

DONALD “DONNY” GENG

Narrator

KIM HEIKKILA

Interviewer

October 23, 2025

Saint Paul, Minnesota



Funding provided by the State of Minnesota's Legacy Amendment, through the vote of Minnesotans on Nov. 4, 2008, and our generous donors and members.

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**TRANSCRIPT—
DONALD “DONNY” GENG**

Interviewee: Donald Geng
 Interviewer: Kim Heikkila
 Interview Date: October 23, 2025
 Location: Minnesota History Center
 Length: 01:34:38

Kim Heikkila: This is an interview for the Oxford Community Center Oral History Project. It is Thursday, October 23, I think we established, 2025. I wrote it down wrong here, too. And I’m here with Donny Geng. My name is Kim Heikkila. Today I’ll be talking to Donny about his involvement at Oxford and the impact that that experience has had on his life, on his world views, on the way he has moved through life since then. So thank you so much, Donny, for participating in this project.

Donald Geng: Glad to be here. These are important stories, and I applaud you for your work and what you’re doing. This is wonderful stuff. People need to hear stories. When people die, the stories are gone.

KH: Yeah, yeah, exactly. So, before we get to Oxford itself, tell me just a little bit about yourself. Who are you and where were you born? Where did you grow up?

DG: I was born in St. Paul. We called it St. Smallsville. My parents both died three miles from where they grew up in the Highland [Park] area around Snelling and Randolph. Not unusual in that part of Highland. It’s not unusual. So my earliest memories were when we lived on Upper Afton Road on the East Side of Minnesota. I was born at the end of the Korean War. So the East Side was a blue collar neighborhood. I began the first of my 17 years in Catholic schools at St. Pascal’s Grade School on the East Side. I went to Sheridan, a public kindergarten. And, as I said, the East Side was blue collar,

working class thing and that work ethic has always resonated with me.

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DG: My father was a prisoner of war in World War II, got his mechanical engineering degree from the University of Minnesota. My mother, I think, maybe went to some college. I'm not sure. But the East Side was really my roots. It was a Protestant, Catholic, white, working class neighborhood. Then in around 1965, '64, we moved to Highland Park, and I attended Nativity Grade School. And that was a very affluent neighborhood. It still is. The western border is the river boulevard, and it's not far from Summit Avenue, which in the '20s was an amazing economic engine, Minnesota's engine. James J. Hill Railroads. Duluth had more shipping in 1900 than New York City had.

Flash forward. I finished my teaching career in South St. Paul. At the turn of the century, South St. Paul had the largest stockyards in the world, larger than even Chicago's. Coming to Highland Park Nativity was a shock because, for lack of better words, the kids were way different. But the point I'm trying to make here is that I really grew up in white Minnesota. Minnesota has changed. The colors today in 2025, it's really a kaleidoscope. It's amazing how it's changed in my 72 years of life.

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DG: It's funny the influences that shape your life. And there are just two, really. From the age four or five years old, all I wanted to be is a professional baseball player. So fast forward now, age 72, I just finished coaching a 17- and 18-year-old team down in Kansas City. I've been working for the Minnesota Twins as an instructor for 30 years. Worked at the University of Minnesota summer clinic for 20. I love teaching, I love learning, I love students.

I don't remember a lot from my youth. But my middle name is Thomas. I'm named after my mother's father who died when she was seven. She was the eldest of four

sisters and so I was the boy that she never had. Father, brother. She went out and pitched me softballs.

KH: Your mom did?

DG: My mother did, and this has lasted. My nickname is Donny Baseball. People laugh because I'm a fanatic about it. And so, that was one influence. The other influence was sometime around the '60s, there was a Gregory Peck movie called *To Kill A Mockingbird*. One anecdote that really struck me was, and I had no basis really for this background, the story is about a Black man who was unfairly, unjustly accused of murdering a white woman. The movie, the book by Harper Lee, which I've taught a hundred times, honestly, I know the book backwards and forwards. An anomaly of English teachers, we're crazy. We become the books that we teach.

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DG: But in the movie, there's a scene where Jim is pronounced guilty. It's obvious that it was unjust, just a racist, small town in, I think, it was Mississippi. I'm getting tears because as Jim is filing out, they handcuff him, chain him, put him back in jail. I think he was then executed. That was in the movie. But *To Kill A Mockingbird* is really about a young woman and her father's relationship. Gregory Peck was a lawyer. So, anyways, this Scout, his daughter, was up in the balcony, the segregated courtroom, and all the Black people up there watching the white people on the floor.

And Gregory Peck, he lost the case, and he was blackballed in this town kind of because of this. But people respected him because helped everybody. He's a helping man. I get tears in my eyes when I tell the story. I mean, this is 1965. Maybe the movie was '67, no idea. But as Gregory Peck is hanging his head with his suitcase, walking out of the courtroom, the Black people and the leader say, "Scout," the girl's name, "Stand up. A great man is walking by." So I have tears in my eyes, my voice, you can hear it now.

That had such an impact because my father was all about integrity and justice. My brother became a lawyer defending railroad injury people. He fought the big railroads and my brother loved it. He was a bulldog. He was adamant about the rights of man. So this is my DNA, that whole disparity of justice, injustice of white, Black was planted in my heart, I think it's God, but it was planted in my heart as a young man.

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DG: So fast forward, '65, '66, '67, it's a little thing. The best player as a baseball fanatic—and I was an overachiever. I always played with older kids and had to be better. The place to go was Oxford Playground. Bill Peterson was the man who ran the playground. Oxford, the best description of it is, it's a typical *de facto*, *de jure* Black enclave. “*De facto*” is the fact is. Oxford is the St. Paul version of north Minneapolis. So you go to any northern city. Oakland, where my brother went to San Francisco to college, they all have a Black enclave. South Side of Chicago, North Side of Minneapolis, parts of Milwaukee, Harlem. They're all segregated societies. When I say “*de facto*”, it's just the fact of life. They're economic enclaves, really.

De jure is by law. And so, laws kind of kept people from buying homes, where they live. Fast forward, one of my friends I met, and I still remember it, in 1969, I met Frank White. Frank ran a playground in Minneapolis. He became director of playgrounds in Minneapolis. He's a historian. He wrote a book on Negro baseball in Minnesota. I have a byline in his book about this incident, and this illustrates the *de jure* part of racism in St. Paul, which no one wants to talk about, but I experienced it at Oxford, and I'll say more about that.

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But what happened was we lived close to Cleveland and Randolph, where St. Catherine's College is located. One of my dad's friends, Lonnie Adkins [ph], was a Black

architect. Ironically, his son, Lonnie, is the exact same age as me. I went to Cretin, but Lonnie went to SPA, St. Paul Academy. I knew Lonnie through his father. So what happened was they bought a house on Niles just west of the St. Catherine's campus, just west of Cleveland Avenue there. And people burned crosses in their yard. They would fill plastic bags full of feces and set them on fire.

My father had been beaten by the Gestapo when he was shot down. He survived the great German death march; 12,000 or 14,000 Allied prisoners of war were marched west away from the Russian front, just aimlessly. In the five months they were marched through the German snow, 2,000 Allied prisoners of war lost their lives in the snow, just as the Jews were murdered by the Nazis. So this whole thing about justice, injustice, bullies has always struck me so much.

Anyways, my father was pretty much a pacifist. When I was a young kid, I asked him, "Hey, Dad, why don't we go camping? Why don't we go hunting?" He said, "I had enough of guns in the war." He became pretty much a pacifist, I think, in a way. Not really, because he had PTSD before that word, but he understood that fascism had to be stamped out, you know? So he went down to my grandfather's, who was a hunter, and got his .22 and his shotgun. And I said, "Dad, what are you doing?" "Well, no one's going to bully Lonnie Adkins [ph] out of my neighborhood." He lived about eight blocks away.

