

Name of Interviewee: James Eason

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Additional Materials: No Additional Materials Provided.

Interviewer: Donato DiGeronimo, Victoria Lizotte and Jane Eliasof.

Date: 05/16/2018

Location: Crane House and Historic YWCA

Introduction:

James Eason was born in 1942. His mother was a housekeeper and his father was a plumber. He grew up with a younger sister and a twin sister. He went to Glenfield School followed by Montclair High School and participated in various organizations and sports such as the Debate Club, the Glee Club, and the YMCA, where he met Jackie Robinson. He graduated from Arizona Western College with a history degree. After working as a teacher for two years, he had the opportunity through Affirmative Action to take a higher paying position for IBM. Both of his sisters were teachers.

During the 1960s, he was drafted into Vietnam where he served as a helicopter pilot. He speaks about his experiences and impressions there and his return to the US.

Coming back, he arrived in Montclair during the Civil Rights Movement. Previously, Montclair was not nearly as diverse but sports still brought everyone together. He got married around that time, and was faced with discrimination when trying to purchase an apartment. He speaks about discrimination several times during the interview.

He feels that diversity had made Montclair a great place, but today's affluence and high taxes has changed the population and the town. He is upset at these changes, and also feels that the town is not welcoming to seniors who can now no longer afford to stay in the town.

Timestamps:

[0:00]: James Eason was born in 1942 at Mountainside Hospital in Glen Ridge. His father's mother lived in Montclair. He had two siblings, a younger sister and a twin sister. His mother was a housekeeper, his father was a plumber. He lived on Maple [Avenue] in the Fourth Ward in a house they owned.

[2:10]: The community he grew up in was close, everyone knew everyone. There were Italians on one side of Maple. They also had the YMCA on Washington [Street] for African Americans. By the time he was in Junior High, he was allowed to go to the YMCA on Park Street, but everyone went to the Washington Street YMCA. The YMCA had tons of different activities like swimming and sports.

[3:40]: He met Jackie Robinson at the YMCA. All the athletes loved him. He remembers being taken to see the Giants, Yankees and other sports teams. There were a lot of other kids who were able to take the train to attend the games, but the children today cannot afford to go. He liked the

Dodgers at the time because he met Jackie Robinson. He got to see him play as well as meeting him.

[5:30]: He does not remember what Jackie talked about.

[5:50]: He went to Glenfield School then Montclair High School. He was involved in football, track, Debate Club, Glee Club and more. He studied for a history degree to work in education and went to Arizona Western College. He wanted to be a teacher because of the long breaks they have. He worked as a teacher for two years until IBM came along and was hiring due to affirmative action policies. He left IBM because IBM paid a lot more. Both of his sisters were teachers.

[7:30]: He was drafted and served overseas in Vietnam for 11 months, 1965 to 1966. James says that it gave him a lot of insight into the world and it changed his world views. He was always told about Communism and how much they were told it was hated. He remembers asking a teacher which was worse, communism or racism and was told communism was worse. In college, he read a book written by Mao Zedong. He recalls a passage describing a great society where everyone would eat under communism. It went over his head until he visited Vietnam and saw the corruption in South Vietnam. It was identical to the North. Mao also talked about the old dynasties of China and James compared those dynasties to the United States today.

[10:27]: He was in Vietnam at a time when African Americans could not even vote in parts of the country. James remembers another veteran, Samuel Debnam, served in World War II and came back to the United States on a separate boat, with a separate celebration because of segregation. When he came back, he was told that, while he was fighting overseas, African Americans were fighting at home. He was a helicopter pilot. The worst jobs were picking up wounded people, known as 'dust off' and another to pick up people in active combat. He remembers one time he was looking down and watching people getting on the helicopter and watching a sergeant running towards the helicopter and getting shot. A white soldier ran off the helicopter into active fire and picked him up and brought him back. There were more African Americans serving than white people.

[13:18]: He remembers being scared leaving, and later glad to be home. While he was there, he noticed that people took their freedom seriously. After the troops left, Vietnam was not annexed by China. Saigon used to be called the 'Paris of the East' and those people were fighting for what they believed.

[14:50]: One of his worst days was going home and checking the mail. He came in and saw an envelope with the draft notice. He knew nothing about the war. He stayed in touch with his friends, especially the friends he met while serving in the military.

[16:50]: He came back on Valentines Day. He got off the bus Bloomfield Avenue. He was drafted twice, and spent another eight months in Germany. He left New York City and got seasick on the way to Germany. He met a World War II veteran who wrote a book about how veterans who came back from World War II or Korea would come back on a boat and have time to decompress and adjust while coming back by plane is too fast.

[19:30]: He came in through Oakland. While the protestors helped end the war, many would attack veterans coming home. He never saw any of the attacks because he left Vietnam before the protests escalated.

[20:30]: He had fun in high school. He went to Bond's, Applegate [Farm], and Rudd's. He knew that there were issues going to certain areas of town, but he went anyway. If you played sports, he remembers that the teammates would bond. They also had recreational baseball. There was one teacher from Glenfield, Ms. Angleback, whom he remembers thinking had to be over six feet tall. She would wear black pointy shoes with thick heels, calling them prison shoes. He describes her as being able to 'jack you up'. She was able to pick up students and pin them against the wall. As a child, he remembers that Glenfield was slighted by the education system because of the way classes were organized. Classes taken there had less value than the other schools when you got to Montclair High. They had second hand books that were almost fourteen years old. James mentions that this was one of the reasons Montclair needed bussing.

[25:10]: While growing up, he remembers the sense of community. This has changed because the children cannot afford it and had to move out. He still loves the town.

