

Mill Valley Oral History Program

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Public Library*

Dennis Fisco

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2018**

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In this oral history, longtime Mill Valley resident, real estate developer, and former mayor Dennis Fisco discusses his life and work in the community. Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, Dennis moved to Mill Valley in the 1980s with his wife Pam, with whom he raised three children. Dennis recounts his path into community involvement. Dennis first served on the planning commission for a number of years, then the city council, and finally became mayor of Mill Valley. Dennis discusses some of the major projects he worked on in city government, including the construction of the new community center and the library expansion project, as well as many of the people he worked with over the years. He also describes his community service outside of government, such as his formation of the nonprofit organization Friends of the Fields, dedicated to the restoration of Mill Valley's fields and recreation areas. In 2006 Dennis received the honor of being named Mill Valley's Citizen of the Year. Throughout this oral history, Dennis conveys his love of Mill Valley and his deep commitment to the life of the community.

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Oral History of Dennis Fisco
October 30th, 2018

Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Dennis Fisco, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.

0:00:00 Debra Schwartz: Today is October 30th, 2018. My name is Debra Schwartz, and I'm sitting here in the Mill Valley Library recording room, in the basement, with a long-time Mill Valley resident, Dennis Fisco, Marin County real estate investor and developer, former mayor of Mill Valley, outdoor lover and, like I said, long-time Mill Valley resident. Dennis, on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library, welcome to the rubber room — that's what I call it — and thank you so much for coming here so we can sit down together and you can share your story with our community and the library.

0:00:49 Dennis Fisco: Well, thanks for the invitation and thanks for the call. I'm looking forward to this.

0:00:52 Debra Schwartz: Dennis, the first thing I noticed when you showed up was it's almost hard to recognize you, because you're in your business clothes, and I'm so used to seeing you and your lovely wife Pam on Mt. Tamalpais on a trail somewhere at any time of day. So I guess you are just a regular working guy after all.

0:01:12 Dennis Fisco: Well, yeah, every now and then I have to show up at the office, let the employees know I'm still around. It's funny we went to a birthday cocktail party last night, but I stopped home first and put on shorts and hiking shoes, and I was terribly inappropriately dressed, but everyone was used to seeing me that way.

0:01:29 Debra Schwartz: Well, I'm certainly used to seeing you that way, too, 'cause I know you and Pam love the outdoors.

0:01:35 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, we do.

0:01:36 Debra Schwartz: I see you many times on the trails near our houses, but there's a lot more to you than the hiker that you are and the outdoor person that you are — you and your family — perched so close to the Elinor Fire trail in that lovely, lovely home of yours on Hillside. So before we get to your work that you've done with Mill Valley, and the time you've spent here and the contributions you've made, it'd be really great to get a little information about you, yourself and your family. Were you born in California?

0:02:14 Dennis Fisco: I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, one of eight kids, in a large Italian family. And my wife Pam Polite Fisco, grew up in the same area as I did. We've been married 39 years now, so it's funny her maiden name is Pam B. Polite, [laughter] and all her siblings have a middle initial B.

0:02:42 Debra Schwartz: Was that irony on her parents' part?

0:02:46 Dennis Fisco: Well, her mother's maiden name was Bowman, so they're all Bowman.

0:02:50 Debra Schwartz: So Pam B. Polite. [laughs]

0:02:52 Dennis Fisco: Well, yeah. Actually, hers is Mary Pamela Polite, but all of the siblings have that middle initial B, so it's pretty funny. We met in seventh grade and we were just good friends for a long, long time. We left Cleveland. We were friends until I graduated from law school and then stopped out in Colorado to say hello to her and things changed a little — for the better. So, we left Cleveland in 1979, spent five years down in Houston, and then we decided we were going to go somewhere where we liked the weather a little better. Her dad happened to be living in Belvedere, so we picked Mill Valley.

0:03:40 Debra Schwartz: And where were your ancestors from? I mean, you're Italian.

0:03:45 Dennis Fisco: Yeah. *Tutti italiano*. My grandparents were from Italy.

0:03:51 Debra Schwartz: What part?

0:03:52 Dennis Fisco: My grandfather was from Campobasso-Rionero, which is south of Rome and east of Naples in the Apennine Mountains — a very poor, olive oil and sheep herding part of the world. My grandmother was from Sicily, which I just found out about four years ago, because I became an Italian citizen. And so because I was, Pam and our three children — Gavin, Dana and Peter — also became Italian citizens. So we all have dual-passports now. But yeah, they came from Italy, and they went to Cleveland. My grandfather was a laborer, opened a plumbing company; my father built that company up, and now my two brothers run that company.

0:04:39 Debra Schwartz: Wow. So what year did your grandparents come to Cleveland?

0:04:43 Dennis Fisco: He came to the United States, in about 1909 and I don't really know when my grandmother came.

0:04:51 Debra Schwartz: And your grandparents name?

0:04:52 Dennis Fisco: Benjamino and Mary.

0:05:00 Debra Schwartz: Fisco, is the —

0:05:01 Dennis Fisco: *Fee-sco* is how you pronounce it, which means taxes. So, when I go to a restaurant and I'm in anywhere where they speak Italian — Portugal, Italy, Spain — and you say Fisco they remember you because that means taxes.

0:05:16 Debra Schwartz: Gulp. [laughs]

0:05:18 Dennis Fisco: Yeah.

0:05:19 Debra Schwartz: Well, in the old days, in the Middle Ages, you might have a name that resembled your occupation.

0:05:26 Dennis Fisco: Yeah. We must have been tax collectors at some point.

0:05:29 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, right. You were telling me before the interview a little bit about your life in Cleveland and the divide between you and your wife. Can you repeat that story again, 'cause it was funny.

0:05:43 Dennis Fisco: Oh yeah. So, in Shaker Heights, Ohio, there's a street called Warrensville Center Road. On the east side of Warrensville it's a predominantly Jewish part of town, and on the west side it's a non-Jewish part. So growing up, whenever there was a Jewish holiday, like Yom Kippur, Tommy Rini and I were the only two in our class, in our school, out of three classrooms. It was the two Italian guys, everyone else was Jewish, and took the holiday off. And on Pam's side of Warrensville, which was probably 200 meters from where I lived, it was exactly the opposite. There was one woman who wouldn't be in class, on the Jewish holidays and being that close together and that divided, was pretty amazing. So as a result, a lot of my friends growing up were all Jewish.

0:06:37 Debra Schwartz: And you've adopted some of the Jewish traditions, have you?

0:06:40 Dennis Fisco: Yom Kippur. My Jewish buddies taught me to get rid of my Italian hit list [Debra laughs] every year on Yom Kippur and forgive all those people who made the list during the years.

0:06:55 Debra Schwartz: So you're saying that, your original nature is to take inventory of the people that you want revenge on, store that up, and then at some point get even, I guess?

0:07:06 Dennis Fisco: Well, yeah. Or just remember.

0:07:08 Debra Schwartz: Or just hold the grudge?

0:07:09 Dennis Fisco: Yeah.

0:07:10 Debra Schwartz: Hold the grudge, that's your natural —

0:07:11 Dennis Fisco: But no longer, ever since I adopted that holiday.

0:07:14 Debra Schwartz: Every Yom Kippur you forgive.

0:07:18 Dennis Fisco: We forgive. My buddies call me to remind me and I go, “Okay”. [chuckles]

0:07:22 Debra Schwartz: Perhaps that is the beginning of your diplomatic gifts.

0:07:29 Dennis Fisco: Maybe.

0:07:29 Debra Schwartz: That helps you to do so well in politics, which you will talk about later.

0:07:32 Dennis Fisco: Okay, maybe, yeah.