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He and some of my dad's cronies, they armed themselves and they stood on Lonnie Adkins' [ph] front steps defending them from this racism. I walked over, I don't think I should have done it, and immediately my father said, "Hey, get home." But I saw them there. It was stunning. Anyways, when I told that story to Frank White, he said, "I heard that story." So I corroborated it. That's why he put it in the book, because I corroborated a story that he had heard.

That was the beginning of my introduction to the racial disparities of this country, and no one wants to talk about it. At least white people don't want to. Once a Black man told me, he said, "I really don't like white people." I said, "Well, you know what? I know way more white people than you do and a lot of white people I don't like either. We have something in common." So I rode my bike from Highland Park down to Oxford, which is where Oxford abuts Lexington Avenue, I-94. By the way, 94 goes east-west, it actually separated the Rondo community, the Rondo, Selby-Dale, Summit Avenue was a Black enclave. The whole area was.

I don't know when that highway was built. I want to say the '20s, maybe '30s. I don't know my history about that, but it bisected that community north and south. And, of course, Oxford was on the south side of that. Oxford was right down from St. Paul Central High School, which with that and Mechanic Arts down by the state capitol, were the white public schools that had a high percentage of Black people in those schools because that's where the kids lived. They were neighborhood schools. There wasn't any busing back then, really.

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DG: I would ride my bike down and from where I lived down by St. Catherine, St. Thomas College. I'd ride down Summit. If I wanted to go across Lexington, I would do that. I'm going to say it was three, four miles. I rode my bike. That was nothing. We lived on bikes. People didn't have fear of that stuff. I went down and I don't know how I heard about Bill, but I was in the baseball scene. I went down there and asked if I could play for him, and he said sure.

Bill was a transformational man. He's a Marine. You can't say anybody's ever an ex-Marine. But he played freshman baseball for that legend Dick Siebert at the University of Minnesota. Dick Siebert won, I think, two national championships with his University

of Minnesota team. And this is in the Arctic Circle. This is not California, Florida, Texas. Their population is around 90, 95 million, maybe 100 million. I don't know. Minnesota is under 6 million today.

We have an adverse climate. It didn't matter. The field was a Caribbean field. There was no grass on the field. It was dirt. Bill had a truck. He would drag it with a dragger. There were weeds. But Bill is an anomaly. He's had two Hall of Fame players. Baseball goes back to about 1840 in this country. What I learned, interestingly, was that Canada was about the same time. I wrote some books on baseball in 1995. At that time in Canada, there had been more written about baseball than hockey in Canada, which was stunning. So we had this long tradition of baseball in North America.

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DG: When I said the Caribbean, that's how in the '60s, or starting with Jackie Robinson in the '50s, when he was integrated, Black players were integrated because they could beat the salary structures. They could bring in great Black players because a lot of white teams wouldn't take these players. Jackie Robinson was the figurehead. There were other Black players and Indian players, Native American players, in the 1910s, 1920s. But Jackie Robinson became the poster child for this. He withstood a lot of racism in his day, as Henry Aaron did when he won the record.

Anyways, I went down there and Bill Peterson has two Hall of Famers. Dave Winfield was drafted at three sports out of St. Paul Central: Minnesota Vikings, last draft, Cleveland Cavaliers for basketball, and baseball. He left the University of Minnesota and was a total anomaly. He went right to the big leagues. That never happens. Usually guys go to minor leagues, flounder or whatever. He went right to the big leagues. David Winfield was the Ohtani of his generation. Dave was a great pitcher. He pitched at the U. He could have been a major league pitcher and hitter. But I don't know if it was

because of a couple injuries he had in college, I'm not exactly sure why, he just wanted to become a hitter and became a great one. In the Hall of Fame he, if you look at the 10 top offensive categories, David Winfield is in the top 10 of about five of those. Runs scored, home runs, RBIs, doubles, stolen bases. For a big man, six-five, six-seven, he ran like a deer, cannon arm.

[00:18:00]

DG: And then Paul Molitor came from Cretin High School, but he played there. Paul graduated in '74. David was a '69 grad. David's great older brother, Steve Winfield, lifetime friend. Steve has done so much for his community. He still lives at his mother's house, 1000 Carroll Avenue. Steve's done more for the youth of that whole area for decades. He's just a great person. So Steve and David, they won back-to-back state championships at American Legion baseball. Then later in 1974, when Paul came around—he became a Hall of Fame player, 3,333 hits, and had one of the longest hitting streaks in the history of the game. Just another exemplary member.

But here's Bill Peterson, this white Marine coach in Oxford playground in a de facto de jure ghetto, basically, manufacturing these unbelievable players. Those are Hall of Fame guys. We had a lot of great college players, whatever. To win a state championship in baseball, they won it '67, '68 with Steve and David Winfield as teammates. And then later Paul Molitor in '74 with his things, is stunning.

So that was the geography of the place that I came into. As a player I went down to play baseball. I was a hired gun. I just wanted to go out and play baseball. Yes, I was beat up a couple times because I was white. I liked to box, so it was actually good for me. After you win one fight, people leave you alone. They go, "That honky be crazy. We aren't messing with that boy. That boy be crazy." So then you establish yourself, and that's the way I did it. I played a lot of basketball there as well. Bill was the great master of

teaching. What his whole mantra was, was encouraging confidence and he did it by breaking you down. He made the game hard. We played baseball without gloves. He'd hit balls hard to us. [After breaking us down, he made the game easy. By accomplishing little details well, we gained the confidence of doing more challenging tasks well, with confidence.]

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DG: He was always encouraging. He would make it fun. He'd laugh at players, make fun of them and he made the game so fun. This is why his players were great, because we played with joy. We played with fun. We competed. Bill was all about competition, but he made it fun. The other thing that he was ahead of his time was practice. Sports are motor skill games. I coached football for 32 years, played in college at St. John's University for four years under the great John Gagliardi, second winningest football coach in the history of football. He's in the College Coaches Hall of Fame. Played baseball in college, high school. But as a player, you play. Well, the seminal moment there was in 1969, Bill asked me—so what Bill did. We practiced all day. Like David, for example, and Paul, Paul came later, but they had T-ball, they had Peewees, Midgets, Junior baseball. Bill would go out and practice with these teams, starting with T-ball, the youngest kids.

So guys like David, he could start, I don't know if he ever played T-ball, that was before my time there, but he could play for all those teams. Then it went from Juniors, which was freshmen, sophomores in high school, to American Legion, which was the best players in ninth through 12th, mostly at that era, juniors and seniors, 11th and 12th graders, because the players were so good. Bill also was an outlier. He brought down white players from other parts. So it was like the reverse of Jackie Robinson. He brought a lot of great white players down there, and they were good. I mean, to win two state championships

there was phenomenal, but Bill trained them. I've heard people say, well, Paul Molitor and Dave Winfield would have made the major leagues without Bill. And I go, "Not so fast."

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DG: What really happened was, the Legion team was called Attucks Brooks. It was sponsored by a mortuary, Attucks Brooks. Actually, I had one of my classmates at Cretin. His father passed there, and was buried there, Bobby Commodore. He and his wife are famous musicians in Minneapolis. Great musicians. So I actually knew what Attucks Brooks was when I went down to a wake. The first time I ever went to a Black wake was when his father died in 1969 at Cretin High School. So, anyways, Bill coached all these teams. The older levels, Peewees, Midgets and Juniors, were traveling teams.

