

Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Project

Detroit Equity Action Lab

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights

Wayne State University Law School

Detroit, MI

John Telford

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

April 12, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

Narrator

John Telford, born 1936, is a native Detroiter. He was a track and field athlete at Denby High School and Wayne State University. He became an English teacher. He has been a teacher, administrator, and superintendent at numerous schools in the Detroit Public School district and the metro Detroit area since the 1950s. He is an activist who was formerly involved with Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management and Keep the Vote/No Takeover and is currently involved with National Action Network. He is also a poet and is currently the Poet in Residence for Detroit Public Schools.

Interviewer

Peter Blackmer is a Research Fellow at the Detroit Equity Action Lab, an initiative of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School.

Oriana Yilma is an undergraduate student at Wayne State University majoring in Psychology and minoring in African American Studies.

Abstract

John Telford discusses his family background, his childhood in Detroit, and his memories of the 1943 race riot. He tells many anecdotes about his athletic career, famous athletes from Detroit, and his teaching career. He talks about why Detroit Public Schools were taken over by the state in 1999, his time as the interim superintendent during the period of emergency management, why having an elected school board matters, Keep the Vote/No Takeover, and how charter schools are eroding public education. He also speaks briefly about the role of the arts and athletics in education, water shutoffs in Detroit, and issues with infrastructure in schools.

Keywords

1943 Detroit race riot; Arts; Athletics; Boxing; Charter schools; Detroit Public Schools; Detroit, Michigan; Education; Education Achievement Authority; Emergency management; Helen Moore; Keep the Vote/No Takeover; Poetry; Track and field; Water shutoffs

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Transcript of interview conducted April 12, 2019 with:

John Telford [JT]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

JT: My name is John Telford. I live at 8900 East Jefferson in Detroit [Michigan]. My affiliations--you got about five hours? [laughs] I'm affiliated with a lot of organizations. Right now, my affiliation I guess is the Detroit Public Schools Community District because I'm Poet in Residence for the Detroit Public Schools, and I'm also affiliated with Keep the Vote/No Takeover. I'm affiliated with National Action Network. I am a lifetime member of National Action Network. I am the Vice President of the Detroit Track and Field Old Timers, and there are some other organizations that I either consult with or I'm affiliated with.

[0:01:04]

OY: Could you describe your neighborhood in the city growing up?

JT: My neighborhood growing up... I grew up at 6021 16th Street, right near the corner of McGraw on the near West Side of Detroit. It was a few blocks east of the old Olympia Stadium on Grand River and McGraw. It does not stand there anymore. When I was a kid, I boxed in that stadium and I also saw Gordie Howe, you know, play a lot of hockey games. We used to sneak in, you know, and we didn't get tickets. The neighborhood itself, you know, lower middle-class, integrated, and it kept getting increasingly integrated. I...I started living there when I was a baby, an infant, in 1936, and I lived there until 1951, and I went to

school at Estabrook Elementary School, which is no longer standing. That was at the corner of Linwood and McGraw, and I went to Bethel Evangelical and Reformed Lutheran Church over on West Grand Boulevard.

I went to Northwestern High School, which was over on West Grand Boulevard and Grand River, until I had a little altercation there my sophomore year with an assistant principal, and I got sent to live with my father on the East Side. My father was a Scotland-born coal--ex-coal miner and prize fighter and union steward. My mother was a kindergarten teacher in the City of Detroit, and my father was a drinker and a gambler, and my mother said, "You gotta get out of here if you won't stop drinking and gambling." She kicked him out. He was out for a while, and when he was out, that was not a real good time for me. But, I got into that altercation. I was competing in athletics at Northwestern. I was playing football and running track. I was pole vaulting. I started out as a pole vaulter. And then when my father--my mother put my father out. About six months later, I ended up--in the meantime, I had been in the youth home. I had a problem that put me in the youth home for a while, and when I got out, I got...I got into athletics at Northwestern. I was also in a Boy Scout troop where we did some boxing, and the Boy Scout was in the church that I was attending.

I know this is kind of disjointed, but the neighborhood itself was a very solid neighborhood, lower middle-class. And then when I got sent to live with my father, it was over at Hayes and Haverhill on the East Side, and he was working in a metal molding company in East Detroit--which is now called Eastpointe [Michigan], but then it was called East Detroit--Keystone Metal Molding Company. I was 16 years old at the time. He got me a job in that metal molding company, and I was cleaning out a degreaser. You had to go down into a pit and clean out a degreaser, and I used to get sick. It used to make me throw up a couple of times. But then, I ended up getting promoted to a punch press, and then I started making a man's wages. So, I probably would've never gone to college if it hadn't been for my mother coming back to my father and saying, "No more boxing. No more factory. He's going to get his butt in high school."

And so, I ended up at Denby High School where those coaches, once they got a hold of me, I couldn't get into any trouble. They were watching every move I made, and it was a very good thing because my junior or senior year--my senior

year--they...the coaches arranged for me to get an athletic scholarship to Wayne State [University], and that was really something that changed my whole life, you know. I'm down at Wayne State then and hooking up with some really good people. Had a relay team with some of the fastest runners in the state, and we won a lot of races. We won the mile relay at the Penn Relays and the Ohio Relays, and we were beating everybody around in those days. It was a very, very good team.

But, you were asking me about the neighborhood. You know, I was in that neighborhood for 15, 16 years before I went to the other neighborhood. The other--it was kind of an interesting culture shock because when I was...when I was on 16th Street and McGraw and when I was going to Estabrook Elementary and Northwestern High School, it was integrated. Matter of fact, when I was at Northwestern, I was probably one of the fewer white kids in the schools. But then at Denby, there weren't any Black kids, and the neighborhood at that time--my father had bought this little bungalow on Haverhill, 10776 Haverhill, and it was brick, you know. So, I figured I really arrived, you know. I'm in a brick house now, you know.

But, I don't know if I've adequately answered your question about the neighborhood where I grew up, but I think I was molded on 16th Street. When I dream I'm going home, I dream I'm going to that house. But, that house is no longer there. That house has been torn down. Matter of fact, the new McMichael [Middle School] is where that house was, the playground of the new McMichael. And my dog Rap (ph) is buried on that playground. At the time, we buried him in the backyard. Somebody shot him, and I came out in the morning, and he was shot, and my father and I buried him in the backyard. That's a long story too about how he got shot, but he's buried in that playground. I have some cats buried on that playground too. I know right where they are. I could go to the playground. I can say, "Rap (ph) is under the ground right here." You know? Because it was my backyard.

[0:07:53]

OY: How has the city changed since then?

JT: Well, the city at...when I was growing up was predominately white. The city now is predominately Black. And, there have been some situations in the city that I witnessed growing up. When I was seven years old, there was a race riot in the city. In 19--no, wait a minute. 1940? When was that race riot?

PB: 1943.

JT: [19]43, yeah. I was seven years old. My father saved an old man from getting stomped to death on the corner of Stanton and McGraw. I still remember that, and--a really old man. He carried him home, and my mother washed his clothes because he had gone to the bathroom in his pants, and they had also broken his dentures. And, my father was a boxer, and the people in that neighborhood knew better. I mean, my father said, "You gotta go over this--over me--to get to this guy." He was already down, and he carried him home, and my mother washed his clothes and fed him, and we kept him overnight, and then my father drove him back home the next day. I think he lived on Wabash. But it was a really old, old man, and they had beaten him pretty bad, and I recall he died about two weeks later. The old man died.

