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Mark Vanecko

9 July 2014

University of Illinois at Chicago

Richard J. Daley Library Special Collections

Interviewed by Marie Scatena

Q: My name is Marie Scatena and its July 9th 2014, and I am interviewing Mark Vanecko in the Richard J. Daley Library at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Hello Mark.

Vanecko: Hello.

Q: So we'd like to get started. Mark, could you tell us when and where you were born and maybe a little biographical information about your early memories or your career— wherever you would like to start.

Vanecko: Sure. I am Mark Vanecko and I was born December 15th, 1966 in Chicago at Columbus Hospital. I don't recall the time (laughter) although my mother certainly would. I grew up on the north side of the city in the Edgebrook and the Sauganash neighborhoods.¹ I am the second son of Mary Carol, Richard J. Daley's second daughter, and the son of Robert Michael Vanecko. I attended Queen of All Saints for elementary school, Loyola Academy for high school and Holy Cross for college. I went to John Marshall Law School

¹ Both Edgebrook and Sauganash are located in the northwest corner of the city and are considered among some of the most affluent and oldest neighborhoods in Chicago.

after that and my professional career is an attorney, and I've been practicing law since 1993. I practiced with the law firm of Daley and George, my Uncle Mike's firm for about ten years and then in 2004 I started my own practice and I've been in my own practice since then. Currently I am married with two young boys, Henry and Luke. My wife is Kimberly. I am the second of four children of Bob and Mary Carol—and that's my background.

Q: Thank you. I'd like to go far back now, to your own childhood. Do you have a story about your grandfather, maybe a special holiday or family event you can remember when you were growing up?

Vanecko: We've always been a very close family, and we've always had holiday parties together. Christmas obviously was a very big one. Just preparing for our meeting I thought about Grand Beach. I know you've heard from other people about Grand Beach, and this being summer, and that being where we as a family would congregate in the weekends in the summer. And actually at that time in my life, when my grandfather was still alive, we'd spend the summers up there. My mom would literally have the car packed the day we got out of school, and we went up and we didn't come back until the day before school started. And we were there—we didn't play Little League, we had Grand Beach and that was where we were. When I think of some of my best early childhood memories it was up there and he was always a constant up there. He was there on the weekends and he was very much a part of our lives. He was really, truly a grandfather to me and my brothers and my cousins Courtney, Peter and Patrick—which was special. We knew he was a very important guy—we always knew that. How could we not? He was our grandfather, but he was our grandfather who walked at the front of the St. Patrick's Day

Parade (laughter). So we knew that he was special, but he was a very loving man, a guy we always felt comfortable with—he was never intimidating. He taught me how to fish, he taught me how to shoot a gun, he taught me how to cut down a tree. When we were up in Grand Beach he would always grab us kids and take us fishing, or just walking through the woods. He had built this nature trail in Grand Beach that was just a path through the property, maybe three or four hundred yards long, that was from the house into the woods up to the top of the dune. And we would walk up there with him and talk about nature and the birds, and it was always very special. And I think that's where I really have the greatest memories of what he was in my life. You know, I was ten years old when he passed away so I would imagine these memories from the three summers before he passed away are the most vivid. And they were just very special times—very happy. And I always think back of how lucky we were—and I was—to really only have known him as a grandfather. I was fortunate to have all four of my grandparents for so long. Grandpa Daley died when I was ten, and my other grandparents didn't die until I was an adult so I was always fortunate to have those people in my life. But when I think of the most prominent events I would say it was those summers. Christmas—I couldn't tell you about one particular Christmas over another because they all kind of seemed like the same big, family party that was just a lot of fun—there was a lot of singing. My grandfather would always be at the center of that—or one of the people I should say, at the center of that—there are a lot of singers and dancers in our family. So certainly Christmas and St. Patrick's Day are special occasions—and Fourth of July. It was just Fourth of July last weekend, and last week up in Grand Beach—my parents still live up there and we share the house with them—they let us stay with them, my little sister and I. And there's a cannon my grandfather had. And the cannon still sits in the yard. And

every Fourth of July he would shoot that cannon off. It's a real cannon, a miniature cannon. Every Fourth of July he'd stuff it with leaves and black powder and he'd fire that thing off. And I know it hasn't been fired since then—maybe once or twice since he passed away. But I would bet the Fourth of July of 1976 was the last time this cannon was fired off. Probably because my grandmother never liked the fact that he would do it, and when he passed away and she was in charge, she wouldn't let anybody do it. *(Laughter)* And that was funny. But it still sits there. My kids were playing on it. And every year we say, 'We should shoot this thing off!' But none of us have any experience with firearms much less cannons. But it's always a memory and a monument to those times. And those were some of the best times—special events—that I can remember most vividly from my childhood.

Q: You mentioned Christmas. And that sounds like it was quite a celebration in the Daley household.

Vanecko: Christmas, having seven children, especially as everyone started having kids—it's tough to get together at Christmas but we always did. And we would always spend Christmas Day with our individual families. And I think it was my grandma Sis who said, 'We're all going to get together before, but you should spend Christmas Day with your individual families.' We would always get together on December 20th or around that time. That's our traditional time now. I don't know if that always was, but I'm sure my mom and my other aunts and uncles would know. But now that's the date because that's when he passed. We would always get together as a family before the holidays to have a big Christmas dinner and then my grandfather and grandmother would have a big gift-

giving among the brothers and sisters, and of course, among the grandkids. Back when my grandfather was alive, there wasn't as many as there are now—maybe five or seven or eight—compared to the twenty-three like there are now and countless great-grandchildren. And they were very special times. We were all very excited to go to them. They were always very animated and just a lot of family fun. There was always a lot of singing. So it was good. And with the size that we are now, we usually rent out a facility. But back then I'm pretty sure we always spent it in the basement at my grandparent's house—which is a beautiful bungalow house in Bridgeport. It has this most cozy basement—and it's still almost exactly the way that it was then. My cousin Patrick lives there now. He did a renovation for the upstairs, but the basement is almost the way it was. And I can remember as a child being down there for years. And as you get bigger, the room gets smaller and I just remember it being the biggest room. It had this big stone fireplace and they had the record player at one side, and they had the table and the little removable bar and pictures everywhere. Beautiful pictures from all different political events that my grandfather was involved with. I don't have the most detailed memories since I was ten, nine, eight years old, but always very happy memories. It was always a very fun and joyful time. Christmas was definitely a big event that everyone in our family was really looking forward to.

