

COLUMBUS AVENUE AND THE UPPER WEST SIDE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Bruce Stark

Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District

2019

PREFACE

The following is a transcript of the first of two sessions of an oral history interview with Bruce Stark conducted by Leyla Vural on April 10, 2019. This interview is part of the Columbus Avenue and the Upper West Side Oral History Project. The Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District has sponsored this project.

The Stark family owned Beacon Paint and Hardware on Amsterdam Avenue from 1971 until its closing in February 2020.

In this interview, Bruce Stark (born in 1957) tells the story of his family's business. He describes the neighborhood as he first encountered it when his father, Mel, bought the store in 1971 and describes how it has changed over the years. Stark also recounts how the business evolved with the neighborhood (from Beacon Paint and Varnish, to Beacon Paint and Wallpaper, to today's Beacon Paint and Hardware). Stark, who grew up in Commack on Long Island, remembers the Upper West Side—a place that he took to immediately—as rough in the 1970s, but also friendly and liberal and consistent with his family's values. He has lived in the area since 1990 and jests that everything he needs (except Zabar's) is available between West Seventy-fifth and West Seventy-ninth Street. Stark talks about the community service that he organized through the store: regular donations to public schools (particularly P.S. 87, around the corner), an annual event for school kids to paint over graffiti on neighborhood mailboxes, a nighttime fundraiser in Central Park for a rare skin disease, and a walkathon for Guiding Eyes for the Blind to honor Stark's sister, Marsha, who was blind and died young.

The interviewee has reviewed, edited, and approved this transcript. Readers should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of an interview and, therefore, does not read like a polished piece of written work. Time codes have been included to make it easier for readers to match the transcript with the audio recording of the interview. Time codes may, however, no longer be completely accurate because of edits to the transcript. Where there are differences between the transcript and the audio recording, the transcript is the final document of record.

The views expressed in this oral history interview are the interviewee's alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District.

Interviewee: Bruce Stark

Interviewer: Leyla Vural

Interview date: April 10, 2019

Session: 1 of 2

Location: New York, N.Y.

Vural: [00:00:01] It is Wednesday, April 10th, 2019. This is Leyla Vural interviewing Bruce Stark in the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District conference room for the Columbus Avenue and the Upper West Side Oral History Project. Thank you.

Stark: [00:00:15] My pleasure.

Vural: [00:00:16] I'm glad that we're getting to do this. Can you tell me where and when you were born and something about how you grew up?

Stark: [00:00:23] I was born in Long Island, 1957. I was born in Levittown, Long Island. At age three, we moved to Commack, Long Island, where I grew up. It wasn't until my father came into the paint business—well, he was in the paint business because my grandfather was in the paint business on the Lower East Side and on the East Side for many years, but it was when my father purchased a store here on the Upper West Side that I started coming into the city. And for a number of years, we commuted back and forth and then eventually, about I think 1990 or '91, I finally decided it was time to move into the city and be closer.

[00:01:06] But from age fourteen, which was 1971—my father bought the store—I was coming into the city and seeing the neighborhood and seeing the West Side.

Vural: [00:01:17] Tell me a little bit more about how you grew up. I know you have a brother and I think you had a sister.

Stark: [00:01:22] I have—we had five siblings in the family. One sister's deceased. She was blind and she died of cancer at age twenty-seven back in 1978. My oldest sister is the bookkeeper in the store. My other sister used to work in the wallpaper department when we sold wallpaper, and she retired when she got married and had kids. My brother came into the business about twenty years ago. He'd always come in, work Saturdays and in the summer and all that but he was a journalist. And he left journalism—journalism left him really, the way things changed here. Instead of working for a newspaper, he was working for a corporation he didn't like. And then he finally left and said he'd come in here. He wanted to be in the store and I was thrilled to have him. It was a concern who would take over. What would happen after my father retired? Would I be doing everything myself? And my brother came out with a perfect chance to have somebody to help me.

Vural: [00:02:23] That's great. Tell me more about when you were a kid. What were you like as a kid?

Stark: [00:02:30] Typical kid. Nothing all that different. Loved sports, couldn't play anything, wasn't good at anything, but I loved it all. I was a super fan. I wanted to be an announcer when I was a kid and I thought that was great. Had a few friends that lived in the neighborhood and a decent—I enjoyed—well, I hated school really [laughs]. I had a couple of good years but I couldn't stand school.

[00:03:02] I did get a college degree—Roger Williams College in Bristol, Rhode Island. I went there for business. My father insisted that I go away to live on my own as opposed to anything, to commute or be local. He didn't ask any one of us to get a job while we were growing up. He felt it was more important that we concentrate on schoolwork. We didn't have to have a job. So, except for when we went into the store, we didn't have a job during high school or junior high school, anything like that. He felt we needed to spend more time on our homework than worrying about working.

[00:03:45] It would have been nice to have that, because I know some friends of mine who had jobs at a McDonald's or a Dunkin' Donuts, and the friends they made and what high school kids do and go out and party afterwards with the friends they made from there. I missed that. That's really my only regret in coming into the business is that I never went to a Saturday football game in high school because I was working every Saturday. I never hung out with the other people my age in terms of that. I had friends in high school but—you know, junior high—but not like that. But I was making money. I was thrilled to have a job. And I know other kids sometimes couldn't really find a job too easy, you know, or something they weren't crazy about, or all the complaints that someone has about a job. But I was thrilled to be doing that.

[00:04:37] I was okay with Saturdays. And in the summer, I worked a few days a week and then next year a few more and a few more. And I fell in love with it from the day I got there. I knew that's what I wanted to do. I liked helping people. I was working on the counter and giving them advice on products to use and I fell in love with it.

[00:04:58] I had entertained—I said, when I was about ten or eleven, I wanted to be a baseball announcer, but I never looked into anything like that. I thought about being—I would like to be a lawyer, but eight years of schooling [laughs], more schooling, turned me off. But I still would have liked to have been a lawyer if I didn't come into this field. But once it was there it was there for me.

[00:05:22] And working with my father was fine. My mother worked in the store on Saturdays selling wallpaper and then she was our bookkeeper. So, it was a family affair. We were a close family and unlike the Corleones we did talk about business at the dinner table. And that was fine because it was us. Even when I was the last one of the family to move out really, it was still my mother and my father and I talking about the store or something else like that, and that was fine.

Vural: [00:05:53] And was it your father's hope or expectation that you would come into the business?

Stark: [00:05:57] Absolutely, his dream. He scoffed at the previous owner whose sons went on to become university professors and they didn't want any part of the business, as it was beneath them. And that was his dream of his father—he wanted to do what his father did, which he couldn't do, but he was—my grandfather, his father—was a carpenter but he couldn't get into the carpenters' union, so he went to become an electrician. And then he went into the Navy and when he came out, after he married my mother, my mother's father had a paint store, so that's where he learned the paint business.

[00:06:35] It was a small one-man shop and there was no growth there, so he left. And there was a chain of paint stores on Long Island called Long Island Paint and he ended up managing all the stores. And he learned. And it was a company that was underfunded and—even the big stores back then in the sixties, the Pergaments [Pergament Home Center], made a dent in their business. So, then he moved on. For about six years, he was working for King Korn stamps, a trading stamp company, and then he left there. And he helped my grandfather for a while but he wanted to own his own business. And there were two paint stores in New York City that were going to be available. He was very friendly. He had a good relationship with the executives from the Benjamin Moore Paint Company, who at that time were just total *mensch*s, just anything they could do to help.

[00:07:36] And there was one store in Midtown, Seventh Avenue and Twenty-third Street, and he was thinking about retiring and this store here, on Amsterdam Avenue, the man was going to retire. The guy on Seventh Avenue, it took him twenty years to decide to retire and he wasn't sure, but this gentleman had nobody to take over so he had to retire—he had to, at some point, sell. So, my father got a job working there and he worked there for about a year with the promise of him buying the store, taking over. And he did.

Vural: [00:08:13] And so he knew that the store was available because of Benjamin Moore?

Stark: [00:08:16] Because of Benjamin Moore, yes. They had a warm relationship. When he got back into the paint business, he spoke to them and said, “I’m looking—I want to own my own store, what do you have?”

Vural: [00:08:29] And at that point, did your grandfather still have his little shop on the Lower East Side?

Stark: [00:08:32] He did, but he was closing it up by 19—by the same time my father was leaving. My father took it over for him because he got sick and then they had to leave it. They—my grandfather had a good relationship with the Benjamin Moore Paint Company that they actually—and he got sick very quickly—that they actually bought the store from him, gave my grandmother one cash payout in a check right on the spot. They didn't take an inventory. They didn't make any, you know, this and this. They just said, "We'll give you this amount of money for it." I think it was \$20,000. And they gave her a check for it.

[00:09:10] And they took over the store, and this was in the early seventies, and they actually sold it to an African American gentleman in hopes of helping minorities. They were looking for a minority to sell to, and they funded it and they propped him up in business but it was too small a store for anybody to grow.

Vural: [00:09:31] That was on the Lower East Side somewhere?

