

Oral History Interviews of the More Than One Struggle Oral History Project, 2007-2008
Oral History Interview with Peter Murrell Sr. and Eva Ruth June 2, 1995, part I

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Murrell, Peter, Sr., and Eva Ruth, interview with Jack Dougherty, June 2, 1995 (at their home, 1302 W Capitol Drive, Milwaukee).

[Note: On their consent forms, the Murrells added that the “Narrator requests that listeners listen to the entire tape and take nothing out of context”]

ERM: I don’t hear too well. Oh, I forgot to put my hearing aid in. I’d better go do it. [departs]

JD: Sure thing. Now, I’m asking you stuff that happened 30 years ago, Mr. Murrell...

PM: And I didn’t do anything to refresh my memory, because I couldn’t find anything [we both laugh].

JD: Well, that’s my job, to see if I can help with some sparks or something. I wanted to know if this brings back, if you know anything about this. This is from the Milwaukee Star, about 1963, it’s called “Statement of Concern.”

PM: Yes, that’s the statement that a group of us got together with, and actually first appeared in one of the daily papers. It was a paid concern, I’ve forgotten how much we’ve paid for that now. It was a nice sum at that time for a quarter-page.

JD: I can imagine.

PM: Yeah, that was the time when both housing and employment were the big concerns here in Milwaukee, and probably employment more than housing, because, what’s the date of this, 1963. That was a time when you’d go downtown, and almost any business that you’d go in, you almost never saw a Black face there. I remember well the first Black employees that Boston Store had, for instance, and knew 100% of their employees for a long time, and of course things changed considerably since then. Boston Store was one of the first downtown establishments to have any Black, Negro we were at that time, employees, and housing was a growing problem although I don’t think at this time it had reached the serious that it later did. Let’s see [reading names of those who signed the Statement], Parks, who died last year...

JD: I’m just curious what you remember of the people who also signed that.

PM: Saunders, I’m sure Larry’s dead.

JD: Actually, he’s in Madison. I just talked to him. He’s ill, but I’m going to try to talk to him next week.

PM: Clinton Rose is dead, I know, he later became a [County] Supervisor. Luther Golden, he’s still around here somewhere. James Dorsey, an attorney who’s now deceased. Eddie

Walker, who was in education, he moved back south. Williemeana Hardy [sp?] I'm not sure about her.

JD: Who is she?

PM: She was a businessperson. I guess she had several beauty parlors around town, as I recall. She didn't stay with this group too long, so I don't really remember too much about her. Ed Smythe is a realtor who is still in business. I suppose he's the elder statesman among Black realtors now. Ralph Jefferson, who's retired, he worked for the State for many years. Rev. Gregg, who's moved away from town, he's a Methodist minister, and they moved...

JD: Actually, he's still here, I talked with him last week. He's not at the parsonage anymore.

PM: Dale Phillips is deceased. Mr. Lindsay is dead, Dr. White is dead, Andrew Reneau is still here, a Court Commissioner, I think. Dr. Maxwell is dead, Holly Cooley, an attorney, who is deceased. Robert Starms is dead. Lucius Barker, he moved away...

JD: I think it was awhile ago, wasn't it?

5:00 PM: Yeah, quite awhile ago. We went from here to St. Louis, got to be quite a name in education, and this is not gospel, seems to me that the last I heard of him, that he's gone back East. Probably to Harvard or something. Kenneth Coulter went to Africa to get in business.

JD: I didn't know that.

PM: He was the publisher of the...

JD: That's right, this is from the Star at the time. He owned the Star at that time I think.

PM: Pollard, a urologist who's still here. Dr. Hilliard is deceased, Dr. Finlayson is still here, Hercules Porter is dead, Thomas Cheeks is still around, Dr. Lane is deceased. Grant Gordon, a retired educator who's still here. C.L. Golightly, a very prominent educator in the UW system, he's dead, he left here and went to Detroit. Calvin Sherard, I don't know him too well, I think he was a realtor.... Eugene Matthews was a barber who's now dead. Wesley Scott, still around. E. Gordon Young. That one doesn't ring a bell.

JD: He was an attorney, I think like an Assistant Attorney General or something? But that's okay.

PM: Clarence Parrish, who became a judge, is now deceased. Dr. Poindexter, who is deceased. Some, few of these people never went ever further than this, but there are several in that group who eventually joined together with a group of the white citizens of town, formed what we call the We-Milwaukeeans committee, which I've forgotten how long we were in existence now.

JD: Now, can I ask you, when you all first put your names on this here, did you all know one another, how did you all get together? This is 1963.

PM: Okay, just one minute. There were several, I guess I can include myself in that, several of us who had been concerned with some of these problems for quite some time, and kind of formed a nucleus of this particular meeting, and it was a kind of semi-public meeting, the first

one was, where we invited anybody, all concerned people there, and I think probably there were considerably more people there that evening than whose names appear here, but what we did, as I said, we had to pay for this, and these names probably represent those who put their name on the list as being ones who were willing to put some money down to get this in the paper. And let's see, who among, there's myself, and Ed Smythe, and I think Rev. Gregg, and Starms, Hilliard, Finlayson, and I think Porter, and I know Tom Cheeks, Wesley Scott, those I remember as persons who eventually joined with the other group to form the We-Milwaukeeans committee.

JD: And you were with them as well?

PM: Yes.

JD: And why did some people go onto We-Milwaukeeans and some not? A bunch of reasons?

PM: I suppose the finances eliminated a number of, and I suppose maybe that there were a number who heard the first pitch of this first statement and decided that that's as far as they wanted to go with it. I'm really not sure how that process came about now.

JD: Well, how about you then, why do you think you, just yourself, went on?

10:00 PM: Well, let's see can I remember the mechanics of how that happened? A group of white power movers in town, primarily Irwin Maier, who was then the publisher of the Journal, saw this in the paper and out of that, they kind of extended an invitation to meet with the group, and I don't remember if that group was chosen, or whether they just went because of their interest. I having been one, quite a number of, who had really brought about the impetus of this thing, of course went. And I don't remember, I just don't remember how we came down to the number we settled on. But the group which, the original group which met with Maier's group, more or less stayed together for the whole time that this Committee was in existence, and along the way we did add a few people from time to time, I can't even remember who they were who we added.

JD: Now, I have a question for you, specifically for you, Mrs. Murrell, in just a minute, but I want to ask just a couple of more just about this group, while I'm still on it, if that's okay, or anything you want to add in that's fine. When I was looking at this, when I was trying to figure out what your Statement of Concern was all about, you mentioned a whole bunch of different issues, housing issues, employment issues, Blacks in power, Blacks in government, education issues. When you all got together, what do you think were the most pressing things that got you together, because something must have made you get concerned enough to all write this statement.

PM: I would say the employment issue, along with the fact that not only did you not see any Black faces in the areas of employment, you did not see any in policymaking positions either. I was just trying to think if we had had our first Black alderman then...

