

Buckhead Heritage Society & Atlanta History Center

Oral History Project

Interview with Andrew Isaac Benator

In the offices of the Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia

October 20, 2025

Interviewer: James Ottley

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SUE VERHOEF | 00:00

On camera.

JAMES OTTLEY | 00:04

Great. Today is October 20th, 2025. And my name is James Ottley. I'm a volunteer with Buckhead Heritage, and with me is Judith Vanderver, also with Buckhead Heritage and Sue Verhoeff, director of Oral History and Genealogy at the Atlanta History Center. We're here today to record the oral history of Mr. Andrew Benator was a Buckhead native, an actor based in Atlanta, and the grandson of the developer of West Paces Ferry Shopping Center. We're honored to have you with us, Mr. Benator, and thank you for participating in this project. To begin, if you would please state your full name and year of your birth.

ANDREW ISAAC BENATOR | 00:42

Andrew Isaac Benator, 1971.

OTTLEY | 00:46

Fantastic. Great. Really excited about this interview. And again, thanks for being with us. Since you're a Buckhead native, let's go ahead and just start with what street did you grow up on?

BENATOR | 00:57

I grew up on Mount Paran Parkway, off Mt. Paran Road, close to the country store.

OTTLEY | 01:02

Gotcha. How was traffic back then?

BENATOR | 01:04

It was easy. I rode my bike every day after school from my house to the country store, which would be insane today, but was not terrible then.

OTTLEY | 01:18

That's great. Any memories you have of, I guess playing with other kids in that neighborhood? How was it like growing up in that neighborhood?

BENATOR | 01:24

It was great. There were the Nemos, the Schwartz's and, the Slutski's, and we would play, touch football every day after school. It was great.

OTTLEY | 01:37

That's fantastic. Great, what elementary school did you go to?

BENATOR | 01:41

I went to Montessori. First Montessori School of Atlanta on Long Island Drive.

OTTLEY | 01:46

So nearby?

BENATOR | 01:47

Very close. Yeah, yeah.

OTTLEY | 01:48

Very cool and so elementary school at the Montessori school. And then where did you go after that.

BENATOR | 01:55

Fourth grade I went to Lovett and I was at Lovett from fourth grade through ninth grade.

OTTLEY | 02:01

Fantastic. Did you have a favorite teacher when you were there that you can think of? Not to put you on the spot.

BENATOR | 02:08

Oh boy, I would have to say --

OTTLEY | 02:09

Did you have a least favorite teacher?

BENATOR | 02:11

I'll tell, I'll tell you. The first teacher that comes to mind is my first teacher in fourth grade. Mr. Alexander. I think his name was James Alexander, and I remember him being a very kind man.

OTTLEY | 02:20

Yeah, indeed. He's actually still in town and a successful real estate broker here in Atlanta. And I'm going to go ahead and share, you know, we've connected and realized we were both at Lovett at the same time in the same class. Do you have any favorite, or funny memories from that time, of Lovett [or] being at Lovett at that time?

BENATOR | 02:41

I have so many just little bursts of memory.

OTTLEY | 02:45

Can you share one?

BENATOR | 02:46

Being on the playground, I remember, I guess in, in the middle school, there was a big asphalt playground where we would just run around and play Foursquare and shoot baskets and stuff, and, you know, like boys overhearing girls over there. I just sort of remember being out there with the kids. I remember Alex Hearn, Bates Madison, Bo Adams, J.T. King.

OTTLEY | 03:09

That's great. That's great.

BENATOR | 03:10

Bunch of people.

OTTLEY | 03:10

Yeah. Very cool. Were you there when the new cafeteria was built? That was kind of a big, big thing and -

BENATOR | 03:21

I think it was there when-- I don't remember it being built, but you're talking about the circle serve?

OTTLEY | 03:25

That's right.

BENATOR | 03:26

Yes. It was amazing. I remember it from, from being there, from, I don't remember anything before that, but it was a great cafeteria with that incredible circle serve, just line up and get your tray that was shaped like that. I remember Pizza Day very well.

OTTLEY | 03:43

What was your favorite, what was your favorite food there?

BENATOR | 3:

Pizza day.

OTTLEY | 3:

Okay. Yeah [laugh] didn't need to ask [laugh]. What about the Natatorium? That was another thing that was built perhaps during time when, when we were there, or maybe it was there beforehand.

BENATOR | 03:56

I don't remember it being built, but I remember it being special and it being a big deal.

OTTLEY | 04:03

Yeah, yeah. Very, very cool. Any memories of sports or going to Friday night football games or anything like that?

BENATOR | 04:12

Football, yes, and sports. Yeah. I wrestled oh gosh -- he was so famous. I can't think of his name, but he was there for decades and decades and decades. I was on the wrestling team, I want to say sixth and seventh grades, and then I broke my leg, and that was the end of my wrestling career.

OTTLEY | 04:34

Okay. Gotcha. Did you do any acting when you were at Lovett?

BENATOR | 04:36

My first play was at Lovett.

OTTLEY | 04:38

Fantastic, what was it?

BENATOR | 04:38

It was called Dark of the Moon. It was in ninth grade. I was sort of done with wrestling and my mom said, you should audition for this play. And I auditioned for it. I got cast in a role. I learned three chords. I played guitar and sang a song in the play. I had a little kissing scene with a senior, which was a very big deal, [laugh]. It was so much fun. It opened up a whole new world to me.

OTTLEY | 05:08

That's awesome. Were you there and did you have any role in the --- remember those, I'm gonna say awful musicals that they forced us into and when we were in fifth grade, I think one was the West, how The West was Really One.

