

[*Main Street WIRE* editor Dick Lutz interviewed Charlie DeFino, outgoing Director of the Roosevelt Island Youth Program, on Tuesday, January 10, at Trellis Restaurant. The transcript was prepared by Elly Stanton.]

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Q: First of all, tell me where you are going.

A: Ah, okay. I'm leaving Roosevelt Island to become the district manager of Community Board 12 in northern Manhattan. That encompasses the area of 150 5th to 2 15th – 150th to really 2 20th St. River to River. Northern tip of Manhattan.

Q: And that's not a youth program?

A: No, no, it's similar to what you have over here in Manhattan that members of the Island are on a district community board. I'm just a district manager; I'm the person that runs the office.

Q: What went wrong on Roosevelt Island?

A: Everything went wrong. There wasn't one person or one situation where I wasn't lied to from the beginning when I got here to the end when I'm leaving. When I was... when I took the job, the first thing I said was, "Is there anything I should know about, are there any hidden problems that I should be worried about?" and I was told [there were not] by the honorable Frank Briseno. You have to understand how Frank was chairman. I'll give you a good story about Frank. Frank and I were standing next to each other. Frank told me when he came here my job was to make it easy for him, and no one should know who he is. He meant that I took all the flak for his decisions. So one day somebody stopped me in the street, Frank's with me, and someone's going "You know that bastard Briseno, he thinks he runs this Island, nobody even knows the goddamn who he is, but he thinks he runs this Island!" And Frank was standing next to me, nodding his head.

Q: What was his job at the time?

A: @Frank basically was the head of RICO [the Roosevelt Island Council of Organizations] and, behind the scenes, he was pretty much... when I got here, running everything on the Island.

Q: This is pre-Richard Jordan?

A: He brought Richard Jordan here as a part of a master plan.

Q: To make it clear, you started when?

A: I've been here for 15 years, to go back. I came in July of '91, I guess. And I'm leaving now. I was recruited by the attorney for Roosevelt Island. I was recruited with his aid. The Youth Center had a seven-year problem – money disappearing, directors sleeping there, drugs and alcohol, kids getting harassed and beaten up at the Youth Center. They recruited me to come here, I was recruited by [then RIOC President] Rosina Abrams, Michael Rosas, and two other people [including] the human resources person, to come here. I had a personal relationship with Michael Rosas through the community board in northern Manhattan. He was then the [RIOC] attorney; he is now a Federal judge. Mike recruited me. I met committee members, but it was my understanding that RIOC would not pay the salary of the executive director, if it wasn't me. So it wasn't one of those choice things. To my dismay about two wee– I found out immediately that Rosina was leaving, and I was looking forward to working with her. And Michael left shortly thereafter to become a... to work for the Attorney General's office. So the two people I came to work with, and who would have been very easy to work with and for, left right away.

Q: Was Rosas living on the Island?

A: No, he was RIOC's lead attorney. Michael Rosas was at RIOC. But he has known me his whole life, we went to

school together. So he recruited me because they did decide they wanted to try to stabilize what was going here. One of the first things I encountered here was when I said to them, "Before I start the job, is there something I should prepare for, is there something hidden, is there a problem?" "No problems, Charlie." I've been here about a week and a half, other than the damn roaches that were downstairs in the basement [in Eastwood in space now used by the Jewish Congregation and the Main Street Theatre] at the time and that fact that we had a sewage backup that when some of the seniors threw their diapers into the toilet, feces would come back up through the basement cause that's where it was supposed to come back up. Other than that we were fine. The fact that people had keys to the place, and there was somebody living in the Youth Center at the time.... There was a young adult who was thrown out of his home and I guess they weren't used to a director coming at all kinds of hours. So I came one morning at about 7 o'clock because I really had a lot of work to do and I heard sizzling coming from the kitchen. So I picked up a baseball bat and I walked back towards the kitchen. And here it was – sausage, bacon, and eggs in a pan and a jacket, but the back door – remember when the backdoor back then was the old empty area which is now the Main Street Theatre – and somebody running out. So I ate the breakfast. But there was somebody actually sleeping and living there. So when I started coming in there earlier and earlier and staying later and later the person had to find some other place to live. So the first call I get is from a gentleman who introduces himself and he says "I'm from the IRS. So we have an appointment on Wednesday, I'm just confirming." And I said, "The IRS? What do you mean?" He goes, "The IRS. The Youth Center had a tax problem several years back and we have to do an audit now." I said, "How large an audit?" He said, "The last ten years," and I said "You have to understand something, I've all been here is like seven days! You can't possibly....," "Look, this has been scheduled for over eight months, you've delayed it about three times." So I basically went into the archive, what I could find, and I remember scotch-taping the years to the wall and to the floor. And I started putting whatever I could find, bills and stuff on the walls. I put together an impressive enough picture for him that I had tried my best 'cause some of them there was feces all of them from rat droppings and mouse droppings and they were wet because they were stored in a back room which was right next to the garbage room in the basement of Eastwood and they were in cardboard cartons they hadn't... this was before the advent of plastic cartons and everything was mildew and some of them, you know, you needed a mask, and some of the stuff you couldn't put up because it just was like half-chewed and you really didn't want to put it up. So, I, the whole Youth Center for that three-day period that he was auditing me was on the floor. 1976... 1981... on the wall and he basically went around. And if it wasn't for the fact that man was a nice guy who realized that I was just trying to – that I was new and I was just trying to do this and that we had converted over... the first thing I did when I came in was convert to ADP, so you have your payroll and your taxes paid. I always give that as my advice as (consult?) to an agency, first thing you do. Don't do your own payroll. You do your own payroll and you're gonna always think you have more money than you're supposed to have. And you're always will... it's like that money you don't put in the bank. You say "I'll do it Monday," and then Sunday comes and you go out for dinner and you spend it and you don't put in the bank, you don't invest it in your stock. So anyway he let us go on that. So that was my first real experience with whether or not the truth was gonna be told to me on Roosevelt Island.

Q: So you survived the audit?

A: We survived the audit only because the gentleman was a really nice guy and he realized I was kind of like overwhelmed with it and he wasn't trying to hurt me and he realized it was a Youth Program. If he wanted to take us out at that immediate point, there wasn't one year where I could tell you, any year where I could put together a full year.

Q: He was auditing the Youth Center books because?

A: They had failed to pay their taxes for a period of time, the employee taxes, for a period of time. All we did back then – what happened there was when I first came here RIOOC was giving us \$95,000 a year. It covered two staff people and it paid for what was the management's whatever the – whoever Rosina Abrams or Michael Rosas or whoever, it was called Guardian, got as an insurance policy, I got. That included disability, life insurance, dental, you name it. I mean – it was a really good, it was better than my City plan and my City plan was – I used to get rebates back from my City plan and this was better. It really was a very good plan. When Barry Chiefetz decided he wanted to become the president he thought if he cut money that the Governor would anoint him the successor and he didn't get the job so once he didn't the job, he you know, he cut our budget and then the insurance net became an issue because it was just too expensive. That insurance today would cost our agency somewhere in the neighborhood of \$75,000 a year. It had disability clauses, you get ten years of your salary if you got hurt on the job or you didn't get hurt on the job, you just could not work anymore. Full dental for family. There's a \$250,000 life insurance policy.

Q: So that was a good situation?

A: It was a management, it was a State of New York management policy situation, yeah. They don't even offer that anymore to their own employees.

Q: Right. What else was going on? You-

A: Well, I was also, what happened, was I came in I didn't know there was a – one of the reasons why I was brought in was my ability to attract capital funds and build things.

Q: And you've been – one characteristic that people talk about is that you've been very successful in raising money.

