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Oral History Interview on Education/Instruccion

Benjamin Dixon

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Dixon, Benjamin

Oral history interview by Jack Dougherty and Jasmin Agosto for the Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Project, August 12, 2010. Available from the Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford Connecticut (http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cssp_ohistory/).

Consent form: DixonBen_consent20100812.pdf

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Location: Dixon's home in Blacksburg, Virginia, via telephone

Recording format: digital audio

File name: DixonBen interview 20100812.WMA

Length: 1:18:35 (see inserted timestamps)

Transcribed by: Anique Thompson, Jack Dougherty

Additional files: none

Abstract:

Benjamin Dixon (born 1939) recalls his activism against housing discrimination in Greater Hartford with Education/Instrucción during the 1970s. In addition, he discusses growing up as an African-American in the Barbour Street area, encountering racism at Hartford Public High School, and receiving support from his mother and individual educators. After graduating from Howard University and Harvard Graduate School of Education, he returned to teach music in Hartford Public Schools and became active in the teachers' union. He and his family were the first black residents in their neighborhood in Windsor. Dixon later became an education administrator who served in Bloomfield, the Capitol Region Education Council, and the Connecticut Department of Education.

Dixon was previously interviewed by Jasmin Agosto for her senior paper, "Fighting Segregation, Teaching Multiculturalism," but that recording was damaged. Submitted as part of the OnTheLine web-book by Jack Dougherty and colleagues (<http://ontheline.trincoll.edu>).

Speaker key:

JD: Jack Dougherty

BD: Ben Dixon

JA: Jasmin Agosto

[all comments by transcriber in brackets]

JD: ...Great thanks for agreeing to be taped there today and, and I just sent you an email a little while ago. It has a one page little consent form it's a standard version we use at Trinity College. And um If you'd just look at that at your convenience, and uh review it and sign it and send it back that just allows us to donate the interview and the transcript that Jasmin will be typing up to the Hartford Studies Project in the library here at Trinity, and just officially shows that you agreed to have your interview shared with them and they can share it with the public and researchers and so forth.

BD: Ok is that similar to the last one I did?

JD: Exactly, it's just that every time we do a recording we have to ask you to do the form. And if it's okay we prefer to have a hard copy mailed back to us so I put my mailing address right there on the email and on the form.

BD: Okay I'll be getting to my computer in just a minute.

JD: That's fine, okay. Uh... are you ready to do an interview now?

BD: Sure.

JD: Okay, so uh... we're going to begin. Jasmin as you know - she's talked with you once before and found it an enthralling conversation. And she's written about Education Instruccion which is going to be our primary focus today for the interview. Jasmin, did you want to begin with that? And then I'll come back to a question I have.

JA: Yes. So, how are you doing Ben?

BD: Good and you?

JD: Good to finally connect with you. Um I'm very good, just busy with Sankofa. Um I - I when I got your message I heard your voice, and you sounded interested in what I wrote and I was curious as to what exactly kind of comments you might have had, any corrections, anything that you might have wanted to say about the paper

BD: Uh I thought it was a good draft, uh pardon me for making that reference because I'm so used to talking to students who do papers -

JA: Right.

JD: Jasmin - Jasmin wrote draft right on the front

BD: Okay, um I'll be honest with you it brought back memories of uh, a lot of the experiences I had with Education Instruccion and I found it to be fairly complete - as I can recall that experience if you can understand what I'm saying.

JA: Right.

BD: And, I had some - just added some stuff like that, but I'm not going to bother you with those because it's a draft. But the content I thought was great. I thought the uh, the progression of the information and particularly the context in which you reflected on the activities of EI. And so I, all I'm gonna say is you just keep going.[00:03:03]

JA: Okay

BD: It's uh, its something that I'd like to get a final copy.

JA: Right.

BD: Uh, you know something that I'm gonna keep in my little pile of EI stuff. I actually picked up information that I didn't know anything about. In terms of the context.

JA: Okay.

BD: The specifics, I had no - nothing jumped out that required major uh... changes in terms of the content.

JA: Right.

BD: Uh, I have - to confess I haven't looked at it since the last time I looked at it which was shortly after you sent it to me and I will try to look at it again if you want, but as I said I thought it was a good deal. Done well.

JA: Well thank-you and any - really any kind of comments even if it is like grammatical or sequential or anything, cause you are an educator you know? Uh I would love any kind of comments.

BD: How are we going to proceed?

JD: Well we've got some questions back and forth here, and we don't want to use up too much of your time. You've got a good 30-40 minutes with us here, I'd like to jump right into a couple questions about Education/ Instruccion (EI)

BD: Okay, and let me put out my disclaimer right away: since I don't have many of the materials I had back in that time. Uh as you can understand I've been retired for 4 years and I'm still trying to clean out.[00:04:47]

JD: I understand entirely. And uh we you know we this is its always recognize this is an oral history interview - people remember what they remember we're just trying to ask some things that we can't quite figure out just from reading all the documents that we've been able to find here in Hartford. So you might be able to shed some light on things and in other areas, maybe you won't have an answer for us and its fine. Um when, Jasmin and I were very excited a few months ago: we finally found the entire collection of - to our knowledge all ten of the Fair Housing At Its Worst reports. And so we have copies of those and we have those online and if you'd like any of those hard copies or something like that just say the word and we'd be happy to give those back to you since its your part of history. We were struck by how uh-uh innovative they were for the time, and still how educational they are to us today just in terms of um explaining um a very complicated process of fair housing at its worst. Can you tell us more about how these reports were created? You know, we see um we see names we see they come out over a period of time but tell us more about what you remember from behind the scenes. How were these sort of sewn together?[00:06:03]