JD: Vel Phillips, you mean?

PM: I guess we did, I guess we did, but there wasn't a lot she could do.

JD: Just as one person.

PM: As one person, and none of the City Hall bureaus other than the Human Relations Commission. Was his name on there, by the way?

JD: Who are you thinking?

PM: Corneff Taylor.

JD: I don't think he's on that list.

PM: I wonder how that happened, because '63, he was here, because he was a member of the We-Milwaukeeans Committee. I don't see Bill Kelley's name on here either.

JD: From the Urban League? I think he might have retired by that time, maybe.

PM: I think so, because Wes Scott's name is here.

JD: You just said something, Mrs. Murrell, about very few teachers?

ERM: There weren't too many Black teachers at that time either.

JD: So that may have been another thing that you might have been thinking of?

PM: That's true, not only were there not many Black teachers, there were practically none on the secondary level, and of course, I've been around long enough to remember the first Black teachers in the City of Milwaukee, and can name them all.

JD: Just name three that come to mind, the first Black teachers that you think of.

ERM: Our brother-in-law, [unintelligible], he was one of the first science teachers at Marshall.

JD: What was his name?

ERM: Aaron Dubose [?].

PM: Let me try to go back a little bit further than that. Helen Taylor, Grant Gordon, a fellow named Yancey, Cecil Yancey I think.

JD: I'm going to see Mr. Gordon later next week. Are any of the other people you mentioned, are they still around?

PM: Helen Taylor is, Helen Porter her name was then, she's still, lives here somewhere.

JD: Is Helen Porter of the Hercules Porter family, or a different one?

PM: No, it's a different family. Yancey's dead, Richardson is dead.

ERM: Grant Gordon you can still talk with.

JD: Yeah, I'm going to talk with Mr. Gordon and his wife next week. I'm just curious.

PM: This turned out [Statement of Concern] to be an all-male organization.

JD: The only woman I saw on there was Mrs. Hardy, we were talking about.

PM: I don't think that she went further than that initial meeting. If it had, Lucinda most certainly would have been one, who had been there, because even prior to this, she had been active in really raising a lot of these questions, and she and Corneff Taylor and Wes Scott, later,

15:00

Bill Kelley first, and Tom Cheeks and myself, spent an awful lot of time meeting with the powers that be before we ever got to this point.

ERM: You mentioned Tom Cheeks, he's a retired teacher.

JD: That's right, he's another one, he's still around, isn't he. I've got his address and I'll see if I can get his number. Now, just back up a second to Lucinda Gordon for just a second. You said that she was raising these issues for a long time. How was that?

PM: She was the secretary for the NAACP. As Executive Secretary for the NAACP, it almost meant that she was the NAACP, and I was president of a couple of organizations in town then, and of course, Bill Kelley, who was over at the Urban League, had interest in that regard, and Tom Cheeks always had a lot of civic interest. We spent a lot of time in the Mayor's office and other government places, that was at the time when it was not popular to have a press conference for everything that you decided to do. We made it a point to have these meetings at a time when it did not attract a lot of attention.

JD: Interesting, interesting. What time of day would that have been?

PM: After work hours, or before the reporters got busy. Usually reporters who cover City Hall and the courthouse usually go home about 2 o'clock to write up their stories, and we would go after 2. I don't mean after office hours, but we would go ahead after the reporters...

JD: After the reporters had left for the day.

PM: Strangely enough, once We-Milwaukeeans got started, and as I said, Irwin Maier was really a moving factor in that, the publisher of the Journal, but he did not allow any reporters, we met in the Journal building, but no reporters...

JD: No reporters there.

PM: ...no reporters were allowed.

JD: One more thing. Lucinda Gordon isn't on this list. Why do you think not?

PM: That's a good question. I can only....

ERM: A typographical error.

JD: Newspapers make mistakes.

PM: She was not there, but it was probably because Lucinda, it was kind of a part of her job to raise these issues, and I think this was undertaken more on a volunteer basis of what we termed to be the business and professional people of the city, who probably should take the lead and follow these things.

JD: Did you, you mentioned just a second ago, it's mostly men on here except for Mrs. Hardy. Why do you think that was?

PM: That was just a sign of the times then. Women had not made the place that they now occupied. That was before the feminists had taken over, and so much emphasis was put on equal

rights and all, gender change, and it just developed that way. It was still kind of the era when the men were supposed to look out for the welfare of the masses, you know.

JD: So, this group becomes smaller, but joins up with the white businessmen, becomes We-Milwaukee, and I remember seeing that that was broken down into different committees. Is that the way they did We-Milwaukee?

PM: Yes, it was kind of broken down on interest, like education, employment, housing.

JD: Did you have a special interest group that you were working with?

PM: I wound up on most of them.

20:00 JD: [laughs] Makes sense. I've seen a We-Milwaukee report that came out, just before the 1965 school boycott. Was that something you might have been involved with at all?

PM: Uh, not the boycott as such, because we kind of took two different directions. We had the people who were marching and chaining themselves to trucks and so forth, had its place, but I never participated in any of that, and I don't recall anybody of that group participating in that manner. But we also had the negotiating part of it, kind of going along simultaneously, and many of those actions, many times, one area helped the other.

JD: Can you think of an example for me?

PM: The housing ordinance, which eventually passed, is one which more readily comes to mind. The time when they were having the housing marches, we were having a harder time in the board room, than they were out there on the streets. But the actions that occurred out there on the street, got us more attention in the board room, you know, because the other part was very worried about, "Can't you do something to get them quiet?" [We replied,] "It's not for us to do. Can't you do something?" [laughs].

JD: Yeah, a good negotiating tactic.

PM: I am sure that what the white business community, the influence that they had with the local legislators, had as much to do, if not more, with the housing ordinance, which was eventually passed, as the marches did. And that's not to put down the marches. They complemented each other to a great extent, but in a different arena.

JD: When I saw this one in the Milwaukee Star, this is July 1963, there are two things about this page that caught my eye. Two big things. One was the Statement of Concern here, and then next to it, just starting up at that time, in July 1963, it says, "NAACP, CORE Join for School Push." It seems to be the beginning of when Lloyd Barbee and John Givens and Tom Jacobson and others were beginning to make a public issue about schools. Do you recall, this is a tough question, do you recall being aware of what those people were doing, at the time you all were doing this?

PM: Oh yeah, we were aware, that although, let's see, this is '63.... I think maybe we had started this [Statement of Concern] and I know the foundation had been laid to proceed with this before this other action really started.

ERM: Golightly's name has been mentioned in there too, because he had quite a lot to say about that at that time.

PM: It's on here.

JD: Tell me what you were thinking about what Mr. Golightly was doing at that time.

ERM: I can't say exactly, I know he was very prominent, and whatever he said, they were quoting him and putting everything they said in the paper.

JD: Because he was on the school board, is that what you were thinking?