[0:09:29]

PB: Was this a white guy or a Black guy?

JT: He was a Black guy beaten by a white youth. Toughs, you know? It was--that was a terrible time. I mean, 1967 was a terrible time too, but 1967 was more a rebellion than a riot. That was a full-blown riot in 1943.

And, you know--this would be an interesting thing too to say--my father was a fighter. He was a professional boxer, and he used to take me to the fights, and I saw Sugar Ray Robinson lose his first fight. He lost it to Jake LaMotta in Olympia [Stadium] when I was seven years old, and he had beaten him the week before,

and then I think a week after he beat him again. And then, he fought him for the title--middleweight. When he was welterweight, he fought for the middleweight title and beat him and took his middleweight title away. That's really not Detroit history excepting when you consider that Sugar Ray Robinson was a Detroiter. You know, he moved to New York when he was a teenager, but he was a--he lived in Detroit.

And, Detroit has a fantastic history of boxers. You know, not just sprinters, but there's been some great sprinters come out of this city, but some great boxers as well. You know, Joe Louis of course everyone knows about, but it's not as well known that Sugar Ray Robinson was also a Detroiter. Now, we know Thomas Hearns. You know Hilmer Kenty, some of the recent fighters. But interestingly, I had--was it last Saturday? I had Stuart Kirschenbaum on my radio show, and he is the boxing commissioner emeritus, and he talked a lot about the history of Detroit boxing. We're trying to get a hall of fame going, a boxing...Michigan boxing hall of fame. There've been some great old-time boxers too. There was Ad [Adolphus] Wolgast, who was a lightweight champion and a Michigan Wildcat, and there was Stanley Ketchel, who was a middleweight champion who had the heavyweight champion on the floor. He knocked Jack Johnson down. Jack Johnson got up and knocked him out. But, I think I'm digressing a little bit. I don't know if we want to talk that much about boxing.

[0:11:54]

PB: Next time.

JT: Yeah, okay.

PB: That's a whole other story in itself.

JT: I can talk about track forever too. [laughter] You know, I mean, some of the best dash men--you know, I'm in a couple halls of fame, but I got in ahead of Henry Carr, and I never should've been ahead of Henry Carr. Henry Carr tied a

world record when he was still at Northwestern High School. He tied a world sprint record. The only other sprinter ever did that was Jesse Owens at Cleveland East Tech[nical High School]. And Eddie Tolan, who was my gym teacher at--we used to get our vocational teaching at Goldberg Trade [School], and we used to run from Estabrook to Goldberg, and Eddie Tolan was my gym teacher. Eddie Tolan had--he was the world's fastest human. He came out of Cass Technical High School and won the Olympic 100 and 200 meters, and they called him the World's Fastest Human. He was, as far as I know, the first man ever to have that appellation. And four years later, Jesse Owens was called the World's Fastest Human in Berlin when he won the 100 and 200 and long jump and ran on the relay. But Tolan was the first one, and when Jesse Owens ran his 10 three [10.3 seconds] 100 meters, the record...he did not break the Olympic Record. He tied it. That record was set by Detroit's Eddie Tolan, my gym teacher. That's a little bit of history that a lot of people maybe don't know.

And, of course, I was on the U.S. team too. You know, I ran all over Europe and never lost a 200 or 400 meter race, which was a little unusual because I'm Caucasian, you know. All of my--all my relay teammates were African-American excepting for me. That was the case at Northwestern, it was the case at Wayne State, it was the case in the U.S. National Team, and it was the case in the Detroit Track Club. Matter of fact, you know, I brought some--this was a relay team--I don't know if you can focus in on this or not [holds up photograph], but, you know, that was the relay team that won at the Ohio Relays and the Penn Relays. These guys, these guys could fly. This guy here was Cliff Hatcher. He ran a 48.8 in high school for Central High, and that's me there, and this is...this guy was Ralph Williams. He was from the Island of St. Kitts. Could run a 100 in 9.8. And, this was Bullet Billy Smith from Northwestern High School, who...who was a world record holder in the hurdles. And, this was our coach, David L. Holmes, who is in the Michigan Sports Hall of Fame for coaching because he coached so many All Americans. You know, I was one of about seven All Americans, you know, NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] All Americans, that came out of Wayne State.

And, you know, I write--I'm the Poet in Residence for the Detroit Public Schools Community District, and this book here is the *Lifelong Poetic Prancings of Mad John*, which is my poetry book and, actually, this is my least-selling book. Nobody seems to be real enthusiastic about poetry. And what I'm doing right now, I'm

teaching poetry at Southeastern High School, and it's like pulling teeth to get these kids to write poems, but I also go around to all the other high schools in the city and do poetry readings, and I have found that the kids at Cass Tech[nical High School] and King [High School] and Pershing [High School]--and I'm going to DSA [Detroit School of Arts High School] in another couple of weeks--they all want to write poems and send me poems, and they call into the radio show and read poems. But, my own kids that I have at Southeastern, you know, it's very hard to get them to write poems. So, I talk about a lot of other things sometimes when I'm supposed to be teaching poetry.

This is a book that I wrote in 2010. It's called *What Old Men Know*, and I feel that I'm qualified to write a book called *What Old Men Know* because I'm 83 years old. So, I wrote a book called *What Old Men Know*. It's a definitive dictionary, an almanac of advice, and this one is a very good seller. And my other--I have seven books. I didn't bring 'em all here, but this is a book I just wrote called *The Poet-Emperor of Earth: An In-Depth Dialog with the Deity*, and it's a dialog between God and man, and I won't go into any great detail about it, but this book is catching a lot of interest, and they're selling this book over at 4240 Cass Avenue, the bookstore over there. I forget the name of it. You can also get most of my books at Barnes and Noble or on Amazon.com.

But, another thing that I kind of like to talk about--and I know you can't focus in on this--but this is a column that I wrote last week in the *Michigan Chronicle*. I write for the *Michigan Chronicle* and for the *Detroit Native Sun*. I've written for a lot of newspapers. I used to write for the [*Detroit*] *News* and the [*Detroit*] *Free Press*, but right now I write regular columns for the *Michigan Chronicle* and the topic of this--the headline of this particular column is "Could This Trumpian Tale Really Happen?" and I draw a parallel in this column between Donald Trump and Adolph Hitler, and I see many, many parallels that--and this is really a very chilling column because it starts out with all kinds of factual stuff, and then it goes into what could happen and what eerily did happen in the Weimar Republic in 1933 when Adolph Hitler was democratically elected to lead the country, and then he systematically took over the country and became the dictator, and I know that the man right now that's in the White House has the heart of a fascist. You know, his father was a Klu Klux Klansman, and he's kind of an accidental president, you know. He didn't win the popular vote, and I know that he's...he's perfectly capable

of doing everything Hitler did if we don't let our guard down, and I can talk about that a lot.

[0:18:53]

OY: Can you help us with the history of state intervention in the Detroit Public Schools?