A: Well... yeah. When I was in Washington Heights my job as a Youth Services planner for the mayor's office was to raise money from 155th St. to 220th and what happened was it was very similar to the demographic of here. If you looked at the census track, if you looked at the census information, it looked like a middle class community and in a middle class community you pay for your own stuff! Whaddaya mean the City's gonna give me a program? I don't need a City program! We'll run a little league, we'll chip in, everybody will chip in, we'll volunteer, we'll do it! That's what middle class communities do. And the census track had changed dramatically within the ten year period within halfway, so what became a predominantly minority community and burnt out buildings... I mean Washington Heights if you remember in your history in the 80's was about a quarter of an inch short of the South Bronx. They were one fire away from becoming the South Bronx and Koch put together a taskforce of some of the brightest people in the City who got out there and just turned that thing around. I was on that taskforce as an advisor for youth issues to legislate it, but Ted Weiss was there, everybody from the Koch administration, the governor's administration, I mean it was unbelievable. That taskforce saved Washington Heights and Inwood. A Washington Heights and Inwood would today been what the South Bronx was, they'd be recovering like the Bronx. I mean...

Q: Over your 15 years on Roosevelt Island you've been really successful as a fundraiser. Do you have a rough number?

A: I well I remem... I'll be totally honest with you; the first money raised to renovate the library was raised to renovate that Youth Center...

Q: Meaning where the Main Street Theatre is?

A: Ah, yeah. See, that was your second lie. The second lie was when I was told to come in I looked at the space. I said I can get, I can raise, money to fix this space, it's about \$300,000 away. Boom. I contacted Brunswick Bowling Lanes they told me they can get me a bowling alley lane. Bowling alleys throughout America were pretty much going bankrupt and they can get me two bowling lanes for free if I could pay for the shipping. They would assemble them and then I would into a service contract with them, which would have cost us roughly \$10,000 for shipping, service, the whole thing. So my idea was to build it out, and I had plans drawn up for that space but I didn't know at the time that Frank, wearing his other hat as RICO chairperson, had worked out with David Kraut and other residents to bring Worth and Nancy Howe to the Island and also then build a synagogue. And that's the only way the Main Street Theatre would have ever been built. Main Street Theatre, when I went to the first meeting-

Q: Because of the need for a synagogue space?

A: Yes. And the facts the votes for the synagogue, the votes, the syna... In fact, the Main Street Theatre, from what I could tell from the first, the first meeting I ever went to David Kraut was the head of RIRA and he was sitting down there where the downstairs in the basement over here and Frank said "I'll show you how things work here on Roosevelt Island!" and they didn't have a quorum, they were running around looking for "yes" votes. The Main Street Theatre didn't have a major backing, but the synagogue did and that's why they tied them together. They couldn't have gotten the Main Street Theatre built. I didn't know that deal existed when I came in. If I had known there was that deal with the Main Street Theatre, I wouldn't have come aboard. And...

Q: You subsequently had your eye on other space?

A: Well, what happened from that point on was Jean Lerman ended up saying, "Look," and Frank Briseno came to an agreement where we were supposed to have what would be an industrial school, which was a school down in Eastwood,

the Eastwood School. And we went in there, it was fine, we looked at it; it was going to need a lot more money, but we were going to get it done. Subsequent to that we raised 187... I think it was a hundred – whatever the money was for the first library renovation – [Assemblymember Pete] Grannis put in the budget for us and then some (bitten idea?) with Jean Lerman converted it over to the library 'cause Jean told them we weren't gonna get the space right away, so... so they needed it for the library conversion. Which was dumb because the truth of the matter was the New York City libraries should have been funded by New York City, not by the State. The councilmen could have got to the money and its capital budget to fix it. There should have been no State money to fix that library in the first place. That was the dumbest thing I ever saw. But – and they didn't really fix it, they cleaned it, they painted it, they put an air conditioner in it, and they painted. Nothing else happened. It's the same library it was when I was in there the first time. So we then were sent down here which was supposed to be a one year to two year temporary fix.

Q: You're talking about 506 Main St., which is part of the Eastwood building?

A: Right. And the idea was that whatever was left in public-purpose capital we would get, I would match, and we would build a Youth Center. They reneged. That's the third lie. They spent the capital money all over the place and there was none – I was told a couple of years later – there was no money left.

Q: Who did the spending, RIOC?

A: Yeah, well it was spent on different things on the Island. Sure.

Q: Okay.

A: The original deal that I was told when I first came here was that all the capital money was reserved for the Youth Center space to build it. So I said "Look, I'm coming in there's \$600,000 to raise – \$300,000, I can do that tomorrow." In fact, Dreyfus had it in his first capital budget when I first came in before he got investigated and had to leave office. So we could have had the Youth Center built 12 years ago. So that was lie number three and then we can just continue on down the line of constantly... But the agency when I first came here was running on... they had an option with Starrett – one of the dumbest things I've ever heard. They could've had a \$75,000 grant for five years or a \$25,000 year grant forever. They chose \$75,000 for five years. And that hurt us. 'Cause when the Fed grant ran out that was the major player in what discretionary money we had. They were receiving very little money from the State which they, we, still are and were receiving a small amount of money in youth services. My first promise was that I would at least raise my salary the first year. Whatever I was making the first time, I think I was making \$38,000 the first year, that was a raise then, I doubled that to \$76,000. We're now getting somewhere from the City. We were last year somewhere in the neighborhood of 600 something thousand dollars from City funding. And we've kept consistent over the years with City funding and Island funding, and everything else of a budget of around \$700,000. And now it's all new money, the neighborhood's in and out, up and down, of course. And, eh, you know it's not the easiest place to raise money either. Everybody perceives you to be very rich and then when you play the rich card they want to know why you're not taking care of the Section 8 [tenants]. So you kinda like get bounced back and forth. And you get all these ads and intervi – these about the new buildings on the Island now, it's ridiculous, you know? Come to Roosevelt Island and everybody thinks this is a pleasure trip, you know? They haven't seen the place.

Q: Would you be leaving now if had the building had happened?

A: Nah, the major mistake that was made, and I have to be totally honest with you, was made by my board. I had decided several years ago that RIOC was not going to live up to their agreement. So when Sarah Seiden and – Doryne Isley informed Sarah Seiden that they would have to pay rent and Sarah Seiden left her space [the Day Nursery space at the southernmost end of Island House], I saw the opportunity to grab it up. We came to an agreement with [Island House owner] Chuck Lucido that was fantastic, a good deal for us, a good deal for them.

Q: This is for the swimming pool?

A: No, no, no, just the regular building, not the swimming pool. The swimming pool might have been something we would have talked about later on as a partnership deal, and we thought it was a good area. One, as that we would move across the street. We'd get rid of that so-called "Youth Center mentality" where it was all minority, 'cause it'd be more

of an open space, people could see in. More parents hang out in that yard and it would have felt more comfortable having their kids roaming in and out, it would have been a more integrated situation. So I felt planning-wise that would have been a better opportunity.

Q: But you didn't go that route?

A: No, we went that route. We had a – in fact we met with Lucido I believe at the Hilton Hotel and over a two-and-half hour period hammered out a contract for the 20 years that we needed to get the sta-

Q: What happened?

A: A board member sat on the deal for close to a year. Chuck Lucido-

Q: Which board member?

A: A board member sat on the deal for close to a year and Chuck Lucido became ill and decided he was going to sell and once he decides to sell, just like this predicament where they're now with Eastwood, as long as they're negotiating with RIOC, you're never gonna get the space. They just can't do it. As long as Belson and Berman now – that's the other mistake we made too, the letter we sent in June. It was just a dumb letter. I'm sorry, but it wasn't the best letter written. My feeling was-

Q: (too indistinct) with the letter that did what?

A: The one that basically... when RIOC sent us, for the 15th time, sent us a letter stating that they wanted more information-

Q: More detail?

