

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 second of two sessions of an oral history interview with Bruce Stark conducted by Leyla Vural on April 24, 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 continues to talk about his family's store, Beacon Paint and Hardware, and to describe the neighborhood as it changed over the years. He recalls first starting to go to Central Park in the early 1990s and recounts his experience during the blackout in August 2003. Stark reminisces about the store's successes (including being named NYC Small Business of the Year in 2008 and Paint Dealer of the Year and Hardware Dealer of the Year in 2009)—and he talks about the challenges of staying in business today. He describes the support that Upper West Siders give to one another and the pride he feels in the neighborhood.

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 24, 2019  
**Session:** 2 of 2  
**Location:** New York, N.Y.

**Vural:** [00:00:00] It is Wednesday, April 24th, 2019 and I'm with Bruce Stark at the Columbus Avenue BID [Business Improvement District] conference room for the second of our interviews for the Columbus Avenue and the Upper West Side Oral History Project. Thank you, Bruce.

**Stark:** [00:00:16] You're welcome. Thank you.

**Vural:** [00:00:17] So, since we met a couple of weeks ago, I'm wondering if you've given thought to our conversations about the neighborhood and Beacon Paint & Hardware and—

**Stark:** [00:00:29] Well, I could tell you the neighborhood—Eightieth Street and Amsterdam, right where we are—was known as The Jungle because of drug deals, and you didn't want to walk past Eightieth Street.

**Vural:** [00:00:41] And what years are you talking about?

**Stark:** [00:00:43] The seventies, even up to the early eighties. It was not an area you wanted to be. I didn't see much crime. There was. I know the runners shop, the sneakers store across the street from us, they got hit a few times by—once, like a dozen kids ran in and they all ran out and grabbed a box or grabbed something and the guys just couldn't catch all of them. We were okay because we have a big enough store where nobody knows if you're—somebody's in the back or this and that. The flower shop across the street has been robbed a few times recently. But if you put a camera in there, that's a little bit better, but not the big camera, she didn't. She should have because it was a small store.

[00:01:34] And here and there, there've been some minor things but nothing since the early seventies of a crime wave. I remember in 1972 there were—every other store was being broken into. And even in one place was a community center—they had nothing but chairs—and the guy said, “What are they doing here?” And the cop said, “Practice.” They smash and grab and they throw a rock through the window and grab a chair and run out, and that was practice [chuckles].

[00:02:02] But otherwise it was pretty—I thought it was always a pretty safe neighborhood, as bad as it was or as tough as New York was. You walked down the middle of the road on the streets at night. You didn't walk on the sidewalk, you know. I don't know any crime numbers or anything like that, but it wasn't—I was never scared. We only parked on Seventy-seven or Seventy-eighth Street, usually, so I wasn't scared to walk around the corner, even if it was at night. I used to stay late, or if I went somewhere, my father never liked me staying after six when leaving by myself, because somebody could, you know, come right up to you.

**Vural:** [00:02:50] Do you remember if your dad was concerned about buying a store in the neighborhood?

**Stark:** [00:02:55] No concerns. It was New York City. That's what he wanted.

**Vural:** [00:03:00] And he knew that—

**Stark:** [00:03:01] That was the place to be.

**Vural:** [00:03:03] And he knew that there were regular people living and needing the things that a hardware and paint shop has.

**Stark:** [00:03:09] Yes. We'd been around at that time for seventy years. The store was there and there was a thriving business. We sold wallpaper then. We sold artists' supplies and paint. No

hardware, no plumbing, no electrical, no light bulbs, but the paint and the wallpaper for people doing it themselves, and artists was a good part of the business.

**Vural:** [00:03:37] So, do you remember what was different about Eightieth and Amsterdam [Avenue]? Why was this The Jungle?

**Stark:** [00:03:43] Just where—maybe there was a store that sold drugs there or where they dealt drugs there and that was just a hangout, certain type of store that they could hang out in or a place of business. That’s all I knew about it. I knew it was called The Jungle. I didn’t go up there, you know.

**Vural:** [00:04:04] Do you remember the blackout in 1977?

**Stark:** [00:04:08] Yes, ah-hum.

**Vural:** [00:04:09] Can you tell me about that?

**Stark:** [00:04:10] Oh, actually I should say no. We were lucky. We had gates, solid gates on the windows because in the early seventies we were broken into twice with somebody throwing something through the window. Then we put up gates. So, they were solid steel gates, so there was nothing for them to grab onto. The gates that we have now where you could open, you could put a hook on there and pull them off. I was speaking—there was a young lady from—if you remember RCI Appliances [Broadway and Ninety-eighth Street, closed in 2014]?

**Vural:** [00:04:43] Of course.

**Stark:** [00:04:44] I was at a meeting a couple of weeks ago and she wrote a book. But she talked about her business, which was going back to her grandfather, and she’s got to be in her sixties now—that in 1977 during the blackout, they got hit and they got hit hard and the place was a

mess. And their concern was not what did we lose, but how are we going to clean up, how are we going to make everything so we can sell? We've got air conditioners down in the basement; we've got to bring them up. We have broken glass all over the place. And everybody was coming in to them asking if they're okay, you know, are they going to stay? So, her father just put up a sign on a piece of paper that said "We're staying" and put it in the window. And they cleaned up and they were back in business.

[00:05:33] But for us, we were lucky we weren't hit. I mean, I remember reading about it and seeing it and thinking how awful it was, you know, but it was the times [chuckles].

**Vural:** [00:05:50] Did you talk much about the city with your parents, like what the city was like and—

**Stark:** [00:05:57] No. No.

**Vural:** [00:06:00] You were just doing your business and—

**Stark:** [00:06:02] Yes, ah-hum. Just that's what it was.

**Vural:** [00:06:05] So, when you look back and you think about the seventies and the city almost going bankrupt, can you kind of juxtapose the way that you were managing your family business and the larger context of the city? What do you think of that?

**Stark:** [00:06:21] You know, I guess I really wasn't—at that time I wasn't aware of too much, you know, except maybe what I saw in the paper, in the paper or on the news, things like that. So, I knew we were doing a business and we had the people coming in. At that time—this was one change—Saturdays were our busiest day. We would do double the business on a Saturday as any day during the week. And also, as a side note, Thursday was the slowest day of the week by

far and there were many businesses that closed on Thursdays because payday was Friday and so you didn't have money. And no one—not too many people—you had one or two credit cards, that was it.

[00:07:14] I remember a woman coming into our store once and a credit card was declined and we gave her—she gave us another one and it said to call the center. And we called. What's she doing with two credit cards? Like oh my God! Like it was some criminal thing. I know my father had a Mastercard and a Visa and an American Express, and a Diners Club then, but not two Mastercards or two Visas.