Stark: [00:09:33] It was actually First Avenue/Seventeenth Street. It was also, I believe, on Third Avenue and Thirty-fifth Street, and Second Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street. When one lease was up, he had to move elsewhere.

Vural: [00:09:48] What was it called?

Stark: [00:09:50] Sutton Paint.

Vural: [00:09:52] And tell me, when your dad bought the store here, I know your dad was the only—your family's only the second owners.

Stark: [00:10:02] Right.

Vural: [00:10:03] So, can you tell me the story of the first owners, from what you know?

Stark: [00:10:06] The first owners were Upper West Siders. The family name was Segalowitz and the gentleman that he bought it from lived on Seventy-ninth Street. So did his brother. And the brother died in 1957—Bernie Sage—and Joe Sage stayed on Seventy-ninth Street. Their father and mother lived on Broadway and Ninety-eighth Street. And then he gave it to the two sons and one had a heart attack in 1957, in the store, and died. That was the year I was born. I'd be happy to die in the store—not yet, maybe in, you know, another thirty or forty years, but [chuckles] that's fine with me.

Vural: [00:10:54] If that's where your life—

Stark: [00:10:55] If that's what happens, that's what happens.

Vural: [00:10:56] Yes.

Stark: [00:10:57] I don't know anything about the man except his name was Bernie, and that was it.

Vural: [00:11:04] And I know that the name has always been Beacon and changed with Wallpaper or Paint or Hardware. Do you know where the name Beacon came from?

Stark: [00:11:13] Yes, this was in the 1890s or maybe around that time, New York wanted to jazz up the city and they changed—instead of Tenth Avenue, it became Amsterdam Avenue and West End Avenue instead of Eleventh Avenue, Riverside Drive. Well, Riverside Drive up north, but then even Twelfth Avenue lower down. But they changed all the names, and Ninth Avenue and Columbus Avenue and they wanted to give neighborhoods distinct names. Some of the names stuck, some didn't. If you said, "Where's Turtle Bay?" in New York, nobody knows that. But Yorkville on the Upper East Side—

[00:12:01] This was the Beacon section, but the people here didn't like it because it sounded too much like Beacon Hill in Boston, like we were copying them or second to them. And I say the name stuck around long enough from people to go out—store owners to go out and get signs made up with "Beacon" on it [chuckles], but if you said, "I'm in Beacon," you think it's Beacon upstate.

[00:12:23] But there was Beacon Paint, there was a Beacon Hardware, a Beacon Garage, Beacon Theater. Beacon Hotel's still there. But there was a Beacon Bowling Alley, a Beacon Pool Hall, a Beacon Garage, Beacon Cleaners. Beacon Blinds is still there. So, many people took that name in hoping that the neighborhood name would grow. I'm sure they were asked to do it in some way.

[00:12:55] So, we got the name Beacon Paint. We were *The* Beacon Paint & Varnish Company until my father took it over in 1973. We changed it to Beacon Paint & Wallpaper, cropping the “The” off, which I thought was interesting. And then I probably changed it to Beacon Paint & Hardware in 2005.

Vural: [00:13:14] And does that reflect the end of everybody wallpapering?

Stark: [00:13:18] We dropped wallpaper in the late eighties. That was a miserable, miserable industry. With the paint industry, we’re full of *mensch*s. These people—excuse my language—were whores. They lied and they were thieves and they were unfair.

[00:13:42] I remember one January 2nd, I called up to order some polyurethane we ordered from—it was a father-son team who made the polyurethane—and we had a wonderful conversation. He said, “You’re my first order of the year.” And I made sure the next year I was again. For three years in a row, I was their first order of the year. And the wallpaper companies I called up and the phone was busy and you couldn’t get through to them and you couldn’t leave a—in those days you couldn’t leave a message [laughs] or anything like that. And you’d order something and they’d be wrong, and they tell you it was in stock and it wasn’t. There wasn’t a lot of money to be made in it. And we had to buy wallpaper books. And we were a small store so we had to pay for them and then they’d be discontinued a year later. And there’s no program to buy back the books or anything. And it was the bigger stores that got the books for free.

[00:14:39] So, we were happy to get rid of it and turn it into—we sold housewares. But we really did that because my sister was going to retire. And we tried to hire a few people to take over, but

nobody had the charm that my sister had, the knowledge, you could walk into the store and she'd say, "Based on what you're wearing, I could tell what kind of things you like, and look at these books, don't waste your time with these books." And she was great with that.

[00:15:11] And then she'd leave notes for my mother, who worked on Saturdays, and they'd go back and forth. Somebody's going to come in, they're going to look at these books. Oh, it was—I was really impressed. I mean, watching them work like that was great. And as long as they were there, it was great, but after they left, it was just brutal. You had to know design. You had to know patterns and styles. I can help you with paint, pick out the right color, but I couldn't take the time to help you with wallpaper. And, you know, you'd need almost a designer. But I was only too happy to get rid of that [chuckles].

[00:15:52] And the financial part was the least of it, actually. We took in cleaning supplies and mops and brooms and made a tremendous profit and people helped themselves. So, that was when we got rid of the wallpaper. Then in the early nineties, we took in plumbing and little by little we took in hardware and light bulbs. Light fixtures we had for a while. We had some housewares, but we had dropped—in the late nineties, there was a major store that came in across the street from us where the Duane Reade is now, on Amsterdam [between] Seventy-eight [and] Seventy-nine, and that was an 8,000 square foot home center and I thought they would kill us on housewares. Well, they only lasted two-and-a-half years and once I saw what prices they had, I realized it was a mistake. It takes a lot of dish trays to make a good profit [chuckles] and you have to carry a lot of sizes and space. So, the plumbing was something in terms of space. We made a better profit on that and more people needed the plumbing. And it wasn't as competitive because if a plumber needs it, he

needs it and supers have to have something, so it was an easy sale.

Vural: [00:17:08] So, it's really interesting to hear you talk about how the evolution of what you sell and provide happened and sort of both you experimenting and looking around and seeing what's the competition and what do people need.

Stark: [00:17:25] Well, we wanted—the building where we are is kind of two buildings in one. They share a boiler. It's the same ownership, although it didn't have to be. But after our store, there's a staircase for the building going upstairs but then there are two more stores, which actually were three stores for a long time. Had it not been for the staircase, we would have taken the entire corner. We would have had lumber and glass and done tremendous business like that. But when you had—it was almost like having a wall in between and that meant you had to have extra people, you had to have almost a security guard there because you had to worry about employees, you had to worry about customers. You couldn't see everything. It was blind. And that really stopped us from doing it. And it would have been a major thing to break down behind there and go around.

[00:18:23] Now you say, okay, maybe it could have been done. But still you would have needed another half dozen employees, in addition to what you would get. But that would have been a nice business, to have been a lumberyard all these years, but it just didn't happen.

Vural: [00:18:37] So, I read that the store was on the other side of Amsterdam.

Stark: [00:18:41] Yes, from 1900 to 1940 we were across the street and where we were was an A&P and they kept the grocery store. And they kept a horse and buggy in the back of the store. A gentleman told me this. He was a box boy then and he had lived on Seventy-eighth Street and he told me the story. We redid our store and when we ripped up the floor we found an empty glass milk bottle—

Vural: [00:19:11] Oh, fun.

Stark: [00:19:11] —that had to go back to pre-1940. Thankfully there was no milk in it [chuckles], but it was one glass bottle that was pretty cool. And also, one day in the late eighties, a woman came in, a little elderly woman, and she told me she'd been working in the paint store in 1940 when they moved over. She told me about the move. I never knew that. And the men had to carry the paint over and they wouldn't let her do it because she was a woman. And she said, "I've been working since I was twelve years old, I could have done it." She says, "Maybe I couldn't carry as much as they did at one time, but I would have done it. But they said no, you have to stay here and take care of the cash register." She said, "I stayed inside. I watched these guys sweat." It was in the summer that the move was made. [Chuckles] I had to give her an employee discount, too.

Vural: [00:20:06] That's great.

Stark: [00:20:09] But that's when I learned about that.

Vural: [00:20:12] And so the store has been in its current location since 1940?

Stark: [00:20:17] Correct.

Vural: [00:20:18] And did you ever think about moving?

Stark: [00:20:20] No. No, I don't want to ever think about moving [chuckles]. It was just maybe because I grew up on Long Island but Amsterdam Avenue wasn't a well-known street. In the seventies, we had a competitor who came in on Seventy-second Street. Jeez, everybody knows Seventy-second Street. It's a major street, you know, or Fifth Avenue or Park Avenue are well-known names. But Amsterdam, you have to explain Amsterdam. And then people think it's all the way up in Harlem. No, no. So, then you had to explain that you were down in the Seventies. Boy, after all that work of having to explain that I've got to tell them no, no, we're not on Amsterdam anymore, we're on this street now [chuckles]. I didn't want to do that. We never had to worry about that. We always had good landlords that were fair and we were able to keep getting lease after lease.

