

# JEWISH LEDGER

AN INDEPENDENT WEEKLY NEWSPAPER SINCE 1929

---

## JHS oral history project will document Hartford's North End

By Sujata Srinivasan

Published: Tuesday, May 1, 2007 5:10 PM EDT

There was a time when the doors to the homes in Hartford's North End remained unlocked and young children roamed freely in the neighborhood without fear.

"We had a very pleasant life and it was an atmosphere of togetherness. There was little or no crime or racial intolerance," recalls 73-year-old Barry Gordon, a former teacher in Hartford and currently a resident of Bloomfield, who was born and raised off Blue Hills Avenue in the North End. "No one cared if you were Jewish or Christian, or black or white or orange," he says.

"There was no drinking or drugs. My generation was all about playing pranks," recalls Gordon of his childhood in a neighborhood where "most residents struggled to make a living."

Yet, there was lots of fun. He frequented the soda fountain at Maxwell Drug Store and played everyday in Keney Park. Though an only child "My parents got married during the Depression and couldn't afford to have more than one kid" n Gordon had plenty of company. His "gang" consisting of neighborhood kids raided fruit trees in people's backyards while an angry, stick-brandishing owner called the police.

"We sat on top of the tree eating fruit while waiting for the policeman to come and get out of his car before we started to run because we knew the police was slow!"

There were historic moments as well. Gordon remembers a Martha Raye performance at the State Theater that was interrupted with the announcement of the bombing at Pearl Harbor, the arrival of Holocaust survivors around 1948 to the North End, and his participation, at the age of 12, in a Zionist rally at Bond Hotel that supported the creation of Israel.

Gordon's recollections are part of an oral history project by the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford, which is in the process of documenting the lives of Jews in Hartford's North End between 1930 and late 1960. Gordon was among 14 participants at the first focus group interview conducted at the Society's premises in West Hartford last week.

"We have around 400 oral histories [of Jewish people], but not of the North End community. This is a big and exciting project for us," says Estelle Kafer, executive director. Sharon Yusba Steinberg, librarian at The Connecticut Historical Society, adds that this project will throw some light on the movement of the Jewish people in the North End from economic difficulty to economic success.

Kafer says a partial grant of \$20,000 from the Jewish Community Foundation will help finance a documentary film, a book on the memories and shared experiences of these residents, and a tour of the neighborhoods for the general public. The project is expected to be completed within a year and will include both focus group and one-on-one interviews at the homes of individuals who may not be able to commute to these sessions. The narratives will span across four perspectives: education, entertainment, worship and shopping.

SUBHEAD: Families valued education

Arthur Nassau, 72, a lawyer at Avon, was born and raised on Edgewood and Vine Streets.

"We had a very mixed neighborhood. I had Greek, Irish and Italian friends," he recalls. But in school, the environment was predominantly Christian and Christmas carols were compulsory. So he "mumbled the words when singing about Jesus." Nassau says most Jewish families in the North End highly valued education. His grandfather, who owned a grocery store in Hartford, managed to educate his father and uncles in law at Yale University.

Windsor-based Susan Juster, 67, formerly an ombudsman for the state of Connecticut's elderly protective services, was born and raised on Kent Street. "Everybody lived in multi-family dwellings. But as they did better, people moved to upper Blue Hills to nice private homes. We all used public transportation and went around by ourselves as children because it was safe," she says. "People didn't isolate into religious groups. We were invited to Christmas dinner by a French Canadian family who lived next door."

Juster vividly recalls the exodus of Jews from the North End starting in the fifties to private homes in West Hartford, Bloomfield and Newington, on the wings of economic prosperity. Her family relocated to West Hartford when she was 13, "but I held on to all my old relationships," she says.

Juster, who put together the first focus group, urges people to pick up their pens or head to their keyboards. "If you are from the North End, start writing. We need your stories."

Sujata Srinivasan is a freelance writer in the Hartford area.

Comments? Email [editorial@jewishledger.com](mailto:editorial@jewishledger.com)