YUSEF MGENI

Narrator

KIM HEIKKILA

Interviewer

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

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TRANSCRIPT— YUSEF MGENI

Interviewee:	Yusef Mgeni
Interviewer:	Kim Heikkila
Interview Date:	March 23, 2025
Location:	Saint Paul, MN
Length:	02:19:26

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Kim Heikkila: This is an interview for the Oxford Community Center Oral History Project. It is Sunday, March 23, 2025, and I'm here with Mr. Yusef Mgeni. My name is Kim Heikkila. Today I'll be talking to Yusuf about his involvement at Oxford and his views on the significance of Oxford in the Rondo and Summit-University community in its many, many manifestations. So thank you so much for participating.

Yusef Mgeni: Thank you for the opportunity.

KH: Yeah, happy to be here with you. So, as I said, I'm going to just launch right into the project and ask you if you can tell me a little bit about your connection to Oxford, and then we'll talk about you and your place in the community as well.

YM: Sure. I was born in Saint Paul, almost a lifelong resident. I spent about five years in southern California, in Los Angeles, and then I spent the better part of 18 months traveling in the 27 largest cities in the United States for a project of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Public Radio, and the Public Broadcasting Service. My connection to Rondo is one of many generations because our family homesteaded the family farm on St. Albans and University back in the 1850s, before Minnesota became a state.

[00:02:00]

YM: My grandmother was very involved in civic affairs as a volunteer and as a

businesswoman. My grandfather was the pro bono attorney for the Saint Paul NAACP [The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] for many years. And so, being a part of the fabric of the community was in my DNA. There were three institutions that were of significant interest to young people my age at about, oh, I don't know, eight or 10 years old. And they were Oxford Community Center, the Edgar B. Ober Boys Club on Western and St. Anthony, what is now Western and Rondo, and Hallie Q. Brown Settlement House, which was a community center. Ober Boys Club and Hallie had a gymnasium. Hallie had craft rooms. They had a ballroom, a theater, a stage. Ober Boys had playing fields. Oxford was a vacant lot with Quonset huts on it.

Now a Quonset hut looks like a barrel that's buried half in the ground horizontally. It's half of a circle. They're aluminum. It must have been horrible when it rained or when it hailed, to live in one of them, like living in a drum set. The Quonset huts were placed there for returning veterans in the 1940s, and they were removed in the early mid-1950s. I attended St. Peter Claver, which was an African American parochial elementary school, which was just on what is currently the other side of I-94 from Oxford. Oxford was on Rondo between Oxford and Lexington. St. Peter Claver School, church, convent, and rectory, and playground were on St. Anthony between Lexington and Oxford. So they were literally a stone's throw apart.

[00:04:00]

YM: I can recall when the Quonset huts were dismantled and the first time that a warming house was pulled in on the back of a pickup truck to Oxford Playground. It looked more like an outhouse than a warming house because it was only big enough for four or five people with a small potbellied stove in the middle. The pickup truck pulled out into the middle of the field, unhooked the warming house, which had wheels and had a stand underneath the trailer hitch. Then the pickup truck pulled off and we couldn't figure

out what it was. Then the dirt was piled around what would become the skating rink and it was flooded with the warming house right there. And so, this young white guy had just got out of the Marines and was assigned as the director of Oxford Playground. That was Bill Peterson. Bill would shovel the snow off of the rink, he would flood it to keep it flat and skate worthy. When we got cold, we would cram into this little, tiny warming house around the potbellied stove and try not to burn our knees or our hands, put our gloves on top and get warm.

And so, that's how we met Bill Peterson. That's how Oxford Recreation Center began. I was a neighborhood curious interloper, a hanger on. I began hanging out at Oxford Playground. My mother bought me some skates, and after many bumps and bruises, I learned how to skate.

[00:06:00]

YM: But after school we would go up to Rondo and Oxford and one of the students would get on the Rondo Stryker, or the bus, and request a transfer. And then, immediately, run to the back of the bus, open a window up and throw the transfer out the window so the next one of us could get on the next bus 20 minutes later and request a transfer, slip the paper transfer and run to the back and open the window and throw it out the window so that the next person could get on the next bus. After an hour, all of us would have gotten up to Dale Street, which was where we lived until the fifth grade. I can clearly remember Eddie Garrett, Lester Miles, and myself, walking to St. Peter Claver School for the first day of first grade class. There was no kindergarten at that point in time.

The interesting thing, St. Peter Claver was a Catholic school, but it was probably about 50 percent Baptist because it was a neighborhood school, and it had the highest academic performance of any school in the neighborhood. It was represented by white

kids, by Mexican kids, by Catholics, by non-Catholics. There were two priests, Father Jerome and Arnold Luger, who were very involved in the community. In fact, one of the Black papers, *The Saint Paul Sun*, accused St. Peter Claver of being a segregated school because of the large number of Black students. Father wrote a response to the paper and said we charge $15 a year for tuition and any child in the neighborhood or in the community who wishes to attend is welcome, and we welcome everybody. It's a Catholic oriented school, but it's not just restricted to Catholics or to Black people. [00:08:00]

YM: This community, although it has always been considered Selby-Dale, Rondo and Dale, Summit-University, Rondo or whatever, Summit-University and its many variations, today there are probably a dozen sub neighborhoods within the larger Summit-University, Summit and University being the two north and south boundaries. And then Rice Street was the gateway to Rondo. Lexington was the far extreme. But the neighborhood actually was shaped more like a football, wider in the middle, because there were parts of Aurora, parts of Dayton, parts of Marshall, where Black people couldn't rent or purchase homes. So, it was several blocks, three or four blocks either side of Rondo and St. Anthony. I-94 is five blocks from University and five blocks from Selby. So, 94 literally does cut right through the path of the Summit-University community.

Oxford Playground was located on the western extreme end of the Rondo neighborhood. But people came and participated in organized sports and social activities at Rondo from all over the neighborhood. It was a safe, welcoming place. Because of segregation, there was essentially a bubble over this community, and you were safe within that bubble because everybody knew everybody. Twenty-five percent of the people were related to one another through marriage or through blood. There were Native Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Africans, Black people, colored people, Negroes.

[00:10:00]

YM: I'll tell you something interesting about myself. My birth certificate says that I and my parents were colored. My baptismal certificate lists me as a Negro. My records at St. Peter Claver say that I was Black. My high school records say that I was Afro-American, with a hyphen. My college records say that I was African American with and without a hyphen. And my passport says that I'm an American. But interestingly enough, I was 42 years old, and I was in Salzburg, Austria, the first time that anybody ever referred to me as an American. I didn't know who they were talking to, because I had walked through the train station and there was an 18-year-old Austrian kid with an automatic weapon on his shoulder in a uniform, doing his military service. He kept shouting, "American, schtein [ph], American, halt."

It was echoing through this train station which in itself resembled a Quonset hut because it was a half-circle aluminum or tin, and there was a restaurant, there was a fruit stand, there was a small store, there was a sex shop that sold sexual tools, or I don't know what you call the rubber suits and the whips and those kinds of things. There was a grandmother with two small children sitting on a bench in front of the sex shop. I must have been beet red because I was so embarrassed. I'd never seen anything like that, and this voice is shouting, "American, halt, American, schtein." And then someone tapped me on the shoulder, and it was this 18-year-old Austrian kid in the uniform with the automatic weapon holding out what he said were, "Your glashes, your glashes."

[00:12:00]

YM: I had taken off my sunglasses when I went through customs, and he was chasing me. I was walking, but he was running behind me for half a block trying to get me to stop so he could return my sunglasses. And because he was shouting "American," like everyone else, given this myriad of ethnic titles that I had been assigned officially

throughout my life, my young life then, 42 years of age, I didn't know who the hell they were hollering at. Okay? So, that was the first time I was ever called an American.

Anyhow. I was the ping pong champion at Oxford after about a year of diligent practice. We played what was called rise and fly. If you lost, you had to sit down and get back in line and work your way back to the table. Then when you lost again, you had to sit down unless the other person left to go home for dinner, and you stuck it out so that you could be the champ of the table. But for several months, I was the ping pong champion at Oxford. Which brings me back to Bill Peterson.

Bill Peterson is the jewel in the crown of Oxford Recreational Center. Fresh out of the Marines, a real disciplinarian, lifted weights every day. All the girls had a crush on him because he was a handsome young ex-Marine, muscle-bound. He was a coach. He coached every sport that kids wanted to participate in. Baseball, football, hockey, basketball. He was a coach in the purest sense of the word because it didn't make any difference whether you were on one of his teams, or not. He was a life coach. He was a character coach, he was a discipline coach, he was a safety coach. He treated everybody the same. He had the same high expectations for everyone.

[00:14:00]

YM: Asa Hilliard, who is an educator and a historian, said that students have a nasty habit of achieving whatever expectations are placed on them. If they're in an environment of love and high expectations, they exceed those expectations without fail. A coach, a good coach, a true coach, brings out the best in people, raises their expectations, supports them, encourages and nurtures them. That was the role that Bill Peterson played for anybody's child or any adult who came to Oxford Playground. He truly was one of the first colorblind people that I ever met in my life. I say that with respect to race, because he never showed any favoritism. He never singled anybody out for disparate treatment. If

you got out of line, he would quickly bring you back into line and tell you, you were better than that. He would encourage you to do better. And he said, "When you learn better, do better, and when you learn some more, come back and do more better."

Many of us lived in single-family homes. My father left or was asked to leave when I was two years old. And so, Bill was a surrogate father. I've never had this conversation with him, I don't know if he knew it, if he assumed it, if he accepted it, but he was a surrogate father for many boys and girls in this neighborhood. He was the best surrogate father that any of us could hope for because he was always a guiding light. He was always a caring person. He was a good listener. He was always encouraging, and he was always funny. He was very humble.

[00:16:00]

YM: But he never allowed us to get too full of ourselves. He always sort of made sure that both of our feet were firmly planted on the ground. So, if I could begin and end this interview, I couldn't think of a better way of doing it than by thanking Bill Peterson, because he sacrificed a lot, he gave a lot. I mean, I can't remember a single day when he called in sick, or didn't show up, or had a bad day or didn't want to listen, wouldn't spend time with somebody, wouldn't say, "Come in the office, let's talk about it," and wouldn't make us better instruments for living together with other people. That's the kind of person that he was.

KH: And Bill, just to make clear, is white.

YM: Yes, Bill was the white director. There were no Black staff in the Department of Park and Recreation at that point. He was assigned to the Rondo neighborhood and welcomed us with open arms and introduced himself, and away we went. He was always Bill or Billy or, "I'm sorry, Bill, I didn't mean to do that." But he never gave up hope on us. Even the kids who were bullies in other parts of the neighborhood minded their P's

and Q's when they were at Oxford, because Bill was a no-nonsense director. I don't know anybody that wanted to mess with him because he was a real Marine, and he was a good person.

