

Interviewee: Edwards, John

Interview: July 17, 2006

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
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Interview with: Joan Edwards

Interviewed by: J.R. Wilson

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JRW: Today's date is Monday, July 17, 2006. Can you tell me your name?

JE: Joan Edwards.

JRW: Joan Edwards. When were you born, if you don't mind me asking?

JE: I was born July 17, 1945. I am 61 today.

JRW: That was a good year. You are doing well. You could have fooled me. Oh, today? Happy birthday.

JE: Thank you.

JRW: As a matter of fact, happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you. It is neat to live that long and to be in good health and all of those things. This is J.R. Wilson. I am here with Joan Edwards to discuss her life and in particular, her experiences as an

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attorney here in Houston with what we will refer to as the Sisters in Law law firm and I think that we will start simply by just kind of going back 61 years and just kind of see where Joan Edwards began. Where were you born and reared?

JE: I was born in Fort Watauga, Arizona. My father was in the Army, stationed in Fort Watauga. I was raised in Marshall, Texas, east Texas.

JRW: What did he do in the Army?

JE: Well, he had a clerical position.

JRW: Was he a World War II vet?

JE: Korean conflict.



JRW: Are your parents still alive?

JE: No. Neither.

JRW: Do you have kids?

JE: I have two children, two daughters, one 41 and one 39. And I have two granddaughters, one 20 and one 10.

JRW: A full tribe!

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JE: No boys.

JRW: I guess it kind of makes it easier then. So, you were raised in Marshall, did you say?

JE: Exactly.

JRW: Where did you go to school in Marshall?

JE: I graduated from Pemberton High School which was the only high school for black children at that time.

JRW: So, it was segregated then?

JE: Yes. I graduated high school in 1962.

JRW: Let me ask you about your experience briefly in Marshall and living under segregation, having graduated from high school in 1962. Were there any experiences that stick out in your mind today from having lived under apartheid in the 1950s and 1960s in Marshall, Texas, or is there any one instance that just has stayed with you?

JE: No, not really. Not from high school. We really lived sort of a sheltered existence. We attended schools where there were all black teachers and you know, I actually remember that whole experience in Marshall as very warm, very hospitable, you know, friendly, a good place to raise children. I actually had my first time being called “nigger” in my first year in college. I was at the University of Texas. You know, up until then, I hadn’t had any such problem.

JRW: O.K. That is intriguing. I guess that is part of the fact that our communities under segregation were self-contained.

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JE: Exactly.

JRW: Socially and, to a great degree, economically.

JE: Yes. Things were a lot simpler, a lot safer then. When we weren't at school, we were playing in our neighborhoods. Everybody went to church on Sunday and it was all very comfortable.

JRW: Were there a lot of kids in the neighborhood?

JE: Oh, yes. It seemed like almost every house had a child about my age. It was a time where we really weren't concerned about locking doors at night, locking cars ever. So, I have very, very fond memories.

JRW: Was public transportation in Marshall segregated? I guess we have to go back and clarify that Marshall, in terms of the size of that city, roughly what size city are we talking about?

JE: I think we are talking about 20,000, 25,000 people.

JRW: As it would have been even when you were a kid and as it is probably today.

JE: Right.

JRW: Kind of like my hometown back in Illinois. It has been 30,000 forever. What portion of the community were African American were living in Marshall?

JE: You know, I don't know specifically but you know, I would give a guess, 20%, 30%.

JRW: Was public transportation on the buses and stuff, was that segregated?

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JE: You know, I never rode the bus but, of course, it was segregated. I am talking back in the late 1940s and 1950s.

JRW: Was there a movie house separate for the African American community?

JE: The movie house was downtown and the black kids sat upstairs.

JRW: In the balcony?

JE: The whites sat downstairs and we sat upstairs.

JRW: Did you enter through the same entrance as the white community, do you remember?

JE: That, I really don't remember. But I do remember the separation of floor.

JRW: Actually, this is a good place to . . . you can see better from up there, you know? I think the powers that be thought they were doing somebody a disfavor but actually, I think it worked out sitting in the balcony for most folks. So, why UT? Was it UT Austin?

