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Oral History Interview on Sheff v. O'Neill (with video)

Eugene Leach

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Location: at his home, 51 Beverly Road, West Hartford, CT

Recording format: Digital video

File name: EugeneLeach_videomedium20110607.m4v

Length: 54:08 (see inserted timestamps)

Transcribed by: Anique Thompson, Jack Dougherty

Additional files: LeachEugene_photo20110607.jpg

Abstract:

Eugene Leach (born 1944) recalls his activism to promote school integration in Greater Hartford with his involvement in the 1989 Sheff v O'Neill lawsuit, along with the lead plaintiffs Elizabeth Horton Sheff and Milo Sheff. He discusses his personal experience as a white suburban plaintiff parent during the case, his role as a Connecticut Civil Liberties Union board member, and public skepticism and political opposition he encountered. He reflects on the broader lessons of civil rights activism, which were influenced by his perspective as a professor of American Studies and history at Trinity College.

Submitted as part of the OnTheLine web-book by Jack Dougherty and colleagues (<http://OnTheLine.trincoll.edu>).

Speaker key:

EL: Eugene Leach

AT: Anique Thompson

JD: Jack Dougherty

[All comments by transcriber in brackets]

AT: ... and then the second one....

JD: if you just sign the bottom we'll fill the rest out later

AT: Yeah... Thank-you.

AT: So this is yours. Wait actually; let me write it out first

JD: How about we do that later.

AT: Okay.

JD: You can sit here and do it when you're done, because we know that Gene's scheduled tight today.

EL: I'm ready.

JD: You're good now?

EL: You shouldn't feel rushed.

JD: Okay.

AT: Okay.

AT: So are we ready to go ahead....

JD: ... Go ahead.

AT: with the interview? So basically I have three big questions that I want to ask you and then like I'll ask some follow-ups. But that's gonna be the main uh – the flow of the interview. So the first section is about the origins: like how you got involved in the case, what it was like when you first started out and then we're gonna move on to like the legal process and like actual court like involvement and all that type of stuff . . . With the lawyers and anything like that and afterwards I'm going to ask you about the aftermath or like long-term reflections about you and how you felt and like your role in the Sheff case.

EL: Mmm hmm.

AT: So if you're ready, do you have any questions about anything before we start?

EL: No, those are – those sound like the big three actually.

AT: Mmm hmm.

EL: and I have thought about all three.

AT: Okay, good. So my first question for you is: what is your earliest memory about your role or involvement in the Sheff case? [1:05]

EL: Well I learned about the, about plans to file a desegregation lawsuit in I think early 1988 at a time when I was a member of the board of the Connecticut Civil Liberties Union. Actually I was a member of the Hartford branch of the Connecticut Civil Liberties Union. I ended up representing the Hartford branch on the state board and because of that membership I heard about the plan to join with other organizations to file a desegregation lawsuit. So that I kind of had advance notice of this intention that was not yet public and as soon as I heard about it I was very interested. I had grown up in suburban Maryland outside of Washington, D.C. went to a of course de facto, not de jure but nonetheless a de facto segregated high school with I think 4 or 5 black classmates out of more than 500, about seven or eight miles from the border of the city

which was predominantly minority, especially African American and I attended the March on Washington in 1963 walking in Washington I had a long-standing interest in the civil rights movement and was well aware of the segregation phenomenon throughout the north and knew about it here in Hartford, always found it troubling and so I volunteered essentially to have the CCLU consider my family as one of the plaintiff families. I believe – actually I don't remember all the details but I believe that statements were made about their interest in recruiting families that represented the entire spectrum of people in Hartford – not just African American families, not just Latino families but also White and maybe White suburban families and as turns out of the ten original plaintiff families we were the only White suburban we were the only suburban family and we were one of three white families and we joined the lawsuit specifically sort of to represent the point of view of people who were probably not going to be the primary beneficiaries of the lawsuit but nonetheless we thought and I'm trying to say we my family, but also the CCLU thought – had a substantial interest in this. In other words desegregation is not simply something that is done for minority populations it really is something that is done on behalf of the civic good of the community including suburban whites and so I got into the lawsuit I volunteered my family through the CCLU and they didn't immediately take us, we were interviewed we spoke with Phil Tegeler who was then I think the assistant legal director of the CCLU. Phil later became legal director of the CCLU and is now – does several things but is once again back in this area. He had been in Washington for some time – years. Phil took us to the Butterfly restaurant on Farmington Avenue which is about a mile from here just to assure us that this was not going to be a piece of cake and there were some anxieties about our you know, neighbors not liking the idea and so on and so forth. To tell you the truth we never worried about that and I don't think we had reason to worry we didn't worry. And, but that they wanted to make sure that the plaintiff families were prepared for some adversity and I think they also wanted to recruit families who were willing to be active in the lawsuit and not simply to be titular symbolic people on whose behalf legal motions were filed but actual participants in something more like a movement. That's what we had in mind as well. So all that worked. [5:13]

