Kurt Malecek: Could you say your name and spell it for me?

Erich Hooper: Erich Hooper, E-R-I-C-H H-O-O-P-E-R.

KM: Okay. Now could you tell me about the sports programs you participated in, in Tremont?

EH: As a child, the West side of Cleveland and Tremont offered a vast array of sports. The Amateur Athletic Union--the AAUs--little league, pony league football, roller-skating and basketball were really big on the West side. They were on the East side also, but equipment was a problem and getting kids together.

KM: Was equipment a problem on the West side then, or no?

EH: No, there seemed to be an abundance of it. Extra equipment was always floating around. It was being donated down through the coffers if you will into the recreation centers.

KM: Okay. Who sponsored some of the teams you played for?

EH: There would be gas stations, funeral homes, churches, park themselves, small businesses, bakeries. I remember as a child, or today I remember Chico’s Bail Bonds from the Bad News Bears, but that was typical of sponsors in the old days. Anybody that could donate.

KM: Could you tell me--. Start with maybe the first team you played on in the area and tell me about that?

EH: The first team I played on was called the Milt Morrens at the Lincoln Recreation center and they were a peewee football team. Great group of guys, great coaches, basic fundamentals, you had to make weight to play and a lot of us did not have experience in the game of football so coaching really came in and learning the fundamentals of the game.

KM: Who else played on the team with you, could you like describe the team make up for me?
EH: Oh jeese there was Tommy Clauser and Italian kid, heavy set, he was a wrestler. Mike () Carl Nester he was Puerto Rican which was unusual because most Latins are very, very small, especially at that age in our lives. We had Polish kids that played the line, Ukrainian kids that played the line, and you know it was a cross of cultures on a football team.

KM: Sure. Could you tell me a little about about the coaches on the team?

EH: One coach Tom Mailey, war veteran, had a wooden leg, he lived right down the street from the park. He would make us run back and forth to the park and if you didn’t run he would kick you with his wooden leg which was pretty funny. Sometimes it would come off. Then there was Lou Salchik. Lou played at Ohio University, basketball and football and went on to be an All-American professional athlete. Those two gentlemen taught us the basic fundamentals of the game. Fundamentals are critical at anything in life from education up through athletics.

KM: What was--. What other teams did you play on, like what happened after the football, peewee football?

EH: Oh the recreation center also offered soap box derby, they had a little league baseball team, Lincoln Rec and again we has a lot of cross culture on the team. A lot of Italians, a lot of Puerto Ricans, a lot of Czechs and Poles and Hungarians and Ukrainians. Basically had an all star team of all these different cultures in the kids.

KM: Could you tell me a little bit more about the soapbox derbies?

EH: The Cleveland Akron SoapBox Derby I’m sure everyone has heard of it, it's huge, it's nationwide. There were--. Cleveland Recreation Center offered kids the opportunity who really couldn’t afford it to build these cars, to learn basic mechanics if you will. Woodworking--. You would build your own craft, paint it and they would get you into the soap box derby race down in Akron. Today, Cleveland has now a soapbox derby track along EdgeWater Park.

KM: Okay. How did the Tremont peewee football league do compared to other leagues, like how good was your team?

EH: Well, you gotta understand that the times that were happening a lot of these other recreation centers such as EstherBrook, Cadell had other teams behind it, Rhodes High School, Brooklyn High School using those schools as a funneling system. Teach the kids young and then when they got to junior high they could play on their junior high teams, and when they got to high school they were basically two or three years ahead of most other kids with weight training programs, conditioning and basic knowledge of the game. This started in the Cleveland Recreation Centers where kids are now grasping the skills to play these games and start to having a leveler playing field, so that when we were funneled into high
school and into junior high school we were coming with knowledge of the sport and how to participate in these activities on the field as well as off.

KM: Hmm. Did any athletes from Tremont go onto the big leagues?

EH: Yeah, quite a few. Marty Hunt played at Kenyon College, when on to play for the Boston Celtics. David Ford from Lincoln West when on to pitch for the Baltimore Orioles. There’s quite a list of athletes from this area, numerous dimensions--. Peanuts Colarus was a boxer and he helps out in the recreation center and down at Merrick House even today.

KM: Were you friends with some of these guys?

EH: Oh yes, yes. I would carry their shoes, their spikes, their gym bags, anything to try to get into their fold and learn from them if you will.

KM: Could you tell me anything about how the AAU got involved with Tremont? Or how that started?

EH: It really wasn’t with Tremont. It was with the city of Cleveland. It was something that John Kennedy--President Kennedy--had started to get kids back into shape and compete on a world level with the Olympics. Track and field being the least expensive sport of all of these was where we concentrated in the city of Cleveland. So that through track and field you would eventually wind up--if you were good enough--to get a scholarship to go somewhere in college and run.

KM: Okay. What kind of involvement did the Cleveland Recreation Department have with the sports in Tremont itself?

