

Interviewee: Georgia Eugene

Interviewer: David P. Cline

Interview date: August 5, 2005

Location: Louisville, Kentucky

Length: 2 discs; approximately 1 hour and 23 minutes

### **START OF DISC 1, TRACK 1**

DC: Good morning. This is David Cline in Louisville, Kentucky for the Southern Oral History Program, Long Civil Rights Movement, and it is August the fifth, 2005. If you could just introduce yourself, that would be wonderful.

GE: I am Georgia Eugene. I am being interviewed.

DC: We'll start just with very basic background kind of information. If you could tell me where you were born and raised.

GE: I was born in Louisville, Kentucky and I was raised in Louisville, spent most of my life, all of my childhood really in what is called the Russell neighborhood now and moved later to Park Duvalle and now live in Hallmark.

DC: These neighborhoods then or now were largely black neighborhoods?

GE: Russell and Park Duvalle was largely a black neighborhood. Hallmark was racially mixed even then.

DC: And still?

GE: And still. It's becoming more and more black though.

DC: When did that start to change?

GE: Probably when there was a subdivision built here and probably back in, I would say somewhere in the 60s, 70s, somewhere in there.

DC: What schools did you attend?

GE: Most of the schools I attended are long since gone, James Bond Elementary, Western Elementary, Madison Junior High, and of course Central.

DC: And those first schools you mentioned are all closed?

GE: They're all closed, all but Central.

DC: And closed around—

GE: Well actually I was still in school when James Bond closed. James Bond was my first elementary school and it only went to grade four and then we transitioned into Western Elementary School. Western eventually closed and became Roosevelt Prairie. That happened in the Seventies. Madison Junior High, which was the name when I attended, became Russell Junior High and it was also closed in the 70s.

DC: Were those all-black schools all the way through?

GE: All the way through, all of my schools were. My whole experience was in all-black schools.

DC: So you graduated Central in what year?

GE: I didn't graduate Central. I quit Central in 1955. I later went back and got a high school diploma but I did not graduate from Central at that time.

DC: Okay. So what did you do at that time? Did you start working then?

GE: No, I got married. I got married. It's interesting for me because all of my life what I wanted to be was a mother. I never wanted to work. I didn't even consider working as what I was going to do. I was going to do have children. In all honesty, I wasn't going to get married and have children; I was going to have children. Of course, God saw fit that I got married. That was wonderful. In fact, I wanted children so bad, most of my mother's friends thought I would never have children, but I did; I had seven.

DC: They thought you wanted it too much?

GE: Thought I wanted them too much, yeah. I wanted to be a mother and no one ever told me well, you really need to be smart to be a mother. You need all the education you can get. Raising children is the most difficult occupation you can have. But nobody told me that.

DC: You figured that out on your own.

GE: I figured it out after I had some though! (laughter)

DC: I bet.

GE: Not before.

DC: So then your involvement in the school system really came about as a mother then, is that right?

GE: It began as a mother when my oldest son started school. I did the traditional thing, I joined the PTA and I began some involvement. But my real in-depth involvement came with the poverty program and Head Start and that's where I really got involved. I attended PTA meetings and I did some volunteer things, but it was in Head Start that I really got intimately involved in the school district. Probably that experience led me to get hired in 1970. By that time, I was chairman of the Russell Area Council and really involved in the whole community action scene. The school district was hiring community coordinators and I got hired as a community coordinator in the teacher corps program.

DC: In 1970 as a community coordinator?

GE: Mmm hmm. By that time, I knew that mothers had to work, especially mothers with as many children as I had. (laughter) I actually began working at Fawcett-Hanes United, which was a printing company here, and then I went to the Census Bureau and worked there for three years before I came to the school district.

DC: Okay. So that was your first [job?]

GE: Mmm hmm.

DC: But you were still volunteering?

GE: I was still volunteering all along within the schools and with the Russell Area Council. By that time, I had expanded. I was on the Legal Aid board. I was a part of the movement to begin the public defender program here.

DC: Tell me about getting involved in all these boards and volunteer activities. What made you want to get involved? Were there other people that sort of inspired you or got you going?

GE: I think that probably the most inspiration came from -- there was one person who was in Head Start who did parent work. Her name was Edith Ristow, but Edith was also a former school teacher. She really got me involved in what politics and social action had to do with Georgia Eugene raising her children, and all the things around me that impacted our lives and a lot of it had nothing to do with the fact that my husband worked and those kinds of things. That's what led to my involvement. Then there was Lucille Phillips and Marcia Jeff, who were at that time at the Plymouth Settlement House and they kept it going and kept it moving.

DC: What kind of things, you said politics and representing your family, what was important to you that you wanted to stand up for?

**END OF DISC 1, TRACK 1**

**START OF DISC 1, TRACK 2**

GE: I got concerned about the fact that I remember learning [phone begins to ring] about insurance and all the consumer affairs things and how decisions were made about how much insurance we would pay based on where we lived and about how poverty really

impacted—my husband worked and had what they considered a good job. We lived in a neighborhood that was not, that was still considered a poverty area and that everything was higher where we lived. I first got into what a lot of people get into. You go out of the neighborhood to purchase and then I soon realized that that was defeating my very purpose because the result of that was that stores in the neighborhoods would close. So it's like getting into trying to institute change where you live and not avoid it. That's the impetus of my— [phone still ringing]

DC: That was the inspiration.