0:07:34 Debra Schwartz: It’s good to do know what you’re dealing with and also good to forgive in order to progress.

0:07:41 Dennis Fisco: Exactly.

0:07:42 Debra Schwartz: So you came to Mill Valley because of Pam’s dad — and his name is?

0:07:51 Dennis Fisco: Will Polite. Will lived here in Belvedere with his second wife. I had built a company up in Houston, that my brother Mike still runs, where we did, of all things, hazardous waste hauling and hydro-blasting for refineries. Pam got her master’s degree at Rice in geology and went to work for Shell Oil, and our first son was born, Gavin.

0:08:29 Debra Schwartz: What year is this?

0:08:31 Dennis Fisco: He was born 1984. So we said, “Do we want to really raise our family down in Houston, in the petrol-chemical capital of the world, or should we find somewhere nice to live?” So we came here on a trip for one week scouting out homes, and it was pretty interesting because I went to the helicopter place over on 101 —

0:08:57 Debra Schwartz: The heliport there.

0:08:58 Dennis Fisco: Right. And I rented a helicopter and a pilot for a couple hours and gave him a map. We had a map in the back seat, Pam and I, and I said, “Fly up to Santa Rosa and fly back and show me flat areas where there are communities, towns — show me where they’re flat and not on hills,” because we had this kid and we were going to have more kids. And he did that. So I ended up with this map with Corte Madera, Ross Valley, Fairfax, Mill Valley, all these little towns on it, and then I handed it to a realtor

and said, “Show me some houses, not on a mountain.” So one day — that realtor didn’t last, because we were up on Ralston, up off West Blithedale.

0:09:45 Debra Schwartz: You mean you were renting on Ralston?

0:09:47 Dennis Fisco: No, we were looking at houses, and I walk out the back door of this house, and it’s gotta be 80 feet down to the ground and I said, “You know, I don’t have a lot of time. I only got five days here and I told you don’t show me anything on the mountain.” And she said, “Oh, no, no. This is the foothill. The mountain’s over there.” And she pointed to Mt. Tam. [laughs] So we got back to our rental house and said, “See ya, I’ve got another realtor.” And the day we were leaving town, we drove by Sunnyside and there was a sign out for sale, “Open House Sunday” — It was a Saturday — “Do not disturb occupant.” And that never bothers Pam, so she goes, “We’ve got to look at this thing. It’s beautiful.” So we knock on the door, and the lady goes “Oh, can I hold the baby?” Pam goes, “We’d like to see it. We’re leaving town. ‘Oh, can I hold the baby?’ Yeah, help yourself.” And coincidentally, the lady was a dual widower and both of her former husbands were geologists. There was a rock shop in the basement. We were staying with Pam’s sister and brother on Catalpa. By the time we got there from Sunnyside —

0:11:03 Debra Schwartz: It was a done deal.

0:11:04 Dennis Fisco: This lady had already called her realtor and said, “I’m selling it to these people. Cancel the open house.”

0:11:11 Debra Schwartz: I remember that house. My twin sister lived right across the street.

0:11:14 Dennis Fisco: That’s right, yeah.

0:11:15 Debra Schwartz: Nancy.

0:11:15 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, yeah. We were there for 18 years.

0:11:19 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, 18 years. And you did some remodeling.

0:11:21 Dennis Fisco: Lots of remodeling. It was a two-bedroom, one-bath, and we turned it into a four-bedroom, three-bath, by going underneath, not really doing a lot.

0:11:34 Debra Schwartz: In a nice neighborhood, close to downtown.

0:11:36 Dennis Fisco: Oh yeah, I really loved that neighborhood. In fact, we still own the house — next door to that is a rental house. We own a number of rental houses around town.

0:11:46 Debra Schwartz: Smart you.

0:11:47 Dennis Fisco: Hey, lucky.

0:11:49 Debra Schwartz: Once you came here, you became a developer and a real estate agent?

0:11:56 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, so my partner, Pam's brother, Wick Polite, who was a fraternity brother of mine, he moved from Cleveland at the same time I moved here, and we decided we were going to go into real estate and knock on wood.

0:12:10 Debra Schwartz: He says, as he's knocking on his head.

0:12:12 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, so we were fortunate enough to have a couple of successful projects early on. And because I lived so close to town, Pam and I would walk to town a lot, and so I started to get involved in things. In fact, the first meeting I ever went to was Dell Getz. Did you know Dell? Dowd's Barn.

0:12:37 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:12:39 Dennis Fisco: She put a little ad in the *Mill Valley Record* — this was before the internet and all that — and it said “Community Meeting,” and I went, “Oh shoot, I'll go to the community meeting. I'll see what's going on.” And I made a mistake that I've never duplicated. So I go to this meeting. It's in her Dowd's Barn, which was a used furniture place, and I sat at the far end of the room — which made Dell in the group between me and the door — and the meeting started. I'm sitting there, and it was people just bad-mouthing the city, and saying how bad it is and how everything's changing, and I'm like, “God I don't think it's that bad. And plus, why wouldn't you do something to make it better?” And I couldn't leave because I was across the room, so I always sit with my back to the door now, so I can get out if I have to.

0:13:38 Debra Schwartz: Future politicians, this is a valuable strategy, here.

0:13:39 Dennis Fisco: Oh, I've learned a valuable lesson.

0:13:49 Debra Schwartz: Let's just get right to the mayor part of it. You were mayor of Mill Valley from what year to what year?

0:13:56 Dennis Fisco: I stopped in '05, so I must have been '97 to '05. I got on the planning commission in about '86 or '87, and I did a redevelopment project up in San Rafael called Montecito Shopping Center, which I still own.

0:14:15 Debra Schwartz: So you own Montecito Shopping Center?

0:14:17 Dennis Fisco: Yeah.

0:14:18 Debra Schwartz: I just did not know that. Holy moley.

0:14:21 Dennis Fisco: Wick and I bought that in 1987. And I had to go through the planning commission up there because we were doing an extensive remodel of it. It was 60 percent vacant and we brought it to 90 percent vacant and then redid it all, built it all over again, and it's been very successful ever since. So one of the citizens who came to protest part of our remodel, or give their strong opinions on how it should be done, was Don Dickinson who was the planning director in Mill Valley. We got through it. We remodeled it, got our approvals and I thought, "God, why don't I get on the planning commission of Mill Valley and then I could work with Don Dickinson and tell him my thoughts about how things should be done and the like." What spurred that on was two things. In the *Record*, in the same week, or same two weeks — 'cause it was a weekly — there were two issues that came up.

0:15:30: The B of A building across from Mill Valley Market, they had gone to the design review — we had design review in the planning commission back then — which I helped get rid of. They had gone for two or three hearings about what color to paint the building, and they finally got so fed up that they painted four or five pallets of colors on the side wall facing City Hall. And they went to the design review hearing and they said, "We don't care what we paint it, just pick one." And the design review said, "That's not our job. You have to tell us which one." And I'm like, "You've gotta be kidding me." And then the next one was Smith and Hawken, which bought the old post office at Sunnyside and Blithedale, and they went in to design review with their landscaping plan, and they got turned down.

0:16:20: To me that was like telling the Pope how to be Catholic. It's Smith and Hawken; they know how to landscape a building. It was their showcase and they got turned down. So I said, "I've got to get involved. This is crazy." So I had run into Betsy Cutler, who at that point was on the city council, and I said, "I'm Dennis Fisco. You don't know me but I would like to try this." And she was brave enough to put my name up and I got on the planning commission. I spent eight years on the planning commission and was chair a couple of times. It's a six-year term, but I mentioned earlier that we got rid of the design review committee. You used to have to go to the design review and then go to planning commission, and hopefully — but a lot of times, you go to the city council. It seemed like a lot of process, and it took up a lot of staff time.