AT: So um, just going back to – you mentioned Mr. Tegeler, was he one of the only people that initially was involved in you becoming a part of the case or were there other people?

EL: Well fairly soon I think Phil was the one you have to remember I was going regularly to board meetings at the CCLU so that I was in touch with all of these people. Martha Stone, a lawyer who's still involved in the lawsuit was also one of, was also there at the beginning – I'm quite sure I talked to Martha. John Brittain who is probably the single most important person on the legal team. I don't think I was actually interviewed by John but I certainly met him early in the going and the then executive director of the CCLU a man named Bill Olds, O-l-d-s. I know I talked to Bill about this so that there were many conversations about exactly what was being planned and the appropriateness of my family to take part in it. [6:14]

AT: Okay so the next question that I have is: How did you come about making the decision to be a plaintiff in the case? Was it a specific moment in time or was it just a part of what you just said before – like a push to be a part of such a movement like that?

EL: I really think I viewed the lawsuit and Kathy [Frederick] – my wife – I think took a little bit of persuading because she didn't have my personal history but I think she quickly agreed that

this was a moment to take part in history as opposed to simply studying it but certainly my background as a U.S. historian meant a great deal. I mean I know more than most people about the American past in general but specifically about the racial divide in the society which has been so very deep and remains so important even now and had been deeply impressed like members of my generation by the civil rights movement, and had taken part in some demonstrations – I actually, as I mentioned I was actually there I don't think I thought I recognized the significance of the March on Washington by the way. I was then 19 and I was actually not as politically aware as I would become later but I think within years I realized that I – even that was being part of a historic event and I belong to organizations like the CCLU who clearly stood for progress toward racial equality. I myself had done very little on behalf of that goal and this was an opportunity to do something. [8:07]

AT: Okay, what was the journey like? From the beginning like when you first started out, like having an idea you wanted to participate and the all the way towards like now?

EL: Well, that's a very good word: journey. I don't think there was anything very dramatic or epic about it. Certainly a very important part of the journey was to meet my fellow plaintiffs. And I should say we, because this of course was a family affair. My wife and I are not plaintiffs, we're plaintiff parents. The two plaintiffs are my daughter Rachel and my son Joseph who were at that stage they were five and seven years old and only one of them was even in school yet. Rachel was first grader at the – in April of '89 when the lawsuit was filed and Joseph was about to enter Kindergarten and they were the actual plaintiffs. But there were nine other plaintiff families. And I can still remember the first meeting at the CCLU headquarters on Hungerford Street in Hartford where I met Elizabeth [Horton Sheff] and Elizabeth spoke and within a couple of seconds I realized why Elizabeth was the lead plaintiff she's an extremely dynamic and charismatic person she speaks with great power – she's a just a phenomenal presence and a very considerable leader and someone who for 22 years has stood rock solid for the core objectives of the program and has often stood against other people who were a part of the Sheff movement who she believes are taking the wrong direction and I have always admired that in her and she spoke very forcefully for a certain point of view – her point of view of course, from the very beginning I immediately admired her and we've become good friends and I would say that simply meeting Elizabeth was a considerable early milestone in the journey. I really had more confidence in the lawsuit speaking with her and something of the same goes for meeting some of the original lawyers who were very impressive people. John Brittain, Martha Stone, Phil Tegeler. There was a man who represented the NAACP legal and defense fund, the LDF, the Inc fund. It's called by a number of names. His name is Jack Boger and he's a North Carolinian. A white guy who we thought was just – Kathy and I were always just tremendously impressed with Jack Boger. He was only with the lawsuit for a couple of years but he was exemplary. The many very talented lawyers who have transitioned through the Sheff lawsuit over the years primarily from the LDF, the Legal Defense Fund and the ACLU, the American Civil Liberties Union both those organizations contributed some incredibly impressive lawyers who are clearly bright enough to become billionaires if they'd chosen another kind of legal practice but have chosen to apply their talents to the promotion of the agendas of these very progressive organizations so I certainly admired them. Learned a great deal and in general the - all the other plaintiffs were very simpatico people and there was a subset of us I would say about five of the original ten plaintiff families who were really very much into the action and determined to be part of the action we