[26:00]: He does not understand how someone can own a home and brag about its value. The taxes would be so much higher. One man retired from the Pennsylvania Railroad and was around ninety, outliving his pension and had to move out. He went to a meeting at Christ Church and wanted to bring in something called Shared Housing so people could afford their homes. He feels that this town is not building homes for downsizing. The town does not care about the elderly and is not accommodating them.

[29:00]: There was a woman at the church program who came from New York and fought against Shared Housing, saying it would turn the place into a slum and that, if you cannot afford to live in this town, you should move out. He was hurt by that. He feels that Montclair is being sold out by developers. The only thing that Montclair does not have is land. Anything that can be sold is turned into apartments. Montclair got rid of three schools, but later had to build Bullock School to accommodate the growing population.

[30:40]: The three schools shut down were sold off. The one on Chestnut was a truancy school and recreation center. Montclair is one of the few towns without a senior citizen facility. He believes that seniors miss out on many of their benefits because Montclair does not have a senior center. On the Fourth of July, what used to be a time to celebrate is now hard to hold. He blames it on people moving in and wanting to make it more like home instead of adapting to Montclair. Most Italian Americans already moved out of Montclair.

[35:26]: [Our Lady of] Mount Carmel [Church] used to hold a giant feast back then, today it is much smaller. A lot of people have passed away, moved out or stopped going to church. The new church was built in the 1960s. There was no church in the area before.

[36:40]: Bruce Taylor used to tell a story about an Italian who moved from the city into Montclair who knew how to play soccer. In Glenfield, there was a belief that if you wore combat shoes you could kick the ball further. That Italian still has scars from them kicking each other.

[37:50]: He feels that Montclair had no diversity while growing up, only from Claremont south. They did not have organized Little League football and, if they wanted to play, they knew the white people who lived on other streets and used to play against each other. That would bring everyone together.

[39:30]: By high school, people would know each other due to those games. The African American community knew each other from the YMCA. The Italians who lived in the area

would sometimes hang out. They used to go to soda fountain style places like Rudd's or Bond's. He never went to Grunnings. For drug stores, they had soda fountains as well, but not like Rudd's.

[41:45]: He loves the people in Montclair. They would ask how he was doing and all that. New people ask him if he really lived in Montclair. He is on the Fourth of July committee. They used to have fireworks in the center of town, but downsized it. He understands why people are not as active, because they are home.

[43:50]: Donato talks about the popularity of football and how everyone knew the players, whether they liked sports or not. The parks used to have games held constantly, including the day before the Fourth of July. They never had to register or sign in anywhere.

[45:20]: There was no such thing as a 'playdate'; people would just go place to place.

[46:00]: He loves the town, but does not like what it has turned into. They do not care about the seniors.

[47:50]: He remembers Earl Williams, who went into professional baseball. The Barbera twins competed in the Olympics. Many Montclair residents were involved in sports.

[49:00]: Donato talks about the lack of understanding of what Montclair was. People move in and do not care about what made Montclair into what it is today. He does not remember being able to go to Bellevue [Theater]. Wellmont [Theater] had African Americans stand in the balcony, but that was before James grew up. He did it because he was able to throw popcorn onto people. Clairidge [Theater] was not available to African Americans.

[51:10]: His father died [when James was] 17. He knew he had to go far in life. In junior high, Ms. Angleback would say things like 'you had to do better because people are trying to stop you'. She spoke out against discrimination. He had a college advisor tell him he cannot take college prep courses, his mother came in and forced him into them.

[53:00]: While at Arizona Western College, African Americans were third on the list: they hated Native Americans and Mexicans more than African Americans. His sister's husband played for the Detroit Lions and would regularly say that, if he decided not to go to class, one of his coaches would force him to do it. At other schools, they would just let you fail. Racism was not just in the south, he mentions that it was alive and well in the north.

[54:50]: When he got married in 1969, he started applying for apartments. There were three sections in the Sunday paper, houses, jobs and cars. After visiting apartments, they would tell them they were unavailable despite having advertisements in the paper. After he was hired by IBM, they went to schools for them and worked mostly with women or African Americans. While working alongside many people, he saw how many of them did not have degrees or any work experience. He mentions that if you were in the Army, if you went to college, if you went to the south, you would see racism.

[57:30]: Policing in Montclair is working well, there is not much conflict. The police were locals, they knew the people they protected. The police knew your family, and would tell them if anything was going on. The police force should come from the town they protect, or at least have some connection to it. Montclair does not have the same thing that other towns do.

[59:20]: Montclair State would hold its football games on Saturdays at the same time as the high school. The high school games were much bigger. Montclair State now has its games on Friday nights.

[1:00:20]: He remembers going to both the YWCA and the YMCA. When people are out of work, and have done everything they can possibly do, they used to be able to get another job quickly. Many big factories and businesses moved overseas. James mentions that many jobs cannot be brought back, but they can change. Pittsburg moved from steel to electronics. He feels that they can bring it back in a beneficial way. He believes that many people in the United States buy things in quantity.

[1:07:30]: Montclair does not elect a Board of Education. This was to keep the magnet schools in place, and because people do not vote in local elections. In New Jersey, property taxes pay for education, which results in people without children having to pay for schools. Every bit of space left in Montclair is being used up. Everything is being turned into apartments without lowering the taxes. Developers make money and then leave. Vacant lots used to be used as miniature parks or playgrounds. They do not exist anymore.

[1:10:40]: Stores just come and go now. Parking is bad. James wants to create a bus system to shuttle people around town because parking is far away and expensive.

[1:13:00]: He has heard of a Koppege family on Maple Avenue. There was a project to put together everyone's photos of war veterans, but there are no photos of the Koppege family. He served in Vietnam for less than a year, but was killed. He is the only one from Montclair without a picture.

[1:14:47]: As a Montclarion, he feels both proud of Montclair, but also disappointed.