BENATOR | 05:24

Were they like social studies shows that we would do in class?

OTTLEY | 05:27

I think they were music class shows, and we all had to be on the risers and the kids were fainting off of them

BENATOR | 05:33

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

OTTLEY | 5:

Do you remember those at all?

BENATOR | 5:

Yes. Yes.

OTTLEY | 5:

Being in and being in the Coral or--

BENATOR | 05:37

Oh, yeah. Yes. Right. Yes, indeed.

OTTLEY | 5:

Okay. Very, very neat. Were there any other shows that you did?

BENATOR | 05:44

No, that was my last year at Lovett. Okay. And that was my first play that I auditioned for and was in.

OTTLEY | 05:49

Fantastic. Where did you go after Lovett? Pace?

BENATOR | 05:52

Pace Academy.

OTTLEY | 05:53

Okay, favorite teacher at Pace?

BENATOR | 05:56

Well, I mean, the most influential teacher was Dr. George Manger, who ran the theater. He was an English teacher, and he ran the theater program, and I immediately got into a play and I just did theater all for the next three years.

OTTLEY | 06:08

Very cool. Any favorite or funny memories from Pace or being in some of these productions? Were there any productions that maybe it didn't go as well as you thought they would, or --?

BENATOR | 06:21

Well, they all --

OTTLEY | 06:23

I mean, what was your favorite production that you did there?

BENATOR | 06:25

It was called, I'm Not Rapper Poor, which [is] a well known play. It was on Broadway, and we did a condensed one act version for the state One Act Play competition. And the leads of the play were myself and Kwame Abernathy, who was the son of Ralph David Abernathy. [The] Civil Rights leader, and Kwame and I did this play. We were good buddies, and we did it at the Regional Competition, which was at Oglethorpe, and we won the regions, and I want to say we both -- we split, like co won "best actor" at this thing, and we each got trophies or whatever. And then we went to the state competition because we won regionals, and we won state.

OTTLEY | 07:06

Fantastic, that's great. Very cool, very cool. After Pace, where'd you go to college?

BENATOR | 07:12

I went to Colgate University in upstate New York. I knew that I would act in college. I assumed I would act in college, but I wasn't considering it as a career. I wasn't looking for acting programs or acting

schools, but every college tour that I went on, I always asked to see the theater. Anyway, I wound up at Colgate, which I loved. It was great.

OTTLEY | 07:36

Fantastic, and after college, would you spend some time in San Francisco?

BENATOR | 07:42

Yes. So, during college, I got very serious about acting, and I thought, if I'm still serious about it, when I'm a senior, I'll go to grad school. So I went to a very classical conservatory training program in San Francisco called, American Conservatory Theater, and did a two year MFA program there.

OTTLEY | 08:01

When did you come back to Atlanta?

BENATOR | 08:03

So after, I stayed in San Francisco for a year and started working professionally, and then I moved to New York in 1996. Stayed in New York for nine years, working for a while and then moved to Atlanta in 2005.

OTTLEY | 08:17

Gotcha, 2005. One of the things that caught my eye was Stranger Things, filmed here in Atlanta. But, do you have any memories or funny stories or challenges or, or maybe even talking about some of the locations that, where they filmed that?

BENATOR | 08:38

Well, I shot, I filmed, so I'm the first person you see in Stranger Things. When in episode one, scene one lights up on this scientist running through hallways, just looking terrified. And then he runs into an elevator and something takes him away. Something very scary happens, and he's gone. And then I was in some flashback episodes later on. Everything I shot was in a studio -- just a big, you know, warehouse type studio in Atlanta. The story of how I got the show was that I had not auditioned for it, and I was just asked to come in and read stage directions when the whole cast was getting together for the first time with the directors and the executives and everything. And I was gonna read stage directions just to sort of help move the thing along. And they had asked for an actor to do this, you know, not just like a P.A. So I did it, and we did several episodes, and the directors, these twin brothers, they were, they got very excited at the end. They were like, "that was -- you were great, thank you so much for doing this. We've already talked about it. We're finding a role for you in the show. We're putting you in the show."

OTTLEY | 09:57

That's awesome!

BENATOR | 09:58

And so I thought, all right, I'll believe that when I see it. But then a few weeks later, I got an offer to play a role of like somebody's lawyer. And then a couple of weeks later, I got a call from my agent. "Hey, they've cut that role [laugh], it's out, but they asked if you would like to do this other scene, there's no

lines, but it's the opening scene of the thing. It's a very fun action, exciting scene.” “Sure,” I said, “sure I'll do it. Why not?” and it turned out to be this great experience. That's awesome.

OTTLEY | 10:28

That's awesome. Did they film at an abandoned mall in Gwinnett County?

BENATOR | 10:33

Yes.

OTTLEY | 10:34

Did you ever visit that area?

BENATOR | 10:36

Well, I think it's called North DeKalb Mall, and I mean I've seen movies there, the mall's closed now.

OTTLEY | 10:46

Yeah. Very cool. And you mentioned that your beard is long today, and maybe your hair is long today for a certain reason.

BENATOR | 10:54

Yes. So this is what I look like from October through Christmas. Okay. In order to play Ebenezer Scrooge in a Christmas Carol at the Alliance Theater.

OTTLEY | 11:02

That's fantastic. How many years have you done that?

BENATOR | 11:04

This will be my fifth year.

OTTLEY | 11:06

That's very cool. I'm sure you'll look familiar to a lot of people, for sure.