[00:07:43] But Saturday was the busiest day. It's now the slowest day of the week. And I blame it all of the parks. Central Park is now a gorgeous place to go on a beautiful day. People go there and it's packed on a nice day. Even on a not-so-nice day, people go there. And the kids are doing activities or playing soccer or baseball, whatever.

[00:08:07] Saturday—we have less employees Saturday. And I once got yelled at by my father because I'd mentioned to him that one of the guys had a Saturday off. "How can you give anybody a Saturday off?" "Look at the numbers." You know? And it was really a slow day.

[00:08:24] I remember there was a guy who we had who was going to fill the paint machines at four-thirty on a Saturday afternoon and my father gave him crap [chuckles], was like, "Are you crazy? Half-hour before we're closing and you're going to go downstairs?" And you stayed up on the counter until—because it was a busy time. There's no rush, people running in before they close now.

**Vural:** [00:08:50] Interesting.

**Stark:** [00:08:51] Ah-hum.

**Vural:** [00:08:52] So, I was thinking. You know, there was the blackout in 2003, in August?

**Stark:** [00:08:58] Yes.

**Vural:** [00:08:59] Do you remember that day?

**Stark:** [00:09:00] That I remember. That I remember. We had one of our flashlights we had in stock and other items that we might be able to sell. Batteries of course went, and the flashlights went. Some people needed special light bulbs for their fish tank. And those were the things that sold. We stayed open until we ran out of flashlights and then there was no point then and so we closed up.

[00:09:32] And I figured I'd go out to dinner [chuckles]. I'll go over to West Side Market for something to eat, and I get there and it's closed. Big Nick's was open. They were selling pizzas by the pie, and how the guy near the grill didn't collapse from the heat, I don't know. But it was only by the pie. And so you stood in line. "I'll take two pieces." And somebody else said, "I'll take two." And somebody else said, "Four." Alright, we got the pie and we divided it up, and they gave us some plates and that was dinner. They were giving away ice cream, because it was melting.

[00:10:07] I went to visit my brother and it was *so*—everybody was all over the place. You couldn't even walk. You couldn't see anything. It was really spooky going up there. And it's like—alright, I was sitting there, I was like, "Where are you?" [Chuckles] You know, "Marco." "Polo." We just sat there and we BS-ed for a little while. I was like, well, might as well go home



now, go to sleep, that's it. And I woke up, it was about five-thirty, and I took a shower and it was hot, and all of a sudden, the lights came on and I just went, "*Yes!*"

[00:10:43] Although when the lights went out—we had different electrical problems from time to time in the store and it started going out almost like first there and then there and I'm like, ah, this is going to be a pain. I've got to figure out where the power went, what circuit breaker is it, was it a wire? They then: "There's a blackout." And I'm like, oh, thank God it's not me. It's not us. We don't have to worry about it, just wait for it to turn back on. [Chuckles] Because, you know, you've got to pull away everything to get to the wires and see where they are in a small area. It's buried behind stuff.

[00:11:22] So, that's—but it was not crime-ridden then, so I was okay.

**Vural:** [00:11:35] Did it contrast in your mind to the blackout of '77?

**Stark:** [00:11:44] In '77, we didn't sell any flashlights or batteries, so I don't even remember anything about it. Were we open? Were we closed? I don't have any recollection of that at all, so I'm sorry, I can't tell you that one.

**Vural:** [00:12:02] No, it's okay. Because I remember in 2003 first being worried because of 9/11 and then it actually being kind of a joyful day—

**Stark:** [00:12:14] Yes, ah-hum.

**Vural:** [00:12:15] —of people being friendly and—

**Stark:** [00:12:16] I remember, yes, people standing on every street corner directing traffic and just getting out in the middle of the road and doing that. A friend of mine was doing that for a couple of hours. I was in the store while he was doing that, but he was out there playing traffic

cop. I remember that. And except for when we went to get the pizza—there was one girl who wanted two slices with pepperoni and two with broccoli. We all looked: *Are you kidding me?* And the guy gave it to her. I guess it's good to show some cleavage [chuckles], because—I was like—I was like just get the pizza and go, that's it. You get what you get. You know, you're lucky to have that. But she did that and he gave it to her and none of us were too happy with her to begin with there.

**Vural:** [00:13:06] So, do you remember sort of when crack was an issue in the neighborhood?

**Stark:** [00:13:13] Not really. I know crack was an issue but I didn't see too much here. You know, where I was, it didn't seem to be an issue. I didn't see any higher crime there or things like that.

**Vural:** [00:13:31] And do you remember the AIDS epidemic coming—

**Stark:** [00:13:33] Yes, sure.

**Vural:** [00:13:33] —to the Upper West Side?

**Stark:** [00:13:34] Sure, ah-hum.

**Vural:** [00:13:35] How do you remember that time?

**Stark:** [00:13:38] Just in general. I remember a painter that lived across the street from me and he wasn't feeling good. You know, I could see that he didn't look good. And, "Are you okay?" He goes, "Yes, I go to the doctor." And one time I said, "What's the matter?" He says, "They don't know yet. And—ah, I hope it's not AIDS." And it was.

[00:14:04] Then there was another wallpaper hanger that we knew that was really a nice guy and really a good person and then we found out he had it. There was another customer that we knew of and I could just, by looking how he was deteriorating, I could see that he had it, too. And that was somebody else we knew.

**Vural:** [00:14:33] Do you remember sort of the heaviness of that time then?

**Stark:** [00:14:35] Yes, sure. It took [President Ronald] Reagan seven years to mention the word AIDS—only because a white kid from Indiana got it. But they—you know, were wondering how many people? Who could be next? People worried about all sorts of crazy things. But it could have been, you know—

[00:15:06] And there was the basketball player, [Earvin] “Magic” Johnson, who said he had it and then it was going to be like, “You can’t play.” Nobody wanted—some guys didn’t want him to play. That’s just being homophobic. But it wasn’t, because if you got cut they didn’t know what happens if you get his blood, his saliva, on you. There was somewhat, I think a little, somewhat a legitimate concern about that and he did step back from the game because of that.

[00:15:36] But I had no problem. I shook the hands of the guys who were my customers, who I knew, when I saw them. If there would have been somebody to hug, I would have hugged him, as anybody else I would have hugged. I didn’t believe it could be transferred from the toilet seat or the doorknob or any stuff like that. And if there was a guy who shook my—who I was going to shake hands with and I got it then, you know, then I got it, but I wasn’t not going to shake his hand.

**Vural:** [00:16:04] So, I remember you were saying when you were a kid you didn’t really go—you really stuck to the store.

**Stark:** [00:16:11] Yes.

**Vural:** [00:16:12] But then you moved into the city and live in the neighborhood. So, do you remember when you started going, for instance, to Columbus Avenue and to Central Park and when that became part of your life?

