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Forty Years of Project Concern and Project Choice

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Forty Years of Project Concern and Project Choice

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Transcribed by: Anique Thompson, Jack Dougherty, Trinity College

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Abstract: Beginning in 1966, the Project Concern interdistrict voluntary school desegregation program transported Hartford city students to suburban schools to promote racial diversity and higher quality education. After the 1996 Sheff v O'Neill ruling, the program was reorganized and renamed as "Project Choice," and later "Open Choice." In this documentary, the program founders, staff, and past and present students reminisce on their experiences and the lessons it taught them. Most interviews were conducted at a 40th anniversary celebration hosted by the Capitol Region Education Council and the Sheff Movement Coalition in December 2006, or in subsequent follow-up interviews.

This transcript was prepared as part of the On The Line project (<http://OnTheLine.trincoll.edu>).

[All comments by transcriber in brackets]

[Text on screen]:

- Hartford's Project Choice Program began 41 years ago as "Project Concern"
- It was one of the first "interdistrict" school integration programs in the United States
- After the Connecticut Supreme Court's landmark Sheff v. O'Neill school desegregation ruling in 1996, the program was renamed "Project Choice"
- Project Choice is now part of the remedy in the Sheff v. O'Neill case, along with a system of regional interdistrict magnet schools.
- In December of 2006, the Capitol Region Education Council and the Sheff Movement Coalition hosted a "40th Anniversary Celebration" of the Project Concern/Project Choice program
- Many of the Project Concern and Project Choice alumni who came to the anniversary celebration took time out to be interviewed.
- This film includes some of their stories.

[1:29]

Nanita Greene: My first day, I cried like a baby in the middle of the classroom. You know how they gather you up in the first-first grade, gather you into the middle of the classroom on the rug so you can introduce yourself and get to know the teacher and the other students? I sat there – the tears just rolled down my face. I'm looking around and I'm like "I'm the only black kid in this room." [1:55]

Concetta Elaine Jones Lewis: My earliest memory is – I was one of the original ones that graduated through the program so I have a different early memory and my early memory was having all the television cameras and news people at the bus stops picking the children up because this is the first thing that's ever happened in the United States. So um. Being very afraid. Didn't know what was going to happen, knew that my mom said this was something that I had to do, um I had to make the best of it. Knew that it was going to be out of my comfort zone but I did it anyway. [2:37]

Mary Carroll Kennedy [First Project Choice Director]: Well, some very wise people designed this program and set it up. You've met Trude Mero Johnson, and the person that she teamed with was Dr. Alexander Plant from the state Department of Education. [2:54]

Marjorie Little [Original Project Concern Staff]: She introduced me to Dr. Plant and they had I recall little workshops. They would come to our tenants association and we would have parents there and they would ask the parents different questions about education. You know 'If your child could go to school in suburbia would you let your child go' and etc. like that. And that's how I first knew about it and that was about two years before project concern began in 1968 – I mean '66. [3:20]

Mary Carroll Kennedy [First Project Choice Director]: Trude was working then for the Department of Community Affairs, which has since changed its name. She was very involved in the community and she had children in the schools, her children – 5 children. The older ones were in the Hartford schools, were going through and she said. "Something is wrong" [3:45]

Trude Mero [Co-Founder of Project Concern]: Project Concern was supported by the business community all the way.... Without them.

Interviewer: Why?

Trude Mero: Because it, the approach we used with them was what we saw that could happen to children in isolation and what I knew was going on in the Hartford schools. [4:14]

Valerie Mathis: I was at a school where the students there- there may have been some whose parents - 'cause I don't think the students at that time – including myself had the maturity to kind of form an opinion of things but there may have been students there whose parents did not want me to be there but I never knew that. The students welcomed me with open arms I was just another kid to them, and they were just another kid to me. [4:42]

Antonio Champion: You adjusted to whatever was going on there you acted like those kids would act and you eventually developed a lifestyle that was closer to what their lifestyle was. Versus the community norms that we were used to and the whole concept was to get a better education so you understood that message so this was part of the learning process – is to make the adjustments of the community that you grew up in into a different community. So it's like maybe now it's to speak two languages, you can speak two languages at the same time or three,

and you understand the nuances between each of them and you were able to appreciate the nuances between them. [5:24]