JE: UT Austin. Because it was a place my mother was willing to let me travel to. The second reason was . . . actually, my priority . . . I wanted to be away from home. I lived in the shadow of Wiley College. Their campus was like in my front door. And I was so afraid that my mother was going to insist that I go to Wiley. She was willing to let me go as far as Austin. I was truly excited to be able to leave home.

JRW: My stepfather went to Wiley back in the 1930s, in fact, from East St. Louis, Illinois, and so that was my first . . . as a matter of fact, I still have his typewriter from Wiley College and it is over at the typewriter shop on Dowling being restored right now.

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What was your favorite class in high school?

JE: I can't really think of a class that I didn't enjoy. I was class valedictorian and so I did well.

JRW: O.K. You liked school?

JE: Yes. I hated for Friday at 3:30 to come. I hated it. Saturday and Sunday just . . . I wanted to pass as soon as possible. I really did.

JRW: That is interesting. So, when you went to UT, you went up there to study what?

JE: Well, I was undeclared of the major. I really didn't know what I wanted to do when I first started. I ended up with two degrees in speech pathology and audiology and in my first career, I worked with young children with speech and hearing problems.

JRW: Oh, O.K. Where did you do that? Here in Houston?

JE: At the Medical Center.

JRW: And so, what happened along your career path then?

JE: Do you mean, why have I had 3 careers?

JRW: Yes, what happened after audiology? What happened to change you from audiology?

JE: Well, I am just going to be terribly honest. I went through a traumatic divorce and I did not feel that I was adequately represented by my attorney and I wanted to remedy that situation. If I ever had that kind of problem again or any sort of legal problem, I wanted to know, I wanted to understand the legal system better. So, after

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working for, I guess, 4 or 5 years as a speech therapist, I went back to school and entered TSU School of Law.

JRW: And you did go to, was it Thurgood Marshall at the time?

JE: No, it was not. I believe my class was the last class to graduate before the new Thurgood Marshall School of Law was established.

JRW: What was it called?

JE: Well, it was just TSU School of Law, and we had classes in Hannah Hall.

JRW: Is that right?

JE: Yes.

JRW: Who was your favorite instructor?

JE: Well, Earl Carl. Earl Carl was the blind torts teacher.

JRW: He could not see?

JE: He had graduated from Yale. No, actually, he came in class every day with a seeing eye dog. He had a great command of his subjects. His class was just most interesting. But, you know, TSU had some wonderful teachers in law school. Earl Carl is the one that I remember the most.

JRW: Right. Did you specialize or find any particular area more interesting in law school than any other?

JE: Again, I liked the whole shebang. There was something very exciting, very stimulating about the study of law and the use of the Socratic method. I liked the idea

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that exam time, I would just be given a problem and a blank sheet of paper. I wasn't required to remember any specific details. You got the problem and if you could think your way through to a logical conclusion, you know, then you got a good grade. I loved that and that was the way we were taught in really all of the courses.

JRW: There is a notion somewhere in some quarters of the community that TSU School of Law is, in comparison to some others outside of TSU, less than or not as great as. In your experience as both a student and in your experience in practicing the law, in your experience in dealing with other people who have come out of TSU School of Law, do you find any credence in that notion of TSU School of Law being "second rate" or "less than" or what have you?

JE: Well, you know, now this was some years ago. I was at TSU from 1971 to 1974 and I really probably can't make a comparison in terms of experience as a student because I was only a student at TSU but in terms of lawyers that I have known beyond school, I couldn't say that any of them were any better prepared than the TSU graduate.

JRW: Would we assume, or in your experience, and certainly your experience having come out of an African American high school, having gone to a predominantly white – UT . . . in terms of the care and the education at TSU, I guess that is saying good, better, best, and that African Americans have to do 110%. Was that the general feeling and environment that also was part of preparing you as young African American lawyers to go out into a society, out into a hostile environment? Did you get a sense of that coming through TSU or was that part of your consciousness of your training or anything? Do you know what I am asking? Do you get a sense of my question?

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JE: You are asking if the faculty was purposely trying to prepare us for a more hostile environment. Is that what you are saying?

JRW: Yes, or that to make you aware that as African American lawyers, you know, that you had a road to hoe.