EH: They were a main supporter of sports in the Cleveland area, especially on the West side and Tremont here. John Nagy, who used to be the director of recreation had a love for baseball and kids and his motto was give a kid a bat and a ball and you won’t have to worry about him all day and they have fields here named after him and streets in Cleveland. Nagy’s love for sports transcended races, transcend politics and it really gave kids an opportunity to step up to the plate if you will and become someone individually and build your own self-esteem.

KM: Where did you play at, like the peewee leagues where did you play in the area?

EH: We played right down here at Clark field. It was right behind the rec center. We would walk down the old hill where 490 exists today and we would sing our fight song: “Here come the Morrens, the mighty, mighty Morrens.” It was kind of intimidating for the other teams to see us come trooping down this hill all twenty-five of us. We would play at Navy Park, Navy Park used to be a recreation center they tore down since then, but Navy Park sponsored a team, all the recreation teams () all the recreation centers basically sponsored a team. Cadell, EstherBrook, then the PAL centers—the police athletic league.
KM: Okay. What was a game like? Could you describe it for me?

EH: It was a festive occasion. The parents again were really big sponsors and supporters of us. I remember a lot of the kids we would go over to there houses and pick them up individually and like you can’t eat breakfast today because you have to make weight, if you don’t make weight you can’t play. And we would gather each other individually, group by group, and then we’d all truck over to the center. It was relaxed atmosphere, it really wasn’t a concentration on the sport itself, but more a camaraderie of guys getting together and okay we’re gonna go have some fun and it’s a beautiful day and win or lose this is our Saturday and Sunday afternoon. Most days started at about seven o’clock in the morning and wouldn’t end till like six thirty by the time we got home.

KM: Was you mom able to come see you play at all?

EH: Yes, my mom came to quite a few games. She didn’t like it seeing her son getting piled on by people. She couldn’t understand the love of the game and why would you do this to yourself, but she was a big supporter of it. She pushed me in that direction, not having my father around at the time she saw the mentors that we were receiving form these great athletes and just generally nice people in the area that cared about kids and athletics and the effect that it had on us as individuals as well as groups.

KM: So you think it had a positive effect overall then?

EH: Oh, definitely.

KM: Did a lot of neighborhood people attend the games?

EH: Yes, there was not a lot to do in the old days. [laughter] So, you know you would get all the neighborhood people to come down to the games, the churches would be around. After the games of course we would have little dinners at the individual places or at rec centers or at other peoples houses or churches. It was more of a community event.

Everything was based in the community. This is our kids, this is our neighborhood versus another neighborhood and another kid’s. It was divided because the school systems you know if you went to Rhodes, you played for EstherBrook, if you wen to Lincoln, you played for Lincoln Rec, if you went to West Tech, you, you know you participated in there area of Cadell.

KM: Okay. Oh, could you tell me some of the other team names from the area? Do remember any of them?

EH: Well, hmm. The Bulldogs of EstherBrook, they were always a thorn in the side. They were fancy dressed, well-coached, well-educated kids. Um, oh jeese [pause] New View TV, they were from the Rhodes area also. The Lawyers of Marshall had smaller teams, () Raiders. The Falcons, Blue Devils.

KM: Okay. What years would you say this went on between?
EH: I checked the trophy last week as a matter of fact and 1966 was the first one I received, outstanding lineman for the Milt Morrens. Yeah that was the first one.

KM: Did you play baseball at all, too?

EH: Oh yes, I love baseball. I breathe football, but baseball’s a passion for me because it’s so intricate. I played basketball with a last name like Hooper I had to give it a go. I tried wrestling because I was so heavy. I would always have to wrestle kids who were older and more experienced so I got out of that pretty quick. One of my police officer friends when I was at the PAL recreation center talked me into boxing and a couple of shots to the face and I got out of that, too. [laughter]

KM: Where did you do the wrestling at?

EH: I did it at the Merrick House, I did it at the Lincoln Recreation Center, I tried it at Lincoln Junior High School. But, a little bit too demanding for me.

KM: Was the PAL Rec Center in Tremont or?

EH: Yes, well they it started out in the projects. The Police Athletic League it’s called and it was police officers working in their communities with the kids to get to know them to build a relationship so that when they became older and more responsible they would have a good outlook on police officers. They later moved the rec center from the projects up to Pilgrim Church and ran it out of there for a few years.

KM: So that was a good program then?

EH: Oh yes, it still exists today And it’s a great liaison between the police departments and the neighborhoods. Cops are now people with names versus just somebody in a black and white unit driving down the street.

(Loud high pitched whistling sound from tape and operator error)

KM: Did you notice a decline in the leagues at all when you were here like the peewee football the baseball going on?

EH: Yeah, it seemed right after the bussing came into Cleveland the sports started to die out, and that was probably ’77, ’78. Less emphasis was put on athletics and I don’t want to say it was put towards education because we look at the education system now in the Cleveland Schools and it sub par to everyone else in the state.

KM: Can you describe for me what a baseball game was like for you in Tremont?

EH: Aw baseball was fun. We usually got to have breakfast, it was a free lunch program so we got to have breakfast there. We’d all get together. We would sing, this was
the era of Michael Jackson and Donny Osmond and those singing groups of three to four people so we were all listening to the same kind of music that talked about peace and harmony and love and success and we carried that on with us so that if you’re up to bat one guy would say a verse to you and everything would come back into play to you so like okay here we go.