[00:18:00]

YM: But Oxford was where the girls got to go, maybe for an hour between school and when they had to go home and help with dinner and do their homework. So you had a chance to meet all the young ladies in the neighborhood. So Oxford was a social gathering. Oxford was competitive in terms of athletic pursuits. One of the curious pieces about Oxford is that I talked about this community having a bubble around it because of segregation. Because if we went to Lake McCarrons on the north end, if we went to the Highland Park swimming pool, if we went to Lake Phalen to the beach, we frequently had to run home, because grown white men in surrounding neighborhoods, whether it was Rice Street or Frogtown or Mac-Groveland or the west end or the east side, made it very clear that we weren't welcome in their neighborhoods.

They had chains, they had sticks, they had pipes, they had bats. And we didn't stick around. They had bad intentions. If they'd have caught us, they would have hurt us. But they literally ran us out of their neighborhoods. We knew we were safe when we got back to Rondo or Selby-Dale or whatever you wanted to call it. We used to swim buck naked for a nickel in the Wilder Pool, down on Seven Corners in downtown Saint Paul. Wilder was a public bathhouse. A lot of the street people would go down there and bathe. You would go in the front door, put a nickel on the counter, and they would give you a towel, and you would go back to the locker room where you would be given a wire mesh basket with a hanger built into it.

[00:20:00]

YM: Attached around the top of the hanger was an elastic band with a little brass

tag with a number on it that corresponded to the number on the basket. It was like a hanging basket. You took off your shoes and your clothes and put them in the basket with your towel and the elastic band with a circular tag on it with the number of your basket was too big for your wrist, so you put it on your ankles. And then you had to run through the shower and walk through a pool of some kind of alcohol. We weren't allowed to swim with swimsuits. We were told it was because poor kid's swimsuits would fade, and if they faded in the pool, they had to empty the water and then refill the pool, and it cost a fortune.

There were white men, maybe a half dozen, who would come in, but they wouldn't swim. They would stand along the wall and watch the little colored babies frolic in the water. We couldn't figure out what they were doing. We were jumping in and out of the water and off the diving board. The buzzer would go off after 50 minutes, we would get in line in the locker room, get our basket, put our pants on, carry our socks and shoes and shirt, and go out the back door of the pool, go around to the front door, go back in the front door, put another nickel on the counter, and go back up the hallway and get another basket and swim for another hour. We would cash in milk bottles, pop bottles, anything that was refundable at the store to get four or five nickels and go down to Wilder and swim. We would go down there, six or eight of us at a time.

KH: And how old were you at this time?

[00:22:00]

YM: I would say from eight till about 15. On the way home, we knew every yard that had a plum tree, rhubarb, tomatoes, an apple tree. And so, we would fold our T-shirts, hold our T-shirts up, and fill them up with fruit and vegetables, and we would eat them as we walked back home. By the time we got back home, we were full. But the interesting thing about segregation is that the kids from the white recreation centers would not come

and compete against the teams at Oxford. So we played pick up baseball and pickup football in the streets near where we lived. We would be invited to go to Oxford and compete against the Oxford teams who cleaned our clocks hardly without even trying, because Bill was such a good coach. We would play baseball; we would play pickup football. We would play hockey against the teams at Oxford.

KH: We, being just your neighborhood friends, were doing this pickup stuff, and you would be invited over to Oxford to play against the more organized—

YM: Against the more organized teams, the Oxford teams. The Oxford teams were very good. Interestingly enough, the first hockey team, all-Black hockey team at Oxford, won the city championship that Bill coached. Dave Winfield, Steve Winfield were on the Oxford teams. Paul Molitor played baseball at Oxford. You know, a lot of the kids got scholarships because of the skills that they attained. They got college scholarships because of the skills they attained with Bill Peterson while they were performing on the Oxford teams.

[00:24:00]

KH: You never participated in the more organized teams at Oxford?

YM: Well, my worst nightmare, it was the winter, I think it was maybe sixth or seventh grade. I shoveled snow all winter and saved up a ton of money. It must have been $40 or $50. There was a Rawlings Sporting Goods store down on, was either 5th or 6th and Robert Street and I bought a glove. I can't remember whose name was burned into the glove, but it was a beautiful leather fielder's glove. I took it home and I rubbed oil against the leather to waterproof it. I had a hard ball that I put in the middle, and I put that in there, and then wrapped rope around the glove to create a pocket, a natural pocket, and put it up on the mantle on the fireplace and went to school.

I couldn't wait till school was out, I think I ran halfway home, so I could get the

glove, unwrap it and go up to Oxford because it was tryouts to join the Oxford baseball team. We had a dog that I loved like a member of the family, who somehow managed to get up on the fireplace mantle and take the glove down and chew it up. There were pieces of leather all over the first floor in our home. I was so heartbroken and hurt that I couldn't bring myself to go up to Oxford and ask if I could borrow somebody's glove or if they had an old one that I could use because the dog had eaten mine. It really broke my heart, and there went my baseball career up in smoke.

[00:26:00]

YM: I also fractured my ankle and had to get two operations done at about that time, seventh or eighth grade. So my athletics were sort of put on hold for a couple of summers. We used to play baseball and football in the side street near where I grew up, and there were maybe eight or 10 of us that would play. We would still get invited to go up to Oxford. And it was only, I think, in the mid-60s when Bill and the other staff members, Frank White, Steve Winfield and others, actually demanded that some of the other teams come to Oxford and compete against the Peewees. I forget what they're called, the junior high school kids, the baseball, football teams. Because Oxford was never invited to go to the white centers very much, but the white centers just refused to come to Oxford to participate.

The only thing that white kids learned about Oxford and about the Rondo community was how to stay the hell out of it. For the most part, unless they lived here, which the white kids who lived here couldn't understand, they did.

KH: Because, as you were saying earlier, there were. I mean, it wasn't only African American people in Rondo.

YM: This community was never more than 30 percent Black, but it was considered the Black community and young kids were taught to stay the hell out of it. And

they did. At school, in school athletics and activities and clubs, we were friends. But it wasn't until we got into high school that we really had any friendships outside of the community, because younger kids were prohibited and strictly forbidden from any association with those kids from Rondo. We were called more than those kids. [00:28:00]

YM: I used to shine shoes on University Avenue. I can remember going into the bars and walking beneath the noose with the sign that said, "No Indians, no n-----s, no dogs allowed." I would walk in underneath it and tug on pants legs along the bar and see who wanted a shoe shine and shine people's shoes and come home and give the money to my mother to help with groceries or rent or whatever. Because she was a secretary in the public school system. Her job, and St. Peter Claver, and her kids were the three priorities in her life. At that point in time, Catholics were strongly encouraged not to remarry if they got a divorce and my mother was a very religious woman, so she never remarried. She probably died 20 years younger than she would have because she sacrificed her life for her kids and for St. Peter Claver and for her job. She worked 12 months of the year, so we were always on our own.

I'll tell you another little side story. The kids' parents used to threaten us and say, "Boy, just wait till you go to John Marshall Junior High School and you have to deal with Cyrus Ettinger," who our parents feared when they went to John Marshall when it was a junior high school before we were born. And sure enough, I was assigned to Cyrus Ettinger's homeroom. I used to play hooky a lot. The phone would ring, and I would pick it up and it would be Cyrus. He would say, "Charlie," I used to be Charles Crane Joachim Anderson III. I figured the world had enough Charlie Andersons, so I became Yusef Mgeni. He'd say, "Charlie, you've got 15 minutes to get your ass to school or I'm coming to get you. Your mother has given me permission to do that." And I'd say, "I don't feel

well. I don't feel like coming to school today."

And he'd say, "Listen, I've worked in the school district for 35 years and I've never missed a day of work. I know you can come to school with a runny nose. Bring some Kleenex with you." And I'd say, "Well, I don't have anything to wear, and I don't want the kids laughing at me." And he'd say, "You ever wonder why my ass and my knees and my elbows shine? It's because I paid $17 for this suit, and I intend to get both sides of my dollar and the edges. So, if I can wear this $17 suit every day, I know you can wear them perfectly good blue jeans you wore yesterday."

And I'd say, "Gee, I come, but I don't have any lunch money today. And if I skip lunch, I'll get suspended. If I go to lunch, the kids will talk about me, and I'll get in a fight and get suspended anyhow." And he'd say, "Listen, what do yinzes [ph] to get for lunch these days? Is it two bits? I'll tell you what. Lunch is on me today. One more thing." And I'd say, "What do you mean, one more thing?" He'd say, "You only have six minutes left." Bang. I'd say, "That son of a, six minutes? I better wash my ass and brush my teeth."

I can remember a dozen mornings where I was running straight up Grotto Street to get to Marshall Junior High School on Grotto and Ashland. He would be coming out of the building jamming his trench coat and his pork pie hat on, and he would see me coming puffing a block away. He had the strangest laugh. He would go [laughs] and he would turn around and scoot back in the building before I had a chance to thank him.
[00:32:00]

YM: That happened dozens of times where he would call, and "I know, I know, I've got 15 minutes." And he gave a damn. When I got into radio and television at the University of Minnesota, I would call Cyrus every four to six months and say, "Cyrus, you were one of the most important educators that I ever had, and I would like to do a documentary about you and about how you felt about me." And he'd say, "I'm just an

average educator. Do it about somebody who deserves it." And he would hang up on me. I think that was a habit of his.

We were fishing up in Canada. There were about eight or 10 of us who went up there, rented a cabin and had three boats and were catching great big walleyes. People get on the lake, and they have a beer, and they talk smack, and they tell stories about when they were younger. And so, somebody started telling a story about Cyrus Ettinger calling them, telling them they had 15 minutes to get to school. And three of us in harmony said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Cyrus called you, too?" We found out that he had a bet with the school principal for a bottle of brown liquor, a fifth of liquor, because the principal said, "I can pick 10 or 15 kids who are going to be forced to go in the Army, they're going to go to jail, or they're going to drop out before the end of the school year." And Cyrus would say, "Well, you know, if we gave a damn about them, maybe they could make it and go on to high school."

And so, they would identify the kids. Cyrus would have all of them transferred to his homeroom. The secretary in the office had one of those old hand crank mimeo machines and she would do the attendance sheets after homeroom. Guess who got the first copy with the ink was still wet. Cyrus.

[00:34:00]

YM: His free hour was the first-class hour. He would go into the teacher's lounge and pick up the telephone and start calling his homeroom kids who were absent. Cyrus really gave a damn about all of those kids. So, it was Bill Peterson, it was Cyrus Ettinger, it was Herman Hogan who was the typing teacher, the only Black staff member at Saint Paul Central High School. There were 5,600 kids at Central when I started in 1964. The first shift started at 6:00 something in the morning. The last shift started at about 9:15, and there were like 14 lunch periods. When you got in line at lunch, by the time you got your

food and got to the cashier, the buzzer was going off and it was the next period. So you had to eat while you were in the line getting your food, because if you waited till you got to the cashier, it was time to go, you had three minutes to get to your next class.

