

Tags: Abandoned malls, Baby Boomers generation, Boomers generation, Cherished memories, Childhood memories, Children, Community responses, Competing malls, Dead malls, Elder, Family, Friends, Fun, Ghost shopping centers, Grandchildren, History, Hobbies, Local business impact, Local history, Mall closures, Mall decline, Mall shopper, Nostalgia, Oral history, Over competition, Redevelopment, Richmond, Shopping mall shutdown, Shopper, Urban development, Virginia, Virginia Center Commons

Joa Kearney [00:00:03] Alright. Today is March the 5th (I meant to say April 5th) and my name is Joa Kearney. I am interviewing Larry remotely through Zoom Meeting. So, this interview was being conducted as part of an oral history project I am doing on Virginia Center Commons Mall. And it is a topic that I'm doing for a student-based project for my Oral History Course at Old Dominion University (ODU). The purpose of this project is to explore the reasons why the mall is closed now, and I will accomplish this goal by hearing from shoppers and possibly those who used to work there. And I plan to make this project available on a website that I plan to make to collect, preserve, and share those perspectives.

Joa Kearney [00:00:55] Good morning, Larry. How you doing today?

Larry [00:00:59] I'm fine. How about yourself?

Joa Kearney [00:01:01] I'm alright. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, and how long you have lived in Richmond or the Virginia area?

Larry [00:01:11] Well, as I said, my name is Larry Capers. I've lived in Richmond all my life, all 73 years in Richmond, Virginia. I grew up in the eastern part of Richmond, called Mosby Court and I've got 7 brothers and sisters, you know, 4 brothers and 3 sisters. I'm the oldest of them. And I really basically took care of all of them except my youngest brother. So, I've been working since I was 12 years old. I'll like, you know, hobbies real good hobbies. I enjoy playing tennis. I like cars. I love exotic cars or imported cars I wanna say. I've been married twice, you know. Lovely wives and got 2 kids, 2 children and I just enjoy life. I was a deacon at 2 churches and enjoyed that. So, I got a really good life. I'm retired now, so I don't have to work. But you know, I find my hobbies and the things that I like to do, take a lot of my time. So that's basically, you know, a summary of my life.

Joa Kearney [00:03:02] Besides tennis, what other hobbies do you enjoy? And also, do you have any grandchildren.

Larry [00:03:10] Oh, yes, well, my grandchildren, you know, they were young, and we hung out a lot, you know. I even bought a station wagon to haul them around. Just in case, just to bring you up to date what a station wagon is. It's much like a SUV (4-seater truck), but more of a car. But anyway, and my grandchildren, oh yeah, we had so much fun together, and we still do when I do get to see them. And you know, we would go to the parks, go shopping, have barbecues in the backyard. They would stay over, you know. Some of their friends would come, and it was just really, really fun time, you know, and I guess every parent or would enjoy their

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grandchildren once, you know, your children have children. But anyway, it was so, so enjoyable, so enjoyable, the things that we did. If I may add, we, you know, went shopping, and oh, gosh! We played horseshoes, basketball, you know, things that you know, grandparents do with their grandchildren away from the mamas and their daddies because they can. They can really be themselves if they don't have, they don't have to be so you know. And grandparents spoil, we spoil our grandchildren. And that's a good thing.

Joa Kearney [00:04:57] So I'm going-I'm going to talk about Virginia Center Commons Mall, but I want to know a bit about yourself first. Like, concerning what you did when you were younger to what you did when you were older. I'm gonna ask you those type of questions.

Larry [00:05:20] Okay.

Joa Kearney [00:05:21] And, second what- Compared to the hobbies that you- that you do now, what hobbies did you partake in when you were younger, and how did the mall- How is the mall included in those hobbies?

Larry [00:05:51] Okay. Well, my hobbies, my younger hobbies, were, you know, playing football and basketball, putting together model cars and drawing. I love drawing. I could. I was pretty good at, you know, looking at a picture or looking at something and drawing it on paper. I didn't have the, what, the advanced knowledge to draw from scratch. But I could, you know, draw from things, you know, and that's the same thing as drawing. Let me see hobbies. Let me think... that is about it.

Larry [00:06:47] Oh, oh! And I like working on cars, you know. I got my 1st car when I was, I think I was 17 years old. It was from my uncle, but I did not have a driver's license yet so it was in my mama's backyard. And I would work on it, you know. It ran like it's supposed to run, but I could not drive it on the street. But I want a different type of car because the car that he gave me was a 3 speed and it was 3 speed manual and it had the gear shifter on the steering wheel column. But that wasn't what I wanted. I wanted the stick in the floor, you know. I wanted to be like the guys that you know, with the stick in the floor (Like a race car to control the speed). So, I bought a conversion kit and put it in the floor. I drilled a hole, cut a hole in the floor, and put my little stick shift in the floor, but you know, it never ran like it was supposed because I really didn't know what I was doing. But I did try, and the car was never licensed to run on the street. But that was my 1st car. So, I've always loved cars as well.

Larry [00:08:25] Okay, now, as far as the mall. Well, we started, I started going down to a place called in Richmond, called downtown, where the shops were. Where you would individually go inside the individual shops. There wasn't like a mall, you know, the mall as we know it now. Basically, you go inside and every store is on the inside. But anyway, that Downtown Mall had stores, had stores called John Hardy, Thom McAn, Tall Hammers, Millen Rose (Now called Roses), Sears, Murphy's Woolworths, Harper's, Rayles. And you know, they were what we, we knew as, you know, the places where we went, and we purchased our things that we needed.

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Larry [00:09:35] But the way before that, our parents used to buy items so we didn't have to so much worry about, you know, putting an outfit together because our parents bought our clothes. So, you know, that was the end of that. But they took us downtown to, you know, try on the clothes and that sort of thing until we got older and we started buying our own clothes. As I said, I started working when I was 12 as a paperboy and you know, you buy little small things starting out. You know, socks, things like that. Wasn't able to buy anything heavy like shirts and pants yet because I didn't make that much money, but I could afford you know little things. You know, that I needed, deodorant, stuff like that. So that was, I want to say, my first encounter with, not necessarily a mall, but getting ready to, you know, go to a mall.