**Stark:** [00:16:25] I didn't go to too many places on Columbus Avenue. I stuck on [chuckles] Amsterdam and Broadway. Just one of those things. I didn't hang out at too many bars late at night. Different restaurants, tried a few different restaurants. I was single then and it wasn't just going out with a girlfriend or a wife to this restaurant or that place, you know. And my brother wasn't living here, so I didn't have anybody to go with to a bar with and didn't want to go by myself.

[00:17:00] Central Park—these days, going backwards, when I was married, my wife, from Canada, walked into the park every day, bringing her lunch in there and sitting there and having lunch, and it was just amazing. We walked past and we saw some things that she had never seen: Hasidic Jews on bicycle, biking [chuckles]. And then we walked a few more feet and there was a Muslim family who had opened up a little bit of the fence and sat down in their corner of the park. They were sitting there [chuckles] and having a picnic, you know. I thought that was so cool. And some guy all by himself up there and wanted the alone time, and that was kind of cool and kind of sad, but it's what he wanted, you know. Once I started running in the park or biking, ah, it was gorgeous. It became such a *this is the park, this is my park, this is where I'm going*.

[00:18:08] Until one day in the early nineties I did a bikeathon for cerebral palsy in Central Park I'd only gone through the park through the transverse, driving. I didn't know there were hills there. I thought it was all flat. And I did a fifty-mile bikeathon starting at Fifth Avenue and East

Seventy-second Street, had to go up Cat Hill, which is a brutal hill, and I was expecting flat. I'm at the top of the hill like [heavy breathing]—oh, another 49.9 miles to go! Like oh my God! And then there's a hill there and a hill there. Harlem Hill, I expected. I went down a nice big hill, so I knew I'd have to come up. There were hills all over the place! It was crazy, you know!

[00:18:54] And then when we ran, of course, we'd run, and like going around the park is a tough run because there's so many hills, you know. But going there—I dated somebody in the nineties and she just liked the idea of walking. *Huh, walking?* Yes, let's go in the park and walk!

[chuckles]. Then by the time I got married, so then I was, oh, I know what you mean. Oh, we're going to walk. Okay, I got that, you know! [Chuckles] But the first time that was a culture shock.

[00:19:30] I did a walkathon—did I mention the walkathons that I did in this project?

**Vural:** [00:19:36] Well, we talked about the ones that—for your sister.

**Stark:** [00:19:40] Right. But in 1998 I actually sponsored a walkathon at that time for xeroderma pigmentosum.

**Vural:** [00:19:46] Yes, we did talk about that.

**Stark:** [00:19:47] And we did it in Central Park at night.

**Vural:** [00:19:49] Yes, we did.

**Stark:** [00:19:51] And my aunt, who I think she—she just passed away last week at eighty-eight—she was okay, went out nice and peacefully. But she came and she said it's the first time in her life she'd ever been in Central Park.

**Vural:** [00:20:09] And she was a New Yorker?

**Stark:** [00:20:10] Yes. So, that was in 1998.

**Vural:** [00:20:14] Wow.

**Stark:** [00:20:15] But, now, she lived all over on the East Side, on East End Avenue, but had no other reason to go walking through the park. You know, now you'll go from the East Side to the West Side, you'll go through the park.

**Vural:** [00:20:26] That's really interesting. She'd never been in the park yet.

**Stark:** [00:20:28] Never been in the park. And, you know, but by that time, I knew the park would be fun and easy, it would be good, no worries about the crime or anything like that.

**Vural:** [00:20:45] And do you remember when you first started going in the park?

**Stark:** [00:20:47] That would have been—well, the bike ride was the first time I was in the park.

**Vural:** [00:20:52] And when that that roughly?

**Stark:** [00:20:53] '90, '91, something like that. And then I didn't do it again until the next year. We did another bikeathon. This time I knew what to expect [chuckles]. I think the next year I did the bikeathon again, but otherwise I wasn't in the park for anything. Had my parents not been so old, I would have tried to get married in the park. But all you needed was one snowstorm, one rainstorm, and my mother was in a wheelchair by then so it wasn't feasible for that.

**Vural:** [00:21:29] What year did you get married?

**Stark:** [00:21:31] '15. So, I would have done it—if the family was younger, I could see doing that there.

**Vural:** [00:21:42] It is beautiful.

**Stark:** [00:21:44] Yes, ah-hum.

**Vural:** [00:21:47] So, even if you weren't hanging out on Columbus, you were passing it—

**Stark:** [00:21:50] Yes.

**Vural:** [00:21:51] —to get to the park. And do you remember what you saw and thought of it then, in the nineties?

**Stark:** [00:21:58] I didn't fall in love with it, because all the stores that were coming in, the restaurants were grabbing all the glory and we'd been there all these years. I was a little jealous. We're out there working. These guys are—you know, my friends who owned the—one of the owners of Lucy's, their dessert was an ice—a froze-fruit, an ice bar. It's like, nah, that's not dessert to me, you know [chuckles]. And it just seemed weird. And they didn't play by the same rules. So, I kind of wasn't crazy about it. I didn't like it.

[00:22:36] And then all the stores on Columbus, the rent was going up there, and selling this and that, whatever. So, I wasn't really crazy about it. I wasn't a shopper, so I didn't go shopping on Columbus Avenue. I wasn't dating anybody then, so it was like ooh, let's look on Columbus or something like that.

**Vural:** [00:22:58] So, it didn't really speak to you.

**Stark:** [00:22:59] No.

**Vural:** [00:23:02] What do you think about it now?

**Stark:** [00:23:06] Now I still don't even do too much [chuckles] shopping on Columbus Avenue. I remember hearing after ten years or so some stores on Columbus being pushed out because of even higher rents, and they're complaining. It's like you're the ones that threw other people out.

[00:23:24] There's a hardware store that's on Seventy-third Street now, Supreme Hardware. They were on Columbus—Seventy-fifth, Seventy-sixth Street—and they were paying, in the eighties, \$500 a month rent. And the guy said, "You're probably going to want to move, we're going to raise your rent." They said, "To what?" He said, "\$5,000." They said, "We'll pay it." And they were there for another five or ten years. Lease came up again and the landlord wouldn't even negotiate with them. They didn't want a hardware store on Columbus Avenue. Wouldn't even talk to them. So, they had to move onto a side street, onto Seventy-third Street.

**Vural:** [00:23:03] And do you feel like Amsterdam—is it just a different kind of street?

**Stark:** [00:23:10] Yes, it's gotten—there used to be—Columbus was a little better than Amsterdam, because Amsterdam had the back of the Beacon Theater and a funeral home, had two monument stores at the time [chuckles], you know, the side of the bank at Seventy-third Street. So, there wasn't that much there. There was nothing fancy going on there. Even on Broadway, there was a time when there was a good side and a bad side. Only on the west side of the street was the good side. There was Zabar's and whatever other stores there were there, but that was the good side. In fact, Danny Koch, the owner of the Town Shop, told me once—he moved—he went from the west side to the east side [of Broadway], but his grandmother made him promise once he'd never go to the other side of the street [chuckles].