got to know each other quite quickly there were constant meetings in the early days. So we got to know each other very quickly and for the first couple of years in fact the entire, the entire Sheff group met constantly. I can tell you more about the activism of the plaintiffs in particular we were meeting amongst ourselves often the entire group; plaintiffs and lawyers sometimes just the plaintiffs and on the side some of us at least were also speaking constantly. I think during the first couple of years of the filing of the lawsuit maybe the first three years I probably spoke at least 50 could well have been 100 times to local groups of various kinds to school groups, to church groups and so on and so forth and that certainly taught me a lot very quickly. One thing it taught me was this is not a popular action; that we certainly believed in this but there was a lot of convincing to do in all parts of Greater Hartford all communities. I don't say especially, but including the black and Latino communities of Hartford, which were not necessarily enthusiastic about this. [13:39]

AT: And what do you think might have been the cause for their, you know, their need to be persuaded.

EL: Yeah, well you know: I'm still thinking about that and even today I feel that more pressure coming from the minority communities in Hartford on behalf of the integration would certainly bring us closer to achieving something like the goal and I think that's still an element which is missing but I entirely understand the lack of enthusiasm and first of all, we're talking about an action: the Sheff lawsuit which is developed more than 30 years after the Brown v. Board of Education movement. Or the movement that led to that great court decision, 30 years later and the fact is that Hartford was still segregated and this is a powerful message to minority communities that the majority communities of Greater Hartford aren't terribly interested in integration and quite frankly one classic response to the realities of segregation, enforced segregation whether the enforcement is legal or simply social. One entirely rational response is to adapt to it and to say, "You don't want us, we don't want you. We'll develop our own community." And you know, often that actually means falling back on 'separate but equal' that we don't see a lot of enthusiasm for integration, we don't see any willingness on the part of the white majority to compromise on behalf of the - they're willing to pay lip service to the goal, but not to actually make any sacrifices for the goal and that being the case we will make do with our own community. And there's the additional - you know this very well as a Project Concern alumna - that the burden of the processes are necessary to integration fall disproportionately on members of minority communities, the people that have to be bused and I don't know what your own experience was but I talked to many Project Concern people. Almost all of them are grateful to have been part of Project Concern for the educational benefit from it but also testified to how very stressful it was, and even how frightening it was. I mean in the same way that white suburbanites could hardly imagine ending up in a predominantly minority school in Hartford. I mean the same kind of dislocation and alienation, sense of alienation afflicted kids who were bused from Hartford to the local suburbs, and often they got used to it and being able to enjoy it. They probably never loved the bus ride to start with. [16:37]

AT: They were very long. Very, very long. [The interviewer is a former student in Open Choice].

EL: Everyone says that, exactly. So there's a very basic reason it remains far more natural to send your kids to the local school. This is true for everyone, yet integration almost inevitably means

more dysfunction and more sacrifices on the part of the people. Most of the people who are integrated who have to change in order to make integration happen tend to be minority people. That's a powerful reason not to be real interested particularly if you sense that the other people who are undergoing integration don't really care that much about it. [17:20]

AT: Describe the neighborhood that you lived in and the schools that you or your children attended while the case was going on.