Larry [00:11:02] And the first mall that I went to was called Azalea Mall and Southside Plaza Mall. They were in opposite parts of the town. One was over in Brook Road, and one was over on Hall Street. The Hall Street one and South Side Plaza was far away, you know. So, and you know, we still lived with our parents then. So, we had to cut the bus way over to South Plaza and sometimes, you know, they didn't have the things that we wanted so we would catch the bus back downtown. Stop there and look again and see what we had down there to purchase and we would end up at Azalea Mall. And Azalea Mall didn't have a whole lot. It was a small mall. You could almost put it into 2 blocks of, of land so it wasn't big. But it was the only mall we knew. There was only two. One of the two malls we knew. So, we would shop there, you know, as we got older. And there was another part of your question. would you repeat the end part?

Joa Kearney [00:12:50] I asked you, including the mall, like, how did you spend your time? How did you spend your time when you're younger? You mentioned- you mentioned from the time when you were younger to the time when you're older now, when it comes to shopping.

Larry [00:13:22] Yes

Joa Kearney [00:13:23] How did you- So, my question now is how did you make that transition from Southside Plaza to Azalea Avenue Mall to larger shopping malls?

Larry [00:13:48] Oh ok.

Joa Kearney [00:13:50] (I interrupted him by accident) And also, what was so fun about going to Azalea Mall and going to Southside Plaza? And how did you make that transition from different stores to different shopping centers?

Larry [00:14:12] Oh, okay, well, it was because me and my friends, and we, you know, we, we just had fun going on the bus, you know. The bus was only 10 cent to ride. And you could transfer, you know, you could ride and ride for 10 cent. But that was, you know, another story. My- They started to build a new mall called Virginia Center Commons, and it was another mall that I'm trying to think of the name of it.

Joa Kearney [00:15:10] Was that Regency Square Mall?

Larry [00:15:18] Yes, that's what it was, it was Regency Square Mall. Yes, but that was so far away. It was way and the buses did not run to Regency Mall, nor did they run to Virginia Center

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Commons at that time, so you know, we couldn't get to them yet. But the stores downtown, they had started to close up. And we couldn't understand why they were closing because that was the only place that we could go and then we found out that the city (Richmond City) that had the buses, they started, you know, going into the county, I think the county and the city, I'm not sure. But I think the county and the city got into negotiations about getting the buses out to Regency Square and to Virginia Center Commons. And that is how we were able to get to those 2 malls that were so far away from us. We couldn't walk because it was just way too far. So, we were happy that we could get to the malls and go to the new stores. They had new stores. I don't remember a whole lot of their names, but they were cool right? (Not asking a question) Because you could walk into a mall and you didn't have to come back outside to go to another store. We just wasn't used to that. So when we were able to get to Regency Square and Virginia Center Commons, it was cool, you know. They even had a food court. We, We didn't have a food court downtown so we could, you know, with our little \$2 to the \$3 we could buy little hamburgers and stuff and sit in a mall with other people. But sometimes, you know, I want to say that the security would, you know, watch us because, you know, we were different from a different part of town and I don't know if they thought we were gonna steal. But you know we weren't. Because we weren't taught like that.

Larry [00:18:00] But anyway, getting back to Virginia Center Commons. That became our go to mall because it was closer and it was new and the stores were new. So we said, well, from now on, we'll just go to Virginia Center Commons and that- I hadn't. We hadn't, I hadn't gotten married and had grandchildren yet so hung out with my friends there at the mall and the food court, and walking around looking in the windows. And it was just so cool, you know, even when it was raining, we were on the inside, and we didn't get wet, you know, so we had fun at that mall. And that's the transition from downtown to Virginia Center Commons.

Joa Kearney [00:19:04] Before you get into your older days, let me ask you a few questions concerning your transition.

Larry [00:19:12] Okay.

Joa Kearney [00:19:13] Did you- You mentioned that because of the stores of Southside Plaza and Azalea Avenue (Azalea Mall) were- Stores were closing down, you said you didn't even know the reason why.

Larry [00:19:33] What?

Joa Kearney [00:19:36] You said you didn't know the reason exactly why those stores closed going down, do you think since they were- The county were building larger malls like Regency Mall and Virginia Center Commons, do you think it was because of competition?

Larry [00:20:02] It was not only the competition. But the malls itself. The mall (the Larger malls, not the initial stores that they used to shop at) got popular, and it was more money to be made out in the outskirts of Richmond. Richmond knew that it would have to either adapt and change its downtown to a mall, or be ate up by the new mall, the new thing, you know, new and

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improved. I want to say. So, if they didn't take their stores and carry them out to the mall that would have happened. And a lot of the stores downtown did move out into the malls. I'm sure they moved into Regency and Virginia Center Commons. And that is correct because there were some stores out there, where it was different people working in the stores but had the same name.

Larry [00:21:21] So yes, I would say that because of the changing of time and the more money to be made in the malls, then that would have been the demise of downtown. And I want to add this as well, downtown has never been replaced. The buildings downtown are empty, they are dilapidated and some of them are just changed into apartments. You know, a federal building has been built where Tall Hammers used to be, and basically everything else is just gone. It's a ghost town if I want, if I may say. So yes, the mall engulfed downtown and grew.

Joa Kearney [00:22:35] What about reconstruction at Southside Plaza? Because I remember, there used to be a church there that was built back in 2000's called Love, Joy, and Peace.

Larry [00:22:52] Okay. Well, see, as I said, we stopped going over to Southside Plaza because of Virginia Center Commons. It was a better variety and bigger, larger. You know, Southside Plaza was good in its time, but we outgrew that store so I did not keep up with, you know, everything that went on at Southside Plaza. I wasn't sure about, you know, what happened. I don't know.