[00:25:11] Rents were totally different from the east side to the west side. And then even there, where Staples is there was a, I think, Today's Man, a men's store, and that died. And I remember, yes, they were on the wrong side of the street. You had Woolworth's on the corner of Seventy-ninth, but that was Woolworth's—cheap stuff, you know [chuckles]. But otherwise, you didn't have much on that side of the street. And then Staples came and Artie's Deli came and the movie theater and it was off to the races. You tell people "the wrong side," they don't know what you're talking about. It used to be, of course not, you never go onto that side.

**Vural:** [00:25:51] And that was in the seventies and eighties?

**Stark:** [00:25:54] Yes, I'd say that, or up until the nineties probably.

**Vural:** [00:26:02] That's really interesting. I never thought of it that way.

**Stark:** [00:26:06] Yes. In fact, there's a guy—Danny Koch, from the Town Shop. He's the fourth generation of owning that store. He was there when Victoria's Secret came up at Eighty-sixth Street, three blocks away. That's been in his family for a long time and he certainly grew up in the business, so he certainly knows Broadway and the old days there.

**Vural:** [00:26:34] That's true, that's true. That's an interesting thought, actually.

**Stark:** [00:26:38] Yes, ah-hum.

**Vural:** [00:26:40] So, obviously you remember 9/11.

**Stark:** [00:26:43] Yes.

**Vural:** [00:26:44] What was that like for you in the shop and your experience of the neighborhood?

**Stark:** [00:26:49] Well, we don't have a TV in the store, so I didn't see anything. It wasn't until about nine, ten o'clock that I was home and saw it on TV. So, I heard it on the radio. And I knew of the guys from the firehouse on Seventy-seventh Street. I didn't know them specifically or by name, but I knew who—when I saw the picture of one guy, I said, "I knew him."

[00:27:19] And everybody was coming in for masks. Firefighters and policemen were coming in. They were mostly coming in. The woman who owned Blondie's asked us for some that she wanted to donate. I knew she was always a good person, so we gave her some masks. When we heard you couldn't—Manhattan was a frozen zone, I went over to The Lucerne Hotel to get my father a room. "Oh no, I'll stay here." "You're going to sleep on a chair like this all night?" I think not.

[00:27:50] I went over there and while I was waiting to speak to somebody there, I was listening to other people who were in tears. Somebody was downtown and lost. I said, nah, I'm not going to get a room at The Lucerne. My father wants to stay in the store, that's fine, and by the afternoon, he was able to drive home. But I thought it would have been so wrong to take a room like that when people who had lost something, went from downtown or lost a loved one, so I didn't even ask. I just said—I told my father, "Let's wait and see what happens." He could always walk up five flights to my apartment [chuckles].

[00:28:32] My best friend was a policeman and he was in Queens, and when they heard about it, he told me at first a few of them wanted to go in and the sergeant said no. He said, you know, "It's an isolated incident and we need people out here." And then when they saw it, he went back to the sergeant and said, "Sarg, you're going to have a riot on your hands here if you don't let us go." He said, "Keep the rookies here." And by that time, he realized.

[00:29:02] And a bunch of them went in. He called me up to stay—could he stay over at my house that night? And the next morning, I drove him downtown and I was in shock then, because there was all the ash on cars and trees blocks away. And as I dropped him off—it was on the Lower East Side—I had to come around the bottom of Manhattan—there was a cop there and I had to go over one street, and I thought for sure he’s going to ask me what I’m doing there. And he was just standing there, I could see the tears in his eyes. A cop without an attitude. You know, I was saying, “What are you doing here?” I drove slow and around it and I couldn’t wait to get out of there, you know.

[00:29:50] There was one day when the winds shifted, it started coming up towards us—I could smell it—but then the wind shifted, went over to Brooklyn, Long Island, and Queens, that the smell was there, not near us. A number of people—everybody was coming in to buy masks or to ask us for a donation and, you know, can we give them some and this and that. And we gave out what we could. You know, we ordered in as many as we could from our supplier. Everybody was doing the same thing.

[00:30:29] And we kept going. Eleven days later, we were set for doing one of my walkathons and I asked a couple of people what they thought, if we should or not. I wanted to do it. I thought you’ve still got to move on. People still need money for other things, you know. And some people: “Oh, no, the park belongs to the people.” I said, “Huh? What?” They wanted to do a memorial in the park, but the logistics weren’t there. I was like, well, the park, let’s do it.

[00:31:05] Then just little by little, it started getting back to normal—for what “normal” was. Downtown was a mess, of course, you know that. I thought in a way it was lucky that they went after the [World] Trade Center, as opposed to the Trade Center and the Empire State Building,

which would have been such a mess and a nightmare, from traffic to people getting around. That would have been even a worse economic nightmare, I think, because the city would have been in gridlock there. Here downtown it was a gridlock but different for other places.

**Vural:** [00:31:48] So, when you think about how the neighborhood has changed in the almost fifty years that you've been here, is there anything you feel nostalgic about?

**Stark:** [00:32:09] There was another paint store on Columbus Avenue that we were very friendly with. I miss them because we got along great.

**Vural:** [00:32:18] What was it called?

**Stark:** [00:32:19] Roxy Hardware [& Paint Company]

**Vural:** [00:32:20] Where was that?

**Stark:** [00:32:21] Columbus, between Eighty-two and Eighty-three, and when he closed up, I spoke to him, when I heard about it, and he said—I would have bought it from him. I would have *loved* to have that. There was so much room for improvement, too. Because they were meant for the super or the worker, not for the consumer. Consumers weren't too welcome there. I could have made it good for both. And he goes, "What rent would it have been on Columbus?" And he said, "We would have charged eighteen thousand." I said, "Yes, that's what I figured." Then we were paying about fourteen. So, I said, "I expected that. I could have done that." He goes, "Oh." But he had already sold his accounts so it became a moot point.

**Vural:** [00:33:02] What year was that?

**Stark:** [00:33:04] Ah, jeez, it had to be mid-nineties. But I was mad because—the old, his father—he was not in the business. He just owned it. He didn't do any work there, he only came

in there once a week to pick up the money. But the father would have called my father and said, “Mel, I’m going to retire. Do you want anything? Do you want it?” We actually once negotiated with him to become a partner, but that was just not going to happen at that time.

**Vural:** [00:33:42] So, you regretted that.

**Stark:** [00:33:43] Yes, I would have loved to have that. We were even talking about who would run that store and who would run this store and which employees would go where. That was actually—the other thing about it was in 2005—because I had two employees that—one of them’s still here—that I would have said he would have gone. My brother would have taken that store and he would have gotten—I was giving my brother the better employees [chuckles]. You get Vito, you get him, I’ll take this guy and that guy, who I could work with better. That would have been great.