Q: So when your grandfather died, that was right after that time?

Vanecko: If I remember correctly—I should know this—I think it was a few days before he died that we had our final Christmas party. And I don't remember that final Christmas because I just remember certain things could've happened then, could've happened

now—certainly the same things happened, the same drinking and dancing was happening (*Laughter*) at all of them. And that was just the fun of it. As a kid I remember dancing with my aunts and uncles, and with my cousins. So I certainly remember after that Christmas when he passed. It was my mother's birthday when we would have the Christmas party. I don't know if there was ever an exact date each year like we have now. But he died on my mother's birthday which was the twentieth, and I remember coming home from school, or being home from whatever and my grandparents were there—my dad's parents, my Grandma Rae and my Grandpa Mike. Which was not strange, but it was not usual because we would know when they came over. They were also very fun grandparents as well, and they were always bringing us gifts. You know, they were grandparents—we knew if Grandma Rae and Grandpa Mike were coming around, we were going to be getting something—there was going to be ice cream or something involved. (*Laughter*) So they were there, but my parents weren't there. And that's when I think things were going on, and it wasn't until then they found out he had passed, and they were the ones who ended up telling us. And it was very difficult. I remember just being distraught. I was ten years old and this was the first time I had ever experienced death of a family member or, really, anybody who I knew, or knew of. And so I remember it was heart-breaking. Having been so close to him it was really, really sad. And then just seeing my mother—my mother was just very, very sad. Having it happen so quickly, so fast—it was a shock, a great shock. But I think the greatest thing coming out of it, getting back to Christmas, we've sort of used that time as more of a time to celebrate his life than to dwell on the fact that we lost him during a holiday period. And I think that's why still, to this day we all make a point of continuing on our family party—everybody—you know it's very difficult to get seven brothers and sisters

together with their children, much less seven brothers and sisters with their twenty-three children, and now it's probably pushing thirty or forty grandkids. But we do. And not everybody makes it every year but we still have the party, and a good majority of everybody makes it. And I think that's a great legacy to the people who my grandparents were, and the emphasis they put on family and spending time together. Which is again, with Grand Beach and why it's been so special is that it's been a place where we all get together a lot—all the extended family, on a regular basis in the summer. We laugh, we see each other every day for three months and then we don't see each other except for one day at Christmas, and that's probably why we're so close. *(Laughter)* As a group—we do see each other in different places, but that emphasis of bonding and remaining a close family and doing things together—it started with my grandparents. And that's something when you get back to Christmas, that's probably where it started—the core to it all, I guess.

Q: Speaking of the core to it all, in some of the interviews with your cousins and your aunts and uncles, they talk about your grandfather ran the city of Chicago, but your grandmother ran the home.

Vanecko: Oh yeah—that's the truth. I know that my aunts and uncles can speak more directly to that because we were the beneficiaries of being grandkids, and had all the benefits of being grandkids. They would let us know, especially my grandmother as we got older, she would let us know if we were stepping out of line, or if she was disappointed in us, but we were the spoiled kids. We talked about the five first grandkids that had those ten years, when we were the only ones. I think we got really spoiled because we were the

first, and they were so glad to have that next phase in in their lives. Yes, Gram ran the house, she definitely ran the house. She set the rules, and I think that everybody knew that and everybody respected that, and followed in line. But she was sweet. She was super, super sweet. One of my cousins said one time that she was one of those people who made you feel like you were her favorite. And when my cousin said that to me I said, 'No, no that's not right. I was her favorite!' (*Laughter*) But she was like that; she really cared deeply about every one of us. And everybody in our family was always there for everybody. But she ran a tight ship. And especially when it came to Grand Beach as well because when we were up there later in my life, it was my Aunt Ellie and my Grandma who lived in the house, and all the other brothers and sisters had their own homes. But that was kind of the base camp for everything. The pool was there, the access to the beach, but they had their rules that we had to follow as kids. We had to take the patio furniture out, take the patio furniture back, we had to rake in the fall—they ran a tight ship. She was great. I would agree with all the observations from the brothers and sisters that grandpa ran the city, but grandma definitely ran the house. But they both ran the family. That was for sure.

Q: I have a question about memories of being in your grandfather's office. Do you memories of going up to the fifth floor?

Vanecko: I do remember going into his office as a child because I remember the first time I went back there when Rich became mayor. And I remembered it being not exactly the same décor—there was the same desk but I remembered the rooms. You came in, there was his office, there was a conference room and then there was a private back office. But I

don't remember a lot of those visits. I remember distinctly walking out of City Hall on one or more occasions during the St. Patrick's Day Parade. And one of the memories I have is that I knew my grandfather was a very important person, and I knew he was the mayor of the city, but as an eight, nine, ten year old I don't think you really comprehend how important he was, and how much responsibility he had, and how much he was actually doing. Now I do, having been a history minor in college, know what politics were like, and what was going on. In my mind I was somebody he would go take fishing, teach how to shoot a BB gun and go chop down a tree in the woods, buy ice cream and hot dogs. And now I think of all stuff he was doing when he wasn't doing that. You know, we'd be up there all week long and then he'd come in to Grand Beach. I remember walking out of City Hall one time going to the St. Patrick's Day Parade, and all of the sudden walking in the middle of the parade, either to the beginning or to the viewer's box. And we were walking with him and it was just hundreds of thousands of people screaming. And it was just us and the rest of the honorary people and I thought, 'Wow, this is a little different. Grandpa's something. He is special.' So that's probably my most vivid memory of City Hall. And his limo. He had a great limo. It had a phone. It was like a dial phone, and I remember it had those seats. I can't remember what they are called, not trundle. What do you call them?

