

Mill Valley Oral History Program
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BOB CANEPA

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Mari Allen in 2014**

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Son of Mill Valley Market founder and owner Frank Canepa, Robert (Bob) Canepa is a lifelong resident of Marin County. Born at Ross Hospital in 1947, Bob recounts his memories of working in his family grocery store and what life was like growing up in Mill Valley with his older siblings, Jim and Marilyn ("Patsy"). Bob discusses the impact of serving in the U.S. Marine Corps following his graduations from St. Ignatius High School and the University of San Francisco. The leadership skills he acquired in the Marine Corps served Bob well when he became a partner in the Mill Valley Market in 1975. During his tenure at the Market, Bob was involved in Kiddo!, the Mill Valley Schools Community Foundation, where, in 1987, he launched the Kiddo! Business Partnership Program. Along with his wife Reggie, Bob has two sons and two grandchildren (with one more due). Bob discusses his post-retirement love of travel and his volunteer involvement with the Mill Valley Rotary Club, The Redwoods, and the Center for Volunteer Non-Profit Leadership.

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Oral History of Bob Canepa
November 17, 2014

Mari Allen: Good afternoon, Bob.

Bob Canepa: Hi Mari, glad to be here.

Mari Allen: Yes, welcome. Can you please start our conversation by telling me about where and when you were born, and a little bit about your family's history in Mill Valley?

Bob Canepa: I was born on September 2nd, 1947, at the old Ross Hospital, which was torn down two or three decades ago I'm guessing. And my father came, let me actually backtrack -. My father actually came to Marin on the old ferry system way back when in the early '20s I'm guessing, or mid '20s. One day on one of his trips to the country visits he got lost and somehow ended up in Mill Valley. He fell in love with it, and at that time he had a store in San Francisco on the corner of Cole and Carl Street in San Francisco, near Kezar Stadium.

Mari Allen: Was that a grocery store?

Bob Canepa: That was a grocery store, and it was kind of in the middle of the Haight-Ashbury area a little bit, on the edge of the Haight-Ashbury.

Mari Allen: What was your father's name?

Bob Canepa: Frank Canepa.

Mari Allen: Okay.

Bob Canepa: Then he decided to come and open a store in Mill Valley. And so he came over on July 4th, 1929. It just so happens that's when the Great Fire was hitting Mill Valley at the exact same time – not an auspicious start at all. He got off the train and they were literally conscripting all able-bodied men off the train. He had a brand new grey suit on, a fancy new suit to open the new store and they drafted him into fighting the fire, and he didn't even get a chance to go into the store, and literally trucked them up to the mountain. He fought the fire all day. I don't know how many days he did that, but his suit was utterly destroyed. But anyway, he went on to open the store.

Mari Allen: Where was the location of the first store?

Bob Canepa: It was next to City Bank on Throckmorton Avenue right where the Hat Box used to be located. That was in 1929, and also not an auspicious year to start because that was also the year, the start of the Great Depression in October. At that time there were a goodly number of little mom and pop markets in Mill Valley and downtown Mill Valley and along Miller Avenue. I'm going to guess at that time there was probably

10 or 12 little markets in the Mill Valley area, and his emphasis was on produce and, top-quality produce and top service to his customers.

Mari Allen: When he opened the store was it called Mill Valley Market?

Bob Canepa: It was called Mill Valley Market, right. He walked the extra mile for his customers. He did everything he possibly could and especially during the Depression years. They either traded, bartered or gave food to Mill Valley residents. When I was younger in my teen years and college years and later, 20s and 30s, a lot of the Mill Valley residents would come up to me and stop me and say, "If it wasn't for your mother and father, we would have starved during the Depression," because they gave away a lot of food and carried a lot of people for a long time and sometimes never got paid. That was a different time, but my father always taught us about giving back to our community and so that was instilled in me at an early age. But anyway, that's how the store got started and it became part of the fabric of Mill Valley.

Mari Allen: And was he married to your mother at the time?

Bob Canepa: I don't know what year they got married. I think they were married then, I'm not sure. My mother was a surgical nurse at Franklin Hospital in San Francisco. And so my father came over to the U.S. in 1912 when he was only 16 years old.

Mari Allen: From where?

Bob Canepa: From Varazze, Italy. I've been there many times. You know my mother came over in the early '20s and she was from Bremen, Germany.

Mari Allen: What was her name?

Bob Canepa: Kaethe Canepa, K-a-e-t-h-e Canepa, and they met in San Francisco in the, I'm guessing somewhere in the mid to late '20s and got married. It was kind of an odd combination because you had the more fun-loving Italian father, but very disciplined in terms of work ethic, and my very disciplined mother from Northern Germany, very strong work ethic. So I started working at an early age, I think I was around 7 ½, 8 years old.

Mari Allen: Did you have siblings?

Bob Canepa: I had an older brother, Jim, who was 15 years older than I am and an older sister Marilyn – Patsy we called her. She was 12 years older, and so I was kind of the surprise child. I mean when I was born, they told my mother there was three things: You either have polio, cancer, or you're pregnant, and she didn't know which was the worst scenario at the time because she was in her early 40s and that was really unusual in those days to have a child at that age. It was interesting because my brother and sister were so much older, I was just kind of left on my own to do whatever I wanted and I explored and I don't think my parents knew where I was most of the time.

Mari Allen: And was your home at the time near the store? Where was your home?

Bob Canepa: We lived on Oakdale Avenue, 277 Oakdale Avenue about, oh, a 10-minute walk, 10-, 15-minute walk from our home to Mill Valley Market. In late 1954, we moved from the old location on Throckmorton to our present location on Corte Madera Avenue and it was a much smaller store then. I remember, it was called The Green Frog Market and it was only the first four aisles and the little barn in back. The barn was the warehouse. I remember what was interesting about the market was there were green frogs everywhere – on the walls, the doors, I mean just green, giant green frogs. Everywhere you looked there were green frogs.

Bob Canepa: Then over the years, later on, I want to say in the late '60s, we expanded into the next three aisles and then in the mid '70s we expanded over next to the creek. There used to be other property where the deli and wine is today.

Mari Allen: So was that another store at the time?

Bob Canepa: There were a number of stores. There was a café. There was a little pet shop. There was a little, tiny insurance shop. And then there was the famous Quinn's Bar, you know which is a Mill Valley landmark and either Jimmy Quinn hated you or he loved you. There was no anywhere in between, and if you had long hair, if you were a hippie, he would throw you out with a lot of expletives. I mean I remember being in there when he would throw out the hippies.

Mari Allen: Oh that's funny. So tell me where you went to elementary school.

Bob Canepa: I actually, I went to the old Mount Carmel on the corner of Blithedale.

Mari Allen: Which is now the Greenwood School?

Bob Canepa: Greenwood School, exactly. And my father was Catholic so we ended up going there. Well actually I went to – in kindergarten, maybe first grade – Park and then went on to Mount Carmel. My parents were really big on education, and so I don't know why it was me but I went to Saint Ignatius in San Francisco. My brother and –

Mari Allen: How did you get there at the time? Were there buses or –

Bob Canepa: I would take a Greyhound bus from downtown; it was then the bus depot, which is now Depot –.

Mari Allen: Where Depot Square is.

Bob Canepa: Right, so I would take it there from Lombard Street and then catch the Fillmore bus over to McAllister and then catch the 5 McAllister from there to the old S.I., Saint Ignatius campus on Stanyon Street.

Mari Allen: Oh, okay.

Bob Canepa: Which is now, that campus is now part of USF. So it was a good long commute each way. Then a good part of high school I would work after school and weekends as well. It was a very competitive learning environment to put it mildly, plus working. So I had kind of an unusual childhood because the only time I really got to play is if we were visiting family in Italy.

Mari Allen: Oh.

Bob Canepa: So I actually probably have more childhood friends in Italy than I do here. When I go to Italy, we have these big reunions with all my childhood friends.