**Vural:** [00:34:14] So, that was in 2005?

**Stark:** [00:34:15] Yes.

**Vural:** [00:34:17] Are there other things that you feel nostalgic about?

**Stark:** [00:34:28] Just the West Side Market, the deli on the corner of Seventy-eighth Street to get something. Things like that. The pimps with their prostitutes [chuckles]. Otherwise, parking. You know, it’s funny. Now we have in front of our store, there are five parking spots, used to be three. So, there you’re only about—if you park legally, you’re still so close to the hydrant. There was a free parking spot on the corner of Seventy-eighth and Amsterdam for thirty-four years. You could park there twenty-three, twenty-three-and-a-half hours a day when they did sweeping, and no parking meter, and nobody ever got a ticket there. Oh, if you got that parking spot, it was

a free parking spot in the city, it was great! [Chuckles] But then the city redid it and they put a meter there.

**Vural:** [00:35:40] Is there anything about the neighborhood, the way that it's changed, that surprises you?

**Stark:** [00:35:48] Well, you know, it went very quickly from being a singles place to family. And not having a family, I wasn't too crazy about that. You know, I remember Jerry Seinfeld lived on Eighty-first Street. He lived here. He was a single guy. He got married and moved out to the Village [Greenwich Village], you know, to Chelsea. Oh, no, he was single, he was down there. Then he got married with a kid, he came back up here. Then he hit it big and he went into The Beresford. But that was like hearing about—you know, so that brings you to—when they were single, they were okay up here. And now, you know, oh, no, wait, I'll get a family, then I'll come back up here. Again, not having a family, a little bit of jealousy there like that. But that's what was all over.

[00:36:42] If you had a restaurant that didn't have room for half a dozen strollers, what were they doing in business, you know?! [Chuckles] Some places advertised that: "We have stroller parking." And they would line up the strollers and have room for it.

**Vural:** [00:37:00] Do you have hopes for the neighborhood?

**Stark:** [00:37:05] Well, I don't know what's going to happen in the future with all the stores that have been closing. And now there's got to be such a big financial backing, from rent to a few months' security that, you know, it's like somebody running for political office. Poor people have to be a millionaire before they could run, or a billionaire before you could run for president, almost. I don't know if it's going to go back. Just the way of the world, I guess.

**Vural:** [00:37:44] So, on that I read in the *West Side Rag* that a friend of yours started a GoFundMe campaign.

**Stark:** [00:37:52] Yes, ah-hum, yes.

**Vural:** [00:37:53] Can you tell me about that?

**Stark:** [00:37:54] Well, we were talking about this bookstore on Broadway [Book Culture] and we had read that he said he needed \$50,000 to stay open and somebody started a GoFundMe page for him and in four days had raised that kind of money. And I said, that'd be nice to have. Along the same way that the Lotto is \$310 million and that'd be nice to have. I could do a lot with that money if I won.

[00:38:17] And my friend knew about the winter and he knew that I'm fighting Amazon and Home Depot and it's tough and we have less employees than we used to. So, he sees there's a drop in business and he decides to post—to get people to help me out. He said it'd be my *It's a Wonderful Life* moment.

[00:38:43] And, sure, at that time, at first I thought, *What?* Now the whole world's going to know? And I mentioned it to my father and my accountant, they said, "So, what's wrong with that?" I said, "We never really wanted people to know our business." They said, "Yeah." But because the guy had \$50,000, they said, "It'd be nice to have \$50,000, though." Last I looked we're up to about thirty-eight hundred. So, it's not fifty thousand, but I haven't been saying we're going out of business either. People have been asking me. No, we're not going out. So, maybe they don't feel it's as imperative. If I say I've got to, you know, I've got to close up, maybe people would come along with more. But we hope to stay around for a long time.

[00:39:30] And we've got mostly positive responses. Other than the money, I hope the feeling would be: "Let's go buy paint from Beacon. They always supported us. They supported our kids' school. Let's get an air conditioner there, help him out, somebody that we can support rather than some big company." So, I'm hoping to get more traffic like that and that's the real reward there, to get that.

[00:39:59] But, as I say, we had mostly a positive response. If you read the comments in the *West Side Rag*, they go from crazy to weird [chuckles] for the most part! A few people have written nice things, but somebody said, "Yes, they do all this for charity and schools and you're paying for that, but they're getting the tax deduction." So, wait a minute, I'm donating to the charities, I'm helping the local schools, and you're upset about that? My prices aren't that much higher because of that. So many ill-informed. Somebody else said, "Well, if he's having trouble, let him just co-op the place." How? [Chuckles] Joe [Joseph] Brusco's not going to say, "Oh, sure. How much is it going to cost me to do that?" What's going to be his benefit? So, many, many—a few people a little on the nasty side of "Let them go." "Let them die." Or "How greedy can you be?" And somebody says, "I love paying \$30 for a hammer." Who said you have to buy a hammer? We have one very good heavy-duty hammer doe \$29, but I've got them for \$19, also [chuckles]. I was like—you know.

[00:41:24] Funny things people say. We wrote a response just to have it out there: no one said you had to give. Yes, but it is what it is for the most part. I try to concentrate on all the people who've said good things and all the people who wrote something nice and appreciated what I've done for them in their school or whatever, you know. And I'm proud of that. That's why you can't concentrate on the other people.



**Vural:** [00:41:55] And really the challenge is for retail, street retail, in the age of the internet, right?

**Stark:** [00:42:03] Yes.

**Vural:** [00:42:03] I mean, that's really what the issue is.

**Stark:** [00:42:05] That's a little tougher, you know, very tough. Because it used to be—you know, I just spoke to a woman today and she sounded like an older woman. She bought some air conditioners. But she said, "Oh, I was looking online at this model." And so now she knows more about it than I do. She's got it right in front of her and she knows how much she could buy it for, whether it's an Amazon or eBay or AJ Madison. They know how much everyone is charging [chuckles], and then she sees what I'm charging. And she bought them from me, because she knew that she could deal with me, and if there's a problem, she's going to call me. And she's been in the neighborhood many, many years. So, I appreciate that. But people do have that information at their fingertips.

**Vural:** [00:42:58] So, I wanted to ask you—I know that in 2011 you won the Westy Award —

**Stark:** [00:43:04] Yes—

**Vural:** [00:43:05] —from the West Side Spirit and you've done so much for the neighborhood. So, when you think about starting with your dad and your whole family, the role that you've played in the neighborhood and that you continue to play, can you tell me what you think about that?

**Stark:** [00:43:24] I'm proud of it. I'm very proud of it. There was a time when a movie was being filmed in the neighborhood and the food truck happened to have been on Amsterdam

Avenue. Right in front of the store, which I had no problem with, but the guy was just throwing the garbage on the street and that wasn't going to sit well with me. Put it in a bag. There's a dump—garbage pail over there. "Oh, they're going to come pick it up later." I said, "I don't care. You've got food garbage all over the street, pick it up." And I had a few words with them.