0:17:15: So Don Hunter, who was the city manager at the time, came up with the idea: "Let's get rid of design review, make the planning commission from five people to seven people, and make two of those design professionals." So we would get input on the design and it streamlined the whole operation. But as part of that, because we were revamping the whole system, he asked me to stick around for two more years on the planning commission. So I spent eight years doing that, and then I got off, and then I spent a year as the chair of the business task force which was formed by the city council because there was a number of vacancies in town. There were people complaining that there were too many Italian restaurants, go figure. So they wanted to know how we could get a better mix of businesses — should we rent control, should we do a formula business

ordinance where, if you have like a Starbucks, they can't come into town because they have too many locations.

0:18:27 Debra Schwartz: Or large companies, I mean corporations.

0:18:31 Dennis Fisco: It was mainly retail, and it was really the downtown area, a little bit of Miller, but primarily the downtown area. So we spent a year on that task force — there were about a dozen of us, many of whom are still around — and we came up with the *laissez faire*, let it all be, the way it is now. The one thing that we put in place that still works pretty well is back then you didn't really need a use permit to put a business into a store. So you could get just about anyone in any location. And it was really bigger stores that people didn't want in the downtown, so we said anything over 1500 square feet you need a use permit, and that worked pretty darn well. And now people would say, "Oh, there's too many galleries in town, or too many beauty shops." But it ebbs and flows.

0:19:28 Debra Schwartz: When I first moved to Mill Valley in the late '70s there was the Mosher shoe store; there were four, as I recall, hardware stores; there was Lockwood Pharmacy. I could go on and on. The General Store. It was really a town where you could get whatever you needed, although four hardware stores seems like a lot, it seemed like we needed them.

0:19:53 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, Lawson Dyer was another one.

0:19:55 Debra Schwartz: The lumber yard. Yeah, Lawson Dyer. Maybe you couldn't get your nails done every other block, but you could live here practically and not have to shop at the malls. In fact, I recall the malls being rather vacant over in the Town Center, and quarter meter malls weren't as occupied as they are now. There was a wonderful feeling of a hometown.

0:20:23 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, in fact when we did the business task force one of our polls of the citizens was what could you not buy in town, and there was very little that you could not buy in town at the time. You could really just about buy anything you needed, but retail has gone a different direction. The rents started going up. Back then, they were complaining about them going up — imagine what they complain about now — and it pushed out all those businesses that are more rent-sensitive like hardware stores. It pushed a lot of them down to Miller Avenue.

0:21:02: We said, "Let's keep Miller as sort of the working part of retail in Mill Valley," and we did for a long time. To some degree, it still is. There's still mechanics down there, car repair shops, tire store, Malugani, the bead shop. Things like that are coming back.

0:21:21 Debra Schwartz: Oh, it is coming back?

0:21:22 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, I just read about that.

0:21:23 Debra Schwartz: I'm so glad to hear that.

0:21:25 Dennis Fisco: Yeah. I've never been in there, but Pam goes in there.

0:21:28 Debra Schwartz: Oh my gosh, it was a treasure.

0:21:31 Dennis Fisco: It's coming back.

0:21:31 Debra Schwartz: It was very sad for a lot of people when it went off.

0:21:33 Dennis Fisco: So, that's the lower rent district, and that's where I think it should stay that way.

0:21:43 Debra Schwartz: Have you any regrets from your time with the planning department and working in the city? Is there something that happened that you wished hadn't, or things that you're extremely relieved did happen, any stand apart moments in your career?

0:22:01 Dennis Fisco: You know, I don't really have any regrets about the things we did. There were some houses that we might have approved that were big for the time, but now they blend in perfectly and no one complains about. For instance, there's a project on Una Way, which is off of Miller, goes up the hill, extremely controversial. When we approved it, it was three sets of maybe three townhomes each.

0:22:27 Debra Schwartz: The shingled ones?

0:22:28 Dennis Fisco: Yeah. And then there's one of them up on Ethel at the top. But they had more or less clear-cut the hillside to build this thing. So when it was clear-cut and you were building these things, obviously it stuck out. But now you don't even notice that and it looks pretty good. To me it looks very good, and they were affordable at the time — so, okay, they were \$500,000, \$450,000. Now they'd be triple that. But they were somewhat affordable for people and they're close to town. They're close to the bus. They're close to transportation. So this is like — this is a no-brainer.

0:23:02 Debra Schwartz: They have the stairs that drop you down.

0:23:04 Dennis Fisco: Yeah. This is a no-brainer. They're on a stairwell — steps, lane and trail. So no, not really — I mean, I think we did a pretty good job. And my dad, we joked that Clifford Waldeck was on the council with me for all eight of those years, and we joked that there were no disasters on our watch. [laughs]

0:23:24 Debra Schwartz: Can you remember some of the other members so we could just include them in this brochure?

0:23:28 Dennis Fisco: Oh sure. Dick Swanson — let's see: Clifford, Dick Swanson, Chris Raker. Oh jeez, well, I'll just name some that I sat with over the years: Kathleen

Foote, Dick Spotswood, Ruth Schneider, Anne Solem. God, I'm going to forget — Garry Lion, Warren Levinson.

0:23:55 Debra Schwartz: Well, we'll just say, "at this moment."

0:23:56 Dennis Fisco: More of them will come to me.

0:23:57 Debra Schwartz: They'll come to you. You can add them, and if you weren't named, it's not out of malice, it was just, you know, we're all getting older, and it's —

0:24:03 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, exactly. Sorry about that.

0:24:05 Debra Schwartz: And you also weren't prepared for the question.

0:24:09 Dennis Fisco: Yeah.

0:24:10 Debra Schwartz: So, you have been involved with other groups as well here in Mill Valley. We talked in the pre-interview discussion about Friends of Field?

0:24:22 Dennis Fisco: Right.

0:24:23 Debra Schwartz: Tell me about that.

0:24:24 Dennis Fisco: That was interesting. And we didn't cover city council. We'll come back to that.

0:24:28 Debra Schwartz: You know what? Let's hold Friends of Field. Let's finish city council.

0:24:31 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, so then I was asked to run for city council, and it was funny because Clifford ran two years before me.

0:24:43 Debra Schwartz: And what year are we talking now?

0:24:44 Dennis Fisco: That would have been '96, '95 — he ran in '95.

0:24:50 Debra Schwartz: Now your kids are at Park School. You're living on Sunnyside with Pam.

0:24:53 Dennis Fisco: We were living on Sunnyside. They actually went to Mt. Tam School.

0:24:56 Debra Schwartz: Oh, they went to Mt. Tam School.

0:24:57 Dennis Fisco: Because when Pam and I moved to Mill Valley, and we put Gavin in Park School, we went to the parent-teacher's night, open house, right after

school starts, and Pam said “We’re Gavin’s parents,” and the teacher looked at us with this blank look. There were 32 kids in the class. I’m sitting in the downstairs, the basement of Park School, and I’m a real estate guy and the asbestos is peeling off the pipes and the paint is peeling off the walls. We came from an area in Cleveland in Shaker [Heights] where the schools were outstanding, and we were public school kids. I just went, “This isn’t — they don’t know the name of the kid, the class sizes are too big, and the facilities are terrible.” That all got changed soon thereafter, when a bunch of —

0:25:49 Debra Schwartz: What grade was he in?

0:25:51 Dennis Fisco: This is kindergarten, so it would have been in ’89, ’90.

0:25:55 Debra Schwartz: Yes, ’cause Gavin was born what year?

0:25:58 Dennis Fisco: ’84.

0:25:58 Debra Schwartz: Okay.

0:26:00 Dennis Fisco: So yeah, it would’ve been ’89.