Herman Hogan was the typing teacher. For some reason, I was fascinated with how fast my mother could type. I signed up to take typing class and I was typing about 90 words a minute on those old-fashioned manual typewriters that looked like a little upright piano. When computers came out, I said "Gee, look, there's a keyboard with a little tiny TV attached to it." So it was the most transferable skill that I ever got. Got me through college, got me promoted in every job I ever had because I could type, I could keep notes, I could evaluate. I had a head start on all of the henpeckers who were typing with the index finger on each hand.

[00:36:00]

YM: But it was part of growing up. The nuns that we had at St. Peter Claver got paid $1 a week plus room and board. They weren't allowed to join one of the white convents, so they started their own order, the Oblate Sisters of Providence. So here you see segregation playing a role in our development. Education was their mission. So they had opened up St. Peter Claver Parochial schools all around the country. They came from the South, they came from Central South and Latin America, from Cuba. If one student didn't do their homework, everybody in the class got beat. The girls got to hold their hand out with the palm up, and Sister had a yardstick, and they would get beat with the yardstick. Now, there were rubber bands around the yardstick because on the other side of the ruler, the yardstick, was a blackboard pointer. The guys had to turn our hands over with the knuckles up, and she would pull her sleeve back like Tiger Woods when he was about to do his backswing, and pow. We would get the yardstick side. So, we had a telephone tree that started at 5:00 in the morning, and we would say, "Did you do your

homework?" "No, I never got around to it." We'd say, "Look, you better stick your finger down your throat and start throwing up, because if you come to school and we get beat, you're going to get beat at recess, you're going to get beat at lunch, you're going to get beat on the way home. If you show up at Oxford, you're going to get beat this afternoon, okay?"

And I mean, we were serious as cancer because we did not want to get beat. In the fourth grade, we were on a 12th grade reading level. And those nuns, we had homework for Thanksgiving break, for Christmas break, for Easter break, for summer vacation. You had homework that you had to do over the summer and bring to your next class in the fall if you were coming back. You had to do it.

[00:38:00]

YM: When I got into the ninth grade at John Marshall, I was bored to death, because the stuff that was being taught in the ninth grade in the public schools, we had learned in the fifth and sixth grade. We were taking Latin, algebra, I mean, history. We had every subject under the sun. I had read every book in the school library, and my grandmother was giving me books by Richard Wright, by John Hope Franklin, Black historians, poetry by Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. I had a high school education before I ever got into high school because of those nuns at St. Peter Claver.

So, the St. Peter Claver kids, we had to wear uniforms that were celery green. I mean, we caught you-know-what, walking through the neighborhood, going to and from school, from the public-school kids who got to wear their jeans and their Italian shoes and whatever they wanted. But 90 percent of the kids in my eighth-grade class went to college, most of whom got scholarships because of the education we got in that segregated Black Catholic school, a half block away from Oxford Playground.

So, when we went to Oxford in the afternoon, we got drafted to help kids with

their homework because we were all smarty pants, because we went to St. Peter Claver. We thought we knew everything and we didn't mind doing it. So we became little coaches working with other people our age, trying to help them. We were encouraged to do it by Bill and by others. And so, we played ping pong, we were ice skating, played hockey, played football, played basketball, and played baseball. We used to go and sit on the side of the basketball court, and there were high school basketball players, there were U of M Gopher basketball players, and there were professional basketball players.
[00:40:00]

YM: And I mean, they would be playing street ball. They weren't playing organized Rudy Poo [ph] basketball. They were playing hardball, okay, on the basketball court, knocking one another down and taking three-point shots and doing the whole nine yards. And it was fascinating. We used to go down to Hallie Q. Brown and watch the men play at night. And many of the high school basketball coaches would come down there and play, Jim Fritsche and others. Bill Tucker was in charge of the gymnasium Ober Boys Club was famous because they had a trampoline. They had a summer camp that only cost a dollar a week. Our mother used to send me and my brother to every summer camp in the state of Minnesota. We went to Camp Wendigo at Sunfish Lake. We went to Fun in the Sun Day Camp. We went to Tweeners Camp. We went to St. John's Landing Camp. We went to Catholic Youth Center Camp. We went to altar boys camp because we were altar boys. I mean, summertime was really a vacation for my mother because she packed our butts up and shipped us off to every summer camp that would take us.

KH: Because she was working.

YM: She was working. She would come home for lunch and make sure that we were on the straight and narrow and then go right back to work all the way out on Rice Street. She worked at Washington High School. She was the senior clerk typist. And she

was good, she was good. She was my best friend. She was my advisor. She was my banker. She was my biggest critic. And she was one of my other coaches and also my surrogate father, too.

KH: And how many kids were there in your family?

[00:42:00]

YM: Five. Three girls, two boys. And she had at least two jobs. She worked at Sears, she worked at the Golden Rule, and she worked full time for the Saint Paul School District for 38 years. She worked 12 months of the year. When Washington High School became a junior high school and was only open nine months of the year, she transferred into Saint Paul, what then was TVI Saint Paul College, because she had a lot of seniority from her years in the office pool.

At Oxford, we learned character. We learned how to complement and support one another rather than unnecessarily duplicating or competing with what one another was doing. The leadership skills. I talked about segregation. We really didn't have a choice about where we went. You know, we were limited by segregation. I'm not saying it was a blessing. I'm just saying it was part of our development that worked to our advantage because of the resilience in the Black community. We had to make do with what we had. And we did.

At the same time, when integration came, the doctors, lawyers, architects, Black professionals, the preachers, all moved to Maplewood, to Roseville, to Burnsville, to Apple Valley, to Oakdale, to Woodbury, to the first-tier suburbs. When the leadership vacuum was created, in came the gangs, the drugs, the prostitutes, the crack and it was really a test for the legacy institutions. Oxford, Hallie and the Ober Boys Club.

[00:44:00]

The Ober Boys Club was supported by the Union Gospel Mission, the Edgar B.

Ober Boys Club. And so, it seemed like it came and went. You know, they had programs, they didn't have programs. They were open, they weren't open. Hallie was surviving on what funding it could get. So the programs that it could afford operated. The summer camp operated every year. Some of the crafts were available. Some years they weren't. When they didn't have the money, we made shoe shine kits, we made ash trays because smoking was pretty popular then. We made lamps out of bowling pins. We learned how to do things with our hands. There were craft classes. And we could go in the gym. We could do other things. The Mother House for the Oblate Sisters of Providence burned down in Baltimore, Maryland, so St. Peter Claver kids sold World's Finest Chocolate candy bars. The nuns used to give three or four of us a case with, it was two boxes, and you broke the boxes apart and there were handles on each box. There were 24 in each box.

We would be given bus fare. We would go downtown, and we would sell 48 candy bars for 50 cents apiece, and then we would get on the bus and come back to St. Peter Claver about quitting time, 5:30 or 6:00. We would get to go downtown about 3:00, a half hour before school got out, and give the money to the nuns. After we stopped at the Coney Island Bridgman's and had a couple of hot dogs and a malt, we'd get on the bus and ride back and somebody would give us a dollar, so there'd be a 50-cent tip, and we would give the money to the nuns to send to help rebuild the Mother House.

[00:46:00]

YM: When I was working for the Northwest Area Foundation, I was attending a National Council of Foundations meeting in Baltimore. I had to talk to six cab drivers to find an old Black cab driver who knew how to get to 701 Gun Road, which was where the Mother House was. He took me out there and he said, "How are you going to get back?" And I said, "Well, I guess I'll call a cab." He said, "Ain't no cab coming out here. They don't know how. You see that tree over there, that shade? I'll be over there taking a nap.

Tap on the windows when you get done and I'll carry you back to town," because it was like 25 bucks each way. He got a nice tip.

I went up, and the front door had one of those large rings on it like on a castle, and I banged that. Mother Mary Alice came to the door. I was standing there with my mouth open, and she said, "Get in here before you let the flies in. I remember you. You're one of them bad Anderson boys, aren't you?" And I said, "Are you Mother Mary Alice?" And she said, "Yes, I am, son." I said, "You were always this towering, powerful figure." She said, "Boy, when you're in the first grade, everybody is towering and powerful and ominous. Come on, get in here." The Mother House had basically been turned into a hospice because the nuns didn't have any pensions, or life insurance, or burial insurance, or retirement.

[00:48:00]

YM: But I really felt like I owed them because they were part of this three-tiered stool, between Oxford, Hallie, Ober Boys Club, and then the Black women in my family and those nuns who made me everything that I am today, I give them all the credit. And my mother. My mother, my grandmother. I used to do my older brother and sister's homework for them every day after school. That's what a brainiac I was. I had a photographic memory, was a bookworm, loved to read, and loved trivia, thought I knew everything. The longest word in the world was pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis. It's a word that has 47 letters and 18 syllables, and it's a rare lung disease caused by the inhalation of quartz or silica dust. The guy who came up with it, his secretary for spelling it, and me for being the dummy who can't forget it, are the only three people alive who know it. It's not antidisestablishmentarianism, it's pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis.

KH: We may have to ask you how to spell that when it comes time to transcribing.

YM: I may have to scratch my head a couple times. Fortunately, it's spelled just like it sounds,

p-n-e-u-m-o-n-o-u-l-t-r-a-m-i-c-r-o-s-c-o-p-i-c-s-i-l-i-c-o-v-o-l-c-a-n-o-c-o-n-i-o-s-i-s.

KH: Naturally.

YM: The "nu" is P-N-E-U, like for pneumonia. And then the moun is M-O-U-N, pneumoun, ultra, U-L-T-R-A, scopic, silicoval, C-O-U-V-A, volcanoconiosis. But yeah, so I was Mr. Smarty-Pants wherever I went. And I was six-two when I was in the eighth grade, I was six-six when I started in high school.

[Audio Break]

[00:50:00]

YM: So, the character development at Oxford and at St. Peter Claver, I was an altar boy. "*Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam. Quia tu es, Deus, fortitudo mea: quare me repulisti, et quare tristis incedo, dum affligit me inimicus*." My mother used to come into my and my brother's bedroom with a nice cold wash rag at 5:30 in the morning and wash our faces and wake us up, say, "Come on, you're serving mass at 6:30, get your butt up, brush your teeth, get dressed." I used to tell people we had to walk five miles to church and school backwards, uphill, in both directions with holes in our shoes and cardboard covering up the holes.

So when somebody got sick in the parish, they would take a whole classroom full of kids, we would go to the house and the girls would do the laundry, they would cook and put food in wrapping wax and put it in the refrigerator. They would iron; they would clean. We would cut the grass, cut the hedges, if there was firewood, or take out the trash. The guys would do all the labor. The girls would do all of the high-quotient stuff, the cooking, the cleaning, the washing, sewing.

And so, we learned at a very early age, selling candy bars to help rebuild the

Mother House. The kids used to hate me because at the end of the candy sale, for every case of World's Finest Chocolate that you sold, they would put your name on a strip of paper and put it in a big bowl like a pickle jar. Father would have about 12 silver dollars, and he would reach into the bowl and shake his hand around and pull a name out. I would generally win seven or eight of the 12 silver dollars because I sold the most candy. I'd sell a thousand candy bars.

