

PHOENIX HOUSE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Conrad Levenson

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Conrad Levenson conducted by Lance Thurner on January 16, 2015. This interview is part of the Phoenix House Foundation Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of spoken word, rather than written prose.

10AM

Session #1

Interviewee: Conrad Levenson

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Lance Thurner

Date: January 16, 2015

Q: So, without further ado, I'll get started. This is Lance Thurner, and I am on the Upper West Side in the home of Conrad Levenson, where I'm here to interview him as part of the Phoenix House Oral History Project. It is January 16th, roughly ten AM. So, Conrad, this is a life history interview. Could we start—a little bit about where you were born, where you grew up, and how you became an architect?

Levenson: Okay. I'm a native New Yorker, which is somewhat rare, I think. And, yes, I was born and raised in Brooklyn, the cradle of civilization. For the East Coast, anyhow.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And my family history is that—[interruption] my family history is that my father—I come from a family of immigrants. I'm straight American, and my father was a year old when he came here from Russia. He had a large family. He had six brothers and one sister. My father was a humorist and an author. He both performed and wrote books about the immigrant experience and what that was like growing up. He, throughout his life, gave back for what this country gave him. So, he spent a lot of time in public service, particularly in support of public education and music in the city of New York.

Q: Do you know why he emigrated?

Levenson: Why he—

Q: Why he came here?

Levenson: Oh, well, it was typical of the Russian migration, because there was a lot of prejudice against the Jews in Russia. And when the boys in the family reached age fourteen or fifteen, they were conscripted into the Russian army. So, what would happen is that at first, they'd send the boys here as they came of age. And then the whole family followed after that. And that was typical of that time. My father was born in 1911, so they got here around 1912, part of the very large migration. They started off on the Lower East Side, then they ended up in East Harlem. And then, finally, when my father was a teenager, in Brooklyn. You know, stepping up a little bit, all along the way. But my father always used to take us, when we were kids, up to East Harlem and show us the old block where he grew up when he was a kid. He had a great affection, a great fondness for New York, and a great respect for the process of immigration as it rejuvenates the city over time, with different generations. And that is really New York's history.

You know, when my parents became comfortably middle class, I followed a more or less normal track. I went to public high school when I was in Brooklyn, and then I went to Columbia College, and then Columbia Architecture School. So, I stayed in New York, you know? I didn't have any hunger to go anywhere else. I just love New York City. I was on a kind of conventional career track. I got my degree in architecture, I went to work in architectural firms, doing the

usual stuff. Then in the spring of '68, when all the turmoil took place on the college campuses, including Columbia, the School of Architecture went on strike and the faculty joined the students, and our—you know, it ended up in a kind of bloody massacre with the police. I don't know if you know this history, but—

Q: Yes, I—

Levenson: But—so, the School of Architecture, during the summer, initiated a kind of reorganization process to try and reshape and reform itself in light of the events, particularly in regard to relationships with the nearby communities, which was what triggered the whole thing. I was a member of the alumni board, and I was the youngest member of the alumni board. The alumni board wanted to help the school and gave them a thousand dollars. But they wanted to make sure their investment would be well spent, so they wanted to have someone represent them. They figured I was the youngest one, and closest to what had happened. And that was only in time, but not really in understanding. I mean, there was a huge difference—I graduated in '66. It was just—things just changed quickly and very radically. So, I was the alumni representative to this process, and we—there were a group of forty or fifty people—including community representatives, architects, faculty, students—who met every evening, four nights a week, for the entire summer. And that was my process of radicalization.

Q: Oh, yes.

Levenson: Instead of reading about history or reading the newspaper or being kind of separate from it, there was this sense that history was being made here. And you were in the middle of it. It was quite a heady experience. I was not in a leadership position. This was really—the students, in particular, drove the whole process. They came up with a whole new—it wasn't a new curriculum, but a new way of approaching the studies so that the students had control of what they studied. They had control over faculty appointments, and the university kind of shrugged and looked the other way and just let this happen.

But that experience connected me to a whole other aspect of communal life. And so, about a year before that, my first wife and I bought a townhouse in Manhattan Valley. I didn't know what I was doing then, but we were among the pioneers who, you know, moved into—and there were a whole bunch of old lefters [sic] and other people who kind of moved in there first. And I became a part of that community, and we set up a bunch of community organizations, a local community development corporation for housing. I got appointed to the Community Board 7 at a time when there was a lot of turmoil and political unrest about the West Side urban renewal area and the whole redevelopment of the West Side. So, my personal and political life was kind of being transformed.

Q: Can you say a little bit more about how that neighborhood was changing and what you wanted your role to be in that?

Levenson: Well, when I got there, it was economically depressed. Maybe ninety, ninety-five percent minority neighborhood, I'd say fifty percent Hispanic, fifty percent black, in that

minority group. And it was during the [John V.] Lindsay administration, when they were promoting things called ‘community participation’ in the planning process and the development process. So, the cohort of people there were looking to find ways to improve both the housing stock and the services that were being delivered to people who were clearly in need. It was also a time when there was a housing crisis in the sense that there were very few new, affordable housing units being built. And so, there were no vacancies anywhere. Even if you wanted to fix up buildings, you'd have to do it with the tenants in occupancy. And our local community development organization took on a project like that, a small project with three buildings on West 107th Street, under a program called the Municipal Loan Program. New York City-financed.

It immediately got into trouble, because it's so complicated. People's lives get disrupted, and they have to share kitchens and toilets, because you're really ripping the guts out of the middle of the building while people are living there. And both the contractor and the architects walked off the job. We were kind of stuck in the middle. Reluctantly, I agreed to take this project on, because at the time, I had a more or less conventional practice. I had residential clients and institutional clients, and—I didn't really know a lot about this. So, that was my initiation into that whole area of low income housing and affordable housing and that world where there were not-for-profit housing developers and the city agencies—and that's where it all began for me. Little by little, I—between my architectural practice, which shifted to focus on those kinds of things, and my community involvement, there weren't enough hours in the day. [laughter]

Q: Right.

Levenson: And it put a lot of stress on me, personally, put a lot of stress on my family. I ended up getting divorced, you know—within a few years. But I decided to fuse the two things. So, my architectural practice became an exclusively social architecture practice, and that enabled me to devote myself full-time, professionally, to those issues that before I was a part-time professional and kind of full-time on a personal basis.

Q: Were you alone in the practice or were there other people?

Levenson: Well, I was the founding partner and kind of the directing partner. I had different partners at different times over a twenty year—

Q: Okay.

Levenson:—period. And what happened was that, you know, as we moved from the late '60s into the '70s and the city went into a period of economic stress and decline, and we had this huge building abandonment problem, I was one of the few architects, even at the national level, who had any experience in dealing with this. So, it was a silly thing, but I say, as long as the supply of homeless people and drug addicts and mentally ill folks and everybody else stays there, I'll have work forever, you know? [laughter] And I did. So, for almost twenty years, I had a very successful architectural practice. I didn't have to sacrifice either my principles or my ability to make a living.

Q: But so who were your biggest clients? The city?

Levenson: Well, this is a question of definition. My clients, first and foremost, are the people in distress, right? They're the ones I'm working for. But, in order to do that, you need vehicles that allow you to do that. So, the next tier was the community based social service agencies that wanted to help these people. After that, you needed the money to do it, so it came from the government agencies that were financing it.

Q: I see.

Levenson: So, it became a collaborative effort of me, the architect, the social service agencies, and the city, and sometimes the state or the federal government—to address very specific issues in specific populations.

Q: Can you maybe talk a little about a particular project at that point in time that was very successful, maybe large or maybe that you're most proud of, [laughter] and kind of how those relationships worked?

Levenson: Well, I can do it this way—because I had long-term, ongoing relationships with a number of different non-profit housing agencies. So, Phipps Houses, for instance, which was the oldest and the largest non-profit housing sponsor in New York, they had a president, Linda Simmons, who was herself an architect, and very committed to these things. So, we kind of had a shared commitment to doing this kind of work. We had known each other socially, and at one

point, she had a problematic project that she needed some help with. I stepped in, and I kind of fixed it. We made it work. So, we got comfortable with each other, and then I went on to do some feasibility studies for her. We actually looked at Bellevue Hospital, the old Bellevue, when it was being vacated—in terms of its potential to be used for things. Then, the city developed, in the early '80s, a homeless housing program called the—it was a special needs housing program. But it included people who were mentally ill and also homeless women and children.

