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Oral History Interview on Bloomfield, CT

Louis Schiavone

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Oral history interview on Bloomfield CT by Aleesha Young for the Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Project, August 16, 2005. Available from the Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford Connecticut (http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cssp_ohistory/).

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Length: n/a

Transcribed by: Aleesha Young

Additional files: n/a

Abstract: Louis Schiavone recalls being active within the Bloomfield community in the 1960's. As a white man, he was part of the Bloomfield Human Relations Commission from the year 1971-73, and also was the principal of Bloomfield High School from 1973-88. He reflects on the positive qualities of the Bloomfield Public Schools and describes the experience of his one son, who attended K-12. As principal, Schiavone organized meetings with white and black students to discuss race relations, and he describes some of their dialogue in detail. He briefly mentions volunteering as a tester for housing discrimination.

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

Speaker key:

AY: Aleesha Young

LS: Louis Schiavone

[all comments by transcriber in brackets]

AY: I am interviewing you because you were active in Bloomfield during the 1960's and 70's, but before we focus on your role, where did you live prior to that time?

LS: Waterbury, Connecticut.

AY: What kind of work did you and your family members do during the 60's and the 70's?

LS: Well I worked, in the 60's I was a teacher, head of the business department, dean of students and my wife worked at the Connecticut Journal.

AY: Do you have any children?

LS: One.

AY: What is their name?

LS: One son [inaudible- Louis] the III

AY: He...Is that one son? [Interviewer misunderstood what the name of the son was during the interview]

LS: He.

AY: When and where was he born.

LS: He was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in St [inaudible] Hospital in 1954.

AY: Did he attend Bloomfield Schools?

LS: Yes.

AY: Bloomfield High School?

LS: K-12.

AY: And what elementary schools did he attend?

LS: The first one was Wintonbury and when they closed the Wintonbury building, they moved over there to Metacomet.

AY: What were your experiences with these schools, Bloomfield Schools?

LS: By that what do you mean because that's a broad question?

AY: Let's see, did you like it? Did you not like it? If you can give specific examples...

LS: You mean as an educator working in the system or a resident, which?

AY: Could you answer both?

LS: First of all, I was very pleased with the school system. My son had an excellent education. And as an educator I was very proud to work, my entire career was at Bloomfield High School and obviously if I didn't enjoy it, I wouldn't have stayed there that long.

AY: Anything else you want to add?

LS: I don't know how to answer that question because it is so broad. One of the things, historically changing was the population, and I am not talking ethnically, I am talking numbers. It nearly doubled today from what it was when I first started which was in 1956. Ethnically it had obviously changed very much, when I was in my last year at the high school the minority population was approximately 65%. Today it's approximately from what I understand it's approximately 98%, which includes Hispanic and Asian..as well as [inaudible--American] black.

AY: What would you say...the next question is about your children's experiences, how do you think your son liked it?

LS: My son loved it. His education was good enough that he was able to study in Sapilian Paris when he was [inaudible] colleges here. He was Vice President of his class, and stuff like that.

AY: In your view how has the quality of Bloomfield Public Schools changed since 1960's?

LS: I can't answer that question because I am not working there anymore and I haven't been since 1988. When I worked, I would put Bloomfield High School as one of the top ten schools in the state of Connecticut. We had a broad spectrum of studies. First of all we had the A.P UCONN courses. Do you know what I mean by the UCONN courses?

AY: Yes.

LS: We were the first school in the state to have that. Possibly a student could earn up to 40 credits, probably that would never take place, but those credits were transferable to almost any college or university in the country. At the other end of the spectrum was the Vo-Ag department, A Vo-Ag departments was sited as one of the best in Connecticut for small schools in the state. We had programs ranging from culinary arts through small machines, which they don't have any more, the culinary arts, they have, but that was abolished, that program went away. The spectrum is big, it met the needs of just about every kid.

AY: I read that you were active I think in '69, Was it the Student Relations [interviewer is referring to the Human Student Relations Council]...I can't remember the name of it...?

LS: That was a program that...

AY: What was the title?