0:26:01 Debra Schwartz: Okay.

0:26:02 Dennis Fisco: So anyhow, Clifford ran before and he didn’t get elected. But he came to me, and we chatted about it and I said, “Look, Clifford, the next time there’s going to be two openings. Right now, there’s no openings and you’re running against incumbents that want to stick around, and they’re doing a good job, so let them stick around.” We have a good tradition in Mill Valley of knowing for the most part — there’s only been two people that have done otherwise — that after eight years, you’re going to retire. So you have your opening to run for council and have a pretty good shot at getting on it. So we ran. It was three of us for two positions, and then we ran again four years later, but we were unopposed. So we saved the city about \$12,000, and in return we asked Don Hunter to replace the 30-year-old seats at the dais that we sat in a couple of times a month ’cause they were so uncomfortable. [laughs] So we spent the 12 grand that we had saved on those chairs. The city council was a lot of fun, and we got a lot accomplished during those days. One of the reasons I ran was to further the construction of the community center.

0:27:28 Debra Schwartz: So the community center, let’s talk about the old community center shall we, ’cause your son probably played sports, right?

0:27:37 Dennis Fisco: Oh yeah.

0:27:38 Debra Schwartz: I know mine did, and I remember very well the size of the building. It was a lovely space, and I liked the building, but it’s nothing like it is today.

0:27:50 Dennis Fisco: Yeah. We used to call it the “Wreck” center, W-R-E-C-K. [laughs] It was an old restaurant, on Redwood Highway, donated to the city. They moved it up the road.

0:28:04 Debra Schwartz: When was it donated? Let’s include the history of the rec center.

0:28:07 Dennis Fisco: I wanna say that it was donated in the mid-’70s, early to mid-’70s.

0:28:13 Debra Schwartz: I don’t know this history. That’s when the rec center first came to be?

0:28:18 Dennis Fisco: Yeah. It was literally moved from Redwood Highway up Blithedale, and plopped down on Blithedale where you and I both were —

0:28:26 Debra Schwartz: Blithedale and Camino Alto, right?

0:28:27 Dennis Fisco: It was a restaurant. They cleared out all the tables and chairs and that was that room you entered into. It was sitting on the old dump site of Mill Valley. So that whole area where the middle school is, where the sewage treatment plant is, and where the current rec center and Friends Field is, that was the landfill in Mill Valley. In fact, up until the early ’60s, almost the mid-’60s, they would burn garbage where the sewage treatment plant is now. Every day, they’d light it, they’d pour kerosene, light it on fire, and the only regulation is that they had to put it out by about 1:00 in the afternoon. They’d take hoses and put it out, ’cause the fog would start coming in and blow the smoke toward town. That’s what made us stop doing that. And then they’d just get their bulldozer and push everything into the landfill. So when our kids were playing baseball there, if they hit a ball into left center, you just didn’t go get that ball. It fell into a quagmire of brown guck. [laughs]

0:29:40 Debra Schwartz: I remember there was a small bathroom too.

0:29:42 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, the whole thing was not —

0:29:45 Debra Schwartz: It was quaint.

0:29:46 Dennis Fisco: Not good.

0:29:48 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:29:49 Dennis Fisco: So in about 1987, Don Hunter, who was the park and rec director, had this idea to put together a group of citizens. There were 12 of us, I think. The city council appointed us. We had one year to sort of survey the city, see what the needs and wants were, see where it would be located, figure out what the components

were going to be. And so at the end of the year we came back — now we're like 1988 — and said, "Here's what we think." Our recommendation was to put it where it is now.

0:30:32: And the components were pretty much the ones that are there now: a pool, a large meeting room, no gym, but there was a gym component — I will tell you about that. So we made that recommendation, and then the '89 recession hit, a really bad recession, so it sort of got back-shelfed. But during that time a number of us in on the original committee kept pushing it forward. We hired an architect — and that took a couple of years — to come up with a design.

0:31:06 Debra Schwartz: And the architect — ?

0:31:08 Dennis Fisco: Mark Schatz was the architect, but I do not know what firm. They changed firms so often, but he is still around town. He was involved in the JCC up in San Rafael. But the original architect — I think it was Mark — came up with this design that just got panned. We went to one hearing in front of city council and they were like no.

0:31:33 Debra Schwartz: Why?

0:31:34 Dennis Fisco: It was industrial looking like the Mill Valley Middle School; there was no real design to it. So he came back with what you see there today. Pretty much the way it was designed is the way it got built. And then we went into the finance part of things, how we were going to finance it. We said we were going to use certificates of participation, which are form of a bond. I was on all these committees as we kept moving along, and so then we got it to the point where all we needed was the money. I kept pushing to get this thing built — oh, and part of it was we were going to remodel the middle school gym, and make that the gym component of the community center. The school district owned part of the land that the community center was sitting on, so we needed to do a land swap with them. We went to the school district, and they kept asking for more and more, and the final one for me was the music director. We said, "We are going to build you portable buildings, sort of permanent portable buildings out there," and the music director said, through their negotiator, we have to have white boards that have the scales already on them.

0:32:55 Debra Schwartz: And who was the music director?

0:32:57 Dennis Fisco: I don't know his name, whoever taught music at the middle school at the time.

0:33:04 Debra Schwartz: Joe Angiulo.

0:33:05 Dennis Fisco: I don't think it was Joe. I know Joe. But I didn't deal with the person directly; it was through the negotiator. And I was just like, "Okay, that's it — "

0:33:17 Debra Schwartz: Forget it.

0:33:17 Dennis Fisco: “We’re never going to finish this thing.” So then they started balking about whether they were going to lease us the land or sell us the land or what was going to happen, and they were sort of playing hardball, so our committee got back together. Hunter had this idea, and we said, “Okay it’s not going to work on that site because we can’t work it out with the school district. We’re going to put it on Bayfront Park instead.” There was a big soccer field there. “We’re going to put it right at the end of Sycamore in Bayfront Park.” The committee voted 12-0 knowing that it was going to be extremely controversial. At the next school board meeting, 100 people showed up to protest and, lo and behold, they sold us the land, and we went back to where we were going to be.

0:34:03 Debra Schwartz: Talk about hardball.

0:34:04 Dennis Fisco: Well, they weren’t being very reasonable at the time. [laughs] So then I got on city council because I wanted to help out. But I wanted to get this community center going. We had Penny Weiss, who was helping raise money, and we didn’t really have a chair for the fundraising committee, so I said, you know, “I’ll do it. I don’t want to be the chair, but I’ll sort of run the operation.” So we sat down, Penny and I, and I called in — I think I had four or five people at the first meeting — sort of saying, “Okay you’re going to be my informal committee.” And at that meeting we raised \$750,000 from those five people, ’cause I had their names already.

0:34:53: And Penny’s like, “Oh this is gonna be easy,” ’cause our goal was \$3 million bucks. So, long story short, we ended up raising \$6 million bucks of the \$12 million, roughly, budget. \$1 million from the Marin Community Foundation, which was their first grant for a large project like that, and for the rest we did certificates of participation. So then the council agreed to build it. But again — this is ’03 — we were building in a very tough environment. Because it was part of the go-go times, contractors were hard to come by, in the public bid process. I can’t remember the name of the construction company, but it’ll come to me. They didn’t have a stellar reputation. They were known for bidding on public jobs, and then change orders and shoddy construction, but we had to go with them.

0:36:10 Dennis Fisco: So Hunter and I and the council got together, and we appointed my construction review committee, which was Rich Robbins, who owns Wareham Development, Gary Van Acker, from Van Acker Construction, and Jerry Cahill from Cahill Family and Contractors. And they went to every meeting every week and reviewed every change order and drove that contractor crazy. But we got out of it with very few change orders and got it all built on time.