[00:21:14] A month after my father bought the store, he had a chance to buy the entire corner, which had four stores and twenty-three apartments. And the guy couldn't make his mortgage payments and my father—this is a month later—and he borrowed money to buy the store and he didn't want to be a landlord, certainly not on the Upper West Side. The rents were—there was one apartment that was a long flat that was \$25 a month. Other than that, everything was either \$10 or \$15 a month and it would take—if you think about it, it would have taken ten years to get

everybody out. And it did. Once they started getting—people died off, many of them, or moved away. It was a long time till they got everyone out. But those rents weren't going to go up.

Vural: [00:22:11] And so this was your dad bought the business in?

Stark: [00:22:15] 1971. And he had actually—the Benjamin Moore Paint Company actually loaned him \$20,000. The funny story about that is that there was a sales manager who knew my father and said to Benjamin Moore, “Don't let him buy it. He has a temper. He'll get into arguments with customers.” And Ben Belcher, the chairman of the board, the grandson of Benjamin Moore, said, “No, he'll be the most honest and knowledgeable dealer we'll ever have. You make sure he gets the business. Do whatever it takes.” And the next day the chief financial officer said to him, he said—my father needs to make a \$30,000 down payment for this place—he said, “If you come up with \$10,000, we'll come up with the other \$20,000.” And it was a handshake agreement in the office. There were papers to sign afterwards, but that was it, the deal was done. Benjamin Moore told Joe Sage this is the deal, that's what it's going to be, otherwise you're going to have to close up.

[00:23:24] But they gave him a good price. And I remember when the landlord wanted to sell us the business I said to my father, “Can you ask Benjamin Moore for the money?” He said, “Never. No, absolutely not.” I said, “How about if you ask them to buy the building and give us a 100-year lease?” He said, “No, it'll sound like I'm just trying to get something that I shouldn't be, you know, that I shouldn't be asking for.” And he said, “If it's another paint store, that's one thing, but not a building.” He says, “I don't know anything about being a landlord and if the boiler breaks, we're out of business.”

[00:24:00] In 1973 there was an oil crisis. Prices went through the roof. It would have put us out of business then. So, my father was smart in that sense. But, boy, if Benjamin Moore would have bought it, it would have been—you know, we'd probably still be paying 1970s rents [chuckles]. It would have been a lease like that with such a small increase. That would have been the steal of the century and they would have had us forever, and then they would have made money when the market jumped.

Vural: [00:24:32] What was your dad's name?

Stark: [00:23:33] Mel. He's still alive. He's 92.

Vural: [00:24:37] Oh. What *is* your dad's name?

Stark: [00:24:39] It's Mel, Mel Stark. And he's in Long Island and he still does some of our billing. We don't have a computer system. I want to see if computers are a fad or not first before we go online. [Chuckles] We do have computers on our desk, but we don't have a point of sale system. We handwrite all our invoices and every few days my sister, who lives on Long Island, will go out to visit him and bring him the invoices and he'll do the billing, and then bring them back. It saves me a lot of time and keeps him busy and he likes doing it.

Vural: [00:25:16] Nice. When did he stop coming to the store as a regular thing?

Stark: [00:25:22] Around 2005, I think it was. It was gradual. He was always working five days a week or six days a week and then four days a week and then three and then two. And it

increased—the same thing when he took over the store. There was no big sign “Under new management.” Nobody knew it. Just the old owner worked less and less. All of a sudden he wasn’t there anymore and my father was. So, only people who got to know him knew that he took over the store. “Where’s Joe?” “Oh, he retired.” “When?” “A couple of years ago.”

[00:26:03] We felt there was a—my father felt it was a good enough store that he didn’t need to say, “We’re under new management.” Let it continue. And the same thing when I took over. Nobody really knew. “Where’s your father?” “He’s off today. He’s off today.” And then, “He retired.”

[00:26:23] He used to have—in the office, he had a desk, and then we needed the space [chuckles], so we put stuff on top of it, so he got mad at me [chuckles]. He goes, “If I don’t have a desk, I don’t need to come in anymore!” I said, “Well, clean it off!” [Chuckles] But it was a schlep for him from Westbury, Long Island, where he is now. If it was nearby, he’d still be coming in and doing the work and it would be great, but they never made the move into the city.

Vural: [00:26:48] When did your family leave Levittown?

Stark: [00:26:51] 1960.

Vural: [00:26:53] So, that’s not where you grew up.

Stark: [00:26:54] No, I grew up in Commack, where the—

Vural: [00:26:55] Oh, right, you said.

Stark: [00:26:57] —the houses were being built at that time. It was a typical suburban place. My father knew something—this was—I never figured out how they knew it, but the Long Island Lighting Company, electrical company up there, he knew somebody who worked there that could do projections ten years into the future and they said that Commack would have a very large Jewish population and so he picked Commack. He didn't want to be a minority. You know, he grew up in the city. He was born in the Bronx and grew up there, so he was used to that. Until he got to the Navy [chuckles] and then it was a whole different world. But this guy told him, yes, Commack will be a nice place and up and coming. At the time it was the end of the world but it does, it does have a large population.

Vural: [00:27:52] And did you grow up in an observant family?

Stark: [00:27:54] No. We were conservative as Jews. He was a charter member of the synagogue. One of my sisters, myself, and my brother got bar mitzvahed there. The other two sisters never went to Hebrew school. We were required to, my brother and I. There was just no way around that one. And I knew that, too, you know I wanted to play Little League but Hebrew School came first. There was no arguing about that one. You know, that was it. I had a responsibility to the religion. That was my father's way of thinking. I had to be bar mitzvahed. That was more important than anything. Baseball was just a game, even if I was good at it. It would have had to wait.

Vural: [00:28:43] And then did you become observant or not particularly?

Stark: [00:28:47] Ah, no, sadly I became less observant. Spiritually, I'm as spiritual as I was, but not as observant anymore. We used to close on the Jewish holidays. Now we still close early if we have to—we get together with family, but not as much anymore.

Vural: [00:29:12] And what was it like to work—I mean, you were saying—I mean, obviously it sounds like it was really positive. But can you tell me a little bit more about what it was like to work with your dad when you were a kid and just starting out?

Stark: [00:29:23] At times it was brutal. If you know of anybody in a father-son business, the son knows what I'm talking about. You work with the father and it's just like being a kid at home. Somebody once said that I should be calling him by his first name, which I—absolutely not. He's my father. He's dad. And he did teach me a lot of things and showed me the right way to do things. He yelled at me when I did things wrong and he complained about me and as I got older, I argued back. But the one thing that held us together, with all my relatives that came into it, with my sisters and my brother—and we fight all the time like any brothers and sisters, and sometimes a lot of three-way fights—but we're on the same page on how to run the store: honestly, help the customers.

[00:30:21] We just had a hotel that they owed us seventeen dollars and forty-one cents and they sent us a check for seventeen hundred and forty-one dollars. And some people would keep their mouth shut, but my sister didn't even have to ask me what do we do with it, she just sent them a note: "Thank you but you overpaid us. Well, we'll give you a credit on the account for that amount."

[00:30:43] And we help the customers. We're honest. And as long as we do things like that we could get along forever. Because the fighting is just typical brother-sister nonsense, typical father-son nonsense—that was nothing—but we were on the same page of how to run a business. Pay the bills quick. We expect to get paid quick. You know, treat the employees fair. None of us were—you know, I don't think we have bad Stark in the family, I'm proud to say. There are other stores that do. There's a store downtown that they were brothers and they broke up because one was honest, one was a crook, and they just—the honest one just wouldn't work anymore with him because he was always with a kickback or something many years ago and still. And they just broke up. They won't do it anymore.

[00:31:46] So, we don't have that situation and I'm thrilled about that, because, you know, every now and then if somebody overpays, we'll say, "Do we have to give it back?" Yes, we do. We know we do and, you know, there's no doubt about it. Even the ones we don't care for [chuckles] we still—we're honest with them.

[00:32:04] I remember once there was a paint company that we were buying from but we didn't like them. I know they didn't like us. And they gave us a credit for \$300. My father called and let them know that it wasn't our credit. And I was a teenager. I said, "But we hate them! We don't like them! They don't like us! Why are you telling them?! We didn't ask for it, they gave it to us!" He goes, "That money belongs to somebody else and that guy'll never get the money."

[Chuckles] So, he says, "Let them get the money." I said, "Fine." Everybody else we get something extra that we didn't pay for we let them know, if it came in on the order or something like that and they made a mistake. So, we do that with our vendors and hopefully the customers

do that with us. So, we've always been on that same page and that's all it takes to work with your family, you know. If you have the same philosophy, you'll be fine.

Vural: [00:33:00] And everything else feels like it'll just pass.

Stark: [00:33:02] Yes, it's all—we'll have an argument and a few minutes later we'll hug and kiss and make up and literally we'll come over and hug each other and kiss each other. There've been a few times we've had to buy my sister flowers [chuckles]. Maybe we get a little bit out of hand [laughs], but we'll email each other and, you know, "I'm sorry" and all this and "I was having a bad day" or whatever. But when you're in close quarters—and we're all in the same office and we don't have doors on our office, just one door. So, we can't close our doors or slam our doors even [chuckles]. We're all in the same area. But that's going to happen. You work behind the counter with somebody, you know, you're going to have those arguments.

