Oral History Interview of Mary Ellen Smith

Interview Date: March 3, 2005

Interviewed by: Anna Maria Hidalgo, Suffolk University student from History 364: Oral History

Citation: Smith, Mary Ellen. Interviewed by Anna Maria Hidalgo. John Joseph Moakley Oral History Project OH-044. 3 March 2005. Transcript and audio available. John Joseph Moakley Archive and Institute, Suffolk University, Boston, MA.

Interview Summary:

Mary Ellen Smith, a Boston community activist who founded the Citywide Education Coalition (CWEC), reflects on her work in education and community organizing in Boston, as well as the ramifications of the 1974 Garrity decision, which required some students to be bused between Boston neighborhoods with the intention of creating racial balance in the public schools. She discusses the various organizations with which she has worked, including CWEC, the Citywide Coordinating Council, and the Massachusetts Board of Education; her experiences working in the Boston Public Schools; the effects of the Garrity decision on the school system and Boston in general; and the ways that her community work has affected her life.

Subject Headings:

Boston (Mass.)

Boston (Mass.) School Committee

Boston Public Schools

Busing for school integration

Citywide Education Coalition

Community organizing

Morgan v. Hennigan (379 F. Supp. 410)

Smith, Mary Ellen

Table of Contents:

Interview transcript begins on next page

This interview took place on March 3, 2004, at the John Joseph Moakley Law Library at Suffolk University Law School, 120 Tremont Street, Boston, MA.

Interview Transcript

ANNA MARIA HILDALGO: I believe that we are recording. My name is Anna Maria Hidalgo, today is March 3, 2004, and I am here with Mary Ellen Smith, the founder and executive director of the Citywide Education Coalition**.** Mary Ellen, thank you for agreeing to this interview.

MARY ELLEN SMITH: Glad to be here.

HILDALGO: So why don't we start with—where were you born?

SMITH: I was born in Cambridge, brought up in Watertown. Went to Boston College [BC] as an undergraduate and graduated in 1965 with a degree in education. At that point I decided that I had spent my whole life in Boston, I was going to try something new, so I went to Chicago for my first teaching experience.

HIDALGO: And what was that like?

SMITH: It was, I think in hindsight, very formative toward—in the sense that it had a fairly large impact, I think, on the rest of my career. I went out there with a friend who was going to graduate school at the University of Chicago, and we shared an apartment. I had applied to the Chicago system and they had never had a graduate from BC before, believe it or not, in 1965, so there was some question about whether or not I would get a job because I had to send them catalogues from BC and all this other stuff. At any rate, late in August just before I was scheduled to move out there, they notified me that I had a job, told me the name of the school. I was delighted because it was near the University of Chicago so it was close to where we were going to be living. I walked into the orientation and they looked at me and said, Who are you?

And I said—I told them my name and I gave them the paperwork I had and they said, Well we don't have you on our list. (laughs)

HIDALGO: Great. (laughs)

SMITH: So here I am in this momentary panic that I've moved to Chicago, thought I had a job, have no car, know nothing about the city. Anyway, to make a long story short, they took pity on me. The principal of this particular school was an easterner from New York, and there's very much a second city sense to Chicago, so she was going to take care of me. At any rate, I worked in the office for a week and finally at the end of the week she threw the data at me and said, "We've got too many kids and not enough teachers. You figure out what grade you can get." So I naively sat down with the numbers and ended up seeing an overlap in second and third grade, so I said okay, and they said, Alright, take the low achieving third graders, high achieving second graders and we'll make a class room for you. Alright, where's the classroom? In the basement.

HIDALGO: Nice. (laughs)

SMITH: So I was in the book storage room in the basement, not a classroom. Pillars, shelves of books. Anyway, on this Friday afternoon I went and took third graders, who thought they were being demoted, second graders, who thought they were being promoted, put them in one classroom—tears, hysterics. Parents came the next week to have it explained to them, of course. Lots of turmoil. No books, so I literally went to the shelves to try to find complete sets and at one point, one child says to me, "Miss Smith, this book is wrong." And I said, "Good, tell me, what's wrong about it?" "It says Midway airport is the largest airport in Chicago." And I looked at it—and it's really O'Hare—and I looked at the date, and it was a 1937 copyright.

HIDALGO: Wow.

SMITH: Anyway, that's how I spent my first year: with very, very bright second graders, third graders who had a lot of problems, and basically I was like a pioneer, I had to learn how to do it. Of course the other teachers in the building said to me, "How can give they give you student A,

B, C, E, F, G? I couldn't handle him, this one couldn't handle him," whatever. But it was a formative experience in that I basically had to make a go of it, and I set up an arrangement with a library; that's how I got books. And it was a wonderful experience for a number of the second graders that moved right on to the fourth grade because they were able to progress as the year went along. We were able to do a lot of group learning activities between the brighter second graders and third graders, whatever, so I started a newsletter for the kids. Some of them had very good writing skills, so it was enjoyable.

I came home—for personal reasons I came back to Boston, and as luck would have it I couldn't get into the Boston system because they had given the exam earlier. So I took a job in Bedford [MA], at a suburban system for a year, while I took the Boston teachers exam, and got an appointment in Boston in 1967 while I was teaching in Bedford. As luck would have it, it was the school that my mother and several of her sisters went to in Dorchester [the Christopher Gibson School]. I learned after I got there that it was also the school that Jonathan Kozol had written about in *Death at an Early Age*. There were largely a new group of teachers there, and we went along over the course of a year reading—Kozol's book came out during the course of that year [1967] so there was a lot of discussion among people who had been there and were mentioned in the book, even though pseudonyms were used.

Anyway, there were a lot of problems in the school and in the spring the school was set on fire by some kids. And so we ended up spending the last six weeks of school in the auditorium of the Jeremiah Burke High School [in Dorchester] because seniors—as you may or may not know, seniors in the Boston schools leave around the middle of May so that there's extra space in the high school, so that they bused the older kids to vacant spaces in high schools. I had a first grade and I ended up on the stage of the Burke High School with a blackboard between us with another second grade and it was just—

HIDALGO: Wow.

SMITH: Everything revolved around when you got the kids to the bathroom and we had very limited materials—it was a nightmare. A parents' group came together ad hoc around that

because they were concerned with what the school was doing and what was happening to the kids themselves; it was a small active group of parents. At the same time, Ocean Hill-Brownsville[1] was brewing in New York. There was some community control activities going on here in Boston around two junior high schools where the school committee and school department was being pressured by the black community to appoint black principals.

HIDALGO: And around what time period was this?

SMITH: 'This was sixty—the spring of '67.

HIDALGO: Okay.

SMITH: So this parent group formed, and that was about it. It was an opportunity I think for me personally and some other young teachers to kind of get involved and get to know parents. It was not encouraged by the system that you did that, the doors were locked, it was not an open system like it is more so now.

HIDALGO: And how many years had you been teaching up to this point?

SMITH: This was my third year.

HIDALGO: Your third year?

SMITH: Correct. So what I'm going to tell you happened in the fall. If that had not happened I would have been tendered, had all my experience been in Boston but because I had two years in other systems, one year in Boston. So over the course of the summer—oh, I'm sorry, as we're

[1] In 1968, New York City attempted to give minority communities more control over their local schools by decentralizing three school districts, one of which was the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood in Brooklyn. When the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district school board fired over a dozen teacher and administrators, members of the United Federation of Teachers (the New York City teachers' union affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers) began a series of strikes to protest what they saw as a violation of the fired teachers and administrators' rights. Because the president of the United Federation of Teachers was white and Jewish, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood was predominantly black, the issue took on a decidedly racial tone. The fired teachers and administrators were ultimately given back their former positions.

leaving school, packing everything up at the end of the school year at the Jeremiah Burke High School, of course we question the principal. You know, What's going to happen in the fall? Is the building going to be prepared? Are we being moved? Do we have jobs? What do we do with these materials? The building was gutted by fire. So she [the principal] just said, "I'm leaving. There's going to be a new principal, and yes, they are going to repair the building."

So we returned the materials to the building, spoke to the district superintendent, a couple of us young teachers who had been talking to parents, and said, You know, we really think it's important—since also a number of the teachers were leaving because the circumstances were just so bad anybody who had any seniority in the system was trying to get out. So those of us who were not trying to get out, and who were committed to staying there and trying to improve things, asked the district superintendent whether or not there would be an opportunity over the course of the summer for the teachers who were coming back to meet with the new principal, to kind of acquaint her or him with the problems that had existed and our thoughts about how things needed to change and so forth.