JE: Sure. Of course that was true. Of course, I found that. But TSU had several white faculty members at that time. But definitely, as I think back over the Earl Carls and the James Douglass and Mr. Henderson and I can't think of the dean of the law school at the time but yes, I definitely got that feeling – that they were very nurturing and they were probably overly patient with us and they took their time to explain. Yes, I would say I had that feeling about TSU.

JRW: When you came out of TSU, what was your first move when you graduated TSU law? What was that feeling like to actually stand there . . .

JE: Oh, it was wonderful! But, you know, I went to school every summer so I actually graduated one semester early and what was doubly great was that I got my bar results back the same time that I got the degree and, you know, it is like 1,000 pounds off your back because the work is so intense to get through law school, especially that first year. You are studying 40 to 60 hours a week just in the books. You know, the load lightens up as you get towards the senior year but yes, it was just great. The first thing I did, of course, was to start applying for jobs. I thought that I wanted to work in one of the big firms downtown and no, I didn't get hired by any of the big firms downtown.

JRW: Was that feasible at that time for an African American woman?

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JE: I thought it was. I mean, you know, you asked me the question if I thought we were as well-prepared as any other attorneys and sure, I thought we were.

JRW: Were there any, to your recollection?

JE: No, but it came within a few years that there were blacks being hired by the big law firms downtown but most of them, at first, didn't come from TSU. People even that had gone to Howard or some of the other big law schools.

JRW: Right. Columbia or wherever?

JE: Right. Of course, they got hired downtown. So, it was a problem but I think now, it is not as much of a problem to see a TSU lawyer being hired.

JRW: Do you think that it worked out that you didn't get hired at one of those big firms in terms of how life unfolded?

JE: Of course! It has all worked together for the good. It has all made me the person I am. You need to deal with a few rejections. You need to know how to come back from those rejections. I also applied at some black law firms and I didn't get hired. So, what we did, 5 of us, 5 women: Bernie, Edwards, Hall, Hartsfield and Scott, we got together and formed our own firm.

JRW: Was this your first law practice?

JE: Yes. We worked together for a short while because what happened was we did this like first out of law school but in a minute, I was hired by the city attorney's office and I got a job as an assistant city attorney. This was a salaried job, unlike the law firm, you know, and I had two children to support so I found myself spending more time, of

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course, working with the city.

JRW: The firm was called with your names?

JE: Yes.

JRW: And it was what again?

JE: Burney, Edwards, Hartsfield, Hall and Scott.

JRW: O.K. That is impressive. I like the sound of that. What was the impetus for forming this firm and I guess, in particular then, you and Zinetta Burney, now Judge Burney, did you got come out of law school in that same general time period?

JE: Yes, we all graduated in 1974.

JRW: Oh, O.K. The same class?

JE: Well, no. Now, Zinetta may have come out a semester or so ahead of us.

JRW: But all within that same general . . .

JE: Yes. But Algenita, Haroldeen, Shelvlin and I, we all are 1974 graduates.

JRW: O.K. What was the impetus? How did it come about? What were those earliest conversations about getting together? What were the seeds?

JE: Well, now, I can't really remember exactly. Remember, this was some 30 some years ago. But we had seen each other either at bar review courses because, of course, Algenita graduated from Howard. Haroldeen graduated from a law school away from here.

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JE: Yes. I know she went to Wayne [State University] but I am not quite sure where she went. But anyway, so we had begun to see each other socially and, as I say, bar review courses. And maybe starting with the Houston Lawyer's Association which is the black lawyers group, we had begun to get to know each other. Of course, we all recognized a need in Acres Homes and we women liked each other and wanted to work together and to see if we could make some change in the Acres Home community. We knew that there was a great need out there.

JRW: Acres Homes on the north side of town?

JE: Yes.

JRW: It is a traditionally African American community?

JE: Yes.

JRW: And so, that was then the focus of the service that you put together?

JE: Yes.

JRW: What did you hope to accomplish in Acres Home that you felt needed to be accomplished or what need were you trying to meet in that community that had not been met?

JE: Well, of course, you know, we were young and maybe somewhat naïve but we figured we could handle all of their legal needs from criminal to family law to helping them deal with contracts or helping taxes, form companies or whatever. We just wanted to be a resource, you know, wanted to be an asset for the black community.

