

ZEPHYRHILLS ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Steven Spina, Ph.D

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Steve: My name is Steve Spina. I am the former city manager for the City of Zephyrhills and have been engaged in this history project since the beginning.

Jon [West]: Can you tell us how long, or what years, you were city manager?

Steve: I was city manager for 20 years from 1996 to 2011 and from 2014 to 2019.

Jon: Tell us about Mrs. Dobson. Who is she?

Steve: Mrs. Dobson, or Ms. Irene—she goes by both—is a longtime resident of Zephyrhills. She is known as a matriarch of the black community, but I think of the entire community, also. She was one of the people that intertwined, or brought together, the two quite often separate communities. She moved to Zephyrhills in the late 1940s or 1950s. She raised her children here. She lived in the Otis Moody subdivision, which was just outside of the city limits. I met her when I was a reporter at the *Zephyrhills News*. The *News* had hired a black reporter from Washington, D.C., Terry, and when his picture was in the paper, she came in to meet him and give him support. That's when I met her, and we became pretty fast friends from then on. One of the things that she asked me to work on with her and her neighbors was getting streets paved in the Otis Moody subdivision, which was just outside the city limits. It was one hundred percent African-American. It was designed that way back in the days when that community was really excluded from the city limits to prevent black residents from having a voice in the city, having access to city services, and really just being a part of the community. So, I worked with her and some other people. We approached Pasco County and we applied for and received a community development block grant. And I think in about 1998 or 1999 the streets were paved and streetlights were put in. The city had already put water lines in the area in the late 1980s. It started progress, incremental steps in bringing services and improved living standards to the African-American community in Zephyrhills.

Jon: Was the Otis Moody project the first project that you remember working on with Ms. Irene?

Steve: The first major one, yes, in terms of actual infrastructure and making changes. She was involved in the Chamber of Commerce. I remember that she was nominated for a “volunteer of the year” award, and I think, amazingly enough, that was the first time an African-American had received a Chamber award. She got active in the Chamber and working on having floats [in parades] and participating in the Main Street and Founder's

Day programs, little cultural things like that. But Otis Moody was the start of major improvements to the community.

Jon: A major thing that you worked on with Ms. Dobson was the Martin Luther King street renaming. How did that saga begin?

Steve: Well, we had begun to get a little more involved with Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church and Reverend Nunn. He had pushed for the city to hire black police officers to better represent the community. There were several times that the city staff would have community meetings there at the church, and we talked about needs, we talked about improving relationships. That happened in the early 2000s. In 2003, Ms. Irene came to me and said, "I think it's time that we named a street after Dr. Martin Luther King. He's a very prominent person, it's the 40th anniversary of his 'I Have a Dream' speech, and Zephyrhills needs [to honor him]." She continued to try to bring the communities together. I told her to bring it to council, that we would have to have a letter on the agenda. She came to me in August 2003 and then she wrote a letter and she passed it around her neighborhood. It took her a little while to get signatures. The signatures weren't necessary for the council, but she wanted to have signatures to show that there was support. It was on the agenda in October and she was there to present it. I supported it to the council. They took a vote and it was passed four to one and things got started quickly. There are processes and procedures to doing street name changing, and she asked that Sixth Avenue be changed to Martin Luther King Avenue, so we started the process. We wrote letters to residents along the street, and then we had to come back for a second vote. The letters went out and we started getting responses from people on the street and people in town. It happened to be a largely a negative reaction. People didn't want the street renamed. They complained about the cost. They complained about street numbers, the numerical grid of the streets. The first vote had passed four to one, but the second vote passed three to two—one city council member said, "Maybe we need to look at this a little more before we move too quickly." Council went ahead with it and we started the process and took off from there.

Jon: What exactly did Ms. Irene come to you and say?

Steve: Ms. Irene came to me and said, "It's the 40th anniversary of Dr. King's 'I Have a Dream' speech, and I'd like to look at naming a street in Zephyrhills after Dr. King." She selected Sixth Avenue because that street runs through the African-American community and across into the general population of the city as well. She thought that it would be kind of a bridge to both sides of the railroad tracks, if you will.

Jon: So the choice of Sixth Avenue was kind of symbolic.

Steve: Right. It was at the heart of the African-American community at that time because Zephyrhills was still relatively segregated then, in terms of where whites and blacks lived. It hadn't been enforced segregation, but just a segregation in place due to history and exclusion, past practices.

Jon: Did you initially have any qualms about naming a street after Martin Luther King?

Steve: No, I didn't have any qualms about naming the street. I think it flicked into my head that there would be some opposition, but I thought it was worthwhile. I thought that Dr. King was a person who had changed our country and made a lot of things different and better, and that it wasn't wrong to recognize people who have had that kind of impact on our lives.