Well, Bill was working there. There were some issues about him leading the playground, blah-blah-blah. So, he asked me, would I take the 12-year-old team, which I think was Peewees. I had 12 Black players on my team. The theme of this is introduction to racism. So I would load these guys into my Dad's Belvedere, I think it was a Plymouth Belvedere station wagon. We'd go all over the city. But what was interesting was, I took my 12 Black players, these Peewee kids, to play other Peewee all-star teams to the neighborhoods that I always played at, the white ones. Edgcumbe Playground, Baker Playground, which was the Humboldt area, that had a high proportion of Hispanic players back then. Hispanic people came to Minnesota as migrant workers, and then rather going back to Mexico, they wintered here. So that's why the west side of St Paul has a high Hispanic population because the migrant workers settled there for the winters and settled there.

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DG: Everyone has these incidents of their life that are just epiphanies. They're just things that you'll never forget. The first one really was we went over to Baker Field, this

Hispanic place. I played there many years as a player myself with white teams.

Anecdotally, if I weren't playing for three teams back then, I was having a bad summer. I mean, nowadays kids do this regularly, play club baseball, which I'm coaching now, but back then that was an anomaly. I played for three teams. So we went over to Baker Playground, and we were in a rush to get there, and I had these kids. In the good old days, only people my age—Kim, the interviewer, she's way too young. But back in the day, the filling station attendant would be a high school kid, whatever, a young kid, and they would fill your gas tank up. You wouldn't do it yourself; they would do it for you.

So this young kid comes up and I don't know, 18 years old, whatever. I'm 16, coaching this team of 12-year-olds. He looked in the car and walked away. He wouldn't service us. Well, I'd had it. I'm an angry 16-year-old kid. I had my issues with boxing and stuff, and I was going to box his ears. I'd had it. I'm walking out, I get out of the car and this Michael Adams, I think his mother's a city councilman, he said, "Well, gee, Don, he must have seen my Black face." So you go from anger to almost tears in your eyes in a second. This was the beginning of it.

Another time we're playing Edgumbe Playground, which is by Cretin High School. When I coached baseball at Cretin, we practiced at that field. I coached a ninth grade team there for the great Dennis Denning, another legend based in Minnesota baseball. He is in the Hall of Fame for Minnesota. He won seven state championships at the high school level at Cretin High School. Then he went on to St. Thomas University, won two national championships and at least one or two runners up, putting both those schools on the map in terms of wins and success.

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DG: So we're playing at Oxford and this one kid, I can't remember his name now, I think it's Tony Lee [ph], I think his name was. I am not sure about that. But bases are

loaded, whatever, and balls are clearing the bases and I'm waving around the run. All of a sudden, I look over and Tony's on top of this white kid, third baseman, pounding on him. I grabbed him, threw him off and said, "Tony, what the heck is wrong with you, are you crazy, man?" He said, "Donny, he called me a piece of toilet paper." Well, the humor in it, of course, which is kind of an ugly humor, is that if someone's Black, toilet paper. But after a while, those incidents don't become humorous anymore. They're incidents that highlight—and this is from a 12 year old white kid that I probably had known at some point in my life. I have no idea. But they're spotting things they learn at home. These are not inherent things that people have. They're something that they learn.

I've got a great cartoon in my house now by [Pat] Oliphant, the Washington Post writer. It's very illustrative of this incident. These two fathers are walking on a sidewalk, pushing their babies in buggies. One gentleman is a Black gentleman; one's a white gentleman. The Black guy looks at the white guy, goes, "White guy." The white guy pushes his buggy, looks at the Black guy, goes, "Black guy." The two kids in the buggy go, "Gee, cool, another kid." It's such a poignant, anecdotal editorial cartoon because that's how God sees us. God sees us as God's children. Yeah, there's white and Black. We have history.

[00:28:00]

DG: I mean, fast forward, I got my master's degree at the University of Minnesota in English education. I'm digressing from this story about Oxford. Let me finish the Edgecumbe story. I'm like Mark Twain. I never finish a story. Taught *Huckleberry Finn* for a long time, 100 times. Another book that's a seminal book. But so, this calling a kid toilet paper. This was just one of these punctuation marks that just illustrate what's wrong with the way that we human beings treat each other. I mean, let's be honest, racism is a human problem. It's not a Minnesota problem. It's not a United States problem.

I've been blessed. I've traveled over Europe, Eastern, Western Europe, Great Britain, Middle East, probably been abroad for eight and a half months. I was in Egypt, which is the northeast corner of Africa. There's racism. You could call it religious racism, Jew, Catholic Christian, Muslim. The Crusades were fought over these issues, religion. But rather than calling it racism, it's just people's insecurity. There's a book called the *Nature Of Prejudice* by Gordon Allport. Fabulous book. Don't remember it all, but his seminal thinking has really shaped how I think about racism. To me, persecution of others, bullying, it's just insecurity. A secure person does not have to put someone else down to feel better. If one is secure, one does not have to put somebody else down.

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DG: Eleanor Roosevelt, FDR's wife, had a great line. She said, "Never give someone permission to make you feel inferior." But a lot of people don't have that tool. That's a very hard tool to use. As a lifetime educator and coach, one of the things I really learned is never to take people personally. Because 99 percent of how people react to us is one percent us and 99 percent of their past or their thing. People are creatures, and they're made. So when this kid called Tony a piece of Black toilet paper, it wasn't funny. It was demeaning. But this happened all over again.

The last anecdote I can tell you about this team was, fast forward now, let's see, 1973, '72, '74. I'm not sure. I'm at St. John's University. I played baseball and football there as an English major. I had a work study program as I worked at the admissions office. We'd stuff envelopes, do mailings. But then the cool part of the job was I gave tours of the campus. The director, Don LeMay, understood my gregariousness. I never met a stranger I didn't strike up a conversation with. And so, it was really great.

Well, this particular day, a busload of Black kids were sent to St. John's. St. John's had a Black student union. I can tell you a story about that, too. They had a Black student

union. They brought a bunch of kids up to look at it. A set of twins from that team, Edward and Howard Cunningham, they're on my team. Now fast forward, they're seniors in high school, and they're visiting St. John's on tour. So we're walking, and the whole group's walking, and Edward and Howard and I, we're having a homecoming. We're talking about the team and our experiences, laughing about people that we knew. It was pretty joyful.

[00:32:00]

DG: I said to one of the Cunninghams, I can't remember if it was Edward or Howard, I said, "God, that was a great experience. I had so much fun working with you guys. I really liked you." All of a sudden it got quiet. I looked at him and went, "Hey, man, didn't I wear deodorant today? I mean, what's up with this thing? Come on, man. What is it? Did I say something wrong?" One of them, Edward [or] Howard, said, "Well Donny, it's funny. I never thought a white person could like a Black person."

These stunning statements that you hear about race, about religion, about whatever prejudices that we all have, and we all have them. I'm not immune from them either is—well, yeah, I'll tell you a little bit about that—is that we have to face it. I had an Auschwitz death survivor come to my class. I was teaching the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel. It's a Nobel [Prize] Book Winner about his experience at Auschwitz. Within three hours of landing at Auschwitz, his grandmother, mother, and two sisters were murdered by the Nazis in Auschwitz, gassed and then cremated there. And he actually forgave the Nazis. I said, "Well, Fred, you're evolved. I'm not. I'm Old Testament. Eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. I could never forgive those turkeys. My father had PTSD [before it was an acronym]." But this Fred Baron, this Jewish man, and my father had the same exact kind smile.

I think persecution gives people a special wisdom. But, any rate, this Fred Baron,

he said, “Every day I wake up and pray to God that I get over my prejudices. I’m prejudiced. I fight that.” So that’s what we have to do as human beings.

