Edwina Garcia  
Narrator  

Thomas Saylor  
Interviewer  

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TS: Today is April 20, 2007. This is an interview for the Richfield Oral History Project, a component piece of the Minnesota’s Greatest Generation Project of the Minnesota Historical Society. My name is Thomas Saylor, and this evening I’m speaking with Edwina Garcia at her home in Richfield, Minnesota. First, Edwina, thanks very much for taking time out of your busy life to be part of this project.

EG: Thank you for asking. I appreciate it.

TS: For the record, and please correct anything I’ve got wrong here, you were born on December 8th, 1944, in Clovis, New Mexico. You grew up in Clovis and in Santa Rosa, New Mexico. You’re married, and your husband’s name is Jose Bonifacio Garcia. You have one daughter, and she was born in New Mexico in 1966. Now, for the purposes of our project, we talked a little bit before about the fact that you and your husband Jose or Joe, and your daughter, were living in Clovis, New Mexico. It’s a long way, a big jump from Clovis to Richfield, Minnesota. So, for the record, can you tell us how in the world you got here?

EG: Sure. We lived in Clovis and moved to Roswell, New Mexico. You know, Roswell is the “outer space aliens” city. We moved there because my husband wanted to take advantage of the G.I. Bill; he enrolled in a vo-tech, heating and air conditioning program. When he graduated he applied for a school in Bloomington, Minnesota, with Thermo King Corporation, a specific certification program in Transport Refrigeration. The school was a six months program. At that time our daughter, who has asthma, was doing so well health-wise here in Minnesota. She was in the first grade. So we decided that Joe would ask if he could extend his work here for three more months, until the end of the school year. Well, lo and behold, they offered him a permanent position. So we have been here ever since and never looked back.

TS: Now when you came to the Twin Cities area there were a lot of communities you could have selected to live in. How did you and your husband select Richfield from among those?

EG: For the first six months we rented in Bloomington, and then we decided that if we were going to stay here, we should look into home ownership. We had owned our home in New Mexico. So we looked around. I volunteered at a school, Cedar Crest Elementary, where my daughter attended first grade, and met a wonderful woman whose husband sold real estate. He sold us our first home at 6732 18th Avenue South in Richfield. We really we wanted to buy a starter home. We wanted to buy something we could afford.
TS: Okay. So as you looked around the area, and Richfield seemed to be, shall we say, a reasonable option?

EG: Yes. We wanted to be close to where my husband worked.

TS: And that was in Bloomington?

EG: Yes.

TS: What did you know about Richfield before you moved here?

EG: All we knew was what the real estate agent told us. He said it was a great community, a bedroom community. People were very friendly and he really talked it up. We drove around and saw Wood Lake Nature Center, the schools and the Hub. As we drove around we decided we liked the fact that it looked like a good small town.

TS: It’s interesting that you use the descriptive phrase “a small town.” So, in the midst of all the urban area, Richfield gave a small town impression.

EG: Yes. Absolutely.

TS: Now how large a city was Clovis, where you came from?

EG: Clovis, at the time when we left it, was around 32,000.

TS: So there’s some similarity between Richfield and Clovis. Size-wise it was not terribly different.

EG: Right. The reason Clovis had the population it did was because Cannon Air Force Base, a SAC, Strategy Air Command base, was located there. It still is there, in fact.

TS: And that includes that population, too?

EG: Right.

TS: That adds a lot of people.

EG: Right. Exactly. But in terms of anything else, there was no industry there, although it was cattle country.

TS: Now this house at 6732 18th Avenue South, let’s stand outside the house and, because we’re doing audio here, sort of describe that house for the reader or the listener as you looked at it.

EG: We had a living room, a small kitchen, three very small bedrooms and a basement. The basement was finished.
TS: It was a rambler house?

EG: Yes.

TS: And I think you mentioned earlier that it had been built in 1954.

EG: Yes.

TS: So there have been some owners, or at least one owner, before.

EG: There had been two owners before us.

TS: Two owners. So it’s an eighteen-year-old house. Had the house been modified at all by previous owners from the way it was originally built that you could tell?

EG: No. It had been kept up but really not modified.

TS: So there were no additions or decks or anything like that?

EG: No. We put in a three-season porch and then we put in central air conditioning. It didn’t have that. And my husband was able to do the work himself, saving us money.

TS: Of course he would.

EG: Right.

TS: There’s a perk. Right.

EG: So we did a lot of improvements in the house.

TS: How big was the lot that the house sat on? Do you remember?

EG: No. It was just a usual lot.

TS: A standard Richfield lot?

EG: Right.

TS: No wider or narrower than your neighbors.

EG: No.

TS: Do you remember the purchase price was?

EG: It was approximately $28,000.
TS: And did you feel at the time, you and Joe, that that was a fair, manageable amount for the kind of . . . your lifestyle?

EG: Yes. Exactly. Because one of the things that we don’t believe in is being in debt. Because being in debt can become a way of life. We wanted to make sure that not only could ends meet, but we could salt a little money away.

TS: And Richfield was a solid community to move into, it sounds like, from the way you describe it, and it was not overbuying.

EG: No.

TS: So it was a house that was . . .

EG: A perfect fit.

TS: Three bedrooms. Even though they were small, you said they gave you plenty of space.

EG: Exactly.

TS: Edwina, when you moved into that . . . now that’s in the east part of Richfield, right?

EG: Yes.

TS: What kind of people lived on your street? Age-wise, demographically. Describe them.

EG: Generally they were couples about our age.

TS: And you were in late twenties by that time.

EG: Right. We had really great block parties later on when we formed the Neighborhood Crime Watch. We had a lot of fun. It was a very close neighborhood.

TS: When you moved in, in the early 1970s, were there . . . to use a phrase . . . minorities or people of color on your block?

EG: No. Absolutely not. Not around that area.

TS: So you were . . . before we started taping you used the phrase, “a novelty”.

EG: Yes.

TS: Was that the case for your neighbors, too? Did they notice?
EG: Yes. One neighbor in particular mentioned to the other neighbors that they moved in, so you can tell what that house is going to look like and what kind of junk they’re going to have, and what they’re going to bring with them. That’s the way they phrased it.

TS: You heard this secondhand, of course.

EG: Yes. And that our neighborhood was going down the drain . . . this is just the beginning.

TS: How did you react to that? I mean, in a sense, you hear this even secondhand. How did that make you feel?

EG: Well, this neighbor didn’t tell me this until later on. It wasn’t like right away. It was a few years later, which was comical because I got involved in the community and these neighbors were never involved in anything. And then, when I ran for city council and won, that was when they told me. And I thought, well, geez, that’s really funny. Because we didn’t have loud parties. We didn’t have . . . if we had anything like get-togethers; it was after I got involved in politics.

TS: Did you feel . . . yourself now, the feeling kind of thing . . . did you feel welcomed or more ostracized in your neighborhood when you moved in?

EG: I think a little of both, because the next door neighbor, she right away brought over cookies and we’d have coffee and she’d invite the other neighbors. So they started off mostly friendly. By the time we all got to know each other, I think we were “accepted” and even liked.

TS: So it sounds like if there was initial hesitancy on the part of some people, they weren’t vocalizing that to you in any sense.

EG: Right.

TS: You stayed in that house for several decades, and so it must have felt like a good fit after a while anyway.

EG: Yes.

TS: So you have a rambler. There were three bedrooms and you did some modifications over time. Now you’ve described Richfield as kind of a solid community, with houses that weren’t too much and the kind of neighbors that made you feel not unwelcomed.