Jon: So you had respect for Dr. King?

Steve: Yes, I did. I have a lot of respect for Dr. King. I have a lot of respect for the changes that were implemented in the United States because of Dr. King and the movement he led, so I thought that she was right, that it would benefit for our community to share in that recognition.

Jon: What was the next part of the street renaming process?

Steve: When the city council voted to approve it, city staff took the steps of starting to change street signs. There was a lot of pushback from people on the streets about costs of changing driver's licenses, checking accounts, and addresses. We actually offered to pay—I think it was \$25, something like that—to cover costs for people who had to make those changes, to try to make it easier and to try to put some of the unease at rest. That started in November or December and went into the new year, 2004. In February, there is a qualifying for city council elections. At that time, we had two people run for city council, and they opposed councilwoman Elizabeth Geiger and councilman Lance Smith. Each had opponents qualify for the election in February. After February, everything kicked up again, and we started having conversations and debates. The whole issue that had kind of died down reared up again in April. Councilman Smith was defeated and Councilwoman Geiger was reelected by one vote. The new councilwoman [Gina King] put an item on the agenda to change the street name back [to Sixth Avenue]. And that's when all hell broke loose.

Jon: What did you think as a representative of the city during this time? How do you think that all of this reflected on Zephyrhills?

Steve: Well, at first I thought that it was a normal protest over changing the street that you live on and I understood some of the comments and concerns, but as it developed further, it turned into more of a racist approach to overturning the vote. It was kind of like, "We'll do it, no matter what!" and I felt that that would have a negative impact on the city's reputation. I mean, we were engaged heavily in economic development. We were kind of a retirement Mecca for older seniors, and I didn't want us to be painted with this broad brush, to be a town that's remembered in the racial history of the country. You mention Selma, Alabama, and that may be extreme, but people instantly think of protest and the bridge and things that happened there. So, I was concerned that we needed to make sure that everybody knew that a vocal minority didn't mean that the whole town was inherently racist.

Jon: What was ultimately the result?

Steve: Prior to the city election, the vote to keep the renamed street was three to two in favor. After the election, the vote to return the street name to Sixth Avenue was three to two. The one new council member switched the balance, and it went back. That's when we saw the national media come, when we saw local people protesting. We saw African-Americans picketing City Hall. At that time, we tried to set up a reconciliation committee, and that worked. It helped. We put people on both sides. Ms. Irene was on it and we had council members on it, and we tried to talk through some of the hurtful things that had been said or the impressions of where people stood. That helped. Shortly thereafter, city staff went out to the [African-American] community—mostly Otis Moody, but also the Sixth Avenue area, because the whole community was out there in Otis Moody subdivision—and offered to look at ways to improve the neighborhood, maybe even annex the different parcels of land into the city. What I had found was that one of the chief arguments [against the street renaming proposal] was—and people levied this—that Ms. Irene didn't live in the city, so she shouldn't have an opportunity to change the street name. One of the suggestions had been to just change the Sixth Avenue name from the railroad tracks east, which would have defeated the purpose of the whole thing. She had lived here [in Zephyrhills] for 50 years and lived just half a mile from the city limits. To insinuate that she wasn't part of the community was wrong, but it was insulting as well.

Steve: So we thought, let's annex you, bring you into the city. We can provide better service. You'd have police and fire closer—a variety of different benefits—and maybe some of these issues would be put to rest as well. But, overall, the community didn't want to do that. They rejected it pretty much out of hand. I think there was—I don't think, I *know* there was—a lot of resentment over the street naming process and how that went, and they didn't want to be a part of a city that they felt didn't want them and didn't view them as residents. So that kind of died on the vine.

[Due to a recording error, the production team elected to re-record the Spina interview same-day. The same topics are covered, and the responses are largely the same, but some new details do emerge that may be of interest.]

Jon: Okay. So let's go back to the beginning. Tell us who you are.

Steve: My name is Steve Spina. I am the former city manager for the City of Zephyrhills. I was city manager for 20 years. I served from 1996 to 2011 and then again from 2014 to 2019, when I retired.

Jon: Tell us about Mrs. Dobson. Who was she?

Steve: Well, Mrs. Dobson, or, as we also call her, Miss Irene, is a longtime resident of Zephyrhills. She moved here in the late 1940s with her family. I consider her to be the matriarch of the African-American community, and of the city as a whole. I think she was one of the leaders in trying to bring the community together to be more inclusive. Her children were involved in different community events. I first met her in the early 1980s. The *Zephyrhills News*, where I was employed at the time, had hired an African-American

reporter. She came in to meet him. She met me as well, and we just started forging a very strong friendship from that time on.

Jon: In what ways was she a matriarch in the community?

