

# Fell's Point Out of Time



## Lisa Chaplin Suit Interview, December 12, 2003

**Interviewer: Jacquie Greff**

**[Jacquie]**

Tell me ... who you are, what you do, how you got into Fells Point.

**[Lisa]**

OK, well. I am Lisa Suit and I own the Fells Point Flower Shoppe. I actually came here because friends of mine were in Fells Point looking for a new location. We all had stores out in Ellicott City. And they called me and said, "You have GOT to go down here. There's a florist for sale. This is your area. This is you. You will love it. You have to go." And so I did. And that's pretty much how it happened. I came in and I met with the woman that owned the florist previously and decided to buy it from her. So, that's how I got here.

**[Jacquie]**

And what attracted you to Fells Point?

**[Lisa]**

There's a feeling to it. You know, I don't even know. There's just something about this that said home. That just welcomed me. And I knew I was home. It was really weird, actually. Because I was just, like, OK, this is it. I love this area. And actually after we got here and my kids, it was about, we'd been here maybe 6 months, 7 months, and I remember saying to my kids I was thinking maybe we'd sell the house and move down here. They literally went home and packed that day. Packed everything. And I'm like, no, no, girls, we have to, you know, put it on the market, you have to sell -- it takes time. They were packed and ready to go, because they love it, too. This is home.

[Short break while Lisa answered phone. 01:01:24:18]

**[Jacquie]**

OK, tell me how you got into the community, how you've found it since you've been here. What you like about it. What you don't like.

**[Lisa]**

Oooh.... This is not a good day for that. OK. The community. When I first got here, I pretty much stayed in my store and was just getting acclimated and didn't really know... I really didn't meet a whole lot of people until I'd been here 6 months or so. And then I had joined the Business Association, thinking that that would be the way to get to know people. And then I actually started the Marketing Group, which really got me involved in the community. Because that was geared

towards more the retailer, to do advertising and marketing. Because I found that the Business Association really wasn't concentrating on that. They were more on the development that was going on around us and other issues. Food and Beverage had their own association to do their marketing. And the retailers basically were just doing their own thing. Everybody being small business and being pretty much individually run, there wasn't a lot of income, so there wasn't a lot of money for advertising. So, I thought well, if you combine efforts and everybody pitches in, \$50 or \$100, that would get us a big ad that would cover all of us. So that's how that really started. It was really set up, not really as an organization, but as a networking group. Let's just get together and throw it up against the wall and see what sticks. And whatever works.... I might have an idea that really doesn't quite work for me, but it might work for you. And you might have an idea that doesn't really work for you, but might work for me. So, it just becomes a way to work together. That's really how I started and what I wanted from it. And it started growing, and we started doing some different promotions and different events. And that's been going on for about 3 years now, that I've done that. And it became a committee of the Business Association to kind of bring ;even more camaraderie to the community. And so that's really how I got out there. So I'm, you know, pounding the pavement talking to everybody. Always. [Laughs.] Just trying to keep everybody up on what's happening. I totally believe in everybody working together and helping one another.

[01:04:03:04]

**[Jacquie]**

What's it like doing business in Fells Point? Compared to maybe other areas where you've been, or whatever. As a small business person in Fells Point, what's it like?

**[Lisa]**

Slow right now. [Laughs.] Which I think everybody would tell you. And that I think is nationwide. The one thing that I find kind of interesting is that I don't see the community supporting the businesses. And in my business, it's probably different than in a lot of the others, being a service. I have gifts and I have the storefront, but basically as a florist, it's people calling me. So I do probably more local business than a lot of people, but a major complaint that a lot of the businesses here have is that the people that live here don't shop here.

**[Jacquie]**

Do you have any idea why or any thoughts?

**[Lisa]**

I don't know why, really. I'm not sure if it's that they don't want to mess with the tourist, because we are a tourist destination, and that's a good thing for the businesses, but a lot of times people don't want to mess with all these other people in their home, you know. It's kind of territorial I guess. I don't really know, though, but I find it very interesting that they don't. Because we have everything here. The only thing we don't have is a drug store. Need a drug store. But other than that, there really is everything here that you need. And so I don't understand why people don't do more local shopping.