Joa Kearney [00:23:35] Okay, you said you're not sure about the reconstruction. Okay, for my next question, before you transitioned, did y'all pack lunches when y'all would go to these stores at Southside Plaza and Azalea Avenue (Azalea Mall)? Did you pack lunches, or did you eat somewhere there? Did you walk somewhere?

Larry [00:24:06] Well, we could if we wanted to. We could walk to Azalea Mall because it was closer. The Southside Plaza was kind of far to walk so we never walked to there. We could walk to Azalea Mall because it was a little bit closer to our house. And on a Saturday when you, when you hung out with your crew, you know, it wasn't far away like Virginia Center Commons, so you had fun along the way, you know.

Joa Kearney [00:24:52] Yeah (Meaning I get what he is saying.)

Larry [00:24:54] So it was. It was. It was good, it was cool, and also they didn't have a lot of the stores that's there now. Like there's a little other little mall that was smaller than Azalea Mall across the street, but I guess they had to build something in that land. So, they put a little, I don't even know what to call it, but it got a chicken place in there, Kentucky (Kentucky Fried Chicken) and a dollar store and Food Lion. So, that was not there when we were younger. But yeah.

Joa Kearney [00:25:45] When y'all- (I cut him off by mistake again) I'm sorry.

Larry [00:25:48] That's how we got to Azalea, we'd walk sometimes and we'd ride the bus sometimes.

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Joa Kearney [00:26:01] What I was trying to ask you was like, did y'all, did y'all have lunch when I would go or did y'all eat somewhere?

Larry [00:26:11] Yeah, we, we did not pack a lunch. No, we just had our little money, you know, and we ate at certain places, you know. Food was really cheap back then, you know, for a dollar, you could get your hamburger, French fries, soda, you know, apple pie. We could get that stuff really, really cheap. You know, even though it's cheap now. It wasn't so cheap back then. But we still could, you know, eat. Or we could go in a store along the way and buy a slum dog (deep-fried hot dog), you know, and a soda, and that would keep us all day long. You know. I'm sure you're not familiar with a slum dog, but it's like a fruitcake, a little small fruitcake, I want to say. And it had, you know, stuff in it. And it was good, you know, or we'd buy it was something else, a pack of Naylor's (candy I think) or something like that, you know, and we didn't. We didn't care too much about food and stuff. [laughter]

Larry [00:27:35] You know, we just wanted to go see what's new in the mall and watch, see what those mannequins in the window had on. And we couldn't, we couldn't afford it right then so they had something called a Layaway plan where you could pay down on the clothes that you wanted, or items that you wanted and pay every week. And that was called a Layaway Plan.

Joa Kearney [00:28:11] Can you tell me more about the Layaway Plan? Meaning, can you tell me more about that?

Larry [00:28:21] Okay. Well, if we didn't have money to pay for, let's say, a pair of \$18 dollars and 99 cent All-star, Chuck Taylor All Stars, you could put like \$4 or \$5 on them, and they would put them, take them off and put them in the back while you pay on it. But you had a certain amount you had to pay every week and it wasn't every month. It was every week because they wanted to get paid. So, we would, you know, get our little paper route together and make our money cause we got paid every week. And we would haul tail to the Azalea Mall and pay on our All-Stars, you know, they had them in white and black and high tops. And we got most of the white high tops because they were, they were the popular ones (talking about converse shoes).

Larry [00:29:25] So, we would pay on them and get a receipt and own them. And by the time we finish it, you know, they will belong to us. So that was that. That is what is called the Layaway plan. I guess now it's called a credit card plan, but back then it was Layaway. Because, you know, we weren't old enough to have credit card, but we were old enough to have a Layaway.

Joa Kearney [00:30:03] Since discrimination was still a bit evident, meaning, evident meaning still present back then. Like visibly present back then, did you face any discrimination when you were at Azalea Avenue, Southside Plaza, and big store malls?

Larry [00:30:34] Well, we, we did not understand it until we got to Virginia Center Commons. We were young so we, we didn't understand discrimination per say. It was, I don't know. Until, like I said, we got to Virginia Center Commons, and it was, it was more Caucasian people out there, and not as many Blacks. So, they looked, the whole makeup of shopping look different

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now because we weren't downtown anymore. Azalea Mall was closing, and the only place we could really go to it now was Virginia Center Commons, when we were young. But then, we kind of understood that it wasn't as fun as it used to be. It was more serious because people were more, a little more serious for some reason, and it looked to be security would always show up, you know, and watched us. I don't know if, because we were, there were about 4 or 5 of us together or what. I don't, I can't speak for the reason because we were, I guess, first introduced to discrimination over at Virginia Center Commons. Now that you know, I sit and I think about it, it was out of town so to speak. It wasn't on the in. It wasn't in the inner city. It was wasn't closer to where, you know, we shopped. we walked to shop. So, it was out in an area where I guess it was a new thing for everybody. It was new for us. It was new, for, you know, everybody that didn't look like us. So, I want to say that you had to, we had to get used to being around different type of people and different type of people had to get used to us.

Larry [00:33:27] Now, it's no problem. It's no problem at all that, you know. You can almost go where you want to go and you won't be followed around now. So yes, that was our first introduction to something is different now. And we had to. We were always on our P's and Q's (This means that they were always polite, careful, and on their best behavior). But now we had to be. We had to do. We had to take it to a higher level, our P's and Q's.

Larry [00:34:10] I hope, I answered, that in a nice manner (Trying to ensure he answered that correctly).

Joa Kearney [00:34:16] There's, there's no right or wrong way to answer a question in nice manner. It's how you want to answer it. (Trying to ensure him that it does not matter how he answers. I am telling him that it is free to answer how he wishes to.)

Joa Kearney [00:34:30] So, from what I understand, you felt- Y'all felt more self-conscious because y'all were in a new environment where it was there- Y'all could not be yourselves that from what I understand because of it.