Steve: I think she was a matriarch because she stepped...out of bounds, I guess. I think there were still places and times where African-Americans didn't participate in certain events. It was still a strongly white majority community. She got involved in the Chamber [of Commerce], she had her children involved in Girl Scouts, she was in the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association]. She just participated like any resident would participate, and she kind of broke down some barriers there. She also worked to improve relations. She was active in city affairs. She was active in the Chamber of Commerce. I believe she was the first Chamber "volunteer of the year" of African-American heritage. Then she started working on different projects where she lived in Otis Moody subdivision, which was just outside the city limits. At that time, in the 1950s, that was the only place blacks could live. They had to live on the other side of the railroad tracks. She came to me once I was working at the city to see how we could help make physical improvements to the neighborhood and pave some streets, get some streetlights, work with the county to get increased sheriff patrolling, things like that.

Jon: So that was the first project with Mrs. Dobson that you remember. What was the next major project?

Steve: We worked with the county on Otis Moody. As employees of the city, we helped residents apply for community development block grants from Pasco County and got the streets paved and streetlights put in. The city had already, in the late 1980s, installed waterlines and fire hydrants. There's been kind of an incremental approach to improvements in that area, which was part of unincorporated Pasco County.

Jon: Do you think those efforts were a success? Did they make a difference?

Steve: Yeah, they did. I noticed this pretty much right off the bat: once the streets were paved and there were streetlights and kind of an improvement to the area, people started fixing up their houses. Some of the trailers that had been abandoned were dragged out. Homes were painted. Different personal projects were initiated along those same times.

Jon: The next major thing I remember you telling us about was the Martin Luther King street renaming. How did that entire saga begin?

Steve: In 2003, around the time of the 40th anniversary of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, Mrs. Dobson came to me and said, "You know, I think it'd be a good idea if we named a street after Dr. King." So I said I'd need a letter to put it on the city council agenda. So she said she'd get a letter together. Then it took her a little while to get signatures from residents. She didn't need the signatures for council's benefit, but I think she wanted to show that there was community support for this street name change. In October, it was on the city council agenda. She was there and the letter was read. I gave council a recommendation. I had no problem with it. I thought it was a timely thing, and they

voted four to one to move forward with it. We started the process then, notifying property owners and advising people that the name would be changed and that it would be on the next council agenda for final approval. At that time, we started getting pushback—mostly from residents on the street, but others within the community, too. One businessman that didn't live anywhere near Sixth Avenue started a recall petition. Different things started stirring up that way.

Jon: Why was Sixth Avenue chosen?

Steve: Sixth Avenue was selected by Ms. Irene because it was a street that ran throughout the course of the city. It started on the east side of the railroad tracks, fronting the black community, and went all the way across town, through the majority white community. She thought that would be a good street. Number one, it had symbolic significance to where she lived, but it also would serve as a bridge that could unite the community.

Jon: Once there was negative pushback on the street renaming what happened next? What was the next step?

Steve: We moved forward with it. The council had voted three to two to initiate the street change. We started ordering new signs. Some of the residents complained about the costs of having to change their driver's licenses and checking accounts and things like that, so we actually offered to pay \$25 per household to cover some of those costs. It might've been more than that, but we tried to help lessen the impact in that way. By the turn of the new year, 2004, things had quieted down a little bit. I think there was still a discomfort with some of it, but things had kind of quieted down. In February, the qualifying came for running for city council, and two candidates came forward to run against two of the council members who had voted for the street name. At that time, everything picked back up.

Jon: When Mrs. Dobson brought you this proposal, did you have any qualms about putting that on the agenda?

Steve: None at all. I had read about Dr. King, and I thought that a lot of what he had done, his work to end segregation and Jim Crow, his work for civil rights, had improved the country. It made the country a better place to live in, and it helped everyone. I thought it was a very fitting tribute and I thought that, although we had a small-percentage African-American community, it really would benefit everybody because he had done so many good things.

Jon: So you had a lot of respect for Dr. King's work?

Steve: I had a lot of respect for Dr. King's work. I had respect for his approach, you know, the nonviolent approach to initiating change. I thought that he was a great American. I just had no problem with it at all.

Jon: So new people started to attempt to run for city council. What were their stated motivations and what were they like?

Steve: When the two candidates for city council qualified and started running, their sole purpose was overturning the street name. They said that it was mishandled, that the process wasn't right, and that the people were against it. City council had kind of sandbagged the residents, and they thought that the whole thing needed to be turned over. There were some valid claims about the process, because the city charter called for either a petition to change the street name or allowed for city council change the street name. City council opted to change the street name. It was a legal action, but I think [the candidates] still felt that there needed to be more discussion and that people weren't brought into it in a timely manner. When you review what happened in other communities such as Tampa and Pensacola, other cities that named a street after Dr. King, the processes and the costs of changing addresses and all of these ulterior issues are brought up when, in reality, a lot of times race is a primary factor.