KM: Oh, great. Where did you play at?

EH: Our fields were all over the city of Cleveland. We played by Rhodes High, we played down at Gordon Park, we played Tremont field of course, we played down at EdgeWater at the old sand trap. It was a huge stadium built in to the sand with telephone polls in the outfield. It cost us the championship because Nestor through a glove at a ball that he couldn’t catch. [laughter]

KM: Do you know what the status of public sports in Tremont is like now?

EH: There really is no public sports in Tremont because they’ve taken the recreation center and turned it into high priced condominiums. The Merrick House is the only thing that really exists down here and they offer basketball, weigh training, GED classes, parenting classes, and gone more into more of a community service center versus a recreation slash center. Without the recreation center in the Tremont area the kids have to walk all the way up to Clark Recreation Center which is two or three miles away. The other nearest recreation center is Michael ( ) which is another three or four miles away, so there really is no sports in Tremont.

KM: That’s too bad. Do you have any really real memorable experiences from playing the sports at all, that you want to share?

EH: Wining championships, seeing our names in the paper those were memories that stick with me. One memory that I have is at Lincoln Recreation Center, one summer I worked all summer and bought myself a bicycle and I rode it up to the rec center to show my buddies and one of the kids that lived around the corner tried to steal it and I caught him and beat him up and pushed him off my bike and went back to the rec center. Well he came back up there with his big brother who was an ex-con and basically a minority hater if you will. He came into the rec center with a baseball bat and swung the bat and almost hit me in the head, but the rec center director at the time was Ida Gene Hopkins who rode the luge in the Olympic games and Hopi stuck her arm up and broke her arm and probably saved my life. I’ve always been indebted to her. Now she’s a park ranger, director over at Chagrin Falls. She played softball for Rainey Tire which was a woman’s softball team with national acclaim. Without her I probably wouldn’t be sitting here right now.

KM: Wow. Any other experiences you remember, anything positive? [laughter]

EH: Well the whole thing was a positive experience at the rec center. Through athletics, you no longer had a color you had a name. (glass being set down) Through the rec center you be able to be fed when you were out of the house for twelve to fifteen hours. Through the rec
center you could get your homework done you could learn other games such as chess, backgammon and tidily wings, Chinese Checkers, arts and crafts. Just develop close relationships with kids in your neighborhood and that’s what’s really missing today the kids don’t have their own neighborhood kind of groups anymore, it’s more of an individual kind of city that we live in, especially here in Tremont. You won’t know your next door neighbor.

KM: Sure, it’s like that lots of places though.

EH: Yes.

KM: So you didn’t have to pay anything to do the rec center?

EH: No, everything was totally free.

KM: All the equipment and everything?

EH: Correct.

KM: And you said you got meals there, too?

EH: Yes they offered a lunch program, a cold lunch program where you could have milk, a cold sandwich, chips, and a piece of fruit which was just about enough to get you through half of the day. And pop used to be ten cents a can and potato chips were a nickel so for fifteen cents you could stay on the go.

KM: That’s great.

EH: On Fridays next door to Lincoln Rec there was a hall there that they since closed down, but they served pierogies and salad no Fridays. Never having a pierogie or knowing what the heck it was, this was quite an event for us. So we’d save our nickels and dimes and go over and have pierogies and pop and looked forward to the day we turned eighteen so we could wash it down with a beer. [laughter]

KM: Did the Plain Dealer do a lot of coverage then of the sporting events?

EH: Yes the Plain Dealer and the Cleveland Press and the Call and Post which is an East side newspaper took the time to invest in the children and athletics and put this information in the newspapers which basically fostered these rivalries between different little neighborhoods. Okay South High versus Lincoln High which was a natural boundary, a natural enemy if you will because of the proximity of the places. Lincoln and West High were converted into one school and these boundaries were tore down, but yes they always were existing and became together.

KM: That’s good. And back to the rec center, the Cleveland Rec Department they covered the expenses of like the food and the equipment then?
EH: The food was donated--set up through the federal government a hot lunch, cold lunch program of you will. The equipment the rec center had or would get donated through the professional teams in Cleveland. If the Indians had extra balls or bats those would trickle down to the rec centers. The Browns had extra equipment that would trickle down. I remember as a child meeting Milt Morren and a couple of the other Browns Dick Shafran, Jerry Shirk, Walter Johnson and they would come and make guest appearances or they would take us out to Hiram House Camp where the Browns used to practice. And it institutionalized us in those kind of techniques of how to be an athlete you know it doesn’t end on the field there’s more to it when you get off of the field. Chico Simone who used to play for the Cleveland Indians and went on to play for the Baltimore Orioles and got a big base hit in the World Series to win the game for Baltimore. He was stationed at our recreation center and meeting a professional athlete on a human level is what recreation centers offered to the city of Cleveland kids. No longer is this person such as Michael Jordan an untouchable superstar, it’s actually someone that you see everyday and you see how they conduct themselves and it gave you sort of mentor to look and say okay this is what this guy does and this is what I need to do to get to that level.

