

Mill Valley Oral History Program
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HUGH FULLERTON

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2016**

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In this oral history, “Ambassador” Hugh Fullerton provides an insider’s perspective on the community of backgammon and chess players who meet daily at the Depot Plaza. Born and raised in Ohio, Hugh moved to the Bay Area with his family in 1969 for a job in San Francisco. Originally touching down in San Rafael, they settled in Mill Valley in 1971. After a few years working as a “corporado,” he became self-employed and found his way into the downtown gaming community. Hugh explains backgammon and the variant of the game known as *chouette* (French for “owl”) that is played at the Plaza. He evokes the social milieu and camaraderie of the gamers, and introduces some of the personalities from the community. Hugh discusses the weekly Friday afternoon game, which draws some of the best backgammon players from around the Bay Area and Northern California, and the annual Fullerton Classic Backgammon Tournament. Throughout this oral history, Hugh underscores how fortunate Mill Valley is to have a central, European-style plaza and expresses his gratitude for the sense of community it fosters.

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Oral History of Hugh Fullerton
August 29th, 2016

Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Hugh Fullerton, who made corrections and clarifications.

00:02 Debra Schwartz: Today is August —

00:05 Hugh Fullerton: 29th.

00:07 Debra Schwartz: August 29th, 2016. My name is Debra Schwartz and I am sitting here with Ambassador Hugh Fullerton. Hugh, thank you so much for joining me today. I am here to represent the Mill Valley Library and the Mill Valley Historical Society Oral History Program and I am pleased to include your story in our collection.

00:32 Hugh Fullerton: Happy to oblige.

00:33 Debra Schwartz: Now, what's so very interesting about your story, Hugh, is that you are here to represent a select sub-community in our town of gamers. You are what I call the Gaming Friday Club, the group of individuals that collect not just on Friday, but often for very big games of backgammon and chess in our Depot square. So, I think a lot of us have seen you guys for years and years, seen the activity, seen the interesting individuals come and go, but never really known about you guys. So, this is a wonderful opportunity to know, who are you guys and what's going on?

01:29 Hugh Fullerton: Wonderful question. Aren't we lucky to have access to a Plaza? We're living in a town, uniquely in the Bay Area, I think, that actually has access to a Plaza in the European tradition — think Malaga or think Bern, Switzerland — and we're very lucky. It could be considered to be an accidental Plaza, in a sense, that in 1950, alas, when they tore up the tracks of the wonderful Northwestern Pacific Railroad —

02:09 Debra Schwartz: That's correct.

02:11 Hugh Fullerton: It ran right up to the train depot and then fanned out into six tracks, having come up Miller Avenue as a spur off of the line that ran all over Marin County. Wouldn't we love to have that situation today as a way of getting around? In any event, we're very lucky to have a Plaza. People you might not have seen for a while who live in different parts of the town passing through — I suppose that, for myself, is the original attraction, and that's also an attraction for many of the other gamers. And in some respects, for some of them it would be like going to the club, going to the gaming club. I can think back in my own case, my dad went to the club, he was a golfer. And this is — in some sense could be considered to be — a poor man's club, where we're not having to pay any dues or what have you. It's open to us. It would be fun to maybe even

make a donation to the Plaza, the way Marcus did; he brings in a nice bench. Bill Graham, the rock impresario — you'd have to tell me the year, maybe 1979 or something — brings the gaming tables to the Plaza because the Plaza to him, living up on Corte Madera Ridge, reminded him of Washington Square Park, Lower Manhattan, down by New York University, which was also a gaming center in that part of New York City. And so we are very lucky to have a Plaza and we hope we're serving the community well to help people enjoy it.

04:22 Debra Schwartz: Well, I have to say there's something comforting about the regularity of your presence. [chuckles] There is. There are just certain things, when you can depend on them, that help you recognize your town, know your people. Even if you never talk to them, there they are, you're home. There's that group, there's this group, the hikers walking by, all these things that give our town a particular ambience and you certainly are a colorful lot. Before we get into actually the word "gaming," which I'd like you to explore, and the crew of gamers that come and go, I'd love to get just a little context about your life. So, I call you ambassador — I do so with a smile on my face — because you're a friendly man, and you talk to a lot of people, and you're here as a representative of the gamers, but you're not officially an ambassador to Mill Valley, although perhaps we can arrange something in the future. [chuckles] But before you became the ambassador, before you became a gamer, maybe you could tell me a little bit about your family history and what brought you to Mill Valley.

05:35 Hugh Fullerton: Sure. I grew up in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, where my wife Elizabeth and I met at Cleveland Heights High School and developed a strong friendship, which led to marriage. And I went back to my hometown after undergrad school and worked in a financial institution at the time, and became known there, and then very luckily received a job offer in San Francisco.