[00:34:00]

DG: So when Edward or Howard said, “Gee, I didn’t think a white person could like a Black person,” it just was stunning to me. It knocked me off my feet. I’ll never forget the statement. This is the bizarre nature of race in this country, religious persecution, whatever it is. And, by the way, the Puritans left England because of religious persecution, but everybody came to America to escape something, whether it was classism, aristocracies. This is the reason Americans came here. This is why we have this great independence in us to fight powers. The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* in 1836 or 1835. It’s one of the great treatises about democracy. He said that Americans by nature are ahistorical. He said the reason that Americans don’t want to know history is because it’s painful. Coming here, they have to forget their past.

We have this xenophobic thing in America where people don’t want to speak their native language. Everybody knows the research. The research is, one generation, the next generation picks up the language, and by the third generation, no one speaks their native tongue. That’s just the way of the world. But this xenophobia is part of this insecurity that we have about foreigners. We’re living it right now. I’m a supporter of having a border. President Trump is correct about this. A nation without a border isn’t a nation. Both political parties use it as a football. We did not make our borders with Canada and Mexico strong. They have to be strong.

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DG: But that said, we’re an immigrant nation. I happen to be of German background. Ironically, our family’s from the Baden-Baden, Munich area. My great-grandfather immigrated in 1888, went to Ellis Island. I’ve still got the papers. My

mother was Irish. She was a Barry. My last name is Geng, my father's name. That's some kind of Germanic thing. But she was Barry. So we're all immigrants. Anybody who denies that would have to be a Native American. And the Native Americans, it seems like they may have come from over the Alaskan Bering [Straits]. The Ojibwes, for example, in Minnesota, came from the eastern Great Lakes area. They were driven out from their home.

So we human beings have always been nomads, migrants, whatever. I just read a book called *The Silk Road*, which covered 10,000 years of Persian, Babylonian, China, the Silk Road. The thesis of the book was basically that we had a sophisticated supply chain in the world 8,000 years ago. And then you go back to China, 10,000 years ago. People have wandered forever. So I digress. That's me. These stories like this guy not gassing my car, the little kid calling a kid a piece of toilet paper, these two Black kids saying they didn't think a white person—it's stunning how this happens.

[00:38:00]

DG: And fast forward, I did my last years of high school teaching at South St. Paul, which I mentioned earlier, and I went to Black Lives Matter. Interestingly, in my career, I actually taught in that neighborhood, the Rondo area. It's right in the heart of Rondo. There's four schools there. I taught at the neighborhood school, Ben Mays, it was 70 percent African American. We had a talented gifted school, Capitol Hill. By the way, which child of God is not talented and gifted in their own way? Gardner's 13 intelligences. Artistic, math, logic, communication. I mean, everyone's talented. Everyone's got their gift. The South Africans say that at birth, a child is given a hidden diamond. One's life's work is to find that diamond, mine it, polish it and perfect it. That's what every human being in my life, my career in teaching and coaching has been, helping people find that diamond. Everyone's got one. What is your talent that distinguishes you?

What's your superpower? What makes that go?

I met these Black guys there. The funny thing is, one of my students from Benjamin E. Mays, he was chairing this [Black Lives Matter] meeting. Two of the Muslim women who were also running it, were dissing him for being a chauvinist, which was hilarious. These two Muslim women looked at me and said, "Hey, you're kind of different." I said, yeah, "You're right. I'm the only guy here with white hair." They were mentioning I was the only white person at this thing. But my line was, yeah, I'm the only guy here with white hair.

So these things happen across the borders. In 1985, I was teaching at National American University. Well, it's called National College then. Now it's called American National University. This college was down at Energy Park, which is between Snelling and Lexington. It's bordered by the railroad tracks on the south and now, ironically, in the fairgrounds. In between there, now there's a Hmong charter school there, actually. A huge one.

[00:40:00]

DG: But National College had a huge foreign population, exchange students. At this time, '85, the largest was Hmong people. As everyone knows, the Hmong people were mountain people. Hmong is French for mountains. They came here to be protected. When they were guides for the CIA, they would help us intercept the weapons supply chain from China through North Vietnam to South Vietnam. They would help the Special Forces ambush those things. Well, then when the United States left, the North Vietnamese started a genocide of killing the Hmong people. So that's when the Hmong people came to this country. Churches sponsored the Hmong people to come here. The big populations are California, Texas, and Minnesota. I think Minnesota's got the third largest. And they were brought by churches.

I'm teaching at this college that had a large Hmong population, and I speak poor French. I took three years of French in high school, a year in college. One of our creed alumnus was the second guy in the embassy in Paris. He invited me over, had lunch with his colleagues way back when. His French colleague said, "Donny, it's been great to meet you. I've always wanted to hear a cowboy mispronounce French." And I'm learning Spanish now. When you're learning a new language, you're disadvantaged. For example, if you have to find a bathroom, you go, let's see, *el baño*, okay? And then you go, *dónde*. Where's the bathroom? Well, you're a child.

[00:42:00]

DG: So one of the cool discoveries I made in teaching is the great profession of discovery, of learning. I taught some writing courses there. When you put a person on a word processor, they become powerful because now they're manipulating language. So they wrote all these great stories. If you want a good piece of writing, what you do is you ask someone to write about something they're interested in. Not your course level, but what do you do? So I had them write about Laos, about coming to America, the refugee camps they came from, and acclimating to here. Well, of course, the Hmong people also were victims of prejudice here. Kumbaya. Kumbaya is a cynical thing. There's a song about we're all brothers, the melting pot. Those are somewhat true, but also untrue.

I talked about ethnic neighborhoods. In Chicago, it's most glaring. You've got Polish neighborhoods. You've got Croatian Poles; you've got Norwegian Poles. You've got Black things. You got Chinese things. By the way, we have Chinese enclaves all over the place. I was in Vancouver, Canada last year. They have a huge Chinese enclave there. So this is how it rolls. People come because they're comfortable there. They're allowed to go to low income housing. They have a language in common. So anyway, no one's been welcome. My family is Irish. They were spit on in New York City. They were the laborers.

The Chinese built the railroads. The Germans were spit on by other people. I mean, no one's really been welcomed in this country. It's people just forge ahead. One of the great revolutions besides the American Revolution was that in Europe, all over the world, labor is plentiful. In Europe, labor was plentiful. What was scarce was land.

[00:44:00]

DG: Well, when immigrants came to America, that paradigm was shifted. Now the individual is important because land is not scarce. Land is plentiful. What's scarce is labor. If you made glass or wheels or a bricklayer, you're important in America. That's what immigrants have done. They've done the work that maybe no one else really wants to do. And, of course, the misnomer is that immigrants supplant American jobs, whatever that means. Well, the truth is when service jobs, manual labor jobs are taken, it allows other people to move up in the chain. They manage those people. So whatever.

I got lost in my story here, but those three incidents. And that Black manager, I'll finish there. South St. Paul is about 10 percent Black, whatever, 20 percent Hispanic. One day someone made a comment, saying, "Close the door." I have an open classroom, but I closed the door. I said, "Listen, our Hispanic kids are not tolerated here. They're respected, and here's why. They brought back family. In this country, we've had huge divorce issues. The Mexican people brought back *familia*, and they brought back hard work. And the joke among my class of people is, when's the last time you saw a white roofing group? They're Hispanic people. They're working their butts off. They're doing work that maybe American kids don't want to do."

[00:46:00]

DG: So that's what immigrants have done. They've built this nation on the backs of their people. I don't care what nationality; Chinese, Hispanic, German, Irish, Polish, name them. This is who we are as a nation. So I came back to my classroom and the kids

said, “Why were you at a Black Lives Matter [event]?” I said, “Dudes, dudesses, men and women, if you don’t show up, you can’t be part of the conversation.” So this is what we’re doing in America. We’re trying to have a conversation. As I mentioned, there’s racism all over the world. In maybe Africa, you may be ostracized because of the color of your skin. It’s not popular to say that. That’s the truth. There’s religious wars. We all know this. Jewish, Christian, Muslim, we know this. The world in the United States is more open. We’ve had conversations about this.

