

Interviewee: Edward Whitfield

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BB: It's February twenty-six, 2006, right?

EW: That is correct.

BB: We are at the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro with Mr. Ed Whitfield, activist extraordinaire—the infamous or famous Ed Whitfield.

EW: Infamous is probably more appropriate.

BB: Do you first want to say a little bit about Beloved Community Center, just what it is?

EW: Starting I guess between twelve and fifteen years ago, some people in Greensboro out of the faith community came together wanting to build a beloved community along the model of Martin Luther King [Martin Luther King, Jr. (January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968) was a Baptist minister and American political activist, was the most famous leader of the American civil rights movement]. They had a servant leadership workshop and some other things. Between Z. Holler [Greensboro, NC local activist] and [Rev.] Nelson Johnson [African-American civil rights activist and minister] and Willena Cannon [Greensboro, NC activist], and some other community activists that were involved, I think Mary Taye and another

lady, whose name I should recall, she passed away, Linda Jones, initially formed the Beloved Community Center. The building has the Homeless Hospitality House that operates four days during the week. That's a place where people can come, homeless folk can come and get showers and eat breakfast. A lot of days they service like a hundred and some folk coming through here. The lady who runs this place does an extraordinary job of both taking care of people, but also showing them a kind of love and respect that very much changed the climate of the place, so that there's not a lot of arguing and bickering and discipline problems that might otherwise exist with a group of folk who are not feeling all that good about themselves or the things around them by virtue of their circumstance. People know to respect this place and do. It goes very well. I'm not directly very much involved with the Homeless Hospitality part of the work, having done most of my work with Beloved Community Center around education issues and peace and justice issues.

BB: What's the name of the woman who runs it now? [Pause as he tries to remember.] Oh, sorry.

EW: That's secret.

BB: That's secret. (laughter)

EW: There's a funny thing that goes on with my brain, which I may as well talk about early, which is that discrete facts sometimes ramble around and fall into nooks and corners of it that require me a couple of seconds. Her name is Terry Speed.

BB: See? (laughter)

EW: As well as I know Linda Jones and Terry Speed and other people, I mean, sometimes their names will escape me. It's a little embarrassing, but they know that. It's like, "You don't remember my name?" It's like, "Yes, I do."

BB: You just say, "It's there. I just can't access it at the moment. Give me a few minutes."

EW: I would argue that there's just so much, I think it's just got a lot of cobwebs in it. But relationships, interactions, and things, I seldom get out of place, because to me, the process of making things make sense is for them to be tied together in such a way that they make sense. It means you can kind of follow the whole chain of events. The discrete facts just, they ramble around. Even though if I put my mind to it, I can remember, like I still remember of value of pie to close to, I don't know, twenty or so decimal places, just because I chose to know that when I was in high school just to irritate other students who would stop after 3.14, and I'd keep going.

BB: The brain's a fascinating thing, Ed.

EW: It is. It's a terrible thing to waste.

BB: Well, let's start with you then. Rumor has it that you were born in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1949.

EW: That is correct.

BB: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

EW: I am the last of four children.

BB: What are your siblings' names?

EW: My oldest brother is Robert. My sister is Winifred. My brother nearest me in age is Richard. I came along at last in 1949. My oldest brother is about eight

and half years older than I. He was born, I think, in '41. He right now is an MIS [Management and Information Services] manager at a small company out on the west coast that installs specialized telephone systems. My sister is a high fashion photographer at this point. This is her latest reincarnation. She continues to reinvent herself. She was a financial analyst on Wall Street. Well, she had been a city planner in New York, packed up, sold all her stuff, and moved to Europe, traveled around Europe modeling for several years, modeling and making jewelry. Tired of that, came back to the United States, became a financial analyst on Wall St., ended up a vice president at Standard and Poor's. Tired of that, and moved to the west coast where she set up as a private consultant financial analyst, as a bond analyst consultant. Then she went from that to raising llamas. She was raising exotic llamas and selling them and made a living doing that for awhile, and had an elaborate kind of rose garden place that she lived on, that she then started renting out as a space for weddings and such. For her process of taking pictures of the llamas as well as taking pictures at weddings, she has transformed herself most recently into a high fashion photographer that is highly sought after and giving lectures in Las Vegas and winning awards around the country and around the world. She's at www.intimateportraitsbywinifred.com, where's she's now doing kind of boudoir photography for (laughter) I would say people with more money than taste.

BB: Boudoir?

EW: Yeah. She also is the proud owner of two pet camels. I have a very interesting sister.

BB: Yes, she sounds like a fascinating human being.

EW: Yeah, I've seen her on television a couple times when I think *Home and Gardening* featured her, her layout place, on one of their shows. But also just the whole idea of her as being a person who every couple of years, she will just decide to follow her dream and if it's not related to the previous ones, it's just where she's going. She's cool.

BB: Is her last name still Whitfield?

EW: Yeah.

BB: Are all your other siblings Whitfields too?

EW: Yes, we're all Whitfields.

BB: What about your parents? What are their names?

EW: My father is Robert Whitfield, born 1909, passed away in 1996. The last eleven years or so of his life he stayed with me here in Greensboro. But he was born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas. My mother is ninety-three years old now. I was there in Little Rock on her ninety-third birthday back this past October, which had happened to have also have been the primary day of the election when I was running for City Council. But I decided I had my priorities in order. I went to my mother's birthday instead of staying here to look at the election results. "Where were you on Election Day?" "I was at my mother's birthday. She's ninety-three" "Oh, okay."

BB: Good son, good son.

EW: You do what you have to do.

BB: What's your mom's name?

EW: Her name is Winifred McLemore Whitfield. Her father was Richard Butler McLemore.

BB: And he goes by Robert? Or her father, did you say her father?

EW: Her father was Richard Butler McLemore.

BB: Okay. Were your parents political when you were young?

EW: Not at the level of any kind of radical politics that I know of. Our family was involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s by virtue of the fact that my sister chose to go Little Rock Central High School. She was in the class that entered there in 1960 and she graduated in '63. That was close enough to the time when it had been integrated in 1957. It was closed the next year, so it was open one year before the year that she went. I think the year that it reopened, only one other black student went there. I think the year that she went, there may have only been three or four. It was still just a tiny handful of African-American students who went there. While she was in school there, my father would take her back and forth to school every day and kind of had to witness the indignities of seeing his daughter, who had just been mistreated at that school. He had bricks thrown at his car sometimes. One time he got out and there was a police officer standing right by the car. He said, "Did you see that?" The policeman said, "No, I didn't see anything. What?" I mean it was that kind of thing going on. But he picked her up pretty much everyday and helped her with her homework. That's the kind of thing that a family does. That's not something that just the individuals in it--. It incorporates it and in some sense requires the support of the whole family.

One of the points I make when I'm talking about education, though, is that the opportunity came into existence for her to go to Little Rock Central High School by virtue of what Daisy Bates and the nine children had done in 1957 with the support and the effort of the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall [the first African-

American Supreme Court Justice appointed in 1967] and this, that, and the other. But the decision as to whether or not to go was hers and she wanted to go. My oldest brother would have been able to be one of the first nine. There would have been ten if he had wanted to be one, because he would have been accepted. But he didn't want to go; she did want to go. My brother older than me didn't want to go and didn't. I did and I did. So within the same family, with no stigma attached to any of those decisions, some of the children decided they wanted to go through that process, others didn't.

After the 1970s, with the forced busing, those decisions no longer resided in families. They were made by school boards with rezoning decisions. I think that was grossly unfair. I preferred the system where there was actually choice...even though that ended up resulting in smaller numbers of African-American students taking advantage of those opportunities. For many of them that were forced to go, it wasn't an opportunity at all; it was an ordeal. I find no justification at all in forcing that ordeal on children as a means of some social engineering project that may or may not be successful. But it was a result of grown folk having messed up stuff over the years. Now we send the children off to fix it and it doesn't get fixed that way. But she went there.

And that was, when you said, "Were my parents political?" My father was also involved in the local voting scene. I always remember him having voted. In Little Rock, Arkansas, there was a poll tax thing, but he paid the poll tax, he voted in every election, and talked about doing stuff. I remember during the time Jesse Jackson ran for President in 1984, my father was part of the Arkansas Caucus that got a chance to be a part of the presidential selection process.

He was also active in trade unions. He was a member of the National Postal Alliance. He worked for the post office. Before that, he had worked for the federal government as a janitor in the federal building. I think he was a janitor for the FBI. He knew a lot of FBI agents, because I remember them having asked him after 1969 when I was at Cornell, this despicable incident we'll talk about later, some FBI agent said something to him, "Is your son up there at school with a gun or something?" My daddy told me, he said, "I wish he'd had two guns." So he was not one to mince his words very easily.

By growing up in the South during that period, there was a tremendous amount of pressure and degradation that took place of families and individuals. I remember once, my mother had written a check at a department store and somehow things were out of balance and the check bounced, and them having said something to her about it. So he went and got her a hundred-dollar bill and told her to take it down with her and pay it in cash. He wanted to be very, very clear that—it was something much, much smaller. This was back in the day when a hundred dollars could buy a whole bunch of stuff. It was just he wanted to make sure that nobody even thought that we would try to cheat them out of money. In that sense, my family was involved with the community around them and politically.

My mother was a public school teacher for thirty-nine years. She was one of the first people in Arkansas to work in the Head Start programs and became the director of Head Start stuff in Little Rock for a while, and was a lead teacher in that. She was very much involved in the community from that standpoint in helping to raise some generations of children.

BB: What motivated you to go to Central High?

EW: I was an arrogant young student, thought I was smart, and wanted to show people how smart I was. That's the honest truth. In fact, I had been offered a scholarship to go to Phillips Exeter Academy, a precursor to Harvard [University]. So I mean, people would have paid me to go to some fancy private school. I did my little calculation, realizing that when I went there in '64, I would graduate in 1967, which would be ten years after the school integration stuff, there'd be a lot of attention on the school and that Central High School was probably the place to be, rather than Phillips Exeter Academy. So I chose to go to Central.

Again, that was one of the interesting points, I think, about early school integration. A lot of folks think that it was done out of all these needs that the black community had about all the things that were missing in the other schools, when for significant numbers of people, it was done as an effort to be able to show people who we were and what we could do. I went to show off. I wasn't seeking something I thought I couldn't get some other way. There were obvious differences in terms of what was available at the schools. I could take calculus at Central High School. I couldn't take calculus had I gone to Horace Mann, which was the African-American high school in the city. But if I wanted to take calculus, there was also Philander Smith College and it would have been no grand problem for me to go after school and find a way to take it there. Because by taking calculus at Central High School, it meant I had to get out of the band. So I could still participate in a band somewhere, my mother enrolled me in Philander Smith College's band. So I could have done calculus there instead of band if I had really

wanted to. For my family and for me, there would have been ways other than being at that school to access those opportunities. I was there to show off.

My mother had told me all the time coming up through elementary school, like I was at an elementary school called Booker T. Washington and she said, "Edward, you might be the smartest boy here, but when you go to junior high school, you're going to find a lot of other children just as smart as you are." It's like, "Okay, what do I know?" So I go to junior high school and it kind of didn't work out that way. Now I'm at the top of that too. Then it's like, "Well Edward, you might be the smartest student at Dunbar Junior High School, but if you go to Central High School next year, you're really going to find a lot of students that are smarter than you." What do I know?" It's like, "Okay." I graduated fifth in my class in 1967. I was a presidential scholar. I was invited to the White House to get my big medal and to shake hands with the President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson.

The only reason I graduated as low as fifth in my class was because I had a band director that was a racist, a guy named A.F. Lape, l, a, p, e. We would do band grades by tryouts and I played oboe. The reason I played oboe is because somebody told me it was the most difficult instrument in the band to play, so that's what I wanted to play. A pattern is emerging here. Well, I'm not worried about the pattern or if people think I'm slightly arrogant. There's also a tremendous amount of humility in here, because I have some grand sense of what the real limitations are of what I can do. But I wanted to play the hardest instrument and I got interested in mathematics because people told me that was the most difficult subject. You know, it was like I would just kind of chase after what was supposed to be hard. Then I found out what is really hard, which is social transformation. But

anyway, the band director would listen to whatever grade he gave her, and he'd give me a grade or half-grade below it so she would keep her first seat chair.

BB: Was this a white girl?

EW: Yeah.

BB: There were so few of you [black students].

EW: Well, the year I went to Central was one of the first years that the numbers started really picking up.

BB: The numbers started picking up?

EW: Yeah. I don't remember the exact numbers, but before I left, there were several hundred out of the two thousand students in the school. There was probably a hundred fifty to two hundred black students before I left. Now the school is predominately black. But certainly, the other oboe player was white and he kept her in first chair where he wanted her, didn't like me at all it seemed, and he gave me B's in band. And had I not been in band, I would have been just taking phys. ed. [physical education]. My phys. ed. grade would not have counted, but band grade did count, and the B in band pulled me down. I made no grade lower than an A in any other class the entire time I was at Central High School. And, in fact, I was in all the honors classes that I was eligible to be in, and edited the literary review, and became the head of the math club and the head of the science club. Again, we're talking about late 60s, so this was not all that usual. I was in a math class one time, geometry class that graded on a curve. This teacher told me that—I think somebody's setting the alarm on the door.

BB: Yeah. Do you want me to pause it?

EW: Let me go check on it.

[tape interruption]

EW: All of my brothers and sisters are involved with computers now. Even my sister, who's the high fashion photographer, uses digital photo manipulation to give her work its uniqueness. But she's very much an artist and the stuff that she digitally manipulates, you just go, "Wow," and have no idea what she's done to it.

But when I was in high school, this teacher took me off of the curve. She said it was unfair to the other students, because I went through the whole year and never missed a single problem, did every extra credit problem that was available. So I had set the curve as being, that stuff had to be perfect. She said that it was just unfair to the rest of her students, her honor students. So she took my grade off, gave me my A, and then graded everybody else on a curve. I thought that was weird.

BB: Well, I'm one of those people that remember the extra brilliant folks in our class who skewed the whole curve. I mean you won a slew of high honors starting really early, the Telluride Association Scholarship, National Achievement Scholarship. When we talk about Cornell later, you got a Cornell National Scholarship to go there. The Westinghouse Science Talent Search Honors group member and a Presidential Scholar like you mentioned. So I guess the first question is are other people in your family extraordinarily intelligent like you? Or is this something that's kind of unique to you?