[00:52:00]

YM: I mean, every afternoon for a month, I'd get bus fare and go downtown and sell candy bars, 50 candy bars. So, what did I sell, 1,500? I don't know, 2,000? I mean, I was just good at it. This little curly haired kid goes to all these secretaries saying, "Hi, our nun's Mother House burned down in Baltimore, Maryland, and we're selling World's Finest Chocolate for 50 cents. Would you be kind enough to help us?" And "Oh, give me three of them." So it didn't take long. All the secretaries, because this was before Dictaphones and all that, all the women took shorthand and typed up the letters. So there was a pool of secretaries at Saint Paul companies, the Pioneer Building, the Endicott Building. I mean, we would go everywhere, all over downtown, and sell those candy bars.

It only took an hour and a half, two hours, to sell 48 or 96 candy bars. Pockets looked like those pants, the safari pants with the big bulge, full of quarters and 50 cent pieces.

KH: And you were how old-ish?

YM: This was elementary school. So this was before the eighth grade, like sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.

KH: Okay. You've talked about how segregation shaped your experiences in Rondo, shaped Rondo, and it was kind of this bubble where you had really caring adults who guided you.

YM: It limited it in one sense, but it expanded it. Because as a result of segregation and living in this bubble, the community was organized. Everyone knew who your parents and your grandmother was, so you couldn't throw rocks at a bottle on somebody's back fence, or somebody's grandmother would stick her head out the window, hands on her hips, and say, "Boy, if you don't cut that mess out, I'm coming out there and whoop your behind and I'm going to call your grandmother and you're going to get another whooping when you get home."

[00:54:00]

YM: And we'd say, "Oh, please, the devil must have made me do it. I promise it'll never happen again. Please don't call my grandmother." We would get on up the alley or up the street. So it was intended to limit us. It was a policy of containment, but that containment also made it easier to organize us, to unite us. I can remember elders in the barbershop saying, "Boy, you make sure you become a credit to the race." We didn't know whether they were talking about the hundred-yard dash or the Daytona 500. We didn't know what race was, but we had to promise we would be a credit to the race when we grew up, and we were encouraged. I still say, "Yes, ma'am," "Yes, sir." Because my grandmother had a hickory stick, and if I didn't, pop, she would remind me that I had an obligation to do it. I earned it vigorously. So trust me.

KH: So, what was it like? But you were just saying you went downtown to sell these candy bars. You shined shoes. So you had these moments of stepping outside.

YM: I shined shoes on University, between Dale and probably Oxford. University was safe because it was the northern border of the community. Going downtown was in the daytime, professionals, people were working downtown. I was a cute colored boy selling candy bars to help the Black nuns at St. Peter Claver rebuild their Mother House in Baltimore, Maryland. So we were tolerated. I was polite, I was intelligent, so I knew how

to behave. I knew how to ask permission. I knew how to thank people. I knew how to make change.

[00:56:00]

YM: I had a lot of repeat customers. They were happy to see me. Every 10 days, two weeks, I'd go back and hit them up again because the first batch would be gone from the secretary's drawer.

KH: Plus, it was good chocolate. I remember that chocolate.

YM: It was. I don't know if it had pecans or what were the nuts in it. But it was what we were expected to do. I mentioned earlier that Asa Hilliard said that kids have a nasty habit of exceeding whatever expectations are imposed on them. That's the way that we were brought up. I mean, like I say, these nuns received $1 a week, plus room and board, and that was it. Okay? And they had committed their life to Christ and education was their mission. So they were all teachers. They used to take their thumb and their index finger and put it here in your shoulder blades and squeeze. Your knees would come out from underneath you.

One of them used to like to box. If you smarted off or didn't follow orders, she would cold-cock you, okay? And she could punch. We used to have to kneel on our knees on the linoleum floor, the tile floor, we used to have to hold the Old Testament in one hand and the New Testament in the other and kneel on the floor for a half hour and you couldn't lower your hands. You had these books in each hand. When Sister came and got the books, we would say, "Oh, man, anybody could do that." Your hands would be so light, they'd go up toward the ceiling. I won't mention his name, but one of the young people in our class was a hellion and all the nuns had telephones on their desks.

[00:58:00]

YM: And Sister would say, "So-and-so, don't let me have to call your

grandmother." He made the mistake of saying, "Well, you better go and do whatever you have to do." And she picked up the phone and she said. "Hello, Mrs. So-and-so. Yes, it's Sister Elise. Yes, ma'am, it's him. Yes, he's beside himself today. You will? Five minutes? We look forward to seeing you then. Okay." That boy's grandmother showed up in class in her bathrobe and her pink curlers, and she had a razor strap, she had an ironing cord, she had a switch that looked like a fly rod. I think it was a willow switch. And she had a belt. She beat that boy around that classroom until he threw up.

This was like the first week of school. Anytime that anybody else acted up, all she had to do was say, "Don't let me have to call your grandma." "Oh, please, Sister, please. I don't know what got into me. Please don't call my grandmother. It'll never happen again." We were perfect angels for the rest of the school year.

KH: Do you think there was a sense, in listening to you talk about how the nuns or adults in the community, your mom, whoever, grandmothers—

YM: Or Bill.

KH: —Bill, also, were they setting these high expectations and kind of reinforcing them through physical duress? Because they—

YM: They were chastising. It was more verbal duress than anything else. You better, or else.

KH: So, any kind of duress, were they doing that simply because they thought it was the right thing to do? Or was there also a consciousness that, Look, if you do step outside of this safe bubble, you are potentially at risk. You've talked about white men chasing you out of Highland Park. Was there a part of you that needed to learn how to behave to save yourself in a hostile world?

[01:00:00]

YM: The integration that we experienced within this community taught us how to

be better instruments for living with other people outside the community. The duress, whether it was verbal, whether it was physical, whether it was "or else," and nobody wanted to find out what "or else" was, was the purest act of love possible. It was an act of love and kindness, because they gave a damn about us, not because they wanted to punish us, or hurt us, or they didn't think we were capable of doing better. It was always done in an encouraging fashion, rather than to criticize us or to belittle us. If you belittle a youngster in front of their peers, you've created an adversarial relationship. It was, "Come on, you know better than that. You can do better than that." And "Would your mother, would your grandmother appreciate that?" And "Is that how you want to be known as the clown, playground clown, the class clown?"

But it was positive reinforcement, and it was nourishing encouragement. That's why the fact that they gave a damn about us made us give a damn about ourselves. So I'd like to think it was done out of love, because it could have been punitive. It could have been, "You're banned. You can't come back here for two months." Or "Look at this clown, this fool," dehumanizing us in front of our peers. It could have easily been very negative because we were genuine shitheads. I mean, when we were bad, we were really bad. They saw enough in us to want us to be better and to encourage us to do that. And so, that's why I say that Oxford was not just a recreational center, but it was character development, it was leadership development. It was integrity. It was kindness. It was advancement. I mean, everything about it.

[01:02:00]

YM: We were better people every day when we left Oxford than we were when we got there. That is what was imparted in us, that we were better, we deserve better, and we could be better. Athletically, personally, spiritually, educationally, socially. We were taught to respect young ladies, not to belittle them or objectify them, or call them names,

or say nasty things about them in public. Boys will be boys. When we were together, we had our own rules of behavior and culture. But when you were at Oxford, you minded your P's and Q's. You were on your best behavior because you wanted to be, not because you had to be or because you feared the consequences.

We did it not so much for approval from Bill and any other adults, but to avoid their disapproval. We didn't want them to be disappointed in us. That's the kind of environment that Oxford fostered. They knew the challenges that we would face in the broader world, the broader community, the broader society. Frequently, we got our hearts broken in other parts of this town. I mean, I could tell you. My godmother and her husband had a farm up near Lake Mille Lacs, and I went up there to spend a week, and there were some white kids swimming in the creek.

[01:04:00]

YM: I went down and swam with them. And they said, "Well, we're going back to our cabin on the lake. Why don't you ask your godmother if you can come along?" And she said, "Okay." So they gave me permission and told me to behave myself. I got in the car, we went down there, went swimming, and when I swam underwater in the lake, my hair went back. And they said, "Oh, my God, he's colored." I had to walk the five miles home. I was probably nine or 10 years old. When I went to kindergarten over on the east side of Saint Paul, the school is no longer there, it was Erickson Elementary School. My teacher's name was Ms. Windgate.

Every day at story time, just before the nap, guess which story she would read to us every day? *Little Black Sambo*. "Did you know Little Black Sambo was the best on his block at hide and go seek? That his hair was like a Brillo pad and his mother could scrub the pans with it after dinner, and that if he closed his eyes and his mouth in the dark, you couldn't see him?" There was one milk carton that sat on the steam radiator and one

cookie that got put on a tan washroom paper towel and ran into the water fountain. Guess who got the warm, curdling milk and the oatmeal cookie turned back to oatmeal? I did. I was in fourth or fifth grade when it dawned on me that I was being discriminated against. And I said, "Wow," and stood up. The nun sent me over to the rectory to confess to Father that I had disrupted the class and to go to confession and do my penance for remembering those horrible things.

[01:06:00]

YM: I was in fourth and fifth grade and just remembered going to the lake or hearing *Little Black Sambo* day after day after day. We didn't inherit self-hatred. We were taught self-hatred. Anytime that we stepped out of the safe, warm grasp of the adults in this community, the Bill Petersons, the nuns, the staff at Hallie, at the Ober Boys Club, my grandmother and my mother. You knew where you were, and you knew you weren't welcome, and it was very painful.

When I went to St. John's Landing, I came home, and a couple of the girls asked me for my phone number. One of the female counselors had picked the girls up and was going to take them out for ice cream or somewhere and called and wanted to know if she could come by and pick me up. I told her that I didn't want her to come to my house because we were poor and I was ashamed. And my mother sat me down and cried and said, "We're not poor, we're just broke. This is the best that I'm able to do for you. But you've got clothes on your back. You've got food in the refrigerator. I put 25 cents beneath the statue of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph every day when I go to work. That's your allowance to get soda pop or candy bars or chips or cookies, or what have you. I don't ever want you to be ashamed because we're doing the best we can. We go to church, we're good people and we're proud of it."

[01:08:00]

YM: That was the last time that I ever felt sorry, especially, I made a vow that I would never treat a woman the way that my father treated my mother. That's why I've been with the same woman for 55 years. [redacted]

KH: And in your family.

YM: And in the family. We were taught to take pride in that. Not to brag about it, but to represent it, and that whatever we did not only affected us, it affected everybody who looked like us. So being a credit to the race came to mean being an upstanding person in the community and being someone who could be trusted, who could be looked up to. And believe me, I volunteered in the prisons because but for the grace of God, there go I. You know? I mean, I could hold a family reunion, a class reunion, a neighborhood reunion every time I went. I taught in the prisons to the people that I grew up with. [01:10:00]

YM: I was taught to believe that if we didn't give a darn about them while they were in prison, they weren't going to give a darn about us when they got out. I taught in the three prisons, volunteered at Red Wing in the juvenile facility, and then volunteered at the federal prison up at Sandstone on Sunday nights until a telegram was sent from FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C. saying that if those of us who volunteered there on Sunday nights ever set foot there again, we were to be detained, and held. That was the last time that I went to the federal prison because they told us we were not allowed on, they referred to federal prisons as federal reservations. Somehow, they thought we were there to do DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion], or something.