JRW: And so, what happened?

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JE: Well, we got a building and set up shop in a very small building right next to a barber shop.

JRW: What street was that on, do you remember?

JE: I have forgotten the name of the street. It is just that I can't call it. But I can see it. But Al Hopkins, if anybody old is listening, will probably remember him and it was right behind his pharmacy. But, as I say, it actually didn't last very long. We had a few clients come in but it seems like each one of us one by one was called to different places. Algenita was hired by Shell and everybody seemed to recognize that we needed to make more money than the law firm was making, that we weren't really able to support ourselves doing that. So, as each one of us got a salary position, then we started doing other things.

JRW: What was your area of expertise with the firm?

JE: Well, I saw myself as willing to take on any and every . . . whatever came through the door, you know, that we'd be willing to take on. And so, we didn't really get far enough to say, well, O.K., she'll do divorces, she'll do criminal. We thought we could do it all.

JRW: I remember that feeling. In fact, when I was in Memphis, I had a theater and an art gallery and I was on the radio. I remember one night, it was a couple of nights before getting a show up and they were putting wallpaper up on the scenery, you know, and I had to go get on the air. So, I am telling everybody, well look, I'll be back, and they are all looking at me like, you know, good-bye. Go on. Mr. Superman trying to do everything. So, yes. How did you, in fact, balance out, if you had a full-time gig with

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the City of Houston, what did you spend evenings at the firm?

JE: Yes, we tried that at first. Just having a part-time presence there.

JRW: Was it walk-in or did you guys . . .

JE: Oh, yes, just would be glad to see anybody coming in to use our services.

JRW: How did people find out about you?

JE: You know, I have sort of forgotten whether we did much advertising but they did a big spread on us in *Ebony* and I can't even remember when that happened - whether it was in the middle of our leaving or it might have even come after. I forgot.

JRW: So then, well, not after you left because I guess it wasn't so much leaving as it was, as you said, more and more of your time just simply was absorbed by the job responsibilities and all . . . were there any notable cases or experiences that did come out of Sisters-in-Laws as the firm is affectionately referred to?

JE: You know, I hate to say no but I really can't think of anything extraordinary. The few people who came in just had everyday kinds of family law problems. Maybe a criminal matter here and there.

JRW: How did you determine your scale? How did you determine what your charges were and all? Did you have a basic \$200 an hour kind of fee?

JE: Yes, we had that figured out and we were charging probably what every other black lawyer was charging at the time for our services but I can't remember what that was.

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JRW: Was it also maybe a sliding with people who couldn't afford . . .

JE: Oh, yes. Oh, exactly. We weren't trying to get rich out there.

JRW: It was a mission?

JE: Right. We, as I said, wanted to be an asset. We wanted to be a resource. It was a pro bono, I am sure of that. No, we weren't trying to charge the highest prices in the city! We realized that.

JRW: So, around this time, you are primarily with the City of Houston as an assistant city attorney. And this would be 1976-ish, 1977-ish?

JE: Well, I graduated in 1974. Right.

JRW: So right around 1975, 1976?

JE: Exactly.

JRW: Were there other African Americans in the city attorney's office at this time?

JE: No, there were not.

JRW: Are you historic in that?

JE: Well, that is what they say. That is how it appeared in a newspaper article or two.

JRW: That you are our first African American in the DA's office?

JE: City Attorney's office.

JRW: Was that significant to you in and of itself?

JE: Right, in that I certainly wanted to be known for doing a good job, you know, I

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wanted to represent well.

JRW: Represent the African American community?

JE: Exactly.

JRW: I guess my question is you were conscious of the significance of your, as an African American, being hired as assistant city attorney in terms of the precedent that you were setting?

JE: Well, I guess, but my emphasis was definitely on doing a good job, as I say, representing the community well. Maybe I really was, to some extent, but I don't think it was the biggest thing on my mind.

JRW: It was about look, I got a job, let me do it?

JE: Yes.

JRW: And let me keep this job - whether I am first, second, tenth or twentieth! Yes. O.K. And so, then, what would your responsibilities have been in that job?

