

Laurel Bauer
Narrator,
with comments by Perry Bauer

Rob Hahn
Interviewer

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LB: My name is Laurel Bauer. I was born Laurie Hanson—or Laurel Hanson—but I grew up in Dinkytown. I grew up about a half a mile from Dinkytown. My grandmother lived in Dinkytown. My grandfather started The House of Hanson on the corner of 14th and 5th in 1932. Grandma ran it for about a decade or so, maybe two. Grandpa passed away at a Marshall High School football game. Yes, he walked in and had a major coronary; and he was gone. Grandma took over. My dad went to into the Service. He came back and worked for Honeywell for 12 years and said, "I'm done working for somebody else." He walked in the store and said, "Ma, you're done" and out the door she went and in he came. At that point, The House of Hanson was a cafe. It originally started as a cafe and The House of Hanson name originally came from my grandfather's initials, which was Henry Oscar Hanson—so the HOH was Henry Oscar Hanson.

RH: That's good. Just for a quick introduction, I'm Rob Hahn; I'm asking the questions.

LB: Sure.

RH: It is December 18, 2018, and we are in Columbia Heights, Minnesota. Let's go back and reminisce or get your reflections. What was your first memory of House of Hanson?

LB: My first memory, I would say I was five; and if mom wasn't home after kindergarten, I would walk to the store—which Marcy Elementary was my grade school, so that was about four block walking. You just went on your own back in the day. So I would go and sit on the end stool and spin and just wait for mom to come pick me up. If dad needed me to do something, I got to get on my hands and knees and sort the penny candy. So the black licorice and the red licorice would mix and I'd have to make sure that they were straightened out.

RH: Yeah, I think you told that was your first job.

LB: That was my first job. So I did things like that: take the garbage out, those kinds of things. Well, I was starting at age 5, but I really didn't start getting paid until I was 12, which would have been my seventh grade year in Marshall High School, which is directly across the street.

RH: What was Dinkytown like in that era, when you were five through twelve—a teenager?

LB: It was a very busy time. We had to deal with the Vietnam War protests, Ban the Barn. Because Marshall High School had just merged with U-High, we were seventh and eighth graders passing through Dinkytown at lunchtime every day. So we had a lot of traffic. We were the first open-enrolment high school, so we had buses coming in from all over. With the merger

of the high school, we now had all the professors' kids. So we had really smart children, we had really poverty kids that came out of the Quonset huts where people were housed. We had a real melting pot for a high school and Dinkytown was a real melting pot. We were fortunate as seventh, eighth graders—junior high students—to be able to experience the student life. We were also allowed to do anything on campus because we were Marshall U-High, so we could join in on any of the activities just with our student ID. It was a mixture of people from all nations and shapes and sizes.

RH: Did you appreciate it then or did it take a few years after being out of high school to appreciate the diversity, the different elements, the culture?

LB: I think we appreciated it at the time, but I grew to appreciate it more after I left realizing that here we were in the not all-white school. Like a lot of them we had: blacks and the whites and the Indians; and the rich kids and the poor kids; and the smart kids and the not-so-smart kids. It was just a really good experience. I still meet with people today and we talk about, "Well, that's what we learned at Marshall." Because we had such a different culture, we were thrown into society and just really trained as to how to treat people of different races. We also had the disabled students, so Marshall High School was the only high school in the city with an elevator. They decided to put all the handicapped students there; people with disabilities were put at Marshall and that was the: hearing-impaired, sight-impaired, and physically-impaired. When they finished at Michael Dowling, which went to eighth grade, then a lot of them were bused over to Marshall. That also was interesting because a lot of people—I still have many friends today that were people with disabilities. My brother was also one of the ones with a disability. He is a polio. We just have a lot of connections with the people that were in that school and it just showed us and taught us that we could communicate with people that were a little different than you.

RH: Did the students—I think you alluded to it, but did the students from Marshall-U spend a lot of time in Dinkytown?

LB: Yeah, all day, every day. I mean we walked right through Dinkytown back and forth and we had a completely open campus. We also did not have to eat lunch in the lunchroom. We were allowed to go onto campus, which was one of the first high schools that was allowed to do that. Burger King was brand new. McDonald's wasn't all that old. I remember when McDonald's just said "One million served"—that really dates me. A lot of our students worked in Dinkytown. Everybody worked in Dinkytown. It was just small jobs. We did fundraising for our trip to France. I was paid 25 cents to sweep the dirt floors in the photo store around the corner, which because Century Camera, which became National Camera Exchange—but it started out as just an individual photographer.

RH: You mentioned different forms of protests, social activism; I just want to take you through and if you could share your memories of them or maybe specific stories related to them. Let's start with the Vietnam War.