EL: We had moved to this house on Beverly Road, three blocks into West Hartford from Hartford. We had moved here in '83. We had one child: my daughter Rachel was less than two years old, my wife was pregnant with Joseph when we moved into this house and we chose this neighborhood quite substantially because it is close to Hartford and a very diverse part of West Hartford. We knew that local elementary school: Whiting Lane Elementary, which is a couple blocks from us was one of the most diverse schools in West Hartford and I actually walked around the school and walked into the school several times before we moved here and then I particularly enjoyed before my kids were enrolled in the school I enjoyed just going around the school because it obviously was a very international kind of place. There were at that point a good number of Vietnamese immigrants in this neighborhood I don't think that proportion, that population is quite as visible now but there were African American, and Latino, and European immigrant kids and a certain number of Asian immigrant kids as well, at Whiting Lane and we found that very appealing. I mean we were, even before the Sheff lawsuit kind of true believers in the notion that the school community is itself educative and contributes to what one gets out of school. We were really frankly prejudiced in favor of an economically and ethnically diverse school population and we found that here. [19:20]

AT: Okay and do you know if it's the same right now? The school population.

EL: Because of various redistrictings of which there have been several, as you might imagine, over the past 22 years I think it's a little bit less so. But still very diverse and of course what has happened in West Hartford and in other inner-ring suburbs especially inner-ring suburbs is that in general they've become more diverse at the point where we found out the Sheff v O'Neill lawsuit in April of '89 the estimate was that something like 10% of the population of West Hartford consisted of minority people. I think the number now is - 10% of the school population was minority people - the estimate now is over 30 [percent] [20:10]

AT: Wow.

EL: So that frankly I'm often somewhat mystified by these numbers because it's common for people to report this. Often in large group settings I don't really see it, but this is what is reported and so in other words, a fair amount of natural integration has occurred as people have moved out of Hartford into West Hartford essentially for the same reason we did which is seeking better schools and better services. [20:45]

AT: Okay. So I have a question, the question about the legal process. When the Sheff case was moving through the courts, what was your role specifically?

EL: Well there's kind of a big answer and a small answer to that. I actually testified at the trial which took place in the fall of - let me make sure my dates are right - it was the fall of '92 and the spring of '93, yes. I testified essentially and answered the same kind of - I spoke and answered the same kind of question you just asked me. "Why are you here, and what has your experience been? And what are your objectives?" So that I was actually part of the trial I personally attended a great many of the trial sessions. The trial actually took place here in West Hartford so it was very easy for me to attend a good many of the trial sessions. The trial went on for about two and a half, three months by the way, so that there was a great deal to be attended and we plaintiffs were encouraged to come as much as we could frankly to show the judge our real commitment to the action. And the larger answer to your question "What was your part in the legal process?" I think the larger answer to the question is that the plaintiffs in this action really from the start under the leadership of Elizabeth Sheff were determined to be something other than symbolic characters. From the start we really conceived our role as one of specializing in public education the lawyers would handle the legal aspects of what was after all fundamentally a lawsuit but we would specialize in - not dominate - but specialize in the public education aspect so that it would be our role in fact to talk to community groups: The kind of thing which I actually did quite a bit, often in partnership with other plaintiffs. [00:22:50]

AT: Okay, what do you remember most about the court case?

EL: Actually I remember testimony by some of the people describing the Hartford Schools. I remember a number of teachers from Hartford testifying about what racial isolation really meant to the students of Hartford. I knew already that Milo Sheff, the actual lead plaintiff had had one white classmate in thirteen years in the Hartford schools. [00:23:25]

AT: Whoa.

EL: Yeah, imagine that. One. And this is not Mississippi. This is Hartford. This is not Mississippi in 1952 its Hartford. But I, here were many of these moments but I remember one teacher testified about the experience of taking a group of small school children, probably second or third graders from Hartford to a site somewhere North of the city, they were leaving the city, and she talked about the excitement these kids showed as the crossed the Connecticut River. Most children had never seen the river. [00:24:05]

AT: Wow.

EL: And obviously we're talking about a kind of physical isolation and we're talking about the consequences of poverty and I guess we were probably talking about there not being that much north of the city that people would naturally want to gravitate towards. What are you going to do? Go to Springfield or something? But - of course there's plenty of stuff up there but there's something particularly striking to me about kids in my own city being excited by the experience of moving out of the city across the Connecticut River. Kind of a metaphor for how different their lives are and how much they - how little of the world they've been able to absorb because of the circumstances of their childhood and probably the restrictions that go with their schooling. [00:25:04]

AT: How did your friends and family feel about your involvement in the case?