Zyretha Langs-Meyers: They didn't have lunch cafeterias, we used to eat in the basement, you had to bring your lunch or you could go home from lunch. So my friends used to go home for lunch, their parents stayed at home, they didn't work so I used to go home with a friend of mine to her house and we used to have. Her mother used to make hamburgers and French fries for lunch you know like real dinner meals at lunchtime and I couldn't wait that was the best part of my day its like going home to somebody's house for lunch. Get a real big fancy meal. So I'm sorry you had a traumatizing experience when you went home to people's house but when I went home with somebody I had a good time. [6:03]

Chrishaun Langs-Jackson: Well that goes back too. Because I - she was more outgoing – I was kinda quiet and shy so I would go to these people's you know, houses and they were boys. It would be a boy's house. And so I'm – I'm a girl – I'm sittin' there what, kinda you- know. I was shy – she wasn't. [6:22]

Valerie Mathis: I never had any type, I never clashed with anyone, no one ever made me feel unwelcome there I enjoyed it. I met one family- um the young lady her name was Joyce Cable [spelling?]. We are still friends. But her and her family kinda took me in on the days when you know, there would be a snow storm and school would close early and my mom would have to come to get me in East Hartford which was a big chore because she would be at work in Hartford and had to get the car to come and get me and when school would let out and they would let me wait at their home and things like that. So I never had - It taught me to be diverse. [7:01]

Gerald Waite: I had plenty of examples of it. I was in a push me pull you catch-22 situation with my people that I played with in Hartford. It was like "Awww you little oreo, you go to that white school and everything else like that." So you know, so I was accepted but I still was slightly on the outside sometimes but you know, it was like "Let's go ask Gerald because he goes to that white school so he knows everything." So I was put on a pedestal sometimes because of my education. [7:38]

Regina Terrell: When one person graduated from the program or from a school we were all happy for that kid not because you made it through Project Choice but because with Project Concern some people had difficulty adjusting and it can be an adjustment if you are used to a particular way of living and you're not open to trying new things and new challenges. And so that part can be a little bit difficult but when you know that you got people on that bus that are your friends and your monitors like your mother and they're trying to do things you know you're doing things after school or on the weekends with the people from your bus – then it forms a bond. And as you figure out you're meeting those people and then as you're going into your particular programs and your particular schools and you're meeting students from the school – and this one lives in this big humungous house where my house could fit inside of it – three times, you know, it's a unique experience but one I don't think I would ever change. [8:40]

Concetta Elaine Jones Lewis: So the staff helped me out as much as they could, my peers on the other hand many of them had not engaged with interactions with minorities before so that was very difficult I realized at a very early age that racism is a learned behavior that one learns from home and you can tell pretty much the children who were raised a certain way and then you could tell just by a ten minute conversation of others that were raised a different way. So that was a rude awakening to me. [9:25]

Marjorie Little: Some of the parents wanted to make sure their children would be treated right out there it's a new experience and child was going out of the neighborhood. But what gave them confidence was that we had what they called non-paraprofessionals, we said teacher aides, that was like a parent who would go out on the bus and work in the school all day and be there for the child in case the child needed any kind of support. The child had someone there just like he was, or she was. [9:52]

Trude Mero: We wanted all the kids to see professional minorities in the school so that some of these schools had never had a professional in their system before. And that was also a part of Project Concern was so that all of the kids would see role models from the different ethnic groups. [10:19]

Debi Davis: The support was there, like I said back in the early seventies, late sixties this was a really controversial thing everybody was not in favor of it. There were black people who were totally against it and there were plenty of white people who were totally against it. And I guess the support from my family was there I had older siblings who went to school in the city of Hartford and they were not happy about it – the fact that I was not going to school in the city of Hartford. [10:54]