Mari Allen: So do you speak Italian?

Bob Canepa: I used to speak better. Let's put it this way, I used to speak semi-fluently when I was 4, and 8, and 12, and less so as I got into college.

Mari Allen: So did your father speak to you in Italian?

Bob Canepa: No, unless he was swearing at me.

Mari Allen: Okay. And what about your mother, did she speak to you in German?

Bob Canepa: No.

Mari Allen: Do you speak any German at all?

Bob Canepa: No, zero.

Mari Allen: Oh.

Bob Canepa: In fact I never went to visit the family in Germany; I don't know why it evolved that way. The only time my mother really relaxed was when she was in Italy. When we were home, it was always work, work, work. So if I wasn't working at the store, we were washing windows or polishing shoes or cleaning. You know whatever it was, you always, you didn't have much idle time.

Mari Allen: When did you start working at the cash registers? Were you young or –?

Bob Canepa: Oh cash registers, probably late teens I'm guessing. I don't even remember because I – my first experience in the Mill Valley Market was sweeping the floor, and the broom was way taller than I was, and I remember my father yelling at me I wasn't doing it right, and cleaning toilets. I mean I did every crummy job there was to do.

Mari Allen: Were your brother and sister working there as well?

Bob Canepa: My brother was a lot older, so he was already in the business at that point and my sister never worked in the business. She was, she lucked out somehow. She was very lucky. But anyway, I delivered groceries in high school and college when we needed a delivery truck, and I'd work in the work stock and then later on did other duties when I got older and wiser – you know, more equipped.

Mari Allen: So after S.I. where did you go?

Bob Canepa: Then I went to the University of San Francisco. So I graduated from S.I. in 1965, and being from a good Jesuit high school I went to a good Jesuit college, which actually served me well later when I went into the Marine Corps because the Jesuits were, in my opinion, the religious equivalent of the Marine Corps. Very hard core, very disciplined but it served me well.

Mari Allen: What was your major there?

Bob Canepa: It was history, and political science minor, and I'm still a huge history buff and political science buff.

Mari Allen: Did you live on the campus or did you live at home still?

Bob Canepa: I lived on campus in one of the dorms, and my junior year I spent in Rome, Italy. So I went over right at the tail end of sophomore year and came back right before the start of my senior year. So I was there for about 14 months. Then I graduated from USF in '69, but the highlight for me was the year in Europe. I traveled everywhere and got in so much trouble. If my kids did what I did, I would kill them. I mean I was almost shot in Algeria and we were pistol whipped and robbed and –

Mari Allen: You're saying "we," who were you traveling with?

Bob Canepa: Oh, I was traveling with a friend of mine across North Africa by car, and was beaten up by a riot in Rome, and I was in Czechoslovakia and Prague right before the Russian tanks came in that summer of '68.

Mari Allen: Did your parents know about any of these escapades at all?

Bob Canepa: No. In fact my father was in Europe when I started my junior year in Rome and he came down to Rome with me and he gave me a wad of cash and he said, "This is for books." I don't know why he said this but he said, "Don't use this money to buy a motorcycle." And I never once, ever, ever mentioned to him anything about a motorcycle. So literally the next day my roommate and I, we go down and buy a motorcycle and we each pay half. And the funny part was, I never told my parents about the motorcycle, but at the end of my stay in Europe, my last few weeks I was visiting my family in Northern Italy, in Varazze, Italy, and I gave the motorcycle to my uncle. He

loved it, and he was so grateful and blah, blah, blah. It wasn't until my father's next visit, he says to my father, he says, "Look at the beautiful motorcycle that Bob gave me. Isn't that wonderful?" Of course I was older and there wasn't much my father could do at that point. But so they never knew about most of this stuff that I – in fact they knew very little what I did, only the good stuff.

Mari Allen: Oh of course, of course. What you sent back in letters and post cards.

Bob Canepa: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Mari Allen: So after UCSF what happened, where did you go?

Bob Canepa: Not UCSF, USF.

Mari Allen: Oh, USF pardon me, I'm sorry, USF.

Bob Canepa: Well, so I graduated, I guess it was May of '69, and the Vietnam War was still hot and heavy, and I'm trying to stay out of the draft and I go to the draft board and said, "I want to go to law school." I didn't really want to but I was thinking three years to keep me out of law school, and they said, "No, we'll give you one year." Okay, fine, so I applied to Dominican University. I went for one year and got a secondary teaching credential just to keep me out of the draft. Then I go back to –

Mari Allen: In history?

Bob Canepa: Oh, no it was just a secondary teaching credential but I was specializing in history, yeah.

Mari Allen: Okay.

Bob Canepa: I did student teaching at San Rafael High School for senior class and a freshman class while I was there. So when I got my teaching credential, I go back to the draft board and they said, "We're going to draft you now."

Mari Allen: And what year was that?

Bob Canepa: This was probably June of 1970. So instead of getting drafted I volunteered for the Marine Corps. I said, "If I got to go, I want to go with the best," which I thought was the best. I'm a little prejudiced. So – but I went on a delayed enlistment program. I don't know how it worked out that way. So I officially entered the Marine Corps. I flew back to the old Reagan – National Airport – I'm trying to think of what it was called then. I flew into National and on Valentine's Day 1971, I found it a rather ironic date. It's Marine Corps humor. It's best picking Valentine's Day and went into the Marine Corps, and that was really my best education ever.

Mari Allen: Why do you say that?

Bob Canepa: In terms of growing up and maturing, and learning leadership. A good example would be, I showed up with what I call California sideburns down to here, and this big, bushy mustache and, well, fairly long hair, which was not very bright. There was only one other moron and myself who showed up with a big mustache and sideburns. Our drill instructor marched us into the bathroom and had us get our shaving gear, and he sat there with a stopwatch and he says, “You have 30 seconds to shave your mustache and sideburns.” Both of us were bleeding like stuffed pigs because in 30 seconds, you can’t do that. And so it was, but it was a good learning curve for me, and it was a lot of fun. So I went through Officer Candidate School and I found out literally the last week – because as I was about ready to graduate and become a young 2nd lieutenant, whenever we went on hikes because we did a lot of marching and a lot of hiking and come back and my feet were always bleeding. The Navy corpsman said, “You know, you have flat feet, you shouldn’t even be here.” And I’m going, “Well, okay, that’s a little late.” But he said, “You can get out.” I said, “No, I don’t want to get out now, I have no intention.” But it was interesting, I find out literally a few days before becoming a Marine Corps officer. So then after that I went through six months of what they call the Basic School. So I’m a young 2nd lieutenant and they teach you a little bit of everything, a lot of infantry tactics, and maneuvers, and compass readings, and maps, but a lot of leadership. It was ironic because years later I was watching the Iran-Contra hearings and I looked at one of the people on the TV screen, and it was Ollie North who was one of the principal figures in the Iran-Contra. He was one of the instructors at Quantico.

Mari Allen: Really?

Bob Canepa: I looked him and said, “I know him,” but couldn’t figure out where it was from. But that was a good learning experience, and then I had, at the end of that six months before I could – I was scheduled to start artillery school, and so I worked on base there doing, I think a month and a half or something like that, I was doing demolitions. They taught me how to blow things up and it was fun. That part was really fun. And I worked for a young Italian American captain named Captain Fasullo and he taught me how to basically steal from the other branches of the military. So I would go up to Fort Belvoir or wherever with forged documents and we would literally liberate massive quantities of lumber, and generators, and other equipment from the other branches of the service. I’d go up there with a couple of five-ton trucks and literally have their personnel even load the material for us, and it was the ultimate bluff, and I don’t know what would have happened if I ever got caught but it served me well in Okinawa. I’ll get more into that later. So then in January, I went home for Christmas, and then in January I started artillery school at Fort Sill.

Mari Allen: Where’s that?