EW: My assumption is that I live in a world full of geniuses. Not only are my family all geniuses, but everybody else is too. It's just a lot of people don't realize it. Much of my approach to children and education proceeds from that. I mean, I really do think that it's like the sculpture that's inside the block of stone, if we had a

way to let it out, but it's in there which is one of the reasons I'm slightly comfortable talking about what I'm able to do, is because my real assumption is a lot more people are able to do this too if they would just go ahead and do it. It's not that they don't do it because they're too lazy to, but by and large we set up blocks and obstacles to people's being able to do it, that I somehow didn't find. My oldest brother was studying math and physics, which is, in addition to the fact that somebody told me it was hard, one of the reasons I got interested in mathematics. My sister was involved in kind of social justice stuff, all the way from the time that she was recruited by a lynch mob to go to Central High School. The reason she wanted to go, she said, was because she had seen the mobs in the street in 1957 on television, and knew that she just had to go there to prove to people that she was just as good as they are. I said, "Yeah, I wanted to prove our people are just as smart as they are too." She said, "No, that's not what I said." She said, "I wanted to prove that I was just as *good* as they are." She said, "I didn't know whether I was as smart as they were or not, and probably thought I might not be as smart as some. But I knew that I was just as good as anyone and I wanted to prove that. I knew that if people got to meet me and see me, that I could prove that I was as good as anyone. All this 'two-four-six-eight, we don't want to integrate' stuff is foolishness." But that was kind of her thinking and I absorbed a piece of that from her.

My brother closest to me in age is a mechanical genius. While having some difficulty in studying engineering at the University of Arkansas, he described himself as possibly being dyslexic. I don't know. He went to California and got into

an apprenticeship program studying machine tools as a machinist, a tool and dye apprenticeship program.

BB: Tool and dye?

EW: Tool and dye, making tooling for industry. He finished first in the city of Los Angeles apprenticeship competition. Then he competed in the state of California apprenticeship competition and he finished first in the whole state. They were given just a few hours to make some very, very intricate machine parts and he was, of all the apprentices that went through--. Then he ended up being flown to Washington, met one of the astronauts, went back out to California and got started in the aerospace industry as a tool and dye maker. There's some stuff that he made that's still on the moon. He made part of the first life support system on the first moon landing. He stayed involved in the tool and dye and aircraft industry until he left California to come here and help me with my dad for a while, and taught at Guilford Technical Community College. By the time he left there, he was teaching something called geometric dimensioning and tolerancing to the people building high-tech stealth bombers and fighter jets at Northrop Aviation.

BB: At Northrop Aviation?

EW: Yeah, he was at Northrop. He had designed and invented robotic equipment that was used by General Electric for maintaining some of their motor stuff for freight train locomotives and stuff. He's quite brilliant.

BB: How do you explain that? You said somehow you just overcame those barriers and blocks that so many people are socialized, especially folks of color in the South in the 50s and 60s, to think are there and immutable. What do you think accounts for your not—

EW: I had a very supportive and nurturing family. I grew up in a house full of books and things. I would hate to venture how many sets of encyclopedias were in my home. I grew up reading encyclopedias rather than comic books. If I wanted to know something, I had the *Book of Knowledge*, the *New Wonder World*, *Compton's Encyclopedia*, and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* laying around the house. Because I ended up going to the elementary school that my mother taught at, rather than the one closest to home, I didn't have a lot of children around me that I ended up wasting time with, playing with. So I ended up mainly playing with my older brothers and sisters and reading books. It was an environment rich with things.

My father was a jack-of-all-trades. He, during World War II, had been a carpenter building defense housing. He was self-taught as that. He had taught himself how to be an electrician. He taught himself how to be a plumber. He taught himself how to be an automobile mechanic. I grew up thinking that all men knew how to do all those things. I just thought everybody's daddy knew how to do all that. Again, what you see closest to you was what was normal. I grew up thinking that everybody went to college, because my oldest brother went to college, my mother had gone to college. We didn't spend much time in the family talking about the fact that my father had not graduated from college, but he had gone to junior college for a little while. But he knew how to do all kinds of stuff. Being able to do stuff, I assumed I was supposed to be able to do it.

One time after I graduated from high school, I was driving a truck, I think, from New York to bring some equipment back to Malcolm X University. The truck engine messed up out on the highway and I rebuilt the engine out on the highway.

I wrote my father and told him about it and he said, "I didn't know you ever knew how to work on cars. You never did any of that around here." I said, "No, I know I never did it, but I saw you do it." I'm just assuming that you're supposed to be able to do all these things. I've never made the excuse, "Oh, I've never done that before" or "I haven't been trained." I figured if I wanted to learn it, I could and I would.

I ended up making some clothes one time. I made my mother a sweater and sent it to her for her birthday. It was like, "I didn't know you could sew." It's like, "Mother, I used to see you sewing all the time. All you got to do is read the directions. They've got all the directions on the patterns." She said, "Well, there are lot of people that cannot follow directions." I said, "Oh, I wonder why?" I mean I was kind of naive about stuff that people think they can't do. See, I don't actually believe that people can't follow directions. (laughter) I mean, I really don't. I believe a lot of people don't follow directions and that they will tell themselves that they can't, and they will accept that. I don't accept it for me. I seldom accept it for other people. So I don't know. Those are the peculiarities of it.

I grew up in a house full of things, when I say "things," there was always a basement area, a workshop area where we could work on stuff. So my science fair projects would be, sometimes they would be overly ambitious. I remember one time I was wanting to build some kind of computerized device that would kick out--. I had a bunch of relays and I was going to try to build some relay-based computer logic. I had no idea that it takes thousands of relays. I probably had a few hundred. I had some difficulties with the card mechanism, but you know, card printing and

distribution things that can kick out a single card at a time are very, very intricate pieces of equipment and sophisticated. I couldn't quite really build one, but I tried.

I remember in the ninth grade, my science fair project was the effect of pressure on the molar specific heat of gases. I will assure that most of the ninth grade science teachers in the city had no idea what I was talking about. In fact, I entered it into a science fair and I ended up getting an honorable mention or third place or something, which was kind of really weird. The kid that won had built a tornado generator by setting up an electric fan over a pile of dry ice and twirling this stuff as it came up. I'm going, "That's nothing." I mean, I was doing real thermodynamics in the ninth grade and this kid was making a fan blow smoke. And he got a—I mean, this was some serious...because by this time, the citywide science fair was a big integrated process. It's like they saw some black kid come up with this thing and they couldn't figure out what it was.

BB: So what was your class background growing up?

EW: My father was a postal worker. He was a union member. He was a mail handler. My mother was a schoolteacher. I grew up believing we were poor. I found out later that we were what was called in that city "middle class." I thought we were poor because my parents, we always shopped at thrift stores. We always rode around in used cars. The house I grew up in we moved into when I was about six, was at the time sixty or seventy years old, built around the turn of the century. It was a cool house. It was like a twelve-room house with oak columns and oak parquetered hardwood floors with patterns in them, and these colonial columns out on the porch, huge rooms with twelve-foot ceilings, molding. But it was in bad repair and it had been broken up into rental upstairs and downstairs, and we

closed it back into a single-family house, opened it up, refinished the floors, and put a roof on. I helped put a roof on the house when I was six years old, so I've been doing roofing.

My family let us all participate in things, so I always did a lot of things with my hands. I think the hand-mind connection in young people being allowed to be responsible is very important for them growing up and kind of fully recognizing, realizing themselves. Then again, I was just around people that seemed like they knew how to do everything, so I thought I was supposed to know how to do everything too. It just was the most normal thing in the world to me.

BB: When did you start playing an instrument?

EW: I started in band in elementary school, played fluteophone, then clarinet. I think I began on the oboe when I was still in elementary school. I played oboe through junior high school. Every once in awhile, like when the band would go somewhere and do something, and during marching band in high school, they would take me off of oboe. They didn't really want anybody walking down the street playing the oboe. I don't know that you can even walk and play the thing; it's weird. They would hand me a piccolo and just tell me to hold it. I wasn't responsible for actually playing it, but I got interested in playing flute. The year after I graduated from high school I saw a flute in a pawnshop and I could blow coke bottles, so I figured I could play flute. I've been messing around with the flute ever since then. At some point years after that, I picked up the first guitar in a pawnshop. I try to play jazz guitar now. I've actually played blues guitar in public and I've played bass on the blues in public. I played at a wedding. I played guitar at another wedding once. I played at a wedding and the people are still married. I

played at a wedding on Valentine's Day two years ago and the folks are still--. And it was all original music; I wrote the stuff on guitar. It was kind of weird, given that I'm not really a guitar player. But I just like music and I like pretty stuff.

BB: So in high school, do you feel like you started to get politically active for the first time that you called it that?

EW: I was interested in the world around me and the news and just at a level of trying to make sense of things. I got to tell somebody yesterday that, they had said that they had read some stuff of mine and they were impressed with it, and I said, "I try hard to make sense and making sense of this world is hard work at this point." There's a lot of crazy stuff around us. But I remember, I believe when I was in high school something happened with the United States and the Dominican Republic around 1965, 1966 that began to expose some of the United States' support of dictatorships and opposition to progressive movements and stuff. I remember reading that and figuring out what was actually going on there and being disgusted by it.

One of the things that happened to me when I was in high school was there was a college in Little Rock. It was Little Rock University at the time. At this point, it's the University of Arkansas at Little Rock; it's joined the university system. But Little Rock University had a coffee shop there called "The Exit," and for reasons that are not at all clear to me, my mother would actually let me go out there on the weekends. So a lot of times on Friday nights and on Saturdays, if there wasn't some high school social function or something that I was going to, I would go out to this coffee shop where people would sit around, play guitar, and drink hot cider or tea or something. Every once in awhile, there were like civil rights activists

coming through, people from SOC, Southern Student Organizing Committee; SNCC, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. People were reading things like *Ramparts* magazine. I got to meet a lot of social activists and hear about them.

I remember that was when I first read about Bob [Robert] Moses [A Harvard University trained, African-American civil rights activist in 1960 who became field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a core organizer of Freedom Summer in Mississippi, and a core founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party]. He was very much a legend during that time period. I probably was reading about him right along the time he was getting ready to leave Mississippi and go to Tanzania. He was kind of one of my childhood heroes. It was so funny; I got to meet him for the first time in 2000 at a SNCC conference in Raleigh. I ran up to him all ready to talk about, "Hey, you were one of my childhood--." He looked at me like I was crazy. (laughter)

BB: As if he's never heard that before. I can't imagine!

EW: Well, I guess, but he's a person of great humility. He's not impressed by people being impressed by him.

BB: There's some wisdom in that, I guess. How did you get involved with the NAACP Youth Council in high school? You ended up being the state president, right?

EW: I was the state president of the NAACP Youth Council for the state of Arkansas. How'd I do that? I don't remember. I know we had a Youth Council chapter. This was during the time the Civil Rights Movement was kind of in its heyday and I wanted us to do something. I was really disappointed to find out that all they wanted the NAACP Youth Council chapters to do was raise money and go

to conventions. They really didn't have any other--. I wanted to be in something like SNCC. In fact, I had these dreams of running away to Alabama. Somebody had given me a phone number or something for, I think, Ella Baker [Ella Josephine Baker (December 13, 1903 - December 13, 1986) was an African-American Civil Rights activist. She organized the 1960 meeting out of which the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) arose and was a coordinator of the Freedom Riders], and told me how to contact her. But then I realized that my mother would kill me. So I didn't get a chance to run off to Mississippi or anyplace, or Alabama.

I thought it insane—I became an activist because of the Vietnam War; the war didn't make any sense to me! It was like, "You mean people are going halfway around the world and talking about fighting for democracy and there's no democracy in Mississippi, there's no democracy in Alabama? Why you got to go ten thousand miles away to force it on some people who seem to have some entirely different view of how they want to develop themselves?" So I knew enough about that conflict to know that it was irresponsible and incorrect. I would be counseling other young folk to not voluntarily join the army if they could avoid it, because they were taking kids straight out of high school into the army. It was like, "No man, that war doesn't make any sense."

I remember passing a resolution at an NAACP regional conference to have civil rights workers made draft-exempt because there's no reason to send them halfway around the world to fight for democracy when they were fighting for it right here. It was so funny that the person who was the Regional Director of Youth was a woman who is now on the County Commission here in Guilford County. Her

name was Carolyn Quilloin at the time; it's Carolyn Coleman now. She credits me with being the first person, when I was a teenager, to ever get her to really seriously think about what was wrong with the war in Vietnam. She heard protests and things, but she didn't take that seriously; she was a good American. She, listening to me, realized that there was something being said that had made some sense. My resolution got sold out by some youth delegate from New Orleans who made a deal to drop my resolution in an effort to get an increase of one delegate going to some convention or something, which I thought was really kind of messed up. That's the way politics at that level goes. I was involved in it and I not only had the state president's role, I was active in church and Sunday school. It might have been something that I heard about through church. I really don't remember how I first got involved with the NAACP. I just remember it didn't ever do anything. That position was something that I had.

I used to know Daisy Bates [Daisy Lee Gatson Bates, (born November 11, 1914 in Huttig, Arkansas; died November 4, 1999 in Little Rock, Arkansas) was an American civil rights leader, journalist, publisher, and author] and have meetings in her house. It was funny, I remember one time, it was probably 1967, we were having this meeting and she said something about, "This is what we're doing here now in 1957." And I remember thinking to myself, "That's the problem with the NAACP. Y'all still hung up on ten years ago. You're still hung up on 1957." It's ironic that I had continued to think that on up into '77 and '87 and '97, that that was still much of their problem. Part of this is a problem that focuses around what I was just saying a little while ago about schools and the choice of children, and how forcing the integration of school and supporting forced busing was supposed to be

a cure-all for everything. I think it created more problems than it cured. I was exposed to and around the NAACP all my life, but I'm not quite sure, I don't remember much of the chronology of that. It was just very little to do with any real work.

During some summers after I got into college, I came back and did work in the community. We built an organized called BUI, Black United Youth, which was active in having protest movements and doing work. I remember a very successful boycott we organized of some Kroger grocery stores around the question of hiring black managers. We had the vegetables rotten and thrown out the back door before---. To me, a boycott of a place like that isn't something you announce and wait for people to not go. It was like you had to be there every day, passing out flyers and talking to people and arguing with them. It became more and more effective as we did it. While I was doing it, my family again was supportive of what I was and what I wanted to do. My father would bring us sandwiches and sodas out there on the picket line. He never came and did it, but he made it clear that he didn't think it was something we shouldn't do, and he brought me the sandwiches. One time, a white customer came up the store and she said something about, "Y'all probably communists." I laughed. I said, "Yeah, we get a check every week from Cuba and Moscow. In case that's what you think, go ahead and believe it."

BB: Did you have a line with any political or economic genre then or system?

EW: No. I went ahead and read a lot of stuff by Bertrand Russell [Bertrand Arthur William Russell, (18 May 1872 – 2 February 1970), was a British philosopher, logician, and mathematician, working mostly in the 20th century] both

his pacifist stuff and his, what I would describe now as democratic socialist stuff. I might have thought myself much along the lines that Bertrand Russell did, a socialist. In fact, I used to carry around Bertrand Russell's address in my pocket, too. I was going to write him a letter and never got around to it...felt bad when he died and I hadn't written him yet.

BB: Do you now?

EW: Write Bertrand Russell?

BB: No, identify with any specific economic platform, system?

EW: Economic stuff—I, for a period of time, went through considering myself a Marxist, and then haven't used that label much and don't really find a need. I bet if Marx was alive today he wouldn't call himself a Marxist. In fact, there were some of his writings where he pretty much said that, that he was a little embarrassed by what people go around claiming in his name. So I don't use that label.

