Henry O. Mears

A Transcription
Of An Oral Interview

Urbana High School
1002 S. Race St.
Urbana, Illinois
July 13, 1983

Interviewed by
Patrick Tyler and
Melinda Roundtree

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Introduction

This interview is with Dr. Henry O. Mears, the present associate principal of Urbana Senior High School in Urbana. After this interview, Dr. Mears was named principal of the Urbana Junior High School, taking the place of Dr. Charles Young. Dr. Mears has been in this community since September 9, 1965.

This interview is being conducted on July 13, 1983, in his office at Urbana Senior High School, 1002 S. Race, Urbana. The interviewers are Patrick Tyler and Melinda Roundtree, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives department.

Henry O. Mears Interview

TAPE 1, SIDE A

Mears: I was born into a family, I don't know if you want that information, born into a family of six kids, a father who was an unskilled laborer, a mother who was a household cook and whose employment was cooking for a white family.

Tyler: First we'd like to ask you about your childhood, your childhood experiences, you know, how was life growing up in North Carolina?

Mears: Life, as a kid, I had a unique experience. I think it was pleasant, while at the same time there were some unpleasantries. Keep in mind that in the early forties, okay, and also fifties until I left the community to go on to school, is that North Carolina at that time was a segregated — I mean, today we call it racism — but it was a segregated community. I mean, blacks on one side of the tracks, whites on the other side of the tracks, blacks went to one kind of school, whites went to another kind of school. Blacks went into the back door while whites went into the front door. I mean this was the whole Jim Crow type, and the whole race, black-white relationship in the South. Those were a lot of unpleasantries for me simply because blacks at that time and particularly myself, were denied many things that I thought I was capable of doing.

Having to leave the streets a lot, having not been permitted to be downtown after six o'clock because I was black is simply another reason again is

that my town was heavy inundated with the Ku Klux Klansmen. I mean this was the headquarters for the Ku Klux Klan in that county, which also made it difficult and unpleasant. Of course, there's a lot things I learned from that community because I came to, I was forced to, given the economic situation and given the employment situation and given the status that blacks had at that time — I was forced to seek other ways in terms of survival-type skills. And I learned a lot as an individual kid how to survive in that kind of environment, how to articulate my needs, and how to make sure that my needs are facilitated without having to violate what I saw as a social trend, a social policy, or even a social mandate in that community. It was difficult.

I can mention that one of the most unpleasant things that I've ever experienced — having experienced all this segregation, having experienced the treatment by whites in terms of, you know, this whole black servitude as slavery that was still existing, to some extent still is in existence — it is that I attended an elementary school in a three-room school. There were grades K through, first grade — there was no such thing as "K" because we didn't go to school in kindergarten — okay, it was first grade through eighth grade, and that it was a three-room school, and all grades were located within those three rooms.

After leaving elementary school, I went on to high school which is twelve miles away to my town one way. It was a round trip, twenty-four miles. I experienced some real unpleasantries in that school because what I experienced, I was very accustomed to racial segregation. I was very accustomed to that, but what I wasn't accustomed to was class segregation.

Okay, so when I attended this high school, I find out that the city boys had more opportunities available to them than a little country boy like me who left twelve miles to go to the school. It was almost like we were of a different class, okay, and we did not fit, therefore. And we were not worthy, and we did not have anything valuable to offer, and this was an all-black setting.

To validate that, I was told by a black high school principal who was in charge of the West Side High School where I graduated at age fifteen through tenth grade. I elected to take an algebra class. That was my first experience with algebra, of course, I didn't know anything about algebra, I mean, mathematics just kind of fascinated me. And I was in that class where at that time he was a teaching — they had teaching principals, you know, you taught one class — and his major was math. He taught math. I was in a class of all blacks remind you. The entire school was black. There were, and I can't recall it, there were fifteen members of that class and, of course, there was one or two girls, but most were boys. He distributed at the first class meeting the algebra book, and I was the only student in that class that came from my hometown, or came in on the bus, okay, you know, from out of the city. He distributed every member of the class a textbook but me, and I told him he had forgotten me. I reminded him that I didn't get a book, and he reminded me he had no intentions of giving me a book because this class, that particular class as he explained to me was for students who were going to make something of themselves, kids who were going on to college. And his perception of me having my background coming from where I came from meant that I had no intentions, nor did I have

anything to offer anybody in terms of going on to college. I was hurt, I mean I was very, very hurt. I mean I was hurt, hurt, okay?