HIDALGO: At this point, did you guys know who the new principal was going to be?

SMITH: No, we did not know.

HIDALGO: You guys just wanted to set something up?

SMITH: Yes.

HIDALGO: Okay.

SMITH: And we wanted to kind of alleviate, if we could, some of the parents' fears, because the building hadn't been touched between the middle of May, when the fire happened, and the end of June when we were getting out of school, the building was still sitting there, you know, boarded up and whatever so there were a lot of concerns in the community. And as I said, there was a lot of activity around community control in Boston and in New York so that these parents

were affiliated with some of these community groups and were angry and wanted a response and we felt that we as teachers could be—a few of us, three of us.

So at any rate, over the course of the summer I stayed in touch, one of the other girls stayed in touch, with the district superintendent and he finally set up a meeting for four or five of us. We showed up and of course there was no principal and so we said to him, Where is the principal? I thought that's why we were here. And he said, "She doesn't want to meet with you until school opens. She feels she doesn't want to assume there are any problems, she wants to start fresh." So then we said, Well, we think that's a mistake and you should make her meet, and we also think that we probably should include some parents. Anyway, we never heard anything else. School opens—first day of school.

HIDALGO: So now it's the fall of—

SMITH: Now it's the fall, September fifth I think it was, or fourth maybe—fourth.

HIDALGO: Of what year?

SMITH: Sixty-eight.

HIDALGO: Okay.

SMITH: And we go into school the day before school starts, okay, and we are handed passes—teachers—and we're told in the teachers' meeting that they expect trouble—they couldn't be clear what is was—and that we as teachers should just go about our business, etcetera. That was about it. Okay, so we come back for the first day of school and get in, with the pass card, get into the building and no kids come in. I'm in the first grade classroom on the first floor. So I could see a crowd building outside, and I only knew, at that point, two other teachers in the building who had been there with me the previous year; the others had either left or I hadn't known them, and there were a number of good teachers. Anyway, the kids never come in, so I go back to the door to try to go out because I figured I'd been there a year, I at least knew some

of the kids. I could help try to quiet them down because they were just running all over the place because the teachers were in the building, kids were outside, there were all these adults; some were parents, who knows who the others were, I didn't know.

I should also state that the school committee decided to appoint black principals at the two middle schools the night before this opened—the night before school opened. So that issue had been settled, so consequently the community groups who had been organizing over that issue came over to support the Gibson parents [parents of students at the Christopher Gibson School], who were upset about the condition of the building because it hadn't been completely repaired. There was a big hole on the first floor with a wooden fence around it.

There was something else that had occurred too, I'm trying to remember, what was it? I don't know it, it slipped my mind. But at any rate, I'm inside the building. I try to get out the front door, and they're boarded up with steel bars. These are the same doors we came in—they've now boarded. And I said to the janitor, "Can't I get out?" And he said, "No, no, we're not letting anybody out." And I said, "What are you talking about? There's kids out there!"

HIDALGO: What was the rationale behind the administration letting the teachers in, obviously with a pass, but then not letting them out? Do you know?

SMITH: I just think that it was a situation in which they were not prepared to deal with it. They were frightened. It was a brand new principal, so she had had no experience in this; in being a principal, let alone anything else. And some of it was just racism; there was a whole bunch of black folks running around outside. What are they going to do?

The other thing I should point out, which was a mobilizing thing for us as teachers, and I remember I was angry—when we met with this district superintendent and the principal didn't show up and the parents were not allowed to meet with him, he wouldn't schedule another meeting, I said to him we've been—he said, "Go ahead in the building and set up your classroom if you want,"—because we had also said this building shouldn't be open, workmen will be in there over Labor Day weekend—"it'll be all ready." Well, it wasn't.

So I went into the building and of course the classrooms hadn't been painted, some of them. And they were covered with soot, because there had been a fire; it hadn't been cleaned. So I called him up and said, "Look, my classroom is a mess; I don't want the kids coming into this." I said, "I'll paint it myself if you can get me some paint." So a couple of the other teachers that were also at the meeting said, We'll do the same thing. So we went over, talked to the janitors, they gave us paint. But basically I spent Labor Day weekend with a couple of other young teachers painting our classrooms, ourselves.

So at any rate, I go down my fire escape, which is off my classroom, and I go down into the back yard. So of course, remember, we've seen these kids one day. They were there the day before. They've come in one day, and—I'm getting—I'm sorry, let me back up.

HIDALGO: No, that's okay

SMITH: We went in for the preparation meeting with the teachers, then the first day of school we had to get in with the passes. Everybody did come in that day; the parents and the community groups came in as well and took over the school. That's what happened. So it was the second day of school where everybody was locked out because they wanted to prevent that from happening again.

HIDALGO: Okay, so they let the children in or no?

SMITH: No, they let the children and parents and community groups in on the first day of school.

HIDALGO: But not the second day.

SMITH: Not the second day. Nobody got in but teachers. The doors were locked. The first day, the community groups and parents, whatever Gibson parents were there—it kind of took on a life of its own and it really wasn't the parents as much as it was the community groups, but the

parents were part of it, but more parents started to show up. They appointed their own symbolic principal. So at some point during—

HIDALGO: How did the administration take that?

SMITH: Not very well, not very well.

HIDALGO: I can imagine.

SMITH: We were summoned to the auditorium the first day of school, we as teachers, and someone came into my room and said, "I will watch your kids. I will watch your class while you go to a meeting with the principal." So of course I get there and it's a stranger who announces that he's the principal, he's been appointed by the community groups and so forth, and we're just to stay and teach, and of course we're like, Where is the other principal? "Well, she's here but we're in charge," or something, so, "Just finish the day out; do your job." So that's what set the tone.

So the next day nobody gets in but teachers. So I go outside, I see the woman who took over my classroom the previous day and I say to her, "What is going on here?" She says, "Well, they won't let us in," so she said, "I don't know what we're doing. There's people talking about it. Let's just line the kids up, because at some point in time they're going to go into the building." So that's what we did, we began lining—all the teachers began lining up the kids as we could remember them, hoping the kids remembered us, of course, after one day. So we're all lined up; we're standing there with the kids in the back yard, which is the school yard, around the front of the building there's some activity going on.

The next thing I know this group of men and women come around the building and announce in a loud voice, "We're taking the kids to Shawn House." Shaw House was a community center that was about eight blocks away. So the kids line up, follow in line. I'm standing there—there's nobody from the school department out there. I'm looking around, thinking to myself, Well, what do I do now? So I decided alright, I'll just go with the kids around to the front of the

building. So we get around to the front of the building and all I can see is a crowd of people at the front door. I don't see any school people—there's police there. The line of kids with these adults goes walking off down the street, so I went with them. We ended up getting at Shaw House—I mean, these kids are six-year-olds; they're first graders and I thought, There really is no choice. The building is locked; nobody is telling us what they expect of us.

I knew some of the parents, because one of the parents said to me, "What are you doing?" as we're walking down the street, and I said, "I don't know. I'm going with the kids I guess." And he says to me, "Well, you're nuts, you know. They may fire you. I said, "Oh, really? Do you think so?" He says, "Yeah, probably. This is hot, you know. Who knows what's going to happen with this." So I said to him, "Well I guess I've got to take my chances. I don't want to go back in there—it's locked." I said, "You know, these kids are too young. I know some of the kids, I know some of the families." I said, "I've been teaching for a couple years; I'll deal with that later."

So anyway, we get to Shaw House and I discover that two of the other teachers that I had known from the year before also made the same decision on their own. They had been inside and they saw this happen and went out; and three other young teachers who were brand new to the building—so there were six of us all together at Shaw House wondering, What are we doing? Next thing you know lawyers are appearing, telling us they'll be our lawyers and all of this and press is everywhere. Here I am, this twenty-four-, twenty-five-year-old teacher who all of a sudden, I'm a media celebrity, and somebody says to me, "Just say no comment." So of course we'd say no comment and giggle. (laughter) It was nuts, the whole thing was nuts.

Anyway, the community groups decided to run a liberation school. We did go back to the school, I think the next day, and try to get into the building because as I'm sure you can imagine, I think I had taken my pocket book with me, but I had a jacket, I had brought my lunch, you know, a lot of the materials in the classroom was stuff that I had bought myself because I mean there were not a lot of—so I mean they were personal belongings that we wanted to go in and get; we were not allowed in. These lawyers went to the school committee and basically said, What are you doing with these people? So they gave us an official notice that we had been

suspended for seven days for unauthorized absence from school, was the charge. And when we had to go into 15 Beacon Street, which was then the headquarters of the school department, to get our official notices, they had one made out to some poor woman who was still in the school. They didn't even know all our names, okay, that was how pathetic and disorganized it was.