Bob Canepa: Oklahoma. Lawton, Oklahoma, which is one of the armpits of the universe. It was not a very nice place to live or be but it was good artillery training and I learned a lot, and I made a lot of good friends there. But the interesting part for me was that when I was choosing my military occupational specialty – they call it M.O.S. – I knew I didn’t want to be infantry because you had to walk and carry these heavy packs

on your back and I said, “That’s not for me. I’m lazy.” So I said, “Well, I’ll pick artillery because I want to be in a combat arm but I didn’t want to walk there.” So I said, “I’ll have my own driver and jeep.” But I didn’t realize you’re supposed to be good in math. I never thought that far ahead. And so I get to Fort Sill and there’s a lot of math, and fortunately, I had a couple friends who were good in math and helped me. But it was challenging and it was a good learning experience for me in that sense because I didn’t realize I could rise to that level of math skills. I really am still terrible at math, but I somehow managed to make it through there and I actually graduated fairly well in my class. Oh, I left something out of the story. In October, before I left Quantico, Virginia, where I was going through after Basic School, I met my – I was going on a blind date. My roommate wanted to go to the Marine Corps Birthday Ball.

Mari Allen: And Quantico is in Virginia?

Bob Canepa: Quantico, Virginia, I’m sorry. I assume everybody knows that but they don’t. So he wanted to do a blind date, and up to this point I had been dating some rather – how should I put this? – dimwitted women in D.C., and you know they were nice and everything.

Mari Allen: But not so intellectual.

Bob Canepa: Not too bright. And because you’re a young Marine officer and you think you’re hot stuff, and I’ve got my, I had a Pontiac Firebird, a used Pontiac Firebird, you think you’re pretty cool and all that stuff. Then my roommate wants me to do this blind date with him, and he was dating at the time, the daughter of the commanding officer at the Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia. And he says, “My girlfriend’s got a friend that you’d really like to meet,” and blah, blah, blah. But the Marine Corps Birthday is rather expensive. So we did a pre-date to see whether we wanted to spend the money to go on the Marine Corps Birthday Ball. So we did the pre-date and we actually went out to the Kennedy Center and saw a play that night and had a great time, and I knew the moment when I met my wife. I didn’t say, I shouldn’t say that, “the moment I met her,” but I knew almost immediately that this was definitely the best woman I had ever met in my life.

Mari Allen: And what is your wife’s name?

Bob Canepa: My wife’s name is, well her name was Regina Reed at the time, and I met her and I was just blown away with her. I just thought this was so cool. So we probably met in late October, and then in late December I go home for the holidays and I start artillery school in January. As I was leaving Quantico, Virginia, to drive to Fort Sill, I hadn’t planned this. I happened to drive by a florist shop and I stopped the car and I got out and I sent her this huge bouquet or arrangement of flowers and said, “I miss you,” or something like this. I can’t remember what I put on the card.

Mari Allen: And is she from Virginia?

Bob Canepa: She was living and working in Woodbridge, or she was living in Woodbridge, Virginia, working nearby. She was a teacher.

Mari Allen: And that's originally where she's from?

Bob Canepa: She's from a Navy family so she lived a lot of different places. In fact, her father was in Pearl Harbor when it was bombed by the Japanese. So we talked on the phone when I was home on leave, and then when I was at Fort Sill we talked on the phone. I flew back. So we dated from October 'til December, and nothing formal when I left, it was just kind of "bye," and we talked on the phone a lot. Then I went back one long weekend in January to visit and then one long weekend in February. I believe it was President's weekend, I went back there kind of spur of the moment and proposed. This is to somebody I'd only known for a few months, literally. And kind of a, well it wasn't kind of, it was rather extremely impulsive you know, but I guess I knew in my heart this was the right thing. And it was interesting, I proposed, well I didn't even make a formal proposal, we were just talking one night and I said – because I thought at the time I was going to Vietnam. I was 99% certain I was going to Vietnam. I said, "When I get back from Vietnam, what do you think about getting married?" and blah, blah, blah, "and doing this?". I caught her totally off guard. She says, "Well, let me think about this, you surprised me." So the next night we had dinner with her parents who were salt of the earth. It was Betty and Jim Reed, and they were just wonderful, wonderful people. I couldn't have gotten better in-laws, they were just fantastic. We had dinner with them, and in the meantime she's telling her mother, "Bob proposed to me last night." After we left to go back down to her place, the mother tells the father, calls the sister in Florida. The gist of the conversation with the mother – she asked her mother, "What should I do?" And her mother said, "Well, do you love him?" And she says, "Yes." And you know, blah, blah, blah. So her family knew the answer before I did. So by the time we got down to her place in Virginia –

Mari Allen: They all knew.

Bob Canepa: They all knew, and it was kind of comical. But I had this huge bug-a-boo about being crippled. I had a lot of friends killed or seriously wounded in Vietnam and I didn't want to get married before I went over because – I didn't mind dying. In some weird thing in my head, dying didn't scare me as much as being crippled because I had been in the hospital wards and seen the wounded – missing legs, and arms, and body parts. So I said, "If I come back in one piece and I'm healthy, I'd like to get married." That was the agreement because I didn't want her to be responsible for some cripple. It was just my male ego I guess. So I finished artillery school in, I guess April, something like that and then I went overseas. The staging point for Vietnam at that time was Okinawa. That was where the 3rd Marine Division was headquartered at the time. And so I was sent over there and I joined a 155 towed Howitzer battery. I was a fire direction officer/communications officer/supply officer/blah, blah, blah. You know I was a young, green Marine, 2nd Lieutenant, and I remember checking in with my new boss, and the procedure was you snapped to in front of his desk, and you would salute and blah, blah, blah. And he said, "You must be the worst officer in the Marine Corps that I've ever

seen,” and he starts yelling and screaming at me and I thought I was – boy, what’s in my record book that indicated you know. And at the end, he’s just, “Oh, I’m just toying with you.” But I thought he was serious, and he was a wild man and his name was Captain Paul Roberts. And it was ironic because later on when he was leaving change of duty stations, well even while he was still there, I was going out and stealing stuff. Well, I shouldn’t say stealing. I was liberating U.S. Military equipment from other branches of the military.

Mari Allen: As you learned earlier, yes.

Bob Canepa: As I learned earlier while I was at Quantico. So I would go down – we needed a generator or we needed paint, or whatever we needed, I would go to some other Army or Navy Seabee base. I don’t know if I went to Kadena or not, I can’t remember, which is a big air base on Okinawa, but I remember going onto the Seabee base one day and we had one or two five-ton trucks, and the Navy guard didn’t salute properly. So I said, “This is good. This will work to my advantage.” So I got out and chewed him a new one. So when we were there, he expedited all of the loading for us, and so they actually did all of the loading of all the equipment and all the paint and gear that we liberated. It was kind of – we had this big commanding general inspection right after that, and the Marine Corps splices and we were always at the bottom of the food chain. We were always the last to get anything, but all our vehicles had brand new paint. We were the only unit on the entire island, the Marine Corps unit that had brand new paint. And the commanding general was doing the inspection, he said, “How is it that Kilo Battery has the only painted vehicles?” So it was kind of a difficult situation because it was hard to explain how we had the green paint and nobody else did, but it worked out.

Mari Allen: So how long were you on Okinawa for?

Bob Canepa: So I got on Okinawa in, within three or four days later, I’m on a ship to Japan and we landed at Yokosuka Beach there.

Mari Allen: Near Tokyo?