And actually, we're working on that. One of the Board Members actually for the Association went to the Homeowners meeting and talked to them about maybe doing a Local's Card, which I think is an awesome idea. Just because then, if you have your Local's Card, you get some kind of preferential treatment. And that would be up to each individual business. Some may do some kind of percentage off. Some will do gift wrapping. Some will do a special promotion that they have in store that they will extend to them. I could give out a rose to everybody that comes in. So it will be up to the individual what they do. But I think it's a way to bring those warm fuzzies in. Because I know for me, I'd much rather go into a place that recognizes me as someone who lives there and shops there and can say, even if they don't remember my name, they're going to remember probably the crazy hair or something and say "Oh hey, how are....". They recognize, they know me. And I think everybody feels that way. So if you have that little Local's Card and people come in and they show, "Hey, I'm a local" and then when you see them, when you pass them on the street you can say hi, because you're going to recognize that they're someone that lives here. And then they're going to want to come into your store because you get that kind of a friendly thing going with them. And that's the way I think it should be.

**[Jacquie]**

What is Fells Point to you, what is the geography?

**[Lisa]**

[Laughs.] That's a big question for a lot of people, isn't it? I actually think of Fells Point as ... I actually go from where Boston ... to me, that's still Fells Point. That's kind of the cut-off. I know the "correct" demographics are ... I think most people consider Wolf... I consider Washington Street still part of it. But I really think of Fells Point as being from Boston where you come in on Aliceanna and then which goes up to Chester, but that area west to basically Central, in my mind. That's all Fells Point.

**[Jacquie]**

And how far north?

**[Lisa]**

I would say to Washington Hill, which is what? Fayette? No, Lombard.

**[Jacquie]**

So Spanish town is part of Fells Point?

**[Lisa]**

I think so. I think it's all ... yea ... it's all Fells Point. I know it's considered "Upper" Fells Point and I guess now it's called Spanish Town. I don't understand why there are all these different titles. Fells Point is Fells Point. Canton is Canton.

**[Jacquie]**

I've talked to some people who say Spanish Town and others Upper Fells Point. In the city web site, it's still Upper Fells Point. And the historic district... Do you see those as being really different places? Or is there enough similarity that you kind of....

[Break to adjust microphone and answer phone.]

**[Jacquie]**

And what is Fells Point? Some people think of Fells Point as just the historic district. And I've had some homeowners say, "Yeah, but they always seem to have a different agenda, and I really don't consider them Fells Point." Talk a little bit about ... is there a different energy in different parts of Fells Point?

**[Lisa]**

It's all East Baltimore to me. [Laughs.] Which still just blows my mind that homes are selling for \$800,000 in East Baltimore, but that's ... Because I remember the East Baltimore of 20 years ago when....

**[Jacquie]**

What is East Baltimore? Some of the people that watch this are never....

**[Lisa]**

Oh they probably won't even know what East Baltimore is. East Baltimore, it was just kind of the other side of ... I guess if you go on the other side of the tracks kind of thing. But 20 years ago this was definitely the lower income and houses were nothing. They were \$5,000 for a house that now is selling for probably \$150,000 to \$200,000. Which is just mind boggling to me.

You know, I don't know, as far as the boundaries go.

[Brief break to adjust mic.]

This is one of my floppy old shirts from last year when I had the broken or fractured shoulder and I couldn't get half my clothes on.

Boundary-wise, I guess when you really think about it... I think of Fells Point as more than just the Historic District. You're right. Most people say Thames (Tems anywhere else in the world) but Thames, which runs along the water and Broadway up like a block, maybe 2 blocks, is what people consider Fells Point. But there is a lot more to it. I'm here on Fleet Street and I consider myself still in Fells Point [sound of truck going by], because I'm bordering on Washington. But this to me is Fells Point. I guess Fells Point proper would have to be to about Eastern, if you want to consider the business district of it, I guess, would go up to about Eastern and then still go over to Washington.