KH: Oh no.

YM: We would take penumbra, mixed blood, the Black doctors, the Black nurses, and they would talk, we would encourage them to write letters home to their younger brothers and sisters and convince them that it wasn't a summer camp, it wasn't a grand

vacation, it was hell, and they better stay the hell out of there. But my wife and I couldn't go out to the nightclubs because somebody who had been in prison, one of my students, would be sending drinks over to our table all night. And we had to say, "We can't drink anymore, we've got to drive home. Don't send any more drinks over here."

KH: So, I'm curious.

YM: My name, Yusef, means, "A person seeking wisdom to benefit others." That reflects my upbringing, that reflects Oxford, that reflects the Oblate Sisters of Providence, that reflects my mother, my grandmother, the Black women who nurtured me and who put their hands on their hips and stuck their head out the window and said, "Boy, if you don't cut that mess out, I'm coming out there and whoop your behind." And we'd say, "Oh, please, please, it'll never happen again. I don't know what got into me."
[01:12:00]

YM: Everybody knew everybody. We had to ask my grandmother for permission to ask somebody for a date because we might be related. And she goes, "I ain't going to have no two-headed babies running around this house." But, I mean, that was Black culture. That was language, culture, and history. And that's part of our DNA. Oxford is part of our DNA because that's where we spent our Wonder Bread years being developed. I don't know that my mother ever met Bill Peterson, but she saw that Oxford was good for me, that it was clean fun, that I enjoyed it, I looked forward to it, it kept me out of trouble, and she encouraged it. It gave her an hour or two to sit down and rest and relax after dinner or whatever.

KH: And how important was the actual sports piece? I know Oxford was a rec center, so it did things besides sports. But how important, either to you or to the community as a whole, do you think sports was to all of this or any of this?

YM: I was 6'6", and I weighed 180 pounds when I graduated from high school.

Okay? I mean, we were involved in athletic activities every day. I had two operations on my left ankle and with a cast, I was out playing baseball in the street, playing touch football. I was the quarterback, so they would hike it to me, and I would throw the pass to somebody. I couldn't run, obviously, but I could stand at the plate and hit the tennis ball with the broomstick that we used for a bat.

[01:14:00]

YM: Sports was the *raison d'être*. Okay? It was the reason for Oxford. It was a recreational center, and the word recreation means to recreate yourself. We did that in the truest sense of the word at Oxford. I don't know if it was the girls, if it was the teamwork, if it was the ping pong, if it was just the hanging out, being with other kids my age and some older. There's always an intergenerational tension that becomes sort of a learning experience. The high school kids, they don't pick on the junior high school kids, but they give them a hard time, okay? You have to be man enough or become man enough to be able to not only to withstand that, but you've got to give as well as you take. And so, they learned what you were made of because they put you to the test, because they knew what was waiting for you as you grew older and as you expanded.

I had friends on the West Side. I had friends on the East Side. I didn't have friends in the North End. But if we wanted to go to McCarrons or Phalen or Highland or wherever, downtown, we went. The Tower Theater was 15 cents. They had six balconies. We had to go up top, but we threw a lot of shit onto people down on the first floor, okay? They wish they could have been in the balcony when we got done, water balloons, candy bars, popcorn, peanuts. I mean, we made the movies horrible for them. I told you, I was a shithead. The guys I ran with were shitheads, too. I mean, we didn't have any money. We didn't have any transportation. We had to walk or ride our bikes everywhere we went.

[01:16:00]

YM: We went out to Como Park a lot. We'd get into it with kids from Como or other neighborhoods who were out there. But we'd go in the greenhouse, the conservatory, and we'd go around the camels and whatever, and we'd go in the monkey house and see the gorillas and the lions and the polar bears swimming in endless circles, bumping their head against the glass and all that shit. We had nothing but time, and we made use of it in multiple ways. We played marbles. We played Eat the Peg. When we weren't at Oxford or Hallie or the Ober Boys Club, we would take a popsicle stick and we would drive it through some dog doo-doo, okay? There would be an eighth of an inch showing, okay? The white kids called it Mumblety-Peg. But you grabbed a knife, opened the blade and held it by the tip. We had Peg in the Air, we had Around the World, we had Over the Shoulder. And you had to do about 18 or 20 different tricks with the knife, and it had to stick in the ground such that you could get three fingers between the dirt and the tip of the handle. If you couldn't get the three fingers, you lost your turn and had to pass the knife to somebody else. You had to go through all of those, and several of them you had to do three times in a row. I used to practice in the dark because I made a promise. If you lost, you had to get down on your knees, put your hands behind your back and pull that popsicle stick out of the ground and out of the dog doo-doo.

But it was one of the rites of passage. Only the real wannabe men played Eat the Peg. I played with the high schoolers, and I was good. I was usually the second or third one out, okay? There would be eight or 10 of us. And they said, "Oh, shit, Wilbur's coming up. There's only two of you left now. Who's it going to be?" We would laugh and poke fun and if whoever didn't want to Eat the Peg, they would get beat up by the other guys in the circle who formed a circle around them and wouldn't let them go home. [01:18:00]

YM: I was a shithead, and I would be right there taunting whoever had to eat to

peg with the rest of them. But that was one of the rites of passage was Eat the Peg. We had to tear everything off of our bikes, and it was just two wheels and a frame and the handlebars, put cards and clothespins in the spokes and make it sound like a motorcycle and ride around town. I used to dive off the barges and go in the caves down on Plato with my friends on the West Side because we met them at Camp Wendigo at St. John's Landing and fell in love with the girls. I used to walk the daughter home over on the west side from Highland Pool, whose father was a well-known businessman in the city of Saint Paul. But all I was allowed to do was walk her to the end of her block and tell her it was nice seeing her and then walk all the way back home myself.

KH: Was she white?

YM: Yeah. Wasn't allowed to walk her up to her door. I was color blind for some reason. I mean, I knew who I was. I'm so light complexioned. When I lived in Los Angeles, they wanted me to take a screen test because they said, "You could play any one of 15 different nationalities." I said, "Listen, nationality is only the country you were born in. You mean ethnicities." They said, "Well, yeah, you can play a Mexican, you can play a Jew, you can play a white person." And "Oh, I'm still trying to figure out who I am, so I'll be all right."

[01:20:00]

YM: When I was in L.A., I got involved loosely with the Panthers, with U.S., with Ron Karenga's organization. *Hair* was playing up on Sunset Strip. The Mamas and the Papas were the number one group in the country. The liquor stores were open until 2:00 in the morning. I was six-six, and I could go into the jazz clubs, and I was dating 35-year-old legal secretaries from the ACLU and civil rights organizations, and man, I was living large. I mean, when I came back here, I brought 75 jazz albums with me and my friends were listening to the Temptations and Marvin Gaye and Martha and the Vandellas. Oh,

there's that jazz stuff. Good luck.

KH: And when were you out there?

YM: In the '60s, the mid-60s, when I left here, 10th grade.

KH: So, you hadn't graduated yet?

YM: Correct.

KH: And what year did you graduate?

YM: I graduated in '66. I came back off and on over a period of five years. I was assigned to go to night school at Mechanic Arts and you could smoke in the cafeteria. My classmates all wore bib overhauls and had trouble with their wees and their wubble-ewes. I dropped out of school in the 10th grade because LaRone Bennett, Jr., who was the editor of *Ebony Magazine*, wrote an essay called "Was Abraham Lincoln a Racist?" Because Lincoln said, "If I have to keep them enslaved to save the union, I will do that. If I have to set them free, I will do that, too. My objective is only to save the union, not to save the slaves." And so, I wrote a paper on that essay and my psychology teacher, Mrs. Fay, ripped it in half and put a red F on the top half of the half that remained. I got up and walked out of school and dropped out.

[01:22:00]

YM: My sister broke her tailbone. Somebody had waxed the steps, she had a second-floor apartment, and she was taking a laundry basket down to the laundry room and slipped and broke her tailbone. I went out and got two jobs and paid the rent and bought the groceries and became the surrogate father for my five-year-old nephew. Part of my training.

KH: So they were in California?

YM: Yeah, L.A. And went to work for the Kaiser Foundation, driving a truck 6,000 miles all over Southern California every month, and dating 35-year-old women. My

motto was, there's nothing wrong with exploitation as long as it's mutual. I was literally burning the candle at both ends. Young, dumb, cute kid from Minnesota, naïve and having fun. So I'm not proud of everything I've done, but I'm proud to say that I have never been a predator, or hurt people, or disrespected people. As I said, my motto was there's nothing wrong with exploitation as long as it's mutual.

KH: So, for five years you were back and forth, and it was during that time that you graduated then through night school at Mechanic Arts?

YM: The teachers that I had at night school told me I had to take the final exams. I was only in night school for three weeks because I dropped out the first month of 10th grade. And I aced, naturally. We were using the comic books in English class and the funny papers was how they were teaching, because all these guys worked at Whirlpool and American Hoist and Derrick, they were all immigrants. They had trouble with their wees and their wubble-ewes, and they were trying to get a GED. I'm in night school with them coming out of St. Peter Claver, and Cyrus Ettinger, John Marshall, and first month at Central High School.

[01:24:00]

YM: Both of the basketball coaches met me at the front door and said, "Boy, have we got plans for you. We're going to show you your locker and show you your classes and you got it made." And I said, "I'm not playing basketball." And they said, "I beg your pardon?" And I said, "I'm not interested in playing basketball." I was shooting pool at Harkins Billiard Palace in downtown Saint Paul, at that time the world's largest pool hall with 50 pool tables. And I was damn good at it. So I got through my first two years of college. But the last night of class, the principals, the Rossini brothers, were the two co-principals of night school, told me to come over to the table where they were sitting with my teachers, and they said, "You've not only not lost anything, you're ahead of the

kids who've been in school all year. So we've decided we're going to give you all your credits and you don't have to go to summer school, you don't have to go to night school next year, and in September you can go back in the 11th grade with your classmates."

And I did. I regretted it because it made me think that I really didn't need to apply myself in school. And I didn't. I still got offered a number of academic scholarships. Like I say, I had a high school education before I ever entered high school with the nuns and Cyrus Ettinger and all the times I had to put my knuckles out in the aisle and get cracked because somebody didn't do their homework. It wasn't me. So I got a hell of an education. I mean, like I said, 90 percent of the kids in my eighth-grade class all went to college. Most had scholarships. St. Peter Claver, those nuns were fierce and they were very dedicated to their profession as teachers. So I went to the 10th grade for three weeks and got all my credits and graduated with my classmates in '66.

