UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Mr. Ester King
University of Houston Oral History Project
Civil Rights Movement

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EW: Alright Mr. King, we are going to start out by asking you when and where you were born?

EK: Let me know when you are ready? Ready?

EW: Yes.

EK: I'm 66 I was born in 1943 before the end of World War II. I was born in Jasper County, Texas on a farm owned by my grandfather. My grandfather had been, not long before then, a share cropper on what we called the Conn farm. That was owned by the people who have the Conn appliance stores in this part of the country. They are from the same place, a place called Magnolia Springs right out of Kirbyville, Texas. This is in southeast Texas in the big thicket in Jasper County.

Moved to Houston oh I think when I was about 6 or 7 and except for going back to the country or the farm every summer to spend my summers I actually grew up in Houston, principally on the north side. First in Independent Heights, it is called Studewood that's what we colloquially called Studewood and then Acres Homes is where I started I believe the 3rd or 4th grade and went to school there throughout my school years.

EW: What brought your family to Houston were there any motivating factors that brought them to the city?

EK: Same forces that fed Houston and Dallas from all of the farm areas, the lack of opportunities or the fact that people didn't want to spend their lives in stoop labor working for basically nothing. Generally what would happen, and of course the war had a lot to do with this as men, young men went into the war from those areas all over the state, when they came back generally they were not going to come back. They wouldn't fit in very well in that agrarian society with its rigidly enforced codes of racial conduct. They weren't going to fit in very well so they just put their roots down in the big cities. My father did when he got out of the navy and we moved and joined him in Houston. But overall the economic opportunities that were developing away from farm labor in big cities like Dallas, Houston, San Antonio was the thing that propelled most African Americans to put down roots.

EW: What was your experience when your family moved to Independence Heights? What was it like for you being in a historically black area such as Independence Heights?

EK: Okay you are going to ask me to go back in my memory banks and try and remember what impact it might have had and that is not going to be real easy because we are talking way back but suffice it to say that I was enveloped in an all black world and to me that's what the world was. It was this world that I was surrounded by, nurtured by a family. We had a lot of family there in Independent Heights and I went up and down the streets playing with friends in this all black world.

As I remember my earliest recollection of being in a black world and understanding that it was different from a white world was on a trip downtown with a

great aunt and I can remember this and things like this when you are a child are planted in your memory and you kind of carry them the rest of your life. I went up to a water fountain that had steps for children and I must have gotten away from my great aunt some sort of way and I must have been about 6 or 7 but as I went up the steps and I'm going to try to turn the thing to get water. I must have seen somebody do it and she violently snatched me away and we walked away at a fast pace and she was kind of upset and she gave me my first lesson in the difference in the worlds saying that that was water for white people. I didn't understand that but the commotion that she stirred with me put it on my mind. It was something special it was something that wasn't normal here. This water was for white people; it was taboo for me. So that was my first indication of the difference in the worlds.

EW: So then that talks about how you contrast it with what you knew of the rest of Houston from Independence Heights. So that was an early incident but what began sort of your opening of consciousness to some of the inequalities of the treatment between blacks and whites?

EK: You know I don't think that I thought of it that much. The only thing I remember in school, we would always… in elementary school and in what people call middle school (we called it junior high). We would always have books that were already used and they had other kids' names in them. We knew that these were books of white kids and they were passed down to us. I think that framed in my mind that we were occupying another tier in society because we talked about it as kids. But other than that generally the only whites I ran across (and remember now this is the very early days of TV so you are not looking into a white world from TV). Really, electronically I can just

remember my mother and other ladies listening to stories on the radio as they ironed. They listened to what people call soap operas but they were on radio. So we didn't have… TV was very young and we didn't have that window. But the thing is, is that I knew I was in an all black world and I knew because that world was impacted by whites because everybody we did business with, my parents did business with, they were white. The people who came in to sell insurance, if you went to the store, remember now there are no chain stores at this time. Because I remember when [You Told Him] (9.26) was the first chain store and the first [You Told Him] out on Airline. But the neighborhood stores in Independent Heights and in Acres Homes, the larger ones were owned and run by Italians. This was after World War II and many Italians came to Houston. Of course I remember that the phrase that a lot of grown folks used for them was Dagos. They would say the Dagos have got the store. That is a derogatory term that people used. This was before the Chinese who came shortly after.

After the revolution in China where a lot of Chinese came from Hong Kong came here off the Island of Formosa and started to get these stores. Then my whole growing up Chinese merchants all over Houston had big stores. Now African Americans would have little stores where you sold candy and little things. Of course they didn't have the Kroger's and all that to do your shopping. Most everybody went downtown Houston to a store called Hinkey's & Pila and you got on a bus or you had a car and you went downtown from wherever you were living to do your big shopping and there was a farmers market downtown as well. But again, the white world I knew that there was this white world. I was in a black world. I had that consciousness but it didn't really impact on me that much. Again, the only time that we really thought about it was at the black

middle school when the white superintendent or the white board members would come and we would make fun of the principal and how he would act and behave and you know… but other than that the white world didn't impact us like it did our parents.