06:23 Debra Schwartz: What year would this be?

06:24 Hugh Fullerton: This would have been 1969. We had come out here on a vacation in 1968, to rendezvous with John Begley, B-E-G-L-E-Y, and his wife at the time, called Nancy Ketchum Begley. We had a wonderful visit, and went back to Ohio for a year or so, while it took me about that long to wangle a job out here. That's the way to come to California, I think.

07:04 Debra Schwartz: You mean, to come visit and then know you will be coming back?

07:08 Hugh Fullerton: Well, I certainly knew I was coming back. John wasn't quite so sure. He said, "I don't know if we'll ever see the Fullertons again." [laughs] I was able to wangle a job out here. And I was a *corporado* for some few years. I've been self-employed for quite some years and been pretty lucky at it.

07:32 Debra Schwartz: So you're here and you're how old? You come to San Francisco Bay Area in 1969, which is —

07:43 Hugh Fullerton: We missed the Summer of Love by two years. Although at that time we already had two bambinos, so —

07:51 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, but this is a very critical time in our San Francisco Bay Area history. Lots of things are going on.

07:58 Hugh Fullerton: Think David Talbot, *Season of the Witch*.

08:03 Debra Schwartz: Yes, he describes it quite well, and you can hear his oral interview very soon. So you're living here when you've got two small babies. And did you come right to Mill Valley?

08:16 Hugh Fullerton: Good question. No, we started off in San Rafael, California, having to do with not being able to afford a house right away. But we saved up. We sold the car — in a situation where I could take public transportation to the Financial District, downtown San Francisco. And when I tell that to people these days they say, "Sell the car to make a down payment on a house? Wow!" It was so worth it, coming closest to San Francisco, after all, and avoiding these tremendous commute problems that we have these days.

09:06 Debra Schwartz: Yes. So you get yourself situated in Mill Valley by what year?

09:10 Hugh Fullerton: 1971.

09:11 Debra Schwartz: 1971. So Mill Valley at that point is like what?

09:16 Hugh Fullerton: Very good question. I would say one-third artists, one-third carpenters, one-third guys commuting to the city. And there have been some changes over the years where maybe now it's two-thirds guys commuting to the city.

09:38 Debra Schwartz: So you're living in, basically, it's a small town. Did they have gaming?

09:46 Hugh Fullerton: Another good question. Not that I was involved with, until rather further along. I would say, towards my retirement time.

10:00 Debra Schwartz: So how old are you when you come to live here?

10:03 Hugh Fullerton: Sure, I was 30 years old, round number.

10:10 Debra Schwartz: 30-ish, coming here with two small babies, early '70s. But then you retire, and then thus begins your other career.

10:21 Hugh Fullerton: True enough. Learning my town, reaching out, learning to be a little less stiff from where I started off in the business world as a *corporado*. I love that

word.

10:42 Debra Schwartz: Corporado, you say it with such flair. I feel like I should hear some kind of music that follows you saying that. Da-da-da-dah! [laughs]

10:53 Hugh Fullerton: Sure. It reminds us, doesn't it, of the song called "Desperado"?

10:58 Debra Schwartz: Yeah. But it also has a sort of a fierce fighting tone to it, a corporado. Is that how you felt that was, being that life?

11:06 Hugh Fullerton: Well, it was certainly incredibly competitive. And I've only come to appreciate that word within the last couple of years. I heard it from Mark Dowie, D-O-W-I-E, the founder of *Mother Jones* magazine, who lives in Inverness, out there, with Tom Killion.

11:37 Debra Schwartz: So, you've made friends. You come to this town, you've met these various people, and does it affect you in your sense of who you are in the world? You're coming from a corporate world and now you're living in Mill Valley.

11:56 Hugh Fullerton: I would say very much so. In fact, we may not really get to know ourselves completely except in terms of other people's reaction to us, let's say. And I appreciate — it may be a little bit of glibness — I know a little bit about a lot of different things. I can very easily get over my head quickly in certain respects, but I find when I am meeting other people that there may be a little tidbit I can reach to that they would think is funny or be surprised that I would know about.

12:44 Debra Schwartz: So that's your social lubricant: your wit, your surface ability to glide along with the plume. [chuckles]

12:53 Hugh Fullerton: I couldn't have put it better!

12:55 Debra Schwartz: So you can garner interest with your witty ways and the way that you communicate. And so you now are attracting people, I'm guessing, that you find interesting in return.

13:07 Hugh Fullerton: Absolutely. And I think people, as a general statement, love to laugh and love to be playful, and I try to abide.