Wayne DeBeatham: For starters just being exposed to a new group of people, a different way of doing things. One of the things that surprised me the most was having a class where the classwork was actually done and not being disrupted for interruptions and I think all the opportunities for learning, the different exposures we had, going places I probably would have never gone to in Hartford field trips, and just learning drastically and fundamentally new and different things I think it made me a stronger more confident person who learned responsibility at a fairly early age in terms of navigating the bus system to get to school, working collaboratively with my colleagues who were also in the program, coordinating things after-school activities at school versus things at home and you know I think they challenged me to be a better student and to work as hard as I could and wouldn't really accept anything less. [11:58]

Zyretha Langs-Meyers: My guidance counselor who was very special to me his name was Mr. Koeppel [spelling?] I'm actually a guidance counselor now so – you know, that's my profession and when I think back on my experiences you know he really had a lot of influence over me at that time. I was a first generation college graduate so my mom didn't have a lot of experience about you know furthering my education beyond high school. Actually she knew nothing about it at the time. She was real clueless and I'm sure that if it wasn't for him I probably would not have gone to college. But I would say that my mom was very supportive of what all his suggestions even though she didn't know anything about going on to college, she encouraged me to follow whatever my guidance counselor was telling me so she was really supportive. [12:51]

Nanita Greene: I was a freshman at Conard [High School, West Hartford] and my cousin [actually?] was going to Weaver [High School, Hartford]– she was in her senior year. And we were sitting down one day doing homework – pulling out my science book....

Interviewer: and you were doing the same thing she was doing?

Nanita Greene: Same exact thing and she was like "I got that science book" and I looked at her and I said "Huh?" and she was like "We have the same science book" and I think even for the timing of that year I think it was probably closer to like fall time but we were still even further in the book than they were at the time which really shocked me and I'm like "You're a senior, why are we in the same. . ." [13:37]

Evangelisto Narvaez [Parent of Hartford student]: He wasn't able to get himself focused in the right direction. In Simsbury his education has gotten better he's able to more focus on himself not worry about anybody bothering him. He has come home loving his homework, he enjoys his teacher. We have a one-on-one, more like a one-on-one even though it's a group setting its more like a one-on-one able to speak to the teacher and it's great that the teacher is able to communicate with us and let us know that "Yes this is what [Fredo, the child?] is doing." [14:10]

Nessa Oram [Project Choice Director]: We have made strides in you know, hiring intervention specialists and building a strong team and the relationship that we have developed with the suburban towns. How I think it can improve is – one I believe is to shorten, still shorten some of the bus rides, and two, continue to seek ways to have the students participate in later activities. Our late buses currently leave about 4:30 [pm] from the towns and most of the sports activities start after that. [14:41]

Zyretha Langs-Meyers: I played a lot of sports I do think that the experiences for students are- is different. If you're involved in say- sports or involved in the choir or drama, somewhere where you [see] in the town a lot beyond the school day you really develop a lot - more close friendships with the kids in the town so a lot of my memories from West Hartford, I had a lot of memories that were on the weekend – a lot of weekend parties in West Hartford... [15:24]

Essence Lee [Current Project Concern Student]: In my sophomore year its getting a little bit better like at the beginning of my freshman year it was rocky but in the middle of my freshman year it started getting better because I played on a sports team so that's how a lot of kids started to get to know me and now I'm mingling a little bit more, I'm talking to more kids, getting to know more kids, getting to see how they live and how I live and then we can talk like that about different separate homes that we come from. [15:39]

Renita Satchell [Project Concern Staff]: It affected my life in a positive sense. Of course there was the academic exposure and having a better access to better education but for me this program is more beneficial in your social development so for the students that really get involved, that are in sports, other extracurricular activity to me I think they benefit the most from the program. [16:05]

Evangelisto Narvaez [Parent of Hartford student]: The one thing he participated in last year was the science – building robots and then he also participated in a math club, he also participated in a football club which is basically talking about his football, he plays football - we got him on a football team. I mean, we keep him as active as possible on the after-school clubs actually CREC [Capitol Region Education Council] provides transportation back from the club, which is absolutely great. [16:37]

