

Sunday Interview with Anne King: 'This was the part of Columbus that just resonated with me'  
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Anne King settled in the midtown area nearly 40 years ago, and she remains one of its biggest fans. In her role as executive director of MidTown Inc., she has been spearheading the campaign for neighborhood renewal and revitalization.

King sat down with reporter Alva James-Johnson to talk about her life in midtown and a grant her organization recently received from the Knight Foundation. Here are excerpts from the interview, with the content and order of the questions edited slightly for length and clarity.

**Let's start with your background. Where did you grow up? And what was your childhood like?** I grew up in northeastern Kentucky, in a small town of about 30,000, called Ashland, a river city and a tri-state area on the Ohio/West Virginia border. It was an idyllic childhood. I think that, looking back, some of my passion for urban environments and city planning were fostered from my grandparents' house, which was in downtown Ashland, near what is called, in Ashland, Central Park — similar to our Lakebottom Park. It was just a great place to live and to grow up. My mother still lives up in the area, so I get up there several times a year.

**What did your parents do for a living?** My father did property management. My mother wrangled us. When I think back, I think of the strong women who have informed my life, two grandmothers who were both remarkable women in very different ways. My mother is quietly strong. My father died two years ago. (My mother) has just been a model for aging with joy and grace. I hope I can do as well.

**What brought you to Columbus?** I met my husband our first day freshman year at Vanderbilt University. He grew up here. His father grew up here. I came to visit. We got married, and this was the natural place to live. Interestingly, I've always lived in what we now call midtown. It's just the place that we've chosen to live. That's how I came here.

**What is it about midtown that you liked?** From my very first visit here, this was the part of Columbus that just resonated with me. (Lakebottom Park) has always been magical — the neighborhoods, the character that's been formed over time. I think now I can put words to these things. At the time, it was just more intuitive. I loved the trees and the green space. We would ride

bicycles on Saturdays. ... There's bird life and people coming and going. But I think the neighborhood character is what defines midtown for me. There are different neighborhoods, each distinctive in its own way. You can find houses built a year ago, you can find ranch houses from the '50s and '60s, but you also find historic homes that date back to the mid-19th century, close to the founding of Columbus.

**Being in the core of the city, do you think that it gets a bad rap from people living north of here who have a different image of the area?** I think we all have our places that we love and cherish in Columbus. I have been called, fondly by the person who called me this, a "Midtown Snob." ... Yes, I think there are people who live other places that don't know midtown and don't know its distinctive character. I feel the same way about other parts of town. I laughingly talk about "NoCo," North Columbus, and feel like I've gone halfway to Atlanta because I'm so used to living in the core community of Uptown and midtown. My life and my work and my exercise and my shopping all tend to be very localized here. ... I do have to go to north Columbus to go to the movies, and we do like to go to movies. Otherwise, most of my life is spent in this area.

**It sounds like you need a movie theater in midtown.** I think we do. We would love to have one — Carmike, if you're listening. ... We used to have two midtown theaters, but they closed.

**You once served as director of education at the Columbus Museum. What was that like?**

That was my first career. It was a wonderful education. ... I had so many great mentors, from staff people to volunteers who took me under their wings and guided me along. I think the beauty of being director of education is that it was never the same job. Every new exhibition, every new way of looking at the collection gave you another way to think and another opportunity. I think it was there that I really was able to think in interdisciplinary terms and bring together different forms of art. In my programming, that's one of the things I loved doing was partnering with other organizations and individuals in the community — the Springer Theater, CSU science programs. We would bring the arts and the sciences and literature together all the time.

**How did you get involved in MidTown Inc.?** I'm going to back way up because I think MidTown Inc. is the result of a lot of people in the community coming together over time and recognizing that we shared common goals. That process really began back in the late '80s and early '90s with a proposed road widening project. There was a proposal to widen 13th Street to a five-lane thoroughfare. A group of us had already come together, just neighborhood folks who were interested in helping enhance Lakebottom Park. ... We were calling ourselves the Friends of Weracoba.

