

Officers Row Memories Oral History Project



Kelly Puntenev

Role in Project: City of Vancouver landscape architect with Central Park Programs

Interviewed November 4, 2024 at the Marshall House, Vancouver, Washington, by Madeline Hagan, historian with Historical Research Associates

This interview transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity. To view the entire interview on YouTube, [click here](#).

Madeline Hagan: I am interviewing Kelly Puntenev. Kelly, would you please introduce yourself?

KP: I'm Kelly Puntenev. I've been here in Vancouver since 1971, which is over 50 years now. I came here from the University of Oregon as an intern for the city Parks and Recreation Department that summer, and have been here ever since. I worked for the City of Vancouver, and started with Central Park programs in '72.

MH: Tell me about that internship.

KP: That internship lasted three months. The trees that had been replanted after the Columbus Day Storm of '62 were starting to get to be the size where they needed more management and care. Between that and other public works projects, they asked me to come up. I am a parks and recreation major with an urban planning background. I never left.

MH: How did that internship lead into working for the city?

KP: They asked me to come back the next year because we had received a grant to build Marine Park. I spent the first couple of years doing that as well as working on trees throughout the community.

MH: Can you tell me how you got to work here in Central Park and Officers Row?

KP: Officers Row was a big part of what was going on. We'd heard about Officers Row for years because it was operated by the VA Hospital at the time and the buildings were falling apart and it was really quite depressing to drive down Evergreen. What was left of the older trees after the Columbus Day Storm were constantly crashing. We knew about the damage that had happened to the houses in the storm too. There was a lot of work to be done. It felt like this Row was going to be lost. Downtown had been devastated by taking old buildings down that had a lot of character and history in the community. So, saving those left was a high priority within the city.

MH: Tell me about the early days of this project at Officers Row.

KP: When we first started, the Marshall House was the local Red Cross chapter office. It was in pretty sad shape, and white with a red roof. Very Red Cross looking. I bought a house just at the end of the block here. So, I lived in the neighborhood, I drove this street all the time. With the Central Park Plan that was being pushed by city council, city council member Ethel Lehman and a whole group of people got together and wanted to see what we could do with the entire original military

base, which was about a mile square, the riverfront to Fourth Plain. There were 13 agencies that were trying to get to agree on everything. It was very difficult that time, but the City Council was very historically oriented. They were upset about the loss of a lot of the history downtown and the loss of trees, in the Columbus Day Storm. They had a group of architects and landscape architects come in from all over the country to do a seminar or retreat on what to do with the entire area. They decided the south end should be historic and based on the military, its history there, and the north end would be more recreational, educational. I sure enjoyed working with all the history.

I ended up in 1982 buying a house right at the end of Evergreen and live there today. It wasn't only the job, but it was a passion of mine to see this be successful.

We got started, and then we got stopped. First, the VA didn't want anything to do with the city taking the property. I think the Jimmy Carter administration agreed with having the city acquire the property, and we started working again. Then the administration changed and Reagan came in and he put everything on hold for a bit. That was just part of the politics of it all.

We had started with this house being a restaurant. Once we got back on track after the Reagan administration agreed that the city could take over the property, we started looking at it from a more historically accurate point of view. I designed the landscape. We infilled with new trees. In 1989, we had the project for the Washington State Centennial to plant trees here on Officers Row with a thousand or more fifth or sixth graders. Each school came and on Arbor Day of 1989, we had all those students here planting the trees. You see the plaques at each tree today from that planting. That was the start of a new generation of trees here. Those trees now are huge. At that time, it was a big deal. We tied the state's centennial to Arbor Day and Earth Day and did all that with the students, and now we've got another generation of trees.

Since that time, I've had students come up and say, "I remember when" they planted. These kids are grown up now, and they are the people that really know and feel an ownership to this.

MH: Tell me about working with historic landscapes.

KP: We chose here to go ahead with the big-leaf maples and plant other trees along the other side of the Row. In some cases, you'll see some other trees. There were things like the big rhododendron out here that were already planted.

We were involved in the major Nihonga art exhibit. I staffed the city landscape commission. They wanted to do a landscape exhibit as part of the art exhibit that was here in the house. We put a whole exhibit in on the east side of the house as part of that summer exhibit. Then that stuff all moved over to the Japanese Gardens in Portland except for the one big lace-leaf maple right out here on the corner. It's huge now and it's beautiful.

