

Doris Diether

An Oral History Interview
Conducted for the GVSHP Preservation Archives
by
Susan DeVries

New York, New York

July 24, 1996

ABSTRACT

Doris Diether is a long-serving member of Manhattan's Community Board 2 and Greenwich Village preservationist. She begins this interview by discussing her early life and introduction to the Village in the 1950s. She continues by discussing her initial foray into public service—in 1959 she entered the fight to prevent the discontinuation of the city's free Shakespeare in the Park.

That same year Diether helped found Save the Village, a campaign which was focused on reforming zoning and rent laws in Greenwich Village, as well as promoting historic preservation. It was while working with Save the Village that Diether was first introduced to New York City's zoning laws. She would gain increasing expertise in this area with her subsequent appointment to Manhattan's Community Board 2 in 1964 and selection as head of the Board's Zoning Committee in 1965.

Diether discusses the origins of the Save the Village campaign, as well as some of its key figures, including Arnold Bergier and Alan Marcus. She talks about some of the campaign's more imaginative publicity efforts—including one which featured a pig walking a picket line. She also discusses specific issues that the campaign pursued, such as stopping the city's proposed Verrazano Street and urban renewal project for the South Village. By 1962 Diether would become president of Save the Village.

Diether continues the interview by discussing the role of the Save the Village campaign in local politics, as well as her own interaction with the Village Independent Democrats and individuals like Carmine DeSapio and Edward Koch.

The interview concludes with Diether reviewing her book of press clippings and reminiscing about various other activities, such as her efforts to help the esteemed poet and Greenwich Village resident, e.e. cummings.

INTERVIEWEE: Doris Diether
INTERVIEWER: Susan DeVries
LOCATION: New York, New York
DATE: 24 July 1996
TRANSCRIBER: Jane King

DEVRIES: The purpose of our first interview is to get some background information. When I was making out my list of questions to ask you I realized there's a lot of ground to cover so this might not be done all in one session. Basically, we're hoping to find out how you came into preservation and some of your early experiences.... Did you always live in the Village?

DIETHER: No, I lived in Queens and my father was a carpenter/cabinet-maker and during the Depression he made signs for theaters.... Every time he changed jobs we moved. It was kind of rough on us.

DEVRIES: You moved within New York City?

DIETHER: Within Queens usually. After I graduated from high school, they moved up to Massachusetts for a couple of years, or they moved up there permanently and I moved up there for a couple of years with them.

DEVRIES: To finish school?

DIETHER: No, I had finished school already, but the small town life and I didn't get along. I went out with a guy twice and they thought we were getting married. You know, that kind of thing.... They couldn't quite get used to my coming home at 2 o'clock in the morning with my car, coming down the block and parking the car in the driveway. Everybody would say, "Ah! What time is she coming home?!" In the city they don't do that, so I moved back to the city.

DEVRIES: So you moved back to the Village then when you came back?

DIETHER: Yeah. I moved to the Hotel Albert. Stayed in that crazy hotel.

DEVRIES: You lived there for a couple of years, didn't you?

DIETHER: Yes, I lived there for a couple years and then the telephone company found me an apartment. Telephone man who used to come in the office found me an apartment on 10th Street. It was a furnished room and I lived there for a couple of years and then I got sick and I went home. When I came back I moved into what used to be the Hotel Colburn over on Washington Place which is now the residential building on Washington Place, 79 Washington Place. Then somebody found me a furnished room in the building next door, 109, and I lived there for a while and then I met my husband. Then when we got married I moved into his apartment and we lived here.

DEVRIES: So you've really kind of lived within the same small area of the Village the whole time?

DIETHER: Yeah, right.

DEVRIES: When you first came to the Village, where were you working?

DIETHER: I was working for a construction company.

DEVRIES: And you stayed at that job, didn't you?

DIETHER: Yes, I stayed with the job for quite a while. At first it was a joint venture building Thule Air Force Base in Greenland. Then they split off. I think they also did the Verrazano Bridge at the same time and that bridge, Chesapeake Bay Bridge, and then they dissolved their company. It was a joint venture, government joint venture, and they dissolved it. One of the parent companies took me on, and I worked for them for quite awhile. They were uptown. The joint venture was in the Village, which was why I had started there. But then they moved uptown, the main concern was uptown, so I worked up there. Then I decided to start my own business. I started a travel information service for travel agents.

DEVRIES: When would this be?

DIETHER: This was in the seventies. I did that for awhile, but every time I'd start to make a profit, they'd raise the postage rates and then my profit would go out the window. I decided that wasn't a very profitable business, so I was looking around for another business and I went to work for a temporary agency. I was working for the Rockefellers for part of the time and RKO Pictures and a whole bunch of companies for a short time, typing and so forth. When I worked for RCA it was funny because they asked me if I knew how to use a Selectric Typewriter, those ones that an "m" is three counts and an "n" is two counts and an "i" is one count. Of course, I had never used them, but I said, "Oh, sure." So I went in about ten minutes early and when nobody was looking I put a piece of paper in the typewriter and I went through all the letters in the typewriter and figured out how many backspaces there were for each letter and then I typed like a son-of-a-gun. But I got extra money for typing on that typewriter. I think they called it an executive typewriter....

DEVRIES: So you were working and living in the Village. What event do you see as the first time you made your way into preservation, or what battle?

DIETHER: Well, I got involved with Robert Moses and Shakespeare in the Park. That was back in '59. I was still working at the construction company at that time.

DEVRIES: And were you married at that point?

DIETHER: Yeah. Newbold Morris was a good friend of Robert Moses, who was the Parks Commissioner at the time, and he had this idea for putting some entertainment in Wollman Rink and charging admission.

DEVRIES: Right. And the Shakespeare in the Park was free at this time already?

DIETHER: Right. And they were not gonna give a permit to Shakespeare because they did not want them competing with Newbold Morris's show. I went down to City Hall and I made this speech and everybody thought I was representing the Clerical Workers Union. [Laughs]

DEVRIES: And who were you representing, just yourself?

DIETHER: Myself.

DEVRIES: Did you just see an item in the newspaper and decide to go?

DIETHER: Yeah. I couldn't understand why there was no follow-up on this item....

DEVRIES: Was there any group that was organized at this time?