A: More detail. Which was basically a character assassination on my board by Patrick Stewart and Ms. Beck. And Patrick Stewart and Ms. Beck should be ashamed of themselves as [RIOC] Board members. You just put that in there, 'cause I want that in there.

Q: I'm going to quote you.

A: Quote me. They should be ashamed of themselves. Ms. Beck came to us, to Steve Kaufman who was... I was told they were personal friends... and told us she wanted to work with us to get that building. And I met with her extensively over a two-week period, twice in her apartment and once in the Youth Center. Gave her a tour, showed her the plans, and at the end of it she has basically been that one person and – let's just tell you this; I told her and Berman the other day that the reason why we held off a little bit on the Lucido deal was that Ms. Beck was so convincing that she was going to get us the other building – we held out that extra one or two months because I was told the friendship between Steve Kaufman and Beck was so good that it could be trusted. And she's probably now the most fervent person on the board against – outside of Patrick Stewart in his lucid moments – other than Patrick Stewart, she's probably the strongest negative impact on us in the beginning. And the two new board members, Alberteen and Shinozaki haven't been able to – haven't been on the board long enough to really help us, I'm not sure they really could anyway. The deal has been set 'n' so... and RIOC wants that second floor for their office.

Q: So you essentially sacrificed the old Day Nursery school situation at the southwest end of Island House because you were expecting to be able to get what is, what we think of as the "Lilies School space" or at least a strong part of that, a major part of that, adjacent to the existing facility at 506.

A: Yeah. The whole consisted – the whole thing you need is, and one of the things people wanna do is, everybody who builds Youth Centers today, or builds youth facilities today, they build these small, confined areas that are built for like the 1950s and 60s. A ping-pong table, a pool table, and a television. You're not gonna get kids with that anymore. You have to have an open area where kids in the summer time, warm time, will still come to you and have an open area where it's also closed in but it's part of the building and there's safety in it.

Q: And that would have worked?

A: Yeah. That space would have worked.

Q: Would it have been ideal?

A: The Lilies School? That would have been ideal. Space here at, uh, Lucido space over here at Island House, Westview space, whatever, that became ideal only because I see what goes on normally as a function of everyday life on the Island with kids and parents in front of the building and them using that small patch of rubber area as a dodgeball area.

Q: You mean Good Shepard Plaza?

A: Right. And I thought that the Plaza itself could have become that same area where kids coulda hung out, put up a volley ball net, have a staff person out there, parents would have been there. So there would have been a lot of kids running around, and there would have been noise but it would have been good noise.

Q: Why did this deal fall apart?

A: Somewhere along the line, Ms. Labate – and the funny thing about it is that I've only had maybe two conversations with her in my entire life outside lobbying for kids... one of the things I did not do well in the first seven or eight years here was lobby well enough for kids. I was constantly being told let other people lobby for 'em. That "the deals were done, the deals were done," and when I finally realized 9-10 years in that the deals weren't done I became very fervent and I kinda like alienated a lot of people by bringing the same point. Because there's no there's no historian now, I mean what RIOC gains now is.... What I told Berman and the CFO the other day, and the funny thing is I never can meet with Berman alone, I don't know if you've had that same thing, but Berman always has to have somebody in the office when you meet with him and when I told him and the CFO the other day that I was leaving they wished me well. But it was almost like, you know, when your son stays home too long? He's 30 something you're saying, "Aw, that's great, son, I'm glad you're going," but it's also a little more than that, it was like they were damn happy to see me go. Let's just say my leaving is more being kind of asked to leave and at the same time in no general - no one's come out and said it – but there's been just a hint of "it might be time," and that's not just from RIOC, it's also from the board itself.

Q: Your board?

A: Yeah, I think more... at least a member of my board that it might be time. The boards' tired, you understand. You go through a six-year period like we've had and the City of New York has come in we audited ourselves every year for 6 years and the City of New York has to come in, and the Giuliani administration... the Dickens administration didn't audit it the last two years they were in office. The Guiliani administration didn't audit the first two years they were in office then the last four years. And then when Bloomberg came in it was these old past audits due, so we basically had to go through, I think it was like it, eight audits not including the two we did ourselves so ten audits in less than nine months. That is very time consuming and very, very... I lost my best staff person, Annette Padilla, she went on to Florida and moved on to bigger and better things for herself and her family. So I was now in a position where the board members who were now volunteering and that were helping me out in the office and doing some of the work with me were kinda burnt out. I lost my best staff person and I wound up with a weak staff and I had to basically take on and shoulder the entire load. This summer for instance, I sublet an apartment on the Island, I would come here 10 o'clock Sunday night and I would leave 10 o'clock Friday night. I would work from 8 in the morning to 11 at night. Each night, five days a week. And then people wanna know why you burn out.

Q: With regard to your board, I don't know who the members of the board are but my guess is that most of them got interested in helping the Youth Center, working at Youth Center board at a time when they had kids at Youth Center age, and now they're past that.

A: That's it. The issue, this board... basically there're several boards you want. One is you want a board of sophisticated people who know people you can get you money, or you want people who will give you money, or you want volunteers who will give you time. This board has been great at giving me time. And this board itself, and then the friends of this

board, the volunteer efforts in the first I would say nine years I was here, not the first two but after the first two from the third year through maybe my tenth year here, were unbelievable and unprecedented. I mean anything I wanted and all walks of life. Poor people, rich people, middle class people. Black, white, a lot of Rivercross support as far as volunteers. A good cross-section of the community – what exactly you wanted, too, was that was the only time this community actually got together was through the volunteer efforts. So we had baseball, basketball, flag, football, soccer, all covered completely. And it worked. But the community's changing, people have gotten older. Just like when you first got here and I got here people who were not senior citizens, they were just tinkering on being senior citizens, and you know, you use to have these nice, lively chit-chat with them and all of a sudden they've passed on and you realize, wow we're all getting a little older, you know? They came here as 40-something-year-olds and this was gonna be their last place and now they're no longer here. There isn't a month where you go by where there isn't a posting somewhere of somebody who's passed away or someone who's gone to a home or something of that nature. And we lost all our characters. With [Al Lewis] Grandpa [Munster] we lost our last character.

Q: He's still here, of course.

A: He's still on the Island, but he's not active anymore, so there's.... And when I first came here you have to remember [Lou] Carbonetti and [Ron] Vass and a lot of people who were on Main Street. Those people were younger, they were still socially active. And Andy's [now Trellis] was a place to meet and have a few drinks, and people would be on the street talking and the meeting structure was more of a social gathering than a political movement. And I think the Island, pretty much along with the Youth Center and everybody else, got caught up into that political thing about fighting RIOC, you know, that came on with the advent of [former RIOC President] Jerry Blue and his policies. I think once that happened, it all fell apart. The streets started looking darker. Don't you notice the lights look dimmer?

Q: There are a lot of points I want to cover here, but since you mentioned Jerry Blue, give me your reaction to the last several RIOC presidents.

A: I'll give you – I knew Jean Lerman when Jean Lerman was a nobody at the Housing Authority. Let's just say Jean Lerman was a low-level person working out of the Audubon ballroom. Some of the rats were probably taller than Jean. Jean's a nice person, lovely person, but I don't believe that she got the job here because she was qualified. Jerry Blue was dumped on us because no one could work with him. Robert Ryan had issues and couldn't work anywhere else but here. And Herb Berman now is just... I like Herb personally; I like him a lot; I think he's done a lot for the City of New York, but I think also that Herb's really not here. I don't think Herb's in charge. I think Cathy Johnson is and Cathy Johnson is Labate – just a little bit taller and a little nastier. And you can quote me on that.

Q: You're on tape... we're recording.