BD: Well off the top here, let me just say that the research that we did was probably in fact - I'll say definitely not conventional. In other words, we didn't spend time in the library somewhere or examining a whole lot of other reports. We literally were creating it out of whole cloth. We found that one of the reasons that stimulated us to do the report and uh follow up reports and so forth was the fact that none of that information collected in that way for that purpose existed. And so in order for us to put a sort of research-based background on our activist activities we had to actually create that information. I mean we didn't make it up. We did the necessary research to get the facts and figures. But we definitely had no real outline or guide for us in terms of the direction the content would take. We knew what our end goal was and that was to eliminate what was going on in the housing area. Particularly in our little neck of the woods. As we did this we found ourselves discovering, if you will, or uncovering, things that we had no notion about. And we did our own analysis based on our notion of equal opportunity and our understanding and knowledge of existing laws or non-existing laws if you will, that would buttress our reason for doing it. We also did it because we needed to be able to convey a sort of legitimacy or at least seriousness-about it and to try to anticipate as much as we could the questions from both the naysayers and the people who understood what we were trying to do and also to leave a full documented trail of information in the progression that others could use. So we did the reports we made them available to those who we thought needed it. And during that time as I recall a number of researchers and or students accessed the information. We don't know how they used it specifically in every case, but we know there was a call for copies of the information. You know we had hard copies. To my knowledge we didn't have anything online per se as we do today. [00:09:42]

JD: It wasn't at the time online, that's correct.

BD: Yea Yea Yea okay I know... I'm old.

JD& JA: Hahahaha

BD: I keep telling my children

JD: Yea?

BD: Uh yea I'm published, I'm published

JD & JA: Hahahaha

BD: But don't think you're gonna Google it right away

JD & JA: Hahahaha

JD: So as we – as Jasmin and I have looked back at the reports we see of course your name, Boyd Hinds, Julia Ramos Grenier. We see some students acknowledged names like Jeanne Bost, Rick Casilli, Donna Fatsi, Jeffrey Grove, and others.

BD: Oh yea, Jeffery yea.

JD: So I'm just trying to figure out you know as you just sort of look back, we don't know where these students really came from – we don't know if they're uh from one of the local colleges in Hartford or somewhere else.

BD: Well uh, as I recall it was a combination of all of the above. I mean we had um people we call students who may not have actually been in college at the time. A number of students gravitated to - a number of young people gravitated to us. Uh and their status was a non-student but they were exercising, if you will, their research skills and their interest in being activists in this area and in discovering us some wanted to get our information uh came and sat with us um and we provided them interviews and those kind of things, but we also provided them copies of information uh that they could use, you know, as a bridge. I don't recall having a student coming in to say 'I'm doing a dissertation on....'[00:11:32]

JD: Right, right.

BD: Okay but I wouldn't be surprised if someone would pop up and say 'Oh yea, that was the basis of my dissertation.'

JD: That's what it turned into for them. Okay.

BD: Right, so we were not – in fact that's what I meant by saying we were not sort of in the traditional modes of the academy, per se. Uh however we used whatever skills we had from our experience in the academy.

JD: I certainly agree with what you said about these being innovative reports and you- certainly you were creating them from the research that you did at the time. Occasionally in the reports we see mention of maybe other organizations in other parts of the country. Maybe a group called National Neighbors in the Philadelphia area or the Suburban Action Institute I believe in the New York area. Do you recall – certainly its very common for civil rights activists or activists to just have other influences from around the country. Maybe people you've met at a workshop or read about for a conference or something like that. Do you recall any other strong influences at the time that EI was putting together these fair housing reports?

BD: Not specifically, the impression that remains with me is that when we made- when we discovered a possible source –if you will, we made very personal kinds of contacts with individuals. You know, one contact would lead to another, you know: the whole network thing. Some of it, a lot of it was sort of unofficial pointing us in the right direction kind of thing. We, I particularly recall – and I can't call names or anything now, getting some good leads from some of the federally based agencies where we would be contacting an individual who we learned about and kind of you know, told them what we were about. They would sometimes give us unofficial leads or official leads. Mostly unofficial. Whether it was a federal agency or one of the types of organizations you mentioned we utilized those contacts to the hilt.[00:14:07]

JD: I can imagine, and do you recall if that would've been people with for example HUD [Housing and Urban Development], or the Department of Justice or some other federal agency?

BD: I would put money on the fact that it was all of those. HUD, the Department of Justice, Equal Opportunity agencies and so on because you remember now, we were not just doing housing...

JD: Correct

BD: We were also involved and concerned about employment as well. So we – I mean we didn't – we were... okay - pardon my language: we were stupid enough to ask questions anytime, anywhere, to ask people to share with us. And sometimes we didn't get people forthcoming but what I remember is that we were surprised at times to the degree which people would share with us. [00:15:12]

JD: Interesting. We sort of see how these reports, the series of ten begins in February 1974 and they trickle out over the next few months and there's certainly a timing here. Several of them appear to be released right around a news conference announcing the lawsuit against the Barrows and other real estate firms and we've seen references that, you know, 500 of these reports were mailed out and there was funding from a couple organizations – The New World Foundation, The Field Foundation – to print another 500 and so forth. Can you tell us more about when you were putting these reports together about fair housing, who did you really intend to read these? Who was your intended audience? And who do you actually really thought, who really seemed to have read them or looked at them as far as you can tell?

BD: There were two types of audiences that we were consciously going after. One were the people who were (in our opinion) committing the sin. Those who we wanted to let them know we weren't just standing on the corner yelling 'foul' with regard to housing. That we had documented what we were alluding to or talking about and so obviously some, many found those reports uncomfortable. The other was to supply and put in the hands of other folks who were like-minded if you will and in their own, you know, organization/community groups and so forth to use that information as a basis for their activism. So those are the basics of the two. We weren't trying to build necessarily a specific body of knowledge that would be something that a lawyer would use in a court proceeding. And you can tell that by the way they're written. [00:17:19]

JD: Sure, Sure.