I had worked with another agency called Women In Need, which was focusing on the population of women and children. I put Women In Need together with Phipps Houses, and I made a kind of marriage there, specifically to develop transitional and permanent housing for homeless women and children. We went on to do two projects together in that program, in the Bronx. One was the Lee Goodwin residence and the other was Sojourner Truth, and between them they had maybe two hundred apartments all together. They were using vacant city home properties that they were trying to put back in use.

And now, in the later '80s, probably '87 or so, Phipps Houses got the opportunity to do a whole neighborhood called Crotona Park West [Bronx]. And it was fifteen or sixteen buildings and almost six hundred apartments. And it was very prominent. It was something you could see. When you drove across the Cross Bronx Expressway, you passed right by this thing. It was all abandoned and dilapidated. This was a very big project, the biggest project that Phipps had done. And I had had this successful relationship with them, and I was actually on vacation when Linda Simmons called me. I was up at Cape Cod. She said, "You know, I'm getting a lot of pressure from the city"—because we were just a kind of small to medium sized firm—"to use

another architect on this project, because the city knows that you're busy, you have other projects going on, you're a certain size." But she says, "I want to do—I want you to do this project," she says, "but I want you to commit to me that you will personally," you know, "that you will personally take responsibility for this and get it done." So, I said, "Sure," you know? And that was easier said than done, but we went on and we did a variety of things. We staffed up a little bit, because I'd had a lot of people that worked with me before. So, we staffed up to about twelve, and then we hired a whole other architectural firm, [laughs] complete with principals and staff similar to ours who were like-minded and we knew could do the work, but were not very busy at the time. We put together this amalgamated workforce, and then we went ahead and finished that project, so it went from a little—over a twenty year period, this small little occupied building's bigger and bigger and bigger—then to a whole neighborhood.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: In all, there were two other neighborhoods where I had kind of similar impact—not quite at that magnitude. But in Manhattan Valley over the years, there were probably seven or eight projects that would have been probably three hundred apartments in Manhattan Valley. And for the New York City Housing Authority in Washington Heights, there were almost four hundred apartments, with about—I don't know, twelve buildings, thirteen buildings. So, it's really nice when you can do them all at once and create enough critical mass in an area where you can create a real community, you know?

Q: Yes. And during this period is when you meet Mitch [Rosenthal], right?

Levenson: Well, no, that was a kind of separate track from the beginning.

Q: Was it?

Levenson: At the beginning of that practice, where I still had some institutional clients and other things—I think I told you this before—I had a client called the Baldwin School, and they were interested in a piece of property called the Riverside Plaza Hotel. So, I had worked with them. They brought me in to do their feasibility study on the hotel. It really didn't work for them, but the broker took the building to Phoenix House and said, "Would you be interested in this?" That was my introduction to Phoenix House. This was '73, '74, something like that. I came with the building, and I did the feasibility study for Phoenix House. I liked them and I knew them and they were doing good work, and they knew what I was doing. Little by little, I began to help them with other buildings, and eventually I was just doing all of their properties, but as an outside professional consultant.

Q: Right, and so with the Riverside Plaza Hotel, did you design the renovation of it?

Levenson: Yes. [laughter]

Q: And as a process, how did it work? Like, did you sit down with Mitch and—

Levenson: Not with Mitch, but with the clinical staff.

Q: So, at that time, I think Frank—

Levenson: I mean, they would bring together a group of clinicians, and they would start to tell me how the program worked and what it is they needed. There are—well, we'll get into this a little more as we go along, because there are a lot of properties involved. The difficulty of siting facilities like substance abuse treatment centers made it such that you very often didn't get your ideal property, right? [laughs] The Riverside Plaza was a perfect example. It had been built in the 1920s as a private club. It was the Level Club. It had three or four subterranean floors that had a gymnasium, a swimming pool, bowling alleys, a lot of stuff. And a huge boiler room, a huge old plant. Then, on the first two floors, it had ballrooms and a big commercial kitchen, because they had events. Then rooms, upstairs, so—originally for club members, then it became a kind of SRO [single room occupancy] or a conventional hotel.

But, needless to say, in all cases, this was not ideally suited to what you needed for a residential treatment center. But, you know, we cobbled it together. I mean, the rooms upstairs were adequate for dormitories. The other spaces were, in many ways, completely inappropriate, because they were these vast, cavernous spaces. It might be okay for a dining room, but not for therapeutic group interactions and stuff. They were just—it was just all wrong.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: But you know, the architecture was—the bones of it were amazing. But that's what they were able to get.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: We kind of cobbled it together. And this was true of other properties that they already had, that they had acquired before I came to work for them. So, little by little, we jiggered a lot of those around. But even properties that were bought later on—a few years later, they sold the Riverside Plaza.

Q: For a huge—

Levenson: For a huge amount of money.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: I mean, the deal to buy it was a ridiculous deal, yes.

Q: Six hundred thousand, I read.

Levenson: And—yes, but it was, like, fifty thousand dollars down, and it was some other deal that—Fred Dreyer [phonetic], from the family—it was a big steel family, but they owned a couple of hotels in New York. And we massaged it for a long time until he gave us this kind of

ridiculous deal to buy the hotel. So, yes, and they sold it for, I don't know, six or seven million dollars, some big—but that enabled them to buy two other properties. One was the old Jesuit seminary in Yorktown, right? Was a huge building. [laughs] And the nursing home, Bernard Bergman, who was a notorious nursing home operator, went to jail—a building he built in Long Island City, which never opened.

Q: Wow.

Levenson: But they took the money and they bought these other two properties. Again, it's always this issue of the controversy of getting in. It took them a year in Yorktown before they were able to occupy the building, after many lawsuits and a whole lot of other stuff.

Q: With the neighborhood association, was it?

Levenson: Yes, the whole community—

Q: Yes.

Levenson:—was opposed.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And the way they were able to do it—is because they were opening a residential high school. It was going to be for youngsters, young adults. The school was a permitted use by the zoning, and it took a long time. Later on, they were completely accepted in the community and their relationships were fine. In Long Island City, it was a little different, but we got the local politicians behind us. It was an almost exclusively industrial area, so there was very little neighborhood opposition, because there were very few people living in Long Island City near—there were some, but very few in Long Island City. But, again, both of these are institutional structures. Yes, they had sleeping rooms, they're—the Jesuit seminary, it was designed to have six hundred seminarians in there, in very Spartan living arrangements. And that's exactly what it was. [laughs] I mean, and huge, 270,000 square feet. [laughs] Anyhow, both of those came before I came to Phoenix House.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: But the point I'm making about this—and the same thing happened in California, where, even before I got there, they acquired property in this opportunistic way. It wasn't easy. But one was a hospital, one was a dude ranch—these are things in California. They're just—it's a challenge. It's a challenge to make them fit the program.

Q: Right.

Levenson: The reason I left private practice is, during those twenty years—because I was ahead of the curve. I was with agencies that were addressing problems before there was a lot of

government intervention. There was some money, but there weren't a lot of regulations. And so, the opportunities to innovate were great. We could create all kinds of models and try this and try that, and it was fabulous. We were not just doing this a building at a time, but experimenting with configurations and things, and different service models and seeing how things worked. But, for instance, when I did things for homeless families, I had maybe six different clients. It's interesting, because one was the American Red Cross, they took over a motel on 41st Street, 42nd Street. Another was a small group in Brooklyn. It was just dealing with six families. One was a small converted parochial school. There were a lot of different models. Then we got the more sophisticated ones that we did with Phipps Houses.

What was interesting is that the configurations helped, but mattered less than the commitment of the service provider to get these families through this crisis and out the other end. So, when you look at the success rate, it's about the same for all the different models. [laughter] It was fascinating. It was fascinating. But by the time 1990 rolled around and we were finishing Crotona Park West, it was clear to me now that the government—addressing homelessness and the housing related to that, and substance abuse and mentally ill folks—it had become an industry with outside consultants and heavy government regulation. The ability to innovate was going away. It's not that the money was going away. There would still be money there. But you were not going to—because of the heavy regulations, they were giving you more and more formulas. And that just wasn't for me, I wanted to continue to innovate and have a big impact on a large number of people if I could. So, that's when I joined Phoenix House.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: Because they had this infrastructure and this kind of captive audience. The ability to influence and impact a lot of lives positively over an extended period of time was the attractiveness of Phoenix House.

Q: Well, can we go back to the Yorktown—

Levenson: Yes.

Q: So, were you involved in the purchasing of it at all? Or were you—

Levenson: No.

Q:—brought in later?

Levenson: Later.