LS: There was really no title. What I was concerned about, and seeing the change, ethnic change in the schools, and seeing the bigotry in the student body I started right here in my house with 20 of the most militant black kids I could think of and I'm not going into detail, because the detail would be like this [Louis Schiavone makes a hand gesture]. But quickly, we met here and after about three meetings I lowered the [inaudible] bomb on them, and we started to be honest with each other, but up to that point it was game playing and they knew it. But it got to a point where they trusted me, and I trusted them and I would asked them questions, What is is like to be black and walk through the doors of Bloomfield High School? This evolved into a tape recording, that was made and ultimately played to the entire faculty of the school system. And I think the University of Hartford used it for....At the other end of the spectrum, I met with some of the toughest white kids I could find, and got to the point where I was able to bring these two groups together, which was never easy because I was by myself. What did happen that surprised me, was the honesty that came out. An example, in one of these meetings, one of the white kids said, "I hated black." And I questioned, "What is it that you hate, is he too light, too dark, too [inaudible], what is it that you hate, the color of his skin, what?" [The white student replied,] "I

hate the way he dresses." And this led to a broad broad dialogue between the two groups, so good that the students expanded to about 300 students. It was educational and rewarding. I saw kids leave who were questioning why they would think the way I thought. Did they change? Yea. And then I brought faculty in, which was fun, I went into that much detail.

AY: You can go into as much detail as you would like.

LS: Ultimately all of this got into the Yankee Flyer. You know what the Yankee Flyer is?

AY: Yes.

LS: Well, advertised in the Yankee Flyer, these meetings would take place. And the adults came to the High School, and this included members of the Town Council and members of the Board of Ed. The students met them, assigned them to different rooms and different groups moderated by a black and white student. And at the end of the evening all groups met back in the auditorium, and each group shared the particular agenda we had for that night. Questions were deep black [inaudible] into black in terms of teaching, sensitive yes, but eye opening too. The dialogue was great, the problem here was I was the only one with energy that took on mobile change, these aren't in the books right now, I have all the newspapers somewhere around the house. And my [inaudible] around that time was my assistant principal and vice principal and principal, so I couldn't do it. But I gave you in a nutshell the essence, there were certain colleges and universities that were asked to sit in and absorb the particular meeting, and it could take place, it was possible. Incidentally, out of the student group meetings, the white and black as a group, all over the school, we had black and white handshakes and kids wore them over their lapels, they were black and white handshakes, no words needed to be spoken, the picture said it all. I could talk to you all day on this one issue. And I still [inaudible] those kids.

AY: That's awesome. Is there anything you would like to add feel free to go into as much detail?

LS: No, you've got the essence of what I am trying to say. I think what I want to say to you is, its possible, but you have to be very honest and that honesty brings a lot of hurt and you've got to learn to deal with it.

AY: How long did this go on?

LS: A couple of years. I am trying to pinpoint the year, I think it was, the end of '68 to '70. Something like that, I can't give the exact dates. '69 was the [inaudible] year.

AY: And you said it went til about 1970, why did you become less active?

LS: I just told you, I was the only one involved in it. I might add too that along with the Bloomfield group, at that time in Hartford, there was a group called the [Magnificent 20's?]. I don't know if you have ever heard of them. Then and even today they were a militant black group.

AY: Can I name one? [The interviewer thought he asked if she could name militant black group.]

LS: You get the idea. What I did was invite them here, up to the High School thinking I was alone, but the 20's were always a rowdy group of kids, they were naughty kids, they were in their 20's too. But they also had a 9th grade program that not many people new about, the breakfast program, the [inaudible] program. I wished they had been in the school sooner. I was criticized for it and message, and that was alright too, the message got across. They didn't have to penalize themselves, they weren't all bad. Yea they were rowdy, and at the time Martin Luther King, shortly after his being assassinated was still that [inaudible] but it worked and [inaudible]. And I think the biggest compliment I got, were at an assembly and they were being silenced, and one kid was getting out of line, a black kid from Hartford, and I went to reprimand him, and as he started to mouth off, one of the kids said, "Hold it man, he's cool." And said to me, "We have arrived, this program has arrived." Do you understand what I am saying?

AY: Yes, I understand what you are saying. Were you active in any other governmental or non-governmental organizations in Bloomfield?

LS: The Human Relations Commission. And the group I was in at the school.

AY: Can you give me a year for that?

LS: Pardon?

AY: Can you tell me what year?