EW: So in speaking with you before you also talked about some of the consciousness raising that happened to you when you joined the military. Would you speak a little bit about joining the military and how that affected you?

EK: Right. Actually my consciousness started to develop I believe as I look back now, I was an avid reader and I read the magazines Ebony, Sepia, and Jet, that was even before Jet magazine. But in reading these magazines the issue of race was dealt with. So in high school which was for me the years of the late 50s, I went to Booker Washington on West Dallas from a school in 6th Ward called Harper on Center Street.

Now after elementary school in Acres Homes there was no middle school or junior high in Acres Homes so we got on a bus every morning and went way across town. We were bussed way across town to the nearest African American school, middle school which was Harper for me. It was Harper like it was the old Smith in 5th Ward and it was Ryan in 3rd Ward but for me it was Harper. We traveled every day to that school to and from and so the fact that we were passing white schools let me know… and by then I knew that we couldn't go… there were places that we just couldn't go and we weren't trying to go but we knew we couldn't go. So my racial consciousness of course at that time and then every summer I went back to the farm. That is another world. That part of east Texas is sort of like Mississippi.

There were strict codes of etiquette, strict behavioral patterns, and so I developed this consciousness of being in an inferior position mainly in the country. My grandfather

had to defer constantly, and my grandfather was a very strong man. He was a disciplinarian and all of that, that you can imagine in the rural south and was a farmer, but in the presence of whites he was almost like a child. Of course we had these rules of behavior. As an example, I remember going to a couple of country stores and we had to walk a long way to go to the store. We went to the store one morning before the proprietor even got up because we had to have something. He lived near the store and we went to his house and as my uncles, one younger than me and one older, started to call the man. Well I'm going to go open the gate and go to the house and knock on the door. They were mortified. They grabbed me and they said, "You can't knock on that white man's door." And we had to stand at the fence and call him, those kinds of things. So, and of course, my parents were always concerned because the thing about Emmett Till sent shock waves around black America and especially the fact that he was a 14 year old kid who was lynched. You know I read about the lynching, I saw the pictures in the magazines and all of that but I never… I didn't associate the lynching with people my age because I was about the same age he was.

Of course after that happened, my parents were very, very concerned about me going there and understanding that even though I wasn't doing anything in the city that would be untoward in terms of whites. I wasn't coming in contact with whites that much but they were just worried that whites there might misinterpret something I said or the way I looked and you know get in serious trouble. So my consciousness of race was developed already by the time I finished high school. But at the time I was finishing school the civil rights movement was really happening, you know you had the Montgomery County bus boycott. All of us knew about that. Parents were talking about

it, everybody was talking about it. Then of course, the student sit-ins in Carolina by those 6, 5 students that went across… so I knew about those things. I'm getting ready to graduate high school going to college, went to college in Dallas. Matter of fact I was enrolled there when Kennedy visited and got killed. We had just left, I was playing football on a football scholarship. We just left going to Austin the evening before that Friday when he was killed. But now, I'm not involved in any of these things but I'm talking about it, we are having conversations about the sit-ins and all of that sort of stuff. Nobody at our school at the Bishop College in Dallas nobody was doing anything about that but here in Houston the students from TSU were already involved, were already engaged in sit-ins. Of course I didn't know anything about that I wasn't paying that much attention but my development in terms of framing these things was on track at that time even though I didn't really realize it. But I will say that all of this was galvanized when I went into the military.

I went in the military in June of '64. Went to Fort Pope Louisiana for basic training. Keep in mind now the Vietnam War is going on now and it is about to heat up dramatically in '65 and '66. But I went to basic training in Leesville, Louisiana which is very segregated. Now in terms of coming to grips with our position in this country, I'm really coming to grips with this now because Leesville was a segregated town by law with signs in windows saying that "No Negros, No Colored" and I'm taking basic training, got a uniform on and I can go to Vietnam and get killed and I'm aware of this now. Of course it wasn't very long when Mohammad Ali burst on the scene, with the political side of him… He had already, I already knew about him as a boxer. But this thing about him being a Muslim and being outspoken I didn't know at that time. So my

sense of being held as a second class citizen and maybe doing something about it is now taking shape.

EW: So once you came out of the military what happened then upon your return to Houston?