EG: Right.

TS: Did that change over time? Did your neighborhood change over time?

EG: Yes. It changed slowly, and one of the reasons why is that we were just . . . we were on 18th and Cedar, and that was where all the apartment units had been built.

TS: Right. On the west side of Cedar there.
EG: Right. And if there were any people of color, they were in the apartments, so oftentimes you’d hear the neighbors’ comments about that. Their backyards were close to these apartments. They would often make some little remarks, snide remarks. But we never experienced any problems at all. In New Mexico you couldn’t leave your tricycle outside or anything like that, because it would be gone. But in Richfield, we felt secure.

TS: Really?

EG: Yes. And here we were just amazed that you could leave your car unlocked overnight and you could leave your toys out there. And they would be there in the morning. Back home in our neighborhoods, lots of poverty.

TS: So you found Richfield a pleasant surprise in that respect.

EG: Yes.

TS: That’s interesting. Your house. You said your neighbors . . . do you feel you got to know your neighbors fairly well? The people at the first house.

EG: Yes, and we still are in touch with a lot of those neighbors.

TS: So you built relationships that lasted even after you left the neighborhood.

EG: Yes.

TS: Let me ask you. When you moved here . . . 1972 . . . did Joe work during the day, so he took the car?

EG: Yes.

TS: Did you have a car available to you at home when you were here then?

EG: At the beginning I didn’t. We would share the pickup. So I would drive him to work and I would use the pickup.

TS: So you had a car, you had a vehicle available sometimes. When you did shopping for, let’s say, food or other kinds of everyday items, where did you generally do that?

EG: We used to go where the new Cub Store is now. It was the old Holiday Store in Bloomington.

TS: And where about is that?

EG: That’s on 86th and Lyndale. In fact, the first time I went in that store I just said, “Oh, my God! I’ll never come in here again. This is huge. I’ll get lost.” I mean I was just . . . I didn’t
know . . . what we had back home was Piggly Wiggly and that type of store. I mean, they were very small grocery stores.

**TS:** When you came to Minnesota, you first rented in Bloomington, so you knew Bloomington a little bit before you moved here, didn’t you?

**EG:** Yes. And Holiday had everything. They sold guns. They had a barbershop in there. They sold shoes. They sold some clothing. This was a brand new world to us.

**TS:** Now did you find yourself often at the Hub Shopping Center, for example, up on 66th?

**EG:** Yes.

**TS:** And how about like Southdale Mall, which is in Edina?

**EG:** Yes.

**TS:** So you shopped around. It sounds like you were going to a number of different locations.

**EG:** Yes. Right.

**TS:** When you and your family wanted entertainment, whether it was going to the park or movies or out to eat, what are some of the places that you remember frequenting?

**EG:** We would go to the movies. We would go to one that used to be in Souhtown. We went . . . I had a neighbor from Bloomington, when we lived there, who took me around all over the Twin Cities sightseeing, because she thought we were only going to be here just a few months. So then on weekends, I took my husband and daughter around to wherever I had already been, and we used to go to the Como Park Zoo. We used to really hang out as a family, because we had no relatives here. The way we started cultivating friendships, getting to know people, was through politics.

**TS:** Were you and Joe members of a church when you moved here?

**EG:** Yes. We were members of St. Peter’s Catholic Church.

**TS:** And where is St. Peter’s?

**EG:** It’s on 67th and Nicollet.

**TS:** Is that officially Richfield?

**EG:** Yes.

**TS:** How helpful was the church community to sort of making you feel part of the area?
EG: As far as I’m concerned, it was nil.

TS: Say more about that.

EG: We had this discussion about religion, and I thought Catholics were just too rigid. So we made a deal that my husband would be in charge of our daughter’s Catholic faith. He took her to catechism and the whole works. We did go to the fall festivals they would have, and all the little events there, but I was never really part of the church group. Later on, the more I got involved in politics, we used to have some of my fundraisers in the church basement. Then, all of a sudden, when they changed administrators, we were told we couldn’t use it because of my position on one issue.

TS: It was one particular issue?

EG: Yes.

TS: What issue was that?

EG: Abortion. This was a new criterion that hadn’t been there before. I thought that was really ridiculous. We paid the rent; we cleaned up. In fact, the one thing they cited was that “you had this fundraiser and all of those people think the way you do.” I said, “Here is Irv Anderson, Speaker of the House, and his wife, Phyllis. They are ‘pro-life’.” And there was Kris Hasskamp, a state representative and a singer, she was the entertainment, and she was pro-life. So how can you go around saying this? But there was a nun that worked at St. Mary’s downtown and she was . . . I met her through the League of Women Voters. She lived at Holy Angels Academy resident hall, near the high school, which is next door to St. Peters.

TS: Right. Now I know where that is.

EG: And so whenever we had the DFL Convention, she always voted against my endorsement because of that issue. When it came down to the general election, she always voted for me. And she told me this. She said, you know, basically I think we’re all pro-life. The distinction was that I think there are some legislators that that’s all they care about. They don’t care about education. They don’t care about feeding kids. They don’t care about medical health for kids. They don’t care about the big picture and the folks that are really hurting. And yet here we were. We were foster parents. We were activists . . . I mean we helped in whatever charity there was. I always voted the right way when it came down to kids and people that are in need.

TS: That one issue was enough for the church to kind of move . . .

EG: It wasn’t really the whole church. I think what it was that that particular administrator.

TS: The way that person certainly viewed . . .

EG: She’s still there, and in fact, one of our current elected officials is no longer going to church there because she was kind of edged out, too.
TS: Oh, really?

EG: Yes. But she really, this woman did do a campaign against me. She had a couple of people write me nasty, nasty letters.

TS: That comes with the turf, doesn’t it though, when you’re in politics?

EG: Yes.

TS: You get a thick skin when you get in politics? I guess you either have to or . . .

EG: I always asked these folks. I said, “Tell me, then, if all these kids come into the world, and they have . . . I don’t care what it is that they have . . . are you supporting them in some way? Do you donate to this cause or that cause or whatever? Are you a foster parent? Tell me how you’re taking care of these kids and then, then I’ll think you have some credibility and some merit on your judgment.” They never could.

TS: Now you worked, you mentioned earlier, pretty soon after you got here, for B. Dalton Bookseller.

EG: Yes.

TS: You mentioned off the record that they appreciated the fact that you were bilingual.

EG: Yes.

TS: How unique were you in that general office as a bilingual speaker?

EG: I was probably the only one.

TS: What could you offer them as a Spanish and English speaker?

EG: I could order books, for one thing, and then I could talk to . . . I talked to the vendors and I talked to the buyers, and then I would talk to customers that were looking for specific books. So they would call and let me know what they needed, and I would investigate our resources and find the books they needed.

TS: Now this office was in Bloomington or Edina. You weren’t quite sure which. How comfortable did your coworkers make you feel working there?

EG: They were great.

TS: So you’ve had really positive things about Richfield and also about your place of employment here. About feeling pretty comfortable.

EG: Yes. Right.
TS: You have a long career in politics, and that must have started somewhere. Here you are. You’ve moved to Richfield. What is it that prompted you to take the first step?

EG: For one thing, with my daughter it was just natural for me to be a participant in whatever went on in her school. Everything from room mother all the way to PTA or the District Strategy Planning Committee.

TS: What school did she go to?

EG: All her schools were on 70th Street. She started off at Elliot. It’s now the Community Ed building, but at that time it was a grade school. Then she went to the junior high, which was next door to Elliot. And then from there she went to the high school, which was on the same street, a little over a mile away.

