

Marvin Anderson
Narrator

Carly Avezano
Macalester College
Interviewer

March 5, 2016
At the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center
St. Paul, MN

MA: Are you an interviewer?

CA: I've done one interview before. I'm Carly.

MA: Hi Carly.

CA: So could you please state your name and when and where you were born?

MA: Marvin Anderson and I was born here in St. Paul, Minnesota.

CA: And what year were you born in?

MA: I was born March 5, 1940. Today's my birthday.

CA: Oh! Happy Birthday. So where in Rondo do or did you live?

MA: I lived in two places. My first home was at 775 Iglehart. It was a duplex and we lived on the bottom. Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell lived on the top. I was there until 1947 when my father and my godfather and two other gentlemen got a loan from the Federal Housing Administration and they built 12 side by side units at 989 and 995 Rondo. My father and my mother they were the on-site managers so we lived in one of the units there. The units were labelled A, B, C, D, E on both sides and we lived in the D unit. So from 1947 until 1948 until 1968 I lived at 989 Rondo Unit D. I left there when I went away to college in 1958. Those units were taken by the Highway Department for the construction of I-94. We were left in around 1959, I was away at college in 1958, so my mother and my father had to be out of the unit around 1959, 1960. Those units remained standing, empty for nine years and then at the end of the ninth year at around 1970 we thought they were going to be destroyed because at this time my father was the sole owner of the units. He was told that those units did not deserve a higher valuation because they were not built solidly enough to deserve a higher valuation. My father insisted that the units that they built were

as sturdy as any building that could be built with concrete. They fought that valuation, at least four times they lost and then the state purchased the units and my father and my mother moved to Maplewood. About nine years later they were still standing.

The state came in and they sawed these units in twos, in threes, and in fours and moved them throughout the city of St. Paul and they're still standing to this day. I have pictures I can show you of where the units are located. The units that got a poor valuation from the state and that valuation was the reason that people like myself were so disappointed and so angry at the way the residents of Rondo were treated when I-94 came through. That's been a part of my history for an awful long time until last July, July 17th 2015. When we gathered, we asked all of the people that had bad memories of Rondo to come to a reconciliation ceremony. We all took a piece of paper and we got a big pot and we burned our hatred and our disappointment and our anger to usher in a new day of Rondo. I carried that memory for a long time but now it's no longer a memory that causes me any anger but it's a good memory that we need to teach people what can happen when they're not organized. When they're not united against something like the freeway or something like an ecological disaster, something like Flint in Michigan. These things still happen to this day and it's up to the citizens to be aware that it can happen and it's up to us to be prepared for this sort of thing. The story of Rondo, which I am proud to be a part of as one of the founders of the Rondo celebration, is to teach that story to kids, to students. To let them know that the history of Rondo can be repeated today unless they're aware of that possibility, unless they're willing to stand up and fight and have your facts right and be vigilant and be prepared to stop government when it takes actions that are contrary to the ecosystem of a community. That's what Rondo stands for.

I don't know if you remember the Green Line controversy. When the Green Line was originally planned it was supposed to go from downtown Minneapolis to downtown St. Paul in 47 minutes. That was the way it was sold. In order to do that 47 minute trip it had to go from Lexington Avenue to Rice Street. If it went from Lexington to Rice Street there would not be a stop at Hamline, at Victoria, and at Westren. The people who would use public transportation, the elderly, the poor, the disabled, the minorities were on those three stops that were not going to be planned. There was a community gathering and someone said the Green Line will not be another Rondo. That was the rallying cry and for the first time in my memory Asian, African American, Somali, Hispanic, poor, disabled, lower class, middle class people who depended upon public transportation formed a coalition, a solid coalition, and three stops were added to the Green Line. That's what Rondo stands for today.

When the freeway came through we like to tell the story that the downtown business people hated the freeway in its present location, Rondo hated its present location. The downtown business men were against it, the Downtown Business Council, because it was going to build a Sears building, there's this huge Sears building, that was going to take away all of the business that would ordinarily go downtown during the workday. Rondo was against it, Prospect Park was

against it, and there was one other community. All of us were just like this [Gestures with separate fingers]. They had their reason, they had their reason, they had their reason. What I tell students now, if they would have gone like that [Makes a fist] instead of having been separate they maybe would have had a chance to get the Northern route which is an alternative route. Which would not have gone through downtown, which would not have gone through Rondo, which would not have gone through Pollum Park and it would have gone along an abandoned railroad line. No people, no businesses, no homes, no destruction of a seventy year old community but we weren't organized. We weren't together [Makes a fist]. When communities are not together, when they can separate - we call it sorting now. When communities are sorted, when the blacks live there and the Mexicans live there, and they live there. When they sort communities, we lose so much as a nation. It's only when communities come together, will it work. And that's why we tell the story of Rondo. That's why the story of Rondo is so important to us. To me, and to others who are trying to tell it. And we tell the story of Rondo through this harvest so that people know what can be lost. So they they don't have to suffer what Rondo suffered, all the memories, all the things we're doing here today. And they are just recalling a life that was taken away from them and it's a good feeling to see it again. But it's more of a warning that your community can be next and you'll have to do what we're doing. And no community should have to do that if there are reasonable alternatives to particular action that they're proposing.