13:18 Debra Schwartz: So you're living as a corporate worker and then in your off hours, you're surrounded by people that are slightly different, I'm guessing. Is that what you're saying?

13:28 Hugh Fullerton: Sure, and there was a very distinct point where I cut the corporate umbilical cord, some years ago and had been happily self-employed for quite a few years. Going through what my wife Elizabeth and I joke as the scuffling days, which has come around to, I would say, a plentiful life.

14:00 Debra Schwartz: Well, congratulations on that. So let us segue in, now that we're nice and cozy and comfortable all around, with how you've managed to segue comfortably into Mill Valley and an identity that you feel really represents your happy place. The gaming, it's only natural, right?

14:26 Hugh Fullerton: It is. My grandson — aged 18, going off to Seattle, Washington for college, and gymnastics while he's at it — he and I were talking the other day at dinner about game theory. And I says, "Game theory is about thus and so," and he was like, "Wow, I want to know about game theory." And I had to remind him, "Well, you'll need to do a little work in probability and statistics, and like that Ben" — my grandson — "before you get right to game theory, but game theory is a wonderful thing to know about."

15:14 Debra Schwartz: Game theory, what is game theory?

15:19 Hugh Fullerton: Game theory, largely, in the game backgammon, is about the odds of the dice, which the best players certainly do know. Now then, the game itself, when it was invented hundreds of years ago in Persia, where it's called the "game of life" because —

15:50 Debra Schwartz: Backgammon was called the "game of life?"

15:51 Hugh Fullerton: The game of life. On any given roll the whole circumstances can change. So there's two different points of view, Debra. One is more a logical point of view about what kind of position you're setting up to take advantage of the most probable rolls, and then there's another point of view among some of the players where, "Oh, all I need is a double six to win the game." Alas, the probabilities of a double six are about 3 percent. So that's a little bit about game theory.

16:31 Debra Schwartz: When did you enter into your court, which is the Depot Plaza?

16:40 Hugh Fullerton: I would say in the late 1980s, and there was a particular Irish guy called Donovan, who was one of the key gamers at that time. He showed many of us how to play backgammon, and he was a very sporting guy, telling wonderful Irish heritage stories. And that's part of the whole process, I think, of enjoying that game in downtown Mill Valley.

17:29 Debra Schwartz: Because it's so much more than a game?

17:31 Hugh Fullerton: Yes, it's communicating about what's going on. It's banter and very much a catching up with people that you may not have seen for a while. The games, though, are certainly the focal point, as you may have noticed.

18:05 Debra Schwartz: But it's your community connection.

18:06 Hugh Fullerton: Yes.

18:08 Debra Schwartz: So Donovan came from where?

18:10 Hugh Fullerton: He came from the Midwest originally, and he was 100 percent Irish heritage, just a very generally happy guy, fun to be around.

18:37 Debra Schwartz: So who else is there? You go over there, there's interesting hats and dressing with flair. There seems to be sometimes, correct me if I'm wrong, certain tensions in there, as people hover nearby watching games or watching how the dice goes. That's an alive place you've got right there by the tables.

19:05 Hugh Fullerton: It certainly is and it's amazing the number of people that have an opinion about what the best play might be.

19:19 Debra Schwartz: You're giving me a funny look. Continue. Explain that look.

19:25 Hugh Fullerton: The style of backgammon we play is very social, in the sense that we play most often a version of backgammon called *chouette*, a French word, C-H-O-U-E-T-T-E. *Chouette* in French everyday means little owl, as if guys would stay up all night to play this style of backgammon game. There is a man in the box playing by himself, and then there may be up to six players on the team playing against him. There will be a captain of the team, and the other members of the team are not allowed to offer any advice until their doubling cube has been offered and accepted by the guy in the box.

20:27 Debra Schwartz: So, one guy sitting in the box, and then there's a team across, but there's a rep to that team. And then everybody else hovers behind him and that's where the vibe comes from as they're all fluttering about, hunched over with that tension.

20:44 Hugh Fullerton: That's sounds pretty accurate. It seems like you've been doing some observation, Debra.

20:50 Debra Schwartz: Well, it's hard to miss you guys, and you really are quite a part of our town. Okay, so you've painted a pretty good picture of the collective consciousness that comes with this kind of scene you've got going on over there.

21:15 Hugh Fullerton: This idea of "collective consciousness," that's very much in this version of backgammon, this *chouette* version that we are playing, very much a collective consciousness, once the other members of the team's cubes have been offered and accepted, doubling cubes.