Q: Yes. I've done a number of interviews that have touched on the subject. There's quite a bit of feeling that that was maybe not the best choice of facilities for Phoenix House, because it was just too large and they were never able to really utilize all of it. I mean, what did you think about the potential of the seminary and what it could be and what kind of vision was there for it, initially?

Levenson: I'm going to go back—just going to step back for a minute.

Q: Okay.

Levenson: The vision is real estate driven, and it's opportunistic. It says, if we can acquire 270,000 square feet of space, [laughs] a lot of space, on almost 120 acres, something like that—140 acres of land, beautiful land, right? How could you say this doesn't have potential, you know? So, it's an easy argument to make, and it's—hard to come by site, so—

Q: Yes.

Levenson: If you were to say, well, if I had to go out and find five sites of forty thousand square feet each, how hard would that be? Here I can do it all at once. So, I'm willing to cut them some slack—

Q: Oh, yes.

Levenson:—understanding the problems they had about siting. They were enormous problems. And I'd say the same thing about Mitch that I would say about Nelson Rockefeller. It's an edifice complex, right? When Nelson Rockefeller was governor, he just built these huge things. He built the Empire Plaza up in New York and it—so, Mitch—you know, there's a certain grandiosity about taking on Yorktown. Or, later on, the same thing with taking on Lakeview Terrace, the hospital in Los Angeles. There is a way to take a great big place and break it down

into smaller, more manageable units, which was my master plan for Yorktown. At the time that I left Phoenix House, that year before, I had created, actually, for the New York region, New York and Long Island, about a seventy-five million dollar capital program that included Yorktown and it included big changes to Long Island City. And a couple of facilities on Long Island that were just too large. You know, the same problem. It's a question of breaking them down into smaller units, creating separate entrances for these different units, giving them their own food service and stuff. Even though it's a great big building, they would have their separate identity—

Q: Right.

Levenson:—within this larger place. And they could be completely different populations. They wouldn't have to interact with each other at all. Because that's the only way to make those things work.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: I mean, Yorktown, for instance, they had a dining room, which had a—I don't know, it was a basketball size—basketball court size—bigger—and it had a thirty-five foot high ceiling with huge windows. It took me ten years to get Mitch's permission to convert it to a basketball court, to make a gymnasium out of it, and move the dining room downstairs to a space that had the same footprint, but the ceiling height was only fifteen feet. [laughs]

Q: Right, well, so—were there other design controversies between you and what Phoenix House wanted? What you thought the building could have, should have, what was—

Levenson: No, I don't think—

Q:—the best utilization of the space?

Levenson:—the controversies were internal. We faced a lot of challenges—

Q: Yes.

Levenson:—which were external. There are space requirements, there are differences in philosophy about treatment. Even in those days, when the therapeutic community, at least in New York, was very much an accepted method—and it relied on the power and intensity of the group, of the whole community, to kind of manage and heal itself—as opposed to individual counseling.

Q: Right.

Levenson: We always had that tension with the state in New York. “Where are your private counseling rooms? Where are all your little things?” So, we're always negotiating and reaching compromises with them. I would have to finesse that by offsetting that with a lot of other space

where clinical activities take place. But let's just—I'm not sure what you want to get at, but let me explain something about the therapeutic community—

Q: Yes.

Levenson:—what that model is. Have they shared any of this with you? Anybody?

Q: Oh, I mean, tons. I know as a subject—

Levenson: Oh, so you know about the pyramid and you know—

Q: This is a subject I want to get to, but I was going to—

Levenson: Oh, well, but they're directly related, so—

Q: Yes.

Levenson:—so this is where the challenge is. So, it's a kind of peer-driven system where clients get to take on more and more responsibility for themselves and for the community in which they live, right? There are high level jobs. Somebody can be the house manager. That's a client. It's not the facility director, it's the house manager. And then others work underneath. It's also a system for feeding back information of what's going on in the community. So, people close to

the bottom are given tasks and checklists, and they go around and they check to see, well, have the toilets been cleaned and the floors swept? Or the—

Q: Yes.

Levenson: This information, then, it's supposed to make its way up, and then those in charge of those departments are supposed to go out and fix things. So, it has this organizational structure, which is a practical one that allows you to run a place without hiring a professional staff. The theory behind it is not just that you save money, which you do. But you empower people in treatment to take on more and more responsibility and to change their attitudes and behaviors. So, you use the work as part of the treatment. It's a whole integrated treatment process. When you look at the physical environment, what does it take to support that?

It takes, first of all, a lot of transparency. There can be no secrets in such a community. So, the place you get the most privacy is where you sleep. But there are no private rooms. There are doubles, there are quads, there are sixes, whatever it is. That's by design, because there's a peer thing going on. You can sleep behind closed doors, you can go into a toilet behind closed doors. Everything else is transparent. When you go through—if you go to the Phoenix Career Academy on Jay Street, for instance, which is a pretty good example, everything is glass. Interaction between the floors, everything—you can hear, you can see. That's deliberate. If people working in offices need acoustic privacy—so, you put glass in. But you can see. Everything is open, everybody can see what's going on. Everybody's obligated to intervene or report or do something, because this whole informational structure doesn't work unless it's completely open.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: Like that. So, it does impact these things. The other thing is that not all clinical benefit comes just from programmed activities. So, if you've got the schedule for the day or the week, which we used to get all the time, we knew what was going on. You see people get up, they take showers, they go to breakfast. They do this, some go to group, some have jobs. Groups only happen three nights a week or something. So, you need enough group rooms for—and those are smaller rooms, a room about this size, where fifteen people can get together. If you have the luxury of the space, they would be dedicated to that purpose. If you needed classrooms, you would have separate classrooms. But very often, you don't have that, so, you do double duty. But every time a client moves—and they move individually and as small groups and large groups. They move from the dorms to the dining room, say—something is going on. It's a wasted opportunity unless there is some clinical benefit from that. Clients and staff need to be stimulated and encouraged to interact with each other all the time. So, you want to use those passageways—

Q: Right.

Levenson:—those intervals to transmit ideas. In the ideal world, there'd be posters, there'd be artwork, there'd be inspirational sayings, there'd be other things along the way, so that people are challenged. There's no down time.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And to the extent that there is down time or isolation, it really works against the process. It really works against the process.

Q: Now, can you remember, you know, back in the '70s—you know, when you first learned about what was going on in Phoenix House, their TC [therapeutic community] model and whatnot, do you remember a little bit about who you were talking to and what you thought of it in the beginning? Did it make sense to you? Did it seem—

Levenson: Oh, it makes complete sense.

Q: You know, this is the same time that the Rockefeller drug laws are coming on. You know, there's much—

Levenson: Yes.

Q:—there's a very different philosophy of how to counter the drug problems in the city at this point in time. I'm wondering a little bit about how Phoenix House appealed to you and how you thought about the model that they were developing.

Levenson: No, well, for me, at the time—and this is early on, right? It was less about the model and more about the fact that these were people in distress, with a particular kind of problem.

And how can I help them? I'm here to be of service. So, tell me what it is you need and tell me what you're trying to do and tell me how you're trying to do it.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And I will find a way to facilitate that. People who are the—and there are very few of them left—who are the old line TC guys, they believed in the power of the model, so much so that it didn't matter what the environment was. When I first joined Phoenix House, I went to California to tour all the facilities. I went with a guy named Howard Friend, who—

Q: Oh, yes, I've met Howard.

Levenson: —you know Howard. All right, so Howard is the—you know, is a great guy and an old TC head of—and he's taking me all around and I'm constantly probing and I'm asking him that very question. I mean, you know, "Would it make any difference [laughs] if we did this, if we"—"No, no, no, no, no." He was oblivious to the fact that—and it took me years to educate him the other way. So, where's this come from? It comes from the fact that the original TCs were kind of patched together in floors and apartments and they used whatever they had. And I can understand the power of that. But when you go to replicate this and you go to increase the size, when you go from twenty guys to two hundred to two thousand—

Q: Yes.

Levenson:—how do you maintain that original intensity?

Q: Right.

Levenson: How do you maintain the integrity of that small group in a larger setting? That's the challenge.

Q: Right, right.

Levenson: That's the challenge.

Q: Right, so when you first started getting involved with Phoenix House, again, in the mid '70s, was it that old line kind of purist idea of the TC that you were experiencing, hearing about? Or were your contacts kind of more at a—I don't know, a more management level that had more pragmatic—

Levenson: Oh, no, at that time, that philosophy was infused, top to bottom.

Q: Okay, top to bottom.