Larry [00:34:51] That is correct. You're correct, even though everybody's money was green, brown, or silver, the hand that gave them the money was of a different color. So yes, we, we were, I want to say, allowed to be there, but we were under the microscope as to how we would be, and how would we act, and how would we do.

Joa Kearney [00:35:37] Do you remember what year it was when y'all made that transition? (talking about the transition from the individual stores shopping district to shopping malls where they had stores inside a single building)

Larry [00:35:51] If I could just guess, it was in the seventies. I cannot tell you the exact year, but I want to say it was seventies- I can't say, I'll just-

Joa Kearney [00:36:13] Okay, that's okay. How old are you, by the way? (Asked this same question earlier in the interview, asked it again by mistake.)

Larry [00: 36:18] I am 73 years old.

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Joa Kearney [00:36:21] 73 years old, so you mentioned the Layaway, how it works, so how was that like in Virginia Center Commons and Regency Mall? Well, Virginia Center Commons because Regency Mall was too far. How was the Layaway Plan in Virginia Center Commons?

Larry [00:36:58] Okay, I've got to put on my thinking cap because some of the stores did have that. And I think, around town, they still do. So it got, it didn't get any better or worse. So, it was the same. You know, you buy it on time and you pay it when you pay it that week. So, it did not change from downtown to Virginia Center Commons. It was just more stores that you could do that. You know, you could put more things in the Layaway the more money you made. And you know, you could, we could even start working there and paying on your items there. When you turn, I think it was 16 and 8 months, you could get a working permit. You couldn't work but a few hours a week. But, you could work on the weekends because of school, you know. You couldn't work those weekdays, but when, when you applied for a working permit, you could work that Saturday or/and that Sunday. And make more money to pay on your Layaway so that means you could start buying your own clothes, the things that you like, not necessarily the things your mama and your daddy bought for you. So that was a plus for us, and especially low-income families at that time. That is, you know, how we survived by paying that Layaway. I won't, there are some of us that didn't need the Layaway, but the most of us did. And the family had the Layaway, you know, the parents had to Layaway and then the kids.

Larry [00: 39:23] We had our own little Layaway because we were, we didn't want to wear those things our mamas and Daddy gave us to wear. We wanted to wear what was those mannequins had on in that shop. So yeah, their Layaway Plan was a good thing, and it still is. You know, they may call it something different now, like credit cards. But you know the Layaway was the beginning, the beginning.

Joa Kearney [00:39:55] Expanding on that- Can you hear me? Hello? (Larry cut out for a second and I wanted to make sure he could hear me because I asked my question)

Larry [00:40:05] I'm sorry. Go ahead. Say it again.

Joa Kearney [00:40:07] Expanding on that, what was affordability like for you and your family? Like, you said that you and family had to rely mostly on Layaway to get clothing and other stuff. When you were younger and your mother, your parents would buy clothing for you- You're the oldest right, so did you have to pass your clothing down to your younger siblings for them to wear?

Larry [00:40:46] Yes, I did. The clothing never came up to me. It went down to them and whatever we did not wear, whatever I did not wear out (meaning the clothes couldn't fit him anymore), it was passed down to my brother. But the thing is, I was 5, I am 5 years older than he is, but my mama pinned his clothes up so he could, it could fit him. Or she sold them where they could fit him so. Yes, the clothing it did not, it did not belong to me. I was on rent. [laughter] It went down. Yes, it did. Yes, it did. But you know, it was okay cause we were, we were never without. We weren't all the time new, new fashions we didn't get, or I didn't get, but I got clothes on my back. And those clothes got passed down to my brother's back. So, I didn't

know if they made it any further, but he got what we used to call it. There's something here, it's called hand-me-downs! We used to call it hand-me-downs, you know [laughter].

Joa Kearney [00:42:25] Following up on that answer, how do you think your siblings felt when, when they would get hand-me-downs? Because you know how some siblings they feel- They may feel sad that they don't have their own clothes when they're younger, especially when they're younger. And they have a big brother or a big sister giving them clothes, their parents would make them, because, like, because they trying to save money and trying to make sure they have plenty of use for those clothes, right? How do you think your siblings felt when they would get your clothes?

Larry [00:43:24] Well, guess what? They had no choice. [laughter] They had no choice at all. I did not have, I didn't have a choice of what my mama and daddy had bought. They didn't have a choice of what I gave, I passed down to them, you know. They just oh well they just had to wear it, [laughter] you know, or either go naked. So, they had no choice in the matter.

Joa Kearney [00:43:57] Do you remember any specific memories regarding that?

Larry [00:44:02] You know I don't. I don't. I'm trying to think specifically. No, because by the time, you know, the clothes, the clothes got passed down. I'm trying to think about that. Let me think. I don't remember that part. I don't, you know. Once I stopped wearing them, I didn't care no more about them. But once they were gone on my back, Tulu (means bye).

Joa Kearney [00:44:51] Sorry, I am hiccupping a little bit because I was laughing. That was funny. Trying to find a follow up question. So, were you treated any differently in that building when y'all would have to do Layaway for your clothing? When y'all would buy your clothing at Virginia Center Commons.

Larry [00:45:59] Not knowing what went on behind the scenes about being treated differently as I said. Yes, we felt we were being treated differently, but as far as how to put it in a category, I don't, I can't put it in a category. How we were, we just knew we were.

Joa Kearney [00:46:32] That's okay. Making the transition to when you were younger to when you were older, what purpose- For what purpose did you go to the mall for when you were older? What was a typical day at the mall like for you when you were older before you stopped visiting like? Did you go to the mall with family or friends?

Larry [00:47:13] Okay, when I got older, I had gotten my car. So, I didn't have to catch the bus or go by walking or go with friends unless I wanted to. So, that transition came from about when I was 18 or 19 when my car, I got a real car. And you know, I could go by myself sometimes, or with you know, my friends. It wasn't, it wasn't a. It was more serious mall because everything was in the mall then. So, clothes, electronics and stuff like that. So, I started to go to the mall on my own later on in life.