EK: Oh okay my eyes were thoroughly opened in the military. I went to Germany, didn't go to Vietnam. As a matter fact by the time the Vietnam War was just like a big vacuum pulling people, people all around me were being rotated there. As a matter of fact I was a Corporal and I took the job as an acting Sergeant over a supply room because the Sergeant had been rotated to Vietnam. By this time I was not going to Vietnam. I would have chosen Sweden. I was looking at all of that but I just knew that I was not going to go to Vietnam to fight and die and understand what the situation was back here. Because right now I am really keeping up with what is going on.

I was at Fort Pope when the three civil rights workers were killed in Philadelphia, Mississippi, Goodman, Shwerner and Chaney and I remember reading the papers while the military, the Navy the CBs were searching, draining bayous looking for bodies and stuff like that. So I had this heightened awareness. We were talking about it in the military. Of course this is the first time I'm thrown in physically to live among whites. The first thing I can remember looking back the first impact it had on me was my discovery that all whites weren't super intelligent. I thought (I didn't know that I consciously thought it) but as I looked at it I said, "Yeah" because I was so surprised to be with whites who were average intelligence. I thought they were all smart. It was a logical conclusion. They ran everything. So anyway I got this awakening. I also am impressed by the fact that since we were minorities in the military we forced each other

to unify, we unified. So that lesson. Then I'm in with guys from all over the country, especially when I went to advanced training in Fort Garden, Georgia and then I went to Germany. I'm thrown in and I'm now having a conversation with people everywhere; not just Houston, not just Texas but all over the place. This gives me another leg up in terms of understanding that there are points of view that I hadn't been exposed to from other people with other experiences.

Then, of course, going… one of the best things that can ever happen to anybody living in America, or for any country for that matter is to go abroad. Go away from where you are from and look back at it and frame ideas and frame your knowledge of where you live from a distance. That was very helpful for me. I'm saying all of that to say that by the time I got ready to get out of the military, after all of these things and I'm not going into detail with any of it but just suffice it to say that I was ready for the autobiography of Malcolm X. That was the tipping point. I had heard of Malcolm while I was in college. They would do these sound bites. He had gotten out of prison and he was in the nation of Islam and he was now the face and the spokesperson for the nation of Islam. They would do these sound bites, take these outrageous things that they thought was outrageous and put them on the news. Well I've got to admit that I thought he was crazy. I mean I'd hear these things that this guy is saying, even though my consciousness is raising I'm thinking, "This guy is off the edge. He is off the hook with some of this stuff." He was so bold and so truthful and in your face but my learning experience got me ready for Malcolm, because by the time he was assassinated and the autobiography came out afterward.

I'm now ready and when I read that book, and I must say and I've talked with other people since then who had the same experience, that book turned my life totally around. It answered questions that I didn't even ask, didn't know I needed to ask. It also did this one thing. It made me (because it lead me or furthered me because I had already started) from an incident that I had in Sweden, in Denmark as a matter of fact. The prime minister of South Africa at that time Hendrik Verwoerd was assassinated. This was in '65 or '66 I think '65 and I come out of this hotel room in Denmark and there is this crowd of folk standing over a newspaper and they are talking and they are speaking English of course. They look up and they see me and they are so surprised and happy and they run to me and they want to discuss with me, get a black point of view about what has happened in South Africa. I didn't know anything about South Africa. Didn't know that there were blacks being oppressed. I didn't know any of that. I had been to college and I didn't know anything about that. It was very embarrassing. I was determined to correct it. I got back to the military and went to the library and checked out every book that I could find going through glossaries. If it had the word Negro, Slavery, Colored any of that in it I checked it out. They didn't have a lot but I read every one of them. That is when I had my introduction to our history and how ignorant I was. So now I'm ready for Malcolm.

When I read the autobiography of Malcolm X and had that period of time from reading it and getting out of the military I promised myself that the rest of my life I would be involved in the affairs of my people, that was a promise. So when I got back to Houston, to Acres Home, the first thing I did when I ran across a child hood friend or school mate, luckily he was a professional boxer and I guess that traveling with

professional boxers, Ali and folks like that, they had a certain level of consciousness that I didn't see ordinarily. Luckily he had consciousness and when I found out I was so happy and I said, "Man you've got to take me to the movement." Brought me to 3rd Ward, took me to Lee Otis Johnson. Lee Otis Johnson in turn introduced me to Lynn Eusan both of these people are now deceased. But Lee Otis introduced me, took me on the U of H campus and introduced me to Lynn Eusan. Then I met Dwight Allen, Omowale Luthuli, Gene Locke all of those folks, Deloyd Parker and so here I am.

EW: Also when you came back and you ended up going back to school at TSU.

EK: Sure.

EW: You just mentioned getting involved with some of the people at U of H, how did you get involved with activism there at TSU?