GE: Yeah.

DC: So were there certain strategies that you used or plans for, I'm sure, for instituting change where you lived?

GE: I did not change where I lived, I would not. I liked where I lived. I liked the neighborhood. It was a very supportive environment for raising my children. Moving was not an option for me. I didn't think it was an option. Also I noticed that when the first wave of desegregation occurred, what they did was [they] took teachers from our schools that had masters degrees and sent us teachers with only emergency certificates. So it was all that kind of stuff. It kept impacting so you just kept dealing with the issues.

DC: So you would go and work with the administration—

GE: We worked with, for real, the Russell Area Council and worked through the administration.

DC: Was there a core group of parents?

GE: Well there was a core group of parents and community residents who dealt with issues. It became so many issues and so diverse that at some point you have to say I

can't do everything. I remember particularly when they were going to close Eleventh Street and we really—I don't believe this.

[conversation breaks off as someone knocks at the door]

**END OF DISC 1, TRACK 2**

**START OF DISC 1, TRACK 3**

GE: What we had learned that what the city planned to do was close Eleventh Street, which was next to Coleridge Taylor Elementary School. There was an apartment complex there at that time called Village West, so there would be no entrance from Thirteenth Street to Ninth Street into that apartment complex when they closed the street. So that was one of our major battles. And the interesting thing is at that time, I worked for the Louisville public school system and I was chairman of the Russell area council. And the area council was going to sue the city and the school district because they were in agreement on doing that. We won the battle, which elevated me in prominence because of the fight. I almost got the area council in trouble because by that time they didn't believe that you took on the city.

DC: So did you actually go to court or were they able to settle?

GE: No, we settled it out of court.

DC: So that was after you were already employed by the city?

GE: Mmm hmm.

DC: So you started as community—

GE: Not by the city, by the Louisville public schools, city school system, yeah.

DC: So you started as community coordinator in 1970 and under whose auspices and who was your employer?

GE: The employer was the Louisville public schools. The superintendent at that time was Neuman Walker. My immediate supervisor was Booker Rice.

DC: What were your first duties then?

GE: One of the things that they wanted with the teacher corps was trying to develop a core of teachers that were more responsive to the communities in which they served. They had long since given up on the idea of teachers coming from that community, but they wanted community coordinators that would be responsible for supervising the teachers corps interns in their community involvement and experience and arranging those experiences. I was hired to do that.

DC: And did that for how long?

GE: Well actually I did it for less than a year because there were six of us hired and Booker Rice, who was responsible for the whole teacher corps program, was our immediate supervisor and Booker decided that that was too much for him to take on, because he had to work with the two universities and work directly with developing different staffing and a whole lot of other issues. That aspect was too much. They decided to hire a senior community coordinator and then I became that person. The senior community coordinator supervised the other six.

DC: Wow. So you moved up quickly.

GE: I moved up quick because of Booker. In fact, I was the last one he met with and all the other five had recommended that I be the person. And so when he came to me, it was to really to offer me the job. From that, I moved into the Office of Organizational Development, because I had begun to participate in a lot of the in-service sessions.

DC: Was there ever, I mean you alluded to this already a little bit about Eleventh Street, but conflicts between your two roles, your employment and your community involvement?

GE: Yeah, several times. I was able to work with people and negotiate out the conflict.

DC: It was all about that navigating that. Did you have a strategy? How do you do that?

GE: Yeah. It worked because I kept getting out of trouble. I kept getting into it but I kept getting out! (laughter) And sometimes it's based on just like well she asked me, said, "What do you think about [this]? Not much." I mean, it's like, how do I take time and say more? So then hence the conversation, which led to other conversations also.

DC: So in 1975 when the busing plan came down, what were you doing at that time?

GE: It's another conflict period. Okay, let's go back a bit, if you don't mind.

DC: Sure. Yes, please.

GE: While I was chairman of the Russell Area Council, the Kentucky Civil Liberties Union began looking for an African-American group or organization to join them in the desegregation suit. At that time, I was also on the board of the NAACP, which eventually joined them in the suit. But I was also chairman of the Russell Area Council, which was one of the groups that they approached before they went to the NAACP and we refused to join them in the suit and gave the reasons why we did not think that it was appropriate, that what we were doing basically was changing the problem. Because the problem was not that black and white children didn't go to school together. The problem

was much deeper than that, and that we didn't see how putting black and white bodies in the same building would change the problem.

DC: The problem being?

GE: The problem being that we had still had [white] teachers on the emergency certificates when they have black teachers with masters degrees and years of experience. The problem being that a lot of the resources that were in predominately white schools or all-white schools were not in all-black schools and mixing the bodies [would only do so much]. I remember making the statement that if I only have hamburger to eat, it doesn't do me any good to go to your house where you serve steak and I still have to eat hamburger. So if you don't address the real issues, you know ... and that we have seen no evidence that anyone could manage, any school district actually managing that. We referred them to the book, *It's Not Our Fault in the South*, which was out at that time but not popular, been out of print for some time, I'm sure. What the book was basically saying, it was talking about second and third generation desegregation problems.

DC: Right.

GE: So then I was on the NAACP board and finally, and it was a real battle on the NAACP board whether or not to join them in the suit. They came to the NAACP later and they got into me again with the same [questions]. I mean, I'm who I am.