BENATOR | 11:10

Yeah, indeed. I played Jacob Marley for six years before that. Oh, that's great.

OTTLEY | 11:14

Oh, that's great. Before we move on to your grandparents and West Paces Ferry, anything else you would like to share with regard to your acting experiences, either in Atlanta or otherwise?

BENATOR | 11:28

No. Except just to tell you upcoming, I'll be in the Lehman Trilogy, which is a really wonderful play. We're remounting a production we did in Atlanta at Theatrical Outfit. We're doing it in Montgomery at the

Alabama Shakespeare Festival in February, and then another play back at Theatrical Outfit in Atlanta called The Price by Arthur Miller. Wonderful.

OTTLEY | 11:48

Wonderful Play Arthur Miller Play.

BENATOR | 11:49

Fantastic. Yeah. Great play.

OTTLEY | 11:50

Very cool. Alright, well, let's move on then, if we can, to in general, the subject of West Paces Ferry Shopping Center. But let's start at the very beginning. Tell us a little bit about your grandparents, your grandfather where they came from, when they came to the, to the US and just start giving us the story.

BENATOR | 12:15

Okay. So the key figure here is my maternal grandfather, Edward Shetzen. He was the developer of Westpac Ferry Shopping Center from raw land in the fifties. His parents immigrated to the US. His father was Wolf Shetzen. He came from Riga, Latvia when he was about 15 years old. He came over in 1890, I believe.

OTTLEY | 12:43

1890.

BENATOR | 12:44

1890. And his mother was Fannie Harris. She came from Lithuania, and I think she went from Lithuania as a small child to Cork Ireland, where they lived for several years, like eight or nine years. And then she came to the US in 1897. And I don't know why they chose Atlanta. I don't know how Atlanta became the place, but that's where they both ended up. And they met in Atlanta and married and had three kids, my grandfather, Edward Shetzen. His father Wolf, I know at some point he was in the grocery business, he had a store, and then he started to get into real estate, and I don't know a lot of detail, but I have seen in pouring through old Atlanta Journal real estate notices that he was very active in real estate. He bought this parcel, he sold it to this man--

OTTLEY | 13:41

Was he a broker or a developer, or both?

BENATOR | 13:43

I think he was a developer but everything, and a builder. Building single homes, small, small buildings, maybe small apartment buildings. You know, duplexes, fourplexes.

OTTLEY | 13:55

And what years would've this been? I mean, what decade would this be?

BENATOR | 13:58

This is twenties, thirties, forties.

OTTLEY | 14:00

Gotcha. South side, North side, all over?

BENATOR | 14:05

I think all over, I mean, definitely the south side. He lived on the south side not far from where the stadium was, where, you know, Turner Field was, Atlanta Fulton County Stadium was before that. But definitely on the south side, and I think into the north side, he lived on Emory Drive, which I want to say is off North Decatur later on. So I think that that's where my grandfather Edward, learned the trade, and he was born and raised in Atlanta. He went to Formwalt Elementary School. He went to Boyce High School. [They] were both on the south side as I understand it.

OTTLEY | 14:52

Okay.

BENATOR | 14:53

He was an entrepreneur, he was an inventor. I know that he had a small factory on Edgewood Avenue under--

OTTLEY | 15:02

And tell us some of the things that he invented.

BENATOR | 15:04

So his company was called Specialty Products and he invented -- he had something to do with corrugated cardboard. He was building a toy that was a popular toy back then. This is probably the thirties, called a Trailer Tot, which was like a small little rolling toy for a kid to roll on that a parent might have a pole that you had pushed behind --

OTTLEY | 15:29

Before kind of advanced, you know, before his time that, you know.

BENATOR | 15:33

Yeah, yeah. And I've heard stories from my mom and my aunts of going to this factory. They have, you know, these vague, vague, vague childhood memories. But there was this huge vat of paint and a wire with hooks, and there would be unpainted toys hanging on the thing and it would dip down into the thing, come out. Then all painted, go on to the dry station and keep going. And then also, I'm told that during the war he couldn't get metal because of the war effort and he started building them out of wood. And then also he invented a machine that would cut and package toilet seat covers --

OTTLEY | 16:12

That you might use in the airport or something like that?

BENATOR | 16:13

Yes exactly, and would sell them to, I know he sold it to a department store downtown called Davison-Paxon. Which was became Macy's, and then at some point he --

OTTLEY | 16:27

This was your grandfather? Right?

BENATOR | 16:28

This is my grandfather. And then somewhere along the line, he starts getting more active in real estate, and he started buying property and building, I think he built single family homes. He also built apartment complexes. I know that he built I believe a 24 unit apartment complex at the corner of Memorial and Moreland Avenue.

OTTLEY | 16:51

Which may still be there.

BENATOR | 16:53

I think it is. I used to live in Cabbagetown, and my mom drove me by and said, that's it. "That's neat. Your grandfather built that." He built an apartment building on Peachtree Memorial Drive, which is south of Peachtree Battle. He built another one on Biscayne Drive, which is between Peachtree Battle and Collier, and actually that was undeveloped land. He cut Biscayne Drive --

OTTLEY | 17:19

That's fantastic.

BENATOR | 17:20

-- cut the street in order to build at the end of it, and as the man who cut the street it was his choice to name the street.

OTTLEY | 17:28

Can't wait to hear how this is named.