Suddenly, this road widening project appeared in the paper and we said, "Well, maybe we ought to just go down and listen to what they're talking about." That's when I attended my first Columbus Council meeting. There were five of us that went down there together. We all sat in our little row and listened. Finally, I get this poke in the ribs saying, "Anne, Anne, why don't you go up there and just tell them who we are and we're concerned about this?" I meekly wandered up and stood at that podium and did the usual introduction that you do at council, which is, "My name is Anne King. I'm a resident in the Lakebottom Park area, and we're very concerned about the possible detrimental effect to the park and to the neighborhoods of a five-lane road coming through here." ... That led to two years of opposing a road widening project with a lot of work from a great many people.

Hundreds of people were involved in this from neighborhoods all around the Wynnton area, at that time. Finally, the whole road widening quieted down.

**What impact did that have?** It's given us an opportunity to rethink our relationship with transportation and how communities flourish when people have access and areas are walkable and bikable and transit-connected. We don't design just for cars — that was very much a 1980s way of thinking. It was progressive at the time: "Let's build the road to move people through." Now we've realized that progress has taken another form, and it's about people, and it's about building communities for people.

**And that led to Midtown Inc.?** ... In the 1990s as the six Midtown historic districts were being formed and approved through the whole national register process led by Historic Columbus, we got to know each other better. ... We realized there was a shared vision for this area, this wonderful part of town, the first ring suburbs, the in-town neighborhoods. We formed a group that really didn't even have a name at that point. That became the MidTown Project.

The MidTown Project created, with the help of an urban design firm called Tunnell-Spangler-Walsh out of Atlanta, a 25-year master plan for MidTown. As part of the MidTown Project, we defined the boundaries of the six square miles that we now call Midtown, defined by 10th Avenue on the west, Talbotton/Warm Springs Road on the north, I-185 on the east and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard on the south. We have an area that is truly a microcosm of Columbus in diversity and population and business and residential areas. We have 24 neighborhoods within our boundaries. There are 11 Muscogee County public schools. Some of our great community places of pride are located here in Midtown — the Columbus Museum, the Columbus Public Library, City Services Center, natatorium, Muscogee County Public Education Center. We've got so many great assets here. ... (Then) we defined areas that were redevelopment opportunities, places that needed better connections. But we knew there needed to be an organization to carry that forward. That's how MidTown Inc. came to be as the organization that is here to advance and sustain and enhance the Midtown area.

**What year was it formed?** We were formed in 2005. We are approaching our 10th anniversary later this month.

**Do you have any big plans for the anniversary?** We are moving forward with great things. I guess probably the Minimum Grid project has been a great way to affirm the organization, Midtown the place, and to think about a connected core community with Midtown and Uptown.

**I was going to bring up the Minimum Grid project. But since you've already brought it up, let's talk about that. You received a \$200,000 grant, is that correct?** Yes, indeed.

**How did that come about?** One year ago, the Knight Foundation introduced their first Knight Cities Challenge. They asked a pretty simple question: "What's your best idea to make cities more successful?" We submitted eight ideas. ... They received over 7,000 applications. Of those, they chose 126 finalists. Our Minimum Grid project was chosen as one of the finalists. There were three from here in Columbus. At that point, we had three weeks to put together a rather extensive proposal that included a great many details and financial information. ... What appealed to them about this project — when they called in March to let us know we were a winner — was the ambition of the project and the interest in connecting the core community, to connecting people and places, and to

the commitment to a process of discovering, through community engagement, what we valued as a community, what are our favorite places, how do we want to connect between those places, how do we want to move among them. And so, it has been a fascinating process.

It's been tied in interesting ways with another initiative that the Community Foundation undertook with Gehl Studio, the international urban planning firm based in Copenhagen, but with New York and San Francisco offices. What the grant has allowed us to do is partner with them and invite them in to help us in this process of discovery and help in planning what we call a Minimum Grid.

**When you say Minimum Grid, what do you mean?** The term, some people find confusing. I've had people go, "Well, what is this minimum stuff? Are you going to eliminate roads and streets and sidewalks?" We went, "No, no, no, no." The idea of minimum is to set a minimum bar. Here's the minimum level of connectivity that we want for people, for places, for people on bicycles, for people who are walking, for people who ride buses. Here's the bar, and we can go up from there. The "Minimum Grid" is the base-level of connectivity within the core community to be able to move about among these favorite places and among neighborhoods.