Joa Kearney [00:48:16] Did you visit any record stores?

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Larry [00:48:19] Oh, yeah! They had. Oh, gosh! Circuit City, Circuit City. It's a place called Sam Ash. Stores like that sold records and record players and things of that nature, and I frequent them. So, I frequent them a lot and it had a place that sold used records.

Joa Kearney [00:48:20] Were you really big on music back then?

Larry [00:49:24] Oh, yeah. They had music on forty-fives. They had music on, music on 8 track, music on cassettes. Oh, yeah, there was a whole genre of music on, on different ways to play it, to listen to it.

Joa Kearney [00:49:59] Did Virginia Center Commons have a record store? You also mentioned that you're, that you were, that you are very big on cars (I'm confirming that he is very interested in cars, he mentioned this earlier in the interview). Did Virginia Center Commons have a NASCAR store?

Larry [00:50:20] I, I don't remember them having a NASCAR store, but they had a hobby shop. And the name escapes me where, you know, they sold hobbies, you know, cars that you put together, and little race cars and racetracks stuff like that. They had one of those there, too. Yeah, but then I kind of outgrew it for a while. I didn't. You know, I was getting older and got married. And you know, like I said, had children, children and children had children, so you know, I hope I'm not getting ahead of you. But that's when I started taking them (his grandchildren) to the mall.

Joa Kearney [00:51:15] Like clothing wise, did you have a reason to buy clothing at these stores in these malls? To go to these big store malls? Even though you were older, did you have a reason to go to big store malls?

Larry [00:51:37] Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Joa Kearney [00:51:39] Besides records and-

Larry [00:51:43] Well, clothing was the big thing, you know, the big ticket item. Burlington's and. Oh, gosh! Let me think. But Burlington was, I want to say the biggest store that I shopped in at that time for clothes. All the other things I kind of, like I said, I outgrew the model cars and the food court. I kind of outgrew that.

Joa Kearney [00:52:25] So, transitioning to once your children were older and they had kids of their own. How- You mentioned that you would spend time with your grandkids, you would take them to places, where would y'all hang out and how did that start? And how did Virginia Center Commons be included in spending time with your grandkids and other people?

Larry [00:53:17] Well, that was really, really good. That was a good time. I think, I think I had more fun with them at the mall than I had with my friends because you know. Well, anyway, yeah, that played a big part in bringing up the grandchildren. I would take them to the stores and let them, you know, do what they would do while they was kids. And we felt comfortable now, going to Virginia Center Commons now because it was, times were changing and everybody got used to each other. So, the grandkids, you know, I would take them, I would see

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them on the weekend. They would spend the weekend, and they would say "Granddaddy, we wanna go to the mall so we would go to the mall, jump into the station wagon and take them, you know, to the mall and let them have fun. Go to the dollar store and you would give them money. Let them shop their own baskets and stuff. They had fun. So that was a really, really fun time. At the mall, at Virginia Center Commons, and also that we even ventured to Chesterfield Mall. And that was way way way away, you know. So, we didn't go over that very very much. But Virginia Center Commons, like I said, was the mall from, that started from downtown, from Azalea, and ended up at Virginia Center Commons. So yeah, the grandchildren. They would. They loved it, too, you know. They loved it, too.

Joa Kearney [00:55:18] Well, besides the mall, where would y'all spend time at? Besides going to Dollar Tree, besides going to stores, where would y'all go?

Larry [00:55:33] Okay, we went to the playground. Even down to the beach, you know, my early grandchildren, my first 2, we would go to the beach a lot. So, where else where we, oh Chuck E. Cheese. Not Chuck E. Cheese, I'm sorry. Oh, I can't think of the pizza place right now. But we would go.

Joa Kearney [00:56:05] Cicis pizza.

Larry [00:56:07] Yeah! Yup, exactly. We would go there and you know, have fun and play tricks on each other like pouring salt in the drinks, and sugar and pepper on the pizza and stuff like that. If you get up and go from the table, it was on it, you know, [laughter] when you came back, we would look at each other and laugh because we knew if you drink your drink it's gonna taste salty and everybody, it got happened. It happened to everybody, you know. There was no, what, team. It was an individual sport. So, you know, we had fun as talking Cicis pizza and like I said, at the playgrounds, we go to different playgrounds here in the city. and just have fun. In the backyard, you know, with a tent. So yeah, that's where we would go. That's what we would do.

Joa Kearney [00:57:19] Regarding going to the store wise, did you- Were you going with them to these stores to teach them life lessons?

Larry [00:57:35] With the children, what do you mean?

Joa Kearney [00:57:40] While they were hanging fun- For example, teaching them in the background when they would have fun to make it ensure- Would you teach them life lessons in the background when you go to these stores? Or when you would go to any place in general with them when you would spend time with them?

Larry [00:58:28] I'm not understanding the question. Could you repeat it?

Joa Kearney [00:58:34] Did you- In the background of ensuring y'all had fun. Ensuring y'all had enjoyed the time y'all spent together, right? If you teach any life lessons to your grandchildren?

Larry [00:58:56] Oh, okay, well just being with them. Not too much teaching them lessons other than how to act when you go out. Oh, I would let them know how important they were, you know, and they were just like everybody else. So that was, I guess, the biggest lesson I would say

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I used. I always told one of my grandchildren to always make sure that you think before you do things, and that way you know, you tend to do things the right way when you think about them first. I always told her, think twice and do once, and you know, don't rush. Just take the time and think. But as for lessons, oh no, I let the parents do that, I wanted the grandchildren to be grandchildren. Be wild and crazy, you know, but in a sense, where they wouldn't get in no trouble or nothing, but, like you know, having fun, laughing and playing tricks on each other. But no, not so much rules.

Joa Kearney [01:00:23] Did you- Regarding life lessons, did you teach your grandchildren the value of money when you go into these stores?