EL: I think the range really was from support to indifference. And I think if there were people who really thought it was a bad idea they kept it to themselves. I don't think we lost any friends as a result of this. I think if anything we tend to hang out with liberal circles and I think they [were] probably more people who admired us for this action than who thought more poorly of us. We got some crank messages from strangers, including a couple of sort of scary things about people who might just be just plain nutsy-poo, to use the technical expression. But very little of that, so that the kind of possible adverse reaction by friends and by the public that Phil Tegeler for instance had suggested we really should think about, I don't think that really ever materialized. Often going out to speak to a church group or something like that I would run into a kind of skepticism that I wasn't entirely prepared for and I would often run into attitudes that didn't mystify me but they certainly angered me. I mean certainly the attitude that the school day only takes up six hours and then these kids go back to deprived environments, what's the use? And of course my answer to that is precisely if the experience in the rest of their lives is in fact difficult and deprived, all the more reason to improve the quality of the school experience. But often I would get the kind of the contrary reaction and you know, I learned how to, I thought of answers for that one. [00:27:00]

AT: Okay, did you encounter opposition to your role in this case and if so what type?

EL: Well, you know, I think the opposition is more along the lines of apathy and skepticism on the part of the audiences that I talked to when I went out to talk about the lawsuit. This is certainly not universal. Almost always there would be a mixed response. I don't think I can remember a single occasion in which I talked to a group that I thought was 100% enthusiastic about the Sheff lawsuit. There [was] very considerable skepticism on the part of at least some of the people in virtually any audience and in some cases a pretty uniform skepticism and in a sense it's a good thing that groups that were that skeptical would have invited Sheff plaintiffs to talk to them. One has to give people credit for hearing the other side that they think of as another side and not their side but I don't - I'm not sure that's actually opposition. I mean, there certainly was opposition. There's opposition on the part of the State. I was from the start disappointed by some public officials at the State and the local levels. The then Attorney General [Richard] Blumenthal was not enthusiastic about this lawsuit. Kevin Sullivan who was at one time Mayor of [West] Hartford and later Lieutenant Governor of the State and the President pro tem of the Senate, the Connecticut Senate, at different times during the history of the lawsuit, Kevin Sullivan clearly was - and is from West Hartford by the way so I particularly identify with him, was clearly very skeptical about the lawsuit. I don't think he would allow himself to be called an opponent of it but clearly would have been happy to have seen it die and likewise school authorities especially in Hartford often seemed very ambivalent about it and perhaps hostile in spite of the fact that our primary interest from the start was always improving the experience of school children in Hartford. A secondary, real but distinctly secondary objective was to improve the experience of kids like my kids in the suburbs of Hartford but the primary, our primary concern and the primary intended beneficiaries of the lawsuit were always the schoolchildren of Hartford and yet school authorities in Hartford often treated Sheff v O'Neill initiative as a distraction and of course there were members of the minority communities in Hartford who were just plain

against it on the grounds that you don't have to integrate to create quality, which of course we agreed with but which they couldn't believe we agreed with. I mean our, for me it was always a powerful argument that the only way to truly guarantee that you will get resources to equivalent to those expended on middle class white kids in the suburbs you would get equivalent resources expended on children in Hartford is to mix the populations so that if you have a classroom which included middle class white kids that doesn't mean that the minority kids are gonna absorb something from the middle class white kids. It does mean that the minority kids will be much likelier to have had access to the kinds of resources that usually go only to the suburban kids. It's a matter of resource distribution. [00:31:08]

AT: Did you attend hearings or follow changes that were made to the original ruling?

EL: Yes. Quite a number of them. Subsequent court hearings and many public meetings

AT: So I'm going to take like a little pause here and show you a picture and I wanted you to just tell me something about what was going on at that time and maybe give me a little bit more about the people in the photo [taken on the day of the Sheff legal settlement, 23 January 2003, Hartford Courant].

EL: Yes this is of course Wes Horton, and that is - this is the Blumenthal who was Attorney General and was never terribly happy about the lawsuit. Milo, Elizabeth Sheff, Carol Vinick, Me, I don't recognize the man in the... this is the school superintendent of, the Connecticut school superintendent whose name I'm blocking on at the moment [Ted Sergi]. Actually he's the husband of the long-time librarian of the Whiting Lane elementary school. [00:32:17]

AT: Wow.