EK: Well luckily a guy who I had gone to school with was already on campus at TSU he was a terrific organizer. I was in class with his sister because I am about two or three years older than he is. His name is Russell Jones he lives here locally. He had organized… I met him and it was by meeting him that made me decide to go back to TSU, to go back to school or to go to TSU. As a matter of fact when I got out of the military I got a job at a place called Cameron Iron Works. It kind of exists in a smaller form now. In its hay day like Sheffield Steel and Reed Roller Bits, these were places where African American, especially men could get the kind of jobs away from being janitors and delivery drivers. Cameron Iron Works… so Cameron was out near where I lived. My father worked there and I got that job. I was there as a matter of fact working when Dr. King was assassinated. So I knew… now I'm running around with these students. I wasn't a student I'm going to conferences all over the state with African

American students from U of H, from TSU we are having these conferences, we are reading these books we are doing all this stuff so my association with this guy, Russell Jones, who had organized the campus fairly well. Of course all of this was as a result of the civil rights movement, which I must say this, our struggle is ongoing and has been since we were captured and brought to mainly to the west coast of Africa to be shipped here. We have been struggling.

In this country the struggling has been constant. But one of the things that happened to fast forward everything was young people getting involved. People forget Dr. King was barely out of his teens. He was about 26 when he took over that role. Jesse Jackson was barely out of his teens when he was in the bread basket. John Lewis was nearly a teenager. So young people, even though the NAACP and those efforts in the courts have been going on, but it was young people who took it to the streets, who took it… so it was the young people from SNCC, mainly SNCC and CORE who excited young folk on college campuses all over this country, black and white. As a matter of fact, TV news was in its infancy at the beginning of the civil rights movement and a lot of TV news grew up on the civil rights movement covering these things that were going on. That's when they started to get black reporters on these newspapers and TV.

So it was the young people and their actions and activities that we were seeing on TV that ignited nationwide groups of young people like right here in Houston we had visits at TSU by people like Stokely Carmichael at that time Kwame Ture the late Stokely Carmichael, Willie Ricks, Jim Foreman… these people visited campuses and when they left these organizations sprouted up. Students at TSU as a matter of fact started organizing around the closing of Wheeler Street. That was a long bone of

contention among us students, between students and faculty in the state of having that busy thoroughfare bisecting the campus, the dorms on one side, administration and classrooms on the other. So that was something that students really could clue to. But now the organizers wanted students to lift their consciousness about everything having some say on what we are taught, how we are taught. You know we are grown folk we are not little children. That was going on all over the south. So it was young folk who really gave the "ump" to the civil rights movement by doing things that generally older folk were so much willing to go to jail because they were taking care of families so they couldn't just go in and out of jail like that, young folk who had that luxury to answer the call.

So here in Houston, we had the same thing in Houston that was going on in the rest of the country. I got in, I found my calling to be in that mix of folks strategizing, studying and trying to do things and that is where I am today.

EW: Excellent, so then you got to meet some people you just mentioned like Omowale Luthuli and Deloyd Parker and you as a TSU student was working in town because some U of H students now or was that a common place for TSU and U of H African Americans students to work in?

EK: At some level but I must say there was a little tension as I look back. I think it, as I examine this, I think that there was a little coolness and it might have come out of the fact that the students at U of H probably came from middle class families more than students at TSU so there might be this… it's the class thing where "You may think you are better than we are because you are over there at the white school" that sort of thing.

So there wasn't a lot of working together but there was working together and I became sort of like a go between.

I was a member of the organization called OBSU, Organization of Black Student Unity at TSU and we were active, on TSU situations this came after the police invasion of the campus in May of '67, May 17, 1967 and the subsequent charging of five students at TSU with the killing this police officer who was actually killed by a ricochet bullet in front of the student union building. Five students, Trazawell Franklin, Douglas Wayne Waller, Charles Freeman, Floyd Nichols and always have trouble remembering this one because I didn't know him as well… I'll think of his name in a minute but these students… so that gave us of course a lot of work to do to try to defend these students. Two or three of them were already locked up when this police officer got killed but at first they were charged under something called "transferred intent" whereby you get involved in something and somebody is killed and you bear the responsibility. They actually, the only one they wanted to go to jail was Charles Freeman, we called him speedy. Charles had been the first African American male student at Rice University that lived on campus, he was the first. He came out of Port Arthur, he was the DeLoyd's homeboy. He transferred to TSU and then got swept up in all of that as a student leader. He was the only one actually who went to trial on a change of venue in Victoria, Texas where he… it was a hung jury. They dropped the charges, they didn't try anybody else but the indictment of those students gave us a cause to raise money to try and defend them and all of that. So at that point TSU was a hot bed of activity.

