Edith Lyons

An Oral History Interview
Conducted for the GVSHP Preservation Archives
by
Vicki Weiner

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ABSTRACT

Edith Lyons (1906-2002) was one of the leaders in the seven year battle with Robert Moses over the use of Washington Square Park as a thoroughfare to Lower Manhattan. Moses' plan to extend Fifth Avenue through the Park was defeated in part by a group that Lyons co-founded and co-chaired: the Joint Emergency Committee to Close Washington Square Park to Traffic (JEC).

In this interview, Lyons discusses the founding of the JEC and the strategies it employed to thwart the Moses plan. One of these strategies involved the employment of models in Washington Square Park to solicit signatures on a petition opposing the Moses plan. Another was the JEC's decision to seek only a "temporary" closure of the park to traffic with the hope that such a temporary closure would eventually become permanent. Lyons also recollects the decision to have the local Democratic Party boss, Carmine DeSapio, testify before the New York City Board of Estimate on behalf of the JEC in favor of closing the park to traffic. In the interview, Lyons reminisces about the planning which went into that testimony, as well as the hearing itself.

Lyons concludes the interview by discussing the work of the JEC after the closure of Washington Square Park to traffic. This included working with landscape architects such as Stanley Tankel and Robert Weinberg to renovate the park. Other people discussed in this interview include: Shirley Hayes, Jane Jacobs, Norman Redlich, and Raymond Rubinow.

INTERVIEWER: Vicki Weiner
INTERVIEWEE: Edith Lyons
LOCATION: New York, New York
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TRANSCRIBER: Penelope Bareau

LYONS: A few months ago I visited Washington Square Park for the first time in a long time. And there were tulips in full bloom; there were toddlers taking their first awkward and comical steps, their parents beaming; there were the children waiting their turns on the swings and slides, and shouting happily all the time; there were old people having a little nap in the fresh air; there were century-old trees in their natural dignity and beauty; there was an acrobat entertaining more than 100 people; there were lovers strolling in the paths holding hands; there were frail people; there were robust people; old, young, of many colored skins; there was a guitarist playing softly who suddenly sang a very simple song in the most beautiful voice. And I thought to myself, this is true, and will be for generations to come, because some 40 years ago a small, spirited, park-loving and park-appreciating group gathered together to fight a Robert Moses plan to destroy this little jewel of a park by running a 6-lane automobile highway through it. If his plan had worked, there never again would have been a Washington Square Park. But almost seven years of arduous, devoted and talented work prevented it. I will never forget the joy that day in the park brought me as I visualized the many generations that would continue to love and enjoy it in the future.

In the spring of 1952 a committee was organized in the living room of the apartment where I still live. The goal of this group was to protect and preserve Washington Square Park, one of the greatest historic and community treasures in Greenwich Village. It was one of the great privileges of my life to lead that committee for seven years. That is not to say that it has been all beer and skittles.

The park has been through some serious times–drug dealing, littering, prostitution, and general neglect. However, organizations like the Greenwich Village Society, and Planning Board #2 and concerned individuals did a great job in bringing it back to what it is today.

I have had a wonderful life, and have done many interesting things, but I think leading that committee which grew to large and impressive importance–from the day it was organized here, to the wonderful evening when the Board of Estimate announced that there would never again be traffic in Washington Square Park–was one of the greatest highlights of my life.

In the process, I learned a great deal. Now I have one more thing to learn: how to be an old lady. I was 92 in May!

WEINER: What was it that led you to found the joint committee to close the park to traffic?

LYONS: It was a one-inch, one-column item in the *New York Times* which said that Robert Moses proposed to run a six-lane highway through Washington Square Park. That would have required narrowing the sidewalks on Fifth Avenue from 14th Street down to the park, which in earlier years had been widened on purpose to make it a beautiful walkway to the park. Robert Moses, as you know, did a lot of very wonderful things, always, however, concerned with the automobile, which he adored. He had no feel for human beings at all. This I knew, and it was a red flag when I saw his idea. Shirley Hayes was the person who showed me...she was in the park with her boys. I was in the park with one of my children. It was she who came over and showed me the item in the *Times*.

After seeing the article, I got in touch with Raymond Rubinow. How I met him, I don't remember. Maybe it was through the Kaplan Foundation [J.M. Kaplan Fund] where he worked, he was their executive director. He called himself "Philanthropoid." He was a brilliant man with an extraordinary sense of humor

and great ability. One of the other feathers in his cap was how he helped Isaac Stern when Carnegie Hall had to be saved. He did many things of that sort while he was working for Kaplan, which was a wonderful arrangement because he was also, when it was indicated, able to get financial support, to recommend it to the Kaplans for these projects. I got in touch with Ray because I had a great respect for his mind. I got in touch with Jane Jacobs, whom I knew through the Planning Board activities. I got in touch with a number of people I knew like that. We met here in 1952, in the spring. That was the first meeting. And we named our baby. We named it the Committee to Close Washington Square Park to All but Emergency Traffic. The longest committee name on record!