ERM: This was before he was on the school board too. Weren't you active in PTA at that time also? We were, rather, but you had the office [unintelligible].

JD: Well, let's get to that if we can, because one of the ways that, certainly newspapers don't print everything, and they make mistakes, but one of the way that I saw your name, Mrs. Murrell, was with the Rufus King PTSA around 1965. Had you been active earlier than that in the Rufus King, or in a different one?

ERM: Well, we always attended PTA when our kids were little, most of the time, and then right on when Peggy went to King.

PM: She started there in '62, so it must have been.

JD: So let me get this straight here. You have four kids, right?

PM: Correct.

JD: I've met Peter, Jr., and there's three others?

PM: Yes.

JD: Okay, Peggy you mentioned?

25:00 ERM: Peggy went to Rufus King, it was a really good school, and before Peter could go there, it had gone, it had dived.

JD: Why? What happened?

ERM: I think they were, they were neighborhood schools at first, people would move to a better neighborhood so they would be in a good neighborhood school. But then, soon after that, they started letting in anybody who wanted to transfer, so we had so many transfers, the school just took a dive. People from the slum areas, the worst areas, they got their kid in Phillip [Elementary?], Phillip also had been the number one school, it took a dive. So by the time Peter went there, was time to go there, we had to try to get him somewhere else, so we got him into Boys' Tech. Boys' Tech was a good school at that time.

JD: Back up just for me. Phillip was an elementary, or a middle school?

PM: Yeah, it was an elementary, an eight-year elementary school.

JD: Okay, eight-year elementary.

ERM: Peggy and Peter got through there.

JD: They went through Phillip.

ERM: Okay, they got a good education.

JD: And they went to Rufus King.

ERM: Peggy went to Rufus King. Peter could not go. He was four years younger. He could not go there, it was just so bad.

JD: So Boys' Tech is where he went, you said. Now was that unusual at the time?

PM: Uh, well, Ruth gave you one side of the picture there, which is very true. At the time Peggy was going there, the neighborhood was pretty stable. Rufus King's reputation grew quite rapidly, so there was a rapid influx of a different kind of student, mostly Black students. And it was a different kind of student, and on the other side of the score, you had a rather, well, staid faculty who was used to kind of people, so you had a clash there that just didn't work, from the principal down. The principal was a very fine person, but these people came on him too fast. He really wasn't sure how to deal with that.

ERM: They opened up the transfers, right away, and then the transfers were the people who got on and sunk the boat. They let, every address except the ones who lived here, and then the people who lived here, they started trying to get their kids into the priv, the University School, and Marshall was, started getting very difficult to get into. Everybody was running.

PM: I just want to get something that's probably not of interest to you, aside from this.

JD: Sure.

PM: People transferred into Rufus King so rapidly it kind of got overrun at that time, and now, a process has evolved, we live in what was the Rufus King neighborhood now. We have a grandson who is, well, a 3.8 [GPA] student who has perfect attendance, who lives right in the shadow of Rufus King, which is now the best high school in the city, and we cannot get him into the school.

JD: Hm. Let me make a note of that. I want to come back to that at the very end when catch up with sort of the present stuff, I'll ask more about your grandson. So, when your kids, Peggy, your oldest child, and other, your younger kids, were at Phillips, were you, you said you attended PTA meetings then. Now I saw your name came up as, like a secretary, so you perhaps became more involved when it was at Rufus King? Let me ask it this way, when did you get really involved in PTA?

ERM: I was involved in the lower grades, I wasn't an officer, I was always doing committee work, because I have, I had a mentally ill daughter...

JD: Oh, I didn't know that.

30:00

ERM: ...and was housebound to a great extent. And she got to go there for one semester, so I didn't want real responsible jobs, I would do jobs like, when I was at Rufus King, I was publicity chairman, so I typed, and I would type up all the cards, and make the phone calls, and I could do that at home, and send the cards off, and I would make the meetings, both of us would make the PTA meetings, because Peggy was here, she could babysit. So I did the things, the work behind, I didn't want to be president or somebody who has to be there on time, so I was the worker, I was the behind-the-scenes person who could do the typing and the arranging for the meetings and the phone work.

JD: So let me re-ask my question then, because this is important. If you sort of put the question about whether you're an officer or not aside, when were you the most involved in PTA stuff?

ERM: While Peggy was at Rufus King.

JD: So that would have been like the mid-60s?

PM: From '62 to '66. That's when your oldest girl was there. Now when you were either talking with people in that PTA or going to meetings, or outside the meetings, what kinds of things did you folks remember talking about most of the time? What was really the top of the list?

PM: Keeping the scholastic standards high.

ERM: Yeah.

PM: Because one of the first things, one of the first views that the faculty took, is that these kids can't do this, so we've got to lower the standards in order to accommodate them. And we said, "These kids can do this," at least most of them, a percentage of them.

ERM: Yeah, we were very much on that, all the way through, even when Petey got to Carleton [College], we were still fighting the battle, we didn't want the standards lowered. And they were, they were just lowering the standards. Teachers started letting things get slipshod...

JD: How did you notice it? Can you think of one thing that might have happened one day that you said to yourself, "Gee, those standards are just going downhill"?

PM: Well, they would kind of tell you that. "Hey, well, we can't do this," and some of the things that we noticed, when Peggy first went there, they had a very good mathematics department going up into the advanced courses for math for the students who came in. By the time she left, they were considering themselves fortunate if they gave a good general math course for the students who came in.

ERM: They even had accelerated math at that time, because Peggy was taking those courses.

PM: And I remember the math teacher there, who was very qualified, he at least had a master's, if not a doctorate, in math, and he was interested in general math really. One of the first, among the things we noticed, is that he got dissatisfied with class because he couldn't get

enough people into a group to start off freshmen algebra, so he said, what he immediately started looking for somewhere else to go.

ERM: He's chairman of the department now at Madison.

PM: Where his abilities would be more challenged, and he was a fairly young person at the time. The old ones just kind of hung on, rode along with. Incidentally, all of our kids did not go to, all the way through Phillips High School [Elementary School?]. Peggy and Pete did, and the third child was the one who's ill and was not able to go to public schools at all, and our youngest one started there, but by then the student body had changed quite a bit, the faculty had changed quite a bit, and he got dissatisfied there, and he got dissatisfied because he said the teacher wasn't paying any attention to him...

JD: This is at Phillips, right?

PM: "Oh, you must be mistaken..." He was one of these kinds of kids, was kind of self-motivated, well, probably saw his older brother and sister. He wanted to read early, and he wanted to do all the other things. They had a system where they would give them books to read, and the teacher, and he kept telling me that he teacher wasn't paying any attention to him, and I know that he had this interest in it, and I thought, well, you know, this is a kid who's thinking more of himself than he ought to think, but, and he was going early for his reading and late for his reading, so he kept complaining, so I finally looked into it, and he said, "Well, I have to go early, because the teacher tells me that that's the only time that she can check my readings, she has to spend too much time during the day, taking care of discipline problems, and she can't get to the reading." So when he started saying this, then we started looking into it, so when we looked into it, we found it was true with him, and several more, at least two or three other kids in school. They would have to go early, and the rest of the day, they would sit there and watch the teacher try to keep order. So we transferred him from that school...