DIETHER: There was a group called “We Want Will” but I didn’t even know about them at the time. They found me after I did my speech. [Gives document to DeVries.]

DEVRIES: So this is a copy of your speech?

DIETHER: [Reads] “When is Mayor Wagner going to start acting the part of Moses’ boss instead of an employee of the Parks Department? There were over 2,600 letters protesting about the closing of free Shakespeare, some of them signed with hundreds of names. He certainly can’t say he thinks he’s following the wishes of the voting public.” [Laughs]

DEVRIES: Didn’t make you very popular at that point with the people who were—

DIETHER: No, but “We Want Will” picked me up fast. They came dashing over. Well, they also were the ones that started organizing Save the Village. Same group.

DEVRIES: I was wondering what that connection was. I noticed some of the same people.

DIETHER: Yeah. Alan Marcus and some of the other people were also involved in Save the Village.

DEVRIES: How did that happen, Save the Village? Again, was it one event?

DIETHER: There was one guy, this sculptor, Arnold Bergier. You’ve probably heard of him.

DEVRIES: Yeah, I’ve met him.

DIETHER: And he was getting evicted. His house was a charming little house right across from the firehouse on 10th Street, and it was actually used in the movie “The Bachelor Party.”

DEVRIES: That’s right. And he also held a party, didn’t he, when he got evicted?

DIETHER: Yeah, he had parties there all the time.... Anyway, he was getting evicted, and he didn’t like it.

DEVRIES: Was this in 1959?

DIETHER: Yeah. He didn’t like the idea of getting evicted to put up a high-rise building on his site. Most of the neighbors had gotten pushed out; I think he was about the last one. He was in like a separate little carriage house, a two-story carriage house. So he got organized with Alan Marcus contacted him... They got together and decided something should be done and they got a group together. Somehow or other they solicited my husband who got me in it. Then he dropped out and left me there. So, they put me in charge of various things, handling the press, which is where I got my press experience, and handling tenants’ problems. Because the tenants were being evicted all over the place and a lot of them were in historic buildings. Arnold Bergier’s building was a lovely little building that’s in Fred McDarrah’s book.¹ There’s a picture of it. It had two-story living room.

DEVRIES: Is that the building that Fred has a photo of where “Save the Village” is painted in graffiti on the building?

¹ McDarrah, Fred W., New York, N.Y.: a photographic tour of Manhattan Island from Battery Park to Spuyten Duyvil, New York, Corinth Books; distributed by Citadel Press, 1964.

DIETHER: Right, we painted that I think on the front of the building.

DEVRIES: So was there a reason why you were appointed for the tenants' rights? Is that an area where you had experience?

DIETHER: No, I had no experience in it whatsoever. I didn't have experience in anything at that time, but they discovered that people seemed to relate well to me. Part of the buildings that we were dealing with were down in the Italian district.

DEVRIES: It was a lot of going door to door?

DIETHER: Yeah. The Italians don't talk to people they don't know. I don't know how I started talking to them and got through, and so I was the one that was put in charge of handling the tenants' problems. Then when they started getting into zoning, zoning issues, they needed somebody that could do that. They said, "Well, you worked for a construction company, why don't we make you an authority on zoning."

DEVRIES: I was wondering if your skill with zoning came first or if you developed it because it was dropped in your lap?

DIETHER: It just dropped in my lap and nobody else had any great interest in the zoning. They knew that it had to be done, but they weren't interested in doing it. To them the zoning was some kind of strange thing. So, they put me as kind of their spokesman for zoning. They organized a whole group of architects. You know, architects don't necessarily talk to each other, and each one has his own ideas. We had quite a number of fairly well-known Village architects in the group, all of whom had their own ideas on how things should be done. So, they put me as kind of a liaison between them.

DEVRIES: I've never read a mission statement for Save the Village. Did they have one battle that they wanted to fight?

DIETHER: Oh no, we had four.

DEVRIES: You had four? Four main areas? I know that tenants' rights and zoning were two.

DIETHER: It should be in one of these articles. [Shows DeVries a series of newspaper clippings.] Early on, one of the first petition signers that we had was Albert Bard, who was a 92-year-old pioneer in urban planning and author of the 1956 state law sponsored by State Senator McNeil Mitchell, who's also from the district, which enabled cities to protect aesthetic areas such as Greenwich Village.

DEVRIES: How did that come about, the association with Albert Bard?

DIETHER: We found him. We found the law and then we went and looked for him.

DEVRIES: You found the law that Mitchell was sponsoring and then went after him?

DIETHER: Yeah, went after Bard to get him down to sign the petition. [Laughs] We had Arthur C. Holden, a city planner and Jane Jacob's husband, Robert Jacobs, was also a city planner; Stanley Tankel, who was with the Regional Planning Association; Robert Weinberg, who lived on Washington Square who was a zoning lawyer and architect. Among the other people was J.G. Malloy, President of the

Greenwich Village Association, Maxwell Powers, Executive Director of Greenwich House.

DEVRIES: A lot of these people were also involved in other fights, like Stanley Tankel with the Jefferson Market Courthouse, and that's true for a lot of the other people. Were you at that point just concentrating on Save the Village or were you involved in some other battles?

DIETHER: No, mainly just concentrating on Save the Village.... We had a four-point program, it should be in here somewhere. [Looks through documents.] One was changing the rent laws so that they couldn't bypass some of the sections of the rent law and throw the tenants out.... I can remember three, but I can't remember the fourth one. One was zoning, one was historic preservation, one was the rent laws, but we had a fourth one, too....

DEVRIES: You said historic preservation was one of the points.

DIETHER: Yeah.

DEVRIES: So early on you saw this as preservation of the Village. Did you see then zoning and changing the rent laws as a way to accomplish this?

DIETHER: Well, you can't do historic preservation without zoning. It's the zoning that controls the height and bulk and without that you can get high rise buildings that may still be in historic districts that don't really fit the historic district. The Landmark Commission has no authority to override zoning.

DEVRIES: Right. At that point were you looking forward and saying, "Eventually we'll have a historic district in Greenwich Village"?

DIETHER: Yeah.

DEVRIES: Was that what you were hoping?

DIETHER: Yeah, I think we got the zoning first. 'cause we got involved in discovering that in order to do a holding battle until we got the historic district, we needed to get the zoning.