0:36:34 Debra Schwartz: I think the community center may have been one of those rare projects where everybody was, I guess, surprised by how beautiful it came out.

0:36:47 Dennis Fisco: Yeah.

0:36:49 Debra Schwartz: Right from the get-go. There are so many nuances to the community center: the color, the textures, the way it blends into the environment. I think it was a real pleasant surprise.

0:37:01 Dennis Fisco: The field, yeah. First of all, it's 16 years later, 17 years later, and now everyone takes it for granted, especially people who are new to town. They had no idea what went in to it. It took 13 years from the day we first met to when the ribbon got cut. And the part that I really like — I like everything about it, but there's so many different constituencies that use that community center. There's the teen room, which, when we first built it, didn't get much use at all, but now you go up there and — I was talking to a kid at the gym the other day and he said, "I'm bummed 'cause I have to go to play practice today, so I can't go see my buddies at the teen room." Well, okay, I get that. The teen room, the senior center, all of the meeting rooms, the main Cascade Room, where they do kids tumbling programs, yoga. There's always something going on in there. And then, of course, the pool.

0:37:56 Debra Schwartz: I just attended the Millies, the other night, and the Millies —

0:38:00 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, I was out of town, it's one of the first ones I've ever missed.

0:38:05 Debra Schwartz: It's such a community feeling. I've taken ballroom dancing in there.

0:38:10 Dennis Fisco: Yeah. Well, one of the controversies was why didn't we build a gym there, in that room, that could be adopted as a community room. But the community said, "Look, we want a community room. We don't want a gym that you could convert into something else."

0:38:25 Debra Schwartz: Yeah. But about that gym, well, I've spent a lot of hours in that gym, and what is particularly —

0:38:31 Dennis Fisco: The middle school gym?

0:38:32 Debra Schwartz: No, at the community center.

0:38:34 Dennis Fisco: Oh, upstairs.

0:38:35 Debra Schwartz: Yes, upstairs.

0:38:36 Dennis Fisco: Okay.

0:38:36 Debra Schwartz: In the rec room area.

0:38:37 Dennis Fisco: Yeah.

0:38:37 Debra Schwartz: And what's really enjoyable for me, going to that particular gym, is that you've got a lot of people from the Redwoods again.

0:38:44 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, well, we have the senior center there, too.

0:38:47 Debra Schwartz: So you've got your seniors, you've got all ages.

0:38:50 Dennis Fisco: Yeah.

0:38:52 Debra Schwartz: There's just something nice about that.

0:38:54 Dennis Fisco: That's how it was designed for every age.

0:38:58 Debra Schwartz: Yeah.

0:38:58 Dennis Fisco: And it worked.

0:39:00 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, it really did work. When I think about the community of people for the years that, in particular, that I spent at the gym there, the friendships and the community that developed in that gym —

0:39:11 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, my friends call it the "people's gym."

0:39:13 Debra Schwartz: Yeah. [chuckles]

0:39:13 Dennis Fisco: Which is a good description.

0:39:14 Debra Schwartz: Everybody knows your name. Watching politics from the machines, and everybody's railing — [chuckles]

0:39:20 Dennis Fisco: The other thing is that field. If you go out there in the fall especially, you got Pop Warner football, soccer, lacrosse, little kids kicking the ball around, winter ball, baseball, there's five or six sports going on there.

0:39:37 Debra Schwartz: Close to the dog park.

0:39:38 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, all the time. It's really fun to see.

0:39:40 Debra Schwartz: And you've got your community gardens there too.

0:39:43 Dennis Fisco: Yeah. Our latest group is Friends of Mill Valley Park and Rec — Friends of Fields morphed into that — and we just finished that garden at the public safety building, which was another fun project.

0:40:00 Debra Schwartz: Well, first of all, I want to say thank you.

0:40:02 Dennis Fisco: Sure.

0:40:02 Debra Schwartz: For your efforts. As long as it took, 13 years, I think that your investment of your time and your energy was well worth it.

0:40:10 Dennis Fisco: Thanks.

0:40:10 Debra Schwartz: As a community member, we all love the community center.

0:40:13 Dennis Fisco: Well, it's one of those things — you say, 13 years, but you just put your head down, just kept going, going, going, going, and then all of a sudden it was built. It didn't feel like it was 13 years.

0:40:25 Debra Schwartz: How does it feel for you when you go to the field or you drive past the community center and you look at it?

0:40:33 Dennis Fisco: Well, I'm proud of what we accomplished, and I'm glad that they're maintaining it well, because I didn't want it to be a building that just deteriorated over time as so often happens, both public and private. It has been very well maintained. The city's doing a great job of that. But I feel the same way about all the fields around town. The one that really got me was when we built Alto Field, which is out behind Edna Maguire. Your kids played on that field, your son. It was Kenny Cahill who was running down there playing U8 soccer, and he stepped in a gopher hole and fractured his leg. That's how bad that field was. So, we completely redid that field. I'll never forget I showed up the day — I was more the city liaison figuring out the money part, where Rich and Gary were the get-it-built part. They were putting the sod down. We put the sod down in five-foot rolls that are 50 feet long. A big machine rolls them out. And I looked, and I went home, and I got the kids in the car, and we drove back, and we were up on Vasco Court looking down, and I said, "This is why I'm not home a lot. This is what we're doing." And they were like, "Holy cow!" Because it just was gorgeous, where it used to be dirt and mud. So it was pretty fun.

0:41:54 Debra Schwartz: Did you find any Native American — ?

0:41:57 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, yeah.

0:41:58 Debra Schwartz: Let's talk about that.

0:42:00 Dennis Fisco: Well, we didn't disturb them. We didn't find it, but they're purportedly — and I tend to believe it — out where the baseball diamond is there, out behind second base. There's a supposedly a Native American — so we didn't disturb the area.

0:42:18 Debra Schwartz: The bones of a Native American —

0:42:19 Dennis Fisco: Well, we have no proof; we don't know. It's just word traveling through the years. We just stayed away from that area. There were some midden mounds there.

0:42:32 Debra Schwartz: Yeah. So what other fields, what other places around town have you been — ?

0:42:38 Dennis Fisco: The fields.

0:42:39 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, other projects. You might as well describe —

0:42:43 Dennis Fisco: All of them, huh?

0:42:44 Debra Schwartz: Just give us an idea.

0:42:44 Dennis Fisco: Well, I was on the city council when we voted and redid the library expansion. And that took a couple of councils to get done.

0:42:54 Debra Schwartz: So, describe the library expansion.

0:42:57 Dennis Fisco: With the library expansion we actually had a committee. I told you about the financing of the community center; we were actually looking at financing both projects, how to go about without competing with each other on these projects. So our committee decided that the first one we'd go forward with was the library expansion because the city could float some bonds. The city has very little bonded indebtedness, so they had the ability. I don't know what the numbers are now, but back then it was the ability to bond up to \$60 million based on their finances. And the only debt we really had was this library and the community center, so maybe \$6 million, \$7 million, \$8 million. That's not right. The community center is about six, and this was maybe four, so \$10 million. So we made the decision that libraries are mom and apple pie. They're a lot easier to pass a bond issue for — we did some polling. So we said, "Let's go forward with the library expansion first, then we'll follow that in a year or two with the community center," 'cause they were both tracking pretty evenly.

0:44:15 Debra Schwartz: The library expansion, describe the depth and breadth of the work that was done.

0:44:20 Dennis Fisco: There was a gentleman in town, Schatz — no not Schatz — who chaired the fundraising for the FF&E — the furniture, fixtures and equipment. That was about a \$600,000 raise, and they raised that money pretty readily. The city floated the bonds, and this project was blessed too. It just sailed along.