JT: They had no business taking us over. At the time they took us over--it was in the year 1999. We had--the Detroit Public Schools--had a 125 million dollar surplus. The test scores, the student test scores, were at the state midpoint and rising. But, we had just passed a 1.5 billion dollar bond, and the Republicans in Lansing [Michigan] were looking at that money with hungry eyes, and they took us over because they could. I mean, why take us over? I mean, I didn't see them taking over Pontiac [Michigan]. I didn't see them taking over Saginaw [Michigan]. I didn't see them taking over Highland Park [Michigan]. I didn't see them taking over Benton Harbor [Michigan]. We were outscoring all those school districts. They took us over. They took us over because of that 1.5 billion dollars.

And, here we are now 20 years later. The test scores are the worst in the country. We're 3.5 billion dollars in debt, and Detroiters didn't do that. Lansing did that. The Republicans in Lansing did that to us. I would love to see a forensic audit. I don't think we're gonna see one, but I'd love to see one because if we could bring an independent auditor in to do a forensic audit, people all the way to Governor [Rick] Snyder would go to jail because nobody knows where that money went, but an audit would uncover it. It makes me very angry, you know, as a Detroiters and as an educator because they ruined a district that was doing a very fine job of educating some very poor kids, and now they're doing a terrible job of educating these kids, and that's their only chance. Education is their only chance.

You know, I'm a poet, and I write poetry. I don't remember my poetry too well anymore, but this one I remember, and I call it "My Vision." I have a vision in my heart and in my spirit and my soul that all the children of Detroit will never have to pay the toll of poverty and ravaged mind or end up dead or on the dole, but

will, through education, find their life-fulfilling future goal.” That’s my vision for these kids.

We didn’t have an elected board for a long time. The short time that we did have an elected board, that elected board, you know, plucked me out of never-never land and brought me back, talked me into coming back and being the superintendent, but they didn’t have enough money to pay me. So, I did it pro bono for a year. And during that year, it was just about the most frustrating year I ever spent because I was dealing with an emergency financial manager. He didn’t have the powers of an emergency manager yet, but he was controlling purse strings, and I was trying to get a program going called “Quick to Learn.” It was a Detroit-based program headed up by James Hare and James Beasley, a couple of statisticians who had a really, really good program. It was evidenced-based, it was field proven, and it would’ve taken the kids from the bottom of the test spectrum to the top. They could’ve brought them up, Two Sigma [Research Group]. It already happened at some other districts. So, they were field proven, but the emergency financial manager wouldn’t let me do it, and I got so frustrated I had a heart attack. I ended up with a heart attack, you know. In fact, the doctors wanted to keep me in the hospital, but, you know, I was in there for five days, and I wanted to go back because I know...I know I had some work to do in the schools.

But, during that...when they first hired me as superintendent--for one dollar. My contract was one dollar. It’s on the contract. The EAA [Education Achievement Authority], which was a group of fifteen schools that Governor Snyder had stolen from Detroit Public Schools to try to start up another district where they were doing some experimentation which did not work, the leadership of the EAA tried to steal me. They took me and my wife into a house in Grosse Pointe [Michigan] and wined and dined us, and I didn’t know what was happening at the time. The lady who did that was actually the deputy chancellor of the EAA [Mary Esselman?]. I can’t remember her name now. But, they offered me a 180,000 dollar contract for five years, and I turned it down, and my wife was upset, you know. She said, “You gotta--they’re not paying you here, so you should take this job.” I said, “It would’ve been like being a trustee at Auschwitz,” because I wanted that organization to fail. I did not want it to succeed.

And, we finally did manage to kill that program. We got rid of it, and we also got an elected board back. Took us a while to get an elected board back, but when we got the elected board back, I tried to get them--I tried to get Dr. [Nikolai] Vitti--he was the superintendent--I tried to get him to do the Quick to Learn program, and he was not interested in doing it for whatever reason. But, Helen Moore and I and some others started a reading program, but it's not Quick to Learn. The legislature--the Republican legislature--has now passed an edict that the third graders in Detroit are going to have to come up to snuff in the test, or they're going to have to repeat the third grade. And, I can tell you right now, with the programs that we're doing, they're not gonna...they're not gonna come up to snuff. So, we're going to have to prevail upon Garlin Gilchrist and the governor, Governor [Gretchen] Whitmer, to waive this rule until we can get those kids reading at the level because it's going to take a lot longer, and we need some better programs. But anyway, I'm rambling along here.

[0:26:32]

PB: No, that's great, and we're covering a lot of ground here, too. I want to take us back to that initial takeover in [19]99.

JT: Okay.

PB: What was your relation--were you teaching, were you administration? What was your relationship to the Detroit Public School District at the time of the takeover?

JT: Yeah, I'm trying to think. In 1998, I was...I was heading up a program at Wolverine Human Services. I was the education director at Wolverine Human Services, and when they took over Detroit Public Schools, I was not in agreement with that move. But, I did come back to Detroit Public Schools. And a little earlier, I had...I had counseled at the Trombly Adult Day High School. See, I keep coming in and out of Detroit. I've had a lot of jobs in Detroit. But in 1999, I came back, and one of my old staff [Betty Hines] when I was an administrator at Butzel Junior High School in the 1960s was principal of Southwestern High School. So, she asked me

to come and coach the track team and teach English, and I was, you know, I was 64, 65 years old, but I did. I went back under that, under the takeover. That was in 1999.

And then, Ken Burnley, whom I had...whom I had worked with when he was a track athlete, became superintendent and snatched me out of Southwestern and put me in charge of the Southwest side of town as the executive director of the principals in the Southwest side of town. And at that time, he brought me back, and he brought Pete Petross, who had run on that Detroit Track Club relay team with me that, you know, the members of that team broke the world record in the 880 yard relay in 1958, and then we went to Madison Square Gardens and took the silver medal after dropping the baton. That's a whole long story, but I don't think a sprint team ever dropped a baton and still came back and won the silver. But, that was Pete Petross. He had been principal at Mumford High School, and Burnley brought him back to be an executive director. He brought Walt Jenkins back who had been a principal at Cooley [High School]. We were all old guys, you know, but he brought us back to be executive directors, and it looked like at that time we were going to turn the school district back in the right direction.

But, unfortunately, Ken started listening to some of the wrong people. And at the end of that year, all three of us--Walt Jenkins, I, and Petross--all got fired. [laughs] We all got fired. And then, I [laughs]--Petross and...and...Petross asked to get his job back and he got his job back. I was too mad. I went and ran the Team--this group here--the Team for Justice. I went and ran the Team for Justice for a year over on Gratiot Avenue. And then, I had warned Burnley about this deputy that he had. I can't remember the lady's name, but she was bad news. He ended getting--firing her and bringing me back. He brought me back, but he didn't bring me back to run the Southwest side of town. He brought me back to be the Executive Director of Community Affairs, and I did that for a year. And then, I got fired again because I didn't like some things that were happening that were counterproductive to the education process. I could get into the details, but that's where I was and what I was doing at the time of the takeover.

[0:30:32]

PB: So, those things that you mentioned that you felt were counterproductive to education, were they symptoms of the state takeover?

JT: They were in that there were people who were put in positions of leadership who did not know what they were doing. I was an English teacher. You know, I started teaching English and coaching track. Actually, I started subbing in 1956 when I was a junior at Wayne State. That's when I first became an educator. In fact, I changed my major. I was majoring in liberal arts English. I changed it. I decided to get a teaching certificate then because I was having a good time, you know, with the kids, and I realized, you know, this is really what I want to be doing. And I'm, you know, I'm rambling. I'm going back and forth. Repeat your question.

[0:31:26]

PB: The things that you said were counterproductive?