**How has the project been developing?** Gehl has been here. They came first in mid-March with the Community Foundation. They came again in May. They have been blown away by our community engagement here. When we have had public programs, we've had between 100 and 170 people at each of these programs. We have had the city planning department and engineering department engaged fully in workshops that we've undertaken. We've had volunteers surveying — students, neighbors, professionals. It's been a wonderful process to get the community involved in determining what do we value.

(Gehl) came back in September to present draft plans. That was a great time. We've used up lots of pads of sticky notes with everybody writing ideas and adding sticky notes to different plans and proposals. They will be back on Monday and Tuesday, Nov. 16 and 17. We will have a public program on Monday, Nov. 16, at 6 o'clock at the Columbus Museum. That will be the presentation of the final plans for the Minimum Grid and the proposed pilot projects.

**So you're hoping that the city planners and the people developing the grid are going to apply this to their plans. Is that how it works?** Yes.

**Some people may see areas like Midtown and Uptown getting so much attention and wonder why other areas like the Liberty District seem to be neglected. What's your response to that?**

I think the Liberty District is one of those essential connections in between Midtown and Uptown. I think it's very much being looked at and (we're) looking at long term possibilities for how do we revitalize this district. ... But it takes citizens who are invested in the process to give voice to that part of town. It's hard to make it happen if there's not the grassroots support for that reinvestment and revitalization. I think that's one of the great strengths of Midtown is there are so many people who have called this home for generations, newcomers who see a lifestyle that has convenience and character and community that they want.

**In the past you've talked about a lot of younger people moving to the area. Are you still seeing an influx of new residents?** I don't have data to support this. ... But anecdotally we see lots of young people moving in. We hear from a lot of young people: "I want to live in Midtown." We see that there are still opportunities for apartments, and there aren't as many available as some young

people would like. I think that, yes, this is increasingly a place of choice for those young people who are moving back to Columbus, who are staying here, who are students at CSU, who are young professionals, young families.

**What do you think is the attraction to the area for that demographic?** Oh, I think it's those 3 C's we talk about with Midtown: convenience, character and community, and a sense of authenticity. I keep coming back to that word, but this isn't a Disney World neighborhood. It's a real place. I think people sense that. There are opportunities. It's convenient to Uptown. It's convenient to Riverfront. It's convenient to most everybody's work. It's just a great place to be.

**Why should people in north Columbus care about the core of the city?** That's a good question. I think the reason is because the core of the city is the microcosm of the city. ... I think the success of the city as a whole is dependent on a healthy core. It's the heart. If the heart stops beating, the body eventually dies.

**Mayor Teresa Tomlinson held this position when she was elected mayor, is that correct?**  
She actually left to run for mayor.

**I imagine that was a hard act to follow.** That would be an understatement. ... It's interesting, both of us have chosen Columbus and Midtown as home. Neither of us grew up here, but this is a place that held appeal. I think, in some ways, we're very representative of those people we're trying to attract today. Somebody asked me at one point, "What's the main difference between you and Mayor Tomlinson?" I said, "Oh, let me count the ways. First of all, I need sleep and she apparently doesn't."

**Do you have any political aspirations?** I do not.

**So, you don't see this position as a launching pad for mayor or anything like that?**

No. ... I think we were very fortunate that Teresa laid such a great foundation here at MidTown. We have been able to benefit from that. We have a phenomenal board of directors who bring so many talents and different communities to the table, literally. I'm grateful all the time for the people I'm able to work with and learn from. They have been great guides and mentors. I have had three board presidents — John Sheftall, Virginia Peebles and Bennie Newroth — all with different interests and skill sets, and each who have guided me in great ways. I feel very fortunate to be able to do something I love doing. In fact, I felt that way ever since my days at the museum, that I've been able to enjoy work that is enriching and fulfilling.

#### **Bio**

**Name:** Anne King

**Age:** 60

**Hometown:** Ashland, Ky.

**Job:** Executive director of Midtown Inc.

**Prior jobs:** Doing independent work, primarily writing interpretive materials for museums in the Southeast. Prior to that, director of education at the Columbus Museum for 14 years.

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in economics and art history from Vanderbilt University; master's degree in public administration from Columbus State University. Graduate studies work at Wake Forest University and the University of North Carolina-Greensboro.

**Family:** Husband, Tom; daughter, Everett; son, Preston; son-in-law, Clark; grandsons, Thomas and Jack.