WEINER: How did you come up with the name?

LYONS: Just talking at that meeting. That's what we wanted to do, so we called it that. We met frequently. Things began to happen. We began to get in touch with—not a tremendous number here but I would say for the first meeting there were at least 12 or 15 people.

WEINER: What was discussed at those early meetings? Did you come up with a strategy?

LYONS: We came up with the fact that we had to do a lot of thinking, meeting, talking, about how to get the belching busses and cars out of Washington Square Park. That was the first thing. Fifth Avenue was two-way then. The busses would come down, ride into the park and sit there and belch smoke. Or whatever they belched. And cars would park in there as well. And how do you go about that was first. Second, why shouldn't all traffic be taken out of a park? Parks are for people, not for automobiles as Moses proposed. That's an historic park, a wonderful little jewel in Manhattan, and what would be left if he had his way? Two lanes of grass

and nothing but six lanes of traffic in the center. What would happen to the arch? It never would have been a park again. So that was our job. To preserve forever that historic and essential resource for the community.

Some time after that we had done some things with the City Planning Commission, we had involved Mrs. Roosevelt to appear before the City Planning Commission and so on. And so the *Times* took notice of it. And on a Sunday when my husband and I were away for the weekend and weren't aware of it, in the lower right hand portion of the first page of the Sunday *Times* there was a piece about half the size of this—"continued on page 994," where they put everything. Buried. It talked about the fact that this committee was in action and named me. Norman and Evelyn Redlich lived on the park at that time, and Evelyn read that little item and said to Norman, "Hey, this really involves us. We're looking at the park all the time. You ought to get in touch with that woman." And he got in touch with me and became one of the most valuable members of that committee. He helped us enormously with the politics of it. He was very keen. It was he who persuaded Carmine DeSapio to appear for us. He persuaded DeSapio that to appear for us would be to his political benefit, because his claim on his part to fame was that he did a lot for this community. Anybody who wanted to be a hero, we all felt, let them be heroes, but do our bidding. Nobody on the committee was looking for personal gain, or anything like that. We had some wonderful architects on the committee.

WEINER: Was Robert Weinberg on the committee?

LYONS: Oh, yes. He was an architect and he had much to contribute. Any number of people of note in the fields of preservation, architecture, of the environment, also joined the committee. In addition, the Greenwich Village grassroots people—competent and recognized people—also joined the committee. The involvement of all the committee was that, down to a few young girls who were at the time typical Wall Street secretaries with little white collars and cuffs, down to them, there was a

big involvement on their part. They wanted desperately for this thing to be good. And they did whatever was necessary at the time.

When the time came that DeSapio was to appear before the City Planning Commission, I had to rush in where angels fear to tread because I had no knowledge about what I was doing, I didn't know about traffic, though I would go and testify as though I had devoted my life to a study of traffic. I took on any subject. I didn't care. I just acted as though I knew something. I knew nothing. But I always had a feel for P.R., and those things would occur to me. So how do we do something special when DeSapio appears in a P.R. way? Well, I decided we should get--not alone. When I say "I decided" I mean I put forth the question. It was decided to try to get 30,000, if possible, signatures in the Village to close the park to all but emergency traffic. How do you do that spectacularly? Well, across the street from here lived Mrs. Roosevelt's niece, who was a very top model at the time. She lived in that house which has a carriage entrance. And she was beautiful and an awfully nice person. Mrs. Roosevelt told her I'd be in touch with her and I got in touch with her. I said, "You can help us enormously with an idea I have. Let me ask you what you think of it. Could you get half a dozen of your colleagues, beautiful models like you, to walk on a Sunday through Washington Square Park and carry clipboards and get signatures of everyone who comes into the park? For starters." She said, "I'll try." And she did get six models who were willing. Then how do we make those models very attractive to get the signatures? Well, I've walked on a cane for many years and there used to be—still is, but the man is dead a long time—a store called Sam the Umbrella Man up on 57th Street. I used to buy my canes there. They were very good. Still are, I understand. I went to Mr. Sam and told him about the thing I'm doing and I said, "Would you make me a gift of parasols for the models to carry?" And indeed he did. I think I have one. They were covered in yellow fabric, some of them with scallops, some of them hanging down, and they were all lined in the most beautiful flowered fabric. They were

lovely. And he even printed legends on them, like, "A park is not a parkway," "Parks are for people."