LB: Well, there were protests. We had a lot of hippies in our school—a lot of kids that had really strong feelings against the war and so there was a lot of that. There were some big uprisings. That was also University of Minnesota's students and then the high-schoolers just kind of got

along with them. There was teargas and breaking up of riots that was kind of scary at the time. I just went home, because I didn't want any part of it.

RH: There was the Red Barn protest as well.

LB: Yeah.

RH: What are your memories of that?

LB: It was amazing. I remember the building still being there, that they were very decrepit and needed to come down, or really be taken care of. It was not that big of a deal, but at the same time fast-food was just coming into the scene. We already had Burger King. We already had McDonald's so we didn't need another hamburger place. Well, if they looked at it today and we could start adding up—when I left Dinkytown six years ago, I think we had 35 different restaurants and I'm sure there's at least another dozen since I left. It's just always been a place for people to come and gather and have a meal. Students were very good at supporting us in our small businesses.

RH: Were you aware of—or maybe even participated in—the sit-in at Bridgeman's when they were trying to move McCosh's Books out?

LB: I was not. I was aware of it but I wasn't allowed, because my father owned a business in Dinkytown and it was always pushed into my head, "No matter what you do, no matter where you go someone will always know who you are." So that had to keep as kind of a Goody Two-Shoes and I wasn't allowed to do things like sit-ins or protests or that. I just stayed out of that picture, because I didn't want it to reflect on any kind of views that the store might have—because there were retaliations at the time—different things I don't want to talk about, but different things that could happen to the stores if somebody crossed—if you crossed people. There were some unsavory peoples.

RH: Let's talk about some of the individuals, the characters—if you will—at Dinkytown. You told me on the phone a wonderful story about Walking Phil.

LB: Yeah, we called him Walking-Talking Phil; he never stopped talking. He was talking from the moment he came in the store to the moment he left the store and there was never really anybody there that he was having this conversation with. He just was always talking. He would come in and—we had a payphone on the wall back when you put a dime in a phone and made a call. He would make calls and talk for an hour and just on and on—just really deep conversations. The secret to it all is we could pick up the other phone and hear what he was saying and we know that he never called anybody. When he was done, he would hang up the phone and his dime would come back out and he would take it, because he only dialed six numbers. We always knew that he was going to come in and something was going to be going on over in that corner with him. It was just one of the many characters over the years, many colorful characters.

We had another woman who would come in too and she was the same way, just always talked; she was always having a conversation; and yet she would still converse with you but as she left the store, she was still talking and talking and talking.

RH: These would be people who are eating at The House of Hanson or just picking something up or just stopping by to visit?

LB: Picking up. The cafe left. The soda foundation was gone in the sixties. So when I owned it, it was all groceries. So people came in for their daily needs, whether it be milk, eggs, bread, towels—what have you; they supported us that way. We had a lot of students that were lifelong students. I mean they just were educating themselves forever. So they would be many generations older than students, but we had several of those. It was just what made up—

RH: You said something very interesting that convenience stores back then were fixtures in people's daily lives for food for dinner.

LB: Right. You didn't have the super-supermarkets. You didn't have the Cubs and the Rainbows—the big grocery stores. There was a Red Owl, there was a supermarket, but we were convenience stores and convenience stores was at that time a place where you went and got your milk and bread and soup—meals. You got food to make a meal; and eventually it evolved so that the conception of convenience stores became chips and pop or junk food and maybe a frozen dinner or something. It's not where people shopped for dinner anymore, so that changed. I also noticed a large change when the high school closed and I lost—there were 1,000 people that came through that building every day. There were a lot of health-conscious people, a lot of doctors and chiropractors and different things and they ate the higher-end foods and they would come in and purchase those from me. When they were gone, that was a big chunk of my health food department that left. I still have them as far as coming in for their lunches, some of those people didn't do the convenience-type shopping or the—what am I trying to say? They didn't go to the fast-food places. They would rather buy an upper-scale meal, a health-food type meal.

RH: How would you describe the relationship, the camaraderie—if you will—among business owners in Dinkytown?

LB: I think we had a very good relationship. I was fortunate in being including in it because I was not only a business owner, but I also owned my property. I was a landlord, so I had businesses that rented from me as well. There were other people in that same—like the Vescios, in the same position. We had meetings once a month and talked about what was going on in Dinkytown. We all knew what everybody was doing. We had holiday parties, which was—all employees were included in that and everyone donated foods and things like that. It was a very—we had a very tight-knit group where we can just make decisions and we had Summer activities trying to bring students in, trying to keeps things alive over the Summer when the major students left—we'd like to keep something going in the Summertime or we would do things in the Spring or Fall when they were coming and going just to keep people interested in our area.