[00:43:55] And it was just when the parents were taking the kids to school, and one of the parents came over and said, "We've got your back, Bruce, don't worry." And there were a few guys standing there waiting to see what happened and I saw somebody—they told me where the head—whoever was in charge. I went over and spoke to him and whoever the producer was—I wish I knew who it was because it could have been somebody famous, but I don't know—he says, "We know about you." He said, "We were told, 'Don't put anything in front of the store and buy whatever you can from him.'" He said, "I'll have the truck moved in about an hour or so." He said to someone, "You tell the caterer to move the truck now." I said, "He doesn't have to move it. He just has to pick up the garbage on the street. You know, it's not right just to throw the garbage on there. Let them put it into a bag. It'll keep it neat." He said, "No, no, we'll move it out of the way." A couple of the actors were neighbors [chuckles]. And I felt—I was very proud of that, very proud.

[00:45:04] On the first day of school one year, the meter maids, two meter maids, were sitting in cars—there was no parking on our side of the street—at eight-thirty and they were waiting there since eight-fifteen. And it's the first day of school. Parents are bringing the kids to school. Parents are seeing each other for the first time in months. Kids are seeing each other. And they ticketed the cars.

[00:45:28] And I contacted Gale Brewer’s office and I said, “There’s no reason for that. You know they’re going to get out of there in a little while. The sweeper’s going to come by and within a week everyone’s going to be okay.” And I sent a copy of the letter to the parents’ association and they really appreciated that, and Gale said, “No, there’s no reason for that, to have two cars with meter maids in there to get everybody at eight-thirty-one.” I said, “They’re only putting the car there to go get the kids to school.” And I don’t have any kids in the school and it didn’t affect me anyway, but I just thought that was a rip-off [chuckles]. And so again I’m proud of that—look after the neighborhood.

[00:46:10] There was one day—I don’t know the date, but I could tell you the night that *The Sopranos* premiered that morning was a Sunday—and out in front of my store some guys were in a car and they were eating breakfast and they took the garbage and threw it out right onto the street. And I went over and I picked it up, I said, “Hey, you dropped this.” I put it back in the car. And a few minutes later, they threw it out again and I picked it up and I threw it back in the car. And then they drove off. And that night I watched *The Sopranos* and guys get beat up and I said, oh my God! [Chuckles] I could have been killed, literally. I mean, in the episode they have one guy pull out a golf club and knock some guy out, you know, and that was a civilian. And I’m thinking, *oh my God, they could have killed me that day, if they were tough guys*. Had it been the next week, I just would have cleaned it up myself [chuckles]. I would have been, “Excuse me, sir, did you realize that you might have dropped that?” And I was pretty of full myself that morning [chuckles]. And I was. I figured I was, because they drove away and they left it there and they didn’t beat me up or kill me. But I remember watching that and going, oh, shit!

[Chuckles]

**Vural:** [00:47:34] And what is it about the neighborhood that is so meaningful to you?

**Stark:** [00:47:40] Because people here care. I like that. If you remember when Rickel's came in where Duane Reade was, well, I was worried about that, until they opened and then I realized I had nothing to worry about. But people coming in still buying from me.

[00:48:09] Now, I remember a lot of people saying, "Oh, they are so high in price. It's so terrible." And I thought to myself, yes, but you still went there, and if they were good prices and had what you needed, that really would have hurt. But there were some that they would shop at my store no matter what. And then we started writing up little signs. We put up a sign when they went out: "David 2, Goliath 0." People still talk about that sign, that they loved that sign.

[00:48:43] I don't know if I told you last time, but when they were coming in and they were going to have three stores in the city—one on Thirty-fourth Street, one on Second [Avenue] and Eighty-sixth, and here—and I remember saying—my brother wasn't in the business then, and I said to him one night, "I don't know what we're going to do." He said, "You're Beacon Paint, you'll kick their ass." And I just changed the attitude.

[00:49:11] That coincided with the walkathon. So, I was greeting everybody, asking them their name, because I wanted a donation, and saying, "I don't know your name, but I know who you are," and I got friendly with people then. And a lot of people liked the idea that I was raising money for a charity and that added to them wanting to support us.

**Vural:** [00:49:35] And where was Rickel's? I don't remember that.

**Stark:** [00:49:37] Right where Duane Reade is, between Seventy-eighth and Seventy-ninth Street, on Amsterdam.

**Vural:** [00:49:42] And when was that? In the nineties?

**Stark:** [00:49:44] '98 till about 2000. They were just—it was an awful-run operation. I used to joke—and the guy who ran it had run another company that went bankrupt, and then he was going into another one that eventually went bankrupt. And I said, if this guy ran a funeral home, nobody would die. It was just really a poor operation, from anything. They were buying spray paint from *us* to spray paint the gates. I was like, okay, you're not open yet, but there's got to be a store transfer. Make a list of everything you need, this store will drive it up and bring it up to you. No, the contractor was coming up to us and getting it [chuckles]. My father was giving the guy a discount and when he found out that he was working there, he started charging him retail [chuckles].

[00:50:34] They needed to have soda. They bought garbage pails from us. One of their employees came in. One of their guys, he was buying stuff for his own house. He said, "I hate to tell you, but I work not at this store, but one of the other Rickel's and we're up here, but they don't have shit. They don't have anything you need." He said, "I don't know how we do it, how we're going to stay in business." [Chuckles]

[00:51:00] And the help was of course awful, like at any big store. And then between—instead of feeling like a hurt puppy and feeling sorry for myself, I took that attitude of glad-handing people and being nicer. And that's when the balloons started with the kids and we were friendly and then—I apologize if I told you think last time, but my friend John who did the GoFundMe, he opened up a bar on the corner of Seventy-seventh, where Chirping Chicken is now, called Wild Life, and he was writing signs in the window and we were writing signs and it was like going back and forth. People were going back to both places to see what each guy wrote. And that helped. When we stopped doing it, people wanted to know, "Why aren't you writing any more jokes on the wall or anything like that?"

[00:51:55] So, that helped. But I think the walkathon, the charity events, really got me meeting people. My father would—if you had a check or credit card, he knew your name, but he might have known somebody for twenty years and never know the person's name. And he was friendly with them and all, but he just never knew what they were. You know, he didn't live in the city. He didn't socialize with them, but it was like not getting to know them. And once I started doing the charity, I was getting to know everybody and then it just—that, the balloons, the teacher that I knew in the school, she was promoting me, and it just steamrolled there—personability, you know, support. And once you start doing—if you raise money for a charity, somebody else is going to ask you.

