

WeHome, Episode 1 Transcript:
The Lorax

ERICA CICCARONE: WeHome is a podcast about the Wedgewood Houston and Chestnut Hill neighborhoods in Nashville, Tennessee. We get strangers talking. Each episode, two community members tour each other's lives and tell each other stories.

Wedgewood Houston is about two miles south of downtown Nashville.

Wedgewood Houston is different things to different people, causing a bit of an identity crisis. For example, the shortened form of its name — WeHo — inspires apathy in some while others embrace it. But on the whole, whatever you claim Wedgewood Houston is, you're probably right.

CHORUS:

EC: Can you try to describe the neighborhood in one word?

VARIOUS VOICES:

Hmm...one word...

It's gritty, you know? It's not ever gonna be the suburbs.

Right now transitioning.

I think right now you just have to say changing.

Eclectic.

Evolving.

One word...let me think about this...

Ahhh....

Favorite.

I don't know...I want to say that that this neighborhood is unique, which feels like a cop-out because every neighborhood's unique.

Ryan stole my word [laughter.] But changing, from a historical perspective, that is what it always is.

Hmm...all the good one-words are played out.

Chaotic [laughs]

Is there one word that means melting pot? [laughs]

EC: It's a light-industrial district where locals restore salvaged barnwood and weld heavy metals. It's a manufacturing hub that produces eye glasses and tennis court resin. As an arts district, it boasts a hearty roster of commercial and artist-run galleries. It might also be called a legitimate

maker district; artisans have been crafting cabinets and glass here for decades. The food and beverage game is gaining ground with distilleries, bakeries, and lunch spots. But aside from all this, and perhaps even in spite of it, it's a residential neighborhood.

And it's booming. Modest homes that were built in the 1940s and '50s are dwarfed by big ones, which are sometimes built two to a lot — “tall skinnies” people call 'em. Homes are selling as high as \$500,000 here now. But a lot of original homes still stand, their flower beds and bird baths subtle reminders of the neighborhood that was.

For the first chapter of WeHome, we've brought two people together for this episode who otherwise might not have said more than a passing hello. The first: a Nashville native who left for Chicago and then Los Angeles, and eventually, came home.

EC: Say your name

ANNA ZEITLIN: Anna, or do you need like...

EC: laughs

AZ: My name is Anna Zeitlin. I work at Zeitgeist Gallery. I'm the gallery manager. I help curate shows and maintain the website. I do a lot of the media stuff and community stuff. I organize the art crawl, A/M at W/H.

EC. The art crawl snakes its way through the neighborhood each first Saturday of the month, and Zeitgeist is one of its flagship galleries. It shares a big, light-filled space on Hagan Street with Zeitlin Architects, Anna's father's firm. Her mother started the gallery in 1996, back when the firm was in another part of town, and the whole operation moved to Wedgewood Houston in 2013.

A few years back, Anna co-founded Fashion Happening Nashville that supports local designers by showing their work in an artistic setting. They have an ethos of “fashion for all” and it gets away from the traditional runway show and focuses on the craft. Tonight at Zeitgeist, Fashion Happening Nashville puts on its latest event. Anna and co-founder Hunter Claire Rogers brought together seven local designers and seven artists to create textiles. The results are very different like a hand bag that looks like it's crafted from some sort of moon substance. Anna studied film at Columbia College, and while she was there, she took a course in an unexpected medium.

AZ: I make hats. Straw, felt, different women's hats.

EC: She went on to study millinery in L.A., New York, Paris, and London. Back in Nashville, she made it official with her online shop, Fanny & June. The hats are modern takes on classic designs, like the handwoven orange straw sun hat with hot pink fringe around the brim, and the gold swoop hat with a big, diagonal brim and handmade silk flowers.

AZ: It's a lot of tiny work so I occasionally have to go get a back massage because you feel it in your shoulders, all the focused handwork.

EC: Anna also lives in Wedgewood Houston. She bought her home in 2014.