Levenson: Phoenix House, when I joined them in '91, they were a twenty-five million dollar company. I don't know how many—maybe a couple of thousand people in treatment on any

given day. And everybody was involved. Most of the people—most of the vice presidents—and there were only a handful of them—were TC veterans. They were clients themselves.

Q: Right.

Levenson: The whole thing was infused with people who had had the TC experience. So, there was never any—internally, there was never—even though Mitch was a psychiatrist, there was never any kind of countervailing force that said, “This needs to be medicalized, this needs to be changed.” On the contrary, there was a lot of energy and determination to maintain the purity and the integrity of it. What happens is, as you grow, [laughs] and the financial obligations and burdens become bigger and the pressures to professionalize some of these things that used to be job functions—they become greater.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: They become greater. And the problem was to actually resist that. So, for instance, as my example, when I got there—and I did professionalize my department. It was only in order to be able to do specific functions better. And when I did that—they had, when I got there, a kind of centralized maintenance and construction workforce, which means they had maybe ten guys. They had some supervisors, and then somebody determined what the workload was, what the need was, and they sent guys out to different places. About a year or two after I got there, we decentralized that workforce. So, we took each guy and we said, “Okay, you are now the maintenance guy for Prospect Place,” or—

Q: Yes.

Levenson: “That's your job,” right?

Q: This was, like, '93 or something like that.

Levenson: So, yes, something like that.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And so, somebody had to take ownership. The guys in a centralized thing, they had a job, they showed up, they were just not connected to that community. So now, there was somebody connected to that community. And the bigger facilities, they'd get maintenance workers who were not part of the pyramid but who were necessary because the facility was so large that—so, you'd have a maintenance supervisor and one guy, or a maintenance supervisor and two guys and—whatever it was, depending upon the size. And they reported managerially to the facility director. But they reported to the director of facility maintenance for technical support and for purchasing and all that other stuff. So, there was this kind of dual relationship. Now, I think that helped a lot, because when you had onsite people responsible for it, it was their job to—because they were there where the rubber met the road instead of relying on client feedback and surveys about what condition the building was in. It was the maintenance supervisor's job to fill out the forms and fill out the stuff and report directly back to the facility

director. So, in some ways, it took away some of the job functions, but it got better information to the top. And then you could hold people responsible. The other thing, though, was that when we had more bodies in place, they could organize their own maintenance, resident maintenance crews and resident construction crews to do little projects that were their own. That was their priority. Not some priority set centrally someplace, but their own priority. So, we got a bigger bang for the buck out of resident labor, I think.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And that, by definition, created more opportunities for residents.

Q: Can we talk about that a little bit more, then? About sweat equity. When you begin helping Phoenix House in the early '70s, was sweat equity a big part of how the Plaza Hotel was renovated and—

Levenson: Yes, it was.

Q: Okay. I mean, were you on the job site telling people how to install a new window or—

Levenson: No, no, no.

Q: No.

Levenson: Before I got to Phoenix House, they had their own director of maintenance. And he was in charge of doing all this, so—

Q: Do you remember who that was?

Levenson: Well, it was—first, there was Bob Pinkerton [phonetic] at the time of the Riverside Plaza. And then it became Ed Kent [phonetic] later on. And then I forget what the name of the last guy was. But, you know, even by the time I got there—and even when they were just a twenty five million dollar a year company, they had enough maintenance and enough construction activities going on that they had to be separated. They were different skill sets. And they allowed me—when I came to Phoenix House, my agreement with them was—because I wanted to do the things we're talking about. I wanted to focus on how the physical environment and the clinical thing come together. They said, “Yes, we want that, but we also need somebody to fix this.” [laughter]

Q: Yes.

Levenson: So, I said, okay, that's fair enough, that's our trade-off. But they gave me the latitude to do that, and I'd come back and I'd say I need to make these changes, I need to hire this, this, and this.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And they gave me what I needed, so—

Q: So, prior to joining Phoenix House, you weren't involved in actually directing sweat equity labor, is that right?

Levenson: No, but I had to know to integrate it into the construction process, because—we had to do divisions of labor and describe that in the contract documents.

Q: Right, because you'd have a contractor—

Levenson: And the contractors had to know that they were going to share the stage with an in-house workforce.

Q: And would that happen simultaneously? Or would, say, the contractor come in, pour the concrete floors and then the residents put in the drywall walls or—and then the contractor comes back and puts the electrical in? Or would they work side-by-side?

Levenson: Well, it depends.

Q: Or how did it work?

Levenson: It depends. In the beginning, that's the way it was.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: Phoenix House had enough capacity and skill level to do demolition work—you know, clean out, interior demolition work. It had some limited electrical capacity. It had the capacity to do partitions and, you know, interior finishes and stuff like that. But, again, within limited skill sets. One of the things I had to do—and I did it later when I got there, too—is very, very clearly defined tasks and skill sets that went with them. Because otherwise, you were—

Q: Right.

Levenson: They would butcher things. When I got there and set up this separation of construction from maintenance—and we had decentralized maintenance guys—I could bring in—let's say at Yorktown, I could bring in a senior carpenter, who I controlled centrally, who is not part of the—so, I had a construction manager, I had a construction carpenter, senior guy. And I'd say, “Okay, you're going to Yorktown and you're going to build the medical center there. Here's the plan, here's the thing.” We'd get coordinated with the clinical staff there, say, “Okay, this guy needs a crew of five or six people.” And he would train them.

Q: And he would train them, yes.

Levenson: He would train them. And then we'd bring in outside plumbers or outside—to the extent that we needed them, outside plumbers, outside electricians.

Q: But that's for a smaller kind of more compact thing.

Levenson: So—but what's the down side? The down side is it takes more time.

Q: Right.

Levenson: If you're in a hurry, don't think about doing sweat equity. But if you have the time, it's worth it. Now, because it takes more time, it doesn't save any money. [laughter] And people need to know that. Because you've got your carpenter, supervisor, and other people working. And if it takes twice as long, you're paying him twice as much. Now, it's true, he's already on the payroll, but even so, he could be doing another project—

Q: Sure.

Levenson: —in the same time. So, it really doesn't save you money. But it does create this opportunity for clients to learn job skills, to learn discipline, to learn how to measure, to learn how to count and to—and those job functions, the construction job functions, were the most coveted in Phoenix House.

Q: Were they?

Levenson: Yes. And they also—although this is anecdotal, but I think you can figure it out—we had the best retention rates, because these guys were really motivated. [laughs] And when I

came to Phoenix House and enlarged that program, I was able to mobilize resources in a way that made it really special. Like, the first project we did, is we did Belle Terre. You know about that, Belle Terre? And we had a very short timeframe, very short window. We had to open within four months. So, I moved up the construction manager, we hired three or four carpenters—people who would later stay on, you know, and work in a facility. We sent, to begin with, twenty residents up there. We moved into the building, with their clinical staff. So, the construction site is a clinical environment. The clinical comes first and the construction comes second when it comes to the clients. So, there's a morning meeting, there's skills training, there's other things. We had a kitchen, a dining room, you know? Everybody ate together. And then I brought in all the outside contractors. So, we had plumbers, electricians, everybody—roofers, everybody was working.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: But now, we had a blended workforce. We had twenty, they had twenty—every day for lunch—oh, and we had guys working for the plumbers and electricians. They knew—

Q: Yes.

Levenson: —that that was part of the deal. For the locals up there it was not a problem.

Q: It wasn't hard to find contractors who were willing to do this?

Levenson: No. No, no. They were cool about that. And so, they'd all eat lunch together. If you went into that dining room, you couldn't tell the difference of who's who. I mean, these country guys were like, you know?

Q: Right. [laughter] Everyone's got a tool belt tied off and—

Levenson: —after the—yes!

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And so, when a client comes out of that experience, after three or four months, they're much stronger than the peer who had not been through that.

Q: Right.

Levenson: That kind of experience. And we had—have you met Jerome Pryor [phonetic]? Did you hear that name?

Q: No.

Levenson: Jerome, I think, is a deputy director now someplace. Jerome was a client in that first Belle Terre work crew. He was a master plasterer, a genius. [laughter] And he worked like a dog. This building was a historic structure, so it was all plaster. No sheetrock.

Q: No sheetrock at all.