22:28 Debra Schwartz: Very interesting. So now, there's more than just a game going on, there's another element, am I correct? I mean, there's a gambling element that has to do with money. Now, I don't know if this is true, but I have heard that a lot of money can ride on these games. Is that true?

23:03 Hugh Fullerton: Oh, I'd certainly say that nobody's missing any meals, Debra, and it's nothing that the players can't afford. In fact, I prefer that we not play for large amounts of money that could hurt somebody if they were losing.

23:30 Debra Schwartz: But there's money in it.

23:30 Hugh Fullerton: Yeah.

23:31 Debra Schwartz: Because it just gives a little spice.

23:34 Hugh Fullerton: That's right.

23:37 Debra Schwartz: So, how many guys are in the Friday Club? How many women? Are there women?

23:46 Hugh Fullerton: We would love to have more women, Debra. We have a couple who come to the annual tournament.

23:53 Debra Schwartz: What is that? You have a name for this tournament, right?

23:56 Hugh Fullerton: Yes. It happens to be called the Fullerton Classic Backgammon Tournament, once a year, in the month of January.

24:06 Debra Schwartz: Jeez, you're out there in the rain playing a tournament with your name on it.

24:10 Hugh Fullerton: Oh, if it's raining, it's inside. [laughs]

24:13 Debra Schwartz: So, you have a couple of ladies? Because, see, I don't see too many ladies.

24:17 Hugh Fullerton: No, there are a couple. And it may be a little bit how our brains are organized, or our needs are organized differently. You may have some ideas about that, too.

24:34 Debra Schwartz: Okay. So predominantly men.

24:37 Hugh Fullerton: Yes.

24:39 Debra Schwartz: Tell me about your teams. Tell me how many, where do they come from? Just help us to understand, all those who are going to listen, what we're seeing, who we're seeing, if you care to share.

24:52 Hugh Fullerton: Sure. Well, very particularly, the Friday crowd. The best players in the Bay Area, San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland, Northern California, Richmond will come over for the best game of the week, the Friday game. The other

games during the week are typically very much Mill Valley folk. Now then, there is one math professor, though, who teaches at College of Marin.

25:30 Debra Schwartz: Jesse.

25:31 Hugh Fullerton: Jesse.

25:31 Debra Schwartz: He was my math tutor! I know Jesse. He's a very good math tutor.

25:38 Hugh Fullerton: He's a very good backgammon player. So, he has had some peripheral experience with a style of brain functioning that might work in both cases, as a math tutor and as a backgammon player.

25:58 Debra Schwartz: So, he's your sort of resident —

26:01 Hugh Fullerton: One of the best. He has a rating. Where backgammon players are rated about how strong they are, he has a very high rating.

26:24 Debra Schwartz: So you have people coming on Friday. What are the other days of the week that you have games?

26:30 Hugh Fullerton: Typically any other day, 4:00 in the afternoon, if somebody is interested in playing or learning, and we love teaching, without necessarily playing for money, of course, 4:00 being our key time.

26:46 Debra Schwartz: That's game time?

26:47 Hugh Fullerton: Yeah.

26:49 Debra Schwartz: 4:00?

26:50 Hugh Fullerton: Yeah.

26:51 Debra Schwartz: On the Plaza?

26:52 Hugh Fullerton: Yeah.

26:53 Debra Schwartz: Good to know. [laughs] How do you release information? Is there a website you go to, or are you guys in a group, or does everybody just know when the game is, what's going on? Is there some kind of jungle music that goes through? How do you guys communicate?

27:20 Hugh Fullerton: That's a very good question. Typically telephone still, of which Jesse is more or less the central character involving the men from the other part of the Bay Area. There's also a small website having to do with the Fullerton Backgammon

Classic, Facebook.

27:49 Debra Schwartz: You have it on Facebook? [laughs] That's great.

27:55 Hugh Fullerton: Otherwise, there are some very highly regarded backgammon players in the Bay Area — a guy called Kip Wolsey who puts out essays for free about how to play Match Play, for example, which is different than the *Chouette* version I was describing earlier.

28:21 Debra Schwartz: Do you ever have young people come up and say, "Teach me."

28:25 Hugh Fullerton: Yes, and we love to do that. It's a great game for kids and we love showing them how it works. Boys and girls. And one of the little gags that I use, when there is a particular child who might be interested, say 5 or 6 years old, the first question I'll have for the kid is, "So, kid, can you count?" And the kid will say, "Yes." And then the next question is, "Does your mom have any money?" [laughs] Which almost always gets a laugh from the mom, as you could expect. [laughs]

29:16 Debra Schwartz: But really, during your games, I have actually gone to say hello to Jesse in the midst of a game, which felt like I was trying to poke somebody out of the most intense concentration. I backed away, such was the vibe. The group looks at you as if to say, "No distractions!"