TS: Right. All the way down.

EG: Yes. A mile or so.

TS: So she went to Richfield High School. How happy were you as a parent with Richfield schools?

EG: I would say that I was very happy. But I think . . . one of the reasons why I participated so much in my daughter’s school is because my parents were divorced. My mother did not participate at my school. She would go if she had to, but that wasn’t anything that we normally did. Parents just stayed away. You just send your kid to school and that’s it, unless there was any kind of trouble brewing. And we decided that we were going to do just the opposite with our daughter from what our parents did.

TS: So you wanted to get involved.

EG: Right.

TS: Okay. But it’s a step from room mother and things like this to getting involved at the next level. What is it that encouraged you to keep moving up your level of involvement?

EG: This woman came to the door one day, campaigning for then Hennepin County Attorney Tom Johnson. When I opened the door, she just said, “Oh oh.” That’s what she said. Oh!

TS: What was she oh-ing?

EG: She was oh-ing about the fact that I was a person of color. She was a Jewish woman. So I think right away we connected. Anyway, she talked to me and found out all about me, and said, “You’ve got to come to the DFL meeting.” By that time I knew what the DFL was. So then I did attend a couple of meetings, and as soon as I walked in they also were interested, because this was a novelty. Here we are, a genuine minority.
TS: A genuine . . .

EG: The only other person of color they had that was active in the party was Matt Little.

TS: I’ve heard his name, too.

EG: Matt Little was just . . . oh . . . he still is a terrific human being. He writes a column for the *Spokesman*, and was the president of the NAACP. He is just a terrific guy.

TS: And he’s from Richfield?

EG: He was. Now he lives in Maplewood.

TS: But he was in Richfield for a long time?

EG: Oh, absolutely. He was even recognized as Richfield’s Citizen of the Year.

TS: So he’s a person also with a good perspective on what it’s like to be a person of color in Richfield.

EG: Right.

TS: So you were a novelty again, to use your phrase.

EG: Yes. Like I said, I was a novelty, and everyone said, “Oh, you’ve got to join the Commission on Human Rights.” So I was on Human Rights. I was in Community Services. I was on the Charter Commission, to which you’re appointed by the judge. Then I became involved in Project Charlie.

TS: What’s that?

EG: Project Charlie [Chemical Abuse Resolution Lies in Education] was a community program working with kids and parents. I became a member of the Richfield League of Women Voters and other school and civic organizations.

TS: What was it that you found attractive about politics? Because in a sense you could have gone in the door and been a novelty and become disenchanted. But you engaged and liked it. What was it?

EG: I grew up without role models—we were poor; no one in our family had a career or a college education. You got married (most of the time without finishing high school) and had kids. When I was a kid we didn’t have TV. Couldn’t afford it. But we rented from a landlord who told us that when he wasn’t there we could go to his house and watch TV. The times available were not during weekday prime time; it was mostly on Sundays. I would go there on Sunday, and keep in mind that in Clovis we didn’t have cable TV stations, we had only network TV channels. And so all I watched was religious programming.
TS: It’s all on Sunday. Right.

EG: Yes. So I watched Oral Roberts. And I thought, my gosh, this guy is great. And I think I liked them because they had this power through which they could influence people, and money would just come rolling in. They could make you feel like anything was possible, and cry on the spot, and this and that and the other. I kind of liked that. Then for some reason, let’s see, in the afternoons I could watch between certain times, and that was when the McCarthy hearings were on. And I was glued to the set with that. I got to the point where I knew everything that was going on. So then I started going to college, one or two classes at a time, and I wrote a research paper on the McCarthy hearings. I remember the professor saying, gee, it’s almost like you know these people. I told her I did. I did know them from television, where I had a front row seat.

TS: Because you watched them so much.

EG: Right. And then I started to like politics, and I thought that was really great. These people had the power to get things done through work and influence.

TS: So there was a sense of liking the power that came with . . .

EG: Right. Yes.

TS: That’s interesting that you say that because, in a way, a good orator can mobilize people and opinion.

EG: Sure. And then after that, as I got older, I read a lot of self-help books. And I think that with my personality, it was kind of natural. I mean, I like people a lot. And I’m the type of person that if you go somewhere to a party and there’s one or two people that don’t have anybody to talk to, well, that’s who I go and talk to.

TS: So you search out the people who aren’t talking.

EG: Right. Or who are not part of the group for whatever reason.

TS: And what year was that that you were elected to the council?

EG: I think it was in 1985.

TS: At that time was being the novelty—back to the phrase again—a plus, a minus or value neutral?

EG: You know, that’s hard to say. But when people got to know me, and got to know who I was and what I had contributed to our community, they were kind of interested. They wanted to know more. And I wasn’t a hothead. I wasn’t somebody that just would just say this or that or the other. If I had an issue, then I had something of merit to say about what I saw behind that issue. So I think after a while I began bonding with constituents.
TS: So there was a gradual acceptance of you for Edwina Garcia regardless of being a female or Hispanic.

EG: Right.

TS: That became almost irrelevant, you think.

EG: Right. Because I had a base of support and accomplishments. I was involved in so many things in the community, and I wrote letters to the editor. I wrote opinion pieces and things like that. In fact, we didn’t have the ward system before I was elected.

TS: What did they have?

EG: Candidates were elected at large . . . city wide.

TS: Oh, really?

EG: And so everybody who was elected lived on the west side of the city. There was no one from the east side. No one from the middle. Just the west side. As a member of the Charter Commission, guest columns for and against appeared in the Sun Current. I wrote in favor of the ward system. Another person on the commission wrote against. It came out on the front page of the paper and people did vote, go out and vote for the ward seats.

TS: Was there or is there a kind of east-west division in Richfield?

EG: Yes. The east side is from Portland to Cedar.

TS: So we’re just about on that border now, aren’t we?

EG: Right. But this is the middle ward.

TS: West of Portland.

EG: Yes. West of Portland to Interstate 35W.

TS: What about on the east side, the old New Ford Town area? That’s gone. What about the developments with New Ford Town and Richfield? How did that unfold? Because I’ve heard a lot about that.

EG: It started when I was a city council member, and continued through my election to the state house. Negotiation went on for sometime.

TS: Now when you got into the DFL, early, and you were on commissions, what issues were important to you individually?
EG: I think at that time there were not any real hot button issues. Development in Richfield has always been a big issue. Tax increment financing. The airport noise. But there were not any other burning issues. I think we wanted to have Democrats on the council, because for a long time this was an isolated bedroom community. In other words, the city fathers did not want establishments that served alcoholic beverages. That is one of the reasons that a lot of the development went to Bloomington. The Thunderbird Hotel, for example, wanted to build in Richfield. But the council didn’t want them in Richfield.

TS: Why is that?

EG: Because they sold liquor.

TS: Okay. So there’s a kind of conservative undercurrent here?

EG: Yes.

TS: To keep “that kind of stuff” out?

EG: Yes.

TS: But it also means it’s cutting off tax base, too.

EG: Exactly. But at that point you couldn’t make the argument because . . . I mean it was in the old days. I remember when the Hampton Inn came in. Here’s a hotel without a restaurant, without a bar. It doesn’t have a lot of stuff. . . . it was just a hotel that rented rooms. But it was a big deal in Richfield. Finally, there was some type of development.

TS: How come?

EG: Because we finally got a hotel.

TS: So anything that came in was welcome.

EG: Yes.

TS: Richfield had some retail, but as far as larger businesses or industrial base, it didn’t have it.