**[Jacquie]**

Can you describe it? How does it change? What is it like?

**[Lisa]**

Well, there are definitely more businesses that are tourist-based farther down, along the water, and in that first... I would say they are more tourist-based than the businesses as you go farther up. Because then you get into your jewelry stores, the antique stores, more flower shops, but more of a general business that is not necessarily depending on the tourist to keep them supported.

**[Jacquie]**

Does that still have the same Fells Point charm and draw to you, or was there certain parts of Fells Point that you are more drawn to? You talked about your reaction about having come here in the first place...

**[Lisa]**

I think it's the overall feel. Yeah.

[01:12:28:20]

Because I started out actually in the 700 block of Broadway which would be part of the Historic District, part of the tourist area. And I've traveled a bit in the last year... [Laughs.] with all my different locations...

**[Jacquie]**

What happened with your locations?

**[Lisa]**

My first move, I moved to the 600 block of Broadway because it was a larger space and it had a back yard so I could do more garden kind of things in the summer. I could do the Christmas trees right there in the same location. Because I tried that outside...

[Break while someone came in.]

So we were on the move, the floating florist for a while... So I moved to the 600 block because it was bigger and had the back yard so I could do the trees and garden things. And I'd been there for.... I guess I was there for about 8 months, give or take. And in that time ... I moved there in April. In May was when I discovered the lumps under my arm, which turned out to be the recurrence of breast cancer. So I started chemotherapy and went through all that while I was in that new place. And the end of November, the owners of the building came to me and said that they had sold the building and that the new owners wanted to be in by the end of the next month. So I had to pack everything up and put it in storage ... actually one of my customers put it in his warehouse ... thinking that I would just find a new place within a couple of weeks and move into the new place, which didn't happen.

There was not too many places available where there was .... there was no where available where I could get the coolers in and the sinks -- being a florist it's a little bit different than just setting up a retail store because there's certain things that I need to have, and the building has to have doors

that are big enough. And being in a historic area, the buildings are not always made for that. So, I floated. I worked out of my friends places for a while. I worked out of Su Casa, which is a furniture store. I worked out of Bohager's for Valentines Day because I needed a large area for cooler space. And they had walk-in coolers and a big kitchen that I could use. So I worked there for that holiday. And then I worked out of the back of a candle shop, Shades of Light, but I was in the back room and I couldn't get a cooler, I couldn't get anything in there, so that didn't work. I worked from home a lot during all that course of time.

And finally found this space a couple of months ago, in September or October, I found this. And finally got moved in. Because there was a movie that possibly wanted to film here and so I was going back and forth with the Maryland Film Office and the Production Manager and the whole bit. They loved the location but the street was way too busy to have to block off for three weeks. But that took some time to figure that all out. So, it's been a long time since I've been in my own little space. [Laughs.] But I'm very happy to be in my space now because I love this building. It's an awesome building. Love this place.

**[Jacquie]**

You sound like you got a fair amount of support from friends while you were moving around Fells Point.

**[Lisa]**

I actually, this community, and maybe that's the air that I feel about here or whatever it is about this place that made me say home is -- the people are awesome. I can't tell you how awesome the people have been to me with all that I've been through. During my moving stages, yes, they were there to offer me places to work out of, to pick things up -- if customers needed to pick something up, bring it here, they can pick it up here, that kind of thing. You can work out of this space.

[01:16:21:23]

When I was going through chemo, they totally supported me, worked in my store for me, fed me. Couldn't walk in anywhere where somebody didn't feed me. There was not a restaurant around that did not feed me. With me saying, "No, no, no ... I'm fine. I'm fine." No, no, no, you're not eating. You need this. Take this. Here. And they would all feed me. They put together a fundraiser for me.

**[Jacquie]**

Tell me about that.

**[Lisa]**

It was an awesome, awesome party. We actually had about 200 people that came to this party that was held at Bohager's. I had 2 friends that were DJs that offered to play. Other friends that had a band played. 30 people shaved their heads for me. So that it was a head-shaving party for my birthday to raise money for my medical bills while I was going through the chemo. Yeah, it was amazing to see all these people... It was overwhelming. And I have pictures of all these guys with their shaved heads in my like pink and purple and hot blue and all those wigs that I wore. I have

pictures of all these guys with those wigs on. It was the most awesome thing anyone's ever done for me. It was overwhelming.