BD: But we understood that that was a possibility and so basically it was written so that we weren't trying to hide it from anybody but we were definitely making sure that the supporters, or people who would ultimately support our effort, were armed with information that was not just generic, but as locally based as possible.

JD: A side note here on these reports: Jasmin and I, we knew of their existence. Surprisingly not a single library of any type to our knowledge in the entire Hartford region has a copy of any of these reports. But the Library of Congress in Washington DC somehow, somewhere they got copies of reports 5, 8, and 9 and they were on file there. And we finally found a set of all ten neatly together in some of the Sheff litigation documents....

BD: Yes

JD: ...By the Sheff by the lawyers before they dropped the housing part of the lawsuit. And no one had seen those in easily ten or twenty years. Does it surprise you that these kind of fell off the radar for a while?

BD: Yes, you know: hindsight is 20/20. Had I – but I am surprised that they are, were collected in the Library of Congress. That surprises me. I don't recall us making sure that that happened or causing that to happen in some way. And so I don't know how it happened, I don't recall that. But I am not surprised that people locally, particularly those in libraries and so on would systematically collect these things and put them for posterity somewhere. I'm not surprised, that was the nature of the environment at that time. [00:19:32]

JD: Sure, Sure.

BD: We were kooks, storefront consultants, we called ourselves. Literally existing and living in the storefront on Albany Avenue, where I think it was an old drugstore or something – I forget what it was. Woodland, the corner of Woodland and Albany.[00:19:57]

JD: Okay.

BD: and so it surprises me that they're collected in one place like the Library of Congress and the fact that you've got your hands on all ten of them is a little bit of a miracle because I don't have them.[00:20:18]

JD: Well, Certainly if you'd like a hard copy of our set just say the word and we'll send those to you or you could just refer to the – you could even print out for yourself the ten that we put up online whatever you prefer.

BD: Okay, probably online would be fine. I have three of them that Jasmin sent me.

JD: So the numbering system on those web links, if you just keep following it.

BD: Okay.

JD: At the very end you must have like a number: 1, 2, 3.... Then just put in a 4, 5, 6 all the way up to ten and ten is what we know of okay?

BD: Oh, great.

JD: So they're all right there for you.

BD: Fantastic.

JD: I have a couple more questions then we'll switch back to Jasmin. The reports 1 and 2 begin with a project Ya Basta – a great name – and every much the housing discrimination testing and this became the case file against Barrows and the other firms. Whose idea was this? This whole idea of sending out testers, was anyone else doing pairs of race, race-based testing in like this in the Harford area at the time to your knowledge?

BD: Not to our knowledge. There may have been some anecdotal information we picked up from people who did it in a less systematic way accidentally, you know, that kind of thing. But to our knowledge – one of the reasons we went heavily after this is because we knew we had to produce the data....[00:21:58]

JD: Yea.

BD: ...and obviously one of the things that led us in that direction is the fact that we couldn't find any. So we not only wanted to produce the data we wanted to have our fingerprints all over it because that was the best way for us to really internalize the scope of the problem. By having our testers and ourselves - because I remember distinctly participating in several of them – to be able to give us not only the specifics of the event or the events, but you know, sort of the background anecdotal kind of flavor of the kind of resistance we got from the real estate industry for even asking our critical questions during those interviews. I mean we did it very systematically. And while the different real estate firms had varying levels of response they were all generally the same: denial, cover-up, etc.[00:23:22]

JD: So let's move on right to one of your memories of your experiences with these uh, we have a lot of the paperwork that was submitted as part of the case file for the Barrows case. At the time, we've got your address as; you're listed as 297 Preston Street in Windsor.

BD: Yes.

JD: It looks like here that one of the – if I'm reading it correctly here – this is just a summary sheet for the lawyers but there was one of the real estate offices that you might have been a tester at was Hurwit and Simons, Ms. Alice Lawler, maybe you did other testing as well. Can you recall any of these incidents of what testing was like when you were there? [See US v Barrows 1974, Documents Pertaining to Defendant (discrimination evidence collected by EI), pp. 98-99]

BD: Uh, a little bit. I know we tested in pairs and sent back other people to establish a baseline, I believe, and then sent in the people representing minority races. My own personal experience, I remember distinctly sitting in one of those offices going through real estate books and asking questions about property outside of Hartford and particularly outside of North Hartford and while we did concentrate in the Hartford area because we had plenty of work there, I think we also looked at the suburban communities, and as a tester, typically we would make sure we that we saw and asked questions on a lot of property during the event that we were engaged in. So that we could not only convey our interests but also to see how they reacted and responded to different properties we'd ask questions about. As I recall, we were encouraged to look at certain properties...[00:25:43]

JD: Yep.

BD: And discouraged in a variety of ways, from looking at others. Obviously it wasn't explicit but it was clear that we were getting a message that some of our other testers were not getting.

JD: When we look at the, all ten of reports – we've kind of lined them up there, there's an interesting pattern that we see in the reports, you know, the early ones. Number one, Number two... they very much saw well, you know, the problem here is: look at these individual real estate firms and look at what they're doing –they're steering people or they're only showing them certain markets, and then the reports they actually sort of advance the whole analysis of really what the problem is. It get more sophisticated, it goes up to the corporations that create markets to the state and national agencies that are failing to regulate, there's a pretty sophisticated analysis if you sort of go across all ten of the reports. Can you tell more – how did this thinking in your group, how did this come about?

BD: Well it came about from what we understood about the difference between individual and institutional racism. We as a team crossed that bridge early on before we did many of these or maybe any of them. Because we had to get those concepts really settled in our own minds, and the progression that you see is a reflection of our understanding that individuals who were biased and exercised that bias to commit what we call 'racist activities' was only part of the problem. The other part of the problem was the fact that they were able to do that with almost no interference because the institutional constructs – the institutional policies, practices, and programs reinforced that behavior - and that's what I believe you see evidence of in those reports. So the reports were done as much as a discovery as we uncovered the complexity of this thing as much as it was an intentional progressive focusing on the difference between individual and institutional racism. [00:28:42]

JD: Over to Jasmin.