EG: Right. When I was first elected to the city council, there was going to be a development plan for 66th and Cedar. Anyway, there were all sorts of different things proposed. Residents showed up at a big meeting at City Hall, and they were saying, oh, we don’t want a bowling alley. We don’t want a drinking establishment. We don’t want a lot of people driving through our neighborhoods. There was one business that they liked. It opened at eight and closed at five, or whatever. It was Copy Duplicating Products—that was the name of it. Anyway, they built and they constructed their own parking ramp. During the process, I would get all the information, including plans during the phasing, so all the neighbors could voice their opinions. I had neighborhood meetings, and I brought the plans, and we talked about it and I made notes and
took it back to City Hall and worked some of those problems out. We went back to City Hall and they presented it and people were happy. We had maybe three of those little meetings right in the neighborhood amongst just us. And so we were able to say, hey, this is a good deal.

**TS:** It’s interesting that Richfield, as part of a big metro area, an urban area, has this kind of small town resistance to the outsiders coming in with development. You’re describing that conservative kind of undercurrent, a sort of “we don’t want that here” attitude.

**EG:** Yes. And now it’s kind of different, because now we’re having lots of development in Richfield.

We have a perfectly good—a really nice neighborhood Menards. Menards wanted to expand here, but apparently the city did not approach them. The Home Depot and Super Target built instead. And a lot of folks thought . . . I mean it’s nice to have something close by.

**TS:** It is nice.

**EG:** But I think we could have done better in terms of development. I mean, we’ve got Best Buy. People resisted that. When Best Buy was coming in, I tell you, everybody was up in arms.

**TS:** They didn’t want that either?

**EG:** Not at all. We had a big lawsuit.

**TS:** Who filed the lawsuit?

**EG:** The neighbors, if I remember correctly. Because they thought that their property had not been appraised correctly . . . it went through tax increment financing. The city used eminent domain. But the question was raised because there were houses that did not need repair and some did. There was no serious deterioration of the properties.

**TS:** But didn’t the Best Buy dislodge a number of older automobile dealerships that themselves didn’t bring in much as far as tax base?

**EG:** Yes. That’s right. And that’s a whole other story in and of itself. Because when I was on the council, I was for was development. And I wanted to get rid of all of those auto dealerships, because they brought in nothing but constant complaints. Black tops do not bring taxes.

**TS:** What is it? I mean why . . . what were the complaints about with them?

**EG:** There was speeding through neighborhoods, and they were open at night. And there was junk and trash all over the place. Car dealership employees parked their cars all over the neighborhood. But anyway, I wrote a big article and said, “Blacktop does not generate taxes.”

**TS:** That’s the bottom line.
EG: Right. And I said, “I think that’s very, very valuable land and we ought to get rid of those folks.” Walser just didn’t want to have anything to do with me, and [Wally] McCarthy didn’t either. McCarthy told a reporter that, “That damn female member of the Richfield City Council is causing problems.” I mean, that was great for me because everybody wrote in to support me.

TS: So it turned out to be a boon for you anyway.

EG: Yes.

TS: Walser and McCarthy were the two big dealers down there, right?

EG: Yes.

TS: And they’ve both been displaced now.

EG: Yes. And the thing is that . . . I have a reputation for being pretty up front, and I get myself into a lot of trouble.

TS: Now was that the case early in your political career, too? Did you make a reputation as someone who was outspoken?

EG: No.

TS: No?

EG: No, not really. It wasn’t until I got on the council and something was before us that I really believed in.

TS: When did you get on the council?

EG: In 1985.

TS: So you cut your political teeth in some other organizations before you got elected to council.

EG: Yes. Right. I did get the DFL endorsement, and I ran against a guy who was a CPA, a member of the Chamber of Commerce. His wife was a schoolteacher. They had two kids. He was just really a well-known and well-liked guy in the community. But, you know, the thing is that we were identical on all of the issues. But he was a CPA, and so he’d gone to all the city council meetings, and at that time when we were campaigning, the budget process was going on, and Dick would be there. I would be knocking on all the doors. I knocked on all the doors. CPAs have a kind of a stodgy image. And I was not. I come off, I think, as real friendly and willing to listen.

TS: And Dick who? Last name?
EG: Starleaf. And I would knock on the doors, and I’d be out there all the time, and it was to the point where my knuckles were just getting ready to peel.

TS: From all the knocking.

EG: Yes. Because I would ring the doorbell, and if I didn’t hear the doorbell outside then I would knock. And then I would be able to engage people, and really hit it off good.

TS: Why do you think you were successful at that? I mean that’s a particular skill to be able to engage people. Cold calling, really. What made you good at that?

EG: I think it’s because I really saw myself as one of the people. I wanted to serve on the council, and I said, “I’m one of you. I’m a homeowner. I’m a vested member in this community.” And why would anybody elect me if they didn’t feel the way I did? I felt that we were all in this together, and we all wanted the best.

TS: Right. Did you feel yourself at all—back to this whole concept of novelty again—did you feel yourself in any way representative of minorities or Hispanics in Richfield as well?

EG: No, because at that point there still weren’t a lot of minorities living in Richfield. In fact, Don Preibe was a former mayor and then he lost, and then he ran for the council, was elected, and a few years later he wanted to retire. And so he asked me, he called me and he said, “I’m thinking of retiring and I’ve looked around.” He said, “I like what you have to say and I like that you work very hard. I want for you to consider running.” He went to the party and told them that, and the party people said, “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Don. It just doesn’t make sense. Let’s put somebody in there that for sure can win.” He said, “Well, she can win.” He said, “I know she can win. I’ve taken time to look at what she’s done, and she can win.” Anyway, they finally said, well, okay. And he was the other mentor I had.

TS: Who was the first?

EG: Gertrude Ulrich.

TS: And how was she important for you?

EG: When I got elected she helped me navigate the process and the system. I knew her also through League of Women Voters and through community participation. She’s a real pillar of the community.

TS: She’s certainly been at it for a long time.

EG: And I think she wanted to open my world up. Wanted for me to grow. And through her—you know she was a member of the Metropolitan Council—I got more involved, and I learned.

TS: That’s right.
EG: Then I was appointed to the Met Council Minority Advisory Council, and that is where I met people like Sharon Sayles Belton, Bill Davis, and Sandy Vargas. I don’t remember how many others were soon to be community leaders . . . Carlos Mariani, a state representative for St. Paul.

Anyway, that’s where I met a lot of Latinos and people of color, and it turned out later on they were in leadership positions. So that was very impressive. And then I was on the Land Use Advisory Committee, and then on the Advisory Chair’s. I can’t remember who the chair was at that time. Anyway, I was on his committee. I did a lot of that. And through belonging to organizations, you go to all these conferences and meetings like that. So you just absorb information, and learn to hone your skills.

TS: You start meeting people.

EG: Yes. You start meeting people and you start learning. And then just . . . like I said, Gertrude opened this world for me.

TS: Yes. When you first got into local politics in Richfield, who were some of the important political figures in the town? That is, people who either you worked with or worked against.

EG: I worked with all the Democrats that had been or were members of the city council. I worked with Mike Freeman. The first time he ran he ran against Bill Frenzel, I worked hard on his campaign.

TS: Really.

EG: Yes. I think it was in 1978. So I helped him out, and then later he ran for the State Senate and I delivered a nomination speech for his endorsement. And I worked on Gertrude’s campaign. Gertrude had run for a number of offices. She had run for city council. She had run for Hennepin County Commissioner.