DEVRIES: I remember some of the articles that you've given me talking about the zoning. One of the interesting things was that Save the Village was certainly known for some of their outlandish rallying efforts. Who was in charge of deciding what was done?

DIETHER: Alan Marcus was the advertising guy. That was his business, publicity and advertising, so he handled the publicity gimmicks and so forth. Most of the newspapers, when they were calling about information, would call me because I would give them the updates. We did little newsletters on a regular basis that I just sent to the press saying, "This is what's going on." When we called them on something, when something was really happening, they would have the background on what had been happening. That's something that most organizations don't do and it's too bad because then when they have something that really happens the newspapers say, "Well, what is this all about?"

DEVRIES: And you were regularly out there with the "Zoning is Old Hat," and the "Pig Pickets", to keep your name in the public's attention.

DIETHER: It was also to bring the issues into the public, and sometimes you have to use a gimmick to get the public to look at the article. Most people don't read zoning articles. [Laughs]

DEVRIES: Very true. Whereas a pig—

DIETHER: Yeah. I think we were the first ones that used an animal. After that, someone used a duck and things like that, but the pig was, I think, probably one of the earlier ones. It certainly got wide attention. Somehow we got picked up by Associated Press Wire Service so it was picked up in papers in Utah.

DEVRIES: You were in charge of the pig?

DIETHER: I was in charge of the pig. It wasn't my idea, but I was in charge of the pig. As I said, I seem to get put in charge of things that I have no responsibility for starting. But, yeah, they put me in charge of the pig.

DEVRIES: And it was rented pig?

DIETHER: Yes. We rented it from a company in New Jersey called Talented Animals.... He was rather balky as a matter of fact.

DEVRIES: I was reading that he really didn't want to participate in—

DIETHER: No, he also liked cigarette butts and I was worried that if he ate a couple cigarette butts maybe he'd get sick. There'd be the problem; we'd rented him and how much liability did we have if he ate some cigarette butts and got sick? [Laughs] It's very hard to pull a big pig away from something.

DEVRIES: I would imagine it would be. Now didn't you also stage something with the Loconik?

DIETHER: The Loconik. Yeah, that was also on zoning. Shortly after we got the amendments to the zoning we went out on the Loconik supporting the new zoning.

DEVRIES: That was in 1960?

DIETHER: Yes, the Loconik was owned by the Hotel Albert. They used to go around the Village picking up people to take to the restaurant. You'd get a free ride on the Loconik if you went to the restaurant. So that was where we got the Loconik from. It was designed by Salvador Dali.²

DEVRIES: Yes. I read about that. Now, that was in 1960. At that point were you president of Save the Village?

DIETHER: No, I became president in '62.

DEVRIES: I remember reading about Alan Marcus as vice president and as one of the early founders of Save the Village. When did he leave?

DIETHER: Well, the organization, once we got the basic things, we got the historic zoning in, we got the regular zoning in, that certainly cut down on the evictions and so forth. A lot of the people kind of faded out because they felt the goals were reached and it wasn't supposed to be a continuing organization like the Greenwich Village Association. It was an organization set up for certain basic aims and once

² The Loconik was launched by restaurateur Joseph Brody in March of 1959. It was donated to the Bronx Zoo in September 1960. (*New York Times*, 10/3/1959 and 10/1/1960)

we accomplished most of them, I got put on the Community Board, plus two other members of our group got put on the Community Board.

DEVRIES: So did Save the Village not necessarily dissolve but just kind of fade?

DIETHER: It faded out. To go live their own lives.

DEVRIES: True. Because you were working fulltime while you were with Save the Village.

DIETHER: Yeah.

DEVRIES: Was that unusual? There were a lot of other women working in preservation at that time. Were they working fulltime also?

DIETHER: No, most of them were either retired or married to wealthy guys or whatever. As a matter of fact, that was why I had these crazy jobs was that after I left the construction company, then I went into doing part-time work and part of the reason for that was that I could go to the hearings. Then when I finally went to work for the Rockefellers I went to work on a basis of three days a week. I picked my own two days off every week so I could sit in with the hearings. Because I always felt—this is one of the things I feel the Community Board isn't doing now, is that they should have people at every hearing representing the Board, who can speak for the Board and follow these things through. Like this guy [from McDonald's] came to our meeting and he said a staff member told him to do the sign the same as Coconuts. Well, he didn't say that, of course, at the Landmarks Commission hearing and the head of our Landmarks Committee wasn't at the hearing.... It could have come up at this testimony, but he wasn't there. We get a lot of issues where there's just nobody from the Board there. When I was head of

the zoning committee, I went to every single hearing on every issue, all the way through from the initial hearing to the final resolution, whether it was at the City Planning Commission or whether it went to the Board of Estimates. They got used to seeing me, and they got used to knowing that we had an opinion that was gonna be voiced and who was gonna argue it. Not just putting in a letter. I always say you can't question a letter. If you have a question about what it says, you can't question a letter.

This was written by Mary Nichols by the way. [Gives article to DeVries.]

DEVRIES: Yes, you gave me a copy of that article. It was very interesting, describing all your stair climbing efforts. That was going back to that landlord and tenant issue, the Martin Schulman fight. That was a very long, drawn-out fight. Was that the major fight for Save the Village?

DIETHER: That was one of our major fights because we got certain changes in the rent law by demonstrating what the problems were. But you have to bring those issues into the public domain so that they can see what the problems are.

Otherwise, you can say, "Oh, there's problems in the rent law, it does this and does that." But you have to show it with people.

DEVRIES: And the condition of the buildings, were they tenements?

DIETHER: Tenements, most of them. Most of his buildings were tenements. Well, he had actually, he had 15 Sheridan Square, that was one of his buildings, too. They hired their own lawyer and he handled it separately from us but we coordinated some of the things because it was the same landlord.

DEVRIES: Was he trying to get rid of the tenants so that he could then demolish building?

DIETHER: No, this was the thing: there was loop-hole in the rent law which said that they could substantially demolish the building and get it out of rent control. Their substantial demolition of the building was just tearing down some partitions and putting up new partitions. That was one of the things that we pointed out, that the plans for the building on MacDougal Street didn't call for a major renovation; they weren't gonna gut the building.

DEVRIES: So just by changing a few things he could do that?

DIETHER: Yeah. That was "substantial demolition of the building." He could put the tenants out.

