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"Public Housing for the Elderly in Portland (Interview Two)"

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Gene Rossman

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Julia G. Johnson (JJ), Gene Rossman (GR)
“Public housing for the Elderly in Portland (Interview Two)”
Portland State University
April 10, 1963

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JULIA JOHNSON: Two weeks ago, our guest was Gene Rossman, executive director of the Housing Authority of Portland, and we're very pleased that Mr. Rossman could come back today. Two weeks ago we talked about general problems and public housing in Portland. Today, Gene, we'd like to ask you specifically about what the Portland Housing Authority is doing in the way of housing for elderly people. You mentioned, two weeks ago, that you now have two units, I believe, that are supplying a minimum of the needs for older people. Is this right?

GENE ROSSMAN: That's right.

JJ: And could we start... you also mentioned two weeks ago your survey that showed how many people do need low-rent housing. How about starting right there, and your telling us what you are now doing and what you're planning.

GR: Fine. Well, we presently house approximately 160 households of elderly people. These are distributed pretty generally amongst our 5 existing housing projects in the city; we have, however, one project at Royal Rose Court Apartments that is a 36-unit court, a very attractive little place which is adapted solely to the housing of elderly people. We are in the process, of course, of building this Northwest Tower that has been receiving quite a bit of a favorable comment. We started on this as soon as the need was definitely established through our surveys, some two years ago, and the first thing we did, our board of commissioners instructed

us to proceed rapidly with the preliminary planning for this project. And a Citizens' Advisory Committee composed of knowledgeable people, familiar with the problems of the elderly and representing a variety of local public and private agencies and organizations, was appointed under the guidance of Mary Haight of the Portland Community Council, and it began a two-pronged study to determine, first, recommended design details to be incorporated into the new structure, and secondly, the advisability of developing an integrated community service center into the project. These were the two things that this Advisory Committee worked on and within six months they came up with some very interesting answers which they submitted to our board for consideration, and our board accepted their recommendations. And that's how the project got off the ground, actually.

JJ: I think the Citizens' Advisory Committee is very important, and you needn't name them by name, but could you give us an idea of some of the areas that they represented. Now, we have Mary Haight from the Community Council...

GR: Oh, the Welfare Commission was represented, the... we had representatives from Willamette View Manor and other existing projects for the elderly, who could contribute certain ideas that we would need in the way of design details that have proven successful in private development. And we had the health services, the U.S. and city health services represented, and... well, there was... we had a couple of experts in—I never can pronounce it right—in gerontology?

JJ: Yes, that's right.

GR: Is that right? And...

JJ: Recreation?

GR: Recreation-wise, we had the city Parks Department here in Portland and also the Jewish Community Center, and Friendly House people, and other settlements that had experience in dealing with elderly people by providing them community services and counseling services of various kinds.

JJ: And you drew on their experience as you planned the design of your new building. And this is a high apartment house, is it not?

GR: That's right.

JJ: For the elderly. Where is it, where will it be located?

GR: Well, it is already located...

JJ: [*chuckles*] Yes, I...

GR: ...Julia, in fact it's up all 13 stories, now. It's on Northwest 19th Avenue in Portland, between Everett and Flanders, and this is right in the heart of "the Bible Belt," we call it. Across the street, across Everett from this new building, is the Trinity Episcopal Church; across the street on 19th is the First Church of Christ Scientist, across Flanders Street is Temple Beth Israel, and there are five other churches within two blocks of this site. It's regarded as one of the most ideal sites in the whole nation for a project of this kind, housing for the elderly.

JJ: And it is not very far from the downtown area.

GR: Almost within walking distance, but a bus will pass directly by the front of the building.

JJ: Good.

GR: It's close to shopping centers and clinics, very close to the two largest hospitals in the city of Portland.

JJ: Now, what will be the price range for these apartments?