BENATOR | 17:30

So he wanted to try to find a way to name it after his three daughters, Leslie, Norma, and Mimi. Okay. And he came up with Lessnormie, [laugh]

OTTLEY | 17:41

[laugh]

BENATOR | 17:43

But decided, or was advised that that was just a bridge too far to name a street. So he named it Biscayne Drive. And I've asked like, why Biscayne? Did they go to Key Biscayne? Was that a spot? And I was told there's no known association with Key Biscayne. We don't know why. Okay. But it's, he came up with Biscayne Drive.

OTTLEY | 18:02

It's kind of interesting. Anjaco Drive is right near there, I believe, correct? I think so. Between Collier and Howell Mill, is that what you said?

BENATOR | 18:11

Or between Peachtree Battle and Collier for the ones I'm talking about.

OTTLEY | 18:15

Okay. It was Anjaco and it was Andrew Jackson Collier. So it's funny that your grandfather would be kind of coming up with a name that combined names as well.

BENATOR | 18:26

Yeah, yeah.

OTTLEY | 18:26

Anyway, so he builds these apartments, and so about what year did he start to kind of eye, or where did he get the idea of building a shopping center?

BENATOR | 18:39

I wish I knew the answer to that. He died in 1975 when I was four, and if I had had more time, I would've had so many questions. Among them, when did you identify it? When did you find out about I-75? How did you know there would be an exit at, at West Paces Ferry? Was there any competition for that parcel?

OTTLEY | 19:01

How did you get A&P to sign up for it? I bet they had to get A&P so there'd be an anchor for it.

BENATOR | 19:06

Yeah. I'm sorry, can we take one quick break?

OTTLEY | 19:08

Absolutely.

BENATOR | 19:10

My nose is so itchy.

OTTLEY | 19:11

On camera. Andrew, was there anything else that you wanted to mention about the family?

BENATOR | 19:17

Yeah, just that my grandfather Ed married Alice Loewenstein. I do not know what year they married. It would've been in the thirties, early to mid-thirties. And her parents, her father was Don Loewenstein and Becky Loewenstein. And Don was also a builder, and I think a more prolific builder than even Wolf Shetzen had been. So I think that Ed was getting the building you know, that he was being pushed, pointed in that direction from his father, and from his father-in-law. So my grandfather marries Alice Loewenstein, and then they had three daughters. Norma, my aunt Norma. My mom, Leslie, the middle child, and then the youngest, my aunt Mimi. And he is building, you know, doing all these apartment complexes and he does the Biscayne Drive, which was, which was a big one for him, as I understand it. And he sometimes he built for other people. He was, you know, a hired builder. Other times he was a developer. Right. Building his own stuff, Biscayne Drive was his own, and he ran it. They hired, I'm told he, you know, hired somebody to be onsite manager, but he owned it and was the operator. And that was early to mid-fifties. So somewhere around here, he bought the land for Westpaces Ferry Shopping Center.

OTTLEY | 20:54

Was it, do you know if it was for sale or he just, did he approach the--

BENATOR | 20:58

I don't know. Here's what, here's what I know.

OTTLEY | 21:00

Yeah

BENATOR | 21:02

It's either 1954 or 1955. It was two different parcels, interestingly, that were cut on a diagonal. And I don't know the history of how that happened. Sort of diagonal going from the corner out to the other corner. He bought one half from Charles Lorigans, which I assume has something to do with Lorigans Drive. You know and he did a decades long, very long ground lease for the other half.

OTTLEY | 21:32

No kidding.

BENATOR | 21:32

Yeah. From the Ford family, which in that family, it was three brothers. And I think possibly they had a sister, but in a patriarchal sort of way, they were referred to as the Ford Brothers. And that was a ground lease and that was the corner. And now to do that, to get the money to do that I know that he sold Biscayne Drive. There was an article in the Atlanta Journal about the sale of that property for \$300,000.

OTTLEY | 22:05

I was going to ask you if you knew what--

BENATOR | 22:08

Yeah and there was another article in 1955 announcing this upcoming shopping center, which was, which was called in the newspaper, the first shopping center in Northwest Atlanta. Because West Paces Ferry and US 41, what we call Northside Parkway, was kind of out there. You know, you had big mansions along Westpaces Ferry, but there was very little commerce out there. So this was a pretty big, bold idea, and the interstate system was under construction all through the 50's, so I-75 was still under construction. My understanding is that the connector in Midtown downtown that was built, but the stretch from Howell Mill to Westpaces Ferry, I don't think was completed until 1957. So around when he's buying this in 54', 55', that is under construction.

OTTLEY | 23:01

It's not there yet, it's coming, but it's not there.

BENATOR | 23:02

It's coming, so he knows it's there. He knows it's on the other side of Northside Parkway. His land's not going to be taken by eminent domain. He must have known that there was going to be an exit on West Paces Ferry, and he knew that the population of Atlanta was pushing North. There, you know, big supermarkets were a fairly new thing, and in order to get the money, I also know one of the first tenants was C&S Bank.

OTTLEY | 23:30

That's funny, because it looks like in the picture, and we'll --- that it's not there.

BENATOR | 23:36

It's not there yet. See, so he went to the president of C&S Bank was a man who was a very well known man at the time, named Mills B. Lane.. Mills B. Lane. And I don't know if he had a relationship, if that was his banker, I don't know if he had gotten a loan there before, but he went into Mills, Mr. Lane's office, and it made a big impression on him that his desk was absolutely clear. There was not a piece of paper on it. And he pitched him the idea of the shopping center, which I'm sure he was selling with, you know, the freeway and exit the whole thing. And he walked out with a loan.

OTTLEY | 24:19

And did he have a A&P?