Q: Like a jump seat?

Vanecko: Yes, a jump seat. So there would be the big seat in the back, and there would be two jump seats. And whenever we would ride with him—he would take all of us cousins—so when it would be just him and one other person when he would be using it for city

stuff—we would go down maybe from the house to the parade, or to a baseball game. I remember we would pull those seats out and we would all be sitting there thinking we were the greatest in this big, giant limousine. And those are the things that I remember about him as mayor in City Hall or in the city limo. I have memories of being at a Council meeting at one time, but I can't remember if it was an actual Council meeting or if it was down in Springfield with my Uncle Rich when he was a Senator. I do have memories being in a council chamber with all of the aldermen being present. And again thinking, 'Oh look—grandpa's up in front!' That was the part, now when I look back on it, which makes it so special to me, is that I always thought of him as just my grandfather. I never thought of him as the mayor of Chicago who was so powerful and all these responsibilities, and who was doing all this stuff within the city. That was years later when I was older, that I saw what it really meant. Then it was, 'When can we see grandpa?' And, 'When can we see him not doing that? When can we see him back in the basement in Chicago, or in Grand Beach?

That's when grandpa was grandpa and he could take us swimming or fishing. I do have to talk about the convention because I saw the picture with Jimmy Carter (looks at reproduction photo on display in the Library Conference Room). So we were—it doesn't have a date but it had to be August, June or July of 1976. We were fortunate enough to go out there and spend the whole time with my whole family. And I'll never forget we stayed at the Waldorf Astoria. I always remembered that name. Never stayed there since, but I will one day. We stayed there and it seemed like we had an entire floor. There were just rooms and rooms and my brother and I would be going in out of them harassing the Secret Service or my grandfather's detail who had their own rooms. And going to the convention—I do remember vividly going to one of the Democratic Party

meetings. And he was the chairman, I believe of the Cook County Democratic Party. I don't know if it was the State of Illinois or Cook County, but I'm pretty sure it was the Cook County Democratic Party. And I remember going to a couple meetings of those and sitting on the stage, or off to the side, while they conducted all of their business. And I remember at that point, 'This is really cool! And he's really important, and he's doing something—they're all listening to him, and telling him what's going on.' I would love to be able to hear a recording of what was going on as far as the delegates and all of that. And I remember being really impressed by that, that he was the chairman. He probably had more of a hands-on impact than what he did as a mayor, because I never really was at a council meeting. And all these people then went to the convention and were on the floor. And I remember thinking, 'Those are the same people grandpa was just talking to that are now down on the floor, voting and cheering for the different speakers who were there to talk to the delegates.' And we sat up in box seats, and we sat with the Carters. So there were—we had our family box where we were the whole time—and we were literally next to the Carter family. And I remember Mrs. Carter, the President's mother, the grandmother, because she was still alive then and Amy Carter was always there, and the children. And I remember talking with Amy Carter one time and thinking, 'Wow, this guy's going to be the president and this is the family.' I distinctly remember my grandfather talking. I don't know if he introduced Jimmy Carter or not, but he was a keynote speaker the day or the day before he announced. And in my mind it's blending all together; my grandpa talking and then we were sitting next to these people. And my grandma was telling us, 'Now that's the family, she's going to be the First Lady, he is going to be the next President.' And this was during the Bi-

Centennial² and so this was as very big event going on. And my parents would keep us out at all these events for hours—at least to me it seemed like hours. Who knows at this point it could have been nine o'clock at night, it could have been midnight. But we would come back to the Waldorf at night and my grandfather would order all these ham sandwiches and have a late night snack. And we would be at the convention for hours, and as a kid you think, 'When are we going to get out of here and go back to grandpa's room and have sandwiches?' (*Laughter*) So that was a special time, or experience when I remember being involved hands-on in his political life and duties outside of the family. And that convention was always something I have a vivid memory of it which I've held onto for a long time. Plus Telly Savalas was there, too. And that was when *Kojak*³ was huge. And I remember picking him out—and my dad's an amateur photographer—and he had pictures from the convention. He has a wealth of pictures of my grandfather and us, and the Carters and my grandfather speaking, because we were up high in a box, and my grandfather was on a dais. And then he had one picture of Telly Savalas which is funny.

Q: So your father is a photographer?

Vanecko: Yes, he took a lot of pictures all through our youth. He's sort of semi-retired and we keep trying to get him to work on them. He did a lot of movies, what were they called?

² 1996 marked the anniversary of historical events leading to the formation of the United States of America. The Bi-Centennial included national and local celebrations culminating in the observance of the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1996.

³ *Kojak* was a popular television program about a fictional detective played by actor Telly Savalas (1922-1994). It aired from 1973-1978.

Nine, or eight millimeter? You need a projector to show them, so it's very difficult. One of these days he's going to put them on video so we can watch them.

Q: So was your father actively documenting your life?

Vanecko: Definitely when I was a child, on vacations he was very much into it. He still takes pictures now. I remember as a child a lot of video, and a lot of photography. But that is one of the things we talked about, is to go and see what he really has. And my brother R.J. he's very much an amateur photographer as well. The two of them share that passion, so I've been encouraging him to do that, too. He has cabinets of this stuff. When you talked about his work at Cook County⁴, he used to take a lot of emergency room photographs for education because he was always a teacher. He taught at Northwestern for years. At that point there wasn't a lot of photography being done about traumas, and so that's where I think he picked it up, and then he carried it on to take pictures of the family. And in regards to this project, I wouldn't be surprised if there weren't some great old pictures we haven't seen in years. Or video. It's just getting the right people motivated to do it. But I'm sure they could find somebody—there are plenty of people now who could put that on a DVD or digital recording.