DC: So the NAACP didn't join?

GE: Yes, they did. I lost.

DC: You lost?

GE: I lose sometimes. (laughter)

DC: But you were chair of that board?

GE: No, I was just a board member. The position of the NAACP became simply that the Louisville chapter had to support the desegregation suit because that's what the national [NAACP] was supporting all over the country. So when the vote came out -- and it was so interesting, there was an article in the paper -- I think it was just Marguerite Harris and I who voted no. But they said in the paper that it passed, but Georgia Eugene and Marguerite Harris voted no. Didn't get me in trouble at that time with my job. But later, in '75 when the writ of mandamus came down from the Sixth Circuit Court that we had to desegregate, I was in the human relations department with the board and I was doing human relations training. Now remember that the city system was there. I was still the Senior Community Coordinator -- I believe that was still my title at that time -- but we had been ordered to merge with the county. No, we hadn't been ordered to merge. The city school district had voted to go out of business. Therefore, the County had to take it, that's what happened. I have to get my facts straight. So we were already reporting in and Bernard Minnis had come in, because since the school district, the Louisville system voted to go out of business, the position of the county was that means that all the county took over, so everybody who worked for the county took over the shop. So everything was run by the county. So that's how Bernard got to be my boss because he was a county employee.

DC: Got it.

GE: Okay.

DC: But you stayed in your position—

GE: Yeah, well, actually I got promoted. I was the only one who got promoted. It was so interesting because I was supposed to get fired because they said that the county system did not have anybody in an administrative position who did not have at least a

bachelors degree and I didn't have one. I was looking forward to getting fired and I decided what I would do is go back to school. I had worked it out, because I had worked through teacher corps and a lot of things with the universities and so I had made arrangements to go to attend U. of L.

DC: So you had gotten your high school diploma by that point?

GE: No, I didn't have to have it. It's some kind of test they usually give and I passed that and you could go to college. I had taken the test and passed it. I had taken the test before when I was still a community coordinator and passed it. And what happened is I got seven children, one of whom is very ill, a husband, a job, and going to school and all my other volunteering, and going to school—uh uh, I can't do it. I just can't do it. So at that time, I decided I couldn't do it. Well then, when I was going to lose my job, then I had time to do that. A lot of the issues that forced me to go to work were gone. I mean my son that was born with a birth defect, we had paid off all the bills so we were more solid with my husband's income.

DC: But your plan to get fired did not—

GE: Well, the writ of mandamus came down. Now in the city school system where I was working, that's when Barry Tripley was my main supervisor, we knew that the thing was in court, so we were making plans. I'm sure they were making plans in the county too, but we were making plans based on what if: if you have to do this. One of the things that we decided, Sarah Joe Hooper, who was over multicultural education in the city, had written a plan for Operation Hotline and it talked about opening up a rumor control network. I remember Betty in a meeting said to us, she gave us the plan that Sarah Joe had written and she had approved, and said if you had major problems with it, don't say that unless you had major problems. Well I was the one with major problems. I mean, I'm

Georgia. So I had gone to her and I said here's what I think the problems are and I don't even remember what they were at this time, but she agreed that they were major problems. She had called in Houston Conley to come in and work with us as a consultant, to have him work through some of those very issues. So he had come in and we had just completed the document when the writ of mandamus came in. By that time, Betty may even have gone. We had completed the document. Betty left us, started working at U. of K. We went through—June Key and I, have you interviewed June Key?

DC: My colleague, Joe, went out to talk with her the other day, yeah.

GE: I was on my way down the hall, ran into June, who was also on her way down the hall because we had heard the same information, we were both going to Bernard's meeting at that time. June that day was to have the PTA and the people at the People Committee, which was a group that June worked with it, bringing in somebody named Holliday from the Chamber of Commerce. We were all supposed to be in this big meeting. I told June, I think it's important that they go on with that meeting, but I also think that we need to open the hotline that day. We need to start rumors that we were not prepared to do that, but we needed to open it because the rumors were going to start the moment that got out. So that night, Louis Williams and I stayed and operated the hotline.

DC: That's really interesting. So you were there, I mean you knew that word would spread and get out of control and you were ready to—

GE: Yeah and from then on, I coordinated the hotline, June and I together. Our role together was to keep the volunteers flowing because we we stayed open all kinds of hours. It was crazy.

DC: What kinds of calls did you get?

GE: Everything. I remember (laughs) and forgot which one of the ladies was on there, and she got off the phone and she said, "I know who the niggers are, but who are the yaps?" I said, "You." (laughter) She said, "Who are the honkies?" I said, "You." (laughter)

DC: My goodness!

GE: She said, "I have never heard those terms in my life!" I had to commend her because she stayed on the phone and let the person just--. But she (laughs) was thoroughly confused. A lot of the calls really was trying to get the accurate information. "I really want to know what's going on!" But we got a lot of bomb threats, I mean everything, you name it, it was just open season. The interesting thing is like when most of the riots occurred, we could honestly trace the riot from its beginning through calls to the factline. The problem became they had a whole command center set up to deal with that. That's where we were supposed to report.

DC: With police and that kind of thing?