AZ: I really love this neighborhood and wanted to be near where I worked, and it's great because I'm able to walk to work some and bike. It being so close to downtown, I think that's the future. I've never been a suburb person. I prefer the country or the city, so being close to downtown is a huge plus and being in the middle of things and being by the freeway.

EC: The neighborhood is doing so well that newcomers might find it hard to believe that it used to be one of the toughest, poorest areas in the city. We're talking grinding poverty: people without plumbing or insulation in their houses in the 1960s. All that changed because of the neighborhood association, South Nashville Action People – or SNAP for short — that started in the late '70s. Of the original founders, only one still lives here.

AZ: I've been to a few SNAP meetings, the neighborhood meeting group, and Bill has been there every time and he is always advocating for trees. So for me Bill was the tree guy, basically the Lorax, fighting for the trees, and overtime a developer would come give a presentation he would make sure they're not cutting down any trees and he knew exactly which ones were on that property. So that was my only expose to him, hearing him fight for the trees in those meetings.

BILL PERKINS: I'm a tree hugger...where are the trees?...two giant elm trees...plus I've planted some. I planted five at the SNAP center if you notice the little ones...these are plum trees. I don't know if you drive by here and see the plums all over the sidewalk...I asked them to save that tree... I planted that tree, I planted that one, I planted all these. I think that's what my tombstone's gonna say. "Tree hugger." No name. No date. Just "Tree hugger."

AZ: [laughs] I think that sounds good.

EC: Bill Perkins moved to Nashville in 1976. He worked for Truck Stops of America then, and was transferred here to run their distribution center.

BP: I didn't know anybody so on Saturdays I would drive around to all the Goodwills and thrift stores and yard sales. And I was driving down 4th one day and there used to be a junk store on Humphreys and 4th, so I pulled into Humphreys and the street was blocked off. They had a dunking tank and you could smell the hotdogs and hamburgers and there were all these little kids. It was really mixed race, probably 50-50...

EC: Bill grew up in Poland, Ohio – a town of about 2500 people.

BP: I thought this is really cool because obviously it was a low income neighborhood. I thought these people are just having fun. How cool is that?

EC: It's hard to imagine Bill being shy. He has blue-gray eyes that twinkle when he smiles and an easy laugh. He comes to meetings bearing jars of homemade jam and spaghetti sauce, pickled okra. But that day at the block party, he didn't introduce himself.

BP: Almost every house was for sale, so I wrote down every one and I called them the last week. Mine was the cheapest one, it was \$8000. It was probably the biggest one too but it was in the worst condition...but I always wanted to fix up an old house, so I ended up buying it.

AZ: So what year was SNAP and who were the initial people involved in putting that together?

BP: SNAP is about 35 years old so you're gonna have to do the math.

AZ: So 82?

BP: So it was Louise, Eva, Joyce and I who started SNAP. There was a bar, I think it was called Pink Poodle 2, I don't know where number 1 was. Louise lived there with her parents and her son, low income, Eva was low income, Joyce was low income, and people would come out of the bar at night and throw beer bottles at her parents and piss in their yard, they didn't care. Back then the Sounds stadium was the only thing to do in Nashville. People would be parked all up here to go to the game, it was the thing to do

AZ: Wow.

BP: ...and they'd throw their trash and pee where they were.

EC: The neighborhood was already pretty unsafe. But something about the indignity of Pink Poodle 2 galled Bill and his neighbors. So they worked out a lease purchase deal with the owners

and claimed it as a community center. South Nashville Action People was born. Anna will take it from here.

AZ: Do you remember the first time you went up against the city for something, like your first big victory or first big loss? Something you fought really hard for?

BP: I don't think there were many losses actually. I remember thinking about that old phrase "you can't fight city hall" I remember thinking, Well hell. You can fight city hall, and you can win, and you can win most of the time.

AZ: Do you think it's because the people making the rules don't care that much or don't know people in the neighborhood?