So Oxford Playground in 1967, ’68. When I came down there, ’65, ’66, I had no idea, de facto, de jure, that was a mirror image of the South. After the Civil War, the *Emancipation Proclamation* of 1863 that Lincoln gave freed the Black man. But the war was still going on. After the Civil War, many Black slaves were—by the way, in 1790, our population in the colonies was 3 million. Eight hundred thousand of slaves, were already 20 percent of our population, was African American back then. I think my math is correct, so 800,000 were slaves in this country. African American. So we talk about slavery. It is the original sin of America. There’s no doubt about that.

[00:48:00]

DG: Let’s see if I got my math correct here. So let’s see. 300,000 divided by 800,000 to three million. I don’t know if it was 4 million. Yeah, so it’s somewhere between 20 and 22 percent was slavery back then. After the Civil War, Blacks weren’t educated. It might have been illegal to do so. They had to go back to the land as sharecroppers where they came from. They weren’t landowners. They just went back, picked cotton or whatever they did down there before the war, and they lived in segregated things. As an educator, I’ve studied the South.

One of the problems with Southern education is that it’s like Minnesota now. Jesse Ventura changed the structure of how cities are taxed. They’re taxed by areas. For

example, South St. Paul, when I left there, had between \$2,000 and \$5,000 less per student than our two adjoining communities, Sibley High School, which is now Two Rivers School, and Simley High School. Our students were getting \$2,000 to \$5,000 less per student because those two communities, Two Rivers and Simley, have a stronger economic base, manufacturing service, whatever. So, even in America, we have disparities in funding for schools.

Well, the South? Multiply it by 20. You've got poor people who are in the back of the bus. They're in segregated schools. They can't have jobs that white people have. So they're going to be economically disadvantaged. Their school system, which were separate and unequal, *Brown vs. US* talking about separate but equal, they were not equal. They were unequal. They were economically not as wealthy as the other schools.

[00:50:00]

DG: In the South, if you want a great education, you either move to an affluent area or send your kid to a private school. I'm a product of 17 years of private schools, Catholic school, so I understand this quite a bit. So here we are. We have Jim Crow in the south and the carpetbaggers from the North came down and Black people were prevented from voting.

KH: So I want to kind of bring this history up to the Oxford era a little bit.

DG: Yeah, sorry, I'm digressing.

KH: No, that's fine.

DG: My last point was that Oxford mirrored the South, a de facto segregated economic enclave, and it's a remnant of the South.

KH: Rondo?

DG: Rondo, yeah. It's a remnant of the South. And of course, during World War II, when the white men were primarily allowed to fight, they had segregated units, not a

lot. The Tuskegee Airmen were one of the examples of a Black segregated unit. Then a lot of Black people came up to the northern cities to work in the factories, and they lived in the Black enclaves in those cities. So that was my point. Sorry.

KH: No, no. So, I just want to kind of piggyback off that. So what I've been hearing as you've been talking is one of the things is that you have been describing your own kind of awakening—

DG: Existential awareness.

KH: —about race and racism. And so, you're talking about being so stunned that a Black kid could say, "I never thought a white person could like a Black person," the gas station, et cetera.

DG: And vice versa, yeah.

[00:52:00]

KH: So I'm interested to hear what you have to say or what your experiences were at Oxford. I mean, you've just been kind of tracing this long history of race and racism in the country. But also, you're at Oxford. Oxford is developing in the '60s during the Civil Rights Movement.

DG: Yes, it was.

KH: During the Vietnam War, during all these kinds of protest things.

DG: A time of great conflict. People talk about conflict today? No, nothing like that. Fifty thousand died in Vietnam. There were race riots in this country, burning down Detroit, Watts, whatever. Yeah, go ahead.

KH: So I'm curious. And you've also talked about your own kind of geographic migration from the East Side to Highland, to Oxford.

DG: Well said.

KH: So I'm curious, if you could talk a little bit about how and to what degree that

context of the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s, was that on your radar? You were a young person at that time.

DG: A hundred percent. Great question, Kim. God, you're insightful. So, during the race riots in the South, we'd be watching our black and white TV, these grainy things. It's not like the TVs today, which are flat screens that you feel like you're at the event. These are these grainy things. We watched the discrimination, the race riots and white supremacy in Alabama. We watched on TV the police night sticking Black protesters. I'm sitting at my table in white East Side watching this stuff. It's beyond description. You're watching white policemen beating these Black protesters. They're blasting them with fire hoses. I didn't even know any Black people back then. It struck me. It defied reason. It was incomprehensible, basically.

[00:54:00]

DG: So yes. I told you about *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the movie, Bull Moose, George Wallace of Alabama, Little Rock. President Johnson had to bring in the National Guard to protect the students of Little Rock. And, by the way, in the Soviet Union, they published those pictures of the National Guard defending the students going to schools. They said, "Oh, this is the land of the free?" This is the Soviet perspective on this whole thing.

KH: Right, so the Cold War is this context as well.

DG: Another background, yeah. That's a whole different story, yeah. But the Vietnam War was part of that, East-West, domino theory, right? So, yeah, the Civil Rights. And so, this *To Kill A Mockingbird*, this watching these night sticks, reading about race riots in the '60s. I later played baseball at the University of Minnesota for four years at the summer leagues. I played with Eric Anderson. He was from Watts, and he didn't have a car. He's a great basketball player. He got drafted by the Cleveland Cavaliers of all things,

a great basketball player. So I would pick him up and take him to games all the time. We'd talk about Watts.

All this background I gave you, Kim, is that this was the intellectual, the background of a deep, deep understanding of African American culture, the history of where it came from. So, yes, it was transformational. At the University of Minnesota, I didn't finish the story. One of my papers I wrote for my master's in English education was the migration of the African language from Africa, the Caribbean, in the slave trading places. What they did in the slave trading places is, they would mix up all the tribes so they couldn't communicate.

[00:56:00]

DG: That's where Pidgin English came from. So the Zulus, the Bantus, whatever, they couldn't communicate. They'd do Pidgin English. Well, now, America. So here's one of the first things at Oxford I would say to my friends, "Hey, how's it going? How you doing?" "I be fine." "What?" "I be fine." Well, what's that about? The Afro American language has a whole different texture. One thing I learned from my studies is that African languages have five tonal levels. Midwestern dialect, ours has three. This is why a lot of broadcasters come to the Midwest, because we have a very monotone voice. But in a Black community like Oxford, "What's happening?" There's a great variation in tonal levels, right?

Which goes back, right, to Africa. The conjugation of verbs. French, I am, you are, *je suis, tu est*, Spanish I'm not good at, but the pronoun and the verb changes with the person, gender, number that you're saying, it's complicated. Won't go into that thing. But a lot of African languages, like Asians, don't conjugate verbs that way. "I be fine." It's not ignorance, it's grammar. I've got grandchildren now, and I've been very aware of this now, they get plurals mixed up. So, for example, the Hmong language, we have items

here. In this table, we've got briefcases, suitcases, things. A Hmong person would say we have many item in this table. They don't use plurals in the Hmong language. A lot of languages, Latin, are the same way. They don't have plurals. No, I take it back. Latin does. But you announce pluralities, more than one, with -s or -es. It's kind of confusing in English.

[00:58:00]

DG: So you hear a Hmong say, "Oh yeah, I bought three apple today, I bought three pear." No, they aren't ignorant. It's just that their language doesn't have it. I hear my grandchildren now, they mess up verbs a lot. "I went-ed to the store." Well, they aren't stupid, it's just they're trying to apply the past tense to a past tense "went," right? I know too much about the language. This is how it goes. So the Civil Rights, yes, it was defining.

