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Kentlands Dot Us Interview with Mayor Sidney Katz

By M. H. Perry

KDU: Studies now demonstrate that corporations have their own culture and there are professionals whose job it is to change corporate cultures that don't work. Gaithersburg government has had a very successful culture of being appreciative, respectful, and responsive to its constituency. Granting that you can't please everyone, it must have been a difficult task for the city operation to be responsive to its citizenry with the amazing changes taking place due to the extraordinary growth. To what do you attribute the success?



Sidney and Sally Katz

Sidney Katz: I believe it comes from a strong sense of community. We do not always agree, but when we disagree we try to do it with respect for each others' thoughts. I have often said that one of the things I am most proud of is that the City Council does not carry over a disagreement to another topic. And I can truly say that we have the greatest staff in the world!

KDU: I know many relatively new residents of Gaithersburg who feel the same dedication to the city as those who have lived here all their lives. How has the city accomplished this "sense of home"?

Sidney Katz: There again, it is our strong sense of community. Each person associated with Gaithersburg can help us become even better. We encourage everyone to get involved.

KDU: When speaking of your childhood in Gaithersburg, you made the now famous statement, "If you threw a stone, someone called your parents before it hit the window." When you were a youngster, you were particularly visible here since your family owned and operated one of the businesses in what was then a very small town. Did you feel that you were particularly "under the microscope" as you were growing up?

Sidney Katz: No. I never felt "under the microscope." What I was trying to convey was that people looked after each other's children. Not only did my family find it helpful, we also found it to be very comforting.

KDU: Gaithersburg has changed more than most places in the last forty years, with dramatic growth, moving from a small town to a significant city. You raised your children, who are now young adults, in

this changing environment. What things did you need to worry about raising children that your parents didn't have to, and what advantages did you have raising children that your parents didn't?

Sidney Katz: When we were growing up, we did not seem to have the same problems as today. Though we certainly got into mischief, it seems that what we did then seems tame by comparison today. Even though we might consider "back then" to be tame, I am sure our parents worried about very similar things as we do as parents today. We all want our children to be safe.

KDU: You were involved with city government for most of the time that your children were growing up. How did that affect them?

Sidney Katz: I was involved before our children were born. I have often joked that our daughters have said that "quality time was when I was not at home." My wife, Sally, has spent much more time with them than I, carpooling etc., but I am proud to say that both Sally and I have a wonderful relationship with our daughters. I never asked them to "campaign" for me. I have always asked my family for their advice on various issues, and they have always been most gracious in giving it.

KDU: What has it been like living in, and being dedicated to, a small town that has grown into a large city so rapidly?

Sidney Katz: I personally have derived a great deal of pleasure by being involved. I often mention that when I was growing up we were a much smaller place—at times we didn't have a movie theater, and we had to go to Rockville to go to a McDonald's. How times have changed! Today we are the third largest city in Maryland. We obviously have many more places to occupy our time. I often, when speaking to a group, begin by saying that I have the honor of being the Mayor of the "Greatest City in the World" and I sincerely believe that. One of the reasons for our success is because of all of the assistance our citizens give to our city by being on committees and being involved. We have many partnerships with non profit organizations and other governments. By all of us working together, we know that we can continue to be Great.

KDU: You were in city government during much of the time your immediate predecessor, the beloved Mayor Edward Bohrer, was and you spoke at his funeral service. Was he a mentor of yours?

Sidney Katz: Absolutely! Ed was one of my dearest friends and a great mentor.

KDU: Who were your other mentors?

Sidney Katz: I have many. My parents, my two brothers Allen and Terry and former Gaithersburg Councilmember Carroll Kearns to name just a very few. Mr. Kearns is the person who got me in interested in becoming involved in the City.

KDU: Men as well as women have learned that when a family member, especially a spouse, runs for office, it is something that involves the entire family, and everyone has to be willing to make concessions for the greater good. What adjustments has Sally had to make over the years that you have been in city government?

Sidney Katz: Sally is a great partner. She attends many events with me and gives great advice (I tease her that she gives it without even being asked!). I often say that Sally has raised two terrific daughters!!

KDU: I'm familiar with many localities that have instituted a borrow and spend long range tactic and have suddenly been in big trouble with no money and no way to get money—resulting in layoffs, closing important services, drastically raising taxes, and so on; how has Gaithersburg maintained a habit of fiscal responsibility?

Sidney Katz: We have a very fiscally conservative management style and a great City Staff. Gaithersburg is a debt free municipality. We have a "pay as you go" philosophy meaning that we save

before we build any capitol project and we have not raised our tax rate in 42 years. The City Manager Dave Humpton and our staff do an outstanding job in watching over the day to day operations of the City to make certain that the needs of our citizens are being met in the most efficient manner possible.

KDU: With our country being so mobile, many people move into a place and urge changes that may not work out well in the long term. If things don't go well, they can just move somewhere else. With your deep roots here, leaving would not really be an option for you. If something is not done that should have been done, or is done that should not have been done, you will not be able to avoid living with it. How has this influenced the way in which you live and work in Gaithersburg?

Sidney Katz: I think it has been a great help to me. I believe those in government need to live with what we do. I do not want to live anywhere else, and I am most thankful that the citizens of Gaithersburg have allowed me to be involved. I have often said it is my choice if I run for office; it is the citizens' choice if I am allowed to serve.

KDU: If you could address the citizens of Gaithersburg a hundred years from now, what do you think you would want to say to them?

Sidney Katz: I would wish them a happy 227th birthday!

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