29:41 Hugh Fullerton: I can certainly understand, and I don't like that. I like people; I like more interaction. And sometimes it may slow the game down, and then my answer would be, "So what?"

29:57 Debra Schwartz: How long do the games go for?

30:00 Hugh Fullerton: Good question. We could play, typically, a game itself may last 10 minutes, maybe.

30:08 Debra Schwartz: Really, just 10 minutes?

30:09 Hugh Fullerton: But many, many games, so we could play until 6:00 at night. Natural rotation.

30:20 Debra Schwartz: How many games do you have going on at once? There's how many tables?

30:22 Hugh Fullerton: Good question. The Bill Graham tables are numbering, I think, six or so. In fact, the City of Mill Valley came recently and refinished them. It was nice of them to do that. And at any given time there would be a couple of backgammon games, perhaps, and a couple of chess games.

30:45 Debra Schwartz: Who brings the boards?

30:47 Hugh Fullerton: Good question. There is a company in Providence, Rhode Island who, in my opinion, make the best boards. I used to have a wholesale account with them and receive their boards and distribute them for no profit, so you'll see a lot of the same kind of a board.

31:12 Debra Schwartz: Is that the board that you brought with you today?

31:14 Hugh Fullerton: It is.

31:15 Debra Schwartz: We'll take a photo of you with that board, because that is definitely no small board. That's for real, that thing. It's big. [chuckles]

31:26 Hugh Fullerton: It's a wonderful board. Cork.

31:29 Debra Schwartz: And well patina-ed, I noticed.

31:30 Hugh Fullerton: Yes.

31:35 Debra Schwartz: You didn't really go into too much detail about the names of your local friends that play. Introduce me to your Mill Valley players, their names, if you don't mind.

31:49 Hugh Fullerton: Sure. Mansour, of Persian heritage — and we acknowledge the fact that he invented the game [laughs] — lives in Corte Madera. A very smart, high tech guy, that's how he makes his living. He comes over — very fluid personality. Jess, the math teacher —

32:19 Debra Schwartz: You're not giving the name of the other guy? The high tech guy. Or is that Mansour?

32:25 Hugh Fullerton: Mansour.

32:25 Debra Schwartz: Oh, okay. Gotcha. Okay, Jesse? Jesse is our math genius.

32:33 Hugh Fullerton: Math teacher. And I should say, in Mansour's honor, we use a couple of Persian words for certain situations on the backgammon board.

32:44 Debra Schwartz: Did he give you those words or, in honor of his heritage, you brought them to the game?

32:49 Hugh Fullerton: You're asking a good question. Maybe he gave us the word *afshar*, A-F-S-H-A-R — a king from 12th century Persia who discovered how important the number five point was, often called the "golden point," the most important point to try to make in that game. Another word from Persia is the word that means candlesticks.

It's a case where you have too many checkers stacked on one place, it's called a candlestick. Who else? Callahan, John Callahan who, as you might guess, was a close friend of Donovan, the other Irish heritage guy. Wonderful character, great storyteller. Let's think, who else? Nick, a guy from Palestine. And various others, maybe their names will come up while I'm —

34:01 Debra Schwartz: Yes. And don't worry if you forget them — or I should say rather, time release, remember them — we can always add them later. Now there is one guy that I have seen, it's impossible to miss him, because he's very elegantly dressed, and he has always had the nicest hats, and that is Arthur.

34:20 Hugh Fullerton: Arthur Sheridan, Sausalito. Now we, alas, don't see him as often as we used to, but very friendly, outspoken guy with wonderful opinions.

34:36 Debra Schwartz: Which he shares?

34:37 Hugh Fullerton: Sure, he does.

34:39 Debra Schwartz: I suspect you're a very sharing group, in that regard. [laughs]

34:47 Hugh Fullerton: I think you've got it. [chuckles]

34:51 Debra Schwartz: How long has Arthur been playing? Do you know? He's no longer playing now?

34:57 Hugh Fullerton: He started playing probably around the same time that Donovan was showing us how to play backgammon. Arthur's also quite a good chess player, so we were seeing him at the Plaza 1989-ish.

35:18 Debra Schwartz: But you don't know when the games began? Because the tables were there, put by Graham, you said, in the '70s. Do you know?

35:27 Hugh Fullerton: Were they put there in '79?

35:29 Debra Schwartz: Were they?

35:30 Hugh Fullerton: Yeah, I —

35:31 Debra Schwartz: We'll have to check on that.