JE: O.K. I was hired as a part of the administrative section of the City Attorney's office and basically, I was hired to do ordinance drafting and interpretation of certain ordinances. But it was administrative and it really didn't allow me much time in court. But where there were matters of deed restrictions that needed to be litigated, then that was an assignment that I . . .

JRW: What was that environment like for you as an African American in an all white professional environment. . .

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JE: It was not really that comfortable for me. You know, I think the people there went out of their way to make me comfortable but, you know, I really didn't like to be singled out. I would have been much more comfortable had it been thoroughly multicultural, let me say, or diverse.

JRW: Were there ever any situations where it was just overt racism jumped up in your face in terms of your job dealings?

JE: No. I really, even to this day, have the feeling that they bent over backwards. If there was work to go out to the secretarial pool, it seemed like they worked real hard to get mine back out to me on a timely basis and I had a very understanding supervisor. And actually, the city attorney at that time was Jonathan Day, the mayor was Hofheinz, and everybody was extremely cordial.

JRW: When you refer to your supervisor, are you referring to Jonathan Day?

JE: No, well, there was a person between us - his name was Alan Lemon - and he was the head of my section. He was the head of the administrative section.

JRW: O.K., and so how long were you in that capacity?

JE: I think I worked as an assistant city attorney, I want to say maybe 3, 4 years. And then, one of my assignments was to draft the Fair Housing ordinance for the City. And after that job was done, I became the assistant director of the Fair Housing office so I left the City Attorney's office.

JRW: So now, in dealing with the issues of fair housing, were you not only in a job but again, having a mission? Did you have a sense that it was more . . .

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JE: Oh, yes, even more so. I figured we had a strong ordinance and we were going to be able to root out some of the very prevalent housing discrimination, especially in the large apartment complexes where people would just outright tell the black applicant there was nothing available and then the next few minutes, show the apartment to the white applicant. I thought we would really be able to make a dent.

JRW: And so, what happened?

JE: Well, we weren't able to make much of a dent. The owners of these large apartments were, of course, very well politically connected. As it turns out, many of them made large contributions to the various candidates downtown. And so, we found it very difficult to weed out much discrimination.

JRW: What was your function again? What was your job title?

JE: I started as the assistant director of the Division and, in a couple of years, I became the director of the Fair Housing Division.

JRW: And how long were you at that post?

JE: Five years.

JRW: Whose administration did that take you into?

JE: First it was Hofheinz. After Hofheinz, it was McConn and after McCann, it was Kathy Whitmire.

JRW: Were you able to see differences in those different administrations?

JE: Not really. If anybody seemed to, at least, speak . . .

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JRW: Lip service?

JE: Right. Lip service is the word . . . it was Mr. McConn. Of course, Hofheinz was, I think, primarily responsible for hiring me as assistant city attorney but yes, they were all pledged to support the ordinance but it seemed that Jim McConn really went out of his way to . . .

JRW: To implement . . .

JE: Exactly.

JRW: And after him perhaps not quite the political will that you had seen with McConn.

JE: Yes.

JRW: In your division, in your Fair Housing division, were you able to affect some change? Let me rephrase that, I guess. Was that a new division when you first came in as assistant?

JE: Oh, there was not even an ordinance.

JRW: O.K., so you drafted both?

JE: Yes.

JRW: Was that your primary responsibility, was drafting that ordinance?

JE: Exactly.

JRW: Can I say that you drafted the ordinance?

JE: Well, I am sure I had some help.

JRW: Right. O.K., and then you had the opportunity to work to try to actually

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implement that ordinance?

JE: Exactly.

JRW: Were you able to bring other people of color into that department?

JE: Into that division, yes. It was entirely . . . well actually, there were 9 employees and I am sure two-thirds of them were black but in order to be effective, you had to have white, Mexicans because it depended on who was being discriminated against and you would have to have enough investigators to go out and pose as home speakers or partner speakers. So, it had to be diverse.

JRW: Were you able to, in fact, though, win some cases or to effect some change or to...

JE: Sure.

JRW: Dent it, here and there?