GE: Mmm hmm. But they were in denial. I remember when it [the violence] broke loose in Fern Creek and we kept getting the calls and we kept calling it in and they kept telling us there was not anything going on. Finally I talked to John Resher, who was the principal at Fern Creek and I said, "John, I keep calling the command center and they keep telling me nothing is going on, but yet I keep getting calls from your community that there's fires, all kinds of stuff." He said, "That command center is a damn liar. I've called them, I've told them, they know what's going on. There are fires," he said. "I've had to sneak the kids out of the building, da da da." He just went on and on and on. So the breakdown became that the command center didn't work. I think it didn't work because they expected trouble in the west end and that's not where it happened. I think that's what happened.

DC: That's interesting.

GE: Yeah, and the other thing: a lot of the riots that happened out Preston Highway and in southwest Jefferson County, actually people went from the east end down to those communities. We knew that through the factline because they were calling.

DC: So Fern Creek was one, Southern.

GE: Yeah.

DC: Where were the main—

GE: Terry Road. That was one of the main ones.

DC: But you felt that the police weren't really listening?

GE: Uh-uh. We believed [the callers.] And not every time we got a rumor, but when they keep coming from different sources. And then there were other things that we had. We had what we called Key Communicators around the communities so we would check out information with them and a lot of times they would confirm or deny "things are brewing." Sometimes, "I don't know what going on but something's not right out here."

DC: Right. I assume you had groups of black parents that were coming to you that were concerned about it.

GE: Oh yeah, of course. In fact, some people said I formed United Black Protective Parents. I did not really form it. I worked with them. I think you've also probably interviewed Benetha Ellis.

DC: Yeah.

GE: So you did that.

DC: I told you this was my third trip here, so that was one of my first interviews. I spoke with Ms. Ellis.

GE: Benetha was a member, but people would say she formed it and she didn't either. It was more like a catalyst. People came together. I was there. I started working with, especially after one of the major incidents on Terry Road, there were a group of parents who were really going to go to Terry Road to show that they weren't scared of white people. So they were going to take the route of confrontation.

DC: How did you know that they were going to do that?

GE: Once again, a call came into the hotline.

DC: Alright.

GE: And then at that time, the Justice Department was here. The Community Relations Service for the Justice Department was here and so sometimes we would get information through them and their sources. But we also got calls through the hotline. So I went down to the meeting and at this point not as a school district employee. I went down to the meeting as a parent concerned about my neighbors who were talking about going to southwest Jefferson County. My fear was so you have a confrontation and y'all shoot up each other. What happens to the kids? I mean, you know.

DC: Now who is meeting? Was this—

GE: It was not a group at this time. They later became the United Black Protective Parents. There was not a group of us, just a--. What made the situation worse is they were already meeting about the violence on Terry Road. Then a bus driver put kids off the bus.

DC: I remember that. I remember hearing about that, right.

GE: On the expressway. So that made it much worse.

DC: So these were just parents who sort of called an emergency meeting?

GE: Yeah, because we've got to do something. And their solution was to go into direct confrontation. Since I did believe direct confrontation would not work, I was there to

oppose that. Now I have to admit that see during this period, I didn't send my children to school. I mean I could not work with all those dynamics and worry about my kids personally. My belief at that time is that nobody was learning, be they black, white. Even the teachers who were trying to teach, one of the things that—

DC: So this is right at the beginning of the school year then?

GE: Yeah.

DC: Okay, so the school year had started, but—

GE: Yeah, it had started and we were having all kind of those issues.

DC: And you held your kids out.

GE: I held my kids out. (pause) Did I start out—I don't know what you want to be on your tape, but I need to go back.

DC: Yeah, please.

GE: I was talking about the conflict. The conflict became with the NAACP, with me being over the hotline and doing the human, because I was also over the human relations training, so I was doing human relations training. At that time, they didn't have any, I was over the training unit; that was my title at this point. They did not have any like the Gaines Academy and all this stuff, nothing was in existence. So we trained everybody, teachers, community, everybody. We were doing it all. So there were people who had real problems with me being in such a role, who was opposed to school desegregation. So if I was anti, how could I be doing this? There was conflict and so some folks actually came to the board to get me fired based on that. That was the point I was going to make.

DC: How did that play out?

GE: I got called into the superintendent's office and he discussed it with me and I told him it had nothing to do with what I'm doing. That's not my job. I was opposed to it,

but what I was opposed to makes no difference at this point because now it's the law. I mean once the court ruled, I mean--. I said I tried to stop it from getting to the point where the court would rule. I lost, so it's here.

DC: So it's not going to prevent you from doing your job.

GE: No. And so there were people who still had problems with that, but still the superintendent understood what I was saying. [Superintendent] Newman [Walker] supported me and backed me at that time. He saw the work I was doing, that what I did on my job was appropriate.

DC: So that meeting where they were getting ready to go out to Terry Road, were you able to—

GE: I was able to stop them by saying what good is it going to do for you to go out there and get killed? Either kill somebody and get arrested, those are your options. You get killed or you get arrested. Now who's going to take care of your kids? You say you're doing it for your kids. Are you really? So you need to be looking at how do you protect your children, not how to do you show somebody else something, because your focus now is on them and not you. That's all. We worked through that and we did a lot of the work through that individually before the meeting, because once you get public (laughter). So I went down and so I did a whole lot of individual meetings in homes and helped people to rant and rave and talk through and get down to what are the real issues and how do we go about protecting our children. Hence, that came up with the name United Black Protective Parents.