HIDALGO: Wow.

SMITH: So anyway, to make a long story short, we were suspended for seven days for unauthorized absence from school. We sent lawyers to the school committee at the end of the seven days to ask for a hearing so we could have our say about why we did what we did, because those of us that had been there had very good evaluations, so there was never any performance question about it; it was totally political. When they went before the school committee they were basically told that we were being terminated for conduct unbecoming teachers. We were allowed back into the building to get our personal belongings, escorted by police, about a week later.

HIDALGO: Wow.

SMITH: The parents' groups ran a liberation school for two months, until November fifth, with donations from community agencies and there were some fundraisers and whatever. We became media celebrities; it was all over the newspapers.

HIDALGO: What was that like for you?

SMITH: Actually, it was kind of enjoyable because we had to create a school so that my experiences in Chicago and Bedford kind of—

HIDALGO: Prepared you.

SMITH: Prepared me, yeah, exactly, so that it was kind of enjoyable. The classes were not as large as at the Gibson. They were more like in rooms like this rather than in classrooms.

Because we didn't have a school building. We moved it around to different community locations. And the parents were involved in the classroom. We had a lot of help from adults, so it was enjoyable; I think the kids enjoyed it. But the school department and the establishment, so to speak, the powers that be, began to put pressure on the parents, withholding welfare checks and threatening them and so forth. So that the population and liberation school began to dwindle, and it was a terribly sad moment when on November fifth, we along with the parents and what was left of the community group, escorted the kids back to the school because we knew we couldn't run the liberation school forever.

HIDALGO: And what was that day like?

SMITH: Very sad, very sad. It was kind of a cold, grey day. The kids were crying because they didn't want to go back; we didn't want them to go back, but there was nothing we could do. We prepared reports on the kids, and what progress they had made and what were we using for materials, I mean we handled it professionally. Never heard a word. We were *persona non grata*, because in the mean time, we had gone to court. Unfortunately, in hindsight, we probably should have gone to a federal court, claiming denial of due process, but we went to a state court. And after a trial of probably two months, the decision I think came out right after Christmas, in January of '69, in which the decision was basically that we had no rights once we left the school. One of the quotes from the decision was. "Those who play with the matches of anarchy deserve to get burned." So that we were out of jobs, all of us, and we maintained contact with the families and we had a legal defense fund. We had to raise money to pay these lawyers, although many of them were pro bono. It was tough. It was very controversial. We lost friends over it. We were heroes to some and lunatics to others.

HIDALGO: And who was the suit against?

SMITH: Against the school committee. Interestingly enough, had any one of us been in the Boston system for three years, that first day would have counted and he or she would have automatically gotten tenure. And so with tenure, would have come a different set of rights. But because none of us had been in the system for that three years and a day, none of us had tenure

so that technically and legally, they were allowed to do anything they wanted with us because we were not tenured. The state law—as a result of what happened to us, the state law was changed. I think the Mass. Teachers Association took it on, so that now non-tenured teachers do get hearings if they're being dismissed or considered being dismissed.

The other thing, of course, is that we went to our union, but as I think I said earlier, the Ocean Hill Brownsville was going on in New York in which the community councils of parents and community groups were running the schools. And the teachers were being fired and teachers were, I think, demonstrating against the community control setup. So that this was the opposite of that, so that there was great fear among the people in the Boston Teachers Union, that this was what was going to happen to Boston and that we were going to be the vehicle of that happening so that for the leadership of the union we were definitely *persona non grata*. We'd been paying union dues, I think I had been paying union dues because I was union member in Chicago and also in Bedford. I don't know that the others—I think they automatically are covering everybody but not everybody paid dues at that time.

So of course I was technically the one that appealed and we went to the executive committee—I'm sorry, the grievance committee. We went up the steps, and at every step, we're basically told, No, we're not going to take your case. So of course we went to the full membership. And it was an epiphany, I think, for many people in the union, some of whom are still around teaching, some of whom are good friends of mine because what happened is that I was the only one allowed to speak because I was the only one who had been paying dues. So I went in and spoke with this—you know, screaming and throwing things, and it was chaotic. And I basically said, "We've been teaching. Nobody argued against our performance. Nobody has heard our side of the story. This is what a union should do, is to support this." And a number of people agreed; people who may not have agreed with our position or our politics at this point, agreed procedurally that a union should protect its members and said things like, You mean to say if this happened to me, you wouldn't support me? What am I paying my dues for?

So it was quite a battle, and we lost, so therefore we really had no choice but to go to court. And I don't think that any of us really expected that we were going to get our jobs back in that school, but I think we felt that the only alternative we had, the only recourse we had, was to go to court.

Anyway, we did, we lost, that was it, we moved on. None of us went into teaching after that for a long, long time. We were clearly blacklisted. People said to us, Well, Jonathan Kozol got a job in Newton after he wrote his book, and you people have been in the press and gotten lots of publicity, so a lot of places will want to hire you. That was not true for two reasons: one is, at that time, there were not a lot of teaching jobs, the market was full; and secondly, for the few jobs they had, they weren't going to take anybody with any kind of controversy. Even if they may have agreed with the politics of it, they weren't going to touch anybody.

HIDALGO: Do you think that that decision was more of a political decision?

SMITH: Which?

HIDALGO: The decision to deny your appeal?

SMITH: Oh sure, oh sure, it was all politics. It had nothing to do with competence or anything else. And it was racism, no question. It was a significant event in the racial politics of this city, which I think in some respects then colored, no pun intended, other things later.

So anyway, what happened after is that I picked up a job I think for six months in a parochial school with a third grade class that had not had a teacher. I just filled in. Then I went to work at Shaw House, which was the community center in the neighborhood, so I had a lot of the same kids and did after school tutoring and adult ed. and day care.

While I was there a group called the Task Force on Children Out of School issued a report on the exclusion of kids from school in Boston: special needs kids, non-English speaking kids. Now this is late—this is probably '70—1970, '71. And in conducting the study they had assembled all of the major child service institutions in the city, from Children's Hospital to the mental

health centers to small community agencies, you name it. They had done a very good job. So they issued this report. It was a big—whatever. And one of the people who was involved in the effort, Hubie Jones, who was also involved in the Gibson Schools effort, was head of Roxbury Multi-Service Center at the time, so he was familiar—he came to me and he said—I was at Shaw House at the time—he said, "You know, we would like to follow this report up so it just doesn't sit on a shelf. We would like to organize these agencies to work directly with schools to try to resolve some of the problems, so would you come on board and help us do that?" So I said, "Sure."

So I went to work for them and I organized something called the Alliance for Coordinated Services, which was mental health and social service agencies paired with schools. It was brutal. It was extremely difficult because I ended up having to deal with many people in the school system who thought I was some kind of a monster, hated me, refused to come to meetings if I was part of them. So I did this all behind the scenes. And the day that it was announced, with, I don't know, twelve or fifteen community councils—the schools were participating, and we did have some people in the system that would be on it—I couldn't even be there because had my face or name been associated with it, the school system would never have agreed to it. So this was three or four years later and it was still that intense.

HIDALGO: And what was like for you knowing that you had done all this work and not being able to be there on that day?

SMITH: It was pretty disappointing and painful. But as you learn when you're learning organizing that the benefits and the fulfillment of an organizing effort comes not from what you've done but from what the people that you've organized are then able to do. So I think I was able to see that on an intellectual level. Emotionally, it was extremely difficult. These are people I have worked with and some of them had to take some abuse at their own schools to agree to participate—had participated with me in these haranguing meetings where I had gotten screamed at and had defended me.

So it was painful on a personal level, but on an intellectual level I just felt good about what we were able to accomplish. So that was up and running, council's working; it was kind of fun to do it once it was going, I was doing it, you know, at some distance.

And the Boston School Committee announced in 1972—now this is after the court case has been filed in federal court with Garrity, the racial desegregation case[2]—and in the meantime, there was a whole effort at the state level—and this is often misunderstood when people look at Boston's desegregation history, this is unique to this city. Before the plaintiffs file the case in federal court, claiming violation of the fourteenth amendment, the rights of black children, the Massachusetts legislature had, for several years, and the governor, liberal governors and a liberal legislature at the time, had passed a law called the Racial Imbalance Law. And with that law, the state Department of Education proceeded to quote-unquote racially balance schools. Legally, the racially balancing formula was different than the equal protection formula that Garrity had to deal with in his case. Plus the fact that the state legislature acted as a legislative body, which makes laws, set up a whole different set of issues that a federal court, which is the judicial branch of government, which operates under a different set of rules. Many people never understood that here.