BP: This neighborhood was always... nobody wanted to mess with it, nobody cared about it. I mean they tore down part of it to put the interstate in... Well the banks had redlined the neighborhood, you couldn't get a loan. As did pizza shops. You couldn't get a pizza delivered here either. It was known as a bad place to be. I still have a bullet hole in my window from the building across from me that was crack house-whore house-crack house-whore house.

AZ: Is there anything here now because of something you fought in the early days?

BP: When we first wanted to become designated a federal neighborhood strategy area, an NSA, we had just bought the SNAP Center, we had a 30-35 year mortgage which we eventually paid off just by bake sales and stuff.

They'd painted the walls inside black and when the paint was wet they threw glitter on it. So SNAP used to be black with glitter walls.

AZ: So you'd have your meetings in a place that looked like a disco?

BP: The floor was all covered in beer bottles, we got those out.

EC: Sidenote: NSAs started in the Carter years, part of the Community Development Block Grant program that still exists today. It required cities to work with existing communities to rehab neighborhoods like Bill's.

BP: To try to become an NSA we had to have the council vote on it, and we invited all the council members to see the SNAP center, which we had just bought and we wanted to make it a

community center. What's wrong with that? Maybe 12 came. I remember one said, "I'm voting against you guys. This neighborhood in ten years is gonna be all gone. It's gonna be nothing but commercial. You potentially could get a million dollars of federal money to make changes. As far as I'm concerned, it's good money after bad, I'm not voting for it." Councilman Betty Nixon said Bill, right now, I'm gonna support you guys. You got my vote...but she said the vote's a couple weeks away, and I'm a politician and something can come up. I'll make the decision and I might decide against you guys, but right now you got my vote. That was a big learning experience for me.

AZ: Yeah. That's so honest of her to be upfront about that.

BP: That was big victory because they did actually vote, and we got a million dollars to come into the neighborhood and we rehabbed the SNAP center. I don't know if you remember what it looked like before this.

AZ I never saw it before.

BP: It looked like a barn, they put this barn roof on the second story so it was really ugly. So anyway, there were all these old people...Now I'm one of them. We put a lot of new roofs on the houses on Humphreys Street, cause Ms. Meyers and Joyce and Ms. Hooper, none of them could afford a new roof and they needed a new roof. My house, where Aunt Martha lived on this side, there was no doorknob. The house has settled so much and she had taken an axe to the door and chopped at it because the door wouldn't close. That's how bad my house was. It should have been bulldozed. She wrapped a rope around a nail in the frame to keep it closed. We spent some money on locks and door knobs for people, down at Fall Hamilton school we put a playground in. And then the little school here, the SNAP housing, we converted it to five apartments for low and moderate income people. So that was a big win, and it did a lot of good.

AZ: Well it seems like a lot of those things are necessities. They kind of helped people survive. And supported your neighbors...roofs are very important. [laughs]

BP: Right. What was sad to me was people wouldn't have trees 'cause they were scared when they got big they'd fall on their house. They had no insurance on their houses...

Back then when SNAP was getting started and very active, it was about survival issues. It was on that level. We had a lot of committees and we had a lot of classes at SNAP. We had GED classes so people could get their education. We had a summer program for kids because they had five meals at school but Saturdays and Sundays it was kinda iffy. We dealt with crime. We dealt with

zoning and codes. At one point they were gonna put a waste treatment plant at the corner of Martin and...Where Corsair's is and Core Development:

AZ: Oh yeah, Merritt.

BP: Yeah. That was gonna be a garbage transfer plant.

AZ: What made you think that you could effect change? Were you an activist as a teenager? Did you see other people have success protesting things in the government?

BP: Boy you ask great questions. Well I graduated high school in '68. I was raised in a giant family of Republicans. It made no sense to me. I wasn't right. I ended up going to a march in Washington from the university where I went to school on a bus. It was like 18 hours to get there. That was really interesting. Jane Fonda was there, she was the lead speaker, she's yelling BEEP the army! FDA! BEEP the army! Yay!

AZ: Was it anti-Vietnam?

BP: Yeah, it was definitely anti-Vietnam. And there was a little food truck there and someone yelled, "Let's liberate the food!" And everybody swooped down and started throwing potato chips and hot dogs. And then everybody got naked and went in the reflecting pool. [laughs] It was a great weekend.

