

Shirley Hayes

An Oral History Interview
Conducted for the GVSHP Preservation Archives
by
John Berman

New York, New York

October 20, 2000

ABSTRACT

Shirley Hayes (1912-2002) was a community activist who led the successful fight in the 1950s against Robert Moses' plan to extend a highway through Washington Square Park. She begins this interview by discussing her early years in New York City and Greenwich Village.

By the early 1950s, Hayes was a married mother of four who would regularly take her children to a playground in Washington Square Park. It was during this time that she read in the *New York Times* of Moses' plans for the park. Hayes describes her reaction upon reading of the proposal and the ways in which she and a core group of other concerned mothers galvanized community opposition to the plan. In addition, Hayes discusses her relationship with and involvement in the Joint Emergency Committee formed by Raymond Rubinow and her eventual appointment to Manhattan's Community Board 2.

INTERVIEWEE: Shirley Hayes
INTERVIEWER: John Berman
ALSO PRESENT: Dennis Hayes
LOCATION: New York, New York
DATE: 20 October 2000
TRANSCRIBER: John Berman

BERMAN: Let's just start at the beginning of when you first started getting involved with community and neighborhood issues. Were you actually born in New York City?

HAYES: No, no I'm from Chicago. I had four kids, and we used to go to the park.

BERMAN: When did you actually move to New York, do you remember?

HAYES: My third year at the Goodman Theater, when I was graduating there.

BERMAN: So you moved here?

HAYES: Well, I came here to work in theater.

BERMAN: Right. You have a theater background.

HAYES: I was at the Goodman Theater. I don't know if you know.

BERMAN: I've read about that. That you come from a theater background, but I didn't know exactly—

HAYES: Goodman Theater in Chicago. It's a school. It was a school.

BERMAN: Is that why you came to New York—to study theater?

HAYES: Well, I was graduating and this was the holiday period so a couple of kids and myself decided we'd be very smart and go to New York and get a job right off and then go back and pick up our hats or whatever they did. It was the holiday time for schools. So some of us went to New York and everybody went home except me. [Laughs] I wanted to stay here because if I go home I'll never get back here. My family will—

BERMAN: So you were excited by the theater?

HAYES: Theater, yes. I was in theater school. So they all went back—not all, but some of them and I stayed here with some cousins. My family felt that was safe. [Laughs]

BERMAN: The fact that you had relatives here already made them feel it was safe for you?

HAYES: That's right. I stayed with them.

BERMAN: Where did they live? Was it in the Village?

HAYES: No, they weren't Village people.

BERMAN: So the first place you lived was not in the Village?

HAYES: Not for older ladies. They were New Yorkers.... And my mother felt safer if I stayed with my cousins. They were older women, so she felt relieved at that. They thought it was very exciting. [Chuckles]

BERMAN: Their little cousin was going to move to New York?

HAYES: They were old ladies.

BERMAN: They were old ladies, but they were going to kind of take you under their wing?

HAYES: Exactly

BERMAN: Show you New York and take care of you.

HAYES: Exactly. So that was the story. And I never went home. [Laughs]

BERMAN: This became your home. I was wondering about that.... Did you work in the theater when you got here?

HAYES: Well, not that soon. I tried to get into summer theater.

BERMAN: Like summer stock?

HAYES: Yeah. So they had that going. And I started to make the rounds.

BERMAN: Were you involved in community work then or—

HAYES: No, no. That was—

BERMAN: Much later when you had children?

HAYES: Oh, yeah. Fighting time.

BERMAN: Do you remember when you moved to the Village? Was that after you were married?

[Extended discussion between Hayes and her son, Dennis, regarding where she lived before coming to the Village.]

BERMAN: Why don't you talk a little bit about what first got you interested in getting involved in the neighborhood—in the preservation work in Washington Square Park?

HAYES: Oh, well, that. In other words, I wasn't somebody who was just going to go in and do something. How shall I put it? I lived on Sixth Avenue then. [Long pause as she attempts to remember.] There was a playground right off the park.... When I read the papers that morning, I came to the park and met the ladies there who had kids.... We started being outraged immediately....

That night I think there was a meeting of the Planning Board, which was new. So we decided to go down to the Planning Board meeting that night. So anyway, we did go down to the Planning Board meeting.... So I went down, and a couple of the other ladies went down.

D. HAYES: Did you get up and talk?

HAYES: No, no. That night we just found about it—what was going to be.