BENATOR | 24:20

That's what I would love to know. I would think you've gotta have A&P in your pocket in order to get that loan, but I don't know that.

OTTLEY | 24:29

Well, Mills Lane helped finance the Atlanta Fulton County Stadium before they had the Braves locked down

BENATOR | 24:35

Is that right?

OTTLEY | 24:36

For sure, so he might've done it without, without A&P.

BENATOR | 24:40

Another interesting little fact from this article in 55' announcing the shopping center. So this Atlanta Journal article in 55' saying there's shopping center coming. It's the first shopping center in Northwest Atlanta. The architects were Heery and Heery. They were the architects for Atlanta, Fulton County Stadium. Also for the Georgia Dome. This was in 55'. It also announced who the leasing agent would be. I can't remember the name. I'm sorry. It said that there would be a supermarket. I did not believe that it said A&P.

OTTLEY | 25:19

Interesting, the sign in the picture, again, we will reference the pictures, the fantastic pictures that you provided. There is one that has a sign that says "Future Site" or "A&P coming".

BENATOR | 25:31

Yes. It says "A&P coming." You can see a car parked sort of on the property. That's my grandfather's car, and his handwriting with an arrow pointing to A&P site. And the A&P, of course, is where Publix is now. So he got the loan, he sold Biscayne Drive, he starts building, and he built it. There are other pictures of like parcels built with huge gaps in between.

OTTLEY | 25:59

Tell us about that.

BENATOR | 26:01

He was building to suit as he got tenants. I'm sure there was some kind of a master plan for the shape. I've seen some old blueprints that are not what wound up being built. So it was all you know, subject to change as things went on.

OTTLEY | 26:22

But it's fascinating that, you know, he built, I mean, he'd get the tenant and he put, like, Gretchen's, I think maybe was, one.

BENATOR | 26:28

Gretchen's is there early.

OTTLEY | 26:29

Yeah, and then there's space, like raw land space. You know, and so it's kind of interesting to me that he had put those up there and then --

BENATOR | 26:39

And was operating. Was operating while continuing to build, filling in the gaps into the sixties. Yeah.

OTTLEY | 26:46

Interesting. Yeah.

BENATOR | 26:46

Yeah. So some of the early tenants were A&P, Wendert Roberts, still there.

OTTLEY | 26:54

Yeah.

BENATOR | 26:55

Thomas Barbershop still there. C&S Bank, which is still there. It became Nations Bank then became Bank of America, but still there.

OTTLEY | 27:03

Do they lease that, that site, I mean, did they build their own building and then lease their site.

BENATOR | 27:07

They did that, that was originally a very long, a long ground lease for C&S. [laugh] The sweetest of sweetheart deals for a long time. You know, he got that loan, right?

OTTLEY | 27:19

Exactly.

BENATOR | 27:20

Yeah.

OTTLEY | 27:22

But then that may be your answer right there [laugh].

BENATOR | 27:25

Right, right. Yeah but then that converted. You know, the ground lease ended, another just a conventional tenant, and then there was down at the end where Starbucks is, I'm not sure if it's actually the Starbucks spot or if it's a little further, you know, what's next to it where, where Matthews and Hickory chair are, a place called, on the sign it says McNeil. And I'm not sure what McNeil was. So I grew up here--

OTTLEY | 27:56

And that became the public library at one point, right? Wasn't that a library at one point?

BENATOR | 28:01

Yeah, so the part that is the dry cleaner Starbucks Duxa. That was all one spot, one address, one tenant, and that was originally the Atlanta Public Library. Then when the library moved up, Northside Parkway, that became Oxford Bookstore.

OTTLEY | 28:20

Got it.

BENATOR | 28:21

Which, that was their second location, I think, after Peachtree Battle, which was, you know, it's an amazing, wonderful bookstore, and then Barnes and Noble kind of put an end to that and then Starbucks.

OTTLEY | 28:34

Yeah, I definitely want to get into your memories of being there as a child. Before we do though did your aunts -- do they have any stories that you could share that you remember about, gosh, some of the early that, you know, maybe your grandfather shared with them of some of the early challenges? Was it hard to get some of these tenants, you know, so far out, and, you know, you said it's kind of like the country almost, but so far out, were there any challenges or any funny stories about the tenants?

BENATOR | 29:10

I have these, I just have these little snippets of stories that I heard over the years. There was a story, and I don't know who the tenant was, but a story that my grandfather, because he managed it. So he built it and then managed it until--

OTTLEY | 29:25

Was he there on site?

BENATOR | 29:27

He didn't have an office on site, but I'm sure, I mean, I assume he was there, you know. His father-in-law had built his house, was the builder for his house on Lanier Boulevard in Virginia Highlands. That's where he lived. That's where my mother and her sisters grew up. 1106 Lanier Boulevard. So I guess he went from Lanier Boulevard up there as often as he needed to supervise the building not on 75', right?

OTTLEY | 29:50

Yeah [laughs], right.

BENATOR | 29:54

But yeah, I don't know. I mean, my impression is that it caught on pretty quickly. I'm sure A&P must have been just very welcome to all those homes along West Paces Ferry. I would think that it was a hit. And I know Wender & Roberts had been downtown and they had a Soda Fountain originally. There is a sign, not the big fascia sign, but if you're walking underneath the canopy in front of Wender & Roberts, there's a sign that says Wender & Roberts, and now it says -- I don't know what it says right now, you know, pharmacy something, but you can see, if you look hard, you can see the old letters that said Soda Fountain.