KM: So they were volunteering their time then?

EH: Some were volunteering, some were court appointed, others were paid. We were to young to understand what was going on behind the scenes.

KM: Sure, sure. Could you maybe tell me a little about going to school in the Tremont area? Maybe describe a typical day of say junior high school?

EH: I started out at Tremont elementary school and went on to Lincoln Junior High it just got converted from a high school to a junior high school, but it only went up to ninth grade. In the old days, race relations in this country were kind of shaky. Lincoln was a five-story monstrosity of a building, it was huge, it was gorgeous. They since then tore it down. But a typical day would be arriving at seven thirty, getting into your classes at eight and into your homeroom, going through classes all day and then breaking for lunch of course and then--. All of the free time was spent playing athletics softball, touch football. We had a math teacher, Mr. Michaels, who, if you weren’t doing well in physics or math, he would take you out in the parking lot and we would play demolition frisbee where you would stand forty feet away and we’d throw frisbees at each other for points. It actually helped get us through school.

KM: There you go. [laughter] Oh, where was Lincoln High School at?

EH: On Scranton Avenue.

KM: What’s there now?

EH: It’s called Louis Luno’s. I’m not sure. Yes, they’ve changed it since the name.
KM: Okay. Do you have any teachers that you remember from school that were really important in your life, served as mentors?

EH: This is one of the reasons I went into education when I went to college K-6, because of the influence these teachers had on me. I mentioned Mrs. Hoyman who was my fifth grade homeroom teacher that gave us two hundred dollars to buy uniforms for our little league team. Clifford Cribbs who was my history teacher in junior high school took me under his wing and even today we have a close relationship with his family and my family. [pause] Mr. Watson who was my horticulture teacher in high school was a professional--black professional--golfer very instrumental in how to adjust to white society if you will and how to get done what you need to get done besides what’s going on behind the scenes. This was the part where they brought out as far as education. There was a gentleman called Joe Haggerty who wasn’t really a teacher, but was always at the school assisting and he was a parent in the neighborhood who we knew and had kids our age and seeing him do things like that and the belief to say hey I can do this, too.

KM: Great. What kind of school subjects did they have at Tremont.

EH: I beg your pardon?

KM: What kind of school subjects did you have at Tremont?

EH: At Tremont I had biology first period which was tough early in the morning. [laughter] I remember dissecting a frog at like eight ten and having a big breakfast of sausage and eggs, so it was--. I had typing class and that was a great thing to have because I learned how to type when I was you know twelve years old and can type today. I had an art class, I had a history class, English, science, German--I took German at Lincoln School and go to a German church today.

KM: Was the school well supplied with equipment like with typewriters and biology lab equipment?

EH: Yes, every classroom had more than enough equipment and we’re probably looking at about thirty-five, twenty-five to thirty-five kids per class. Everyone had a book. Everyone had pencils and papers. Everyone would have a microscope. Everyone would have an instrument if it was a music class. Everyone would have a music stand if you were playing a musical instrument. There was no shortage. We would go to shop classes, woodworking, metal classes or printing classes. Everyone was fully equipped with whatever they need so there was no I’d don’t have this or I do not have this to participate in the class, everything was here.

KM: That’s really good. Did you ever see any fights at school?

EH: Plenty.

KM: Anything memorable?
EH: Most of the fights were over girls back then. One race wanting to date another one. A lot of the fights were over just jealously, nit picking, kids being kids. The fights eventually escalated into race riots and these were basically perpetrated by the older adults, the high schoolers that would come to the junior high or the parents of these kids. Up on West 44th and Clark which we weren’t allowed that far up by Thomas Jefferson Middle School, they had a white power building across from the Cleveland Fire Department. And it existed up until 1994 or ’95 and you could call the number up and they would have in the background Congo drums beating saying “who needs niggers they rape our women and they kill our kids.” They would come up to our school and put posters up on the trees of gorillas and black people being hung and this was the kind of era that existed and you kind of stuck to your limits of where your going to go because as I said if get caught out of the area that you belonged in you could virtually wind up dead.

KM: Wow. Were there any race riots in Tremont?

EH: Yes, yes, yes. Quite a few, quite a few.

KM: Okay. So did you date anybody in high school?

EH: In high school I had a girl friend Iliala Pecan and she was from Guatemala. But her dad didn’t like me because I wasn’t a Guatemalan or a Hispanic so that only lasted a couple of weeks. I really didn’t try to date anyone because I was involved in athletics and I saw a lot of my friends go on the wayside of having babies at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen and I said well that’s the last thing I want to do I don’t need a girlfriend I can get one in college. I did go to the prom, but it was a stretch. I couldn’t afford a tuxedo so I finally got money together and bought a tux and finally asked someone out that had graduated the year before so I did go to the prom. Really didn’t need a girlfriend in high school, didn’t really need one in junior high school. I had plenty of girls that were my friends, but as far as kissing and holding hands, that was just something I wasn’t interested in. I’d rather go out and catch a ball and score a touch down and get high fives if you will.