I find great problems with capitalism. I think it's kind of really messed up. I'm an anti-capitalist, but you can hardly define yourself on the basis of what you disagree with and don't believe in. Questions of religion come up the same way. I used to tell people I was an atheist, but again, you can't hardly describe what you do believe by saying what you don't. I find that because people make so many assumptions, there's so many assumptions attached to all of these labels that I generally tend to avoid them.

Sometimes I think of myself as a type of anarchist, and that again means for me not chaos, and many people say that's what it does mean—anarchy is chaos. Anarchy means without rulers. It means that nobody is fit to rule somebody

else, which makes perfectly good sense to me. Chaos doesn't make all that much sense to me. In fact, I think there's some natural orders of things and some ways that communities have to be built with orders and integrated connections between people, that by and large, organize themselves and are emergent qualities. So the whole notion of self-organizing systems and emergence is something that I was aware of, paid a lot of attention to, even before I was aware of the more formal work that people had done on that. I had done some thinking along those lines that made some sense.

But yet again, the labels, it's just terribly problematic. One of the ways I began to associate with the problem of labels and in some sense, it grows out of the problem of language that's exaggerated—

BB: Let me switch the tape, okay?

EW: Sure.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

BB: One of the problems with labels...

EW: The problem with labels has to do with a notion of a verbal attractor. One of the things that grows out of, I guess, complexity theory or some discipline that I've never formally studied, is the whole notion of an attractor, which has to do with if you get within a certain basin of an attractor, everything kind of falls into that central point. You can think of there's a certain gravitational radius around a black hole that anything that gets that close to the black hole falls into the center of the black hole. But this whole notion of a basin and an attractor as it relates to words

is that there's some words that once you get something close enough to it, it just kind of drops down there to the middle of it. Then sadly though, what you pull back out once you've used that word gets to be not necessarily what it was that dropped into it, but whatever it is that you add onto it.

So you know, chaos, little black bombs with curly cords coming out of them, is all that people associate, Sacco and Vanzetti with anarchy. [Nicola Sacco (April 22, 1891 – August 23, 1927) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (June 11, 1888 – August 23, 1927) were two Italian anarchists, who were arrested, tried, and electrocuted in the American state of Massachusetts, on charges of murder of Frederick Parmenter, although there was popular doubt regarding their guilt. The murder and robbery occurred on April 15, 1920, with three robbers]. But there's a whole Christian anarchist thing, people like Ivan Illich [a Croatian development critic (Vienna, September 4, 1926 - Bremen, December 2, 2002)] and Jacques Ellul [a French philosopher, sociologist, theologian, and Christian anarchist (January 6, 1912–May 19, 1994)] who writes on technology. There's a whole kind of world of people who see a problem in these hierarchical systems that exist, that also use that same label. But once you use the label, it kind of drops down into the black hole so someone will hear you and they don't reach in and they pull out Ivan Illich. They reach in and they pull out some black bomb, a cherry bomb with a curly cord out of it. That's what they think you've said. Communism is another word like that. In a lot of ways, every word and substance is like that, that ends up losing content once the word is used. Then you have to restore the content to it through a process of conversation. Often, we don't have long enough to talk about the thing.

I remember, I think I had this discussion with you once before. I was trying to explain it and might not have explained as well. It was like you said, "You seem like a person who was saying that you can't really understand anything anybody says." It's like, "No, not exactly. I just think that it's work to do so and that without the effort, that we often end up talking past each other and not knowing it." I'm kind of cognizant of it, that as I talk to people, I'm pretty clear that I don't know what they're talking about and that I would have to talk to them much more to ever understand what they're really talking about. A lot of people aren't willing to do that, because they don't have the time or the energy, or they suspect your motivations in asking all these extra questions about what they're saying, or they think you're trying to be critical.

Or for me, it's like, "You think you're smart and you're trying to trick me in some kind of way. You're asking all these extra questions to trap me up or something." And I'm not. I mean, I just realize something that I know is true for me, and I know is assume for most other people, that most of the time when you're talking to people, you don't actually know what they're talking about, and that you approach it with a number of assumptions about what they're talking about that may very well get you through the conversation and indeed, on some occasions, will even be correct. But you don't know whether or not they're right unless you talk to them a lot more and you really kind of know them. I assume that's true for everybody and that a lot of people just don't realize it, and I realize it. Rather than walking around thinking that I know more than other people, I actually spend much of my time realizing that I know less than most people assume that they know.

BB: So what are the implications for this for social transformation, which you see as some of the hardest work? Harder than physics and all these other things you mentioned.

EW: It is around the importance of conversation and communication, and people extending, at least developing relationships on the basis of a whole lot of interaction. It is only through that that any social transformation or anything else is possible. We won't do it with labels. We won't do it with ready-made programs that end up fitting under certain contexts and not others. It will happen the same way as people develop other kinds of meaningful relationships that they do, which is over time and through processes of great interaction, give-and-take, and struggle. Without that, we'll end up with what appear to be quick cures to things that will often contain within them problems every bit as great as those we think we have tried to cure. That's what it means to me. Unless you're conscious of that and kind of live with an understanding of it, you're subject to engage in processes that lead people often into confusion and are ultimately really problematic. Did that begin to answer that?

BB: Yeah, sure. That's a good beginning. I want to ask you more about self-organizing systems and emergence, the thing that you mentioned, and how that relates to some social transformation work you see going on. But maybe that can just come out through some of the stories. Let's go back—

EW: I got a funny story.

BB: Okay, good.

EW: One time I was talking to Nelson Johnson. Nelson has an agricultural background, which is really interesting, because farmers know how to do things.

Farmers are used to processes that develop with the rhythms of the earth and nature. For him, the idea of building an organization is much like planting a seed and nurturing it a certain kind of way; there's a time for harvest. That is kind of what informs his thinking. Well see, I wasn't a farmer, but I'm a builder. I design and build stuff all the time. I've built different kinds of equipment, and by and large, the things I've built I have to plan. But one time, we were talking about something and I had said something about, "Well, this will come with the process of people doing--." And he said, "You act like people could throw up a pile of boards and it will fall down being a barn."

BB: Throw up a pile of boards?

EW: Throw up a bunch of lumber and it will fall down a barn. It's like people don't have to actually build the stuff. I sat and thought about it and thought about it and thought about it, and decided, I forget the name of this essay I wrote, but it was basically on how you could throw up a pile of lumber and it will fall down a barn. (laughter) Basically, I said the only thing you had to do is make sure that on the ends of the lumber there were some kind of magnetic something that ended up attracting certain pieces to the right place. It's like you might protest that, "Well, there is no such thing on lumber." But yet people and organizations are much more complex than lumber and do tend to have that. In other words, people do have natural affinities toward various ideas, toward other people and that which prevents them from falling...that if for instance you threw up a bunch of magnets and allowed them to be separate from each other until they got high enough, they would end up linking themselves as they fell back to the earth, they would end up linking themselves into chains and rings. The natural form of them would be a ring,

because it's complete and it wouldn't tend to attract other magnets. The precursor to that would be chains, long links of it. But eventually, given enough time and random possibilities, the ends would find each other and they would form a ring. It's not hard to understand that magnets are able to do this, because that's one of the things in the nature of the magnet. That no one has to come to these magnets with the idea of the circle or the idea of the ring, and tell them that, "We want you to be--." It is in the nature of just the simple fact that magnets have opposite poles on either ends that end up making them form something that is ring like. And ultimately, it would try to be a perfect circle. The only thing that would be required to get magnets to form into these rings is to somehow separate them. If you had them in a clump right now, there'd be a much more amorphous-looking clump that they would be likely to be in. But you'd have to separate them from those links and give them enough room to fall, and they will naturally form these rings.

In a similar kind of way, the possibility of self-organizing systems around people—the fact that people do have these tendencies toward things and toward people that they tend to be attracted to, and toward ideas that they're attracted to, and toward structures that make sense to them—that if you could somehow burst them out of the more artificial things that constrain them and give them enough space in which to fall, in which to make the alignment that is most natural to them, then you would find that there would be a tendency to form much more perfect organizations than the kinds we impose on people by, "Let's approach this with a plan." Because it requires no plans to make these rings out of these magnets. I took the challenge of, "Could you throw up some wood?" It's like, "Yeah, if the ends of the wood had anything that kind of would attract them, then you give them

enough space and that's where they're going to go." Since wood might not have that capacity, people do, and magnets, it's obvious, do.

BB: A pretty powerful metaphor, I think.

EW: It helps recognize a possibility that quite frankly isn't in people's direct experience. It's like, we do know enough about magnets to realize, "Well, that makes sense that magnets would probably do that." But you don't actually do it, because I can't throw magnets that high; I can't do physically what would be required to do that. And again, realize that even a weak magnetic attraction, given enough time and not hitting the ground first and stopping by virtue of the fact that friction's going to stop it, will eventually lead the things together. All you've got to do is throw them high enough.

One of the organizational possibilities is that we need to create the possibility for people to align themselves into that which feels most naturally comfortable to them, taking away the restraints that come from existing culture and other kinds of things that set limits on people, often self-imposed limits, that drag them back and keep them from doing what they would. Then there's this very, very difficult task of separating what are the things that are your natural, real tendencies as distinct from the imposed, artificial, limiting ones. That's not a simple question because you don't know where the one starts and the other one stops.

BB: Let's get back to your timeline here.

EW: You realize I'm crazy.

BB: No.

EW: Okay.

BB: I realize you're brilliant, Ed. Why did you choose Cornell—besides the obvious that it's a prestigious institution and you got the Cornell National Scholarship and whatnot? Why Cornell?

EW: If I had wanted to go to a school on the basis of it's prestigious, I'd have gone to Harvard, and I could have gotten a scholarship to go to Harvard. I went to Cornell because of the Telluride Association, pure and simple. I don't know if you know the genesis of the Telluride thing, how it works out. On the back of the preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test, and probably the National Merit qualifying test too, there's a little box that says, "Check here if you want your scores sent to the Telluride Association." Well, as you can imagine, I didn't care where you sent my scores, I wanted them to see them. So I checked the box. I had no idea what this was. It was like, "What's the Telluride? I don't know," and checked it anyway. So I get this letter back saying that "your scores have qualified you to apply to go to one of our summer programs. We have these summer programs at Cornell and at Hampton Institute." The one at the Hampton Institute was something called, "The South in Historical Perspective." Some guy who was a history professor at Brandies University was coming to teach it. Ray somebody; I forget his name. So I checked it and they go through this interview process. A lady named Ms. Beatrice McCloud flew to Little Rock to interview me. After the interview process, I sure enough was accepted into the Telluride summer program. I chose the one at Hampton Institute.

BB: The summer program?

EW: It was a summer program. This was the summer of 1965. No, it was the summer of '66. In '65, I was in a summer math program up in Kenyon College.

The summer of '66, I was in this program studying history. After the summer program, what they do is they evaluate the people who were in the summer program to offer some handful of them, some two or three, a Telluride Scholarship to go to Cornell University. So if you think about it, this gets to be a really, really selective selection process for them. What Telluride House is was an academic community on Cornell's campus made up of people who had pretty much been selected through the process that I described over the years. But they lived with free room and board. You had to wear neckties every day to dinner. It was an intellectual academic community where Rudolph Kolisch, some Polish violin player, would come and might sit around and play chess with you all day and give concerts at night. When Malcolm X [(May 19, 1925 – February 21, 1965), born Malcolm Little, also known as Detroit Red, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, and Omowale, was a Muslim Minister and National Spokesman for the Nation of Islam. He was also founder of the Muslim Mosque, Inc. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity] had spoken on the campus in, I guess, '63 or '64, he had stayed there and gone to a reception at Telluride House. Francis Perkins, who was the secretary of labor under the FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 32nd President of the United States] administration, had been a resident there for several years at Telluride House. So it was that kind of academic community. I actually thought that being invited and given a Telluride Scholarship was something that was even more selective than going to Harvard. Because they began by looking at the top one percent of the students' scores in the whole country, and it was from that that they narrow it down from that pool of a few thousand to there were about three out

of the Hampton program, and maybe two or three out of the Cornell program that were selected with Telluride Scholarships. That's what got me to Cornell.

BB: Again, that motif of what's the most challenging, and you're drawn to competitiveness...

EW: Yeah. Well, when you say competitive, I'm trying to think, is it? Yeah.

BB: It's almost like you're competing with yourself, that's the greatest challenge for you.

EW: That's what I am competing with. Because the level of competition where I need to put somebody else down is boring to me. I don't know. I'm competing with myself. I'm just trying to see what I can do. It's like I can watch the Olympics and get tears in my eyes, because there's something about the struggle for excellence that is just, I don't know, I'm naturally drawn toward it. And I've never been enough of an athletic competitor. I mean I was an athlete in high school and in college. In high school, I was a shot putter, because my dad wouldn't let me play football. He'd talk about the white kids would try to poke my eye out or something, and he didn't want to see me with one eye. I'm going, "I'm two hundred and eighteen pounds and muscular and strong, and they got eyes too. I don't that that's going to happen." But he wouldn't let me play football in high school. He was too worried that I would get hurt. Out of that, I never restricted my son that way. It's like first of all, I don't know if you'll get hurt or not, but you can't go through life not doing stuff on the basis that something might happen, not if it's something that has any other value to it. I never gave him those restrictions, but I had them.

Then when I got in college, I rowed a boat. I was in crew. But because the focus of my life was not around athletics—my father had played football and baseball, but because I didn't go to the school closest to the house, I didn't consequently participate in a lot of athletic stuff with kids in the neighborhood. So I was, the kind of time that you spend in athletics developing that level of perfection-. So I could do things like get strong, which is all it took to be a shot putter or to row a boat, but I never developed the level of finesse that would be required for high levels of playing basketball or other kinds of stuff. I was just a big, old, strong, dumb country boy.

BB: So pretty soon, it seems like almost right away, you got involved in politics, of course, at Cornell.

EW: Oh yeah.

BB: Ended up chair of Cornell's Black Student Organization. Was that kind of the hub for you, your central station for your activism in those years?

EW: Yeah. Again, I was living in this academic community, but some of the people around me were supportive of the fact that I needed to be involved in other campus activities, which was good they were supportive. I would have done it anyway. The summer of 1967, before I went to Cornell University, Telluride Association asked me to come back to be Assistant Factotum at the summer program at Hampton Institute. That's because they didn't get any black students in the program that year and they wanted somebody else there kind of as a link, and they figured I was responsible enough to do it. So that was a pretty unusual position that they kind of created for me then.