Q: It sounds like you family, and extended family, all have a great sense of history. Do you have a story or memory of your 'Irishness?'

⁴ Founded in 1834, Cook County Hospital was a public, urban teaching hospital now known as John H. Stroger Hospital of Cook County. Cook County Hospital gained an international reputation for innovative medical practices including trauma protocols and HIV/ AIDS treatment.

Vanecko: Yes. One in particular would be the player piano in their basement that was going constantly during family parties. Even though there were a lot of the traditional sing-a-long songs from those years, they would always be interspersed with Irish songs. I think that my grandfather was—we were always an Irish family. My father's dad was Austrian, Slovak—that's what Vanecko is—and my grandmother on my dad's side was Scotch Irish so we were mostly Irish and raised Irish, especially on my mom's side. I remember having a strong sense of the Irish tradition, of coming from an area which was a predominantly Irish neighborhood, working class people. My great grandfather was a sheet metal worker who worked with the local sheet metal workers union. And he was first generation Irish, his parents came over from Ireland. And I always remember there was a sense of pride in our family. And that was something that we were made aware of, something that we were known to be honored, and we had a lot of St. Patrick's Day parties. Still to this day we have a very strong sense of our Irish heritage. Something to be proud of and like any other working class as a community who were able to build their way from not the best of situations into a really good situation, is something that we were always made aware of. I never met my great grandfather, unless it was when I was a really young child. But I always knew that he was a sheet metal worker who worked every day of his life. One of the stories they would tell was when you drive up to Grand Beach the two domes of the city hall of Gary—there are these two big metal domes—and I remember to this day my grandfather saying, 'Big Mike built those. He worked on those.' And there was always a sense of pride I think which came from my grandfather. I remember thinking, 'Wow, he really did something!' Up in Michigan there is a work-room where there are still some tools which I believe are his. There are some

big old vices and snips from years ago that were probably tools that he used back then.

Yeah, we definitely had a sense of history and of our Irish heritage.

Q: Getting back to Grand Beach, in one of the interviews we recently did with Vince Gavin, he talked about your grandfather planting flowers, and you spoke of a nature path. Could you talk a little bit more about his love for beautification?

Vanecko: Yes, first of all I don't think I ever saw my grandfather in a swim suit. He was always in work boots, work pants and a flannel shirt up in Grand Beach. And he would be working around the grounds. And the property up there is one of the most spectacular pieces of property I think, in the world. It's about seven acres of old growth Michigan woods that fortunately hasn't been touched since at least 1952, if not prior to that—which is around the time my grandparents bought the property. So you have all this old, old growth forest and the houses are all around. And this house has a giant lawn with a couple of big flower beds, and he was always working there. The nature path was through this old growth forest that we talked about that rose to the top of the property that looked over the lake. And he had stumps at the top that you could sit on and we'd go up there and play Cowboys and Indians and pretend we were out in the middle of nowhere. And that's when he would teach us to go pick a tree and chop it down—not that that was environmentally conscious thing. *(Laugh)* They were weeds, I should say, they weren't trees. And we spent a lot of time there. But he worked around the yard—it seemed like all the time. And he'd be planting, tending to the different gardens. He had a vegetable garden for years, and it was something we always said was tradition we said we would carry on, but I don't think we had quite the stamina. And it wasn't the most

productive garden, but it wasn't for lack of effort. He spent as much time planting and tending to the garden as he did attempting to prevent critters from stealing his strawberries and corn. I'm sure people you've interviewed told you it was really a sanctuary for him to get away from everything. And I think that was why it was so great for us to be a part of it because whatever stuff he had in the city, responsibilities and issues, he really just put that away. And it was a time for him probably to meditate and forget about that stuff for a moment. Yeah, he was always around a big flower bed. He always had big planters full of flowers during the summer. I always remember him doing stuff. He was always in the yard. We'd be on the beach, or we'd be in the pool and he would come by and sit down and have lunch and he would be in his work boots and Dickey pants or some type of work pants—I remember it being a heavy khaki and a flannel shirt. And we have pictures up at the house back then. And that's what he wore the whole time. And Vince was one of the guys on his detail who was up there, and who my brothers and cousins and I harassed constantly. He was one of several guys on the detail who would come up and they would spend the night and go back and forth. And there was a small guest house that they would stay in. I think my brother and cousins and I spent almost as much time in there with those guys, 'Show us your gun! Let's see your gun!' and all that kind of goofy stuff—as much time as we were at the beach. And they were great. Vince was a very nice man, and very loyal to my grandfather. To this day every time I see him, we catch up—and he must have been in his twenties or thirties and me being ten years old—it's funny how we still remember so many things about up there in Michigan. It was certainly special. Yeah, Vince was right, he definitely was a gardener. I can't speak to how well he gardened—I don't remember that—but he was definitely out there. He liked getting away from the city and out into the country.

He definitely embraced the country, and the peace and tranquility that gave him from all his other hysteria. And his donuts! He would go out for donuts every morning—that's another story I remember. He would go to six o'clock mass every morning. And if we were lucky enough to be up he'd take us with. And right in Indiana actually, there was a donut shop where it was the first time in my life I had a donut hole. I don't know if they can lay claim to inventing it, but I can remember my grandfather showing us, 'Look at these things—they are the donut holes! This is what was in the middle.' We would all say, 'What? How did that happen?' So as kids if we weren't up, or didn't go to Mass with him, and if we saw the car coming back in the summertime mornings, we always knew he was coming back with donuts. And that would get us to immediately get us up and over to grandma's to spend some time with him. But we'd have breakfast with them all the time. They would laugh that we would eat breakfast at our own house and then go over and have a second breakfast from grandma, with grandpa. Because cousins—and I know I did—we always wanted to be around him. You know, meals we would always want to sit with him, and he would always have us as little kids at the kitchen table or at the dinner table, or when he'd have lunch we'd always be hanging around with grandpa. So those are special memories that I can hold onto. I don't have the specifics as a child, but I do remember just watching him eat—things you did as a child. And probably saying, 'When are we going fishing?' that is another thing—it was always on his time, when he would get ready to go. And we always wanted to go.