**[Jacquie]**

I didn't go to it, but I remember seeing all the pictures on the stores....

**[Lisa]**

And people to this day, when I say I own the flower shop .... they all know somebody that shaved their head for me or that went to the party. I had one woman say to me "Oh, my gosh, my roommate came to your party and she came home with this just wonderful feel ... she came home just talking about ... that was just the most wonderful feeling to a party that I've ever been to. It was the most uplifting, most amazing party I've ever been to. She still talks about it." So people still ... that was a year ago and people still talk about it. Because it was, it was the most amazing thing to be a part of. And that they did it for me, it's totally overwhelming for me. But everybody just had such a wonderful, wonderful time. And we still talk about it. We still laugh about it. People will still come by and [rubs hair] ... "is this still you, is that really you?" "It's me now." Because a year ago, there was nothing there but a lot of wigs. Different wigs. And I think that's what's so wonderful about this community.

[01:19:06:27]

When we had the flood, when Isabel came through, everybody helped one another. Kayaks came by and rescued people. I helped with a fundraiser for friends of mine that lost everything, that were in Thames One Apartments down here on the first floor was totally flooded. So there was a fundraiser held for that that I helped to put together.

I've done fundraisers for different things, and everybody always out to help. It's a family. We are like brothers and sisters. We fight like brothers and sisters sometimes. But, we are a family and we're there when we need to be.

**[Jacquie]**

Now without naming any names, you've mentioned some bar owners. And some of these bar owners are somewhat controversial in the community. Is the community somewhat divided on some issues and is everybody as supportive as you say? Or are there divisions?

**[Lisa]**

There are definitely divisions. There will always be divisions. Even though we're all business owners or whatever, we all still have our own interests at heart, obviously. There are things that some business owners, be it bar, be it retail or whatever, that they are going to advertise and do things their way, which maybe other people don't agree with. That's kind of the way it almost has to be. That's America. That's what is so great about our country. As long as you're not breaking laws and hurting people, it's fine. There's always going to be division. I think some of that division probably is jealousy-based at times, because maybe Joe Blow is doing things the way you don't like, but he's successful. And so there's some jealousy, I think, that comes into play. Ego comes into play a lot of times with it, which maybe that's the jealousy thing, too. That's anywhere, though.

[01:21:03:27]

**[Jacquie]**

If you had to describe the major community issues, just from a generic standpoint, not from yourself but as a member of the community, what are the big community issues these days?

**[Lisa]**

Cleanliness, as far as the streets and the overall cleanliness of the area. Parking is always an issue. It's the city. Parking is tough. We now have the parking garages, which definitely helps. That's always going to be an issue for people.

Panhandlers, that's a big issue, I think for everyone, whether you're a business owner, whether you're a resident, whether you own a home, whether you rent a home. Panhandlers - that affects everybody because they are, they're there. They definitely bother the tourist. They bother anybody visiting here. They bother us. Most of them know us, if you've been around for a while, pretty much, these guys, when they see me, they start and as soon as soon they recognize me, they go, "Oh, never mind." Because I just tell them I don't need to hear their story again -- 'cause they always have a story as to why they need money or whatever. And if I really believed that they needed help, I would help them. I've offered work to different ones -- they don't show up. Because I feel that if you truly need the money and want to work for it, then fine, I will pay you and I will help you. But if you're just going to stand on the corner and bum money so you can go drink or do drugs or whatever it is that you're doing with it, no. I'm not going to help you. So they have their stories. And if their stories change all the time, then I know that they're really looking for work or looking to better themselves.