JA: Yea, sure. You're talking about these large, I guess connections between the systems. The individual and the systems for which the individual goes through. I know last time we spoke, I heard a great kind of anecdote about you growing up in Hartford – going through the school system. Maneuvering your way through and getting into higher education, then coming back, and I kinda wanted you to talk about that again so we could get it recorded. But just tell us, you know, what was it like, you know, growing up here and then going through the education system and you coming back. What was that process like, because you did talk a little bit about your mother advocating for you.

BD: Yes, okay. Let me try to keep this succinct. Basically – excuse me – I was a typical African American youngster growing up in society in Hartford and fairly innocent through at least, Junior High School, about what really was going on. My initial experience in the whole area of

inclusion and diversity was as I look back on it now probably the most impactful experience along these lines because I grew up on Barbour Street, after we left the projects, to live in a community that had a diversity of people. I'm not saying there was no racism there; I'm simply saying that on our blocks that were around us, we had different nationalities and so forth, and so on. I thought that was the way the real world was, and that's the way it operated. Of course, being a youngster, I didn't – I wasn't sophisticated enough to know what was really going on. We didn't have anybody in our household preaching things like racism and so on. The value set that we were receiving was not race-specific per se. But of course my parents and grandparents understood their status. By the time I got to Junior High school even though there were some things that happened that I was too young to understand, my mother understood how important it was for me to be in the right program at the Hartford Public High School and I only – I think I told you Jasmin, I only really heard my mother speak about it because I asked her a direct question about a year or two ago when I asked her: why did she, an African American woman, who finished high school, no college education... know none of the things that you would think about, for someone to go down to the Board of Education and talk with the Superintendent directly after we found out that I had been targeted as a student to go to the general and vocational program at Hartford Public High School when I left the Junior High. For her, at that time, to march into the Superintendent's office, and tell him – not ask - and tell him that her son was going to go into the college prep program and there was no reason that she saw why that shouldn't and couldn't happen. I don't know what other conversations were held and so on, but my mother's statement to me a couple of years ago was: "I was ready to go to jail." [00:33:11]

JA: Hmm.

BD: I get emotional about it every time I think about it. Anyway, I wound up in Hartford Public High School (HPHS) and of course, being older, I began to look around and check out what was happening. And there were instances and incidents at the high school of unfairness based probably on race that I experienced as a High School student. But not in such a blatant way that I could take any action per se, and I won't you know, belabor it for you; but that's when my eyes were really really opened and as much as I struggled to be a top student at HPHS I realized there were constraints against my being recognized that way. And so the issue of what to do after I graduated was pretty clear: One, my family couldn't afford to send me to school. Two, I didn't get any – much reinforcement from the school as an institution that would tell me that I was college material. However within the institution, individuals opened doors for me and one of them was my high school counselor who literally forced me to take an exam for Howard University. [00:35:11]

JA: Hmm.

BD: Literally forced me. And that was done by telling me that when after finally reaching the level of the Honor Society in my fourth year, told me that if I wanted to be in the Honor Society, I needed to go take this exam and to make it even worse – I had to take it at Weaver High School, which was a competitor in football and everything else, and I was steaming.

And he said: 'Who am I?'

I said: 'You're Mr. Carlson'

'What do I do?'

'You're the head guidance counselor.'

'And who's in charge of the Honor Society?'

'You are sir.'

'Then you will take this exam, otherwise you're not getting up on that stage.'

JD: Wow.

BD: and I believed the man, thank God. And I went to Hartford High [correction: probably meant Howard University]. And it was the best exam I've had in my whole academic career.

JA: Really?

BD: I was so steaming, I – I was so steaming, and I got to that exam and I, you know, I wanted to be in the Honor Society. Fortunately, that was what was the pinnacle of my education – I thought. So, anyway, that's the story. I don't know if I fully answered your question Jasmin....[00:36:39]

JA: Yea, no... that's great.

JD: Ben, can I just do a couple fill-ins here to make sure I can piece this story together in time. It's a great story. When did you graduate from HPHS?

BD: 1957.

JD: And so you were born 1940, 1939?

BD: 1939.

JD: 1939, okay. And your mother's – your parent's names?

BD: My mother's name at that time was Rose Dixon.[00:37:11]

JD: We've read that, for your undergrad – you went to college. Did you go to Howard? Did you matriculate there?

BD: Oh yea.

JD: And so you graduated from Howard around 4 years at Howard then?

BD: Actually 5 years, I majored in music, and was training to be a music educator. I took extra work, extra courses and so I turned it into a 5-year program.

JD: Got it.

BD: and when I left there, I had a similar incident with a professor on the campus who said: 'Who am I?'

I said: 'You're my major advisor'

'And so therefore you will do as I say.'

And I said: 'What?'

'You will go and take this exam for graduate work at Harvard University School of Education'[00:38:16]

JD: Got it.

BD: and I believed her. So and that's how I got to Harvard.

JD: And so that's the – I think we've seen the Master of Arts in teaching you had from Harvard?

BD: Yes.

JD: And so we're just trying to connect it back, did you come back after your degree at Harvard; did you come directly back to Hartford?

BD: Directly back to Hartford, and couldn't get a job.

JD: Tell me more about that.