Now that was both a deterrent for me, at the same time, it wind up being motivation for me. I quit school. Quit school. And I was gone away from school for three weeks, but I decided to some other kinds of _____ experiences I had outside the school that I did want to live with the rest of my life, neither was I going to try to survive, you know, or make a livelihood for myself when I thought I had more other things to offer. So anyway, I quit school, but I did come back. I didn't take algebra because I wind up, you know, hating the stuff. But I did wind up finishing high school; I did go on to college; I did go on to get a master's degree; and I did go on to get a Ph.D. degree, okay. And I did wind up taking, I was forced to deal with algebra when I was doing my Ph.D. program, okay, because I had to take research and statistics. Okay, and I wasn't given the background for those types of statistics because you really had to have a strong algebra background, okay. But I managed to get through it with an "A," and that's kind of complimentary to me having getting an A in statistics at the University of Illinois, where a significant high percentage of graduate students flunk. So it was to me, it was, somehow it operated in the reverse, it did turn around and it motivated me because I was determined to prove that point.

I guess that's one of the most unpleasant. You know, having thinking that your worst enemy was the white man, when it turns out really in your life, it's the black man, which I had a lot of confidence and I never did think I'd ever experience that, but I did, okay.

Tyler: Well, could you tell us a little bit about your family background and brothers and sisters?

Mears: Well yes, I was, came up in a family, and I don't wish to sound like at this point Cinderella or even a country pumpkin, but I came up in a family that was by any stretch of the imagination was destitute. Very poor family. But we were the kind of family who always operated independently. And we'd depend and we teamed with each other, okay, to survive all of the challenges that we had economically, the economical challenges we had.

Unfortunately, I was the first member of the family to go on and get a college degree of the entire Mears generation, black Mears, and most immediate black Mears generation to go on and get a college degree. The unfortunate thing is that I was probably one of the less brighter ones of the family. And I say that because there were, I had some bright, bright brothers. One sister who did wind up doing, getting nursing training. And I'm one of four boys. One kid, one brother of mine who is the next to oldest, wind up going into service, quit high school and went into service because he was hot about the experience, and he did experience the same thing I experienced at the same high school. Okay, we knew where we stood and where we stood in the eyes of those people who were at that school, was at nowhere. We had nothing to offer, therefore nobody spent anytime doing it, working with us.

And then I had another brother, and I don't know if that was a rational excuse for him, who quit school in the ninth grade, who went on to . . . He's

working now for an airline and who is working in a skilled position and very successful. I have a younger brother which we all sort of pooled our resources to at least try to guarantee certain kinds of opportunities for him that who is now in law school at the University of North Carolina, and I think this is his last year of law school.

My parents right now are both, both are living. They're relatively young parents. My father is only 62 years old, and my mother is 63 September, so they're relatively younger parents. And I'm 42, so it's, and I have a sister who's 44. So my parents are relatively young. So. And what else can I say?

We had, one thing that we valued and that was the faith and the confidence, the trust and the love we had for each other. We valued that. We thoroughly valued that; we depended upon that. And we depended upon and we lived by the rule that no one is going to do a heck of a lot for you, okay. If you're really going to be a successful individual at anything, at anything, regardless of what it is, okay, do your best at it. Operate with your best potential, put your best foot forward, and you got to do it with yourself. It's ironic that I talk about stuff because I'm also right now going through some stuff, some changes with some — I must say some black situation that I experienced even in my childhood, but I don't want to deal with that. But it is, it's quite a . . .

I had quite a remarkable family. It still is quite a remarkable family. We had a lot of self-pride, very independent, very independent. And we always believed that nothing is worth doing unless you want to sacrifice _____ to do it. That's when it becomes most valuable to you, that's

when you try the most. It's not when you have had it given to you. Neither is when you have had to walk over the backs of others to achieve it. You have to deal with it honestly.

Tyler: Okay. What college did you graduate from?

Mears: I went on to Fayetteville State College, which is now Fayetteville State University. That was an all-teacher training college, and I entered in 1959, and got my bachelor's degree from that school in elementary education in 1963. Again that was another thing, I was very proud of in myself. And think, I mean not boastfully, but I think I have a lot to be proud of. I worked my entire way through school, because I had no monetary resources, outside resources.

Tyler: How about your masters? Where did you receive that?

Mears: I completed a masters at the University of Illinois. And got my masters, I think it was in 1968. And after coming to Urbana and having taught in Urbana for a couple or three years, and the university was available, I had to go to the university to get my master's degree, part-time work. I got my masters in '68.

I later went on back to school and I took a course here and a course there in a non-degree program. I wasn't interested in going to a degree. And then later I did decide that I would pursue the doctorate degree, which again I did that part-time basis, and that was completed in 1982, last year.

Tyler: What motivated you to come to the Champaign area?