Basically, when we went forward with projects, we were pretty much tied to what historic photos showed. Down at the Grant House, I did the design based on photographs where the sidewalk splits, doubles around a little entrance there from the sidewalk. We sold brick pavers in there to pay for that. Brick pavers aren't historic at all but they decided to leave that alone because of the look of the project.

Then we did the little plaques all along the Row as a fundraiser. I bought one of those close to my front yard.

Then after that project, the O.O. Howard House came a little later. Photographs certainly did dictate what we did. The plaza on the northeast side didn't comply, but served the purpose of being able to have events outside of the building. We planted a lot of trees, and we did the rose garden out there based on Ed Lynch's desires. The benches that we put in were a special period design that was developed by the local Cascade Company. We called them the Renaissance Benches because I was also doing the Waterfront Renaissance project. We bought them for along the waterfront and here, and they're still here today.

I also was involved in what we called the Historic Walking Loop. That was a two-and-a-half mile route before the land bridge was built. We had hoped the land bridge would be built 15, 20 years before it was. We couldn't wait for that, so we did a loop that allowed us to go down around the Pearson Air Park and under the railroad tracks. Had an opening already there along the waterfront and came up through downtown and back through Officers Row with its looping.

Another project that I was involved in is the Evergreen Arboretum. It was dedicated in '79 but it took quite a few years. That was all privately funded and done before we really had acquired the surrounding property. That project was kicked off from wanting to honor a head of the Democratic Party and a head of the Republican Party in this community who both died the same year. The widows were both tree advocates, Silva Bolds and Betty Avery. They got a group together and came to the city and said they wanted to do something honorific and dealing with trees. Jean Norwood, a former city council member, led the charge. I was the staff person. We got that started under the Chamber of Commerce, and not as a nonprofit. Eventually it got tied to the Community Foundation. We were one of the first funds of the foundation back under Mary Granger, back in, I guess it was probably '82, or '83.

This past summer we closed that account and used the remaining money to reroof that little gazebo down here at the end of Officers Row that still remains the Evergreen Arboretum. We moved the thought of the Evergreen Arboretum to a property down on the old Evergreen Highway, to the Jane Weber Evergreen Arboretum, and merged those two into one. Now it's a nonprofit down there but the roots started right here on Officers Row.

MH: Tell me about the design here on Officers Row for the arboretum.

KP: I worked with local designers and the first trees that were put on there came from down here on Evergreen when the street was widened. We moved cherry trees. There's still two of them there. Then every year we would plant another tree on Arbor Day. Most every tree that was planted in there was celebrating Arbor Day on the second Tuesday in April of every year. We had a number of memorial funds that came to us. We built the gazebo first. There are bricks with names of the donors. I believe in about '92, we did that beautiful bronze art piece that's in the pond there. Now the area here is managed by The Trust.

MH: Tell me more about the change to the National Reserve.

KP: I sat in on all the early meetings when it was the five agencies - the Army, state historical society, city, federal government and Park Service. We were dealing with Pearson Air Park, the Row,

O.O. Howard House, all that and how that would be administered, plus taking on more of the property as the Army stepped away. Many, many long meetings. John Marshall was involved. I went to be assistant to the city manager in 1991, or '90, '91, somewhere in that era. I was there till '95 or '96, and that period of time is when we were developing all that. It came together slowly but surely. There were ups and downs with that but it all, I think, came out in pretty good shape. Today's program by The Historic Trust is based on that work that was done. It's good to know that they're doing things like what we're doing today to keep this history alive because it is a pretty amazing project. Certainly, it's a great model for others to follow and I'm glad to be part of it.

I spent a good 30 years of my life working on it. Of course, I live right at the end of the Row today, and still get to appreciate everything that's growing. It's good to see the third generation of street trees being put in, and the one immediately out front here that is one of the originals. I'm glad it's healthy and alive still because a lot of them weren't.

MH: As a planner at the beginning of this project, what was it like to work with other interest groups?

KP: Of course, everybody had their idea of what it should be but because we were using the regulations that were required of historic structures, we all had to come to the same conclusion. Pat Stryker and I, Steve Burdick, Bill Macht and all of us, got to know each other real well through the whole process. It all went well in the long run. There were lots and lots of concerns about budgets. It's a beautiful project now.

One of the people that I really give a lot of credit to is Don Bonker. He was the congressman in this area at that time and a good friend of mine. He just passed away a year ago and I'm doing a memorial for him down at the Stanger House where he lived and was married years ago, 50 years ago last year. He was a critical part of the funding to make this work. There's always been great support from Washington, DC, for this project.