The guy who was the Head Factotum, the person who'd already been at Cornell and part of Telluride Association, was a guy named Robert Davidoff, who is interesting, because today he's one of the leading gay activists on the west coast, has written a significant book on gay activism and on why the gay question matters. At the time, he didn't know he was gay. We've talked, most recently, I've talked to him every once in a while now. He's a good friend of mine. But Davidoff made sure that I knew about other opportunities and other people, introduced me to folk on campus right away that would help me to be quickly involved in the black student stuff. Because one of the peculiarities of my going to that campus was that I didn't go through the normal route. The normal route was something called the COSEP program, which was the Committee on Special Education Projects. COSEP had these special tutorial programs. Can you imagine? I hit the campus and the first thing somebody's going to tell me is, "Oh, you know we've got this special tutorial program if you're having a hard time with your math classes or something."

BB: Ow.

EW: It's like, "I didn't ask you all about no tutorial program, did I?" "Well you know, we just want to make sure this is available. This is part of our affirmative action program." It was like, "I didn't exactly get here through y'all's affirmative action program." It's weird, because I'm not opposed to affirmative action programs that do extend opportunities to people who otherwise wouldn't have had some opportunities. But many of them, once given the opportunity, find themselves able to excel. That was just actually not how I got there. So it's like, "Well look, actually if you all want to help me, you can help me do this." It's like,

“What? Okay.” I said, “I’m trying to register for twenty-three hours of classes and they told me that the most they’ll let me register for is twenty-one, because I got here and the normal course load is twelve to fifteen. I’m trying to register for twenty-three hours and I think I can do it.” It’s like, “You don’t want to register for twenty-three hours your first semester.” I said, “I really do. If you could help me just a little bit with that, that would--.” It’s like, “Well look, we’ll see how you do next semester.” Well, I did well enough with eighteen or twenty-one that I was able to register for the first semester so that they did extend it to let me register for about twenty-three hours the next term. That was kind of all I wanted them for. I never took advantage of the math tutorial programs because I went there and I started out taking senior and grad-level math courses.

I did all right. I didn’t ace the math and I was not the most advanced student in my math classes. There were some people, that’s all they did; that was not all I did. So I use that as my justification for finally having reached the place where what my mother said was true, that, “You’re going to find some people--,” and I’m at Cornell University and I find people that are just kooks, and they know stuff about math that I’d never heard tell of. I was still able to hang at a grad-level course as a freshman and do as well as many of the grad students that were in it, but there were some people who were just like, I don’t know what planet these folks came from—Planet Mathematics evidently.

BB: So these are incredibly turbulent times in society.

EW: Yes, we have a war in Vietnam. The first thing I did when I got to campus was there was an October mobilization against the war in October ’67, that ended up with a few hundred thousand people going to Washington, and had

these massive demonstrations around the Pentagon. During this demonstration, there were some people who scaled the wall at the Pentagon, waving flags, talking about they had taken over. I'm thinking, "They got machine guns up there." I had this practical kind of sense to me. That didn't strike me as making all that much sense. But some of the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] folk, they scaled the wall. At any point where folk wanted them off that wall, they were going to be off the wall.

BB: You said SDS?

EW: Yeah. But I wasn't in SDS. I was in the Afro-American Society, but we went on the bus together. The campus Republicans and stuff were throwing eggs at the buses. There were right-winger opposition to the antiwar protest that were much more militant and violent than the—well, you know people in favor of war should probably have a tendency to be a little more violent than people who are against it. Because they go out and have wars and stuff, that's pretty violent too. So yeah, I participated in antiwar stuff and had a connection with that, as well as participating in the Afro-American Society. I very quickly became the chairman of something called the Philosophy Committee of the Afro-American Society. We were trying to look at the issues of black ideology. We got involved in the struggle for black studies there on the campus pretty quickly.

BB: Did you have anything to do with the whole controversy around the phys. ed. course, "The Theory and Practice in the Use of Small Arms and Hand-to-Hand Combat?" Do you remember that? It was like in '69, I think, there's a lot of controversy around trying to get this course, which wasn't really atypical; it was happening on some other campuses too. But it particularly scared the white elite

that in the struggle for black studies courses that some people were calling for judo-karate, hand-to-hand combat and the use of small arms and whatnot. I was wondering if you were part of that particular—

EW: No, because it was weird, we did that off-campus. We did have some training in--. There were a lot of kids who had never seen or touched a gun, so we took them off-campus and let them see and touch guns and do target practice and stuff on some private land. I don't recall it being one of the big demands of some of the things through the black studies program. But we did do that, and particularly a lot of kids from the city. Again, when I say I grew up in a house full of things, one of the bunch of things that was in the house I grew up in was guns. And it's weird, the guns in my house were not there for hunting. My parents were not hunters. They ain't going to shoot no little animals.

I never really quite understood why they were there until I ended finding out, just a couple of years ago, about an incident that had happened in Arkansas in, what was it, 1927? There was a lynching that took place downtown in the middle of Main Street, right when my parents, I think I decided my father would have been seventeen. So it would have been 1926 or so. They took this man, drug him through town on the back of a car, threw his body on the corner of Ninth and Broadway, broke into the black church, the biggest black church in town, took the pews and the pulpit furniture out and used it to build a fire to burn his body to a crisp, and later that night, somebody was seen directing traffic with the charred arm off of his body. There were lynch mobs running wild in the streets and breaking into people's houses, trying to extend what they were doing. The only reason they stopped is when they ran into some armed opposition of some of the

residences that just--. Because the chief of police and the mayor left town. They said, "Oh, well this is going to be dangerous." They left town. A guy was named John Carter who got lynched in, I think it's 1926 possibly.

This was around the kind of formative time of my parents. My mother would have been fourteen or so and my father was seventeen; he was born in 1909. It became more and more clear to me after I read about that. The other interesting thing is my parents never mentioned that to me. I first heard about it when I was at the Central High School Museum back less than a year ago, around June or so of last year. I bought this book on the history of Ninth Street, a history of what had been the main drag. It was kind of like Pettigrew Street or something, I guess, would be in Durham. Ninth Street had been the main drag through the black business district, and in describing it they talked about this lynching on Ninth and Broadway. My parents never mentioned it to me. I asked my mother about it. I said, "Do you remember that?" She said, "Of course I remember it." She said, "I went to school with the boy's sister." I said, "Why did you never—?" "There's no reason to talk about it."

BB: But they kept a gun because of that?

EW: A gun? No, I grew up in a house full of guns. I assure you that it was not a gun. There were shotguns, there were pistols, there were rifles.

BB: And that was the motivation?

EW: It almost has to be, because the guns were almost always talked about as--. And we would shoot them on New Year's Eve at midnight. We'd go out in the backyard and shoot a shotgun up in the air a couple of times, just make noise. My father took us out and we did target practice out on a farm that belonged to an

uncle or something. He wanted to make sure we knew how to shoot. But we never talked about the gun being there for hunting. We didn't hunt, and it was not really talked about as being there for burglaries. I mean that was not that much of an issue. But there were guns in the house. My conception now is that it had to have almost grown out his sense that a responsible person has a gun in his house, because you never know when people could go crazy.

BB: I remember a conversation we had at the Black Workers for Justice banquet this year. I was just finishing Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*. I was talking about what I found so interesting, that so many folks—it was just, I guess, my naiveté, I had this idea of people fitting into neat little boxes about non-violence and pacifist or armed revolutionaries and what-not. That book, and you specifically said, "Yeah, that's just there are plenty of people, and so many black folks in the rural South, who have been armed for generations and they also would say, 'I'm non-violent.'" They're sort of armed non-violent folks, unless they needed to defend themselves. So how culturally it was that so many people didn't see a contradiction between--.

EW: Well, I'll tell you, a guy named John Steele, who is the son of Cornelius Steele, who was the guy in Philadelphia, Mississippi that invited Schwerner and Chaney and Goodman [three Congress of Racial Equality field workers killed in Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1964 by the Ku Klux Klan in response to the civil-rights work they coordinated, which included promoting registration to vote among Mississippi African Americans] to come to their church to use it to talk about setting up a Freedom School. Cornelius Steele had for years maintained these memorials around their deaths when a lot of other folk weren't paying it any

attention. His son, John Steele, gave a speech last summer in Philadelphia. I was one of the speakers on that program too. I wormed my way onto the program. He talked about the time that his father told Martin Luther King, he said, "You can come on through here and we'll support you," he said. "But I can't be in your march," he said, "because the first time one of those people put their hands on me, I'm going to break up your whole march and everything else, because I'm not going to tolerate it." He said that was what it had required for his father to be able to raise his family in that part of the...and that folks knew.

So you begin to get a sense that it was not out of the passivity and the kind of moral suasion that the Knight Riders quit going through those neighborhoods when they wanted to intimidate folk. It was because it got to a point where if they did it, there were some neighborhoods they couldn't get into a neighborhood and have gotten back out. When they knew that, they would be more deliberate about where they went. On a certain level of intensity they would get angry enough to do it anyway and this happened where there were these massive periods of violence in the street.

But the whole issue of violence in the South is a complex and interesting one that is seldom talked about candidly because they're people with too many kind of ideological irons on the fire to want to talk about it right. This whole distortion of the whole view of non-violence—to me, it's hypocritical to say you're non-violent, but you want the federal government to send troops to protect you. You want them to come without their guns, of course, since you're non-violent, right? It's like, "No, they need to bring whatever they have to bring." Well, then you're not non-violent. You just don't want to be violent. You want somebody else

to do it for you. My thing is that whatever it is that they're supposed to do for me, I think I'm legitimate to think there's no ideological reason I would not do it for myself. There may be any number of practical reasons, like they're better trained or whatever. But that doesn't become an ideological justification and difference of your position on violence. So it just struck me as really being hypocritical that people would sit around and have other folks there who would have guns to protect them, and not be willing to protect themselves. It's like, "I'm not too good to do what it is that's asked—there's nothing that I would ask somebody to do for me that I think I'm too good to do for myself."

BB: Is that how you felt in some of the discussions around violence or non-violence, or armed resistance or not in the Student Organization for Black Unity? What were some of the discussions around questions of violence going on?

EW: I don't remember any discussions around--. In SOBU, I don't think we ever referred to ourselves as a--. I don't remember any position ever that we would not have been willing to be as aggressive as necessary in our own defense. I know of no instance where people advocated the use of aggressive violence in order to extend a position. I never heard of anybody ever talking about attacking anybody. I only heard of people who were talking about whether or not you had a legitimate right to defend yourself. It's interesting, I think, that there is a real distortion of that discussion. What a lot of people take for granted around the right to defend themselves is denied to the African-American community. Half of this country celebrates somebody being non-violent while running around the world in aggressive wars. That level of hypocrisy has been pointed out for years.

BB: Are you referring to Bush [U.S. President George H. Bush] going to Gandhi's grave? [Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (October 2, 1869 – January 30, 1948) was a major political and spiritual leader of India, and the Indian independence movement].

EW: I didn't even know he had gone.

BB: Oh, sorry.

EW: But that's good. I'm glad now that I know that. They should have..

BB: I think it's happening sometime very soon.

EW: Oh.

BB: He supposed to lay a wreath on Gandhi's grave.

EW: They should ban him from Gandhi's grave. But philosophically, Gandhi had enough sense to know that resistance was more important than non-violence. He said that if the only way you can resist is violently, then go ahead and do it. But he said that non-violence is a higher form of resistance. That's fine. But some of us aren't that high in our form of resistance that we're getting around to resisting. I think that tactically, it makes the utmost sense. That there are all kinds of reasons—largely because the folk you're resisting got more guns than you do. It doesn't even tactically make sense to go out and start attacking, it just doesn't.

But this right, it's like caught up in this whole notion that, "Look, we're humans just like you are. If I just let you beat me down and come in and destroy my family and attack people and did nothing about it, it would have to be out of some assumption of your superiority. I mean you treat us like roaches. We're not roaches! We're not vermin! We're people just as good as you are. And if we're people just as good as you are, then you have no right to do that, and we have a

right to resist you doing it in any kind of way we need to, to stop you from doing it.” To me, that which I just said is a healthy thing for somebody to say. And the people who can’t say that have fallen for part of this “You’re not human like we are.” That view is a prevalent view.

I recognize that there are genuine pacifists and Quakers and other communities that genuinely hold these non-violent views. But I remember one Quaker I talked to, I asked him something about, “Well, what if somebody broke into somebody’s house and was getting ready to come in and rape their wife and daughters?” He said, “I’m going to tell you what this old guy told me once.” He said, “I’d be standing at the top of the stairs with a shotgun and it would be useful for you not to be in the way of where the buckshot went.” Because it’s like the non-violence, it didn’t go that far. At the point where there are these limits on it—if it were fully a matter of principle, then it wouldn’t have those limits. It is the principle of it, and it’s not. It has a certain kind of practical justification for it.

I mean, as far as I know, I’ve never attacked anyone in my life. And under some conditions, someone could attack me and I’ll do nothing. But I reserve the right to do whatever I need to do under those circumstances and I would suggest to people that it’s not a good idea. Don’t do it just on the assumption that--. I mean, I really, really, really, really would rather not have to engage in any kind of--. I don’t practice that. I’m not a martial arts expert or anything. But on a given day, I’ll have a knife in my pocket that’s long enough to do something other than open envelopes.

I’m not afraid of guns. It was weird. One of the books that was written on the Cornell stuff in 1969 said something about I looked nervous with a gun in my

hand, or something. I grew up around them. There's even some claim of some discussion with my father where he said something about he didn't know why I would have a gun. My daddy told the FBI he wished I had two, so I mean, they fabricated some of those facts in that book. It's funny.

BB: Well, let's talk about that story a little bit. Since I met you in 2000 or something, not too long after I'd moved to North Carolina, in group settings, there'd be these references and chuckles about the photo of you at Cornell. I never knew exactly what they meant. But it's this real famous story of this photo that ended up winning the Pulitzer Prize, for heaven's sakes, that Steve Starr took, right, of you in 1970 in Cornell coming out of a building holding a gun.

EW: In '69.

BB: It was in 1969?

EW: Spring of '69.

BB: This was all about a campaign to get a black studies department established, and y'all had taken over a building, right? Well, why don't you tell me the story.

EW: A group of us, I think there were three of us, had come down to North Carolina to take a look at what the Duke [University] students had done. Because we ended up hearing about Duke students having building occupation and a number of them stopped going to school and went to form their own school, Malcolm X Liberation University. We came down and met with a couple of Duke students and found out that while some had done that, they'd also been instructed by their parents to get back into school immediately, and most of them weren't really leaving school just to be part of the university, but a few were. This other

young man and I, named Robert Roan, we decided on that trip that, "Look, we're getting ready to go back and we're still engaged in this stuff. We're not going to back down or change our minds. This is right. We need it. It's legitimate."

On that trip, when we got back to the campus, there were people. There were all kinds of manipulations going on around the African-American Studies program. A guy named John Gardner, who had been the head of the group, quit school over it and left. His resignation kind of left the leadership of the Afro-American Society up in the air. So Robert Rone, who was the other person who I talked to about this, he immediately volunteered to be interim chair and to go into some elections the following week. During the next week, I was elected the chair. Was I a sophomore? Yeah. The spring of 1969, I was a sophomore. So there were all these seniors and juniors and other folk who were there, and I stepped up to do that.