TS: Oh, did she? I didn’t know that.

EG: Yes. And she lost those races. And when she ran for the council, you know, I was really one of the ones that really kind of encouraged her, hey, you’ve got to do it. I hated for somebody that gifted not to be elected.

TS: Didn’t she run against Leuttinger for council?

EG: No. Who did she run against? She represented this side of town. I think it was Larry Wozniczka.

TS: I’m not sure who it was. Somebody . . . I interviewed somebody who ran against her and defeated her. It must have been for council.
EG: It could have been. It could have been also for Hennepin County. Maybe it could have been Vern [Leuttinger] at one time. Vern is a pretty decent guy.

TS: Yes, he is. He was a great guy to talk to, and he’s another person who knew a lot of the issues in Richfield. Whether it was schools or economics. The same kind of economic development things that had been frustrating over the years in some respects. People who have a vision of Richfield becoming something. There was a lot of what you described as kind of no, no. We don’t think so. Bedroom community means tree lined streets and that’s it.

EG: You know, I think there were a lot of . . . we had some good Republicans. Gene Jacobson, Vern Leuttinger and, you know, we’ve had some good people. But they’ve never been very independent. They don’t go against the grain at all, because if it’s the party, that’s the way they’re going to go.

TS: And the grain is the party in other words.

EG: Right.

TS: So there’s more of a monolithic kind of . . .

EG: Yes. Right.

TS: I know also . . . now when you think about the kind of . . . we talked about issues. Were education or Richfield schools an issue while you were in politics? Were there debates about the school system? Because demographic change means there were issues.

EG: Right. Those issues didn’t come up until later on, in the mid-1980s.

TS: With the downsizing of the schools? Because all the building in the 1950s and 1960s, that peaked in the early 1970s maybe and . . .

EG: Right.

TS: The system was struggling with declining enrollment.

EG: Have you talked to Lowell Larson?

TS: No.

EG: He’s the former school superintendent. He was great. He was there, and I don’t know exactly where he lives now, but his son still lives here. He was the best guy in the world. Talk about a professional guy.

TS: Okay. You moved up the political ladder, as it were. What was the step for you before you made the decision to run for the House of Representatives?
EG: Well, I ran for the council and I won, and then my second step was to get re-elected.

TS: What’s the term of office for the council? How many years?

EG: At that time I think it was three. It is four now. So when I filed for re-election, no one filed against me.

TS: No kidding.

EG: I ran unopposed.

TS: Oh, my gosh.

EG: So I thought, gee whiz, that’s really great. And then the DFL came to me again and said, “We’ve got this guy, Chris Tjornhom.” I think he was going on his fourth term, and they had had others run against him, including one that was a former school board member and banker. He’d run for the office twice. So they said to me, “Well, we’ve got to have you run, because Tjornhom cannot go unopposed, and you’ve got your city council seat to fall back on.” “Well, wait a minute,” I said. “I’m willing to run, but I’m not willing to lose. Sure, I’ve got the city council seat, but I’m willing to move up. So if you don’t think that you can help me in every which way I need your help to do that, then I don’t want to run.” So then they said, “Okay. Sure, go ahead.” So I ran, and I remember at that time, I think it took a two hundred vote margin to win, and less than that meant an automatic recount. I prayed and I said, “Lord, I need to win by way over two hundred.” And I won by four hundred and one votes. But the thing is, when the first poll was conducted, Chris Tjornhom was way up here and I was down here.

TS: Oh, the opinion polls.

EG: Yes. Right. He was up here and I was down here. As the time went on I had nothing to do but hammer him, and that was my advantage because I was a woman of color. So I was a woman, and woman of color, and I really just . . . worked. There’s one thing about Richfield: writing letters to the editor in our little Richfield paper pays off.

TS: I’ve seen this over the years in the paper. There are little columns and letters and people really . . .

EG: Constantly. So anyway, there were all these letters to the editor. Jim Swanson, who had been there forever, had lost his seat because the tape recorder was still running and he happened to say, after a committee meeting—he was chair of the Human Services—he happened to say, “These senior citizens are a pain in the neck.”

TS: And the tape was still running?

EG: Yes. Some Republican said, “Hey, we’ve got Jim.” And sure enough, that got him.

TS: Took him down?
EG: Yes. This was really dumb, because he had done so much for not only the seniors, but for health care. But that goes to show the public. They’ll listen to little things. We’re kind of a summary society.

TS: Yes. A little bit. A little snippet?

EG: Yes.

TS: That’s all it takes.

EG: Yes.

TS: And it outweighs years and years of service.

EG: But anyway, during that campaign Tjornhom had done a little brochure that said, “What has your state rep done for you?” Then you opened it up and it had Swanson and then it had Tjornhom, comparing what Jim did to what he would do. Okay. So that was way back then. But I liked to collect all this political stuff. So I had kept that brochure.

TS: You had the original.

EG: Yes. And so I said, “Aha. Why don’t we just do this? What has he done for you?”

TS: And flip it. He’ll be the incumbent now with a track record.

EG: Yes. He only had one bill that he ever passed while he was in St. Paul. And it was a bill that would allow therapy dogs in restaurants and places like that. I had ten bills in my first term. So anyway, I was always jabbing him. Here’s a “do nothing” guy. When we had the debate forum that the League of Women Voters puts on, I said, “If you want to elect somebody who wants to warm a seat, there’s my opponent. If you want to elect somebody that brings home no bacon, there’s my opponent. If you want to elect somebody that’s good at rhetoric but zero in action, there’s my opponent.” I said, “We don’t need empty seats over there. Richfield needs action.” Towards the very end he really knew what was going on in the polls, because I had just come up. That’s in October, and he was just out there hustling like you wouldn’t believe. That got him afraid.

TS: Sure it did.

EG: But it was too late, because he wrote a thing saying, “There’s just some things I wouldn’t do to win an election,” that type of thing. I then bought out half a page in the Sun Current. I had my logo, and I wrote in longhand about my opponent, and I said, “No public official should be above public scrutiny.” The record is clear and all of this. And I did it in longhand, and at that time you never did anything like that. It caught peoples’ attention. He couldn’t recover from that.

TS: And you beat him by more than two hundred votes?
EG: Yes. I won by a margin of four hundred and one.

TS: Were you surprised to have won?

EG: No. Because I knew . . . I had gut intuition.

TS: And you had a good feeling about that election?

EG: Yes. So on Election Day we went out for supper, and then we went home, and then went to the party afterwards and the vote came in. I was the only Democrat to win; the other two wards were won by Republicans.

TS: It dragged on for a long time, didn’t it?

EG: Right. And the people in New Ford Town . . . it was New Ford Town, and the golf course, and then another section called Rich Acres.


EG: And these folks wanted to move out of there.

TS: The Rich Acres folks.

EG: And the New Ford Town people.

TS: So they were all . . . from the way you remember it, they all wanted to get out of there.

EG: Yes. The majority of them wanted to get out of there. We had a real activist guy, and so we all were part of that movement.

TS: Who was this guy?

EG: George Safranski. He passed away a day before the deal was signed. He had a heart attack. He was a young guy, in his fifties. A lot of Richfield residents didn’t think that we should lose those homes, our tax base. But the New Ford Town/Rich Acres people were making a good case. And I door knocked there, and I knew all those folks really, really well.

TS: What was the issue then? In a sense, was Richfield simply too small to buck the airport? Was that a foregone conclusion what was going to happen?