RH: How much do you think the closing—let me rephrase that. What impact, in addition to your health food department, did the closing of Marshall-U have on the transformation of Dinkytown?

LB: Well, I think it was huge. Besides the 1,000 people that came and went, they also supported my store. I also owned the parking lot behind and so that was a lot of traffic that came through there. I think we lost a lot of different people that worked there. Like I said before, the doctors, the nurses, and the chiropractors and other—there were foreign studies, there were foreign

classes, there were language classes. It was, again, the school still stayed a very eclectic group of things happening and I think when that closed it really impacted Dinkytown and took a lot out. Then I'd also seen the plans and understood that once that building came down, it was the first time that there was ever going to be enough land available close to my store to cause something to come in that would be big enough to compete with me.

Prior to that it was the CVS, which was about three blocks away. That took about one-third of my business, because it was three blocks closer to campus. I noticed a huge decline with that and then when I heard the news that a 30,000 square foot space was being set aside for a grocery store across the street from my store, I knew that the evolution of time had come and it was time for the convenience store to be gone, because there's no way I would have survived. I was fortunate enough to see the handwriting on the wall and had the right people approach me. I felt that when Opus came in, we worked with them and we made sure that we had—that we stylized the building to fit Dinkytown, not to overcrowd it, that there's setbacks on it; and try to keep the street life active with retail that was functional for the area.

RH: Was it a difficult decision?

LB: It was a very hard decision. I was third generation in this business and I did not want to be the generation that—I didn't want to run it into the ground or lose it because of mismanagement. I still felt that I still managed it to the best of my ability as long as I could, but once I knew that something was coming in across the street that would compete with me—more than the CVS already had—I knew that I was done. I had watched Dinkytown over my lifetime. I have seen pictures and talked to my family and relatives. I know what it was 80 years prior when my grandfather bought it, when things were still being delivered with horse-drawn carriages. The horses aren't here anymore. We're now getting stuff—the small delivery trucks aren't here anymore. We're getting stuff delivered in 53-foot semis. It's time to move on and I just had to throw in the towel.

RH: Was there any pushback from other business owners?

LB: It was a huge pushback from other business owners and the Preserve Dinkytown. It was a very, very stressful time in my life—because I appreciated Dinkytown more than anybody—I don't know. It just was home for me. I spent 44 years in Dinkytown and supporting it and being on the committees and promoting it and just trying to keep it, but at the same time progress was coming through and student housing needed to be there. There was a lack of student housing and when I made my decision, I had no idea of the ball that was continuing to roll after Marshall came in and our building came in and then couple of apartments went down. There was a lot of building going in the last six years, but I don't think any of it is bad. We still go to Dinkytown all the time. There's still a lot of people walking around. The businesses are staying in business, so there has to be people to keep the businesses running and if you have a captive audience by having them live there, they're going to shop there.

RH: We were talking about the closure of the high school—Marshall-U High School.

LB: As a high school.

RH: As a high school, but then the building lived for a number of years after.

LB: Right. So 1983 was the last graduating class. The school had declined in enrolment immensely. When I came in in 1969, we had so many students that still had to use the building on the University of Minnesota campus, which is why we crossed through Dinkytown every day. We were still using an entire building on campus, because our enrolment was no huge, and it just dwindled and dwindled down to that we were under 1,000 in the building; and that was sixth grade through twelfth grade. They had just added the sixth at the last year—my last year in like 1975. There were lot of—you had a junior high and a senior high in the same building and we still couldn't survive.

Yes, the students supported Dinkytown but it was different. It was more like the candy bars, the pop, the soda—that kind of thing where once the U-Tech came in you now had professionals and so you had a different—I continually evolved. Every time something closed, for instance the hardware store, then I put in hammers and screw drivers and things like that. Every time something left—the stationary store left, I put in index cards and it was just was always like, I tried to be there for everyone and fill all the holes just so that people wouldn't start going somewhere else.

RH: When you look at the development of your former land, other places in Dinkytown, can you look back and point to one or two pivotal moments where you could say, "That's what set this whole development into motion"?

LB: The moment I heard that the high school was coming down.

RH: The structure itself; you knew that?

LB: The structure itself, because at one point in time I had heard that what they were going to do—which they have done to other buildings. The original idea that I had heard was the building was going to stay but they were going to gut it and add another couple of stories to it and make it condos—that type of thing—but still have the grass. The setback was huge from how far back on the street it was to where it is now, but as I watched the building come down and the dust flying and myself just standing there watching brick by brick come off every single day, that building just—then they started digging the hole and it got closer and closer and closer and it was just like smothering me out. It was hard to watch, but it was also part of the evolution. It was part of progress. I think it's made it—it's still Dinkytown. I think it's still coming alive with new things coming in.