35:00

JD: Where to?

Both: To 65th Street School.

PM: And after he had been there, was he there a year? We didn't know anything about the Superior Ability program, but we received a letter in the mail that he had been selected for Superior Ability...

ERM: He was a very brilliant child, and they recommended him for that, and in 4th grade, 5th grade, well, they recognized it, he was just there for a few months. Some of his work that they did, one of the things was, a science project that he'd done when he was in 3rd or 4th grade, was collect a lot of, anyways it was very outstanding, I think they put it in the paper, the little school paper that they have that the Superintendent's Bulletin, his name got in that thing a lot for projects.

JD: Interesting.

ERM: We didn't know anything about, PT, what did they call it, PTSA...

PM: PSAT [Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test].

JD: That's the test we're talking about.

ERM: Superior Ability, so they recommended and put him in that. He started 5th grade then at 81st Street in that program.

JD: Now, just so I get the aging right. There's four years between Peggy and Peter, Jr.

PM: Yes.

ERM: And 8 years between Peter and...

JD: Your youngest son's name is?

PM: Michael, no, I'm sorry [laughs], James.

JD: I'm glad he's not here [laughs]. Let me ask, just back to the Rufus King PTA thing again. When you think back to it, when Peggy was going there, and when you were involved then, what kind of people were involved in that PTA? Just tell me about them.

PM: They were....

ERM: Good parents, they were interested in their families, in their kids.

PM: Quite a few

could be termed, I guess, middle-management families, and one person who at least became an administrator in the school board, Mr. Plap[?]. There were some of Schiltz's [Brewery] upper-echelon people among the whites, there were several professional families among the Blacks, doctors, lawyers' families, but the whites of that level started leaving in a hurry, well, not a big hurry, but they gradually started leaving. And that group here, they wanted the standards maintained too, so the first group of us, we managed to work together pretty well, because we were, all had the same things in mind, and had students were of comparable abilities. So there was no division of thought about what direction the school should go, but many of the faculty got a little disheartened, and the principal at that time had been so used to things like they were for a long time. He had no clue as to what he was supposed to do. And when they did get another principal in who had had similar experiences on the southside and understood the situation a little bit better, but he was kind lost on what to do about it...

ERM: Things just happened so fast.

JD: This is when Peggy was there still, or after that?

ERM: Peggy managed to graduate with that good class, wasn't it Priscilla Plap and that crowd? It was the last good class, I think, when she graduated.

PM: This was about mid-way through her term there. We could see what was happening, you know.

JD: Can I ask, what year did she graduate from high school?

ERM: '66.

JD: Okay, '66, that sounds right.

PM: But you could see what was happening. After the original principal who was there left, Powers came there right after him, right?

ERM: Who?

PM: Mr. Powers came right after Dr. Bower left.

ERM: I thought it was the other one, from southside, the white-haired man.

PM: That's Powers.

ERM: No, name the other one, the nice looking one, he was Polish but he cut his name down.

PM: Poland [?] was the vice-principal. I don't think he was ever principal there.

ERM: But he was very important there.

PM: He was vice-principal both under Dr. Bower and Powers.

JD: Okay.

PM: Mr. Powers wanted to do something, he hadn't the faintest idea what it is...

ERM: Mr. Powers let things slip because he didn't know what to do...

PM: And his reputation had been made, you know? He had...

JD: Which one? Powers?

PM: No, Brauer.

ERM: Brauer, he had been at Washington.

JD: His reputation had been made how?

PM: He had been principal and administrator for a number of years, commanded a lot of respect. Wasn't much else place where he was going, you know, and he wasn't too far away from retirement anyway, and Mr. Powers was kind of on the way up, and he really wanted to do something, so he enlisted us, we made several trips to talk to the Superintendent. I don't remember exactly what it was what he wanted us to talk about now.

JD: Now can I ask you another question about the, think back to say, 1964, '65, like when Peggy might have been a sophomore or a junior, and you were in the PTA. At the same time in Milwaukee, as you said, people with MUSIC locking themselves up to the buses that were busing kids and all that, so there's lots of protest about desegregated schooling and all this. What did you folks in the PTA think about all that?

PM: Let me just say one thing.

JD: Oh, sure, sure.

PM: Before you get into that. One other person I happened to remember who was very prominent in the PTA at that time was one of the Assistant City Attorneys, Ted Crockett.

JD: I haven't heard that name, Assistant City Attorney.

PM: He's retired now, but he had a son there, about the same time, and I remember, his being on some of the committees that we had, going down and talking with the school board. Now the question you had?

JD: If you picture yourself back in 1964, '65, and you're with on the PTA groups, or PTA friends, or something like that, elsewhere in Milwaukee is where the group of people doing the MUSIC boycotts and the busing, locking themselves to buses. What did you, what did you and your friends think about all of that at the time? Do you remember talking about that at all?

ERM: Yeah, we did talk about it. I remember disagreeing with C.L. Golightly about letting everybody transfer into Rufus King. I was mad because he was letting everybody in, but then he had to show why he had to let everybody in. To me, it didn't seem fair at the time, but I guess it depends on what side you look at. Some of those inner-city schools had gone to the dogs, so why weren't they, I don't know how it happens, you can explain why it happens, I suppose, but I guess, thousand and thousands of people were coming in here, and the Black population was just exploding, and I think too much was happening too fast, and too much at once, and the schools aren't ready for it, teachers aren't ready for it. Some of the teachers just threw up their hands, and just, the kids were just doing anything. The schools were a mess.

PM: I think maybe, I had some real mixed emotions at the time. I never was in one of those, well, first of all, a little of my background, I'm from the south.

JD: Whereabouts?

PM: Kentucky. The schools were segregated. We had the poorest schools there were, the other people had the best schools there were. But the thing that we were always taught was that, despite all of this, you can still do the best you can, and if you strive to do the best you can, when that opportunity comes when you can do better, then you will be ready. And I kind of disagreed with a number of the people because when Rufus King was inundated with transfers from all over town, it seemed to be the general idea that in order for our kids to get the good education, all we had to do was get them into Rufus King, and strangely enough, that same feeling is returning now. It doesn't make any difference whether the student has the ability to do well, it doesn't make any difference whether they are motivated to do well, it doesn't make any difference whether the parents are involved or not, you didn't have to be involved, just send them there, and I never agreed with that. I always said, thought that, regardless of where you are, you've got to have some motivation, you've got to have some ability, you've got to have some involvement with the parents, you've got to have all of these things, in order to make it go. So when people went out and raised a lot of noise just to say that we gotta have our kids go to school at X place in order to feel equal, I never really completely agreed with that.