JT: Oh, yeah. Well, they were putting people in leadership positions--they stopped teaching traditional grammar for one thing, and we've got kids who've got dialectical problems, you know. 85 percent of our students in Detroit are African American, and there are dialectical problems that need to be addressed because those kids need to talk like the man talks on television, and they need to be able to read, and the English curriculum, which had been traditional grammatically based and could deal with dialectical problems, was trashed. It was thrown out. That was one of the things I opposed. I wanted to put it back in again.

Also, this assistant superintendent that he had--I still can't remember her name. It'll come back to me. But, she changed graduation requirements, you know. She made the graduation requirements tougher, and they were already tough enough. You know, we wanted to make sure the kids had enough wiggle room where if they flunked a course they could take it again in summer school, and it became very difficult for that. And, I can remember telling Burnley at the time that you gotta get rid of this lady because she's doing things that are hurting the kids, and he finally did. He fired her, and he brought me back and put me in charge of community affairs, but I really should've still been in curriculum. So, anyway, those

were two of the things that were bad--three of the things that were bad that happened at that time that I did not approve of.

[0:33:11]

PB: So, you're inside of the system at the time of the takeover.

JT: Yeah.

PB: And outside in the community, folks are organizing against the state takeover. Folks like Helen Moore...

JT: Absolutely.

PB: So, can you tell us a little bit about Keep the Vote/No Takeover and what your relationship was with it?

JT: Okay, well I just signed on with Helen [Moore]. I mean, I completely agree with everything Helen does. I mean, Helen is like Grace Lee Boggs. I mean, Helen is a great, great woman. I mean, she's--we need--I hope Helen Moore can live to be 100 because we're going to need her for about the next 10 years. It's such a mess right now. I don't even know where to start, very frankly. Keep the Vote/No Takeover was instrumental in getting the vote back, but some of the people on the school board even now are neophytes, and they needed to listen more to Helen. I think they're starting to listen now. I think the superintendent is starting to listen. He's getting... You know, he's starting to see that he can't do this whole thing by himself. And, he's not a Detroiter either, you know. It's gonna be an uphill climb.

It's gonna be--what I worry most about is these Republicans making those third graders repeat the third grade. We gotta make sure that doesn't happen. That would be a disaster. The kids would be--the parents will be pulling their kids out of

school in droves and going into the charter schools, and that's what Betsy DeVos wants to do anyway. She wants to see everything chartered in Detroit. You know, it's a...it's a multi-billion dollar business, and it's all about money. It comes down to being about money. It's not about kids. You know, they don't care about the children. The parents do. The community does. But, the people who have been in power positions have been looking at the dollar sign. They haven't been looking at what's good for children in Detroit.

[0:35:11]

PB: So, with Keep the Vote when...when Helen Moore and others are organizing at this time, what was your role within that?

JT: I didn't...I didn't have any at that time. I just knew Helen. I always supported Helen in everything she did. Helen is the community guru along with Reverend Charles Williams at, who is--he's the, he's the leader of this group [points to name on t-shirt, National Action Network], you know, the Michigan group. I'm the education coordinator for the Detroit group of this group. That's the grassroots leadership, Sam Riddle, Helen Moore, Bill Davis who's on the Police Commission. These are...these folks are the leadership people along with some others who aren't directly affiliated with the National Action Network. You know, that's Al Sharpton's group nationally. The National Action Network is probably the premiere group. I mean, they shut down Woodward Avenue one time, you know, when there was something that needed to be done.

But, you've also got...you've got some other preachers in the city who are activists. There's the Reverend Arpos Brooks (??) over on Harper Avenue, Harper Avenue Gospel Church. There's David Bullock--Reverend David Bullock, you know, who's in Highland Park. But, you also have--and I'm not going to name names--but you've got some big-time preachers in Detroit who have been accused of being on the take and who have been cooperating more with the corporate power structures than they have with the grassroots people who are trying to help the community and children.

The mayor himself--and he's been on my show. He's been on my show three times. I've asked him some rather tough questions at one time or another because he keeps saying that we don't have two Detroits, but we do have two Detroits. We've got the Detroit that Dan Gilbert's trying to buy up, you know, in downtown and midtown and now on the Gold Coast. You know, they're calling where I live actually--from downtown to Grosse Pointe along the river--they're calling that the new Gold Coast, and people are buying those apartments, and they're putting people out. You know, there's a real gentrification going on. You know, I'm not necessarily against gentrification as long as it doesn't displace people who've been living in their homes, you know, for decades, and then all of a sudden, they're looking. Where am I going to go now? And, this is...this is what is happening in the city and we gotta--that's one of the things that the National Action Network will be fighting.

[0:38:03]

PB: So, I want to come back to this struggle for the elected school board that was taking place over years, right?

JT: Yeah.

PB: I'm not certain that there's a strong understanding of what the exact significance is of having an elected school board versus having a mayoral-appointed or state-appointed school board. Could you talk a little bit about what that struggle was and what the importance is for local control of the school board?

JT: It is essential that the community elect their representation all up and down the line and that includes the school board. The school board is a very important body, and we had appointed...appointed school boards that were...that were not knowledgeable, number one. And number two, they weren't accountable to the electorate. You know, you have to be able to recall a school board member. You have to be able to talk to your school board member and say, you know, in our elementary school, we have black mold. You know, in our middle school over here,

the kids don't have toilet paper. In this high school over here, the swimming pool hasn't worked for 13 years. These are things that have to be...that have to be organized and directed from below, from the grassroots, and this has not been the case in Detroit for the past 20 years. We've got to turn that back around.

[0:39:45]

PB: So, you come, and you are pro-bono superintendent of the public school district. That's in 2012, 2013?

JT: 2012, 2013 was the year I did it, yeah.

PB: So, you are in that position when the city comes under emergency management, right. So, the school district is already under...

JT: What happened...what happened was we challenged emergency management. Public Act Four was the emergency manager law. We challenged it, and I told the emergency financial manager because he figured, "Oh, I'm gonna be emergency manager now. We're gonna uphold that law." Because the law got challenged and it went to a vote, and I told him, "We're gonna vote it down. So, when I'm...when I'm superintendent and we vote down the emergency manager law, you're gonna work for me. And then, you're gonna help me get this Quick to Learn program going so we can get those reading scores up." He said, "No, you're not gonna win. We're going to...we're gonna overturn the emergency manager law." But, it turns out he was wrong. We overturned the emergency law. So, what does the Republican legislature and the governor do? They put it right back in. They called it Public Act 436 in March of 2013. When they did that, that was on the 28th of March of 2013. On the 29th of March, the newly empowered emergency manager fires me as superintendent and disempowers the elected board, and that was the worst thing that possibly could've happened for the children. But, it did. Well, it was the second worst thing. The worst thing was the takeover in 1999.

But then, we finally get an elected board back, but they're neophytes. They don't, you know, some of them are sort of corporate collusive. I don't want to mention any names because I think some of them may have been innocently leaning in that direction, and we might be bringing them back now into the fold. But, LaMar Lemmons got elected to that board by the skin of his teeth, and that was a good thing. But then, he ran for state senate, and he had to relinquish his seat, and he didn't win the state senate race either. So, LaMar Lemmons is off that board now. His wife [Georgia Lemmons] is still on the board. But, I'm playing with the notion of running for that board myself this coming fall, and LaMar and I may be--another lady, Ida Short--we might run as a team and try to get on that board because these test scores have got to come up. Until we bring the school district back to where it was in the mid-1990s, the city's not going to come back. We've got to bring the schools back. I'm 83, you know, but if I'm still around in another couple--my dad died when he was 84, but I'm still in decent health. Had that one heart attack and a couple strokes, but other than that I'm still viable.