BD: Good, good. Suffice it to say that by the time I was a senior in high school I had a little name, a little bit of a name recognition in the town. Because I was active a little bit in the community and I was one of the newspaper boys for the Hartford Times and because of my activity at Hartford High, particularly in the area of music there was a little bit of name recognition in the town for Ben Dixon. So I came back to a community that 'knew me' for a teaching job and of course it was announced that there were no jobs available. So that summer, while I was looking for other work, I did get a call from the head of the Music Department at the Board of Education which simply said two weeks before the school opened – schools opened,

that there was a job available. The job was available in the North End of Hartford, of course. You couldn't get further north. It was on Tower Avenue, Barbour school. [00:40:24]

JD: Mm hmm.

JA: Right.

BD: And I came to find out later that it became available because a senior member of the music staff, who was assigned to that school, must've lobbied or found an opportunity to move to the South End, to one of the schools in the South End. That left a hole at the last minute, that summer. And of course they gave it to me and I literally walked in, shook the hand of the principal. By the time I had signed up for the job and he sent me to the classroom because school had opened by then. So my next hurdle in the Hartford School System as a professional was to get a job in the South End of the city.[00:41:28]

JD: So we've seen three school names associated with your name: Barbour, Northwest Jones, and Kennelly. Are those the three where you taught?

BD: That's right. I taught two schools at the same time, so almost 1000 students a week.

JA: Wow.

BD: If you add up all the classrooms and the students in the school where I had total responsibility for the music program, it was close to that...

JD: Yup, yup.

BD: ...and I thought that was natural. You can tell I learned more about what was going on in the system, and Kennelly school, for example – I don't remember the exact size of it, 500 students, maybe even less. And when I applied to be in the South End it was strongly resisted. Had it not been for – what's her name, the principal.

JA: Of Kennelly? The principal of Kennelly?

BD: Yea.

JA: Okay, I don't know.

BD: Anyway I served under two principals one was a former nun. Ah, what was her name? Anyway. My name must have come across her desk and she said 'Yeah, I want him.' And I believe – or put it this way: the music director in the city suggested my name and she OK'd it. And then I served, before I left there, under the former principal of Annie Fisher School, who was also a musician, and served well under her. We put on musical events where she performed at the piano and so forth and so on. It was a good experience once I got there. Then, like a fool, I became active in the teacher's union. [00:43:41]

JD: So, before we go there, back me up to... why apply to teach at Kennelly? Why not just continue teaching at Barbour, Northwest Jones? What's the motivation to apply to a different school on the South End?

BD: One, I learned I was doing an impossible job with the two schools I was given. This was a single school. In fact, I never knew where Kennelly was until you know; I began to apply and to explore. Two: I believed I could do the job, and I believed that the conditions in that school on a general basis were more supportive of a music program including the parent groups and so forth and so on. In all of this, of course I learned, as I operated in the system as a professional. You know, going to meetings across town and stuff like that. So my theory, or my belief and what I was taught at home was not 'I can't' but 'Why not?', and so I did.[00:44:59]

JD: So we think from everything else that we've seen it sounds like you spent about three years teaching at Barbour and Northwest together. Does that make sense? About three years?

BD: Yea, well... I need to have my résumé in front of me. I'm pretty sure I spent more than a year at Kennelly. But most of my early teaching was at those two schools: Barbour and Northwest Jones.

JD: Okay.

BD: And then I went to Education Instruccion – not Education Instruccion, I went to Westledge School.

JD: So let me just get the chronology straight, and roughly, you know – if you have your résumé somewhere maybe we could just look at that. But you begin teaching in Harford Public Schools around 1963? 64?

BD: Uh.... Probably 63.

JD: Okay, that makes sense.

BD: Summer of 63.

JD: Because you graduated from Howard, and you did one year at Harvard. Right?

BD: Right, right.

JD: That makes sense. And then you mentioned getting involved with, I assume the Hartford Federation of Teachers?

BD: Yes.

JD: Was that when you were at Kennelly?

BD: Definitely when I was at Kennelly. Probably only when I was in Kennelly. I was second Vice President of the union. Dorothy Billington was the first Vice President and that was during the time they were putting teachers in jail for you know, unionizing. [00:46:42]

JD: Yup, yup.

BD: And I remember distinctly being up on the stage at Hartford High, maybe I'm not sure where and literally the sheriff and the police or whatever came to arrest the leadership. They took the head guy and did not take the Vice Presidents. Dorothy Billington and I were both African American. Okay?[00:47:19]

JD: So I'm trying to piece this together. So they're not arresting you...

BD: That's right. But they arrested the – it was a symbolic gesture obviously, uh they arrested the President. I want to say his last name was Hill.

JD: Okay, well we can look that up, that's fine. So you and Billington are – she precedes you? She gets involved in the union before you?

BD: We – she might have had a few months or something, slightly before me. But I recall we were both shaking in our boots at the same time.[00:47:52]

JD: Yup, yup, yup. Let's just follow through to Westledge now. We know you were teaching at Kennelly, and how did you go from Kennelly to Westledge? What was the leap there?

BD: I'm an avid reader of the classified section in the newspaper...

JD & JA: Hahaha

BD:When I'm looking for a job, and the only thing I can recall, I don't know what led me to search the ads. Yes I had the experience in Hartford and so forth and so on but I saw something about a new school and got enough of an inkling from the ad that the purpose of the school was to, in essence, build a diverse student population... blah, blah, blah and that struck me as something I would be interested in. Particularly since I had that North End and South End experience in the Hartford School System.

JD: Sure.

BD: ... and I made a call, I made a contact and I'm not sure if it was Boyd Hinds I talked to but more than likely it was since he was the assistant honcho, you know, director of the school.
[00:49:24]

JD: Ok.

BD: ... and was interviewed I guess and they gave me a job. You know, again as a young professional not knowing any better, even though I had a family to feed and so on, I jumped out there and took this job at this new school.

JD: So it sounds to me like this was a big risk. I'm guessing this was a pay cut from a public school teaching position to a private position.

BD: Surprisingly as I recall: it was not that much of a pay cut. In fact, it might have been a little bit more.