Mears: Interesting you would raise that question. After graduating from college, I guess I had, some people would call it at that time, "high ideals." Okay. For the simple reason I thought I had a lot to offer, okay, that even those in my rural area of North Carolina could not begin to appreciate, okay. And what I really wanted to do is to make sure that I had a broad experience, and feel things out for myself. And not only to test what I thought I had to offer, but at the same time, to see if that's the direction I want to go.

Well I wind up going to Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in which I worked for two years, and nothing had to do with the teaching at school. And one thing to another, I was involved as a truck driver, semi-truck driver and I got a chance to travel, etc. The other thing I was involved in a civil service job with the state unemployment office, you know, and finally came to Champaign-Urbana.

I was, I learned about Champaign-Urbana through a friend of mine who was in graduate school at the University of Illinois, okay, and who came back to visit me and who continuously tried to influence me to go back to graduate school, which at that point I was not interested in going because I didn't see myself going to classroom and being a graduate teacher the rest of my life, at least until I felt comfortable with that's what I wanted to commit myself to. I'm kind of a stubborn person, I need to make up my mind and once I commit myself to something I'm committed to it. I did come out and visit.

I had an opportunity to talk at that time with the principal of King School who I was introduced to by this friend of mine who was in graduate school, and who is now a professor at the University of Illinois. And I talked with Dr. Bustard who was principal of King School and we had a long conversation about education, directions, and just trading and exchanging viewpoints. As it turned out he was informally interviewing me. He later introduced me to, at that time was director of personnel, Mr. King. And to make a long story short, after going through several formal interview sessions because Dr. Bustard apparently saw something in me that he wanted as a part of his staff, I was offered a job to teach at King School. And somehow, some way I wind up saying yes later and accepted a job at King School. And I taught there for three years and I left King School and I went into junior high school as assistant principal. And from the junior high school, of course, where I spent the first 10 years of my administration — the first nine or ten years of my administrative experience — I went to the high school _____.

Tyler: What year was it when you first came to Champaign?

Mears: Oh, in 1965. September 9, 1965.

Tyler: How was things, well, people in the black community when you first came?

Mears: Well, it was, it was not as visible, you know, in 1965 as the black community is now. And maybe so because the people as I saw was not as actively involved in what goes on around them. They did later become involved simply because of the social trends and the movements that happened across the country. That was in the late sixties, you know, '68 and '69 when things were hot, okay. People did become involved and I think that generated a lot of their concerns and _____. Initially when I first came to this city, it was very strange because most of the interaction that occurred in the black community, occurred in the black community had their ties with Chanute, Rantoul. Okay. So anybody who was new face in the community, it was subsequent _____ was that you were an airman, or you came through Chanute, okay. There was little opportunities, at least from my standpoint, that had been available to blacks in some of the professional type jobs, such as teaching school. And you know there's been the perception that we talked professionally — that's always been the syndrome — a black, if you talk professionally they either look at you as . . . The first thing that comes in to mind is that you're either a schoolteacher, you're a barber, you're a beautician, or you're a minister. That used to be the categories of what they call black professionals and black business people, or you cook barbeque, whatever. But that, that was the perception of the black community, the black community not actively involved. There was a few people who were actively involved in some of the city politics, but it was relatively quiet, I should say. And it's not to say they didn't have concerns but the mechanisms have not been developed by which

those concerns were being articulated. _____ one or two sources available to them through the city council, particular in Champaign, and to some extent it was in Urbana. It was, you know, it's hard to describe.

Tyler: How about during, you know, the, like you was talking about when things had got kind of hot during the civil rights movement.

Mears: Well, during the civil rights movement, and the Twin City, there was more active black involvement, okay. And that involvement on the part of adults was really precipitated simply because, or by or generated by the youth community because the youth began to form with their own gangs. And then they were more actively involved unfortunately, you know, they were almost at rivalry with each other. Not actively involved in a civil rights movement as a collective group, fighting in behalf of the civil rights movement for the most part they reinforced the perception of whites, you know, that we always fighting among ourselves and damaging ourselves, as opposed to fighting for the cause. But that was generated, and then later it was re-directed by some of the key concerned members of the black community, and re-directed into a more constructive thing.

Tyler: You was talking about your job as a teacher at King School. How was it? What grade did you teach?