[0:43:22]

PB: So, what was the role--Elena Herrada called--she was on the school board at this time, right?

JT: She was.

PB: What she called...what she referred to the board during that time is the school board in exile.

JT: Right.

PB: So, what was the role of the school board during the time that the state comes in with the emergency manager?

JT: We kept meeting, you know. And, I was the superintendent in exile. We kept meeting. The community came to our meetings, and we kept militating to get...to get another election and to get a truly empowered elected board, and when that happened--in the meantime, I had run for mayor. They had asked me to run for mayor, and I did. I ran against [Mike] Duggan, and one of the main reasons they wanted me to run was so that I could debate him because he was the treasurer of the EAA. He was on the--and I debated him. I shamed him into getting off of the EAA. Probably helped him win, actually. I was... There were several of us that were running for mayor. And then...then--that was in the primary. And then, final two against each other were Duggan and Benny Napoleon, and Duggan beat Benny and got the mayoral chair.

And, Duggan's done some good things too. I know that Sam Riddle will say, "Oh no, don't say that." And Helen Moore will say, "Oh no, don't say that." But, he's also not done some things that I would've done if I had been mayor that I still hope that he will do. One of the things I hope he'll do is waive that requirement for the Dexter-Elmhurst [Center] to have those fire extinguishers because there are a lot of buildings in the city that don't have that kind of equipment, and they're running, and they haven't been shut down. So, why do this to Dexter-Elmhurst? So, that's what I'm going to be talking about WCHB, you know, 1340 AM this coming Saturday, whatever date that is, you know. Helen Moore is coming on my radio show, and we're going to...that's going to be our total topic. If necessary maybe we gotta get a GoFundMe thing going or something, but it seems to me that...that Mayor Duggan, he's got the power to just say, "Hey, let's just kind of just waive that rule." Because that community center is absolutely essential where it is. That must not be closed down. And, again, I'm rambling.

[0:45:51]

PB: No, no, no. That's great because, I mean, community--not great. That's a terrible segue for me to use. Community centers, rec centers have been systematically been targeted over the last 20 years.

JT: Yes, they have. Along with the schools.

PB: That's...that's where I want to take us. Can you talk about the school closures that have taken place over the last 20 years and what, like, what impacts that's had on the district, on children, on... Tell us that story.

JT: Well, the big problem is the encroachment of charter schools. The charter schools have been growing like weeds, not only in the city but on the periphery of the city, and they're...they're taking all our kids, and they don't play by the same rules that we play by. You know, if they played by the same rules--I was a world-ranked runner, okay? I was a world-ranked sprinter. I was judged by an unforgiving instrument called a stopwatch. The teachers in the charter schools don't have the same credentials. They don't have to play by the same rules. Track and field is brutally fair. The stopwatch doesn't discriminate. The charter schools are cheating, basically, and they're... [sighs] Some of them are good. You know, there are a handful of charter schools that have good people that are doing a good job, but they don't have--they're taking away the resources. They're taking away the money that should be being spent on public education.

True, traditional public education is the cornerstone of democracy. Even when you look at Detroit kids the past 10 to 20 years, we didn't have some of the facilities you're going to find in Birmingham [Michigan] and Bloomfield Hills [Michigan] and Grosse Pointe, but we had...we had a basic education and support that is now being eroded by the charter schools. If I had my way, I'd close every charter school there is. I know that's not gonna happen, but if we've got to have charter schools, make them play by the same rules that the traditional public schools are having to play by.

[0:49:00]

PB: So, the dominant narrative, right, is that charter schools are more efficient, they cater more to educational reform, that the private sector is more capable of providing good education than the public sector. That's the dominant narrative we keep hearing, but how do you respond to that?

JT: Their scores are worse than the public. They're a farce. They're a fraud. We've got to strengthen traditional public education. That's what has to happen, and that's what I'm hoping that Governor Whitmer will do, and I'm hoping that she'll meet with Jim Hare and James Beasley and all of that crew from Quick to Learn. And if we can't get it going in Detroit, let's get it going in Benton Harbor. Let's get it going in Ecorse [Michigan]. Let's get it going in Pontiac. Let's get it going in Highland Park. Let's get it going everywhere else. And eventually when those scores come up, Detroit's going to have to do that same thing, if they haven't all been chartered in the meantime. Because that's what Betsy Vos--Betsy DeVos wants to do. That's what Trump wants to do. Betsy DeVos, of course, you know, being his...his--the lady that was talking about grizzly bears, you remember? I mean, it's...it's...it's...it'd be funny if it...if it wasn't so scary what's happening to this city, this state, and this country. Republicans are running it into the ground, and the president himself is a fascist. That's what we're dealing with. Never thought I'd see it.

[0:50:35]

PB: So, I mean, charters, in my mind, like, go hand and hand with the EAA, right, and the EAA being imposed.

JT: Yeah, that was...that was the same mentality. The... You know, when Detroit scores slipped so far down that they became the worst in the country, there was a school district--quasi-school district--that had worse scores. It was the EAA. Their scores were worse. You know the old saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it?" They never should've taken the schools over in 1999. It was--they took us over because they could. Never should've happened. We had a superb superintendent, Dr. Eddie Green. Scores were rising despite all of the social problems in the city, you know, all the poverty and all the drug trade, everything, all the ills that we're dealing with in a big urban center. Despite all those ills, the schools were thriving. They're not anymore. It's gonna be a long road back.

[0:51:39]

PB: So, schools are getting...schools are getting taken over by the EAA, schools are being closed during this period. Are there... Do you remember were there any particular schools that you saw really deeply impacted that have stayed with you?

JT: Well, my alma...my two alma maters, you know. I went to Northwestern, and I went to Denby. The neighborhoods of course were degenerating because the schools were degenerating. The schools were closing, were being closed, were being sold. They sold Southwestern High School to some enterprise. I'm not sure who they sold it to, but before they sold it, we had put a 150,000 dollar track at that school. You know, that money just--I mean, there wasn't any planning. The people that were running the show either out of ignorance or deliberately were trashing the foundation of a noble district that had been one of the best in the country historically.

I mean, I got a great education in Detroit Public Schools. I can remember when I was at Denby. I was a junior at Denby when I went over there. I mean, that English department was like a college English department. We were learning Chaucer, you know. We were learning, you know, things that you don't learn until you're a sophomore in college. That's the kind of school district that we had, and it wasn't just at Denby, which was an all-white school. When I went to teach at South...at Southeastern--I had been a sub for a while, and then I went and taught at Southeastern. I can remember in the fall of 1960, they had the same curriculum, was all across the city, and traditional grammar was being stretch--stressed, totally stressed.