All these experiences, Oxford playground, de jure, de facto, the incidents I told you about with the kids, my experience of being ostracized as a white a little bit, sometimes, being a token white at times. I got that. When I taught at Benjamin Mays, the school was 70 percent African American. I had an African American boss. A lot of my colleagues were African American. So, really, how did that affect me as an educator? Greatly.

I had my first teaching job out of college at St. Thomas Academy. It's a very elite school. Great education there. I think kids are doctors, they're lawyers. In one classroom, I taught British literature for seniors my first year there. I had kids from MIT, three kids from Notre Dame, three kids from Carleton, St. Olaf, Northwestern, Chicago. I mean, brilliant kids. You talk about one to five percent of the top kids.

[01:00:00]

DG: At Ben Mays, for example, the average kid there was two years behind in school. So the research says this. Part of my master's is in reading development. The

research says that when you start behind in school in reading, for every year you advance in school, you lose a half a year. So by sixth grade you're reading at the third grade level. In first grade, you're half a year behind, second grade, you're a year you're behind. And unless there's some potent intervention, that pattern is going to happen.

So how does that apply at St. Thomas Academy? Well, I coached ninth grade basketball and football there. We had three Black kids in my class, the ninth grade class. I could name them by name; I won't do this here. But I always looked out for those kids because I understood what it was like to be a token. The St. Thomas Academy kids were very welcoming on average. But here's one of the interesting stories, really. One of the kids that I taught and was on my basketball team, we had a parent conference, and his mother came in. She was a professor at St. Catherine's College.

She said, "Hey, Donny, can we have a chat?" "Oh, sure. Mrs., won't mention the name. Sure, come on in." "Can I close the door?" "Of course you can. It's America, do what you like." I said, "Now, you realize I don't have Mark, your son in class. You realize that?" "Oh yeah. I just want to talk to you." So here's her thing. Her theme was that she raised her son to think that he could do anything. I said, "Well, why is that, ma'am?" She said, "Because for 400 years, Black people have been told they're nothing. I rectify that by telling him he can do anything." Now this is a St. Catherine professor. She said, "I really appreciate how you encourage the kids. I know you got their back. I know you're old school." I'm an old school coach. I mean, I believe in discipline and hard work and no excuses. She said, "I love that about you."

[01:02:00]

DG: But she said, "I want to clue you in. I know you encourage Mark, but I never want you to tell him there's something he can't do." This is a defining moment in my education. I'm a 22-year-old kid teaching 18-year-old kids. Abraham Lincoln's got a great

line—he’s got a couple great lines—he says, “Whether you think you can or think you can’t, you’re correct.” So that’s why educators should always be giving kids positive imagery, right? You can do this. Don’t quit. Persist. Develop. So that theme continued in my career. And, also, just having some empathy. I was blessed with a Down Syndrome child and that revolutionized my teaching. It was in 1985, so I’d been teaching nine years. That revolutionized my teaching because then I started thinking about, Okay, how would I want my daughter treated? She was in mixed classes, heterogeneous classes. How would I want my child taught?

So these are moments of empathy as is said in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Gregory Peck said, “Unless you walk in a person’s shoes for a day, you don’t know that person.” That’s part of this Civil Rights Moment. I told the story about the Adkins Family moving into the Highland thing and being persecuted. A lot of St. Paul, Minneapolis cities have charters that forbid Black people from moving in. They’re trying to erase it. They’re still in the books; they just don’t follow them, really. So, yes, the Civil Rights Movement. I went to the most pretentious summer school in America. It was called the Talented Youth Institute. It was a six-week course, and it was put on during the summers.

[01:04:00]

DG: The first year was at Macalester. I read everything there was on Black literature. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver, James Wright. Cleaver and Malcolm X were militant. They were against peaceful change. They wanted violence. Langston Hughes. I read everything Langston Hughes had written. And again, it’s Black dialect. Here’s one of Langston Hughes’ great couplets. “O God of dust and rainbows, help us see that without the dust the rainbow would not be.” Well, he’s a poet. You can hear the rhythms, you can hear the rhyming, the assonance, repeating of vowels.

So, yes, it's an apt word here, the Afro American culture has infused, has colored my lenses, my perspectives and it's been a rock in my life of just trying to understand people.

KH: And I mean you've been speaking so eloquently about how you came to this lifelong really awakening and interest and empathy.

DG: It's an awakening.

KH: I'm just trying to think of how to ask this to kind of look at it in a slightly different lens. What did all of those experiences, coaching these young African American kids at Oxford and bringing them and seeing what they experienced, what did that teach you not just about African American people and culture, but about being white?

[01:06:00]

DG: Well, it's a great question and you just stimulated something. So this Blizzard Club baseball team, we have a great coach here, Eddie. He played in the minor leagues. He's from down South, maybe Tennessee. Brilliant coach. He happens to be Black. But we were talking the other day about this because when I'm with an African American and they say, "What do you do for a living?" "I'm a coach." The whole conversation changes because sports, like the military, has been all about this equal playing field since Jackie Robinson, let's just say.

Back into Jackie Robinson, before that, it was separate but equal. You had the Negro Leagues; you had the Major Leagues. Well, as baseball became integrated with Black people, Hispanic people, now Asian people, right? We've got some great Japanese players, Korean players, Dominican players, of course, who are Latino and their Black mixtures. I've been an instructor with the Twins for 30 years. One of our clinicians was Julio Bécquer. He was born in Habana, Cuba, 1932. His father was an army sergeant in Cuba. He came with Tony Olivia, our Hall of Fame Minnesota player.

His first pair of shoes in Cuba was when he was 13 years old, 12 years old, he tried out for the Cuban Olympic track team. That was his first pair of shoes, a pair of track shoes. So when my father died, Julio became my mentor. I mean, only in America can you have an Afro American Latino Black man as your mentor, as your surrogate grandfather. Only in America can this happen. But Julio used to say that Minnesota was the least racist place he's ever been.

[01:08:00]

DG: So, if I'm coloring—bad choice of words—but Minnesota being racist, Minnesotans on average are the most open minded, kind people. Yeah, we're reserved. We're Scandinavian, we don't show our emotions on our sleeves. But Minnesotans, by and large, are welcoming people. Julio said it's the least racist place he's ever been. He told me a lot of stories about him growing up as a Black man in America and baseball. But, so, yes, rephrase your question again, would you?

KH: Oh, yeah. It was just about how all of these experiences in and with African American people and their culture, what it taught you about being white?

DG: Yeah. Well, this is funny. I was blessed with three of the greatest women in the world as daughters. My middle child is a recovering social worker now; she's left her work to take care of her two beautiful children. But she went to St Olaf. The big thing there, they talked about white privilege and she would lecture me about this. I took it for a while. I said, "Christina, unfortunately, honey, I lived it. You have not lived it. But you're right, there is such a thing as white privilege." So, yeah, you become aware of white privilege. White privilege is just all the things we take for granted.

A simple thing, economically. A home in Rondo, Selby-Dale, Oxford, the value of that home is probably 20 percent less than a home anywhere else. Because a lot of African American people were not able to get high paying jobs, they weren't homeowners. For

example, my father died. He gave our five children a legacy inheritance.

[01:10:00]

DG: That's missing in a lot of poor communities. Not just Black, but Hispanic, whatever. So that's part of the white privilege thing. The disparity in education. If you want to find the three worst states of education, it's probably Mississippi, Arkansas, maybe Florida, although Florida's gotten way better even though they're trying to extinguish Black history down there, which is another stupidity. If you don't know your roots, you don't know who you are. That's that Tocqueville thing about ahistoricalism. But the reason those schools are poor is because their school districts are funded by the local economy. If you're in a depressed economy, you're not going to do that.