GR:... Well, the rental is... all rentals in public housing are based upon gross family income. The minimum rental that we charge, and this includes utilities, is \$25 a month, and that would normally be the rental that would be charged to elderly people whose incomes are less than \$100 a month. We anticipate the average rental in this apartment house, when completed, Northwest Tower will be probably in the neighborhood of \$38 to \$39 a month. There will be some who, because of their incomes, will be required to pay \$45, \$47, \$48 a month, but the average should be around \$38.

JJ: How many units in the building?

GR: We have 150 units for the elderly and these are distributed on 13 floors, and at the south end of each floor... at the end of the main hall on each floor is a solarium for the use of the people on that floor, and I might add that this is the first and only instance so far in public housing, where a local Housing Authority has been permitted by the Public Housing

Administration to provide such a facility as a solarium on each floor. But this is done because these people will be in rather cramped quarters in their units, and we feel that they need this extra area to expand in, and it's a nice feature to have for them. Now, I must say that in addition to these 150 units for the elderly, there's another little building, 3 stories, adjacent to this 13-story building which will house small families with preschool children. Now, it's anticipated most of the most of these 30 tenants will be the heads of houses... where the head of the house will be a student at the University of Oregon medical or dental school.

JJ: Is this required? Must he be a student or...

GR: Nope, no, but we do have at the present time some 60 of these students that are housed with their small families way out in Columbia Villa and Dekum Court and our other remote projects, but this will be so much closer to the medical school that I... and also to Portland State. Many of our tenants are from Portland State, that we feel that there'll be a great demand and we try to put people in the projects they wish to go into when they apply for housing to us.

JJ: How... what is the size of the units in Northwest Tower? Now, I don't want floor space, but are they all going to be one room, or will there be some with a bedroom? And I'm assuming they all have a kitchen, is this right?

GR: Oh, yes. Yes, the size of half of the 150 units are what we refer to as "efficiency units," in which the bed is included in the living room. The other half are one-bedroom units. Now, they will be given primarily to elderly couples, but there will be some instances where an elderly person will be permitted to live in a unit with one-bedroom. Every unit has a kitchen, and all kitchens are supplied with new electric refrigerators and ranges; otherwise the household goods and the... must be supplied by the tenant.

JJ: No other furnishings except the range and refrigerator.

GR: That's right.

JJ: Will there be washing facil... laundry facilities in the building?

GR: That's right. There will be floors in which there will be laundry facilities that may be used by the tenants. They'll be the metered type, and I might also say that there'll be electric garbage disposal in each of the apartments in this project, which is another first for Portland, this has never been done before.

JJ: In each apartment?

GR: That's right.

JJ: Mmm. Now, when you mentioned the adjacent building for younger couples... with children? Or is this [*slight chuckles while speaking*] required?

GR: Well, yes, it would be, because they're all two and three bedrooms, and we have a formula we go by that a married couple without youngsters are not permitted to live in a unit of more than one bedroom. So these would require that they have some youngsters, and this was deliberately planned to eliminate what other might otherwise be a stigma of an old folks' home attached to a project that was housing exclusively elderly people, and...

JJ: I...

GR: Pardon me.

JJ: Excuse me. Now, I haven't kept up with the project as well as I should have, and when you say adjacent, I'm wondering if you mean directly adjacent. I think I remember that when it was originally planned, there was to be a courtyard between the two buildings or some area. Is this true, or are they hooked right together?

GR: No, they're not hooked together. This whole complex covers an area 200 feet by 240 feet. The large building that houses the elderly is on 19th Avenue, and then in-between that and the 30-unit, three story building for the families with small children is a two-level parking area and also a playground for the young children of the tenants in the 30-unit apartment. This will make it possible for the elderly people in the tall building, if they feel the desire to communicate or otherwise attach themselves to the activities of the youngsters, they can go out on the promenade and visit with them and watch them at play on their playground equipment. On the other hand, if the elderly people want to isolate themselves from the youngsters, all they have to do is to retire to their apartments, or to one of the solariums, or to make the use of a two-story community center for them which is attached right to the large building.

JJ: This, in other words, they have... they're not completely segregated from other age groups, but at the same time they're not going to be falling over a roller skate every time they go out of their door.