**END OF DISC 1, TRACK 3**

## START OF DISC 2, TRACK 1

DC: So what kinds of things did you implement with the group?

GE: Oh, I don't even remember. I was so busy at that time in my life. I remember actually having my phone cut off because I mean, I could never get dressed, that what I learned, that people would come to your house. (laughter) But I mean because as soon as I would walk in the house, the phone would start ringing. I mean I was on the phone all day at work and then I came home. And then I was also trying to develop training material and training, I mean it was just—and supervise the staff.

DC: And you had kids.

GE: Yeah, I had a husband and a bunch of kids. (laughter)

DC: Right. So at what point did you feel that you could re-enroll your kids in the public schools?

GE: Oh, it was during the first maybe six weeks after school started, except for my first grader, the one who was starting the first grade, the law permitted you not to put him in school until he was seven, so I kept him out that first year. And he like to die to go to school.

DC: Why did you continue to keep him out?

GE: I felt that he had not begun and to enter into that confusion, and at that time, we still were not, in my opinion, managing school well. The teachers were doing it just to get through. I remember one of the plans that we had developed in the city system which they never really got implemented, they never did, was we called the “integration management team,” where we would get teams of people who would help people to

manage, to look beyond mixing bodies and really integrate the instruction and to help people to do that. We believed that it was unrealistic to take people who were caught up in the mess and ask them to manage it and that you needed some people who could step back and come in and help them to do that and help them to look at what was going on, but that never happened.

DC: It never happened. It just wasn't ever approved.

GE: It was never approved, right.

DC: I seem to remember talking to somebody who said there was kind of an emergency team that if there was a problem in a school, that they would be dispatched.

GE: But those were reactionary teams. When there was a biracial fight in a school there—did y'all interview George Unsell?

DC: Who?

GE: His name was George Unsell.

DC: No.

GE: I'm surprised.

DC: I'll put him on the list.

GE: It was George Unsell, Montesse Yves, it was a group of them who would go out—that's interesting. I don't even know any of the white ones that are still living. George may know because he would have kept up with them more, but they would go out and meet with the kids and try to dispel the issue. There was that team that came out of student activities. And for real, when they went in, it's like they took over the school.

DC: Right, wow.

GE: But it was always reactionary and it was to quell their problem and they were through. So it really was not about managing.

DC: Now when your kids did get back into school, all but the youngest, were they bused that first year?

GE: Mmm hmm.

DC: All of them?

GE: All of them.

DC: And where were they bused from and to?

GE: No, that's not true, some of them were not. My children were actually, and those kids went, they were in the Brown School and the Brown School was at that time and I don't know what the rules are for Brown now, but Brown was fifty percent black, fifty percent white, fifty percent male, fifty-fifty. So that whole school population was exempt from busing. It was my kids that did not go to the Brown School that were bused.

DC: Okay, so you had some at Brown and then—

GE: The ones that were bused went to Shawnee—I mean Butler High School.

DC: And how was that for them?

GE: My son said it was strange. They were not used to being treated the way they were treated at Butler. Even though I talked with them, the only words I could ever them remember saying, it's strange, it's different. They actually got into, they had no racial problems. It was like "I don't like the way they treat me." I remember my son, Kenneth, came home once and said that—and he actually ended up dropping out of school, he ended up going back and completing and in fact now he's a physician, but he actually dropped out—the main thing that, it was not learning that was the problem, it was that you had to figure out what the teachers expected and wanted and behave that way. And my kids have been in schools where they were challenged and not about what does the teacher expect but you know, what did the lesson reveal and whether they could be more open and write what

they really thought. That's one of the reason my kids were in the Brown School because that's the kind of atmosphere that was there.

DC: Right. But at Butler it was more like sort of hoops you had to jump through, you had to figure it out.

GE: Yeah.

DC: So Kenneth, when did he drop out?

GE: He dropped out in the eleventh grade, stayed out for two years. I couldn't get him to go to school for two years but then he went back. I got him to get a job and the reality of the job sent him to school. (laughter)

DC: That'll do it.

GE: That this is what you can expect. You can't stay in my house and not work, so you've got to do something.

DC: And did he go back to Butler or did he go somewhere else?

GE: Well, no he had gone back and got his high school diploma, but he wouldn't go to college. That was the impetus to go to college. He went back to Butler. He graduated from Butler. Yeah, he went back there.

DC: So you can't really point to specific racial incidents but that still was informing it, you think?

GE: Yeah. Not for my kids. There were other situations where the racial...see, that's a part of the problem for me and part of the conflict for me, because I was in the pyramid in the middle where I saw a lot of the stuff that was going on that affected the kids, and then I had to respond as a parent to my own children and their situation. Because I was known in this community and "Eugene" is not in this area; everybody named Eugene is related to me. (laughter) There was no other Eugenes. So my children, who are also

Eugene, people knew. They got some of that too. Sometimes it was good and sometimes it was bad.