0:44:49 Debra Schwartz: So the work, the actual space inside the library, how were things working?

0:44:53 Dennis Fisco: Well, I don't recall exactly, but we're sitting in part of it. This downstairs wasn't —

0:44:57 Debra Schwartz: We're sitting in the sound room in the basement.

0:45:00 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, this downstairs wasn't here. When you came into the library, the room on the left as you come in was there, the big reading room was there. But the kids' reading room was new, and as you pushed out into the redwoods, that's all new, and then obviously that whole shaft going down three stories, which is the part where we are.

0:45:23 Debra Schwartz: We walked here into the Creekside Room and the history room.

0:45:25 Dennis Fisco: Right. So, I don't recall who designed it, but it's just magnificent, as you know. It has won all kind of awards. And that was another one done under Don Hunter's watch. It was nice where they integrated the old and the new. The same gentleman — actually it was his son — that made the original furniture, also made the new furniture.

0:45:50 Debra Schwartz: Yes, right. Oh, I wish I could remember his name, because I interviewed Eddie Stiles, who talks about —

0:45:53 Dennis Fisco: This was in Bolinas.

0:45:57 Debra Schwartz: That is the gentleman.

0:45:57 Dennis Fisco: Yeah.

0:45:58 Debra Schwartz: Oh, I apologize for not knowing that name, but you can hear it in Eddie Stiles' interview.¹

0:46:03 Dennis Fisco: There you go. So the library was a great project. I mentioned Friends of Fields with Gary Van Acker and Rich Robbins. So in '92, we were Little League coaches and we were at Boyle Park — no bathrooms. Kids would go down in the creek, or they'd run over to the tennis courts, and they'd be up at bat and you'd go, "Where are those guys?"

0:46:27 Debra Schwartz: They're out of sight, yes.

0:46:30 Dennis Fisco: And then balls hit in the infield would bounce up on the dirt and hit a kid in the face, and we were like, "God, what's with this?" So we went to Don Hunter — actually there were 10 or 11 of us on a committee — and we said, "Look, give us the field. We'll raise the money, we'll fix it, and then we'll give it back to you. It's as simple as that." And Don, at the time, was not the city manager. He was the park and rec

¹ The man being referred to here is Arthur Espenet Carpenter, also known as "Art".

director. But he stuck his neck out and we raised about a little under \$100,000 bucks. We, from the community, threw all kind of different events. But one of my favorite ones was — Bob Weir, with the [Grateful] Dead, is an old, old friend of mine. I met him when I first moved to town. And so I went to him and said, “Would you be willing to play? We’re going to do a benefit.” And he said, “Sure.”

0:47:26: So we had Pete Sears and the whole Dead band except for Jerry Garcia in the back of D’Angelo’s and we sold dinner tickets. That was our main fundraiser for the evening, and they played sitting in front of the fireplace. I don’t even know how we fit in there, but we raised about \$100 grand. We fixed the field up, did exactly what we had said we were going to do, added restrooms that are still there today, added snack bars, added drainage — ’cause that was a problem, they had no drainage — and handed it back.

0:48:09: And we realized that it was a successful project, but there were too many people involved, because we just wanted to get the job done. And meeting with this committee of 10 or 11 — that was Friends of Boyle Park. So we whittled that down and created a 501c3 of Rich, Gary and myself called Friends of Fields, and we went from ’93 to 2003. We raised well over \$3 million bucks, and we rebuilt every field in Mill Valley, and we did College of Marin for Branson School. Some of them we did twice over 20 years, so it was fun.

0:48:47 Debra Schwartz: Hey, thanks. I didn’t know.

0:48:49 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, Bayfront we did twice, ’cause it was the first field we did, and we’d learned from doing all these others the better method. We re-did that field eight years later, and the city just re-did it again, so those are really fun projects we do every two years. I don’t know if that’s semi-annual, but every two years we would do a fundraiser at the community center and Bob Weir — in one form or another, sometimes with a band, sometimes by himself — did every one of our fundraisers. One of them we did at the Buckeye, so yeah.

0:49:33 Debra Schwartz: Are there community members that stand out who supported the things you do? You’ve mentioned a lot of names, but have we missed anybody in the discussion?

0:49:43 Dennis Fisco: Oh boy, well the city council has been incredibly cooperative with us over the years, because again we had this group which essentially was a public private partnership with not a lot of written agreements. Even the school board got involved, ’cause some of Alto was owned by the school district and most of them were all done on a handshake. Sometimes we’d write up an agreement when Jim McCann took over as city manager. He called a couple of times and said, “Well, is there a written agreement about this?” and I said, “I don’t think so. I think we just did it.” Things like the skate park, which we’re about to redo, that was sort of a pick-up project, and it turned out we did do an agreement with the school district, the city, over liability issues that they are just now renewing. But we’d all forgotten that we even had a written agreement ’cause

we just said, “Okay, we are going to do this, we’ll get it done, and we’ll let you know when it’s done.” So, it was sort of fun. A lot of city council —

0:50:50 Debra Schwartz: Small town politics.

0:50:51 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, so there were a lot of city council members over the years that have been a big help.

0:50:57 Debra Schwartz: In the many years that we have passed each other, on trails or on the street, coming down from something or another — we’re on the top of Bayfield Bridge — wherever we’ve run into each other, I actually didn’t know that you were involved in all this.

0:51:13 Dennis Fisco: Okay.

0:51:16 Debra Schwartz: The way I know you is through your love for nature, and with Pam, the cutest couple, you two.

0:51:25 Dennis Fisco: Thank you.

0:51:26 Debra Schwartz: The two of you enjoying nature, my husband and I passing you guys, or as his knee started to get a little worse, just myself. Tell me what the natural environment here means to you, how it inspires you, how it changes the way that you see our town, just the effect that it has on you and your family.

0:51:48 Dennis Fisco: Well, we’d spend a lot of time in Colorado too, and just being near the mountains, near the ocean here, it just invigorates us. Pam and I have a second home up in Soda Springs, up near Sugar Bowl. So just being outdoors on the mountain, or a mountain, is part of our lives. So I’ll leave here today, and we’ll go hike on the trail. In 2002 we moved from Sunnyside to Hillside.

0:52:21 Debra Schwartz: Into that amazing house on Hillside. One of these days I’m going to knock on your door and ask for a tour.

0:52:25 Dennis Fisco: You should.

0:52:25 Debra Schwartz: Because it really is perched overlooking the valley, close to the road, and it has this Tyrolean look to it that’s so charming.

0:52:36 Dennis Fisco: It’s an interesting house because it was built by Eleanor Borgstrom, who was the daughter of Joseph Gardner. Joseph Gardner helped found Mill Valley, and he owned that side of Mill Valley. So when she got married to Borgstrom — he was a local dentist and she was a high school teacher — her dad said, “I own that land over there, go build a house.” We have photos. It’s the only house up there, and Hillside didn’t exist. It was built on Bolsa, and the stairs come up from Bolsa because people

walked in those days — in '28, '29 — and then later they put Hillside in there. So yeah, she picked the perfect spot to put a house.

0:53:22 Debra Schwartz: The bird's nest.

0:53:23 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, and it has leaded glass windows and wood shingles. It's somewhat of an East Coast house here in Mill Valley. So yeah, we love that house. We walked by it, when the kids were in strollers, and never would I have dreamt that we could live in a house like that. But we're right up against, as you know, what's called the "hidden trail," across my front gate, that goes right up to the knoll and to the Blithdale Ridge. So it's pretty much a no-brainer to head up there.

0:53:53 Debra Schwartz: Good views of Throckmorton Ridge, with the clouds flowing over the ridge, sunny on your place, but also close to where they had that awful slide.

