Lisa G.: You look like you getting ready to take a picture for a magazine.

Lorne Coombs: No. This is a mugshot for jail.

Interviewer: Oh, So thank you for meeting with us today. To start, can you introduce yourself?

Lisa G.: I'm Lisa G.

Lorne Coombs: And I'm Lorne Coombs.

Interviewer: Great, thank you. Can you tell me about your history with West Baltimore Street?

Lisa G.: We have been business owners on West Baltimore Street since 1997. We're next door at the laundromat, and I had a tax business next door but now we're in this location and we've been here since December.

Interviewer: Okay. How did your business end up on West Baltimore Street?

Lorne Coombs: Strange. Lisa worked at a bank down here at the 800 block of Baltimore Street.

Lisa G.: Carrollton Bank.

Lorne Coombs: Carrollton Bank, and I'd just retired from General Motors after 35 years, and I had nothing to do and she said it was a laundromat next door for sale. So my brother had retired from his job, so the three of us decided to go in the laundromat business. After we signed the papers, I think it was a week later my brother passed away and it just left me and Lisa there.

Lisa G.: Correct.

Lorne Coombs: I knew nothing about laundromats. I'd been building automobiles for 35 years, and we just got into it and here we are still down here. Yep.

Lisa G.: And with my banking background I started a direct deposit program next door. We had a lottery machine, we did bill payments, we did money grams, and I knew some of the people in the neighborhood.

Interviewer: So eventually did the laundromat close and you moved over here?

Lisa G.: Yes. The new owners of the building no longer wanted us there, and so we're here. I'm still doing my tag and title work in the back and preparing income taxes, and Mr. Lonnie basically runs this area, the café. You know how Capital One has a café? Well we have a café.

Interviewer: Do you get a lot of foot traffic for coffee and-

Lisa G.: I would say so.

Lorne Coombs: I would, yeah. We get all, a lot of the people that across the street, waiting on the bus will come in early in the morning and get a coffee. And mainly the people in the neighborhood, when they found out that the laundromat was closing, and it was a possibility that me and Lisa was leaving this area. They was very sad. Because we've been around here for over 20 years, and we've seen kids from-

Lisa G.: Grow up.

Lorne Coombs: Grow up. We've seen second generation around here. And they was really upset. And Jenny next door that owns the restaurant told us to come look at this. And we looked at it, and by the grace of God everything just fell right into place.

Lisa G.: I'll tell you what I like about it. After being here for 22 years of being in the neighborhood for 22 years, and now that we're here without bulletproof glass, and we can actually touch our customer if we wanted to, the conversations that we have with them are more engaging than ever before.

Lisa G.: I have found out more about my customers now than within a 22 year period. Now isn't that strange? And we call this the Situation Room. Everybody has a situation. And people come in and they buy soups and coffee and tea, they sit down, they have conversations. And especially with March Madness going on right now. But anyway-

Lorne Coombs: Just like, it's just like a bar. You go in a bar, you have a drink, you tell the bar maid or the bartender all of your business. And you think they just going to hold it in a safe and that's it, that's as far as it goes. But they come in here, and they say well, Mr. Lonnie, Miss Lisa, what do you think about this? What do you think about that?

Lisa G.: They do.

Lorne Coombs: You know. This is everyday, you know.

Lisa G.: They kind of look up to us, and that's a nice feeling.

Lorne Coombs: You know, you have people in this particular area that really-

Lisa G.: Need help.

Lorne Coombs: Need help, and they depend on me and Lisa. If it's some wording, a housing project, or whatever, they just think that me and Lisa has all this knowledge, and so they say well, go to Mr. Lonnie, go to Miss Lisa, they know.

Lisa G.: If we don't, we'll find out.

Lorne Coombs: Yeah.

Interviewer: That's great. Sounds like you're really connecting with your neighbors and the community.

Lisa G.: Yeah. They're like, I see them more than my family members, than my aunts and my uncles and my cousins.

Lorne Coombs: True.

Lisa G.: So these people, they are our family. We have fostered some good relationships.