Levenson: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. And Jerome is working—I mean, he's working his ass off and he's busy. And we're two and a half months into the job and he's got a clinical issue. So, the clinical staff pulls him off the crew. So, I go and meet with them. I say, “We have a little problem.” [laughs] This is the essential part of the thing. And we came to an understanding. He needed to address what his clinical stuff was. He knew that he was not going to be allowed to work until he addressed that, so that was a great motivation for him.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: Took about three days, and then he was back on the job. And then he went on to a career. He would have had a brilliant career in the trades. And he said, "No, that's where my problem began," he says. "I'm not going there." So, he became a substance abuse counselor and went on to a very good career with Phoenix House that way.

Q: Now, as far as using sweat equity, were there any legal issues about using sweat equity or living in a building that you're working on at the same time, or matters of insurance that were particularly difficult to negotiate?

Levenson: Well, every situation is different. Belle Terre had its advantages and disadvantages. There was no local building code in the town where Belle Terre was.

Q: That's useful.

Levenson: There was no local building official. So, I got the state agency, OASAS [Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services], to agree to be the code agency for the project. And that was true for environmental things, too. So, we did have environmental issues. We actually built a three acre—a brand new, from scratch three acre septic field, which was a whole separate story in itself, which—we had trucks running around the clock [laughs] for six weeks—

Q: Yes.

Levenson: —day and night, doing things. But we did have to get approvals and go through all that. But OASAS was the lead environmental agency. So, they handled the reviews. But, you need a license for a place, to have clients in treatment in that place.

Q: Right.

Levenson: So we needed to get a temporary license. And we identified the dorms and the bath facilities, the kitchen, everything, and the clinical space, and OASAS signed off on it. So, we get a temporary license for four months. [laughs] So, what you're saying is true. These things are not easy to do, unless you have the confidence of the agency. One of the things that I was able to do with OASAS is I had a great working relationship with them. If I needed to do something unusual, I had partners.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And we were able to make that happen. So, you asked the right question, I mean—

Q: And were there, then, significant differences, say, in California than—

Levenson: Yes.

Q:—there were in New York? And what—

Levenson: Yes.

Q: What was different?

Levenson: [laughs] In California? Oh, you mean around sweat equity or around—

Q: Yes, around sweat equity and around, yes, this issue of—

Levenson: In California, there's a big difference between adolescents and adults.

Q: Right, right.

Levenson: In California, they treat adolescents as if they were in small group homes. So, we had two academies. One, Lakeview Terrace, and one near San Diego, at Descanso. The group home model is like a fiction. We're talking about forty kids in Descanso and 120 in Lakeview Terrace. This is not a group home. And they didn't allow bunk beds. There were a lot of issues around the adolescents. And there's no sweat equity. In other words, with adolescents, you can't use them as part of a labor force, so—

Q: Was that true in New York, as well?

Levenson: That was only true in New York because of the time constraints in the schedule.

Q: Because they have to go to school.

Levenson: They have to go to school.

Q: Right.

Levenson: But we didn't want to do that anyhow. I think it was just that—it's just too complicated. But in California, I used the same model. And there, I had more problems recruiting contractors. I remember we did—we have that facility in Venice, on the beach. We emptied that facility to do the construction project. Construction crew lived in Orange County and they came up every day. Finding a general contractor who was willing to do this took some doing; although, we'd like to do competitive bidding. And to find the right contractor, we did

that. But I needed to use an architect—we used local architects and it went well and I—he had a contractor that he had worked with before. And we just kind of strong-armed this guy. [laughs] We said, “This is the deal if you want the work.” He wanted our assurance that if there was a problem that he would not have to address it, that we would address it. So, I said, “Sure, you know? We have a clinical guy on site, all the time. If something happens, they take care of it right away.” So, and we had guys working with all his subs. It was the same thing. They work with the plumbers, they work with the electricians.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: We were in the job about a month, and he comes over to me and he says, "These guys are wonderful." [laughs] He says, "They come to work every day with a good attitude. They're very hard workers, and they're drug and alcohol free." And he says, "I don't have that in my regular workforce." He says, "I got nothing but trouble." [laughs]

Q: Yes.

Levenson: Right? And he did—over time, he hired two or three people out of the program to come work for him.

Q: Why do you think there was this trouble of finding a contractor in California? What was different that made contractors in California so—

Levenson: Oh, I don't—I'm not sure.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: But it was much more difficult. Much more difficult. But once they have that experience—every member—you know, this is a problem with funders, too. When we were doing the Phoenix Career Academy and putting together the funding, Mitch and I went together to Detroit to see the Kresge Foundation. Kresge had been a supporter of ours before, and at the time their program was—they wanted to build institutional strength, but they used capital grants as the vehicle for doing that. Every grant they gave involved a construction project of some sort.

Q: Right.

Levenson: And they'd give you some money, you had to match some of the money, you had to show them that you were growing your base of support, your donor base in relation to this. So, I knew and I had known that they got into trouble with some of their grants. Some of these construction projects went bad. [laughs] Right? Which could happen. And it could happen most often when you had a non-profit organization that did good work but had no experience in doing projects. Of course, Phoenix House had this advantage that they had an in-house architect and we had this whole history of doing this by the time I went there. So, I knew exactly what this problem was. So, I went and I did a great presentation, Mitch and I, with the guy, and I said, "We've done this and this and this." And, "We got all this money and this is the plan." And I said, "And to make it worse"—I said, "We're going to project manage, construction manage,

[laughs] and do half of the construction with Phoenix House clients.” And I told them up front. I said, "I know this is a problem for you." [laughs] I mean, I acknowledged it. I said, "I know this is not going to make you comfortable."

Q: Yes.

Levenson: I said, "But, look, these are all the places that we did it. We didn't do it at this magnitude, but when you add them all up, it's more than what this is. We know how to do this." And they gave us the money. [laughs]

Q: So, let's talk about the Career Academy. It's my understanding that that building was a warehouse that Phoenix House had since the '70s, and mostly used it for—

Levenson: Yes, it was donated to Phoenix House.

Q:—for storage.

Levenson: It was an old paint and varnish factory. And it was Phoenix House's attic. I mean, they just filled it full of trash. They did some food storage out of there. So, centralized food storage. They had a big freezer and refrigerator. But it was a mess. So, we decide we're going to do this project. The first thing we did, at the very beginning, is we moved our offices in there. My whole department was in there for about maybe a year before we did anything else there.

Q: Oh, really?

Levenson: And then we said, “Okay, we're going to—“ And we had the luxury of time, too. It ran three years. But again, it costs money to—staffing up and figuring out how to do that was critical. And we had to go through a zoning variance process and we had some environmental issues. So, things took some—

Q: What were the environmental—were there—

Levenson: Well, it was a paint and varnish factory.

Q: Well, right. So what—

Levenson: Well, I just want to say that, to my surprise—because we had to test every drop of residue that was left there. We had tanks—old pipes where tanks were upstairs, we had buried tanks in the basement, we had tanks in the courtyard.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And it turned out there was nothing there. I mean, this was an incredible surprise to me. Was nothing that we had to remove. We had to seal up tanks and fill them and take some tanks out, but there was no bad stuff in there. [laughs]

Q: So, like, no mercury, I guess, would be the—

Levenson: No, no, well, whatever goes into paint and varnish. In those days, lead was the big thing.

Q: Lead. But you could just seal lead in? Was that—

Levenson: No, there was nothing there. Nothing. Well, there was lead paint on the windows, but the windows were coming out, just to—

Q: Yes.

Levenson: That was not a problem. But there was all these tanks and pipes and stuff. Zero. Zero. So, we really lucked—

Q: What was the neighborhood like at that time?

Levenson: Just a few artists living there, and a lot of vacant industrial buildings. Some factories, still. And we were the only ones there, so I'd say—

Q: Yes.

Levenson:—we were all by ourselves. And so—

Q: Dark streets at night, huh?

Levenson: Oh, yes. But it was safe, because if you were a mugger, and you did your homework, you would not spend any time down there, because there was no one there to mug. It was one of the safest neighborhoods in the city, because nobody was there. And we had to get community board approval, and there were issues around that. So, that took a year, year and a half. But we organized this structure where we had the director of construction, we had a site supervisor, we had a trainer, [laughs] and the plan was to hire, I think, four carpenters, two electricians, two plumbers, and then have—

Q: It's an awfully big building for—

Levenson: Well, it was eighty thousand square feet, right? And then, we had residents—adult residents living at Prospect Place who came to the work site every day. There were potentially forty of them, but we probably got between fifteen and twenty on any given day. And, again, it was a clinical site, so you start the day with the morning meeting on the site. Then they got safety training, they got some skills training. And then off to do the work. There was a clinical staff member on site all the time to deal with issues. And over the three years, I think that 250 or more clients worked on that project. We have great photo documentation of all of the projects that we did. But this—

Q: Yes.