Larry [01:00:39] Yes. I did. And I let them have their own money, you know, at Christmas time. You know, I would take them to the dollar store and let them pick out what they wanted to pick out, and they would change. You know, they would swap stuff in the store, but as far as money being taught to them, I let them know that, you know when you work, you earn money. So you know, always try when you get older to get a nice job and work. But yeah, those are were the values that I let them know. And I did open up a bank account for them, for 2. I think it was 2 of them. While they were young.

Joa Kearney [01:01:40] Regarding money wise, when did y'all transition- Regarding money wise, when did y'all transition to using paper money to using debit cards? How and from when you were younger to when you were older?

Larry [01:02:13] Okay

Joa Kearney [01:02:14] And what was that like?

Larry [01:02:15] Well, I remember opening my first bank account with a debit card. The bank was called State Planters and I was working then at a nice job. And I went into the, I got paid and I went into the bank, and I opened up me a bank account. But at that time, debit cards weren't out. We used something called checks and I got a book of checks, and I started writing checks before I started using a debit card. Checks were back in the seventies, sixties, seventies. Well, I'm not sure when they were. But I got mines about early, early eighties. I got my first check, you know, to write, and that was cool too because you did not need green money. All you had to do was show your ID and the check itself. And you could buy things, you know, with that. And you could write a small check or you could write a big check. But checks were the normal for that particular time. But then, I would say, Oh, gosh! And I don't like say, I don't know how long has been here, but I do remember when I got mine. My first debit card was at another bank called Sovran and it was a piece of plastic that the retailers would put down on this machine and they would slide this lever across. Click, click! You know. They gave you a receipt, and the receipt was carbon copy. They kept a copy. I think it was like 3 copies and that's why this little machine, making all this noise because it had to put an imprint on the receipt. So, they gave you a receipt. No, no, they gave you the whole thing first and you had to sign it. Then they gave it. They kept a receipt, put a receipt in a little box, and gave me a receipt. So, that was the debit card or was it a charge card? No, that was the charge card. I'm sorry.

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Joa Kearney [01:05:44] I'm gonna-

Larry [01:05:50] I'm sorry

Joa Kearney [01:05:51] No need to be sorry.

Larry [01:05:52] Okay, that was the charge card. That was not the debit card yet. I had them mixed up. I apologize. Okay. Now the debit card came. So, I must have had a charge card before I had a debit card. I did. With the charge card, you, that was not your money. That was money that you had to pay on like a Layaway. In other words, you didn't have to pay nothing yet. But then you got a monthly bill so you had to. And it wasn't a weekly thing like Layaway. It was a monthly thing like a charge card. So, you know, that was that. And then debit came. Debit cards came out. That was your money. That was the money that you had in the bank that you would, the bank would pay the retailer, but it was your money. So, you had to keep money in it, or it would be declined. You know, your purchase would not go through if you did not have money, your own money in the bank to cover the debit card. I think maybe they were losing too much money with credit cards at that time so they figured they flip flop it and make you use your own money, but you didn't have to carry green money around. You just carried a piece of plastic.

Joa Kearney [01:07:36] For my next question, how comfortable did you and others feel using, making that transition from paper money to using card and checks?

Larry [01:07:53] They were easier. They were easier to not lose because if you lost money, if you lose a \$20 bill, it's gone, you know. Somebody might come behind you and pick it up, and it's gone. But if you lose your debit card or your credit card, you can always call in and say, you know, put a stop on it or what have you. So, it was safer. It is safer to have debit card or a check because you had to write the check. A lot of places don't take checks anymore, but some still do. But it's electronic. I don't know how that work. So, the transition was good. Every time, seems like in my life that I had to transition to another method of paying, it got better. I have lost my debit card. I have left my debit card in certain places and even no one has ever put any charges on it. But if it did, I could always prove that it wasn't me who did it. So, the transaction is good because it's safer, and you don't lose your money. You can dispute a charge, you know, and most places now they are transitioning to cards.

Joa Kearney [01:09:46] Regarding that answer, did you know anybody around you that weren't so comfortable using- making that transition from money to card use? Did you know anybody who- who was uncomfortable with that transition and felt more comfortable using paper money?

Larry [01:10:13] Yes, I do. My brother, he refuses to get debit card or banks other than the cash his checks. So yes, I would say yes. I do know only one person that I know of, and that's him. He will not use a card, he rather have green money. And also, I want to say, that those people in the world that see you use money, they know that they can easily rob you. So, you know, I always say that debit cards and credit cards are more safer in that respect.

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Joa Kearney [01:11:06] Why do you think your brother was more comfortable with paper money?

Larry [01:11:10] It's what he's used to. And he doesn't want to change. So, that is what he's going to use all the time and the reason, I don't know his reasoning. I guess he's comfortable. He's comfortable with counting out money. I'm not. I think I done forgot how to count money. I would have to, you know, think about how to use money to give the right change. Give the right amount and get back the right change. So, I want to say that I love the debit card, and I love. I don't use as many credit cards anymore, but I use my debit every day.

Joa Kearney [01:12:14] Moving on, from that point, when you would go to places with your grandchildren like the mall, like the park, like Cicis pizza, other places and stuff, when did y'all notice that Virginia Center Commons was declining? And once that mall closed, where did y'all go then?

Larry [01:13:07] Okay. When we were getting older, as you said, I noticed that some of the stores in Virginia Center Commons were closing. And at that particular time, we kind of didn't know why, until I heard, on the news that they were building a new and bigger mall. And it would be an upstairs and a downstairs, a lower level and a higher level. It will be a 2-level mall and this mall would be in Short Pump. So, I believe that is why Virginia Center Commons started to decline because there was a bigger and better mall, a bigger mall I don't know about better yet. But a bigger mall, and it's like a little fish getting ate up by a bigger fish. Then a bigger fish getting ate up by a lot bigger fish, the bigger. the big, the biggest and the biggest and that was what happened. That's what I think happened to downtown. That's what I think happened to Azalea Mall and now that we see the stores in Virginia Center Commons starting to decline, and something called Short Pump has started to eat up Virginia Center Commons. That is my analogy of what was going on at that time. It was getting bigger and bigger and bigger for the malls. And that's my analogy. Also, I wanna- (I interrupted him again by accident).