Lorne Coombs: We don't have, all of us seem to have this certain crime. But over a 20 year period, we'd just seen so many people grow up around here, it's like we have our own protection. Nobody messes with Mr. Lonnie and Miss Lisa. And they're like our kids. Are you all right? They come in in the morning. They say hi Mr. Lonnie. They go in the back, hi Miss Lisa. Come to get their coffee and donuts, and they go on.

Lisa G.: But there are problems. Definitely problems. Homelessness, a lot of homeless people living in these abandoned buildings. And they get a check each month. Drugs definitely. You can see that. The vacant properties. Oh there are problems, real problems.

Lorne Coombs: Twenty years ago when we came here there wasn't a vacant house-

Lisa G.: On this block.

Lorne Coombs: On this block.

Lisa G.: Or in the vicinity.

Lorne Coombs: It was a couple of businesses here. We opened up 20 years ago, 6:00 in the morning. And we were here until 8:00 or 9:00 at night.

Lisa G.: In the evening, yeah.

Lorne Coombs: Because it was that busy. And then we started seeing things go down. You know, the vacant houses, the lack of communication from the city to do this or do that. So things changed so, and we lost money. Because weren't nobody coming in to wash clothes. So we've seen our business actually go down.

Lisa G.: But you can look around, you can look outside. The vacant properties and all this. And there's a lot of people living in these abandoned ones. We call them abandominiums, yeah. They need housing. They need somebody to help them.

Interviewer: I was just going to say, that's a short period of time, 20 years is not a lot of time for what you see walking on the street.

Lisa G.: You say it's not a lot of time?

Interviewer: I mean, it's relatively quick. You're saying that all these houses were full.

Lisa G.: Yeah.

Interviewer: But in the space of 20 years, it's so different now.

Lisa G.: I don't know how the landlords can get away with leaving these buildings looking like this. I don't know how they can get away with it. I really don't.

Interviewer: What are some other challenges for your business, you said you had to downsize because of the lack of foot traffic. What other challenges have you faced?

Lorne Coombs: Well you know, from a business point of view, it's the little bit of foot traffic we get, and it's about the word West Baltimore, West Baltimore, you know. It started with, even though Freddie Gray is on the other end of West Baltimore, it still affects this part of West Baltimore. So people are reluctant to drive in this area. If they drive, they just look and they keep on going.

Lorne Coombs: Some people look at the signs up there, and they stop. My thing, I'm not going anywhere. I love this area. I really and truly do. And I love the people here. They just have to be given a chance. And I don't think that this area is going to stay like this. I think eventually it will change.

Lisa G.: I mean, you're close to 295, 95, 395, you're not far from downtown, you're in between two major hospitals. I mean I don't understand why West Baltimore Street can't be a Greenmount Avenue with local businesses from one corner to the other. Monument Street, North Avenue, even Pennsylvania Avenue. I don't understand, I don't understand.

Lorne Coombs: Why you can go for blocks and blocks and blocks and see nothing. You know, it's been rumored that they just want this area to go completely down to nothing, like they did over DC, and then all of a sudden a group of guys come up and they buy, and now what you got? You got the Verizon Center, you got all these major high-end shops. Thirty years ago, DC was like Baltimore, believe it or not. I mean, I used to go over there. It was run down and a couple of guys came in, bought everything up, and now look at it.

Lisa G.: Let me ask you a question. Have you guys talked to the people that live in the community?

Interviewer: We're working on it. So you're our first interview, so we're happy to talk to some more people in the community.

Lisa G.: Oh, okay. Because I think it needs to be like a supermarket around here. Fresh fruits and vegetables and juice, things that are healthy, instead of a lot of carry-out joints, which are grease.

Interviewer: Chicken box, chicken box, chicken box, chicken box.

Lisa G.: And places for people to go and job placement. I know there's a few places going towards downtown, but the kids around here, the kids are just so used to yellow tape, they're so used to the boys on the corner. I mean, they just don't have a lot to look forward to. They really don't.

Lorne Coombs: We were, when the guys was buying the building next door, it's a huge building, huge. It's so huge, you can get a Chuck E. Cheese in there. That's how huge it is. And that was one of the ideas I was throwing to the new buyers. Because in this area, if somebody want to have a birthday party for their kids, they got to get on a bus, or they got to get a car, they got to go to route 40 or Glen Burnie-

Lisa G.: They have to go to another neighborhood.