LS: I was on board from '71 to '73. I resigned when I became principal, and I just couldn't do it anymore, because one of the big project we took then was...the town was starting to put together what the word...I am trying to get the word...were homes...steering, homesteering and we would actually go into homes, and ask realtors, why they sold to white or black, or whatever it might of been and some of the answers were hair raising. Now we didn't go much further than that unfortunately. One of good people who was [inaudible] at that time were called to jobs either has jobs, we out of town, or they became too busy to stay involved, but that was good group to work with.

AY: And you said you were principal of Bloomfield High School?

LS: Yes, principal, vice principal of the 9th grade 1973 to 1988, for 15 years. I don't look that old do I?

AY: No. And you stopped being Principal in 1988?

LS: Because I retired.

AY: During the 60's and 70's there were debates in Bloomfield about several issues, can you tell me if and how you were involved in each of these? The first is racial imbalance in public schools.

LS: How was I involved with it?

AY: Were you involved in it?

LS: No.

AY: What about the voluntary busing from the Blue Hills Elementary School?

LS: No.

AY: The redistricting of public school boundaries?

LS: No.

AY: I know you kind of mentioned this block-busting and racial steering by real estate agents and the town's lawsuit against them.

LS: We actually went door to door and tested.

AY: Is there anything you would like to add about that?

LS: No, just that the stories we were getting. People were furious...[inaudible] as they did.

AY: Were there other issues about race, schools and housing that I haven't asked about, that you would like to add?

LS: No. You do realize that these questions are so broad that you could take one of them and talk all day.

AY: Why did you decide to teach and become the principal in Bloomfield Schools, was it because you lived here?

[Because Louis Schiavone was also an administrator in Bloomfield Schools, Aleesha felt it was important to ask about his experiences as an educator as well]

LS: Why did I decide to become a teacher? And the other one was why did I decide to become a principal?

AY: Well why did you decide to become an educator in Bloomfield as opposed to another town?

LS: That's an interesting story, I was visiting someone at the state office building, they were busy, I went across the hall to visit the department of business education. I got to meet the man who was in charge, told him I was just graduated college. He asked me if I was looking for a job, and he mentioned a couple of places. He said I am not a placement agency, but I could recommend a couple of places. One of them was in Bloomfield, mind you I was in Hartford at

the time, I didn't know where Bloomfield was. And through that little lead I applied for [inaudible-superintendent], was granted and was hired pretty much within the same week, so...

AY: What were the concerns of parents when you first started working?

LS: When I first started working...it mostly had to do with school curriculum. At that time we did not have racial concerns that we have today. I would say the curriculum was the biggest thing, biggest concern.

AY: And did the concerns of parents change over time?

LS: Oh yes, because of the thing with the kids, it obviously became a concern to parents that their kids were being either harassed or somebody else was always at fault except their child.

AY: What were some of the challenges you and the Bloomfield School system faced during the 1960's?

LS: One of them I already told you about, the program that I already told you about which was probably the major challenge at that time. Another one was, the moods of education were changing, you had situation with classrooms without walls or a modern map, which I believe frankly undermined the educational process. These experiments came and went overnight, but the effects lasted for a longtime. In my mind we are still seeing the effects of that today.

AY: Now the issues that mentioned, the different moods of education, are there any...can you describe how these issues were dealt with?

LS: They were dealt with openly, you can't deal with them in a subversive manner, they had to be on the table, up front with everybody, otherwise, it's a buried issue. In other words, it was never gonna be dealt with. And that's why we had these face to face meetings, as hair raising as they were, sensitive as they were, it was the only way to communicate.

AY: Why did the population of Bloomfield Schools change during this time?

LS: I can't give you an answer to that, I think, its being contiguous to Hartford, and the migration into Bloomfield.

AY: Just...I know you talked about racial steering before, did you ever experience...?, well you did mentioned that you guys went to different homes.

LS: Yes, in fact MrLeFebrve, Norma, her husband, Al and I used to go around door to door.

AY: How has Bloomfield stayed the same, and how is it different, than when you first moved here, and when you first taught here?

LS: I think the town has change dramatically. All you have to do is go to the center to see that, the congregating place for so many people, so many groups.....[inaudible] nighttime and go to the restaurants. We don't have in the center, the homeliness we used to have.