JD: Okay, Ok.

BD: Remember now I was – the check I got in my second year of teaching was 5,200 and something dollars. I had a 200 dollar raise. So I believe it was more money, but that wasn't what was drawing me, as much as the nature of the opportunity.

JD: Oh I hear that for sure, yea. I'm just trying to see how it all worked out, how you made it work. So this is your first contact with Boyd Hinds?

BD: Absolutely.

JD: and Julia Ramos Grenier, first contact with her also is through Westledge?

BD: I actually was there before she was. She may have come the second year I was there and so on but I was definitely there before her. [00:50:59]

JD: ... and we aren't sure how long you taught at Westledge but the impression we have is that from meeting up and talking with people at Westledge this is where Education Instruccion really was born. The three of you meeting each other there and deciding to sort of create an organization – create a non-profit out of this.

BD: Yea, that's correct and had I not been there and Julia joining the school both of us probably would never have met Boyd Hinds and it was Boyd who made the proposition to us to leave the school and to form this organization and I say it that way because he didn't ask us to join him, but he asked us to help him create what turned out to be Education/Instruccion. [00:52:07]

JD: Did you have any idea what it was you were going to be creating?

BD: I had an idea because he was very, he was a clear as he could be in explaining what he thought the goals should be – what his goal was and the passion that this man had for what he was talking about I already knew that he was a bright guy, a go-getter you know, just loads of energy and I had come to respect him and value him as a friend while I was at Westledge. And then when he said to me he was going to invite Julia to be part of this, that was the first evidence that I had that this man could walk his talk. [00:53:18]

JD: ... and the evidence was?

BD: The fact that he was willing to put the three of us together on a co-equal basis.

JD: Okay.

BD: Okay and he lived up to that, almost to the point I used to have to tell him: 'You know, you don't have to continue to check out to see whether or not we feel like partners and not people working for you.' I mean he was very adamant about it, and he did that until the day he passed away.

JD: We obviously, haven't had the opportunity to speak with him as he is deceased. And we pieced together some information about Boyd Hinds, but I'm still a little unclear about what kind

of – was he doing corporate work before he? Was he a systems analyst or something like that? What do you recall him doing?

BD: Um I know he was – I think he was in the Navy, I don't know if all of that analytical work and so forth was a result of that or it was just college training or whatever. But Boyd was the kind of person who did not play up his credentials.

JD: Okay.

BD: and frankly, at that time I had no need to know all that stuff. I saw the evidence of what he was able to do and capable of doing and I guess I was too busy trying to internalize this new situation for me. I haven't had once since and that is to be working with a white male, in a way where I did not have to second-guess myself with regard to who's on top and when I saw him operate that way with Julia at the same time in fact, Boyd and I had the little pact about the issue of gender equity in the office. Because I knew what it felt like and I definitely did not think I had all my stuff together when it comes to understanding the differences and the similarities between male and females in a corporate or in a work situation. And I say that because a lot of our learning and understanding came out of direct experience. And we knew all three of us had the same goals. We knew that as long as it was possible EI needed to continue to exist so if we had challenges and problems and concerns individually or collectively but particularly individually we had an open dialogue and we would talk things through and work things through because I think the trust that we developed with each other was just outstanding. [00:56:46]

JD: Around this time we've got your address in Windsor. Was this a big move for you?

BD: For getting to Windsor?

JD: Yea.

BD: Oh yea, I mean by the time I moved out of our apartment, created some space. I'm sorry yea, I moved out of my mother's house, moved into an apartment in Harford and had one – two children at that time and I wanted to uh. No wait wait... I had one; I had a couple of children.

JA: Hahahaha.

BD: My youngest was born in 1970 so she wasn't around at the time I don't think and we wanted to move to a suburban community of course. We knew that we were going to be up against it with respect to locating housing and I don't mean financially and to make a long story short because of our work and other things... we got in touch with, or we were actually contacted by Howie Klebanoff, Howard Klebanoff? A lawyer in town who was like-minded and he ran something called the something – Littleton Group. It was probably a non-profit or whatever that searched out for housing and provided support for minority folk to acquire housing in non-minority neighborhoods in particularly suburban communities.[00:58:42]

JD: Let me just get the name straight if I can. Cause I'm not familiar with this one. This is Howard Clevell? Like C-...

BD: Klebanoff. N-o-f-f at the end.

JD: And does it begin with a K or a C?

BD: K

JD: Okay so Klebanoff. K-l-e-b-e-n-o-f-f.

BD: Yea.

JD: and you said it was like the Littleton group that you remember?

BD: Something like that: Littleton or Little-something. Uh in fact it might have been, I think it was somebody's name.

JD: Okay.

BD: So all I knew of this was my contact was with Howard Klebanoff. And they had proposed to us that we would move to South Windsor. They had a property there, and they talked to us and talked to us and talked to us and we said no, and one of the reasons we said no was because of the location at that time. Not – you know, we knew nothing about the community they wanted us to go to but we were obviously familiar with Hartford and our church was in Hartford and so forth and so on so we wanted to be in that first ring around Hartford. [01:00:00]

JD: Okay.

BD:... and they found a place for us in Windsor: 297 Preston Street. And we were the first black family in that neighborhood.

JD: I was gonna ask about that. Just trying to place the year here, so if you don't remember what year you moved there, maybe you do. But we know you had two kids. Can you tell me what year your kids were born?

BD: My first one was born in '62, we adopted him. The second was '66 and the third '70.

JD: So its between '66 and '70 is when you're moving in to Windsor it sounds like.

BD: I believe that's correct, I believe that's correct. [01:00:56]

JD: Ok.

BD: Man you guys are really ha-ha... you're making me work at this, Wow.

JD&JA: Hahaha.

BD: I should have my wife listening in on this she's the one who's got the memory mm, mm, mm.