So the state had this racial imbalance law. It was argued ever year. It was largely supported by suburban representatives who weren't affected personally, individually, by the consequences of it, so that it was a battle ground every single year. There were efforts to repeal it, and large efforts. There was significant mobilization in white groups—people —in Boston, Springfield, Worcester, other cities, but mainly Boston. Boston was the big place. And the state house is up the street; they could get there for the lobbying, so that lobbying efforts went on every single year. In the meantime, while these lobbying efforts went on and failed, the state developed a plan, a racial balance plan for Boston and Springfield and other places, so people mobilized to oppose it and so forth. The Boston School Committee said, We're not having anything to do

[2] In 1970, a group of black parents in Boston filed suit against the Boston School Committee, alleging that their children's 14th Amendment Rights were violated by what they saw as the committee's deliberate policy of racial segregation in the Boston Public Schools. In 1974, Judge W. Arthur Garrity ruled in *Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James Hennigan et al.* (379 F. Supp. 410) that the school committee had been deliberately segregating the schools. The ruling resulted in what is called the Garrity decision, a plan that called for some students to be bused from their own neighborhoods to attend schools in other neighborhoods, with the goal of creating racial balance in the Boston Public Schools.

with this. This is the state's plan. You tell people what it is. We're fighting it, we're going to beat it, we're never going to do it.

Okay, so that's going on, on the one hand. The plaintiffs, the black parents and the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and the Center for Law and Education file their federal case, so all this is percolating in '72. Hubie [Jones], again, who was chairman of the Task Force on Children Out of School, says to me, "You know, we've got all these agencies and community groups across the city who have been working on the alliance with you, who you've mobilized to help with schools. The school committee's conducting a national search. Let's see if we can get people together because we don't want another hack in here. The guy who's leaving—we know that desegregation or racial balance of these schools is going to occur over the next couple of years somehow, whether it's federal court or state. We know that's going to happen. We want a superintendent who can handle this and has a commitment to make it happen peacefully. We can't let this racist school committee—which is fighting racial imbalance—we can't let them control it."

So at any rate, we started calling people. We got people together, including the conservative homing school(??), the teachers' union—a pretty good group. And basically came together and got real help from the media, and that's because the media at the time were just fed up with the Boston School Committee and the games that went on, and so that they were helpful to us. For example, they would—oh, so we organized the group and went to the school committee and said, We want some community participation in this search. We want a national search, not a backroom deal. And they basically said, Get lost. So that we felt the only way we could have impacted was with public pressure, so that's where we kind of married a couple of reporters, of the *Globe*, mainly. They used to tell us when the candidates were coming to town, so that we would contact the candidates ourselves and we would say to them, We're representing a community group. You don't have to come talk to us, but if you get appointed you're going to have to deal with us; we're not going anywhere. So of course all of them came to the interview—we'd either meet them at the airport and shepherd them away before their interview with the school committee or whatever.

So it was an interesting process. We had committees and we met and we decided that we would not select a candidate. Our agenda was, to be very clear, it's the school committee's decision. However, these are the things we want them to look at in candidates, and these are what we believe are the priorities that these candidates should be asked about.

HIDALGO: Because you guys naturally are the ones working with the community.

SMITH: Right, and because at that point in time we had come up with what we felt were some key areas that needed to change in the system. There needed to be reforms in a variety of ways. Bilingual programs needed to be created; a whole long—parents needed to be welcomed into the buildings, there needed to be—whatever. But a list of reforms. So we sat down with each of them, we came up with—which we issued publicly because the school committee had, you know—through the newspaper, that was the only way we had—and said basically that these are the candidates, we've interviewed them, this is the rank order that we put them in. It's your choice. Any of the outside candidates are preferable, but if you insist on going with an in-house candidate, this is the best of the in-house candidates.

That's who they appointed. We have no idea whether we had any impact; he always felt that we did. His name was William Leary.[3] He felt that we helped get him the job—the community pressure. Therefore, he committed himself to working with us, over his term, on the specific reforms that we had laid out. We came up with a reform document—that was the birth of CWEC [Citywide Educational Coalition]. It disbanded, as often happens with community groups after that particular target issue was dealt with and he was hired, but he wanted to continue to meet with us. So the small group of volunteers stayed together, refined this agenda through community meetings, and then had a big meeting with him six months into his first term. And that was really the beginning of the foundation of CWEC.

Now at the same time, things are moving along; it's '72, it becomes '73. The state racial balance plan is still going on. Boston won't tell people where their kids are going to school. They're reading in the paper, hearing on the radio that there's going to be busing coming to Boston.

[3] William J. Leary served as superintendent of the Boston Public Schools from 1972 to 1975.

Nobody knows where their kids are going to go. So this group of CWEC was the only multi-racial, broad-based, citywide group of people. So that we came together and said, We've got to raise some money and get some information out to people. So we literally went begging around. I actually worked organizing it and I can recall distinctly sitting in the city council chambers—I don't know what issue we were fighting on but something related to this—in which literally someone's hat went around the gallery and collected money, and that was what I got paid for, because I wasn't working at the time. I was collecting unemployment for a while so I was covered but once the unemployment ran out, I literally had no money, so people were trying to keep me doing it, while we were also trying to raise money.

So we were able to raise a little bit of money, [and] opened up a store front down on Arlington Street. One of the members of the groups had a church and he had some room in this building, let us set up a bank of phones. We went to the state—we said, Explain to us how you've assigned kids in Boston. They did. We plotted it all on maps. We got a bunch of volunteers. I was the only one being paid a small amount, the rest were all volunteers. And we went on television one snowy Sunday afternoon and said, We can tell you where your kids are going to school; we got the state plans. We got ten thousand phone calls in a month. I mean, we couldn't—you'd hang them up and they'd ring again. And what we would do is—all people had to do was give us an address; once we had the address we could go locate the address on a map, see what GIA(??) code it was in, go to the state plan, and say, If your kid is in fourth grade this is the elementary school or junior high, or whatever. And we were the only ones telling anybody anything.

So anyway, we continued to do that. This is now into '74 I think; yeah, we are now into '74. We continued to do this public information, we printed stuff, we got a small amount of money, a couple of grants. It was beginning to become clear the Garrity decision was coming down, so that we began fundraising to be prepared for that. The mobilization of anti-busers continued to grow and they went to the legislature in the spring of '74 which is literally a month or two before Garrity ruled and they overturned the law. So the state racial imbalance law was no longer in the books, which meant all that information that we had given out, the state plan, all of that, is moot because it can't be enacted now. So there's chaos again, people saying, So what happens? You

told us what the state was going to do with our kids, now what happens? [We said,] Well, we don't know, sorry, call the school department. Of course the school department is saying, Nothing is going to happen because we overturned it. We were successful! We won! Ignoring that there was going to be a court case and I think believing, naively, that because this political pressure had overturned a state law, that somehow that was going to impact the federal court.

And so we continued to raise money and were able to hire a few more staff people to kind of organize in communities to be ready for whatever came down. In the meantime, the school department is not preparing anything because they're denying it's going to happen. June 24, 1974, word comes out that Garrity has ruled. I will never forget it. I go over the court house to pick up the ruling along with—

HIDALGO: And this was on that day?

SMITH: I think it was actually the last day of school. I think it was. And I'm riding up in the elevator with the deputy superintendent and other people from the school department that I knew, because I had been working on the outside but certainly there were people inside the school system that were very grateful for what CWEC was doing because they knew the information should be given to people. They were working on the plans, they knew where kids were going, but they weren't allowed to tell. Therefore they saw us as helping them, basically, and helping the community.

Anyway, I remember riding up in the elevator and the school department people saying, Nothing's going to happen. Don't worry about it. We're off for the summer. Let's go home, have vacation. And then coming down everybody's thumbing through it [the decision] and people are going, Wow, whoa, look at this! Of course it's like this thick [indicates thickness with hands], so you're trying to thumb through it. And the school department people [were] just devastated. "I can't believe this! I can't believe this."

HIDALGO: So going up in the elevator you didn't know what the decision was? (41:41)

SMITH: No, no, nobody did.

HIDALGO: You knew or the group that was in the elevator at that moment just knew that a decision had been done.

SMITH: Correct, and they were going to pick it up to see what it was because it was literally being released. The word was, Garrity's decision will be released at 4:30, so that everybody was on their way for this 4:30 mad rush—press, officials, community groups, anybody. It was available to everybody and they were just giving it out. No, nobody knew beforehand.