I can remember when I came back in--you know, I started in 1956 as a teacher. When I came back to...to Southwestern in 1999, I started trying to teach the same curriculum, and I was teaching...I ended up... Betty Hines, who had worked for me when I was administrator at Butzel and when I was administrator at King High, she said, "Can you help the teachers learn some of this?" And, I did. I was teaching, you know, the departments some things, and one day a lady from downtown came...came...came in there, and she went up to the second floor where my...where I was teaching my class. She looked in the...she looked in the door, and she saw that my kids were diagramming compound complex sentences on the board, and she went running down to Dr. Hines who was the principal then and said to Dr. Hines, "That man up there is teaching diagramming," you know. "That's

not part of the curriculum.” And Dr. Hines said, “Yeah, it’s a pilot program. Leave him alone,” you know. “The kids are learning better, and their writing is getting better.”

But, I was just doing that in one classroom and then in some other classrooms having the teachers do it at Southwestern. That should’ve been happening all over the city the way it happened in the 1950s and the 1960s. And as I speak, as I speak, that curriculum has not come back, and that’s one of the things that has to be restored, and I told Dr. Vitti that, and I was starting to do it when I was superintendent, but I was only superintendent for one year.

[0:55:19]

PB: So, we have some DPS grads in this room. So, I want to, like, provide some space that if any of you all want to raise some questions or raise some topics for conversation, please feel free to do that.

Herbert Taylor [HT]: I don’t have anything at this moment, but I’m sure something will come.

Antoine Wells [AW]: I graduated from a charter school.

HT: I went to one for a minute, but I graduated from the Detroit School of Arts.

JT: Oh yeah, DSA?

HT: Yeah.

JT: Yeah, my...one of my close buddies who was a starting forward at Michigan State [University] teaches there now, and when I was at Finney [High School], he

worked in my department. I've had so many iterations of--I've had more lives than a cat. I went back and taught at Finney, and after I got fired the third time from an executive directorship, the principal at Finney--I had put him at Finney--and he brought me back to Finney to teach English and...and to head up the program, to head up the academic program there, and that was a mess. That school was a mess. It reminded me of Butzel Junior High School almost when I was there in the [19]60s. Finney, we had about eight fights a day. The school was being used as a dumping ground. ATs were coming in--AT is an administrative transfer--and the kids were getting kicked out of Kettering [High School] and Denby and Pershing. We were getting them--it was like a dumping ground. We get the school straightened out, and then we have 50 more ATs came in, and the fights would start up again.

What I finally did was started up a Second Chance program, and I told--I picked out almost 300 kids who were...who had the most discipline referrals, and I took them all into the auditorium and told them, "Okay," you know, "you're gonna go in the Second Chance program now, but this really isn't a second chance. This is your last chance, and I see you before four o'clock, I'll have you arrested. You do not come back until four o'clock." I changed the schedules--we changed the schedules of some teachers so they would start at four o'clock and work until eight o'clock, you know, whereas the other teachers would start at eight o'clock in the morning, you know, and work until three. And, you know, every one of those kids except one graduated, and they would not have graduated if we hadn't started that Second Chance program, and we did independently of downtown because we knew if downtown knew we were doing it, they would tell us we couldn't do it because it wasn't a part of the...part of the program at the Central Office.

But, I still see some of those kids every now and then. There was one kid--I'm trying to think of that kid's name. One kid did not graduate, and I ran into him in the grocery store years later, and he had gone and got his GED [General Educational Development], and he did graduate, and I can remember he said to me--this was a kid [laughs], this particular kid--I'm trying to think of his name. It'll come to me. I'm getting bad on names--but this particular kid, his science teacher sent a note with a kid to my office one time, and the note said, "You have to come down and get Ralph."--the kid's name was Ralph--"You have to come down and get Ralph because he said he's gonna kill me." So, I go down, you know. I open the door and say, "Come here, Ralph," you know. I slapped his butt all the way down

to the--you're not supposed to do that--but I slapped his butt all the way down to the [laughs] science room. And then, I...I made him write an apology, and that particular kid did not graduate. He just was too hard headed, but eventually, you know, everyone matures, you know.

I have kids who are calling me right now--Finney kids--that are calling me from prison. There was one of my kids, when he came out of prison, he became a boxer, and he's going to be fighting in...at some place in Farmington on May the 10th, and I'm gonna go and see him. You know, I gave him...I gave him some tips from my dad. I was a Golden Gloves fighter. I had the--I won the welterweight in 1951, but I never wanted to be a professional. I hated to get hit. But anyway, this particular kid is 19 and two now as a fighter, and he's fought cage fights, and he's fought regulation fights, and he's going to be fighting. And, again, I'm rambling. I'm doing an awful lot of rambling here.

[1:00:02]

PB: No, that's fine.

JT: I've lived a lot of lives in education. Some of them I haven't shared with you. A lot of schools. Coached track, had champions. State champions at Pershing, Southeastern, Finney. It's been a great career. I'm kind of toward the end of it now.

Rhiannon Chester-Bey [RC]: I went to Mumford [High School]. I graduated from Mumford High.

JT: Okay.

RC: Before it was an EAA school. [laughs]

JT: Good. Yeah. It was a good...one of the best.

RC: Yeah. I loved my teachers. Ms. Saunders. But I was also a part of BAMN [By Any Means Necessary] when we were fighting the school closing, and--you know, By--

JT: By Any Means Necessary.

RC: Yeah, I'm sure you know about BAMN.

JT: Oh, yeah.

RC: And so, I remember fighting the first round of the 32 school closings, and I think those were--like, we talked about the state takeover and how they stole the money and all of that stuff, and we organized walk-outs and all of that, but I'm really interested about the transition from EAA. Like, I didn't... I was kind of out of educational organizing by the time EAA died. And then, how it became the Detroit Public School Community District and what that really is because what I've heard is that they're actually... Like, like, the old district has the debt...

JT: That's right.

RC: ...and the Community District, Community School District is, like, debt-free.

[1:01:49]

JT: It's debt-free, but it's underfunded. It's underfunded. And, I can--are we still being recorded?

RC: Yeah.

JT: Okay, it's underfunded and that...I have to believe that's very deliberate. They're not giving us enough money to run the schools, and you're talking about Mumford. The old Mumford and the new Mumford. There was no reason why the old Mumford should've been torn down. There was nothing wrong with that school. They should've maintained it. The old Mumford was a better school with an indoor track. Of course, you know, I'm a runner, but you had a 16 lap to a mile track up in the balcony. Those cost a fortune to build, and that school was torn down and replaced with a low-bid school that nowhere comes near to meeting--you know, the old Mumford was built on the blueprint that Pershing and Mackenzie [High School] and Denby and all those wonderful schools that were built in the 1930s were built on. And King High School, that's another school that never should've been torn down. I was an administrator at King High School back in the late 1960s. That school got torn down, and there's an architect named Bill Dickens that I'm probably going to be talking to.

We're planning to get a group of people to write a history of the Detroit Public Schools, and there are gaps in my knowledge. You know, I go way back to the 1940s and [19]50s and [19]60s, and then there's a gap in my knowledge. But, LaMar Lemmons is going to be working on that book. Bill Dickens the architect is going to be working on that book. Tom Pedroni, who is a professor at Wayne State, is going to be working on it. Helen Moore. And, we're gonna try to write a book that tells the true...that gives a true picture of the history of DPS.

RC: Yeah.

JT: And, it's not--the recent years, it's not a real happy history. It's...it's just... It makes me angry, you know, and I think about it too deeply, which I probably do every day. You know? That's one of the reasons why I've...I'm back on the radio, you know. I'm... As long as I keep selling these books, I'll stay on the radio.