EG: No. They thought that their neighborhood was . . . they couldn’t sell their homes because of the airport and the airport noise, and no one wanted to fix up their homes. They were really deteriorating, and if they updated or expanded, the homeowners would never recover that cost.

TS: Okay. So it was a question of . . . you saw them wanting to move. They were ready to quit. To cut and move out.
EG: Right. And they came to the city council. We didn’t go to them. They came to the council, and we listening and exploring options.

TS: What could the council do for those people, really? Could you get them a better deal with the Airport Commission or with the state?

EG: Yes. The first step was the council, the MAC [Metropolitan Airports Commission], and the state. Congressman Martin Sabo was heavily involved in that partnership, too. We all negotiated that deal.

TS: Was the negotiation for the buyout price for those people? Was that what was being negotiated here?

EG: The negotiations included the deal for MAC to buy out New Ford Town. The golf course was part of the airport’s property. We were paying to lease that land.

TS: So that land was really . . . could be reclaimed or recalled at any time.

EG: Right. And we started leasing that for a dollar a year. Then, as the profits grew, then they would take a higher percentage of the profits.

TS: So those folks in New Ford Town, did they get a . . . in your opinion . . . did they get a good deal when they moved out of there financially?

EG: Yes. Marv . . .

TS: Iverson?

EG: Iverson. He was a New Ford Town person.

TS: He was. I interviewed him yesterday. He had very specific opinions about what happened there and how it played out.

EG: Yes. He remembers probably more than I do. A lot of things have happened since.

TS: He remembers from the inside, of course, as a person living there who was anchored in the community there, and he gave his perspective on how that played out over time. So it’s interesting to hear someone who was on the council who didn’t live there. Right? So you saw that really from a larger Richfield political perspective.

EG: I could identify with those neighbors. Plus, we had all the baseball fields that were there, too.

TS: Yes, that’s right. Now the airport has been there for . . . before you and I were around. Over time in what ways do you think, positively or negatively, that the airport has impacted Richfield over time?
EG: I think that probably on the whole it’s been positive.

TS: What arguments would you make to prove that point?

EG: I think a lot of improvements that have happened have happened because of the airport. One of the things is that Richfield . . . you can get anywhere from Richfield. That’s not necessarily true of Bloomington or other places. But we’re right . . . we’re landlocked, but we’re near all the right places, and we can go zip zap and we’re there. When I got elected, Jane Ranum, a state senator, and Jean Wagenius, a state rep, they were from Minneapolis. I was on the B-side of their district. Legislative redistricting happened during my first term. And that’s when I got in trouble a lot, because I voted for the redistricting plan. I was on the Redistricting Committee as a reward for winning and beating Tjornhom, who had been there forever, and I was given every committee assignment I asked for.

TS: I see. This was 1985 again, right?

EG: No. It was 1990.

TS: It was 1990 that you were elected to the House.

EG: Right. 1990. I started serving in 1991. So anyway, I was given a seat on the Redistricting Committee. I know that Jane Ranum and Jean Wagenius wanted the airport to move.

TS: This discussion went on for a while, didn’t it?

EG: They wanted a land bank. I thought Richfield never did have the position of relocating the airport. That’s one of the reasons why I felt ostracized by Minneapolis. Because I didn’t hold that position.

My biggest bill was probably . . . even though Jane was my senator, Phil Riveness was the senator author in Bloomington, and he had had a bigger portion of Richfield in his district before redistricting. After redistricting, his portion of Richfield had shrunk.

The majority of the city was in Jane Ranum’s. But Phil had represented part of Richfield before, when he was a state rep. Then he ran for State Senate. So when I was in the House, every bill that had to do with Richfield, he carried it. He was the Senate author. Jane and I did not have a good working relationship because of that. So we came up with this . . . it’s called the PFC, Passenger Facilities Charge, and every passenger that went through to board an airplane was charged three dollars. We did the research, and across the country a lot of those monies went directly to noise abatement, and here in Minneapolis, none of it went to noise abatement.

TS: None of it at all?

EG: None of it at all. In some places all of it went for noise abatement, and in others some portion of it did. Here at MSP, nothing. Phil and I really worked hard. I was very grateful that we had it planned. It went through the House first, because that was where we knew we’d have a
hard time. But I got the Speaker of the House, Dee Long at the time, and she placed it as the first bill on the agenda.

TS: The first one?

EG: Yes. Because that’s when people are just coming in from their offices and visiting, so they are distracted. So it came up and passed just like that.

TS: Very good timing.

EG: [Chuckles] So for the second reading it was a little harder. But we made the effort. We need a little bit of help—after all, this is the state’s airport and all of this. Thank God everything fell into place. The MAC [Metropolitan Airports Commission] was just terrible.

TS: As partners to work with?

EG: Oh, absolutely. They were opposed to this bill big time.

TS: Why? What was their argument?

EG: Because they wanted that money to be used the way they wanted. They didn’t want to share the funds.

TS: They weren’t against the fee. They were against where it was going.

EG: Yes. They didn’t want to share that fee. Dave Dombrowski was working for the MAC as a lobbyist. I don’t know whatever became of him. But he was the lobbyist and he just . . . he really made me cry. He came after me and harassed me big time. I had never cried. He’s the only guy that gave me a reason to cry. Our city manager, Jim Prosser was so good. He knew the issues inside and out, and he is a real pro. I don’t remember who he contacted, but I told Jim how pushy and unethical Dombrowski was, and soon after talking to Jim, Dombrowski did not invade my space.

TS: He must have been brutal then.

EG: Yes. Well, I told him, “I’m going to tell you straight out, and I’m going to tell my city manager and others that if you approach me one more time you can look for a harassment charge against you.”

TS: Okay. So the MAC was breathing hard about this.

EG: Yes.

TS: When you got to the House, you were the first woman of color in the House.

EG: And in the Senate. The first in the Minnesota Legislature.
TS: Let’s go back to the novelty concept again. Did you feel that? Were you made to feel that way when you got there? Because it must have been announced that here’s the first woman of color.

EG: No. It was really . . . and I think one of the reasons why it wasn’t a big deal is because my sole agenda was to carry Richfield legislation.

TS: So you don’t think that . . . not much was made, as you can recall, of the fact that you were the first female minority in the Minnesota Legislature.

EG: No.

TS: Did you feel that yourself? That you were in a way representing Richfield, but also had another agenda perhaps.

EG: That’s the way it was. We had what was called the Minority Caucus, because State Representative Richard Jefferson was there, and from up north, State Senator [Harold] Skip Finn, a Native American. And who else was there? State Representative Carlos Mariani. We were freshmen. And so we had a Minority Caucus, and other people from the community would come and join us. And they wanted for me to carry certain bills relative to “minority” issues. And at the point, like I said, during my first term I had ten local bills, and I was successful in getting them passed.

TS: And those bills, were they . . . as you said, you came in with an agenda to put Richfield legislation forward . . . was that what your bills were?

EG: Yes. And the way I felt about it was that Richfield residents supported me. They voted for me. They wanted me here for a reason. And this community guy (member of the minority caucus) kept really getting nasty with me about this. His reasoning was that “you’re supposed to do things for your people”. I finally said, “Hey, you know, I’m not coming to these meetings anymore.” I said, “You know where my people are? They live in Richfield. Richfield is my city, my community . . . that is where my heart is.” I asked, “Where were you when it came to fundraising? When it came to door knocking? When it came to delivering literature? When it came to doing any of that you weren’t around. Don’t talk to me about my people.”

TS: Okay. So you really . . . you put your position out there and basically said that you represent your district.

EG: Right.

