

Walsh, Matt - CBPL 25th anniversary oral history 2023-05-26

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: [00:00:00] Okay, so this is Antonia Krupicka-Smith, a n t o n i a k r u p i c k a hyphen s m i t h, and I am the Library Director for the Council Bluffs Public Library. It is Friday, May 26, 2023. Just after 2 o'clock, 2:09, we are at 400 Willow Avenue here in Council Bluffs in the Library Boardroom. And this is another entry for our Oral Histories Archive related to this building.

And how it got started. And I am speaking with Mayor Matt Walsh. Matt, will you introduce yourself?

Matt Walsh: Good afternoon. I'm Matt Walsh, Mayor of Council Bluffs. In my 10th year as Mayor, prior to that, 18 years as a City Councilman. I'm a lifelong resident of Council Bluffs. And my spelling of my name is m a t t w a l s h.

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: Awesome. And so you mentioned what your role is now. What was your role 25 years [00:01:00] ago?

Matt Walsh: Um, I would have been on the city council when they started at the library. I actually, um, go back to the Mildred Smock days of the old Carnegie library and spent many hours in that library. I went to St. Francis Academy, which was, um, fancy word for grade school, uh, which was within about 300 feet of the old Carnegie library.

And so after school, we spent. A lot of time there until Mildred threw us out. Um, and it was well deserved to throw us out. We were kind of hellions in those days. And so we spent a lot of time sneaking in the back door and then, uh running through the basement, which really didn't have any of the collection in the basement, but, uh, um, that the public had access to and for whatever reason, they could never figure out that the back door was open, but we spent a lot of time there and then [00:02:00] ran through the library. And like I say, she moved us on.

But when I was, 25 years ago, I was on the city council and we recognized that, uh, that we'd outgrown the old Carnegie Library and the city tried to pass a bond issue to get a new library built.

I can't remember exactly what architectural firm we hired at that time, whether it was Leo Daly, who ultimately did this library, or somebody else, but, uh, um, for the bond issue, we had them do an architect's rendering, and they did the surrounding buildings, uh, about three quarter size, and then did the library about one and a quarter size.

And so, when people looked at that rendering, they were kind of shocked that, uh, it was way out of scale. And they said, you know, this is way more building than we need. It literally looked like the Taj Mahal and, [00:03:00] and, uh, we will not vote in favor of this. And so it, uh, the bond issue did not pass and, um, it was probably two years later the Iowa West Foundation, um, actually had some money by that time and, uh, and it was one of their first big community projects. And, and they, um, led the charge and, and many people in the community contributed to build this, uh, beautiful building we had.

They hired Leo Daly. Um, there was no expense spared. I, I'd actually talked to the architect from Leo Daly, who, who did the work on this building and he told me that, uh, that never in his career had he had a job where everything he wanted to do, he was allowed to do and with this building, [00:04:00] he said that was the case. And one of the things I think we found out was the fact that, uh there are multiple different light fixtures and multiple different light bulbs that need to be held in inventory to, when those lights burn out, and that's just one example of, uh maybe wasn't as well valued engineer, but again, the foundation wanted to make a statement.

I think I'm, famous at the time for objecting to, to the library. It was, it was the advent of technology. Um, people didn't have cell phones. I don't think at that time if they did, they were just starting. Um, they didn't have tablets, but the laptops were, were, um, the fashion of the time. Many people had computers on their desk and I said, you know, nobody's gonna go to the library because right at their hands [00:05:00] is the research mechanism that they can use to, um, get information on anything they need.

Um, people are using, uh, um, I'm trying to think what the reader, um, tablets were at the time, um, there were two different brands and you could order books on line and read your tablet. So why create all this shelf space and, and, uh, house it in a, in a magnificent building when nobody's ever gonna, within 10 years, nobody will ever come here.

And so, um, library directors, that followed after that statement have reminded me how, uh the lack of knowledge I had on the subject and how the number of patrons that, come to the Council Bluffs library grows on a monthly [00:06:00]

basis, the number of, uh, it's not just books today. There are, um multiple, uh, um, sources of information that the library, um, dispenses to the general public and, and I believe I'm correct that, uh some 49, 000 people have a library card today. And so, um. And that's 25 years later, so it's a constant reminder of, uh, how, um, sometimes I don't know what the hell I'm talking about.

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: So you spoke a little bit about, um, you know, your memories of that time. Um, do you have a memory of when you first heard like, nope, this is happening. This building's being built. Like what, what was your first reaction? What was your memory from that?

Matt Walsh: Well, again, it was, uh, um, somewhat dusty, dirty town, [00:07:00] um, at that time. Um, and it wasn't just Council Bluffs, downtown Omaha was, uh, people were moving out into the suburbs and vacating the downtown and there really wasn't a lot of reason to go downtown and the businesses that were there were either shuttered or approaching being shuttered.