Mears: My first assignment at King School I think I was employed as a sixth-grade teacher. At that time we had operated in groups, in teams, okay, the intermediate, the primary — the primary, the middle primary, and the intermediate, the upper primary and the intermediate. And I was part of the intermediate team which taught across grades four, five, and six. My major responsibility was the language arts for the sixth. I was kind of_____ teaching sixth grade, language arts, social studies, and in the team approach I taught P.E. and science to fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students, and that was my major teaching responsibility there. I enjoyed it. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I can't, 'cause I've had some pleasant experiences in both the junior and high school, but I guess it's the context in which I put them in. It's almost, I can't. The experience at King School still stands out as one of the more memorable experiences, maybe because I first went into my teaching profession then. But it was a very memorable experience. The school was 99.9 percent black. I remember having classes of all black students. Students who had heard, but never knew what Chicago looked like, and I felt good that I had provided them with those kinds of experiences like with Chicago.

We didn't talk about the state Illinois history without touching the history of Illinois. We touched the monument in Springfield, we touched the Lincoln Memorial house, and that's the way we had history, and that's the way we taught and learned the history of Illinois. By the same token I had experiences, and I refrain from calling names, of students who came to me and couldn't read, never knew what it was like to experience reading. And it was a joy to me, to see the

joy on their face, having me work with them in reading and having learned certain reading concepts that they had never been taught before. Much of, I used to do a lot of Saturday morning tutoring at King School for anybody who was willing to come, and even adults that I worked with who couldn't read. I mean, I'm saying it's the most memorable experience because I feel that I do have a talent. I am fortunate that I do have a particular skill, whether it's by a God gift, or whether it was manually, whether it was by the training provided me by an institution, okay? I have that skill and I feel that it would be oh, utterly amiss for my part not to share that and see that as many people benefit from my skill as possible, and that was, I saw as my professional mission. And again, I enjoyed it.

I enjoyed it because I enjoyed, and I hate to think what I would've been had I not had this kind of enjoyment, this kind of experience in my profession. I thoroughly am committed to my teaching profession. It's a joy to me to see, to think that I can leave an institution during the day and think that I have made a difference in somebody's life. That's what it's all about, that's what it's all about. You think and, I quote what a gentleman said to me — if I call his name, you would know it — who had no former training in school. He said, 'Henry, if politicians and successful people who criticize the schools (in talking about today's issue with America today and what the schools are not doing) who criticize the school would stop and think that they are successful because of an experience in their life, and for the most part is an experience because of a classroom teacher.' He said, 'If that's the case, why knock education?' Okay. It was a negative thing on my part, but I moved in the profession I was motivated

simply because of the experience I had with my black principal. It wasn't a positive experience, but it certainly worked in the reverse. I would love for it to be a positive experience, okay, but unfortunately it wasn't. But I think it was, that experience was, of course, the experience you get at the secondary level at the junior high school was a different kind of experience too, and they all, you know, they all are different kinds of experience and they all have a certain, play a significant role in my whole professional experience and I don't try to prioritize one against the other. They all are significant, each one of those: King School, junior high school, and the high school. Different, but significant.

Tyler: Could you tell us a little bit about the junior high when you was there?

Mears: I entered junior high school in 1968 as an assistant principal. At that time I was one of the few blacks on the staff. Moreover, I had some difficulty simply because, not just the mere fact of being black on the junior high school staff who had little experience with black administrators in positions anyway, other than the fact that Taylor Thomas was the black assistant principal here at the high school, okay. It complicated, the fact that I was younger . . .

[End Tape 1, Side A]

Henry O. Mears Interview

TAPE 1, SIDE B

Mears: At the junior high school I had a wide range of experiences from the area of discipline, to program development, trying to implement programs and trying to come up with all kind of experiences, suggest and strategize experiences that I know that could yield to being a successful student or a group of students. And I saw that it was enjoyable to me. It's still enjoyable to me to see that it's something that we all could get together and work on that somebody had some success, or felt some success in terms of experiences.

High school, I came to the high school in 1977, even was more of, you know, another kind of challenge because I had seen the elementary, I've seen the junior high, now I see them ready to leave for the last time, and their last chance, and the last hope they have for being skillfully equipped to handle this ruthless world. And I too saw a mission in that, to feel that . . . A mission from the standpoint of having the responsibility of playing a critical role to see that those skills are adequately met so that they can adequately deal, and effectively deal with the adult life.

Tyler: What were the difference in the black children that attended the schools? What I mean is, how did they react to, you know, school, and did they interact very well, you know, when time had progressed or was it better when you first started interaction?

Mears: Well, I don't think the wishes and the motivation of black students were any more significant now than what they were then. I think the problem then is what while blacks were motivated and had the same kinds of desires, they didn't have nearly the resources in terms of the skills, okay, to pursue those kinds of directions and those kinds of goals. Everybody, and always will be, and I think blacks have always valued education, okay, and the value placed on education then among the black families, among black students, is no different than what it is today, okay, except that today has been a more concerted effort on the part of the black community, a more concerted effort on the part of schools themselves, okay, to see that blacks get the same equal opportunity, okay, to at least maintain or have those skills it take to be successful and pursue those kinds of goals. I think the values is basically, of education, is basically the same.