I mean sometimes even what looks like good was bad, like the time I'll never forget that my son, I happened to be going, and you can only say that God worked it out, going to the school when my son, Tony, was walking out in the middle of the school day when I got there. I said Tony, where are you going? And it was like, "home." I said oh? And he answered, without realizing that he was talking to me because I was behind him. Then he turned around and saw me. Then he began to change. But when I took him back into the school, well I found out that the teacher was having all kinds of problems with Tony and the teacher was not telling me because Tony told him that I knew the superintendent and if he messes with him (laughter), I would tell the superintendent. I said, why would I do that? If you mess with him, you have to deal with me but it ain't got nothing to do with the superintendent. It's me and you and right now you're messing with him. He said, well what do you mean? I didn't do nothing. I said you let him walk out of this building. I said that's messing with him. Don't you ever let him get by with anything. At least tell me. But it was crazy; that's not what we're going to talk about. (laughter)

DC: So there were some rough roads though there, I mean personally as well?

GE: Oh yeah, but there's always rough roads for people. On the other side, I did a lot of growing and a lot of learning through this whole process, not only about schools and people, but also about me and my family. So it was interesting. I mean we had all kinds of experiences with racial conflict. I remember when the superintendent decided to, there was an altercation between parents and so he agreed to meet with the black parents in the neighborhood and when he agreed to meet with them, then the white parents got mad and wanted him to meet with them. Somebody told him that he should meet with both groups

together. So he agreed to do that. I was not involved in any of those decisions. I attended the meeting that he went to in the black community but I was just there to see what was going on, didn't go to the one in the white community, was not a part of the decision to have the combined meeting, and got called in later when they thought it was going to be problematic and asked to help. I think I can thank Bernard Mennis or June Key. I'm not sure which one of the two got me involved in that mess.

DC: Was that early on in the first year or was that something later?

GE: No, that may have been—it was either later in the first year or near the beginning of the second. It involved Stewart High School parents and whoever had planned the meeting knew that they needed not to meet on Stewart's property. They needed to meet on mutual ground and so they met at another school. The idea was for the superintendent to come in and address both groups. I don't know what discussion got into to make them believe that would be problematic, but that did. And so when they thought it may be problematic, then they asked me to fix it. I said well, I don't know that I can fix this. I said there are several things. I said one, the emotions are too high to even try this. Then the superintendent felt he had given his word so he had to go through with it and he had given his word to both groups. What had happened, he felt comfortable because he had met individually, but I said you're having a "y'all come" meeting and the same people who are coming are not the ones you've been meeting with. These are people—when you called the meeting in the black community, when you called the meeting in the white community, you had talked to the people who wanted to work it out. Well now you're having an open meeting. That's a whole different dynamic. You didn't invite just the people who have been working with you. You've having an open meeting.

So he promised me, I said I would come but I need to have kind of power to, if I say break it up, it needs to be broke up. I'll be monitoring. I'll have some other people there and we'll be monitoring the crowd. I remember in that meeting I got the word from somebody that there were some, what do they call them, skinheads or something, and some Klan in the group, and then there was someone, there were people with guns. I sent word to the superintendent that he needed to come off the stage right now, get out of there, and we need to put people in small groups. We had people there who could facilitate the small group discussion. So what we did was immediately just disperse everybody. I told him there would come a time after we let them vent in the small group where they could hear one another and deal with that, then maybe we could come together and do it. And the police needed to arrest the people with the guns. (laughter) And they did. And once again, it worked. But then, and I'm talking about the people who were over security for the school district, got angry at me because they said I was out of my role, that security was their business, not my business. By that time, we had successfully gotten out of it so the superintendent was just like "it worked" so forget it. (laughter).

DC: Who was the superintendent?

GE: At that time, it was Ernie Gregson. It was Ernie Gregson.

DC: What was he like to work with?

GE: Ernie was an affable gentlemen who I personally got along with. I didn't work a whole lot with him, I mean because I was not that close to the top. I still like Ernie until this day. In fact, I saw him last year.

DC: So, just a little bit more on United Black Protective Parents and what kind of work you did. I remember Ms. Ellis talking about testifying before the Civil Rights Commission and then maybe going up to DC.

GE: Yeah, that's what they did. I didn't do that.

DC: You didn't do that part.

GE: No, my role with them was more as a technical advisor. They recognized that I was a member of the group, but I was not—I just worked with the people and got to know them. My main thing at that time, I continued to meet with them because they wanted me to, but I talked to them and worked with them on how you work through systems and to get things accomplished, and that rebel-rousing never works and that, for real, you can have all the demonstrations you want, but after the demonstration, people just go on and do what they want to do. So you need to be in for the long haul. So I just helped them to go through chains of command and channels to accomplish whatever their agenda was.

DC: Can we talk a little bit about your transition over to Duvalle and your work? That made up a big part of the rest of your career.

GE: Yeah. Duvalle was a middle school that was losing enrollment as a part of school desegregation. The school board made the decision to close the school and to open a community education facility. They had some concerns. I know Lincoln Cosby, who was the African-American board member at that time had concerns about when they closed schools, they had a history of letting them just stay vacant and not doing much with them. So his position became that we need to do something with the building, so they needed to keep it open. At that time, I was in the Office of Public Affairs and I remember getting a call from the superintendent who I didn't even know knew I existed. David DeRuzzo was the superintendent back then. The only thing that DeRuzzo asked me and it was, I believe if I remember right, the day after they had voted to close Duvalle, did I believe that white people would come to Duvalle and/or Shawnee for programs. I told him it depends upon the program. White people and black people go where they needed if it's something they

want, but if they don't want it, I mean--. And that's the only question he asked me. Then later he set up a committee through Joe Atkins, who was over Equity and Poverty—that wasn't the name of it. He was Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources; that was his title then. I was put on the committee with George Unsell and it was the three of us and maybe Minor Daniels—no, Minor was not there. I have to keep my teams straight. So it was George and then we added Montesse Yves. We were given the responsibility of coming up with a plan for utilizing Duvalle. We developed the plan and by going out in the community, talking to various people who we identified the formal leadership, got them to identify the informal leadership in that community, and—

DC: And that's known as Park Duvalle, that neighborhood?