Lorne Coombs: Another neighborhood. There's nothing in here, if you wanted to throw a party for your kid. You have to do it in your backyard, and you can't get all the kids in there. And this, there's plenty of buildings around here, plenty of space. It can be done where the money doesn't have to go out of the neighborhood. It can stay right in the neighborhood.

Interviewer: So what else would you like to see in the neighborhood besides a supermarket and more opportunities for children?

Lisa G.: Maybe some housing for the homeless. Instead of having them over there illegally, they get $771 a month. Maybe fix up these joints around here, and only charge maybe $200, have somebody manage the property. And that's what I think, housing for the homeless, more things for kids, a nice market with some healthy food. Mr. Lonnie was talking about some high-end retail stores. I don't know about that because most of the folks around here are first of the month people. They have money, first of the month, and then around the 10th, everybody's struggling, business owners as well.

Lorne Coombs: You know, me and Lisa, you have to agree or disagree. If money is going to come into a neighborhood, if you're going to get some investors, they're going to want a return on their money. So you would have to put certain things in the area that would draw certain people that's making more than 750, 700 dollars a month. You have to get people in the area that makes at least $100,000. This way, people with that type of income would draw other people. And you can get, I didn't mean to use the word high-end, but you could get some good investors to say well look, let's put an apartment place in here, and let's charge them $1300 a month, and the neighborhood would automatically change. Not saying that you would push the low income people out, but you could mingle these two groups of people could actually mingle together, the low income and the high income people. They can mingle. And that's my thing.

Interviewer: Lisa, do you want to say-

Lisa G.: No. I'm waiting for your next question.

Interviewer: So what are some of the changes you have seen in the area, for good or bad, that we haven't talked about, and how do you feel about them?

Lorne Coombs: Honestly, I haven't seen any changes. Nothing. Absolutely.

Lisa G.: It's gone down.

Lorne Coombs: I've seen, the only positive thing I've seen is Southwest Partnership, and Microsite. I've seen them aggressively trying to change. I've seen that. Other than that, zero.

Lisa G.: I mean, any time you have 13, 14, 15 year old kids on the corner selling drugs, it's unbelievable. Kids? Come on now. Usually old men do that. But kids, then you got kids out here. It's sad.

Lorne Coombs: We got first, second, third generation people around here doing the same thing.

Lisa G.: And the drug epidemic as you all know is horrible, with the Fentanyl. Horrible. As a matter of fact, with that in mind, we put a box of this behind the counter. And had to have used it one time. Unbelievable. That a shopkeeper would have to keep something like this in their place of business. Gentlemen standing where you are, Nicole, and I said, this man is getting ready to go out. And then the gentleman was outside in his car. Unbelievable.

Lorne Coombs: I'm not a doctor but I know how to use that. I've used it on that particular day and he woke up, he said, have you seen my mother? And hi Mr. Lonnie, and walked out the door. In other words, he didn't remember anything.

Lisa G.: When the ambulance got here he was gone.

Lorne Coombs: We used to keep, when we was at the laundromat, we used to keep a list of the people that died or got shot or killed in this area, and what a hundred, we had-

Lisa G.: In 2006, when I stopped keeping track of it, we had a hundred and three people on the list. People that actually walked into the store that we knew by name. Now a lot of them were older people. You know, they died from old age or from illnesses. But a hundred and three people's names on that list, from 19, I don't think I started it as soon as we got there, but I know I ended it in 2006, because the person that died worked for us, and she hated that list. And I couldn't bring myself around to put her name on it, so I just got rid of it. But it's just, it's sad. It's sad. I'm constantly on guard.

Lisa G.: You know, you're constantly looking, making sure, you know, nobody's about to jump the curb. Like a gentleman came up here about 4:30 p.m. on Monday September the 10th, and totaled my SUV, and something told me he was not going to do the right thing. So I stood out in the middle of the street. He backed up, he backed all the way out to Cary and Baltimore and made the right, and got as far as Schroeder and Emerson and jumped out and got in somebody else's car.

Lorne Coombs: He didn't realize what he did.

Lisa G.: What you mean he didn't realize what he'd done? Excuse me-

Lorne Coombs: He was actually high.

Lisa G.: He was high on something.