KM: Sure. Where did kids in the area go on dates really, anywhere in Tremont?

EH: The park, to the ball fields, they would show movies in the area at different buildings or you could go bowling at St. John Cantious. You could go roller-skating at St. Augustine’s at the top of the church there. There were concerts in the churches. It depends on what you were into depending on your nationality. The Puerto Rican culture during Christmas they go door to door singing as a tradition. The Italians have big parties and festivals in their houses. So locally you could stay within a block or two and do anything that you want. McDonald’s up on Clark Avenue was a stretch and there used to be a Red Barn up there that we could go up and get chicken or just hang out in the area. Bicycling was big, you could be down at the lake in ten minutes bicycling or walking. There wasn’t a lot of busses in the area back then so everything was basically walking or riding your bicycle. But there was always plenty to do just in the Tremont area. It’s a city within itself.

KM: What was your high school prom like?
EH: It was--. I had no expectations on what a prom should be I mean the only thing that I ever saw in the prom was the movie “The Graduate” and things of that nature. People broke off into groups, you know your clicks and it pretty much stayed like that. I didn’t really hang around with the jocks because I was sent to theater and I was into the arts and choir and other things in the school like I could go from one group to the next group to the next group without having a problem. So at the prom basically that’s exactly what I did, going from table to table to group to group. I on our Alumni board right now at Lincoln West, I’m their caterer and we still get together as a group. There are 750 people in our graduating class so it’s quite a few people you know to befriend

KM: Was the prom at the high school?

EH: No it wasn’t, I can’t remember where it was today.

KM: [laughter] That’s fine. What’s the alumni association like, being in that?

EH: It’s a challenge. It’s one of the things that really hurts the Cleveland Public Schools is their alumni period. You know I look at guys like Dick Feagler, the columnist for the Plain Dealer, and he talks about when he went to East High School and the close knit group that they have and that kind of went by the wayside. So our alumni, although there were 750 people in my graduating class, the numbers have gone down since then it’s hard to get 750 of us together. Lack of interest, bad taste from high school, not wanting to do anything with anyone else, who knows why people don’t get together. You know we do our emails, we do our emails, you get online to us through the computer system. It’s a core group of us that have been struggling our president now is Adrian Meldinato, he was a wrestler, he went to the Army with my brother, he’s a councilman in Berea right now and he’s got his plate full, but we still try to have our monthly meetings and get stuff done. We had raised close to five thousand dollars, donated it to the school , they’re renovating the auditorium. In the time that that happened councilman Nelson Centron stepped forward and gave the school some money so our renovating the auditorium took a second step now. Okay well the auditorium is done because councilman Centron taken care of it for us. Since then the school has purchased--I don’t want to call it a monster of a machine, but for the auditorium it’s a new system of sound and lights and it was donated to the school but they don’t have anyone that knows how to the run thing so it’s--. You have a quarter million dollar machine sitting up in the auditorium with no one knowing how what to do with it.

KM: Wow. [laughter] Okay, what was one of the first jobs that you had?

EH: Other than shoveling sidewalks and shining shoes, Cleveland Stadium. It offered kids an opportunity to work. We had an old man down here named Mr. Johnson who would round up a bunch of the kids that were in the right age group fourteen, fifteen take us down to the stadium and we would sell peanuts and popcorn. This was a beautiful thing for me because A. it got me into an arena I enjoyed, athletics, B. it got me to meet professional athletes again and see it put money in my pocket. Those were three things that as a child I’m like wow I’ll be able to buy a car next week next year.
KM: Wow.

EH: I did.

KM: How much did you get paid for that?

EH: You got paid per load it was like wen, twelve dollars per load. If you sold thirty-six bags of peanuts you’d get like eight or nine dollars.

KM: Okay.

EH: But with seventy thousand, eighty thousand seats there was incentive.

KM: Sure. Do you have any real memorable experiences about doing that?

EH: I have some wonderful experiences about the old stadium. Actually being up on the roof of the old stadium. As a child I thought that the foul balls would go outside the stadium but there was gutter that ran along there and when we got on the roof we saw like a hundred baseballs and like wow! [laughter] We were putting them in our pocket and you could only carry like five or six, but here we are stuffing all these balls in our pocket. I got to work there during the World Series () and actually dug the whole that they put the fuse box in there. I did a little bit of the ground crew, I worked on the maintenance crew and I met a lot of great people. I used to clean Art Model’s office as a child and as a matter of fact when they tore the stadium down I’ve got his garbage can in the basement. One of the things I acquired. Jack and John Limo who were the directors for the stadium--. Dino Lukeareelly, fantastic man who’s still with the Cleveland Browns today I grew up with his kids and know them and Dino kind of looked out for us we would take the Kushmen (phone ringing) cart from one top of the stadium--.

KM: Okay you worked for the Cleveland Rec Department?