ERM: And we were unhappy about the busing too.

JD: How so?

ERM: Because they brought carloads of them, and put them there...

JD: You mean kids being transferred, or something else?

ERM: Just carloads of wherever they came from, just busloads I should say. But before that time...

Oral History Interviews of the More Than One Struggle Oral History Project, 2007-2008
Oral History Interview with Peter Murrell Sr. and Eva Ruth June 2, 1995, part II

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Murrell, Peter, Sr., and Eva Ruth, interview with Jack Dougherty, June 2, 1995 (at their home, 1302 W Capitol Drive, Milwaukee).

[Note: On their consent forms, the Murrells added that the “Narrator requests that listeners listen to the entire tape and take nothing out of context”]

[Side B]

ERM: ...program. We had to furnish his transportation. We had, I had to drive him every morning to 81st Street. He was a good student, he was worth it, I took him. I managed to get him to school everyday. So busing wasn't, it didn't start right away, waited awhile. And then those people, then, who tried to get their kids, whose kids were smart and could make the grade and fit in and be good students, good citizens, then the bigger system could absorb them and everything went smoothly. But then when they started this old-style busing, well, it's just too much to expect the situation over here to absorb this great big unruly batch of people, so all of that played a part into it. So we were against the busing, that's what happened to Phillips, and that's what happened to Rufus King, and not just those, but I suppose, other schools around too, because Marshall went from top to bottom, and I suppose all of the big schools just sort of went down because...it gets to be unwieldy.

PM: I have always felt, and that's what I've taught to my kids, coming up, is that along with privilege goes responsibility, and if you're going to have rights and privileges to do certain things, you also have the responsibilities of living up to the requirements of what's necessary to succeed there. And to me, in the large measure, a lot of the protest movement really seemed to have forgotten that, and just concentrate on the rights thing, which is important, we need the rights, but to take advantage of it, you've also got to assume the responsibilities. And just now, just in the last year or two, am I beginning to see that idea promoted....

JD: How are you beginning to see it?

PM: In the writings, in the paper forums, people like [Thomas] Sowell, I'm sure you're familiar with him. I don't agree with everything he says, but his general philosophy needed to have been said thirty years ago, and it wasn't.

JD: Interesting, interesting.

PM: And a number of people who have been thinking otherwise, well, take a look at the reversal of the, what just happened in California yesterday, equal opportunity thing. Great idea. But unless you can take advantage of it, what good is it?

JD: Let me ask another thing about Rufus King here. When I got through the newspapers, about 1968, it seems a lot of things were happening at Rufus King. Now this is two years after Peggy had graduated, I guess, and Peter didn't go there, or he just went there for just a year?

PM: No, he did not go.

ERM: We didn't want him to go there. We felt the school had gone down so badly.

JD: So you didn't have any kids there at the time, but let me ask you, I think I brought the clipping.... "Rufus King Lunch Program Boycotted in School Student Unity Move" and the "Black Organized Youth" talking about students protesting, here's Mr. Powers. What are your reactions to any of these? This is 1968, and it's students refusing to eat in the school cafeteria, or buy lunches in the cafeteria. Do you remember this at all?

PM: Yeah, I remember, but I guess at that time, I was so glad to have been relieved of that responsibility. It didn't have the same effect, because this is of course....

ERM: What made me angry, I don't know the time frame, and then I started doing substitute teaching in '72, I was a substitute teacher from 1971 for ten years, then I became a regular teacher for seven. But I get confused about the time frame, but when some of those schools, like I worked at North Division, I worked at all the big high schools except Hamilton, I didn't work out there, but I worked at Bay View, I worked at, usually the northside. But most of those kids, later, had free lunch, they're the ones that I thought had some nerve being so unhappy with the food in the cafeterias, and the cafeterias became such a sore spot, because they had to place teachers and aides in there to make those kids take their trays back. They wouldn't even bother to take their trays. They just wanted to eat, come in and eat, and throw the food around, that's a different subject, I know...

JD: ...No, no, no. Whatever strikes you as most important, that's fine.

ERM: But I don't think that any of them should have been complaining about the school lunches. Most of them were free anyway.

PM: Things come back to me. Our school, our kids were in school during some of the boycotts.

JD: We're talking about different boycotts now. This is the 1964 boycott you're talking about?

PM: When was it that they were boycotting the schools?

JD: This is Lloyd Barbee, and they bring Dick Gregory in and others, 1964 was the very first one, like May.

5:00

PM: Yeah, they were in school, they were in school during the boycott, but they went to school.

JD: They went to the regular school, which would have been Phillips at that time, right?

PM: Right, '64, well Peggy was...

JD: Peggy was...

PM: ...at King, and Peter was....

ERM: Did they have her write those stories on the boycott when she was still a senior, or was that the following summer?

PM: No, this was in '67.

ERM: She started working for the Journal for her Senior year, at Rufus King, and she wrote those record things. And then they let her write a couple of stories.

PM: That was later. But during the boycott, they went to school.

JD: Okay, and how did you make that decision.

PM: Well, I said that if the schools are so bad, they need all the education that they can get, and they don't need to be missing any, especially Peggy, who was in the middle of her high school career at that time, and she was not taking slop courses. She was taking advanced math, and all of these other things, and I felt that they needed to be in school more than they needed to be protesting on the streets. If there was something wrong with the school, I took the position that it's the adults' job to fix what's wrong with the school, but it's the kids' job to be there where they can get the education.

JD: Now, let me ask you, other Black parents who had their kids at Rufus King at that time, in Peggy's class.

ERM: What's the question again?

JD: Think about other Black parents who had their kids in Peggy's class at Rufus King. Are we talking about, were there like five other Blacks at the time, or more than that?

PM: Maybe about a dozen.

JD: Did they agree to keep their kids in Rufus King during that boycott, or did they have a difference of opinion, did you think?

PM: I'm not sure, but I think...

ERM: The Hilliards kept their kids in.

PM: ...I think most of the parents...

ERM: ...oh, that's right, they didn't go there. She took them out and they went to that private school. But she was active in the PTA.

PM: Some of them were still over there. George and Larry went to school there. So did Pat.

JD: Which families are these now?

PM: These are Dr. [George] Hilliard's.

JD: Dr. Hilliard's, okay, their kids went to Rufus King.

PM: I think most of them stayed in school.

JD: Most stayed in school, you think.

PM: I'm almost positive that Crocker [?] kept his kid in school, and I think the Hilliards kept theirs in, although I'm not prepared to swear to it.

JD: Oh yeah, it's thirty years ago, it's tough. Was that something that other Black parents who had their kids elsewhere, did they disagree with you for keeping your kids in, do you think?