A: I'm just saying. I have no problem with that one either. (laughs)

Q: Alright. Well, let me turn this around a little bit just for a minute. You're hinted that you're controversial.

A: Sure.

Q: Tell me about that. Why are you controversial? You and I have had arguments.

A: Yeah, because our issues... we've argued but the point is we also got past them. On Roosevelt Island, if you're not an Islander or part of a specific economic group you're considered an outsider and that's why you'll never get the whole Island involved. That's why RIRA will never get a complete composite of the Island involved in their meetings. Because people don't think they want them to come to them. And when they do come to them, people's opinions aren't appreciated. You know, I went to a meeting last week and I saw a gentleman in the back and he looked almost like he was homeless to me and they were talking about Ambulatory Care Network which was started in northern Manhattan, which revolutionized the way you get people out of the emergency rooms. And I said [to myself] this homeless guy's here, let me just watch him, and then about five minutes later he got up and asked a question and he was so articulate and so knowledgeable that this guy has to have a Ph.D in something – in some kind of medicine. And I was never so wrong in my life. That person on Roosevelt Island...

Q: He really surprised you, right?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay. But back to you. Why were you, why are you, controversial. What is it...?

A: You need to...

Q: I'm not asking you to do a mea culpa here... Everybody has their strengths and weaknesses and I'm wondering how you evaluate your own performance.

A: (sighs) Ah, you gotta look at the point as when I first was asked to come here, I was more of a person who mediated situations. It's hard to believe and I think people on this Island will probably be laughing when they hear that, but my main strength was the mediation of progress, getting things done. Move the ball down the turf, down the field. How do you do that? You get four educated people in a room, four ideas. You talk long enough, you go out and have a drink or a coffee, you come back to a meeting a couple of days later and you go, "OK, I'm going to give my point, you're gonna give yours; we're gonna settle." Dick Lutz walks out of the room, he didn't get what he wanted, but you know, he got something – he got enough concrete things involved that he's happy with it. On Roosevelt Island, I don't think you can ever come to that conclusion in any room. I have not been in a room on this Island or at a meeting where someone hasn't come in, an imposing figure, in their own mind at least, it was the Frank Brisenos – and whatever after that – that they didn't come in and it was their way or no way. Patrick Stewart's that way. The RIOC board is just... just soured. "It's my way or no way." RIRA has been that way for years, I think. It's almost like kids stamping their feet, you know? How do you react to that? And you're controversial when... I don't think people really understood... In the beginning I don't think they understood what passion was and arrogance. I think my passion was mistaken for arrogance. And then my passion did become arrogance, at some point.

Q: Really?

A: Very rarely. It was just at a point where as you gotta get it eventually. The coconut falls out of the tree, hits you in the head. Eventually you've gotta not sit under that tree, 'cause every time you sit under the tree, the coconut hits you in the head. And I just kept constantly going on and on and as the years went on I was really the only one who knew the history. I was the only one who knew that David Kraut presided over the meeting that gave away the first Youth Center and now makes believe... and has a letter that Jean Lerman gave that said we get the building, and sits there at a meeting and acts like he doesn't know what's going on. Patrick Stewart, who has called my children, the children of the Island, "animals" when we came back from [taking] 60 kids to Florida. And I will tell you, I've never been in a situation in my entire life where I seen a group of anybody, adults or teenagers, who behaved better than these kids did. And followed direction. If I tell you a kid lost a ticket to get into the amusement park was the biggest, most controversial thing that happened the entire trip...

Q: Which is nothing.

A: Which is absolutely nothing, that was it. And they're in a hotel, they're in rooms, they're near each other. The rules were set down; they followed 'em. They dressed accordingly. They enjoyed it. We took them to first-class restaurants, to different things. We played in a major baseball tournament at the Disney World, and they behaved themselves perfectly. I could never tell you [of] a group of kids I would be more proud in my life, taken anywhere. And to have come back from that trip and have a RIOC Board member, and that was Patrick Stewart, ask two different members of my staff that were on that trip, "How'd the animals act? Charlie told me they were great, but how did they act?" That is just totally insulting.

Q: You're going to miss the kids.

A: Yeah...but most of the kids that I knew the last few years – that's the other thing too, the last few years I have not been able to really get to know the staff as well as I should, or the kids as well as I should.

Q: Because...?

A: Just been too bogged down with the fightin' for Youth Centers, fighting the City of New York, fighting the State of New York, fighting the residents. You know, as I said before, eventually you keep saying to somebody, "No! You promised us the building," and they've heard it 5,000 times and they tell you, "No, just forget that; now let's talk about the new deal." What new deal? There is no new deal. You know, people tell you something in a room and five minutes later... I mean, Herb Berman and I are fine. I get along with Herb really well and.... I mean, we're at a Board meeting, and he just dressed me down in public, and I would never have... and I was asked not to do that to him ever by Gifford Miller, and he did it to me twice at two different open forums. And I'm like, "When do I win?" It's almost like the conversation I had with you at one time. One time I got out of a board meeting and I was really arrogant, I was really off. I was off the mark and I was banging it, and you kinda chided me in an article about it, and we had a little discussion over it; I wasn't happy with it. This is where we got into a little wordplay, and the next month I went to a RIOC Board meeting and I took your advice. I sat in the back and didn't say a word, and I was drinking an iced tea, and in your article you'd mentioned basically something to the effect that "while RIOC Board members questioned something about the Youth Center, Mr. DeFino sat in the back quietly." And I said, "Damn, I can't win!" You know, it was one of those things. I think that kinda like puts the focus on what goes on here.

Q: I have to admit I'm at an age where I don't remember this.

A: And journalism, journalistic-wise, you're right. Mr. DeFino did sit back in the second meeting and let people make statements and didn't challenge them. In the first meeting, Mr. DeFino challenged 'em probably too hard and made it personal. Took it personal, and then made it personal.

Q: So the problem here is to find the moderate route?

A: And there is no moderate route. There is no individual I see on this Island that has... There might be somebody in Rivercross who controls the train of thought in Rivercross. There are people in Eastwood who think they are; there are people, nobody in Manhattan Park; and there's one in Island House and Westview who really can come out. There's no street politicians. When I first got here there was the Frank Briseno, the Ron Vass, the Lou Carbonettis who were out in the street. They could get Archie and a few other people in a room to talk something out, and get something solved.

Q: You could make things happen?

A: I could go to somebody. There's no one I can go to now. I mean, I'm alone. Who do I go to? I don't know who you go to anymore. It comes to the point on the Island, it's RIOC runs the place, it's their world and you live in it, and you take their answer and that's it.

Q: Is any part of this problem, in your view as you've experienced it, is any part of the problem related to the fact that very few members of the RIOC staff, if any, live on the Island?

A: No, not – in fact I find the staff, the actual staff people, not the management staff people...

Q: That's what I'm talking about.

A: But let's talk about the regular staff people here, 'cause a lot of people have said over the years that Charlie doesn't get along with the RIOC staff. I have had a great relationship with Jean Lerman. I used to walk in the building, make copies, walk around the place... They didn't start lockin' me out of there until Jerry Blue got there. Then he'd schedule a 1:00 meeting for me and he's come out and get me at 3:00. I'd left at a quarter to 2:00, and then I was told I was arrogant. Well you don't let nobody stand outside an office waiting for two hours for a meeting when you're scheduled, when the people you're meeting with don't have an appointment. That was the real irk. I can understand if an emergency came up, I can understand if an appointment ran along, but when people just walk in off the street... And I think that when Jerry Blue came here he definitely brought out that little racist thing along with Richard Jordan. Richard Jordan was incompetent. Frank Briseno hired him – the biggest mistake the Island ever made, they wasted...

Q: Just for clarity, Richard Jordan was the paid staff member at the Roosevelt Island Council of Organizations [RICO] at a time when RICO had their offices where the Montauk credit union most recently was?