HIDALGO: Before you actually got the decision, what did you think the decision was going to be?

SMITH: There was never any question in my mind that he was going to rule them [the Boston School Committee] guilty because I had lived through it. It was very clear—you could see it if you were in the schools. And right down the street from me, from the Gibson, I mean the Gibson had a few white kids in it, not many, it basically was a black school. The other school in its mini-district also was mostly black. But the next district over had four schools in it, two of which were basically all white and two of which were all black. Well we're all in the same neighborhood; no busing would have been required.

And I also had been to meetings in the community because the state had built, at Boston's request, had built two brand new schools, the Hennigan [Elementary School], and the Lee [Elementary School], the previous year. The only agreement the state insisted on is, We will put up a certain percentage—a significant percent of the money to build those schools, but you have to balance them racially. And of course Boston took the money, built the schools, then sat down and voted to not balance them afterwards. So I had been at that too, so it was pretty obvious to me at least that they had to be found guilty. They were violating the rights of black kids and they were consciously districting in such a way as to separate black and white kids.

HIDALGO: So you get out of the elevator, you get the decision, you get the paperwork, you're thumbing through it, and at what point do you realize as you're reading it, that this has actually happened?

SMITH: I think right away. I think that the first question in our minds of course was, What does this mean? It is now the end of June. Everybody's going home for the summer, you know, people go away. What does this mean for September, and what does this mean has to be done between now and September? I don't think I was naïve enough to think that because there had been a federal court ruling that all of a sudden the school committee was going to change its posture. So I think—I took it back to the CWEC office and people came in, members and whatever, and everybody wanted to look at it. And I'm sure we sat around and met and tried to figure out what to do. The school committee of course is saying, We won't accept this, and we're going to appeal. There was all this crap—excuse my language.

But it was pretty obvious and the mayor I think at that point, who was Kevin White, actually said something to the effect of, "Even though I may not agree with the decision, we are going to uphold the law." And therefore he basically said, "I am the leader of this city," not in these words, but, "regardless of what the school committee posture is, I am going to do it." And [William] Leary, the superintendent, was essentially saying the same thing. So it was clear that there were some people in leadership who accepted the ruling and said, We've got to move on and begin to organize, to keep kids safe, to follow the law and so forth.

And then there were others, the school committee, [who said,] We're going to appeal, we're not going to do it, the buses will never roll, don't worry about it, etcetera. What we didn't know was what would happen, and it didn't take long because as I recall it was just a short period of time before Garrity, rumor has it, without ever looking at it, just took the state plan, that the information had already gone out on, that kids had been assigned under. And obviously for different purposes, it did not cover all the schools because racial balance is different than integration, so that not the entire city was covered. East Boston, Charlestown, Allston/Brighton I don't think was included, but there were parts of the city that were not included in full. So that, he just ordered that for the first phase, and in hindsight a lot of people have questioned whether

or not it might have been better to have had his own plan, to have delayed it and had his own plan. But be that as it may, that's what he did.

So then CWEC basically were able to raise some money in the crisis. I can remember going to fundraisers—I'm sorry, to funding institutions in the city that summer with members of the CWEC board of directors as a mixed racial group and saying, "There's going to be violence here. It's classic. This table is being set." And people saying, You're nuts, there's not going to be any violence. It's probably not even going to happen. If it does happen, it'll just go right through. You don't need money; we don't believe it's needed number one, and number two, even if we thought it was needed, we don't think you people can do it, this ex-fired school teacher as a staff person and the rest of you, etcetera.

So it was tough to raise money. We were able to get some money because the mayor basically pulled some slight of hand with some people in city hall who were supportive of having some fools on the streets. There was nobody real anxious to be out there putting themselves on the line so that they were able to get some quote-unquote safe streets money through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. But they couldn't give it directly to us because the city council would have never let it get through. So that—I forget—it was smoke and mirrors how they gave it to some small city agency that then subcontracted it to us.

Anyway, so we hired five parents. Two of them had been anti-busers. They organized what we called community councils in the neighborhoods, got people involved and were helpful with the police and the school officials because they were able to say, If you made that street one way, you can get the buses this way, make the other street—but don't do that street because there's a day care center or whatever. So they helped mobilized these communities.

We set up a rumor control center linked to city hall, to the rumor control center in city hall, which worked very well because we were able to say, We're hearing this, and they said, We heard this, can you confirm it? So that helped, and we had about five hundred volunteers on the streets when school opened.

Money was always an issue; I think I was making nine thousand dollars full-time, no benefits, so it was tough. It was largely a volunteer effort. And I will never forget it, the night before school opened in '74—day, late afternoon, I must have gotten twenty phone calls from some of these same foundation people we'd been to for money that said no, from large business owners in the city saying, What's going to happen tomorrow? Do we need to board up our windows? Do you really think it's going to be as bad as—etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And which I wanted to say to them, "You know, you didn't want to hear it before, you didn't want to help us out by raising money, why should I help you now?" But I didn't; I was being responsible and said, "We hope not. We certainly don't think there will be anything downtown. If there's trouble, it'll probably be violence against poor little kids on buses in neighborhoods, and we can tell you which neighborhoods seem to be the most vulnerable and explosive right now," but I said, "Don't worry, nobody's going to come to the top of the John Hancock [Building] and blow it up.

HIDALGO: So what was the first day like?

SMITH: First day, surprisingly, was relatively calm because a lot of people kept their kids home initially. Then of course once the buses arrived, then all hell broke loose in Southie, then there was trouble in Hyde Park. And I can't even remember—I think two of my staff quit after one day; I had to coax them back. Because you have to remember that not only were these people organizing, and doing a very good job, [but] the one [staff member] in Southie and the one in Hyde Park had also been anti-busers, [and] had their own children who were going to school, so they were considered to be leaders, so if their kids went, other people's kids went. And I don't remember whether it was the first day, or the second day, or the third day, because it all kind of blurred together because it was pretty much the same for the first week or so as I recall.

We were inundated with phone calls from people wanting to know where this bus was and that bus and what happened, because there would be buses that would get stoned, rocks be thrown at them. Let's say in Southie, a bus would go—the high schools get out early, bus would go to the high school, pick up kids, it would get stoned, those kids would get off the bus wherever—high school kids—and if some were injured, the rumors would fly. The buses all had broken windows

and glass on the seats; those buses would then go and pick up elementary kids who got out at three or 2:30. I can remember one of my staff people saying she rode the bus deliberately and when she got to Columbia Point she kept saying, "The windows weren't broken with these kids in it,"—they swept the bus up, those volunteers—"this didn't happen with your kids, it happened earlier. They shouldn't have sent this bus, but they did. We cleaned it out; your kids are okay."

And then there would be the copy cat. Something would happen in one neighborhood so therefore there'd be a retaliation and another one. And I can recall days that when I, who did not have children, was the only one in the office because the staff would hear—and the field staff were on beepers, so I could always get in touch with them. I'd beep them—no cell phones at the time—and then they would call in, so we could stay in touch. Obviously for rumor control you needed that too. And we had volunteers, like I said, that would go into the schools to keep the peace, volunteers at bus stops. We'd keep kids safe, because there were people coming and telling kids, Get home, don't you go to school. There were kids in Southie who were going to school, and couldn't tell anybody they were going. They'd have to tell their father, for example, after he went to work, they didn't go to school that day, so they'd have to sneak off somewhere to try to do homework. We called it the War Years because that's really what it was like.

Then eventually the abuse started with the motorcades to peoples' houses, death threats on the phone. We all had to change our phone numbers. And it was like being at war without any weapons. It was chaotic because as much as Kevin White, the mayor, was trying to exercise some leadership, he was still very much a political figure, and he wasn't going to tip too much to one side because if you weren't against it, you were for it.

HIDALGO: There was no middle ground?

SMITH: There was no middle ground.

HIDALGO: Do you think that maybe was one of the biggest misunderstandings, one of the biggest problems, that there was no middle ground?

SMITH: Yeah, we were it, the middle ground. But who were we? We were able to mobilize the little folks in the neighborhoods and it certainly helped, there's no question about that. We were able to do rumor control and we had credibility for that. Because there were still people calling up years after we stopped doing that service—they were still calling up and reporting how many kids went to the school today (laughs) because that's what they were doing for years, for two years, so they just kept it up.