DEVRIES: And then raise the rents.

DIETHER: Be out of rent control. Of course he didn't do too well. [Laughs]

DEVRIES: No, you ultimately won that battle. Didn't he have to keep a number of tenants in the building?

DIETHER: Oh sure, some of those guys are still there. Yes, I get Christmas cards from a couple of them, they're still in the building.

DEVRIES: Is there one other battle from Save the Village that you see as one of the most important contributions to preservation?

DIETHER: Well, the zoning itself was a big problem, getting the support of the people.

DEVRIES: Zoning is a difficult thing to understand. What did you hope to accomplish with that zoning?

DIETHER: We wanted to go with the zoning that was proposed in the Village so that they couldn't put high-rise buildings in.

DEVRIES: This was at the time that they were changing the zoning from the 1916 zoning.

DIETHER: Yeah, right. As I said, we snuck in that amendment to the 1916 zoning in 'cause we discovered there was going to be a year or two years grace period after they passed the 1960 zoning before it went into effect. So anybody could file plans in that period of time and then build. So we snuck in the amendment to the 1916 zoning 'cause nobody was looking.

DEVRIES: So what was your amendment to the 1916 zoning?

DIETHER: It said you couldn't build any buildings higher than three quarters the size of the street.

DEVRIES: And what would it have been under the new zoning?

DIETHER: Well the new zoning was about the same but it wouldn't have gone into effect for two years after it passed.

DEVRIES: And were there many upset developers when they realized?

DIETHER: There were over 100 buildings planned for the Village. Most of them the plans had not been filed yet. You know, places where the tenants had already

heard that the landlord was going to be putting them out because he was putting up a new building and so forth. We chased down all those sites and we found there was over 100 new buildings planned for the Village. We put a big sign up in front of one of the new buildings saying, “This is what’s planned. 100 new buildings like this.”

DEVRIES: And that caught people’s attention, I’m sure.

DIETHER: Yeah, that kind of thing they can understand. So we said you can’t build a building higher than three quarters the width of the street. Well, most of the streets are 60 feet so a 45 foot building [would be the tallest they could build].

DEVRIES: Right. And who put that zoning amendment together? You and who else?

DIETHER: Some of the architects we were working with. Then we presented it to the city and went down and campaigned for it. We got it passed. ‘cause nobody was paying much attention to us. They were busy concentrating on the big picture; citywide zoning and where they had substantial properties. Most of the properties in the Village that some of the developers had were not *the* major part of their development plan. They were concentrating on the overall picture rather than the crazy little things that we were doing down here. So that cut about 75 buildings out right there.

DEVRIES: So that was a substantial victory. Were they mostly residential high-rise construction?

DIETHER: Yeah. Pretty flimsy construction, as we discovered on some of them.

DEVRIES: I have a list of names that I would like to ask you about. Well, we talked about Arnold Bergier. Now he was the president for just the first few years of Save the Village?

DIETHER: Yeah.

DEVRIES: And Charles McGuiness?

DIETHER: He was a politician, and he was a lawyer in insurance I think. He lived on 8th Street, I think he still does live on 8th Street. He was in for one year. He was mostly using it as a stepping stone to higher office but he didn't make it.

DEVRIES: And Alan. We've talked about Alan Marcus. One name that has come up: Diane Bishop. I have here as a secretary.

DIETHER: Yeah, she was a secretary. She belonged to the church next door, the Christian Science Church. She was a very nice woman, not very aggressive, rather shy and retiring. I understand she died. She was a good worker, she was just not very flamboyant, she tended to stay in the background. She preferred it there.

DEVRIES: Douglas Anderson?

DIETHER: Yeah, he was our treasurer and he was evicted, too. He was in one of the buildings on Charles Street and he was evicted. He and his wife moved up to Chelsea. He kept in touch for a while, I haven't heard from him in a long time. He was pretty good about working with people and organizing things. He organized most of parties and those kind of events. He liked social events so he did a lot of that.

DEVRIES: Did you have regular meetings, regular events in Save the Village?

DIETHER: Kind of catch as catch can. [Laughs] When something was going on, we had a meeting. A couple times we hired Greenwich House because we had big meetings. We tried to put together panels on some things.

DEVRIES: Right. You had a panel on zoning in 1961. Charles McGuinness was on the panel, and that's one reason why I came across his name. Was that just to try and get the community involved, to know what was going on?

DIETHER: Yeah. I always felt it was very important to keep people in the area involved, and get them working. I never handled a building where I went into the building and they said to me, "Well, fine, this is our problem, take care of it." I said, "That's not the way I work." I said, "We work together." I still do that with my cases. Like on the Tribeca thing, I had all those people down at the hearing yesterday. I talked to the people that I was working with and I said, "Bring people down to the hearing and this is what we're supposed to be saying, this is the line that we're taking." And so forth. We had quite a number of people writing letters and so forth. We had John Kennedy yesterday.

DEVRIES: Oh, really?

DIETHER: Yeah, John Kennedy came to the meeting.

DEVRIES: In opposition of the movie theater planned for Tribeca?

DIETHER: Yeah, he spoke against the theater. I believe that the more information you get out, the more people get involved, the more people get interested. Some people say, "Well, they're only interested in things on their own

block.” Well, that’s a start. I mean some people never get beyond that but there’s always a few people you can edge on to do a little more. I mean even on our Board we have some people who are just one or two issue people. Did you hear of Vera Schneider? The Christopher Street Garden? Well, she was the one who started that ‘cause she lived there and they had that triangle out in front of Sloan’s Supermarket. The garden there was originally a parking spot, you know, just a parking triangle. They opened up this drug place at One Sheridan Square.

DEVRIES: A drug rehab clinic?

DIETHER: No, nothing like that. It was called a Juice Bar. Have you ever heard of that term? It was called The Haven. The kids used to come on their motorcycles, rev up, park in that triangle, go in the juice bar and get all juiced up and come out and drive their motorcycles around in the street. There were all these Jersey cars parked in that triangle. She decided the best way to get rid of the drug traffic was to change the triangle into a garden. That was one of her big projects.

The only other project she was interested in was the Morton Street pier. The Morton Street pier was her pier and nobody was working on that pier without consulting Vera Schneider first. If you talked about anything else in the Village, she would be sitting there reading a book or looking at a magazine. She wasn’t interested. You mentioned Morton Street pier and she was up like a flash.