The opportunities I think, as a result of the movement that concerns race, the civil rights movement across the country, I think the opportunities for blacks had been opened, okay. Yet at the same time, blacks are still having a tough time trying to maintain, or at least trying to appeal some of the key types of positions. This is also true in education. In other words, I don't see any real difference in motivation or desire or the need or the value they perceive, and they value they have in education, then as opposed to now. I do see that blacks are taking more of an aggressive and concerted effort to develop certain strategies by which that is to be incurred, that is, by which that is to be developed.

The problem is that the schools and the public institutions being as responsive to those kinds of needs, wishes and strategies as proposed by

blacks. I don't see the schools and public institutions in terms of black needs in education any more responsive now than what they were — they were more responsive then, than what they are now. 'Cause I think there's a period where maybe there was a certain level of sensitivity for blacks in public institutions. At least there was a guilt that, yes, maybe we have done some wrongdoing, and yes maybe we should open up some opportunities, okay. And at the same time is that it had been made known by many key leaders in this country that we have to implement and present policies and legislations that will affect the civil rights of blacks, okay. And they mandated some of those things, so now it's a matter of just following mandates and in some instances institutions try to get rid of the same mandates that were legislated several years ago to guarantee certain opportunities for blacks, okay. So in other words I don't see the responsiveness being as great now as it was then. And I think it's even more critical now that schools be responsive to development and strategies for blacks and their skills in terms of being successful, and pierce the jobs that I think blacks too have the capability of pursuing.

Tyler: I was wondering about your involvement in the community, in the black community. Could you tell us if you have joined any organizations?

Mears: Well it's kind of strange on how one views involvement. Yes, I've always been involved in the black community, I've always been part of black organizations. A matter of fact, at a time I was involved in the initial, first

Concerned Citizens Group that existed at that time, which whites perceived as a radical group of blacks, okay. When it was wasn't proper to be a part of simply because I was part of the school and was supposed to be a professional man, and this was in direct conflict. Yes, I was always involved in that.

I have served on a number of boards and always been involved in the church. I am not one who is a visible, I guess you would say an active religious person. I'm one who believes in God, okay, very much believes in God. But I also believe that, and I hold very dearly to the principal that we have to believe in fellowshipping, okay, and fellowshipping to me is not doing it publicly. Fellowshipping to me is doing it inner with myself, and I don't worry about who knows how much fellowship I do. It's not stacking and showing how many, you know, it's not showing your track record, okay, and comparing your track record publicly. Yes I have been, I have been involved in the black community. Now whether one interprets involvement as one who's out there all the time carrying a picket sign and doing like that, well I have a kind of a personality that doesn't lend itself often, frequently to those kinds of activities. Yet, at the same time, it does not mean that I can't actively be involved to affect the change by which we are all trying to bring about that affect blacks.

Yes, I've served on a number of boards in many areas, and I have also initiated some things myself with the black community. And see, Pat, see, it's not what, see it's not really what I do to gain visible credibility for the black community, okay. It's what I do for Pat when needs it done, okay. See my way of fellowshipping is this, Pat. Is that, I have to some extent, and I don't want you

to interpret this as being boastful, okay. I don't want to say that I have arrived because I'm still the "nigger." Anyway you slice it, I don't care where you go, the white American still perceives you as a "nigger," okay, and it's a reality with me, okay. But the point being is that I believe wholeheartedly is that the way you have to di-strategize this is that, I have skills to offer, okay. I have the experience that you can benefit, okay. I have some authority that I think I can perfect things for you, okay. So the point is this, do it for Pat. Okay? Now what Pat is supposed to do is do it for her (referring to Melinda). What she's supposed to do is not forget who done it for you. Okay, and that's got to passed, and that's got to be almost a broad chain reaction that we have to do. Other ethnic groups do it to affect the lives. They do that. They manipulate their resources. They do that Pat, and that's something we have to, as a black group we have to do. Now that's my involvement, that's my involvement. And when I involve myself in that kind of thing I don't expect to get up and say, 'Well Henry Mears is doing this and Henry Mears is doing that, and Henry Mears is doing that.' Okay, that's not why I do it. I don't expect to be accountable, to give account of that until Pat, excuse me. (The tape recorder is turned off and then back on.)