It was around the time there had been some students who were tried on judicial charges that were connected with protests toward getting the thing. We had told the administration that the charges were illegitimate. We were college students. Part of the energy and the issues that you choose have to do with, "We told you not to do this, and you did it anyway. So we're going to do something."

We ended up taking over a building. We were kind of careful about what we took over. We took over the student union building as opposed to the administration building. We did it on a weekend. It was parents' weekend. So we were in a building with beds and food and pool tables and the cafeteria and a six months supply of food. If you're going to take over a building, you know. And also exposure, because it's not like we just took over, we took it over on parents'

weekend so that the administration certainly had to concede to the fact. They had the radio station in there, but we had enough sense to know that you don't take over radio stations. That's a federal crime. But the parents were gotten out of the rooms who were there and we had this takeover.

While we were there, the students in the building next door, which was a fraternity, where a lot of football players and stuff were there. They wanted to come in. They crawled in through a window so they could get us out. Just like we were saying, "We're going to take over the building," it was like, "No, you're not." So they crawled in through a window. They got thrown back out through the window they crawled in through. So later that day, when I received word by telephone that there was a group of students with loaded guns in their car that we're going to prove that we weren't going to take over that building, that's when I asked the folks to bring the guns in that we had.

The situation quickly escalated. The administration moved fairly quickly to try to resolve the situation as soon as possible and kind of negotiate their way out of it, and agree to whatever it was that we were talking about. We came up with an agreement that ended with us leaving the building.

I remember I was in the process of negotiating this agreement when this guy, who was a black student at Cornell University, came to the building with his child and two more guns. It's like, "You know, it's time for us to leave." I certainly had no intention of anyone being hurt. The reason we brought guns in was so no one would come in and hurt us. We had no intention of hurting anyone, but the guns were loaded. They were not there for show. I would never want to be in a situation where I would play around with an empty gun.

BB: You would?

EW: I would not.

BB: Oh, you would not.

EW: No, an empty gun gets you killed. It will get you killed with no option of doing anything about it. It's purely provocation at that point. I'm not suicidal at all. It was a thing my father had talked about, like all the guns in our house were loaded. It was weird, because see, I could be around loaded guns all day. I don't touch them. I don't play with them. They're not toys. They're real and if you need it to be real, you want it to be real right then. I've been around people who couldn't be around that kind of stuff. It's just strange to me. I've met women in my life who said they would never live in a house with a gun. It's like, because I grew up with them-. It's weird spending all this time talking about guns.

It was time to leave and we negotiated the thing. By that time, I'm told that there were armored personnel carriers headed in. The National Guard in the state had been mobilized and had these armored personnel carriers with mounted machine guns and they were ready to get us out of there. This was not taken very lightly by them. I have seen later evidence that they had taken—Ithaca is on a number of lakes, and there's a boathouse and stuff downtown. They had converted this boathouse into a restraining cell. They had lined it with barbed wire. They were looking to have to get a whole bunch of people and lock them up. So it was time to leave and we negotiated a settlement, and went through some stuff.

But there was one person whose opportunism around this just needs to be noted, particularly since he's become such a prominent person in the world since then. You should restrict this part all the way until we get to the bottom of the

steps, which is not at all. This is a guy named Tom Jones, who was, I think, a year ahead of me. He had had an opportunity to exercise some leadership inside the organization and hadn't.

BB: And you're still talking about the African-American Society?

EW: Yeah, the African-American Society, which changed to the Black Liberation Front temporarily, but they changed it back quickly.

BB: Hold on a second, let me switch it before you get into the story.

EW: Sure.

BB: Flip the tape.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

BB: Okay, we're back. You were talking about Tom Jones.

EW: After we had left the building and stuff, there was a whole bunch of convocations and meetings held at Barton Hall. What an incident like this does to a campus is that it creates a conversation. From the things we were saying earlier, conversations are healthy things. People started talking who hadn't talked before. They started thinking about stuff that they hadn't thought about before. They started questioning things that they didn't see any need to question before. There were thousands of students involved with some of the conversations that were taking place. There were big convocations going on at Barton Hall where there was a big assembly and there were speakers coming out, because there was a lot of conversation that () too.

Tom goes up to Barton Hall one night when I was someplace else, and gave this speech talking about, “Up until now, we have been the ones doing all the dying. Well now, some pigs are going to die and the university has three hours to live.” I heard about it. It’s like, “Tom, you said what?” I said, “What were you talking about?” “I really had them going, I really had them going. I had them scared.” I said, “Do you have any idea how irresponsible what you’re doing is? You’re talking about nothing, because there is no such—what is this three-hour threat?” “Yeah, I really had them going. I’m going to make them come up with--.” Tom has since that time become a trustee for Cornell University and he gives out the James Perkins Race Relations Award. He’s offered his apology to the university for his participation in the thing, and talked about how he was misled and guided into it by people who tricked him. Then at other points, he’ll claim that he was a leader of it and that I didn’t have to do any real leading stuff. He’s just a purebred opportunist.

BB: Is there a picture of him right there?

EW: No, there will be a picture of Tom in a minute. That’s Eric. This is part of the convocation at Barton Hall that I was talking about.

BB: Okay, and so you’re looking at a book called *Cornell ’69*. Who wrote this book?

EW: There’s Tom Jones. Donald Alexander Downs, *Liberalism and the Crisis of the American University*. They basically claim that the university-- See, by identifying Tom as one of the leaders—and he wasn’t even in the leadership of the group at the time—they basically said that we threatened the university into capitulating around his threats of violence. I made no threats of violence and would not have. It’s a weird kind of distortion of what took place and why. But he’s

kind of scary looking. There were thousands of people at Barton Hall in these meetings sitting and having these discussions.

BB: Thousands! I didn't realize how big it was.

EW: I mean, my position is that ultimately, this was very healthy for the university, again, because it created--. Incidentally, I came out on the front, right. Tom comes out on the back row, but with his fist in the air.

BB: Black power.

EW: Now that he realizes that (laughter) it's safe and he had a chance to drop his stuff and run to the back of the building, up until the rest of the hundreds of us come out. He's bringing up the rear and claims that he's in charge, that he's the leader. Anyway, there are some pictures here if you get really, really bored.

BB: Thanks, hardly bored.

EW: So that's much of what happened. The university kind of accelerated its process toward creating a black studies program, brought a guy named James Turner from, I think, Northwestern University out in Chicago, in to be the director of the black studies program, one of the people that we had considered and found reasonable. The university also kind of quickly moved to quell some of the militancy of the students by bribery, offered people trips to Africa and stuff. So I could have toured the world right then if I had calmed down. But as you can imagine, I'm not the--. As rich as Cornell is, it does not have the resources to buy me. So it's like I refused all of that stuff. I was back during the fall of 1970 and other students became clear that the closer they were to this quote "militant faction," the less the university was wanting to continue with the bribery. So I got

voted out as the chairman of the African-American Society and the name got changed back.

BB: Changed back to?

EW: The African-American Society from the Black Liberation Front. And the trips and the bribery continued. The black studies program thrived there for a while. It was one of the larger kind of, there's an Africana Studies and Research Center that is doing quite well. Part of the direction of it when we were talking about founding it was to move toward establishing an urban institute that would be headquartered somewhere in New York City. Cornell's medical school was in New York City and they had properties there. The Cornell Club was in New York City. They could have taken some of the place for that. But they could buy some property up in Harlem or something and use it as an urban center, so that people could look into some of the urban development questions that exist in this country, and again, use the resources of the African-American Studies Center to look into or try to help resolve some of those issues and problems. Rather than moving toward the urban center, it moved toward the Ph.D. program. There are really two diametrically opposed ideas of what it is because then the question became academic legitimacy not how relevant are you to the inner cities, but how relevant are you to the academic integrity of the institution.

So I left. That struggle continued years after I was there. By the time I left, it was just, I left because the black studies program itself had taken a turn toward a reformist way of looking at things that was, in some ways, dishonest. Which is not to say that there weren't a lot of very good people who were brought into it. But it's clear to me that they were there on a mission, that there was a deal that had

already been made, that, “Look, we’ll support y’all doing this, but y’all got to cut down on all these militant crazy students we got up here. You can’t run this program as some kind of radical thing that challenges the structure of the society.” So it didn’t.

I was still about challenging it, because it was clear to me that the war in Vietnam was still going on and Cornell was still involved in this, that, and the other, and that we could not legitimately not raise those kinds of things. And something about full participation in the full American way of life was not a goal if I saw that quote “way of life” as being somehow corrupt itself and inadequate and a cancer to the rest of the world, which was my attitude toward it then, and it’s my attitude toward it now. It’s like this is hardly a legitimate goal just to be a quote “full-fledged American citizen,” because what is America doing in the world? The full citizenship I seek is one that challenges that and questions it, not accepts it and tries to be a part of it. So anyhow I left and I came to North Carolina to work at Malcolm X Liberation University.

BB: MXLU started in '68, no?

EW: Its first academic year when it accepted students in was the fall of 1969, September '69.

BB: And ended in '73, right?

EW: Yeah.

BB: So were you invited down because of your previous work here? Or did you decide, “I want to go to North Carolina”?

EW: I had come to North Carolina a second time. I had come down and met with the students at Duke. The second time around, the founding of SOBU, which

was in either very late April or early May of 1969. It was before the A&T [North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University located in Greensboro, NC is the state's largest historically black university] rebellion, when the SOBU conference was held. It was held at the Memorial Student Union. In fact, the Saturday it happened was the Saturday—well, students from Dudley had us march over to Dudley. Maybe it was a Friday, because I think Dudley was in session. We ended up marching over to support the students at Dudley. That's when I met Claude Barnes [African-American civil rights activist, former commissioner of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission] and Nelson Johnson and Joyce, probably met Lewis Brandon [A graduate of N.C. A&T State University and was a student organizer in the 1960s. He is actively involved in the Congress of Racial Equality, Greensboro Association of Poor People (GAPP), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] around then too. So I had been down here for that.

After I got back to campus, within a few days, the May A&T war was on the front page of the *New York Times*, with National Guardsmen crouched down behind armored personnel carriers while shooting machine-gun fire at Scott Hall. For years and years, up until last year, the bullet-ridden walls of that dormitory were still up. They finally tore all that down and built some new dorms. But the bullet-ridden walls were worth looking at. I think I still have some photographs I took of them to make sure, because they claimed they were going to take those bricks and do something else with them, build some memorial. But I don't know where the plans are for that. There was this real distortion of the question of violence. I was looking at something, reading a piece on the history of the United

States from World War II through the Nixon [Richard Nixon, 37th president of the United States] years. It talked about the misperception of the Watts riots [a large-scale riot which lasted six days in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California, in 1965].

BB: The misperception of what?

EW: The Watts riots. It happened in 1965, I believe. What it was saying was that the perception on the part of most white Americans was that there were these snipers who were out shooting and killing white people. It said the fact is that thirty-five people died, all of them were black, all of them were killed by white people. All the people that died in the Watts Riots were black and all of them were shot by white folks, and that there was some property destruction that took place, but that it was the response to that property destruction that was the killer. But that's not people's perception of it, this kind of view of snipers who were killing people. It was kind of, for some folks, the last straw: "We tried to do all we can for these Negroes and now look what they're doing. They're out here shooting at people."

But similarly, the stuff at Cornell, there was no violence that came at the hands of those of us who were in the organization. There were some incidents on campus. There were some violent incidents where black students were attacked. There were actually some violent incidents on campus where some white students were attacked. It may have been done by black students in retaliation. I won't say that that never happened. I was not a part of it. I never would have done that, because it wouldn't have been retaliation against the perpetrators. It would have been just grabbing somebody and that just doesn't make any sense to me.

BB: Tell me a little bit about Malcolm X Liberation University and what the purpose was.

EW: Well, the purpose was to do what it was that you couldn't do at Cornell, which was that outside of the question of somebody's concern for academic legitimacy, look at the question of what are the conditions of African-American folk and what is it that we need to try to figure out how to do.

One of the problems that happened early on was that there were some people around Federal City College in Washington, DC, (FCC), Nathan Garrett in particular, who was the director of the black studies there, who had taken this turn toward Pan-African Nationalism. As such, that began to be pushed in Malcolm X as the main kind of ideological thrust. So much of what we did in the beginning years was to look at ourselves as an African people intimately connected with the continent of Africa. But not the healthy connection, which was that we're here and involved in a whole lot of kinds of things, and the vast majority ain't going nowhere and need to figure out how to make this work or how this struggle in it is tied to the struggle around the world. That would have been the healthy way of looking at it.

It was almost instead part of this thing that there was a fatalism around what was here, that you could hardly do anything about what was here. We Africans, what we need to do is to try to figure out how to integrate and relate to the African continent, which does not get you a lot of respect in a lot of neighborhoods. It's like (laughter) the African stuff and cultural heritage stuff, all that's nice, but what about right here? There were some people who were never completely wrapped up in it, depending on how closely linked--. I would say very

honestly that Nelson [Johnson] never completely fell for that, because he was doing too much in communities.

BB: But Howard Fuller was all about it, right? [An African-American civil rights activist and a founder of MLXU.]

EW: For a while, he was really wrapped up in it. So there was a lot of tension between those two kind of views. Howard got trapped behind enemy lines over in Mozambique at one point and came back. People didn't know if he was alive or dead for a while when he wasn't able to communicate, but he came back. African Liberation Day and some other things emerged from it that were positive, but one of the things he realized when he was there, he was told by the revolutionaries in Mozambique, was that, "Look, we don't need no extra bodies over here or people. We don't need people to come over here to do anything for us. We need you where you are to deal with the policies coming out of your government that make our lives so miserable." He kind of heard that from the other side of the world too, which helped him to realize it.

BB: Was that before or after or while he was at—when he went to Mozambique, what year was that?

EW: It was during the time he was there, which was late in the life of the school. It was probably '71, maybe as late as '72; I think it was '71. I had gone, the school had sent me over to Liberia in, I think, '71. So I was there when Tolbert [William R. Tolbert, Jr., President of Liberia from 1971-1980] was inaugurated, but I had to leave—

BB: When Tolbert was what?

EW: Tubman had died. [William Vacanarat Shadrach Tubman (November 29, 1895 – July 23, 1971) was President of Liberia from 1944 until his death in 1971.] Tolbert had been his vice president and he was inaugurated as president while I was there. Pat Nixon came over. [Patricia Ryan Nixon (March 16, 1912 & n dash; June 22, 1993) was the wife of Richard Nixon and the First Lady of the United States from 1969 to 1974.] Tolbert kissed the ground in front of her feet. I got disgusted and had to leave Monrovia and go somewhere to the interior. I couldn't deal with that. It was like, "Come on brother, you don't have to kiss the ground in front of this white woman's feet, no." But that was back in the day.