AZ: Was this your first time being around this attitude?

BP: Yes.

AZ: What did it feel like coming from Republican background?

BP: It felt great

AZ: Like these are my people?

BP: This is where I belong. This makes sense. This feels right.

AZ: Was it seeing the images of the war that made you want to go be part of that?

BP: That was part of it, and I believe it was Walter Cronkite who ended the news every night by saying, "and 67 were killed in Vietnam today," and the next night would be, "27 were killed."

Everyday you got that death toll, and I think that really helped end the war. That constant reminder. The ones who were dying were your neighbors. Eventually everybody had someone they knew personally who was killed. It had to end.

AZ: I'm curious...housing prices have increased so much in the neighborhood in the last few years. Have you seen more people benefit from cashing out or lose their house? Have you seen positive and negative? What's your takeaway?

BP: The first developers were offering \$114,000 basically for a little 50 by 150-foot lot, and a lot of the elderly jumped at that. They bulldozed, cut down the trees, built the tall skinnies and sold em for \$300,000, \$350, \$400, \$500...and as time went on, the developers had to pay more and more and more... A lot of those people who sold out for \$114, after they paid the taxes on them, probably 28%, how much did they actually end up with, and where can you go with that small amount of money?

AZ: And have you heard from any of them? Where did they go? Did they move out to the suburbs?

BP: All I know, one of them moved in with her sister somewhere, but then others...Where in the hell do you go with \$114, after taxes?

AZ: That was something that I really liked about Colby early on was that he was telling people...if they make you a low offer, do not accept it. A lot of people just aren't informed and that's a lot of money.

BP: I think SNAP should have been more proactive. We used to do flyers door to door. SNAP should have done that and had a meeting telling people, "Don't sell at 114."

AZ: Do you think they just didn't know any better? It looked like a good deal?

BP: I don't think some of the people who lived here for a long time had a lot of pride in their neighborhood.

AZ: Especially if you bought your house for \$8,000, \$100,000 sounds great, but where do you go?

BP: I had to evict Aunt Martha and Doris because I was moving in...I was stupid. I didn't realize that if I buy this, people are gonna have to leave. The guy I bought it from, his dad owned houses in Nashville and he was selling them off. He said you're probably gonna have to take Aunt

Martha and Doris is court to get them outta here. They haven't paid me rent in I don't know how long. So I did. I felt so horrible. I still feel horrible. But Aunt Martha, when we got back from court, she said, "Come on in honey. I don't want you worrying about me." She had cut out pictures of silverware and glued it on the wall...out of Sears catalogues and chandeliers glued it on the wall. Pretty cool art exhibit actually. She left and came back and took her bank book out of her bra. She said, "Look here, honey. I've worked all my life. For every dime I made, I put a nickel in the bank." She had \$11,000. She said, "Don't you worry about me. I'm gonna buy a trailer and move to Dickson."

AZ: Oh that's great!

BP: She moved up the street, the house is gone now. I used to take her to the store all the time. One day she invited me over for breakfast, and it was squirrel brains and eggs.

AZ: Gross! She must of had the original Joy of Cooking. They had all the roadkill recipes.

BP: Yeah. So it answer your question that you asked a long time ago. I miss all that. The neighborhood has changed. I liked it when it was like that. I don't really fit in this new neighborhood, I don't think. So...there don't seem to be any battles to fight. I need to fight some battles. That's when I'm happy.

EC: Bill still lives in the same house he moved into in 1976. When his partner of thirty-five years, Stanley, passed away, Bill began to fill his days with hobbies: making and preserving his delicious jam and spaghetti sauce— felting, frame collecting, gardening...

He's not involved in SNAP anymore. He says he got burned out, but it's also connected to this idea of not fitting in anymore, which is ludicrous, frankly, because Bill is an artist.

AZ: This is such an elegant room. I think the giant mirror is just gorgeous and the high ceilings...