A: Yeah. But the thing about RICO was, RICO to this day – RICO will now tell you that was RIOC’s people, not theirs. They never signed off on the audit where they can’t find where the money went. No one’s ever signed off that audit and RICO... When I – this is another conversation I had with RICO – I mean, here’s an organization that existed in the shadows. You didn’t know didn’t know who was a member, even. Roosevelt Island Council of Organizations, and the Roosevelt Island Youth Center, Main Street Theatre, the churches, the press... You’re an organization on the Island, never was represented on the damn thing. [It] was a bunch of people who got together and said “Okay, we’re RICO.”

Q: What would you do differently if you could go back over the last 15 years the last 10 or the last five?

A: In the beginning, I think I did what I had to do. I had to put in the time, the hours. I had a great staff. I mean, I had people like Dolly Perez, Gus Cruz, Charles Reuss, Lorraine Rademaker, and Chirstina Ewing, who comprised probably the best staff I would ever have in this business in my life. And then we had younger kids like Annette Padilla, who I took on as a 12-13-year-old girl and trained her and made her my assistant. Those years I would do nothing, nothing I would have did differently. I think that I was too passive in pursuing at that time the agenda. I relied too much on the powers-that-be or people that thought they were the powers-that-be, to keep their word and their honesty. I wasn’t naïve, I just didn’t... You work for people and, when you work for people, you do a bunch under direction. I should have challenged them a little more

Q: More recent years?

A: [In] more recent years, my big failure simply has been communication skills, basic... It came down to, basically, you know, like I said before: Anger is one [thing]– passion is one thing. Just total frustration and anger is something else. I mean, this job made me sick for almost a year and a half, I could barely function.

Q: Did you... did you just run out of patience?

A: (pause)Patience would mean something’s gonna happen and I’m not willing to stay and wait for it to happen, so I think that would be overstating the fact. I’ve just run out of any hope whatsoever. To the degree that... One, people have... First of all that minorities on this Island will be treated properly or at least be made part of the community – that kids on this Island will be appreciated for what you have. I mean we’ve asked... [There are] some kids on this Island that have done some things you cannot believe – are remarkable, I mean. We have kids who come, that are on this Island that turned around their lives and, you know, the number of people that we have helped, I can’t even begin to give you the numbers. I can tell you we sent 20 kids to the Bahamas, that we’ve sent over 300 kids to Florida, and 90% of them never flew before, and it was all free, of course. We had the largest Girl Scout troop ever in the country. United States of America – largest Girl Scout troop ever – and that was broken up basically because that little thread of racism that runs through this Island, and I don’t think it will ever leave. I think all decisions here get somehow based on something like that. But yeah, if you want to call it “patience” I’ll accept that. I think I just became to the point where I know my board’s pretty much at the end of the road and I’d have to bring in a whole new board, and I’m not willing to do that anymore. I’m too old for that. And you also come to the realization, too, at some point, where I’ve been doing this since I was 15... I don’t remember how many kids I’ve worked with. I mean, I got approached, there’s not a part... I went to an Applebee’s in the Bronx and I run into two kids in the Bronx; both those kids are ex-Roosevelt Islanders. We go on a trip as a youth group, to Florida, and in Disneyland, we bump into five or six families that used to live here or came to our programs. We’ve drawn people from as far away as Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, northern Manhattan, to come here because they felt the service here was better than anyplace else, and cheaper. And we made everything... there was nobody denied a service on this Island. Hopelessness, yeah. And you know it’s... even if they do build a Youth Center they’re not gonna build it the way I want it built. And I think the way I want it built is the way it has to be built, if you really want to service a population. I remember when I first came here there was a program funded through –I forget the name of the agency – it was called the Challenge Program and when it was presented, it was primarily a take-kids-from-4-River-Road-off-the-Island-on-the-weekends program. That literally was what it said, I was to take youth from 4 River Road off the Island, and I turned that into a snorkeling, scuba-diving, canoeing, kayaking outdoor adventure program. I think that was probably as good as any program I’ve run. We did something a few years back that the people don’t appreciate: During a very hot summer when the City was –and this was with RIOC’s help through public-purpose funds – is that we did 100% employment. 100%. We had over 150 kids hired. Half of the money was paid – 40% by the City. 40% by RIOC, and 20% by the Youth Center. Only two kids on the Island were not hired. One was doing drugs very heavily and one was

selling 'em. Everybody else had a job. I think people miss out, too, as to the economy of the Island. In the summertime, we've run camps for up to 500 kids. They spend \$10, \$8, \$7 a day. How much money has that brought to the economy? Has Tony's... would Tony's Pizza Shop still be there if the Youth Program wasn't as active? Would Kaie [the proprietor of Trellis Restaurant] be? I mean, there's economics – people haven't really understood the economic value of having viable organizations. My staff eats on the Island, whether it's Chinese food or whatever. Doryne's [Doryne Isley of Roosevelt Island Housing Management] staff doesn't eat on the Island, the maintenance men don't eat on the Island, RIOC... the RIOC staff eats on the Island occasionally, in the back [of Trellis] – that's basically it. You know, you've gotta remember, my kids are used to eating here – this is like their, you know, cheeseburger-cheeseburger [place], you know that's what it is. But those are the two biggest. The Challenge program... we lost funding for that, weren't really able to continue that. We didn't really lose the funding; we lost the staffing – I didn't have the qualified staff to run a technical program of that nature, and that's the [type of] program you want to run. On an Island like this, you should have two or three technical programs really to get kids involved. But we've taken kids to the Bahamas, Florida, Pennsylvania, Monticello, New York for different tournaments and different activities. I think we've done a good job and I've had some great staff. There isn't a kid on this Island who doesn't put on their resume "Roosevelt Island Youth Program" as their first job, and that's a big thing people don't understand is [that] the hardest person to get a job for is a 14-year-old. No one wants 'em. 14-year-olds you have to turn around and pretty much... a 14 year old... you've pretty much got to hire someone to like baby-sit them through the process, so that is not the most cost-effective hire in the world. It's like you getting students, like we talked about one time and then you have to re-write the copy completely. So, are they really helping you? Someone says to me one time "Why don't you let so-and-so do it?" Well, because I'd have to do it over. Or I have to sit next to them and do it, why don't I do it and let them watch me?

Q: In 2,000 words or less, what's your advice for your successor?

A: Don't take the job.

Q: Oh my god.

A: I would... In the last couple years I've tried to hire people with the idea of them being my successor and I've offered them anywhere from \$12,000 to \$20,000 more than they had, and they choose either to take a lower-paying job and/or a different job. Roosevelt Island, who're you gonna meet? Who're you gonna meet on Roosevelt Island?

Q: You mean for career advancement?

A: Yeah. Jessica Lappin?

Q: What you're saying is, it's dead-end?

A: Yeah, it's a dead-end. You need to either get a young person who has all the energy in the world, who's looking to be here one or two years and build a resume and has a passion for doing work with kids, or you're gonna need someone at the end of the road who really just wants to have a nice job where he works with kids. Someone who's done this a long and it's almost like a semi-retirement thing. Almost like a real Rich Jordan [but] not like the plastic one we got.

Q: Given the fact that probably somebody is going to take the job, what should they do?

A: You know, you've gotten to the point now where with the City the way it is, and the way Bloomberg has re-orchestrated the funding mechanisms, you're really gonna have to go private as far as raising money. I've told my board two years ago that we had to get all the housing companies back into the fold – new buildings coming, everything else. We needed to go more private; we couldn't rely on the City any more. And they're gonna have to go more private. And the building over there, for instance – the Youth Center – last year I put \$17,000 into it. Realistically, I can put \$17,000 into it this year, but we don't have it to put in, and that building is just going to be a drain. 17, 17, 17 [year after year]... You constantly need to do what we have to do. The one thing I've done is we used to do rolling needs assessments and that was based upon what trends were going on in the City with kids. Was it video games? Was it music? What was it? We'd always look to the kids for what they wanted and mold the program around them. We've actually this year, with fixing the building over at the Youth Center, we're averaging about 140-something kids a day, and we're getting the good kids. We're not getting the... but then you don't have on this Island a lot of kids that you might call "bad kids," I mean.