If communities act in concert, and communities act together, you can force government to make a reasonable alternative action than one that is just going to wipe out a community or just bulldoze their way because they have to do what they call the path of least resistance. So that's something we believe in and that's something we feel we have to share in any way that we can. We share our memories of Rondo as a warning to other people that they shouldn't have to go through this. We share our memories because it's nice to remember. It was a community. It was a great community. It was a warm community and we miss it.

CA: What is your favorite memory of Rondo?

MA: I remember we had a thing in Rondo called the Hallie Q. Brown Center, it was a community center. The Hallie Q. Brown Center was a daycare center, it was teen center and a young adult center. I remember going through that whole process. My sister has gone through it. My brother had gone through it and I remember them coming home and being so excited. I was the family baby and then I had the chance to live the same things: the acting class, the chess club, the snow day dance, playing on the midget and the peewee football teams, playing on the basketball teams, going on the powwow--they called it a powwow, going on the hay rides. Your first date, your first snow dance, your first girlfriend all came out of Hallie. The people who worked at Hallie Q. Brown all gave us an opportunity to dream beyond Rondo. Rondo was great place but they always encouraged us to just read and be more than what Rondo could give you because they saw limitations in Rondo.

It was there in Hallie Q. Brown, through one of the instructors, that I first heard a foreign language being spoken. Somebody was speaking French. And I had no idea what the language was and they said you can learn that too. You can speak French. And I had never even considered speaking a foreign language before and that just stayed with me until I learned how to speak French years later. Years later, but I think what Rondo gave me and Hallie Q. Brown in particular gave me was a spark. It's like a pilot light, you can turn it on and go with it or just stay. They gave you enough to live, but if you heard what they were saying through these instructors and the relationships they had with us, they could give you spark to go as far as you wanted to go educationally or athletically. They had Home Economics classes and you could learn how to cook there. They prepared you for whatever life you wanted to live. That is one of the things that we don't have now in our community and I think that's a big loss. Kids don't know how to prepare themselves for life. You can't always get it at home and there was no way we could of got that in Rondo but we had a place that everybody trusted. My parents could drop us off there on Saturday morning and know we would come back at 5 o'clock and we would not jus bet watching TV. We would have been doing something, reading, writing the newspaper; we would have been doing something to keep us active. That's one of my best memories of growing up in Rondo, that community center: Hallie Q. Brown.

CA: Did you also attend church?

MA: Yes, that was another big influence. St. James AME church, that's a very big influence in my life: sunday school and the summer bible camp and the big, community meals. There were a lot of cooks in Rondo that worked on the railroad and so all the churches would have cooks. They would do these magnificent dinners after church on Sunday. Our cooks would cook up these great meals and you'd go to church and then come downstairs and have your church dinner. It was just fantastic. And the Union Hall was a big influence on our life. The waiter's union and the porter's union would host things for us to do. So all these organizations were always trying to improve their lot by creating a society that, we, in my generation, could go beyond because they knew that the railroads weren't going to last forever. They knew that so they wanted us to prepare for that day when the railroads weren't going to be our source of income. It was their source of income. So we go a lot of that "be ready for that, be prepared for that. Get your education." That was another big influence; get educated because one day this is not going to be here. I think if you talk to anyone from Rondo from my generation that came up in the 40's and 50's, they'll tell you we were prepared for what was going to happen but we were not prepared for the freeway to take it away before it was done. That was the wild card that prevented us from having a physical connection from the community. The physicalness was really necessary because it was an integral part of Rondo, that little space that was ours.

CA: I know the mayor recently issued an apology. What are your thoughts on that?

MA: Well, just the apology alone wasn't enough. We did this in conjunction with the mayor. Our reconciliation for forgiving and accepting was all done at one day. We forgave and they apologized. The mayor did something later one last year, that for our particular purposes, we wanted to build a commemorative plaza for Rondo. We wanted to build a permanent marker on this lot that we found and we would not have been able to do it without the mayor recommending that we would be given a substantial sum of money. We had to apply it. The mayor said that if you win it, I'll approve it. So we had to apply for it and we had to go through three public hearings and our proposal to build a plaza was rated high enough so that if the mayor decided to give us the money..well it's not even the mayor's money, it's the federal government's money but the mayor said if you go through that process, I'll recommend that you receive funding and he did. On June 1st, 2016, we'll break ground on the Rondo commemorative plaza which will be a way to bring all the memories and commemorate it once and for all.

CA: Any last comments?

MA: My comment is to keep doing this. That's my comment. Keep Rondo in mind as an example, as a symbol of a united community. That's something that really has to come through. It's a symbol of what happens when a community is disjointed and has been sorted. We have to unsort the community and blend it together. If it happens in Rondo it can happen in Highland. It just hasn't happened yet. It can happen in Mac Groveland. It can happen anywhere. The reason they pick on poor communities is because they know there is some disunity there. So now we've formed some coalitions here within the Frogtown Summit-University area and we're in the process now of trying to teach this message to kids. It's our hope that the Rondo commemorative plaza will be able to convey this message in a way that they can understand. That's my final thought.