Julie Meyer [Host Parent from Simsbury]: Currently we have nine children and we try to do activities after school so they stay right at school and then we get a late bus home from CREC that does take the kids door to door and primarily the activities really revolve around outside fun. For instance in October – the end of October we're going to Rosedale Farms to go to a corn maze and pick pumpkins, hay ride. We have an after school activity planned in November with our gym teacher. We'll do kickball and capture the flag, and games such as that. Halloween, we've got something planned for Halloween – family trick-or-treating with the different families who are involved. The kids love anything the kids from Hartford as well as the kids from Simsbury that we bring together for our activities just love anything we do so we have great participation. [17:33]

Nessa Oram [Project Choice Director]: As I go from town to town and as I do professional development and educate boards of Education – parent groups I realize that a lot of people don't really understand why Project Choice is important and I think when we do the educational component of that and people understand the true value they're more open and they're more receptive so – you know - it seems that we need to do some more education within those towns to better help people to understand and to be more open. [18:03]

Wayne DeBeatham: It would be great if you had a different means of getting people around but of course you're kind of constrained by what you have. Maybe even providing opportunities to say a late bus so you can do – kids can do after-school activities and feel like they're a part of the community. I often felt at times that I was kinda torn between two worlds. Yes I'm at school today but I can't do the science club because I have to catch a bus home. [18:29]

Essence Lee: For new Choice kids or something, they should at least have a welcoming committee or something so that the kids can get to know others. Like, I had someone that showed me around the school like before I entered and she was like, she brought me around the school and when I seen her around the hallway she wasn't as friendly as she was during the walk-through. So I was like, "You're the one that's supposed to be teaching me around. Why aren't – you know – like you're supposed to help me and mingle with the others." I had to do that all on my own. So I think more constructive of the school system – for Enfield per se that they get a welcoming committee and like the kids stick with you and get to know you and walk you around and let you know how stuff is. [19:18]

Debi Davis: I think looking back, I think the best thing you can do for a child is help them to know self. You know, help them to have pride in who they are and teach them that they don't have to change – you don't have to blend – you know what I mean - to survive. That was one of the things that was more difficult for us. Because it's hard to –you know – especially when you're in elementary school. You know, at that age you want to fit in. But I think we need to, and

that's what I try to instill in my children. Pride in who you are, and your heritage, and your culture. No you are not Irish, no you are not Italian, you have your own culture. You have your own heritage and you just need to make sure that our children know that. Teach them what our history is so that they can be proud of it. [20:12]

Gerald Waite: No Black History. Social Studies. We had Social Studies when I was going to school. We breezed over Social Studies like quick fast in a hurry. The slavery aspect of it – you know, we were into the Georgetown settlement, Jamestown settlements and all that other stuff. Black History: we breezed through it. I regret that I didn't get much of Black History in my culture, education about my culture and stuff like that. [20:42]

Mary Carroll Kennedy: The paraprofessionals, the support personnel were the backbone of Project Concern. They worked to make it successful. They were that bridge between the Hartford parents and the suburban communities. The Hartford, they answered two very serious questions: What's going to happen to our children when they get out there? And on the part of the suburban parents: What's going to happen to the academic standards when these needy children come into our classroom? That was the paraprofessional. [21:10]

Regina Terrell: I think what Project Concern – we had monitors on the bus and we had very good monitors. They were very motherly and because we were on a bus even if you tried to do wrong it was just like in the black community when you're in church – you can be sitting way away from your parents but if you do something wrong and there's a parent around – not yours, you're still in trouble, and I think that's how it was on the bus, the bus monitors really watched us and they treated us like we were their own children, and I think that's why now when you see some of these bus monitors in my adult life – they still treat me like I'm their daughter. And so they had many daughters and many sons. [21:55]

Concetta Elaine Jones Lewis: I just, all the experience, getting to – not necessarily for me going to a suburban school. But letting them know about me that was really important because they had this preconception view of what black children were and like I said – learned behavior that many of them got from home either bad or good but it was really important for me to let them know: we're just as smart, we care about pretty much the same things. [Given] the same advantages, the same opportunities we can do the same type of work. Given the same type of the before school activities, the after school activities, that we were given a chance to do these things, we can excel in those things too. [22:51]