And so the fact that there would be some attraction that would um, be a cause for people to come downtown was exciting as a city council person. And I say that having fully recognized that I wasn't sure that it was going to be successful, but, um, it was a beautiful building, no expense spared. And so it, it took down some dilapidated apartments that were up on 4th street, uh. Old red apartments with the front porch is falling off [00:08:00] them and um, just being able to remove some of those dilapidated buildings. And replace it with a new modern prairie style building, um. Really, in and of itself spruced up a multi block area of, of downtown.

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: Yeah, do you have, um, do you think there was anything that was done wrong? You mentioned the, the lights. Do you think there's anything that, like, we opened those doors and you as a councilman or you as a citizen was like, you really messed that up?

Matt Walsh: You know, I don't have that recollection at all. There was, um... it was well planned, I think, by the people who planned it. Yeah, it, it, it's become more expensive to run than the smaller Carnegie library, and a lot of that was just scale. Larger collections in those days, it was just books and, and, uh, um, [00:09:00] those just rotated in and out of the collection. But, but today with videos and DVDs and, um, the cost of a collection is higher, but I assume that would have been the case if we'd stayed in the old Carnegie library.

And so, um, it, it's a pretty impressive building when you walk in it and, uh, and the envy obviously of, uh, communities throughout the metro and, and probably

throughout the state of Iowa. Um, no, as I said earlier, no expense was spared, I don't think. So even the furniture with it. It's, the building has a prairie feel and, and, uh, and the furnishings inside kind of reflect that.

And so, uh, um, Leo Daly did a good job of putting the library together with no infringement on, on the architect's, uh, vision and dream, so.

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: Mm hmm. [00:10:00] Um, is there, uh, do you have any memories of, like, opening day? Or moving the books over?

Matt Walsh: Well, I think we had a cocktail party, um, in the library. Um, I remember moving the books over was a big issue. The, um, the books were heavy. One of the things I remember after the old Carnegie Library was vacated, at that time it was in a flood zone. And so we were trying to decide what to do with the Carnegie Library. We were told that we'd have to fill the basement with sand up to the ceiling because it was below flood level and whoever took it over and we, you know, we contemplated selling it to a law firm because of its proximity to the courthouse, uh, um, and really didn't have a good idea of a use for it until the [00:11:00] Union Pacific, um, Museum came along and, and, uh, solved that problem for us.

But, uh, I remember a big community, uh, party inside the library that, where they did the unveiling.

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: Yeah, uh, are you a gold card member?

Matt Walsh: I am just a regular, I don't know if they gave me a gold card or not, they, they, they gave me a library card, um, which I hadn't had one for, for many years, uh, Mildred probably, uh, revoked my...

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: Blacklisted you.

Matt Walsh: Yeah, the, the one thing that I remember kind of shocked me in, in the Mildred Smock days, you got four books and for two weeks and, and they took the old rubber stamp that had the return date and spun the month and the day when they had to come back and stamp the inside the cover of the book.

They put a little pocket with a card in it [00:12:00] that you had to bring it back on that date. And I served as a library liaison when Jim [Godsey] was the director, I think was maybe the first director that we had here. And somebody had checked out 56 books and hadn't returned any of them. And I was just kind of shocked that, uh, I said, 56 books?

No, no wonder their collection is so expensive. Somebody just decorated their bookshelf at home. But, um, it's, uh, it's been a nice run for 25 years.

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: Yeah. I heard...

Matt Walsh: And the best librarian is here at the 25th year or so.

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: I heard that there used to be... one memory I've heard about the old library, and I'm curious because I feel like you would remember this, um, that there was hopscotch in the kids area. Do you remember?

Matt Walsh: They did have hopscotch. I think it was carpeted hopscotch maybe.

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: Okay.

Matt Walsh: Um, they, uh, it was upstairs, I think on the top [00:13:00] floor back in the, would be the northwest corner. Um, For many years, my mom would drop me off there and, and, um, during story time and, and run some errands and then come back and pick me up and, uh, um, so, yeah, I really enjoyed it.

The other thing is that they, in one area, they had a glass floor with people underneath the glass floor, which I thought was unusual. They, uh, ultimately painted that and it looked horrible. Um, my wife said, why would they paint that glass floor? And I said, what do you think?

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: That is why they painted it.

Matt Walsh: That's it. Exactly. I stood under it and looked up and said, I don't know why would they paint it.

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: Well, I appreciate you sharing your memories. Do you have any other memory of the building of this building or your time in helping and serving the city with libraries that you want to share?

Matt Walsh: No, [00:14:00] the only other, which is not really as relevant to the building, but as I said, I was on the city council at the time and I'd gotten a complaint about the contractor, um, tracking mud out onto, uh, Main Street, um, from a merchant that was across the street.

And, uh, and I took the call and had not done anything about it. And within five minutes, he called me back and said, they are out there cleaning it right now. He said, uh, thank you for your quick response. I hadn't done anything so I said just trying to help.

Antonia Krupicka-Smith: Thank you. I appreciate you chatting with me today.

Matt Walsh: You bet.