EH: Yes I did. I worked for the Cleveland Recreation Center at Lincoln Rec. I was a playground supervisor. That was a very interesting job because I got an opportunity to start mentoring and tutoring kids the way I was mentored and tutored. Through the recreation center and through the park we put together fantastic teams of kids. Soccer was just being introduced into the city of Cleveland’s Recreation Center and I’ve got a Ukrainian friend named Andy Wozniak and my dentist Miron Klaus who were big soccer guys and they taught me what they knew about soccer and again I taught the kids what I knew about soccer and that was pretty cool. We were now meeting kids from other parts of the city instead of just our little hub our ten-mile hub if you will.

KM: That’s pretty neat. Can you tell me about being a cheerleader for the Cavs?

EH: Yeah, that was a very good time. Fifty buck an hour, full-time, part-time, limousine rides. The NBA has such mad money it’s incredible. I mean just to put your feet
on the floor would probably cost you three hundred dollars at a basketball game. Here I was, an inner city kid from the projects on the floor dancing to the YMCA song with four or five other cheerleaders. It was a fantastic experience to meet some of these guys on that level, these professional athletes if you will. Talking with Michael Jordan-- Dennis Rodman, I asked him for his tennis shoes after a game and he said he wanted mine and I was stupid enough to go you’re crazy. We weren’t aloud to talk to the players really or ask for autographs, but you know coming from where I did I’m like what are they gonna do, fire me? If they do, so what? I gonna have a once in a lifetime opportunity to talk to these guys. Omar Vizquel came to a base--basketball game and when I saw him I jumped on my knees and gave him the salami, bologna, bologna, salami. Kenny Lofton would start coming to games so I’d start meeting Tribe players at these NBA games, also. As well as other celebrities, TV personalities, radio personalities, people of that nature, coaches from colleges et cetera et cetera.

KM: How did you get that job?

EH: One of my hobbies is to read the help wanted adds in the Cleveland Plain Dealer. Any day you can read the Plain Dealer and it says astronaut wanted apply at NASA. [laughter] Here I’m thumbing through the paper cheerleaders wanted for the Cleveland Cavaliers auditions are at two o’clock so I says I’ll go down and try it. And having a theater, dance background, whenever I go to an audition I consider myself Fred Astaire and Robin Williams. Between those two characters you could pretty much accomplish anything. [laughter]

KM: What was it like being the Crunch Mascot?

EH: Kickster. The Dinoscore for the Cleveland Crunch. It was phenomenal. I was the center of attention, top dog if you will other than the players themselves. Twenty thousand fans at a game, ten of them yelling your name. I borrowed my son’s scooter to get around the arena because they’re so big and the costume weighed so much. Appearances outside into the community driving as far as Canton, Hudson, and Stow, and West as far as Avon, entertaining kids, teaching them about soccer, having these same relationships that I talked about earlier with the soccer players now that I had with the baseball players and the basketball players and the football players. The only bad thing that happened to me other than having my head knocked off by John Ball because when we won the championship I ran into the locker room with my video camera and I’m videoing the guys drinking champagne and smoking cigars and they were all naked. [laughter] So the next season I go hey John guess what I got a video of you guys when you won the championship and you’re naked. So when the game started he ran up on the field and he clothes lined me instead of high fiving me and my head came off and the goalie Otto Orf came up behind me and he shoved my head back on for me and he put it on backwards and it kind of scratched my face up. I feel bad about not being with the team now since we changed over now to the Cleveland Force and they’ve tried to go back to Darth Vader but there’s copyright laws with using Darth Vader as a logo and Kickster was not a copyright problem. When we won the
championship, everyone received a championship ring and I did not receive one which leaves a bad taste in my mouth to this day--.

END OF SIDE A
EH: --ownership when Paul Garefellow became the general manager and Mr. Detrick kind of stepped to the side and Mr. Gibbins who was an Ignatious grad became owners I was in the bathroom at the Shoeless Steakhouse Restaurant in Independence changing clothes for this appearance. A man was using the urinal and he saw me changing clothes and he goes oh you’re Kickster and I’m like yeah, yeah, yeah. He goes how do like it and I go I didn’t get a championship ring and a notepad fell out of his pocket. Here he was a reporter from Crane’s business. Well he made some notes and walked out of the restroom, while I was finishing changing another man came out of the stall and this was the new owner Mr. Gibbins and I’m like oh man am I in hot water. He says don’t worry, if we win a championship I’ll make sure you get a ring. Well, we haven’t won a championship, I’m not with the team, and I’m out of a ring so let that go on record to say that you know the mascot and Slider gets a ring when they win, Whammer gets a ring when they win, and Buzz will get a ring if they win, Big Dog will get a ring if the Browns win, but Kickster was cheated out of a ring. And it was something that I was going to pass down to my son. Playing an undefeated Mid-American Conference Championship team, the memories and the souvenirs I saved for that and this thing with the Cleveland Crunch I thought would be a really nice leave behind for my son.

KM: Definitely, that’s too bad. Now you said you were a chef for the city of Cleveland for a while there?