And there are other factors, too. For instance one of our great accomplishments was the fact that the statistic is right there in front of you and sticks out in any census information you look at, or anything: If you're a teenager and you get pregnant, you have a child, you're going to be impoverished and your child will probably be impoverished. On Roosevelt Island, while we have not been able to really conquer that pregnancy issue, as far as the teenager getting pregnant. We didn't stop that, but I'll tell you one thing we did stop was, we stopped the fact that those kids did not have to live that percentage. We reversed that percentage. 90% of them actually went on, got to college, got jobs, are self-sustaining themselves – aren't on public assistance – are working.

Q: In spite of having a child?

A: In spite of having a child. We were able to reverse it. While we couldn't effectively stop the numbers, we could not stop the pregnancies, based upon our averages, it's lower than most communities but it's still too high. But the kids that have gotten pregnant, we've been very successful in helping 'em get jobs and get careers. I mean we've gotten kids careers in.... and Ron Vass has helped with this, and Lou Carbonetti and a few of my friends, personally, we've gotten people – not jobs – we got 'em careers. In the [UNINT] union, in the steamfitters, in the electrical union. These are careers. I have kids out there making 20, 30, 40 thousand dollars more than I do, and they're not 25 yet – they're not 25 yet. They're buying houses I can't afford.

Q: Doesn't that kill you?

A: Yes. And I'm sitting here, I'm going... you know, what're you talking about? I mean, you know... I think also I'd like to remember, the one thing I think that's really important here, is you remember this and I remember this: Was when I got here, 4 River Road got here, people were not prepared for that transition. They thought they prepared for it, but they didn't. And the Island became very hostile towards kids in general and the kids pretty much went off the limb here and started beating up Public Safety officers.... If you remember they set their car on fire and turned it over. You don't how many actions that we stopped that they were gonna do. When a guy named Warren Frasier came on as my outreach worker... This is the thing I miss with Jean Lerman, Jean Lerman was very good at understanding. When you brought something to [her], Jean Lerman would sit down, analyze it and react with you to it. Very proactive person. Now you'd get people who'd want to hem and haw, they wanna talk about it. They wanna (know/go?) one more time well, that's a criminal act, whatever. We got... we hired Warren Frasier and I would with Neil Hetherinton's [Public Safety Chief at the time] help, we would get to events before the police did. A fight's breaking out in front of 548 [Main Street] or whatever? Warren and I would run there, get there before Public Safety got there. Because once Public Safety got there, the fight changed to be the kids against Public Safety, not kid against kid. I mean, I remember when there was 200 kids outside of Public Safety and the Public Safety had to call the police department to be able to get out of the building. (I didn't know but?) Public Safety officers were chased around in cars. I think [on] privatization, I think every housing company on this Island has not realized the effect we have had on their ability to privatize.

Q: I was going to ask you that question, as a matter of fact. Very specifically, that is, if you visual Roosevelt Island over the last, say, ten years without the Youth Center, what kind of a... how is the Island different?

A: I'm going to give it to you over the 15 years. The person they were going to hire instead of me would have done so much damage, okay? Rich Jordan, who they hired to come in to be the savior, did so much damage and we were able to control it. You would not have had a community.

Q: What would have happened?

A: You look at your drop-out rates, your drug addiction, your drug problem, you look at your unruly teens, you look at your families that would have left. You would have had "white flight." Nah, I shouldn't say "white flight," because I'll tell you something – and I believe this today: Everybody's growing up as, you grow up with wanting your kids to have a little better than you do. I know a lot of families on this Island [are] barely getting by – black, Latino, whatever – barely getting by, paying the rent, but they do it because they want their children to be in a safe environment. We have helped maintain that. That would have been completely non-existent here. This place was becoming... you had kids being – extorting money to go to school, you had kids extorted going to the train station, you had kids who were getting threatened in the middle of the night, phone calls to their house. You had sexual acts being performed and they were not consensual. A lot of the stuff we stopped. I mean, the staff I started out here with, we did a fantastic job. That group of

people, people like that will never be put together again. And another thing, too, looking around at my staff now and the people... I could pay 'em whatever you want to pay 'em – they don't have the passion. You gotta have a passion. You're running a newspaper on the Island, okay? On what is basically a small Island like this. There are very few issues that will stimulate you, most of the time you're writing articles about so-so's parrot died or something, so, I mean, you gotta dig down every once in a while and bring that passion back and get an issue. I think that's why sometimes when you get fervent, and the people have said the same thing about you they say about me, you know? And when does your passion...

Q: Intemperate?

A: Yes. When does your passion become arrogant? When do you think you know more than the other guy? I had a talk with a commissioner about two months ago and this is when I really – and it's the truth – but he looked me in the face and he's yelling at me and he goes, "You know, you think you know more than me," and I said, "Excuse me, commissioner, you're wrong. I do. I don't think it, I know I know more than you do. I'll take the test right now." And it's difficult. I don't think the Bloomberg administration is friendly toward Roosevelt Island right now. I don't think the proposals and programs the City is going towards are the right way to go. I think the Bloomberg's youth policies and expenditures of money, while a lot – and he should be commended for getting that money – is gonna totally ruin Youth Services. Agencies, the good agencies are gonna go out of business. Large agencies are spending now \$5 on administration to get rid of a dollar. It's totally reversal of what we should be doing, you know. I was always prided myself on the fact that I could deliver a service for 40 cents. I'll take you to the Zoo, to McDonalds, and home for 40 cents. We've moved 500 kids to the circus, 34th St., during the Christmas season, or the City Christmas show whatever. You can't do that. You show me an agency that could do that. On the subway. 34th St. And got 'em all back and haven't lost a kid yet.

And I wanna get out of there. I got three days remaining. I wanna get out of there while I haven't lost a kid. I just don't see the passion in this business any more, and my feeling is I've always liked... from the days I used to plant trees in Washington Heights and Inwood for senior citizens, you know, plant 'em a tree in front of their house, it made their day. So they had something to look at, you know? Getting a pothole fixed that no one else could seem to get fixed, I want to go back to that life. I think it'll be a little fun.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in northern Manhattan, I was born in the area I've lived in my whole life. In fact I was born in what is now Junior High School 143. And when I was asked to a speech because I was born at home, 'cause my father was under the bed, I think.... This is back in the day when nobody locked their door and neighbors would just rush in. I was delivered by my mother's friends in the building, 'cause my father didn't want... well, he was a little drunk and he didn't wanna get – didn't the time to take my mother to the hospital, so my mother had me and, you know, I was supposed to die. Presbyterian Hospital sent me home the second day with my mother and said, "Take him home. He'll die, anyway." And I was very sick for the first like six or seven years of my life.

Q: Wow. How old are you now?

A: I'm 49. It's time. It's a younger man's world, younger man's job. I can't give the kids 100% anymore and that's...

Q: It's hard to keep up with them, isn't it?