Levenson: —they really got to do a very big range of skills. Very big range. It started with clean-out and demolition stuff. But they got to do all kinds of stuff. And, again, we ended up with this huge blended workforce that—

Q: Yes, and it's a gorgeous building. I mean, with the beams and the archways and—can you talk a little bit about just the actual building and how you decided the way to design it?

Levenson: I'd say for at least my last three or four years in Phoenix House, maybe more, there was so much construction activity going on across the country that we couldn't do the in-house architectural work. We couldn't do the architectural work in-house anymore. So, we were hiring architects outside to do projects. And we went through an architect selection process for the Phoenix Career Academy. We ended up with a small firm who had done similar adaptive reuse projects. We had done all the space utilization planning, and so we knew what the layouts were. That was all a given already. And we had a good working relationship with them. But they, at some point, had some problems and dropped the ball.

Q: Like, internal problems?

Levenson: Internal problems. They remained the architects on record, but we ended up having to do more than we would have otherwise, ourselves. I don't mean construction. I mean management and drawings and design of things. So, I would take more credit for the design of that facility than I might take for others where we had the architects do more of the work. But

related to that, and related to Yorktown too, is that there was a very large donations component to that project, where I used my long-term relationships with a lot of different vendors to get things done and then get a lot of deeply discounted pricing on lighting and plumbing fixtures and a lot of other stuff. I also took in—prior to that project, about three years before—135,000 square feet of donated ceramic tile. [laughs] Twelve by twelves, eight by eights, different kinds and colors.

Q: I've noticed—I saw them there.

Levenson: So, we split it up into thirds, the original—we only had to pay transportation. So, for the value it was about a half a million dollars. It cost us six thousand dollars. We sent a third to Yorktown, a third to Long Island, to Brentwood, and a third to Jay Street, when it was still a warehouse. There's probably still some of that tile left, but the joke at Phoenix House was that I tiled anything that didn't move. [laughter] And the great advantage of that tile, if you go to Career Academy now is, it's fifteen years old, and all that tile work makes the place look fresh.

Q: Right.

Levenson: All the time, you know?

Q: Yes.

Levenson: It looks gorgeous, because it's very durable and easy to maintain. So, anyhow, we had this big donations component, too. We designed all the tile patterns, just based on what was in inventory. We knew what we had and we—so, until we ran out, and the farther up we got out in the building, the more creative we had to be to make things work. Now, the thing about that building and the question we discussed before about the relationship to the clinical program is that—that was very carefully thought out. Has anybody interviewed Jean Scott?

Q: Yes, I have.

Levenson: Oh, you have, okay! So, Jean and I have a personal history. I think we both went to the same high school.

Q: Oh.

Levenson: I didn't know her in high school. I went to college and she went to jail. Those were our divergent—

Q: Diverse—

Levenson:—paths. And then she ended up with her life at Phoenix House. Jean was very committed to the clients. Anything—and she and I worked very closely on the planning and programming of the Career Academy. So, there was a lot of very good input from her. But what we had there is we had the luxury of space. And we did not have to do as much sharing of space,

at least at the beginning. I mean, things change over time, and I didn't know what they've done to it now. I have no idea. But when we originally designed it, we were able to maintain the integrity of the group rooms and other things in the physical environment. So, you come in there, and that street, that pedestrian street that you come in on, is the original driveway that came into the warehouse, the old warehouses.

Q: Under those arches, yes.

Levenson: Right. They were horse-drawn wagons, and then they'd offload through those arches on the sides and then load other stuff, and then they'd go out through the courtyard in the back and out the other end. So, when we got there, that thing had all been built up to the first floor level. We pulled all of that out and went back down to the original—

Q: It was just full of rubble, huh?

Levenson: No, it was hollow.

Q: It was hollow.

Levenson: They had just raised the floor up.

Q: They just raised the floor.

Levenson: So, we pulled all of that out. We left it high where you come in.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: So, it's a little bit like a cathedral. You come in, you have all these arches. We rebuilt a new arch at the front that wasn't there. And then, when you came in, right by the reception desk, we built two more arches, right and left, that weren't there. But real brick arches, you know? And then you see through, behind the reception desk, to the courtyard in the back. So, that's the kind of organizing principle. You come through this church, and—

Q: Yes.

Levenson: —the nave, and you come through the transept, and over the desk, it's open to the second floor. So, when you have the luxury of space, you can open up floors and you can do those connections. But it's also—you can see and hear everything. And even though one is a medical office and one is a—other things, it's pretty much open and people know what's going on. And then it splits. So, if you go off to the right, you go into the residential treatment center. If you go off to the left, you go into the vocational training piece. The decision to keep the vocational training kind of rough and tumble with all the exposed brick and the exposed wood and everything was deliberate. But even there, when you go up, everything's glass, everything, you can see, all across—

Q: Right.

Levenson:—and in and out.

Q: You can see right from the hall into the—

Levenson: Right, and you can see—

Q:—workshops and—

Levenson:—everything that's going on.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And then when you got—on that side, there were some group rooms and other things. Again, I don't know what that looks like now. And one of those classrooms got converted to a teaching kitchen, which is there, and one of the workshops got converted to Beyoncé's cosmetology thing. But before that, there were three floors that were identical, with classrooms and workshops on opposite sides of the floor. Then the other side has the—so the first floor has the kitchen and dining room, the second floor had some clinical offices and group space. And then the other floors were the three dormitory floors, which all had the corner lounge, with the view out.

Q: But so, would—

Levenson: And then the seventh floor has the great big space.

Q: Right. Well, so, in the decades between the Riverside Plaza Hotel and the Career Academy, what happens therapeutically in some ways has changed at Phoenix House. Did that become manifest in the building, in the Career Academy?

Levenson: I—this is after my time.

Q: Yes. Well, I mean, as you were designing the Career Academy.

Levenson: Oh. Well, no, it's just, there—because we had enough space, we could have very little multiple use. Very little multiple use.

Q: Yes. But otherwise, the requirements of the TC model and how it was adapted by the late '90s was—

Levenson: It's the same.

Q: It was—okay.

Levenson: Now, the other thing is that—[laughs] the current OASAS regulations that were regulations when I left required sixty square feet per client in the sleeping room. The older

regulations required forty. We finessed that with our friends at OASAS to allow us to do forty for a bunk bed.

Q: That's pretty tight quarters.

Levenson: But there's a reason for this. The reason was that in the TC concept, the only thing you do in the dorm is sleep. It's not a college—it's not something else. It's not a place where you have a little desk and you sit down and you do your homework. It's not that. It's very basic. Beds and wardrobes, storage. By the time we got to do the Career Academy, there was this issue now about space. So, we went back to OASAS and we said, “Look, we have this attitude that we don't want to put that space in the dormitories. We want to have a bigger lounge, we want to have wide corridors. We want to have a place where they can have tables and computers and other things in that—we want the common space where they live, in the dormitory units—we want the common space to be more important than just the place they sleep. Because we think it is more important, they're getting clinical messages and they're getting a nice lounge.” And besides, we have fourteen foot high ceilings. So, it's the difference between putting a bunk bed in a room that has an eight foot ceiling and one that has a fourteen foot ceiling. So, we have very high ceilings, we got big windows. We got ceiling fans, we got—you know, it's just different. And so, they bought into that. They let us do it. I'm not convinced in the ideal world that we wouldn't give up the bunk beds. But to cut the population in half, then you don't have enough population to support all the other space that you need. So, you needed the two hundred bed—240 bed critical mass. I think in that case, it's okay. But I think if there are other places like

Belle Terre, where some of the dorms are big rooms with fireplaces and nice—some of them are a little on the tight side. It would have been nice to have some rooms that didn't have bunk beds.

And there was always talk, although we almost never did it, of using—because, as clients progress in treatment, they get more privilege. One of the privileges could be more space and a little more privacy. So, if you were in treatment—and people stayed, you know, twelve to eighteen months in those days. So, if you were in the eighth or ninth month and you're making good progress, why shouldn't you be able to move into a room with single beds? And then it does have a desk. And it reflects the fact that you're writing resumes and you're job searching, and you getting your GED [General Education Development], and that place in treatment should look more like where you're going than where you came from. I did a redesign for Prospect Place that was never built that would have made Prospect Place a kind of model reentry facility, where you had rooms like that where there were no bunk beds. There were two to a room, with the desks and other things, and a separate bathroom. Separate toilet.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And there should be things like that, I think. If you had enough space and you could find a way to support it financially.