0:54:03 Dennis Fisco: Two doors down, yeah. I happened to be the mayor when that happened. It was tragic, the gentleman was killed.

0:54:14 Debra Schwartz: Down on Bolsa, right there in that wash.

0:54:16 Dennis Fisco: Right.

0:54:16 Debra Schwartz: You could see the street moving up on Hillside. There were some shifts.

0:54:21 Dennis Fisco: In fact, at one point we were an island up there, because there was that slide, and then there was another slide on the other side of us three doors down. The city had to do an emergency repair on the minor one in order to keep the road open so that we could even get to our house. But I was back east when that slide happened. We were visiting our son at Colgate University, so three-hour time change, and I get a call about 1:00 in the morning on my cell phone, and it is from my office. I didn't get to it in time, and I hang up and I go, "Well who's calling from my office at 1:00 in the morning?" And then about an hour later I get a call from Don Hunter, and he said, "Where are you? We evacuated your house, and you're not here at the emergency center." I said, "Oh, well I'm back in New York." And my house sitter was an employee of mine, and she didn't know where to go when she got evacuated, so she went to the office, and that's who was calling me. So he said, "Well turn on the news." So I turned it on and there was our house, and all the tragedy.

0:55:38 Debra Schwartz: It just let loose, the hill. I guess it was slightly above Hillside, or right below.

0:55:45 Dennis Fisco: Well, there are two waterfalls that come through there, and then they channeled into a drainage channel that was right where that house was built. Now

it's all been stabilized. The city paid a substantial settlement on that, \$6 million or something.

0:56:03 Debra Schwartz: I believe the owner of the house had expressed concerns about the land in advance, and he was out in the middle of the night checking to see how the water was moving because he was concerned.

0:56:14 Dennis Fisco: Yeah. He had hired a contractor to put some pipe in there to try to channel it. It was just a tragedy.

0:56:19 Debra Schwartz: Anyway, it let loose while he was outside. And then his beautiful garden his —

0:56:27 Dennis Fisco: Someone has rebuilt that house.

0:56:30 Debra Schwartz: Just so similar.

0:56:32 Dennis Fisco: And you're just like, "Okay, I hope you had a good engineer."

0:56:38 Debra Schwartz: Landslides are a part of our concern living here in a tourist city, where there are some places you just hope are stable.

0:56:47 Dennis Fisco: Well, in that whole Hillside area is clay and serpentine, and the two don't really mix that well, so it's all prone to sliding. Now the engineering is much better. They build those things with caissons and piles, but back then they just sort of plopped them down.

0:57:10 Debra Schwartz: Things have changed in Mill Valley since you were working with the city council. We talked about your being mayor, though is there anything in particular we missed about you?

0:57:24 Dennis Fisco: Well, we had our 100th anniversary of Mill Valley when I was the mayor. It was actually interesting, because once I got off the city council I was fortunate enough to be named citizen of the year. When you are on the city council you ride in the parade, and then as citizen of the year you ride in the parade, and then it was 2007 or '08 when I finally went to a parade and went, "Oh my god, this thing is so long."

0:57:51 Debra Schwartz: They're really fun to go to probably.

0:57:54 Dennis Fisco: And interesting, you know, sort of fun to see those.

0:57:58 Debra Schwartz: Did you get a ticket from the fashion police?

0:58:00 Dennis Fisco: Oh yeah, absolutely, Larry [Lautzker]. I am one of his favorite targets. Yeah, so just everything about being the mayor — you sort of guide the city in a direction, you try to get projects done. Each mayor picks a project that they try to get

done, and one of mine was the community center, and then the second one, I don't even recall what it was. But we put a lot of money into the steps, lanes, and trails when I was there. We passed the Municipal Services Tax. We re-upped for the first time. So we got a lot accomplished, and we all got along well. We didn't always agree, but we agreed to disagree in a cordial manner.

0:58:53 Debra Schwartz: That's an accomplishment in itself.

0:58:54 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, it was really nice.

0:58:57 Debra Schwartz: What's your favorite part about living in Mill Valley?

0:59:00 Dennis Fisco: Oh, one thing was that when Hunter came here one time and said he was thinking of retiring, I said, "Don, if you're going to retire, I'm not running for city council again." He goes, "Okay, I'll make a deal. You stick it out and I'll stick it out," 'cause we really enjoyed working with each other, together. What was your question?

0:59:26 Debra Schwartz: What is your favorite part about being in Mill Valley? What are the things you love the most?

0:59:32 Dennis Fisco: I love the small town community. I love how eclectic it was, especially in the old days, but it's still very eclectic. You get people from all walks of life, from all socioeconomic frames of life, and you don't really know how successful this person is versus where the success comes from this person — not necessarily monetarily. You mentioned the Milleys. I love going to those because you're like, "Oh my God, these people are living in town. I had no idea."

1:00:06 Debra Schwartz: The heroes amongst us.

1:00:06 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, like one lady — God, it has to be seven or eight years ago — she was a Japanese paper expert artist, and had written all these books, 15-20 books, on this stuff, and she lived in Mill Valley all her life. And it's like, "Really?" But she's world renowned for that stuff. So I love the people, the whole area, being able to walk out your door and be in nature. I always joke that when I come back I want to be a kid growing up in Mill Valley, 'cause it's just a fun place to be for kids, too. You got the golf course, you got the tennis club, you got Boyle Park, all these great fields, you got the mountain, you're near the beach — I mean, what's wrong? Gavin one time, when he was little, I came home and I go, "Gavin, what did you do today?" This is summer time, 'cause I caught him in between trips. He left in the morning, played nine holes at the golf course, walked down to the Mill Valley Tennis Club, had a burger and swam, walked back — this is with his buddies — walked back up to the golf course, played another nine. He had just gotten home from the Mill Valley Market, walking there with a backpack with a block of ice in it, because they were going up to the golf course to slide on the ice blocks, hopefully not get caught by the police, and that was his day. I was like, "Oh my God, I want to do this." [laughs]

1:01:43 Debra Schwartz: Do you know, I was walking in Boyle Park with my son, who's 32 now —

1:01:47 Dennis Fisco: Wow.

1:01:47 Debra Schwartz: And we stopped over there by the fields, and he was watching the kids, the dads out there. You were one of those dads, and like so many dads in town, doing the coaching. I recall that time so very fondly. I think about the community we had as parents. It was beautiful, but I don't think it was as beautiful for me as it actually was for my son. It just conked him on the head.

1:02:11 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, that's good.

1:02:12 Debra Schwartz: He just was looking and smiling, and it sunk in as he was reminiscing about how much fun he'd had had.

1:02:20 Dennis Fisco: We had Little League parents' dances, and soccer club parents' dances. Who would do that now? Maybe we'll go to Sweetwater and do that. We'd have a hoot just doing that stuff.

1:02:35 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

1:02:36 Dennis Fisco: All the carnivals started back then, like the ones Jim Wickham runs. That all started back in that era.

1:02:44 Debra Schwartz: Yes, Mill Valley, do you think has changed much?

1:02:50 Dennis Fisco: The demographics have certainly changed. It's a lot harder to get people to volunteer now. I'm always very surprised by that. When we were doing all the fields, we realized that one of the problems was as soon as they were fixed up, it was hard to raise money for them. But we still convinced people that we were paying it forward to the next generation by paying for these fields over and over again. I'm not saying everyone, but there's a lot more people that feel entitled because they paid a lot of money for their houses, and they pay a lot of taxes as a result, and they just feel like they're doing their part by paying that dough, and they don't really need to volunteer. So, you see a lot of volunteers for Kiddo! as the kids are going through school, but some of the other things — sometimes the city's having trouble filling the Arts Commission, filling the Planning Commission, getting good, qualified people to volunteer. So it's changed in that respect. We talked about the retail and not being able to walk downtown and buy everything. Pam and I go to the Mill Valley Market about every day, so thank God they're still there.