GE: Yeah. We went and we talked to the people. We found out who was anti-using the facility, we found out who was for it, and people who were just neutral, people who were willing to work. We began to work with the people who were willing to work. We engaged Bill Wilson, who had a small public relations firm then and he did a focus group, came up with a needs assessment and then we took that needs assessment and then again went out and met with the people. There was a lot of opposition to closing the school so we got caught up in the middle of that opposition. But we did—

DC: What was that based on or who was that coming from?

GE: Some parents and some of the ministers in the community.

DC: What kinds of things were they saying?

GE: (laughter) I remember they were saying that they were not interested in working with us to do anything. They wanted the school reopened and so to work with us to develop programs would be counter to what they wanted to occur.

DC: And they wanted it open because it was a traditional black neighborhood school?

GE: Yeah. They wanted to continue and to do anything would just be counter and they had a following of people who came out and supported them. They looked at the school as a resource for that community.

DC: In a similar way that Central was considered or not?

GE: Oh no, not anywhere near that. I think that it was based on their history had been that schools stayed vacant and were eyesores. They felt that if people wouldn't come to the school, that they still would not come to any programs that we set up, no matter what they were.

DC: Oh right, so they thought that—

GE: So it would end up being closed anyway and become an eyesore, that kind of thing. That was the opposition.

DC: So you had that opposition but then you had support as well?

GE: Oh yeah. And of course, we had opposition inside the district because even though the board voted to keep the facility open and to do programs there, there were people who worked for the school district who felt that should not happen and they were in key positions too. But anyway, we—

DC: So what programs did you identify as the ones to start with?

GE: I think there were Head Start units that were there and one of the things that the community wanted was the continuation of those Head Start units; they were going to remain. They wanted adult education there and the school district wanted adult education there because they needed to move the site that was at Shawnee. That met with the school district's needs so we put those two together. The Head Start administration at that time

when they closed the school was at Williams Middle School and that's where they had wanted to put a school there. So they needed to do something with Head Start Administration. We also became a site for Jefferson County High School initially. That did not pan out. Then the community, they wanted and would support vocational courses. They wanted child care there, there was a definite need, and tuition-based child care. So that's where we started out, with that.

DC: What was your title?

GE: My title then was coordinator.

DC: Is that was it remained?

GE: It was always that but I functioned as the principal of the facility, but I didn't have a degree so they couldn't call me principal, see you've got to remember that. I was the coordinator. We continued to identify programs based on—I remember adult education put the homeless education piece in there. There was not a homeless population in the Park Duvalle community because they were not identifiable; there were a lot of people who were what we call the “couch homeless,” but not the other kind. But they actually bused people in for that.

DC: Was there a residential shelter there then or it was more like meals and things like that for the homeless?

GE: No, nothing. There was no homeless program. What they did, Project Work was the name of it, they got federal money to do homeless education.

DC: Oh, education.

GE: Homeless education, and they brought the people from the shelter to the—

DC: Got it.

GE: Yeah. But we had programs. We did some training for non-traditional jobs, whatever programs that we felt--. We also felt that just like the community was growing and changing, that the services and programs in Duvalle needed to grow and change. It can't be this is what it's going to be. So that's what we did. Now our population was—I mean I'm sorry. Our target geographical area was much larger than Park Duvalle. We were housed in Park Duvalle, but our geographical area went from the Shively city line to Glenwood in the city, from Eighteenth Street to the river.

DC: Oh wow, that's big.

GE: Yeah.

DC: That's huge.

GE: That's big.

DC: So are there particular things that you're proud of accomplishing at the center? I mean how long were you there?

GE: I went in 1986 and I retired last year.

DC: Okay, so almost twenty years.

GE: Just the fact that it lasted twenty years. (laughter)

DC: That's a serious accomplishment right there.

GE: And that it grew and survived the total renovation, revitalization of Park Duvalle, because for a long time that whole area in there was gone. The fact that what that community said that it wanted got provided for them, even when they wanted an elementary school as a part of that facility and they ended up getting it. Now once they got it, they decided that ain't what they really wanted, but that's what they said and were insistent upon having.

DC: And still have.

GE: And it's still there, yeah. It's there. What they did not look at is what they would have to give up, because naturally when you put an elementary school in there, there are programs and services that we had that we no longer had space for. So you had to give it up and they didn't like giving it up.

DC: But do you think it really became sort of the heartbeat of that community then?

GE: Yeah, oh yeah, and it still is. It's still got a lot of programs going on. Part of the issue became the ability to be responsive to the needs and identify needs, both of the community and of the school district, because a lot of times, and then to write programs and services. Well we started an after-school programs -- we first did a summer program, we did it with strictly volunteers. We had absolutely no money so we ran it with volunteers one summer. Now you're talking about hectic. When we got through the summer and then the next year, \_\_\_\_\_ Bingham gave us money to run it, so we got funding for the next year. Then after that, the KIRA came into being and we were able to get funded out of the extended school service money. That was when Don Ingwerson was there and then they gave us some extended school service money but not enough to fund us, but at least they were still pinching it together and getting it to happen. I think that the thing that I'm most proud of is that it continued to be responsive to the needs and concerns of the community and it still is.