Q: So, I'd like to take a little bit of time, because we're running short now, to talk about the internal structure of Phoenix House, especially after you joined. So, you joined right immediately after this long-going controversy between Kevin McEneaney and Ron Coster.

Levenson: Right.

Q: Was your hire, somehow, in the solving of that—was a resolution of that conflict, or—

Levenson: No, it kind of slipped in somewhat unnoticed before then. Almost all of my dealings with Phoenix House were with Ron.

Q: Were they?

Levenson: Because Ron handled the real estate and everything was close to the vest, and he always treated me very fairly. But he was a little bit of a strange dude. And very big ego. But he and Mitch were like this. I was aware that things were happening. But Ron and Mitch and I went on a trip. We flew upstate someplace to look at a piece of property. This is before I joined. But I'd already talked to Ron about coming over. And so, I had a chance to talk to Mitch on that trip about this, and why I thought it was a good idea. And then Ron, in his usual fashion, beat me down on my salary [laughter] a little bit. But that wasn't—the salary wasn't my primary motivation. My primary motivation was finding a setting where I thought I could have an impact on people's lives. So, we cut that deal and I came in. And within weeks of the time I came in, the conflict was erupting.

Q: Okay, so you were hired right before—

Levenson: Yes. Maybe a few weeks. When I got there, there were only a couple vice presidents. Just a handful. I got no orientation. I showed up, and they just kind of found me a space with a desk. They sent me to what was called Mr. Filatro's [phonetic] room. Did you hear about Mr. Filatro?

Q: No, please tell me.

Levenson: When they sold the Riverside Plaza and left, there was one resident left there. One guy, an old man. They brought him to 74th Street and put him in a room with its own bathroom and stuff.

Q: He was a renter, right?

Levenson: And he was a renter!

Q: He was an SRO renter.

Levenson: Yes.

Q: Right.

Levenson: They brought him back to 74th Street. He came voluntarily.

Q: Because he refused—

Levenson: Well, he came voluntarily.

Q: Oh, did he?

Levenson: Yes. They had a resident who was at his disposal. Service—they cleaned his room, they gave him meals, and he lived out his days there at Phoenix House. So, I guess he had died a little while before I got there, so I got his suite. And all I got was a desk and a chair. My department was in Brooklyn, in Jay Street.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: But no orientation, nothing. It took me a while—I mean, I was able to deal with the department—it takes a while to get acclimated to the institutional setting. And in the case of Phoenix House, it's a somewhat idiosyncratic one, because it was closely held. It was close to the vest. One of the things I'd mentioned to Ron after I'd been there about a month is, "Don't the vice presidents meet?" [laughs] And he said, "No, no, that never happens." I mean, they weren't interested in getting feedback from anybody. [laughs] They didn't—

Q: Who was vice president at that time? Was Kevin a vice president at that time?

Levenson: Yes.

Levenson: But there was just—I don't remember how many—the general counsel was a—

Q: Was one.

Levenson:—vice president. It was just a handful.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: I had known these people because I'd worked with them before, so—but nobody's meeting, nobody's talking to each other. I think my biggest frustration in all the time I was there is that it was hard to find a clinical counterpart who would take the time to sit down and talk to me about the issues we were talking about before, about—

Q: I see.

Levenson:—the relationship between the program and the environment. I brought a lot of sensitivity around that issue, but people were always too busy doing their regular jobs.

Q: Well, it seems like that would have been Kevin's role, right, as clinical director at that time.

Levenson: It could have been, but I think there was and—because Kevin perceived me as Coster's guy, I think, it took—

Q: Because you had a long—

Levenson:—a while for Kevin to warm up to me and to understand. Now, years later, we worked—I reported to him for a while. We worked very closely together. And I got to appreciate his commitment and his understanding. But nobody had the—they were all smart, but they didn't have the intellectual inclination or curiosity to say, “All right, you know, I'm going to step back from this. This is an interesting thing we should be talking about.” And so, they never took full advantage of my presence because of that. Now, I brought a lot to the table in terms of the property and relationships with funders and relationships with regulatory agencies, and I took care of a lot of important stuff. I bought and sold a lot of property while I was there that made them a lot of money. But I was really interested in [laughs]—

Q: So, were you mostly just kind of working on your own, then? As far as these decisions?

Levenson: Yes, and ultimately, if I couldn't get an answer, I would make the decision myself. I was never completely comfortable with that, but it's not like I didn't have an understanding. But I would have preferred that it were informed by great institutional wisdom and knowledge, which was never forthcoming.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: See, I think—if we'd had that there—and I'll step back for a minute about Mitch. But if we had had that there, we could've taken this whole issue of model facilities to a whole other level—it could've become the go to place to teach others how to do it.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: That was not something anybody was interested in. To his credit, though, I would say Mitch, more than anyone else, was concerned about the quality of the physical environments. I'm not so sure that that was a clinical concern or just an aesthetic concern.

Q: Well, I mean, an interesting thing there is during these very years of the '90s, Kevin McEneaney was very much interested in how to—his word is codify—how to make the TC something that can be exportable and taught to the world. I would have thought he would be very interested in the built environment and how that, too, would become a model. But he wasn't, huh?

Levenson: Well, I'm not saying he wasn't interested. But what I am saying is that he didn't give it the time. So, all I can say—I think that's a conscious choice that people make. I think he was a little—part of his unease with me is that I was a professional. I was an accomplished professional in my field. And I think that he had a different career track. He had a different kind of education, he had a different kind of background. I don't think he was completely comfortable, feeling that we were equals. I think that comes through in other areas, too. It comes through in

his writing, because he was not that good a writer. I'm not saying he wasn't smart. He's a smart guy. But I think he lacked self-confidence in certain areas.

Q: Yes, and maybe overcompensated in others.

Levenson: Yes, exactly. I mean, I had some very difficult times with him when we were—

Q: Did you?

Levenson: Yes. But I think it had nothing to do with me—and to do with the pressure that he was under and the ultimate stress in his relationship with Mitch.

Q: So, at the same time that you're hired, Norwig also comes on, right? Norwig Debye-Saxinger. I imagine you two were probably working pretty close as far as relations with the state. How did that develop?

Levenson: Not to my liking.

Q: No?

Levenson: Norwig is a very smart guy, and very personable in ways. And now that he's gone—I mean, from Phoenix House. You know that, or maybe you don't. Yes. [laughs] I found him the

quintessential bureaucrat, from all his years in Albany. I never dealt with him when he was at OASAS.

Q: No? Okay. I was assuming that this was a continued relationship.

Levenson: No. I didn't even know him there. I dealt with people on the facilities side and on the capital side. Never dealt with him. I thought we were going to become good friends and work closely together. But I found him—although he was very smart and knew a lot at the time, I thought he was just lazy. And I still think he's lazy. [laughs]

Q: Okay. Okay, so I would like—

Levenson: And there's no personal hostility in this at all.

Q: Okay. Well, that's fine. I'd like to, then, as we're getting—

Levenson: Well, I can give you just one example.

Q: Okay.

Levenson: Because since we were both new—and I brought a lot of contacts with me from the special needs housing world—and I knew the people in Washington, at HUD [Housing and Urban Development], because I had done the federal city shelter in Washington, D.C., and I had

a lot of contacts there. I figured we're going to find a way to tap into what they were doing there to maybe get some funding or do some special things at Phoenix House. So, I took him to Washington to meet with these guys. And he went, he didn't contribute, he never followed up. He wasn't interested in anybody creating work. [laughs] That's—

Q: Okay.

Levenson: And that's all I can say about him.

Q: Okay. Now, I'm wondering a little bit, then—there's a few final topics I'd like to touch on. One is how your relationship with Mitch maybe changed over the years, especially as you became part of Phoenix House. Also, if you ever had much contact or relation with the board over these years.

Levenson: Okay, well, I'll start with Mitch. Mitch and I always had a cordial relationship. At times, it got personal. I remember once—his mother lived in this house in Queens, and the house needed some work. I found a contractor, a small one-man guy, Joe Capanigro, [phonetic] who had worked for my mother for years. And Joe was perfect, because Joe would come in in the morning and sit down with the lady of the house, have a cup of coffee. They'd schmooze for a little while [laughs], then—and he was a great worker, and he worked by himself. Then he'd go and he'd do the work. So, this worked out perfectly for that, and he did whatever Mitch's mother needed. And she was very comfortable with him. He was very appreciative and very grateful for that. Over the years, I socialized with Mitch a couple of times. At dinner, at his apartment,

an occasional lunch. But not much after that. Not much. I did go in to see him when I thought that the temperature of his conflict with Kevin had risen to the point where it was impacting everybody's ability to work.