Then out in the community of course you had Lee Otis Johnson who was this flamboyant spokesperson and activist out on the streets and then you had, of course, the

traditional groups NAACP, the Harris County Counsel Organization. So there was a lot of stuff happening in Houston. It was at this period where we could see after Montgomery some victories in terms of moving the bar. Of course you had the civil rights bill, the voting rights act and all of that. Texas played a part in that because there were lawsuits filed that helped that whole process, even with the Supreme Court decision in '54 when the school desegregation, Houston played a part in that. So you had all of this stuff going on, students were taking it to the streets, we were taking it to the streets. Matter of fact on the campus after the police invasion and all of that, eventually the street did close.

We moved on to other things. We tried to force… we did we were successful in getting a black studies program, not a department but a program; they may have a department by now. But we had to fight for that. We actually had to shut the campus down we had to take over the administration. Matter of fact I was appointed the person to put the locks on the door, the chain and the locks on the Hannah Hall saying that nobody is going to school here until… we had been negotiating with the administration. The president gave us, Saywer at that time, Granville Saywer gave us hope that he was going to sit down and really talk when the time came, we had pulled the faculty on our side. When the time came he was out of town we got angry and shut the campus down. So we went through all of that. That was happening in campuses everywhere probably with the exception of Prairie View I don't think a lot of that stuff went down with Prairie View (that's another story). But anyway, I met DeLoyd at that time DeLoyd was actually the barber for the movement. I met him in an apartment over near campus, adjacent to campus, he cut hair. He also, and at that time if you look at pictures way back then you

see all these African American men, these beautiful African American men with all these naturals, with these afros and DeLoyd was a master of changing processed hair to natural hair. So all of the women especially went to him, his apartment that is how he subsidized his going to school, cutting hair that's how I met him he was over there cutting hair. But anyway, that period of time was… saw us very busy, we were doing things… As a matter of fact part of the police coming on campus in that police riot was that the students on campus had been going to like, people were finding a dump out on Holmes Road. Also there was a situation going on Homestead that area that is known as scenic woods now was just being inhabited by black folk. The school out there, Forrestbrook and the other school that were mainly white schools; there was friction out there so students were involved in all of this.

Stuff was just happening, just everywhere, both on campus and off campus. Very, very different from what, how things are today. Things are quieter. There are people working but things are quieter. So I came back fell in love with all of this stuff and I met all of these people who become lifelong friends to this day, people like Thomas Melonsong and his wife Tayeta, DeLoyd Parker, Gene Locke, Omawala Lithuli just on and on and on, just a host of people from that period. Of course I've known people who came later who were younger and on down the line. But these were the people that, who became associates and friends during that time. We went to jail together. I was one of the, what we call TSU the U of H 14, the 14 students indicted for rioting and destroying property we all went to jail.

Oh I must say this too in all of this stuff that was happening and it was a lot of stuff. We were always defended by a couple of attorneys who never charged us anything,

Bobby Caldwell and Raymond Jordan. One of the things that the people who oppose what you are doing can use as a weapon is the threat or them actually having you arrested. They will fabricate stuff or whatever, have you arrested and know that your parents can't be paying for lawyers and bail and all that stuff. So we were fortunate in that we had these two attorneys who not only would defend us free but would arrange bail. I know Lee Otis worked Bobby Caldwell and Raymond Jordan to death because they were arresting Lee Otis about every other day. They were constantly getting him out of jail and of course when they put the marijuana on him and sentenced him to 30 years in prison and he didn't have Bobby Caldwell as the attorney in the trial and of course that trial shocked us. I didn't even attend the trial I thought it was such a minor thing that I got word to come but I had something else to do so I wasn't even there at the trial the day he was sentenced. But when the district attorney who tried the case personally asked the jury for…he didn't ask for 30 years I think he asked for 20 the jury gave him 30 years but Lee Otis had another attorney but the appeal that got him out, that freed him Bobby Caldwell handled that and gave this beautiful argument at the Texas Supreme Court I will never forget it and it got Lee Otis out of prison after he served 5 of that 30 year.

But I'm sort of painting the picture of a lot of activity going on during this time Dr. King made two visits to Houston. His last visit was months before he was assassinated. He was here in the summer of '67 and he was killed, of course, in April of '68. We had a march from the Jefferson stadium I think we went down to Elgin. We went to Emancipation Park, had a rally at the Hester House and that's when I really got to meet Andrew Young and Jose Williams and James Bevel and those people and that's the Elsie because we were… we were using students as the leg people that do the work, they

didn't have money to pay in preparation for Dr. King coming passing out flyers, running off flyers about. Then it's so different from today. Now you get on a computer and shoot an email. Then we had to go to something, they had something called the Setena, it was the brand name of a copying machine that you cranked by hand, it had this weird smelling purple ink and these flyers were all purple flyers. You know you can imagine turning out, trying to turn out 500 flyers by one at a time cranking. But we used to do all that sort of stuff. It was just a very exciting time.