DEVRIES: Was this in the 1960s?

DIETHER: No, this was later than that.

DEVRIES: Did you find that one issue brought a lot of people to preservation?

DIETHER: Yeah.

DEVRIES: Did many people stick beyond that?

DIETHER: Some.

DEVRIES: Some? But many were just interested in one issue and once that was accomplished—

DIETHER: Or their block.... But, you know, you always get a few that you can hook onto, and I'm usually pretty good at hooking people, too. When I was head of the zoning committee, we had very interesting people on the zoning committee that I was kind of grooming.

DEVRIES: Was this the zoning committee of Save the Village?

DIETHER: Of the Community Board. And I had a number of people that I was kind of grooming, some of whom have gone on to other things now. Like Rick Landman is now at the Real Estate Department of NYU. [Laughs]

DEVRIES: Let's see, another name that I had. A couple of lawyers actually. It seems like Save the Village had a number of lawyers that volunteered for the cause. Carey Vennema was one.

DIETHER: Carey Vennema is still in the Village. I tried to get him interested. He went on the Community Board, and he got very disillusioned. He was only on the Community Board for a couple of years.

DEVRIES: Was Save the Village his first preservation effort?

DIETHER: Yeah, I think so, and he just couldn't deal with the Community Board. You know, the red tape and the personalities and so forth. So he went back to his legal practice and left the Community Board. I thought that was a big loss because he was quite a good lawyer, and he had lots of ideas. You could talk to him and throw ideas out and he would come up with other ideas. He's married and he's got three kids, I think, who are now grown up. They were little kids when he was with Save the Village.

DEVRIES: You had a number of lawyers for Save the Village. How were they drawn? Did one lawyer bring in another?

DIETHER: No. They were all from different parties. We had every political club in the Village. Yeah, we had Bill Passanante from DeSapio's club, we had Leon Braun from the Liberal Party, Jerry Ullman from the Republican Party. Who was the one from the VID? Ed Koch.

DEVRIES: Right. I have his name down. You mentioned Bill Passanante and DeSapio.... There's one issue that I've tried to understand—the whole DeSapio issue. It seemed there was a split between people who went with DeSapio and those who didn't, but I've never really understood the root of that argument or what the issue was that kind of divided people.

DIETHER: Well, DeSapio ran things his way, and he picked his candidates and so forth. He was a rather autocratic guy, and some of the younger people, younger politicians would like to get in to the thing. But he was having no part of them. They couldn't get in, so they started their own club.

DEVRIES: Which was?

DIETHER: The VID, Village Independent Democrats. When Save the Village started we said we're not going to get involved in politics so we invited both of them. [Laughs] Lawyers from both clubs. Prominent lawyers from both clubs and prominent lawyers from the other two parties. Leon Braun was running for State Senate at the time, I think. Ullman was running for something or other. They both kind of faded, they disappeared, I don't know where they went, but Passanante got elected.

[Break in recording]

DIETHER: So anyway, we solicited representatives from each club and said, "We want one of the lawyers from your club to come and work with us or you're gonna be left out." And nobody wanted to get left out. If there was something going on that was likely to get publicity, they all wanted to get in so we had all of them. We put all the names on the letterhead and we put all the names on all our court papers and so forth and sometimes one and sometimes another one would go into court for us. So we had this illustrious group of lawyers supposedly on retainer. [Laughs]

DEVRIES: And they all just wanted their names in the paper?

DIETHER: Yes, but we said, "There's no problem with you getting credit as long as you work." Ed Koch handled the final agreement on 40-42 MacDougal Street. When we made the final arrangements on that. It was funny because he really didn't know all the background. We went before the judge and it was these technical questions like, "Exactly what has to be done in this apartment? What has to be done in that apartment?" The first time I went up with him and the judge said, "You're not supposed to be up here, you're not a lawyer, go sit down." So, I went and sat down, and then every time that he asked Ed a question, Ed would have to come back and ask me. Finally the judge said, "Look, you're taking up too much time!

Why don't you just come up and sit with him!" [Laughs] So I ended up sitting at the desk anyway. We had this whole list of complaints on each apartment and what had to be done. Which apartment needed the electricity changed—

DEVRIES: And some of them had been without heat for so long, right?

DIETHER: Yeah, and then there was broken windows, a whole slew of things. We had each apartment on a separate sheet of what had to be done in that apartment. Schulman was funny because Schulman lied all the time. He came in and said that they had been working on the roof of the building. We said, "Well, the roof is still leaking. When were you people working on it?" He said, "Oh, well. I have the dates right here" and he pulled out the dates. So before the next hearing I ran down to the weather bureau and discovered that one of the days they were supposedly working on the building we had a hurricane. [Laughs] Next time we came to court we said, "Well, we don't really think your men were working on the building when we had hurricane going!" [Laughs]

DEVRIES: You did your homework. I don't believe I would have thought of that, checking the weather bureau.

DIETHER: Well, I just wanted to see what the weather was like when they were supposedly working. I still do things like that. [Laughs]

DEVRIES: Let's see, another name I came across. He's not really involved with Save the Village. Raymond Rubinow.

DIETHER: Yeah, he was mostly with the park [Washington Square Park].

DEVRIES: Right, with the Joint Emergency Committee. But he's one of the people we don't really know much about. Like some of the others, was he someone that appeared for just one event?

DIETHER: The one who could probably give you some information on him is Shirley Hayes. Do you know Shirley Hayes?

DEVRIES: Right. She's one of the originals. There were a number of people like Douglas Anderson and so forth that we come across their name but don't know how involved they were or if they went on to fight something else.

DIETHER: Not that I know of. What else do you have on your list?

DEVRIES: That's actually all that I have. But I have a question. You were talking about the VID. When you first came onto the Community Board 2, weren't you also working for VID Housing Committee? Actually you're Republican, right? How did that come about?