Back when we first started this, Magnuson and Jackson were the senators. Very powerful people. They helped make this thing happen, too, because of their commitment to the area and the Row and understanding the federal government's part in that. Of course you go way back to the congressmen before that, there were people really committed to seeing this all saved as the Army was retreating from the area.

MH: Tell me about being a project manager for the O.O. Howard House.

KP: Well, I was in it late in the game. It was pretty well on its way to being complete but somebody had to sign the papers and keep the thing moving. I was just on the maybe last six months or a year of the project. I guess my interest was as much about the grounds around it. Of course, Ed Lynch had his vision. I believe he paid for the benches that went in there. I'm almost sure the six benches around the rose garden were going to be sold to various people to have their name put on them.

Of course, the National Park Service doesn't really like to do that. That's kind of against their regulations but most of this happened before they really got involved. I can understand their point. But you know, when you're scraping for money, you've kind of got to do what you've got to do to keep things moving as long as you're not doing damage to the historical stories. We did put a bench right outside the O.O. Howard House for Ed Lynch. He was a very powerful guy who had a vision

for the property and really made a lot of things happen. I didn't feel like I was stepping too much out of line to do that for him. That was for his eightieth birthday, if I remember correctly. Now, I'm working on the Stanger House. That's the oldest house in Clark County on its original location. I've done several of my own houses. I have the passion for historic preservation. Plus I was, for a couple of years, assigned as the arts and cultural facilitator for the city. I had an office over upstairs in the back of the Grant House. It was a little out of my league but I did have an art degree. That was like herding cats, though, with arts people. They're all very independent. We started the Officers Row Ghost Stories here. That was a big annual event we started in October where various things were going on in different houses. It was a big hit for a few years.

The '70s were a time of a lot of exposure to this area. I got to know a lot of people and they were really passionate about this property. Probably city government couldn't do now what we did at that time.

MH: Tell me more about the actual process. We've heard from a few other interviewees about archaeology that was discovered and all that kind of stuff.

KP: That was why we were held back on landscaping. Like when we were planting for the Nihonga exhibit, we had be careful what we dug into out on this side of the house. The archaeologists had to do everything they wanted to do before we were allowed to come in and do anything. I do know that there were a lot of things found that were interesting. It was a big topic as we moved along but it also slowed things down and also frustrated a lot of people. "When are you going to get done with this thing?" Cost overruns and things like that were a big deal. So, we had to try to be as good communicators to the community as possible. All in all, we had such good support for the property that it worked out fine.

MH: Tell me about how you see the role of Fort Vancouver, Officers Row, Central Park, in the larger Vancouver community?

KP: Well, it's kind of the heart of everything. It's what really started things. Fort Vancouver, the Hudson's Bay Company, that was the beginning of it all. Of course, we used this building for so many of the events. I can't tell you how many receptions we had here in this building. Good seeing the houses brought back - I don't know that we'd be able to do it today. Maybe, but it's hard to say. I would say a good 25% of my time in those early years was put to this area. And, we had a whole city to deal with, so that was a good chunk of my time.

MH: What was your favorite memory working on Officers Row?

KP: You know, there was a favorite memory probably of each decade because there were a lot of decades in there. That event that we had for Arbor Day in 1989 would probably be the most impactful to the community from my point of view of what I was in charge of seeing success on. But we had a lot of others, too. The Nihonga exhibit, they only did that a few places around the world. In the bigger scheme, I have 36 years of a lot of events, a lot of things that happened. I would say Officers Row was one of the biggest, most exciting. The waterfront was the biggest for me but Officers was right up there, second in line to the waterfront.

MH: Pat Jollota told us, I don't know if it's a secret or not, that in every park that you worked on, there's a pine tree. Can you tell us about that?

KP: Well, I tried to always put in a coast pine as a signature piece in every park.

MH: Is there a coast pine in Officers Row?

KP: There is.

MH: Where is it?

KP: I'll let you find it.

MH: Are there any questions that you wish that I had asked you?

KP: Well, I'm just pleased that you guys are doing this. It's so important to capture this history. I just had a very good friend pass away that's younger than me who had a lot of history. I appreciate what Holly and The Trust are doing to capture this history. It is certainly one of the finer moments of Vancouver. The Historic Trust is still alive and well and a lot of good people have come and gone from there. They still have work to do, and they're on the right track. I want the model we did to live on because I think other communities could learn from this.