WEINER: Did the committee come up with these phrases to go around?

LYONS: We consulted on everything. And the day came, we didn't get the whole 30,000 but we got an enormous amount and we collected after that more and more and more. When the figure was enormous, all of it was on 8 by 11 paper. Those little two girls who were secretaries on Wall Street came and fastened these hundreds of 8 by 11 sheets of paper so it was one, long sheet. Then they came to this historic living room one night and I got out what I prized very much, my grandmother's rolling pin, which had two handles on the ends of the round pin. They stuck one handle in between the upholstery of a chair and the bottom, and they wound all of that into a big thick thing like this on the rolling pin. Then we tied it with a green satin ribbon because that was part of our logo, if you will. We used green for everything. We put a piece of green satin ribbon and a bow on it. And then we attached a little tin pin that we had made which said, "Save the Square," and gave them to people to wear. We put that pin on the bow. Then came the day, and my little friend—her first name was Barbara but I'm damned if I can remember the rest—went up the steps of City Hall and when Mr. DeSapio arrived handed him this thing and artlessly pulled out the pin. The ribbon opened and this long continuous petition went down the steps of City Hall. Then he went in to testify. Well, it was such fun for me to do and have it happen, I can't begin to tell you. And that was the sort of thing—I left the bigger minds to do the bigger things, and I did...

WEINER: Was there something about a big key? What was that about?

LYONS: [chuckles] One of the things that we devised was that DeSapio was also to present the Board of Estimate—not the City Planning Commission, the Board of Estimate—with a seven-foot gold key, papier mache gold to lock the park to traffic forever, and he did. The night, seven years after that first meeting, after we all shed blood, it was seven years of terribly, terribly hard work, it was not easy. The night that we had all arrived at 8 a.m. in order to get seats before the busloads of people that we had arranged for arrived. This happened about 7:30 at night. We, the committee, were still there. The bus people had left.

I won't tell you the details of how—you know the Board of Estimate is composed of five borough presidents and the mayor and the comptroller. I won't tell you how we got to go to the bathroom because we didn't dare leave our seats. But there was one borough president very much concerned about us, and that was the borough president of Brooklyn. This was the fall of 1959, that I remember. He would send his assistant—they each had an assistant—who ran messages for them, took their seats when they had to go to the bathroom, and he started sending his assistant down to let two of us go to the bathroom and come back and then the next two and so on. Even funnier than that was that at one point he sent his assistant down to me and he said, "Mrs. Lyons, the Borough President notices that the members of the Board of Estimate have gone out one by one to lunch, but that your committee has not gone out for lunch, so he has had set up in their executive room, lunch for your committee, and we will, two by two or four by four, cover your seats, and you go out."

There was a great oval conference table in their executive chambers there, and on it, closely packed, were stacks of Jewish delicatessen sandwiches, all the corned beef and pastrami and tongue—name it—they were stacked this high. Then of course there were accompanying pickles and potato salad and coleslaw, but in the center, where you would normally put a floral something, were bottles and bottles of soda—Dr. Brown's Celery Tonic, which you can't remember, you're too young, but

that was a great thing in Jewish delicatessens. Also root beer and cream soda and all the things that were served in delicatessens at that time.

WEINER: He must have been on your side to provide for you this way.

LYONS: He was. He was always very warm to me. I had no outside connection with him, it was only when we appeared and testified. That evening the Board of Estimate retired at about 5:30. All the outsiders were gone, just the diehards, the committee, were left. As soon as they left, we lay down on the pews—you know City Hall, don't you?

I love that room; it's beautiful. As soon as they went out we lay down on the pews, thoroughly exhausted. In back of me lay Barbara, who had unhooked that ribbon that day, I told you about that, and lying down, I called out, "Barbara? Did you get something to eat?" She was not of my persuasion. This was all foreign to her. She said, "Oh, I did, and it was delicious, wasn't it? But I seem to be belching a lot, and guess what I taste when I belch—celery!" It was the celery tonic. All these wonderful things happened without which we couldn't have stood it. If it hadn't had some fun with it.

WEINER: Was there a vote that day from the Board of Estimate?