35:33 Hugh Fullerton: Sure. Now then, you're raising a good point in that the chess game precedes the backgammon game by so many years and there was chess playing before Donovan showed up to show us how to play backgammon.

35:52 Debra Schwartz: So let's do a little switch here onto another game. Let's get to the chess, because that's part of it, too. Tell me about the chess games.

36:06 Hugh Fullerton: Very fluid. Probably, on the whole, far more players coming in to play chess over time. Maybe not quite as regular as the backgammon players, and I'm less familiar with specific names; however, Tim, a guy who comes down from Fairfax to play chess, some other backgammon players and chess players, Mark James. Jess also plays chess.

36:54 Debra Schwartz: Do you play chess?

36:55 Hugh Fullerton: Not well.

36:58 Debra Schwartz: Do they bet money in the chess games, as well?

37:01 Hugh Fullerton: No.

37:04 Debra Schwartz: Do you have tournaments with the chess games?

37:08 Hugh Fullerton: Not the way the backgammon players do.

37:15 Debra Schwartz: Interesting. I wonder if one game evokes one kind of ambience and the other game another?

37:24 Hugh Fullerton: Perhaps the backgammon is more social, in a sense.

37:32 Debra Schwartz: Less inner thought? They're certainly moving more, all that shaking and everything.

37:37 Hugh Fullerton: And more collective consciousness. [laughs]

37:43 Debra Schwartz: And you have got a bunch of guys ganging up on one. [laughs]

37:51 Debra Schwartz: So you're in the square. Let's step away from the gaming tables for just a moment and talk about the square. You're in the square, you spend a lot of time in the square, do you ever feel like you own the square? Or that it's your territory?

38:06 Hugh Fullerton: I love the nickname Ambassador. [chuckles]

38:10 Debra Schwartz: What are your responsibilities as ambassador?

38:14 Hugh Fullerton: Well, when we think about the people who use the Plaza on a regular basis, you and I know Yella and her children, and various other young, beautiful mothers, I should add, with their children. It's a wonderful place for young mothers to come with their children to meet other children and maybe throw a soft frisbee around.

38:48 Debra Schwartz: Yes, I saw you had one in your car.

38:49 Hugh Fullerton: I do. And, also, the various Mill Valley folk who have friendly dogs, which we love. The Plaza is a perfect place to bring a friendly dog who can interact with the children, interact with the other dogs, show us a little bit as human beings about interacting.

39:21 Debra Schwartz: Do you have any players with dogs that are like good luck dogs?

39:26 Hugh Fullerton: A very good question. Callahan has a wonderful dog who is a terrier, a Jack —

39:42 Debra Schwartz: Jack Russell?

39:43 Hugh Fullerton: Jack Russell terrier. He's an old guy, he's — I don't know, 14 or 16 or what have you. He would see me coming, Debra, when he'd already be at the park and he'd bark a little bit. He knew that I was going to take him for a circumambulation of the Plaza and meet the other dogs and meet the sometimes beautiful owners of dogs. [chuckles]

40:14 Debra Schwartz: I wish the people that are listening to this could see your face. [laughs]

40:21 Debra Schwartz: There's so much in your expressions. Obviously you appreciate saying "hi" to people on the square. So you're in your town, you've got your domain, you have a very important position as ambassador, there's risks, there's rewards, there's community.

40:43 Hugh Fullerton: You are a good storyteller.

40:48 Debra Schwartz: What is it, if you could say — explain what that means to you living here.

40:58 Hugh Fullerton: Well, first, from my point of view, it is about seeing myself in terms of other people. The idea of being of help, of service is common to all of us, I think. Maybe this is my small way of contributing.

41:35 Debra Schwartz: You mean having that place in town, having that spot where you know that that's where your attention is going and that you take it seriously?

41:46 Hugh Fullerton: A place of community and how important community is, after all, I think.

41:52 Debra Schwartz: How important is community to you?

41:55 Hugh Fullerton: I think it's very important. After all, when people look at the communities that they are involved with, most people are involved with several different communities, not only the family community, work community in most people's cases — this is a wonderful community where there can often be surprises, after all, no appointments, what was it the Indian guy said? "No appointments, no disappointments." We are, again, so lucky — aren't we? — to have this accidental Plaza.

42:49 Debra Schwartz: It's always really nice in an oral interview to include those stories about something that happened. When you think of all the years you've spent with your gaming crew, and the Friday Club, are there any particular days or moments or something that happened that stands out in your mind?

43:15 Hugh Fullerton: Let me think a little bit about that. I could say, "Oh, yes, there certainly is, but I forgot."