A: Nah, you know, what it is, I'll tell you something, it's not. It really isn't. Ask grandparents. They might not be able to do it for as long as they used to, but it keeps them alive, it gives them... I still enjoy this, I will probably be volunteering in Washington Heights and Inwood in some way with kids. Just because I like doing it and it's something I do well – whether it's coaching baseball or football, something. I'll do that but you know I did this job for free. You know, you've gotta understand something, I was the youngest-ever elected treasurer of a Little League, youngest-ever elected president of a Little League. I mean, at the age of 17, I had a 30-some odd thousand dollar bank account of community money. I mean, that's something to say for who I was and what I was. I was just as passionate back then, it was misconstrued back then probably as being arrogance too. I mean I was called Hitler once when I was 19. "Hey, you run this place like you helped Hitler!" I said, "Stan," – Stan Abrams who used to be a vaudevillian-type performer but this is in the late 70's early 80's – I said "Stan, if I was really Hitler do you think you'd still be around?" Stan was a good

man, great volunteer. Did the Abbot and Costello thing better than anybody. But I don't know – I hope they'll find somebody. I don't wish this place, as far as Youth Services, bad at all, or the residents that have helped me or anything.

Q: Is there someone in charge now?

A: Steve Kaufman will be taking over. Steve Kaufman will be running the show. He's already running the show.

Q: He's a board member?

A: Yeah, he's a board member. He's already running the show as we speak. My function this week is to just basically clear out my desk and stuff. That's all I'm really doing. Try to get some paper work back from the City of New York [laughs].

Q: I'll talk to Steve and see what he has to say about where all this goes and so on.

A: And that's another thing too, to be totally honest with you. I do not like what and where they wanna go. I didn't agree with the board when they didn't take the [Day Nursery] site. I didn't agree with the board when we went back with Ms. Beck, who lied to us – blatantly lied to us – about her support for us, then turned around and became – when I mentioned to her and Berman last week was the only reason we went back even we started fighting in the first place and [Board member Mark] Ponton got involved, 'cause Beck came back in and got Steve and I interested back in possibly going for the full, whole ball of wax. If she'd kept her mouth shut, we'd have been over there [in the Day Nursery space], probably. I didn't believe her, but she was a friend of Steve's. And I think I have to, you know, end this by really thanking Mr. Ponton for promoting, trying to push hard for the kids. And he's another gentleman who's probably considered the same as I am – we're similar in a lot of ways, I think. You've gotta push buttons sometimes to get things done. You gotta look at the room, gotta look at your audience, and in yourself. It's like a comic or anybody else – you look at your audience and what they want; you gotta give 'em what they want. These people wanted to be, they ... sometimes I gave them what they wanted and people said to me that maybe I shouldn't have. And you're right, I probably shouldn't have. But if they wanted me to be the jerk, okay I'll be the jerk. I gave 'em what they wanted, I over-emphasized things. You know, that's what you want... if you want me to be a caricature of myself, I will be. 'Cause I was really willing to throw myself at any point just to get the job done. I've offered up my resignation four years in a row: "If you'll give us the building and build it the way I want. That's it." You know, there's no financial gain here, there's nothing, I'm not leaving this place a rich man. I could've... I've wasted probably my most productive 15 years of my life here.

Q: Can I ask you what your salary is at the end?

A: Uh, basically it was six figures. It was \$100,000. But you have to remember, too, that the first ten years I was here I wasn't paid anything. That was more compensation for taking... every raise I got here was subject to me giving something back. So I really never really got a raise. When you get dental back, that's an \$8,000-a-year nut – that's over ten years, \$80,000. When you give back the health insurance policy that has everything in it you could possibly think about, that's giving something back. When, you know, don't use, you don't – my week is a 35-hour work week. I think you know from seeing me around that 35... you can't do 35 hours in six days. Last summer alone I worked somewhere around 58 hours a week for nine weeks. And I lived on the Island and I didn't get appreciated for that. In fact, I'm gonna be – probably in the long-run, I don't know, I was taken advantage of there. I was promised that certain... I really wanted to leave last April. I had had it, I was completely burnt out and I knew it. 'Cause I can't help it. I'm burnt. I can't fight the City. I can't fight the State. I can't fight the Councilmen, 'cause Gifford Miller would not work with me as far as anything with Berman, 'cause Berman was [a] friend of his and he couldn't go after Berman, even though Berman can handle himself. So where do you go? I mean... and on the Island, you have another thing that's very unique, it doesn't really exist anywhere else. I can't really go to a Councilman, the Assemblymen, the State Senator, the Borough President, or even the goddamn Mayor for help. Because even Mayor Bloomberg will be told by RIOC, "Stick it. I'll call you when I need something." So, who else is in that kind of situation?

Q: So the political structure is a handicap?

A: Is... is oh, handicapping! That's like putting on a 5,000 claim [horse] and putting you and me on the saddle and asking 'em to run a mile [with that weight] and the horse'd be dead out of the gate. That's not a "handicap." That's like trying

to win the World Series of Poker and the best hand you get are deuces. It is almost impossible here. And people happen to fail to realize that I was someone who came here and I was pretty much politically astute. I knew the ways around Council – the agency I worked with... anybody they're getting now is on a learning curve and they're not gonna stay long enough to learn. So I think you're gonna go back to bumps and bruises. And I'm sorry to hear that, I don't want... I'd like to be able to say that I'm leaving here on terms with the board and RIOC and things like that where they could call me any time and I would give them advice... but I'm not. I'm just not leaving on friendly terms. Like I said, everything turns to anger eventually. I don't want to work on anger anymore, I really don't. You don't need it. Who wants to work being angry? I mean, you know. And I really got it from people when I talked to kids sometimes. They'll look at you and they'll go, "You're really angry, aren't you?" When they start noticing it...

Q: The kids, noticing?

A: Yeah, the kids were noticing it – that I was angry about things, that there were less times where I would be interactive with them and stuff like that. We used to have milkshake talks where I'd walk up Main Street where I know a kid has a problem or someone would tell me he has a problem and I'd bring him in here and buy him a milkshake and he spills the load to me and we'd talk. You know, there's something Bowser-like [Jim Bowser, former Main Street WIRE editor] about me. That's probably the reason why I've last here was in the Jim Bowser editorial in your paper, "Said It Ain't So, Charlie," it was called.

Q: I remember that.

A: Yeah, and that's the only reason I stayed, was Jim Bowser. I'm – it was just ridiculous. And Jim gave me hope by getting me a couple of people like Steve Kaufman and other people to join the board. He helped me maneuver getting Frank Briseno off the board, who had just [UNINT]. He got Jean Lerman kinda off my back and stuff like that, he helped me through those and, if it wasn't for him, I would not have stayed past the second two, maybe third, I would say two and a half years.

Q: That was when he was editor of The WIRE or president of the Rivercross board?

A: Yes. And he said "Look, I've got a couple of people for you. What's the problem?" I said "Normal, normal people. People who come in and not just... yell." It's almost like a Vietnam vet; I'm coming back from war from for two years this is, you know, this is going to take me a month to change. Even Annette Padilla told me that after she left she thought she'd miss it and then one month later she started feeling like she was healthier. And she's doing very well in Florida and I'm very proud of what we were able to accomplish with her. We trained her and she, she's probably the prototype for what we would have been able to do for a lot of kids. There are kids on this Island who are gonna go to college, when they fall out of their mother's womb, they're going straight to college. But I'm more proud of those other kids that – I'm telling you – when they're in college, the kids that we broken computers fixed for them, the kids that we pay for the forms to send the colleges so they can go, the kids we get into schools, the kids we get into technical schools. If you look up and down Main Street, you can count the number of knuckleheads, and there's not that many, okay? And you know that as well as I do. And you can count 'em... it's on any given night and that's unique.

Q: And others, as well as you, attribute that to what the Youth Center does.