KH: And that was from Central or from Mechanic Arts?

[01:26:00]

YM: Central. Mechanic Arts was where I went to night school in 10th grade. I was supposed to go to night school and summer school and then night school the following year in order to make up for the credits that I had missed, the eight and a half months of 10th grade that I didn't attend. I was parking cars and shooting pool down at Harkins Billiard Palace and went to night school for the last three weeks of the academic year. But it was impossible, somehow, for me to shake all of the training and all of the preparation. We were taught luck is when preparation meets opportunity, and we were prepared every single day in this community. We didn't know what we were being prepared for, but when the opportunity presented themselves.

I have been blessed. Every job that I've had within six months, I've been making twice what I was hired at. And I've been in radio, television, print journalism, community

organizing, teaching. I taught college classes before I had a college degree for Antioch University. Taught in the prisons. Taught for Metropolitan State University after I graduated from there. Audited classes at UCLA and USC when I was in California, worked in Beverly Hills, right down the street. I worked at a women's department store called Haggarty's and made the credit cards because I was trustworthy. I sat at a machine and typed the names and the numbers in the hot plastic and put them in envelopes and mailed them out to people who opened up charge accounts.

Fell in love with jazz. I have a nasty habit of falling in love with every woman I come face to face with. So, if we fall in love, please don't deny me. My wife gives me permission to flirt. Like I say, 55 years. I told my wife I've given her the best years of my life. You know what she said? She was afraid of that.

[01:28:00]

YM: I said, "Baby, listen. I can't do half of what I did 25 years ago, but the half I can still do, I do twice as nice." She said, "I know, honey. You snore twice as loud as you did 25 years ago." And I said, "Well, let me practice my Michael Jackson moonwalk and see if I can get out of this conversation." So you've got to have a sense of humor. I mean, I've had friends, three quarters of the people that I grew up with are dead. Drugs, gangs, murdered, suicide, dangerous jobs, shitty accidents, car crashes.

KH: And you said earlier that it was when Black professionals started moving out to the suburbs that this part of town started encountering some troubles.

YM: It's when the gangs and the drugs and the crack and the prostitution flourished.

KH: And about when was that, '80s? Earlier? Later?

YM: No, I'd say it was the late '60s onward, up until about almost 2000. Yeah. The Mighty Vice Lords, the Gangster Disciples, the Crips, the Bloods, the drugs, the

prostitutes, the crack houses. The gangs were drafting all of the kids, forcing them into the gangs. Some of the kids were joining for what they thought was their own protection, and then they wound up selling drugs, going to jail, going to prison. Like I say, when I was teaching or volunteering in the criminal justice system, I could have a family reunion and a class reunion at the same time because I was working with the Black inmates. Most of them I grew up with, they were happy to see me. They were ashamed.

[01:30:00]

YM: I tried to teach them how to read, how to write, how to take advantage of the few opportunities that remained in the prison system, the vocational classes, what have you. The two lifers that I advocated for were both convicted of murder. One of them bought $6-worth of what he thought was cocaine that turned out to be talcum powder. He demanded his money back, and the drug dealer who sold it to him had two people beat him up, and one of them had a little tiny knife, and he pushed him, and he stuck him under the arm and punctured his heart, and he bled to death on the sidewalk in north Minneapolis in January, in sixteen below zero weather.

The other one got high, and a cop pulled a gun, and he pulled his, and they had a shootout, and the cop died. And he spent 38 years in prison. Three weeks after we got him released, he discovered he had pancreatic cancer, and they had to take his pancreas and his colon out. He'd been working two jobs, he's had six cars. He's responsible, but he's still 22 years old. That's how old he was when he went to prison. And now he's 66, 67 years old. It's a damn shame.

KH: And were these two, or some of the other people that you counseled and taught in prison, were they from this neighborhood? And they were the ones who then got caught up in this stuff after?

YM: One was from North Minneapolis. I've always operated in both cities with

fairly limitless freedom. I bought the old Bryant Junior High School from the Minneapolis School District, which today is Sabathani Community Center on 38th and 3rd, and raised about $7 million to renovate the building, and 165,000 square feet on six and a half acres. Recruited 50 different agencies to move in, renovated their spaces.

[01:32:00]

YM: Then several foundations were trying to hire me at the same time. This is when DEI became popular, back in the ’80s. I worked for the McKnight Foundation, for the Hill Family Northwest Area foundation, for the Dayton Hudson Foundation. I served on the board of the Harry Davis Foundation, the Headwaters Fund. I haven’t decided what I want to be when I grow up yet. That was one of the blessings of growing up in a Rondo neighborhood was that you learn multiple skills and you take advantage of multiple opportunities.

I think the longest job I ever had in my life was five years. Our daughter has three degrees and she’s a licensed therapist and charges $200 an hour. Our son is responsible for all the people that do coding at Best Buy’s corporate headquarters. He’s got a three-bedroom house with a three-car garage on Lake Phalen that he lives in alone, 55 years old. Our daughter is 45 and just remarried an engineer with a PhD at 3M from St. Croix. So they’ve both got enough money to light a wet mule on fire. And me and the missus didn’t have anything better to invest in than our children.

Our son got a summer job at Oxford Playground making $4, $5 dollars an hour pushing dirt from one side of the room to the other and pushing it back. We’re proud of our kids. Again, I made a commitment that I would never treat a woman the way that my father treated my mother. And I’ve got, like, 13 siblings.

[01:34:00]

YM: My father played in the Negro Leagues and worked on the Great Northern

and Northern Pacific Railroads and, you probably won't be able to print this but took his wiener out everywhere the train stopped and had kids. And so, we made a commitment that we would be together, at least until our kids were adults and self-sufficient out in the world on their own. This is our granddaughter's stuff because they lived with us for the past 11 years. She just got married a few months ago. And this is our granddaughter. She went to the Chinese immersion school which had the third highest test scores of any school in the state of Minnesota. She reads, writes, and speaks fluent Mandarin and will only have to do three years of undergrad to get her bachelor's degree. But I'll be glad when they really move out. You know? I mean, what are you going to do?

KH: I have a couple more questions, going back in time to speak about Oxford. So you were talking about having friends on the East Side, on the West Side, in Highland. Perhaps the answer to this is implicit in what you've said, but I'm going to ask you anyway. There were rec centers throughout the city of Saint Paul, this is one of the things I'm trying to figure out. Did you get a sense that there was something unique about Oxford, or would those kids on the East Side have said the same thing about their local rec center?

[01:36:00]

YM: I've never had this conversation with them. But the rec centers, the booster clubs, the American Legion, the VFW, the churches, the neighborhood schools, because all of the schools were neighborhood then this was before magnets or specialty schools, had their own culture, their own language, and history, and DNA. I would hope that they had exposure to some of the same kinds of experiences that we did. I think the experiences we had were necessary because of segregation and prejudice and discrimination and racism. We were constantly being prepared for shit that we didn't know anything about, that we had nothing to do with creating. When it was thrust in our

laps as we matured into adulthood, there was resentment, there was anger, because it just seemed so unnecessary.

As I said, I considered myself colorblind, and I could count the people on my fingers because of segregation, who I met that I thought were truly colorblind. The majority of them were priests. At St. Peter Claver, we had white priests. Father Luger, Father Worth. Jerome and Arnold Luger, Father John Worth. We still have white priests. Father Kevin McDonough married my wife and I; we had an African wedding ceremony. He did the civil ceremony some years later, baptized my wife and daughter and gave them Holy Communion, confirmation. My wife and my daughter were very involved. My wife is on the trustee board, the pastoral council, the liturgy committee. She's the sacristan at Mass on Saturday. She's in the Ladies Auxiliary to the Knights of Peter Claver; I was the Grand Knight for the Knights of Peter Claver. I was an altar boy for six years. Maybe not six, maybe five. Hence the Latin.

[01:38:00]

YM: But as I said, segregation limited us, or was a policy of containment, but within that segregated bubble, we also had a world of opportunities that I don't know that other young people our age were exposed to or benefited from. There were Black women who really took me under their wing. There were some Black men later in life, Black professionals when I got into the world of work. But it was Black women who nurtured and guided. And Bill Peterson, surrogate father. There were two or three friends who still had fathers in the household, who also were sort of surrogate fathers, but never really took me on as a project like Bill Peterson did, almost without knowing it and without saying it, because it was the way that he treated everybody.

I mean, I could talk to Bill. Bill would listen. Bill would encourage. Bill would also give me shit and keep both my feet on the ground, make sure that my head didn't get

too big for my shoulders. Everybody felt that way about Bill, who encountered him or who interacted with him. It's the kind of person he was.

KH: So you played ping pong there, you're a ping pong champion. You and your friends from the neighborhood were brought in to compete against the Oxford teams. How many years do you think you were involved at Oxford or had this relationship with Bill when you were a young person?

YM: Ten.

KH: Ten years. Okay.

[01:40:00]

YM: Like I say, I was on the corner waiting for the Rondo Stryker when they pulled in the first warming house on the back of a pickup truck.

KH: So, back to that early, early timeline, so the Quonset huts were there, and when this came in, when the pickup truck pulled in—

YM: The Quonset huts were gone; the field was vacant. There were houses on Iglehart. The Jimmy Lee Center, none of that was built. It was from the alley between Carroll and Iglehart. So, Oxford went from Rondo to Carroll, and then halfway to the next block. It was like a block and a half. There were apartment buildings on Lexington where the swimming pool is, and there's vacant lots on the corner of Lexington and Rondo. There were apartment buildings there, brick. They were like a six block, three story, one, two-bedroom apartments, two on each floor. There were two or three of them. There were houses on Iglehart. The whole block was full of houses, and there was an alley there. There's still a driveway where the alley was behind home plate between Carroll and Iglehart. So, you had from Rondo to Carroll, and then Carroll halfway to Iglehart, half a block.

[01:42:00]

YM: The warming house was in the middle on the west end of the lot. Like, this is Lexington, this is Rondo, and this is Iglehart. The alley of the south side of Iglehart is right here where this paper towel is. The warming house was right here. The basketball court was right here. And there was a vacant spot here. This was left field. And this was a baseball diamond here, and then there was another baseball diamond here. The hockey rink was built there, and the skating rink was built right here. So all of the ground was utilized. For some reason, there was a hill here because of the change in elevation. This was vacant. And I used to hit home runs over the left fielder up into this area.

KH: And so, obviously, this basketball court at this time was outdoors, before the building was built.

YM: Yeah, just one court. No, it was there after the building was built.

KH: Okay, so it stayed. But it was all outdoor until the building was built with a gym.

YM: Yeah. And the Minnesota Vikings and somebody else paid for the artificial turf not too many years ago.

KH: And so, when you were the ping pong champion was that after the permanent building, the first part?