BERMAN: You heard rumors?

HAYES: Well, it was in the *Times*, and I was first, as we sat there in shock....

Anyway, we went down and we listened and brought up [our concerns]. So we brought it up at the meeting. That I remember.

BERMAN: Do you remember how you felt at that meeting? What it felt like when you first came in and you heard the news?

HAYES: No, we heard that in the morning, reading the *Times*.... At any rate, we talked about it at that meeting. So from then on we started to think about it. We started meeting at my house....

BERMAN: Do you remember who “we” was? Who else besides you was a part of that group?

HAYES: Well, there was a lady whose son played with my son in the park and she was very interested. And two other ladies.

BERMAN: All parents?

HAYES: Parents, yeah, whose children played in the park.

BERMAN: Who were concerned about the safety of their children?

HAYES: Yeah. That was the whole thing. I mean, we were there every day with the kids.

BERMAN: At the playground?

HAYES: Yeah.

BERMAN: And there was a road going through there [the park] then, right? It was a small road but the city wanted to build a wider highway through it. That was the original plan.

HAYES: Robert Moses wanted to put a—well, it was very political. And he wanted to build a series of apartments on the other side of the park and they started talking about the buildings subsequently.... You're familiar with what I'm saying?

BERMAN: Absolutely... The urban renewal area?

HAYES: Well, it wasn't a renewal area yet, so far as we're concerned. We didn't know what they were gonna do.

BERMAN: Right. But what you're saying is that part of the plan to widen the road had to do with his plan to build more on the other side of the park?

HAYES: Oh yes, yes, yes. No question they wanted to build housing there. And that was the plan: to build housing there.

BERMAN: So they wanted to build what? It was a four lane expressway through the park? Was that the plan, the original plan?

HAYES: Yeah. The thing was to build, as you say, the expressway.

BERMAN: Do you remember how you started trying to convince people that this was a good idea, to close the park to traffic?

HAYES: Well, you know, we started to get pretty hot and bothered over this.... And the "girls"—the three or four of us—would then be the nucleus, the beginning of

this.... So then we started having meetings among ourselves.... We started by calling schools, churches.... A lot of them didn't even know or care. Until we told them what was happening....

BERMAN: At the same time that they were talking about expanding the roadway in Washington Square Park, they were also talking about the slum clearance project on the other side of the park. So the whole idea was to make the road wider to open up the whole area for development.

HAYES: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. No question about it. And then I began to get terrified as to what was gonna happen....

BERMAN: I think I have some pictures. The traffic would go around the arch. That was the plan. I may have some pictures.... [Shows photographs to Hayes.] They were never gonna tear down the arch. The traffic went around it. And your playground you said was on the northeast corner?

HAYES: Northeast, yeah.

BERMAN: So it's right over here. [Points to drawing.] So it's right near the traffic. So I can understand your concern.

So you said that you called schools and churches?

HAYES: Well, later when we were getting more organized we wrote letters and sent them to schools.

BERMAN: I have some of those letters.

HAYES: Pardon?

BERMAN: I have some of those letters. [Shows letter to Hayes.]

HAYES: You do? Oh, that I wrote to the schools to appoint somebody who would be their representative in this situation, and then they would meet with us. So it went with all the different schools....

BERMAN: So you started small and kind of worked your way up?

HAYES: Right.

BERMAN: A few parents started out

HAYES: Right, just a few parents. And they'd come to my house and we'd meet and talk and—

BERMAN: Do you remember the names of any of those other parents who were involved in those early days?

HAYES: Yeah, I have some names somewhere if you're interested.

BERMAN: Sure.

HAYES: 'cause there was a little inner group and an outer group and it went on that way.

BERMAN: Was Jane Jacobs a part of that group?

HAYES: No, she wasn't a part of it. She was busy with something on the other side there. She didn't join our group 'til way later on.

BERMAN: Okay. So anyway you called parents, you contacted schools.

HAYES: Yeah, we had parents that did things like that.

BERMAN: Did you find that people were interested right away?

HAYES: Oh yeah, right away.

BERMAN: Was it mostly women involved in this original work?

HAYES: The men I think were in the army.

BERMAN: In Korea you mean? It must have been Korea. That was in the early fifties....

HAYES: It would be the Korean War?

BERMAN: That's interesting. 'cause it was '52 that you were first doing this.