DIETHER: They didn't have anybody else who knew that much about housing. They needed somebody who had the connections with the Italian community, because the VID was trying to infiltrate—that was DeSapio's territory, the South Village. They had not been able to get a headway in there, and they knew I had. So they put me in charge of their housing committee. But their housing committee didn't run too well, so that didn't last too long. It wasn't that I couldn't get the people, it was that they [the VID] weren't really interested in following through. They just wanted the votes, whereas when we were working on the buildings on Downing Street we actually got the politicians in there to paint one of the apartments to shame the city into the fact that the apartments hadn't been painted for years. We had Carol Greitzer painting the walls. [Laughs]

DEVRIES: That was when they were going to put a street [Verrazano Street] through and demolish a number of the buildings near Downing Street? They were all city properties, right, that were in horrible condition, weren't they?

DIETHER: The city had bought them years before to put the street through and never put the street through.

DEVRIES: They just let them decay thinking eventually they'll put the street through?

DIETHER: Yeah. So some of the tenants contacted me and we went to work on those buildings.

DEVRIES: And that was Save the Village?

DIETHER: Yeah. We had all sorts of stories about the city as a slum landlord.

DEVRIES: And that brought the politicians out?

DIETHER: Yes. We had rallies in Sheridan Square. Ed Flanagan was one of the ones who spoke at the rally.

DEVRIES: And who was that?

DIETHER: He was a politician, too. He was with Humphrey, Hubert Humphrey, and he was with VID. He was another flash in the pan. He lasted for two or three years and disappeared. He was with VID at the time, he spoke at Sheridan Square. We had the mayor down. The mayor was not happy [laughs] about being brought

down to Sheridan Square for a rally about Verrazano Street and the fact that the city was a slum landlord. We got the buildings cleaned up though.

We did things like that. We would ask the politicians to come down and help us paint. The politicians, of course, would call the press and say “I’m going to be painting this building—”

DEVRIES: “Come take a picture of me“

DIETHER: Yeah, right. So lot of times we used their press connections. You know, if you got them involved then they would get the press in, because they wanted the publicity, and they’d talk about us, too. You know, “They are painting the apartments because Save the Village” etcetera. So we got publicity, too. As I said, I was great on publicity.

DEVRIES: You mentioned VID was trying to go into the South Village and take it away from DeSapio. How did that play out?

DIETHER: Eventually, yeah, DeSapio lost. The first time they ran against him, they lost. DeSapio won by a narrow margin and the second time, they beat him. Part of that was the fact that we could show that DeSapio wasn’t really looking out for the interests of the people down there. That was when I marched into DeSapio’s club with the Italian women.

DEVRIES: Sounds like a good story.

DIETHER: Yeah, he had a club on Seventh Avenue called Tamawa Club. We knew he was there on a certain night of the week ‘cause they had meetings and he would be there. I had this group of Italian tenants from MacDougal Street and King Street, so forth, in that area; there were several buildings. And they had been

trying to get DeSapio to do something. They had been getting a lot of help from us, but not help from their political leader. They were not about to go to VID, because they didn't know anybody at VID. Tamawa was their club. It was mostly a male club by the way; most of the people there were males. So one evening when we knew he was gonna be there, I went down with about four or five Italian women. We marched into the club. They tried to stop us and, of course, me I just went bullying right through.

[End of Tape, Side 1]

DIETHER: He [DeSapio] was standing in the middle of the room and I said, "These are your constituents. What are you gonna to do for them?" He said, "Uh, we have a lawyer here that works with tenants" and I said "Really? Who?" He said his name was Lester Fabricant. I said, "Yeah, we know exactly how he works 'cause we get all the cases he louses up." They tried to hustle us out, but the Italian women could not get him to answer. That was the best answer they could get out of him, and the Italian women, a lot of them had dealt with Fabricant and gotten these, "Oh, well, you really can't do anything about the situation, you might as well move. We'll get you a cash settlement to get out, etc." but not "We're going to keep you in your building." So, after that the VID did much better. [Laughs]

DEVRIES: They spread the word to the other residents?

DIETHER: Yeah.

DEVRIES: You really had to learn to deal with politicians when you were in Save the Village and obviously when you got to Community Board 2.

DIETHER: Well, politicians, I've never been in awe of politicians. Most of them I know pretty well, having met them earlier before they got to be big politicians. Like Ed Koch got to be mayor. But I knew him when he was still running for district leader. So, I was not in awe of him as the mayor. And most of the other politicians, too. But DeSapio was funny, he had a little tic when he got excited or nervous, this little tic would start.

DEVRIES: Was that why he always wore sunglasses?

DIETHER: Yeah. So that night when we walked into his club he got the tic.
[Chuckles]

DEVRIES: I'm sure seeing a group of six women coming at him—

DIETHER: Yeah. As I said I was probably the smallest one in the group. Those Italian women tend to be big. Not fat necessarily but big. And they weren't about to be put out by these men—no way!

DEVRIES: I'm sure most of them had been living there for quite some time.

DIETHER: Oh, yeah. One woman had been there forty-five years or so. So DeSapio was always the guy that could fix the tickets, and take care of all the little problems and so forth. But the thing was that his lawyer obviously couldn't handle things like evictions, and he didn't have somebody else that he put in charge that could handle it. As a matter of fact, we weren't quite sure that they weren't making deals with some of the property owners to turn the properties over and get more affluent people in there. Actually, more affluent people wouldn't have helped DeSapio because they wouldn't have voted for DeSapio. He wouldn't have been

their kind of politician. So he really should have been working to keep these Italian people in the buildings.

Anyway, we had a couple run-ins with DeSapio. We had a run-in on Verrazano Street, too, where he said that he would work with the tenants on Verrazano Street if they didn't work with anybody else. They were not about to kick out everybody else that had been working with them, so the big headline in the paper, something about "DeSapio stays home!" He couldn't get his own way, so he stayed home. I guess we weren't very popular with DeSapio. And then Passanante switched over to the VID after awhile.

[Break in recording]

DEVRIES: I noticed in some of the articles about Passanante it was hard to tell which issue he was for or against because it seemed that he stood on—

DIETHER: Yeah, we got him to make a stand on our issues. [Laughs] No, he waited to see which way the wind was blowing. We have a lot of politicians like that, you know, wait to see which way the wind was blowing before they decide which way they're gonna jump. That always hits me like the cowardly way to go. I mean you either you do it or you don't do it.

DEVRIES: I think those are all the questions that I have on what I call your "Save the Village years" [laughs] and I certainly want to talk to you about Community Board 2 and politics in the Village, but maybe we'll save that for another time.

DIETHER: Okay.