[00:52:51] But I gave, I gave. You know, we went back and forth. There's a guy who lives on Seventy-seventh Street. First there was a woman who does the AIDS walk, now for the twentieth year, I give to her every year, she gives to me. There's a guy who does an ALS [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or Lou Gehrig's disease] walk—his brother died of ALS—every year. It's almost like we're exchanging checks but we're always, you know, doing, which is fine. It is what it is like that [chuckles].

**Vural:** [00:53:16] That's lovely.

**Stark:** [00:53:17] Thank you. So, that's all helped, especially now, knowing I've got to be—I don't want to say on my best behavior, but I've got to put our best forward and be helpful and, you know, willing to help anybody. There's got to be a reason for them to come to us other than—because we're not going to beat them on a price, but we'll out-service them and out-care.

**Vural:** [00:53:46] Do you remember when the Bruscos bought the building?

**Stark:** [00:53:49] Yes.

**Vural:** [00:53:50] When was that?

**Stark:** [00:53:55] '86? We had a Hassidic rabbi who owned the building for a couple of years—for a few years—then he sold out to the Bruscos, and it was somebody we knew. So we knew them as people in the neighborhood, knew them as customers, but it's almost like, well, let's see how you are when you get married, you know [chuckles]. How's it going to be? Is it going to be any different? And it really wasn't. We had no problems with them. We had everything continue for another ten years after that actually. It was '86. We didn't have to sign a—make a new deal with them until '96. Everything stayed the same. So, for ten years, it was fine. And then we signed a new lease with them and that was going to be bigger bucks, because the rent had gone up. We had a very good deal with the landlord. The Hassidic rabbi, his son was in the diamond business, they'd do business on a handshake. And somebody ripped him off and he needed money, so he came to us and a few other stores—I forget the amount of money, but he said, “Give me this amount of money, I'll give you another five years at the same price.” And it was about \$2,000 a month then.

[00:55:21] I remember asking once, “Your son lose any more money? I'd love to do another—” He goes, “You couldn't afford it!” [Chuckles] I said, “Give me another five years, I'll give you that back!” That was a phenomenal deal. As soon as we told anyone we told—the bank or the accountant—“Definitely, give him the money!” [Chuckles] There was salesman in from Benjamin Moore, he says, “Let me see how much do I have on me!” [Chuckles] He said, “You can't beat that.”

[00:55:50] Because that was the beginning of the rising rents there. And the Bruscos lived with it. They never came to us and said anything. When somebody asked my father once, I remember

hearing him say, “You’re going to have to renegotiate?” “No, there’s nothing to renegotiate. We have a lease.” And they never came to us once, proving the same thing. I said, “There’s nothing to renegotiate with them. You know, no reason.”

**Vural:** [00:56:17] And you knew them because they own property and they had come to the store to buy stuff?

**Stark:** [00:56:20] Yes, yes, ah-hum. We knew who they were and they were around. They were our customers.

**Vural:** [00:56:30] And did you know Nicola [Brusco]?

**Stark:** [00:56:32] No.

**Vural:** [00:56:33] The father?

**Stark:** [00:56:34] Oh, I know Nic, yes.

**Vural:** [00:56:35] Yes, Nic. Nic.

**Stark:** [00:56:36] Nic. Oh, yes, yes. He still goes strong. They were putting a penthouse on the roof of our building and they had roof paper that weighs ninety pounds a roll and he was putting it on his shoulder and then he was going to walk up five flights of stairs. I said, “Mr Brusco, wait for one of the workers to carry that. What are you doing?” He’s got the suit and tie on and he’s going to carry it up [chuckles]. You know? And he still comes in the office every day. I know last year, he lost his wife, but—he’s got to be in his mid-eighties.

**Vural:** [00:57:13] Well, Joe [Joseph Brusco] is the person who recommended that I get in touch with you.



**Stark:** [00:57:16] Yes, Joe's the guy that I deal with. He's a good guy. They all are. They're all very nice people. And, in fact, when I was doing my walkathon for the xeroderma pigmentosum, each one of the sons—Nic Junior, Joe, John, Paul—they all gave me their own separate checks. Not a check from the company, okay, but each one of them, each family gave me a donation, which I thought was really, really special. You know, they said, "Well, it's a good cause and we're all our own people."

**Vural:** [00:58:00] That's classy.

**Stark:** [00:58:02] I says, "I would have done it the cheap way and let the company pay for it!"  
[Chuckles] You know?

**Vural:** [00:58:08] So, before we say goodbye, is there anything you want to tell me at all about how you think about the neighborhood and your role in it.

**Stark:** [00:58:23] Nothing really specific. You know, I know that I felt more like a bigshot more maybe ten years ago than I do now. Maybe I was doing more—the school knew me better because of the one teacher that I dealt with. Gale Brewer was the [City] Councilwoman. She knew anything she needed, I would help her with whatever we could do. So, I felt more like that was okay. You know, more like I was the mayor of Amsterdam Avenue, something like that. I was a bigshot.

[00:59:12] We were the New York City Small Business of the Year in 2008 and Gale had written a beautiful letter about us. We were the Paint Dealer of the Year in 2009 and the voting was in a way that—the way they set it up is on different business—your profit, community service, this and that. So, we were in third place, but all our points came on community service, because we weren't a big store, we weren't going to make tremendous money, but we won the whole thing

as a national dealer based on our community service [chuckles]. And the Hardware Association—we were the Hardware Dealer of the Year. And you went out to Las Vegas and there's a huge twenty-foot sign welcoming you and there's my picture. And that was cool.

**Vural:** [01:00:08] What year was that?

**Stark:** [01:00:09] 2008. The American Express Award was the—American Express had a contest, Shine a Light on a Small Business, and there were four thousand entries nationwide. We finished in the top three. And to get to the top three was based on merit. The first three places were popularity. And there was a company out in New Mexico that was selling low-cost internet service to the Native Americans, a dollar a month for internet service, and I think they said, “And you have to vote from us, too.” [Chuckles] That's how they get their votes. They got every Native American: “Vote for us and we'll give you the dollar.” [Chuckles] And a dollar and then you're connected.

[01:00:56] But I spoke to that guy. He was a nice guy. Then there was a woman in Brooklyn who had organic baby food and she came in second. But it was a tough contest. We all had said the same thing, that we almost didn't apply because the rules were so rigorous. And you emailed and it got kicked back and this and that. And we had all waited till the last day and just basically said we'll give it one more try [chuckles]. And we entered. I won \$10,000 and they sent me not only \$10,000 but about another \$5,000 to pay for taxes.

**Vural:** [01:01:30] Wow, congratulations.

**Stark:** [01:01:31] And I got this check, I said—and I called them, I said, “I don't want to give it back but there's like \$5,700 here.” She says, “Yes, that's to pay for any taxes you may have to incur from the \$10,000 prize.” It's like wow! So, that was great, you know [chuckles].