HAYES: '52?

BERMAN: Yeah, so that makes sense. But this is a long fight. This is seven years—

HAYES: Ten years.

BERMAN: Ten years really when all traffic was taken out of the square.¹ It's a lot of time.

HAYES: Well, it was a busy time I must say.

BERMAN: It seems like you started from being an interested parent but then you became a real community leader—

HAYES: Well, involved in this.

BERMAN: Right. And involved in, not just in this but also in neighborhood politics, right? Because you joined the Community Planning Board.

HAYES: I was appointed.

BERMAN: You were appointed. I'm sorry, yes.... So how did you build the movement? You said you called schools. What other ways did you get people involved? Did you have rallies?

HAYES: No, that was too big for us. [Chuckles]

BERMAN: Edith Lyons. Does that name ring a bell?

HAYES: Of course. What I did was send a letter to the different schools and ask them to send somebody who could be a representative for that school. Edith was a member of—what school was that? I can't think of the school.... It was a private school.... But she was their representative. Each school that we said, "Send a

¹ The square was closed to automobile traffic by the end of the decade. It was not closed to bus traffic until 1962.

representative of your school.” And so these people were notified of meetings. And Edith was representing, naturally, I can’t think of the school. So she represented that school at the time. So she came to meetings like all the rest of us.

BERMAN: Did you ever think at that time that there was a chance that you could really win this?

HAYES: No. No, I had never been involved in this kind of thing. Any kind of thing, as a matter of fact. This was all new stuff.

BERMAN: Do you remember how it felt the first time you went to a Board of Estimate meeting?

HAYES: No, I was too mad. [Laughs] No, I was never really involved in this kind of thing.

BERMAN: This was brand new.

HAYES: Brand new.

BERMAN: And you were dealing with a lot of people who had been doing it a long time, your opposition were people who were very savvy politicians, right?

HAYES: Oh yeah. Right.

BERMAN: You’re dealing with Robert Moses, who had a lot of power.

HAYES: I saw him [Moses] once, peeking in, at a Board of Estimate meeting. They had people there from both sides. And at the back of the house—

[End of Tape, Side 1]

HAYES: He [Moses] peeked in. To see who was there and who Shirley Hayes was that was talking, so he peeked in. So that was kind of funny. Because by that time I'd been making enough noise to warrant his peeking in to see who this Shirley Hayes was.

Then my letters began sending out to all the schools. And other organizations.

BERMAN: Do you remember what other organizations you sent letters out to?

HAYES: Yeah. They were just about any organization in the Village. And then it enlarged to—

BERMAN: Like civic groups?

HAYES: Exactly. Exactly.

BERMAN: When did Ray Rubinow's group come along?

HAYES: Not 'til the end. And it was pretty certain that we were gonna do well. Ray Rubinow would not join us. He worked for some organization.² What he did was it looked like we were on the winning side by now, as far as people went. And I had never been able to get him to join us. They had the money. And they could have given us money. And worked with us. But they didn't do that....

² Rubinow worked for the J.M. Kaplan Fund.

BERMAN: How was his group's position [the Joint Emergency Committee] different from your group's position?

HAYES: Well, they had it all set up.

BERMAN: The compromise you mean?

HAYES: Yeah. And set up so far as—you know most everything was done by the time they started. They were people that we knew but had never joined, never did anything for us. For our group. Which was outrageous.

BERMAN: So your relationship with his group was never particularly good is what you're saying.

HAYES: No, he used me. [Chuckles]

BERMAN: You mean he waited until there was a groundswell of support for you and then came along—

HAYES: Then he came on, right.

BERMAN: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but—

HAYES: That's alright. Doesn't hurt. It was towards the end this happened. And he saw his way clear to jump in. It was really very disgraceful what he did.

BERMAN: How about Jane [Jacobs]? Was she—you said she came along later.

HAYES: Who?

BERMAN: Jane Jacobs. Did she support your position?

HAYES: She was working on a highway up north.

BERMAN: Right. The northern part of the Village.

HAYES: The other part of the Village. And she was very busy with that.... I had tried to persuade him [Rubinow] to join us, which he refused to do.

BERMAN: You mean to join the Washington Square committee for the elimination of automobiles in Washington Square Park?

HAYES: Right. The whole thing. But he didn't want to join. Until it was pretty sure.

BERMAN: Was he waiting until he could be on the winning side?