BB: Were you asked to teach? There weren't that many teachers, right, when you first—

EW: Yeah, I was asked to teach. I mean, people had some notion, I passed off the idea that I knew a whole lot of different stuff and could teach whatever you asked me teach if you give me a little time. So I ended up teaching machine shop and had never run machine tools. But again, my brother was a tool and dye maker, so I must have known how to teach machine shop; and mathematics, which I'm always comfortable teaching some portion, the part of it that I know. At some point I even taught, like political economy, courses on Marxism essentially, Marxist political economy. I was also in charge of mechanical repair work, rebuilding engines. I rebuilt a John Deere 2020 or 2010 engine from the ground up. That tractor purred like a kitten once I got done with it.

BB: So what are some of the good things that you think came out of the university?

EW: I got some tools out of it when they closed down. I'm just looking at a disc and belt sander that—

BB: A what belt?

EW: Disc and belt sander. I think that various exercises in democracy--. I'm about the conversation, not the conclusion. The process was one that allowed people to engage each other in a real healthy kind of way and sometimes come up with good decisions, sometimes bad. I've talked to some of the people who were there and benefited greatly from it in terms of their commitment to ongoing participation in struggle. It's good to be around, watching people being committed and working hard at something and trying to figure out how to excel at it. I'm just very proud of all the people who were there and the hard work that they did. I would think that all of them would find themselves better people for having been a part of that process. I don't know of anyone who has ever expressed to me kind of regretting that they wasted part of their life in this thing that kind of didn't work out. It was frustrating around the time that it was closing, because people had had hopes for it to be able to continue. It didn't have any funding stream and not much likelihood for developing one, given that it wasn't closely enough attached to what people wanted to fund at the time.

BB: You think that was the main reason it closed?

EW: Well, I mean, yeah. Well, I know it closed because it didn't have any money, and that it wasn't able to get any. It was heavily scrutinized by the existing powers. Like one time, we tried to buy Palmer Memorial Institute, which would have given us space for new programs.

BB: This is in Greensboro?

EW: Palmer is in Sedalia. It's right outside Greensboro.

BB: In where?

EW: Sedalia. It's in Guilford County, but it's outside the city. In fact, Sedalia's an incorporated black town. I think less than a thousand inhabitants, but it's still there. All kind of fear mongering was done in the community there in Sedalia. They had people afraid to let us into that community. Those kinds of attacks took place too that made the existence of the institution more difficult. Something about this mysterious group of black folk who were operating autonomously and didn't want anybody to even scrutinize them very, very closely was seen as a threat by any number of folks. So that made it very difficult. But you could have gotten past some of that had you had deep enough roots and connections into communities. But we had a political line that prevented that from taking place, this whole Pan-African Nationalism that was too disconnected from people's everyday experience and everyday life and concerns and problems.

BB: Just for the record, the university actually closed in Durham and then tried to reestablish itself—

EW: No, it moved from Durham to Greensboro. It didn't close. It was seen as a move. That was seen as a step up. One of the other things it was going to do was move to Greensboro where this was this kind of community organizing base that would be an important part of it. So it was to move here to get connected with Nelson and the work that was going on in communities here. But again, it had no real way to benefit from and extend that work very much, given its kind of ideological line.

Which again, I think, is one of the things I've said about ideologies and kind of rigid—dogmatism irritates me. I'm always approaching everything with a level of flexibility that probably bothers people who are more tied to what it is they believe. Because I'll tell you without being too ashamed of it, I don't know exactly what I believe. I haven't finished figuring it out yet. The world's changing and there's too much to be known and I don't have a lot of answers.

I got a lot of questions. I got good questions! In fact, part of what ends up being misperceived from me, again, where people think I'm arrogant, is they'll think that, "The reason you're asking me all these questions is because you think you know the answer." And the reason I'm asking all these questions is because I know I don't know the answer, and I don't think you know the answer either. So I'm not ready to accept that you have the answer. Part of it is like, "What he said doesn't make any sense." It's not because I have something that makes a whole lot more sense. It's just that I realize *that* doesn't make any sense. I'm willing to question and continue to participate in that process. It's not like out of all that I know. It's like out of all that I know that I don't know. I'm most cognizant of how little I know.

BB: If you could go back, would you do anything different in the leadership role with the university?

EW: Precious little. I guess, I almost never seriously entertain "going back and doing things differently" questions, because I have some sense that how you get to where you are is through where you've been. So that much of whatever it is that you've learned in the world came through the experiences, positive and negative, that you've had. I guess there are things about where I am that I don't

like, naturally. But I don't have any sense that having done something differently would have helped me avoid what I don't like. It would certainly have helped me not know some of what I do know. I think that the situation we found ourselves in was one we had to function with, which is not at all to say that all of the things we did were right. I think the real challenge is figuring out what to do, starting on February twenty-six of 2006. That's the challenge. That's the hard part. All of the stuff about all the times that took place before then is just illustrative of maybe how you might want to think differently in February twenty-six of 2006.

BB: I'm glad you answered like that. In asking the question, it makes me realize that the real question under that is one I try to ask in different ways in every phase of your life. It's like, "What are the lessons learned?"

EW: Oh, okay.

BB: What does it mean for today? That's a more direct—

EW: For lessons learned, it has to do with the danger of dogmatism, the danger of isolation, and closely associated with that is the real beauty and usefulness of humility and the importance of conversation, which remains with me. I just really think it's important for people to talk candidly when they have the opportunity, because there's so much that gets missed in the brief exchanges.

I guess there are probably college courses that talk about this in much more substantial ways and maybe in linguistics or something else I never studied. But you've got this mind problem: I've got a mind and I can have an assumption that you have one. I say that with no disrespect. I'm saying this "you" as a very generic thing. I think that the reason I think that you have a mind is because you do things that are very similar to the things that I do and that are connected with my mind.

So I'm kind of thinking that these things outside of me have minds. I know that I get ideas in my mind and I'm, because I'm assuming that you have mind, trying to translate these ideas to your mind.

The medium through which we do it is largely words, but not just words, words, suggestions, and other kinds of things. But we know that this attractor problem makes this process very difficult, because where I have taken this one word to sum up some very complex thing that is always particular and peculiar in its real manifestation in the world, I dropped it to a word that could not possibly connect it to its particularities and peculiarities because the word's been around for a long time and the phenomenon I'm describing is immediate and very particular. I want you to have this idea in your head that was the same as the idea I had. I translated into this word that is much more general, so what it is you're able to reconstruct has to do with your set of experiences, because you have to construct some meaning out this word that I've got. You don't get meaning from my word, you have to construct it, and all you have to construct it with is experiences.

So the only way I can even begin to get this idea in your mind to be close to the idea that was in my mind is to kind of have a lot of back and forth with this because I've got to share more than a couple of words. I've got to share something about the experiences that informed my use of the word. I have to learn something about the experiences that inform your interpretation of the word, so that consequently, to the extent that they diverge significantly, we can begin to talk about those divergences and maybe use some additional words to help with always imperfect process. Because the end result can never be me getting exactly the right thought that's in your head.

Ultimately, what you're going to do with whatever thought that gets in your head is another thing you're going to construct that I may have some interest in, because it may be that we're doing something together. Then I have some real interest in what you're going to do with this, so that requires even more. There's the opportunity for kind of engaging in this. And then, you can do it really, really badly by giving people a lot of misleading things in the very beginning that take them way off in the wrong direction and take even longer to get them back. Or you can be kind of good at it, to kind of focus in on it. I think the more conscious you are of what it is you're trying to do, the more you can kind of focus in on doing it and making it work.

For a couple of years, I was writing a column for the *Carolina Peacemaker*. I'm very careful with how I use words when I talk and when I write. One of the things that was funny to me was I remember having been quoted by some newspaper reporter that took something I said and found some other way of saying it. I remember thinking that you know, I try to use words like a surgeon and it gets reported back to me like I'm a butcher. (laughter) I'm very, very careful, and that's why I said it that way, thinking about all of the other things that I'm trying to avoid implying, and I got it dumped back. I mean, that's even worse than the problem of words that are general, that even if I'm saying them, that there's all this space for misinterpretation.

BB: Do you need to talk to those folks?

EW: Let me see what's going on downstairs.

[tape interruption]

BB: So just coming down in 1970 to North Carolina, you've ended up staying thirty-six years now, huh? Is that just what you got involved with or did you choose to stay and organize and be an activist in North Carolina? Why North Carolina, I guess?

EW: I ended up raising a family here. I have two children. My first wife was one of the early students at Malcolm X Liberation University. In fact, we met her—I met her during the summer of 1969 when I was just fresh from being a quote “famous activist” at Cornell University, and she had enrolled in a summer VISTA program as a VISTA volunteer. [VISTA or Volunteers in Service to America created by Lyndon Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, was the domestic version of the Peace Corps.] I got hired by that VISTA program as one of the supervisors or coordinators or something. The VISTA program was involved in doing voter registration in the state of Arkansas, so they were traveling around the state and I was kind of following her around. I convinced her to leave Little Rock University and come to Malcolm X Liberation University. I was still at Cornell for a while longer, but we ended up getting married that following summer. As soon as we both turned twenty-one, we got married. That way, we wouldn't even have to ask anybody, “Could we?” My first daughter was born in 1971.

BB: Nandi?

EW: Nandi. And little Kazi [Mzilikazi] was born in 1973. They entered school here. This was a community that I had some connections with, just out of the history of the closing of the school and some continued work I was starting to do. There were some people who were doing some labor organizing in the area and I was helping with a group, a small collective of us that were helping around some

textile organizing. I got hired at a textile mill and worked there for a little while at Burlington Industries, menswear-finishing plant. I worked there for a couple years, never got much going on with that. But was working with some people who were working at Cone, in the white-owned plant in particular. My first wife was for a while at Cone Revolution Plant.

BB: Where?

EW: Cone Mills Revolution Plant. She ended up—I don't know if she got laid off or quit, and worked a couple other jobs. We split up sometime after 1979.

BB: What's her name?

EW: Her name's Annester. I think she was really frightened and intimidated by the dangers associated with kind of movement stuff. I mean, she had known Sandi Smith well and some of the other activists who were killed on November third [the Greensboro massacre]. She seemed to be really, really kind of disturbed by that whole thing and frightened by it and wanted to withdraw from connections with organized leftist activity. So she backed away pretty quickly and we split up shortly after that.

So I stayed in North Carolina because I was kind of involved with people from here doing things and didn't have any reason to leave and go anywhere else. It struck me that one's in a position to struggle wherever one finds oneself, and I was here with the family and never even thought much about leaving.

BB: Do you think it's important to organize in the South of the United States?

EW: Well, I think it's important wherever people are that they should organize, so organizing in the South is important. It would never be sufficient,

because organizing the South is not going to change the problems in the inner cities of Chicago and New York. So people need to organize there, too. I don't have any kind of formulaic thing about the South having some key. I know organizing in the North isn't sufficient either. Organizing in North Carolina's not sufficient, because there are people in Mississippi with problems that are peculiar to them. Organizing in Arkansas is not--. So I guess I think people should organize wherever they are.

What is the South the key to? Let me think. Certainly, there's a lot of militarism, military bases in the South. The South in some sense reflects many of the kinds of problems that exist in other places, because it's a mix of the urban and the rural. There are problems growing out of its peculiar history all the way back to the Civil War, but those are problems for the nation as a whole. Those very much inform the ideology of the whole country and will require some work wherever you are. I think there's a lot of unfinished stuff in the South that does grow out of the period of slavery and the Civil War, but it's led to unfinished work in the urban cities. You know, the draft riots that took place in New York during the time of the Civil War, the anger among Irish immigrants about being forced to go to the South and fight to free slaves that they didn't care nothing about, and the fact that they're willing to engage in pogroms in New York, Philadelphia, other northern cities; the Red Summer in Chicago, 1919, when there were these violent incidents across the country and some of the most intense ones were in the South where the question of political power and political rule directly was being confronted; Memphis in 1866; New Orleans in '65 or '66. Some of these things happened

every twenty years, Wilmington in 1898, in addition to the ones that happened in the early period, 1860s.

There was a whole wave of violence and lynchings and stuff that took place in the early 1920s, the whole period following World War II. A lot of these things followed after returning people from the military, black folk coming out of military service just came back with the attitude that they weren't going to deal with things the way they had been. And after some period of folk kind of struggling to get their courage up, they would end up being attacked, often very violent attacks on communities of folks. So I mean, that's part of the history of the whole country, for which the South has its peculiar role that it played and every player else did too.

I mean the South is where I am. So if I was someplace else, I may or may not leave and come to the South to do some things. But I know I had no particular urge to stay in kind of small, isolated communities. Like I knew people that really kind of found a home in Ithaca, New York. If I wanted to go someplace because it was pretty, I may want to stay in Ithaca, New York, because of those gorges and the whole alluvial valleys and stuff that were carved out by the glaciers during the Ice Age. It's just an incredibly beautiful place, but I only noticed that in recent years. I didn't notice it when I was at school there. I was too busy doing other stuff. But it is incredibly beautiful, cliffs and gorges and waterfalls. But there's not enough—I would always want to be where there was a sizable African-American community. But that could be Harlem or the south side of Chicago too.

BB: With your family, you stayed in Greensboro after the university closed, right? And you got involved in labor and other community organizing work. Well, you were probably involved in it already in some ways.

EW: Peripherally.

BB: And you served as chairman of the Greensboro Redevelopment Commission for nine years. So tell me some about the commission and some of your work with them.

EW: My appointment to the redevelopment commission, I mean, I think they were just looking for somebody they could appoint. Alma Adams was a sitting city council member. I had run for the seat that she ended up holding. I ran in 1983. I was involved in the first struggle for a district system. We were trying to get a 6-3-1 ward system, break the city into six wards and have three people at large and a mayor, and then later coming up with a compromise system of 5-3-1, that we thought was not as good. But in recent years, there's been someone elected pretty consistently to one of the at-large seats, so it's not as bad as it might have been. There's an African-American woman who was up until this year the mayor pro tem for the last several terms. She was the highest vote getter of the enlarged county.

So I was involved in that process and when it got to be a district system finally in 1983, I ran in the first district election, and the person I ran against, a lady named Katie Dorsett, who's a state senator now, it was just a really, really lopsided loss. I was eliminated in the primary. There was later a runoff and the other person was a guy named Jack Zimmerman. He wasn't going to poll very many votes, so it was pretty clear Katie was going to win.

BB: He was what?

EW: Jack Zimmerman was a white candidate running in that same district. It was a district carved out to be majority black. But it also took in a certain part of the working-class area and he was from that community, a retired police officer.

But Katie won overwhelmingly in the election of 1983. Then when she went, she took a job with the governor's office and I think, either that or she was elected to a state legislative position. I forget which is right. I know she ended up later working as an administrator of the Hunt administration. [James Baxter Hunt Jr. (born May 16, 1937) was a four-term Democratic governor of the U.S. state of North Carolina (1977–1985, and again from 1993–2001)]. I just don't know if that was early.