TS: When did Richfield, as a whole, start to experience the kind of demographic change that we’re seeing right now? I mean because now we see people of color all over Richfield.

EG: All over. Yes. And after I was elected . . . let’s see. It wasn’t until . . . it happened slowly, and first we had African Americans. People started noticing that. And then the folks started complaining about the fact that people from Minneapolis were coming over, using “our”
swimming pool, they’re going to our stores and they had a presence here in Richfield. One of the things from Chris Tjornhom, when I ran against him, was that he said, “If she wins she’s going to open all of this up to minorities.”

**TS:** That’s a heck of a thing to say.

**EG:** I know. He never said it in public, but that’s what he was telling people at the door. And I said, “Well, I don’t have [that] power.” But anyway, it started happening, and then you saw an influx of the Hmong folks coming in.

**TS:** What would you attribute the influx of African-Americans, of Mexicans or Hispanic speakers, Hmong . . . what brought them to Richfield? Because for decades Richfield was basically an all white community.

**EG:** The Hmong people, I don’t really know, but there was a definite bias against them because there were so many cars around their homes and on the weekends they congregated. It was a cultural thing. I don’t know what kind of get-togethers they would have, but people would call and complain. I would ask, “Are they parking in front of your house?” [They’d reply] yes or no. “Are they disturbing you in any way?” “No.” “Are they being loud?” “No.” “What’s the problem?” Folks would reply that cars were all over and there were a lot of those of people in the houses. I asked if they were interfering with them in any way. “No,” they’d say, “but I just don’t like them here in our neighborhood.”

**TS:** That’s what it really was, wasn’t it?

**EG:** Yes. Right. It’s the same thing. For the blacks, I think first it’s the apartments around here. We have a lot of apartments, to which unfortunately a lot of them are going to go. And our city doesn’t recognize that we need affordable housing. They think we have it. And we don’t.

**TS:** Okay. So the apartments were where we saw people of color moving first, more than into the actual owner-occupied houses?

**EG:** Yes. Right.

**TS:** Was there friction with that? I mean it seems like for a long time because Richfield didn’t have people of color, did this just happen without problems or were there tensions?

**EG:** There were only tensions within those apartment communities. They didn’t spill over into the neighboring areas, to the homeowner community until later.

**TS:** Because even a homeowner who wasn’t near those apartments might have kids in the schools where the demographic change was also happening.

**EG:** Right. Yes. And I think it hasn’t really gotten really, bad until maybe the last ten years. The friction in schools.
TS: And how would you describe the situation in the schools in the last ten years? What’s going now?

EG: I think we’ve seen that there’s a big, big conflict with Latinos and African Americans.

TS: In the schools.

EG: Absolutely. And then there’s the gang stuff going on. But I think part of that, too, is that the schools have failed to do much. They didn’t reorganization the situation; they had a sort of “head in the sand” approach.

TS: To better integrate people or to diffuse situations?

EG: Yes. Right. To diffuse the situation. I worked for the schools as the Diversity Coordinator for a while. I worked on that part with my other job as Community Coordinator for Resources.

TS: When were you doing that? Approximately. When were you doing that?

EG: I did it in January of 2006 to December of 2006.

TS: So you have a pretty current view of what’s going on in schools.

EG: Yes. And I personally think they’re doing a rotten job, in that some problems are ignored.

TS: What needs to change?

EG: I think there needs to be recognition by the school board and by the superintendent that they can go home and live in their own world, but that’s not the real world. You rarely see them around town. Maybe there’s only one school board member that you see around in the community. Other school board members, they’re not part of the community. I don’t see them at city events; they never write letters to the editor, in large part they are invisible. If you asked people who their school board members are, they don’t know. A minority of voters elect the school board. The superintendent is a little bit more integrated into the community, but again, you have got to know first hand and acknowledge the real happenings. You have to be a good listener. I think a lot of these folks know things because they’ve read it in books when they were in college or whatever; they’re not in the real world of poverty, and social justice. I don’t think they understand exactly what’s going on.

TS: Do they live here in the community?

EG: Yes. They have to.

TS: They have to live here.

EG: As the Diversity Coordinator I wanted to be in the field, so to speak, and I know how to get things done. My reputation is that I am too frank about the issues. But the superintendent opened
up a part of the Central School Building to become a parent multi-cultural community center. It was supposed to be a community center for helping diverse populations. There’s an organization in Richfield called MIRA, and that’s really a Latino resource center. So they’ve been pretty successful.

Anyway, she wanted MIRA to come in and expand the programs that they had, like ESL, summer activities, parenting classes and the like. She also wanted other community groups, minority community groups, to come in. I’m a great believer that to get things done you go to people, to their homes and their turf. I wanted to go to every school building and find out who were the parents who were involved and who was participating. I wanted to contact parents and form an advisory committee for the center. I thought we could have meetings there and share in what we were going to do and what needed to be done. You see, I’m really a self-starter. I don’t want to sit back and just do administrative things. I didn’t want to be a caretaker doing little piddly stuff. I just can’t do that. We have to talk about people being part of this community, and being part of the school community, too. That’s not happening.

**TS:** So it’s not happening. So people are not getting involved, in other words.

**EG:** No. And I don’t think the school or the administration is involved with day-to-day realities of childrens’ teaching or problems. Teachers and social workers have a lot on their plate. Diminishing state funding and resources mean they have a lot more to do with less, and that means less staff, too.

**TS:** I’d like to conclude by asking where you think Richfield as a community is going in the next ten years. I mean, if we look at the last ten years, it’s been one of dynamic change. Fewer schools. Different populations. What are we looking at for the next ten years for this community?

**EG:** There are several possibilities.

**TS:** Okay. Map them out.

**EG:** Number one is that we could consolidate with another school district, like Bloomington.

**TS:** That’s been talked about, I know.

**EG:** Right. People don’t want anything to do with Minneapolis. Big, bad Minneapolis.

**TS:** What’s up with that? Because there is almost a phobia in Richfield about Minneapolis.

**EG:** I didn’t really know how bad that was or really understand it until when the legislative line pushed south into Richfield/Bloomington. But Minneapolis people tend to dominate; they are very city- and neighborhood-oriented. We may be the largest portion of our legislative district. The 63rd senate district is all of Richfield and a big chunk of Bloomington and less of Minneapolis. The Minneapolis people turn out their folks in droves it makes our numbers look miniscule.
TS: So they roll over you.

EG: Right. And they don’t . . . things have gotten better since they’ve known us a little bit more and they’ve let us share in more of the Steering Committee and Central Committee work and whatever. But at first they just came in. They controlled.

TS: So there’s the big city and almost this . . . the country bumpkins here in Richfield?

EG: Yes. That’s a good way of putting it, because that’s true.

TS: And it’s amazing that . . . because they are so close and they are . . . Richfield is itself . . . well, you go across the border to south Minneapolis it doesn’t look much different. It’s almost the . . . but there’s definitely a feeling that Richfield is not as good as Minneapolis.

EG: Right. But I think the only school district that would even be open to merger would be Bloomington, because for some reason there’s this little thing with Edina, too.

TS: Yes. What’s up with that? I mean that’s another one where . . . I don’t get that.

EG: I think it is because Edina is affluent, and we are blue-collar working class.

TS: How do people in Richfield see themselves?

EG: I think we see ourselves as the little guy, the first ring.

TS: Little guy in an economic class sense as well?

EG: Yes. In land, seven square miles. In economics, in tax base, in just the way we live. I think it’s been that way for a long, long time.