EH: Yes, I was the head cook for the city of Cleveland for five years at the Warrensville Correctional Workhouse. Very stressful job, I’ve got all this gray hair since then. When my grandmother died , my mother and I were driving in New York and I was telling her about the job and the stress and what goes on behind the scenes in those places and she advised me to quit and it was probably a month or two after that I actually walked away from the job saying the money that you’re paying me and it was twelve, thirteen an hour, full benefits, the whole nine yards of working for a city. It wasn’t worth it to me. In hind site if I could have hacked it out for another ten years I could have probably retired because of the accumulated time that I’ve had in with the city. But morally, things that I saw I went and told the mayor Mike White about and he basically turned his back on me. That was the deciding point to say hey if the system is like this I don’t want to be a part of it and I’d rather work in the private sector.

KM: Any other jobs you want to tell me about?

EH: Well there’s quite a few. I used to work at the Cleveland City Club which is a citadel of free speech in Cleveland, one of the oldest in the country. There I would meet the bishops, the cardinals that would come. Every president in the United States that’s ever been elected has spoken at the City Club. This is the caliber of people that come to the city club, the movers and shakers, the people with humanitarian concerns about people as well as the country. Couple years I was a sausage maker at local meat plant here in Cleveland--Five Star Meats--and I learned the sausage making trade [laughter] which is very interesting to actually hand make sausages and wiener--there not called hot dogs there wiener on that level. Other places I’ve been to are jazz clubs, the Top of The Town which was owned by Stouffer’s and I
worked for three or four different Stouffer’s restaurants before Stouffers sold there individual pilot projects. John Cues was a steakhouse that still exists today on Public Square and that’s where I honed my trade in cooking and my basic fundamentals of food service, Stouffer’s has an intense training program for their employees and since they’ve gotten out of it it has slacked off considerably. Working at the Top of the Town where the Galleria is at now, there was a fire in the building and were up on the top floor of this building and they’re like well evacuate to the roof. And I’m saying well how are they gonna get us off the roof. [laughter] You know Cleveland didn’t have a helicopter then. You know until George Forbes came up with the idea we need a helicopter for the police department, since then there’s plenty of helicopters in Cleveland, but that was a bad idea working there. Being so high up off the ground that if anything happened on any floor below you you were basically trapped and gonna die. I worked at several athletic clubs in Cleveland the Cleveland Athletic Club, the Cleveland City Club as I said. Again movers and shakers of the city of Cleveland always behind the scenes, never in front of them and it seemed like they kept us off the beaten path if you will. Even today you can go down to a lot of the clubs in Cleveland and the restaurants and bars especially in the flats and you will not see black bar tenders, you might see a black waiter or a waitress and that’s been prevalent since I was a child in Cleveland. I’ve worked in nursing homes taking care of the elderly, cooking there. I worked at Dover Center Catering which is out in North Olmsted, now it’s in North Ridgeville. The owner of the place is David Pickcock. Dave was a Sous chef on the Queen Mary and personal friend of the Beatles, he grew up with John and Paul. And when he started his business and moved to North Ridgeville, he needed an extra fifty thousand Yoko Ono sent him a check for fifty thousand. So when they did a Beatles tribute at the Rock Hall I said Dave you oughta take some of your Beatles stuff down here and let them display it, cause he has stuff you know that only friends of the Beatles would have. Of course he wouldn’t come off of it or let them even look at it, because you know he’s British. [laughter] I cut fish before at Natilus Seafood, being in the food industry as I said food service has always offered me an opportunity to work behind the scenes, the chef jacket can get you into anyplace in this country that a shirt and tie cannot. I’m with the band, no I’m with the caterer, green light go. We opened up the Rock Hall as their caterers, we opened up the Science Center as their caterers handling these huge events. Aretha Franklin the induction ceremony, Michael Jackson, I can’t think of the list of people that were inducted in the initial ceremony here in Cleveland, but it was phenomenal.

KM: Sure, it’s cool. [pause] So are there any stories you can tell me about the projects you lived in when you first moved to Tremont?