I got visited by the FBI, they came out to my job and this was actually before, it was right after Dr. King was killed but before I entered TSU. They came to the job because we had a student conference in Austin where black students from all over Texas and part of that weekend was some weapons training. I conducted weapons training and I had been in the military and the FBI promptly paid me a visit. Out on my job I was working at Cameron Iron Works and they came, the FBI are sneaky people let me tell you. They first called my father sort of like, "Opps we called… we got the wrong person." They called him on purpose. He went… they interviewed him. But I met him on the way back when they sent for me and they could have come to my house but they came to the job, create some stuff. But the people on the job already knew me. I had this hair and I had this attitude. So it was no news to them, they already knew. But I wasn't planning on staying there anyway. But anyhow, they came and they did the perfunctory thing and they always ask you if you want to be an informant. They always do that it is just a matter of what they do because they don't know maybe you will be and a lot of people are. So they ask you if you want to give them information on other people and stuff like that. But then they try and… oh they do this to. They try and put you in awe.

They start telling me about what I was doing in elementary school, who my teachers were and stuff like that, to show you that they go into your background very carefully. That didn't faze me! Hey you get paid to do that. If I made the kind of money you make doing that I could have information on people too. But anyway, they do that sort of stuff. But all of this, there are so many episodes and incidents and all of that stuff.

As I look back on it now I've had a very exciting life actually going all over the country going to all of these national conferences, Congress of African people in Atlanta. It was the first time in 1970, the first time I ever saw Minister Farrakhan in living flesh. He spoke, Whitney Young and it was put on by Mia Baracka and Leroy Jones. You know the first time I met Queen Mother Moore was at that time. Gary Indiana Jesse Jackson, Hatcher and Coleman Young all these folk so very, very exciting and actually a lot of good experiences. I got to be very good friends with Kwame Ture, the late Kwame Ture. As a matter of fact he was married to Mariam Acaba at the time and she named my daughter. I have two children. My daughter is Tandaway and I got that name from Mariam Acaba who was married to Kwame Ture. He was Houston speaking and he stayed at the house.

Myself, my wife, Gene Locke and his first wife lived together because we had the organization headquarters was where we lived. So he stayed with us and my wife was pregnant, Gene Lock's wife was pregnant and he sent back these names, male and female because we didn't know which but anyway we chose Tandaway when my daughter was born. Gene Locke and his wife chose Timbakele so his daughter's name is Timbakele they are both from South Africa, those names. So very, very exciting life I've had really.

EW: Could you tell me you had mentioned you and your wife and Gene Locke and his first wife living together in that whole era. One thing I'd like to know a little bit about is your recollections of the beginnings of Shape because you mentioned Lynn Eusan and I know she was involved and some of the people that were involved so what are your recollections of the origins of Shape?

EK: Shape Center was born out of the feeling of a lot of people in the community that we had to take responsibility for our development. Actually the first genesis was students from U of H setting up places, Lynn Eusan was instrumental and she used to go because U of H was in proximity to what is called the bottoms, that is around Elgin and Scott and those areas over there Tuam and Dowling and I mean Tuam and those streets over there. Very depressed over there, always has been and is now. As a matter of fact it has almost mostly gone now because of the few renters who are still there and the homeowners are on the wing. So she would take these children and take them on campus, take them in the swimming pool and start to tutor children. Then it was thought that we ought to have a regular place to tutor children and they tried to get U of H to help sponsor some of that.

They were having a hard time so students from U of H just went over there and rented a place around Canfield and Tuam and over there and started to tutor children and interact with children. So that was the genesis. That was the thought that we have to start to take responsibility. We had, there were pastors who understood that the church had more of a role or should have then just Sunday and going to heaven that the church should be involved in the quality of life for people here now. I remember people like Bill Lawson and Bill Lawson was a young pastor over at Will Avenue. He and his wife and I guess some other people founded it, founded that church. But he was actually a minister

on TSU's campus when I met him. Like on college campus you would have the… Catholics would have something on campus and at TSU it was Newman Center and Protestants will have something. Well Bill Lawson was an advisor and pastor on campus. Then they developed a Wheeler Avenue Church, they were small when they started out.

So Wheeler Avenue, Sherman Douglas I believe here at Holman Street and a few other pastors were of a mind that the church should also play a role. So they started a summer program that Deloyd from what I gather talking with him was pulled into to help. That started actually Shape Center. But it started out as a young folk feeling that we had an obligation to be involved in communities where we lived or where we went to school. Shape started over in that area around Canfield and Tuam, the first Shape was a house there. Then it moved to on this corner of Alabama and Live Oak, not the building it's in now. There is a place, a church now on that corner but that is where the first Shape over here was. Then they moved it, leased or rented this building they are in now on Live Oak was a night club and had that Hot Pillar Motel behind it.