GR: That's right. They're segregated only to the extent of their own desire.

JJ: Yes, which sounds good. I know that recently we've read reports that in the federal government, in studies of housing that received federal aid, have discovered more and more that a majority of older people seem to prefer as much independence as possible; and yet they also, on the whole, prefer to be within easy distance of other age groups. They don't want to be put off all by themselves with one age group, and we can understand this since certainly, at all ages it's more normal to be with other people than just those of our own age. I was interested, however, when I mentioned this in some report and then received a letter from several older women in a housing development where this policy has been followed. Where they put in some young people also. Would you mind if I'd read you this, as these women said they think they're the exception? That they [*chuckle*] were also interested... in these comments, where we keep saying that older people do not want to be all alone, and she said, "We found some drawbacks when we have all ages put together. We think this is a big mistake: mixing families and old people. The idea we see expressed in so many articles, that it supplies baby sitters et cetera, must be a point of view from the younger people." [*JJ laughs*] "By the time we've spent some 60 years raising our families, helping with grandchildren and so on, we're anxious to be free of child care. It's too tiring and nerve-wracking." Now, she might feel different if she didn't have some children around, but this was her opinion. Gene, you mentioned this community center or the two-story building that would be directly attached to Northwest Tower, what about that? What services will be provided there?

GR: Well, they'll have such facilities as multi-purpose recreation rooms and space for counseling offices. Now, there'll be a first-aid clinic, hobby shops, a library, a TV room, and such facilities as that. The center will be operated by Friendly House, a local settlement house, under contract with the Housing Authority, and, in turn, Friendly House will solicit the participation of a wide variety of local private and public agencies, such as the city Parks and Recreation Department, for various community activities and various counseling services. Family counseling services... oh, there's a number of them, and the health services are invited. I think at the present time we have commitments from some 16 agencies, private and public, who want to participate in the use of these facilities as adapted to the elderly people in the project, and to other elderly people living in the general area, who are not in public housing.

JJ: The recreation facilities in this building will be open to anyone who wants to come in, is this right?

GR: That's right. That's right.

JJ: Now, when you mention health... well, let's start out with counseling. Would there be a full time counselor there all the time, or would this be scheduled so many hours a week at regular times, or do you know this yet?

GR: Yes, we have a general idea. We know how we want it to work and we have discussed these things with Friendly House and they agree. No, the facilities, we hope, will be utilized to the maximum. From 8 o'clock in the morning till 10 at night, something should be going on and almost every one of these interesting rooms that are being developed for the benefit of these people, and it is the responsibility of the operating agency, which is Friendly House, to see to it that these various services are properly scheduled and that the tenants and other people in the area know what services are going to be available at what hours, at what days, and the same thing with the various community activities such as... there's always a lot of interest in dancing, square dancing and other types of dancing, on the part of elderly people, and there'll be a program of that nature there and other things to keep them productively occupied, and for those that want to participate—the tenants who want to participate—the facilities are there. The program is there. Those that don't, of course aren't required to do so, but we find that in our present projects that there is great interest on the part of the tenants to be part of the community and *do* something, and not just pine away.

JJ: Will there be a charge, either for the residents or for non-residents, for people in the neighborhood who come for any of these recreational facilities?

GR: No, except in some rare instance where the tenants themselves... there'll be a tenant council in this project. When the tenants, themselves, vote to put on some kind of a program that might cost each one of them \$0.50 for a special little lunch arrangement in connection with a certain activity, they can do that.

JJ: Yes, and then, well, you didn't exactly say that there would be craft rooms, but if they're doing wood-working...

GR: That's right.

JJ: ...or metal-working, will there be any craft rooms?

GR: Yes, there's one specific hobby shop area, and we're going to have to determine the use of that hobby shop on the basis of trial and error... a survey after the tenants are in there to find out what the tenants want to do. I found in one Eastern project, on a trip I took East last year, that one of these local authorities had developed a beautiful woodworking shop and some very

expensive power tools had been donated, and nobody used it. There wasn't a person in the project that had a desire to do any wood-working! So here was this beautiful room, beautifully equipped and no activity. Now, we want to eliminate any such possibilities as that. We want all these facilities in use all the time.