1:04:11 Debra Schwartz: Excellent prepared food, by the way.

1:04:13 Dennis Fisco: Well, we still buy our lettuce and some fish or meat at the market and make dinner, but you can't go buy a pair of socks or that kind of stuff. You got Pharmaca now in town, so at least you have a little pharmacy.

1:04:32 Debra Schwartz: What would you like to see for the future of Mill Valley? You've been a visionary in your time. You've imagined what could make a town better that you live in, and you've devoted yourself to actualizing that vision.

1:04:45 Dennis Fisco: Yeah.

1:04:46 Debra Schwartz: Let's do that now.

1:04:47 Dennis Fisco: Well, somehow we have to figure out the housing situation and not just pay it lip service. So, I would like to see some multi-family housing projects, and they're going to happen. Unfortunately, or fortunately, they're going to happen along Miller Ave., and we just have to buy into them and make them work. It'll change the flavor of Miller Avenue in certain areas, but I firmly believe that we'll grow into those projects as they're there, because there's nowhere else. I mean, your son, my kids, it's hard for them to live here. So, there's a couple city parking lots that I'd like to see something happen on, housing-wise. The one behind D'Angelo's where you could still have public parking underneath, but go up into the hill and sort of tuck those projects in there. There's the one across from Whole Foods by the Marin Theater Company.

1:05:54 Debra Schwartz: Edgar's Plaza. The plaza's in the back, so you're looking at the parking lot, right, contiguous to Miller Ave.

1:06:03 Dennis Fisco: Right, yeah. So, those are just two. Where they built the retaining walls on Miller, that's so controversial right now. Once they build that out, I think it will start to blend in and we'll see some housing.

1:06:19 Debra Schwartz: Has that been given the go ahead?

1:06:21 Dennis Fisco: Well, it's been given the go ahead for the original nine [units] that it was proposed to have.

1:06:25 Debra Schwartz: But isn't it being proposed to be more than that?

1:06:28 Dennis Fisco: Yeah, I think the developer gave up and is just going to build the nine now, because of the opposition. I developed that stuff, and it's just all over the county, all over the Bay Area, but especially in the county it is very difficult.

1:06:46 Debra Schwartz: What about the projection of water rise? How do you think that's going to affect, for example, the community center and other areas?

1:06:54 Dennis Fisco: Well, I think it's definitely here. The community center, I think will be okay, because I think we have enough elevation there. Although it is sinking, it's

probably sunk a foot since we built it, as it was designed to do. The building itself isn't sinking, it's on pilings, and the pool. So with water rise, you're not going to really affect that. You'll affect the fields. It obviously is affecting lower Miller Ave., where I think the solution is to get the flood control district, which has quite a bit of money they're sitting on, to build the bike path up. Environmentally, we need to do that, to act as a berm when you have the high tides and big winds, because that could be a dike along there. But yeah, we just can't build in those areas anymore, we've learned. And the county has done a tremendous job in mapping all that out. So you could see an interactive map based on a 30, 40, 50-year flood, ocean rise and flood plain, what's going to be affected. So don't buy in those areas, don't build in those areas. I'm at 300 feet.

1:08:16 Debra Schwartz: Yes. I checked file elevation trails. [laughs]

1:08:18 Dennis Fisco: Yeah. And we saw it on Sycamore right after I got off the council, when they had the flooding down there.

1:08:26 Debra Schwartz: Oh, yes.

1:08:27 Dennis Fisco: So the other avenue is to make sure that the drainage channels are clear, which now the city is doing a tremendously good job at doing, but we didn't do as good a job as we could have back then.

1:08:39 Debra Schwartz: Do you see yourself growing old here in this town? You've got other properties, you could live other places.

1:08:46 Dennis Fisco: Pam and I talk about it. We love it here; we are here for the duration. I don't know if we'll stay in the house we are in right now. We up-sized when the kids left home.

1:08:58 Debra Schwartz: Which is ironic. You went from a relatively modestly-sized house to this huge house with just the two of you in it.

1:09:06 Dennis Fisco: Well, there were five of us when we moved there, but, yeah, it's just the two of us now. The kids come back and hopefully there'll be some grandkids someday. But no, we love it here. We have a family place in Colorado, Pam and I have, a place in the mountains that we like to go visit just about every weekend. But I love Mill Valley. All our friends are here, and so we socialize a lot and it's fun to go to the market for a five-minute errand and leave 40 minutes later after saying hello to everyone, catching up with everyone.

1:09:46 Debra Schwartz: Well, I just want to thank you, Dennis, for all your efforts and for what you've given.

1:09:49 Dennis Fisco: Thank you for the invite. This has been enjoyable.

1:09:52 Debra Schwartz: You've done a lot for our community, and it's easy to take things for granted when you don't really know what goes into these projects, the consciousness and the efforts and the people. I am so glad we managed to capture your story.

1:10:04 Dennis Fisco: Thank you, I really appreciate it, and it's been fun reliving all that.

1:10:09 Debra Schwartz: So I guess —

1:10:11 Dennis Fisco: And I apologize to my council members, whose names have escaped me at the moment.

1:10:15 Debra Schwartz: We thank them too.

1:10:17 Dennis Fisco: Yeah.

1:10:18 Debra Schwartz: There's a lot of people that don't get named, but we know that every single thing that we appreciate in any town or any place is the product of somebody's effort and vision, so I thank you for yours. Thank you so much for your volunteer actions. I'd like to talk to you at some point in the future about getting involved with the Historical Society, if you care to.

1:10:42 Dennis Fisco: I am on the board of the Marin Historical Society.

1:10:45 Debra Schwartz: Well, we'll save that for another discussion when I see you on the trails.

1:10:49 Dennis Fisco: When you had your annual meeting on the same evening, we had our fundraiser at Sweetwater.

1:10:55 Debra Schwartz: Well, we'll talk about that later, shall we? To be continued in that regard. So I think that concludes —

1:11:00 Dennis Fisco: Alright. Well, thank you Debra.

1:11:00 Debra Schwartz: Unless there's anything that we missed at all.

1:11:03 Dennis Fisco: Well, you asked about accomplishments and then you also asked about what I'm most proud of, and we failed to cover, in those two topics, my family. Pam and I have been married for 39 years, 34 of which have been in Mill Valley, and we have three kids. Gavin, who is married to Laura, Dana, and Peter, who is married to Kristin. I'm very proud of them. We talked about, or I mentioned, how I wanted to come back as a kid in Mill Valley. Well, they taught me how to do that, because they just loved living here, growing up here. None of them live here right now, but I'm hopeful that they'll be back in town sometime in the future. I'm almost positive they will be. So

there is a proud accomplishment. I am really happy that we were able to raise our kids here in Mill Valley, and that they're all very accomplished, and 39 years with Pam, 52 knowing her.

1:12:05 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, it's awfully nice to have family and people that you love to share the wonderful things that you have in your life.

1:12:13 Dennis Fisco: Absolutely. Gavin is a geologist like his mother, Dana's a marine biologist, a scientist like her mother, and Pete is a real estate guy like me. So we are splitting them up here and it's all good. [laughs]

1:12:28 Debra Schwartz: Well, I think that concludes this interview then, yes?

1:12:33 Dennis Fisco: Thank you, yeah. I really enjoyed it, and thanks for inviting me.

1:12:36 Debra Schwartz: Okay, so on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society, and on behalf of the Mill Valley Library, this concludes this interview.