Q: There are a lot of stories that he was quite the fisherman.

Vanecko: He was. He loved to fish. He'd take us to this little pond, Rhode Pond in Michigan⁵ and we'd fish there. And it was just a tiny pond with bluegill, and bass and catfish, and when we were ten, eleven and nine, and nine, eight and seven. And that was the spread. And he taught us how to fish, and then he would say, 'Now go on. Do it yourself.' And he would sit up on his lawn chair and he'd be fishing, and we loved it! We ran around. And we had a couple of trips to Florida. He loved to fish in Florida. My dad and mom were stationed in Homestead Air Force Base⁵ when I was a small child—I think I was six months. And he came down a lot and my uncles would come down, and they did a lot of fishing down there. We never went with them but there are a lot of pictures and bonefish mounts from those days up in Michigan—lots of pictures and stories. And a couple trips when we were older, one in particular we went down to Venice, Florida and my parents and my Aunt Pat all rented a house with my grandparents. And he took each one of us fishing. I can't remember if he took a couple of us, or if he took one of us—but he took us in small groups just so he could have us along. And I have a picture of him when I was a little kid—and it's one of the best pictures I have of him and I. I have shorts and a t-shirt on, and he has long pants on, a long sleeved shirt, he's got a big sunhat on, and I'm holding this little tiny fish. Yeah, he loved to fish, and I love to fish and I think that all started on those trips to Rhode Pond when we were little kids. That's a great memory that I have. And as I said the best thing that I have are all these personal memories as opposed to serious memories, I guess. It was great to have had him as such a personal grandfather, and not knowing him as intimidating as he might have been. He wasn't like that at all. He was a very kind, gentle person. Even though I know other people could testify to how strong-willed he was and determined to do what he needed

⁵ Homestead Air Force Reserve Base is a United States Air Force Base located in Homestead, Florida, a suburb of Miami.

to do what he needed to get done. My experiences with him are on the gentler side, especially as a little kid. As much as I wish I had been able to experience what it would have been like as a twenty year old to follow him around and see a little more hands-on how he was as a leader.

Q: Well, you're giving us a great other side, and that's also part of being a leader. I have to ask you about the White Sox, and attending baseball games. As a ten year old boy, I can only imagine how exciting that was.

Vanecko: Well again he was just our grandfather who took us to the baseball games except we sat in the front row with Bill Veeck.⁶ (*Laughter*) So that was a little bit of a different experience. My Aunt Pat and Peter, Patrick and Courtney lived next door to my grandparents for years—lived with them for a while, too. And we would go almost every Sunday down to Bridgeport and stay with them. My mom and Pat are very close, and Courtney, Peter and Patrick are like brothers and sister to my brother Bob and I. And so we would spend a lot of time down there and we would go to a lot of Sox games with him. We'd go a fair amount, all of us, but he liked to take one or two of us. And I think that was just so he could spend individual time with us. And boy, we went to a lot of Sox games. And I remember old Comiskey⁷—it was great. I was growing up in Edgebrook and Sauganash and I never went to a Cubs game. I actually I went once. I have a picture

⁶ Bill Veeck (1914-1986) was a Chicagoan who owned a number of professional U.S. baseball team franchises including the Chicago White Sox from 1959 to 1981.

⁷ Located on West 35th Street, Comiskey was the home of the Chicago White Sox professional baseball team from 1910-1990. It was the site of four World Series and named for baseball player, manager and Chicago White Sox owner from 1901 to 1931, Charles A. Comiskey (1859-1931). It is now known as U.S. Cellular Field.

with my grandfather and my brother and I—and we were in Cubs hats at the time, which is something we get in trouble for with every now and then. But we went to so many Sox games. Whenever we were there, we'd head over to the park. We'd walk. That was the nice thing, you could walk from there. And I could remember those games vividly. It was always a lot of hot dogs and popcorn and all the stuff your parents wouldn't give you at those games. Boy, he loved the White Sox. We had some great times. And it was neat, the box that my grandfather had, my uncles kept up and it's almost the same spot in the new stadium. I can remember going back years later as an adult, or as a college kid, when the old Cominsky was still there—the green brick wall and the way those seats sat down and you were below the field. I remember those exact views as a nine or ten year old boy sitting there with my grandfather. That was great. And that was another thing I think he instilled in all of us—a love of sport. And Blackhawks games—he would take us to Blackhawks games all the time as well. We would go in a group to games and those were exciting times. I remember whenever you'd go to a Blackhawks game, and I believe we sat next to where the Wirtz⁸ family was. And they had a tradition that I see today and I think it was part his and part my grandfather's that we'd always wear a jacket and tie to the Hawks game. So when we were kids, we had to wear a jacket and tie to go the Hawks game with my grandfather. And I never sat in a better seat for a Hawks game than when I went with my grandfather. Those were great times as well. He loved sports a lot. In fact when we were in Grand Beach, he would always stage baseball games between my cousins—my cousin Patrick and I would be on one team and my brother Bob and cousin Peter would be on the other. We would have baseball games on this yard which is now my Uncle Mike's

⁸ William 'Rocky' Wirtz is the principal owner of the Chicago Blackhawks professional ice hockey team.

house. It is not much bigger than this room. So to give you an idea of how small we were, and it was a full baseball field. And he'd set up the chairs and have everybody watching. And he loved doing that—we would complain because we never really played Little League. I never played Little League ever because like I said, we were at Grand Beach. My mom said when we were up there, 'You've got plenty to do. Go play a pickup game of baseball.' So one summer he started a kind of Little League game between us kids. We had caps and uniforms just playing on the yard, and that was lots of fun.

Q: That's a wonderful memory.

Vanecko: Yeah—the White Sox were definitely a favorite.

Q: Did you go to opening day?