But if I think that they're really trying to find work then yeah, I will help them, and I've offered them jobs. I had one kid, actually, when I was decorating the square for the holidays, and he was being yelled at by one of the people that worked there because he was skateboarding all around and just being kind of obnoxious. And so I asked him to leave. And I said, "Look, you're kind of bothering us. If you can just go skateboard at the park, just not right around where we are, I'd appreciate it." And he's like, "Well, I have the right to be here." And I said, "You do have the right to be here." And he's like: "Well, I'm just trying to make money." And I said, "How are you trying to make money? You're skateboarding." "Because people pay me to skateboard." And I said, "Who's paying you to skateboard? You have to explain that to me because I don't get that one." "Oh, yeah, if they see me out here skateboarding, they'll pay me." I said, "Are you really looking to make money? Is that what you want to do?" He's like: "Yeah". And I'm like: "Fine." And I gave him my card, and I said "You call me. Because I have work you can do. I just moved into a new location. I've got some clean-up." He said, "What do I have to do?" And I said, "I have clean-up. I have a garden in the back that needs some work done. It's labor that I need. But if you really are serious about working, then call me." He didn't call me. I still see him skateboarding in the square. And when he sees me, he goes the other way. Cause he's really not. So that's the kind of person that we really would prefer not be around bothering people. And he might be a perfectly nice kid, but he's out bumming money and using his skateboarding as an excuse. But, yeah, panhandling is a big issue around here.

[01:25:08:07]

That's probably, as far as community issues... I think the biggest business concern issue would be the lack of business that's down here right now.

**[Jacquie]**

What do you attribute that to?

**[Lisa]**

I don't know if it's the economy in general, if it's nationwide. I know everybody's off to a certain degree. But Fells Point seems to be not on anybody's map right now as a destination. We just don't have the people coming through here that we used to. Whether that's tourists, or whether it's locals, whatever, we just don't have the people coming in our stores. I was talking with one of the other business owners the other day, and she's like: "I have six people coming into my store in the course of the day. That's it."

**[Jacquie]**

Now the bars seem to do pretty well, though. Halloween was mobbed.

**[Lisa]**

Halloween is always mobbed. That's kind of a tradition, I guess. Halloween is totally nuts down here. But I would say on any other given night, it's not happening.

I was out last night. And I was at Rodos and Mike said that he had the most people that night that he's had in probably two weeks. And he was not full. He had a decent crowd. He said he's been very slow. I looked in a couple of different places. Max's was not busy, and that's one that usually is. I don't think we do have the people we used to. I don't think the bars are doing as well as people think. Everybody thinks the bars always do well, because there's so many. Everybody: "Oh, the bars are fine. They don't need any help. They're fine." They're not fine. Power Plant Live has taken a lot from this area. Which is OK in one way in that they've taken a lot of the young kids that are trying to drink under-age, that we don't want here. So it's fine that they've kind of gone over there. The problem is, the other people don't know that those kids aren't here any more. So the general conception is, "Oh, Fells Point is just a bunch of kids down there drinking." The reality is, the people that are coming here now, I would say, you've got more of the 25 and over group that are coming, but in small amounts. We need to get more of those people here. And that same customer that is coming to the bar, is going to be my customer. That's going to be your customer. That's going to be the gift shop customer. That's going to be ... the toy store customer. We all really do have the same customer, in general. I think people tend to forget that. Because people think, oh, the night time is just the bar crowd. It's not.

[01:28:14:03]

There's a lot more to Fells Point than people realize. There are a lot of stores here. There are very neat little stores here that have things that you can't find everywhere else. Which is nice. That's

what I think the charm of Fells Point is. It does have this eclectic little collection. You've got some shops that are totally funky. They are completely off the wall in their product. And then you also have the very conservative. It runs the gamut, which is nice. You can find things here that you're not going to find everywhere else. You're not going to find it at Target or Wal-Mart. Nothing against them, but we're not a chain. We don't have chain stores here. At all. There's not one.

**[Jacquie]**

If you could stereotype the types of people you see around Fells Point, homeowners, visitors, store owners... Give me some stereotypes. Kind of describe the typical ... whatever.