But anyhow, when she left that office, Alma Adams was appointed to it. Then Alma had been on the school board and she chose not to run for school board anymore, but was appointed to this position and held it for several years. While she was there, she appointed me to the redevelopment commission. Then when Alma Adams was elected to the state legislature, I was her campaign chairman. She was elected to the state legislature and Claudette Burroughs-White was appointed to the position, even though Alma had recommended me for the position. The mayor supported me for the position, Alma supported me for the position, but other people, in particular Skip Alston [African-American civil rights activist, former president of the NC NAACP] and Earl Jones [African-American civil rights activist, former city councilman in Greensboro, NC] kind waged a campaign to distribute my old pictures for Cornell and, "Do you really know who this person is? Ed's this crazy leftist. You will get trouble in your district if you support him for this appointed seat." And normally the person who's in the seat already, who was elected to this position, and the mayor would kind of sway the council. I mean, very seldom do they override those, but they did in this case.

They appointed someone else, who was Claudette Burroughs-White. So at the point when Claudette chose not to run, some folks talked me into running for

the seat again, and again I didn't get elected. This time because the endorsement, both from Claudette and the black PAC in town, was for the other candidate, Goldie Wells, to get their endorsement. There's still a lot of following behind the recommendations from that political action committee, even though I largely think they've outlived their usefulness in terms of African-American voting strength, for reasons that—they grew up during a time of at-large elections when white candidates were not able to campaign very openly for why they wanted the black vote and whatever kind of suggestions of things that they were going to paying attention to if they got elected. So they would end up with these kind of secret, backroom deals with voter organizations. So you'd have to go out and say, "Well, go ahead and vote for this guy, because he's not going to have this-and-this campaign literature and he's not going to say any speeches, because he wants to get elected. And we know that we've got an arrangement and he's going to make some money available for a park or he's going to help do this or that. We've already made that deal with him."

That level of dealing has some level of legitimacy in the world of at-large elections. In the world of these district elections, where things are much more transparent, the question of the role that essentially backroom deal-making plays is much more questionable. I don't know what use it is, particularly given that it tells folk who to vote for without telling them why. This other candidate was endorsed and never said anything about our relative qualifications or who's been involved in working in the community longer and works the hardest, knows the most, most articulate, some of the kinds of things that people might want to know about in making a decision. It just comes up with a list of names and a lot of

people are very used to voting that list unless they have overwhelming reasons not to. In other words, if they kind of independently knew both of us and know that, “Hey, this is bogus,” then they might not vote it. There have been some cases where that took place, or where there was a very, very strong level of organization and structure that was able to go out and work around it. But in the absence of the kind of time and energy it takes to put that together, the list endorsements overwhelmingly win and did in that case too. I’m still not on city council and will probably likely never run for it again.

BB: Really?

EW: It’s a draining process.

BB: Because you just ran again last year?

EW: Yeah. There’s something about being rejected that’s just not that much fun.

BB: Imagine that.

EW: I’d rather think people like me than run for office and find out they really don’t.

BB: I’m guessing that you were motivated for other reasons besides just that people talked you into running. So why that path?

EW: You know, I’m kind of staying with “people talked me into it,” because I really—it was the farthest thing from my mind before someone said, “Hey Ed, we really need you to do this.” The areas of things that I’ve been most involved with recently are education and peace and justice. It wasn’t particularly connected with that. I’ve been writing for the newspaper. It would have taken me off in a direction that’s not all that exciting to me around rezoning decisions and such.

But it was at the same time that this police scandal was getting ready to break in Greensboro. The city council was at the center of it in a way, in terms of political decisions it's going to be making, that would have a different flavor if I was on council. First of all, the information that the city's choosing not to share with other folk would have been known to council members. Well actually, what they would have tried to do is find a way not to even share it with the council if I was on the council. That would have been very difficult to do, because some of it's got to be about me. I mean, if we talk about the secret police that were gathering stuff—

BB: Will you say a little bit more about what the scandal is? Do you want me to pause this for a second to get the heater going?

EW: No, I'm not getting ready to start the heater. Ever since I was a little kid, I took apart things so I could see how they worked inside. I was just trying to figure out would the screen easily come off the heater. Excuse me.

BB: And it did.

EW: It did. But part of it was a thing of looking at it long enough to even know where the avenue of attack was, and it was pretty clear to me how it would have had to come off. And sure enough, my prediction about how the physical world is put together was again accurate. The police scandal—

BB: The police scandal.

EW: There was a black police officer named [] Henson who ended up finding a tracking device that had been planted on his car. He was able to trace this back to a group of people in the Greensboro Police Department. There was a secret police division; they called themselves the Intelligence Division, which was different from Internal Affairs. It had its history in having first began as the Red

Squad. It was the folk who kind of tracked down activists and such back during the 70s. So this would have been the squad that would have been mostly tracking down the Nelson Johnsons and Howard Fullers and Ed Whitfields in the town, and finding out, keeping up with them.

It had a kind of rebirth after 1979 with a claim that was passed out as its origin, but turned out not to be, when it said that after the problems of the police department following the 1979 massacre--. One of the members of it told me that they came into existence after then in order to have better information on the Klan and people who were having demonstrations and stuff. It turns out that's not true. It's entirely likely that they were involved in spreading some of the information. In fact, there's some evidence that some have, and aren't able to talk about where their sources are, that they were actually involved in some of the planning that took place before—

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

BB: Okay, so you're saying there's some evidence that they were involved in some of the planning, making sure that the Klan were there on November third.

EW: Yeah, and that folks wouldn't have known about the Klan coming, but they would have known where they were. There is even some evidence that some of them might have been involved in plots to assassinate black political leaders in the city, Nelson Johnson in particular.

BB: And I assume that these were all white officers?

EW: Yeah. In fact, one of the big things with the black officer with the tracking device on him is a view that one of the police chiefs that was hired recently, a guy from Washington, DC, who was brought into the system and hired, had promoted black police officers too rapidly and too much and that in response, they were trying to find ways to bring down some of these black officers and get the good old boy network back in charge. There have been investigations done and they found out about a black book that had the photographs of, I believe, a hundred and nineteen African-Americans in it that was being spread around, and asking people, "Have you got any dirt on any of these folk?" And included in that were the black officers, but also a number of people in the community who were not police officers.

The existing police chief, who denied the existence of this document at first, later said that the reason for it was for a specific investigation where some police officer had been accused of fondling a woman during some search or arrest or something. Since they were trying to get information on a black police officer, it was legitimate to have a book with just black folks' pictures in it. But he had denied the existence of the document at first. It still was around. It had almost a hundred people who were not police officers in it. If you're looking to investigate some police, you're not likely to find it among people who are not.

So there are any number of questions that would have been growing out of the investigation. The FBI has been brought in and involved with it now. The sense is that the community deserves a much fuller disclosure of the information that's growing from the investigation that's going on, which the city manager and the city council have, and it's not filtered into the rest of the community.

That situation would have ended up different if I was on the council, because again, they would have probably tried ways to hide it from the council, figuring that the current council can probably be intimidated into actually knowing it and keeping silent. I don't even know if anyone would have bothered with me to try to scare me into not telling somebody. They would just think it would make more sense not to tell Ed, then to think that you can tell Ed and trick him into not saying it to anybody. So I guess it was along those lines that folks thought it would be real useful. But I did not get elected.

I'm going to resume the work with kids. I had been doing a lot of volunteering in the elementary schools, which I enjoy because it's some direct contact with some children. Kids need a lot and a lot of what they need, they're not getting from the schools as they exist. A lot of what they need to get needs to come from the outside anyway. It should come from contact with interesting adults who do interesting things, because other than that, children have no opportunity to learn much about the real world. We've got child labor laws that prevent children from getting a chance to doing anything useful. Not that I advocate the exploitation of children in factories or anything, but this isolation of children from productive life is isolating them from even the sense of potential of what it is that they ought to do and want to become.

We got kids who have never seen much of the world, and we ask them what they want to do when they grow up. What do they see? They listen to the radio, so they hear about rap artists. They watch television, so they see athletes. So almost any kid you ask, "What do you want to do?," he'll either want to be a rapper or a basketball player. It's natural because it's all they've had a chance to

see. If they saw more astronauts and brain surgeons and chemists and agricultural experts, then it's likely that they would have, some number of them would have some interest in something beyond that. But when we isolate kids in such a way that they see their schoolteacher and they see television and they hear the radio, it's frightening.

I end up, when I'm in the schools, just kind of being this other guy who's just around for awhile until at some time it becomes—when I was at one school volunteering one year, I told them that I played musical instruments and I would bring something and play it a little bit for the class. The teacher always enjoyed the break and kind of got fascinated with it. I told her I could bring a different instrument every week. They challenged me. I ended up having to go out and buy some from some pawnshops. But I mean, between guitar and my three-chambered ocarina and my alto flute and the regular flute and my in-blown flute and [] and electric bass and acoustic guitar and dulcimers and a type of harp, I was able to bring something weird and different. I would use it to talk about music and sound frequencies and the mathematics that's associated with frequencies, string vibration, air column vibration, logarithmic scales, and the kinds of things that come out of a natural discussion about music. I wanted them to see somebody that knew how to do something, could make sounds that were pretty, knew a level of an understanding of a thing that was a connected with how something in the real world actually works, and connect academic learning of a thing to a different way of understanding it. I can do that relatively smoothly and still try to make it fun.

But there are other places, the next year when I was volunteering, I got the chance to do that for a little while in one class and later I got asked not to be in that class, because I had challenged—the school had a state team of supposedly experts there. One of them was there making a presentation on mathematics and said something to the kids that was wrong. I didn't say anything in front of the kids. I went up to the lady between class. Well, I went up to the teacher of the class first and told her that, "What this lady has just told your students is wrong." This lady was uncomfortable with math and would let me teach some of the harder parts of math when I was there. But now they had all these experts around, so this expert was doing it. And one of the experts was just dead wrong. I explained it to her why it was wrong and she looked at me like, "Who are you?" It's like, "Look lady, I'm somebody who works in industry. I'm a senior electronics specialist. I work with math all the time. I used to teach math. I studied math very seriously." "Well, these are just fifth graders." I said, "You know, they deserve the very best." It was a miscalculation of the shape of an object, where she basically told kids that something that was made up of two isosceles triangles was the same shape and size as something that was made up of two right triangles. Under some conditions, they could certainly be the same size, but they can never be the same shape.

BB: So you're sketching it for us.

EW: Yeah. These have angles that are the same. These got a right angle here and something that's different from a right angle there so that there's no way that these were going to be exactly the same. If the angles here are the same size, and the length from there to there is the same length, then these can't be the same. I showed her why it wasn't the same, showed her the difference, calculated

the area of the difference in pointing it out to her, and she said, “Well yeah, but that’s real close.” I said, “Maybe.” I said, “But the whole of modern physics is made up on recognizing the difference between things that are real close and things that are--.” “Well, they’re just fifth graders.” It’s like, “Okay, lady.”

But anyhow, I got called in by the principal a couple days later. My first thing to tell the principal was to relate this incident too, because it’s like, “Hey, did you know that you got people in there telling the kids--?” “Oh yeah, well I heard something about that and that’s what we wanted to talk to you about.” “Well, talk to me about it. I’m glad to talk about it. What?” “Well, we want to know what you’re doing in that class.” He said, “It seemed like you’re there to evaluate and posture as opposed to there just to help.” It’s like, “Look, I come from a community, this city, this community, these kids are my kids. I’m concerned that they learn and grow and do as well as possible, and I am here just to help. But part of my help is that if somebody’s telling them something wrong, to go to the person that’s telling them. Because I don’t want to confuse the children by their wondering who’s the expert here. I’ll just talk to whoever thinks they’re the expert and let them be the expert, but give them the information, because I have access to it. I mean, I do know mathematics. I know it quite well. I’m not the dummy up in here.” It’s like, “Well, we just think there’s some places where you could help more and they seem to be doing okay, and we’ll let you go.”

So they put me in this other class full of discipline problems and I helped out with that. It may have been someplace I was more needed. But there’s something about having an opportunity, again, to share in a positive way something that an interesting adult, that knows interesting things and cares about

kids, can share that is a real part of the growth of young folk, that needs to be done more and more. And quite frankly, it didn't cost anything; I'm free. I think you can talk to and train and prepare any number of other people to be that kind of resource and it'll make all the difference in the world to kids and whether or not they're learning, as opposed to some of the experts that are hired and are dumb. There are a lot of dumb people in the world, excuse me.

BB: So all the while that you're doing this, organizing against the Iraq war and US imperialism more broadly, your work with the Beloved Community Center, mentoring students in elementary and high schools, you write for the *Carolina Peacemaker* still—

EW: I haven't written since the election. I wrote one article, I think, since the election. I'm on hiatus, so I'll go back to that though.

BB: Still co-chair of the Greensboro Peace Coalition?

EW: Which isn't very active, so that's not a lot of work either right now.

BB: So all the while, you've got this full-time job at Lorillard Tobacco Company, right, where you've been since '78? Is that right?

EW: Yeah. I started working there in December 1978. Before that, I had been working as a machinist. See my access to all the jobs I've ever had came through a process of chutzpah and lying. So when I went to Gilbarco in, I think, 1974, I applied for a position as a machinist. They asked me did I have any experience. I had applied there a couple of years before, a year before or something, and I had signed and told them the truth, but I figured they had thrown that application away, and they had. So I wasn't going to try that again, because when you tell them the truth, which is, "No, but I could do it anyway," they look at

you like you're crazy. So I told them, "Yeah, I got some experience. I worked for Whitfield Tool and Machine Company in Little Rock. We made surgical equipment. I had prepared my brother to tell folks that—this was one of his brief trips away from the west coast. He had been in Arkansas for a little while. I had prepared him to tell folks if they asked him that I used to work for him. I was living in North Carolina when I was claiming to be in Arkansas working for Whitfield Tool and Machine Company. I told them that we used to build surgical stuff and I had never worked on any of it. They took me around through the shop and showed me all this equipment, like, "You know that is?" "Yeah, it's a turning lathe." "You know what that is?" "Yeah, it's a vertical milling machine." I read it in a book so I knew what the stuff was. I'd seen pictures. By the time I had been there a week—

BB: The recorder picks is that plastic crunching. Okay, so by the time you had been there a week—

EW: By the time I had been there a week, they were telling me, "You know, we can tell you got a little of experience, because you're really good at this." There's a concept I have about permission. My brother had told me something that really helped a whole lot, because people need to know when it's okay to know and when it's okay not to know. Because if you know when it's okay not to know, you're willing to ask questions at the right time. If you don't know that it's okay not to know it, you'll be afraid to ask the question and consequentially, never get to know it. So he told me, he said, "Edward, if you go to work there, you need to know that no one can possibly expect you to know how to even turn on the machines there, because every machine is different and it's peculiar. So don't mind asking people about anything about the specific operation of any of the tools

that are in there, because they would expect you not to know that. You couldn't have known that, because you haven't seen. You might have worked at Bridgeport, but you've never worked at Lodge and Shipley. So just use whatever it is that you're working on as something that you're willing to ask people about."

So I accepted that and I asked questions I needed to. The people who ended up training me the actual, practical, hands-on work I've ever done, had no idea that that's what they were doing. They just thought I was asking some particular thing about something. Between that and the application of common sense and some general principles about machining that I had read and had understood I was able to teach myself how to be a machinist and get that job.