I also think though, as I said earlier, that what happened was the opponents of busing really believed that they had won when they overturned the racial imbalance law, and so therefore if they just kept at it, they could change this federal judge's mind. And nobody told them they couldn't. Or if anyone told them—we certainly said that—it's a law, it has to be up until it's overturned on appeal. But they really believed they could change it, so that they would go into his court room and disrupt and they would stand in line and threaten people and they would intimidate people to keep them from going to school, because if nobody showed up to school then he couldn't continue to do what he was doing.

HIDALGO: And what was the media coverage like at this point?

SMITH: Some have argued that the media coverage was too much one way. I thought that it was pretty fair and pretty accurate, but the anti-busers certainly felt that it was much too much pro—pro-busing. But that I think was a function of the climate in the city, which was there wasn't much middle ground, so that when the media tried to take a middle ground they were perceived as being pro-busing. The *Globe* [the *Boston Globe*] particularly—the *Globe* had its windows broken on Morrissey Boulevard as a result of demonstrations and who knows what. There were kids killed. It was a scary time and there was nowhere to go for guidance. We were out there on our own, just operating on our own basic human instincts.

It certainly was not easy for CWEC to stick together, as a mixed racial group, because when things became really tense—I remember a meeting one night in which a group of black board members wanted the National Guard called out. I don't remember what the circumstances were but it was particularly violent. And the board talked about it, and the majority of the board did

not agree for that to happen and I had to call the mayor's office, which was waiting because we were one of the few mixed racial groups that they could go to for what's the community across the city. And I remember calling up the deputy mayor at the time, Bob Kiley[4], and [he said], "What did people say?" And I said, "Well, a significant minority of this groups wants the National Guard called out, but that was not the vote." And he said, "I understand that, and if I were in their position I would agree to it, but we don't feel it's a wise move." So I went back and reported to the group and they seemed satisfied

But the reason I tell you that is that, what it finally came down to with those kinds of discussions—and there were many, many more, about who was at fault in this community or another community and what the police were doing and the mayor. What was interesting about it is that what it finally came down to in a lot of ways, was the individual relationships that had built up over the previous couple of years. So therefore if people—as politically charged as the discussion might be, when it finally came down to accepting disagreements and accepting differences, there was that past experience and friendship that got us through. And that was one of the unique features of it I think, because it was tense and there were times that I wondered whether CWEC was going to survive the tensions between the staff members as things proceeded and also between the board members. Never between the board and staff; I mean, that was all healthy. But among board members with one another and among staff with one another, so that if it was going to be a representative group—which it was, and which it had to be to do the kind of work it did because if it only represented certain segments of the city it would not have been effective as a broad, citywide base—then it had to have those differences of opinion and be a place where you could process.

So that's one of the things I think we did. We also put out a newsletter and so forth, and that went on through the second phase. We wrote tomes to Garrity, thirty-, forty-page letters in which we just took staff reports of what they were doing and what was going on in the neighborhoods and advised him because there were often times when the plaintiffs were saying one thing and the school department were saying something else, and sometimes the school

[4] Robert Kiley (1935-) served as deputy mayor of Boston from 1972 to 1975. He then served as chairman of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority until 1979.

department was either lying or inaccurate. So he came to really respect, I think, what we were doing, because it was the one independent voice he could get that didn't have a particular axe to grind, that was just trying to obey the law and get people to keep things relatively quiet. So for two or three years we communicated with Garrity regularly in letters.

I got appointed to the first Citywide Coordinating Council[5], which was what he put together as kind of a community monitoring body, representing CWEC. And so we got engaged in all those debates about the second year plan and monitoring and what was working and what wasn't and what was causing violence and all of that kind of stuff. Every fall for three or four years we, CWEC, who had some success and history and know-how in public information would—after the first year—the first year we did it on our own and maybe even the second year, but for three or four years after that, we would go in and my staff would take over the school department's switchboard for the opening couple of weeks of school, just because our people were more pleasant (laughs), knew the information better, would answer the phone instead of putting it on hold. I mean, basically, we did their public information each fall for a number of years.

There were times that, as the experts got involved, school assignments were questioned; we would be getting calls from hundreds of parents if their kids haven't gotten an assignment yet, or they had gotten an assignment but they hadn't gotten a transportation assignment, [so] they couldn't go to school. It was causing havoc in families because they couldn't go to work. We would literally go and sit outside the door, sometimes Saturday nights, Sundays, weekends, while the experts, Marvin Scott, and Robert Dentler, [6] would sit in there with the school department people and go over each assignment and make sure it was whatever, racially balanced or contributing to integration. And they would come out of the room, somebody from the school department, [and say,] "Give 'em to us!" We would run down the hall, have all these envelopes, match up the envelopes with the assignments and get them out on a Saturday night or a Sunday just so we could get these kids into school.

[5] The Citywide Coordinating Council was created by Judge Garrity in 1975 to monitor implementation of the desegregation plan. Its operations ceased in 1978. The Council's records are held at Boston College. (Information taken from http://library.bc.edu)

[6] Marvin Scott (1944-) and Robert Dentler are both sociologists who served as consultants during Boston's desegregation years. Both have focused their studies on educational and racial issues, and both held administrative positions at Boston University during the 1970s.

Who knows what the school department was doing. They weren't prepared. They deliberately weren't prepared. They didn't want it to happen. When it happened and they couldn't stop it, the best you can say is that the people who were in there and being paid to do a job tried, but they didn't have the training, they didn't have any kind of orientation, and in many cases the system was no better than it had been before [desegregation], which meant there were lack of materials, there were classrooms uncovered by teachers, there were—all the same problems that existed before the court order still existed.

Through this we met with Leary, the superintendent, on a number of reforms, tried to negotiate. You've got to start improving the system while you're also—it doesn't do any good to mix kids up. It's like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic; if you don't change the way things are being done, then nobody's going to benefit. There were particular issues that we raised about performance evaluation of teachers. We just struggled with that all along for the three years he was in. And then they hired Marion Fahey.[7] No search, nothing, just put her in there. Grossly, in my view, incompetent. Nice lady, pleasant, but didn't have a clue what she was doing. Never should have been put in there. There were some who believed at the time that she was deliberately put in there, which was a cruel move because she didn't know what she was doing, and that she therefore would have been hard-pressed to try to move the system forward with any kind of reform agenda or plan or whatever.

So that was it. CWEC went back to its reforms, kept the public information up, began to produce publications, research studies. I remember doing a—it's kind of a humorous thing—I remember doing a study, hiring some staff and doing a study, on the budget, the school department budget, which nobody could ever figure out, let alone comment on. But we did, we finally got some people together and we did get the budgets and did some analysis and went to a budget hearing of the school committee. And I can't remember what year it was, but Marion Fahey was superintendent, and she had her glasses down on her nose, and she's looking at the—with microphones around, she's looking down at the thing [CWEC's report on the school department budget]. Then one of my staff people got up, one who had done some of the

[7] Marion Fahey served as superintendent of the Boston Public Schools from 1975 to 1978.

research, and said, “Miss Fahey, I’d like to point out on page,” whatever, “of our report,” which we had issued, “you will see a list of,” I don’t know how many, let’s say twenty, could’ve been a hundred, I don’t know, but—“you will see a list of people whose names and social security numbers are provided to you; these are people who we have discovered have been receiving pay checks for the past five years. All of them have been dead all that time.” And Miss Fahey’s looking at the thing [saying], “Uh-huh, that’s right, okay,” because she’s obviously not listening and just ignoring it. And so my staff person says again, “Miss Fahey, I’d like to repeat,” —of course the cameras and lights are flashing—“I’m sorry Miss Fahey, I would like to repeat—I don’t think you understood me. These people are dead and they are still getting paychecks.” And finally she looks up and she says, “Dead?” (laughs) It was a wonderful moment. So that became CWEC’s research projects, public information, whatever. I left there in 1979 for a couple of reasons; one is that I was tired.

HIDALGO: I can imagine.

SMITH: Yeah. Just worn out. And I also felt that it was probably time—I had gotten through the war years, and that it was really time for somebody else to come in with a fresh view and structure it for the next phase, whatever that might be, and that I just didn’t feel like doing it. So Robert Wood had been appointed as superintendent.[8] He came in as a big reformer and he was going to change public information in the school department. He asked me to come work for the school department. I didn’t really want to because, I don’t know, I was tired of it, but he sold me this bill of goods that public information was key and that we knew how to do it and he was going to give me carte blanche to do it, and that he also wanted me to do research on how to stabilize the system in terms of enrollments, get people to look at it again and so forth and so on, deal with the parents groups that had been created by the court and were all over the place and do some organizing, you know, those kinds of things. So I figured, maybe I’ll go do it for a year or two.