Bob Canepa: Near Tokyo, and there were thousands of anti-war protesters on the island waiting for us. They were lined up against the sea wall and that’s how it was. Then we drove from there up to Camp Fuji Japan, and we were literally right on the base of the mountain. My recollections of Fuji were cold, wet, and windy most of the time and I remember lava coming out of your sinuses continuously. I mean, you blew your nose and there was lava coming out. But we were there, I don’t know, I want to say two or three months, then we went back to Okinawa. And I remember we were on the beach at Yokosuka. I said Yokosuka? I meant Numazu. Did I say? Anyway, I meant Numazu Beach, and it was a typhoon or something was hitting, I don’t know what it was going on but they couldn’t get the ships in to load us. And we were sleeping underneath the vehicles and we were – it was torrential downpours and we were totally filthy, and we were there for three or four nights. I had never been so wet. We were just soaking wet all the time and dirty. We were covered in engine oil and I remember boarding the ship

early in the morning, and then the captain was real nice and we were the only Marine unit aboard there, and he let us come into the officer's mess just the way we were. He said, "Don't change." We were dry at this point because by the time we got all the vehicles loaded. I remember sitting down for lunch, and there were four Marine officers with, I don't know, 15, 20 Navy officers or whatever was aboard there, I don't remember, and we were ravenous. We were eating like you wouldn't believe. We hadn't had fresh food in weeks. We'd been living on c-rations and somebody mentioned to us, "How can you guys eat that icky food?" And I looked around the table and said, "Who might you be?" And he says, "I'm midshipman Jones from Annapolis on my training cruise." And I remember telling him, I said, "To you, my name is 'Sir' and I want you to know, this is the best food we've had in months," you know since we were last on ship. But anyway, I loved being aboard ship because we could – it was very light duty and we did some training and stuff but we had good food and that's one of my –

Mari Allen: Best memories.

Bob Canepa: We also gambled a lot.

Mari Allen: Now did you ever go to Vietnam?

Bob Canepa: No, I was lucky.

Mari Allen: So how long were you in Japan before you went home?

Bob Canepa: So I was in Okinawa for a few days, Japan for about two or three months, back to Okinawa for two or three, four months, whatever it was. Then back to Japan and I actually went back and forth one time as pay officer, but I flew home from Japan.

Mari Allen: And when was that?

Bob Canepa: That was in 1972.

Mari Allen: And where was Reggie [wife Regina] at the time?

Bob Canepa: She was living still in Virginia. But one thing I do remember in Japan, when I was at Camp Fuji, I was pay officer one time. Uncle Sam would pay us in bills, everything, all brand new bills, and I remember going into town to convert the U.S. dollars into Yen. And I don't remember how much money I had with me, but tens of thousands of dollars and we would go in a convoy of three jeeps and, you can imagine doing this in Mill Valley. Each jeep had a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on there.

Mari Allen: Oh my gosh, yeah.

Bob Canepa: And loaded with pay guards and I have a .45 caliber pistol on my hip and a briefcase full of money. And we peel up in front of the bank and face outward with the three jeeps, with all this armor. I mean it's a vivid memory of being in Japan and

everybody kind of staring at you because it was just a security concern. But anyway, I came back to the States in 1972. Excuse me, yeah, no, '73, okay '73. Let me backtrack a little because I always requested Hawaii as my first duty station and they always sent me my third duty station. You know there were three choices, and so when I went to Okinawa – I put Hawaii, they sent me to Okinawa. When I came to the States, I put down Hawaii and they sent – my third choice was 29 Palms, which is about an hour north of Palm Springs – and so they sent me to 29 Palms, which it turned out to be great. I had had a lot of nuclear training when I was in Okinawa. I was one of the very, very, almost nonexistent officers that had nuclear training. It was just starting up then and I was assigned to Mike Battery. And as I was walking down the hall to take my, to report in, I met another young lieutenant and he said, “Where are you headed?” I said, “I’m going to Mike Battery,” and he says, “You’re screwed.” He says, “That’s the worst boss you possibly could get. He’s literally fired the last three or four XO’s before you in the last four months.” He said “Nobody lasts more than a month, he’s a bigot.” I can’t use the expletives, but –

Mari Allen: But imagine, we can imagine what he said.

Bob Canepa: Yeah, he used a lot of expletives in describing this guy, and I met him and instantly disliked him, and we had a lot of run-ins. The scary part is, we were the nuclear contingency battery, the first to go in the world with low-grade nuclear weapons, and this unit was in really bad shape. It was one of the worst Marine units I’d ever seen. And we butted heads for several, the first two, three, or four weeks and I finally – we had a blowout argument one night and I said, “Just get off my back and let me do my job and we’ll make some changes here.” And I had to use some rather innovative techniques but we got the job done. I got back stateside in April or got down there, so this is April of '73, and basically I got rid of most of the noncommissioned officers. He had somehow ended up with some of the worst ones I’d ever seen. Anyway, we did a lot of training out there in the desert, a lot of time, and in October of '73, the Arab-Israeli War broke out and we got orders to invade one of the Arab countries with nuclear weapons. And all I had time to do was run home and leave a – we were living on base and I left a note for my wife Reggie –

Mari Allen: So were you married at the time then?

Bob Canepa: Yeah, oh, I’m sorry, I forgot to mention when I got back – well no, right after I got back, so in June of '73 we got married, June 23, 1973.

Mari Allen: And where did you get married?

Bob Canepa: In Navy Chapel in Washington D.C.

Mari Allen: Oh, very nice.

Bob Canepa: And our honeymoon was not very glamorous because we drove her car loaded to the brim with all her stuff from Virginia to California in the heat of the summer,

and the highlight was two nights in Dodge City. We actually had air conditioning and a pool. I mean that was the highlight, everything else was one night. One night in Saint Louis, one night, you know, Las Vegas or whatever.

Bob Canepa: But at any rate, in October of '73 we had the orders to, with the nuclear weapons, and I just had time to run home and leave a note for my wife Reggie who was in town teaching. I said, "I can't tell you where we're going and what we're doing, but I'm going to be gone. Love you." So we sat there for, I don't know how many, two or three days, but we had the planes in there waiting for us, and I remember having a meeting with all the enlisted. I gathered everybody in this giant auditorium that we had, and we had, I think I had about 160 young Marines working for me. I had my First Sergeant standing next to me, and he'd fought in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. He had ribbons all the way down his chest. Anyway, we go into this meeting and I basically told all the Marines, I said, "If you have a problem" – well let me backtrack because this is the first time we had unlimited resources. If we needed new equipment, new personnel, whatever we needed, we got it. Never a question asked. That was my one and only time experience we had all this stuff. So I had the meeting and I said, "Anybody that doesn't want to go, you've got girl problems, drug problems, family problems, whatever, fear problems, whatever your thing is, I'll arrange a transfer." And the First Sergeant looks at me like, "you are the dumbest officer I have ever seen in my entire life." And I go back to my office and I'm literally sweating bullets, and not one Marine came forward. That actually was a morale builder, which was my intention. But the good news is, the Israelis were able to turn the tide of war and we didn't have to do it. So that was a, I don't want to say happy experience, but it was a good experience in that it didn't happen. It didn't have to go. Because I was the commander, I get to fire the nukes and that's, in hindsight, it's a horrible responsibility to have that, I mean because you're killing 10-, or 20-, or 50-thousand people. So anyway, finished up my Marine career in May of '74, great experience for me, and then I did a trial period at Mill Valley Market. They had invited me to come back for a trial period to see if they wanted me, and to see if I wanted to come into the business. So I did that through, from mid-May until end of December.

Mari Allen: And where were you living when you came back for that short time?

Bob Canepa: Well when I came back we bought a little house in Greenbrae, and that was our –

Mari Allen: What was Greenbrae like at the time?

Bob Canepa: Pretty much like it is now. It hasn't changed a whole lot because I've driven by the house. The house is a little better now, but I mean it's, it was a nice starter home. It's what we could afford, you know. I got a Cal Vet loan, which was great. So we did the trial period, and it worked out and then I became a partner on January 1st I believe, 1975.

Mari Allen: And was your father still living then?

Bob Canepa: My father was still living but he was out of the business by that point.

Mari Allen: So who was responsible for the business at that point?