So Shape was able to get a lease purchase thing there and of course has lasted nearly 40 years and that's through the commitment of DeLoyd and a lot of other people but especially DeLoyd. He doesn't like to agree with that but without his being totally committed to that institution, the institution would have followed so many others like it between that time and now, it would be gone. It would just be a memory. But that was the genesis of Shape. Students who felt an obligation to be involved in the community, to not to simply go to school, get a degree, move to The Woodlands and do all of that but who felt a commitment. That is one of the things that was more prevalent then than I see now. Because we've had this period where everybody wants to get an MBA and get rich

and drive a Lexus and have a Rolex and the whole nine. But then there was this notion all around the country of people being obligated to use whatever talents they possessed to help lift the whole situation. Of course much of what we face was so much more clear cut then because you just came from a period where there were actually had laws barring you and then of course when the laws moved you had these ceilings that were not… you couldn't reach them or touch them but they were there. Where we are now, we are still there! But we were more mindful of needing to fight against it having a history and a legacy because the people, we knew and another thing I find different.

We knew about Fannie Lou Hamer. We knew about Ida Wells. We knew and I didn't know them when I was in high school or college, the first round I didn't know them then but as I learned about them I fell in love with them and their sacrifice. So I had this feeling and many others had the feeling that it would be a stab in the back to those people who had so much less in terms of resources then we did and did so much more. It would be a stab in the back to not carry, pick up the baton and carry our weight. I find that… we had kind of a gap and a bump in that but we may be getting back to that I hope.

EW: So then I'd like to wrap it up by asking you how do you frame, because you mentioned we've been struggling since we were brought here so how do you frame this whole black struggle, especially here in Houston which is where you have been and have been working all these decades. How do you frame that in terms of what you were doing back then and what you are doing today and do you see anyone out there that is willing to take up the mantle or do you see that the struggle has changed in any degree or what

would be your way of summarizing what has happened since then to what is going on today?

EK: Well I frame that discussion in the fact that we have adversaries. Just because we are busy doesn't mean that the adversaries are not going to be busy. They are very busy. You had something called COINTELPRO whereby they were setting people up, jailing people, running people out of their country, killing people. All of that sort of thing. We lost Dr. King, we lost Malcolm we lost a brother there in Jackson Mississippi, Medger Evers, these are just folk that we knew that were big names. Well the enemy and the adversary give you all kinds of problems, problems in your immediate family, problems between spouses and of course you always have the economic thing you are facing. So all of these things are on the table as you struggle, as this struggle that I said from the beginning it goes on. You have these realities that you deal with. So the adversary got very busy and in the face of, especially, boy this can't be stressed enough.

We talk about the civil rights marches and we talk about the boycotts and all of that. We don't talk as much about the rebellions in the cities. The Watts and the Newarks… these things listen, these things shook this country to its core. When you look and turn on TV and you see this city, a large part of the city smoking and flaming for days, man that shakes you up. Out of that came, I believe, the employment situations where black folk couldn't go and get jobs in these places and be cash registers, be managers, you could just go sweep and clean up and that sort of thing. Well this thing that was going on in these major urban areas, made everybody involved say, "Hey wait we can't just keep this kind of system because…" and then of course they are in the Cold War too bumping heads with the Soviet Union on Germany and Africa and Asia was

waking up so they want clients and this doesn't look good. You are putting dogs on people about voting and you say the fountain of democracy and that doesn't look good but the rebellions really shook the country. So on the one had they relieved some of the pressure and that's by opening up job opportunities. Some housing situations where black folk kind of moved out of these congested areas. So that alleviated some of it but they also went to work on who they saw as the groups that they were having trouble. And the FBI, you know, they made… J. Edgar Hoover made his career sort of like fighting communists and then a little bit the mafia but they really fought us man, the really fought us and they fight us now. It was determined when Coretta, the late Coretta King died that the FBI had been following her and spying on her right up until her death. I cut the thing right out of the newspaper, right up to her death. So they really went to work on us. That I believe explains some of the slow down. Some people decided, "Hey man this is a little bit too dangerous and certainly I don't want my children going to go to prison." We've got a lot of political prisoners locked up right today. The most noteworthy is Jamal but there are many others right here in Texas and across the country and in Louisiana. So there were some people that determined "wait this is a little bit too dangerous I don't want to do this." Also, some of the opportunities that were forced open siphon off people who, you know, saw careers where they didn't see careers before. So they had that path and they were kind of lost to us. Some of them felt, "Ok when I get in here I'm still going to turn around and give back" and some of them do. But for the most part I peg my examination on this: Ebony magazine used to do a survey starting with I think, after the Montgomery bus boycott. They would ask black students, especially when black students started going to schools other than historically black schools. "Do

you feel an obligation to give back to your community? Do you owe your community?" Every year up until (and I read this and it really stuck with me) up until somewhere in the 70's, every year the response was overwhelmingly "Yes." Somewhere in the '70's for the first time they said, "No we don't owe anybody anything." I think coupled with two things: 1) the failure on our part to really connect our young people with their history and the history of what had happened before and 2) the opportunities that they saw and this whole notion (not just with black folk but with white folk too) "I've gotta get rich." We come through a period of what do they say, the "me" generation?