HAYES: He wanted to be sure that it was. He didn't contribute any money. Not a cent.

BERMAN: How did you guys raise money?

HAYES: Through the schools.

BERMAN: The schools contributed?

HAYES: Oh, the Catholic school—I don't remember whether it had a special name—sent notes home with the kids, by the kids, to their mothers to bring, I don't

know, a dime or a nickel or twenty-five cents. To bring money. Which I thought was lovely when you think of it.

BERMAN: That's really community organizing. People contributing a quarter and a dime here and there.

HAYES: Well, it was so little amounts, it was wonderful.

BERMAN: Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between your committee and some of the elected officials? It seems like from what I'm reading that it took a really long time for most of them to—

HAYES: Wake up?

BERMAN: Yeah. I guess what I want to know is I'm amazed that you were able to get somebody like DeSapio—

HAYES: No, not then.

BERMAN: But it took awhile.

HAYES: Yes, it did....

BERMAN: What was his position originally? I guess I'm thinking that this was a ten year fight. I'm looking through '52 to '61 and I'm seeing how you started with this small group of parents who were just concerned with the safety of their kids. And it ends up being a movement where you got these powerful—you got Robert Moses who admittedly his power starts to diminish a little bit with the whole thing with the Tavern on the Green and all that but still extremely powerful. You've got

Carmine DeSapio, the most powerful Democratic leader in lower Manhattan, who comes around to your position later on because he sees that there's a groundswell of support and he decides he wants to be on the right side, the popular side, and he sees that you're a popular side. So I'm just so interested in the different ways you built the organization.

HAYES: You'd think it was planned. I mean we just did it. It wasn't planned.

BERMAN: Did you go to the park let's say on a weekend and handout fliers to people?

HAYES: Oh, we had people doing it. Oh, yeah.

BERMAN: How'd you organize that? Did you just kind of say, "You take this part of the park Saturday and I'll be there from 10 to 11 and you be there from 12 to 1."

HAYES: Yeah, it was that kind of thing.... In fact, towards the end we rented cars to drive around with a big sign on....

BERMAN: That's great. Well, you know, let me just throw some names at you and maybe you could tell me what your relationship was?

HAYES: Okay....

BERMAN: I'm gonna throw some names at you and you tell me what their role was.... How about Mary Nichols and the *Voice*, and the *Village Voice*, and her reporting. How important was that to you?

HAYES: Terribly. Village-wise it was, the editor was Wolf.

BERMAN: Dan Wolf.

HAYES: Dan Wolf. And he's really responsible for helping us in such a way that it was amazing. He was so for us and wanted to do whatever he could. *The Village*—what's the other one?

BERMAN: *The Villager*?

HAYES: *The Villager* was our enemy.... They were on the other side.

BERMAN: So the fact that Mary was writing these articles—

HAYES: Mary was writing for them.

BERMAN: Right. For the *Voice*. That made a difference to you?

HAYES: Oh, yes....

BERMAN: What was Wagner's role?

HAYES: Robert Wagner?

BERMAN: Yeah, I know he was kind of supporting the compromise plan. I didn't know what your relationship—obviously, you had to work with him.

HAYES: We had a friendly relationship....

BERMAN: He became mayor in 1953, I think. Right after you started this. So I'm wondering how you went about—obviously, as the mayor of New York his support was important to you in getting it. So I wondered how you went about organizing to kind of get him to pay attention to you.

HAYES: I don't know. [Laughs] Well, pay attention, because the interest was enlarged by now. And we had the press was with us....

BERMAN: I see a lot of articles that you wrote. I see a lot of letters to the editor. Clearly you kept trying to keep this as a very visible campaign. Were there ever times that you got discouraged?

HAYES: No, but we got fighting mad at things, which we always had to answer.

BERMAN: Like what?

HAYES: Well, from somebody in City Hall or one of those people would write stuff. And we always had to answer it and say, "This isn't so" or "This isn't so."

BERMAN: You mean try to discredit you?

HAYES: Yeah.

BERMAN: What kinds of things? Do you remember what kinds of things they wrote about you?

HAYES: Mmmm. No, they didn't write anything personally.... But they did write how it wasn't very smart to have this road and all the reasons why they thought it was stupid.

BERMAN: That your position of closing the road was stupid, you mean?

HAYES: That's right.....