YM: Yeah, the rec center had been built and the rec center had one main room. It had two restrooms, and then it had Bill's office. Then behind Bill's office was the weight room where he would lift weights every afternoon. Anybody could go back there and lift weights with him. But the main room had a ping pong table. There might have been a vending machine, a pop machine or something like that. That main room was about the size of this living room and dining room. Then his office was the size of a small kitchen, and the weight room was probably half the size of this room. So, there was his office, the weight room, and there were the two restrooms, and then there was a main room. But the

main room was the warming house.

[01:44:00]

KH: Okay. And so, that was before the big gym was built?

YM: Yeah, before Jimmy Lee was built. Yeah, all of that is new. They tore down the old warming house, and that was up on a hill. Small hill, but up on a hill.

KH: Okay. So there was a progression of smaller to bigger and less permanent to more permanent structures built at Oxford.

YM: I think the swimming pool was built in part by Central High School, by the school district, because there's a single pool in Central High School, but it's not big enough for spectator sports. When they built a swimming pool, they put a kiddie pool next to the lap pool. There's a steam room, or there's a sauna in there, and they've got slides. When you drive down Lexington, you can see one of the slides outside of the building.

KH: Yeah, my son had some birthday parties there.

YM: Interestingly enough, the swimming club is all white.

KH: Now? Currently?

YM: Always.

KH: Always has been.

YM: They charge $8 a day to swim there.

KH: Interesting.

YM: So the kids in the neighborhood, our granddaughter learned how to swim there. My daughter enrolled her in swimming class. There was a mixed group of kids who learned how to swim there. But the ones who go there every morning at 6:00 and swim or after work, it's basically white adults. And they treat it as their pool. There's still a policy of containment. Yeah. There's only so many laps in a pool, so many lanes and yeah, it's $8, it was $8 a day several years ago, and neighborhood kids didn't have the money to go

in there and swim.

[01:46:00]

YM: Now, I don't know if that's changed or if they've made certain days. I was never very involved in the new building because that was built long after I became an adult. I think Mayor Latimer owned the apartment buildings that used to exist on Oxford between Iglehart and Marshall. I don't know if those brick buildings are still there or not, because Oxford is kind of like the pool, and the new center, and the parking lot. They tore down the houses on both sides of Iglehart and on most of Marshall to build the new rec center, which is named after the guy who ran the elevators at the First National Bank, Jimmy Lee. That's what they call it now. They don't call it Oxford. They call it Jimmy Lee.

KH: Yeah. I'm going to open my laptop here a minute because I want to show you a map, so we have some visuals. I have some visuals. You have them clear. While I'm doing that, another question for you is this. You have talked about the importance of African American women in your life, whether your mother, kind of those community mothers, grandmothers, nuns, teachers, educators. And we talked, of course, about sports. When you were growing up in the neighborhood and you were at Oxford, do you remember girls playing sports?

[01:48:00]

YM: Yeah, I told you that Debbie Montgomery was elected to the national board of the NAACP when she was 17 years old. I think there were 72 members on that board. For my generation, there were several Debbie Montgomery's. I wasn't old enough to remember Toni Stone. Mancini's is going to induct Toni Stone into their wall of fame, the first woman. Toni played in the Negro leagues. In fact, the field up Dunning Field, behind Central High School, the enclosed ball field is named after Toni Stone.

KH: You can enlarge that, too. And you probably have seen this.

YM: I have, yeah. The neighborhood map.

KH: Wait a minute, where's my zoom? I'm sorry, transcribers. We're just looking at a map here. So here's Oxford Way over here on the west end.

YM: And ,you see, 94 is where?

KH: Well, so here's the freeway, right? So this is where it would have been. So this is from 1920 to '60, so before the freeway opened. So it's this little corridor here.

YM: And this is 94, the dotted lines. Okay. So there are houses on both sides of Rondo and Carroll. I've got a picture of the Quonset huts. Would you like to see it?

KH: Yes, I would. Because there's been some question about when they were there and did they take up the whole space and, et cetera. Because on this map—I'm going to get a better one for us here. That was not good.

YM: I remember the Quonset huts being on the northeast corner of the lot.

KH: Right. Because on this map anyway, that's what these are.

YM: Quonset huts?

KH: Yes. So if you look at the key. Oh, for crying out loud. Sorry.

YM: It happens. No problem.

[01:50:00]

KH: I'm going to close this one down. That's not the one we want to look at. We want to look at this one. There we go. So, if you look at the key—why is it not opening the right version here? I want the TIF. This one. Okay. Try this again.

YM: I can send you the pictures of the Quonset huts.

KH: Yeah, that would be great. Because here on the key here. Seven, "These huts, are World War II veterans Quonset huts, 1947-1955. In the late '50s, the site became part of Oxford Playground." So, it looks to me, am I right in reading this correctly—

YM: What's the green shaded area?

KH: Well, that's the Oxford Playground. So that was my question. Do these coexist?

YM: That's wrong. See, you see where Carroll Avenue is? And where Iglehart Avenue is? Oxford Playground went from Rondo halfway between this block. Now, on Lexington, there weren't Quonset huts all the way up to Lexington. There were apartment buildings on Lexington, and there were houses on both sides of Iglehart. On Oxford, from halfway, there were houses on this end on the south side of this block, this green block. So Oxford ran from here halfway through here. I would say if you take those last two houses, and you drew a line straight up Lexington, there were houses there, and apartment buildings.

KH: So Oxford as a playground could not have existed at the same time the Quonset huts were there?

[01:52:00]

YM: Correct.

KH: Because they were in the same place. So it had to be once they were cleared out.

YM: There were houses on both ends of this block. I don't know where this plat map—you say this is from the '20s?

KH: Well. Well, it's not a plat map.

YM: Our house was built in 1922, so that's when most of the houses in this neighborhood were built. But there were houses on both sides of Iglehart. This is Iglehart here and this back half was all vacant. There was an alley there. And home plate today is right here. There's white rowhouses on Carroll, for this block. Well, right across from the row houses is where home plate is for this playing field. So, all of this was vacant, half of

this block. There were houses on Iglehart, on this half. And there were apartment buildings on Lexington. Because where the second house is, is where the basketball court was, exactly where that is. And the warming house was right here, going part way. If you went down Carroll Avenue, you could see part of the warming house. But the warming house would have been right where this second house is here on Carroll or the second Quonset hut. So, that's not an accurate map, unless—

KH: Unless it's just representing different times.

YM: Because there were houses here. Now, today, there were three apartment buildings that George Latimer owned between Carroll and Iglehart on Oxford on this end of the block, on the east end of this block. There might have been one or two houses here because the new Jimmy Lee is all built up here.

[01:54:00]

KH: And now, I mean, this whole area is Oxford and Jimmy Lee, right.? Carroll, you can't get through anymore.

YM: Except for right here. I think there's a driveway that goes into the parking lot here.

KH: Off of Carroll?

YM: Off of Carroll or off of the old driveway that used to be here.

KH: Because the parking lot, let me think. Oh, this map didn't go down far enough. So, this is Marshall here, right? Iglehart, then Marshall?

YM: Yes.

KH: So, now you enter the parking lot off of Marshall. I think Iglehart is the driveway that goes in. But anyway, the point being—

YM: Yes, Iglehart is the driveway.

KH: Oxford and Jimmy Lee now takes up most of the two and a half blocks. So I

wonder if this map, because it's from 1920 to 1960, is showing these things at different times? I'm just looking down here to see who made the map. Marvin Anderson, I don't know.

KH: He was the law librarian at the State Supreme Court and he's the one of the founders of Rondo, LLC.

YM: Do you want to come upstairs with me to my desktop, if you don't mind?

KH: Sure, let me pause this.

[Audio Break]

KH: So we couldn't find the picture yet of the Quonset huts, but it is coming. So we're going to get some clarity, some visual clarity on where those Quonset huts were. And yeah, when I was looking through my email, I had emailed myself an article from 1952 from one of the papers, I don't remember which, and it's about Frank Loss running for the Commissioner of Parks and Rec or something like that, and that he's going to ask for money or something to get a playground there when those huts are removed. [01:56:00]

YM: When I talked to Bill about those Quonset huts, he said he remembers them being there when he left for the Marines and did he say they were gone by the time he came back? Anyway, what else, Yusef? I'm sure there's many other things to say, but anything else that you want to say about Oxford in particular, your experiences there, and what it's done for and how the community has supported it?

KH: Well, I think Oxford Recreational Center was a reflection of the resilience in the community because there was never an abundance of resources. Bill was always the only staff member. Occasionally, during the summer, or certain athletic seasons, he would be able to hire Frank, or Stevie, or David, to do some work around one of the teams or a competition or something. The booster club was very well organized, had a lot of

fundraisers. They worked with a lot of the neighborhood institutions, mostly the social clubs, the bars, the restaurants, things like that.

But Oxford was a reflection of the resilience in the community where whatever could be done would be done, had to be done, and somehow managed to be done against great odds and with very little external support. Bill's salary was paid, and that seemed to be about it. I cannot remember any other occasions where there was surplus equipment. I mean, the booster club was really responsible for raising any discretionary money that Bill had, which was good because it wouldn't have happened without them.

[01:58:00]

YM: I know for a fact that the groups did not travel a lot or spend a lot of time on the road or competing with others. I get about 50 text messages a day asking me for money to flip the GOP, do this, do that. Social Security, Rachel Maddow. I mean, it's crazy. But anyhow.

KH: So one of the things I just also found in my archives was an article from 1960. I'm not going to open my laptop again, but it was from 1960, I'm quite sure. It was the article in the paper, can't remember if it was *The Recorder* or Minneapolis or Saint Paul, major paper, but they were talking about how citizens in the Rondo Summit-University area had protested plans to replace, I think it was the Hollow and Oxford, to replace those playgrounds with public housing. So that must have been part of the urban renewal movement.

KH: In Hollow, they succeeded. Hollow was a white rec center. Black people were not allowed to go there up until the mid to late '50s. It had a building on Kent Street. The Hollow was between Central and St. Anthony, one block east of Dale. There's a large octagon shaped high rise there now that might be 10 or 12 stories high. You can't miss it from I-94. The Hollow took up about half that block.

[02:00:00]

YM: Frank's first wife was Sandra Pryor. Sandra was a professional figure skater, and her mother used to bring her down there, and we would all stand around the periphery of the ring, and she would skate and do the twirls and stuff when we were 10, 12 years old. When the building was torn down, there was a gazebo in the middle of the field, in the center of it, like you saw in that movie where they sang all the songs? You know what a gazebo is?

KH: Yeah.

YM: Two story gazebo in the middle of the field. *Oklahoma*, I'm thinking, or something. I forget what it was.

KH: Oh, yeah, I can picture it.

YM: There was a gazebo. There was one in *Sound of Music*, too, in Austria, actually, at the Archbishop Summer palace, where I got a post-doctoral fellowship to spend some time. But yeah, the Hollow was just vacant land that was flooded in the wintertime where we skated, and the kids played pickup baseball there in the summertime. They might have played touch football or something. But the Hollow was two blocks from Hallie Q. Brown. So Hallie Q. Brown kind of overshadowed, because Hallie Q. Brown was on Kent and Aurora, where the Unidale shopping center is now, a half block off University, and took up most of the block with St. Philip's Episcopal Church, which was Jim Griffin and Corky Finney and Judge Maxwell's church. Churches were known by who their most outstanding members were.