Vural: [00:33:53] Absolutely. So, tell me, you were fourteen when your dad bought the business and you were saying you didn't have to have a job, but you did have a job in the family business.

Stark: [00:34:02] Yes, right. That was different.

Vural: [00:34:05] Do you remember when he first bought it? Do you remember first coming and seeing the store?

Stark: [00:34:12] I remember, yes, I remember. We'd gone to—well, my grandmothers—one grandmother lived in Queens, one in the Bronx. So, we went there whenever we visited them and

he took us to Radio City Music Hall sometimes for movies and premieres. And I remember the Horn & Hardarts in the Empire State Building and things like that, but I didn't know of the West Side. And I remember I couldn't wait. The drive in—and he took every side street there was and zigging in and out where he thought he might save a minute or so, and I'm like is this the street, is this the street? I couldn't wait to get there. I couldn't wait to show—because I had no frame of reference where we were, but I was excited about getting there that day. And that was it, you know. It was pretty cool.

Vural: [00:35:08] Do you remember who came that day? Did the whole family come?

Stark: [00:35:11] No. I remember him and I. I don't know who else. But I remember where the counter was, and we used to have a rolling ladder. Everybody loved the rolling ladder and that was fun to roll on and just to climb up and get something. Because there are twelve-foot ceilings in the store, so you got right up to the top there and that was cool. I could tell you in the neighborhood was very interesting then. First of all, as you probably know, people walked down in the middle of the street. Nobody walked on the sidewalk in the seventies in this neighborhood.

Vural: [00:35:55] Tell me about that.

Stark: [00:35:56] It wasn't safe. It wasn't safe to walk down the street, because somebody could be hiding behind some garbage cans or in the brownstone stairwell. So, if you walked in the street—you didn't have as many cars then, nobody was coming to the West Side [chuckles] — you were safer if it was at night and you walked down the street.

Vural: [00:36:17] So, that wasn't the case in the daytime though, was it?

Stark: [00:36:19] No. I never saw any violent crime there. I know on Seventy-eighth Street there was a man who was shot dead on the street, a community activist who was shot.

Vural: [00:36:35] What year was that?

Stark: [00:36:39] I'm not sure. It had to be '72. In '72 our store was broken into a couple of times and some other stores in the neighborhood were broken into. They caught the kids that did it and it was a small gang. And the cop on the beat had told us when they turn sixteen, they're not going to do so much because then they won't be in juvenile court.

[00:37:06] But our window was broken and we had just—we had just gotten a brand-new register and they threw paint on it. The register couldn't have been more than a week old. But we had a pyramid of paint of about forty gallons and they could have knocked that all over, and it was after hours, so we were lucky. Nobody got hurt. So, then we put some gates on.

[00:37:32] And we had *solid* gates at that time. The old owner had put a gate in front of the front door only because there were homeless people sleeping in front of the door and he couldn't open the door. So, that kept them away from that. It was a slide gate that was about four-foot wide and we only put the gates on after the window had been smashed. The neighborhood got nicer that we got new gates that you could see through, although those gates you could grab on and if—during the blackout in '77, when the looting was, they were pulling the gates off [chuckles]. So, I

don't think we're going back that direction, but that was the only negative about a see-through gate.

Vural: [00:38:22] So, tell me you're fourteen years old and you come to the Upper West Side and you don't even really know where it is. Tell me a little bit more about how you remember it.

Stark: [00:38:34] Well, the neighbors, I could tell you about the neighbors. We had a sanitation department depot next to us and garbage trucks were triple parked, which would never go today [chuckles]. When a garbage—a sanitation worker pulls up in front of the store just to go across the street to a bagel place to get a bagel, I'm looking out and thinking what's he doing there? When's he going to leave? Am I going to have to call the city on this? And he's just getting a bagel and a cup of coffee. But there it was—lunch hour came or 8 o'clock in the morning came—and the trucks were just all over Amsterdam.

[00:39:11] And the guys were friendly enough. But we were friendly with one guy and I remember he whistled at a woman. I said, "Frank, that's my grandmother." He goes, "Yeah, but she's built!" [Laughs] What do you say to that?!

[00:39:36] Now, we also had a hair salon that was nothing more than a hangout for pimps. And they showed up dressed like pimps did in the seventies and they had Cadillacs and Lincolns and they parked there, and if we pulled up with our car or our delivery truck, one of them would always yell at the other one, "Hey, move the car." We never asked. We never spoke to them. We never dealt with them. They never came in the store. But they always, as soon as they saw us, they always moved the car for us so we could park in front of the store.

[00:40:19] And they never had a cross word with you. Nobody ever fought with each other. They just hung out there and smoked, drank, or whatever they did, and they'd sit outside on the sidewalk or they'd sit inside the place and they were probably our nicest [chuckles] neighbors!

Vural: [00:40:37] And where were they relative to you?

Stark: [00:40:38] Right next door to us. The La Vela Restaurant, which just closed a few months ago, was actually two stores, which was the sanitation department depot and the hair salon. The hair salon went out and a store came in selling pillows, with six telephones [chuckles]. And it wasn't long before they were arrested and gone because that was nothing more than some drug or bookie joint with six telephones [chuckles].

Vural: [00:41:10] And so when you were a kid, what sense did you make of that? Did you understand that those were pimps, and what did you think of that?

Stark: [00:41:18] Well, I was too young. It was sort like the day I found out what they sold, they were leaving. It was like *wait! Come back! I'll give you paint! I'll trade you!* It was like *ah, man!* [Chuckles] I had no idea what a pimp was [chuckles] and then they were gone.

Vural: [00:41:38] And who were your customers? Who was coming in buying paint?

Stark: [00:41:41] People who lived in the neighborhood. There were many old-time West Siders, some of whom bought brownstones in the sixties or just lived there. We had a huge art supply business that up until the mid-seventies, a lot of artists lived here on the Upper West Side,

so we had a tremendous business there. My father took over and he knew nothing about art supplies so he got rid of that. But two years later, he realized it was a mistake and we actually took over one of the stores next door. Before La Vela became one place, there were two. We took over where the sanitation department was and opened up an art-supply store. And that was just at the beginning of the end for artists here. They were all moving down to the Village [Greenwich Village].

[00:42:37] So, we had a sustainable business for a couple of years, but it just didn't pay to have that extra rent and that extra space. We moved it all back into the main store. And you had to have people who knew art supplies and that was a little bit tricky and then less and less artists were coming in.

Vural: [00:42:59] So, I think that's really interesting. What years did you have the art supply store? Do you remember?

Stark: [00:43:05] I think '76 to '79. I remember I was given the job of setting it up, and sitting there and then some guy comes in. I says, "Well, I'm sorry, sir, we're not open yet." And he goes, "You should be buying Bokor acrylic paints. And I said, "We have that. I just haven't unpacked it" He goes, "Oh, hi, I'm Lenny Bokor." Now, his hair was all messed up. He shirt was out. His tie was off the center. And he's, "I'm Lenny Bokor, how you doing?" And he shook my hand and I told my father. He goes, "Yes, that's Lenny!" [Chuckles] I go like, "You know him?" He goes, "Yes, I know him." And he dressed like a schlump, but he came in to tell me that.

[00:43:36] And a couple of days later some guy walks in in a suit and tie and I go, “We’re not open yet, sir.” He goes, “You should be selling Robert Simmons brushes.” I said, “I think I’ve got that.” He goes, “Oh, I’m Robert Simmons, how you doing?” What, is everybody [laughs] just named after a company? You know, no big companies [laughs]. It was kind of funny like that. But there was so much to know and specifics and technical. You know, I mean, there was a paint store down on Canal Street, Pearl Paint, that had one whole floor—they had five floors—one whole floor devoted to pencils [chuckles].

[00:44:23] So, that was a tremendous business, but it was, as I said, the customers were moving away so it didn’t really pay for us to have that.

Vural: [00:44:35] What interests me about that is that sometimes when people talk about the neighborhood in the seventies, sort of sixties and seventies, they don’t always remember that lots of people were living here—all kinds of people, that it wasn’t only a troubled place. So, it’s interesting that that’s not your memory.

Stark: [00:44:56] No, there were people—no, the West Siders were old dyed-in-the-wool liberal West Siders. Those were the ones that were living here. People who were probably born here and who were going to die here—and very community-minded people all the way, way back when.

[00:45:20] The West Side had that image of the liberal West Sider, you know.

Vural: [00:45:31] And how do you remember the racial and ethnic mix in those days?

Stark: [00:45:35] Back then it was more blacks and Hispanics living here, much more. But the rents went up and pushed them out. Now it's much more white. In fact, I certainly try not to look at anything, but when a Hispanic person comes in, they're probably a worker and they're buying—you know, they're a contractor or they're working for a painter or a landlord. And it's more or less true, you know. I don't assume anything but you could tell, sometimes, maybe sometimes the way they're dressed, because they're wearing workers' clothes, that they probably aren't living in the neighborhood. Which it was different. We used to have to carry paint of three different qualities depending on—and it was some minorities were buying the less expensive ones, some bought the better ones, but some of them, I guess by income, African Americans who seem to have been successful were proud to buy the top quality, I guess proud they had what they had. I guess other people who weren't, for whatever they did, they bought less expensive paints. In the eighties, we didn't need the less expensive paints anymore.