JD&JA: Hahaha.

JD: Well she can look at the transcript and add any corrections she wants if you were to ever look at this later on.

BD: Okay.

JD: So we also know that you start working in the Bloomfield School District. We think this is around '71, '72. While you're doing work with Education/Instruccion, does this sound right?

BD: That's correct. We pulled back – I pulled back from full time Lily and I, and did some adjunct work in the summer with University of Connecticut for I think it was like a minority student pre-collegiate program and it was at that time that one of the people either involved in some way was assistant superintendent in Bloomfield School District who had distributed a vacancy or position for a federally funded program in Bloomfield. I took a flyer, read it, and applied and they brought me in as the director for Title VII, I believe it was.[01:02:24]

JD: Okay.

BD: That's how I got in to Bloomfield, about 13 years later I left Bloomfield to go to the Capital Region Education Council (CREC). While I was in Bloomfield, my mentor was Dr. Herbert Chester, who was at that time when he retired was the longest serving superintendent in the state of Connecticut. 25 years.

JD: Huh.

JA: Wow.

BD:... and he was my mentor. I feel very lucky in my life to have people at the right time – as I look back on it – in the right place to believe enough in me to give me opportunity and Herb did that. Every time I got ready to leave the Bloomfield School System to go on to what I thought was gonna be bigger, and better, and greater, and more whatever... he would say 'You know, you haven't learned this yet.' He would give me a new title, some more money, and I got more experience. This man was the kind of guy who the day I went up to get my – to fend for my

doctorate at University of Massachusetts, the day before rather. He knew I was going and he said, he came out of the office and he said: 'You ready to go?'

'Ready to go where?'

'I'm driving you up to UMass. We're gonna have lunch and then I'm going to sit in on your dissertation defense.' [01:04:08]

JA: Wow.

BD: Of course, he was the boss, and I was going to tell him: I haven't cleared this with the committee and he says, 'that's alright, no problem... we'll talk about that in the car.' The man fed me, got in the defense they accepted him as an observer and of course in the defense, you know they throw at you the mud-ball from the back of the room question and I opened my mouth to respond and Herb Chester jumped in and said: 'Look,' and I forget what exactly he said but he was all out of order.

JD & JA: Hahaha.

BD: He was out of order, you know, he was on time with what he was pointing out. He knew it was a curveball and it gave me just enough space to get my stuff together – you know, get my head together around it and then I proceeded to answer. Then he drove me back. He's also deceased. But so he was the kind of guy when he said: 'You haven't learned this; you got to do this now.' So left the Bloomfield School system having done almost everything in leadership out of Central Office. Except facilities and I had the opportunity to create new units and stuff like that you know, as the system grew and so forth. On the basis of that was you know, the opportunity for, when I left the Bloomfield School System – the opportunity came to join the Capitol Region Educational Council (CREC) and another mentor of mine, John Allison who was the former director, first Executive, he created the organization and he was executive director. Created a position as assistant executive director and asked me to take it. So again another opportunity to create something out of whole cloth, and I tell you, a valuable experience. But no experience was as valuable in my entire career as Education/Instrucción. Including my college education. [01:06:34]

JD: And you haven't even mentioned that you moved on to become Deputy Commissioner of Education in Connecticut, and certainly all the many many items in your career you certainly trace a lot of this back to Education/Instrucción it sounds.

BD: I trace it back of course more deeply than that to what my mother did for me when she took the bull by the horns and got me into college prep. But yes, I go back to my Education/Instrucción experience. I had been – at that point practicing diversity and inclusion with or without portfolio at every single job I had since then and my last job here at Virginia Tech was probably the only job they actually paid me to do it. [01:07:33]

JD&JA: Hahaha.

BD: It was hard for me to deal with that. Because I was actually being paid to wake up in the morning, have my coffee, and think about diversity.

JD&JA: Hahaha.

JD: What you've been doing all the way along; now its part of the official job description. Ben at the beginning of our conversation today you referred to – I think you said your 'pile of E/I stuff' and as you can tell Jasmin and I are sort of you know, we're historians. We're trying to make sure we can piece together people's stories of civil rights in Hartford from all the documents we can piece together and find and we would never ask you for your copies of these materials but we were wondering if you'd be willing to work with us to work out something where we could have photocopies or scanned copies of any documents you might be willing to donate back to

Hartford so we can have a copy here in the Hartford Studies Project collection here at Trinity to share with others. Is that possible?

BD: Well I'll look through my box, and now its down to one box and see if there are any items that I don't think you have and I'd be happy to share those with you.

JD: We'd be very appreciative. Jasmin would you be willing to follow up with him on the logistics of how we could do that if he finds things that he's willing to share?

JA: Oh yea, definitely.

JD: And along with that is; we have many other photographs from this era but to date – Jasmin and I still have not found a single photograph of you, and Boyd, and Julia together. Do you think you have a copy of something like that? [01:09:15]

BD: I'll look and see. You know, we were not – we were very good people in documenting what we were doing in reports but we weren't so good about you know, documenting our existence.

JA: Hahaha.

BD: With photographs and so on. I don't recall us literally, we were photographed many times by...

JA: News reporters.

BD: ... The newspaper, or...

JD: Yup.

BD: Or the people at the Travelers Corporate – what do you call it – annual meeting when we were standing up. Julia – Boyd speaking to them in Spanish as to why they didn't have a diverse board. I'm sure we were photographed but I don't have copies of them.[01:10:09]

JD: If you don't we have one more place to look, the Hartford Times Photo Library has been donated to the Hartford Public Library and they're just organizing it now so we haven't looked there yet...

JA: Oh wow.

JD: ...But that's one more possibility.

BD: Yea okay.

JD: and then Boyd [correction: Ben], can I ask you one more question, and this is still just, we're still trying to piece things together of other documents that might be flying around there.

