



Andy DeMonte



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Interviewer: Chad Comello
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Transcriber: Eric Skoglund

INTRODUCTION

Andy DeMonte has lived in Morton Grove since 1960. He went to various schools around Chicago and Morton Grove, including St. Martha's and Niles West. He began working for the Village of Morton Grove in 1969, shoveling asphalt as a member of the streets and alleys crew. While serving in the National Guard throughout the 1970s, Andy worked his way up through Morton Grove's Public Works department, working as, among other things, a street sweeper operator, pumping station operator, and Division Superintendent of the Water and Sewer Department, before becoming Director of Public Works in 2003. The father of two sons, he has stayed engaged around the community as Morton Grove baseball association board member, park commissioner, and leader of Morton Grove Days.

In this conversation, Andy shares stories of his life, exploring the village on his bike as a kid, dealing with a particularly bad snowstorm, and appreciating Morton Grove's residents and small-town feel.

AD: Andy DeMonte

Q: Question asked by interviewer, Chad Comello

Q: Where did you grow up?

AD: In Morton Grove. We moved in about 1960.

Q: So you were born here?

AD: Not born here. I was probably second, third grade when we came here. Came from the South Side, moved to La Grange, and then came to Morton Grove.

Q: A Chicago person.

AD: Yeah, pretty much all my life. Born in Jackson Park Hospital on the South Side.

Q: Do you have any early memories of Morton Grove?

AD: Oh God yeah, a lot of them. I think one of favorite ones, and is still going on because we brought it back, is that Santa Claus Comes to Town. We remember the Legionnaires doing it when we were kids. Then it kind of ended, and I think somewhere back in '87, '88, four of us were talking about it one day in a bar over

a beer and we thought, Why not try to do it again? So we did and it's been going on ever since.

Q: What else do you remember doing as a kid in Morton Grove?

AD: Oh, a lot of bike riding. A lot of exploring. Back then I don't think we watched our kids like I watched mine and people do now. It was "Get out of the house and see you at dinner", you know? So all you did was wander the neighborhoods and the forest preserve. Years ago, back behind all those factories along Austin Avenue, it was all forest preserve and some ponds back there, almost like sand beaches. We spent a lot of time playing back there.

Curly's Gas Station, which was at Austin and Lincoln—it was an old Sinclair station. Kind of the hangout when we were younger. Curly was the guy that owned the place and he'd go, "Come on, pump for me for a while, I got to run to the bank" or something. So he'd leave us in charge and he was a great guy. And I think that's it, the older generation when we were young. They were just great guys. They were World War II vets and some of the nicest people you'd ever want to meet. They really treated us well as kids.

Q: What do you remember about Morton Grove then that's different from now? You mentioned that there was not much supervision...

AD: You know, I think there were a lot more kids in families then. The population was a little higher than it is right now, but most of it was kids. Every family had three or four kids where now the trend is more one or two. So the kids all got together and did whatever. And things weren't organized like they are now. You got out and played ball or whatever, and if you didn't have enough players, left field was out. Until I came up to bat because I was left-handed, then right field was out. So things like that. Not as much organization.

Everybody knew their neighbors. I think you knew your neighbor better than certainly they do now. Somebody lost their job, the whole neighborhood got together and 'You buy them groceries this week and we'll buy it next week until they got back on their feet', you know? Where now I don't think you have that. The government takes care of you now if something happens.

Q: Right. What was your family like back then? Do you have siblings?

AD: I had two brothers and a sister. We lived on Monroe, 5800 block of Monroe. Lived there up to the time I got married. Then when I got married we moved to Des Plaines for about three years and just always wanted to get back to Morton Grove, because everything we did was here. So once we could afford it we bought a little bungalow on Mason Avenue and been there ever since. Probably been there 35 years now, 40 years.

Q: Did you have any favorites subjects in school or things you liked to do?

AD: No, not really. I went to St. Martha's up to about fifth grade, then I think they asked me to leave. Always battling a little bit. Then went to a school in Chicago around Devon and California, St. Timothy's. And I think eighth grade they asked me to leave. So I finished up at Lincoln.

Q: So a little bit of a troublemaker?