Yes, we had Black colleges. I was actually recruited to go to Howard University in D.C. The coach there was a professional basketball player, Chuck Hinton. Bill Peterson called him because he wanted to get Paul Molitor to go to Howard. He knew Paul was going to go to Howard, a historically Black College. So I had a really cool conversation with Chuck Hinton about that, but I didn't go for other reasons. So that's why Black colleges grew up.

So reverse racism now is calling people racist, labeling people, and whenever I get on my racist high pedestal, it's a bad idea. Human relations have a lot to do about equality. Understanding the person across the table as you are, Kim, you're smarter than me, better looking, is about equality, is about making people feel comfortable in their skin, about affirming who they are, not judging them.

[01:12:00]

DG: Jesus said, "Judge not lest ye be judged. He without sin, cast the first stone," something Christians aren't necessarily really great at understanding. But so, to call someone racist is inefficient. It's a mistake in position. All of us are products of our

upbringing. Psychology teaches us that we don't see reality. We see our life through rear view mirrors. So, for example, fear and flight. When my brother was going to law school at the U, he had this exercise where he hired one of his friends to assault him on the stage. And this guy assaulted him, and the guy ran off, and the law professor said, "Write down who it was."

Well, of course, they got 37 different descriptions from 37 different students. They weren't seeing what happened. Their background took over, and they were seeing the assaulter in their own past, white, Black, Hispanic. At convenience stores, a lot of times you'll see a ruler, seven feet tall. The purpose of that on the door is so that you can identify the height of the person. This law professor's point was that the most easy thing to overturn in a courtroom is eyewitness testimony for that reason. Our perspectives are colored by, I'm using that word there, it's nuanced, our lens is our past. This is what guides our future.

[01:14:00]

DG: The way I explain it to my students is, it's a stupid example, but it's interesting. But I say, let's say I don't like cowboy hats. I don't. I like cowboy hats. But let's say I don't. When I meet a person with a cowboy hat, because I don't like cowboy hats, I don't like that person. It's stupid. Now what have I done? I've turned myself off to the opportunity of knowing this cowboy because of my prejudice against hats. It's illogical.

KH: So I'd like you to talk about how the dynamics you're describing occurred or played out at Oxford when you were there. You talked about biking from Highland to Oxford because you wanted to play ball with Bill. And two very different communities. You said it wasn't easy initially for you to crack that in.

DG: I wasn't welcome. I mean, there's always a couple bullies there that'd pick on

me. And so, you fight and it's over. Then people accept you. I mean, kids are accepting on average. I illustrated the two bullies, and whatever, but most of the kids are accepting. They're kids. We played. We played basketball together. I played a lot of basketball, too. I wasn't very good, but I played it. So we got along. That's what I was saying about Eddie, this coach I'm with, professional baseball player, Julio Bécquer. Athletics is a level playing field, primarily. Good coaches like Bill, it didn't matter if you were green, black, blue, purple, green. You played. He played the best players. It was meritocracy. It's not favoritism. It's not nepotism. It's meritocracy.

[01:16:00]

DG: When I mentioned to you that when I travel throughout the United States, it comes up in conversation I'm a coach. If I'm with a Black or Hispanic person, the whole conversation changes because, "Oh, this guy gets me. He's not going to judge me by the color of my [skin]." Martin Luther King [said], "I have a dream where a man is judged by the content of his character, not the color of his skin." So, yes, that meritocracy, judging a person by their character, not the nature of his skin, has been so ingrained in me.

Here's an anecdote. One of my friends, Wally Langfellow, he's a broadcaster. He's on NPR, he's a sports guy. He's got a sports magazine. He and his wife started baseball in Africa. I'm trying to think of the country now. It just skipped my mind, but he started baseball there [Benin, Africa]. Well, he sent over one of the coaches to shadow me for a week at the University of Minnesota. He'd come every day, and he'd watch us how we instructed kids so he could bring it to Africa. Well, the following year he brought the African [Benin] kids to the University of Minnesota. We're going to play. After our camp was over at 4:00, 4:15, whenever it was, these kids came. It's a French-speaking country. It's in East Central Africa. Let me just see if I can think of the name. It's a French colony. Benin, Africa. These kids are from Benin, Africa, so they speak French.

The University of Minnesota camp was expensive. The kids there were pretty affluent. We had a lot of professors' kids, brilliant kids, brilliant parents, affluent people because the camp was expensive to go to. So he brought these 20 kids from Benin to scrimmage these kids.

[01:18:00]

DG: At first it was quiet, like that Oliphant cartoon, okay? The white kids look at the Black kids; the Black kids look at the white kids. Wow, different. There was a moment, and I want to say it was less than 20 seconds, maybe 10 seconds, who knows, of real discomfort. Because now everybody's paradigms are being shaken. Wait a second. These are white kids. These kids are dressed well, they have uniforms. We're Black kids from Benin. There's a French barrier. The language is a barrier. Forget color.

Well, we started playing catch with the kids. [Any discomfort] disappeared. It was gone. That awkwardness was absolutely gone. So now our kids are playing baseball. They're playing baseball. No language in common, but they're having fun.

KH: So it's like sports is its own lingua franca.

DG: That's a great word. Lingua franca. It is a language, it's meritorious. Good coaches are playing the best players. You can debate the merits of college athletics today with NIL, name image likeness, players being played. You can debate the portal. It's free agency, which I actually believe in. I think a kid should be able to go to his or her best places. I say her, too, because we have Title IX in Minnesota, which women never were able to accrue. My daughter was a beneficiary of that. She got to play hockey her whole career, and it's been instrumental in her business career, learning how to run teams, learning how to communicate, and how to be motivated. That was seminal. So it is a lingua franca. It's meritorious.

[01:20:00]

DG: College coaches, they're choosing the best players. I have a friend, an assistant tennis coach at Penn State now. He's getting a lot of kids from Europe because of Title IX here; a lot of tennis scholarships are full rides. It's hard, maybe, for a kid to get into an institution. He's been at good ones, like at Penn State. He was at Missouri; he was at Colorado. He's recruiting a lot of foreign students, Scandinavian tennis players. They have really good tennis there, to make his team better. This is what college coaches do. Our football coach at Minnesota, whom I really admire, PJ Fleck. It's meritorious over there. He doesn't care what color the kid is. Hey, if you're performing, you're playing. So that is the model.

There's been a lot of talk about affirmative action. I think there's a cause for it. You have to balance the scales, given the disparity in education levels. A lot of these kids from inner cities are coming from poor schools. They're way behind. Ben Mays was way behind. I mean, look at test scores. You know, they call it the racial—what's it called?

KH: Achievement gap.

DG: Achievement gap, and that's misunderstood. Part of that whole thing is that—well, there's a lot of things. When you have a small number of kids, that number is going to be exaggerated. Suburban versus inner city schools. That's what's causing it, really. But it's also the background of the kids. Their educational level, which I mentioned. It's many factored. Racism is too simple an answer. It's socioeconomic. It's really an issue of socioeconomics.

[01:22:00]

DG: So, yes, this experience at Oxford was transformational. It was epiphanies, Civil Rights, level playing fields. We live in a country of meritocracy. You know, Martin Luther King, when he gave the "I Have A Dream" speech, in 1963, he said, "We're meeting in Washington, DC to cash a defunct check. The check has bounced. We have not

made an equal society.” And that’s what he’s talking about.