Mears: So that's my way of operating Pat. Pat, I've seen it all. See, one cannot talk to me about racism. One cannot talk to me about classism. One cannot talk to me about being denied opportunities, okay. But one cannot talk to me about having confronted strategies where you know people are setting up strategies, be it black or white. I've experienced it all. See, I've experienced strategies where

blacks are just as guilty of what they accuse whites of doing to deny blacks opportunities, okay, because at that point they want to bring about, at that point it becomes not racism, but classism, okay. So I have a tough time dealing with that. I have a tough time dealing with that. I think we have to deal with the standpoint of open and honesty in terms of if we all about that mission, we all about the mission. Okay.

See, we all about the mission, we don't have to do a check and balance on each other. We don't have to say what he's doing or what he's not doing, okay, because we all have confidence that we're all about the same mission, okay, and no one worries about well how much of that have you done and how much of that I've done, okay. See because Pat as I go back and I think, and I think and one of the things that I do feel good about, I frequently get phone calls that say, 'Mr. Mears I want to thank you, remember so and so, remember that time,' okay. And this is not from black kids — white kids, too. That's my mission. That's my mission because Pat, the poor white kid is in worse shape than the black kid, because he does not or she does not have the _____ for them that black kids have frequently in our public institutions. See, Pat, you can come to me, as an example, as a black kid because you, for whatever reason, perceived that Mr. Mears might be, you know, amenable, at least sensitive to my problem because I'm black, okay. Well, how many poor white kids can identify somebody on this staff that they can lean on? Not always the case, not always the case, okay. But I was just trying to make a point.

Roundtree: I have a question, you know, about Dr. Young and what's happening. The churches are supporting him a lot, you know, and I was wondering like when you came here was the church as much involved as it is now with things going on in the community with people trying to get justice?

Mears: Well, I think the concerns were there okay, but see when I first came in the community I don't thinks the church had really developed the subject by which they articulate that kind of involvement, and I think that's been a big plus in the community. Now they have developed that structure, okay, and that strategy by which they can become involved in terms of to get involved in activities that do affect blacks, okay, in the community. See you have to understand that's one of the purposes of the black church, period. It's always been one of the purposes of the black church, okay. And it's not to say that serving God is secondary, no that's not the case, okay. But, church has always been that institution by which blacks rallied around, okay, to express his own concerns about what happened and what affects them.

But collectively that had not happened in this community because they had not developed that kind of strategy and structure. Maybe at that point there had not been a need to do so, until the civil rights movement. And if you know, that whole civil rights movement generated out of the church, okay. See Martin Luther King was about God, okay, and Martin Luther King knew that God was about humanity. So I'm saying that whole thing rallied and generated around and about the church.

Roundtree: Another thing is the government, the form of government, when you came here was it more for the people or did it benefit blacks more?

Mears: No. No. No more than what it does right now, okay. Keep in mind that, and I'm just a belief of this. I don't think the democracy in the government in our country and it also is the same way local. See, local is no more, see local government is just a replica of what happens nationally, okay. That they're no more concerned — maybe, I'll retract that. While there may be some concerns about me, the ultimate concerns is about him, okay. Him meaning that, it's the government, okay. We operate in this society and our society always reflects the government, policies, mandates, and the like and the behaviors of the government, okay. We operate with a society that's a class society. And we operate with a philosophy and we actually practice even in our schools, our government, our churches: classes, class, class. There's somebody got to be on the bottom.

In the black community there's somebody's got to be on the bottom, usually it's the guy who doesn't have a degree, okay. It's goes right back to the same thing I talked to you about in my high school days. Somebody in that school system and that all-black high school had to be on the bottom, and it was those kids who rode the bus, poor kids, poor black kids. See what I'm saying? That's the syndrome we operate from in this whole American society. In public institutions and public schools, somebody's got to be on the bottom. Who is it? Usually the black kids.

In government, in legislation, okay, mandates are there to affect the mass majority. Now who's the mass majority in this community, in this society? White middle class, okay. Give an example. Black kids in Harlem, New York, in the thirties, the forties, fifties, always, blacks always experience with heroin and drugs, always, okay. That's always been sort of one of the activities in New York and many other cities. I knew blacks _____, because that's how certain white leaders made their capitalizing on the weaknesses of blacks, okay. Now see, we never recognize there was a drug problem till certain whites starting having drugs. And it's like a classic statement, I've always said. I came to Urbana in 1965. I used to see kids in King Park all the time just smoking and _____ marijuana, okay. Marijuana and drug use in Urbana schools did not become an issue until a couple of white kids, and I say, a couple of white kids on the Southeast Urbana started taking more than three aspirins, okay, then it became a problem. (Tape recorder is shut off and then turned back on.)