Wayne DeBeatham: There was always a lot of time constraints. A few things that I regret but by and large the education opportunities that I had were so profound, I don't think I'd change it for the world. I'd often times wonder how different my life would have been on that fateful day my mom said "Okay we'll let you stay," kind of wondered where I'd be, what I'd be doing – I don't really know but I do have a strong feeling that being in Project Concern and being in the West Hartford school system had a large impact on my life. [23:29]

Debi Davis: I think it gave me a good foundation for everything that came after because it was such diverse situation to see basically the world outside of what I knew, to see that everybody

was not like I was all families were not like the family that I knew it was good. I mean there were some bad experiences but there were a lot of good experiences. [24:03]

Julie Meyer [Host Parent from Simsbury]: I would say for the Choice kids the opportunity for them is to socialize and become friends with the students from the students they go to school with and otherwise they go home, they get home at four on a regularly scheduled day and how often will the parents drive them back to Simsbury to be part of our you know, after school sports programs? Probably very rarely so by doing these activities I think they really have a sense of community and I believe that that's just as important as the academics I think there's the big push of No Child Left Behind, to me that's an academic initiative but really it's the other side of the coin of No Child Left Behind socially is if the child's not happy well the academics can suffer so they're both important and I think maybe that's the piece that's been missing and hopefully by doing some of the things that our group is doing – the kids from Hartford feel welcome and they make friendships and it starts to blossom from there and you know, people have them over. I have a neighbor whose little boy has become quite friendly - she's part of our committee – with one of the Hartford boys and they're sponsoring him to play soccer twice a week. [25:19]

Evangelisto Narvaez [Parent of Hartford student]: And its good to see a kid who wants to get up in the morning and go to school and not have a kid who gets up in the morning and says: "Oh my God, do I have to go to school?" you know? And it's wonderful to see your kid come home and say "Daddy I was in the Math club and we learned this today, or we learned this today," or "Daddy we built a robot today and it was a group of us," because it shows him team building, it shows him cooperation, it shows him how to work with people. It's not a one-on-one individual but in these programs that they have they show him a lot about team building. How to work with each other, how to help each other out, how to be each other's support – which is awesome. [26:00]

Nessa Oram [Director, Project Choice]: Tonight I'm going to Simsbury, at the middle school and they're having an event for choice families and the Simsbury families. So when we get out there it will be some team building activities, there will be games, it will be food and so the families from Simsbury will meet the families from Hartford and so that relationship can begin and so it continues after that. But there are times when you need to have the resource to support that and to check with families how are things going because I think a little bit of intervention sometimes it does help. [26:36]

Valerie Mathis: I think Project Choice, it allowed us to dream and not just dream like you know – 'I want to go on the moon' and not a dream that's never going to happen. It allowed us to dream and showed us how we could achieve our dreams and it let us believe that we could achieve our dreams where as that wasn't there before and it allowed I think, it didn't just affect the students, it affected our parent's lives. My parents realized that: okay, this is a good thing and this is something that we need to grow on and elaborate on. [27:18]

Marjorie Little [Original Project Concern Staff]: Then I find that parents I meet in the supermarket or at church or at the mall or something, they'll see me and they'll say "Oh I wish my daughter could get into Project Concern" or something like that. I had a good experience

there, I wish you were still there and all of that. So the program, even though it's old, parents still fill that it helped them. Even those that did not graduate they feel that the experience was worthwhile. [27:42]

[Text on Screen]:

-Today, the Project Choice program places slightly over 1000 Hartford children in 27 suburban Hartford school districts – far below the program's capacity.

-If the Choice program is to grow, suburban towns will need to substantially increase the number of seats that they offer each year.

-At the same time, the State of Connecticut needs to provide adequate per pupil financial support for each Hartford student attending a suburban school.

-State legislators and the local school board members need to hear from supporters of the Choice program in every town in the region.

-To read a detailed assessment of the Project Choice program, and learn more about what you can do, visit the Sheff Movement coalition's website at www.sheffmovement.org [28:30]

[Credits:]

Forty Years of Project Concern and Project Choice

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