So, moving forward, we want to not entitle people, but have a meritocracy where people are able to use their talents freely. That is a real challenge in a lot of different ways. But the model of meritocracy is what’s going to make America great. When we talk about racism in Minnesota, I told you my friend Julio Bécquer said it’s the least racist place he’s ever been. He’s been all over the world. He traveled all over the world. Besides his baseball career, he’s a world traveler. He used to collect elephants. His house had 30 elephants from every place in the world. When I started teaching, Confucius says, “From the student, the teacher will learn,” it’s really true, “From the teacher, the student will learn.”

[01:24:00]

DG: When I retired in 2018, I was still volunteering in two high schools, coaching a lot of baseball, Twins, Stillwater High School, this Blizzard thing. The kids that I was blessed to work with, learn from, learn with, this is the least racist generation in the history of America because they’re used to diversity. Yeah, do all people of every color, race, religion have prejudice? Yes. Is it something we have to overcome? Yes. But by and large, 50 percent of kids are playing extracurriculars. Those extracurriculars after school, they may be in tract classes, honors, average, below, athletics, extracurriculars, debate, band, whatever. Those barriers are gone. Now, you’re working together as a team.

So I have a lot of hope for America because I’ve seen the kids that I’ve taught. By and large, they’re the most open kids about diversity in the history of this country. I don’t care what anybody says. I know something about this.

KH: So I have one last question. Just looking at the time, we’re going to have to start wrapping up here pretty soon.

DG: I digress. Sorry, you’ve been good at trying to orchestrate this. This is

probably an issue you guys have.

KH: No, that's okay. So you mentioned Title IX. I just want to ask this, I think I explained to you on the phone how this project emerged out of a project I did on women in sports.

DG: Yeah, Toni Stone.

KH: And Lisa Lissimore and Linda Roberts. So whether or not you were coaching them or obviously involved with them, tell me a little bit about what you remember about girls, maybe even women, being involved in sports at Oxford.

[01:26:00]

DG: Oh, that's a great question. Well, the girls played basketball down there with the boys. They played. Didn't see many on the baseball diamond. Baseball is more an individual sport. Basketball, you've got one basketball, you got to share it. So there were women out there playing all the time. I have to tell you that as a young man, you're pretty myopic. You're pretty focused on what you're doing. There's a word for it. Narcissistic. Psychology says we evolve from self-immersion narcissism to hopefully other-centered. Some people never go there. I'm not going to mention any names right now. Happen to be in our White House. But that's the evolution.

That whole thing I was not aware of, but I was aware of it in a number of ways. In high school, college, I dated a woman who played basketball and volleyball at the U. She was an outlier. The interesting thing was when I would go to Twins games with my friends, she knew more about baseball than my friends did. It was stunning. But she was an outlier. She was the one percenter. She was an outlier of that thing.

KH: What year did you graduate from high school?

DG: In 1971. Yeah, and she was the same age as me. She went to De La Salle High School. So opportunities for women were pretty much nonexistent back then. They

were. So Lisa Lissimore, and who's the other name you mentioned?

KH: Linda Roberts.

DG: Yeah, Linda Roberts. Don't know her as well as Lisa, but yeah. In the Mauer family, a big, big clan, know them all. I know all the grandfathers, the fathers, like Jake, Jr. His father was Jake, Sr. His son is Joe Mauer. Know all of them. They're a patrimony of really great athletes. So they're all type A. They're beautiful people. I love them all, but they're all jocks.

[01:28:00]

DG: And so, I said, "Well, you know who the best athlete in this room is?" Well, now they're interested. They weren't interested in anything I was saying, but as soon as I said that they wanted me to name it. "Well, it's Theresa Maurer, Joe's mother." She was a point guard at St. Paul Central. That was the first year the state tournament was televised, and she was probably the best athlete on the team. So that was kind of the beginning of that whole thing, right? Yeah.

KH: Okay. So by way of closing or wrapping up here—and in some ways, I don't even know if I should ask this question, because you've been saying it all along, but looking back now, where does Oxford sit in your life?

DG: Well, that's a great question. It's a memory, a fond memory. All these things I told you about are part of my DNA now. It's stuff that I've taught, stuff that I've shared with people. If there's a race card played, I can talk about this stuff. It doesn't matter who's playing the race card on me. I mean when I was at Ben Mays, I'm a rule guy. One person speaks at a time. Do all your work, come on time. Be a young lady, young gentleman. That's my own thing. Well, this kid was talking when I was talking. I go, "Hey dude, you missed the bus?" "What do you mean?" "One person speaks at a time." He said, "Well that's racist, man." He's a 16 year old kid, big kid. I go "Cory, that's interesting. I

have more Black friends than you have.” And, of course, all the Black kids laugh because they knew me from the hood. I played basketball with their mothers. That’s another thing. Yes, I forgot that.

[01:30:00]

DG: I played basketball with a lot of their mothers. Or grandmothers, maybe, I don’t know. I mean, yeah, so basketball was common. Football was not. Baseball was not. There may have been softball, but I doubt it back then. Bill was a baseball guy. These opportunities are legion. Did I answer your question?

KH: Yes.

DG: Yes. So my daughter was a recipient of this Title IX. She played at the Mecca of—bad choice of word—the best high school for women. The coach there is still outstanding. He’s got 700 wins, 600 wins, and will never be done again. Great place.

KH: She played what?

DG: Hockey. And soccer, but hockey was hers. I couldn’t get her to play softball. She loved hockey. She was on a great program in high school. She’s a three time captain at Bethlehem University. But all those things conspired to teach her about leadership, management, communication. She’s great at that biz now. These are the opportunities that sports give women, obviously. So the research in education says this grade point average, GPA, the only thing that predicts is you’re going to be successful next year in school. Academics are important. What’s most important though is character.

What schools should be teaching and advocating and encouraging is character. Helping the kids become the best they can be. Find that hidden diamond. That’s what school should be about, not academics. When a kid finds his or her passion, they take off. I mean you’re a history buff; you love history. No one has to tell you to do it. You’re going to do it because you love it. That’s success. They say, “Find a job you love, you

never go to work.” That's the honest to God truth, and that's what every educator should be helping a kid do. But the longitudinal studies about educators say this.

[01:32:00]

DG: The most successful people are those that are involved in things outside of school. Work, jobs, band, student council, drama, sports, debate, name it. Because what are you doing? You're multitasking. You're managing defeat, you're managing persistence. You fail. You aren't good at this. You set goals, you reach goals. You work together as a team. You're communicating with all peoples. Here's what I tell my team. In life, if I don't like somebody, I'll walk away from them. You can't do that on a team. You've got to work with every turkey on your team, whether you like them or not. It's a great lesson of life, is how to get along with people.

KH: Is there anything else you want to add about Oxford?

DG: Oh, gee. I just had a brainstorm about something I didn't mention about it, but no, just thank you for doing this, Kim. I appreciate this opportunity. I hope you can make some semblance out of the ADHD. But just to crystallize it, this was a transformational epiphany growing up there. It's changed my life. The experience there has made a night and day difference in my life in terms of empathy, in terms of trying to understand others, of accepting others, of being an advocate for equality, for meritocracy, level playing fields, and then all the ancillary lessons of self-motivation. How does one become successful? What are the attributes of success? Ironically, tomorrow I'm giving a talk on careers of teaching and sales. Everything today was a great review for this thing. Really was.

[01:34:00]

DG: But also, sales is the same thing. It's goal setting. It's communication. It's not taking people personally, but listening is the key factor. To be a good salesperson, you've

got to be a listener, serve the other's needs.

KH: Well, Donny, I really appreciate your time. Thank you for doing this.

DG: I loved doing it. It was a blast.

KH: And like I say, you will be hearing from Sara here at the Historical Society within the next few weeks maybe about the transcript.

DG: Well, you two are going to have to do quite an editing job.

KH: All right, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]