TS: So we have the kind of wealthy bigs. We have Bloomington, Edina and Minneapolis on three sides, and the airport. And so “poor little Richfield” in the middle here feels, the way you’re describing it, as kind of dominated by these bigger, wealthier neighbors that know better.

EG: Yes.

TS: And that hasn’t gone away, that sense.

EG: No. Well, it hasn’t, but it’s gotten better because when I was in the legislature, like I said, we did a lot for Richfield. You know, the school superintendent Lowell Larson, and the city manager Jim Prosser . . . we really worked hard. The needs were as crucial when I got elected. At the time, with the players we had, things came together.

TS: In 1990. When you were elected in 1990.
EG: Right. We worked on the New Ford Town, Rich Acres, and MSP issues. The 77th Street detached frontage road. It’s a detached frontage road, which means it’s a block away from freeway, and that happened with partnerships between the city and the state and Martin Sabo. He brought in federal monies for Richfield.

TS: Oh, did he?

EG: Yes. So that really helped us a lot. And there are the developments we’ve had, and how we made that happen.

TS: Does that mean that for the next ten years, for Richfield as a community, you’re painting a positive picture?

EG: Yes. But we’ve got to think of ourselves. We have to change our image and think of ourselves as being in there, and being instrumental in making things happen. That’s one of the reasons why I managed Debbie Goettel’s campaign for mayor.

TS: Tell me about that.

EG: Because the mayor of Richfield wasn’t involved, and he relied a lot on city staff. He is a nice guy, and he was everywhere. He never came up with an idea or a thought; I expect initiative from my elected officials. He never took on anything controversial. I served with him on the council, and I serve with him on the Community Action Partnership Suburban Hennepin Board.

So . . . well, going back to the school district. They could either merge with Bloomington, or I think the other thing is, we would have to recognize who we really are, and that we’re diverse, we have free and reduced lunch and we are small, with only five schools. We have a lot of minority kids, and we have to think about their needs. If you look at the rating we got from the state or national rating services, we didn’t do very well. And everybody says yes, well, but. But no. We’re not taking care of the issues, and unless we start taking care of the issues and put a school board in there that reflects who the community is, and that is not afraid to talk about the issues, nothing is going to happen.

TS: Do you foresee that happening?

EG: No. Not in the immediate future.

TS: So Richfield will continue to be an increasingly diverse community that is represented by people who don’t look like that.

EG: Yes. I mean look at the city. We need human services. The cities of Bloomington, Eden Prairie and Edina have a FamiLink (like a local United Way 211). I don’t think that the Richfield city administration knows exactly what human services are. We don’t need to deliver direct services, but resources, referrals and information can and should be done. We need someone who knows about human services and who does not want to concentrate just on administrative type duties. The city council has to be realistic; right now they don’t get it.
**TS:** So there’s a fundamental struggle here.

**EG:** Yes. They just don’t know. We need someone who lives in Richfield, appreciates the residents we have and knows the broad services. That’s what I did as Community Resources Coordinator. People still call me; I knew the social services world, the philanthropic community, and the local and state governments. But the money that supported the position ceased. So the city should have, and can still do, what I did. You know, Richfield just still doesn’t get it: housing, basic needs, county services, pre-school, day care, mental health, health and wellness, legal services, multi-cultural services, senior citizen, social recreational and crisis, all these are services we need to direct residents to.

**TS:** Now Richfield seems to be . . . I’m going to posit another view here . . . 66th and Lyndale for example, one example of how Richfield is kind of fundamentally redefining itself, attracting . . . trying to attract a senior population. Is that a good, bad or indifferent kind of development?

**EG:** The only reason why I think its bad it’s because people like us can’t afford to live there. We own our home, but if we sold it we still could not afford to live in current senior housing. We don’t want a mortgage at our age.

**TS:** So there’s a class distinction with who they’re inviting in.

**EG:** Yes.

**TS:** Are they looking for tax base, Edwina? Is that what they’re looking for? I mean the city. The city, because those new units are owner-occupied. A number of those are.

**EG:** Yes. I think so. I think the city went in there thinking, we’re going to do great here. But the city has yet to accept the fact that we don’t have affordable housing. They think this house is affordable housing. But it’s really not. Because if we were to sell it, many people wouldn’t be able to afford to buy it.

**TS:** It’s affordable on the continuum of what all homes cost, but who can actually buy into even neighborhoods like this, or Midway St. Paul, that have become priced out of a lot of peoples’ incomes?

**EG:** Right. Exactly.

**TS:** So what you’re saying is, the city is not solving the problem of the lack of really affordable housing.

**EG:** No. If we wanted to sell this house for . . . I think it’s worth $260,000-$270,000, there’s no way that we could sell our home and pay for a condo in Richfield. We’d still have a mortgage.

**TS:** That’s not affordable housing, then, you’re saying.

**EG:** No, Not for us.
TS: The minority population moving into Richfield, is there lower cost housing, then, that these people are finding?

EG: Really, the only thing is the apartments . . .

TS: And a lot of those are going, you said.

EG: Yes. Oh, yes. There are some apartments right across from the water park in Bloomington—across I-494. The person has bought about three of those apartment buildings across the freeways in Richfield. Then look at all the apartments we got rid of there.

TS: On 66th?

EG: On Cedar.

TS: On Cedar, I mean. Yes.

EG: So we have apartments, and we have people that own a home with two other families.

TS: I see. Okay. So it’s really . . . it’s a hidden problem in some respects.

EG: Yes. When we sold our house there were five buyer co-signers. It was the parents, one grown child and two others relatives. The family could not afford to buy it on their own.

TS: Richfield has to be creative in building housing because it is built out in a sense. It has to either replace housing, or in the case of 66th and Lyndale, redevelop and build up.

EG: But Richfield has . . . I mean look at the housing. If you go down Lyndale into Bloomington, you will see housing on the right and the left that they’re building, and that’s affordable housing.

TS: But they don’t get that here, you say.

EG: No. I don’t know whether we don’t have the vision or whether we’re afraid. We don’t want to build housing for poor, needy families.

TS: What you’ve described is a city that’s very careful and measured in how they act and the way you’re describing them almost if push comes to shove to hunker down and kind of hope that the problem will go away somehow?

EG: Right. Well, like going back to the city, what the city is doing. I think they have one minority police officer. And they have someone that’s teaching the cops phrases and little bits of Spanish, or whatever. I don’t know that it’s anything formal or not. Now Hennepin County has gotten a chunk of LCTS monies. So they hired someone in Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center in pilot programs, part time people that they hope will be cops. And then another person to work with the cops as a community liaison with new immigrants and refugees.
Then Hennepin County offered the pilot program to Richfield. An outsider will probably be hired. Someone who doesn’t live in the Richfield community and understands the community and speaks the Spanish language. You need to be able to call anybody in Richfield and converse with them to find out what people think. One of the things I did when I was in elective office was to use the Richfield phone book, which is about that thick.

**TS:** Half an inch thick or something.

**EG:** Right. And small. So what I would do is I would look up some names and pick a name of someone I didn’t know.

**TS:** And just call them?

**EG:** Call them and say, “Hi. This is who I am, and I just wondered if you had any thoughts about how the community is going. Tell me a little bit about you, and how you feel.”

**TS:** Wow. That’s the way you get to know people, isn’t it?

**EG:** That’s the way you get to know your community.

**TS:** Sure it is. Yes.

**EG:** And people will be honest with you.

**TS:** Yes. People liked to be listened to. They want to feel that someone hears them. Thank you so much for this interview!