[1:04:09]

RC: So, with the... So, the old district--I don't really understand the split, right? So, there's two jurisdictions with...

JT: There is no jurisdiction with the old district. They just threw the old district in and said, "Okay, you got the debt." It's gonna take the taxpayers about 40 years to pay back that debt.

RC: Okay.

JT: In the meantime, you got the new district that is underfunded.

RC: Okay.

JT: It's not being given enough money by Lansing to really operate. And hopefully, if Dr. Vitti can get some good lobbyists and now at least we've got a Democratic governor and lieutenant governor, but we still have a predominate Republican legislature. That's the same thing that Jennifer Granholm had to deal with, you know. She wanted to get a graduated income tax. She wanted to do a lot of the things statewide that Bernie Sanders and...and...and Mrs. [Elizabeth] Warren want to do at the national level.

RC: Yeah.

JT: Start taxing, you know, some of the folks that are in that one percent category. Jennifer Granholm was always unable to do it. I had her on my radio show too. She came on my show. She got a bum rap. A lot of people blame her for stuff that she really couldn't do much about. And, unfortunately, Gretchen Whitmer is in the same...the same bag...

RC: Yeah.

JT: ...because she's fighting that Republic legislature and some of this gerrymandering. I'm...I'm an executive board member of the 14th District--Congressional District--Democrats, and part of what we're trying to...to lobby for with some of the legislators is to turn that around, but it's an uphill battle. And then, you look at what's happening in...in Washington [D.C.], you know. You know, we're fighting an uphill battle at all levels, city, state, and nationally. And Trump, of course. Don't get me started on Trump. The man is, you know, he's a narcissistic, pathological liar. I mean, he's--it's just so frightening. When I think of some of his predecessors... You know, we had John F. Kennedy. We had Barack Obama. We had Franklin Roosevelt. And now, we've got this imbecile in the office there, and he's... Well, anyway. Anyway, thank you for interviewing me.

[1:07:00]

PB: Can I ask you two more questions?

JT: Sure. Right.

PB: Do you have anything else?

RC: No. I'm good.

[Cross-talk]

HT: I think I have something.

PB: Yeah, please.

HT: You may have--I don't know what your question was--but how do you... I guess, what's your take on the importance of the arts in the schools?

JT: Essential. Essential. I learned to play the violin in the fourth grade at Estabrook Elementary School, and I was the concertmaster of the Denby orchestra. I've sold paintings. I'm an artist. This all didn't happen by accident. I'm a poet, too. You know, I mean, these are... I mean, the humane arts are what make us human, and to...and to curtail them in any school district is a crime against humanity. The same thing goes with clubs. You know, the extracurricular activities. Chess clubs. Things like--and athletics, of course. If it hadn't been for...for athletics, when I was an athletic coach--and I coached at Southeastern and Finney and King and Pershing--and...and...and athletics were keeping some kids in school who would've dropped out otherwise. Don't get me started on the need for the arts. The arts are essential. Essential. And, that's... those are some of the things that are being cut in Detroit Public Schools.

[1:08:50]

PB: Do you see a connection between... So, I'm thinking about all these massive cuts. I mean, there's just this full frontal assault on the people of Detroit during the emergency manager, right? Do you see a connection between the destruction of the public school system, the water shutoffs, ...

JT: Yes.

PB: ...the foreclosures?

JT: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. Water is a human right, and that's another battle that I've been fighting. I was fighting it with Lila Cabbil, you know, at DREM, Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management. You know, that was one of our battles that we fought. Lila just died, by the way. We lost Lila. There are so many battlefronts in the war to prevail...for democracy to prevail. You know, as

soon as you plug one hole in the dike, another one comes open. And, you know, I guess I use athletic terminology a lot, but I'm passing the baton, you know. We've got to pass the baton to some of the young folks. That's what I tell these kids that I'm teaching at Southeastern every day, you know. The limits of your language are the limits of your world. That's what I tell them. I'm in an English class, and you've got to master this language, man. It's the language of the marketplace.

But, yes, the water shutoffs. They shouldn't be happening. And, you know, Helen goes around to some...some homes in the Dexter-Elmhurst neighborhood where there is no water and...and...and where in some situations you've got children in homes that have no water. You've got old people in homes that have no water. That's a health crisis. And, of course, she can't say names, you know, because if you... She's...she's...she's giving people water, you know, from the community center. That's why it can't be shut down. Bottled water. And if...if...if some people had to sign for the water--because if they sign and people find out who they are, they'll come and take their children because the children are in houses without water. I mean, parts of Detroit are like...are like a third world country. That's my hometown, you know, and I grew up on 16th Street and McGraw, and that was considered a slum at the time, but I had running water in my house. There are houses right now with no running water. They've been turned off. I think that the number is close to 17,000. It's an incredible number. [sighs] George Gaines (ph) knows a lot about that. He was--you know George Gaines?

PB: Not personally. I've heard some of his presentations.

JT: Okay, yeah. That's my guy. You know, we were runners together at Wayne State. He was a distance runner, and I was a sprinter. He used to be Coleman Young's public health director, and George is... You know, he's my age. [sighs] We've put a lot of store into Gretchen Whitmer, man. I just hope that... I mean, yeah, fix the damn roads, like she says, but we've got a lot more things to be fixed in Detroit.

PB: Okay. What about the schools, the infrastructure?

JT: They're coming apart. They're absolutely coming apart. Even when I was at Finney... When I was at Finney, I was in a classroom one time at Finney, and there was a hole in the ceiling, and I came down to that classroom. A lady who was one of the English teachers was teaching a class. There was a hole in the ceiling, and a rat fell out of the hole in the ceiling, running around the floor. Girls are all getting up on chairs. The...the teacher got up on her desk. [laughs] I got called down to the damn classroom to get this rat out of there. You know, you're not gonna see that in Birmingham, I'll tell you that right now. This is what we're dealing with. This is what we're dealing with in Detroit Public Schools Community District.

[1:13:27]

PB: So, there was--I know we're winding down, but now I have another question. So, there was that multi-billion dollar bond that...

JT: That all disappeared.

PB: ...DPS was sitting on in [19]99, and now...

JT: It disappeared into people's pockets.

PB: And now, there's... Now, there's lead in the pipes in the public school district.

JT: That's right. And, you know, the actual bill is 3.5 billion dollars. They are 3.5 billion dollars in debt, and they had a 125 million dollars surplus when they took us over, and they took us over for fiscal reasons. They're gonna--we're not running our schools right. We've got a 125 million dollar surplus. That's all we've got, so we're gonna have to be taken over. So, emergency financial managers come in, and they put us billions of dollars in debt. They're financial managers? I mean,

they were financial mismanagers is what they were. We had...we had two decades of emergency financial mismanagement is what we had. And, these weren't Detroiters, you know. These were people who Lansing sent us. We didn't do this to ourselves. They did it to us. They need to pay it back. They need to give Detroit 3.5 billion dollars back that they...that they misspent and stole, and they need...we need an audit.

PB: So, let's call that period a period of criminal behavior.

JT: Right. That's what it was. That's what it was.

[1:15:08]

PB: What would justice look like for the children of Detroit in public education?