LYONS: They came back at 7:30 that evening with a favorable vote. The park was to be closed. And that night my husband and I were attending a very posh benefit for some charity and it started with a theater party in the evening. Well, I couldn't get there in time. Was I a mess! I was in a navy blue suit, I remember, that was so crumpled and so messy and so awful, but as soon as they came with the verdict, I went out to the washroom, washed my face, combed my hair and tootled up to the theater, where my husband embarrassed the devil out of me by having on his lap a florist's box and in it was a huge what-I-hate orchid. And I had to pin it on that

dirty suit and all the women were in beautiful evening clothes, the men black tie, but there, I sat through that. Now came the end of the performance, and as my husband and I walked out of the theater, there, strung along the edge of the sidewalk but facing the theater, not facing the road, were Evelyn and Norman Redlich and Connie and Ray Rubinow. The four of them were holding up this seven-foot papier mache gold key, and as we emerged, Ray Rubinow called out to this elegant crowd, [laughs] I'll never forget it, called out, "There she is, there she is, the mother of Washington Square, Edith Lyons."

WEINER: They presented the key to you?

LYONS: To me. Well, [laughs] I was not about to accept it. However, we compromised. We walked from the theater to The Plaza, where there was a special little room—the George M. Cohan room—and they, Norman and Ray, they had reserved for us to go to that room. And so we marched through the Palm Court of the Plaza Hotel with the four of them carrying this mysterious object, and we got to that room. I'll only say a very brief, parenthetical thing. On the way to that room, I passed the man who almost killed himself because I wouldn't marry him many years earlier. And there I was, looking so ridiculous in that suit and the orchid and the key. It was very funny, very funny. Anyway, that was what Ray always called me, the mother of Washington Square.

WEINER: Why did the Committee come up with the idea to close the park temporarily?

LYONS: Well, that was Jane Jacobs' brilliant idea. At one point she said to us, "Let's not keep demanding forever. Let's ask them for a three-month temporary trial, and I bet you when that trial is over, it will have proved our case and it will never be opened again." She was right. Jane Jacobs was someone to reckon with.

Do you know about her? I know a great deal, I know her, she's still my friend. She lives in Toronto and she's been very close to my daughter, who lives in Toronto too, over the years. Jane Jacobs was an internationally known city planner. She's noted because she's very sound. I learned my respect for the retention of the neighborhood from Jane. Jane thinks the destruction that we have done of neighborhoods, where people knew each other, where they knew each other's children, where they knew the storekeepers and the storekeepers knew them, is one of the reasons for the terrible problems in our cities. The high-rise public housing, and so forth, which had destroyed neighborhoods in order to be built. She has written a number of books. The first one was *The Fall and Rise of Great American Cities*–she reversed the rise and fall. She has written several since. It's inscribed to me, and it was very recent. She gave it to my daughter to bring to me from Toronto, and she made a reference in the inscription to the wonderful battles we fought together. She was some battler. She was wonderful! And she had of course what I never could have, her intellect and her experience and her ability and I am most respectful of it. A quite wonderful woman.

We became friends through the Planning Board work, and as friends we talked about many things. I was always interested, of course, in my beloved Village. I do love the Village and always did, and naturally we talked about her interests and her theories.

WEINER: So the idea of things like asking for a temporary closing, were her ideas. Were there any others like that, strokes of brilliance that you can remember?

LYONS: That she made? Oh, yes. She was always very helpful when the committee had something to diagnose, to discuss, and so on. But I remember especially her idea to ask for a temporary closing. It worked. The Park was never opened to traffic again.

WEINER: What kind of activities did the committee have after the temporary—so-called "temporary" closing. Did the committee continue to work?

LYONS: Yes. Joining the committee at that time were seven, I think, local architects or landscape architects. Stanley Tankel was one, Robert Weinberg was another—that's a story that Rita Lee can give you, the names of the seven. They were the ones who redesigned the park and did a wonderful, wonderful pro-bono job. The committee didn't disband until after that renovation of the park was done. In the meantime, of course, there was the Washington Square Committee, which sprang up with reference to the park.

WEINER: Part of the Greenwich Village Association?

LYONS: Yes. And some of us joined that association, some did not, but the Joint Emergency Committee disbanded then after that. Added to my sentimental journey, it was not always thus. There have been bad periods when the park fell into disrepair, when there was a drug trading problem, et cetera. I think that we must be grateful to the GVA, and what was then called the Borough President's Planning Board, and a number of individuals in this area who came to the rescue. It is just beautiful and so well used now. And no one can question its historic value.

It was one of the great privileges of my life to have led this wonderful preservation effort from beginning to end. I have had a good life. Such a good life. And I've enjoyed the many varied activities in which I was involved. The one activity that I find difficult is to learn how to be an old lady. I was 92 in May! That ain't easy!

Note: Only the portion on the first page of the transcript will be spoken by myself or a substitute on November 2, 1998 during a public program of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.