[00:47:08] Now, jeez, people are buying \$5 million apartments, you know. I'm insulted if they ask if there's anything less expensive than the most expensive one [chuckles]. I'm not giving you the cheap paint! You know? So it changed like *that*. But I never saw the crime being any different, but it was. Amsterdam Avenue and Columbus Avenue were, if you know Monopoly, the Mediterranean and Baltic Avenues, that were the low end. Nobody came here if they didn't have to, you know.

[00:47:47] And also back in the seventies, Saturdays used to be our busiest day, did twice as much business on a Saturday than any other day. And people who were home—people worked during the week, they fixed up their home on the weekend. Nobody was going to go to Central

Park then. So, there were no runners or bikers or anything like that. They weren't going in the park, they were going away.

[00:48:13] The first time I told my father that somebody was off on a Saturday, he gave me grief. “But Dad, it's the slowest day now. We don't need so many people on a Saturday.” Saturday had become the worst day of the week for us. We do more business on a Sunday—we started opening Sunday in the early nineties—and we do more on a Sunday than we do on a Saturday now.

Vural: [00:48:35] And is that because people are buying paint for others to do the work during the week?

Stark: [00:48:42] More in this neighborhood now, more and more people have contractors already. They're not asking me for paint as much as they used to. They're not doing it themselves anymore. We used to have people who even sanded floors themselves. We had three floor sanders in the seventies we would rent out and people came in and did their floors. Now it's always there's got to be a guy doing it, there's going to be somebody doing it for them. And we don't have—we have very few do-it-yourselfers in this neighborhood. If you can afford this neighborhood [chuckles], you can afford to hire someone to do it. More people do it because they want to do a project than “I can't afford it, I'm going to do it myself” type thing. It's like, “Ah, I'm going to slum it a little bit and use the hammer this weekend. I want to see what the common folk do.” [chuckles]

[00:49:35] So, our business changed, because we might have a consumer come in—and I like to say my first experience with a gay person—I get everybody’s attention with that—but there was a man who came in and he—back in the early seventies—he spent about \$300 worth of paint, and I helped him. He thanked me: “Thank you, sir.” Like all I know is that it was a big sale. And then he came back and ordered more the next week and I said, “I don’t have any problem with gay people [chuckles]. I like all people, anyone who’s coming in like that!” And I never understood how or why people would have a problem with gay people. I couldn’t understand how somebody could complain about somebody spending money like that. But he was one of the—genuinely one of the nicest people. And so helpful, you know, and thanking me for all my help. And it was like, you’re the one giving me the business, you know, but he was just typical of somebody—“We need paint, we need brushes, we need supplies, we need this, we need that. We’re going to do it.” And they did it.

[00:50:46] But they were—that didn’t even faze me. I didn’t know if someone was gay or not and I didn’t care. I couldn’t care less either way. It was a customer, that’s all that matters [chuckles].

Vural: [00:51:01] That’s interesting, because then you were seeing the world sort of through a lens of business and if it was—

Stark: [00:51:05] Yes.

Vural: [00:51:05] —good for business, it was fine.

Stark: [00:51:07] And you had to be—I had to be polite to everybody, can't be rude to people no matter who they are, you know. I never had anybody where I had to—or had that attitude. Once a man came in and I saw a swastika tattoo on his neck, and a few customers were—we all just stood there and stared—and he bought one item, and I just said it was this price and he took it and that was it, never saw him again.

Vural: [00:51:37] Wow, that would be hard.

Stark: [00:51:40] And I didn't know what I would do, you know, but I never had to worry about that.

Vural: [00:51:49] So, but back to talking about gay people and artists, they are—looking back, they often are the first wave in what later becomes gentrification because of the way that people are welcomed or not into neighborhoods. So, it's kind of an interesting—

Stark: [00:52:09] Yes, I guess it is. I never thought of it like that. But, yes, the gentrification changed the neighborhood and then when people could—when they changed the laws about you could buy your own apartment, that's when the real estate just totally changed. I remember it was 1975. There was a restaurant on Columbus—The Museum Café—they were the first restaurant really, you know, and then a couple more opened up, and then it was off to the races. There was even a TV show in the early nineties where one guy said to the other, “You remember bar hopping on Columbus Avenue when we were younger?” [Chuckles] Five years earlier it's like, what do you mean? You know, nobody would have ever said that.

Vural: [00:53:02] So, tell me about The Museum Café. I'm actually going to interview Michael Weinstein, who was the owner of it.

Stark: [00:53:10] Oh, I know they showed up on—you know, they opened up and I don't know too much about them. If I remember right, they had like a twenty-five-year lease. They were there for quite a bit of time right where Shake Shack is now, Columbus and Seventy-fifth Street. And because we lived on Long Island, we didn't come to too many restaurants here. Then there was one that opened up—as I said, another one and then another one. There was a restaurant on Amsterdam and Seventy-eighth Street called The Copper Hatch. That was a very nice family-style restaurant. We were very friendly with them. And that was just when that new building was built, in the early seventies, and we liked them, so we went there a lot. But we didn't explore too many restaurants, as I said, because we weren't in the city every day. Once I was, then it was a different story. Then you look for places to try different places. Now every place is a restaurant. Well, there was a time when every other store was a restaurant. But it's certainly gorgeous when you get all the people sitting outside and eating and how nice it looks. Lights on and everything like that.

Vural: [00:54:19] So, when did you graduate from high school?

Stark: [00:54:22] '75.

Vural: [00:54:24] And did you go right to college at that point?

Stark: [00:54:25] Yes, ah-hum.

Vural: [00:54:27] And at that point, did you know you'd be coming back and joining the business?

Stark: [00:54:31] Oh, definitely, definitely. If anybody asked me what I was—if I knew what I wanted to do, I knew what I wanted to do. I could state specifically I'm going to go to work for my father in the family business.

Vural: [00:54:54] And, I'm sorry, I don't know if you've said this already, where are you in the line of kids in your family?

Stark: [00:54:50] Number four, fourth oldest—but the favorite. [Chuckles]

Vural: [00:54:56] [Chuckles] Of course.

Stark: [00:55:00] I'm only missing my sisters and my brother here because even when my mother passed away, my brother said, at the eulogy, he said, "And mom's last words were 'Steve, I always liked you best.'" [Chuckles]

Vural: [00:55:23] So, when you got back to New York, where did you live when you finished college?

Stark: [00:55:29] I stayed in Commack, Long Island. I lived there until it was time to move out.

Vural: [00:55:35] And so did you commute with your dad?

Stark: [00:55:37] Yes. He drove in the morning and I drove at night and we just slept when the other one drove.

Vural: [00:55:46] And how many days a week were you both working?

Stark: [00:55:49] Six. I was working—well, we were both—actually I think we were both working five days a week then. No, I would have to say six days a week. We had—my father had a manager, a gentleman, that ran the store a couple of days a week when he had off, but when I came in, there really wasn't the need for him, and I had to justify my salary, so he left. But we kept him a couple more years, but he realized he was going to be out, so he just walked out.

Vural: [00:56:24] When did you move into the city?

Stark: [00:56:26] 1991.

Vural: [00:56:27] And where—

Stark: [00:56:28] I knew it was time to move in when I was driving in the city, and it's one thing to take a nap on the drive home, but it was at six-thirty in the morning and I couldn't keep my eyes open. I had to pull over and take a nap. And then that afternoon I contacted some of the landlords that I was friendly with and said, "I need a place."

Vural: [00:56:46] And where did you move?

Stark: [00:56:48] West Seventy-sixth Street. I'm still there, in a brownstone. Fifth floor walkup, which was a lot more fun when I was thirty! [Chuckles] Not as much fun now. But I'm happy there. It'd be nicer being in an elevator building or a bigger apartment, but the rents are just ridiculous. I was even married for two years and we lived in the apartment. The ultimate dream was to get our own place, but it wasn't working out. The marriage wasn't working out, unfortunately, so we stayed there until it did. But that's—things happen like that sometimes, so, you know.

Vural: [00:57:35] Yes.

Stark: [00:57:37] I didn't think she was going to be able to handle a one-bedroom, but we got along well in that respect. We weren't on each other's nerves for the things you'd expect, especially being in a small place.

Vural: [00:57:51] Sometimes you just can't know.

Stark: [00:57:52] It's just the way it is. Yes, you don't know.

Vural: [00:57:57] So, what's it like for you to have the neighborhood be your work and your community?

Stark: [00:58:05] Oh, I love it, I love it. I always loved the community. I learned from my father. He thought Community Board 7 was just awesome. He knew they were liberals and he knew they were good people. And we're not the most common business people around. We're

not—we're certainly not a big corporation, but even for a small business, we're more—we're Democrats and liberals and believe in more consumer laws than you'd think any—than probably any other business. We're consumers for everything we buy, and we certainly believe in consumer rights, employee rights, and things like that. But we run a business.