Lorne Coombs: He was high, and he actually passed out, and when he realized what he was doing, he tried to get away.

Lisa G.: Right. Well he did get away.

Lorne Coombs: Well he did.

Lisa G.: But we got his tag number, and went through, one of the things I do for a living, I ran the tag number, so but anyway.

Interviewer: So how do you keep hope?

Lisa G.: How do I what?

Interviewer: Keep hope. Because earlier you-

Lisa G.: I pray.

Interviewer: You pray?

Lisa G.: Yeah. Pray.

Lorne Coombs: We do that.

Lisa G.: My church is right on the corner by the way. And I'd like to give you guys some names of some other business owners to talk to as well. But my church is right on the corner, so we do a lot of praying.

Lorne Coombs: Pray every morning. Every morning I get up I pray-

Lisa G.: All day long.

Lorne Coombs: And when I get home at night, I sit at my kitchen table and all of my bills, and I have a little high ball and I pray again, because I got up, came down here to work, and they're home.

Lisa G.: Right.

Lorne Coombs: You know, I think they're doing a lot in the city. I'm not going to say they're not. But for over twenty years, nobody has mentioned Baltimore Street. I hear about North Avenue, I hear about Pennsylvania Avenue, I hear various things-

Lisa G.: Park Heights.

Lorne Coombs: Park Heights.

Lisa G.: They're even doing some work up there.

Lorne Coombs: John Hopkins, over there. But nobody says nothing about Baltimore street. Nothing. I haven't heard nobody say anything, you know. And I look at the news everyday. I get on my customers' nerves because at 12:00 I must turn on the news, I want to see what's going on. The first ten minutes of news is bang bang bang, who got shot.

Lisa G.: It's negative, negative.

Lorne Coombs: Yeah. You got to come over here, Lisa. Don't be scared of staying beside me.

Interviewer: So speaking of West Baltimore Street, what is the role of this area in the larger picture of Baltimore?

Lisa G.: That's a good question. What is the role of this area?

Interviewer: Or the impact this area has on the city of Baltimore?

Lisa G.: You mean moving forward? Is that what you're asking? Or in the-

Interviewer: It can go either way. Whatever way you feel comfortable with.

Lorne Coombs: Me personally, I just think in another, I'm 72 years old. It's not my call to see how long I'm going be here. But I actually believe in my heart that something's going to done, especially with the 1500 block. Because there used to be a lot of businesses on this block here. And I think that eventually, somebody's going to wake up and say, let's get that 1500 block, let's do something with that 1500 block of Baltimore Street. And that's what I actually think is going to happen. And I know Michael Sykes, he is 100% dedicated to this part of town. And he's a wonderful gentleman.

Lisa G.: Well the building we came from was a movie theater until 1975. And then the other blocks, a couple blocks down you had furniture stores, you got the bank, the Carrollton Bank where I used to work, that was at Carrollton and Baltimore Streets. And you had people living in these buildings, and so moving forward I just, I don't know. If you can't get the drugs off the corners, get the boys off the corner, get the homeless people in some shelters, get these buildings rehabbed, I don't know what to tell you.

Interviewer: What are your earliest memories of this area of Baltimore?

Lisa G.: I would say the ones, if I shared something, I would like, supposed to be a good memory. Unfortunately, that's not the first thing that comes to my mind, but-

Interviewer: You can take some time to think about it.

Lorne Coombs: We had snowball stands up in the hole here. During the summertime, we would do snowballs, and we had a rapport with the police around here. Everybody knows, all the police know Lonnie and Lisa. This one particular police, we had her granddaughter up here, and he would pull up, and he would sit, we had two benches out there, we had umbrellas, snowball stand and he sits there and by the way, her granddaughter's name is Autumn. And he would sit there, and he just fell in love with Autumn. And we was up, a nice day, his radio wasn't going off, and he was okay, I got to go Autumn. I'll be back later on. And sure enough, he came back later on.

Lorne Coombs: And to me, being 72 years old, that's the way it was when I was Autumn's age. It was always a police walking around, twirling his stick, knew everybody's name. And when I sit there and watch that, I thought about when I was eight or nine years old, the police come around and know everybody's name in the neighborhood, nobody buying, none of that stuff. And I mean, I'm not fantasizing, but that's the way I like to see it.