I don't think you see the entrepreneurial that we used to have just because of the way life is. Property is so expensive. The property taxes down there are expensive. It's difficult to rent to just somebody coming in saying, "Oh, I want to make jewelry and sell it" or "I'm going to do weavings and have this little shop." That's just isn't feasible in an area with a tax-base that high.

RH: Having spent 44 years in Dinkytown, what was your favorite era and why?

LB: Probably from age 16 through my college years, so 1974 to 1980, just because I was kind of a free spirit. You were a student and you could take advantage of all the life and fun that was on campus. After that you had to kind get to work and support yourself. I was able to enjoy it as a high-schooler and not have to be so concerned about my studies or my future life—where was I going to end up?

RH: Was there ever any question that you would take over for your dad?

LB: I was never going to take over for my dad. I was 17 when my brother passed away. He was a gymnast at the University of Minnesota. He was done with his tenure as a gymnast for a regular athlete; he was working out for an alumni meet. He was on the high-bar and he did a double-back summersault and he only did a one-half and landed on his neck and broke his neck. He was my dad's business partner and my dad's son—and my brother. I had to fill that hole. So that was part of that era of—he passed away in 1974. I had been in the stores all the time, but I was looking for colleges—not knowing where I was going to go or what I was going to do. I planned to go away to college, because all my friends went away to college.

My plan was to go away but I was 17, I was a senior in high school, and I knew my dad needed me, and I knew the stores needed me. If he was going to survive emotionally and financially, I felt that I was needed. So I kept my foot in the door and I stayed. I worked there until a week before our first child was born. I kept my foot in the door while the kids were growing up—we have four children who also worked at the stores, went to the University of Minnesota, put themselves through college—we helped a little. We also said, "You're working." They learned how to do things. Dinkytown was a great place for them to learn the same sort of things that I learned in just how people live life. They weren't stuck in a small-town setting. They were more intuned with real life.

RH: What am I forgetting to ask about?

LB: What are you forgetting? What's he forgetting to ask me?

PB: How you met me.

LB: Yes, I met my husband in Dinkytown. I met him my first-quarter freshman at the University of Minnesota. I would have not met him because I was going to go away to college and instead I stayed at the University. We met in a class—family social science class, the class of: the dynamics of dating, courtship, and marriage. He was an athlete for the University of Minnesota. Actually, he was roommates with Paul Molitor and they were the last team to go to the College World Series with the Minnesota Gopher Baseball team. He was a left-handed picture. We never, ever met again by accident after that first semester. He was in my class and he was my referee for intramural football. Those were the two places that I met him: that semester and after that. I never ran into him by accident again.

Perry also helps support me in the stores. He was the breadwinner here, not me. He got the insurance—it was one of the reasons I could continue to run the store as a woman with four children, because he had the real job, he had the insurance. I could not have done it without his support. So that was—again, part of that period of time from the seventies where I met him was a fun time on campus and going to the games and being part of it—being part of the University of Minnesota. Sometimes we look back and go, "Did you really get it?" My daughter said, "Did you really get it? Did you understand you were dating the co-captain of the baseball team?" It didn't go to my head. We just had fun with it.

RH: Any other questions?

PB: Talk about some of the entrepreneurs, like Lowell Lundeen, his jewelry store. Do you want to talk about some of the others?

LB: Lowell Lundeen was a wonderful jeweler. He was also renting from my dad in the building prior to the building that I was in. The first building was supposedly—actually, I'd heard that it was moved from the campus. So it was an old campus building, moved to Dinkytown, but it was like multiple buildings shoved together and then we had room for other retailers. So we had Lowell Lundeen. We had Dave the Barber; Dave the Barber is a character that needs to be remembered as well; wonderful man. He was in Dinkytown a lot of years; very supportive of Dinkytown, the parties and keeping everybody together. Barbers are like that, you know. They know everything and they talk to everybody. We had other small businesses coming and going in our space. It was always fun to get to know them as well as all the restaurants. I knew every restaurateur, because when they ran out of something they came to me. They kept me alive as well, so that was always good. People respected me for that.

I remember Blarney would come over and he goes, "There isn't anything you don't have." Or Al's Breakfast would come in and then he'd want horseradish. I'd said, "I just can't keep horse radish on the shelf for when you come and need it every six months." I would put it in there and then he'd buy one and then he wouldn't come back until six months later when it was already out of date. It was fun to be there to have everything that people needed—that was my goal was to never let anybody leave without what they came for, or whatever. It was a challenge for me to keep everything. I had 40 distributors. I got things from all over the place, including shopping myself and trying to get the good deals and trying to keeping things within the price range of my clientele.

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