A: I don't think we get as much credit as we should. I attribute a lot to the kids too, I think. I think we set an environment that allows them to feel free and safe. I don't think it was a safe environment when I got here. I would not have wanted to have been a Rivercross kid on Main Street, early on. I don't think Steve Kaufman's kid is the same kid today it wasn't for us and you've gotta remember too, we saved the Little League when it was going out of business, we took it over. The Girl Scout troop was going out of business we took it over. When the Library people told them they were gonna go out of business, we said we'd take it over. They changed their minds slightly after, I thought it'd be great for a Youth Center to have a library and would only cost me \$20,000 a year so it was like nothing. The soccer league was going... basically no longer a volunteer program and no one really had the time to do it. We took it over. These are some major staples in the community. And we kept the Youth Center alive. We're open seven days a week. We have a martial arts program with 145 registered kids, free. This is a \$3,000 program off-Island.

Q: 145 kids?

A: 145. We have a learn-to-swim program on Sundays, 20 weeks a year, two ten week sessions. So we've damn near taught the whole Island how to swim. We're gonna do something this year that I wanted to do, it'll be done after I'm gone but we're gonna... One of the things we wanted to do was we're always looking for new niches in which to get kids jobs and employment, so what we're gonna do is train 50 to 75 kids on the Island to be lifeguards. And we've already got them slotted for jobs at the Parks department and with the PAL. So those are avenues you want to do. They are things you can do. You can't do it – you've gotta be innovative in some aspects because the City, for instance, is not going to give Roosevelt Island any more. Charlie can not get 150 job placements for Roosevelt Island any more. It's all lottery; it's the Bloomberg way. You know, statistics and numbers. It's more important to have a number. If I'm supposed to spend 45 minutes with a kid, teaching the kid to read, and there's a kid sitting on a ledge ready to jump, Bloomberg expects me to finish the 45 minutes with the kid reading before I go out that window to talk to that kid.

Q: I don't quite get that but...

A: Well, the point is there's prior priorities and you need to understand that sometimes, sometimes you're gonna see a situation on this Island and because it's so small and close-knit – you know, when [a] kid's having problems. I will tell you that this summer alone I spoke to two who were suicidal. We referred one, and the other one I think we worked with him, because he wasn't as bad-off as the other one.

Q: Teenagers?

A: Teenagers, yes. And they were – and I stayed up until 2, 3 in the morning with them because you're not going to get them anyplace else. When I was first here early on I had a counselor named Jesse Morgan, who I brought with me who was part of the District 6 drug program had a great impact, but couldn't have funded. You have to understand at some point people have to become full-time to keep 'em, and you can't do it. You're not going to be able to do that here. You're never going to be able to do that here.

Q: I have that problem with reporters.

A: Yes. You come to a point, where you know, I need to make a couple dollars and how far can you go? We're over-paying kids now who'd be making \$7 or \$8 in sneaker stores, we're paying 'em \$12 or \$13 'cause we can't get the college students to come here. Because this is a draining job, you know. We don't cap programs. Across the City, agencies cap programs. They'll take 25 kids for a program, 25 kids for this program, 50. A martial arts program in any other beacon would be 50 kids tops. We don't cap 'em, we tell the teacher, "Deal with it." So you know, so we have to pay him more but he's got a 150 kids and he works it out over a three-day week. So it's an expensive program. And in some areas we've done other things. And I think saving the programs on the Island, working with the kids... And, as you know, I walk up and down Main Street, I have a great rapport with all the kids. I have no problem with the kids, and I can say pretty much anything I feel like saying. They might not like it but that's life. I didn't like it when my parents or my brother's friends used to smack me in the back of my head. You remember those days when the older guys could smack you in the head and tell you to stop. I remember getting my ass kicked as a kid because I was seen with a pack of cigarettes going home. And I was like 11. And my brother's friend beat me up and took the cigarettes away from me and said, "I don't want you smoking," and they were for my father, you know. So my father had to come down and say "Give him those damn cigarettes back." So I mean, that's a problem too.

Q: Listen, the Island has changed in the sense that it used to be – my sense is that it used to be that in the early '80's, when I first got here, it used to be that everybody knew everybody's kids. Kids couldn't really misbehave in public because mom or dad would hear about it faster than the kid could get home to deny it. You know? And my sense is that now we've grown in terms of population, number of kids and so on, to the point where you don't quite have that community monitoring that you once had.

A: I think that's consistent in American today, I don't think that's just relevant here. I think it's a fear of kids in some cases. That if you say something to them they will retaliate, it's a fear that goes on. But I see that everywhere, I don't just see that here. I see that all over the City. I've done consulting work in other States too, and I've seen it there. It's not like that anymore where Eric's mother would yell out the window "Eric," everyday at 5:45, "it's time for dinner!" [Or] "Dick, get upstairs it's time for dinner!" And my mother would run across, "Dick's over here, he's eating here, is

that okay?” “No, I told Dick no more eating at your house, he’s gotta come home tonight,” and Dick’s got to go home. I had friends that would pick apartments you know, spaghetti and meatballs, stew, whatever they want. They wanna eat Jewish, they wanna eat Italian, they wanna eat Irish, German, whatever they left like eating. They would turn around and that’s the apartment they would go to. I don’t think I remember a day where I didn’t have somebody extra in my apartment sitting at my table. You don’t see that anymore, either. But you don’t also see kids staying over and eating at people’s houses either. I think it’s all changed. I think that kinda went.... The last you’ll of see it, you still see that in a couple of families, the [name] family. They’re a large family and their kids got like 35 friends, so you see. That’s like a Youth Center in itself. It could probably get funding. They should probably get funding for that.

Q: You know what, we’ve been doing this for over an hour and a half.

A: Wow.

Q: And I’ve got more here than I can type because I’m going to put the transcript on the website, but let me just give you a chance to add anything you’d like to add.

A: Well, I’d like to thank the people on the Island for giving me the opportunity to work with their kids and I’ve enjoyed it. I’ve enjoyed these kids a lot and I wish the best of luck to these kids and to the Island itself and in the future. I don’t wish anything bad on the program or the kids and I wanna see the program succeed. When I left Washington Heights the first time to come here, I’m still proud those programs I started up there still exist. The one or two that didn’t, I’m very unhappy about and it’s usually the people that come in behind you. And I just hope that the people making the decisions going forward make better decisions than I think they’re gonna to make. I really am really not confident that the board members and members of the community, including RIOC, are gonna make those decisions going forward. I think that RIOC wants to become more of a part of the operation of the Youth Center than it should. I think that... I wish the Island and I wish the kids well. I really do. I’ve made some friends here and I’ve made some enemies. The enemies rightfully so, I should have made ‘em. And the friends... So you know, I’ve always said in my life the first 21 years I made 1,000 friends and I spent the next 21 losing them for various reasons. Friendship, it takes [on] different definitions as you get older. I’ve had a good time here, I had a good run. I wish it wasn’t as adversarial at times as it has been but... and if there are things I could have taken back.... The one Charlie, the one personality, because I’m a Gemini, would say to you, “Of course,” and the other guy would say to you, “Hell no. Fight those suckers one more time.” But you can’t beat RIOC, you’re never gonna beat RIOC. It’s an institution that... it’s like talking to someone who’s dumb.

Q: By dumb you mean...? Low IQ?

A: Dumb. Low IQ. It’s like talking to a dumb... They’ll never really totally get it, so... You gotta change your... They’ll just never get it. Those are guys that when they yell “Fire!” in a theater they still sit there and eat their popcorn. RIOC has that mentality. But really, the one thing though I really, really find is that when RIOC finally – the Island clamored for years to get control of the [RIOC] Board and they have control of the Board... but do they have control of the Board? What are the Island residents doing for the Island residents? And I think some have been there just too damn long, you know. Just to be a member; why do you want to be a member of a group that doesn’t pay you a dime? There has to be something wrong with you. You know? People that are on community boards for 30 years or organizations for 40 years are kinda like... You understand maybe it’s just a friend thing, but that’s not a friendship kind of thing that’s just a go to a monthly meeting to get hammered, you know.

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