[00:59:01] So I learned from him on the Upper West Side. You know, these are good people.

And he loved some people and some people loved him. There's some that he didn't care for and some that didn't care for him, I know that, but the ones who loved him adored him and still do, still ask about him. And he just thought these people who were the politically minded were just what he stood for politically.

[00:59:32] So, that was a—knowing that we're in this neighborhood, I felt at home. A large Jewish population was good. Liberal was good. This was my home. And I do have a belief that if it's not between Seventy-fifth and Seventy-ninth Street, I don't need it—with the exception of Zabar's. I go up to Eightieth for them. And the funny thing is when I got married, my wife would explore the city. She went to places where I never went to. And she came from Canada and she's like, "I'm here for like a month and I've been to more places than you have." And I said—and I would say that line—"If it's not between Seventy-fifth and Seventy-ninth Street, I don't need it."

[01:00:10] Now, the store's on Seventy-seventh and we live on Seventy-sixth Street and so of course there's Fairway and Citarella and West Side Market. And she says that one day she needs to get a birthday card and there's a store, Papyrus, if that's the way it's pronounced, and I said, "Oh, that's Seventy-sixth. That's Broadway right near Seventy-sixth Street." And she rolls her eyes. And then she tells me that her father asked her to go to Saks on 5th Avenue and get a

shaving cream that he likes that he can't get up in Canada and I said, "We've got to go to Saks?" And I didn't want to go there. And I said, "What's the name of the shaving cream?" She says, "The Art of Shaving." I said, "Oh, that's on Seventy-sixth!" She says, "Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" [Chuckles] I said, "No, it's right next door to the card store!" I said, "Do you want to get some lunch?" She says, "I suppose there's a place right in the neighborhood?" I said, "Yes, right across the street, there's a diner!" I said, "We don't need to go out of the neighborhood!"

Vural: [01:01:11] My husband loves to think of all the things we can walk to: the shoemaker, the dry cleaner, the diner.

Stark: [01:01:18] Oh, that was the hardest change, because you had to plan. You couldn't carry your dry cleaning and then go food shopping. Or you couldn't buy food that was perishable and then go somewhere else. When I first moved in, I had to really organize it and plan it out. And, you know, you're driving a car, you see the light's about to turn yellow you speed up, you go through it [chuckles]. You're not supposed to, but you do. You're walking like I'm never going to make this light, and there's no chance of running and getting ahead of the traffic. Like I've got to wait for the next light. And then you've got to plan it.

[01:01:59] I got friendly with the doorman who worked in a building on the corner Seventy-sixth Street that I could leave my dry cleaning there and come back. And I'd always give him a tip—at Christmas time—always give him a tip or buy him some coffee or ice cream, and any time I needed to leave something there, I could. But otherwise, it was a pain in the neck to go back and forth, especially if you're on the fifth floor.

[01:02:25] That was a hard—it's still hard. My wife had a very difficult time getting used to that, of the shopping, as opposed to taking a car and going from Store A to Store B to Store C and just throwing things in the car [chuckles], you know. That was the only adjustment I had to make.

Vural: [01:02:45] That's funny because I feel like it's easier in the city because in the suburbs you have to drive all these long distances.

Stark: [01:02:53] [Chuckles] That's one way of looking at it.

Vural: [01:02:56] That's funny. So, I'm paying attention to the time. Do you feel like you want to talk a little more?

Stark: [01:03:03] Whatever. Sure, I've got no problem.

Vural: [01:03:04] Okay, great. So, let's just take a break for a second.

Stark: [01:03:09] Okay.

[Interruption]

Vural: [01:03:11] Okay, so it's recording again. So, I wanted to ask you about sort of how the neighborhood changed. So, you came back from college in the late seventies.

Stark: [01:03:23] Right. Well, we didn't have much—there wasn't much crime. There was always crime, and like I said, if you remember the park—you didn't go into Central Park. You

don't go in Central Park, unless you want to get mugged. I could tell you one time there was a deli on the corner of Seventy-eighth Street run by some wonderful sweet men, but before them, there was a guy who ran this deli and one day a couple of the police officers on the beat came in and asked my father not to sell magic markers to the kids because of the graffiti. My father said, "We don't even sell magic markers." He says, "And we wouldn't sell them to kids anyway." And he said, "Who would?" I don't know, maybe the grocery store. And he goes in there, and the guy says, "You can't tell me what to sell. You can't tell me what to do." And one cop said to—he said, "Did the health inspector come by today or tomorrow?" And the other guy says, "I think he's coming by both days." And this little man, about five foot tall and chubby, comes running into our store shaking, asking my father, "Do you want to buy these, these markers?" [Laughs] And we said—and my father gave it to him. And it's like, why? We don't even deal with them. We don't like them. He says, "Ah, help them out a little bit." So, he paid a couple of bucks for each marker and we used it ourselves.

Vural: [01:04:52] And when would that have been, roughly?

Stark: [01:04:54] I'm sorry?

Vural: [01:04:55] When would that have been?

Stark: [01:04:56] '73. '74. We always used the line—I was always afraid of any kids or anybody up to no good if I said, "No, I'm not going to sell it to you." So, I always used the excuse, "It's against the law, I can't do anything about it." So, I didn't need to alienate or anger anybody. And the same thing with utility knives or boxcutters, spray paint, because they could

sniff it or graffiti it. So, we didn't sell that to anyone under twenty-one. And even now, we still use that and we ask people no matter how old they are if they're over twenty-one.

[01:05:42] There was one—a little girl came in and she was obviously going to use the markers—at that time, we did sell some markers or spray paint. She was in a dress and she seemed like she was probably a good student in school and doing a project. And I said, “I couldn't sell it to you.” And her grandmother came in with her and said, “You can't sell it to her?” And I told her why. And she thanked me for that, for trying to keep the neighborhood clean. She said, “Well, I could buy it.” I said, “Are *you* over 21?” And she came behind the counter and gave me a kiss [chuckles] and she said, “That's the nicest thing anybody ever said to me!”

Vural: [01:06:20] [Chuckles]

Stark: [01:06:22] I love it when we speak—when there's somebody who speaks Spanish and they don't understand—they speak some English, but they don't understand when I say, “Are you over twenty-one?” until one of our men who speaks Spanish says that to them. And, well, they burst out laughing when they—[chuckles] you know, the moment they realize what we're saying. And we have so much fun with it. I tell people, “Come back.” You know, they could be fifty or ninety—“You have to come back with your mother.” You know, or, “Come back with your father” or something like that, and it becomes a nice fun conversation [chuckles]. I do tell people, “If I see a graffiti that says ‘Getting old sucks,’ I'm coming after you, I'm reporting you.” [Chuckles]

[01:07:08] But it's a fun thing. I tell the new employees they have to ask—because I'm being a little bit—it becomes a fun thing. I've a young man, twenty years old, he loves asking that [chuckles].

Vural: [01:07:19] That's great.

Stark: [01:07:22] But the spray paint was behind the counter because of the theft. Well, first it was under lock and key. Now it's always behind the counter. It's fine, but we never had a problem like that. We had one time the Department of Consumer Affairs sent a kid in who looked like a punk, sounded like a punk, and he wanted some spray paint, and nobody was going to sell him spray paint. And the woman told me afterwards who she was and I said, "You know, about a week ago a very well-dressed young man, who looked like he could have been in his early twenties, came in, waited in line and politely asked for a can of spray paint. When we asked him if he was over twenty-one, he said no and another man who was standing over there walked over and he was a cop." I said, "You could stand here all day and send that kid in, no one's going to sell it to him." I said, "A criminal won't sell it to him. But you want to spread the word really. You know, you want to ticket somebody, he's getting a ticket, not you." I said, "You're just wasting your time doing that—you know, getting him." And she thanked me for that. I said, "But he was, you know—somebody else could have fallen for it."

[01:08:37] And we did. One of my men did fall for it like that. He got a ticket. The City made him go to court. He couldn't even plead guilty or send in a fine, which we would have paid. He had to go down to court and take a day off of work. And he got there, a legal aid attorney grabbed him and said, "We're going to plead entrapment," and he got off. Like what was the

point of that? My father paid him for the day, but somebody else wouldn't have paid him for the day, and it was just a waste.

Vural: [01:09:08] Do you remember when you noticed that people weren't walking in the—literally in the street anymore at night?

Stark: [01:09:17] Yes, once people started buying co-ops and getting their own apartment. And then when the brownstones went up—you know, there was a time you could have bought any brownstone on the Upper West Side for ten grand. There was a guy who owned the pizza place on Columbus Avenue, Tom's, Pizza Tom, and he said—he told us one day in the early sixties, he said, "Take a look at me." He said, "Do you see those five brownstones? Give me fifty grand, they're all yours." He said, "What, are you crazy? The guy spent \$50,000 on a piece of—you know, in this neighborhood on those buildings?" Now they're about five million each, ten million each. You know, my father also had that opportunity, but nobody was going to buy that.