Vanecko: Yes, we would go to opening day—I think we probably went to all of them. I can remember when we were taken out of school because it was opening day, and going to those games—and some them, he would throw the first pitch out. And I remember being there for one or two of those. And that was always a big deal. And even today we carry on that tradition when we get together at my grandfather's house, my cousin Patrick will actually have a little party before, and that was always a big deal when the baseball season started. He was always ready for that. I don't specifically remember

opening day as much as just going to the games with him in general. It was always a big deal to get to the game, and we had those great seats. And he was always—in that day and age—he was in a suit the whole time. You see the pictures, but everybody was like that with a suit and a hat. It was interesting to see—are there any pictures? (*Looks at reproduction photographs on wall of library conference room*). There you go—yes that's right where it was, probably the seats are right there. The World Series 1959—a little before my time. As I said there were always a lot of social activities he included us in. I think he liked to have his family around him at Sox games, at Hawks games and up in Michigan—things like that were so special when we were kids. And when we'd get that call that it was our turn to go to the Hawks game, or the Sox game it was always, 'Yeah—we're going!' And if we would hear the next day that the Thompsons got to go, we said, 'We're getting the next one!' It was special to be a part of that.

Q: I'm curious to know what Bridgeport looked like and your recollections. What did it look like? What did it feel like?

Vanecko: What did it feel like—good question. The street where they lived on—now, I guess when you compare to then it was a lot more working class—or there were a lot more apartments. There are a lot more single family homes on the block now. You certainly would have gotten a sense of how it was such a hard-working town at one point because I can remember big old buildings that have since been torn down that were tenements or boarding houses. Big old frame apartment complexes. I can't really speak to how it feels. The Bridgeport that I know from having been being there, and the

people, it really hasn't changed much for me. Because the people, the families that I knew through my grandparents, through my aunts and uncles and through the Thompsons—those people are all there, and they haven't really changed. *(Laughter)* They're the same families— their children are Peter and Patrick's good friends—they're all still there. A lot of them live in the neighborhood. A lot of them still work for the city. They're all die-hard Sox fans. In that sense it hasn't changed. I can remember as a child, probably after my grandfather passed away when we would spend a lot of time—we would do a lot of sleepovers at the Thompsons—and I remember going go to the Stockyards a lot more. And we would go to the Ampitheatre⁹ at least every year. Actually I remember going with my grandfather to the circus. When the circus would come to town they would have the 11th Ward Night, or the Bridgeport Night at the circus. And it was always a big deal. My memories of the circus were of having this super luxurious box. And the Ampitheatre was such a giant place, so much different from any other modern-day stadium. And I remember going with my grandfather to the circus, and then years later that tradition carried on and my uncles would be in charge and always have somebody speak, and then we would watch the circus. And my grandmother would take us, too, and we would eat at The Stock Yard Inn.

And when it changed and was torn down—that was different. And in that sense it became lot more industrial there. I don't think it was ever the Stockyards during my lifetime, but there were always remnants of it. But there was a western store—I forget what it was called. My grandma, she would take us to get cowboy gear there when we were kids. And when we were older. I remember her buying a pair of cowboy boots

⁹ Also known as the International Ampitheatre, it was an indoor arena which hosted the International Livestock Exhibition. The Ampitheatre was located near south 42nd Street and Halsted in Chicago and adjacent to the Union Stock Yards. It was in operation from 1934 to 1999.

their when I graduated from 8th grade, because that's what I wanted. And it was from this store that was connected to the Stockyards. And I always remember how uncharacteristic of modern-day Chicago it was because it was a cowboy store with this big giant steak place next to it—the Ampitheatre which was used for the circus or the animals. I don't know how much of the actual Stockyards had been gone at that point, but I guess that would probably be the biggest change I've seen in Bridgeport that I've seen. The community—the church was always a big thing. We went to church a lot. Even though we belonged to Queen of All Saints, we went to Nativity¹⁰ a lot. Obviously for a lot of family events held there, and from being in Bridgeport a lot. I just remember loving it—such a big, old beautiful church. It hasn't changed at all. It's the same place to me. But I wasn't a Bridgeporter. I was a northside kid who was lucky enough to spend weekends there, hanging around with my cousins at the Valentine's Boys Club every now and then, and playing basketball, and playing fast-pitch baseball at the Wallace School, and some of the parks there. It was interesting, my mom and my Aunt Pat being so close we grew up a lot together with the Thompson kids. We were fortunate enough to kind of grow up in two neighborhoods. We obviously spent most of our time on the north side. But I can say I have a little bit of southside in me. Probably not as much as Peter or Patrick would admit, but I ran around those streets a little bit—as much as they would let us. *(Laughter)*

Q: As you travel around the city today are there places which really make you think of your grandfather as you are just going about your business?

¹⁰ Nativity of Our Lord Roman Catholic Church was founded in 1868, designed by architect Patrick Keely and located on West 37th Street in the Bridgeport neighborhood.

Vanecko: City Hall, definitely. The Picasso—yes, The Picasso does.¹¹ Because getting back to Christmas, I can remember lighting the tree and that's probably one of the most traumatic things as a child the year after (Richard J. Daley's death), 'We're not going to be able to light the Christmas tree? I don't understand this!' But that was one of the things he always included us in. Every year we would go down to what is the Daley Plaza now—and we would light the tree. And I remember The Picasso being there and thinking, 'Wow, this is a really weird sculpture. I don't get it,' but always being intrigued by it. So I think that area of the city, and the Christmas tree every year. Because as a kid that was a big deal and he would always bring all the grandkids. And in later years, even the littlest ones. My little brother R.J. has the famous picture of him sitting on my grandfather's lap. So that time of year and that part of the city—I think of him. The Sears Tower reminds me of him because I have some pictures of the ground-breaking and aerial shots of the topping off that were from there, I think my Uncle John gave them to me, he had them in his office in storage. And you see that and the John Hancock. Those are things that I thought of more as I got older and realized what he had accomplished and what things he had done as mayor. And I look at that and I think of the side of him that I didn't grow up with, but that I got to know through history afterwards. Things like that, remind me of him. The Tavern Club¹² is place I remember going to—I don't know if it still exists. But The Tavern Club was one of those private dining clubs of years ago, and I remember going as a child. And again, he would bring us

¹¹ Dedicated on August 15, 1967 the untitled, fifty foot iron sculpture by Spanish artist Pablo Picasso is on display in Daley Plaza in downtown Chicago.