DC: I wanted to ask also about Central, because of course Central was a heart of that community, and what your opinions were of the lawsuit with Central that was sort of able to get the ratios lifted?

GE: I thought it was good for the school to be able to get the ratios lifted. I think that Central has gone through a very difficult transition period. Central, as the all-black school, was the all-black school for the state of Kentucky. It was not just a local thing. And

I don't mean that they didn't have other—there were times when people came from miles around; they had to come to Central. But even when that quit happening, it was still like the pinnacle of black schools, even when they had other black high schools in the state. Then when desegregation happened and things began to happen to Central, I remember in, if there's been a constant transition, and I think it was in '84 that they were attempting to make Central an all-magnet school and ran into elements of the black community that were opposed to that because they honestly believed that if you made it a magnet school that people wouldn't come, and so that it needed an attendance area. What happens to Central keeps changing, much like Duvalle, for real. It's like because what the community wants keeps changing. But right now, it's thriving on what it is. There was a period of time when a lot of African-Americans did not want to go to Central. Now they want in and they're angry because they can't get in.

DC: Why did they not want to go at that point, because of the facilities?

GE: I remember a friend of mine, Guy Phillips, said that we went through a period where whatever we had wasn't good enough, that we wanted something different. So I think that it suffered from that period. Then we got to the period where what we had was good; we want it back. (laughter) I just think it's the growth and evolution of a people.

DC: So I mean overall, looking back over thirty years now since the deseg Judge Gordon decision, you were never really a *proponent* of it.

GE: And I'm still not.

DC: And still not. Any variation in your views on it over that time?

GE: Not much. I still think we have not managed, and I don't see where it has been managed anywhere in the country. I remember Marcia Jeff, who was one of the persons I was involved with initially, who was a personal friend of mine saying to us, "it's only

peers that integrate.” So I have to accept that you’re a peer of mine and you have to accept it for us to truly integrate. Just because we’re in the same space at the same time doesn’t mean that integration occurs. We have not yet managed in this country to truly integrate, except in isolated cases.

DC: Do you think that should be a goal?

GE: Yes. I think it’s interesting that what we really tried to implement, in my opinion, is the melting pot theory, but for real, and I mean that you melt us all down and we all become “American” and forget everything else and that’s not a realistic goal, that we all need to learn to exist with one another and accept one another as we are. I think that’s the true aim of integration and yes, I think it’s a worthy goal. But it’s how we get there that we’re not doing a very good job of. It may be the only job we can do; I don’t know.

DC: So you think school busing is not a way to do it. Are there other ways that you think might work that haven’t been tried?

GE: See, let me go back. See I don’t think school busing was set up to be that goal. See you have to understand where I am. I think that school busing was set up to bring about dispersal and it was to make people move. If you look at it, no; I call it white flight and black pursuit. They fly and we follow, and they fly and we follow. But then what we do, what we leave behind is a remnant and the remnant we left behind we don’t leave the sustenance with it. We need to learn, just like when I got involved to try to make the community where I live better, we need to learn to make where we are better. I think that we would have done better with, rather than desegregate, to deal with the issue that first brought us to court in this country, because the issue was black kids having to go past all-white schools to get to school. So the solution became sending white and black kids past

schools. That doesn't make sense. You changed the problem and then you wonder why, once you changed the problem and put a solution to the changed problem, why it didn't solve the original problem. You never tried to solve the original problem. When the case was taken back to court, it was based on no money, that there was an equal share of resources given to white and black schools. The solution came to bus kids. The problem with that is you never applied the solution to the real problem. What somebody said is that this country would not support putting more money into black schools so we will make no schools black. We changed the problem; we keep doing that.

DC: Right.

GE: We keep doing that and then we wonder why stuff doesn't work. We won't deal with the real issues. We keep changing the problem and then applying the solution. My opinion.

DC: Well we could end there except let me just ask one last question, which is, is there anything I didn't ask which you think I should have asked? (laughter) Or that you thought I might ask that didn't come out?

GE: I don't know. I think that I have honestly answered your question, but I do have the feeling and I don't even know what the question would be, that I perhaps scurried over stuff and around stuff that you're trying to get at, but I'm not sure I know enough about your project to know that. I think that one of the things that stays in my mind and was said first by Kevin Cosby, I'm trying to think of this particular group. We were working with a group and Kevin was a member of this group, but one of the things that SAVE, Saving African-American Values and Economy. But Kevin said that part of the problem is that people think that there's a monolithic thought in the black community and there is no monolithic thought in any community. People think individually and those of us

who have some of the same goals and aspirations sometimes get together, but we didn't come up with a collective thought. We individually thought and we found out we thought alike. For me, that's the real issue when we keep trying to make everything American, rather than understanding that America is a complexity of contradictions and accept that and learn to live with that and learn to negotiate with that. We will still be searching. And that's all.

DC: Great, thanks. I'll stop this now.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

Transcribed by Emily Baran. December, 2005.