AD: Yeah. I don't know if I was so much trouble, but always battling somebody. Always fighting somebody. I was fine if they left me alone; I'd leave them alone. Then you get a little bit smarter when you get older. But school, I wasn't really a student. Went to high school, went to St. George in Evanston. They were closing, so in my junior year I transferred to Niles West. I actually dropped out of high school. So then from there I think I got a job at Monogram Models on Waukegan and worked there about six months and was able to hook up with the Village in about 1969. So I got that job and worked there about four months then joined the Air Force National Guard. Then through that I finished high school through a GED and continued with the village.

Q: What year was that?

AD: 1969. September '69 is when I started with the village. I think March of 1970 is when I went in the Air Force.

Q: OK, so that's Vietnam.

AD: Vietnam era, but National Guard; we weren't sent to Vietnam. We were just all local. Spent a lot of time in Colorado and Mitchell Field in Milwaukee.

Q: How long were you in the Air Force?

AD: Nine years. I reenlisted for three. I actually wanted to stay in for 20, but I could never get a security clearance. Nothing I ever did, but my father and grandfather, so. So the highest rank I could ever achieve was sergeant and couldn't go any higher with no security clearance. But I still liked it and stayed in for three more years and then I figured, I can't go anywhere so might as well just get out. And that was it.

Q: So then you were working for the village?

AD: Yeah. And actually in the National Guard you're still here. You're kinda that weekend warrior type thing. You go for two weeks in the summer camp or winter. Otherwise it's one weekend a month. So that's really what we did.

Q: So what sort of work were you doing for the village when you started?

AD: When I first started I think I was shoveling asphalt on the streets and alley crew. And from there I think they had an opening for a street sweeper operator, so I did that for a couple of years. Then I think I went back to the streets and alley crew as a foreman. Then after my first son was born I could remember begging to get on the water and sewer department just because they were the only ones that made any overtime. So I did that for a couple of years and then I can remember begging to get off the water and sewer department. (Laughter) Because it was just brutal in the winter. Oh my God it was horrible. I was young and could do it.

From there there was an opening at the pumping station. So I ended up going there. Most of my career, really, was there. Then I ended up the division superintendent of the pumping stations and then took over the whole water and sewer department. I was there when they offered me the position of director of public works. So I've been doing that since 2003 now.

Q: Yeah, you're the guy that makes sure everything works (laughter).

AD: We try. We do our best.

Q: Right, things happen. But I think, myself included, people don't really know how this stuff really works. So water and sewer was one thing you wanted to get on because of the overtime. What was that job like day to day?

AD: What you're doing is repairing water mains, sewers, curb drains, and cleaning and televising, and doing leak locates. You're busy every day. It's a great job. A lot of overtime, because in the winter the mains break like crazy, so you're out on a hundred main breaks in the winter.

Q: Is that a 24/7 on-call job?

AD: Oh absolutely. But that's all of public works. It's just these guys get called out much more. That and the pumping stations, because there's always a pump fail or something always happens over there too. My whole career has always been 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Q: Interesting. Is there a sort of thrill to that or does it become a grind after a while?

AD: I think at my age it's starting to get a grind. But when I was younger, I think for most of the guys it's a challenge. You're solving problems. A problem comes up and you solve it no matter what it might be.

Q: There's some sort of satisfaction to that?

AD: Oh absolutely.

Q: What's something people don't realize about this job that you wish they knew more about?

AD: Hmm. I don't know...

Q: You've had a lot of jobs over the years, so you could pick any one of them.

AD: Yeah. I think the biggest complaint we get is the cost. 'My taxes, my taxes'. People don't realize that we're only about a third, if not less—and that's for police and fire and public works and all the buildings we maintain. And I believe even the library budget comes under ours; we levee for you. They think all that they're paying in taxes is coming to us, and it's not. We provide so much more service and the majority of their taxes goes to the high school and the grade schools in their area.

Q: You're working with a limited amount.

AD: Oh absolutely. We give them a lot of services for basically a third of their taxes, especially when you consider police and fire also. That's huge. And people don't really have a grasp of that.

Q: Right. Taxes can be very... vague.

AD: Yeah, they look and see 'I pay \$10,000 a year in property taxes' and when they start yelling at us they think it all goes to us.

Q: I assume you've built relationships over the years, just having worked and lived here with lots of people. Any sort of relationships you've built that you've come to appreciate in that time, either with residents or with other staff?