Interviewer: Do you think anybody bought a pass? Okay.

Speaker 4: [inaudible 00:22:05]

Interviewer: What do you know about the history of this area in general? Is there anything that's important to you or things that you think we should know about the history?

Lisa G.: I would say no.

Lorne Coombs: I would say the Capital Movies that, and by the way, the building, you in there, used to be a furniture store. This was-

Interviewer: This?

Lorne Coombs: Yeah. This used to be a furniture store back in the early 1900's, and the Capital Movies, that, was like a lot of movies in the city. Blacks wasn't allowed to go into certain movies.

Lisa G.: The black movie was down in the 1100 block.

Lorne Coombs: Yeah. And then when, it was a change in the city, when they did allow blacks to go in the movies. It wasn't for a long period of time before they closed down. And that's basically what they did to Capital Movies. They said hey, we're not making no money now, so let's shut it down and do something else. You had a lot of eateries around here. A lot of good eateries. You had your neighborhood bars, you had a place at the corner here, Baltimore Stripper, it was a fish joint, they'd sell beautiful fish. And it was packed, I mean, they got there tremendous business. Then you had Arundel Ice Cream, and that was good ice cream back in the day. You had a lot of shops. And I remember, because I used to come up here and shop, you know. A lot of clothing stores. And all of a sudden, they're gone.

Lisa G.: The business owners around here, we have a relationship. We respect each other. So that's, I guess that could be a good thing, that we all know each other, respect each other. We all just trying to make it happen.

Lorne Coombs: You know, one thing. I grew up in a place called Cherry Hill, which was beautiful. And from Cherry Hill, I worked and I used to go to Pennsylvania Avenue to the Royal Theater, like clockwork every Friday. My mother'd say well, where's Lorne? Ma, you know he's at the Royal Theater watching the show, watching the entertainers, Diana Ross, Smokey Robinson, Patti LaBelle, all them. What hurt me so much is that New York got Constitution Hall, where they have shows, skip Baltimore because we don't have no place for Blacks to go in this town.

Lorne Coombs: Then you skip here and you go to Philly, they got it. And then you go to New York, they got their Harlem. When they tore the Royal Theater down, they took a piece of a lot of Blacks in this town. Should have never happened. That the Royal Theater was it, that's what we had. And now, what do we have? And I'm not playing the race card here. But as Blacks, Pennsylvania Avenue was it for us. There wasn't a whole lot of crime, it was just a place to go and watch James Brown, all your entertainers. And then after that, it was Painter's Mills. But we had to go way out, Painter's Mills in Owings Mills, we had to go far, but in the inner city, as Blacks, we had nothing. And our neighborhoods, you see it. We have nothing. How many Black mayors we have had? Promises, promises, promises, promises. And they tore the Royal Theater down? Unreal.

Lisa G.: I'd like to say that in all fairness to a lot of the folks around here whose taxes I prepare, I've been doing that since 2003. I have watched them move up in their careers. I have watched them move away from the neighborhood and move into a better situation. So that given me a lot of peace and does my heart good to watch these young ladies and men progress. So yeah, that makes me feel real good to see that. And I'm still doing their taxes, so.

Interviewer: So I think we're almost out of time, so before we close, I want to ask you, what's the one thing you want us to remember from this conversation with you?

Lisa G.: That we're hard workers. We're hard workers and we're here everyday. We're here everyday. We're committed to what we do. And that's another thing a lot of the kids around here have learned by watching us. We're here everyday. So that's the one thing I'd like for you to take with you.

Lorne Coombs: I'll be on Baltimore Street until the end. And my undertake is right up the street, so he'll come right here-

Lisa G.: He don't have far to go.

Lorne Coombs: And pick up, he don't have far to go. Come here, pick up my body, and just take me on up the street. Because I just love this area. And I just want to be a part of the change.

Lisa G.: Right.

Lorne Coombs: I want to be a part of the change that's going to come in this particular block.

Interviewer: That's great. Well I wouldn't say it's far, I mean you're here all day like you said.

Lorne Coombs: Yeah.

Interviewer: Working with these, talking to your neighbors, engaging everybody. Great. Thank you.

Lisa G.: Thank you. Thank you very much.