I worked there a year and a half as a machinist. I ended up going to New York and working in a machine shop there for a while after I got laid off at Gilbarco. Also, I was going up there to work on this left-wing newspaper, it was called *Palante*, with this leftist group that I knew some folk in. When that stuff fell apart, probably with agents provocateur who were tearing it up, I ended up coming back to Greensboro and working at a couple more machine shops for about a year at a time.

By the time the job came open at Lorillard in 1978, I had worked in enough different places, I didn't even have to lie anymore about experience that I didn't really have. I actually did have a lot of shop experience in different shops, which again, is a very useful way to know something, because every shop has its own set of rules and procedures and ways that people do things. They will consistent and good, but if you work in two different shops, you'll have two sets of something and you can choose between them and have an even better set of stuff. So by

virtue of the fact that I was able to work from one place to another, I ended up with a much broader sense of how to work in that kind of setting.

Then when I got to Lorillard, I'd been there working in a machine shop for several years and had a reputation for being a really good machinist. A job came open in electronics. I didn't know anything about electronics, but I had this same kind of sense that there's nothing I can't know. I had heard that no one in the plant had ever been able to take the test for the electronics job, and they always had to hire from the outside people who had just been in school for electronics. I said, "I ought to take that test for a joke," because I'd tell people in high school that my favorite sport was taking tests. Some guy again gave me permission to do it. It was like, "Well Ed, don't take it as a joke. Why don't you take it seriously?" There's something about somebody in a position who can tell you well enough to go for it, that kind of frees you to do it in a way that would be different from--. Like if my brother had told me, "There ain't no way you're going to be able to make it in a machine shop," then I never would have tried. Or if this guy, who was already a supervisor, had told me, "Ed, you're not going to be able to do this if you really don't know electronics," then there's no way I would have really tried it. But these folk kind of gave me permission to try.

Between that and my own sense of self-confidence and possibility, I did it. A guitar player recently did that to me when I was plucking on the guitar around him. It wasn't like, "You need to stick to the flute." It's like, "Hey, that sounds pretty good. You ought to go ahead and try it." So that's why I ended up playing guitar at somebody's wedding. But at just different points, I have just seen places where that has worked for me, and so consequently, I try to be conscious of it and

whenever I can do it with someone else, kind of open up the avenue of, "I really think that you can do this if you try it," and to give people permission. Because I ended up taking that electronics test there. I bought twenty-five dollars worth of books from Radio Shack, read them for one week in the break room, people saw me sitting around reading these books on electronics, and taking the test and made the highest score anyone had ever made on it. So I was told by the guy giving the test, who knew at the time. People assumed that I was lying about not having ever going to school for electronics, or they thought that if I wasn't lying and I hadn't flunked or passed this test, then I wasn't going to really understand anything well enough to be able to do the work.

It was only a few years later that they were offering me a job in management as an electronics specialist, which I resisted until recently. I accepted that job in 1997, after I ended up kind of needing the personal flexibility that I could have with a salaried job rather than the hourly job. I took a little pay cut at first, but it's made its way back. But yeah, I'm self-taught in almost anything useful I know how to do, and been in there since 1978. After I've been there thirty years, I think I'll be gone. I'm not going to stay much past either December of 2008 or June of 2009, when I turn sixty; I'll be out of there.

BB: Why, to retire?

EW: I'm going to retire, take what they've got, and do some other things full-time, spend more time working with kids. A friend of mine has some money to be given away in a charitable trust foundation that I'll probably end up working with, and work with the Beloved Community Center and some other things that I want to do, writing more, building drums.

BB: Building drums, yeah? Did you see your work with Lorillard, was it always separate from activism and movement-building movement?

EW: No.

BB: In what ways?

EW: One of the main reasons I was interested in going was because Lorillard had the largest and most active union in the city.

BB: What union?

EW: Tobacco Workers Local 317-T. When I was in it, it was Bakery, Confectionary, and Tobacco Workers International Union. I think they've expanded beyond bakery and confectionary to have some other people, some other service jobs that are affiliated with it. I'm not directly with it anymore. I ran for union president. I was for a while a shop steward there in the union, and very active on the negotiating committee for a long period, and real active with it. When I was running for president, again, they would traipse out the whole picture from Cornell. That picture has had a lot to do with limiting things I've been able to do. I wouldn't trade it, as I have said in general, my attitude toward the past, I wouldn't trade it in for a second. I'm fine with the fact that people like to bring it out.

I like to think how silly it is to bring up something that's that old. In other words, if you want to know who I am, there's plenty of evidence based on having been around me for the years that I was at Lorillard or the years I've been in this community, and know what I do and whether or not I threaten people or intimidate folks or I'm a bad person, or any of the things that you might think you know from looking at the picture. It's like, "What is it you can see in this picture that is more real to you than what you've seen and heard in the real, actual contacts you've

had with me? And how is it that this image can become more of your reality than your experience?" It's an amazing part of the way people will sometimes process information that leads folks to do that and for that question to emerge. It's like, "This is more real to you than your experience? What sense does that make?"

BB: Is it a trust issue or is it a fear issue?

EW: I don't know. I think people are, in some sense, given some tools on how it is that they are expected to process information and they try to conform with them. So if you see somebody within an old picture carrying a gun, then that must mean he's something that you don't want to be your whatever.

BB: You're involved in so many things and all the while with this full-time job. What sustains you?

EW: Sleep is optional.

BB: Sleep is optional. You're serious about that?

EW: Yeah. I have, on some occasions, been up until three or four in the morning and made a 7:30 meeting.

BB: So lack of sleep sustains you or just that it's optional?

EW: It's optional, so you can get flexible with that. I remember there was a stretch of time when I was everywhere, when I was working third shift. One time I did that, I was able to catnap and sleep and get enough sleep. Another time, I could not get enough sleep and I was miserable and I was walking around zombie-like sometimes while I was at work. There is a danger, working around high-voltage electricity and feeling like a zombie is not good. I haven't worked third shift much lately; I don't like it. Right now, I'm on second shift, which means that during the day I'm flexible to be around schools and stuff.

And not having much of a personal life helps. There are periods when, times I do the most writing and stuff, big periods when I'm just pretty much by myself, and don't have to entertain people regularly. Part of it is a process of trying to identify opportunities. Like if you're lonely, that means you got time to do something else; do it. If you're not, enjoy the companionship and know you can't write all the articles that you would otherwise be able to write because you got somebody you're responsible to. It just depends. At different points, as my life has gone through whatever levels of fluctuations and stuff, I've figured that each one of them creates new opportunities. The question is identifying and seizing on the new opportunities, as opposed to lamenting what is missing.

BB: Do you see all those things as sort of antidotes to burnout too? Have those things helped you—

EW: Burnout. Well, I mean, the biggest antidote to burnout on anything is variety and flexibility, which under some conditions does not sound like a good thing. For instance, if I was to say that the biggest anecdote to burnout in personal relationships was variety, then you would quickly come up with a, "Hmm," a new theoretical justification for philandering. But it's probably also true, it probably would be. It's just it wouldn't necessarily be a good thing because of the consequences of the damage to a certain level of stability and trust that would otherwise be useful. But it keeps you from getting burnt out. As far as politically, it was the September eleventh [2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, NY] stuff that led me to a lot of recent writing about peace and justice. In fact, it was the coming together of the Beloved Community Center that led me to do a lot of writing, because for a long time, there were whole stretches that, other

than somebody finding old notebooks of mine, you would never know I existed during those periods because I didn't have anything written. Then there's these fairly prolific periods when I do a lot of writing. Some of the stuff I written, I've gone back and reread. Some of it tends to make a lot of sense.

I don't know the date on this notebook, but there's something on the front page of that, that I need to make use of and develop more, where it talks about the question of whether or not people are simply possessionless or are they dispossessed, which has to do with how it is that we come to look at people who don't have things. I think that fundamentally, people don't have those things because those things were stripped from them, that people's lack of access to them, to productive means, is something that was stripped away during the whole period of the emergence of classes.

Part of the thankfulness that people will approach an employer for giving them a job, that's just real, like "Ooh, I should have—", which kind of blurs or mitigates the class struggle, the antagonism between "this man is exploiting you. You're producing much more and they're taking all they want of it off of doing essentially nothing." But people are so thankful to be in that position, because that employer is also giving them a reconnection with some productive means that he is otherwise is stripped away from and isolated from. And in isolation from it, you can exist; you can't live. So by giving people back a little of that which has been torn away from them, you create the possibility of kind of existing and making it and all this gratitude. I think that ultimately, what we should want to do is give people full access to that which has been taken from them, that the reason why some people have too much is because others have had it stolen from them.

This whole notion of power, it's one of the things I was talking to some people about last week, that there are almost two kinds of power. One is the power to do, the ability to bring into realization ideas that you have and the power to get things done. The other is power over, power over other people. The reason some people have coercive power over other people is because the other people have too little power to do. It is by taking away people's power to do and their access to the things that would allow them to do. At one time, it was historically a question of land, so that the question of, "Are we going to give slaves access to land?" It's like, "No. Do you know if we give them Negroes, they won't never listen to us again; they won't have to." So that the way you maintain the "power over" is to keep people away from the "power to."

This explanation that I'm making right now, I don't know, it may be something you already knew, but I don't find it a common explanation. I think that had someone said this to me in very clear terms years ago, it would have helped me to see any number of things that I've seen unfold since then with a level of clarity. So that to be able to explain something like that and to help people see it as a way of thinking of the homeless. I mean, why are there people who know how to build houses who are homeless? All around me, I see homeless carpenters, construction workers. Why is it that people who know how to grow food go hungry? It has to do with understanding how we have stripped people away from—what it takes to build a house isn't just house-building skills. It's land and some raw materials and stuff and the capital, the way that you would have to have access to that, is something that we have taken from folks. The way to grow food is almost simply to have contact with land, but we've taken that away from people.

The way to make cars or things that have, the capital that's been accumulated, again, this was accumulated from the labor of folk over a period of years, but that concentration of accumulated capital is required to buy the machinery and the raw materials. The fuel that goes into the production process is something that, except for their connection with General Motors and Toyota, people who have the skills to be autoworkers don't have access to it. So they're thankful for having a job, even though General Motors and Toyota get much more out of their employment capacity than they get. General Motors has to put nothing into it. It just becomes a repository of this; the surplus from your labor keeps going into the accumulation of their power over, by virtue of their control of, these resources. Did that make sense?

BB: Yeah. Well, I think, how I understood what you said makes sense to me.

EW: Is that a cop--?

BB: It made me think of some feminist literature, like Starhawk. Do you know Starhawk?

EW: I would love to read her stuff.

BB: She talks about "power over" and "power with," and what those two look like, and in some ways, elaborated about using resources as an example. That was sort of my comparison while you were talking.

EW: Well, I hate to say things that are common. The other thing I have is this grand urge not to do something that somebody else is going to already get done if I don't do it. Then I feel like I'm wasting my time, so that I'll tell somebody, "I'm the slack guy. I'm here to do the stuff that's not going to get done if I don't do

it.” And consequently, if I see something being done real well without me, I’ll move on. I stopped being involved in, for instance, when I was in college, I was heavily involved in the anti-apartheid stuff connected with South Africa, but at the point when there were big demonstrations being held at the South African Embassy and Amy Carter’s daughter was going down getting arrested there, I left it alone.

BB: Jimmy Carter’s daughter, Amy? [James Earl "Jimmy" Carter, Jr. (born October 1, 1924), an American Democratic party leader, was the 39th President of the United States (1977–1981) and the Nobel Peace laureate in 2002.]

EW: Yeah, Jimmy Carter’s daughter, Amy. Around the time that—what’s the guy’s name with TransAfrica? He’s written a number of books. One of the most recent was *Debt*. It talks about reparations and stuff—Randall Robinson.

BB: Randall Robinson?

EW: I think so. Anyhow, at the time when they were active, I had stopped doing it, because there were plenty of folks to do that. So I needed to do something else.

BB: What time is it?

EW: Ten minutes to three.

BB: Okay, let’s see. I have to pick the last couple questions.

EW: Gosh, you’re slow. (laughter)

BB: Well how about, what have we not talked about today that you want to cover?

EW: Wars depress me. I just think it’s out of this sense of the incredible potential in humans to do just really, really cool stuff, that the waste of human potential in war, where people are just bodies to be blown into bits and counted,

this really is a depressing thought to me. At the same time, it's clear to me that the search for meaning leaves people in situations where a collective meaning, a meaning of your relationship to community as opposed to meaning of you in isolation as an individual, is so great that sometimes people's participation in war is the most meaningful thing they can do.

I was told once that there were any number of people who have lived through wars that will say that about them, say that about the Civil War, say that about any other war. It's like doing that was somehow the most meaningful thing that they had ever done in their life. It's kind of sad, but it's also instructive. I mean we can't undo what it is that people find meaningful, any more than we can tell people what they should be offended by or anything else. Part of the humility of being a human and in my mind, properly respectful of other humans, is to recognize that meaning is something that people construct, and that some folk construct this sense of meaning out of being part of this larger whole that is connected with how they see the connection with war and even at the risk or possibility of dying, and certainly the possibility of taking somebody else's life. But it's depressing to me. So I would much rather try to figure out how we can construct a meaningful world that doesn't rely on that as a principle means of resolving conflict.

But it's really, really sad as we look around the world today, both in places where there's kind of major imperialist control over what's going on, as well as places where prior imperialist control over what has gone on has so damaged things as to leave people weak and without many resources, but often still in heavy levels of conflict between each other, and see that there's just so much

violence and death around us. It really is depressing to me. But there's nothing else I want to talk about.

BB: Well, two more quick questions, I think?

EW: Two more quick questions.

BB: Okay.

EW: With short answers, watch.

BB: I think so. If there were two people that you'd want to be interviewed for the *Heirs to a Fighting Tradition* project, or just have their oral histories captured in North Carolina, who are social justice folks, however you broadly define that, who would they be?

EW: Lewis Brandon is one. Is he somebody—he may not want to do it, but Lewis Brandon. I mean, well and Nelson.

BB: Nelson Johnson?

EW: Mmm hmm.

BB: So how was this for you?

EW: I just had the feeling that I rambled on and on, may or may not have said things that made sense. For me, an ongoing thing is, "Am I making sense?" I really want to know and it's part of the feedback from the conversation that I'm hoping that I'm kind of connecting with something that's sticking and in such a way as to be useful. But I sometimes hear myself talking and don't know that, under these conditions, it's normally not too bad, but there are other conditions, under which I know that folks will tire of it and disconnect from it before it goes on too long.

BB: Yeah, it's an interesting dynamic because it's really not meant to be a conversation, right? It's meant more to be an interview. I had to make myself not respond or dig deeper to some pieces where we could talk forever. So that's an awkward thing for you.

EW: What else do you need to know?

BB: That's it.

EW: Really?

BB: Thank you, Ed Whitfield, yeah, for today. I've kept you longer than the two or three hours I said. So thanks a lot.

EW: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. April 2006