Mears: I don't think the government is significantly changing. It's unfortunate that in a society that people have to remind people that we are human beings too, even when we make a significant percentage of this society as blacks. I don't think it's changed that much. I think it's changed in terms of how blacks have been enabled by the way of skill and by way of training to filtrate some of the professions and certain positions. But, I don't think the attitudes is changed, and I think Reagan is proving that, okay. I think the attitude is still there because you know what Reagan represents, right? But you also know the big population

that put him there. Isn't that the thinking of this community? Isn't that the thinking of the country?

See the president of this country by way of election, the personality, the behavior of the president always reflects the population of people who elected him. So when you talk about Reagan you're not talking about a personality, an individual man. What you're talking about is a significant population of this country. He represents the thinking of the majority of this country. Keep that in mind. So you're not criticizing him as an individual. See when he talks about supporting schools who segregate against blacks, private schools, I mean giving them tax breaks, and you know the issue, I don't know if you know the issue.

Well, there are several schools in this country, and one is North Carolina, Jones University, who are getting tax breaks as a non-profit organization. That's a big chunk of money, okay. That means it's government supported. Tax breaks, when they segregate, are discriminating against blacks. Blacks can't enroll. Private schools. And what Reagan is saying is that they have a right to do that. Now certainly that is the thinking of this country, okay. Well, Reagan says he agrees with that. Now that man didn't say he'd agree with that if he didn't have the backing of a lot of people. Keep that in mind. Okay, so, you know, I am saying it. I'm not sitting here trying to be overly critical about government, but I'm saying there's a reality that does not limit itself to just race also. It's a class reality.

If you were in a town of all blacks, honey, I would stake my life on it, you would have the same discrimination that you experience in a mixed population,

but there we call it class. A mixed population we call it racism. And it's both in a mixed population: racism and classism. But see, in a mixed population, even when you're white and poor, you don't have anything going for you, okay. But what you have going for you is when you're poor white, who's operating competitively with the black. But if you're a poor white operating with another white, you don't have anything going for you. But you have something going for you when you're operate against black, okay.

Roundtree: About the job opportunities, how were they when you first came here?

Mears: Well, let me try to sum that up this way. Is that, there were not many job opportunities for blacks because there are certain positions that the local white community perceived that blacks should hold and shouldn't go any further, okay. And that still holds true. I'm not saying it's changed very much. You haven't seen a black superintendent. That has not changed very much, okay. Is that, because that has a certain amount to whites, a certain amount of authority and which comes along with some expertise that we don't feel blacks have, okay, to perform in those areas. When I first came into the community after the first two years, I was working on a master's degree, which I was to receive in August of 1968. The individual who was director of personnel at the time, we got into a casual conversation. I'll never forget it – it was the hall of King School. And he said, 'You're working on your masters, and I understand you're just about

finished.' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'What do you intend to do?' I said, 'Well, you know, I'm working on my masters.' No, I said, 'I'm working getting my masters in elementary education, and I'm putting some emphasis on school administration.' He said, 'Well, you know, there's not very much around in administration.'

You see, the same guy who's director of personnel, and the same guy who knew right away that there were two jobs available in – one job I believe in principalship, as an administrative job opening in Urbana. But what he was telling me, there's not much for blacks. That's exactly what he was telling me, and I tried to make him tell me that, and he wouldn't. He wouldn't admit it. I said, 'What you're telling me about is there isn't anything for blacks,'

By the same token is that . . . And I have experience situations where, you know, that I personally challenged for some jobs that you know I wasn't successful in getting while, you know, it's hard to say that it was because of race, because at the same time I had to go back, too, and look at my credentials. You see what I'm saying? I mean to make sure that I'm thoroughly qualified, at least competitive. See, one thing you have to keep in mind is that you have to be twice as good – ten times as good – to compete with average white in certain positions, but you got to be super. See, the average white can come up and laugh, and I'm not saying that as put down, okay, but, it's a reality that the black guy who beats the average white out on a job is a super black guy. He's super, or she's super, okay. Absolute super. Any running back you ever know that played football was a superstar, wasn't he? You didn't have any ordinary blacks running. You had ordinary whites, didn't you? Okay. And right now, today, if

you're a football fan, right now, today, when you see a black quarterback in the pros, you immediately think that he must be super, okay. And it's just the reverse in basketball. When you see white guys now in basketball, you think they must be super, that they can play with the "super blacks." You see what I'm saying? So it's the context in which you place that.

Roundtree: I wanted to talk a little bit about school, since you've been in King, the junior high, how the parents interact with their students. Have they been involved with teachers in conferences, talking to them about their work?