[02:02:00]

YM: But yeah, the Hollow succeeded and public housing built a high rise there. It was supposed to be senior housing. It has eventually become housing for whoever wants to live there, or whoever can get in. It's not a bad looking building. It's a high rise, but it's

shaped like a stop sign. Eight-sided building, six or eight sided. And it's got to be 10, 12 stories high.

KH: But Oxford remains as a playground and recreational site.

YM: Oxford was expanded, because they took out housing on both sides of Carroll and Iglehart, and one side of Marshall, the side where you enter Jimmy Lee, just east of Lexington.

KH: And just in looking through a lot of newspaper accounts, there are repeated stories about how residents in the neighborhood, in the area, to your point, went to city council, they wrote letters, they made really significant efforts to save and expand Oxford as a site.

YM: It was generally the NAACP or the Urban League who spearheaded those efforts. Lonnie Adkins was a Black architect who had his office in the Pioneer Building in downtown Saint Paul, was president of the board of the Urban League. As I mentioned, Roy Wilkins was the chair of both the NAACP and the Urban League. But that was before he went to the national NAACP. Denzil Carty was the chair of Hallie Q. Brown and the Urban League. Denzil was the pastor of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, and he was from the Caribbean.

[02:04:00]

YM: From the '50s until about the '90s, the leadership positions in the community were held by pastors because the Black church was supposed to be the Civil Rights Movement, the vanguard institution. There were a lot of meetings held in Pilgrim Baptist Church about I-94. That's where all the resistance was located. The meetings were held at Pilgrim Baptist. Floyd Massey was the pastor then. Floyd is now the pastor of Second Baptist Church in San Francisco, which is the second largest Black church in the country. He lived right across the street from the Convent at St. Peter Claver on Oxford and

Central, interestingly enough. There was a house on the corner there that the church purchased for him, built for him.

But yeah, the ministers were in all the leadership positions in the civil rights organizations, NAACP, Urban League, the community organizations. David Goodloe is who I remember. David is still alive. David was the president of the Booster Club for Rondo. And I think Johnny Cotton was on it. I'm trying to remember who some of the—I don't know if Johnny is still alive. I'm 76. David, if he's still alive, Jeffrey Hassan is his son. Bill would know if anybody on the booster club was still alive who could really talk about some of their efforts to fight on behalf. We were kids, basically.
[02:06:00]

KH: Yeah. The arguments were to save it from building public housing as urban renewal was coming through, or the Parks and Rec Department isn't allocating enough money to Oxford versus to other sites in Saint Paul. We can use this question as kind of a wrap up question here, but as you were just saying, I think there's a wide recognition of the importance of Black churches in organizing and supporting and leadership and resisting racist oppression. Why was Oxford so important? Why all the time and effort and energy to support it, to expand it, to save it? Why is a recreational site important to the community?

YM: In a nutshell, because it was so important to the community that the kids had someplace to go. Oxford always enjoyed community support. Hallie Q. Brown had a fundraiser called the Queen of Hearts Ball. My sister used to sell tickets. Whoever sold the most got to be the Queen of Hearts. And Jana Bell Taylor, who was in charge of programming down there for many years, was the original Miss Queen of Hearts back in the 1930s. Her mother was Alice Onque, who was one of the first staff members. Hallie Q. Brown was established in 1929.

The Urban League, I'm trying to think, would have probably been—see, the Democrats were credited with the formation of the NAACP. The Republicans got mad and thought that the Democrats were going to take all of the Negro votes, so they created the Urban League. You know, I worked for the Urban League from 1970 to 1972, and I'm embarrassed to say that I found a bunch of *Opportunity* magazines from the 1930s in the storeroom that nobody knew anything about.

[02:08:00]

YM: I hope they went to the Historical Society and not to the dumpster out back. But the Urban League was supported by businesses. NAACP was a membership organization. Why was Oxford so important? I think Oxford was apolitical, number one. Bill Peterson did not play favorites. Everybody was welcomed, valued, and respected at Oxford. And it was a cherished community institution. Now, Oxford started long after Hallie Q. Brown and the Edgar B. Ober Boys Club. And being on the edge of the community—see, here's another piece.

The neighborhood east of Dale street was considered Cornmeal Valley, lower income. West of Dale street was considered Oatmeal Hill, or bourgeois, bougie, we used to say. Oxford was on the west end of the entire neighborhood. Yet, somehow, Oxford quickly attained the same status. The Ober Boys Club was almost a quasi-religious organization. You know who Tiger Jack Rosenbloom was, the Black Jew, who had the little shop on Dale and I-94? He was Jewish. He used to call himself the Black Jew. He came here from Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He lived on the Winston-Salem plantation, the cigarette tobacco plantation where they grew the tobacco for Winston cigarettes, Winston's and Salem's, same company.

[02:10:00]

YM: Tiger Jack hoboed up here on the trains, okay? And he said, "Where can you

get something to eat?" And they said, "Well, you have to go to the Union Gospel Mission." So, he went down to the Union Gospel Mission downtown, down where Spaghetti Junction is, down by East 7th Street and what's the bridge, Lafayette Bridge down there. They told him if he took a shower, he could go with the boxing team to Stillwater to the lumberjack camp, and he could get a full meal. Otherwise, he'd have to live off the donuts. He said the donuts were so hard. I interviewed him for my radio program. He said if you held them up to your face and dropped them, they would bounce off the floor and bounce all the way back up to you where your mouth was. He said the donuts weren't too appetizing, so he said he went in the shower with his clothes on, okay, and took a shower and washed his clothes at the same time.

So they got on the bus, they went to the lumberjack camp, because Stillwater was a mill town, lumber mill town. They put him in the ring with some great big Swede. And Tiger was just some scrawny little Black kid with soaking wet clothes from the shower that he took. And so, Tiger started just throwing windmill punches. And somehow, he managed to hit the big Swede and knocked him unconscious. There was a woman who was broadcasting the fights on a local AM radio station, and she said, "You should see this little Jack Rosenbloom. He's a real tiger." And that's how Tiger got his nickname. Tiger Jack, the Black Jew. We didn't know what a Jew was. We knew Tiger Jack was the Black Jew. He used to have a little wagon, and he would pull it around the neighborhood with coal and go door to door and sell people coal because people had coal furnaces or coal stoves that they would use to heat their homes with.

[02:12:00]

YM: Tiger refused to sell cigarette papers because he knew what the kids did with them; they rolled marijuana joints with him. Tiger was a very religious Jewish person, bless his heart. He used to always praise my mother and say, "What a wonderful mother

you have to raise all them kids and sacrifice her life. I hope you kids appreciate your mother." But Tiger Jack. Tiger Jack Rosenbloom. Couldn't understand a word he said. He could talk a lot of shit though. He sold candy and knickknacks in his little shack. The little shack is still there. His son is the co-chair of the Minnesota Republican Party, Lucky Rosenbloom, who used to have a Hip Hop for Jesus program on the cable access channel. Lucky's a real right-wing duck.

But it was important. People didn't want to lose it. People valued it. The kids loved it. I mean, the kids considered it theirs. We couldn't go to any other rec centers. I used to play football for Valley Recreation Center. You know where Valley is?

KH: No.

YM: Mount Airy Projects? You know the real steep hill across the street across University from Regents Hospital? Up on top of that was Valley Playground. We had cardboard helmets. You had to pry the helmet apart to put it on your head. Cardboard. And from getting wet, they got like concrete. It didn't have a face guard in front of it. When somebody on the other team wanted to hurt you, all they did was lower their head and run right at you, and the top of the cardboard helmet was like this, you know? When that hard cardboard hit you in the chest, you couldn't speak for a couple of minutes.
[02:14:00]

YM: But somehow, I got on the Peewee football team at Valley, and I played there for about a month and then I didn't. It was too far to walk. But I never played on the football team at Oxford because I had the two operations on my ankle. I was riding a female classmate on my bicycle, and she was on the crossbar, and a dog ran down a driveway and jumped at the bike, and his foot went through the spokes. When the spoke got up to the fork, it threw me and Marilyn off the bike, and I pushed Marilyn onto the grass, and I landed on the sidewalk and fractured my ankle. The marrow was coming out,

forming another growth.

So I went to the hospital, they cut the back of my ankle open. They scooped all of the marrow out, they put pins in it, and they put a cast on it. A week after they took the cast, my ankle swelled up again. Doctor, oh, he was a bone surgeon, Carl something, did the second operation and wouldn't let my mother give him a dime because he thought he had got it all the first time. Second time, they broke the ankle, split it open, scooped all the marrow out, put the ankle back together, put pins in it, and then I had a cast from above my knee all the way to my toes for the remainder of the summer.

KH: Oh yeah. No sports.

YM: For two summers, no sports. And those were my football and baseball years. And that was right after the dog got the glove.

KH: Oh my. Bad luck. Just a streak of bad luck.

YM: Yeah. If it hadn't been for Shepard, I'd have been on the Oxford baseball team. What you doing there, Mr. Happy?

[02:16:00]

KH: Well, Yusuf, I really appreciate all the time you've given me to talk about Oxford and Rondo. Is there anything else now?

YM: I wish there was more that I could share. If you think of something later, give me a holler and let me know.

KH: Yeah, I will.

YM: I'm happy to help you out.

KH: I will. I appreciate that.

YM: And if Frank sent me the picture, I will send it to you. Frank White, aerial photo. Here we go. Here it is. Here it is. Wow. Okay, University, Rondo, Marshall. Guess what? Well, first of all, let me email this to you, and then I'll let you ogle it. Share. Now, I

may not have your email address on the phone. I know I have it on the desktop. Kim, I did have it. Okay. Subject Rondo. R-O-N-D-O. Picture. Send this message. Okay.

Now, I'm trying to get it to turn horizontal, and it doesn't want to do that, but here's University, here's Rondo, here's Dunlap. Okay, here we go. Here we go. Here's Lexington. Here are the Quonset huts.

KH: Oh yeah.

YM: Looking like half a barrel buried. And here's that whole block, that whole area, and they're sort of on the eastern edge.

[02:18:00]

KH: Yes, I see it.

YM: Now. Look, there's two four, six, one, two, three four, there's 24 of them. They're on the southeast corner of the lot, where I said the northeast, because there's Oxford and Rondo. That's the corner. Now, you'll see right here, here's the basketball court. Here's the apartment buildings on Lexington. Up there where the pool is. Now, here, this is like the hilly area that I was talking about. This is where the pool is now. This would be Marshall. Here's Central High School. This is the old one. And this is the old one, if the Quonset hunts are there. It sure is. And this is Iglehart right here. The front steps of Central High School went right down to, here's Iglehart.

KH: I wonder what year this photo is. Oh, 1951, it says. Okay, I'm going to turn off this recorder, so we don't have to record our comments. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]