Vural: [01:10:02] So, would that have—

Stark: [01:10:03] But once that started getting better, once the restaurants started getting better, then the young people moved into the neighborhood. It was a hopping place for singles. And that was—the bars weren't too—nobody was crazy about all the bars because of the noise and the drunks and the drinking, but the restaurants weren't that bad really except for the fact that *every* place was a restaurant, you know.

[01:10:35] Then the single people moved down to Chelsea, to the Village, and families moved in, and that changed everything. If you were a restaurant and you didn't have space for baby carriages, you were going to be out of business [chuckles]. You know, everything had to be like that. And that's what—that was really the latest change. That was about probably about twenty years ago, thirty years ago almost, and that's when families came in and the neighborhood changed a little bit.

[01:11:07] There was a school on Seventy-seventh Street. At that time, they put all the rotten apples into one school. So, those kids we'd have to stand guard almost when they got out if they came in. They went to the sneaker store and robbed there, knocked things over, went to the corner deli and stole, and screaming and fighting on the streets. And then the schools changed and they didn't have all the rotten apples there. There kind of—I guess they separated them, which was what they should have done, but they just—they gave up on those kids [chuckles]. Not having any kids, I didn't need to know the details of the New York City school system, which I think is a great thing not to have to worry about [laughs], because I hear so much about it. But that really was the changing time. When that changed, the whole neighborhood became something special.

Vural: [01:12:02] Tell me when do you remember the kids from Seventy-seventh Street being an issue after school?

Stark: [01:12:11] I'm trying to think of the years, but it's been—in the nineties it was, since they all got out at the same time. Now, those kids were, I guess, junior high school, where the parents didn't have to bring them to school or take them home. Many of them went into the deli. It drove

those guys crazy, but they told me they could make an extra \$500 a day. Every one of them came in and bought breakfast, got a bagel, and then in the afternoon, they'd get lunch there. And that was kind of sad because they also—that's all they bought was fattening things that's going to clog their arteries: a bacon burger with cheese and fries [chuckles], sugar-filled soda. And there's nobody eating—those kids weren't eating healthy. And that was just—it was really sad.

[01:13:15] I actually had met somebody at a community breakfast from the NAACP and I was talking to her about it. I said, "They put the soda that has twice as much sugar right out front at a lower price and ninety percent of these kids are black and they're buying all the worst foods. Don't they have anything in the schools?" And she said, "We know, we're working,"—it's something that they're working on. And they changed, you know, through—I guess they have healthier foods in the schools now and the kids don't come there like that. Now everybody in this neighborhood, the parents take the kids to and from school, which is nice to see. It's also fun to watch the kids just around our school—"Stay there!"—and they can't be more than six or seven—"I can walk the rest of the way myself!" [Laughs] These little kids. We're not talking teenagers. We're talking first or second graders. "Stay there! I can—don't come with me, mom!" You know, it's really funny sometimes. They have to walk themselves.

Vural: [01:14:25] So, one of my children went to P.S. [Public School] 87.

Stark: [01:14:27] Oh, great.

Vural: [01:14:28] Yes, so I know that corner very well.

Stark: [01:14:33] Yes.

Vural: [01:14:35] And I know that your business is—not only do you like the neighborhood, but you’re really generous to the neighborhood. Can you tell me about what you do and why you do it?

Stark: [01:14:50] Well, they’re our neighbors and they’re our customers, so we support them. I was told once that I was the biggest donor to P.S. 87 for a nonparent. Whatever they needed, we gave them. We used to, if they had an auction, we’d look for the cheapest thing or can we gift the cheapest thing. And I never liked doing that. We looked for something that didn’t sell [chuckles]. And then we started saying wait a minute, let’s put a full-page ad in the journal and what else can we do? And I was very friendly with some of the teachers, so I gave them things no charge, whatever they needed. And the parents were the ones coming in and buying it. Once the parents’ association got a hold—it wasn’t just a teacher who maybe lived in Queens or Jersey or even if it’s in Manhattan. And the schools didn’t buy paint from me because they bought through the City. But it was the parents, and I got friendly with quite a few of them.

[01:15:52] We started giving out balloons to kids and that took on a life of its own. Kids came in every day for a balloon. And there was one day I saw a little girl on the sidewalk crying, on the dirty sidewalk, with her coat over her head and the mother trying to plead with her and not to make a scene. And I went over to the woman, I said, “I don’t mean to butt in, but if a balloon will help anything, we have balloons.” And we’re still friends today and that was about thirty years ago.

Vural: [01:16:27] Nice.

Stark: [01:16:29] And they loved me for that because that gave her—that little girl came in and we exchanged Hanukkah gifts and she comes back—she’s living somewhere in California now, but if she comes back, she’ll come and say hello to me, you know. And other kids remember that we gave them balloons. Used to have one kid would just come in the office and she was sitting at my desk. We gave her crayons and I had to go out front and it’s like, “Do you need to go?” “No, I’m okay.” Her mother said, “Where’s Gaby?” I said, “Oh, she’s in the office working.”

[Chuckles] She says, “She can’t go to the office.” I said, “Ah, it’s okay. She’s sitting at the desk and she’s drawing and having the time of her life.”

[01:17:12] Another one came in and started telling my brother all about her vacation [chuckles]. And so we get along—so, we got to know the parents and we made it our business, if you give a balloon to the kid, you have to get the kid’s name and introduce yourself to the parents. So, the parents liked us more, and then once we did for the school, and we give out playdough, stuff animals. We have a bucket of tools that we give out for auctions for the schools. We do about ten of them a year. Anything else they need from us, we do. And we’re only too happy to support them and help them, especially as the kids go from one school to the other. I get a call—“Oh, my kid’s—you know me from this school and now he’s at this school. Can you help us?” “Sure.” But that’s fine because they pass the word around. And many of the parents, you know, they appreciate it and they know me. And I get invited to the school auctions sometimes and I’m happy to be there. I enjoy going there. The P.S. 87 auction is a lot of fun. And, you know, they know who I am and they know where we are. And I always say, I love the community and they love me right back.

Vural: [01:18:32] That's great.

Stark: [01:18:33] So, we do a lot of street painting. We paint over graffiti. In fact, we're going to do one in May with the 20th Precinct. We're going to supply all the paint and they're going to supply the kids and we'll do that.

Vural: [01:18:44] So, tell me, how does that work?

Stark: [01:18:45] They're going to—they're organizing it, the young somebodies, I forget what the name of their group is. But they get the kids together, and on mailboxes, we have the blue and green paint, and they'll paint over all the graffiti. We'll get the paint donated from our paint supplier and we'll organize everything with the police and the kids will go out—young people—go out and paint the street and clean up everything. We've done it a number of times and we've had tremendous success with it.

[01:19:28] The Computer School [at Middle School 245 on West Seventy-seventh Street] used to have it for the kids who had to do a community project. The kids that didn't pick anything early enough in the year, [chuckles] they had ours. They would come and do this one.

Vural: [01:19:36] And what's the geographic area that you cover?

Stark: [01:19:38] Anywhere on the West Side. We try to do—depending on how many people you get for painting—it's always between Seventy-sixth and Eighty-fifth [Streets], because it's just a matter of walking around. And most people are very happy about it. You know, I had one

time where somebody from the post office came by and they came to the store—a kid said, “Oh, yes, Bruce over at the store”—and he asked me about it and he said, “Just don’t paint over where it says what time the pickups are.” I said, “Oh, no, we know that. I already told the kids that. They just paint around it.” But I had checked with the post office to make sure they don’t have somebody who’s doing it, because I don’t want to take work away from a guy, you know. They said, “No, we don’t have anybody doing it.” I said, “Okay, we’ll do it.”

[01:20:23] And Seventy-seventh Street has a good block association, and Seventy-fifth Street they do. So, when they do their projects, anything they need, they come over and get from us.

Vural: [01:20:34] And how does that feel for you?

Stark: [01:20:35] Oh, I love it. It feels great. As I said, I’m friendly with the people and they’re my customers and my neighbors, you know. I live in the neighborhood, so I’m part of the neighborhood. And, you know, we had a saying: “Anything P.S. 87 needs, P.S. 87 gets.” So, whatever we could give them—

[01:20:55] I had a friend who used to say, “You guys aren’t in business to make money.” He says, “You give too much stuff away.” But it’s not that bad [chuckles].

Vural: [01:21:08] That’s great. Does anybody else in your family live in the neighborhood?

Stark: [01:21:11] My brother lives on 83rd and West End [Avenue], so, people see him with his dog. That’s another thing. We have a dog, a black lab. And we had one named Bru. My brother

named it after me. It was going to be Little Brucie, but it was a girl so he named it Bru. And if I ever get a dog, it has to be Little Stevie. But that dog was a fixture. The kids came in to see the dog and the dog loved kids. And people came in to see the dog. And we have a new dog who's not as much into kids yet, but kids come in there to see her. And that helps the business. My brother—and people know my brother from going to the park every morning and the dog runs or whatever—and so he's known as the King of Dogs. Like that. He's out there every morning in Central Park and meeting people there and glad-handing them.