**Vural:** [01:01:48] What year was that?

**Stark:** [01:01:50] 2008.

**Vural:** [01:01:51] That was a big year.

**Stark:** [01:01:52] That was a better year for us. Yes, eight [2008] and nine [2009] were great.

And I used to take—I would walk—if my brother was out, I would take the dog and in the summer, we'd go into the playground. And the dog didn't play. The dog would lay down in the sun, soak up some rays. And somebody said to me, he says, "The dog's not allowed in the park." He said, "It's against the rules." I said, "Yes, the rules don't apply to me," I said. But the minute somebody said something, we got right out. The women were cleaning in the park, the people doing the maintenance work, they knew the dog. "Oh, it's okay, it's okay, as long as nobody says anything." And we'd go there for three to five minutes, you know, and then leave. [Chuckles] It was kind of funny. It just felt right. If nobody's in the park, we'll go in there, but if there are kids in there, we don't go in there anymore with this dog because she's more wild than the other one was.

**Vural:** [01:02:45] This is the P.S. [Public School] 87 playground?

**Stark:** [01:02:48] Yes, ah-hum. But it was the other one [referring to the dog, Bru, who died in 2018]. We'd go there and lay down and that was it. And this one [referring to the dog, Dinah] wants to run around and play. So, if a kid's got a ball, I'd have to be worried about it. But in the snow we let her go in the park because the kids aren't in the snow then and that's no big deal. But that's the way I really felt, like I owned the place. That was a good feeling to have. That was nice.

[01:03:14] And then things got a little bit slower. Then I tried to concentrate on being married and that didn't work either, so now I've got more devotion back in the business. I couldn't manage the wife and the business.

**Vural:** [01:03:34] That's been a hard stretch.

**Stark:** [01:03:35] That was a tough one. Yes, so it was a few years where—and I would be out of the store. For a while it was a twice a week I was off, which was great but we weren't getting anything done. You know, I had the manager off twice a week. I had to change his schedule around. I needed to get work done. And then we started opening till eight o'clock at night. That was a little bit tougher. Yes, but we're trying to, you know, hang tough. It's like a few years we—was it one year?—probably 2008—I remember Home Depot had announced their earnings were less than expected. And I said, “Yes, that's because we're better than expected. We won. We beat them.” It was like winning the World Series, you know. We kicked their ass and we were thrilled with it.

**Vural:** [01:04:29] That's something to feel good about.

**Stark:** [01:04:30] Yes, that was very good. Now we're trying to fight to get back up there. Got some things to be optimistic about. We're feeling better about ourselves than ever. I'm focused on the store. If we just had a little bit more help, I'd be—that's stressing us out a lot. We can't get any decent help these days.

**Vural:** [01:04:51] You mean in terms of people to work for you?

**Stark:** [01:04:53] Ah-hum. I mean in terms of people that have any product knowledge. It's been atrocious. Not even people coming in and saying, oh, we don't like him, he was late, or this

or that, but just ones with product knowledge. Just unbelievable. The work ethic of some of them are lacking, you know. We had a manager who drank his way out of a job but he showed up every morning. He did work hard, I'll give him that, you know. He wasn't the most personable person at times and he did a lot of things I didn't like but he was a good, hard worker and he made that effort, and he was good on things like that. You could tell him something once, he got it, you know [chuckles]. And it's been very tough to get that help now. That's been killing us the last two years, stressing my brother and I out a lot, because we don't have people we can count on.

**Vural:** [01:05:54] Who understand paint and the things you sell.

**Stark:** [01:05:59] And how to do something. If somebody comes in for something, you know, if we don't have it what to do, you know.

**Vural:** [01:06:08] It's a lot to run a small business.

**Stark:** [01:06:10] Yes, ah-hum. It used to be, okay, I could take a few days off or something like that. Even if I went away, I've got Steve, I've got this guy John, okay, I've got two quality people. **Now**, just my brother [chuckles]. If we had a couple of extra bodies—because people don't come in—so, if we had one or two more bodies, it'd be a lot better. But I'm interviewing somebody tomorrow and somebody Friday, looking for a part-timer.

[01:06:40] And we do a lot with the—have some interns from [Louis D.] Brandeis High School. They come in a few hours a day. But that's going to end in June, so I have to decide if I want to hire them or not. And they're not the brightest but they're doing the job. A lot of it's grunt work. I have one young man who's now on the counter who started off like that. But then he almost feels entitled. We said, "Okay, we've got stuff outside to get put away." He goes, "Oh, you

waited till I got here to do it?” Well, besides the fact that we had other work to do, I said, “Well, no.”

[01:07:23] Well, yes, we did wait for him. He’s twenty years old. And he’s going to do the heavy stuff. I said, “Well, Number 1, it’s your job. Number 2, we only have so many people. Number 3, it was more important to do other stuff first.” And I’m trying to teach him that sometimes we do the inside stuff first, sometimes we don’t. It depends. We had to mix paint in order to get it on the truck to make a delivery. It didn’t matter if we got it downstairs. “Oh, you should have gotten the paint downstairs.” No, we shouldn’t have. First of all, I’m going to run it my way. Second of all, no, it was more important that the truck gets out on delivery so we can deliver paint to our customers.” You know? And he didn’t understand that. Like, okay, I’m here to do it, you know.

[01:08:09] But sometimes he’s good and sometimes he says something like that that bothers me [chuckles]. I was like, “What do you think, you’re going to have it easy? He just reminds me of what somebody said about George Bush, that he was born on third base and thinks he hit a triple. He’s the only kid that—the only person that because of the minimum wage, he feels entitled. He’s getting \$13 because we don’t have—we’re under the number of eleven people to give \$15 [an hour]. He thinks that \$13 is almost beneath him. Well, two years ago it was \$8 or \$9. Everyone else is *thrilled*. I raised some guys and some guys I said, okay, I don’t have to raise you, but I’m going to anyway. Everyone else was appreciative and thrilled, but he’s twenty and he thinks he’s entitled to it. That’s it.

**Vural:** [01:09:09] So, when you think about the neighborhood going forward, what do you feel good about?

**Stark:** [01:09:20] No crime. It's safe. It's a good place to live. I don't know about too many more thriving small businesses, but I think that's stopped because the landlord's got to—you know, if you've got rent of \$15,000 and you need two months' security and a month—you're talking \$45,000, plus it could be \$50,000 just to set the place up and clean it up and fix it up. And if you don't have \$100,000 right there. What's the point?

**Vural:** [01:09:59] But do you think you'll always feel like this is your home?

**Stark:** [01:10:02] Yes. Oh, yes.

**Vural:** [01:10:07] Alright. Is there anything you want to tell me before we say goodbye?

**Stark:** [01:10:09] No, I think that's about it.

**Vural:** [01:10:10] Alright. Thank you.

**Stark:** [01:10:11] I thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]