JE: Exactly. We did achieve some results. We worked really closely with the Houston Board of Realtors and we got them to emphasize fair housing with their membership. Their big sign on the freeway, we got them to put the fair housing logo on their big sign. We got them to add the logo to all their advertising in the newspapers. And we did a similar thing with the Houston Apartment Association. The big problem though was that when you are trying to implement a city ordinance, there is not much in the way of fines that can be imposed.

JRW: Enforcement?

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JE: Right. And so, the property owner could come down and pay . . . the maximum fine was maybe \$500 or \$1,000. But, you know, that could be just like yearly dues. You could just come and pay that and just go about your merry way discriminating how ever you wanted to. So, it didn't have that much teeth in terms of the actual punishment.

JRW: Yearly due.

JE: Yearly dues to discriminate . . .

JRW: To the exclusion club. That is interesting. That is a small price to pay to keep your environment lily white.

JE: Yes, but that is how it is with the City ordinance, you know.

JRW: Without enforcing it.

JE: Well, we are not really talking about a felony or a crime. It is just a violation of a city ordinance which is a low level misdemeanor. But the cases that we thought were really meritorious, of course, we advised the applicant to file in federal court because there was the Federal Fair Housing law in place, to actually get some damages.

JRW: It is interesting . . . you are mentioning getting that logo . . . what did the logo say?

JE: It was a house with an equals sign.

JRW: Oh, it is just a house with an equals sign?

JE: Yes.

JRW: And is there a phrase that goes with that equal housing opportunity?

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JE: Equal Housing Opportunity. Right.

JRW: I guess it is interesting here in 2006 when we see that, we don't even think that there was a process that had to be gone through and pressure applied to get that notice publicly displayed.

JE: Oh, very much so.

JRW: And what that represents, the reason that that exists, O.K., why that logo is even needed, why that statement is even needed and so, again, what was required for people to go through, the effort necessary, in order to get that publicly displayed, to make that statement publicly.

JE: Exactly. It took a little arm twisting, negotiating, some long meetings.

JRW: Who would be in those meetings? Like you said, people from the Houston Realtors . . .

JE: Right, and the Houston Apartment Association. And we also worked with builders.

JRW: That is interesting. So, you are down there blazing and pioneering trails and stuff in the City Attorney's office and in Housing and all. What transpires that takes you away from that?

JE: O.K., well, again, I am going to be very honest.

Side 2

JE: What happens to change the course of my life at that point and lead me to my third career? Well, my mother died of breast cancer and I watched her as she went

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through, you know, the radical mastectomy, the chemo, the radiation, and you know, at some level, you have to know there has got to be a better way to deal with this. And so, I started reading all the holistic health literature that I could, alternative ways of treating these catastrophic diseases and I really developed interest in herbs, nutrition, alternative health care strategies. And so, at the end of my ninth year with the City of Houston, if I would have stayed one more year, my retirement would have been vested . . . I am just saying to let you know how excited I was about getting out to study holistic health full time . . . so I went to Utah and got a certificate, master of herbology but I knew that wasn't enough to hang on a shingle.

JRW: What does one have to do . . .

JE: I went and studied with John Christopher who wrote several books on herbs and nutrition and I studied with him and learned the various herbs that he used for different types of disorders and just sort of did an internship, sort of an apprenticeship there. Then, I had to write this long paper and I actually had to come back to Houston and scout herbs that are native to Houston and what they could be used to treat, what disorders. And read a lot of books. Anyway, that resulted in that certificate. I knew it all along - I couldn't make a living counseling people on herbs and nutrition, so I started chiropractic school. Chiropractic is noninvasive and primarily focused on musculoskeletal disorders and we learned how to treat those musculoskeletal disorders in a noninvasive way, without drugs, of course without surgery. We are only licensed to treat with our hands and the various physical therapy modalities. So, that, along with my knowledge of herbs and nutrition, it gives me a license to practice.

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JRW: When did you make that transition?

JE: I started chiropractic school in 1983. So, I spent really 9 years at the City, 1974 to 1983. And I have been doing this chiropractic now ever since. What is that? Almost 21 years.

JRW: My son was born in 1985 and he is 21.

JE: Well, I actually graduated chiropractic school in 1986 and I started this practice in 1987.

JRW: O.K., so nearly two decades. How has it been?

JE: The best thing I have ever done. Well, not really. I have enjoyed everything that I have done but this practice allows me . . .