Bob Canepa: So at that time there was my brother Jim and another gentleman, Joe Morello. They were partners and they invited me to become a third partner, and I did.

Mari Allen: And how did you collaborate? Did you divide up who was responsible for which part?

Bob Canepa: Yeah.

Mari Allen: And so what was your part?

Bob Canepa: My part kind of grew, and I started out buying and doing, what was it? Frozen foods and dairy and stuff like that. But the problem was, the business was antiquated, so my role evolved more into modernizing the business in terms of computerizing everything and –

Mari Allen: So you brought in the technology then?

Bob Canepa: The technology and, I'm not a tech geek but I mean they had an old typewriter that was, it could have been in the Smithsonian museum, it was that old and they didn't even have a copy machine. I mean it was just – but they were doing okay, but they needed some changes and so we made a lot of changes.

Mari Allen: So when you came in, what was the market like, the configuration? Had you taken over, had you had all of the space?

Bob Canepa: We had the seven aisles, but we did not have the wine and liquor department and deli department at that time. So that came in the mid '70s, we expanded over in that final corner. So I guess my role was a lot of the marketing, modernization, a lot of the hiring. I got rid of a lot of people. There was a lot of dead wood that shouldn't have been there, and one thing I hated was firing anybody. So I really, that's the last thing I like to do. So I went through the, you know, disciplinary steps and a lot of times people corrected their – and people were taking long lunch breaks and flaking out. So we cleaned up the –

Mari Allen: So do you think your Marine Corps training helped prepare you for being the boss?

Bob Canepa: Yeah, definitely, absolutely. There's no doubt in my mind because we, there was a little more accountability and less sliding, and even the pricing system was not – I mean I noticed, I think in the six months after I got there that we had been mis-billed on our dairy purchases from the old Foremost Dairy. And I paid for my salary – I went through as far back as I could go back on these invoices and I paid my salary for all the overpricing they had done for us for the first year. That's how much they had

overbilled them. So it was more keeping an eye on things, making some changes and stuff like that. It was a challenge. It was fun, and –

Mari Allen: And how is it working with your brother?

Bob Canepa: Well he was kind of on the quiet side but we always got along fine, the three of us, and the only bad part was the long hours. We had horrible hours. Normally a work week was six days, well some of the weeks you'd have a five day, five day and then you'd have a six day, five day, five day, six day, but you were working 11 to 12 hours a day. So you know people complained about 45-, 50-hour week, that was nothing. And when we expanded into the wine and deli department, my other partner Joe Morello, I think literally, I think the first or second week of the remodel, he had a heart attack. So my brother and I, Jim and I, were working 13 days on, one day off. We'd alternate every other Sunday and we would start work at 6:30 in the morning and go 'til midnight or 1 o'clock in the morning, and we did this for months, and months, and months. And on the 14th day I would just sleep. I'd get up –

Mari Allen: And was Reggie involved in the business at all?

Bob Canepa: No, she was not but we had kids at this point.

Mari Allen: Oh, tell me about your kids.

Bob Canepa: I totally forgot, I got off track.

Mari Allen: You forgot?

Bob Canepa: Yeah, yeah.

Mari Allen: Tell me about your children.

Bob Canepa: So Matt was born in June, oh golly, I'm getting the birthdays – he's born July 23rd, 1976, and this was when we were in Greenbrae, and Brian was born June 29th, 1978. And we moved to Mill Valley from Greenbrae in May of '79.

Mari Allen: And did you move into the house that you –

Bob Canepa: We're in right now. So we live on 6 Middle Court, Mill Valley, now. The house actually came on the market – we'd been looking with a realtor for several months. We couldn't find anything remotely that we'd liked and then one day he says, "I've got this house for you, this is the house." It was on a Monday and I said, "Well, let's go look at it tomorrow, Tuesday." And I say, "Pick me up at the Mill Valley Market the next morning," I think at 9 o'clock or something. Eight thirty the next morning he called me and he says, "Bob, the house sold already." And then a month later he calls me and says, "The house financing fell through, would you like to see it?" And I said "Pick me up in 10 minutes." So we went and saw it, called my wife and she came down to look

at it and we put a bid on it that same night. This was the house and we loved that house. But anyway going back to my two sons, I digress a lot.

Mari Allen: That's fine. This is exactly the conversation that we wanted to have.

Bob Canepa: I have two wonderful sons that are the apple of my eye.

Mari Allen: And where do they live now?

Bob Canepa: So my oldest son Matt lives on Miller. Right off Evergreen, right off of Miller, and he was in banking for a while and then mortgages.

Mari Allen: And where did he go to elementary school, and middle school, and high school?

Bob Canepa: Oh, he went to Park, Mill Valley Middle School, Tam High, Pepperdine, got a degree in business from Pepperdine. He did his junior year, half a year in Florence, and a half a year in London.

Mari Allen: Oh.

Bob Canepa: And so he graduated in 1998. And Brian went to Park, Mill Valley Middle School, Tam High, and then he went to Bates College in Maine.

Mari Allen: Far away, huh?

Bob Canepa: Far away. And he graduated in the year 2000, and he did his junior year in Strasbourg, France, and he was actually in a French university. Both of them, probably listening to all my travel stories, they did a lot of traveling while they were abroad. Actually, Matt did his sophomore year, I take that back, he did his sophomore year in Europe. That's how Pepperdine did it. But anyway, and Brian graduated in 2000 and then he went to live in – So Matt was living in Southern California, working down there in banking and Brian lived in the Washington D.C. area when he graduated. And he went on while he was working, he got a Master's degree in political management from George Washington University, and then he got another Master's degree from Virginia Tech in urban planning with a specialty in transportation. So anyway, Matt lives in Mill Valley now and his wife was making more than he did, and when the baby, our granddaughter Sophie, was born seven-plus years ago, he became Mr. Mom because they wanted to have a stay-at-home parent. And Brian moved out from California, excuse me, moved from Virginia to California in 2006, and he got a great job in San Francisco. He works in transportation planning for a firm called Nelson\Nygaard in San Francisco.

Mari Allen: So is he living in San Francisco still?

Bob Canepa: He's living in San Francisco. So Matt's wife is named Joella, you know we love her dearly. So Matt has two children: Sophia who's 7 and Sean who will be 3 in

January. And Brian just got married in June of this year, and to a wonderful young lady named Livier and they're now expecting a child in March.

Mari Allen: Oh, congratulations.

Bob Canepa: Yeah, so we're blessed with two great sons and two great daughters-in-law, and two great grandkids and a third on the way. One thing I do want to say, I've been extremely lucky and blessed throughout my life. A lot of luck, you make it your own but I've also been in some hairy situations where I've been very lucky, that I managed to get out of trouble when I could have been in a lot worse shape than I was. But to have the family that I have, I'm really, really blessed. They are the apple and joy of my life.

Mari Allen: Now did either of your boys think about working at the market? Or did they as young boys also, like you did?

Bob Canepa: Well I never put – I put zero pressure on them. I said, “Do whatever you want to do.” That was always the only pressure I put, but I said, “Just follow your gut and do what you want.” They worked in the store periodically bagging groceries and doing stocking and inventory and stuff like that, but they had no inclination for the business and that was fine with me. I didn't really care. I mean, if they did, that would be great. If they didn't, that was great too. I had no pushing whatsoever in either direction. And Brian in fact, is going to, he's Chief Growth Officer for his firm now and they're talking about making him COO in January. So we'll see how that goes, but it's been interesting. And Matt is a far better father than I ever was. I mean he's just phenomenal with both our grandkids. I just admire his parenting skills because he literally was a lot more patient and a lot better father than I literally ever could be or would be, and he's an amazing dad. But anyway, I'm very proud of my entire family.

Mari Allen: And what about, let's go back to Mill Valley Market just a little bit? So how long were you there? When did you retire?