PM: Oh yeah, there were quite a few of them, but I think it was a matter of appearances, you know? Like I remember one person, "Thirty years from now, when you're kid asks you, what were you doing during this time, what are you going to tell them?" I said, "They won't have to ask me, they'll know. That I told them that they should be in school." [laughs]. And I didn't have to take them out to satisfy the opinions of any leaders, and so-called leaders, of boycotts.

ERM: Because we predicted....

PM: That was my opinion.

JD: Sure.

ERM: We predicted that when the kids were boycotting and doing the wrong thing, we were saying, that's going to backfire and these kids are going to, a few years now you won't be able to deal with them. It happened.

JD: How did you see it happen?

ERM: Well, the kids got, once they're allowed to let loose and be boisterous, and then you can't take it away. It still comes up through the, it has to wash its way out, and it washes its way into the mainstream, and kids become more sassy, and belligerent, and lackadaisical. They don't, they figure, well, they did it back there, so it carries over...

PM: And so now are completely out of control.

ERM: Out of hand.

PM: For instance, the playgrounds that my kids could go to, they didn't go that often, is up at Phillips, but there was no fears in going there. I wouldn't dare send my grandson up there now, and this is one of the more stable neighborhoods around. But the kids are completely out of control, and back in the '60s they were told that, "Hey, you know if you don't agree with this, you don't have to do this."

JD: Interesting. When I was talking with Peter [Murrell, Jr.], this is a couple of years back, he was talking, I'm looking here at my notes...

PM: A couple of years ago, I'm sure some of the things that Peter might have said then, sounds contrary to what I'm saying now, but he's beginning in the last couple of years to kind of come around [laughs].

10:00

JD: I'll ask about that in a second too. Some things are, but not everything. Here's the phrase. Peter was saying that he felt when he was growing up, he said something like, "My experience was unique," something like, "I was a pioneer in integrated settings." Is that something that makes sense?

PM: They were the first Black students in Phillips school.

JD: They were the first Blacks in Phillips school. That I didn't know.

ERM: Why don't you tell him about the experience that Peggy had with that, was it that German teacher, who was very prejudiced.

PM: Yeah...

ERM: What was her name? Metz or something? Menzer?

JD: What happened?

PM: I don't remember anything specifically....

JD: Do you want to tell it?

ERM: Peggy was a tall, brown-skinned girl. That's her picture in the middle.

JD: This one here?

ERM: Yeah, that's her high school graduation. So Peggy....

PM: Would you care for a cold drink or a pop or something?

JD: Help yourself, I'm fine. You're the one who's doing most of the talking, I'm listening. Keep going. Thank you anyway.

ERM: My kids, they integrated the school. There might have been one or two others, I don't know..

PM: I guess Henry Aaron's kids were going there [the baseball player?].

ERM: It was about a handful of kids.

JD: But all about the same time, you're all the first Black kids in that Phillips school. So what happened with this teacher?

PM: At the time they were started, excuse me, each one of them was the only Black in their class.

JD: So they were all sort of separate across the whole school, okay.

ERM: Most of the teachers just played it by ear, and we made our kids really behave, and Peggy was very smart. She has a very high IQ, and Petey has a high IQ, and he has very good grades, and anyways, there was a German teacher named Mrs. Menzer, she was very definitely prejudiced, she did everything mean, but we told Peggy, no matter what, be very, no matter, if she calls you a name, just ignore it, just forgive her, and just be nice. So Peggy did that, no matter what, she would just swallow it and be happy. But Mrs. Menzer would actually buy cookies and give everybody some except for Peggy, or she would do things that were very petty, and very little, but Peggy learned to ignore that, come no matter hell, just take it, and be nice, so

Peggy did that. The point of my story was, now, but anyways, Mrs. Menzer, Peggy finally won her over, Peggy just kept right on, making good grades, and finally, the kids could see that Mrs. Menzer was acting bad, and anyways, Mrs. Menzer was practically won over by the time Peggy left there. But she was one of those ones that....

PM: On the other hand, in Peter's case, I don't know what his report was on that, but our perception was, he started in kindergarten, and he had a very good and fair kindergarten teacher. I don't know if he felt that way or not.

JD: I didn't ask him in detail about this, but tell me what you remember.

PM: He certainly didn't lack for attention. I thought he got a good, Mrs. Nordsworth [?], who eventually became an administrator in the public school system, but she was a very good kindergarten teacher.

ERM: But some of those teachers were so good that they took that as a learning situation, and they didn't have to treat the little Black kids any better, just treat them nicely, as long as they were clean and courteous, and our kids were, they had a lot, they learned a lot from it, and if they could have kept on getting the same kind of kids, I guess they would have been happy. But at least they got a good introduction, because our kids, those early Black kids were very clean and neat, and well-trained, and they were bright. Winifred's [?] kids were very bright too. You think people are trying to move away and get the best things for their kids, of course, everybody is, the white people, Black people, everybody's trying to do the same thing, I suppose even those people who load their kids, those women that don't wash them and don't feed them, they want them to come to the school where they're going to get free breakfast and free lunch, and they want the best for their kids too, all of those people from the Illinois are moving up here because welfare pays more, everybody's trying to get the best, I suppose. I guess you can't, when you look at it from their viewpoint, it's really hard, it makes it difficult.

JD: Let me just, to clarify for me, are we in the Phillips school district zone right now?

PM: Yes.

JD: So you didn't transfer your kids to Phillips, you moved here, and then they started to go to Phillips, is that the way it worked?

ERM: We moved here because Rufus King was a good school, and we figured we had our school situation set for our children.

JD: Now let me just back up to get some feedback here, because I'm the outsider in Milwaukee. Were you born in Milwaukee?

PM: No, I was born in Kentucky.

ERM: No, I was born in North Carolina.

JD: So what year did you come to Milwaukee?

PM: I came to Milwaukee in 1944.

JD: And you?

ERM: I came in 1948.

JD: So when you met up with one another, you were married in what year?

Both: 1947.

JD: So you came here, you said, in '48 as a couple? Where did you first live in Milwaukee?

PM: 6th and Walnut Street.

JD: 6th and Walnut, and Peggy, your first child, she was born?

ERM: She was born here.

JD: Like, 1959?

PM: '48.

ERM: We were married in September of 1947, and Peggy was born December 21st, 1948.

JD: 1948, so...

ERM: But I didn't come right away, because I was working for the government, and I worked up until November, and she was born in December.

JD: Right up to the wire then.

ERM: Well, we needed the money. He was just opening his [dentistry] practice.

JD: Sure, so 6th and Walnut is where you lived first.

ERM: Above a drugstore.

JD: And you moved right from there to here?

PM: No, we moved to the 2600 block on North 9th Street, and we lived there from '49 to '57.

JD: So when Peggy started kindergarten, had you moved here yet?

PM: No, she was still, she went to kindergarten and first grade in 12th Street.

ERM: Came here in the 4th grade, didn't she?

JD: So you all moved here when she was in 4th grade. Do you remember what year you moved here?

ERM: 1957.