Obviously in the years after the death of Boyd and Wendy his spouse correct? Is that her name?

BD: Yes.

JD: We, Julia's mentioned that its possible that some of their children may have some documents about EI or about some of Boyd's personal papers at the time because he went on to become a legislator and so forth. But we haven't had luck yet connecting with any of the children and I don't know if you have any suggestions in this area? I know its been many years but I don't know if you've still been in touch with anyone. Or even names of the children.

BD: No I haven't been in touch with – the last time I saw one of them was I think, Julia and I saw the older boy together while I was at Travelers insurance company. I recall meeting in the building there. Unfortunately I lost track of them.[01:11:33]

JD: That's fine. Two boys and a girl to the best of your memory?

BD: Yes.

JD: I've got names like Alfred Boyd Hinds III?

BD:.. Yea.

JD:... and Benjamin Hinds?

BD: Yea, yea. And is it Lisa?

JD: I can't tell I have a name here, but I don't know of its one of their spouses. I've got a name that says Kirsten LeClair Hinds, and I don't know if that's one of their children, or a spouse of one of the Hinds boys.

BD: No, I don't recognize that name.

JD: Okay so your first guess was something like Lisa, might have been the...?

BD: Yea, I think so.

JD:... and the sensitive issue about all of this, there seems to have been – I don't know if the family members are, I can't tell if they are in good communication with one another after the passing of their parents. There was something like a wrongful death lawsuit filed years ago by..... Do you know anything about this? I can't...

BD: No, by one of the children?

JD: Its, This is complicated and I don't understand it all, it seems to be the estate of Wendy was sued by... I'm sorry the executor of the estate of Wendy was sued by Alfred Boyd Hinds III. That's one of the boys, and it seems like you know, – as these things often are, these are very complicated family dynamics that sort of wind up in court somehow. You don't have any knowledge of this?

BD: No, no...

JD: Okay just trying to [figure it out].

BD: Well, that's too bad. I know, I know.

JD: Well maybe it was just a technicality about the executor who's not a family member – maybe he was?

BD: Oh, oh, oh okay I can see that yea.

JD: Because the executor's name is not Hinds, it's John E. Drew. So maybe the person in charge of Wendy's estate wasn't following the wishes of the family and they had to go to court.

BD: Yea, that's probably what happened.

JD: I hope that's what the case is there. Okay. Well we'll continue to see what we can do on that end there. Jasmin I've asked my questions for today, is there anything else Jasmin on your list?

JA: I think last time we were talking to Julia and she has mentioned these families that had moved on to Blue Hills. Did you know about that? Maybe some of the families from Westledge? That were moving into the Blue Hills community?

BD: Oh yeah yeah. In fact while we were at EI, Boyd and the family were there.

JA: Oh, okay.

BD: On Ridgefield Street.

JA: Ridgefield, okay.

BD: and that was a major deal because it was at that time of course we had 'white flight.'

[01:14:29]

JA: Right.

BD: ... and so Ridgefield was filling up with non-whites and for Boyd to move back in to that community on purpose and his you know, the kids went to you know, Weaver High School I guess it was. That should be somewhere in the newspaper archives as background information because Boyd also ran for city council I believe.

JD: Mmm hmm, mm hmm.

BD: ... while he was there.

JA: And do you recall maybe any of the other families that decided to move on Blue Hills?

BD: Other family members?

JA: I think, Julia had mentioned that it was other white families that were doing the same thing.

BD: Oh, yea... I think one family. George... There's another family that moved on that street, George, Wells. George Wells and his wife.[01:15:37]

JA & JD: Okay.

BD: ...and family. I don't know if there was a third but those, definitely George and Boyd were groundbreakers in returning to the North End.

JA: and they stayed there for a while? Or do you know how long they stayed there?

BD: They were there for a number of years because even after I left EI Boyd was still on Ridgefield Street and they also they had property up in Green... Greenfield or Greenville... in Massachusetts..

JD: Greenfield, Mass probably..

BD: Yeah, yeah, yeah – so yeah; they were there. In fact Boyd lived a few houses down from the minister of our church. Bethel AME, I mean... was it uh, no, Metropolitan AME Zion church. Our pastor had his home there on that street.

JD: Well Jasmin, should we wrap it up then?

JA: Yea, yea, that's fine.

JD: That's great. Well Ben thank-you so much for being willing to be re-interviewed today and its been our pleasure to listen and talk with you and to help preserve Hartford's civil rights History. Jasmin's job is she'll be taking the recording here and – it takes a couple weeks but she'll be typing this up. What do we send Jasmin when we have this all done?

JA: We're gonna send you the transcript as well as an audio recording on a CD of the interview.

BD: Oh my goodness.

JD: Yea, that's always just part of our arrangement whenever we do an interview with someone its their history so they should have a copy of it as well. But by signing that consent form we sent out today and mailing that back, that allows other people to read your history – and it allows the library to share it with the public. But of course, its your story – you can do whatever you want with it.

BD: I appreciate that, and I would love to see the copy of your paper when you finish it Jasmin.

JA: Yea, Hahaha. When I finish it yeah.

BD: I won't you what I used to tell my Dissertation 2 students: 'Finish the paper, and you know, graduate. Because that's just the beginning.'

JA: Right.

BD: Okay.

JA: That's what I have to do. Hahaha

BD: that's why they call it commencement. Thank-you very much Jack, Nice meeting you this way. Hope to maybe run into you at some point if and when I'm back up in the Hartford area.

JD: Oh please, please do we'd love to – a chance to meet up with you that way. We'll keep you posted on things we're doing and occasionally get my way down to Virginia so...

BD: Okay, very good.

JD: Have a good day now.

BD: Okay, you too.

JA: Thank-you Ben.

BD: You're quite welcome.

JA: Okay, Goodbye.