Joa Kearney [01:15:18] Oh, sorry.

Larry [01:15:20] I wanna throw this in as a side note, Regency (Regency Square Mall). Their stores started declining as well. And like, I said Southside Plaza was probably ate up by Regency and Regency were starting to decline as well. Then I found out that there was a place, you know, there was another mall. I think that was Chesterfield.

Joa Kearney [01:16:10] Chesterfield? Chesterfield Town Center?

Larry [01:16:12] That's, Chesterfield Town Center. I know that they- (I interrupted him again.)

Joa Kearney [01:16:21] White Oak (White Oak Village)?

Larry [01:16:24] No, not yet. Not yet. White Oak didn't come until Virginia Center Commons was closed. So, the Chesterfield had to ate up Regency and Southside Plaza because they kind of, in that same area. But getting back to the decline of Virginia Center Commons, I believe that Short Pump had its eye on the customers at Virginia Center Commerce, and they wanted them to

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come and spend money there. So, the retailers at Virginia Center Commons started moving up to Short Pump. But the only thing that was left was Burlington. So, Burlington stayed a little while longer than the rest of them, but they finally closed so Short Pump ate it up.

Joa Kearney [01:17:44] Okay, what do you think- What changes- Before Virginia Center Commons started to decline, what did you notice about its surroundings? Like, what can you recall about how the mall looked like before it started to decline? And once it just started to decline, what did it look like after this after you realized that it was a dead mall?

Larry [01:18:26] Okay, well as I said, it was flourishing at first, you know, with the grandchildren and whatnot. And I mean, there were people everywhere, you know, you would walk through, and you would have to move over to the side, or somebody had to move over to the side. It was just crowded. It was a place where you know fun was to be had. You didn't have to, there was always someone there, you know, you just wouldn't be by yourself, or you know, whomever you take. There was always families there with their kids, or whatever you or grandchildren. And when it started to be declined, you could almost walk around the mall by yourself. There was nobody there. Even people would come up there just to walk, you know. It was on the inside so it was like a not a gym, but a place where you could go and just walk, and you would, no one would be in your way. Right after there was declining, you could see you could see a notice where this not, it reminded you, it reminded me of Azalea Mall and downtown. Where is everybody at? It's supposed to be a Saturday, you're supposed to be in the mall, but nobody there. It was a mystery. Well, not really a mystery because we knew that they were building Short Pump and some, I guess some of the stores at Shaw Pump was already built. So, they started going up there to that 2-level mall in Short Pump. And that was way way too far for me, even with a car. It was just way too far.

Larry [01:20:33] And the prices. From what I heard were way way too high, way too high. That was in the heart of, you know, the better than middle income family houses, money wise. There were top line stores up there like no Nordstrom (Retail store) and Saks (Designer store), places that I knew I could not afford. There was no way I was going to spend my hard-earned money on a name. It just didn't make sense. Neiman (Designer store). Them places were in New York and Chicago, and highfalutin (meaning pretentious) places and stuff.

Larry [01:21:31] So you know, as Virginia Center Commons declined, I wasn't going. But they started to build a place over where I live at now called White Oak. White Oak didn't have those highfalutin stores like Short Pump did. But still there was a Burlington at Virginia Center Commons so I would still shop at Virginia Center Commons at Burlington. But then I started looking around at White Oak, but the difference between White Oak and Virginia Center Commons is that you had to come outside the stores at White Oak. I didn't like that too much. You were in a store and then to get to the next store, you had to come out of that store, and going to the store, and they were all everywhere. There was no continuity like Virginia Center Commons, where you were inside and the store. The doors of the stores were inside, so I didn't like, and I don't like White Oak. I don't like that style of store and I found out that Short Pump is the same way. You had to come out of a store to go into the next door. That doesn't make sense.

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Downtown was like that, but there was no more downtown. So why, you had to come out of store and go to another store? I don't like that. But anyway.

Larry [01:23:37] I hope that answer your question.

Joa Kearney [01:23:43] So, do you think the company behind them all couldn't have prevented or slowed down the eventual decline of Virginia Center Commons? What is your opinion on that?

Larry [01:24:04] What of the apartments?

Joa Kearney [01:24:07] In general- No, not yet. Do you think something that was done to the mall could have prevented or slow down the decline of the Virginia Center Commons Mall?

Larry [01:24:22] No, I don't. I don't think that there would been anything that the developer or the retail shops, or whoever owned Virginia's Center Commons land. I don't think that they would have had a choice. As I said, once, that big fish started eating that little fish, that little fish is going to disappear. It's just going to, it's just life. No, nothing that could, nothing. They could have done. The only thing they could have done that, I believe, tear down Virginia Center Commons and build a 3-level, a 3-level shopping center to compete with that 2-level shopping center out there at Short Pump. If they were to build something new and different that nobody had, an underground one or one with a park or forest or wheels and things for kids. That's the only thing that they could have done. But once they started building Short Pump, that was it. There was nothing they could do, nothing, no ma'am.

Joa Kearney [01:26:00] How do you feel now that the mall has been repurposed as a fitness center and a housing area? Have you revisited the area yet? And what is it like for you now?

Larry [01:26:18] Well, yeah. Well, yes. I'm glad that they did something with the land. And you know, build houses or a fitness center. And that it's good for those that wanna live out that way and it's good for the land itself and development. But I did, you know, take one of my grandchildren over there, through there, and I reminisced about what used to be out there. But now it's gone, and I feel as though a part of my history with Virginia Center Commons, it's gone now. That's all I got is memories, not history. So, I want to say, because I was a shopper out there, I did help go as on as long as it could, but as far as me having really really deep thoughts. I've taken those yearnings, and I've have put them towards other places. And I don't go mall shopping as much, not because of that. but because of you know, my age. I don't need to look into the doors, into the windows and see what you know the newest, newest fashions are because I'm older and I do my own fashion. So, I don't get that. Just this. This disconnect like I would have gotten earlier than my earlier in my life. I don't. I don't get it. Get that, you know. Separation.