JD: In '57 you moved here. Was this another sort of pioneer integration experiences? Were you one of the few Black families on the block, or were there others?

PM: We were the only ones in that school district at that time.

JD: When Peggy was having a difficult time with that math teacher you were talking about, did you have second thoughts about whether this was a good decision or not?

ERM: No, we didn't get discouraged easy. We knew that as long as she did everything right, as Peggy did correctly, and we participated in the PTA, and I made the, baked the good oatmeal cookies and things for the class, and did all that stuff that the other mothers did and fathers did, and finally, we just made her feel like she was so ashamed, this teacher. And we shook her hand,

and asked her how was Peggy doing, and finally, she just had to be truthful, and it made her feel bad, and she...

PM: I never questioned that decision. I'm not so sure about Peter and Peggy.

JD: What do you mean, whether they questioned it? Because why?

PM: Well, I'm not so sure that they always appreciated the pioneering role.

ERM: See, the other kids got to notice it, and the other teachers got to notice it.

JD: Got to notice what?

ERM: How Mrs. Menzer was doing.

PM: Well, we kind of dropped that part now.

ERM: Oh.

JD: Okay.

PM: But at times, from the expressions they made, they maybe weren't crazy about that role, but I still think that under the circumstances, it was something that we needed to do at that time.

JD: If I can just ask a little bit more, you've certainly seen a lot since you've been here in Milwaukee. You're exactly the kind of people I like to talk with, because you've seen a lot of changes happen, and I'm interesting in how changes happen over time. When you saw the Judge Reynolds deciding that the Milwaukee schools were segregated and they had the integration order, this is like the late 1970s, and everything that happened with that, what was your reaction back then, like 1979 or so, about how things were working out with this desegregation thing?

ERM: Well, you had to look at it from your own family and your own situation. Then you had to look at it from the point of the whole race and what's good for the masses.

JD: When you thought about your own family, what did you think?

PM: Well, I'll go back to what I said a few minutes ago. I was born in a segregated state, got a segregated education. I never got to the place where I felt like, in order for me to get a good education, I had to sit next to a white person. I did feel like that I needed the same opportunities that all other white people had, but if those same opportunities came in a classroom which was all-Black, I didn't see where that made any difference or not, or whether it was in a classroom where they were half Black and half white. I felt that way when Judge Reynolds made the decision, that this is not going to do anything for the education of the children, and I think maybe if you look at what has happened, can you tell me that kids are better educated in Milwaukee now?

JD: You answer that question for me.

PM: No.

JD: And you?

ERM: I agree.

PM: We had a good school system, educational-wise, in Milwaukee, and there were very few schools in the City of Milwaukee where you could not get a good education. There were some that, maybe the facilities weren't [unintelligible] as other places, but there was not a school in the city where you could not get a good education. Well, I will say very good schools in the city where you could not get a very good education. Okay, thirty years later, it's the other way around. There are few schools in the City of Milwaukee where you can get a good education.

JD: So, I've got to ask it this way, so I can figure out how you were thinking at the time. You said that it doesn't matter whether it's an all-Black classroom or not, as long as, you're looking for where the quality educational opportunities were. Now, you decided to move here, to this house and this school district area. Why here? Because it was an all-white area?

PM: No.

JD: Why?

25:00

PM: We moved here because the schools where we were, Peggy was the only one who went there. She had some very excellent teachers there, some of, at least one of which is still in the city. But, they gave her a good start. But they, like many others, were getting disgusted, they were getting overwhelmed with the way the school system was going, and you could see them becoming discouraged and getting ready to leave, and when they leave, who comes in? Most of the time, it's not as good as what left. Teachers are students, really. So it was like a creeping wave of mediocrity, which was overcoming schools, one right after the other. Well, we just tried to get ahead of that wave. Coincidentally, and I do think it was coincidental, this creeping wave kind of went along with the increase in the Black population. And if that sounds like begging the question to you, I don't think it is.

JD: No, no, because I'm asking you how you saw it at that time, and that's the way you're answering it for me, which is just what I'm trying to get an understanding. Just a second ago, you Mrs. Murrell, were sort of saying when I said, "What did you think about the desegregation order in 1979?" and all that, you said you could think about how it worked for your family, or how it worked for the masses, or the whole race or something. We talked about your family....

ERM: When I thought about my family, I knew how things would get, so I would say, always do your best, and see what they're doing at the best schools. For instance, the reading list, they used to have reading lists, I guess they still do, children should read so many books in each grade. Well, you used to know about those, and the kids would read their books. Now, they don't care whether you read a book or not. But I still, I have a list somewhere for Mike, but now that he's going to go to Marquette, they sent him a list. But being an educator, I do a lot of little things that maybe other people didn't, and I would, I would also teach my kids a lot at home, I wanted them to be as good as anybody else, to know as much as they might know at University School. So I always helped them to know more than their classmates, or to be up with

everything, because they had to compete with, I reminded them that they had to compete with the world, so I really went out of my way to make sure they knew a lot more than they did.

JD: And I know you said you substitute taught all around, but you taught permanently for MPS, where?

ERM: What schools? I've even taught at grade schools, when they get desperate, they say they need a warm body at 7:30...

PM: He's asking about where you were permanently assigned at.

JD: Where you were permanently teaching, I'm sorry.

ERM: I taught, my first assignment was at Marshall.

JD: Marshall High School?

ERM: I was there for a year, and then I got bumped.

JD: And where did you go then?

ERM: I went to Juneau, and I stayed there until I retired.

JD: Okay, and what did you teach?

ERM: As a substitute?

JD: No, at Juneau.

ERM: Marshall and Juneau.

JD: No, what topics did you teach, what subjects?

ERM: Business education, that included, first it included typing, shorthand, bookkeeping, business law, then after awhile, they made the business education teachers learn computers, and I taught computers.

JD: Because I knew your husband was a dentist, I wasn't quite sure what you had taught and all that, I just needed to get a better sense of that too.

ERM: My field was business education. A broad spectrum with eleven subjects under it.

JD: Yeah, you do a lot when you're doing business ed. I asked you about what were your reactions to the desegregation decision in '79, and then let me go a little bit closer to the present. I talked to your son, Peter Jr., because I had read an article that he had written about the New North Division District. You remember, this was like the late 1987, 88, he and Howard Fuller and some others at that time, were talking about, creating a new school district, the New North Division District idea. What did you all think about that when Peter was interested in that?

ERM: Well, I got to see the school when it first opened up, in fact I taught there, a beautiful school...

JD: North Division, the school itself, okay.

ERM: I also worked in the old school. The second one was just grand, wonderful, just palatial. And they had this medical center, with dental chairs and hospital equipment...

JD: It was like a specialty thing, right?

30:00

ERM: But when I saw that, I thought, gee, they're not going to get many kids to come all the way back there, they never did either.

PM: I guess I don't remember enough about what that was all about...

JD: It didn't last that long...