JJ: And I can imagine that if there were supplies need in connection with these crafts, that there might be a charge for that, for those.

GR: It's possible, although we have already had all types of offers of donations of supplies for the various crafts, so I don't think that it really would probably involve a cost under any conditions.

JJ: Fine. You also mentioned a first aid room. Would this be staffed by a nurse, or exactly what does this mean, and would the service be available to those in the community or only to residents?

GR: Well, it would be available on emergency basis to anybody in the area. It is primarily a room that can be adapted to the use of our tenants who have minor accidents of one kind or another, and as to what hours a qualified person would be on hand to administer this aid to them, I don't know. This would be a responsibility of the operating agency which is Friendly House, in this case.

JJ: Oh, they're even going to take that over? I didn't...

GR: Friendly House?

JJ: Yes, I didn't...

GR: They have their own operation in the immediate neighborhood, and they've been very successful with it, and they have had a lot of experience in providing various services for the elderly, so they offered to operate this project for us for one year. This is just the center we're talking about now, not the building.

JJ: Yes, I realize.

GR: And after investigating their capabilities and qualifications, the board of the Housing Authority accepted their offer and went into agreement with them. They have a one-year contract to operate this center.

JJ: I am very pleased, because we all recognize the good job that they have done and we know, too, that they have the cooperation of many other agencies and groups throughout the city. I imagine that there will be a number of volunteers who will be coming in to work with their pro... various programs also. Will there not?

GR: I'm sure there will. Yes.

JJ: Will there be any medical care service; will there ever be a doctor there for consultation during the week or is this completely out of the...

GR: No, there's a possibility. We've discussed this with the city Health Department; of course they can't give any more or any greater consideration to a project such as this as they would to any other area, but we have such a concentration of elderly people there that I know that some of the health agencies are considering the advisability of having representatives on-call there. We also... a visiting nurses' service will be very active in this project...

JJ: Oh!

GR: ...and so—as there are now in Columbia Villa. We have a well baby clinic operating now in Columbia Villa, and we'll probably have a well baby clinic operating in this elderly center for the youngsters in the project, and for youngsters in the immediate neighborhood, but it'll be a rather minor activity in this connection.

JJ: Yes, I can see that. But the visiting nurse service will be available to residents?

GR: Yes, I'm sure it will.

JJ: Now, when someone's interested, I think that on our last broadcast you said already you have 600 applications for Northwest Towers, am I right?

GR: Yes, we have more than 600 applications from people who have been determined to be eligible for this project.

JJ: Who may apply?

GR: Anybody who is... the same age requirements apply as involved in Social Security, so anyone who... what is that? Males, 65...

JJ: Well, now the males are down, or...

GR: 62?

JJ: Yes. Mm-hmm. Or going down, I guess.

GR: That's right.

JJ: 62, right. Perhaps right now it's 65.

GR: ...and everyone who was interested and who considers themselves as eligible is urged to apply to us, because this is our way of knowing what the actual demand is. And they can do that by contacting our offices in the telephone directory: Housing Authority of Portland. And the address is 8920 North Woolsey: W-O-O-L-S-E-Y.

JJ: Now, while we're right on this, why don't you give the telephone number, also?

GR: Butler 9-5-5-7-1.

JJ: Butler, 9-5- [GR joins in to say the numbers] 5-7-1. But anyone may call the Housing Authority of Portland, and this number is in the telephone directory. Butler, that's B-U-9-5-7-7-1.

GR: ...5-5-7-1.

JJ: Oh, excuse me. 5-5-7-1. Now, is this... when you have said that there will be people... that anyone eligible 62 to 65, or 62 on, if a husband is 62 and his wife is 55, can they still apply?

GR: Yes, any questions of that nature can be resolved, again, by calling the office and talking to our rental officer. I would say that... I would suggest that they talk to the rental department, because there are lots of unusual situations that might exist that we do have regulations to cover, and they can get the real technical facts on these unusual situations from our rental department.