¹² Located at 333 North Michigan Avenue, The Tavern Club operated from 1927-2007. Notable patrons included; Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Carl Sandburg, Enrico Fermi and Mayor Richard J. Daley.

everywhere—I couldn't tell you if it was a family party, or a business meeting, or he was just taking us out—but we would go to places like The Tavern Club and he would say, 'Okay, now you sit here and the adults will sit here.' And we would go sit with our cousins and eat club sandwiches, steak sandwiches and ice cream. And every time I hear The Tavern Club I wonder, 'Is that place still around? What ever happened to it?' That would be a place if I could get back there that I would have vivid memories of my grandfather. The old ballpark would have been a spot, the old Stadium. I could tell you spots all over Grand Beach that bring back memories to this day, and that haven't changed. Rocks in the yard and in the garden that have been there and trees—and some furniture that's still there reminds me of him. This is a story that I talk about with my mom—he used to eat liverwurst sandwich with onion and he'd drink a cold beer with it in this little glass, which are still up there to this day. And I can remember sitting there thinking liverwurst was the worst think in the world. He would say, 'Taste it,' and I would say, 'Ugh!' Beer is the worst thing you can taste as a nine year old—not that I ever did. But I remember watching him and the way he would have his sandwich and eat it—it always looks so good! Today we all eat those sandwiches now. That's kind of our Grand Beach lunch. We sit out at the same table and we'll have a liverwurst sandwich with onion and mayo on the rye bread with this cold beer. And that is probably something that brings back the most vivid memories because I can remember just idolizing him—sitting there and watching him eat. He could make anything look like that was the tastiest thing in the world to eat. And probably thinking as soon as he finishes I hope he takes us fishing or doing something. Because I sit now trying to enjoy a moment of relaxation and my kids are asking to do this or that (*Laugh*).

Q: When you were studying history when you were older did you come across courses which discussed your grandfather?

Vanecko: Yes, this is my story. I remember social studies classes in high school where the city was discussed, and there were history classes that dealt with urban politics and dealt with Chicago—you start small. It wasn't until I got to college that I took more in-depth U.S. History and Political Science. I was a Political Science major. And I remember taking 20th Century Urban History, and a quarter of the class was spent on Chicago. The professor, Father Kuzniewski, S.J.—we got to be dear friends—he taught me and my cousin Maura as well. He had as the textbook for the part of the course about Chicago, the book *Boss*,¹³ which I saw out there (*Refers to artifacts displayed in the Special Collections at the University of Illinois' Richard J. Daley Library until July 2014*). And I have to check myself, but I'm pretty sure, is a book of fiction. It's not an actual historical, non-fiction book. And so that was our book, and it was an opinionated book. I went to school at Holy Cross which is in Worcester, Massachusetts. And it was a pretty hard-edged book—it was an opinionated book, I'm sure based on a lot of truths, but it obviously didn't paint him in the best light all the time. So after that I started to have an interest in history, and in what my grandfather accomplished. Not in great detail but things like; his involvement with the '76 convention, his involvement with development in the city, and the highways that were built, the high rises that were built. And I was very proud to see that Chicago wouldn't be the city that it is today, and wouldn't have had the ability to be the city that it has become in the last forty years without the infrastructure that was

¹³ *Boss: Richard J. Daley of Chicago* is an unauthorized biography written by newspaper columnist and Pulitzer Prize winner Mike Royko. It was first published in 1971 and remains Royko's most famous work.

started with my grandfather. I think that is something kept it from potentially becoming a Detroit, or other cities that have struggled. I'm very proud to know that my grandfather had a major part of that. So when I was reading Boss in a history class with a bunch of guys from the east coast I was very defensive in trying to present the other side to all this because if you read it and don't know anything about Chicago, it just exacerbates the image of Chicago as being a very clout-driven, corrupt city. And while I think there is some truth to that, I don't think that's the only truth to the city, and what my grandfather was about. And I made it known on my final essay, 'Father, this is a book of fiction!' He got a kick out of that. And I actually saw Mike Royko years later at an event during the '96 convention which was here. And there was a party at the Art Institute, and Mike Royko was standing at the bar and I walked up to him and he said, 'I know who you are!' And I thought that was very strange. Here I was a 26 year old kid, I'm sure he knew the name, but to say, 'I know who you are!' was weird. I told him the story and he said, 'You're right!' (*Laughter*) I thought that was funny. Going back to the history, when you see the stuff that was accomplished, not only locally in the city, but the national politics and influence he had, the respect he received, and the advice he was sought after for—from presidents, too. I can remember as a child my grandfather taking us from Grand Beach—we actually flew from Michigan City to Meig's Field and we were going to meet Gerald Ford. And he brought myself, my brother and Courtney, Peter and Patrick. And we went out to the airport to greet him as he came down. There is a great photo we have of my grandfather and all of us shaking his hand. And at that point I don't know if we knew, or if it was later—we got the sense there were the Democrats and the Republicans—and there were the good guys and the bad guys. I remember being told at some point by my grandpa—you always respect the president.

And he would always go out, no matter what to greet the airport to greet the president because you respect the office, and the president. And I can remember us going out there. And again we went back to a dinner they had for the president, and we were in separate rooms with just the cousins eating hamburgers and then we went back to Grand Beach that night. It was special to be included in that. I think we were all wearing white suits, too, because we didn't have any clothes or something (*Laughter*). It's a very interesting picture from the '70's with our big-collared shirts on. (*Laughter*)

Q: It sounds like you were very much included in quite a few things that your grandfather did.