PM: But very likely I disagreed with what he was doing, because Peter and I used to have some pretty big arguments about some little things too [laughs].

JD: It gets complicated.

ERM: The beautiful building did not pull the people in, they did not come just to see the building.

JD: Okay. And you told me a little bit about the schools where you were growing up in Kentucky. I assume it was an all-Black school you were in...

PM: Definitely.

JD: ...and the way you thought about that, and where did you grow up again?

ERM: I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and my life was similar to how, that's why I helped my children so, because my family moved from North Carolina when I was less than a year old, so I grew up in a place where it was like one Black family and all other people. And we had to fit into a neighborhood...

JD: In Pittsburgh now, right?

ERM: In Pittsburgh. And we fit into our neighborhood, and I got good grades at school, and I'd be the only, we were like one Black child in each room, even my graduation class in the best high school in the whole state, Taylor-Alderdice [sp?], like Rufus King was here...

JD: Oh yeah, I had a friend who went to Alderdice, I know what you're talking about.

ERM: Yeah, Taylor-Alderdice High School, I graduated from there with high honors.

JD: When Peggy was going to Rufus King...

ERM: All my experiences, I could just fit them right over, and tell them how it was with me, and I think that's what helped them a lot, because I had many tales to tell them about how things happened for me.

JD: Can you think of one that you might have told your daughter that helped her get through a day, on a tough day or something?

ERM: Yes, Mrs. Minzer [sp?], that time, there were a big school like that, you're going to find people that treat you different, and they did, but then I worked hard, I struggled, and I made good grades, and you come clean and neat, and you say, "thank you," and you're courteous, and you never get angry, and you do all the things, and it pays off, and it paid off for me. It did, everything happened wonderful for me. I used to stutter, and I was very poor, and I come from a large family, but my mother kept me clean and neat, and we just were a hard struggling family and we managed and most of us went to college, and those things paid off for me, those were my

strategies. My mother would say, "No matter what," my father too, "No matter what they do, kill them with kindness."

JD: Kill them with kindness. And those strategies that you used, and that you used, do you feel that you used the same strategies when your kids were growing up, or did you feel you had to change your strategies for dealing with school?

ERM: Well, I started them out with mine....

JD: And did it work...

ERM: It worked.

JD:as far as you saw it?

PM: I guess the main things that I told the kids that, using alibis for failure really gets you nowhere. You know, if you don't do something, it's not the other person's fault, it's your fault, you didn't do it. And you're not going to get anywhere unless you put forward your best effort, regardless of where it is, and I think probably that that was the biggest message that I had.

ERM: The kids were pretty much my domain. He was a young dentist starting out, and he was president of everything that they had around here that was Black, the Alphas, the Frontiers, the Y, he was always gone to these meetings, these civic meetings, and except for, he would come, he would go to PTA, but otherwise, it was their homework, and when he would come in, they would, it's time to eat dinner and go to bed, they'd go up and do their homework and go to bed, and then he could have a little bit of peace and read the paper, but he didn't have to worry too much with them while they were little, because I had, I didn't have a job then, because I had my kids, and my sick daughter, so the kids were my world, and I just worked in it.

35:00

JD: I'm almost wrapped up here and I've been taking up a lot of your time, but I just wanted to ask one more thing here. I've got an article written by your son, Peter, at home in my filing cabinet, and I haven't read it yet, but it's an article about another thing that's been here in Milwaukee, it's kind of new, they call it the African-American immersion schools. Do you know what I'm talking about? So now I haven't read this article yet by Peter, but what's your reaction been to that innovation here?

PM: I'm not sure how it has worked out here. I can see some merit in it, as long as it doesn't have, you know, it's not right up front as the number one aim. If I understand it correctly, they're supposed to take their African heritage, at least the best parts of it, and show how it can be applied to American, the Afro-American experience.

ERM: I never want a child of mine to go.

JD: Why not? Sorry to interrupt.

PM: That's okay.

JD: Can you just tell me why?

ERM: Because this is America and I don't think that should be necessary.

JD: I cut you off, I'm sorry.

PM: That's okay. Well, as I say, I do think there's a place for it, as long as it's put as the panacea for all the troubles and the number one priority in school, I think it's fine. I think some parts of it should be used, but if it is put forward as being the solution for all the problems of the Afro-American, no, because I, as Ruth said, this is a country where you have to learn to exist as an American, but that is not to say that you cannot have an appreciation for your own heritage, which is all, the only place I see it has, so that you can develop [unintelligible] appreciation for where you came, but not that it's going to help you solve your problems, in this country, because nobody is, you can't impose those cultures on somebody else, you can only use them for your own benefit, and when it comes to existing in it, you have to learn to exist on the same basis with everybody else.

ERM: He says he finds a little merit. I don't find any merit.

JD: Uh-huh. Let me just ask my last question then to wrap it up. If you put yourself in my shoes for a minute here, I look at Milwaukee and African-American efforts to improve schools, or keep schools maintained, and I say to myself, from like the 1950s to the 1990s, there's been so many different ways that people tried to keep good schools for African-Americans in Milwaukee. People tried integration, people tried joining PTAs to maintain standards, people tried school choice, people tried this African-American immersion school. Why do people try different things? Why have people tried different things at different times for the past forty years? Any clue on that?

PM: No, except every wave that comes along, comes along with a new set of things that they learned [laughs], of theories that they learned in school, and say "Hey, this one is the one to do that," and I don't think that there is any such answer as that. I guess, I don't know how you do it, but the thing that I think is necessary is that you get an education on the same basis as everybody else, hopefully providing the same opportunities and go into with the idea that there's no free ride, anywhere, we've got to learn how to operate in this world, and realize that for every right or privilege, there's a responsibility that goes along. I don't know really what else can do...

ERM: No country has really solved it. That I know of. Because what happens, the public schools maybe have a good period, they flourish, and then they begin to change, and then people take their kids out and put them in a private school, pretty soon, everybody's in private school, and then I suppose, maybe so many kids in the future, then they'll all start back again and try the public schools, it's just a revolving, an evolving and revolving situation that may stay settled for a decade or so and then changes come in.

PM: Because I think a real simple answer, and again, I don't know really how to do it, is that it's impossible for somebody else, a board, or any kind of agency, to do things for people. I think the best they can do is make it possible for people to do it for themselves, and then it becomes an

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individual responsibility. If he has the opportunity to do it, then he has the responsibility to do it. I don't think there's anything you can do for them. What is the saying that Abraham Lincoln said, "It's impossible for you to do for anyone what he can and should be doing for himself." And the only thing that I can see that agencies can do is to provide the opportunities, economic, physical, and everything else, for people to do it, and I think it's people's responsibility to do what is necessary for them.

ERM: What are you going to do, write a book?

JD: [Laughs]. This is my dissertation, which means, it's sort of about 300 pages when it's all done about a year from now, and maybe it will turn into a book, we'll see.

[consent form]