JJ: But there are no requirements such as that they must be receiving old age assistance or anything else?

GR: Oh no! No, no.

JJ: And income is a requirement, I realize, but I think this had better be discussed with your office. We cannot get involved in that...

GR: Well, that's true...

JJ: ...too much now.

GR: ...other than I can say that the income of the household must not exceed \$3500 a year...

JJ: Yes, all right.

GR: ...that, of course, takes in an awful lot of people.

JJ: For a couple.

GR: That's right.

JJ: Yes. Going back to our playground, we've said that there will be a director there for recreation. From the standpoint of the younger families and the children, will there be a director for... a recreation director for them?

GR: No, because so few children are really involved in this particular playground area, and it's of a nature that the mothers in the apartment can put their youngsters out there, and it's fenced in in such a manner that they're safe to play all by themselves on this very unique playground equipment which we acquired... This is some little story in itself, but it's multicolored, various types of animals and stuff that are out of wrought iron and so on. We picked up the idea from San Francisco, and we think it's going to be something that'll add a little frosting to the cake when people drive by our project and see this cute little playground.

JJ: Oh, yes, I hadn't even seen any of those new pieces of equipment until recently, and I was intrigued, myself, by some of them. I think now, before we close, I want to ask you, Gene, about one thing unrelated to Northwest Tower, and I certainly thank you for giving us this good rundown on it. Incidentally, do you know when it's going to open?

GR: Presently scheduled in September.

JJ: September...

GR: Of this year, of this year.

JJ: Of this year. September...

GR: Yes, we're hoping that...

JJ: ...1963. Now, in a conversation not long ago, you told me that there's going to be a conference on public housing held in Portland in May, and I'd like to get some details of that because I believe you said that this is open to the public.

GR: That's right.

JJ: Could you give... tell us when it is, where it will be, and what will be covered?

GR: It's on May 16th and 17th, that's a Thursday and Friday, and this is a workshop conference, the type of a conference that people who are really involved in any aspects of housing or related fields, as to the elderly, can find some useful ideas that they can adapt to their needs of their work when they go home. This workshop is being sponsored by the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, and it will also feature our national Commissioner, Marie McGuire, who will be here for in the Northwest for the first visit that she has ever made to this part of the country.

JJ: Is it aimed largely at housing for the elderly, or all housing?

GR: There are three sessions, and one is exclusively a workshop on housing for the elderly, and it will consider such things as distinguishing characteristics of the elderly, development considerations and planning housing for the elderly, and management considerations in operating housing for the elderly.

JJ: Do you know yet what day that will be? On...

GR: Now, that will be both on Thursday and Friday...

JJ: Oh! Oh, these are going to run...

GR: These are concurrent sessions, and the one on the elderly runs through both Thursday and Friday.

JJ: Is this only public housing, or could people interested in private housing for the elderly get some information out of it?

GR: Well, I'm sure they could, because a number of our speakers and panelists are from private housing, and I'm sure that there'll be a lot of interest to people who are engaged in private housing for the elderly.

JJ: Is there a registration fee?

GR: Yes. A registration fee for people who attend the full conference is \$15, but that includes the banquet and the two luncheons. Otherwise, if somebody wants to just come and audit one of these sessions, that's perfectly acceptable, and there wouldn't be any charge for that.

JJ: Where will it be held?

GR: At the Sheraton Hotel.

JJ: Sheraton Hotel in Portland, on May 16th and 17th.

GR: That's right.

JJ: Our time is almost gone. I think, however, that you will be sending to our office information on this conference, and if anyone wants further information, they may write the State Council on Aging, P.O. Box 5197 Eugene. That's State Council on Aging, P.O. Box 5197 Eugene, and we shall either forward the information directly to our listeners or get the request to you, Gene.

GR: That's fine! We'd appreciate it.

JJ: Thank you so much for being our guest again, today. Our guest has been Mr. Gene Rossman, Executive Director of the Housing Authority of Portland.

[program ends]