EH: Yeah the projects were a unique place in themselves. They put together people of different races and when I moved here the projects were ninety-nine percent white. Different ethnic backgrounds if you will. As the blacks and Puerto Ricans started moving West and making friends and living in the same community it fostered a new relationship that a lot of people weren’t ready for at the time but embraced if you will. Don’t date my daughter, but you could be my son’s friend was the motto. My older brother dated out of the race and I’m a half breed, my older brother dated out of the race as they called it back then and he had quite a few problems and fights to stand up for his manhood and being who he was. My youngest brother really didn’t date a lot. He kept to himself being younger and just watching
and listening and learning. There were other black families in the projects that we had befriended because okay we gotta stick together cause all the others are sticking together and this is the way it is. If you had a problem you could go to another black family and through that work out your problem situation be it financially, food wise, transportation wise, or somewhat to socialize with on a Sunday afternoon. The Sunday afternoon dinners at someone’s house, the walk in the park, the Sunday drives, these things still existed during those times and the projects kind of homed that in for us. It also offered a huge playground for us. You gotta understand how the projects are where there was vast open land with buildings in it and a park behind it so that every day we could go play and eat and run back home and do the same thing or if you wanted to go over someone’s house it was just an apartment and it was probably in the same row house as you or it was just a building or two over, but then you could only go so many buildings over before there was a natural boundary of you know what are you doing over on this side of the projects. There was a giant hill that leads down to West 5th which runs into Houston and the street was kind of chuck holed and bumpy and lumpy and we would go up to the candy store--the Choo Choo Penny store--and get candy for a penny and pops for like ten or fifteen cents and recycle the bottle. Driving down the hill one time on my bicycle I hit one of those nasty chuckholes went over the handlebars, cut my hand, broke the bottle and oh it was kind of tragic. [laughter] My mother taught me how to drive down on the projects. She had an old Cadillac that kind of looked like the Batmobile and she would let us drive it around there and it was a pretty fond memory of the projects. One of the families that was really close to us was the Clipjacks and the Clipjacks were I think were six or seven kids and a mother and father and they were just as poor as we were but Mrs. Clipjack would make her homemade soup which was carrots and potatoes and a can of tomato sauce and a lot of water and she would feed armies with this, this pot was bottomless. [laughter] Jesus turned a loaf of bread and a fish to feed thousands Mrs. Clipjack was right up there with him. [laughter] Her fridge her refrigerator door was always open as with everyone else’s refrigerator in those days when you were going to there house now granted you know don’t eat us out of house and home which five or six kids coming over visiting your kid could do, but you know to nibble knowing that you weren’t hungry you wouldn’t be eating was a train of thought. Friends that I grew up with from there I still have today. Successful or poor whatever they’re doing now, we still have these common bonds that hey we grew up with nothing and here we are today with something such as owning your own home and being married or having kids. One of my best friends Dale Gollack who was a scrawny little white kid with an afro so he stood out. We would take rubber balls and bounce them off the buildings and play catch that way and I see Dale even today and when we have a beer together we sit back and we reminisce about the old days of playing leap frog and just sledding down the giant hills that are in the Tremont area and almost killing yourself. Is there a car coming, no go ahead, wait a minute, too late your half way down the hill. [laughter]

KM: That’s great. What years did you li--. [coughing] Excuse me, what years did you live in the projects through?

EH: We never really moved out of the projects. They built another project, townhouses if you will up on Walton Avenue. As I said my mother worked for CMHA so when these new homes were built we moved there. At that time I was just going into high school, I was
in tenth grade. These were nice fabricated, throw’em up homes. In the row house style again, section eight low-income people basically. It didn’t have the same feel because now it was set in a different part of the neighborhood. It was on Walton and West 25th which was two or three miles from where I grew up, it was closer to the high school but it just put us in a new community with new challenges. There wasn’t as many churches in the area that you could go to, the kids were older or grown in that area now and it was more of a commercial area. The supermarket was there, the fast food restaurants were there, the banks were up there, so there was really no where to go or play. You know at that age you know we would find ourselves playing tackle football in the parking lot at the supermarket, at Tops or Finast or Pick and Pay as it was called back in the old days.

KM: Okay. Were you living in the projects then when it started maybe from a shift from African American over to, I mean from white Americans to African Americans?

EH: Yes.

KM: Okay. When do you think that happened, roughly?

EH: It started in ’68, ’69 and continued to about ’73. I’d say by ’73 ninety-five percent of the whites had moved out of the projects and into Parma, Lakewood, Strongsville, Brooklyn, Old Brooklyn and Dennison area. The white flight was well under way.

KM: Okay. So for Tremont’s block clubs, what was the change really from going from the older block clubs to the new block clubs?

EH: The older block clubs were more politically motivated. They would get behind candidates who they felt that were going to fulfill their needs and have humanitarian thoughts. Pushing Dennis into office and into council. Staying behind stokes or Ralph Perk who is from the area. Those mayors and those people and their political careers. This is what the old block clubs were concerned with. Racial Harmony, getting people together saying hey we all bleed red and this is a common cause and we should really be working for jobs and justice and education. That’s what the old block clubs concerned themselves with. The new block clubs that have come up since then through Tremont West Development are more concerned with acquiring land and connecting Tremont into the downtown area again. Again we are part of downtown’s ward and we have the largest ward in the city of Cleveland, used to be three councilmen around our ward and now there’s only one--he’s bombarded--. He missed a meeting for the City Club Your Kids you know because he wrote the date down wrong. It’s just too much to handle for one person. So the new block clubs are more concerned with acquiring land and putting up new homes and restaurants. I can only tell you that since this has happened we probably picked up another fifteen bars in the area.

KM: Hmm.

EH: We need another bar like we need a whole in the head. Especially when they’re charging four or five dollars a beer. You know martini bars charging ten dollars for a
Martini. Nobody from Tremont that lives in here is going to these bars so it’s all catering to a new clientele if you will and sort of laying down the format for the future of Tremont. You know as a family you can’t go out and eat in your own neighborhood anymore more or less afford the rent. The rent used to be a hundred to a hundred and fifty dollars a month, you usually knew your landlord. Now rents anywhere from four to twelve hundred dollars a month for the same space.

END OF INTERVIEW