Mears: Unfortunately, there's never been enough of black parents involved in the schooling of their kids, okay. And I'm one who holds true, holds firmly on the belief that if you want your kid to have successes in our public school, you've got to take an interest in what direction they go, okay. You cannot chance leaving the total livelihood, and the total education of your child up to a classroom teacher. You've got to make sure you're there, not to tell a classroom teacher what to do, or not to supplant the classroom teaching in terms of what skills and strategies in providing the professional strategy by which to provide your child some experiences. But you're there to help remind and help to remind teachers that they too have a responsibility and must be accountable to the teaching and the learning of your kid. By the same token, you have to show your child that you're interested in that. There's an old saying that charity starts at home and spreads above, and I believe in that. That too frequently, too frequently, in

having had experience in the public schools, and we aren't perfect, okay, but too frequently we leave the education of our child up to the public school. You know, I mean we don't take a direct interest in it.

Now let's look at that from a political standpoint and I'm talking about a real – that was an idealistic parental kind of involvement, community idealistic kind of involvement once you take it from school. But let's look at it from a political standpoint. The average classroom teacher, and I'll say average now. There are some people who are beyond that point, but the average classroom teacher is going to respond to the child that she knows or he knows that the parent is most concerned about. That's just human nature. It's human nature. It's human nature, okay. Because this young man on my left is entering in a school where his parent is never involved, you don't see him around, or he comes from an area where you know people don't get involved and different things, okay. And he may be highly motivated. And this may be an extreme case, but I'm just trying to make a point. It's not true all times. As opposed to you, okay, who comes from a family that you know is well-known, know that's going to watch the teacher and every move she makes.

[End Tape 1, Side B]

Henry O. Mears Interview

TAPE 2, SIDE A

Mears: Okay, 'cause I'm going to have be accountable for that. You see that's dealing with the human nature, and that's why I say, and I hate to say, use the term that there are certain kinds of threats and intimidations that just the mere presence of people in terms of . . . But maybe that's what public schools need, maybe that's what we need. _____. I love to see parents, whether we agree or disagree. I love to see parents actively involved. I love to see that. As a matter of fact, I used to pull all kinds of stunts when I was teaching at King School, because I never saw a parent at King School. And King School is right in the heart of the community. Okay. But I found myself having to do social work what was unfortunate. I had to go around the next block and visit, okay, and I had to do certain things, and write certain notes that aroused parents and made them mad so they could come out and argue with me. You follow what I'm saying? And it was almost like a gimmick. But that's the kind of thing that, that's the kind of thing that you get involved in. (Tape recorder is turned off and on again.)

Mears: Pat, it's that, I welcome that, I think that's what makes a healthy learning environment. See, we've always treated learning and schooling as if though it's something that only the privileged should have. Okay. And that's the way we operate it because it's only the privileged who've been out there bidding for their

share. The underprivileged, they haven't been actually bidding for their share, so therefore, we don't feel as nearly responsive to them.

I applied for a job once, Pat, and I won't tell you where, where I was not offered a job, okay, where everybody knew on the entire committee, even I, it was obvious that I was head and shoulders above the person who finally got the job. Okay. But the reason given to me when I asked why wasn't I offered the job, is that I was too committed to the black and the poor kid. That's how I was perceived. That's unfortunate. But it's also complimentary to me because he told me who I am. Okay. See, Pat, my argument is that if you come to me as a person who does not have reading skills, okay, and she comes to me gifted, as described and defined by all my criteria, okay, as a gifted child who's a superb reader. See, I feel more responsive if I got a choice between the greatest, most motivated, most outstanding teacher, I think you would benefit most from that teaching than she would. That's my feeling, you need it most. See, she can still survive the lazy, incompetent, non-concerned teacher. You can't. That even further complicates your problem. Okay. See, that even further complicates your problem. And that's, you know, I mean, of course, you can't always stack it up, because it's not really the way we operate in the school system. But honestly, in many cases, if you walk in some of the school systems and you look at where your programs are, your gifted programs. (Machine is turned off.)

Tyler: Due to my lack of material for this interview, I was short of a tape to get the further information that Mr. Mears had talked about. But to let you know that also in this interview he discussed a study that he was doing on the black graduates of Urbana High School during the last five years. And he was trying to find out the percentage of them that went on to college and higher education. Also, later in the interview Mr. Mears pointed out that only, that most of the blacks that have graduated in the last five years, which he gave a very high percentage, of 90 percent, graduated in the lower 50 percent of their class. And he also explained the problem that associated with this high percentage, which was the lack of motivation. Also in the interview, Mr. Mears, or Dr. Mears, talked about the parents and their relationship with their child and their education. And he has stated in his final request that he wished to see in the future that more black parents will become more involved as a person in the Urbana School District. Thank you.