And also it was attractive in another sense. It meant that eleven years after I had been fired as a teacher, that the system had changed enough so that the blacklisting and the kinds of things that

[8] Robert Wood served as superintendent of the Boston Public Schools from 1978 to 1980.

had gone on with us were no longer relevant if I could be hired back to the superintendent's office. So I went back to work there for about a year and a half and then just decided I had had it. There were things that we could do, there were things that we couldn't do. The bureaucratic inertia was very difficult to deal with, and ultimately I think what he did was hire a parallel structure instead of removing the deadwood and changing fundamentally some of the problems in the system structurally, he just hired new people, spent more money.

So anyway, I left in—I guess it was '79. No '80; I left in '80. Went back to school because my degree had been in education, elementary education, that's what I knew how to do. And in the intervening eleven or twelve years, I had gone from being a classroom teacher to a community organizer, a social worker, a researcher, and ultimately a manager, okay? And I learned it by the seat of my pants. And thank god for them, at the hand or at the knee of some people who did know some of this stuff and taught me. But I felt the need to kind of bring together what I had learned by the seat of my pants. So I went to the Kennedy School at Harvard, and got a masters in public administration, which was good. It gave me the theory to go with the practice—the practice I had had which was pretty unique compared to most of my classmates. (laughs)

HIDALGO: I would say.

SMITH: Yeah, so it was an adjustment. But anyways, I got that, came out and said, "I'm not going to have anything to do with education anymore."

HIDALGO: After you got your degree?

SMITH: After I got a masters in public administration, I said, "I'm going to try to do something else." So I came out and this job became available at Boston Public Housing.[9] The Housing Authority had been put in receivership; there had been a receiver appointed. They wanted—they had set up a group called the Committee for [Boston] Public Housing and they were looking for a staff director. Some of the people on it knew me, I knew some of them from previous work.

[9] The Committee for Boston Public Housing, Inc. (CBPH) was founded in 1981, during the period when the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) was in receivership, to increase the involvement of public housing tenants in decisions affecting their housing. (Information taken from http://www.cbphi.org)

And what they wanted me to do was basically organize tenant organizations in the housing projects and link them up with community agencies, including schools, so it was kind of a good match. I went to work there, started that up. That's still around; it's now called the Family Community Resource Center.[10]

CWEC is not [still around], by the way. CWEC—we finally closed in 2001. It survived for thirty years. Basically, the funding climate in the city was as such that it just couldn't, and it needed a new agenda or whatever, and people were tired. The last couple of directors just kind of let it go without any kind of long term planning or thinking of future things. So CWEC is closed, the Committee for Public Housing became, as I said, the Family Community Resource Center. It's still going.

While I was doing that—and I loved it, it was organizing again, and it was a new arena, and it was kind of fun—Dukakis[11] was in as governor and came to me and said, "We want to get the federal court out of the Boston schools. We think the Boston school department is ready to take over its own activities. There's a more responsible school committee now." This was before they appointed—but it was a more representative group, had become nine members from five. So there had been a management study, and there had been some reorganization. So he says to me, "So would you accept an appointment to the Board of Education, because we need a couple of Boston people on there to basically help the state get out." So I accepted an appointment for five years to the Board of Ed. along with Loretta Roach who was then the director of CWEC. I was running the Committee for Public Housing. So we served on the board for five years, the two of us, and got the state to take over more of Boston, fought the Boston battle from a distance. I was elected chair in '85-'86. That was the year we hired a new commissioner, and did a management study of the Department of Ed.

The problem was at that point in time, I left the Committee for Public Housing because I discovered I couldn't do both the Board of Ed.—it was too demanding, and they hired a new

[10] The Family Community Resource Center was created by the Committee for Boston Public Housing in 1984.
[11] [11] Michael S. Dukakis (1933-), a Democrat, served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives from 1962 to 1970, then as governor of Massachusetts from 1975 to 1979 and from 1983 to 1991. He was the Democratic presidential nominee in 1988, but lost the presidential election to Republic George H.W. Bush.

director, who was wonderful, and is a terrific person, did a great job with it: Mary Lassen, who's now at the Women's Industrial Union, running that.

And that's one thing, let me just say parenthetically about the whole CWEC experience, and just to a great extent also public housing, is that one of the things that happened through that whole experience is because we took people who basically came to it with a political agenda but we weren't really looking for a whole lot of skills because we were so green at this that we didn't know what we were looking for. But that we took parents, we took young people just out of college who had some research skills—that people really grew, their lives changed dramatically. There were marriages that ended because the demands and the pressures were so great, particularly on the women, that the families just disintegrated and they had to kind of rebuild themselves afterwards. But you're taking people who all of a sudden are on TV, they're key leaders in their communities, and it moved very quickly under very stressful circumstances and in a fishbowl. And so that it did have an impact on peoples' lives, some positive, some negative.

The bonds that were created then were everlasting. I mean, you bump into people who were part of that, and you went through an experience that was unique and that nobody can ever take away from you, and there's just a warmth and a caring that just never goes away. But you know some of the people who came to work through CWEC in those years went on to make wonderful careers for themselves because they grew and then went to school and developed—like the former head of cable television in the city of Boston was once a newsletter editor for us at CWEC. And there are people all around that started out, learned the ropes, and then were able to go beyond that.

HIDALGO: What was the impact on your life?

SMITH: On my life—well, it certainly was difficult in that I lost childhood friends, college friends, had difficulties within my family at various junctures because people didn't agree with what I was doing. I think that I ended up sacrificing a lot of my personal life because it was so intense. It was a twenty four hour job. I don't think I realized at the time because I was young and dedicated and I was going to save the world. You just kind of get caught up in that stuff. I

think it impacted both my personal life in terms of relationships but also financially, which I am now feeling because as my father recently said to me—my father's ninety-three—"You know, if you had applied your organizing skills and your drive and your brain and whatever to the business world, you'd be a millionaire. You'd probably be a millionaire today." Well yeah, that's a father talking, but when I think about it, and I think about the kind of hours I put in, what I learned, and how I applied it, I realize that it's probably true. But now as I approach retirement age, I realize that I wasn't thinking about that kind of stuff and now I'm in a situation where I'm never going to be rich and I'm hoping that I can basically retire because physically I've got some problems now, and I couldn't work full time now if my life depended on it. So I think I took a beating physically as well, you know with long hours and fast foods and just kind of—and yet I would do it all again.

HIDALGO: Would you?

SMITH: Yeah, I would, I would. Not only because of what it gave—what it gave to the city, because of what benefited the city even though it hasn't gotten the publicity that other efforts did. The history books will be written someday and there's no denying what happened. But also because of what I gained personally from it. I learned a great deal, I've made wonderful friends, and nobody can take that away from you. I mean I can die and feel as if my life meant something and I had accomplished something. And I might change a few things but I don't think I would do it much differently. I did, as I told you earlier, leave—as I got off the state Board of Ed., I had to leave the Committee for Public Housing, so I had no way to make any money; I couldn't support myself. So I had to do consulting. And I would run into the state ethics commission all the time because I had to be very careful that my state Board of Ed. responsibilities didn't interfere with or that they weren't impacted by my consulting, so it was tough.

So when I got off the state Board of Ed. I went looking and there really wasn't a whole lot in Boston available at the time. And so I left again and moved up to the north as I told you earlier and ran a consortium of colleges, which I loved. It was more community organizing. Lawrence [Massachusetts] reminded me of Boston in the sixties; it was so provincial. And not just

provincial, but racist and almost—the politics were Neanderthal when I was there, which was the eighties. To think that some of the stuff that was going on in the political world up there was just nuts.

But anyway, I enjoyed it, loved the work with the colleges and the school systems, pairing up colleges with the schools. Stayed up there for five years and then came back to Boston and went to work for ABCD[12], where I ran an alternative high school, adult ed. programs, daycare, summer jobs programs, etcetera. Did that for a couple years, four or five years, and hated it. It was hard for me to go back into a big, major institution and fit, because I had used to being able to sort of structure a plan and report to a board, and that's a particular agency that's sort of run on a kind of cult of personality. And you only get to do what you're blessed from on high to do and the purse strings are controlled. And I certainly loved the people I worked with, loved the kids and the young adults and so forth, but I felt constrained. I felt like I couldn't really manage the staff the way I wanted to, I couldn't get the funds that I really needed and so forth.