DEVRIES: But if there's anything you wanted to—were there any other clippings you wanted to show me or anything I haven't seen?

[Diether pulls out her press book.]

DEVRIES: This is a wonderful press book.

DIETHER: Yeah, it starts out with this original letter. It was one of the earlier ones where I was mentioned by name, and then I got mentioned more regularly.

DEVRIES: Right. I notice you testifying and rallying.

DIETHER: Yeah. Sometimes my husband got into it. Not very often but sometimes. See, [points to a photo] there he is, Jack. That's my husband. 'cause I was working, so he went down.

DEVRIES: So he would rally when you couldn't?

DIETHER: Well, occasionally he would. He liked to go to parades and things like that. I kept getting mentioned. [Reads] "Chairman of the Group's Tenants Committee." We toured Mr. Schulman's properties in the Village. I'm sure he loved that.

[Points to a new document] This is one of the articles that Mary Nichols did. Yes, Mary Nichols did this but she used a different name.

DEVRIES: Really?

DIETHER: That's a name that is used by actors when they don't want to use their own name.

DEVRIES: Georgette Spelvin?

DIETHER: George Spelvin is usually for males. It's a pseudonym.

DEVRIES: Well, that's interesting. I'll have to go back over the articles that we have and look for that name. That's interesting, I never knew that.

DIETHER: [Points to a new document.] That was my AP Press release.

DEVRIES: With the pig.

DIETHER: I got that from somebody who worked for AP.... Here's my picture with the pig. This guy is the son of the woman who was the head of the 15 Sheridan Square tenants. Her name was Annette Kaufman. This was her son, who is now grown up, of course.

DEVRIES: That name sounds familiar, Annette Kaufman.

DIETHER: Yeah, she was involved with everything about 15 Sheridan Square.

DEVRIES: Now that one you were picketing with the pig, you were picketing—

DIETHER: Rockefeller's office on rent control....

[Points to a new document.] A membership drive we had, Arnold Bergier was still president. We wrote letters. This was one of the tenants on MacDougal Street. [Reads] "Doris Diether was the first to comment on urban renewal."

DEVRIES: This is over the tenants fighting?

DIETHER: No, this was on the zoning. This was the South Village thing where they were gonna do an urban renewal plan for the South Village.

DEVRIES: This was in '60, right?

DIETHER: [Reads:] "A middle income project to replace old buildings." I said, "Right now 15 building were getting the ax in the neighborhood and whatever replaces them will be too expensive for most of the evicted tenants."

DEVRIES: What ultimately stopped that?

DIETHER: Well, that urban renewal plan was a private one, and it kind of fizzled out when they couldn't get the buildings. But the West Village urban renewal plan which I was also peripherally involved with 'cause they got a group going and I said, "Well, if they've got a group going, let them handle it. " This is part of our Committee. [Reads:] "Among the legislators and citizens sending telegrams were Bill Passanante, Democratic State Assemblymen; Gerald Ullman, Republican candidate to State Assembly; John Lindsay, Republican Congressman; John Westergaard, candidate for State Senate."

DEVRIES: And you.

DIETHER: And me. [Laughs] Never got to be a politician.

DEVRIES: Did you ever want to run for office?

DIETHER: I did once. I was gonna run, not for a city office but I think for the Housing Department or something. They were gonna to run me, but there's so much money involved in running, and I didn't have that kind of money. I was Vice

President of Save the Village by this time. Around 1960. I think I was Vice-President under Charles McGuinness....

[Points to a photograph.] There's Diane Bishop and that's Douglas Anderson. That's Carey [Vennema].

DEVRIES: And Leon Brown was one of the lawyers also?

DIETHER: Yeah. And that was Charlie McGuinness. So that's the whole crew you were asking about. I'm sorry I don't have a better picture of that. That was my husband in the back.

My husband also picketed for the prostitutes in the Jefferson Market Jail.
[Laughs]

DEVRIES: Picketing for or against? [Laughs]

DIETHER: Probably "Save the Prostitutes." Every once in a while we got into strange pictures. They gave a course on pornography at the New School one year. The newspaper [*The Villager*] got me to come to the course. The first session they had I was sitting in the front row with my husband, and the photographer came and took pictures. There I was on the front page of the paper in the front row of a course on pornography. [Laughs] I was doing it for the paper.

DEVRIES: When did you start doing articles for the paper?

DIETHER: In '73.

DEVRIES: That was while you were on Community Board 2?

DIETHER: Yeah, I have been on the Community Board 2 since '64. [Reads:] "There's no Starring Role, DeSapio stays Home." That was when he didn't show because he didn't like the fact that he was not gonna be the start of the show..

[Points to another photograph.] Here are our Happy Warriors. That's Mr. and Mrs. Castore. Unfortunately, I didn't get in a lot of the pictures because I was not there. I was working.... We had Lefkowitz down here. We got the politicians down here. They wouldn't let him into Washington Square Park with a sound truck. That was because he was running against the administration.

[Points to another photograph] That was me when I got a plaque. That was when they were gonna put me up for New York City Housing Administrator. There was a vacancy and the VID was going to put me up.

DEVRIES: And they did or they didn't?

DIETHER: They didn't finally. I don't remember why, whether it was money or what, but anyway, shortly after that I became head of Save the Village.... [Reads:] "The fourteen points brought up by Save the Village Committee at the City Council on the rent control bill were the following . . ." " There were fourteen points, just on rent control.

DEVRIES: Did we ever come up with the fourth point of Save the Village?

DIETHER: No, not yet. [Points to another article.] This was my contact with e.e. cummings. I got a phone call from his wife saying that they had a problem. She didn't tell me his name, she gave me her name and she had a different name than him, she had a professional name. She asked me if I could come over and discuss the problem. So I went over to talk to them. Of course, he didn't come down for the first meeting, he stayed upstairs and she told me about this problem they were having. They had two apartments.

DEVRIES: This was in Patchin Place?

DIETHER: In Patchin Place. The landlord wanted to put in an extra kitchen and bathroom 'cause he said it was two apartments and each apartment should have its own kitchen and bathroom. Of course, they were using both floors and they didn't really want another kitchen and bathroom. Legally, he had the right to do it. That was the problem. You know, sometimes you have to figure out, well, yeah, he had the legal right to do it, but does he have the moral right to do it.