OTTLEY | 30:39

That's fantastic. Yeah. I'm going to look for that the next time I'm there. Before we move on to your memories and kind of more, you know, memories of the seventies and eighties, and things like that at the center, is there anything else that we didn't cover that you'd like to cover?

BENATOR | 31:00

No I think I wish that I knew that I'd had a chance to do this with my grandfather. Because a lot of it has been--

OTTLEY | 31:14

Yeah, don't we all right?

BENATOR | 31:16

Yeah, a lot of detail has been lost at time, but those are the broad strokes of the stories that I've heard my whole life.

OTTLEY | 31:26

Yeah that's cool. So what are some of your first memories of being there? It sounds like you spent a lot of time there.

BENATOR | 31:32

I was there all the time. So I went to Lovett, you know, which was down the street, and then I went to Pace, which was down the street. And I was there all the time. I mean we shopped at A&P, I got my hair cut at Tommy's. We went to Wender & Roberts, where we had a house account at Wender & Roberts, where you just go in and charge something. Like, can you believe that?

OTTLEY | 31:51

Back in the day, yeah.

BENATOR | 31:53

Yeah, went to the library. And I always knew, I didn't understand, I didn't see it from a big, you know, a big macro perspective, but I always knew that my grandfather had built this place, and my mom was very low key about it, and my aunts were very low key about it. You know, we didn't advertise that it was family owned, but I always had a very quiet special relationship to the property. It was the shopping center, like that's what the words, the shopping center in my family.

OTTLEY | 32:30

That's what it meant to you.

BENATOR | 32:36

That's what that is.

OTTLEY | 32:37

Sure, sure. Do you remember, you've got a picture of it, but do you remember when the building, which is now the Okay. Cafe was a gas station and when that changed, I don't remember, but did it go directly from Gas Station rebuild or renovate it directly to being Okay Cafe? Was there something in the middle there?

BENATOR | 32:58

There was another, and I don't know if they were attached, but there was a Russell Stover Candy that was out on the corner. There was the Texaco gas station, which was there for a long time until the seventies, I think.

OTTLEY | 33:11

Yeah and I remember that, I mean, this is your interview, not mine, but I remember people would park their cars and just leave them in the parking lot with a "for sale" sign [laugh] on right next to the Texaco, because there wasn't as much traffic back then. There weren't as many people fighting for parking space. I don't know if you remember -- was it, do you remember it being less crowded back in those days? Or?

BENATOR | 33:35

It was definitely less. It was definitely less crowded in those days. By the time I was involved in it, it was very crowded, and you know parking was tight. There was the permitting rules, the zoning rules about, you know, how many parking spaces you needed for this square footage, et cetera, changed over the years, and the density increased so much and more people started coming, so it just got more crowded. But I don't have a lot of specific memories about, about Texaco, but I know that there was, there was a Russell Stover Candy store that was a realty store that I think at one time was a Adair Realty, and then I think it was Ackerman Realty

OTTLEY | 34:18

At that kind of corner? In that building? Or?

BENATOR | 34:22

At the corner. I don't exactly know. I think that they were separate buildings, and they were small. They wouldn't have had a large footprint, but those were the things at the corner, and then when the gas station, I don't remember which, which went out first, you know, which --

OTTLEY | 34:39

Well, I think the gas station, I mean, I think that that building frame is, is the basis for Okay. Cafe, isn't it?

BENATOR | 34:46

Well, maybe because when the Okay Cafe has expanded over the years. You know, it, it started off quite small and was successful, and they, I don't remember the year exactly, but early eighties, early mid-eighties is when they came in, they expanded. They expanded again, to have a pretty sizable, you know, pretty sizable footprint now.

OTTLEY | 35:11

Sure. You probably you remember the -- was it Steve's ice cream? Was that Steves, which became Gorins?

BENATOR | 35:16

Yeah.

OTTLEY | 35:18

Yeah.

BENATOR | 35:19

Steve's, where Willie's is, was Steve's ice cream, which was this ice cream concept where this marble thing where they would take ice cream and flatten it out, and then you would choose your candies and they'd put 'em in and wrap the, wrap your candies in ice cream. It was great. And I don't know why it changed from Steve to Gorins, and then Gorins also had a sandwich shop. That was great. I can remember this turkey melted cheese heated up sandwich in there [laugh]. That was really delicious. Yeah that was there for a long time. I've got-- you want a list of some old tenants?

OTTLEY | 35:53

Would love it, and memories you might have of visiting those stores, in no particular order

BENATOR | 35:58

Okay. A&P, which became Publix, C&S, which is now Bank of America. Panos and Paul's, which was, you know, kind of the original fine dining in Atlanta. Came in the seventies and was there into the late nineties. That was the first restaurant of what became Buckhead Life Restaurant Group. And it was such a big deal and it was so unusual to have this truly fine dining restaurant, like with a hardware store, two doors down, [laugh]. The hardware store, Smith Ace Hardware which was a wonderful hardware store run by the Nemo family who lived up the street from us. Bob and Carol Nemo, before Panos and Paul's was a restaurant that I barely remember called Saccone's. Saccone's had a big -- there is still along West Paces Ferry between OK Cafe and Starbucks. In the middle of that strip, there's a stone column that has all these trees around it. That column used to have a Saccone's sign on it, and the sign went, Saccone's went away. The sign went away. No sign has ever been there again. But the stone column is still there.

OTTLEY | 37:17

The stone column. So look for the stone column when you're driving.

BENATOR | 37:19

Yes. Gretchen's Children's Shop, which was there until, I mean, less than 10 years ago. It was there for a long, long time.