JRW: You can't take it back.

JE: I don't want anybody to think I didn't enjoy the law or the City. This, I get to do out of my own little space. This allows me to form relationships and most of them long-term relationships with patients. Chiropractic lends itself to getting to know your patients really well. You know, you work on backs, you work through tight muscles and people are just so glad to have some way to get rid of these aches and pains in a noninvasive way.

JRW: But it is very intimate. Noninvasive but intimate and that is pretty intriguing in itself, to be able to have an intimate relationship with your healer but not a physically invasive relationship necessarily.

JE: Yes, it is a very hands-on kind of thing and the patients really appreciate that.

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JRW: There are a couple of things I am really curious about. Why did you choose this location which is here in Third Ward on the branch, cater-corner from MacGregor Elementary School here on that northwest corner cater-corner from MacGregor Elementary School? Why did you choose this location?

JE: Well, Third Ward is really the only place I ever thought of working. I wanted to be, again, in the black community.

JRW: Did you live in this area when you were with the City?

JE: No, actually, I couldn't afford it. I tried to get one of these big old houses back then but I ended up in the Brentwood area in a much smaller house. You know, I was determined to get here for a practice and identified this old house, fell in love with this old house.

JRW: Why?

JE: Well, because it is beautiful and it has lovely wood floors. It has sort of an interesting history but it is just beautiful. It's got lots of curb appeal.

JRW: What is its interesting history?

JE: Well, I didn't know this at the time I was negotiating on the house but I have had several people come by and tell me of times that they were in the house, specifically in the basement at parties given by Joe Brown who was the lightweight world champion boxer at the time.

JRW: Is he African American?

JE: Yes, he is black. And apparently he used to give big parties down here in the

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basement and, in fact, there are still signs of it. The support beams have tables built around them where they used to play cards. It is just a wonderful house. Almost everybody who walks in here for the first time says they feel something special in this place. And after almost 20 years, it is filled now with loads of memories. A lot of my children's stuff is in the basement, grandkids stuff is everywhere and books left over from the book store which was a brief chapter in my life.

JRW: Where is that book store chapter? As a matter of fact, I noticed your email address.

JE: Yes, Black Books which is left over from those days.

JRW: I really like that. To be able to have that, that email address, I can assume that that email address will be passed on down through the Edwards line.

JE: Yes, we have had it since . . . it was the very first one when we first got a computer and internet and everything - we started with that address.

JRW: Is there some love of books that is in you?

JE: Well, yes, for sure. I wanted the community to have a similar love. And so, we opened Sankofa Books.

JRW: Where was that?

JE: It was on the corner of Wichita and San Jacinto. I am thinking we opened in late 1993 because by late 1996, we were already closed. But it was a great experience. As I said, I just kind of wanted to share our love of books, especially books about black people. We had thousands of volumes of books that were written by and about black

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people. But after all, a business is a business and it was very hard to compete with the big book stores which, by then, were getting their own black sections.

JRW: I was just thinking that that same market that would come into your book store, I know I bought books there. We would have been the same customers who would have gone to Whole Foods over on Shepherd and then as that moves out, then we end up going to the book store that is . . . I guess actually the book store and the old theater was next door.

JE: To Whole Foods. It is still there but, you know, it has been bought by one of the big chains.

JRW: One of the big ones. But just in terms of your market and if I go into Whole Foods to buy some garlic and I come out, I am going to wander into the book store and hang out and a book that maybe I would have bought from your store, I may, in fact, end up buying there so that would be, in fact, a . . . for a small independent . . .

JE: Right but, you know, then was a time when people were starting to buy books over the internet. Amazon.com was not far behind. And I think a lot of people do that now. I really think that is where it has evolved today. As I go now to these big Borders and Barnes & Nobles, you know, the black book sections are dwindling. They are not as big as they were when we had our store.

JRW: As well as what they are carrying.

JE: Yes. So, I think people who are reading are ordering and having it delivered to their home. The same with the music. You can't go very few places now and buy your

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music off the shelf.

JRW: Right. So, you closed that business then in the 1990s?

JE: Yes.

JRW: Was that painful?