43:25 Debra Schwartz: Well, think about that. Sometimes it's just a moment that stands apart, a person, one play. Because it seems to me that you guys are pretty present with what you're doing over there.

43:47 Hugh Fullerton: Another one of our players, Wayne, a very smart retired health professional, comes over on Fridays, the big game, from San Francisco. A lot of my memories might pertain to some things that perhaps some people have said about — certainly this year — the political atmosphere. Certainly, people are expressive of their opinions about politics in the Plaza, and we have a certain bent in Mill Valley. It's not everyone's bent, and so the political banter has been pretty funny this year in some respects. So in my case, I threw in the line about, why Donald Trump was unwilling to release his federal income taxes. Did you hear that? He's so embarrassed about the million-and-a-half dollars of deductions he takes each year for hair products.

45:08 Debra Schwartz: Some really corny jokes going on over there.

45:11 Hugh Fullerton: Some pretty corny jokes going on.

45:13 Debra Schwartz: Have you ever excluded a player who's come up? Can it be exclusive over there?

45:23 Hugh Fullerton: There was one player — this is an interesting question — and I think I know why he was excluded. In fact, Jess was pretty much the guy who says very simply, "I don't think I want to play with you any longer." And he [the excluded player] may have been using HGH, which you may know stands for Human Growth Hormone. Why somebody would use that, I don't know, but he would come to the Plaza and be a little tense and sort of create —

46:09 Debra Schwartz: Aggressive tendencies, perhaps?

46:10 Hugh Fullerton: Yes, aggressive tendencies. And it's something that we don't

need in an otherwise very pleasant gaming atmosphere.

46:24 Debra Schwartz: That's a point well-taken. It is a very pleasant gaming atmosphere, that's important, then.

46:32 Hugh Fullerton: It's why people come to the Plaza, I think, whether they're playing games, or otherwise.

46:42 Debra Schwartz: Have you developed a kind of support system between you? Has anybody ever been in trouble and it's the gamers that come? You have your own sort of like a church, only without the heavenly aspect. The community, perhaps.

47:00 Hugh Fullerton: Sure. It's another good question. And thank goodness, as a general statement, none of our players are missing any meals, as I might put it. Now then, a couple of our players have some health issues. In fact, one of our players has epilepsy and had an attack at the Plaza, so we, of course, assisted. And the emergency services responded very quickly, and we learned that, normally, there's not a whole lot emergency services can do in respect of epilepsy, but we made him comfortable while we were waiting for them, and then followed up afterwards, made sure he was okay, greeting him when he came back a few days later from resting. So we're very concerned about the health of all of our players as a general statement.

48:16 Debra Schwartz: So you sort of look after each other?

48:18 Hugh Fullerton: Try to, in that respect, sure. And some of the guys have particular talents, in terms of trades, or consulting talents, and we try to make people aware of those talents, so where they might help.

48:40 Debra Schwartz: You mean outsiders? Help promote each other?

48:42 Hugh Fullerton: Sure.

48:43 Debra Schwartz: Help to maintain the flow going through?

48:49 Hugh Fullerton: Sure.

48:51 Debra Schwartz: Well, that's awfully nice. I think we've got a lot of information here, but I'm going to ask a couple more questions. We talked about a lot of things. We've talked about the characters that you play with and we talked about the kinds of games and the various philosophies of backgammon. We've talked about the Plaza and the community. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to add in? Any comments of any kind?

49:22 Hugh Fullerton: Now I'm remembering a couple of other players' names. You'll like this. Two guys called Nirvan, which you might know is an Indian name, and it comes from the time when they were Sannyasins.

49:39 Debra Schwartz: Oh, they were Sannyasins? Rajneesh?

49:42 Hugh Fullerton: Rajneesh. What some of us call the “Orange Mafia.” But they were each in Oregon at a ranch —

49:51 Debra Schwartz: Rajneeshpuram, yes, in Antelope.

49:54 Hugh Fullerton: Exactly. And Nirvan gets a call from his mother and they talked for half an hour only to learn that, no, it’s not, it was the other Nirvan’s mother. They talked for an hour on the telephone! [laughs]

50:10 Debra Schwartz: Wait. Did the mother know she was talking to the wrong man?

50:15 Hugh Fullerton: No.

50:18 Debra Schwartz: I didn’t know that Sannyasins were interchangeable.

50:21 Hugh Fullerton: Their voices are similar.

50:23 Debra Schwartz: But whose phone was called?

50:26 Hugh Fullerton: There was a community phone at the ranch, apparently.

50:30 Debra Schwartz: Oh, right. Oh, that’s interesting. [laughs] So this call comes — mom gets ahold of — oh, okay, gotcha. I thought it was during the game.