We come through a period where everybody thinks that you can possibly be you know somewhat like one of these very rich like Bill Gates, somewhere in that area and of course black folk became CEO's of some corporations that never happened before. So that kind of thing held out a pool. But I think the biggest part was that we didn't… my lifelong commitment came after I looked at the lives of other people and what they had done, that made me feel obligated. I think we dropped the ball with a couple of generations now. People who are in their 40's, people who are in their 30's are not as connected who may not know who Ida B. Wells was and what she did, Fannie Lou Haman and what she did. So don't… they may more have a feeling of entitlement rather than obligation. I think that is on us and we've got to correct that. Because I think it's only when you understand your place in history, your place on a movie set, your role. Why are you here? How did you get here? It is only when you understand that I believe that you become very useful to our struggle understanding that you will not be here always but it is important in terms of what you do while you are here and especially given our past, given what has happened to us. The other day (and I didn't know this) the

Chronicle ran this front page story of this brother who tried to be a pilot with Continental. They wouldn't allow him to be an airline pilot anywhere but he sued and it took him about 6 years in the Supreme Court and he is dead now and they named a plane after him. But they talked about the hardships after being denied he wound up washing milk cans or something. This brother became a brilliant pilot. So when young folk know that when you see yourself walking down the hall in one of these corporate buildings and you are feeling so good about your preparation and your place in life, understand how you got there. Understand that they weren't waiting all these years for your brilliant self. That there were a whole lot of people who could have done that, who weren't allowed to do that but somebody had to go on the cross for you to be able to.

I think we've been slack in getting that, and of course we had help because we had the mass media, especially the electronic media just fills our days and all our space with all this stuff. You know all this stuff on TV that doesn't leave a lot of room for the kind of conversation and attention that I think we should be paying to other things. So that means we have to work doubly hard to get through the clutter and not just wait for February to tell our young people about George Washington Carver and his accomplishments. I also point out that in all of his accomplishments brother Carver decided not to get a patent on any of that so we didn't get a chance to benefit from all of those things. So we have to correct that kind of stuff. Certainly people patted him on the back and gave him a lot of accolades but anyway, I think that that's… but I'm hopeful because I went to Jena, Louisiana and I saw those young folk and I know that young folk are equipped with two things that I didn't possess. They were born with all of this knowledge about our past and at their fingertips. You hit a computer and… I pulled up a

thing the other day on Dr. King. I was going to go to a speaker about Dr. King on a birthday thing and so I was getting some stuff and I hit Dr. King and man you could sit there all day long and look at stuff on Dr. King there is so much. So I didn't have it, I had to go get a book and many of the books had not been written of course the books that he wrote had been written I could read him. Also, young folk now aside from having the ability to get all of this information, you were born in a time when many young people don't have built in a sense of inferiority. They feel equal to anybody on the globe so… and I didn't (and I didn't know that I didn't) but until I came into contact with other people it dawned on me that my brain was as good as anybody else's but I didn't know that. So young folk have these things going for them and we should… but I'm hopeful even though the activities that I was involved in and solved then I don't see it duplicated but I know that there are people who are slowly, quietly working. I'm involved with a lot of them so I know they are. I know that the thing the spiritual thing that you all do with capture an era. How many of us have ever heard of that? Let me just say this in ending, to show you have we've really, really short-changed.

When I grew up watching TV one of the favorite programs on TV was a show called I Love Lucy. The star of the show Lucille Ball was actually married and on the show married to a guy named Rickey Ricardo. Rickey Ricardo was from Cuba. Ricky Ricardo used to be on the shows, a lot of times they show him with his musical aggregation. He would be playing this conga drug, big old drum. In playing he would be saying "Babalu!" and it never dawned on me I never knew who Babalu was until my daughter pointed out because she… her major was in Spanish her minor was in African presence and contribution in Latin America. She said, "Daddy Babalu was a Yoruba

God." I said, "God?" "From Nigeria, from West Africa, from Ghana it's Yoruba. Babalu was one of the Gods." So I didn't know anything about Santería and I didn't know anything about that. So I'm looking at this growing up at me saying Babalu and he's talking about us. I had no idea. So that is what we have to fight through, understanding who we are in history and who we are in the world.

EW: Alright well that's about it. I want to thank you so much.

EK: Oh well I enjoyed it naturally.

End of interview