EL: With whom I often worked because every year I would go in and do a little thing for the second graders on Algonquins and Puritans. But God, I'm just blocking on that but that's who that is. And this is, oh yeah, sure. This is Denise Best who worked at Trinity. I just noticed her in the corner there, worked at Trinity until only a year or two ago. She was eventually became director of Individualized Degree Programs and also oversaw the Graduate program at Trinity and I think is now back working at the Urban League, which is where she worked earlier in her career but Denise was also one of the original plaintiffs. So I mean we have representatives of four of the original plaintiff families. Denise's family, obviously Elizabeth, Carol Vinick and her husband were also original plaintiffs and that's "Big Gene" as nobody called me except for myself. [00:33:40]

AT: Okay, so thank-you for telling a little bit about the picture.

EL: And, you know, by the way that - the occasion I well recognize is the occasion of agreement to the, is the conclusion of the first implementation agreement which all parties particularly the state and the Sheff team signed off on in 2003. This is a four-year plan and notice this comes seven years after the 1996 Supreme Court victory so this is many years in the making and after many, many starts and stops. But in 2003 there was agreement to a four-year plan to bring about an increased level of integration in the Hartford schools which ran through 2007 which we in the

Sheff group thought were inadequate consequences. The goals were not met and in fact Professor Dougherty at Trinity College is one of the people who has most persuasively documented the failure of the state to fully live up to the agreement and you probably know more about that research than I do.

AT: Yes. He's shown us some PowerPoint slides and stuff like that in classes. Yeah.

EL: I bet. I've seen those too and they're very powerful and in fact they've been used by our people. [00:35:00]

AT: Okay, Thank-you. So I want to talk some more about the long-term reflections that you have and the aftermath of the case.

EL: Sure.

AT: Looking back, what lessons have you learned from the Sheff case?

EL: I think I have learned the lessons that I suspect people who engaged in, people who are engaged in really deep social reform have always learned and that is that deep social reform means moving mountains that do not move at all quickly, that you were to some degree talking about generational change, change that occurs literally over the course of generations. Brown v. Board is 1954. Sheff v. O'Neill is 1989. Here we are and Sheff v. O'Neill was undertaken to start with partly because the federal courts had turned against the integration objectives of those who had brought the original Brown v Board action in the early 1950's as early as the mid to late 1960's the federal courts beginning with the Supreme Court but also inferior federal courts begin ruling against desegregation initiatives on a consistent basis for a number of reasons and particularly desegregations in metropolitan areas like Hartford where you have clear jurisdictional lines between a predominantly minority city and a predominantly minority white suburbs. The prospects of achieving desegregation in those kinds of metropolitan areas was declining in the federal courts as a matter of fact, it was done and so Sheff v O'Neill was developed as an alternative means to stimulate desegregation to achieve to implement desegregation in metropolitan areas like Hartford. Using state constitutional guarantees as opposed to federal constitutional guarantees so all along, we were kind of a descendant of Brown v. [Board]. We were kind of a collateral line of descendants of Brown and so you've got Sheff, you've got Brown in '54 uneven implementation to the Brown decision, especially in the South into the 1960's very little action on behalf of desegregation in the North which brings about Sheff v O'Neill in 1989 and here in 2011 we're still talking about Hartford which is very predominantly minority and in which Project Concern is considerably smaller the equivalent now is actually smaller probably than when you were in it and certainly much smaller than when it was first invented in the late 60's Project Concern for instance one instrument, just one instrument of mixing of racial and economic groups in this area. Initially project concern was projected to move as many as 1,500 kids a year. I don't think it ever got bigger than six or seven hundred I think it's been way below that ever since then. But the sum of what I'm saying is that the progress has been very slow. I think it's been disappointingly slow. I think the lawyers understood this better than I did when I went into this action that even if we prevailed under the law they knew and I quickly learned that that wouldn't necessarily mean anything like rapid action to implement the verdict of the courts and that certainly has been the case and the fact is

that I've think I've learned that America both majority and minority communities has lost faith in the integration goal to some degree. Lost faith in deliberate implementation of integration. I don't mean that people are more against integration than they were back in the 50's or even back in the late 80's. I think that probably people are now more in favor of integration but they remain extremely resistant to artificially induced integration of any kind. Busing of course creates hysteria whenever it's mentioned. Although quite frankly, I was open to the possibility of mandated busing from the start but that shows you how "out to lunch" I am because that was never going to happen and I don't think the lawyers ever imagined it was going to happen. Where in New England, in Boston when they tried busing 30 years ago there was blood in the streets and I don't know if there would have been here but in any case that has not been part of the solution. The solution has amounted to various kinds of voluntary initiatives especially centered on magnet schools. The creation of new magnet schools and magnet programs in existing schools and I think what advancement there has been along the lines of creating quality integrated educational environments for all children in this area what advancement there has been toward that goal has been achieved largely through magnet schools. [00:40:53]

AT: So in hindsight, would you have done anything differently?