50:38 Hugh Fullerton: Oh, yeah. No. This was separate. I just remembered it.

50:40 Debra Schwartz: So you’ve got two — perhaps they’re still Sannyasins, I don’t know.

50:44 Hugh Fullerton: I’m not sure. That was an interesting time, back in the mid ’80s.

50:49 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, I recall.

50:50 Hugh Fullerton: People coming through Marin County, coming through Mill Valley, in particular.

50:53 Debra Schwartz: Yes. Lovely colored clothing.

50:56 Hugh Fullerton: Yeah, saffron.

50:57 Debra Schwartz: Okay, that’s something we didn’t talk about, the Sannyasins. Good that you remembered. How about anything else that we haven’t talked about,

anything at all that comes to mind, that represents you?

51:09 Hugh Fullerton: Well, personally, I'd like to figure out, I'm in the happy position of being able to actually give some money away, and it would be fun to think of a small gift or what have you, like Marcus' bench. Marcus has only lived in Mill Valley for three years. He's not part of the gaming group. He's an Englishman and he observed the need for a bench and made a nice — he had a lucky Silicon Valley career — a new friend of mine from the Plaza. And so in my case, I'm trying to think about where I might —

52:00 Debra Schwartz: You might contribute.

52:00 Hugh Fullerton: Might contribute.

52:03 Debra Schwartz: More than just yourself.

52:04 Hugh Fullerton: Yeah. [laughs]

52:09 Debra Schwartz: So you are the ambassador, perhaps of not just the gaming, but it may very well extend throughout the Plaza. It's good to know this. What do you say when you meet people that are coming from the outside and how do you greet your visitors? The Plaza folk?

52:30 Hugh Fullerton: Well, we have a wonderful Mill Valley resident called Jeff Sears, who owns a wonderful bicycle company called Blazing Saddles. He must be very happy that we're taking this four-lane boulevard, Miller Avenue, and converting it to two lanes for cars and two lanes for bicycles. And it has become a huge enterprise during the summertime, in particular, for people from all over the world to come to visit San Francisco, and who have heard about what a wonderful experience it is to hire a bicycle and ride up to Mill Valley and hang around the Plaza for a while, maybe talk to some locals.

53:28 Debra Schwartz: So you greet a lot of travelers.

53:31 Hugh Fullerton: I do, which may —

53:32 Debra Schwartz: That is a responsibility.

53:33 Hugh Fullerton: May have evolved into, contributed to this nickname, Ambassador, I don't know. [chuckles]

53:38 Debra Schwartz: See, you really do have some very serious responsibilities. Do you speak any other languages?

53:43 Hugh Fullerton: I wish. I'm learning, I'm trying to learn.

53:46 Debra Schwartz: To say hello in every language.

53:48 Hugh Fullerton: In every language to say, “Just kidding,” which is a very important phrase if you’re trying to learn another language.

53:54 Debra Schwartz: Oh. I thought you were going to try to learn, “Does your mother have any money?” [laughs]

54:03 Hugh Fullerton: But generally the travelers get a kick, and then sometimes there will be some local jokes thrown in for the travelers that they find also funny, getting a little local feel, and what have you.

54:18 Debra Schwartz: I think it is very, very nice for any traveler to come into a town and to have a smiling face and a friendly person to greet you and to make you feel at home. You really do have a very important position.

54:35 Hugh Fullerton: And you may have been to some other places in the world, which I have, and been lucky to be able to do that. In many cases it’s simple reciprocity, in a way, just from other people’s kindness.

55:00 Debra Schwartz: Yes. Well, I am very glad to know about your people and about the game. I think that if people will listen to this, they may feel more comfortable, perhaps, approaching you and learning about what’s going on there in the Plaza with the backgammon and the chess. I certainly will spread the word.

55:27 Hugh Fullerton: Sure. Maybe even, Debra, some other folks from the coffee shops in town — where we say, “Oh, another coffee shop, the continued boutiqueing of Mill Valley, where we used to have a hardware store.” But we like the people at Ecuador — Equator, what am I saying, Equator.

55:48 Debra Schwartz: Everybody has their place. Well, I just want to say, Ambassador, that it has been a delight talking with you today. I very much enjoyed learning about the tables, the games. It’s something I’ve watched for so many years and I’ve never really known about. So, this was a particularly interesting interview for me. Thank you so much for sharing your story with the Mill Valley Oral History Program and the Library, and I shall see you on the Plaza.

56:17 Hugh Fullerton: You are a good interviewer. We are lucky to have you in that position.

56:22 Debra Schwartz: Thank you very much.

56:24 Hugh Fullerton: Thank you.