OTTLEY | 37:32

And did they -- did your grandfather, or, I mean, they were one of the first ones.

BENATOR | 37:38

Oh, yeah. He signed the lease with, I believe her name was Gretchen.

OTTLEY | 37:42

Okay, did he have I mean, were the families friends, I mean, how did Gretchen come to know about the shopping center? Was there any--?

BENATOR | 37:51

That I don't know. There were so many origin stories that I would love to know, but those details are lost in time.

OTTLEY | 38:00

Yeah it happens.

BENATOR | 38:01

Yeah, there was a fine men's clothing store called Parks Chambers, which I don't remember, but I've been told about by my aunts. They had a few stores. I've seen the ads and the old ads in the Atlanta Journal. They had a few stores, stores around town. Oxford Books, which I mentioned, which was a great bookstore.

OTTLEY | 38:21

Wolf Camera?

BENATOR | 38:22

Wolf Camera was there for decades. Long time. Do you remember that where Goldberg's is in the seventies was a liquor store?

OTTLEY | 38:30

Is that right?

BENATOR | 38:31

Well, it was also a Mrs. Fields. It was before Goldberg's, so it was a Mrs. Fields cookies and sandwiches. But before that, in the sixties and seventies, it was a liquor store, and that was the, that my grandfather owned. That was the only store that we ever owned.

OTTLEY | 38:43

Okay, interesting.

BENATOR | 38:44

Yeah. And there was a story about the reason he wanted to have a liquor store, had something to do with the proximity to Cobb County, because Cobb County had been dry for a really long time and it wasn't dry at this time, but maybe there weren't many, and it was, it was something to do with, it would be a good location close to Cobb County.

OTTLEY | 39:03

Drive traffic Yeah. Into the, into the shopping center. Yeah.

BENATOR | 39:05

And the liquor store, I remember my aunt Norma managed it for a while when I was a kid. Now we'd go in there and I remember some of the guys who worked there, and I would get these little tiny cans of

grapefruit juice. And then in the office there was a safe in the floor, like under a panel, like a secret panel, and then a combination safe that would swing over.

OTTLEY | 39:24

How cool.

BENATOR | 39:25

As a kid?

OTTLEY | 39:27

That's cool now!

BENATOR | 39:30

So cool! Now I could [laugh]... there was a, a store called Elmore's five and ten, which sounds like it would've been a neat store. The Russell Stover Candy, there was a women's clothing store called Tennis Lady, which I assume sold, you know, tennis and sporting clothes. There was a gift store called the Orient Express. There were a few different hair salon places. There was a place called Judy's Hairstyles. There was Rich's Bake Shop. So Rich's department store had these little standalone bake shops that would make cakes and cookies and stuff. Part of where Willie's expanded into this other little sliver that used to be Panos's office, and that used to be Rich's Bake Shop. Snack and Shop, do you remember Snack and Shop being up the hill? Where Houston's is?

OTTLEY | 40:25

We're getting a nod back here. I don't remember, but keep going.

BENATOR | 40:29

Snack and Shop was owned by Saul and Reini Feldman, who were friends of ours. We knew them in the community, and it was a great store.

OTTLEY | 40:39

Where was it before again?

BENATOR | 40:40

It was in the, what is now the Publix produce department. So Publix was even smaller than it, [laugh] than it is, and their produce department was a separate tenant. That's where the Snack and Shop Deli was. And then they moved up the hill, and A&P expanded into that space. There was a really wonderful gift shop that my uncle owned called Sterns where Smith Ace Hardware wound up as a big store, like 11,000 square feet. Which was really great.

OTTLEY | 41:14

Where was Smith? Was it the hardware store before or did they come into that space?

BENATOR | 41:20

That's a good question. Sterns was, but Sterns was the first tenant in that space, and whether it was anything between Sterns and the hardware store, I do not know. I do know that when the hardware store moved out in 2007 or something, I was there and we were doing all this demo because we were dividing it, subdividing it into two spaces and on a steel beam that had been encased in, you know, drywall or whatever for, for fifty years. I found a note card scotch tape to this steel beam in my uncle's handwriting.

OTTLEY | 41:57

Is that right?

BENATOR | 42:00

It had been like a time capsule back there for fifty years.

OTTLEY | 42:06

That is so cool.

BENATOR | 42:06

Yeah.

OTTLEY | 42:07

Do you, did you keep that card?

BENATOR | 42:09

Oh yeah. I gave it to my cousins, to their father. And also when the Panos used to have this really cool stone wall, and when Panos went out, Matthew's Furniture expanded into it. It's now called Hickory Chair, where it's still part of Matthew's Furniture. And they changed the facade and they took down the stone wall and inside the stone wall encased in stone and concrete for fifty some years, were a Coke can, a Sprite can, and a Coke bottle that I still have on a shelf at home. And I had to look up the designs to see like, when were, when were these, and it made perfect sense. It was, you know, in 61' or 60'. Whenever that wall had been put up.

OTTLEY | 42:52

Right, that's so cool.

BENATOR | 42:52

Really neat, yeah. And some of the old spaces, there's some cool old secrets buried in the walls.

OTTLEY | 42:58

Oh yeah. Sounds like it.

BENATOR | 42:59

There was an old dentist shop called Woodward's Dentist Office. Gorins Ice Cream we mentioned. There was a store called Dean's. There was Pinkard Cleaners. There was Three Dog Bakery that didn't last a terribly long time. It was like a bakery for your dogs.

OTTLEY | 43:17

Oh, really?