JT: Well, pay the money back and try some folks and sentence them to prison. There've been some low hanging fruit that've gone to prison. You know, some principals have stolen, some of whom I knew. I'm not excusing it, but I want to see Darnell Earley go to prison. I want to see [Rick] Snyder go to prison. I want to see everybody that stole from us. Barbara Byrd-Bennett, you know, she was stealing from us. She was a superintendent for a while. Then she went to Chicago [Illinois] and stole there. They caught her. Now, she's doing seven years in the federal penitentiary. That's what I want to see some of these other people that are walking around free.

[1:15:56]

PB: So, what happened with that 2016 lawsuit that you and Helen and Yolanda [Peoples] and LaMar Lemmons started?

JT: It...we still have some lawsuits that are still viable. They're passing them around like hot potatoes. Nobody wants to deal with it. I think eventually we're going to win though, unless some of Trump's federal judges, you know, rule against us. That's another thing that I worry about, you know. I worry about, you know, he's got two appointees on the Supreme Court, and right now, you know, he wants to...he doesn't want to give his taxes. It's almost as though he's just thumbing his nose at the law and getting away with it with all the cowardly Republican senators who are letting him do it. It's, you know, from top to bottom. You know, I never thought I'd see anything like this. You know, I grew up in the Depression. I was born in the Depression. I remember [Adolf] Hitler. I remember World War II. I remember the whole thing. I can remember my father taking me into the kitchen and opening the kitchen drawer and taking out two butcher knives and putting one in my hand and saying to me, you know, "If the Nazis ever come here, son, we're gonna fight them in the street." You know, and me, I was about eight, nine years old, I said to him--no, I don't think I said it to him. I was afraid to say it to him, but I said to myself, "But, they have machine guns. [laughs] I don't know if I want...want to use a butcher knife and fight them in the street." He had...he had been drinking, you know, when he said that. But.

[1:17:32]

PB: So, I have one last question unless anyone else has something.

RC: I wanted to actually ask something that's a little off-kilter, but you talked a little bit about how you all would try programs that you didn't tell downtown about. [laughs] You would, like, smack kids down the hall. I've definitely seen teachers pop kids when I was in school, [laughs] but...

JT: That usually wasn't my style, but there were a couple of times when I forgot myself and did that.

RC: Yeah, you know, there were less cell phones back then too. [laughs] But, can you kind of talk a little bit to the impact of doing things outside of the...what downtown curriculum was or doing things that are, you know, not prescribed?

JT: Teachers know what needs to happen. Downtown doesn't. It was kind of like The Charge of the Light Brigade that they made--Tennyson's poem, you know The Charge of the Light Brigade. You know, generals way back, the line, the front line, said, "Charge," when they sent them into the--"onward, onward rode the 600." They rode into the cannons, and they all died.

RC: Right.

JT: There are things that...that teachers know what to do better than superintendents know what to do who are up in the...some high building in the Fisher Building. A lot of times I bent the rules and, of course, when I was at Finney, I had appointed the principals, and he was one of my guys, one of my kids. In fact, he was a student at Butzel Junior High School when I was an administrator there. And he said, "John, just do whatever you gotta do," and I did. Although, I remember one time he called on the PA because I was chasing a kid across the lawn that had... [laughs] He had run away from me, and he was gonna go home. He had--I was chasing this kid across the lawn, and Al Ward, who was the principal, you know, he goes on the loudspeaker says, "Dr. Telford, cease that pursuit!" He says... [laughs] I was about...I was about one inch from catching the kid, you know. I was 70 years old at the time, but I had these...I had these gym shoes. I used to wear the gym shoes, and if a kid...if a kid ran from me, I'd chase him and catch him. They couldn't believe it, you know, this old white guy with a pony--I had a ponytail then. I was catch...I was collaring these kids. In fact, the kids would say, "Get...get 'em, Doc! Get 'em." You know, running around. The gym shoes made it easy to take--you get traction on the turns and on the stairs, you know. [Laughter] See, these are things they don't teach you in Education 101, right?

RC: Right [laughs].

JT: But, you deal with the situation. You know, everything is situational, and you adjust to what you have to adjust to, and sometimes that's forgotten by the generals and colonels and chiefs and all that stuff, you know. And, I've been at all

levels. I've been a superintendent, and I've been a teacher and everything in between. And, I've been a counselor. I've been an executive director. I've been a...I've been department head, you know. I've done everything there is to do in the Detroit Schools as an educator, and a lot of folks with my background know better than somebody like Dr. Vitti who came from Florida and before that he came from somewhere in Dearborn and he just doesn't really know--I mean, Detroit, the Detroit schools, that's a unique animal. I've never seen anything like DPS, you know, both the good and the bad.

But, you gotta--and I grew up on 16th and McGraw, you know. You've got to know--it probably helped me a little bit, too, to spend that four and a half months in the youth home, and also, you know, my teachers at Estabrook, they didn't play. You know, they'd grab me by the head, knock my head against the wall. You know, I went home and said to my dad, "Ms. McGinnity (ph) grabbed me by the ear and knocked my head against the wall." He said, "Oh, like this?" He grabbed my head, bam, bam, bam, you know. I never complained about Ms. McGinnity again. But, you know, sometimes--you know, I'm not saying you should grab a kid by the ear and knock his head against the wall, but sometimes, you know, that can be a salutary lesson, and you realize the next time you're not gonna misbehave.

Anyhow, I'm old school, you know. I don't know if everyone would agree with that. This wasn't my own method most of the time. I remember one time I was at Pershing though, and one of my long jumpers was calling an official an MF, you know, who had called three fouls on him, and he was just losing his head and just screaming these curse words. So, I slapped him. I slapped him. His name was Freeman Melboss (ph), I remember. He was one of my best long jumpers. And...and Lorenzo Wright, who was coaching at Eastern High at the time--who was an Olympic runner, by the way, had been an Olympic runner. He went and tattled on me to...to Will Robinson, who was the basketball coach. And Will--I was just a young, young coach, and Will said to me, "John, you mustn't hit the kids." And I said to him, "Will, you're right. We mustn't, you and I." Because Will used to whip them this damn leather strap all the time, you know, when they were--Spencer Haywood was a basketball player, was one of my shot-putters and high jumpers on that team, and that team, you know, we won the state track and the...we won the state basketball, and they're all the same kids. We had some horses, let me tell you. And, again, I'm rambling, but. Am I still being taped? I don't know, am I? No,

okay. Anyway. This has been fun. I've been--There's Doc [Michael] Holbrook coming to get me, coming to collect me.

PB: Thank you very much for spending your Friday evening with us.

JT: Oh man, this was fun. I get this tape, though, right?

PB: Yeah.

JT: And I can put it on Facebook?

PB: Yeah.

JT: Oh, good. Okay.

[1:23:46]

PB: Before we cut you loose, Mama Lila Cabbil was part of the...part of our team that was putting this project together. So, one thing...

JT: Who was?

PB: Lila Cabbil.

JT: Oh, I love Lila Cabbil. You knew Lila, didn't you?

RC?: Yeah.

PB: One thing we're asking everybody before they take off is if you just have a brief memory of Mama Lila that you'd like to share for, like, put a video together to give to her family.

JT: Okay. I've been with Lila many times, and I was with DREM--Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management--with her. Lila is one of the great crusaders and will be...will be deeply missed. I wish we had a hundred Lila Cabbils in this city because Lila...Lila is leaving a big void in the activist community with the loss of Lila. And, you couldn't even find a seat at her funeral. That's how many people were there.

PB: Thank you.