Jon: That brings up an interesting question: How much research have you done into these other communities that have gone through the same thing?

Steve: I've done quite a bit. I did my dissertation on Martin Luther King street namings. I did it because of my experiences in Zephyrhills. I looked at Tampa, Pensacola, Palmetto and the Zephyrhills process. Each case is unique and they had different issues involved, but in all four cases, the complaints were similar, the arguments were similar, and the pushback was similar. In a couple of them, the outcome was the same. Tampa was successful and Pensacola was successful, two larger communities, but the smaller communities had more trouble, more pushback and had a harder time enacting the change. In Zephyrhills, ultimately, that change ended up being reversed. How did that happen? Well, with the April election, one of the candidates for office beat the incumbent Lance Smith and the second candidate lost by one vote to Liz Geiger, so the dynamics of the council changed. Where before that election, it had been three to two in favor of the street name, after the election, it became three to two against the street name. The new council member immediately put it on the next agenda to change the street name and reverse the whole thing. It was a one-issue election and really it became a one-issue term of office. In May of that year, they had another vote and they voted to change the name back. That's when the city was beset with national media: the *New York Times*, CBS News, ABC News. There was picketing at City Hall and a lot of discomfort, a lot of disruption and a lot of hurt feelings, I think, on both sides.

Jon: So did you have any concerns about how all of this would reflect on Zephyrhills?

Steve: Yeah, I was very concerned about that. I knew during the civil rights process and protests that communities were tarred with bad reputations for different things that had happened there, and some of them will never recover from them, like Birmingham or Selma. We were in the midst of economic development changes. We were a Mecca for seniors retiring to Florida. I didn't want us to be saddled with a reputation of being discriminatory, racist or not welcoming. We had to put that issue to rest right away. Council then voted to compromise on the street name and changed the name back to Sixth Avenue, but they also left the Martin Luther King Drive sign there as an honorary recognition and I think that helped. But I think that there are still vestiges of hurt and discontent, probably on both sides, about how it all came down.

Jon: One of the biggest examples of that was the annexation. How did that go? How did that process unfold?

Steve: Well, shortly after the street name was changed back to Sixth Avenue, city staff met with residents in Otis Moody and the Sixth Avenue area. We would meet at Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church. Reverend Nunn opened his doors to us to have community gatherings. We thought that one way of helping resolve the issue would be to ask residents to voluntarily annex into the city, and that would bring them a role in government. They could run for office, they could vote, they would have better municipal services in terms of fire and police. Annexation would put to rest forever the idea that "they don't live here." I think that to say that Ms. Irene wasn't a city resident when she had lived half a mile from the city limits for 50 years was insulting. Those exclusionary tactics of old needed to be put to rest, so we went out and approached them about annexing, and basically they said no. "We feel we're not welcomed and we'll sit this one out."

Jon: How did geography play a role in Zephyrhills and disenfranchising the African-American community?

Steve: Well, back in the in the early 1900s, when the city was incorporated, there were African-Americans living in different sections, but the city limits were established. When more African-Americans moved to the area, they were purposely moved to areas outside of the city in the '50s and early '60s. It's referred to as exclusion: if you're excluded from the city limits, you have no voice in what happens. You have no voice in what council does. You have no opportunity to receive services from the city in terms of fire and police. The city will have a fire station a half-mile from you, but you have to wait for one to come from the county, which may be eight miles from you. It was a purposeful act of excluding minorities, and it was done all the time in the older settlement times. That's why we thought that the annexation process would be a better method of bringing the area into the city limits and making it part of the community. The whole street naming was very hurtful, and you can see it in different parts of interviews with different people. There was a lack of trust of the white power structure and it's like, alright, now you're going to come back here? Why should we trust you now? And I think the trust wasn't there.

Jon: Do you think that the power structure now is trying to learn from its mistakes and correct its mistakes?

Steve: Definitely. We did go back and try to annex again a couple of years ago, and again that was about a 50-50 split. Part of the problem we had then was working on a specific utility issue with [converting] the septic to sewer. If they were in the city limits, if that neighborhood was in the city limits, it'd be easier for the city to apply for funding and oversee the project and deal with that issue. If they're not in the city, it's harder. You have to get another agency involved, and it's kind of a small segment of 60 households. It's out of sight, out of mind when you have 450,000 living in Pasco County, for example. So there is an interest, but it's pretty split still. And even two years ago, even then we

were asked, "Why should we trust you?" I think there's interest and there's wanting to do right, but there's still building that needs to be done. Building trust and community.

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