Bob Canepa: So that's a good question because in, I think it was November 3rd, 2004, Matt and his then-girlfriend, now daughter-in-law Joella, Joe we call her, we had gone out for Chinese food that night. And I came home and got very sick. I was throwing up and diarrhea, but I'd never had vomiting like this. This was – I learned what the term “hurling” meant that night. And my wife wanted to call, Reggie wanted to call 9-1-1, and I said “No.” But then I was losing consciousness and I still wouldn't let her call, but when I got pain going down my arm, I finally let her call. And the next thing, I look up and our bedroom is filled with police, fire, and paramedics. One thing I never have mentioned thus far is, I used to do these awards at The Redwoods [the Mill Valley senior community] for 20 years, and one of the awards was the Public Safety Officer award. It was kind of cool to look up and see a bunch of people who had received awards at The Redwoods. But there were eight or nine police, fire, and paramedics in our bedroom. The interesting part was they gave me some medicine or something, I can't remember what they did but nothing was working, so they zoom me out of the house and into the

ambulance. Reggie was in her pajamas, this was like 10 o'clock at night, and we head over the hill because we live in Scott Valley area. We head over the hill from Mill Valley into Corte Madera, and I heard the paramedic speaking to the hospital and he's saying, "You better have the heart team there because I don't think he's going to make it to the hospital. He's going to need treatment immediately. His vital signs are so bad; he's probably going to die before he gets there." I had my eyes closed. He didn't realize I could hear him. He thought I was unconscious and I heard every word he said. I'm getting misty here.

Mari Allen: No.

Bob Canepa: I started crying because I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye to my wife because I didn't realize how serious it was. At any rate, the next thing I know, we're driving around and the paramedic is screaming at the ambulance driver, "Where the F are you?" He'd gotten lost.

Mari Allen: Oh my gosh.

Bob Canepa: In the meantime, Reggie was in her pajamas, had to put her contact lenses in and she drives to the hospital. So we had a big head start because she had to lock up the house and everything. She gets to the hospital and there's no husband. And we finally pull in and, I have to say, Marin General [Hospital] really took care of me. I had a stent put in that night, and another one a couple days later, but it was -. And when I was finally released, the nurse who had released me was a nice lady, a nurse from Africa actually. I think it was Nigeria or Kenya she told me, and I said, "You really smile." She had this beautiful smile, and I said "You look really happy." She says, "Oh yeah, I normally work in the emergency room. I was in the night you came in and we all thought you were a goner because you were in really bad shape and we thought you weren't going to make it." So this was a really, like I say, this was the second best thing that ever happened to me other than my wife, and kids, and grandkids, because it made me prioritize my life in terms of what was really important. But I didn't want to make a rush judgment. Reggie, we'd talked about it in terms of retiring and she says, "Give it some thought, don't make a spur-of-the-moment decision." And so I did. In the meantime I went through a cardiac rehab program in Greenbrae for eight weeks. It was about 100 hours of this rehab program, and made a lot of lifestyle changes: diet, stress, exercise.

Mari Allen: And when you left the market who, when you retired, who was still in charge or who were the new people in charge?

Bob Canepa: Well, so 20 months after the heart attack, then I formally retired.

Mari Allen: Twenty months later?

Bob Canepa: Twenty months later.

Mari Allen: Oh, almost two years.

Bob Canepa: Yeah, but I also wanted to coincide with the end of our fiscal year. So it either would have been eight months or 20 months, and eight months I wasn't quite sure at that point, and so I just timed it and I wanted to make it a smooth transition. I didn't want to leave a rough transition and then leave problems behind. And so I talked to my two nephews, and we had a –

Mari Allen: What are your nephews' names?

Bob Canepa: Oh, my two nephews Doug and David Canepa, Jim's sons.

Mari Allen: And Jim was living at the time?

Bob Canepa: Jim was still living, yes.

Mari Allen: Had he retired by this time?

Bob Canepa: No, he was no longer a partner. So in 1990, Joe entirely retired from the market, Joe Morello. Jim quasi-retired, in the sense that he didn't have ownership anymore but he still worked there. He kind of set his own hours, and whatever he wanted to do was fine. If he wanted to go to Italy and go hiking, that was fine. It's whatever he wanted to do was fine. But he was a hard – I mean he worked harder retired than any of the employees ever did. But anyway, so Doug and David bought me out in – so my last day was June 30th, 2006, and I went into retirement, and that's probably the third chapter of my life because I love retirement.

Mari Allen: Well before you talk about retirement, I need you to go back and talk about – so you've talked about what you did as your paid job but you've done so much for Mill Valley with unpaid volunteer time. So I want you to talk about the things that you did when you said, from a very young age, you said you knew you had to give back to your community. I think you're so well-known in this community for all that you've given to our town, not just as a business person and as a retired business person, but your volunteer commitment to so many things in this town are probably what people know you for. So can you talk a little bit about what you did and why you did these things?

Bob Canepa: Well, things just kind of evolved, and you know when you're in a building such as Mill Valley Market for so many hours per day, it gets a little bit old after a while. I mean, basically you're doing a lot of the same stuff over, and over, and over, and somehow or other, I became the face of the store. My brother was also very involved in the community and so were my two nephews, Doug and David.

Mari Allen: Yes, very.

Bob Canepa: I mean the whole family's been involved. So at some point, my mother was a resident at The Redwoods, my father died in 1978, just a few months before Brian was born, and my mother was a resident of The Redwoods. She moved in there in the '80s I believe, or maybe, no, maybe before this. I'm trying to think, she probably moved

there late '70s, early '80s. But anyway I got involved at The Redwoods, I started out as a blackjack dealer for their fundraiser.

Mari Allen: Annual fundraiser.

Bob Canepa: Fundraiser. And then I started doing, I was on their board of directors, then we discussed this thing called the senior prom and –

Mari Allen: What was the senior prom?

Bob Canepa: The senior prom initially –

Mari Allen: And is it still going on?

Bob Canepa: It was supposed to be a dance for the residents, and I'm a new board member and I said, "Why don't we – kind of a crazy idea, why don't we see if we can get some kids from the high school to come over?" And the other board members looked at me like, "He is dumber than dirt. Why would the high school students want to come over here?" I said, "Well, let me pull in a few chips," and I had done some stuff at the high school already at this point, and so I pulled in some favors and got four or five students the first year to come over and help decorate and schmooze and dance with the seniors. And they had such a good time that there after we had to cut the –

Mari Allen: They, the residents, or they, the students?

Bob Canepa: Both. Everybody had such a good time. The residents loved the students. I didn't realize, you know, it was my – you know it was my hope that this would turn into and be something good but it turned into something great. The residents loved the students. The students would come over and decorate and we'd put together these goodie bags. I'd get all the vendors to give me merchandise, and so there would be goodie bags for the residents, the students, and the other volunteers, the emcees, and the band. But the best part was, the students communicating and interacting with the residents. And I remember one evening there was one lady – we also had a professional band, and we had a dance instructor, right. And I remember one evening they were doing the Charleston and there was an 86-year-old woman dancing with a 17-year-old boy from Tam High, and she was doing the Charleston and it was hilarious. I mean she was having the time of her life, and I found out three months later she died of cancer. But she had a great time. And we were joking the first year, we could have called this the mothball prom because a lot of these gowns had never been – they'd been in a mothball for many, many, many years. And the women really love – especially the women – they loved the opportunity to get out there and dance and dress up. And the problem is, at the Redwoods, there's 80 percent women or maybe even higher so we didn't have enough male dance partners, so we had some students and then I would beg, borrow and steal anybody who owed me a favor at City Council, school board, any male person that could walk or talk. Didn't need to dance necessarily, if you could schmooze that qualified. So I would persuade people to come down and dance and it was a great opportunity. And

then we also did the Celebration of Service Awards down there, which was for teachers and students, and public safety officers and other awards. I loved doing that because I got to meet some real incredible teachers and students that way. I've been inspired by some of these students especially. I also did – I've been a Rotarian for almost 31 years now. I've enjoyed that a lot. I was president in the early '90s.