BERMAN: It sounds like you were pressured to compromise a lot. Like instead of building a big road we'll build a smaller road.

HAYES: Oh, they came up with different roads. [Chuckles]

BERMAN: I'm really interested in how you organized. I think we're all really interested in that. [Begins reading document] I see [reads] "Please sign each of the four tear-offs and mail complete sheet back to us." I see "Mayor Wagner and members of the board have mentioned that we ask that Washington Square Park be closed to all vehicle traffic, including Fifth Avenue buses." And then you've got another: "To Honorable Hulan Jack, Borough President." And you've got another to "To Honorable Carmine DeSapio." Then you've got another to the Washington Square Park Committee. So it seems like you would just get people to sign all these things, flood them with mail. [Hayes laughs]

And I see—let's see, is this something that you wrote?—yeah, and I see, I don't know if this was a flyer, but I see this "You can help save Washington Square Park. Robert Moses can be stopped." And you write—I love this—"A handful of women did it in Central Park. The bird watchers did it in Central Park. The Washington Square Park Committee has helped hold back the steamrollers in Washington Square Park for six years. BUT an all out effort must be made now to stop Mr. Moses and Traffic Commissioner Wylie from destroying little Washington Square Park by making Fifth Avenue into one of the major traffic arteries of New York City. A wide highway through the park to connect with the six lane"—what did I say before, four lane?, it was six lanes they were talking about—"to be called

Fifth Avenue South.” This is really incredible. To think of a six lane road going through Washington Square Park.

So I guess this kind of things was something that you would hand out on like a weekend....

HAYES: We were just in a fighting mood but we didn’t know. We never did this before.

BERMAN: Right, right. Who were like your supporters? Who were people you felt—

HAYES: They were mothers.

UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: Was Edith Lyons a mother as well? Edith Lyons, was she also a mother?

HAYES: What happened with Edith Lyons was her son went to a private school (I forget the name of it) and when we asked people to send a representative of that school, they sent Edith as their representative. That’s how she got into it. But she’s been telling little lies about how she got into it.... We worked very closely during the whole thing. But the terrible thing about Edith was that we were very close and very friendly and at the end when, towards the end, she got together with other people and—

BERMAN: Do you remember which other people?

HAYES: Yeah.... They called themselves, they had a name for it and more or less organized another group....

BERMAN: So your feeling is—

HAYES: We were very friendly. So I don't know what got into her.... The thing was so unbelievable what Edith did. Unbelievable. We were such close friends. And then, boom, there was a new committee and Raymond Rubinow was in part of it....

BERMAN: I see that there was all sorts of compromises. I see that there was mention of building a tunnel beneath the square here.... I see an article by [Tony Dapolito] in the *Voice*, he was the civic affairs officer. He wrote about the possibility of building a tunnel. What was his relationship to you?

HAYES: To me, it was just a friendly relationship....

BERMAN: Was Koch involved in this at all? I wondered if he was a supporter and the whole Village Independent Democrats—

HAYES: Yeah, the VID.

BERMAN: —were they on your side on this?

HAYES: Oh, yeah....

BERMAN: Do you know what I want to ask you, actually? You were also doing a radio show on WNYC?

HAYES: I was.

BERMAN: Yeah. How did this relate to this work? Did you use the radio show to get more publicity or was that totally separate?

HAYES: No, no. That was entirely different. That was a job.

BERMAN: That was your job.

HAYES: That was my job.

BERMAN: And was that a music show? Or was that a public affairs show?

HAYES: No, I was a reporter. I did the news, the weather. All the stuff that they throw at the only woman announcer....

BERMAN: I guess the one thing I'll end with is kind of where we started which is the other kinds of fights you were involved in besides the roadway. Having to do with the other parts of the Village. What other things were you involved in as far as any of the slum clearance or with NYU or any of that that maybe you could talk about? Were you involved in the whole campaign to save some of the low rise housing south of Washington Square Park?

HAYES: South?

BERMAN: Yeah, the part that Robert Moses wound up tearing down in the whole slum clearance when the Title 1 housing project. Were you involved in any of that?

HAYES: I don't remember.

BERMAN: How 'bout as far as NYU and their plans for the library or anything like that? Were you involved in that?

HAYES: Ten years from now there will be nothing except NYU. No question of that.... And they just don't stop.

BERMAN: No. This is true.

HAYES: I mean they've gone so far north and south. It's incredible....

[End of Interview]