EL: I, this may sound more hang-dog than I want it to sound but I think overall I'm a little, I'm disappointed in my own performance as an informant for Sheff v O'Neill. I was a public educator. I think I could have done a better job of anticipating the kinds of skepticism that I ran into and perhaps a less aggressive approach towards selling the objectives of the program. 20 years ago I hadn't yet absorbed the lessons that I'm describing to you now. I wish I'd learned those lessons earlier and begun adapting to those lessons earlier than I really did. I have no regrets whatsoever about Sheff v O'Neill I'm very proud of our role in it, I think it's one of the more significant things that I've done with my life insofar as there's been some progress toward improving the educational experience of children in Greater Hartford insofar as there has been some pressure against the continuing great pressure toward division in the society. I think we in Sheff have been responsible for a good deal of that and I'm willing to be proud of that and certainly would not think again about any part of that. I wish we'd made more progress and I'm constantly drawn to questions about what we might have done that might have made a difference. But I really think that we have run into historical tides that were rather more powerful than we could have intended to reverse. Possibly we could have been more successful in resisting them than we actually have been. [00:43:00]

AT: Did being involved in the case, in the Sheff case change your life in any way?

EL: It, well it introduced me to people and organizations that I tremendously respect. Elizabeth being the by far, the star example, the primary example but I think the CCLU, the Connecticut Civil Liberties Union its now called it's called the ACLU in Connecticut - it [has] changed its name- but I think this is a just an extraordinarily effective organization given how small it is and how impoverished it is. Running somewhat contrary to what I said a couple of minutes ago: organizations like the ACLU for that matter and the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], the Legal Defense Fund and other comparable organizations have proved to me the capacity of dedicated well-organized people to move mountains. I talked

about the necessity to move mountains and how that can't be done quickly, but a lot of earth can be moved by just a few people, if they're willing to totally beat themselves up. [00:44:35]

AT: Do you - or how have public education opportunities changed in the Hartford area over time to you?

EL: You know a rising percentage of the students in Hartford I think have been to a rising number of alternatives. More doors have been opened for them and that has always been our objective not forcing people through any doors but opening doors and enabling them to get through the doors if they so choose and I think there are more doors open, there is more concern for the experience of the children in Greater Hartford it was widely documented back in the 1960's that segregation was increasing in this area and the experience of school children was declining. It is still nowhere near what it should be but I think it is improving and I'm not quite as sure that the experience of the suburban kids that my family sort of always symbolized in the lawsuit has changed that very much although the fact is that that shortly before you contacted me a 9th grader from Hall High School contacted me. I told you briefly about this case there are students in the West Hartford schools, and this has been true for years who have themselves been fascinated by the effort to desegregate the schools. In other words the Sheff lawsuit insofar as its had an impact on West Hartford has had an impact in terms of consciousness raising and it's much more, people are much more aware of the fact that at least a third of the school-age people in Greater Hartford are minority people and that figure is rising rapidly and it has for a long time. I think the figure could be much higher than that. In other words the future is going to be a much more integrated future, it's going to be a much more diverse future than most people realize. I used to ask audiences when I was speaking about the lawsuit many years ago if they would estimate the number of school-aged children who belong to minority groups and typically the guess would be 5%, 10%. Well the actual figure even back then in '89 was 30% and now it's probably upwards of 40% it could be 50 [%] for all I know. In other words people literally talked about isolation. Isolation works both ways. On the one hand kids in Hartford are isolated and on the other hand adults in the suburbs are isolated from the basic demographic realities of the society they live in. All they see are fellow white suburbanites and they assume that that makes up all of Greater Hartford. Well the fact is that they're driving past them, or driving around them, but they're there. [00:47:40]

AT: Do you still keep in touch with other plaintiffs or lawyers besides Ms. Sheff?

