sup> From City of Mountain View website: "The Below-Market-Rate (BMR) Housing Program helps address the high cost of housing in Mountain View by increasing the diversity and supply of affordable housing through the provision of mixed-income residential developments that integrate both market-rate and affordable units. The basic objective of the BMR Program is the provision of on-site affordable rental or ownership units within a new housing development."

(Silicon Valley at Home)<sup>21</sup> too.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 42:16

Good. I haven't asked this of anybody, but what are the roles? What is the, why are advocacy groups so important in defining the future of a more inclusive city, particularly in our area?

**Sue Russell:** 42:38

Well, first of all, one thing we hear sometimes from city councils, both in Mountain View and Los Altos is it's good for us to be speaking up on some of the issues that might be controversial because then gives cover to the city council to council members. But that's just what they say about the state too when the state comes out with certain regulations, then they have to follow them. That gives them cover to say it's not my idea, you know? If there's enough of us advocating for something that gives them cover, and it's also important, I mean there's been some projects where the YIMBYs or the neighbors have come out in droves against something, and it's important for other people to speak up. You know, let's say for the greater good for the community, rather than just the fact that you don't want construction in your neighborhood for three years. So I think it's important for that, but I also think sometimes, I mean, we've generally had good relations with, both the city council and in the old days we often met with planning commission members one-on-one, we haven't been doing that lately. I mean, I think it stopped before COVID, but COVID sort of, we just sort of dropped all that we used to, but we did like to meet with city council people one-on-one and get their ideas, pick their brain and tell them our ideas. I think that's useful for both of us because we get some ideas of what they might be thinking of that we haven't even thought of. Then sometimes they pick up something from us. I don't know it, and then we sometimes meet with staff people and talk to them, which I'm sure you do with the HRC, but I mean, I feel like it's okay.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 44:27

Well, being in the commission is its own...

**Sue Russell:** 44:34

Right?

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 44:35

What are we, are we inside outside in part of the city or outside of the city? Obviously, I think, I think technically we're just really inside the city.

**Sue Russell:** 44:48

No, you're right. It's different, but anyway...

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 44:51

It's different. It's different.

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<sup>21</sup> Silicon Valley at Home (SV@Home) works towards protecting and creating affordable housing in the Silicon Valley ([siliconvalleyathome.org](http://siliconvalleyathome.org))

**Sue Russell:** 44:55

But we find that it's very useful. I mean, for example, in Los Altos just give it because it's recent, but we've been meeting with the new city manager and the new city community development director, and they tell us some things that are sort of off the record and we get some insight as to what's really going on behind the scenes. It's very helpful for us to know what they're thinking and therefore what we might push for. I don't see as much off the record in Mountain View, but the staff is very open about what they feel their bandwidth is, what they feel their priorities are. And that's helpful to know that and know what to push for. You know, we also find in both cities that sometimes city council members will suggest to us that we advocate for certain things. Obviously they want that advocacy. They think it's good to have it on the record and good to have somebody speaking up for it. 'Cause it makes it easier for them, I guess, so I think it's important for all these advocacy organizations to speak up, really.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 46:15

Really interesting. It's very interesting to hear that in Mountain View, it's not just giving cover to city council, but helping them push their ideas forward. Like it came from someone else, right.

**Sue Russell:** 46:25

It's actually true in Los Altos too. Right now.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 46:28

This makes sense. It would be anywhere, but yeah, I occasionally do get asked to help promote, individual's ideas under the flag of some other, any name, any other organization. It's interesting. It's interesting the way we work together.

**Sue Russell:** 46:47

Right.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 46:49

Well just taking a step back, when you look at all the work you've done in housing, so everything professionally, everything, I guess, more on a volunteer or a personal basis, what is, what do you think your most important accomplishments have been? Or can they still be yet to come?

**Sue Russell:** 47:09

No, I don't think-

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 47:10

It would be an answer I would go for, I think-

**Sue Russell:** 47:13

Not if you were my age. I mean, I guess the most satisfying has to be a developer of a project and see it from the very beginning to the end and then be there when the families move in and they're so happy to move in and seeing something concrete like that, for me, was the most satisfying.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 47:38

A few people have said that, [including] Roy Hayter<sup>22</sup>, I just spoke to him earlier today. He's actually my neighbor. He says the same thing. He talked about working with you on some projects too.