Vural: [01:22:10] What's the new dog's name? I forget.

Stark: [01:22:11] Dinah.

Vural: [01:22:13] And so Dinah's the store mascot and goes home with Steve every night?

Stark: [01:22:17] Yes, ah-hum.

Vural: [01:22:19] Nice. Nice.

Stark: [01:22:21] Yes.

Vural: [01:22:22] So, that reminds me of your sister who I'm very sorry that—

Stark: [01:22:26] Thank you.

Vural: [01:22:27] Her name was Marsha?

Stark: [01:22:28] Marsha.

Vural: [01:22:30] And I know you—do you still organize the walkathon?

Stark: [01:22:32] Yes.

Vural: [01:22:33] Can you tell me about that?

Stark: [01:22:34] We do a walkathon. The last ten years we've done it for the benefit of Guiding Eyes for the Blind. And we do a walk on a Saturday night and it's in the schoolyard at Columbus and Seventy-seventh Street. A lot of restaurants, a lot of food places, give us food. We don't need all the food—like Chirping Chicken will give us four trays of chicken, for a few years Pizzeria Uno gave us thirty pizzas—but restaurants of any kind don't like to give out money [chuckles]. I wouldn't get nearly as much money from them if I asked them for cash, so if they want to give out food, I'll take it. And people come in there and have dinner and we have goody bags for the kids and T-shirts. They have a DJ playing music. We take a nice little walk into Central Park, down Seventy-seventh Street, down to Sixty-seventh in the park and we turn around.

[01:23:31] Gale Brewer comes every year. Linda Rosenthal comes. Helen Rosenthal comes. All our politicians. They basically do—their speech is basically a commercial for us, which is just wonderful [chuckles] and great. And we have a lot of fun doing it. And the people in the neighborhood, the kids love it and they get to run around and play at night. So, I go to the school. I give an assembly at P.S. 87 and the kids just go crazy about it.

Vural: [01:24:06] And then are they raising money?

Stark: [01:24:08] Yes. Many of them bring in their own money, they raise money. And we did about \$20,000 last year and we've done, give or take, the last few years like that. There's one organization—somebody makes an anonymous donation of \$10,000.

Vural: [01:24:30] That's amazing.

Stark: [01:24:30] It's called Tripling Elephants. We have Googled it and Googled it and there's nothing on it. One time fifteen years ago Stephen Colbert used the expression "triple elephants" but—I have a friend who runs marathons to build schools around the world and they give to her every year the same thing. And she asked me who it was and I said I don't know. But I'm going to go under the assumption that it's Stephen Colbert, because I like him, but I'm also going to respect his privacy and not try to promote it, you know, or say anything about it. That's all I know. And Guiding Eyes would call me and tell me they got a confirmation—they got the money. The first year they wanted to get a name. "No, can't give it to you. We're just authorized to transfer this money to you."

Vural: [01:25:23] So, you just anonymously get a check or something?

Stark: [01:25:25] Yes, ah-hum.

Vural: [01:25:26] That's amazing.

Stark: [01:25:27] It's great. And we love it. And, as I said, we have no idea who it is, but again if somebody wants to be anonymous, that's fine with me and I'll respect that privacy. But I'll still hope it's Stephen Colbert [chuckles].

Vural: [01:25:40] Why not?

Stark: [01:25:41] You know, exactly. Somebody I like, you know [chuckles].

Vural: [01:25:45] And then you're honoring your sister and you're—

Stark: [01:25:46] Yes.

Vural: [01:25:47] —and you're building community and—

Stark: [01:25:48] Right.

Vural: [01:25:49] —that's great.

Stark: [01:25:51] Yes, so it becomes a community event. It's a lot of work sometimes and we've thought about, is it too much work. Everything is paid for. Everything is donated. So, there's very little financial outlay on our part, virtually nothing. Guiding Eyes, the charity, doesn't pay anything. They get a hundred percent of the donations. So, we'll pay something, but every now and then we'll get a sponsor who will cover it. But I've a friend who does the T-shirts for me. We buy T-shirts, that's about it. We used to have a journal made up and our printer did that for us for no charge. That was his donation. So, that worked out pretty good.

Vural: [01:26:37] That's a beautiful thing.

Stark: [01:26:38] Thank you.

Vural: [01:26:40] Yes.

Stark: [01:26:41] The first ten years—we started doing it because I used to do work with a charity called the Xeroderma Pigmentosum Society. Xeroderma Pigmentosum is a very rare degenerative skin disease that effects children mostly and they can't go out in the daytime or in fluorescent lighting, ultraviolet light. It's also a fatal disease. There's no cure. And I read about it in *The New York Times* once, an article. They had a camp, a summer camp for kids, but it operated from midnight to six a.m., and I called up offering to help. And one year they had a walkathon on a gorgeous sunny Sunday afternoon. They were right outside Poughkeepsie and the little girl who had the disease, who was a block away, couldn't come out. And I said to the woman in charge, "Why don't you to do it in Poughkeepsie?" That was like a big city to them. Now I said, "Do it at night." "No," I said, "I'll do one for you at night. I'll do it in Central Park." And I got permission to do it in Central Park. We met at Tavern on the Green and we did it at night and the kids who had it were able to come.

[01:27:54] And we had a couple of years I had a midnight movie that the Loews [Theater] on Sixty-eighth Street arranged for me. And then we had a snack at 2 a.m. over at Blondies, and the kids who had this disease, who were up all night, had the time of their life.

Vural: [01:28:13] Is that what your sister had or—

Stark: [01:28:14] No, no. She did have—it was skin cancer that she died from, but it wasn't this.

Vural: [01:28:23] But did you see this as kind of service to her?

Stark: [01:28:24] There was a little—there was a connection to me. I felt a connection to it.

Vural: [01:28:34] And had she been born blind?

Stark: [01:28:36] She was blind at age two. She was—my parents were told that she wouldn't live to age two, or to live more than another year—and she did.

Vural: [01:28:52] That's a heavy thing.

Stark: [01:28:54] Yes. But she's the one that taught me to care about other people. We used to call the Jerry Lewis telethon, make a donation. I'd say—I called her Marge, her name was Marsha—and I'd say, "But Marge, you're blind." You know, like, "You're handicapped." At that time, that word was okay. She says, "Yes, but these kids can't walk. You always have to help somebody worse off than you." So, that's what she taught me.

Stark: [01:29:22] How close in age were you?

Vural: [01:29:23] She was about six years older. And then she was at that time, in 1969, the youngest person to ever have a guide dog. She was sixteen. And they didn't give them out to people under twenty-one then, but they felt she was able to handle it.

Vural: [01:29:43] And I guess Dinah was a seeing eye dog.

Stark: [01:29:45] She was a release dog, yes.

Vural: [01:29:46] What does that mean?

Stark: [01:29:49] When they said to the dog “sit,” she was looking at her paw—*oh, look at that!*

Okay, she’s not going to make it! [Chuckles] She wasn’t interested in studying.

Vural: [01:29:59] I see.

Stark: [01:30:00] So, sometimes dogs have a nervous reaction to a noise or they get startled by something sudden. And the test for a dog after a year and a half of training is, they open an umbrella really quick, and if the dog jumps, that’s it, they release them.

Vural: [01:30:17] I see.

Stark: [01:30:18] Every year—but Dinah she was two months when we got the call she’d be released. But maybe she was a smart one, because instead of having to work for her life she’s sitting on a big chair and having cookies [chuckles]. So, maybe she was playing it smart.

Vural: [01:30:39] I think I’ll be the mascot.

Stark: [01:30:42] Yes, let’s see. Work with a harness on me all day or eat cookies all day? Ah, I think I’ll go for the cookies!

Vural: [01:30:52] That's a beautiful thing that you've—that you remember Marsha by doing good work.

Stark: [01:30:58] Yes. And I actually did voluntary work for the Jerry Lewis telethon for twenty-seven years.

Vural: [01:31:04] As an outgrowth of that?

Stark: [01:31:05] Yes. I worked—I saw it in the—I was a phone room supervisor for a number of years, both in Long Island and the city, and I was the studio chief the last ten years that I did it, in [AM radio station] WOR.

Vural: [01:31:19] That's great. Does that still exist? I'm not sure.

Stark: [01:31:22] No, no.

Vural: [01:31:23] Yes, it's gone.

Stark: [01:31:24] And that was it, yes.

Vural: [01:31:27] That era's over.

Stark: [01:31:28] Yes. Well, nobody could have replaced Jerry Lewis.

Vural: [01:31:32] Yes.

Stark: [01:31:33] That was one thing.

Vural: [01:31:36] So, I'm wondering if we should take a break and get together again in a couple of weeks.

Stark: [01:31:41] Sure, sure.

Vural: [01:31:42] Great.

Stark: [01:31:43] I don't know if I know anything else other than what I've been telling you all night! I hope I didn't go on too long.

Vural: [01:31:48] Not at all. It's wonderful. Just perfect. So, let's say goodbye.

Stark: [01:31:52] Okay.

Vural: [01:31:54] And I'm going to turn this off.

[END OF SESSION]