Vanecko: He did--we were a part a lot of stuff. And I can remember a lot of the big things we were a part—I'm sure there were a lot that there were a lot where we were left behind, too. When as a father when you have certain things to go to, especially formal affairs, it can be kind of a pain to bring young kids. But I can remember a lot of events where it could have been a lot easier if we weren't there, but we were there. We might have been at the kids table, or off to the side, or under the table at some point, asleep, but we were included. That was really special. As I said, the Democratic Convention in New York in '76 was something. I remember as being so neat because it was New York City, and we stayed in a super luxurious hotel, and every night we went to the convention and there were all these people and all this excitement. And there were these late night dinners and we had these giant hotel rooms and these hallways we were running down. And it would have been a lot easier not to have a bunch of ten year olds with you.

Q: How do you think that impacted your life, being a part of all of that?

Vanecko: It's given me—having a profound sense of family. We try to make sure everyone is a part of it. We still to this day do a lot up in Michigan where everybody comes. We bring all of our kids and just try to include everybody. It gives me a great sense of closeness to keep everybody close—my cousins, and even the younger ones now, to have the older generation for lack of a better term, the firsts, and the mids, and the older—each one of those groups are very close individually and then close as a group as we've become adults. And now our children are the same way, and it's so nice to see that. It gets harder and harder with each generation—and then you have your own family. And again one of the great things about Grand Beach is that we're all together now. I know right now two of my cousins are up there now with their families running around the pool that we ran around when we were kids. So it gives me a sense of wanting to maintain that close sense of family is probably what that is a product of.

Q: If you were to walk around the city today with your grandfather today, what do you think he'd say about it?

Vanecko: What are all these lights? (*Laugh*) I don't know—it would be interesting. I think he would be surprised at how congested the city is. He would probably look for certain improvements. He would probably be upset with the play of the White Sox right now.

Like I said, I never knew how his mind worked when it came to that, because I was younger and he was always just my grandfather. So it would only be speculation through my studies of him in history. But I think he would be proud, I think he would be happy to see how the city has grown and expanded and continued. In a way (pause) I kind of cherish—as much as I would have loved to have been a part of that part of his life at an older age, because I don't think I could have comprehended it then—I do like the fact the memories I have of him as a grandfather are no different than the same memories I have of my dad's father in the sense they were both these big, cuddly guys you could hang out with, that were there for you, and who wanted to make you laugh, and to make you smile, and show you some fun—good times. I would be speculating to come up with some witty political answer. *(Laugh)*

Q: Well, you don't have to do that—this is about your memories.

Vanecko: I think he would be very happy, but I'm sure he would have plenty of criticisms of what he would like to do. Now my Uncle Rich, he was very much involved in what he would see and not see and what could be done. I'm sure there are plenty of streets that have to be cleaned and street lights that have to be fixed. He was very much involved in what he would see and what needed to be done.

Q: These are great stories—we could go on and on. I have one more question. When you talk with your own kids about your grandfather Richard J. Daley, what do you say to them?

Vanecko: I have done a little bit with my oldest, because he studied leaders, so we talk about that in school. And we talk about the presidents, 'Who is the president now?' And I explain to him that his great-grandfather was he mayor, and his great-uncle was the mayor. And I think I'll share with him my thoughts and feelings as I have with you about him as my grandfather. I certainly will educate him on what his accomplishments were, what type of person he was, where he came from, what his vision was. I like to think that he accomplished a great majority of the things that he saw in that vision. And I think with that as well I will talk with him about how he was a very powerful, a very respected, and probably a very intimidating person to a lot of people. He was a very honest and kind and caring person. He was very religious man. That is something we didn't really touch on, but I saw the strength of his faith as a child and I think a lot of my faith came from that that—and was passed down through my mother. And so these will probably be the things I will talk with him about. My Luke is kind of interesting because he understands now when he sees the news when he sees Mayor Emmanuel and say, 'But Rich is mayor!' and I will say, 'Not any more, Rich was mayor.' And he says, 'Okay.' And then I try to explain to him there are several mayors, 'First Grandpa was mayor of Chicago, then Uncle Rich was mayor and now Mayor Emmanuel is mayor.' And so I will certainly try to express those kinds of memories. And my 3 year old, I'll have to wait a few years. He's more concerned with his birthday today.

Q: Well this is a nice birthday gift. Is there anything else you'd like to add now?

Vanecko: Let me think and see if I look at this *(Pause to look at documents)*

Q: In thinking about your grandfather's accomplishments, is there one that you are the most proud of; he did this, made this, built this, created this?

Vanecko: It's been talked about a lot and goes without saying that this school is important. And I never knew the background behind that until we started as a family getting involved. And really my aunts and uncles, and my mom educated me that this was something he was very, very proud of, to have created a public school, and why we didn't have a state school. And coming from private schools to have that vision to see that this is something this city deserves. And in a lot of ways, knowing who he was, probably demanded, really. And I think that's a great accomplishment. And being able to put together on a massive scale at a time from '55 to '76, and maybe even from '55 to '70, as a leader be able to coordinate what it would take to build all the highways that came through here, to get the large scale private development in high rises that occurred, at a time when there were major wars going on. That was the whole Vietnam era. There was a lot of unrest in this city, and in the country. And to be able to maintain a government—that I don't think anybody can really, truly say wasn't for the better of the city as a whole. There are critiques on every different minor aspect of it, but when I think you look back

in history as to where this city was in the 40's and early 50's and where it came out in 1976, it's the city that it is now, and it's set up now to only become a better city. And I think that foundation is what was started with my grandfather, and continued on with other mayors. But I think if those accomplishments hadn't occurred during that time period you wouldn't want to see what the alternative would be. So that pretty much sums up what I am most proud of.

Q: That's a great way to end.

Vanecko: I'm done!

Q: Thank you very much.

Vanecko: You're welcome. Thank you.

End of interview