EL: Nowhere near as much as I once did but yeah, I, Carol Vinick and her husband Tom Connolly, they're other plaintiffs who were in Hartford now they're in West Hartford. We see them occasionally and as a matter of fact. Some of the plaintiffs continue to meet with some of the lawyers. There are continuing meetings. I think the last one I went to was some months ago in contrast to the first couple of years when we had meetings often in this house by the way. We hosted probably two dozen meetings in this house. But early we were meeting once a month now it's more like twice a year - something like that. But there still is that level of engagement. Whenever the lawyers propose to do something significant they try to sound the plaintiffs particularly Elizabeth but they try to get the rest of us together as well. So that still happens. [00:48:50]

AT: So for Ms. Vinick, do you have any updated numbers or like an email address that I might be able to... [Unclear]

EL: Oh I can, I can supply that to you.

AT: Okay, alright. Yay. That's good.

JD: Why don't we save that for after. That makes sense?

AT: Yep.

JD: Thanks.

AT: The next questions that I have for you are just some background questions that we didn't cover in the interview before. Where were you born, and how long did you live in Hartford?

EL: St. Paul Minnesota, 1944, and I moved to Hartford when I joined the faculty at Trinity in '75 and lived in Hartford on Monroe Street near the college just off of New Britain below the college until the fall of '78 we moved to West Hartford another house in '78. Moved to this house on Beverly road in '83.

AT: Okay, all right. What did you or your children attend during the case and afterwards?

EL: My wife and I were past school age. But the kids attended Whiting Lane Elementary. King Phillip Middle School and Hall High School. My daughter for only the first two years of High School and then she spent her last two years at The Watkinson School. Joseph spent all four years at Hall.

AT: What type of work do you do?

EL: I teach History and American Studies at Trinity.

AT: How do you identify your race or ethnicity?

EL: I'm White.

AT: Those are all the questions that I have for today. Let me just make sure. Actually I have one more question. As I was preparing for the interview I was doing some background reading and stuff like that and I came across a 2006 article in the [Hartford] Courant and I wanted to read a quote back to you and ask you a question about it if that's okay with you. [Source: A DECADE OF HALF MEASURES; 10 YEARS AFTER A HARTFORD MOTHER AND SON FORCED CITY SCHOOLS TO INTEGRATE, PROGRESS HAS DRAGGED. Stan Simpson. Hartford Courant. Hartford, Conn.: Jul 23, 2006. pg. 4]

EL: Sure.

AT: So in the article you say: "I'm where Douglass was in 1848, I haven't changed my fundamental belief about what the country professes as equality and equality means open doors for integrated education and open opportunity for integrated education." And I just wanted to know if your beliefs are still the same, and where did that quote come from, like what was your thinking behind that quote.

EL: That certainly sounds like what I still believe, and I refer to Douglass in...?

AT: Yeah, Frederick Douglass.

EL: Yes, yes. Who is a great hero of mine and I've done a great deal of research on his - on him and actually much of what he was speaking before even before emancipation remains things to be desired in 2011. Which this is now about 160, 170 years later. I think Douglass; I think eventually Abraham Lincoln as well actually knew each other at least superficially in the course of the Civil War. I think Lincoln also came to the point of view that this kind of society had to be a genuine democracy if it was going to work and if it was not a genuine democracy you know, it would not fly away but it would not be the America that they had in mind and so I think Douglass and Lincoln are working for fundamental equality of human rights in the 1850's Douglass as early as the 1840's. He comes to this much earlier and that's what I believe in now. [00:52:55]

AT: And have other people changed their beliefs on integration and education?

EL: Do I think that's true of other people?

AT: Yes.

EL: I think there actually has been long term progress along these lines and I you know, I do think simply in terms of public consciousness not yet sufficiently in terms of public action. There is much more sympathy for the aims of the Sheff v O'Neill lawsuit. Much more sympathy frankly, for my point of view, about the necessity for recognition of universal human rights than there was when I was a child and for that matter when I was a much younger plaintiff, or plaintiff parent back in 1989 and I believe there has been progress. But of course we have one symbol back in the White House even though he's a big disappointment but nonetheless an astonishing development and a great leap. [00:54:08]