JE: Well, in a way, yes. It was a dream. But I am very practical now when it comes to business. If you are not making what it takes to pay the bills, then you've got to move on and do something else. And I have really even had it in the back of my mind because I have got many books left because we have donated lots of them to the SHAPE Library.

JRW: SHAPE Community Center?

JE: Yes. But we've got some left. It is easy to have a business off the internet now. They made it really easy to sell books on the internet now.

JRW: Yes, as a matter of fact, in writing my manuscript, I decided I was going to buy all the books that were in my bibliography. So, one of the books that I ordered and lo and behold, I was in a meeting with somebody at U of H and it was with the person who I was trying to buy the book with over the internet, it was them. And so, they just brought the book the next day and said, "Here."

JE: Yes, it is an invaluable resource, especially for out of print. You can get the books from other countries if you have to.

JRW: So, are you still practicing law? Every once in a while?

JE: Not really. I have taken an inactive status. But my law license is still good. I

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could be active again if I wanted to. But no, I do really love what I am doing now.

JRW: And this is how you make your living?

JE: Right.

JRW: That is great. I think it is great whenever we can find our passion and actually that that passion generates revenue, the consequence of our passion being dollars and cents.

JE: Yes, that is an unbeatable combination.

JRW: Then it is not work. That is how I feel about teaching at the University. It simply is not work. It just isn't. Well, let's see - I am trying to think of any other good stuff to dig into that you might have to share with us. Well, is there anything else that comes to your mind?

JE: Well, I think when we started, you said this was sort of a telling of life story but I really think we have hit the high points. I feel very fortunate that I have been able to go down so many career paths, that I have been able to try new and different things. That has truly been a blessing. And still pay the bills. And also to raise two daughters. Now, I have a hand in raising two granddaughters. Truly, it has been a wonderful life. And here on my 61st birthday, I am more or less trying to do this part-time. I've got some other interests. I am helping one daughter develop a business right now. And to tell you the truth, I would rather be on a plane or a boat somewhere. I am getting to enjoy traveling. I have been fortunate enough to have traveled to every continent except Antarctica. I am planning to get to that one if only for a moment and with a great big coat on. I figure I have been to 35, 40 countries and I intend to get some more on that

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list. But it is good. Life is good.

JRW: Do you have a favorite city? Do you have a favorite top 3 or whatever of your travels actually outside of the country?

JE: Well, of course, I like to travel to West Africa. I have been there 12 or 13 times. I go now really to visit friends. But any country in Africa. And, of course, you know, right now, you have to go to the ones that are stable. But there is nothing better to me than somebody saying, "Let's take a trip."

JRW: Let's go!

JE: Right. Asia. I have been to Hong Kong, Beijing, Shang Hai. Then, Singapore. Thailand. Loved them all. Loved visiting the Asian countries.

JRW: As you compare our culture and society, or do you have to avoid that comparison as you travel, even though it is kind of a natural tendency but just in terms of going into other countries and remaining objective, remaining keeping things in relative terms as opposed to comparing everything to our United States existence. Do you find that, in fact, when you travel, it is not difficult for you to be as you had said earlier, in the moment, in that country, in that culture, and not wish that you were back home with a glass of ice water or back home with this or that or the other?

JE: Oh, no. I have no problem being in the culture. From Haiti which I think has probably been the most third world type conditions that I have seen . . . of course, I have seen similar conditions in Africa but no, I don't have any problem relating to people, conditions as they are. I like to go and I like to come back. I have a great joy in

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exploring new people, new cultures and places.

JRW: Do you speak any language?

JE: No. A little Spanish but not . . . and, you know, it is hard to go to a place where many people don't speak English. It is hard to find a place where people don't speak English. There is usually no language barrier.

JRW: Well listen, for the University of Houston Public History Program, Houston Oral History Project, we just want to thank you so much for taking the time, Joan Edwards, for allowing us into your home and for you sharing your recollections. What we will be doing is we will have this transcribed and get a copy to you so that you can have it for your own family archives.

JE: Well, thank you.

JRW: Also that this will then be going into the University of Houston's library. As a part of their expansion, they have created more archival space and so this will be going into the archives. And again, we just want to thank you so much for taking the time.

JE: O.K., well, thank you for your interest.

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