**[Lisa]**

Oooh.... Stereotypes. Well, there's actually a couple of typical ... You've definitely got your artsy type of person. Definitely have the artsy, creative people. And then we have the extreme opposite, too. We have the very conservative, button-down... Which is kind of funny. But it all blends. It all works, which is kind of a neat thing. I would say the overall feel, to me, of Fells Point is that it's definitely an eclectic, kind of funky, fun, almost Soho kind of feel to it. That's what I get. I get more of a European kind of feel to the whole area, which I like.

[01:30:15:02]

**[Jacquie]**

If you looked in a crystal ball, what do you see this place being like 10 or 20 years from now?

**[Lisa]**

Oooh.... I wish I had that crystal ball! I see, of course, growth and development. It's going up everywhere. Hopefully, and I won't say this from the crystal ball, but hopefully what I see is that as the development goes on and envelopes us, we stay as the quaint community that we are that becomes kind of the place that people can escape to. Away from the chain stores and the tall buildings. Because we still have the historic buildings. We still have the cobblestone streets, or Belgian block I guess they're called, not cobblestones. I've been corrected on that one. Ours is a quaint ... It's got that old-world charm to it. So hopefully that becomes people's escape or sanctuary. It's a magical place. It really is. It's very magical. And I would love to see that stay, and not get devoured by the development that goes on around us. That it kind of becomes the safety spot for people to go to.

**[Jacquie]**

Do you see that happening? Or do you think there's a real chance that it won't get devoured? That the development will respect it somehow?

**[Lisa]**

I think that the development that goes around us, that's going up, is gonna try to. Because that's a human nature kind of thing. That's corporate nature or whatever. It will kind of try to do this taking over. Because it's definitely coming from the East. It's coming from the West. It's definitely coming both ways. I think, historically, it does just kind of take over and it all grows this way [using hands].

But I think there are enough of us squeaky wheels here that we can kind of keep our little magical wall up, if you would, to keep that from happening. Because I think people that are here, that live here, that work here, believe in Fells Point. That's bottom line.

Passions are usually, are always in the right place. That's one thing I've learned from dealing with different people in this community, different associations, whatever. I think the passions are always in the right place. They just don't always know how to convey it. Don't always know how to talk to people about it. So it sometimes ... doesn't come off the right way. But I think the passions of the people here are all in the right place. And I think we're all heading towards that same goal. We're just all on kind of different paths. Eventually we'll all get there. Or even if we stay on the different paths, all those paths will kind of cross over one another, so that it all still goes to that common goal, which is to keep the historic aspect of Fells Point intact. And not be devoured. And not be taken over. And become the place that everybody goes, "You've got to go to Fells Point, it's such an awesome place." Because it is. People just don't know that yet.

[01:33:43:28]

I tell people that all the time. I was at a hotel taking a delivery the other day. And these women were getting directions on how to go to the Inner Harbor. And I just kind of turned to them and said, "Excuse me, why are you going to the Inner Harbor? Just out of curiosity. And they said, "'Cause where else do you go? We're from out of town. We're here for a meeting. We don't know where else to go." And I said, "I gotta tell you where to go. You've got to go to Fells Point." Like: "What's that?" "It's this great little place. It's before the Inner Harbor. It's such a cool place. There's shops. There's restaurants. There's bars. There's everything. And it's just a really cool place. There's historic buildings. You can just walk around the streets and you'll see these great old buildings. It's just a really neat place to go to. If you've never been, you've got to just stop in there and take a look. And they're like: "That's a great idea. That's wonderful. Where do we... Who should we see... What stores...." So I gave them lists of different stores. I asked them what their interests were and told them what stores they should go in. Suggested different restaurants. And that's what I think all of us ambassadors of Fells Point should do. But I really believe that. Any time I meet anybody and they ask where I am, I'm like: "I'm Fells Point...." My card goes to them. Any questions about it, call me. I'll be glad to give you directions, tell you where to go, what to talk to... That kind of thing. And I think everybody should be doing that. Hopefully they are. I don't know.... As the self-appointed ambassador... I just so totally believe in this area, that I'm always talking about it. I love it.

**[Jacquie]**

That's really good. Thank you.

**[Lisa]**

You're welcome.