Joa Kearney [01:28:25] So really, Virginia Center Commons and other malls like other places, that that would you and your family would hang out at- It's really, you associate with those places with a sense of memory, a sense of place rather than because- You associate memories you share with others attached to those places that you used to visit?

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Larry [01:28:59] Now. Yes, let's just say I'm driving by there with somebody in the car, you know, whether it's my relatives or friend or whatever. If I drive by there, I would probably say there used to be a mall over there where there was houses at and I used to hang out at the mall and I used to bring my grandchildren to the mall. Only in passing, do I think about and in this interview. It doesn't strike a nerve like it would have when I was going there. So yes, it would come to mind when I passed there. You know it's the same thing where I used to live at. When you go past it, things are different. Things have changed, and somebody that is born now wouldn't even know there was a mall unless there's a history concerning it, or people that's, you know, passing down that information.

Joa Kearney [01:30:15] So because you no longer go to the mall, do you still hang out with some of your grandchildren, at least some of them, now that they're older? And what do y'all do now to spend time with each other?

Larry [01:30:32] Well, good question. My favorite, you know, granddaughter, we go to the library and we hang out there and we have just as much fun there as I did in the mall. We play checkers and dominoes and whatnot, and have fun check-out books. And play games. So, it's just as much fun. It's just as fun. So, I guess- (I interrupted him again by accident).

Joa Kearney [01:31:14] That sounds just as fun as you said. That sounds fun. Trying to think of what other questions that I could ask you. After you stop going to big malls and stores and stuff like that, what is a typical day for you? What do you do now to have fun?

Larry [01:31:59] Well, I walk my dog, that's the main thing, you know. I walk my dog and go to different parks, and I'll come back, and maybe play my PlayStation game, or my little bass (instrument). I've, you know, I've taken up an instrument over the years. Watch a little TV. Go sit out in the gazebo. Just chilling, basically chilling, just enjoying this time. Don't forget now, I remember you asking me how old I was. I'm 73 so that running around I do nowadays, but I still go shopping. I don't go to malls and stuff. I go to thrift stores because they have some of the things that I am used to. And I do like it, you know, and the prices are good. So, I may go to the grocery store, but far as fun, I play or I put together puzzles, or I'd still like my little cars, my little model cars. And I don't draw anymore. I don't do that anymore. I miss it. But you know, it's a thing of the past. So, that is basically what I do, and then the dog, she knows it's time again in the afternoon to go for that walk again. So, that's that, I may take a trip here and there. And like I said, I may hang out with my granddaughter, you know, every once in a while. So, I'm living like a smooth lifestyle right now. There's no big ups, no, no big, no little downs. It's just nice and smooth, like a straight line.

Joa Kearney [01:34:08] Well. So, I'm trying to think of a follow up question I can ask. Do you still play tennis? Are you still active?

Larry [01:34:36] Yes, but I don't play necessarily with people anymore. I just take my racket and I hit on the wall because I'm not as active as I used to be. I don't run as fast. So, I try not to play against nobody or hit with anyone because, you know, it takes more energy to. To run after the ball. When I'm hitting on the wall, if the ball don't come to me, it's okay because it's okay. You

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know, I can always start over. Yup. So, I do play, I want to call it who bounce tennis and what that mean is I can let the ball bounce 2 times or more. And then, you know, in regular tennis, you only can let it bounce once, so I'm on the 2-bounce tennis court.

Joa Kearney [01:35:46] I don't have any more questions to ask you. We finished very early. Do you have any questions to ask me?

Larry [01:36:03] Do I have any questions for you? Yes, I do. I have one. This interview, what will happen to this interview?

Joa Kearney [01:36:14] This interview, I will be sending you a copy, a recorded copy through a mp3 format to your email along with a transcript of the recording. And there will be, both will be sent to you to your email, and then I will- And then in a couple of weeks, I will be making our website where I will present these, the interviews I have collected, the transcripts I have collected. And I will be representing them through a project (the website that I plan to make as an archive).

Larry [01:37:07] Oh, okay. Okay.

Joa Kearney [01:37:09] And that's how an Oral History works. As we- as I have mentioned before on the release form, where this project is to inform others about the Virginia Center Commons and its history and the reasons why it closed down.

Larry [01:37:40] Okay.

Joa Kearney [01:37:41] Everything.

Larry [01:37:42] Well, I'm glad- (I interrupted him again by accident.)

Joa Kearney [01:37:43] Yeah, everything relating to that will be included on the website. And I'll be making that soon once I finish transcribing the recording. I will present it to you through email first and then we'll present it through the website. Once I finish the website, I will then share it with you and other interviewees as well.

Larry [01:38:23] Well, I'm glad to have participated. Thank you.

Joa Kearney [01:38:28] In a few days. [laughter]. I interrupted him again) Oh, thank you for participating, I really appreciate it.

Larry [01:38:37] My pleasure, and what's your, I'm sorry, what's your name again?

Joa Kearney [01:38:44] Joa.

Larry [01:38:46] Joa, oh okay. Well, it's good to meet you, Joa.

Joa Kearney [01:38:50] Good to meet you, too, Larry. [laughter]

Joa Kearney [01:38:52] Oh. In a couple of days, I will send you a copy of the recording to your email. Also, I'll send you the transcript as well once I finish with that. The transcript is going to

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take me a bit longer, but I will get it to you. I will send it to you with the recording to you as soon as possible.

Larry [01:39:28] Okay, I'm in no hurry.

Joa Kearney [01:39:31] Okay. I really hope you have a good day. Please email me if you have any more questions and I will end the recording here.