Mari Allen: This is for the Mill Valley Rotary Club?

Bob Canepa: Mill Valley Rotary Club, and we were actually at the district conference we have every year. We were the number one club in the district. It was very active, so we had a very active year and it was a very good year and a very good experience. I was glad when the year was up because it was a lot of work, but I still do a lot of stuff at Rotary.

Mari Allen: What is the philosophy of the Rotary? What is the organization in case people who listen or read about it, what does it do?

Bob Canepa: The Rotary model is “Service Above Self,” and that’s what Rotary is all about. I remember going on a – I was part of a medical team to Mexico and I was supposed to be there essentially to take photos and stuff, but I ended up taking photos and working with the eye team. And I went down with an optometrist I guess and he had six or seven thousand pairs of eyeglasses with him. So they taught me how to do the eyeglasses and how to do all the readings and stuff. I remember they brought in this woman who was technically blind, she couldn’t walk by herself. She was led in by her granddaughter. So the woman was probably in her mid 80s, the granddaughter was probably 15, 18, I don’t know, maybe it was even her great-granddaughter, I don’t know. But I remember putting the glasses on the woman and we had a mirror in front of her and she started crying like a baby, literally. And she reached over, and I said something in Spanish, “Muy bonita, very beautiful with your new glasses,” and she gave me the biggest kiss.

It was probably one of the best experiences in my life because – we were there for, I don’t know, a week or 10 days, whatever it was – because thousands of people every morning lined up because there were dentists, doctors, gynecologists, every – and just being part of that experience and being able to make a difference. It was a really unique experience.

Back, I don’t remember what year it was, but I actually got, there was an award in Rotary called the “Service Above Self Award”. It’s the highest honor you can get in Rotary and I actually got it back in the '90s. You know it was really a nice surprise to get that. But anyway, I enjoy Rotary, I still do that.

Mari Allen: And what is your role right now in Rotary?

Bob Canepa: I’m in charge of our Endowment Fund. I’ve been president of that since we started it eight or nine years ago, and we fund different things such as Kiddo! and a

lot of other groups. I also do most of our programs, and I also do various miscellaneous things. I try and make things a little bit more fun, so I just kind of – I get my fingers in different pies.

Mari Allen: Well tell me about your involvement in the Mill Valley School District because you've also been involved with the Mill Valley Schools and Kiddo! for a long time too.

Bob Canepa: Well, so both my sons were in school in Mill Valley, and I was asked to join the Kiddo! – well then Mill Valley Schools Community Foundation before it became Kiddo! – and was asked to join the board.

Mari Allen: By Trisha Garlock and Penny Weiss?

Bob Canepa: Penny Weiss, yes. And they had a retreat at the Ralston Retreat House, and the lady who was supposed to be in charge of this business committee, which was fairly new at the time –. It was really, well it was new. The business committee never really operated before then. It had a name but never really did anything. And I remember being at the retreat, and the lady that was supposed to in charge of business committee flaked out. And so we were going through the retreat asking everybody's goals for the year, and it was either Penny or Trish said to me, "So Bob, what are the goals of the business committee?" I mean she totally blindsided me. I had no idea I was going to be asked anything. It was my first meeting of any meeting of these people in fact. And I was kind of knocked by surprise and I said "Twenty thousand dollars." And everybody in the room started laughing because they had no money.

Mari Allen: And this was in 1987, right?

Bob Canepa: I don't remember.

Mari Allen: Yes, it was.

Bob Canepa: You tell me.

Mari Allen: It was in 1987.

Bob Canepa: I'm glad you're here because I don't remember what year it was.

Mari Allen: Yes, 1987.

Bob Canepa: Okay, and so we went home to try and figure out how to accomplish that because there was no – we started from nothing. And I talked to my wife, and I was going nowhere and then one night about a week later I literally, in the middle of the night, woke up, got a yellow legal pad, and went in the kitchen and just started writing. And the whole premise was based on a reciprocal relationship. My philosophy has always been win/win. There's not a loser if everybody walks away from the table happy.

I tried to do that in the Marine Corps and Mill Valley Market. Everybody walks away happy and a winner, you know, so the whole premise of the program was devised around that concept. And the first year was really tough. I spent, I can't even tell you how many hours walking the streets of Mill Valley. I knew from the get-go, the only – especially the first year, phone calls weren't going to do it. So it was, I think almost all our, we call them “adoptions” in those days instead of “school supporters,” but they were almost all done via cold calling or making an appointment in advance, but face to face contact. And we –.

Mari Allen: What was the relationship between the businesses and the schools at that time?

Bob Canepa: It was not good. Well, when I say it, that's an understatement. The relationship was horrible.

Mari Allen: And why do you think that was?

Bob Canepa: Because the parents would – the schools would collect the money and then go shop elsewhere, and it was definitely not a win/win situation. And so I had to persuade the business community by supporting the schools, the schools and the parent community will support you. That was a tough sell because we'd gone 180 the other way today. And so the first year was extremely, extremely, I can't even begin to tell you how difficult that first year was, but we got almost \$20,000. Penny and Trish were, I think, astounded because they didn't believe we could do it. And we were close enough, but I think we had \$19,500, something like that. And the second year I think we were at \$30,000, and the third year we were \$50,000. So it was a good experience and I've always enjoyed working with kids and I can be fairly persuasive when working with people and so it worked out.

I've done other things kind of on the sidelines with the schools. I mean I was a teacher, not teacher, I was an instructor at Tam for many years on job interviewing and college interviewing. I'd do these classes like that and we'd do these mock interviews, but I really enjoy working with kids and it's one of my highest priorities is the children. So I was involved, and now I'm still a little bit involved with Kiddo!, helping a little bit with the Business Committee and the Endowment, and even the Strategic Planning Committee.

Mari Allen: So when you're not volunteering these days, you're traveling a lot. And in one of the interviews I've read of you, you said you had a goal of a certain number of countries you had wanted to visit. What was that goal, and have you reached that goal?

Bob Canepa: Well the goal is a minimum of 80, excuse me, goal of 100 because there's a club called the Century Traveler's Club or something, there's actually a website.

Mari Allen: So you have to get passport stamps or how does that work?

Bob Canepa: No, it's just all word of honor.

Mari Allen: Oh, okay.

Bob Canepa: You don't have to prove this. I've got lots of old passports but so I'm at 86.

Mari Allen: And which countries are most memorable to you?

Bob Canepa: The highlight was the Ecuador Galapagos Islands, closely followed by New Zealand. And the most bizarre trip was North Korea, and I almost – this is where I talk about being lucky because I was within a hair's breath of getting arrested one day.

Mari Allen: And what year was that you were in North Korea?

Bob Canepa: So that was about four years ago right now, and the one day we were out there in the countryside picnicking and I was with a group of about 14 or 15 tourists. We had one young female guide, and then two spy guides. And the spy guides would do periodic body counts, and we were sternly warned not to do certain things, and I kind of pushed the envelope. And so one day, the day of the picnic, I snuck off and went up the hill and I saw some North Koreans picnicking. You know, I just wanted to do a quick photo with them and they invited me to join them because I had some rice wine and some food, kimchi. So what I thought was going to be a minute or two, turned into several minutes and I got my photo op with them but the two spy guides caught me and they went ballistic. They were screaming at the North Koreans, they were screaming at me, and then they were screaming at each other. And I think the only thing that kept me from being arrested is that they would have been in more trouble than I was.

Mari Allen: For letting you wander off?

Bob Canepa: For letting me slip off, yeah, exactly, because I've been – I follow the North Korean news closely and I noticed a lot – I'd seen a lot of Americans being arrested since then and I think literally that's the only thing that saved me, is they would have been in bigger trouble. That's why I say I'm lucky because I've had so many things in my life. I could have been shot in Algeria, I could have been, you know, whatever that got intervened. My wife Reggie likes to joke that my guardian angels are exhausted.