So anyway, I left, and my old friend Hubie [Jones] who had been—who basically is an old friend, said to me, "We got one last shot here kid; the school committee is going to conduct a national search for a superintendent again"—this is the one that resulted in [Thomas] Payzant[13]—"so let's see if we can get a group of folks together. Let's sit down with CWEC." Which we did. Loretta Roach at the time felt that CWEC didn't want to take on anything like this, but the theory was, let's get the folks together again, let's make sure it is a national search, let's get some community involvement in it, let's basically do what CWEC did way back when in '72. But let's also do something else: let's mobilize people to help whoever the superintendent is, because the stars are in alignment, people are supportive of schools again, they really want a top flight superintendent, they want to try to mobilize resources and help this person out.

[12] Incorporated in 1962, Action for Boston Community Development [ABCD] is an anti-poverty agency that supports low-income residents of Boston through a network of neighborhood-based organizations. (Information taken from http://www.bostonabcd.org)
[13] Thomas Payzant served as superintendent of the Boston Public Schools from 1995 to 2006. He is currently a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

So that's what we did. We were not asked for, nor did we venture, an opinion on the superintendent candidates. It was very clear to us as we interviewed them—this time they allowed us to interview them—that many had chosen Payzant and that this was all just a sham. And it turns out that I think that that was true. And we tried. Payzant's a very nice man. We tired to be helpful. His style then, and probably still now, is not to ask for help. The help we offered usually fell on deaf ears. We found we had to again go the route of doing studies, exposing problems, getting him to focus on it. Worked out some pretty good relationships with him; he was always professional, never took any of it personally. Some of his underlings were deputy superintendents, and others were very cooperative and very helpful.

And of course, who were we? There were some younger people involved, and the group became called Critical Friends, for the Boston Public Schools. I ran that, as the director. I was the only staff person. We housed it out of Northeastern; they provided us space and were the fiscal agent for money we could raise. And that's what we did, and many of the people of the group were old timers, who had been trying to reform the school system for years, several of them many more years than I. So they were an influential group of people, and then there were some young people from newer efforts. We offered our help; it really wasn't really welcomed, but there are people in the system today who are old friends of those people who were part of Critical Friends. We were able to influence, and some of those people in the system, deputies and associate superintendents and stuff, would give call on individual members of Critical Friends quietly. So I think we had some influence.

We certainly had the big issue we took on in which we made enemies of the final moments or couple of years of Critical Friends was on the contract, teachers' contract. We basically went to the man and said, You've got to make some changes—to the mayor and Payzant—you have to get some changes on the seniority stuff because you're saddling principles with deadwood. And they can't handle it. You can't ask them on the one hand to become more accountable for what happens in their schools, and then via seniority have them have to take on teachers that can't function; they just get passed through the system all the time. So they came to the brink. Probably, in my view, could've gotten more, but at least got something in the last contract. Some of my old friends at the teachers union—because some of the reformers now—when I was

fired—have now become the powers that be in the union, and some of them, that was it, I was a turncoat. Critical Friends lasted about four years maybe, and then there just wasn't funding for it. It was never designed to be long term. It was seen as a short term measure to help Payzant—or help whoever became superintendent, you know, Payzant. So after that I worked at Northeastern teaching a couple of courses, training student teachers, which I loved.

HIDALGO: Is that what you taught at Northeastern?

SMITH: Yeah—no, I taught management at Northeastern. I also did some curriculum development work with teachers, and I supervised student teachers, which I loved. It got me back into the schools, got me to see some old friends who are now principals, some folks that are still teaching, and I love just being able to get back into a classroom and help these young people think about what they were doing and change some of their perceptions about, you know, the kids are the problem or whatever. But it was fun, I enjoyed it. But Northeastern did not have a full time position available to me. My mother got sick and ultimately died, but I took a major role in caring for her the last couple of years, which just took a lot out of me as well.

HIDALGO: I'm sorry to hear that.

SMITH: Thanks. I pretty much have been semi-retired, picking up a little consulting here and there, and moved out of the city two years ago, and live out in Walpole in a condo. Took up golf two years ago. And still find myself tempted because I still have good friends, one of whom is a principal of a school and I see her very often. And I have several other friends that I bump into at various events; I stay in touch with Hubie. Actually he called yesterday, had a nice chat with him. So I mean I'm still on the fringes of it, but when you're not in the city, it's not the same. And I miss it, I miss the city, I miss the political activism sometimes, but there's political activism everywhere. And as I said I took up golf, because there's a lot of golf—of courses, I had never golfed in my life and it was kind of fun. And ended up getting myself elected chair of the condo association out here. So my political roots have just had to blossom somewhere else.

HIDALGO: It seems that your organizational skills are just in your blood.

SMITH: Yeah, I think they are too. You learn that after a while. And on a condo development where a lot of the people are older, many of them—most of them older than I, they didn't have very many people who had chaired large meetings before and had had the kind of experiences that I had, so I was willing to offer it. But it's a whole different arena. (sighs) Give me Boston any time, at least I know that.

Can we take a quick break?

HIDALGO: Oh, sure. I just—real quickly—

SMITH: Yeah, go ahead. I don't mean right this second.

HIDALGO: Looking back thirty years since all of this has happened, what looks different to you now?

SMITH: I think the city is very different. I think it is much more cosmopolitan. While there are still, and perhaps always will be in Boston, distinct neighborhood orientations, those neighborhoods are nowhere near as isolated and parochial as they once were, either racially or ethnically, so I think it's a healthier city in that regard. I think the school system has changed. I think there's much more—and that's, I think, a factor, of a variety of things. I give Payzant some credit, but I think pressure from the state and the federal government and just cultural changes in the city and pressure from the community—the court order certainly had an impact on that. I think the system is focusing more on education outcomes, certainly than it did thirty years ago. I think that there is, while not enough, more attention paid to accountability on the part of teachers and principals. Nowhere near enough, but it's progress; it's moved forward. I think that they still have a long way to go in terms of hiring supervision and evaluation of personnel, which is a key element.

I think that the school committee, while I support an appointed committee because the elected committee was chaos, I'm not sure that that's better because I think we've gone from one end of

the spectrum, which was a chaotic, nine-member, individual, parochial, in fighting games. While we went from that on one end, we now have basically a rubber stamp of the mayor and a strong superintendent, and I worry about that because I think that the community has effectively been pushed out of the schools. So whereas thirty years ago they were pushed out of the schools by very different leadership and for very different reasons and under different circumstances, we've now come full circle and I think the community is largely irrelevant in the school system today as well, but for very different reasons and under very different circumstances. And I have to blame the lack of an elected school committee, because I don't think if we were to elect them today, we would necessarily have the same kind of games that we had before. But I think it's the danger you have when you have all of the power in the city or in any institution, vested in one person, the mayor, who then hires one other person who really is only accountable to him, and so I just think that's dangerous and I think that we're not seeing the kind of progress in schools that we need to in large measure because of that.

I think the media pays far less attention to the schools today than they did before, and I think that's a function of the lack of community involvement. I mean, who do they ask about it? They still call me sometimes and I'm out in Walpole, I've been away from it for two years. So I think that there's a lack of community pressure on the system, there's a lack of accountability to the community, and I think that's a problem for the future.

Other than that, what's changed in thirty years? I've changed. I think you've got another generation of kids who are now parents of children in the school system. And some of these parents went through the busing years themselves. I think there's a healthier climate around racial issues and diversity here, certainly than there ever was thirty years ago. You would never see a school consciously lock out parents now. They may lock them out figuratively, but they will not lock them out literally. And yet you've got kids who are dealing with enormous problems in these schools and yet there really isn't a whole lot of connection between the communities they live in and the schools, and so there's no safety nets for families in crisis. I mean, kids don't come to school just for education needs, they have a lot of needs and schools can't meet all those needs, and therefore they need to have a community around them to support it, and that just doesn't exist.

That's the kind of stuff we did in the Alliance for Coordinated Services, the stuff in Lawrence and Lowell I did, and that's just kind of been lost, just disappeared. I worry when that happens because the schools can't do it alone and they need help and they're under more pressure now for accountability. They need all the more to mobilize resources to help them, and yet they're both closed to that because they're kind of focusing in a very narrow way on scores and skills and whatever. Well, the skills aren't devoid from experience and problems and poverty, language differences. So while on the one hand, there's a more healthy environment for kids accepting differences, there's also, I think, an unhealthy isolation that exists throughout schools today that doesn't bode well for the future.

HIDALGO: Okay, is there anything else you would like to add or—

SMITH: I can't imagine, unless you have specific questions about anything

HIDALGO: No, I think we've covered everything pretty much. Mary Ellen, it truly was a pleasure. Thank you very much for taking time out of your schedule to come into the city and speak with me.

SMITH: You're very welcome. As you can tell I love to talk about it.

END OF INTERVIEW