**Sue Russell:** 47:51

Yeah.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 47:51

That makes sense to see something tangible.

**Sue Russell:** 47:54

Yeah.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 47:54

Would you say there've been some disappointments along the way, like significant disappointments that you wish you could go back and fix if you could?

**Sue Russell:** 48:14

Maybe if I'd been a more courageous litigator, I could have taken on more cases, but I found I wasn't very good at litigation. I didn't do that. I mean, you never get as much as you want in terms of the housing. I think it's been more disappointing obviously in Los Altos, but you're catching me at a time where I'm feeling sort of optimistic that Los Altos might be finally doing something better. So other frustrations, I hope we can say the best is yet to come, that might be true in Los Altos, that there might be some some good things in the next couple of years that will feel much better than any other time that I've lived in Los Altos and I've been here like 45 years.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 49:08

We get an amazing accomplishment to see happen and amazing feeling to have.

**Sue Russell:** 49:13

Yeah. Yeah.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 49:15

Sounds like your frustration is part of your passion though, right? Like we could always, we need to do more and then that drives you to keep going despite...?

**Sue Russell:** 49:25

Well, that's true. If everything was perfect, then you wouldn't have anything to do. Right.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 49:31

Very true. Not everyone shares that feeling, but some of us are driven by that. I think I'm

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<sup>22</sup> From Sue: Roy Hayter was a founder of Advocates for Affordable Housing in MV and an active member of our LWV Housing Committee for many years. Lives in MV.

reaching the end of my formal questions, but this is where I say, is there anything you'd like to share or things, something I didn't ask that I should, or something you'd like to add to what you've said, anything at all?

**Sue Russell:** 49:55

I feel like you've been very thorough. I mean, I guess what I'd like to say is that over the years I feel like Mountain View has been an example. I mean, 'cause I did work in Palo Alto and you know, I did work in Santa Cruz county and the people in Santa Cruz County were, they were easy to work with, but they're so into the environment that it makes it very difficult to do almost anything. It's [land] either coastal, or you're [near] an earthquake [fault] or you have to have a septic system because we don't want bring the water there, and I helped some in Half Moon Bay, where there were similar issues. So I feel as though Mountain View was always one of the easier communities to work in, but I also feel, and maybe it's just, I don't remember as much from before I got active with the League, but I felt like there were a couple of city councils that weren't as great, but there was mostly a majority on the city council. Kevin Duggan was a wonderful city manager [Mountain View city manager 1980-2011], Mike Martello [Mountain View City Attorney from 1994-2009], there was good staff all the way back as far as I can remember. I feel like it's gotten better maybe in Mountain View in terms of the concerns about things like rent control and trying to do more. But I always felt that the city was fairly progressive compared to Palo Alto or Cupertino. I worked in Cupertino. I had a project that we actually lost money on because the neighbors got a referendum and killed the project. Yeah.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 51:53

Yeah. It's a lot of work because you don't like somebody else. Oh boy. Okay.

**Sue Russell:** 52:02

Yeah.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 52:02

I guess we do see a little less of that. Like, I can't imagine, let's say, a group of residents coming together to get a referendum against, say, the Crestview Hotel conversion project, but maybe I should shut my mouth. Well, let's hope I just didn't jinx the entire city.

**Sue Russell:** 52:30

Well, and even that that's for, that's like a very, very low-income type. You have a different clientele. We were doing a normal family, affordable housing development. Yeah. But it was those people, you know, don't ruin our neighborhood.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 52:46

Oh boy. Well, so is there anything else that you would like to share? You've been wonderful. You've been incredibly dynamic.

**Sue Russell:** 52:57

No, I just wish my memory was better. Because it's very far back.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 53:01

That's why we do this, to catch it, right? Otherwise it will all be forgotten. Just a couple other questions that are basic, really basic demographic questions and feel free not to answer them if they are offensive. What would you say is your racial or ethnic identity?

**Sue Russell:** 55:03

White.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 55:04

What would you say is your gender identity?

**Sue Russell:** 55:07

Female.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 55:08

Would you mind telling us your age or approximate age?

**Sue Russell:** 55:16

81.

**IdaRose Sylvester:** 55:17

I didn't know that. Well, thank you for sharing. I am going to flip off the recording.