EC: Bill's house is packed to the gills with art and antiques that he's been collecting since he moved here.

AZ: It's like a 30s parlor...you can just see intellectuals hanging out and sharing poetry here.

BP: Look at this! This I just bought! This is Shirley Temple paper dolls. There's outfits...

AZ: Oh my goodness! I remember those from my grandmother's collection!

BP: And I'm gonna mount her onto metal.

AZ: That's amazing!

BP: This is a 1920s French deco postcard from Portugal.

EC: His collection spans a range of high and low art: bronze statues and gilded mirrors, bucolic landscape paintings, and weird odds and ends that delight Bill, like a Field Museum banner of Tutankhamun that Stanley pilfered in Chicago years ago, the dented hood of an old red tractor, and this lifesize cutout of two guys in their shirtsleeves watching something intently.

BP: A Robert Redford movie called *The Natural*, a baseball movie? Instead of hiring extras, they had a whole bunch of these cut-outs in the stands. And if you watch that movie...

EC: Bill has something big in the works — something that could again connect him with the neighborhood that he loves.

BP: See I've collected art almost my whole life, and I can't take it with me...

AZ: Sure.

BP: So I thought, sell it, and this is the neighborhood to sell it in. And I was thinking if I did a gallery...

AZ: You'd just open up your home and...

BP: Hang price tags.

AZ:...almost like an estate sale kind of thing.

BP: I was thinking maybe I'd just have a room and just rent that to a local artist. They'd pay for the room for a month and I don't take commission or anything. They'd just sell their stuff. But the rest of the gallery would be my stuff I've collected plus something themed, like *Guns Kill Kids*, almost a juried show...people send in their stuff, and whoever the jury is, we'd pick two dozen pieces and that's the show. Abortion, or I don't know... some kind of issues...

AZ: [laughs] Yeah. Those are edgy.

BP: [laughs] ...that get people stirred up!

EC: They're laughing, but I believe Bill will do it, because he's already done so much that seemed impossible at the time. I caught up with Anna after she talked to Bill and toured his art house and asked her what she learned.

AZ: I didn't know anything about his passion for art or his history in this neighborhood. To hear from someone who was a founder and had been here since the '70s was pretty amazing.

EC: Do you feel like knowing more about the history of the neighborhood might affect the way you interact with it and live in it at all.

AZ: I think a lot of the issues with the neighborhood are things that the government has to fix. Developers are gonna make as much money as possible and you have to place limits on them. But I think hearing his perspective, it was really interesting and did make me feel more connected to the history of the place. My family has been in Nashville for generations so feel connected to city as a whole. As local, I want to change it for the better and help guide it to a good place. I feel like I'm having an impact by being part of this creative community and keep artists and creative people in the city and have a retail outlet so people don't flee to New York. Art has been part of this neighborhood for a long time and it was cool to see Bill is an artist! Hopefully he'll come out to the art crawls and see that the galleries are here for him. I think a lot of people are intimidated by galleries because the art is so expensive, but entry is free and anyone can go. It's for everyone. And hopefully, people who haven't been are inspired by what they see and empowered, have a dialogue.

To me the most interesting thing was the fact that he graduated high school in '68 at such a volatile time in our country, and the fact that he went to a Vietnam protest march and that he took that experience and came and started SNAP and felt that as an activist he could have an effect...Even if he didn't necessarily connect those dots...I think that says a lot, and I think we owe him and his cofounders a lot because if they hadn't have done that, this wouldn't be a residential neighborhood. I wouldn't have a house to live in. It would be commercial and developed, and I'm glad it's a neighborhood. I think we owe that partially to Bill.

EC: Special thanks to Anna Zeitlin and Bill Perkins for sharing their stories with us.

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and our project coordinators. Nashville Public Television is our media partner. Lauren Cierzen illustrates every episode of WeHome. You can view them online at our website wehomepodcast.org and learn more about Anna, Bill, and our team.

Thanks for listening. I'm Erica Ciccarone, asking you to go out and do something in Bill's honor. Go hug a tree.

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