Mari Allen: And does Reggie travel with you to all of these places?

Bob Canepa: Some of the places. Some places she doesn't want to go.

Mari Allen: Did she go with you on the North Korea trip?

Bob Canepa: No, no way. There's absolutely zero way. But anyway, I enjoy traveling and I'm heading off to Cuba in January, and then hopefully in the fall Turkmenistan, Kazikastan, the other –

Mari Allen: All the “stans”.

Bob Canepa: There’s five stans. I’m hoping to do the five stans next fall. So my goal is at least 100.

Mari Allen: At least 100, that’s fantastic. Now a hard question for you is, in a few words, how would you describe Mill Valley now watching your grandchildren grow up here versus the Mill Valley you grew up in?

Bob Canepa: Oh God, huge difference. When I was a kid, the kids in my class were middle-class families. I mean there were teachers, sons or daughters of teachers, plumbers and electricians, and trades people, and it was not this affluent community that it is today. I mean it was a very, you know, you could almost call it “bucolic” time. I walked to school, Mount Carmel and go to the Sequoia Theater, and I don’t know, 50 cents or 60 cents, I’d have a movie ticket, popcorn, and spearmint leaves. That was me. I still remember my favorite candy from those days. And it used to be where, oh Phyllis’ Burgers, there used to be a Lady Baltimore Bakery there.

Mari Allen: Oh, Pearl’s Fat Burger.

Bob Canepa: Pearl’s, that’s what it is, right, okay. But there used to be a Lady Baltimore Bakery there and I used to go on Sundays to get my donuts, you know. It was a much more, I don’t want to say blue collar, but it was blue/white collar, but very middle class. It wasn’t the uber-wealthy that we have today. Nothing bad about the new residents at all, I love the new people moving in as well, but the affluency is way different. I mean it’s just a different world. And the homes were a lot smaller and it was a simpler time. I mean if you had one car, that was a lot, and not two or three cars per family or whatever, but it was a good time. I would go down to the – I got in trouble. I used to go down to the golf course and go in the creeks and snag golf balls and sell them to the golfers. I was an entrepreneur.

Mari Allen: Yeah, I think there’s still kids that do that.

Bob Canepa: Yeah, no, but I mean I’d go in the park and get the soda bottles and redeem the bottles. But it was a very simple time and –. But again, because when I was 4, 8, and 12, I went to Europe.

Mari Allen: For those summers?

Bob Canepa: For those summers. Well, actually, when I was 8, I was there for six or seven months because I actually did a half a year of school in Italy at that time, but it was a simpler time. I love where Mill Valley is today. It’s a beautiful town. I mean in the old days, downtown Mill Valley there were two pharmacies, there was a hardware store, there was you know all these self, resident-serving stores. Now Mill Valley has become more like Sausalito with the ultra-fancy women’s shoes and dresses, and clothes, and all this stuff. I really don’t, other than Mill Valley Market and Welles Fargo Bank, and the

card shop, there's not a – or some of the restaurants, but I don't – these other shops I really don't have much use for.

Mari Allen: Now you hike a lot too these days with your dog.

Bob Canepa: Molly.

Mari Allen: Tell me about your favorite trails. Where do you like to go?

Bob Canepa: So we live in Scott Valley, so we usually do North Ridge because I can let Molly off leash. I was up there this morning and did almost a four-mile hike. There's a loop that I add on. And so I do five days of hiking and two days of gym, so that's my routine. So I do probably eight, or nine, or 10 hours of exercise a week, and then we have an elliptical machine at home. So I'll do my hike and then I'll do 20 minutes of elliptical or I'll go to the gym and do elliptical, you know, but it's part of my lifestyle changes after the heart attack. So I've exercised more since the heart attack than the time between then and my Marine Corps years. My Marine Corps years, I was pretty lean and mean, and then I packed on the pounds. That was one of the pitfalls of the job is all the food.

Mari Allen: The gourmet food all around?

Bob Canepa: Well, people would –

Mari Allen: You have to taste everything to make sure it was good to sell to your customers.

Bob Canepa: Well, then I'd go to a lot of food shows and people think, "Oh, that's such a glamorous job that you have. You get to go here and go there for glamorous," you know, and you eat, and you eat, and you eat. But it's hard on the waistline. In front of my desk used to be a pile of boxes just loaded with samples all the time, cakes, and cookies, and beer, and chips, you know all this stuff. So that part I don't – I miss it in a sense because it was fun eating all this and trying their stuff, especially the beer. I'm glad I'm not tempted anymore, let's put it that way.

Mari Allen: Now you brought a few things in this packet. Is there anything that you wanted to tell me about or are they just things that we can add to the file here?

Bob Canepa: Just so you'd have it in the file. Just some stuff about Mill Valley Market and there was also an interesting thing about my mother, and my sister, and brother. They got stuck in Nazi Germany when war broke out in 1939.

Mari Allen: Wow!

Bob Canepa: And there's some –

Mari Allen: Articles about that?

Bob Canepa: There's a number of articles in there that I copied here from the History Room and they had a really tough time getting out. The war broke out on September 1st, 1939. They were just about ready to leave Germany and all the shipping closed down, everything closed, and they had a very perilous return journey. So they were fortunate to make it back, but it was one of those being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Mari Allen: Yeah, but then they were lucky like you.

Bob Canepa: They were very lucky, exactly.

Mari Allen: Is there anything else that you wanted to add?

Bob Canepa: Well, just that I loved and still love, being part of the Mill Valley community and I still get involved with different things. Oh, I know. One thing I forgot to mention is when I retired, I became a volunteer at the, volunteer consultant for the Marin Center for non – what is it? Marin Center for Volunteer Leadership, CVNL, I forget the actual title of it. Center for Volunteer Nonprofit Leadership, that's it.

Mari Allen: Yeah, I know you wrote it down in your notes somewhere, yeah.

Bob Canepa: But –

Mari Allen: Yep, Center for Volunteer Nonprofit Leadership.

Bob Canepa: Exactly, so I did that for the first seven years after I retired and I really enjoyed that. I never thought of myself as a consultant, and I worked with over 30 different nonprofits. I did more nonprofits than anybody else in those seven years. Most people did one or two a year, or three and somehow I ended up with the really tough, the challenging ones, and it was fun. It was really a good experience for me. So I'd meet with the executive directors and fund development directors or whoever, and I worked with school groups, prison groups, arts groups, veteran's groups. It was just amazing. I met some really incredible people, so that was a fun component. And I enjoy that part, and I enjoy being retired.

Mari Allen: Well, I mean you say you're retired but I feel like in all of your volunteer service, you're working a lot too but in a different way.

Bob Canepa: Well, I'm going to be Santa at the Redwoods here in December, so my two Santa gigs at the Redwoods, and I do the visiting the different rooms and the residents, and I do the party but I love working with people and helping in small ways. It makes life exciting and fun. I get to meet such wonderful people. I've been blessed because of all the great people I've met through volunteering and through my job and my customers. People ask me what I miss most about working. It's the customers and most of the staff and some of my vendors and sales people and stuff, but the day-to-day stuff I

don't miss. But the customers because I became very good friends with a lot of customers, and I still get to see them. That's the good part. I mean I don't get to see them as often as I did when I was working, but I just love living where I live, having worked where I lived and I'm a very blessed, lucky person.

Mari Allen: Well Bob, thank you for your time.

Bob Canepa: Sure.

Mari Allen: The Historical Society and the History Room appreciate all of these stories and the impact you've had on Mill Valley because you were asked to join this oral history project because you are a well-known person in our town, and because of all of the wonderful things you've done as a business person, as a volunteer, and just as a member of our community, so thank you.

Bob Canepa: Thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure, believe me.