Q: Did it?

Levenson: And so, I went in to see him about this. And I said, "You got to do—[laughs] you got to do something about"—

Q: Yes.

Levenson: I think it was not very well received in the sense that he thought this was all Kevin and he had no role to play in this. And I don't know the truth. I just know how much each one complained about the other, you know? All the time. [laughs]

Q: For years or—I mean—

Levenson: Oh, well, I—it seemed like—it seemed like for years.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And then, it got resolved.

Q: Well—

Levenson: But I think it was destructive. I think the process—whatever happened there was destructive. And I have to say that I never considered Kevin to be a serious contender to be Mitch's successor. And his view of that was completely different, but I just never saw it. I just didn't think he had what it took to do that.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: Doesn't mean he didn't know the same people and didn't know—but he just was not at that level somehow. But I was only interested institutionally. I just felt that there was damage being done and that—

Q: Yes, I mean—for how long do you think that went on? Because, in a certain sense—

Levenson: It seemed like forever at the time, but I would guess it was three to six months, maybe.

Q: Okay, okay, that's what I thought. So, we're talking summer of 2006.

Levenson: Yes.

Q: Yes, yes.

Levenson: I'm going to get back to the board question—

Q: Okay.

Levenson:—that you asked before. But when Howard [Meitiner] and David Deitch showed up, I just felt, well, this is a breath of fresh air. They seem very reasonable and very rational. And David Deitch, who I'd known from before—this was my chance. I was going to get my frustration satisfied. I was going to have somebody on the clinical side at Phoenix House that I could talk to about these important issues, because I knew he was aware of these things. And it never materialized. I could not get him engaged. And I think he had a different agenda when he showed up, and it was a different time in his life, and he just—

Q: Sure.

Levenson: So, that was my last attempt to try and do something like that, before I left. And then I was just left by myself. So, I figured by now, I'll have to do the best I can.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: I don't think it was bad, but I don't—it could have been better. Now, with regard to the board, I had some friends who were board members who I had contact with regularly. Nancy Hoving, [Richard] Dick Davison. When we were doing a lot of real estate transactions and

planning, they set up a real estate committee of the board, and I was, for a while, the liaison with that committee for a short while. But then—I mean, occasionally, I'd do a board presentation on properties. Showing pictures of what the properties were around the country. And I attended some board retreats. But otherwise, I didn't have a—

Q: You didn't have much of a relationship with the board? So, when Howard was brought on, that didn't change much about your position in the organization? No.

Levenson: Well, it did only at the end, to the extent that they fired me.

Q: How did that happen?

Levenson: [laughs] Very abruptly.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: I just thought it was unprofessional, because it had nothing to do with my commitment to Phoenix House or the work I was doing. It was a problem with one development project in Florida, which I would say I had a role in not fulfilling my obligations completely. But that was just the last thing. Up until then—and we were right in the middle of this huge capital campaign and this big plan and everything. I had a lot of accumulated knowledge and technology in my department. And three, four, five direct reports and then other people. So, I

was headed for a meeting and they just said, "There's no meeting. Let's talk. You're out of here. Now. Today." Was a Friday. "You're gone."

Q: And you didn't see this coming at all?

Levenson: No. And I said, "Wouldn't you like a little transition?" "No. Just go to Clyde's [Rush] office and he'll"—blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

Q: What was the given reason? What was the ostensible reason?

Levenson: No, there wasn't any reason.

Q: No.

Levenson: Well, I had a decent salary, but it was not—I mean, maybe they were looking for the money, but I don't think so. So, I went into Amy's [Singer] office. You know, Amy's my significant other?

Q: Right.

Levenson: Amy Singer, right? And she went crazy. I said—it took me about ten or fifteen minutes, and I said, "You know, this is fine. [laughs] There's a life after Phoenix House, and maybe after sixteen years it's enough and I'll be fine, it's okay." They had already called over to

my department and told everybody I was gone. And were meddling around there somehow. They just drove people crazy there. So, Amy went in to see Howard and cursed him out and said, you know, "There's something wrong with this." So, Clyde called me down to his office and he says, "Okay, we've decided that you'll stay until the end of June." I said, "Okay, I will give you a transition report." [laughs] After all, you know, there's a lot of stuff going on.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: I just couldn't believe it.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: So, I went back to the office, first, and I calmed everybody down. I said, "It's okay. [laughs] Everything's going to be all right. Just relax, just keep on doing your work. I'm fine, everything's going to be okay." But what they did—they just fouled the air there for everybody.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And everybody figured, well, if they can fire me, you know... Nobody's got any future, yes. So, they just ruined that. And so I spent a month and I wrote up a transition report. I said, "These are all the issues." And I packed up my stuff and I was gone.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: And then I went to a meeting with Howard, about a week before, and I gave him the report. And he says, "Well, you can do this and this and that." I said, "No. You have to do this. [laughs] I'm not going to do these things."

Q: Yes.

Levenson: "This is for you to do," right? And I left.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: I was done. And within a short period of time, they just shut—within a couple months, they shut the whole department down. There's a database, there's a million dollars worth—

Q: Of stuff.

Levenson:—of stuff. I have no idea what happened to it. And I just thought it was weird. It was weird—

Q: And have you ever—

Levenson:—that in this critical area—

Q: Yes.

Levenson: —that they wouldn't say, “Okay, someone else is going to take the ball, somebody's going to”—nothing. And if it weren't for Amy's yelling and screaming, they would have just stopped it, cold.

Q: And have you ever been able to come to a decent interpretation of what happened?

Levenson: No. I have no idea. Now, maybe they just thought that this kind of activity was a luxury or superfluous.

Q: Yes.

Levenson: If they looked at it from a business point of view and they said, “Well, with all these salaries, maybe there's a half a million dollars in this a year. What are we getting for it?” I would say they got a lot. Even just on the property sales over the years, I more than paid for myself for the sixteen years I was there. So, I don't think it's money.

Q: And even if it was, that seems like a lousy way to do it.

Levenson: And then, maybe I was Mitch's man. I don't know, you know?

Q: Yes.

Levenson: Howard and Mitch were—yes, I was one of the few people left standing from that era.

Q: Really?

Levenson: Yes, so—

Q: So, was there a larger house cleaning after Howard was brought on?

Levenson: I guess so.

Q: Yes?

Levenson: Yes. I guess so. It was most of the people from Mitch's era that were kind of pushed out. But there's this strange thing with Howard and Mitch staying on together all these years, which is not good for the institution either. But I think Howard had—in the end, he didn't understand Phoenix House. He didn't understand the business. If you can call it a business. I think it's a business. But he didn't understand it. I'm not saying he didn't believe in the mission, but it's one thing to believe in the mission and another thing to galvanize a workforce around a mission and make things happen. And he was too corporate, in the end.

Q: And since you were fired, have you ever talked to Mitch?

Levenson: Oh, yes, I have—

Q: Yes.

Levenson: Well, I went in to see him, actually, the day I was fired, and he gave me a big hug and he said, "I'm sorry, I couldn't head this off." I said, "All right." And I really—it didn't take more than fifteen or twenty minutes to figure out that, for me, this was a good move. I might not have liked the way they did it. I felt badly for the institution, because I think this is wasteful. This is not the right—if it was nasty personally, from an institutional point of view, it was a very bad move. But as you can see, one of the things they gave me was my third career, and now—

Q: As an artist, yes.

Levenson: As an artist, and I have no regrets. No regrets about that.

Q: Yes. Well, this has been a wonderful interview. Are there any last things you'd like to add to this tape that we haven't covered?

Levenson: I don't think so. I would just say this. One of the problems for Phoenix House, going forward—and I care about Phoenix House's clients—is that right now, it appears to be a real estate holding company with some services and programs attached to it. And that's a problem, because the value in the real estate keeps you from going under. I think they need, going

forward, an integrated plan which looks at capturing the value in the real estate, and then reinvesting that in whatever the new reality is in terms of the models for programs and places. And that hasn't happened yet. I don't know if it's going to happen. I hope it does, because otherwise, they will end up just with the real estate. [laughter] Because it's not about money. They'll never run out of money. The real estate's too valuable.

Q: Wow. Hopefully, as they now search for a new CEO, [chief executive officer], then this becomes part of—

Levenson: I hope so.

Q: —the new mission. Well, thank you so much, Conrad.

Levenson: Thank you!

Q: It's been a wonderful interview.

Levenson: It's been a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]