BENATOR | 43:17

Making like really high-end bones and treats, probably might do better now. There was a place early, early on, you have the picture of attached to the, attached to Gretchen's what is now Optique was a store called Tallyho Casuals.

OTTLEY | 43:36

Okay.

BENATOR | 43:36

Which I'll bet had some really cool men's clothing in there. There was a wig store back in the day called White Wigs. So those are some of the history places.

OTTLEY | 43:51

Cool. Let's see, we covered Okay Café, well, I've got a question. You said when he first developed it, part of it was a land lease, or ground lease, and part of it was fee ownership. Did the lease ever convert the fee?

BENATOR | 44:09

We bought it out.

OTTLEY | 44:10

You bought it out?.

BENATOR | 44:11

Yeah, in the eighties.

OTTLEY | 44:14

Yeah. Makes sense [laugh].

BENATOR | 44:16

Made all the sense in the world. Yeah, indeed.

OTTLEY | 44:18

Yeah, indeed.

BENATOR | 44:19

To sort of unify ownership of it.

OTTLEY | 44:21

Yeah fantastic. Well, Andrew, are there any other, you know, items you'd like to talk about? Either your life, your experiences and like I said, we talked about your being at the center and kind of have a reverence for it. I mean, are there any other things you'd like to share about your life or about the center or your aunts or anybody that we didn't cover?

BENATOR | 44:47

I mentioned a little bit, but just to say that, so my grandfather, you know, it's unusual to be family owned and operated for such a long time. My grandfather managed it until he died in 1975, and his wife, my grandmother Alice, who had really not been involved in it at all, had to figure out with her daughters how to run it. They ran it until she passed away in 1980, and then the three sisters started running it. And my whole childhood, I remember my mom saying, "I've got a meeting, I've gotta go to a meeting. We're doing this, and then I've got a meeting." And the meeting was meeting with her two sisters and sitting around one of their kitchen tables and going through whatever it was, repaving the lot or renegotiating a lease or new tenants coming in or what. So, I grew up just sort of being around the stuff. And over the years, one aunt, and, my mom stopped working in it. One aunt stopped working in it until one aunt one, my Aunt Mimi was doing it alone. And then she asked me if I would get involved, and I got involved.

OTTLEY | 45:49

Did you enjoy working with it?

BENATOR | 45:52

Yes. It's like, I mean, it's like being the steward of a neighborhood institution, you know? And that's how I think we all kind of felt about it.

OTTLEY | 46:01

And it's a special place.

BENATOR | 46:02

Yeah it's still a special place that generations of people have gotten their hair cut at the same place, or shops at the same store.

OTTLEY | 46:09

Yeah, there was a police officer, an off-duty police officer—

BENATOR | 46:13

David Mulkey.

OTTLEY | 46:14

Okay. Tell us a little bit about him. Hewas kind of a I would say famous character, but I mean, a lot of us knew him or knew to get away [laugh], like, hey, don't park here, or whatnot.

BENATOR | 46:31

Officer Mulkey, David Mulkey was a, he is a retired Atlanta PD officer who worked as security just on during Christmas for many years, and then he started working full time for a long time. He was great. Tommy, I mean, Thomas from the barbershop, he's kind of the mayor of the place, and he's another major fixture out there. And after David retired, we've got some other retired a PD officers who, work security and like that.

OTTLEY | 46:56

Did Officer Mulkey ever have some funny stories or interesting anecdotes to that, that he...

BENATOR | 47:04

I'm sure he did. I'm sure he does. I would, we'd have to bring him in to get some of them, but you know, people have feel such a sense of ownership of it. Like they knew that he was David, a lot of people had his... I'll tell you one, when that, when Snowpocalypse happened and there was no notice, and the whole parking lot was a sheet of ice.

OTTLEY | 47:28

Like in 82' or recently?

BENATOR | 47:29

No, no, no. The recent one, which was, I don't know, 2014, 11 years ago. Matthews, Steve Matthews, whose parents and now he owns Matthews Furniture, tons of people were stranded at the shopping center and employees at Publix. And Steve and David Mulkey, officer Mulkey was like, I'm not leaving. I'm not leaving while all these people are stuck here. Steve Matthews opened up the store and I don't know how many people slept in his store, including Officer Mulkey, you know, because they had to be warm and safe.

OTTLEY | 48:11

Right, that's fantastic. That's a great story. Thank you for sharing that. That's really cool. Well again, have we covered everything that you'd like to cover?

BENATOR | 48:19

Yeah, yeah. I've covered everything that I can think of.

OTTLEY | 48:21

Okay great. Well, again, this has been a pleasure. Thank you so much for doing this. And I mean, you've told us some great stuff today, thank you again.

BENATOR | 48:30

Absolutely. You're very welcome.

SUE VERHOEFF | 48:31

Thank you.

BENATOR | 48:32

Thank you.

VERHOEFF | 48:33

We're off camera. On camera.

OTTLEY | 48:35

Okay. So just kind of one last question. In general, how do you choose or how have you chosen the tenant mix, the people that are, that are there?

BENATOR | 48:45

We have always been very aware of what a part of the community we are and how the community feels a sense of ownership of the shopping centers, an extension of the community and their residences. And we've always felt that it is incumbent upon us to be supportive of the community and to have part of that is having independent shops, mom and pops, local stores, run by local people. We have some nationals, but we've been very, very mindful about how we curate the tenant mix over the decades. That's just a very important part about how we run the shopping center.

OTTLEY | 49:31

Very cool. Yeah. Well, again, thanks so much for being with us. It's a lot of fun, thank you.