AD: The residents have been great. I certainly can't complain. They provided me a way to feed my family and my wife and kids—I have two kids. You'll have a few residents that'll just beat you up. And usually they're mad for the second, so you take it and try to understand. And then usually when you see them again they're fine. They had an issue at the time and they wanted to lash out. That's really what it was. The residents have been great. All the mayors—I think I've worked under eight mayors. Trustees... they've all treated me very well and I certainly have no complaints. I love this town. I wouldn't have stayed here as long.

Q: Right, obviously you're from here and have relationships here. Did you ever have any desire to move away?

AD: No, no. When I was in Des Plaines I was there because I had to. I couldn't afford anything when we first got married. Took me three years to get back and so that was kind of what we did.

Q: So jumping back to that, how did you meet your wife?

AD: I think I had just got out of basic training and there was a place in Park Ridge called The Deep End, a dance hall. So I met some other girls that I knew there and Sherry happened to be one of them. She actually started going out with a friend of mine first. They went out for probably just a year then we started dating and then we were together for five or six years before we got married. And we've been married 41 years—it'll be 42 years coming up.

Q: Wow. So two kids you said?

AD: Two boys, 9 years apart. One's 39, one's 30. One's in Iowa, one's in Des Plaines.

Q: So what do you do when you're not director of public works?

AD: We just bought a house in Michigan on the lake. The reason we did is we've been going there for 30 years on vacation and got to be friends with the owner. He came to us and said in a couple of years we're going to get rid of the place. He's going to split it up amongst his kids and they're going to build houses. So he goes, 'I just want to let you know because I know you like it here, just wanted to give you a chance to look for something.' So we did and last year we bought a little place called Gun Lake. It's between Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids, so it's not too far away. We spend a lot of time there. I've got an old '66 Impala I work on a lot and drive around town.

Q: So you like the outdoorsiness of that house?

AD: Yeah, I like boating and relaxing. You go out there at night and you can actually see stars and it's in a very wooded area, so no lights at night. It's very nice.

I'll give you something that sticks in our mind, mine and all the other old guys: the winter of '78-79. One of those years, got a lot of snow, but a lot of cold too, so the snow never melted. It kept on accumulating on everybody's garages. We were out plowing and 'there goes another one'—somebody's house garage caved in through the weight of the snow. So as the day went on we went to pull in our trucks to put chains on the tires because we couldn't get any more traction, and while we were in there—thank God we had the trucks in there—our garage

roof caved in on Main Street. There were about 12 of us in there at the time and one guy got hurt really bad. The rest of us got really lucky, because when the roof came down it laid on top of the trucks when we were putting the chains on the tires. So we lost half the fleet and yet still had to plow snow. One of the guys that was working for me at the time, I see him hop in his car and I was like 'Where are you going?' and he's like 'We just lost all of our trucks and I'm going home'. 'Get out here'. So we stayed an extra three or four days to make sure that the town was plowed. The town put us up at the fire station for a little while and some guys up at one of the hotels. It was one of the worst years we've had. That always sticks in my mind as one of those things I'll never forget at public works.

Q: Any other moments like that, where you're like 'I can't believe this is happening right now'?

AD: Ah, no. A lot of them were snow related. Trying to get the town done. One of those times where you're getting 15-16 inches of snow. We lost a couple of employees who went home and never came back, had heart attacks at home. We're a pretty close group, so it hit everybody pretty hard. It seems like when people come there they usually stay. We have very few people that leave after four years and find something else. Most of our guys are there 30 years. I've been there 49. We've got one guy that's on his 41st, and most of them 20 and 30

years. It's been a great place to work, can't complain at all. And most of the guys grew up in town even if they don't live here now.

Q: Seems like a good testament to you and other people in charge that people stick around.

AD: Eh, I don't know if it's me. I like to think I'm a little part of it, but there were people before me and there will be the people after me too.

Q: Is there anything else? Any other memories of Morton Grove that stick in your mind as a kid or later in life?

AD: I don't know, just the people themselves, all the organizations. I was on the park board too for a while, for about 16 years. If you get involved, it's kind of rewarding. I've always looked at Morton Grove as almost like Mayberry. You know three-quarters of the people in town. I don't know how, out of 23,000 people, but you do. Whether it's the carnival—we've been involved in running that—or Morton Grove Days, the fireworks, you get to know most of the people then. It's usually the same people that volunteer all the time. I think that's probably the best thing I can say about Morton Grove: even though it's down to 22-24,000 people, it's more like a smaller community.