I told her that the only way to fight this was to take it to the press. He [cummings] hated publicity, he absolutely hated publicity. Finally, he agreed and we took it to the press. Every paper in the city covered it. Of course, the mayor made a special dispensation that the landlord couldn't touch his [cummings'] apartment as long as he and his wife lived there.

DEVRIES: Did you get a lot of calls from people who had problems and heard about you from others?

DIETHER: Yeah, still do. [Laughs] I had a call from somebody from Houston Street the other night that I had dealt with 20 years ago. She's having a problem with a new landlord, and she called me up and said she needed some help. So I referred her to a couple of different people, you know, who to contact and so forth, but she remembers me from 20 years ago. She's still giving my name around.
[Laughs]

[Points to another article.] That was in Washington Square Park and GVA had a meeting. GVA kind of faded out. The Greenwich Village Association.

DEVRIES: What was its purpose?

DIETHER: It was a community group like the Washington Square Association, and it was supposed to be working on Village issues and so forth. Sometimes it was very active and other times it fell through. They made a couple of wrong decisions. They backed, for instance, the idea of urban renewal and of tearing down SoHo to put up a housing project, and things like that. And a couple of wrong decisions like that by a major organization.... So they just kind of disappeared.

When I started writing for the paper, I sometimes did articles on community issues also. I did a series of articles on the city charter.

DEVRIES: Was this for the *Voice* or the *Villager*?

DIETHER: The *Villager*. And I did some articles on the Little Italy zoning, trying to put things into perspective so that people could understand them. I did three articles on Little Italy and I think it was three articles also on the city charter.

[Points to another article.] Here's Patchin Milligan. Somehow or other that little section of Sixth Avenue got zoned incorrectly and was zoned for high rise buildings. Of course Patchin-Milligan Place are little two story, three story buildings. The guy who owned the property decided to make a deal with a bank down here that used to be on Sixth Avenue. It's now Emigrant, but it used to have another name.

The president of that and a real estate company and the owner of the property got together and they were gonna to put an 18 story building where Patchin and Milligan Place are. The zoning called for that. We found out what their plans were before they filed them and we filed an application to amend the zoning and reduce the zoning on that section.

DEVRIES: Just on that section?

DIETHER: Yes. It was about a two block section between 12th and 13th Streets, and it came down as far as 8th Street. Anyway, we put in a proposal to rezone it. We got to the City Planning Commission before they found out about it and then when we got to the Board of Estimate they brought down their troops and they tried to kill it at the Board of Estimate. They got one guy to vote against it, and you needed a unanimous vote. They got one guy to vote against it and it happened that he was the Republican on the Board of Estimate. I think he was Borough President of the Bronx at the time. He was the only Republican on the Board of Estimate, and we got the whole Republican organization to sit on him. I was a Republican, Carey Vennema was a Republican, and, of course, McNeil Mitchell was a Republican. We got everyone we could think of who was a Republican who had any clout at all to sit on this poor guy. We brought it up again ten days later and got it passed. [Laughs] He made a minor modification and then it was fine. We got it passed because everyone sat on him. We brought all sorts of pressure on him to save Patchin and Milligan Place. He finally decided that he had voted wrong.

Of course, everyone else had voted the other way 'cause they made deals like this. I don't know if you're aware of it but at the Board of Estimate if something comes up in Manhattan and the Borough President of Manhattan can't afford to vote against it because it would be politically suicide, he'll make a deal with one of the other Borough Presidents to vote against it. Then he can say "Oh, I tried, I tried and I tried and he insisted on voting against it and we didn't have enough votes to carry it." We were aware of this and apparently they had picked this guy from the Bronx. They had picked the wrong guy to vote against the thing. They didn't really want it either, but they couldn't afford to vote against it because it was politically a hot issue. So, anyway, we got the vote reversed. It was on my birthday, January 10th, that they reversed the vote. That was a nice birthday present.

But that was one of the problems with the Board of Estimate. The new City Council has other problems. The City Council is so big you don't know who to contact.

DEVRIES: So it's larger than the Board of Estimate was?

DIETHER: The Board of Estimate had the five Borough Presidents, the Mayor, the Comptroller and the President of the City Council. Only eight members.

DEVRIES: And how many are now on the City Council?

DIETHER: Fifty something. So you can't put together a coalition to fight something. It's much harder and of course one person, like Councilman Freed or Councilman Duane can get sat on because they don't control a big enough block to be able to really wield some power unless they make a deal with somebody. "I'll vote for this and you vote for that." They don't have the same kind of power as the Board of Estimate had.

DEVRIES: When did that change over?

DIETHER: Not too long ago, about five years ago. I knew it was gonna be a disaster. You just don't have anybody who is accountable. The Borough President doesn't have a vote on a lot of these things now. Everything goes to the City Council rather than to the Board of Estimate on which the Borough President had a predominant vote. I didn't think that was gonna work....

[Points to another article.] See again, we got coverage. Morningside. Yeah, they called me up from Morningside to address an open meeting of the Morningsiders United who were fighting Columbia University and they wanted to know how to do things. So I was up there. I occasionally get calls from other areas.

[Points to a new article.] This is anti-Nathan's. That was a zoning change that I had advocated in 1964, '65. In 1969 we still hadn't gotten it passed. We finally got it passed later. I started advocating that in '64 because I realized the

zoning was wrong on 8th Street. Sometimes you could spot the places where the zoning was wrong. Actually, I think I personally changed the zoning on 3rd Street. It used to be all strip joints on Third Street. Then when the zoning proposals were being discussed we all put in statements, and I put in a statement that 3rd Street was zoned incorrectly 'cause it was zoned for entertainment. I said it was a very narrow street right next to a university, you've got students from the university, plus students from the different schools all these strip joints were lining the street. I didn't think it was appropriate for that narrow street. If they're going to have that kind of place it should be on Sixth Avenue, where people are able to see what's going on rather than a little narrow street. They changed the zoning on 3rd Street. Soon people were saying to me "How come they changed the zoning on 3rd Street?" [Laughs] They agreed with me that it was the wrong zoning.

[Points to another article.] This is NYU again. 1970 already.

DEVRIES: Why don't we stop at '70 because next time we talk we can pick up with the Community Board and politics. I'm also going to go over what we talked about today and see if they're any questions and see if we need to backtrack....

[End of Interview]